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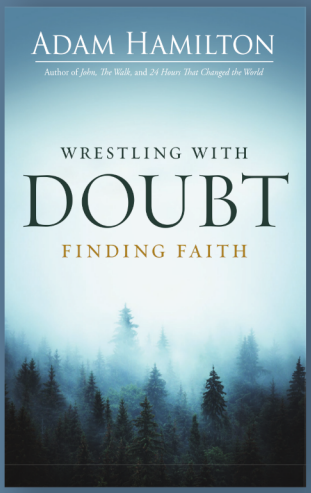

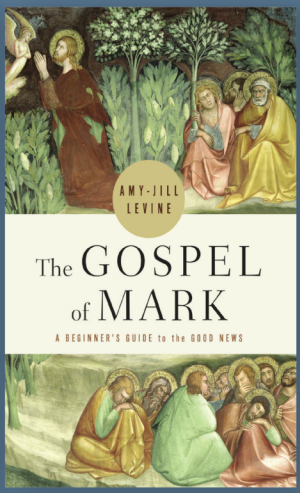

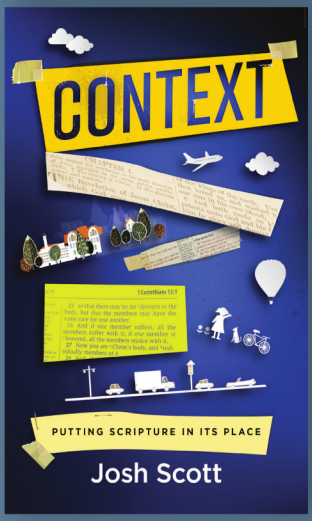

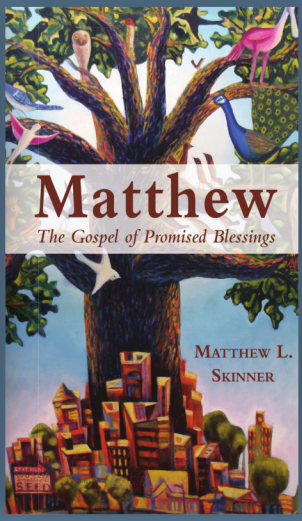

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Books of the Bible
Bible Study Sampler

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ADAM HAMILTON

Author of *John*, *The Walk*, and *24 Hours That Changed the World*

WRESTLING WITH DOUBT

FINDING FAITH

Contents

Introduction

In Praise of Honest Doubt

There lives more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds.

—Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Only God and certain madmen have no doubts!

—Martin Luther

Everyone doubts.

Regardless of your faith, or lack of faith, certainty is virtually impossible to come by. This is true not only in matters of religion but also in life. The night before marrying my wife, LaVon, I was 81.7 percent sure getting married was the right thing to do and that it would lead to a happy and fulfilling life for us—but there was at least 18.3 percent of me that wondered what on earth I was doing (we married the week after high school graduation!). I'm pretty sure I'm going to live a long life and be here to provide for my family. But I have life insurance just in case that

Much of this chapter was previously published in my book *Seeing Gray in a World of Black and White* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008).

doesn't work out. And every time I get on an airplane, I feel confident that I'll make it to where I'm going and back home again, but I often leave a note to my wife and kids telling them I love them, just in case the plane goes down. *There are few absolute certainties in life.*

We want certainty, but God gives us mystery.

When it comes to matters of religion—including the question of whether there is a God or not—it is no different. This is true for the atheist and for the believer. I am reminded of one atheist (who later became a Christian) who told of the anxiety he experienced as an unbeliever when he considered the possibility that God might actually exist. What is true for the atheist is going to be true for the Christian. We want certainty, but God gives us mystery. All who embrace a religious faith (and I consider atheism and agnosticism as a kind of religious faith as well) are going to have periods of doubt, and for theists, times when our faith seems ridiculous and we have more questions than answers. Some fear doubt. They fear that doubt might be just the tip of the iceberg and that if they allow themselves to doubt, to earnestly confront their deepest questions, they might very

well lose their faith in God altogether. Others believe doubt must surely displease God, and so, for God's sake, they can't allow themselves to admit to doubt. It implies a weak faith or even sin.

Doubt is not only natural, it is healthy, provided it spurs us to further reflection and a search for what is true.

I don't see doubt this way. Doubt is not only natural, it is healthy, provided it spurs us to further reflection and a search for what is true. Most of us wrestle with doubt from time to time, and our doubts become particularly pronounced in the face of adversity, or when encountering persons who see the world differently than we do. Some life events can't help leaving us searching, questioning, and wrestling with doubt. And some periods in our lives, the late teens and early twenties, are commonly times of doubt. Midlife can be another. These doubts and questions may lead to a crisis point, a place where all we thought we knew for certain has been called into question, and our religious, philosophical, and moral foundations are shaken.

These crises commonly produce one of three responses. Some come to reject everything they had learned growing up, and the faith that they were raised with, and they turn away from God completely. Others suppress their questions and retreat to an intractable faith—a faith that is filled with certainties and is immune to questions. Often this is a fundamentalism that offers certainty based upon an inerrant Bible and lots of reassurance that what one believes is absolutely true. But there is a third option, one that faces doubt head-on and that carefully examines the presuppositions and assumptions of the faith that we've held up to this point. It accepts that there may well be truth in the faith we were raised with, while making room to question and critique elements of that faith, recognizing that perhaps not all we believed in our early life is true.

Once more, one of the premises of this book is that doubt and questioning are not the enemy of faith, but often a path to a deeper and more authentic faith. As Anglican writer Os Guinness once wrote, "If ours is an examined faith, we should be unafraid to doubt. If doubt is eventually justified, we were believing what clearly was not worth believing. But if doubt is answered, our faith grows stronger still. It knows God more certainly and it can enjoy God more deeply."[1]

The Bible itself is filled with stories of people who had their doubts. Abraham and Sarah, though known for

"believing God," seemed often to struggle with doubt. Jacob, Abraham and Sarah's grandson, wrestled with God. When God called Moses to lead the children of Israel out of slavery, Moses offered excuses, an expression, I believe, of his doubts. Many of the psalms attributed to David point to his doubts, as did his moments of infidelity to God. A major theme of the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament is the struggle God's people, collectively, had in being faithful, a struggle to believe in, and serve, a God they could not see.

The New Testament records many examples of doubt. In fact, the New Testament opens with the story of Joseph's doubt when told by Mary she had conceived a child by the Holy Spirit—Joseph becoming the first person to doubt the Virgin Birth (or at least the virginal conception). Religious leaders doubt that Jesus is the Messiah. Peter doubts when Jesus comes walking to him on the water on the Sea of Galilee. Jesus routinely notes that his disciples are those of little faith. After three years following him, the disciples doubt the women when, after his crucifixion, they tell the disciples that Jesus has been raised from the dead. And even after the other disciples have seen the resurrected Christ, and report this to him, Thomas still refuses to believe until he actually sees Christ for himself. Matthew begins with Joseph's doubt and ends telling us that among Christ's followers there were some who still doubted the Resurrection (see Matthew 28:17).

I love the story in Mark's Gospel of the father who brought his son to Jesus for healing. His boy was plagued with seizures. The man pled with Jesus, "If you can do anything, help us! Show us compassion!" (Mark 9:22). Jesus replied, "'*If* you can do anything'? All things are possible for the one who has faith" (9:23). And the boy's father exclaims, *"I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"* (9:24 NIV, emphasis added). This has been my prayer on many occasions as well. "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief."

There's a measure of faith required in almost everything in life.

Here's what is important to know: doubt is normal. There's a measure of faith required in almost everything in life. Doubt is not the opposite of faith, but often leads to a deeper faith. And while there are good reasons for a thoughtful, intelligent person to be a Christian, there is no irrefutable proof for the central claims of Christianity—nor those of any other religion, just as there is no irrefutable proof for atheism's claim that there is no God. They all, including atheism, require a measure of faith.

Ultimately, faith is a decision, a choice, based upon a thoughtful and even critical examination of a particular

faith's historical, existential, and spiritual claims; its consistency with the world around us; the experience of those practicing the faith; and the implications and impact of the particular faith on the lives of its adherents and on the world.

I am a Christian. I believe the historic tenets of the Christian faith. I wake up daily seeking to follow Jesus. I pray each morning, offering my life to Christ. But I also know that the three pounds of gray matter at the top of my head are hardly adequate to fully understand the nature of God or the universe around me. I admit to myself and others that I could be wrong—I don't think I am, but it is possible. But until proven wrong, I cast my lot with the idea that there is a God who is behind the vastness and mystery of the universe; that this God came to us in Jesus who shows us who God is and what God longs for from us. I seek to follow Jesus's ethic of love, not warm feelings but a dogged desire to practice justice, kindness, and mercy toward others. I seek to live as he taught his disciples to live. I believe that in his death we see selfless love and receive mercy and redemption, and that in his resurrection we see the triumph of love over hate, kindness over cruelty, and life over death. But, I recognize that I could be wrong.

There are some who wait for absolute proof before they are willing to have faith. Some of these are paralyzed by the possibility they could be wrong. But if we act only

on things we are certain about, we'll live a life of "analysis paralysis" and miss out on what scripture calls "the life that really is life."

This is true in every area of life. If I hung on to my doubt and allowed it to paralyze me, I would never have married my wife of forty-one years. I would have missed out on a lifetime of love and fulfilling, amazing experiences. If I insisted on absolute certainty, I would never have had children. I would never have boarded an airplane or jumped off the high dive platform as a child. I would never have become a Christian or a pastor or started the congregation I serve. And I would have missed out on most of the greatest experiences of my life.

When it comes to faith, we explore our questions, we critically examine the evidence for faith, we weigh the testimony of others, including the witness of the Bible itself, we explore our options, and then, we *make a decision*, we take a leap, and we trust. And for many of us, our prayer becomes "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief."

Chapter 1

Is There a God?

The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
—Psalm 19:1 NIV

"One can't prove that God doesn't exist. But science makes God unnecessary."
—Stephen Hawking

"The wing of a fly is proof enough of the existence of God for me."
—Pat Conroy

"Is there really a God?" That's where our conversation began as I sat down with a young university student. Her philosophy professor in college had asked her this question, to which she responded, "Of course there is a God!" This young woman had grown up in church and never really questioned her faith. Her professor followed up, "How do you know? What proof do you have?" And then the professor asked one more question, "And what difference does it make if there is no God?"

The professor was not intending to attack her faith, only to help her think clearly about why she believed. Yet

the questions led her to panic as she recognized that she did not have good answers to her professor's queries. She could not explain why she believed, and since she could not, she began to wonder if there were valid reasons for believing beyond "My parents and my pastor taught me to believe."

For some, the question of God's existence is a persistent source of doubt. I wonder how you would respond to the philosophy professor's questions? If you believe there is a God, what are *your* reasons for believing this? What difference does believing in God make in your life? If you struggle with belief in God's existence, what are the sources of your doubts?

In the chapters that follow, we'll talk about a variety of questions and faith struggles, each of which can lead to doubt. This includes questions that arise from faith's relationship to science.

Throughout most of human history, the order, beauty, and sheer existence of this world led humans to faith in a Creator. The psalmist captured this idea in Psalm 19:1-2:

The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they reveal knowledge. (NIV)

To this day, for most people, regardless of religion, the observable world, and our very existence here, is evidence of the existence of God. But as science has identified the

laws, forces, and processes behind much of the natural world, there is a sense among some that all that exists can be explained in purely naturalistic ways. As theoretical physicist and cosmologist Stephen Hawking said in a 2010 interview, "Science makes God unnecessary."[1]

I admire Dr. Hawking—I think he was brilliant. His *A Brief History of Time* is one of the best-selling popular science books of all time (though it's also been described as the least-read best-selling book of all time, as many found it challenging to understand!). Much more accessible was his last book, published just months after he died, *Brief Answers to the Big Questions* (Bantam Books, 2018). It's a great read and offers his thinking about a variety of life's questions. Chapter 1 asks the same question we're exploring in this chapter: "Is There a God?" In it he writes,

> If you accept, as I do, that the laws of nature are fixed, then it doesn't take long to ask: what role is there for God? This is a big part of the contradiction between science and religion, and although my views have made headlines, it is actually an ancient conflict. One could define God as the embodiment of the laws of nature. However, this is not what most people would think of as God. They mean a human-like being, with whom one can have a personal relationship. When you look at the vast size of the universe, and how insignificant and

> accidental human life is in it, that seems most implausible.[2]

I thought we'd begin this chapter by considering Hawking's words, then I'll offer a few thoughts on why, despite appreciating Hawking, I believe in God. But let's begin with one source of some of the conflict between science and religion: the creation stories in Genesis.

Science vs. the Bible's Creation Stories

The Bible famously begins with two creation stories, Genesis 1:1–2:4a and Genesis 2:4b–3:24. The first is poetic, positive, and idealistic. God creates by speaking things into existence. Each of the six days of creation includes a refrain along the lines of "And God said let there be . . . so God made . . . and God saw that it was good . . . and there was evening and there was morning."

The second story is a meaningful short story written in prose that begins with God creating the first human from topsoil, then creating plants, then the other animals, and finally, in response to the man's loneliness, God creates the woman from the man's rib after which they become "one flesh."

The two stories disagree regarding the order of creation. They consistently use different language for God. They

appear to be two distinct pieces of literature brought together at some point in Israel's history. They are beautiful, powerful, and meaningful and, from my perspective, teach profound truths. They are foundational for the Bible and biblical faith. But neither was written as a science lesson.

Unfortunately, much of the conflict between science and faith stems from Christians attempting to teach these biblical stories as science. Some Christians believe that science must make its conclusions conform to a somewhat literal reading of these creation accounts. I once heard a Young Earth Creationist refer to Genesis 1–3 as the "eyewitness" account of what happened "in the beginning." He explained that God was the only eyewitness at creation, and this was God's account, and since God cannot lie, these accounts must be true and science must conform to them.

The two Genesis creation accounts were written by people whose scientific understanding was far different from ours today. The aim of the first creation story was to clearly assert that behind all that exists, there is God. God's creation is good and beautiful and is a gift. Humans were created by God and bear God's imprint or image. The second account, written in prose, is a masterful short story that helps us think about the meaning of life, the struggle with loneliness, the power of relationships, and our human struggle with temptation and sin. Again, these stories offer

us theological and existential truth. But they are not written as science lessons.

The stories are not attempting to explain the *how* of creation, but the *why* and *who* of creation. When Christians seek to read Genesis 1–2 as science and history, the result is a false conflict between science and faith.

Cosmologists, astronomers and astrophysicists, evolutionary biologists, chemists, and other scientists seek to unravel the natural laws, chemistry, forces, matter, and energy behind all that exists. The scientific method is focused on helping to reveal *how* things work—to increase our knowledge of the physical universe. Conversely, theology is intended to help us understand the *why* of the universe and the meaning and purpose of human existence.

I love exploring the latest findings of various sciences. I love astronomy. I have a deep interest in biology. I am fascinated by physics, though I admit there are ideas in physics that make my brain hurt! Science doesn't threaten my faith. To the contrary, every fascinating, complex thing I learn from the sciences leads me to stand in even greater awe of God.

Has Science Rendered God Unnecessary?

Hawking and others have suggested the vastness of our universe, and the smallness of humans in it, render the idea

of a personal God implausible. It is true that our universe is massive. We live on a relatively small planet orbiting our sun. Our sun is one of somewhere between 100 billion and 400 billion suns or stars in the Milky Way galaxy. The Milky Way galaxy is one of as few as 100 billion and as many as *2 trillion* galaxies. As I ponder this, I'm reminded once more of the words of the psalmist:

When I look up at your skies,
at what your fingers made—
the moon and the stars
that you set firmly in place—
what are human beings
that you think about them;
what are human beings
that you pay attention to them?
(Psalm 8:3-4)

The current model for understanding the beginning of the universe sees the universe emerging approximately 13.8 billion years ago. Georges Lemaître, the theoretical physicist who proposed the big bang theory around 1930, spoke of a "primeval atom" that held all the energy and matter that would become the universe as we know it. The initial "detonation" hurled the building blocks of the universe into the void, moving away from the "bang" in every direction at mind-boggling speeds. From that initial "atom," as Lemaître described it, we now have a universe estimated to

be 93 billion light years across. In essence, everything that exists was derived from virtually nothing. For many this sounds a lot like the words of Genesis 1 where, out of the darkness and formlessness, God spoke and said, "Let there be light."

As an aside, Georges Lemaître, who proposed this theory that still holds sway, was not only a theoretical physicist but also a Catholic priest. He was one of many prominent scientists who embraced both science and faith.

The big bang seems to require Something or Someone to have "lit the fuse" as the Prime Mover or Uncaused Cause—God. This was part of the reason Albert Einstein was hesitant to accept the proposition. Hawking acknowledges, "The one remaining area that religion can now lay claim to is the origin of the universe." Yet he goes on to say, "But even here science is making progress and should soon provide a definitive answer to how the universe began."[3] He maps out what it might look like for the universe to self-generate out of nothing, with no intelligence or power to light the fuse or to provide the energy, or to develop the laws that govern it. To me, these hypotheses continue to point to a Creator and do not eliminate the existence of God.

