

MATT RAWLE



**WHAT MAKES A
HERO?**

**THE DEATH-DEFYING
MINISTRY OF JESUS**

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Chapter 1

GOOD, EVIL, AND GOD

After a young Bruce Wayne witnessed the murder of his parents one night in a dark alley, the force behind Batman was born. Out of a desire to fight the kinds of criminals that changed his life that night, Bruce Wayne became a force of good dressed as a bat and armed with finely tuned physical and intellectual skills. He vowed never to use deadly force. From his inception in 1939, Batman has overcome adversity to become a pop-culture hero who continues to fight crime and inspire viewers to this day. In his relentless fight against the evil forces of the world, Batman has become a hero to millions of readers and viewers throughout the world.

Heroes lie at the center of the good-versus-evil stories we tell. Whether we are wide-eyed in front of the latest Batman movie,

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glued to Saturday-morning action cartoons, or puzzling through the vivid images in the Book of Revelation, we are drawn to the struggle between good and evil. When the Empire does strike back in the classic Star Wars film, we just know that the heroic Jedi will return and there will be a happy ending. Why does everything feel right when the cowboy in the white hat foils the plot of the hunched, mustached villain? How do we know that good will always win in the end? Could it be that we want the forces of good to win because we think that good is on our side?

The struggle between good and evil is so fundamental to understanding the world around us that across cultures we share a common story told in different ways. The heroes of our stories are characters who represent all of us. They are men and women who help us understand what is good, and they fight for what's right. We see ourselves in the hero stories we tell, which might be why our heroes never have it too easy. If Superman never sweats, the story isn't interesting, and we no longer identify with it. Our heroes are human. They struggle, fight, and persevere, but no matter the odds, they are victorious in the end.

Even though we like to see ourselves in our heroes' stories, our heroes are very much *not* like us. They are stronger than our muscles can manage and wiser than our feeble minds can comprehend. They move faster than our own clumsy bodies. They are not confined to past, present, and future. The hero is a picture of who we are and what we can never be, and this is why we need them.



A NEW KIND OF HERO

Be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us.

Ephesians 5:1-2

We look up to our heroes as role models, and we find in them great sources of inspiration. There is a natural desire to imitate the people we most admire. When there was a controversy in the church in Ephesus, Paul urged the congregation, “Be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us” (Ephesians 5:1-2). Paul urges the congregation to imitate God’s works by imitating what Jesus has done. In this way, Jesus takes on the role of a hero for us, and we seek to imitate his behavior because he is the supreme example of goodness and love.

Imitation is one of the first ways we learn about the world. I witnessed this in action one evening while I was giving my daughter a bath. “What does a duck say? Quack, quack!” I asked, as I paraded a yellow rubber ducky around the waves of lukewarm bathwater. I asked again, but before I could finish the question, she looked up at me and said, “Quack, quack!” I stopped. My face lit up with excitement. I asked again, “What does a duck say?” She answered, “Quack, quack!”

My daughter wasn’t actually saying that a duck quacks; rather, she was mimicking my words in the game we had been playing for

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a couple of weeks. It's like a golfer watching videos of other golfers' swings, vocalists listening to famous opera singers, a student-teacher observing a third-grade classroom, or a child watching his dad clean a fish. We learn who we want to be by imitating those we already look up to. Imitation helps us discover the world around us, and our place within it.

At some point, we move away from imitation, and we begin to tell our own stories. We carefully step away from what is familiar, and we launch ourselves into the dangerous unknown, just like our beloved heroes before us. Both Luke Skywalker and Superman had to leave their home planets and strike out into an unknown world.

Do you remember a time when you took those first few steps away from what you knew? Maybe it was when you began to drive, and you visited a side of town you didn't know existed. Maybe you took a job offer and moved halfway across the country. Maybe it was when the doctor announced, "It's a girl!" and you quickly realized that your world was about to be turned upside down.