Is it possible that this vast universe, its laws that govern it—laws that can be explained in beautiful mathematical formulas—the energy and matter that permeates it, and the life forms that developed on earth, and presumably

elsewhere, spontaneously generated without a programmer, a guiding hand, a source, a sustainer? Perhaps, but, to me, this proposal that cannot be proved requires more faith than the idea that there is an Intelligence, a Power, a Programmer, a Geneticist, an Artist, a Mathematician—a God—behind it all.

Scientists will continue to uncover the laws and mathematical formulas of the cosmos. But does that work render God unnecessary as Hawking said, or do their amazing discoveries make an even greater case for One who is the First Cause? Your answer is a choice you make, a decision to believe that the magnificence, vastness, and beauty of creation is a lovely accident, or is the result of One who said "Let there be light."

This is an overly simplistic analogy, but perhaps one that might be helpful to you. Julie is a member of the congregation I serve. She is amazing for many reasons, one of which is her artistry as a baker. Everything she has ever baked for LaVon and me is both beautiful and delicious. But the best thing she ever made for us is her white chocolate macadamia nut cheesecake.

Her cheesecakes are beautiful, but they taste even better than they look! I had one of these cakes at my house one Easter, and when our family came over, they asked, "Where did you get that amazing cheesecake? Who made it?" (They somehow knew neither LaVon nor I had the skill for this!)

Imagine if I had said to them, "No one made it. It just showed up at my doorstep." They would rightly say, "That is ridiculous! C'mon, who made this?" I might reply, "No, seriously, the universe self-generated this cheesecake, on its own. It took 13.8 billion years, but this was the result." They would never believe this. The shaved white chocolate curls, the delicious combination of ingredients, the perfect baking temperature could not have happened on its own, even with 13.8 billion years for such an act of spontaneous generation to occur. It required a baker.

Richard Dawkins, noted evolutionary biologist and atheist, acknowledges the difficulty of claiming the spontaneous generation of life on earth (and presumably all that came before it), but notes that if the idea of a Creator is accepted, one still has to explain who created the Creator, or, as I've been asked by children in my congregation, "Who made God?"

He's right. To me it comes down to this question: Do I choose to believe in a universe that is self-created, whose laws are self-created, where life is ordered out of nothing, or do I choose to believe in a universe that is an expression of the power, beauty, and will of a God whose origins I cannot explain? Both require a measure of faith. I choose to believe that there is a God whose handiwork is seen in the cosmos, who created the laws that order our universe, and who brought forth life on our planet.

Do I choose to believe in a universe that is self-created, whose laws are self-created, where life is ordered out of nothing, or do I choose to believe in a universe that is an expression of the power, beauty, and will of a God whose origins I cannot explain? Both require a measure of faith.

The Plausibility of a Personal Transcendent God

Hawking noted that when he used the word *God*, he did so to describe "the embodiment of the laws of nature." Most of the time it appears that is how Einstein used the word *God* as well. Recall the earlier quote from Hawking, "This is not what most people would think of as God. They mean a human-like being, with whom one can have a personal relationship. When you look at the vast size of the

universe, and how insignificant and accidental human life is in it, that seems most implausible."

Christian faith does not see God as a "human-like being." It sees humans as in some way "God-like beings," created in the image of God. To be created in the image of God, I believe, means that we are created with the capacity to love, to reason, to sustain and care for one another and our planet; we are invited to be cocreators, to delve into the important existential questions animals cannot explore. We have the ability to be selfless, to transcend mere instincts, and we have the capacity to experience fellowship with God.

Hawking's point was that the vastness of the universe renders it implausible that there is a personal God who knows us each by name, who walks with us, guides us, loves us, and never leaves us. Yet, to me, so much of what Hawking taught about things like quantum physics is consistent with the ability of God to know and simultaneously be connected to each of earth's 8 billion people. I've often thought that the world's governments and databases somehow "know" most of the world's people—knowing where they live, who they are, certain details about their lives. Our technology allows most of us to communicate with one another around the world. If this is true of us, what is it to think that the mind and power that created and sustains the universe could know each of us personally, hear our prayers, and care for us?

God is not the universe and the universe is not God. But God's glory and presence saturate the universe.

I love the apostle Paul's words, quoting the ancient Cretan poet, Epimenedes, when he said of God, "In him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28 NIV). There is nowhere that God is not. God sustains all that is. God's presence permeates all creation. Yet God also transcends the universe, being both within the universe and beyond it. God is not the universe and the universe is not God. But God's glory and presence saturate the universe.

There are many in the field of science who do not believe the idea of a personal God is implausible, nor that the advances in science render God unnecessary.

I think of so many of the foundational figures in modern science. Many saw their scientific discoveries as pointing to the existence of God, not rendering God unnecessary. Copernicus was a Catholic priest. Galileo, despite the church's tragic condemnation of his views, did not believe that his views of astronomy and the movement

of the planets were inconsistent with faith in God. Johannes Kepler saw his work in science as a calling from God. Robert Boyle, the great pioneer in chemistry, saw his research as an expression of his Anglican faith. Francis Bacon, one of the fathers of the scientific method, held a deep faith in Christ. René Descartes, like Galileo, had a sometimes rocky relationship with the Catholic Church, but he maintained a deep faith in Christ and offered rational arguments for God's existence. Blaise Pascal was not only a scientist but a theologian. And Sir Isaac Newton penned more words about theology than science.

But this is true not only of the founding fathers of modern science. In the most recent Pew Center survey of scientists that I can find, from 2009, 51 percent of scientists who were a part of the American Association for the Advancement of Science reported belief in God or a higher power. That is less than the general population, yet still just over half of scientists who affirm both science and God.[4]

Personal Experiences and the Power of Faith

We began this chapter recognizing that throughout history, most humans saw their existence, the beauty and order of creation, and the magnificence of the cosmos as evidence for the existence of God. I still find this a

compelling argument for the existence of God. But that is not why I came to believe in God. My faith in God was shaped by my experiences of God in my life.

I was fourteen when I first began reading the Bible. I considered myself an atheist at the time, though I was likely more of an agnostic. I loved to read ancient mythology, and I was curious what was in this book that had so shaped Western civilization. As I began to read the Bible, despite its complexity and its sometimes disturbing sections, it began to speak to me. I found myself wondering if there might be a God.

I eventually began to pray, still uncertain if there was a God. There were moments when I prayed that I felt a presence with me—that Someone was near, listening. I experienced peace as I conversed with the God I could not see and comfort in the midst of the chaos of my life. I started attending church, and found a love and acceptance in the church that surprised me, and a sense of community and friendship that was life-giving. And I felt that same love from God.

My decision to finally cast my lot with Jesus, to identify as a Christian, came after reading the first three Gospels. I appreciated the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, but it was as I read Luke's Gospel, and his portrayal of Jesus's concern for the outsiders, outcasts, and the outlaws,[5] that I made a decision, a choice, to follow him.

I did not have absolute proof that there was a God or that Jesus was the Messiah. Instead, I read the story of Jesus, a man who spoke of God, who taught about him, who embodied God's love and grace, who showed compassion and mercy for sinners, who called others to follow God, who suffered and died and then rose from the dead as if to say evil, hate, sin, and death don't get to have the final word.

I *chose* to follow Jesus. I believed in God in part because Jesus believed in God and taught about him in such compelling ways. I wasn't thinking about the big bang theory and the origin of the universe when I came to believe. I was drawn to Jesus, and the God he taught about, whose presence he incarnated. I said yes to his call.

That *yes* has changed my life for the better. I have come to love Jesus. Each day begins as I awaken, slip to my knees, and speak with him. I thank him for the day and offer myself to him, asking for help to pay attention to opportunities to serve him by serving others. As I began this journey, my values, my words, my thoughts, my actions, began to change. I slowly became more interested in serving others and less focused on serving myself. Later, when I married, this faith made me a better husband, and when we had children, a better father than I would have been had I not chosen to follow him. My faith has led me to greater generosity toward others. It has led me to think about the major problems in our world and how I can be part of the solution. And

following Jesus has led me to do things in service to others I never would have done apart from his call.

Through my faith in Christ I have come to believe that the painful, difficult, and challenging things in life do not have the final word and that God can redeem them and bring something good from them.

Forty-five years after that *yes*—and each day I continue to say yes—my faith has given me meaning, purpose, joy, and hope. I've experienced acceptance, forgiveness, and love. Through my faith in Christ I have come to believe that the painful, difficult, and challenging things in life do not have the final word and that God can redeem them and bring something good from them. I am a very different person than I would be apart from God's grace.

On another note, every bit of research I've read points to the fact that a deep and abiding faith, practiced in community, reduces stress, improves emotional health,

provides greater coping mechanisms, creates more optimism, and leads to better relationships and a better adjusted person.

In summary, I believe in God because I believe God is the best explanation for the universe we live in. I believe in God because I've experienced what I believe is God's presence and my life has been positively affected by my faith. I believe in God because I am drawn to Jesus, and Jesus believed in God. But I also believe in God because I see the impact faith in God has had on the lives of so many people, and through them, on the world.

I've seen the impact of an authentic, critically examined faith in a God of love and grace on the lives of those who believe. I've seen people's lives radically transformed by accepting God's grace and turning their lives over to him. I've watched as people were liberated from addictions, and from brokenness and pain. I've seen people find peace, strength, and hope. I've seen people move from living self-absorbed lives to selfless lives of service to others.

One church member summarized the change in his life by saying,

> Before I began to believe in God, and started to follow Jesus, you would have never caught me volunteering to read to low-income children, or giving significant amounts of money to make sure that others had enough to eat, or a quality

> education. I never thought about what the rest of the world should look like. I was primarily concerned about what I wanted my little world to look like—what I had and what I wanted. My faith in Christ has turned me inside out. And I am so much happier for it!

None of what I've just written proves the Christian faith is true. But it is part of what goes into my confidence in and gratitude for my faith.

If I were to die tonight, and in that last glimpse of consciousness I were to discover that this life is all there is—that there is no God, no heaven, no afterlife—I would not regret having lived my life as a follower of Jesus, putting my faith in God and living as though he were real. But for all the reasons I've articulated, I choose to believe, and find great confidence that there really is a God, who came to us in Jesus, who calls us to follow him.

Doubt is not the enemy of faith.

"A perfect gift for a questioning heart."

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Adam Hamilton is founding pastor of The United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas, one of the fastest growing, most highly visible churches in the country. *The Church Report* named Hamilton's congregation the most influential mainline church in America, and he preached at the National Prayer Service as part of the presidential inauguration festivities in 2013. Hamilton is the author of more than thirty books, including *Why?*, *Creed*, and *The Lord's Prayer*.

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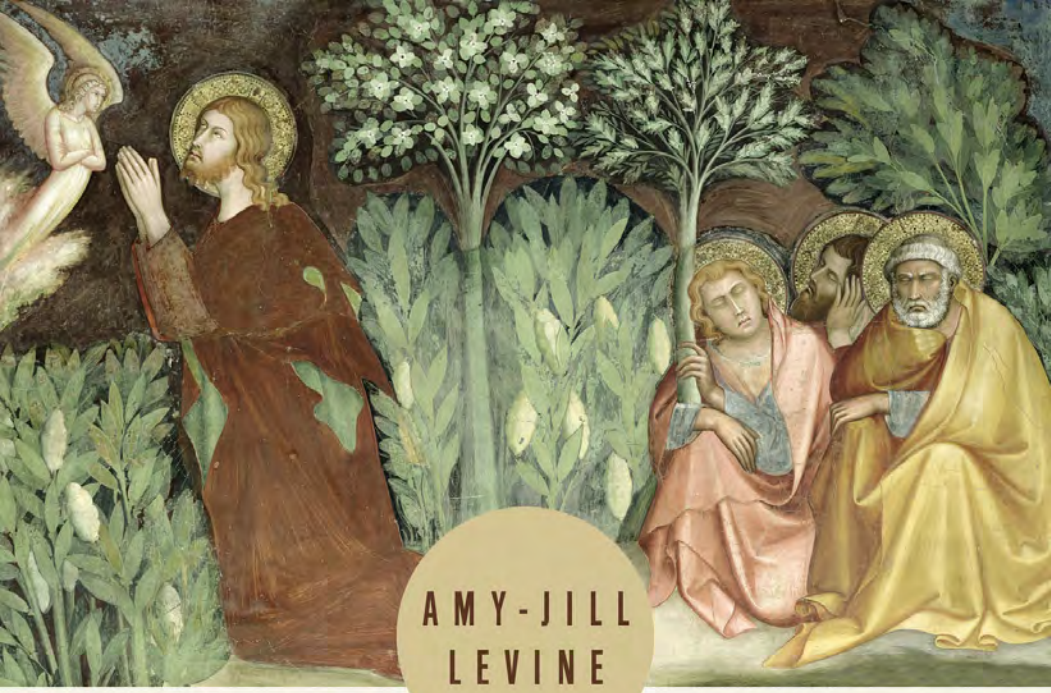

AMY-JILL LEVINE

The GOSPEL of MARK

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE to the GOOD NEWS

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The Gospel of Mark, considered by most scholars to be the earliest canonical Gospel, is shorter than the Gospels of Matthew, Luke, and John. Unlike the other three Gospels, Mark's text offers no account of Jesus's origins and no Resurrection appearances. Instead, Mark's Gospel starts with the preaching of John the Baptizer, and it ends, at least in its earliest manuscripts, with three women fleeing the empty tomb in fear. Most biblical scholars agree that the evangelists we call Matthew, Luke, and John not only used Mark's Gospel as a source but also supplemented and even sought to correct it. When the Gospel of Luke (1:1) speaks of the many who have attempted to compile an orderly account of the story of Jesus, the writer most likely had Mark in mind.

This study seeks to learn from and about the Gospel of Mark on its own terms, without the details the other three Gospels introduce. Going chapter by chapter rather than by themes (discipleship, Christology, miracles, etc.) allows us better to experience Jesus's complex identity: at one point unable to do mighty works because of people's unbelief and at another walking on the water as only God can do; at one point demanding that people not announce his miracles; and at another clearly announcing his death and resurrection. This progressive approach helps readers to answer the question Jesus asks his disciples midway through, *Who do you say that I am?* (lit. *Who do you say me to be?*)(Mark 8:29). The answer may change at the end of each chapter. When we reread Mark's Gospel, the answer may change again, just as our sense of our loved ones changes over time.

Since we cannot cover every story, this volume features in-depth studies of select passages that I have not elsewhere discussed in this

series. I have provided my own fairly literal translations from the Greek and Hebrew in order to allow hearing the stories anew (these translations appear in italics). They may seem choppy—and they are. But what they do is show where in the Greek sentences terms appear, stick more closely to the Greek than English translations that smooth over Mark's occasionally awkward syntax, and remind us all that we are reading a work that was written two thousand years ago You are encouraged to read along with your own Bible. Comparing my literal translation to your English versions will help you focus on hearing the text as if for the first time. And that's not a bad thing.

The chapters locate these passages in their historical context, develop their connections to the Old Testament (the Christian Bible, Part 1), and show how they impact both the events that follow and give added perspective into what is earlier described. This study reveals how the Gospel of Mark spoke to its earliest audiences and how it continues to speak to readers, including me, today.

Initial Questions, Illusive Answers

Who wrote this Gospel? We don't know. All four canonical Gospels were originally anonymous. Early Christian tradition regards Mark as the "John Mark" who accompanied Peter, until he didn't (see Acts 12:12; 15:37-39). Therefore, we'll call the author "Mark." Were I Peter, I might be inclined to sue Mark for defamation, given his generally negative presentation: we'll keep watch for Peter, who emerges in this Gospel as a failed disciple. Yet we know from the other Gospels, from Paul's letters, and from post-biblical tradition that Peter, after denying Jesus, became one of the leaders of the communities gathered in Jesus's name. Already we glimpse Mark's genius: Mark gives us the first half of a story, up to Peter weeping upon hearing the cock crow after he three times denies Jesus. It is our responsibility to continue the story, to move from despair into hope

and from death into new life. Similarly, Mark leaves us at the empty tomb; it is our task to bring resurrection to the story of Jesus and find new life for ourselves as we read, and reread.

When was Mark's Gospel written? The text dates to the first century, probably after the Romans torched the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE. Where? Tradition locates Mark's Gospel in Rome. The first Epistle of Peter (I doubt Peter the apostle wrote this text, but that's another story) states, *She in Babylon, elect together with you, sends you greetings; and so does my son Mark* (1 Peter 5:13; most English translations gloss that unidentified "she" with something like "sister church"; that "she" could be a woman; again, another story for another time). Another tradition sees the Gospel as originating in Egypt, since Mark was considered the first bishop appointed there. Other suggestions include Upper Galilee and Syria.

You can determine for yourselves whether the location would matter. For example, were Mark writing in the wake of Nero's scapegoating of Christians for the great fire in 64 in Rome, the Gospel's first readers may have understood Jesus's own suffering as mirroring theirs. But Mark's import was not, and is not, restricted to whatever an initial audience may have heard. Mark, like the other Gospel writers, likely addressed anyone willing to listen.

Even why Mark wrote remains speculative, and Mark may have had multiple motives: to preserve the memories of Jesus as the first generation of followers died; to focus on Jesus's suffering rather than his miracles; to show that outsiders—a Syro-Phoenician woman, an unnamed woman who anoints Jesus, a centurion guarding the cross—can be more faithful than insiders such as the twelve disciples or the women who followed Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem; to encourage perseverance despite despair, rejection, persecution, even death.

When I first started studying the Bible (for an approximate date on that, when Noah was on the ark), my professors told me the Gospels of Matthew and John were written to Jewish followers of

Jesus, and those of Mark and Luke were addressed to Gentiles. Today, biblical scholars are much more cautious. The arguments for positing a gospel "community" are circular: we read text, we construct the intended audience based on what we've read, and then we interpret the text based on the construction. Circular arguments are always problematic. Mark clearly has Gentile Jesus-followers in mind since Mark explains, sometimes incorrectly, Jewish customs; but I suspect Mark would be delighted were anyone, whether Jew or Samaritan or Gentile, to read this Gospel.

Upshot: Mark's Gospel was written, in Greek, somewhere around or after the year 70, in the Roman Empire. That Mark's is the earliest of the extant Gospels (others may have been lost to history) does not mean that Mark's Gospel is the most accurate with respect to recording what Jesus said or did. The other evangelists may have had access to other earlier or better sources. Further, all the evangelists have their own agendas: they are not simply recording what they heard; they are also writing to develop the faith of their readers and to promote particular understandings of who Jesus is and what it means to follow him.

Had Jesus's followers not been interested in different perspectives, they could have combined all four Gospels into one continuous narrative, as did the second-century Syrian Christian Tatian in his *Diatesseron* (Greek: "through four, one") and as do most Christmas pageants (with Matthew's magi and Luke's shepherds), Passion Narratives (with the famous seven last words of Jesus, taken from all four Gospels), or Resurrection stories (Matthew's Great Commission, Luke's appearance of Jesus to two disciples on the Road to Emmaus; John's Mary Magdalene at the tomb and doubting Thomas).

When I ask my students to tell me what parts of the Gospels they find most memorable or most interesting, few if any cite material from Mark. Popular is Matthew 5–7, the "Sermon on the Mount." In Mark's Gospel, Jesus teaches more by actions than by words.

Many cite Luke's compassionate Jesus who says, *Blessed are you poor* (6:20), tells the parables of the good Samaritan and prodigal son, and prays from the cross, *Father, forgive them* (23:34). I picture Luke's Jesus extending his arms and welcoming people into his embrace. Mark's Jesus is more likely to glare in frustration (grading papers often makes me feel the same way), whether at demons who promote their own kingdom or at disciples who miss his points repeatedly.

Some cite Jesus's self-revelation in John's Gospel, *I am the True Vine* (15:1) . . . . *I am the Bread of Life* (6:35) . . . . *I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life* (14:6), and the famous John 3:16, *For in this way God loved the world that his Son, the only begotten Son, he gave*. Mark's Jesus is less self-revelatory than secretive; he often tells those whom he has healed *not* to make this news public. Mark's Jesus does not say anything "plainly" until chapter 8, midway through the Gospel, when he announces his forthcoming death.

Mark is an acquired taste: savor it slowly, let it lead, and let it challenge.

Mark is an acquired taste: savor it slowly, let it lead, and let it challenge.

The Beginning

The Gospel of Mark begins, *Beginning*. All words matter, especially for texts that were designed to be read aloud and that had to be copied by hand. The Greek for "beginning" is *archē,* as in archaeology. The Septuagint (abbreviated LXX, for "seventy" given the legend of seventy translators who prepared the Greek text from the Hebrew original), the Greek translation of Israel's Scriptures—what Jews eventually called the Tanakh and Christians the Old Testament—starts, *In the beginning (en archē)* (Genesis 1:1). Mark's opening invokes Genesis. We'll hear such echoes of that text throughout the Gospel.

The two next words in Mark 1:1 are *tou euangeliou*, *of the good news* or *of the gospel. Tou* is easy; it's the genitive (the possessive form of the direct article "the"). Now, we've got a problem. There's an old Italian saying, *Traduttore, traditore*, literally, "translator, traitor." Every translator chooses among options. The Greek term, in the nominative form, is *euangelion*. *Eu* is "good," as in eulogy and euphemism. *Angelion*, whence "angel," means "news" or "message"; an angel is, by job description, a "messenger." Thus, Mark's third word is, literally "good news."

Mark again echoes the Septuagint. Isaiah 40:9 offers a *herald of good news* (*euangelizomenos*, a participle), and the good news in this verse is, "Here is your God." The term reappears in Isaiah 52:7, which in the Greek reads, *like the feet of one bringing good news (euangelizomenos), of a report of peace, like the one bringing good news (euangelizomenos) of good things, because I will make your salvation heard, saying to Zion, 'Your God will reign.'*

For ancient Israel, salvation did not mean an eternal blessed afterlife. It meant salvation from this-worldly dangers: slavery, illness, war, famine, or drought. Salvation was palpable. So, too, for the Gospels, the message of salvation, the good news, must be more than a postmortem fate. Salvation also occurs in the here-and-now.

So, too, for the Gospels, the message of salvation, the good news, must be more than a postmortem fate. Salvation also occurs in the here-and-now.

For Mark's contemporaries, *euangelion* was a secular term; it was good news, usually of the political sort: the "good news" of the emperor's birthday, for example, often came with tax relief or gifts to the poor. However, thanks in no small measure to Mark, the term very early became associated with the story of Jesus. The Greek term comes into Latin as *evangelium* (whence "evangelical") and then into Old English as *god* (i.e., "good") + *spel* (i.e., spiel, or story/news),

whence "gospel." Thus, Mark opens with either *[The] beginning of the good news of…* or *[The] beginning of the Gospel of…*. Mark will use *euangelion* six more times (1:14, 15; 8:35; 10:29; 13:10; 14:9; and in the appendix, 16:15). With each use comes additional nuance. Mark again offers an invitation: What "good news" do we find with each story, and then how do we find "good news" as we leave the empty tomb and carry the story forward?

The next words are *Iēsou Christou*, "Of Jesus Christ." Again, a translation problem. (Don't worry; we won't stop at every word!) Jesus's name, in Aramaic, would have been something like Yeshua, from the same Hebrew root as the names Joshua and Hosea, or the term "hosannah," which people shout as Jesus enters Jerusalem (Mark 11:9); it means "Save Now!" or "Save, please!" "Christ" is a Greek word that translates the Hebrew *meshiach*, which means "anointed." *Meshiach* can also be translated "Messiah."

When we read Mark's Gospel, we shall need to determine what kind of Christ, what kind of Messiah, Jesus is.

Do we read Jesus Christ? Jesus Anointed? Jesus Messiah? All are correct, but each has a different nuance. Christ, which is not a last name (I've had students think that Jesus is the son of Mary and Joseph Christ), has the connotation of "lord" or "savior." "Anointed" suggests a commission for a particular task: kings and priests were anointed. *Meshiach* or "messiah" connotes, at least in the Hebrew, less a divine being who saves from sin and death and more a human being who announces the in-breaking of the messianic age signaled by the general resurrection of the dead followed by a final judgment and then peace on earth. Thus, when we read Mark's Gospel, we shall need to determine what kind of Christ, what kind of Messiah, Jesus is.

Compared to contemporaneous literature, Mark's Gospel looks like a biography (the technical term is *bios*, or a "life," as in the term "bio-logy"). Suetonius wrote *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, Philo of Alexandria wrote *Life of Moses*, and Mark was, as far as extant sources go, the first to write a Life of Jesus. In antiquity, people wrote "Lives" less to record what happened and more to provide moral guidance: some biographies depict what an honorable person says or does, so that the "life" serves as a model to be imitated; some depict what a dishonorable person does, so that the "life" serves as the model to be avoided.

For Mark, Jesus the Christ who suffers and dies is the model to follow, hard as that path may be. Mark does not paper over the difficulties of discipleship. Jesus speaks plainly when he teaches, *If any wishes after me to follow, let that one deny himself [or herself] and take up his [or her] cross and follow me* (Mark 8:34; I've included "herself" and "her" because Jesus's followers, and Mark's readers, have never been only men). To take up the cross is to be willing to risk death, indeed to die, for the cause. Mark is not suggesting that disciples court martyrdom; no one, not even Jesus, wants to be put to death. Rather, Mark shows how to face death, with grief and anger, but also with trust and hope.

The last two words of 1:1—*huiou theou*, meaning "Son of God"—are also problematic, but not only because of translation. The first problem is that these words do not occur in all major ancient manuscripts. Since it's easier to explain why scribes added these terms to reinforce Jesus's divine status than to explain why scribes would have omitted the words, many scholars think that Mark did not begin by identifying Jesus as the Son of God. Rather, copyists thought Jesus needed something more at the outset than the title "Anointed One," or "Messiah," which would not initially have held much meaning for Gentile (that is, pagan) readers. The second problem is whether to capitalize "son" in the expression "son of God." Ancient Greek does not give us the convention of capitalizing

proper names or titles, so the choice is ours. The capital "S" indicates a divine being; the lowercase "s" does not.

The title "son of god" is known from Greek and Roman texts: Hercules, Perseus, Theseus, as well as Alexander the Great, Augustus Caesar, and lots of other figures were technically "sons of" one god or another. The previous sentence also shows the problem with capitalization. We do not typically capitalize "god" in referring to Zeus or Odin, but we do in referring to the "God" of the Bible. Hence theology impacts grammar. For ancient Israel, "son of God" was especially associated with the Davidic kingship. Psalm 2:7 (LXX), for example, a "royal psalm," states, *The Lord said to me, 'My son you are; I today have begotten you.*' Psalm 89, another royal psalm, reads in the Greek translation, *He himself will call me, 'My Father you are, my God, and the upholder of my salvation!' And I a firstborn will appoint him, the highest of the kings of the earth* (Psalm 89:26-27/ LXX Psalm 88:27-28).

So far, we have a beginning, something new but something that also concerns the Book of Genesis. We have "good news," but the content is vague: Good news for whom? Regarding what? Now or in the future or both? "Son of God" may have something to do with Davidic kingship as well as appeal to Gentile readers who know of heroes with divine paternity. As we work our way through the Gospel, we'll find more allusions to the Scriptures of Israel, a developing sense of the good news in terms of exorcism and healings, provision of food, and a death whose meaning we readers must determine for ourselves.

Where Are We Going?

For the rest of this introduction, we'll see how Mark begins to tease out the contents of this "good news." It cannot be only that Jesus dies as a *ransom for many* (Mark 10:45), since Jesus will not die until chapter 15. Indeed, Mark may have written a Gospel to supplement Paul's letters, since Paul makes much of Jesus's death and

resurrection but in his letters says very little about his life. Mark's good news begins with the preaching of John the Baptizer, Jesus's own baptism and temptation, the calling of his first disciples, and several healing stories. For this introduction, we'll develop those first several verses about John.

Mark's good news begins with the preaching of John the Baptizer, Jesus's own baptism and temptation, the calling of his first disciples, and several healing stories.

For chapter 1, as with all the chapters in this book, we must choose which among Mark's numerous stories to highlight. Chapter 1, which covers the rest of Mark 1–4, looks first at John the Baptizer. Here we address Mark's repurposing of ancient Israel's prophecies, the question of Jesus's sinlessness, and the role of repentance. We turn then to the call of Levi the tax collector, and what it would have meant for Jesus and his contemporaries to associate with tax collectors. We'll talk about fasting, a ritual still practiced by Jews, Christians, and many others; and we'll develop this point in terms of how we often misunderstand the practices of different religious traditions. We conclude this chapter with a look at Jesus's parables, especially that of the sower in Mark 4, to see how stories that are confusing, even for the disciples, are stories that help us realize the dangers of being insiders: the privilege of being an insider can make us complacent, intolerant, even wrong.

Chapter 2, on Mark 5–7, takes us to Jesus's rejection in Nazareth, a story that both Matthew and Luke rewrite, likely because they were uncomfortable with the idea that Jesus was incapable of performing miracles. We next look at the mission of the disciples in the light of the death of John the Baptizer, an "intercalated" or "sandwiched" story in which one helps to interpret the other. As Mark alerts us, the line between miracle and martyrdom, discipleship and death, is very

thin. This chapter ends with the story of Jesus's debate with Pharisees over handwashing, ritual purity, and morality. Here we learn about the historical Pharisees, explore how ritual can bring meaning and order to life, and discuss how metaphors help us think in new ways about values and behavior.

Chapter 3 brings us to the Gospel's turning point, Mark 8–10, where the evangelist takes us from impenetrable parables and commands to keep news of miracles quiet to Jesus's stark announcement that he is going to suffer and die, and on the third day rise. We'll unpack Jesus's statement that some of his disciples will not taste death before they see the Kingdom come in power. Then we climb the mountain, traditionally identified as Mount Tabor, to witness Jesus's metamorphosis (Luke uses the term "transfiguration," but Mark really does use the term "metamorphosis"), where his divinity leaks through his humanity and where he appears with Moses and Elijah (9:2-13). We then look at one of, to my mind, Mark's most profound lines: the father of a demon-possessed boy who begs Jesus, *Help my unbelief* (9:24). We end this chapter with the third Passion prediction (10:32-34, 45) better to understand Jesus as the suffering servant, the martyr, and the ransom for many.

Chapter 4 begins the Passion Narrative with Jesus's entry into Jerusalem in Mark 11. We encounter one of the stories that my students resist: the cursing of the fig tree. Following is our discussion of the parable of the wicked tenants from Mark 12—which, like the story of the fig tree, I find disturbing. Accepting the allegory of the "Lord of the vineyard" as God, his murdered son as Jesus, and the tenants as the Jerusalem political establishment, we also look to the parable as an invitation to recognize, and then to repudiate, violence.

Chapter 5 concerns Mark 13, the "little apocalypse," where Jesus predicts the destruction of the Temple and then details, in highly symbolic language, the end of the world as we know it. His description includes the coming in glory and power of the Son of Humanity (often translated "Son of Man": the Greek is *anthrōpos*, whence

"anthropology"), the title he uses as his self-designation. We'll see how this chapter both encourages and challenges, both assures and keeps us readers from becoming complacent.

Chapter 6, on Mark 14 and 15, focuses on two figures who continue both to fascinate and to disturb me and, perhaps, you. First, we meet the enigmatic Judas Iscariot, fated to betray Jesus. Mark's picture of Judas forces questions of predestination and personal responsibility, of the inexplicability of evil and of the limits of forgiveness. Second, we come to Mark's most enigmatic figure, the young man who flees, naked, from Gethsemane.

The conclusion brings us to Mark 16: its initial eight verses that describe the women's visit to the tomb, their encounter with a young man (who may be the streaker of Mark 14, or an angel, or both), and the women's flight in fear and silence. For some of the early followers of Jesus, Mark's initial ending—which I think is brilliant!—was insufficient. The so-called "longer" ending of Mark is where we find the commendation of taking up serpents and drinking poison. Given the Gospel's downplaying of miracles in favor of the suffering of Jesus, Mark likely would have been appalled at these additions.

I think Mark wanted people to read this Gospel, or, if they could not read (which would be most people in antiquity), to hear the text, again and again. Each time through, new mysteries and marvels, new revelations and reflections, appear. The text is inexhaustible in meaning.

CHAPTER 1

The Good News Begins

Mark 1–4

John and His Baptism

Mark's Gospel was not simply read from a scroll, page by page; more likely, the reader would explain the text passage by passage. Otherwise, the opening is like whiplash. First, we have the *Beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Messiah* with *Son of God* perhaps added. And immediately we get a quote that is a mash-up of verses from the prophets, a quote that is less about Jesus than it is about John the Baptizer. Mysteries abound: Who is this John? Why is he dunking people in the Jordan River? Why, if he promotes repentance, is Jesus coming to him—did Jesus sin?

Mark 1:2-3 reads:

> *Just as it is written in Isaiah the prophet, "Look, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way. A voice crying in the desert, ['You (pl.)] prepare the way of the lord. Straight [you (pl.)] make his paths."*

Mark likes Isaiah (Isaiah is the only named prophet in the Gospel), but despite Mark's attribution, the citation combines Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3-4. Malachi 3:1 says, *See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me.* I imagine Mark putting pen to papyrus and, with a smile, thinking, "I wonder if readers will know that I am quoting not just Isaiah but also Malachi?" Mark may be imagining even more.