Batman's story began with a separation, when Bruce Wayne lost his parents. Jesus' ministry also started with a separation, but of a very different kind. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul writes:

*Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself*

*and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.*

Philippians 2:5-8

Christ “emptied himself,” to take on the flesh and blood of humanity in its fullness. He left behind all that was familiar for the sake of humanity. For example, before washing the feet of his disciples, Jesus “got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself” (John 13:4). He shed his outer robe in order to join the disciples and become a servant to them. This wasn’t a loss so much as a way that Jesus welcomed the disciples, and us, into God’s divine story. In other words, what we see as separation in our heroes’ tales is understood as hospitality and sacrifice in the Gospel stories.

Once heroes muster the courage to separate themselves from the familiar, they often find themselves in the midst of trials that must be overcome for the story to continue. Not long after Princess Moana sailed away from Motunui in the Disney film *Moana*, she came face to face with the evil Kakamora. In order to find redemption, the Roman god Hercules had to complete twelve labors for King Eurystheus. In the Bible, David walked out onto the battlefield with a sling and a rock to face the towering Goliath, who mocked him on the other side. No matter the odds, it seems our heroes overcome whatever gets in their way.

Our heroes succeed through feats of strength, unparalleled cleverness, or the sheer unwillingness to give up. Jesus himself faced trials during his ministry: the temptation in the wilderness, frustration with the disciples who never seemed to understand, betrayal by Judas, denial by Peter, and ultimately death by crucifixion. Unlike other heroes, though, Jesus did not turn to

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strength, cleverness, or stubbornness in order to overcome his trials. He did not remove himself from the cross through divine strength. He did not outsmart Pontius Pilate. Instead, Jesus submitted to the agony of being nailed to the cross, he breathed his last, and he was buried in a garden tomb. But there was still a victory. Jesus' victory over death was not about power, or might, or God being stronger than the grave; rather, Jesus revealed God's desire that life would always have the final and everlasting word.

Jesus' story is both familiar and completely separate from us. His life, suffering, death, and resurrection mirror our own hero stories in many ways, but Jesus' story is much different. Jesus is the Messiah. It's not that Jesus is better, or stronger, or quicker, or wittier than the rest of us. Jesus *is* us, and at the same time he is altogether different. When we look to Jesus' story we find a common thread, but we also find that the thread is woven into a subversive, upside-down revelation of God's kingdom. Jesus is a new kind of hero.

Who are some of your heroes? What makes them heroic?

How can you be a hero in someone's life?

In what ways are you imitating Jesus' life?

SUPERHEROES

Batman¹

Comic

Publisher: DC Comics

Created by: Bill Finger and Bob Kane

First appeared in: *Detective Comics #27*, March 1939

Character

Alter ego: Bruce Wayne

Species: Human

Hometown: Gotham City

Currently resides in: Gotham City

Teams: The Bat Family; Justice League

Powers

Genius-level intellect

Peak physical and mental conditioning

Extremely skilled martial artist and fighter

Detective skills

A wide array of highly advanced technological equipment and weapons, such as

- The Batmobile
- An armored Batsuit
- The Bat-signal, which is used to call Batman when his help is needed

Notable enemies

The Joker

The Penguin

Two-Face

The Riddler

SUPERHEROES

Interesting fact

In most representations of the character, Batman refuses to use guns to fight crime due to a gun being the weapon that killed his parents. Bruce has had an extreme dislike of guns ever since.

Origin

One night when Bruce Wayne was a young boy, he went to the theater with his parents. In a dark alley, a thief kills both parents in front of Bruce. Deeply affected by the murder and loss, Bruce begins to train himself both mentally and physically to be able to fight criminals. He adopts the symbol of a bat because he was very afraid of bats as a child, and he wants to strike that fear into the criminals he pursues. Once Batman is born, Bruce continues to run his father's company during the day and fight crime by night.

Heroic moment

After a long search, Batman finally corners the evil and dangerous Joker in an abandoned building. Just as he is about to catch him, he hears the cry of a little girl trapped in the building. Batman chooses to save the girl even though it means letting the Joker get away.²



DISCERNING THE GOOD

A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit.