The opening, "Look"—or "Behold"; I opted for "look" since I've yet to hear someone say to me, "AJ, behold"—prompts us to picture the storyteller pointing, and then the heads in the audience turning. At whom do we look? The "messenger" from God. The term is *angelos*, so not only do we look, we also hear: we hear an echo of that opening term *eu-angeliou*. First there is a good message, and now there is a messenger to begin its proclamation.

Mark immediately raises questions about the popular search for heavenly messengers in contemporary contexts. I wonder: Why look for angels with harps and haloes when the messages we need to hear may be from the friend who calls to ask how we are doing? We look for a word from God and so for good news in ancient texts, but we may also hear it coming from shelters or nonprofits or encampments of asylum seekers at the border. There are angels, good-news givers, all around, if we have ears to hear.

Next, audiences who know the initial line is from Malachi will likely also know that Malachi ends by predicting the coming of the prophet Elijah to announce the messianic age. Elijah, introduced in 1 Kings, never dies; rather, he is in bodily form, in heaven (via that sweet chariot that swung low), which means he can return at any time. In the Jewish tradition, Elijah attends every Passover seder (we open the door for him); he is sort of like a Jewish version of Santa Claus coming down the chimney. Santa delivers presents and gets milk and cookies (the reindeer get carrots); Elijah signals the promise of redemption and gets sweet wine. For Mark, John the Baptizer takes the role of Elijah, here to announce the arrival of the Messiah. In 9:13, after the Metamorphosis where Elijah appears, Jesus tells his disciples that *Elijah has come*. The reference to this returning Elijah is to John the Baptizer.

Making Mark's citation to Malachi even more meaningful: in the Septuagint, the basis of the church's Old Testament, Malachi is the last book. The Jewish canon (the Masoretic text) as developed in the Middle Ages tucks the Prophets in the middle and ends with

2 Chronicles. By alluding to Malachi, Mark again shows the continuity from the Scriptures of the Hellenistic Jewish community to the Gospel of Jesus.

Finally, for Mark, the "your" as in "before your face" and to "prepare your way" is Jesus. John the Baptizer is, for Mark, the messenger who comes before Jesus, both physically, to baptize him, and socially, to prepare anyone who will listen for his messianic message.

Understanding ancient texts as referring to something in the present is a not a misreading. The authors of some of the Dead Sea Scrolls saw their community as predicted by the ancient prophets as well. The meaning of a text will always outstrip what its author intended. New generations will ask new questions; new intertexts will provide additional insight into the original text. We continually pose to great literature questions that the authors may not have considered; sometimes we find new answers.

We continually pose to great literature questions that the authors may not have considered; sometimes we find new answers.

Mark next sees something in Isaiah 40:2-3 that the author of those verses may not have seen. Mark finds new meaning, in effect, by redefining terms and changing the punctuation. Since technically punctuation hadn't yet been invented, such adaptation was easy to do.

Isaiah was writing to the covenant community in sixth-century BCE Babylon. The prophet's good news to them is that their exile is ending. King Cyrus of Persia (today's Iran) has conquered Babylon (today's Iraq) and is repatriating the Judeans taken into captivity. Politically, Cyrus needs allies on the Mediterranean; theologically, Cyrus is for Isaiah "God's anointed," "God's messiah," or "God's Christ" (Isaiah 45:1) who ends the exile. The community in Isaiah's time was out of place; for Mark's readers, whether in antiquity or

today, there still may be a sense of dislocation. Part of the good news of Mark's Gospel is finding "home," as we'll see as we continue.

Now we come to punctuation. Isaiah wrote, were we to punctuate, *A voice crying, 'In the desert, prepare the way of the Lord'* (40:3). The prophet exhorts: go to the desert and build a highway from Babylon to Jerusalem, because you are going home. Isaiah calls for road construction. Mark moves the imagined comma and the imagined quotation mark: *A voice crying in the desert* (1:3), and that voice is the voice of the Baptizer dipping people into the Jordan.

Along with repurposing Malachi and Isaiah, Mark encodes additional hints about Jesus's mission. For example, "way," as in "prepare the way" in Greek is *hodos*, the origin of the English term "odometer," a mileage indicator. According to Acts 9:2 (see also 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22), the early followers of Jesus were not called "Christians." They were known as the "followers of the way" (*hodos*). Isaiah spoke about building a way, a highway; Mark repurposes: the way being constructed is the way Jesus's disciples will follow.

This way is "of the Lord," and "Lord" in Greek is *kyrios*; the underlying Hebrew is *YHWH*. The pneumonic (to remember that the "Lord" translates *YHWH*) is that YHWH has four letters and is referred to as the "Tetragrammaton," a Greek word that, appropriately, means "four letters," so also "Lord" has four letters. But Mark imbues the term with additional meaning, for "Lord" (again, the problem with whether to capitalize) is the title Jesus's followers give him.

For Isaiah the "Lord" is YHWH; for Mark, this Lord is Jesus. Nowhere does the Gospel clearly designate Jesus as the divine "Lord"; thus, readers must determine for themselves, when someone identifies Jesus as *kyrios*, should we think "lord" with a lowercase "l" and the sense of "sir," or should we think "Lord" with an uppercase "L" and with the sense of "God incarnate."

Who is preparing this "way"? The imperative verbs are in the plural, as "Y'all" (I live in Nashville), or "yous" (I do recognize that "yous guys" is on Stanford's list of terms to avoid) do the preparation:

anyone who can hear Isaiah's voice or Mark's Gospel. It is the responsibility of "all y'all" to do the preparatory work.

Mark 1:4-8 describes this mysterious figure:

> *John, the one baptizing, appeared in the desert, and he was proclaiming a baptism of repentance regarding the forgiving of sins. And were coming out to him all the Judean region and the Jerusalemites, all, and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins. And John was clothed in camel hair, and a leather belt around his waist, and he was eating locusts and field honey. And he proclaimed, saying, "Is coming the one stronger than me, after me, of whom not am I worthy, bending, to loose the thong of his sandal. I baptized you by water, but he himself will baptize you in the Holy Spirit."*

Then as now, location matters. The Greek term for "desert" or "wilderness" recollects Israel's forty-year sojourn before entering the Promised Land. The setting suggests the beginning of a new way of life, which is what Jesus will shortly proclaim when he states *The Kingdom of God has come near* (Mark 1:15). The setting also suggests a retreat from comfort. Mark is not talking about glamping. Mark is suggesting a reset: leave behind what makes us comfortable; open ourselves to new possibilities including, as did ancient Israel in the wilderness, a renewed sense of dependence on God. What needs to be left behind? What needs to be lifted up?

What needs to be confessed? The expression *baptism of repentance regarding the forgiving of sins* (1:4) needs unpacking. The ritual, which likely meant full-body immersion, is related to the *miqveh*, the Jewish bath for ritual purity, but it has a different function. Jewish washing, including the handwashing in Mark 7:1-20, concerned ritual purity and not sin. One immersed after contacting a corpse (e.g., preparing and burying a body), menstruation or ejaculation, childbirth, etc. Nothing to do with sin here. Just as Mark repurposes the words of the prophets, John repurposes the ritual.

We might think of John as promoting an ancient altar call, an invitation for people to repent and then rededicate themselves toward doing what God wants. Such repentance is needed, since as John puts it, someone stronger than he is coming, and this coming one will baptize not with water but in the Holy Spirit. John thereby suggests that the present, right now, is the time to repent. Repenting means fixing broken relationships and so doing one's best to restore community. Public testimony, and John's baptism is a public act, means that others present are responsible for keeping the repentant one on the right path.

Repenting means fixing broken relationships and so doing one's best to restore community.

The first step in repentance is to confess one's sins. The next step is to make restitution where it is possible, and the related third is to turn from sin to righteousness. The Hebrew term for repentance, *teshuva*, literally means to "turn" as in turn away from the evil and toward the good. The Greek term in Mark 1:4, *metanoia*, also has the sense of changing one's thought patterns.

Many commentaries suggest that John is engaging in an anti-Temple protest by taking away the priests' monopoly on granting forgiveness. According to this reading, one need not go to the Temple or pay for a sacrifice; one only needed to go to John, whose penitence is cost-free. This view, while it has a cachet especially with people who are "spiritual but not religious" or who do not appreciate the communal aspects of religious affiliation, misunderstands Jewish practice and belief. God was, and is, always ready to forgive the repentant sinner. Sacrifice is not required to be in a right relation with God. Rather, John's baptism is a personal reset in light of eschatological urgency. So, too, a tent revival is not a replacement for regular church attendance; the two complement each other.

None of Jesus's followers, as far as we know, rejected Temple worship. Paul refers to it as one of the irrevocable gifts God gave

to the Jews (Romans 9:4 mentions "worship" or "service" [Greek: *latreia*], which meant the worship in the Jerusalem Temple), and Acts shows the followers, including Paul, not only worshipping in the Temple but also sacrificing there (see Acts 21:26). Since the Temple worked on a sliding scale, people who wished to make an offering, as do Mary and Joseph in Luke 2:24, were able to do so regardless of economic status. Comparable would be passing a collection plate on a Sunday morning in church: people give what they can, and if they cannot give anything, they are still welcome.

As for John, many people at the time regarded him as a prophet. While what we call "classical prophecy" and hence biblical prophetic texts end with Malachi, our first-century historian Josephus speaks of Essenes as having prophetic abilities. He mentions "sign prophets" such as Theudas and "the Egyptian," a prophet named Jesus the son of Ananias, and another prophet named Menahem who both predicted the rule of Herod the Great and exhorted Herod to behave in a just manner. Josephus even attributes prophetic abilities to himself. John would have registered to some Jews as a prophet, as did Jesus.

When I first heard that John wore a "camel-hair coat," I thought of high-end shopping. Today's (expensive) camel-hair coats are made from the hair of the bactrian camel (two humps), with the industry centered in Mongolia and surrounding regions, but the dromedary (one hump) is native to the Middle East. John likely wore what Zechariah 13:4 calls a "hairy mantle" (which, contrary to my initial impression, has nothing to do with the shelf over the fireplace, and just as well), a garment marking an individual as a prophet.

As for his diet, locusts combined with wild honey suggests John is living off the land. On the other hand, the Greek term for "locust" sounds like the term for "honey cake." Mark may be hinting at manna, the "bread from heaven" ancient Israel ate in the wilderness (Exodus 16:31; Numbers 11:8; popular etymology proposes that "manna" comes from the Hebrew *man hu*, meaning "What is that?"). Other explanations strike me as less likely, for example, that locusts

are related to the plagues in Egypt or that honey concerned promised land, flowing with "milk and honey" (e.g., Exodus 3:8). It is our task, or gift, as readers to determine what, and when, symbolism is in play or which readings we find palatable.

John's message is, like his setting, one of anticipation. Some in John's original audience, already disciples, would understand "baptism in the Holy Spirit" in terms of spiritual gifts, such as speaking in tongues (see Acts 2; 10; 19; 1 Corinthians 12–14) or healing. We might also think about the Holy Spirit as "possessing" people, but in a good way. If we are possessed by the Holy Spirit, the Spirit then works in and through us. Just as Satan can possess people, so can the Spirit.

The Baptism of Jesus

Mark's opening scene ends with Jesus's baptism. In Matthew's version, John insists that Jesus, being the greater of the two, baptize him, and Jesus responds that John should perform the ritual for the sake of "righteousness" (one of Matthew's favorite terms). In Luke's Gospel, John and Jesus are cousins, and even when they are *in utero*, John acknowledges Jesus's superiority (1:41). In the Fourth Gospel, John never baptizes Jesus (there's a baptism scene in John 1, but no baptism). Mark, who has had John announce his subordinate status vis-à-vis Jesus, offers the following unembellished account in 1:9-11:

> *And it was in those days, came Jesus from Nazareth of Galilee, and he was baptized in the Jordan by John. And immediately, coming up out of the water, he saw splitting the heavens, and the Spirit as a dove coming down to him. And a voice came out of the heavens, 'You are my Son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased.'*

John is baptizing for the remission of sin, and John baptizes Jesus. The logical conclusion is that Jesus had sinned. The Epistle to the Hebrews (which, I find myself consistently noting, Jews generally don't read since it is not the Jewish canon) states that Jesus *in every*

respect has been tested (or tempted, or brought to trial) as we are, yet without sin (Hebrews 4:15). We can, following this epistle as well as later church teaching, regard Jesus as sinless, or we can, in Mark's account, see him as knowing what it is like to sin, to repent, and to be forgiven.

There is a third option beyond the "he sinned" and "he did not sin" to explain Jesus's baptism. Jewish life then, and now, is communitarian. On the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), we pray: "forgive *us*. . . ." The "*Our* Father" (note that "our"!) prayer includes the verse, "Forgive *us our*" debts, sins, trespasses—all are viable readings. Atoning in the plural, as being a member of a community means that one person's sin impacts the many. Even if we were not personally responsible for committing a particular sin, we still atone as a community. By accepting John's baptism, Jesus can be seen as accepting his role as a part of the human community. He also sets an example for his followers.

According to Mark, the heavens ripped or split apart (the Greek verb is *schidzō*, whence "schism"). The same term appears in Mark 15:38 to describe the tearing of the Temple veil. The symbolism of the veil does not, contrary to some claims, indicate that forgiveness is now available, outside the Temple, to Gentiles, people who were ritually impure (e.g., suffering from vaginal hemorrhages or leprosy), or the poor. The Temple could not and did not restrict either forgiveness or salvation. Nor was there a barrier between humanity and divinity that needed to be broken. The opening of the heavens at the beginning of Mark's Gospel and the voice that descends is known in Hebrew as a *Bat Qol*, the "daughter of the voice." This voice speaks in rabbinic literature as well. The opening of the heavens here, repeated at the cross, tells us that Jesus was never alone, even though he cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me" (Mark 15:34, quoting Psalm 22:1). God has ripped the heavens, as Jews rip a garment when in mourning. God is present, even when we most acutely feel the absence.

The dove can recall the dove Noah sent to determine if it were safe to leave the ark (Genesis 8:8-12), or gentleness (Psalm 74:19), or a variety of other images that "dove" or, for that matter, "pigeon," would evoke. It seems to me historically plausible that as Jesus rose from the water, he saw a dove and interpreted it as a divine message. This approach means being open to the natural world. It means heavenly signs can be as ordinary as a pigeon strutting on the sidewalk. It means that all signs require interpretation.

This baptism engages our senses: the touch of John's hands, the wet of the water on the skin, the vision of the dove, the hearing of the voice. For Mark, the voice speaks directly to Jesus; it is personal, even intimate: *You are my son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased* (1:11). The voice confirms Jesus's mission. Mark here also unites Jesus with the audience of the Gospel: *we* like Jesus hear the voice from heaven. *We* know what the other people coming to John that day do not.

This voice from heaven can be taken as announcing an adoption; for Mark, Jesus's role as God's anointed comes not at conception or birth; it comes when Jesus submits to John's baptism. The voice is also a mash-up of Psalm 2:7 LXX (a royal psalm depicting God telling the Davidic king, *My son you are; I today have begotten you*), Isaiah 42:1 (one of the so-called "servant songs," which reads, *Here is my servant [or slave], I support him, my chosen [in whom] is pleased my soul; I give my spirit upon him; justice to the nations he will bring forth*) and perhaps Genesis 22:2 (God's command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, *the son whom you love*). Again, Mark repurposes the words of the ancient prophets. These early texts can be seen, retrospectively, as pointing to Jesus, but they will always have additional meanings, whether in their own historical contexts, or as read by (non-messianic) Jews, or as read by anyone who sees the texts as still having something to say. Anyone can be a beloved child, a suffering servant, a seeker of justice.

DISCOVER THE GOOD NEWS IN THE BIBLE'S EARLIEST GOSPEL

AJ Levine has once again, through her brilliant, accessible scholarship, opened up the Bible in fresh and exciting ways. I was amazed at how many times I was taken by surprise by a detail or observation that I just hadn't seen before. You'll want a highlighter on hand when you read this book!

—**Josh Scott**, Lead Pastor at GracePointe Church, Nashville, Tennessee, and author of *Bible Stories for Grown-Ups: Reading Scripture with New Eyes*

Amy-Jill Levine's characteristically rich and witty scholarship provides fresh insights into Mark's Gospel that will benefit even the most experienced student of Scripture. She deftly weaves ancient understandings with modern interpretation as she moves us through the Gospel at a quick pace. This book will be a gift for preachers, teachers, and churches seeking to dig into Mark's good news.

—**Dee Dee Porter Carson**, Pastor, First Presbyterian Church of Virginia Beach, Virginia

Amy-Jill Levine has gifted us with a clear, no-nonsense guided tour through the Gospel of Mark, conveying the feel of the words, places, people and encounters with marvelous clarity and freshness. She bushwhacks through hackneyed spins on familiar stories that now don't seem so familiar. Veteran and rookie readers alike will be drawn deeply into her clever, wise takes on Mark.

—**James Howell**, Senior Pastor, Myers Park United Methodist Church, Charlotte, North Carolina

AJ Levine has done it again! She has written a careful analysis of the provocative Gospel of Mark with seriousness and humor that compels one to continue examining the great mystery and humanity of Jesus and his mission. This is a must-read for anyone interested in spirituality, theology, and desiring to see a fresh interpretation of this beloved Gospel. What feeds my spirit is the emphasis on how we live, and its message of hope.

—**Jerra Jenrette**, Chair, Intentional Faith Formation Team, Edinboro United Methodist Church, Edindoro, Pennsylvania

Professor Levine gives permission to the reader to move away from dogma and see characters and stories in the Bible from a different perspective.

—**Hyiwot Teshome**, Pastor and Head of Staff, First Presbyterian Church, Johnstown, Pennsylvania

Amy-Jill Levine ("AJ") is Rabbi Stanley M. Kessler Distinguished Professor of New Testament and Jewish Studies at Hartford International University for Religion and Peace and University Professor of New Testament and Jewish Studies Emerita, Mary Jane Werthan Professor of Jewish Studies Emerita, and Professor of New Testament Studies Emerita at Vanderbilt University. An internationally renowned scholar and teacher, she is the author of numerous books including *The Difficult Words of Jesus: A Beginner's Guide to His Most Perplexing Teachings*, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*, *Entering the Passion of Jesus: A Beginner's Guide to Holy Week*, *Light of the World: A Beginner's Guide to Advent*, *Sermon on the Mount: A Beginner's Guide to the Kingdom of Heaven*, and *Signs and Wonders: A Beginner's Guide to the Miracles of Jesus*. She is also the coeditor of *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*. AJ is the first Jew to teach New Testament at Rome's Pontifical Biblical Institute. In 2021, she was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. AJ describes herself as an unorthodox member of an Orthodox synagogue and a Yankee Jewish feminist who, until 2021, taught New Testament in a Christian divinity school in the buckle of the Bible Belt.

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CONTEXT

PUTTING SCRIPTURE IN ITS PLACE

Josh Scott

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The Family Bible

One of the staples of almost every house I entered as a kid was the Family Bible. Are you familiar? It was a large, oversized Bible, with an ivory cover, and "Holy Bible" written in gilded letters. It was also placed in a central location, usually on a coffee table in the living or family room, so it would be in regular view. My family had one as well, and even though we didn't read out of it very often (we used our smaller, personal Bibles for study), its meaning was important and symbolic. Its prominent placement signified the centrality of the Bible for our lives, as did the fact that it was a repository of our family history. The dates of our births, deaths, marriages, and baptisms were all recorded in that Bible. In a real way our lives were bound up in and with the Bible.

So, to say that the Bible has been an important part of my life would be a massive understatement. I spent my childhood immersed in all things biblical—I memorized verses, learned the stories, and even carried a Bible to school most days. As I became an adult, I developed an even deeper interest in the Bible. I took courses in undergrad and eventually did a master's degree, which meant learning the languages and studying the world that created the stories, poems, and letters we

call Scripture. I have not only given my life to learning about the Bible, but I have also loved the Bible. The work to which I have committed myself has been and is still a labor of love. That's why I wrote the book you are reading right now, because I love the Bible. My sincere hope is that you can sense that love and appreciation as you journey through the pages ahead.

WHY WE READ THE BIBLE

Isn't it fascinating that we are still talking about the Bible, thousands of years after the contents were originally written? I can't imagine that any of the authors of any of the texts within the canon of Scripture had any clue that their work would transcend time and location the way it has. Not only is the Bible the best-selling book of all time (five billion sold), but it has spawned a massive industry of Bible adjacent paraphernalia—wall hangings, coffee mugs, tee shirts, and tattoos, just to name a few. It would blow their minds, and I bet they'd have questions about royalties.

Not only is it the best-selling, but it's also the most talked about publication in print. Whether on social media or in a doctor's office waiting room, when the Bible comes up, people have opinions. Strong opinions. Which brings us to a really important point about reading the Bible: We all have our reasons for doing it.

For some of us, we are trying to get closer to God. That's one of the reasons that we did our "quiet time" back in my youth group days. We were encouraged to go off, alone, and spend time reading the Bible and praying for insight from God about what we read.

For others of us, we come to the text looking for encouragement and hope. We scour chapters and verses looking for something that

could be applicable to the particular moment we are in, something that would be just the shot in the arm we need to keep going.

For others still, we come to the Bible looking for something that might inspire us and empower us to overcome the challenges and obstacles we encounter. When we find such a verse or passage, we might commit it to memory or even post it somewhere we will see it regularly, so that it serves as a reminder to keep going. These are all meaningful and valid reasons to engage the Bible.

We come to the Bible looking for something that might inspire us and empower us to overcome the challenges and obstacles we encounter.

Yet, at times, our approach to the Bible can end up being more about searching for passages or verses that serve other purposes. Instead of looking for inspiration or encouragement, we can easily begin to use the Bible as a source to prove our rightness, and of course, others' wrongness. As we will see, this quickly leads to the weaponization of Scripture and this way of approaching the Bible has harmed countless people over the past several thousand years. While it's true that not every reading that is divorced from context is harmful, many of them are deeply so. We'll see examples of both in this book, the benign readings that miss the context but aren't terribly harmful and the readings that have wounded and traumatized people under the guise of being faithful to Scripture. It's so important to both name and reject the latter, and, at the same time, to also offer a reading that is grounded in context.

PUTTING THE BIBLE IN ITS PLACE

Everything and everyone have a place. What I mean is, we are all from *somewhere*, and that place of origin shapes almost everything about us. I am originally from Appalachia, born and raised to adulthood in a community in the hills of southeastern Kentucky and southwestern West Virginia. While I have spent more than half of my life now outside of that community, it still shapes me, my sense of identity, and my understanding of the world. My friend Brad Davis, a United Methodist pastor who is from, and still lives in, my home region likes to say that we are not just *from* this place, we are *of* this place. Every time he says it, I feel it deep in my bones. I am of that place, and I can't be un-of-it.

The same thing is true of the Bible. It's *of* particular places and people. The poems and stories, the letters and laws, are all shaped by the land, the people, and the events that produced them. The Bible doesn't have *a* context, singular, but contexts, plural. Let's spend a few moments fleshing this out more fully.

To begin, the Bible is not a book. It is a collection of books, a library. This particular library was created over the course of about one thousand years, from the 900s BCE to around 135 CE. However, there are some older snippets than that found in certain books. For example, scholars date the *Song of Deborah* (Judges 5:2-31) and the *Song of the Sea* (Exodus 15:1-18) as older than both Judges and Exodus, perhaps by two to three centuries than some of the other sources that make up those books. Think about how much has changed societally and technologically between 1960 and now. In sixty-plus years we've experienced drastic and dramatic transformations of life and how we understand it. Now think about that one thousand-ish year period during which

the texts that comprise the Bible were written. How much change occurred? We are not dealing with a single context, but several contexts. During that period the land and people that are the central focus of the biblical narrative, Israel and Judah, experienced domination at the hands of various empires: Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Greek, and Roman. Each of these represent different policies and pressures that would impact the Israelite and Judahite communities, and as a result, impact both how and what the authors wrote.

That span of time means we are also dealing with multiple authors of the biblical texts, and some books are even the product of multiple authors representing multiple time periods. This means that throughout the Bible we are hearing multiple voices and perspectives, and they are interacting with one another over the generations. This is why I don't prefer the language of *contradiction* when it comes to the Bible. When we encounter passages that say different things or offer contrasting perspectives we shouldn't be surprised. It's not a "gotcha" moment for the Bible. That's what we should expect as we hear from our spiritual ancestors who are, from different times and contexts, wrestling with the same complexities and questions we are still sorting out today: What does it mean to be human? What does it mean to be a good human? Who is God and what is God like? Why do we suffer? Why do bad things happen to good people? How do we partner with God to make the world a better place?

The reality is within Scripture we are witnessing conversations between generations of our spiritual ancestors, and as we engage and interpret, we are joining our voices within that conversation. No wonder the Bible is called *holy* and considered *sacred*. The entire experience, the writing and preserving and engaging, then, now, and in the future,

are holy and sacred tasks. We not only have the opportunity to meet God through these stories in some mysterious way, but also our ancestors and ourselves. I'll say more about the last part, us, at the conclusion of the book.

Not only do individual books, and in some cases specific sections of individual books, have their own contexts, but the canon of Scripture itself is a context. So is how these texts and this canon have been interpreted over generations. When we approach the Bible, we are joining a large cloud of witnesses that have come before us, and we are making our own contributions that will become part of that very cloud of witnesses for future generations.

As I typed those last words I was reminded of my great grandmother. Her name was Wilma, but we called her "Maw Bill." She was a gem of a human. Born in 1919, she was in her sixties when I made my grand entrance into the world. She wasn't just a great-grandmother in title alone. She really was the best. Before I started school many of my days were spent at her house, right next door to mine. She was at my beck and call. She cooked for me. She played with me. She let me do many things my parents would never have been okay with. She was, in a word, amazing. My favorite thing was when she told me stories of our relatives who had passed before my birth. The way she talked about them made them present to me in some way. I had never met them, but I knew them, I could talk about their lives and, in a strange way I still don't fully understand, I knew them.

I feel similarly about the writers of the Bible. They have given me a gift. As they recount the stories and experiences of our spiritual ancestors, they have made them real to me in ways I can barely fathom. They are present, even though they are past. Which means I wrestle with

them, ask questions of them, listen to them, and learn from them, even today. Their voices were not silenced when their time here ended. That, I think, is one of the great gifts of Scripture.

A COMPLICATED RELATIONSHIP

My guess is that, if you are reading a book about the Bible, you also probably have some sort of relationship with the text. In my experience as a pastor, I recognize that, because of all we've already discussed, many of us have a complicated relationship with Scripture. That's more than okay. It's justified. The Bible has been co-opted and used to condemn, shame, and exclude people for far too long. This library we call the Bible is the product of marginalized communities, and to use it to further marginalize is the most tragic of ironies.

How does that happen, we might ask? It is the product and result of approaches to the Bible that ignore the context of a passage or story, and instead, whether accidentally or intentionally, then seek to apply it to a specific person or situation. The following are a few examples of that kind of approach.

The *Ransom Note* approach. While the term might not be familiar (I think I made it up?), the practice likely will be. Think about movies in which someone is kidnapped, and the kidnapper sends a "ransom note" detailing the threat of what will happen if their demands are not met. Demands, followed by threat. The letters are often snipped from different magazines, creating quite the mismatched image, all designed to convey both the demand and threat. This is how many people have been taught to read the Bible. Texts are collected from various parts of the Bible and cobbled together, without a thought to the individual

contexts of all those passages, and are applied to situations or people, often with an implicit (if not explicit) demand and threat. "Fall in line, or you'll be in trouble with God," is the vibe. This kind of proof texting was honestly the first way I was taught to engage Scripture. We memorized verses and stories, without much thought to how they fit into their own context, or the larger context of Scripture. It wasn't malicious for me, then. It was just all I knew.

This was especially experienced in contrasting theologies about an event called "The Rapture." If you didn't grow up with *left-behind theology* you are blessed and I don't want to introduce you to it here. However, it is an example of this approach to Scripture. A verse from Ezekiel here, a splash of the Gospels or Paul there, and top it off with a literal, non-contextual reading of the Book of Revelation, and you have a *Ransom Notes* approach to *Eschatology* that has become embedded and unquestioned in evangelical theology. When placed and intercepted within their own contexts, the passages cobbled together do not create a coherent *end-times* narrative.

The *Magic 8 Ball* approach. Do you remember the *Magic 8 Ball*? Imagine an 8 ball from the game of pool. Inside it's filled with a liquid and twenty-sided die that contains various answers like "yes," "no," "maybe," or "ask again later." The point is to ask a question, shake the *Magic 8 Ball*, and then get an answer that would help determine your next steps. This leads to a couple different ways of engaging the Bible.

First, it leads us to see the Bible as an answer book. In the summer of 2002, I served on a team at a summer camp. It was a big deal for me, because it was the same camp I attended during high school, and it was during the summer of my senior year that I realized that being a pastor was the vocation to which I wanted to commit my life. That

being the case, serving on staff that summer was a huge deal for me. Every morning our team went to an early breakfast before the campers flooded the dining hall, and every morning we participated in what we called "Dropping It." This entailed one of us opening one of those big family bibles I described earlier and randomly pointing a finger at a verse. That was our verse of the day. Sometimes it was thought-provoking. Sometimes it was hilarious. To be sure, we didn't take it seriously; it was for fun. But the reality behind it was that many of us had actually used this practice to try to make decisions before. Who should I date? Where should I go to college? What should my major be? Surely, we thought, there was a verse for that. Right?

Another example of this approach might be helpful. When I was in elementary school my classmates and I discovered that the Teacher's Edition of our textbooks had all the answers to our homework in the back. This led to many, many attempts at getting those books so we could check our homework before turning it in. Many people see the Bible in the same way, that it's filled with answers to the questions life brings. This doesn't seem to be what Scripture is actually doing. The Bible asks far more questions than it answers. The writers of Scripture weren't crafting an answer book but were instead cataloging their questions. They, just like us, struggled with the big questions of existence. At times they experienced some clarity, and at other times they just stood in awe and wonder at the reality of existence.

When we come to the Bible expecting linear and literal answers to our questions we will, more times than not, either walk away frustrated or we will attempt to use the Bible in a way it was never intended to be used. Pulling random quotes from a passage of a collection of books like the Bible, without considering the context, can lead to serious harm to

ourselves or others. One of the gifts of Scripture is not that it answers all possible questions, but that it teaches us how to ask good questions, to be open to the mystery that is faith. Placing the passages and stories in context will not always give us answers, per se, but it will often help us learn what questions might be helpful, and how to begin to engage those questions.

The *Hermeneutic of Assumption* approach. *Hermeneutic* is a fancy word that means "how we interpret the Bible." A hermeneutic is the lens through which we read a text and make decisions about what it means. Everyone has a lens—you, me, everyone. It's impossible to not bring with us our understandings of the world and the experiences that have shaped us. The key, I've found, is to be aware of our lenses and how they might bring biases to our work of interpretation. One further caveat—everyone is interpreting the Bible. No one, including me, has the capability to just "tell you what the Bible says." We all interpret the text.

The *Hermeneutic of Assumption* is exactly what it sounds like. It's what happens when we just assume we know what a passage or text means, without paying close attention to the details or the context. One of the most surprising experiences for me has been the times—the many, many times—I have begun with the assumption that I know what is happening in a particular story or text; but once I engaged that same passage contextually a different interpretation began to emerge.

Making assumptions, thinking we know someone or something so well that we approach them without curiosity or wonder, is detrimental to all relationships, even our relationship to the Bible. The Bible is connected to my earliest memories, and yet, as I live into my fourth decade, it still surprises me. I am still learning and growing and finding new perspectives that make Scripture an exciting and three-dimensional

experience for me. When we just assume we have it all figured out, when mystery is conquered, we can end up missing the counterintuitive challenge that the Bible offers us, even today.

When we just assume we have it all figured out, when mystery is conquered, we can end up missing the counterintuitive challenge that the Bible offers us, even today.

A WORD OF WELCOME

So, if you come to this book skeptical, you are welcome. If you come to this book frustrated with the Bible, you are welcome. If you come angry, hurt, and unsure if you even want to engage further, you are welcome. You are also safe. What I offer ahead is a recontextualized and de-weaponized approach to several important passages and stories, most of which are likely familiar to you. I wrote this book with you in mind. So often I encounter people who feel like the Bible, because of the way in which it's been interpreted and understood, has been taken away from them. My hope is to offer it back to you. That what was once a source of wounding might be transformed into a source of healing.

In the following pages, as we dig into some familiar passages and stories that have been separated from their context in our interpretation for about as long as we can remember, we will discover the importance of keeping the contents of Scripture in their place. They were created by people who lived in a real time and place, who experienced real

pressures and struggles, and who were trying to sort through the big questions of life. Sounds a lot like us, doesn't it? By seeking to ground our interpretations of the Bible in the context of those who created it is the most honoring and loving way we can approach Scripture. It also unlocks a depth and meaning that we previously might have missed. That is what lies before us in the pages of this book.

CHAPTER 1

A More Excellent Way

(1 Corinthians 13)

THE TIP OF THE ICEBERG

I performed my first wedding at the ripe old age of nineteen, and over the last two decades plus I have helped more couples than I can remember tie the proverbial knot. While I can't, offhand, recall every wedding over which I have presided, there are some that I can vividly remember. One that I'm sure will make that list of stand-the-test-of-time ceremonies happened just last spring. It was a bit unconventional, which always ends up being my favorite scenario. The couple met while working as servers at The Pearl Diver, a great little tiki bar in East Nashville, and wanted to have their wedding there. They rented the outdoor space—a beautiful little courtyard surrounded by tables—and were surrounded by their closest family and friends as they exchanged I dos, vows, and rings. It was a really lovely evening.

One of the requests the couple made for the ceremony was that I read from 1 Corinthians 13—Paul's famous ode to love. They wanted

these words at the forefront of their hearts and minds on that day and always. In case you need a refresher, here are those words:

> *Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable; it keeps no record of wrongs; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*
>
> *(1 Corinthians 13:4-7)*

It makes sense why couples would want to hear these words on their wedding day. They are poetic, familiar, and describe the kind of love that would, no doubt, create a long, happy, and fulfilling marriage. That being the case it's no surprise that 1 Corinthians 13 has played a central role in wedding ceremonies for hundreds upon hundreds of years.

However, if we go beyond this specific use of this passage, with the goal to understand why Paul originally wrote these iconic words and why he wrote them to the Corinthian community, it's important to begin here: Paul was not writing wedding liturgy when he wrote 1 Corinthians 13. Further, if Paul knew that almost two thousand years after he had written this letter that a group of people called Christians would elevate his writings to the status of sacred Scripture, and that one of the primary uses of this specific letter would be during wedding ceremonies, he would be puzzled to say the least.

Our engagement with this passage has only been the tip of the iceberg. When we hear chapter thirteen in the overall context of 1 Corinthians a larger image begins to emerge, one that still offers a challenge to the church, and to each of us who are part of it, today. Before we turn to examine that message, let's talk about what kind of text 1 Corinthians is.

SOMEBODY ELSE'S MAIL

Getting the mail is one of my most favorite things. As strange as it sounds, going to our mailbox is something I look forward to every day with great anticipation. It's a kind of ritual for me. The suspense is just so exhilarating. What might be in there today? Did I win something? Maybe there's a check with lots of zeroes just waiting to be opened? That enthusiasm is usually dealt a swift and merciless blow by reality. Usually, my haul is junk mail or, worse, a bill that demands to be paid.

On the rarest of occasions our mail carrier will accidentally put a piece of our neighbor's mail inside our mailbox. Sometimes I don't catch it at first, and I'll accidentally open it before I realize what's happened. It doesn't take long for me to realize that I am not the intended audience for this particular communication.

When we open the Bible and begin to read a letter like 1 Corinthians, we are reading someone else's mail.

When we open the Bible and begin to read a letter like 1 Corinthians, we are reading someone else's mail. Our name isn't on the envelope, and we aren't the intended audience. I am confident that Paul had no idea in his wildest imagination that his letters to various church communities would be collected, elevated to the status of sacred Scripture, and still be read and debated two thousand years after he wrote them. Please hear me on this: I don't mean that Paul's letters have nothing to say to us. They surely do! By hearing these words first within their original,

first-century context, we become more attuned to what they might be saying to us today.

With that in mind, here are a few things to remember when reading a letter like 1 Corinthians. First, Paul's letters were almost exclusively occasional. That is, he was writing to address specific situations in communities, not building a systematic theology by attempting to codify doctrinal or dogmatic positions. One of the criticisms often leveled against Paul's writings is that he seems to know very little about the historical Jesus. Outside of a couple of quotations (1 Corinthians 7:10-11 and 11:23-25), one fleeting reference to Jesus's birth (Galatians 4:4), and a multitude of references to his death and resurrection, Paul gives us nothing about Jesus as a person. He doesn't mention any parables or miracles, for example, two things that were central to the stories of Jesus we find in the narratives of the Gospels. Is Paul unaware of such stories? Does he have no understanding of who Jesus was and what he did beyond his death and resurrection?

I find this criticism of Paul a little unfair, because it doesn't take into account what he's doing in these letters. None of Paul's letters were written so that he could flex his theological muscles and share everything he knew or thought about Jesus. Instead, he's writing to address specific issues that are causing problems within the communities, and to encourage them to remain faithful and do good. It would probably have felt quite odd to the recipients of these letters for Paul to begin with "Here's everything I know and think about Jesus as a historical person."

Paul didn't have a settled theological framework that he was trying to impose. If we pay close attention, across his letters, we will find a theology in flux, in development. Paul is very much building

the plane as he's flying it, responding to crises in his communities and articulating his growing understanding of the meaning of Jesus and the movement he began in real time. Our letters from Paul come from the cutting edge of the Jesus movement. He is not the elder statesman teaching the orthodox theological position. He's breaking new ground and trying to remain faithful, while, at the same time, trying to hold together communities that were diverse and fragile.

Second, these letters were written to communities, not to individuals. The word *you* is most often plural. That fact is seen in the names we have given to the majority of his writings: Galatians, Thessalonians, Corinthians, Philippians, Romans. Even the short letter of Philemon is addressed to the community in which the recipient belonged:

> *From Paul, who is a prisoner for the cause of Christ Jesus, and our brother Timothy.*
>
> *To Philemon our dearly loved coworker, Apphia our sister, Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church that meets in your house.*
>
> *(Philemon 1-2 CEB)*

It is important to keep this in the front of our minds: Paul's letters are not instructions to individuals about what to believe, but to communities about how to behave toward one another. If Paul waxes on about something theological, it's because of the practical implications that it has for the community to which he's writing. It's critical to keep this communal focus in mind, especially with the individualistic emphasis of the culture that has shaped many of us.

Finally, these letters would have been read to the assembled community from beginning to end. When we hear the words of Paul in sermons or lessons, they are usually snippets of chapters, like 1 Corinthians 13. Many Christians are surprised to discover that

chapters and verses in the New Testament were a brand-new idea when they began to be used in the thirteenth century. So, when Phoebe delivered and possibly read the letter to the church at Rome, she wouldn't have read a chapter at a time. The community would have heard the whole letter read for them in one sitting.

This means that Paul—or any other biblical author for that matter—was not writing small chunks to be taken and understood in isolation. Instead, he was creating letters and narratives that are connected from beginning to end. That being the case a holistic approach, one that takes into account both what came before and what comes after a text, is helpful to hear the larger message being conveyed.

PAUL AND THE CORINTHIANS

Paul's Corinthian correspondence is deeply pastoral. He's writing not as an outsider who has heard some juicy gossip, but as someone known to this community. After all Paul is the "planter" of the Corinthian church (3:6) and he describes their relationship as a parent-child connection:

> *I am not writing this to make you ashamed but to admonish you as my beloved children. For though you might have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers. Indeed, in Christ Jesus I fathered you through the gospel. I appeal to you, then, be imitators of me.*
>
> *(1 Corinthians 4:14-16)*

Paul founded the Corinthian church, but now he is away from them and still seeking to pastor his beloved community from afar. This feels somewhat familiar to me as a pastor in a post-pandemic world. Before COVID-19 hit in 2020, my pastoral role was very much confined to

the GracePointe community that gathered each week in Nashville. Sometimes people would reach out from outside the community for pastoral care, but it wasn't the norm. Fast forward to today, and our community is literally all over the world. Zoom calls, social media direct messages, and email allow me to be a pastor to anyone who needs me, regardless of zip code. That technology would have made Paul's job much easier. In the early 50s CE, however, Paul put pen to papyrus to guide his communities from afar.

It's evident from the letter that what we call "first" Corinthians, isn't. He reminds the community that he had addressed certain issues in a previous letter (5:9), and apparently, they had responded to that correspondence with a letter of their own, asking for clarity and raising new issues for which they needed pastoral instruction (7:1). This letter is ultimately Paul's attempt to address a church community that was in deep division and controversy by reminding them of what he'd previously taught them, and, more importantly, calling them to prioritize caring for one another.

THE WHEELS ARE COMING OFF

Not only could Paul not have imagined that his letters would achieve the status of sacred Scripture, but neither could the church at Corinth. If they could have, they no doubt would have said, "Sheesh, Paul! You didn't have to air our dirty laundry for untold future generations to see!" But that's just what he does. It becomes evident pretty quickly that the wheels are coming off of the Corinthian community in several different ways.

While he begins by calling them saints and expressing his gratitude for them, Paul doesn't waste much time getting to the point.

> *Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you but that you be knit together in the same mind and the same purpose. For it has been made clear to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters.*
>
> *(1 Corinthians 1:10-11)*

How popular are Chloe and her people right now? Can you imagine the side-eyes they received when the reader of Paul's letter read those lines? They've tattled to Paul about how divided the community in Corinth has become, and that division is threatening to tear them apart. The central problem that Paul addresses in 1 Corinthians can be summed up in one word: *hierarchy*. In his absence, the Corinthian community began to function more like the Greco-Roman culture around them than the countercultural Kingdom movement that began with Jesus. Paul's understanding of the Kingdom project of Jesus was one of radically inclusive egalitarianism.

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In an earlier letter to the churches in Galatia Paul included words that were light years ahead of his time that sum up his understanding of what Jesus was doing: "There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28 CEB).

It's believed by scholars that this could be an early baptismal creed which that have been recited as new converts joined the Jesus

movement. As they entered into and emerged from the waters of baptism, they were becoming part of a new kind of community, one that transgressed and transcended the barriers to full belonging that defined the larger Roman world. As a result, what set these early Jesus communities apart was their aversion to being divided up in hierarchies that mirrored the society as a whole. The problem in Corinth was those old ways of seeing and ordering the world were seeping into the life of the church.

HAS CHRIST BEEN DIVIDED?

Corinth had an embarrassment of riches when it comes to preachers. In fact, they had so many charismatic teachers that it became a dividing issue in the community, and Chloe's people raised the alarm to Paul.

> *For it has been made clear to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is this: that each one of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?*
>
> *(1 Corinthians 1:11-13)*

Apparently, the Corinthians were ranking preachers and taking sides. It's interesting that celebrity culture in the church isn't just a contemporary problem. The Corinthian church was being divided and becoming entrenched around specific voices. The problem isn't that people had preferences, but that the preferences were creating a gulf of separation between members of the community. The result is the institution of a hierarchy of leadership that prioritized the messenger over the message and created a sense of competition within the church.

This wasn't just a Corinthian problem. Toward the end of Jesus's public activity in Luke we are invited into a scene in which the disciples display a total misunderstanding of what greatness truly is.

> *A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. But he said to them, "The kings of the gentiles lord it over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather, the greatest among you must become like the youngest and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.*
>
> *(Luke 22:24-27)*

Paul's response to the Corinthian celebrity culture is the same as Jesus's to his disciples. He calls them to see both himself and Apollos, and by extension any other voice in the community, as people fulfilling the role they had been given.

> *For when one says, "I belong to Paul," and another, "I belong to Apollos," are you not all too human?*
>
> *What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.*
>
> *(1 Corinthians 3:4-6)*

Each person who led and served the community was just doing the work they'd been given to do. The point wasn't the individual personality, but the good work being done to nurture and care for this fledgling community. Instead of seeing others as rivals or threats, Paul invites the Corinthians to see them as co-workers in caring for the community's well-being. The cracks of division will only grow from here.

EXPLORING THE CHAPTER BEHIND THE VERSE.

In a world where most Christian books are full of razor-thin spirituality and regurgitated theology, Josh is offering us something liberating, life-giving, and fresh. *Context* excavates the hidden meanings of familiar Bible verses while teaching readers how to responsibly consider the historical and cultural soil from which these scripture passages spring. Josh's witty and provocative prose makes this book an absolute joy to read.

Jonathan Merritt, contributing writer for *The Atlantic* and author of *Learning to Speak God from Scratch*

For years, many of us have been seeing a great problem and a great need. The problem: too many people are turning the Bible into a weapon that does harm. The need: for gifted teachers to model a fresh new approach to the Bible, not just in theory, but by demonstrating that new approach through their deep, honest, and interesting engagement with actual biblical texts. I'm so thankful that Josh Scott is offering exactly what we need!

Brian D. McLaren, author of *Faith After Doubt* and *Life After Doom*

Josh Scott is one of those pastors who genuinely emulates "love thy neighbor," and it comes through on the page too. In *Context*, he dives into some of the Bible's most popular passages used in churches today and gives an insightful, objective account of the text. This book shows the Bible was never meant to be used as a weapon to oppress but as a tool to liberate.

April Ajoy, cohost of the podcast *Evangelicalish*

Josh Scott continues to remind us that it is more important for us to take the Bible seriously than to take it literally. By placing several well-known texts within their contexts, he opens up doors of interpretation that will allow these ancient words to speak into our own readings. Scott encourages us to see scripture as more than bumper stickers and slogans and invites us into the text's complex world so that we might navigate our own complex world more faithfully.

Derrick Weston, Theological Education & Training Coordinator, Creation Justice Ministries

Context is the guidebook addressing why our church training led to exclusivism and superstition rather than the loving, compassionate Kingdom Jesus pointed to. Josh is doing the kind and necessary work of untangling layers of theological thoughts and ideas that have buried many of us in a belief system that simply doesn't check out.

Mike Maeshiro, social media influencer and LGBTQ+ advocate

Josh Scott has been a pastor for the last two decades. He currently serves as the Lead Pastor at GracePointe Church in Nashville. The focus of his work is reimagining, reframing, and reclaiming faith through a progressive Christian lens. Josh is the author of *Bible Stories for Grown-Ups: Reading Scripture with New Eyes.* You can read his latest thoughts at joshscott.online. He lives near Nashville, Tennessee, with his wife, Carla, and their five kids.

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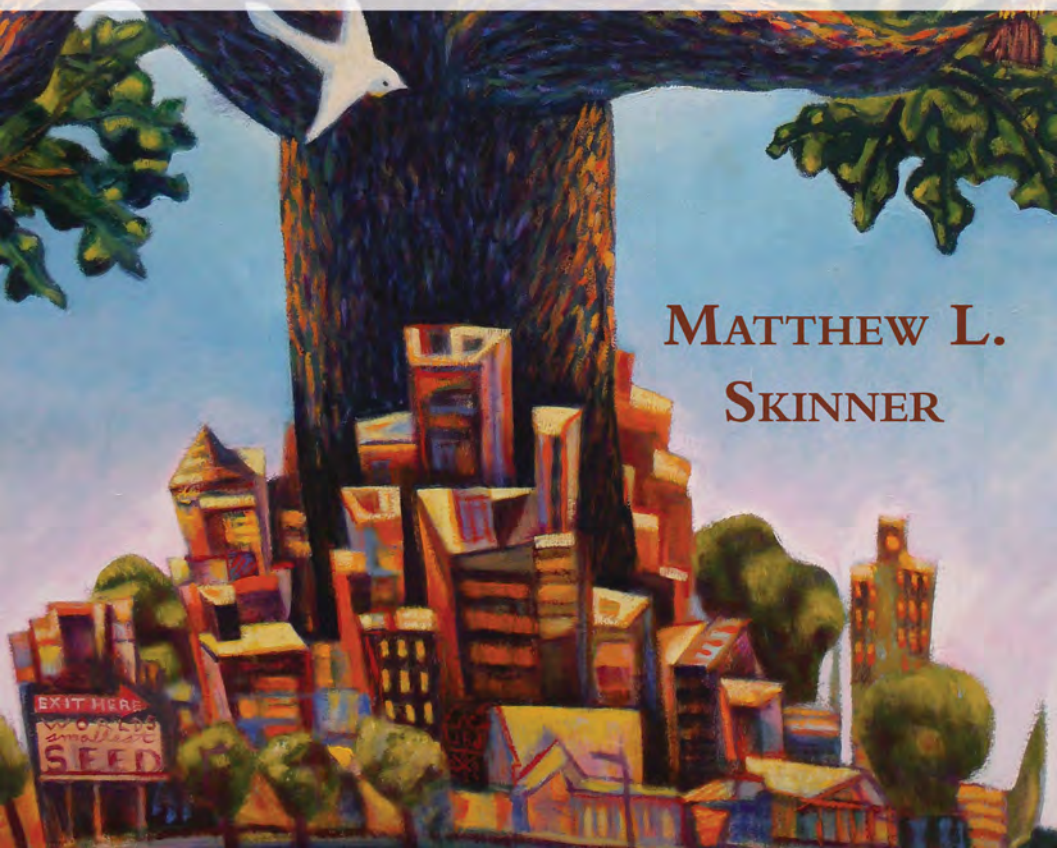
Matthew

The Gospel of Promised Blessings



MATTHEW L. SKINNER

Contents

Introduction

It never fails to happen. Every three years in November I receive emails about the Gospel according to Matthew, and they make me smile. Preachers, most of whom were once students in my seminary classroom, write to ask if I can recommend anything to help them make sense of Matthew. "Any new books out there? Any good insights?" I think they hope someone made a breakthrough or found a scroll with all the answers buried in a cave somewhere. At the same time, I understand the dread in their words. I share their concerns.

First, I chuckle. Don't I always tell students that the Bible isn't easy? Sometimes you have to wrestle with it to get a better perspective.

Let me explain. The Revised Common Lectionary, a resource that assigns biblical passages for congregations to read throughout the church's year, follows a three-year cycle. Every time the cycle renews, at the beginning of every third Advent, congregations that follow this widely used lectionary encounter a passage from Matthew on almost every Sunday for a full year. And Matthew, you see, is notorious for producing mixed feelings, probably more so than any other Gospel. A lot of preachers, who generally are people who like to focus on God's generosity and Jesus's good news, tremble.

When I reply to the emails, I stand up for Matthew before acknowledging the difficult parts. Without this Gospel, we wouldn't

have Jesus's famous Sermon on the Mount. Plus, it's one of the two Gospels (Luke is the other) that makes a strong effort to highlight Jesus's parables—short, quirky, illustrative stories like the one about a dense tree that grows from a tiny mustard seed and provides a safe habitat for birds. Parables indicate that Jesus wants people to think and imagine, not simply to have information spoon-fed to them. Also, what about Matthew's story of the courageous magi who journey with gifts to honor Jesus after his birth and then have to outmaneuver evil King Herod? What a great reminder of Christmas's strangely subversive qualities!

But Matthew tells a bigger and often harder story. That's why the emails come. Everyone I know who preaches or teaches about Matthew recognizes the challenges. An anger courses through Matthew, expressing itself in harsh language and disingenuous caricatures of people who oppose Jesus. Over the centuries, many Christians have mined Matthew to gather fuel for their antisemitic ire. In addition, Jesus threatens judgment and punishment frequently in Matthew. It can be tricky for a preacher to assure a congregation that God is love when the Scripture reading for a given Sunday talks about casting someone "into the eternal fire."

Since you're still reading, I assume you're still interested in Matthew. I am. It's an occasionally challenging book to understand, for reasons I've mentioned and more. At the same time, it presents us with a depiction of Jesus that overflows with relentless kindness, profound concern for those who suffer, stunning gentleness, and abundant grace. Jesus promises blessings and delivers them. Yet Matthew also presents Jesus as a controversial figure in a contentious landscape. Matthew emphasizes that Jesus's followers should expect to find themselves likewise in difficult conditions. Faith does not come easily. The false promises that compete with Jesus's promises are seductive, but hollow. The world has to change, otherwise mercy will be overrun and justice will never arrive. The people who most need relief from the cruelties of the world won't receive it if Jesus's followers get distracted from

what matters. The stakes are extremely high in Matthew's account; accordingly, Jesus comes across as impassioned and achingly urgent. This Gospel tells the story in a way that urges readers to opt for Jesus and embrace his vision, avoiding anything that can knock them from the path he sets before them.

The stakes are extremely high in Matthew's account; accordingly, Jesus comes across as impassioned and achingly urgent.

Studying Matthew will help us learn more about Jesus and more about how this Gospel might have influenced the people who first read it in the early generations of the church. But exploring Matthew will also lead us to consider our own faith. Our journey into Matthew will prompt us to ask productive, worthwhile questions. What does it mean to follow the same Jesus who promises to accompany his people? What is the purpose of the Christian church? Which dimensions of our inherited Christian tradition align or do not align with what this Gospel really says? Matthew deserves our attention.

Where Matthew Came From

No Gospel ever intended to say *everything* that could be said about Jesus. Each Gospel tells its story to reassure, galvanize, correct, or convince readers, and that raises questions for us about who the Gospels' ancient audiences might have been, what their circumstances were, and how a specific Gospel might have influenced them. We can say nearly the same thing in a different way: every Gospel tells us something about Jesus, of course, but also every Gospel tells us something about the memories that some of his followers held on to decades after his life, death, and resurrection. Matthew could have relayed more information about Jesus and could have emphasized

different aspects of his teachings. Nevertheless, the episodes Matthew narrates and the themes that recur reveal this Gospel's interest in reassuring some people, criticizing others, and equipping still others for the journey ahead of them. What can we observe in Matthew itself about the issues that influenced the way it tells its story?

The text of Matthew never identifies its author or describes what was happening when it was first put into written form. Later Christian writers connected this Gospel to one of Jesus's close followers, a man named Matthew (9:9). It's impossible to prove or disprove that. I don't think we would read Matthew much differently, however, if we knew for sure that a certain disciple wrote it or if we somehow decided it was written by someone else. The story is what it is.

Most credible scholars conclude Matthew was written during the last two decades of the first century, at least fifty years after Jesus's death and resurrection, roughly 80–100 CE. At that time, the Jerusalem Temple was in ruins, destroyed by Roman forces in 70 CE. The catastrophic loss of the temple effectively meant the loss of the priesthood and temple rituals, so Jews found themselves in the position of reshaping or reforming what it entailed for them to practice Judaism. It was a fertile time of religious reorientation. Also during that time, cracks began to widen between churches and synagogues. Christian faith originated within Judaism; Jesus and his first followers were all Jewish and not intending to create a separate religion. During the first decades of the Christian church's existence, it seems that Jews who embraced Jesus as the Messiah or the Christ (the two titles are synonyms) lived and practiced their faith relatively harmoniously among Jews who did not share those beliefs about Jesus. Over time, and especially around the point when the temple was lost, the harmony began to break down for reasons too complex to trace here. By the early second century CE, the division was pretty much complete.

I'm convinced that Matthew carries in itself the tensions that strained some predominantly Jewish communities as the harmony was

eroding. That's not a controversial or unpopular opinion among New Testament scholars. In the ways that Matthew presents Jesus and in the themes that stand out, we can detect the pain and frustration that arose as groups of Christ-followers (composed mostly of people who also were Jewish) contended with other Jewish groups over questions about who rightly interpreted Jewish law and tradition. Matthew reflects the point of view of people who attached their full allegiance to Jesus. Through Jesus, Matthew insists, a new reality for humanity will emerge, accomplished by the God of Israel. Knowing not everyone agrees, Matthew tries to make a case for Jesus that proceeds in at least two ways: celebrating Jesus on his own merits, and setting Jesus and his teachings sharply against other leaders who have different ideas for how Judaism should move forward.

Many passages in Matthew instruct readers about coexisting with people who aren't quite right in how they believe or hope. That suggests Matthew would have appealed especially to believers who found themselves in conflict with other believers over questions about observing Jewish law or maintaining certain standards of Christian conduct. The influx and behavior of Gentiles (non-Jews) in some Christian communities might have also intensified disagreements among churches or especially between churches and other groups of Jews. In any case, suspicion is in the air in Matthew, and so stories about dealing with discord and distrust loom large. Imagine separate groups of religious people clashing about which of them and their beliefs rightly describe how God might be known and how God might be in the process of setting the world right. As we know, those kinds of disputes, whether ancient or modern, generate a lot of heat.

Most communities of faith engage in lively debates about religious belief, the ground of people's religious identity, fostering friendly fellowship, honoring traditions, and anticipating the future. When those debates grow more fierce, conflict takes a toll on communities and on people's ability to trust their neighbors. Folks cling to grudges and make extra effort to root out falsehoods. Earlier I noted an angry

streak that emerges from time to time in Matthew. That would fit scenarios where escalating friction had frayed people's nerves and perhaps traumatized their minds and bodies. Experiences like those understandably influence how people think about God, themselves, and others. Matthew tells a story about Jesus that means to equip people who were navigating difference, rivalries, and polarizing quarrels.

Matthew proclaims Jesus as the Jewish Messiah, sent by God to the Jewish people to inaugurate what he refers to as "the kingdom of heaven." Jesus's Jewishness is evident in his teaching, values, and merciful actions. The Gospel's keen attention to Jewish traditions and the law of Moses, as well as its frequent citations of passages from Jewish scripture (also, now, the Christian Old Testament) prompts some to refer to Matthew as the most Jewish of the four Gospels. Matthew also depicts Jesus delivering harsh criticism to Jewish Pharisees and other religious leaders. The book has no patience for people who embrace different teachings or who don't believe in Jesus the way they supposedly should. Some, therefore, refer to Matthew as the most anti-Jewish of the four Gospels. They mean that Matthew promotes a way of remembering Jesus that actively seeks to discredit other expressions of Jewish teachings and practices. Matthew certainly has been called upon to speak that way during the church's long history.

The Intensities Flowing through Matthew

It's safe to conclude that the energy driving Jesus's teachings and actions was an unflinching conviction that God is on the verge of shaking up the human condition and instituting something new and wonderful. The theme that arises most frequently in Matthew—as well as in Mark and Luke, yet to a lesser extent in John—concerns the arrival of that new reality: God's "kingdom."

"Kingdom" is the traditional way of translating a Greek term that means "reign" or "rule." "Kingdom" in English implies a new

place or country. "Reign" in English more accurately keeps the focus on the action of the one ruling, the one who sets the standards and protects the inhabitants. Jesus, therefore, announces a state of affairs in which *God's* intentions have sway. This new reign emerges when God activates God's graciousness within human society, reordering our values and ushering in wholeness, health, and security. With Jesus's arrival, this new state of affairs "has come near" (4:17). He inaugurates the Kingdom, although it remains in transit, still in the process of breaking through in all its fullness. Jesus situates himself on the cusp of a new era in how God will be present to the world and for the sake of the world.

Only in Matthew does Jesus speak of the "kingdom of heaven," although every now and then "kingdom of God" also appears. Both phrases refer to the same thing, with "heaven" working synonymously for "God." In this book, to avoid confusion, I'll keep the traditional language of "Kingdom" instead of "reign," since most Bible translations still use it. It's up to you to remember that Jesus's use of "Kingdom" refers to a new society breaking in and God altering a status quo that we might have thought could never be changed. He imagines it *here*, not in a far-off paradise. The point is, with all of Jesus's talk about a Kingdom in which conventional expectations for what's right, what's fair, and what's possible get rewritten, Jesus lets us know that he perceives everything differently. The passion behind his desire to share his vision for how the world should operate is consuming and tenacious. It makes him come across as . . . honestly . . . intense.

All the Gospels, each in its own way, portray Jesus smoldering with a determined intensity.

All the Gospels, each in its own way, portray Jesus smoldering with a determined intensity. It emerges in various ways, such as when he faces off with the authorities in the days before his arrest,

berates his opponents, issues warnings to those who harm innocent people, and cautions his followers about travails they'll face. We in the church often try to file the sharp edges off Jesus, because they make us uncomfortable and are easily exploited by religious extremists. In the end, however, the Jesus of the Gospels remains restless. He resists our desires for him to mellow out.

Matthew creates challenges because much of Jesus's intensity in this Gospel comes across either as anger or as him threatening to make others suffer for their waywardness. It's fair to call Matthew an occasionally irate Gospel, in that Jesus sometimes seems to have no patience or grace for certain actions or people.

Matthew's intensity doesn't mean to bully us. Remember, it's a book that urges readers to choose Jesus and keep their trust fixed on him. As Matthew tells it, a choice needs to be made, and that choice comes across as all the more urgent because the world is a duplicitous place and many counterfeit assurances vie for our attention. Matthew also lifts up the importance of the church but doesn't want the church to embrace Jesus in ways that make it self-satisfied. A perennial challenge for us who follow Jesus involves espousing the urgency of his promised blessings without becoming intolerant, unwelcoming, or obnoxious.

Jesus's basic intensity shouldn't surprise us. Visionaries in any era who see the world plainly for the broken place it is and imagine new, appealing possibilities often can't contain their frustration. The frustration sometimes lashes out at people who can't perceive what the visionary does. It can arise from knowing the massive piles of injustice and opposition that stand in the way.

When Jesus's intensity rises to the surface in Matthew, we may be tempted to take those passages as contradicting or negating the more comforting things he says and does. Understanding this Gospel well requires us to realize that Jesus's aggravations and warnings instead reveal the magnitude of his compassion and his desire to shelter the people who most need sheltering.

Jesus has more to say about judgment and punishment in Matthew than he does in the other three Gospels. Almost all of the writers we encounter in the New Testament nevertheless make some kind of reference to a culminating judgment. They all regard Jesus as, among other things, God's designated agent to judge the world and do justice. Our actions have consequences, and God expects obedience and goodwill from us. Jesus will be the means by which God sorts out the world's shortcomings and fixes the problems humanity creates. What exactly that will look like is described differently in different biblical books.

No biblical book includes as many references to "hell" as Matthew does. The Greek word in question is *Gehenna*, which comes from the Hebrew name for a valley outside Jerusalem. Prior to the Babylonian Exile (sixth century BCE), *Gehenna* was a site where some people would sacrifice children (using fire) and engage in other abominable cultic practices to satisfy foreign gods. By the time Jesus was born, the term understandably had come to connote evil and was used to designate a place for punishing evildoers in the afterlife.

Matthew doesn't include detailed descriptions of what Jesus means by *Gehenna*, but two references speak of "the *Gehenna* of fire" (5:22; 18:9). In other passages Jesus doesn't mention hell but talks of people suffering "weeping and gnashing of teeth," "outer darkness," "eternal fire," and other images that you don't want the preacher to mention on the day you invite your new neighbors to church.

If suddenly you're worried you bought the wrong book, stay with me. I bring up this topic to point out that Matthew is one of the few New Testament writings that have contributed to Christian imagery about hell and punishment, as theologians through the centuries eventually developed their more expansive doctrines of judgment and retribution. The other books include 2 Thessalonians, Jude, and Revelation (no surprise there!). In other words, dwelling on hell is not a concern of most biblical authors. We can talk about divine

judgment without it involving harsh punishment or eternal torment. Furthermore, the biblical books that do mention punishment have little to say beyond symbols that illustrate destruction and sorrow.

We have been overly influenced, however, by traditions that emerged after the Bible. Later thinkers such as Dante Alighieri, in his fourteenth-century work *Inferno*, which is part of his Divine Comedy, are responsible for the detailed visions of punishment that make your skin crawl and feed the assumptions that countless people make about hell and the afterlife. Search for the fifteenth-century Beaune Altarpiece ("The Last Judgment") online and observe the painting's awful rendering of an emotionless Jesus overseeing souls weighed in scales to determine who goes to heaven or hell. Imagine being fed a steady diet of those themes every time you go to church. I guess that's one reason—but hardly the only reason—why wild-eyed individuals choose to walk around Times Square waving signs reading "Turn or burn!" Add all of this to the list of things that must frustrate Jesus on a daily basis.

Notions of hell as eternal torment have led the church in very unhelpful directions when it comes to making sense of what Jesus says about judgment in Matthew. Yet we can't read Matthew and not discuss judgment.

I'm not denying that Matthew's focus on judgment is unpleasant; I'm saying we shouldn't overlook it. Considering judgment will help us get inside the Gospel's impassioned promises about blessings. My agenda isn't to make Matthew's bitter verses more palatable. It is to offer ways of navigating this intense story about Jesus. Then we can consider how Matthew's intensities align or clash with the ways we speak about God, the good news of Jesus Christ, and the human condition.

We can read Matthew's bitter verses in more productive and accurate ways. Many parts of this Gospel promise punishment for

some. Those passages sound cruel, especially at first glance. We'll investigate several of the relevant passages and consider whether we can or should reconcile the images of a God who pours out love and blessing with images of a God who promises judgment to come. Are love and judgment utterly incompatible? I believe they are not—not if we understand what those things mean to Jesus, as Matthew presents him.

Overview of Matthew

I recommend you read all of Matthew before you go too deep into this book. Having a basic grasp of the full narrative will help you keep track of where the individual passages that I'll discuss fit into the Gospel's overall scheme. Try to read Matthew like you read other stories, paying attention to how the parts influence your sense of the whole and vice versa. All sorts of mischief arises when people build a theology—their overall conceptions of God, humanity, and Jesus's good news—around just an isolated verse, a single passage, or a lone theme. Let the whole book tell its story in all of its beauty and sometimes strangeness.

Matthew begins with a genealogy of Jesus and tales about his birth and early childhood. Avoiding multiple threats, his family eventually takes him to Nazareth in Galilee, where he grows up.

When Jesus is an adult, he presents himself to John the Baptist for baptism, at which point God's Spirit comes to him and sends him into the wilderness. Jesus resists various tests the devil places before him and relocates to Capernaum on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Once he learns that the authorities have arrested John the Baptist, he begins proclaiming the arrival of the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus conducts a public ministry marked by teaching, tangible acts of mercy and miraculous healing, exorcism of unclean spirits, criticism of certain religious leaders, and warnings about resisting God's emerging kingdom. He gravitates toward people known for their

dubious reputations and calls people to follow him and participate in his ministry.

Beginning in 16:13 the narrative takes a turn when Jesus begins to talk about his upcoming arrest, suffering, death, and resurrection. The prospect of his arrival in Jerusalem heightens the dreadful anticipation. Some of his followers witness his appearance transfigured and hear God, speaking from a cloud, reaffirm Jesus's identity as the Son of God. The narrative now focuses less on miracles and healings and more on Jesus's instructions about how his followers should conduct themselves.

Jesus finally arrives at the outskirts of Jerusalem in 21:1. Matthew 21–25 describes him teaching in the city, frustrating some religious leaders, appealing to the crowds, and offering several parables and warnings about being prepared for what the future will bring.

After Jesus shares a Passover meal with a group of his closest followers, the local authorities arrest him during the night, interrogate him, and bring him before Pilate, the leading Roman official in the region. Pilate condemns Jesus to execution by crucifixion.

In Matthew's final chapter, two women named Mary, followers of Jesus, observe an angel unsealing Jesus's tomb. They meet the resurrected Jesus, who instructs them to arrange a reunion in Galilee. There, Jesus commissions his followers to carry on his ministry and be confident in his enduring presence with them.

The skeleton of Matthew's plot may sound familiar to you, for it resembles the plot of Luke's Gospel and especially Mark's Gospel. The general outline of John is similar, too. Most scholars conclude that the author of Matthew constructed this narrative using Mark as a source and framework. A very large proportion of what appears in Mark also appears in Matthew. Additionally, Matthew includes much material that came from other sources, both written and orally preserved memories about Jesus. Approximately one quarter of Matthew consists of stories about Jesus that appear in no other known Gospel. If not for Matthew, we wouldn't have them.

I've chosen not to organize this book as a stroll through Matthew in sequence from its opening verses to its final scene. Instead, we'll jump around the Gospel, exploring specific passages and noticing various themes. As a result, I will skip over some parts of Matthew. It's a long Gospel. I won't say much, for example, about Jesus's birth or his crucifixion. The baptism, the transfiguration, many miracles, and Jesus's predictions of his death and resurrection will also miss the cut. Obviously those are important pieces of Matthew's story, so let me refer you to a meaty study Bible or the books I recommend in the "For Further Reading" section if you want to explore them.

In the chapters ahead, I'll give preference especially to action, teaching, and topics that either appear only in Matthew or have a distinctive "Matthew-like" quality about them. You'll learn to speak Matthew's language, so to speak, and get inside its perspective. You'll gain a clearer sense of why this Gospel offers such an intensely passionate portrait of Jesus and his transformational vision for the world and the church. You'll know where to find the refreshing blessings Jesus promises.

Whether you're sitting down with Matthew for the first time or the fiftieth, this way of exploring it will help you understand what makes it a delight to read, a challenge to read, and sometimes both at once.

My approach won't explain every word of the Gospel—as if I could!—but it will encourage you to consider how Matthew, even with its intense parts, might nourish, challenge, and reorient your faith. Whether you're sitting down with Matthew for the first time or the fiftieth, this way of exploring it will help you understand what makes it a delight to read, a challenge to read, and sometimes both at once.

If you don't believe me about that, ask a preacher what they think.

Chapter 1

Promised Blessings

Passages to Explore:

Matthew 5:1-12	(Blessed Are …)
Matthew 6:30-33	(Promises for Those of Little Faith)
Matthew 20:1-16	(Workers in the Vineyard)
Matthew 25:31-46	(Sheep and Goats)

I remember one of my professors saying, "A lot of people read the Bible and assume the first question they need to answer is, 'Based on this passage, what should I do? How should I act?'" He urged us to think differently: "A better way of approaching the Bible is to ask, 'What does this text promise?'" He was passing along good wisdom. The Bible is full of promises—some explicit, most implicit. Instead of treating it as a rule book or a history book, try to absorb what it claims to be true. What is God like? How does God operate? What can we expect for the future? Sit with questions like those first. You might decide to act differently as a result, but that happens down the road.

We begin our exploration of Matthew, then, with passages that show us Jesus making bold promises—declarations about what he will do, where he will be, the kinds of people who catch his attention, and how he will nurture his followers. These passages illustrate Matthew's special interest in presenting Jesus as a source of blessing and comfort to a weary world.

Matthew 5:1-12

(Blessed Are ...)

One of the first things Jesus says out loud in Matthew, for a gathering of people to hear, is the word *blessed*. He's not speaking about the quality of his own life. He promises blessings for others. The promises would probably surprise most people, because Jesus's promises don't square with common expectations. No wonder crowds follow him, eager to hear what he proposes.

One of the first things Jesus says out loud in Matthew, for a gathering of people to hear, is the word *blessed*.

First, we should recognize that a lot happens in Matthew before we receive *any* up-close view of Jesus making promises to a group. The Gospel covers much ground over its first two chapters, starting with Jesus's birth, the visit of the magi from the East, and his family's flight to Egypt to escape a murderous tyrant. The narrative stays fast-paced in its next two chapters, telling us about Jesus's baptism, his encounters with the devil in the desert, and four of the first people who choose to follow him. At last Jesus starts ministering in public, preaching "the good news" about God's "kingdom" and healing people (4:23-25). His popularity quickly spreads widely: throughout Syria, Galilee, the

Decapolis (east of the Jordan River), Jerusalem, Judea, and further beyond the Jordan. That didn't take long.

Precisely at this point, with Jesus already drawing crowds, Matthew gives us a rich taste of what makes Jesus appealing. The first big public event that this Gospel narrates, starting in Matthew 5, is a sermon commonly called "The Sermon on the Mount." Jesus's "sermons," or extended speeches, in Matthew appear to be literary creations. To help the Gospel's audiences understand Jesus's significance, some of his teachings were arranged together and are presented as single events. They play a part in shaping Matthew's distinctive perspective and structure. The timing of this first sermon, at the outset of Jesus's ministry, sends a signal about the importance Matthew attaches to Jesus's influence as a teacher.

By contrast, in the Gospel according to Mark the first extended public scene in Jesus's ministry is an exorcism of an unclean spirit. That's on-brand for Mark, which calls attention to Jesus's authority to wage an urgent, cosmic conflict against spiritual powers. The first big story of public ministry in Luke describes Jesus as he reads from Isaiah in a synagogue and announces he fulfills the ancient prophet's grand vision of liberation. That fits Luke's accent on the prophetic aspects of Jesus's life. In John, the inaugural scene—turning water into wine at a wedding—provides a miraculous demonstration of surplus, surprise, and symbolism. Additional signs come later in John. In Matthew, a sermon, Jesus's opening statement, tells us Jesus is a teacher. Matthew lays it down: Jesus has something to say. He begins with blessings.

The sermon bursts in with poetry. There's a rhythm to the first nine sentences, which all begin, "Blessed are…" It's a rhythm carried by promises, not accusations. These are declarations, not commands. They promise relief, not tests. Jesus expresses grace in its purest form, gifts with no strings attached.

Who's blessed? Jesus names eight different groups of people. (His ninth "Blessed are…" sentence is about the same group as his eighth one, folks who suffer religiously motivated persecution.) He doesn't

define the eight categories; they open our imaginations. All eight share something in common, however: they are the types of people who often find it difficult to keep their heads above water in Jesus's world, as well as in our own.

Generally speaking, people in the Roman-controlled Mediterranean region during the first century lived in an agonistic society. The word *agonistic* comes from the Greek word *agōn*, which means "struggle" or "contest." It's also behind the word *agony*. An agonistic society is one marked by competition. It doesn't mean that everyone is your enemy. Rather, in that kind of culture, social status, power, and privilege matter in every social interaction. You know your place in the pecking order, and you might lose your advantages if you don't guard them. Never give rivals a chance to best you. It's not such a foreign concept, is it? There are agonistic elements in our modern democratic and capitalistic societies. Sometimes a sense of struggle fuels progress. Sometimes it crushes people.

Other places were more agonistic than Galilee, where Jesus lived, but he and his neighbors knew how things worked. In that kind of culture, the people Jesus promises to bless at the beginning of his first sermon are the ones who tend to bring up the rear in the rat race, because in a competitive world they're the easiest to step over, take advantage of, overpower, or just ignore. Whom does he have in mind?

The poor in spirit? They are people whose vitality has been broken or taken from them, making it difficult for them to hope anymore or to have a sense of their own self-worth.

Those who mourn? All of us must go through seasons of mourning, but I propose that Jesus means people who never find their way amid the loss and emptiness that grief creates. These are people who must live without parts of themselves, perhaps through the bitter and irretrievable loss of a spouse, a child, a job, a community, innocence, or health.

Those who are meek? This isn't about shyness or politeness. Picture the people who get stepped on and whose voices are never heard. These

are our neighbors who have no advocates or who just can't get their foot into a door of opportunity without it being slammed on them.

Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness? Jesus refers to people who get cheated or unfairly blamed. Understand "righteousness" here as justice. To hunger for it is to long to have the truth told. In our predatory world, systems and prejudices deny justice to many people; the systems are designed that way.

Those who are merciful? At least a little mercy is a good thing for everyone to give. I won't hate you for causing a fender bender. But if I'm too merciful and generous, won't that make me a sucker and a target for scams? In a dog-eat-dog world, the merciful dog might end up as someone else's lunch.

Those who are pure in heart? We all should strive for purity, right? Of course. But I suppose most of us have lowered our standards for ourselves and the world so we can avoid being disappointed. We've learned to tolerate corruption. We overlook the injustices around us, chalking them up to the cost of doing business or achieving a greater good. True and uncompromising purity in heart can leave someone stuck with constant heartache as they navigate a mean and power-obsessed world.

Peacemakers? Jesus doesn't mean the times I signed petitions and wrote letters to my senators. Jesus singles out people willing to place themselves in the midst of conflict, whether it's on a battlefield, in a neighborhood, in a conference room, or around a dining-room table. Think of people who get involved so they can foster reconciliation. Think of people who put reputations or careers on the line to help others. Think of people who provide sanctuary to those who need it.

Those who are persecuted? Jesus specifically indicates persecution because of someone's commitment to God's righteousness and someone's affiliation with Jesus. He doesn't say that suffering is a good or redemptive thing, just that aligning oneself with him may earn a person some enemies. He acknowledges his message is going

to upset the status quo, if that hasn't already been made clear in the sermon so far.

Jesus's overarching message goes out to people who are vulnerable, people who are generally disadvantaged in a world that rewards advantages, people who are dissatisfied with the way things are, and people who suffer because of their convictions. All of them are now, or are about to be, blessed.

Personally, I have a hard time getting too excited about the English word *blessed*. It typically gets used in saccharine or sanctimonious ways. Other times people use it as a synonym for cheerful or fortunate. The Greek word that we translate "blessed" carries a sense of being "happy," but not in a smiley or delighted sense. When we consider that word as it's used in other relevant literature, such as Greek translations of the Old Testament, its meaning is closer to "satisfied" or "unburdened"—perhaps the way you feel when someone has done you a favor, honored your dignity, or given you a valuable gift. Jesus, therefore, promises revitalizing *contentedness* to a range of people who need it, declaring them recipients of something useful, refreshing, and life-giving.

What makes this surprising? People who grieve or suffer religious persecution don't usually see gifts coming their direction. Jesus launches his ministry by inverting our assumptions. People in his audience surely must think he's got it backwards. Aren't the strong and self-assured people the blessed ones? No. Jesus has a different reality in mind. Changes are coming for precisely the kinds of people whose lives seem far, far from "unburdened" or relieved.

When Jesus calls those people blessed, he announces his determination to being among them and making a difference in their lives. These verses function as a mission statement for his entire ministry. He discloses where we should expect to find him: among the people who live beleaguered and hard-luck lives. Begin your search for him and his influence there.

We misunderstand Jesus's words if we take "blessed are" to mean "cheer up" or "recognize that you're really the fortunate ones." Jesus isn't insisting that the people who customarily get treated like objects or who find life difficult are somehow surprisingly happier than comfortable people. He's not saying that simpler lives make for better life. He's not suggesting that pain is good for you. Instead, he's declaring that people who have been denied peace and satisfaction will find it, through him. Jesus promises to embrace the unembraced. That's the blessing.

Through his embrace, Jesus subverts conventional notions about what it means to be successful or content.

Through his embrace, Jesus subverts conventional notions about what it means to be successful or content. If we're going to understand what he's up to, we're going to have to change our systems of measurement and our values. A new society is coming into being, Jesus promises. It's not beginning among people who enjoy the success, belonging, respect, self-reliance, and prosperity that take so much of our energy to hold on to and defend.

Matthew 6:30-33

(Promises for Those of Little Faith)

In the second half of the Sermon on the Mount, we discover how Jesus acknowledges human frailty and understands the difficulties that come with trying to trust God. Probably because I occasionally talk to my plants to encourage them, I compare Jesus to a careful gardener. He knows a seedling is vulnerable, yet he can perceive its potential to grow into something majestic. Jesus understands that faith often requires delicate handling for it to blossom.

Jesus reassures people "of little faith" that God is reliable and is concerned about their needs. He uses the expression *you of little faith* gently, not to scold. I think he's talking about all of us, or at least most of us. Having a limited amount of faith isn't a fault as much as it's simply part of what it means to be human in a world that often tells us we have to fight tooth and nail to secure our own future. Leave the anxious striving to other people, Jesus says, it's what "the gentiles" do. (He means the people who don't know God's trustworthiness.)

Faith doesn't automatically burst into being as something sturdy. It needs to be nurtured. Good thing Jesus is a nurturer. This is a crucial theme in Matthew.

The English nouns *faith*, *belief*, and *trust* are all legitimate translations of the same Greek word. I think *trust* best gets at what Jesus is talking about: people with "little trust." Bible translations usually opt for the word *faith*, but the idea usually isn't about "believing in God," as if it's some decision we make with our minds. Instead, biblical "faith" is about trusting God—trusting that what God says about us is true and trusting that God's ways are good for us and for our neighbors. Jesus's emphasis is less cognitive and more experiential: how does a person of "faith" actually live?

With the expression *little faith* Jesus acknowledges that we're still growing and learning. Trust takes time in any relationship. Jesus says he's okay with that. He will take care of people with little faith. He repeats the expression in 8:23-27, when he protects his followers during a violent storm as they sail across the Sea of Galilee (see also 14:28-33). Versions of the expression appear also in 16:8 and 17:20, and just once elsewhere in the whole New Testament (Luke 12:28). Matthew seems to like using it.

Returning to the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6, we also find there a promise Jesus makes to us, to anyone of little faith. He urges his listeners to seek God's kingdom first, then "all these things"—the basic necessities of life—"will be given to you as well" (v. 33). He

doesn't seem to be pledging to provide food, clothing, and housing with a miraculous wave of the hand. He promises that God's desired society—the emerging kingdom of heaven—will make our worrying obsolete. As God's ways come to pass, we know how to use God's gifts to ensure that everyone receives care. That's a promise, one that we can begin to realize now if we let God nourish our meager ability to trust. It helps when we practice that together.

Matthew 20:1-16

(Workers in the Vineyard)

No passage in Matthew illustrates how outrageous, lavish, and upending God's grace is better than this parable does. It captures the magnitude of generosity embedded in God's desire to bless the world through Jesus Christ and the Kingdom he inaugurates.

Jesus lived and taught in an agricultural economy where most manual laborers worked land owned by other people. The parable, therefore, begins with a scenario that would be very familiar. The man who owns a vineyard hires workers at the start of the day and offers to pay them fairly; one denarius for a day's work was standard. A few hours later he enlists more people and is less specific about the wages but promises to pay "whatever is right" (literally, "whatever is just"). He says the same thing to people again at noon and 3:00.

Near the end of the day, one hour before quitting time, he finds potential workers standing around. They explain, "No one has hired us," but he sends them to the vineyard anyway. We should pause here and consider who these people might be. Nothing suggests laziness. They've been waiting all day to work. I suppose I could be one of them. I'm not especially strong and my back can't take much strain. I'm better at drinking the fruit of the vine than I am at cultivating grapes. So we're probably talking about people who are infirm or who are getting on in years who remain unhired at 5:00. Maybe some of them have bad reputations in the village and aren't considered

trustworthy. Others might not speak the local language. Someone might be coughing too much or look like a life of poverty has robbed them of their productivity. In other words, the vineyard owner hires the people who struggle to find work and who most need sources of income. What will they receive when he pays "whatever is right"?

We learn the answer right away: everyone gets a denarius, the amount for a full day's work. It doesn't matter if you worked one hour, three hours, six hours, or the whole day; to the landowner, each person receives precisely what he thinks is right or just. We don't hear how the 5:00 crowd responds, but I'm sure they're elated. They aren't paid according to how much they produced but according to what they and presumably their families need to survive another day. The landowner holds nothing against them, not their disadvantages, their misfortune, their stigmas, or their bad choices.

The people who worked all day are understandably upset. They expect more, because that's the way the game is supposed to work. Even if the landowner wants to be generous, why not show great generosity to all? Don't the most able still deserve the most reward? Didn't they contribute more? Wouldn't the vineyard benefit more from the full day's effort they put into it? They complain that the landowner, by paying all the other workers the same wage, has "made them" (the latecomers), "equal to us." Their effectiveness and their virtue haven't received proper recognition.

Jesus doesn't imply that the full-day workers were fooled or cheated. For them, the system worked as it was supposed to. The crux of the parable emerges when those workers respond with jealousy toward the landowner's generosity. The landowner recognizes that the late-day workers couldn't make a living in the normal system, so he delivers them from the system and dignifies them with what they need. He desires a system that works for them instead.

Jesus isn't giving lessons in how to run a business. If the landowner starts to behave this way every day, no workers will ever show up at his vineyard again before late afternoon. Nor should we limit the

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