Matthew 7:18

One of the things that sets heroes apart from the rest of us is their solid understanding of good versus evil. Sometimes it's easy to tell the difference. We know instinctively that Superman is the good guy and Lex Luthor is the bad guy, but it's not always that simple. Maybe goodness is much more subjective than we are comfortable admitting. We see this in the story of King David, who early in his reign was seen as "like the angel of God, discerning good and evil" (2 Samuel 14:17). Near the end of his life, his vision became cloudy and dim, and when his son Solomon usurped the throne, David didn't even realize it (1 Kings 1:18). If we can imagine that King David wrestled with understanding goodness, then what hope is there for us?

Sometimes when we think about what is good, we think about the feeling something produces or how well something worked. Goodness, however, goes beyond a nice feeling or something pleasant. I know a good buffalo wing sauce when I taste one, but I would be hard-pressed to say something moral about it. Medicine can offer healing, lower a fever, and keep our minds alert, but ask any toddler how good it is to swallow an antibiotic!

Goodness also contains more than just how effective something is, like a good plan or a good sermon. Some Sundays when I've preached a good sermon, people enjoy the message but nothing

good comes from it. Other Sundays when I didn't feel confident about my preaching, a new ministry is born and people ask to join our church.

Often, we judge goodness according to the result it produces. It's like when Jesus warned against following false prophets by saying, "A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit" (Matthew 7:18). It's true that we will know goodness according to its fruit, but it's not the fruit that makes the tree good. The work we do doesn't make us good or bad, and neither do those works earn or lose us salvation. Instead, the work we produce is a sign of our connection with God.

God is the source of good. Instead of thinking about goodness as what is pleasant or effective, we must understand that good is simply our word for God's activity in the world. But how can we tell which activities are of God and which are not? We could say that the good, the bad, and the ugly all come from God; but this doesn't sound like the gospel. Perspective matters. I've heard it said that God doesn't give you more than you can handle, but this suggests that it is God who is the one giving you trouble. This doesn't sound like the Gospel either.

Not everything we experience is from God. Trials, stumbling blocks, despair, and violence are not God's way of testing our faith. As Jesus says, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted" (Matthew 15:13). There are accidents, and tragedies, and atrocities that just happen, and those are not planted by God. Sometimes the most loving word we can hear or offer is difficult. Intervening when a loved one is struggling with addiction, refusing to stay in an abusive relationship, and speaking truth to power are far from pleasant endeavors, but they are good.

When do we finally understand something to be good or evil? Heroes seem to have a bent toward the big picture. In an old

How does Jesus redefine hero?

What Makes a Hero? The Death-Defying Ministry of Jesus offers us an image of what it looks like to be victorious over trials and temptations. Looking at pop culture heroes and others through the lens of faith, Matt Rawle shows how Jesus turned the concept of hero on its head. In keeping with his theme, "Pop in Culture," the book examines how good vs. evil, right vs. wrong, and overcoming adversity are fundamental to how Christians understand salvation. Heroes help us discern the good, fight for what's right, define identity, execute justice, spark revolution, and save lives.

Rawle enters the Gospel story to tell quite a different victory story—one obtained through humility, obedience to the cross, and an empty tomb. How does Jesus redefine what it means to be a hero?

"Who better to connect the Gospel story to modern-day heroes in film and real life – and to differentiate Jesus from them – than Matt Rawle, the undisputed master of thoughtful reflection on Christ and culture? From Batman to Mandela, from Wonder Woman to Harriet Tubman, Rawle brings wisdom and a light touch to this exploration of those who inspire and entertain."

—**James Howell**, Senior Pastor, Myers Park UMC, Charlotte, NC

"You can always count on Matt Rawle for outside-the-box thinking. Actually, for Matt there is not usually a box; certainly not one that can contain his creative and innovative spirit. *What Makes a Hero?* is another example of his best thinking. It will not disappoint."

—**Cynthia Fierro Harvey**, Bishop, Louisiana Conference, The United Methodist Church

"Matt Rawle is a dynamic, creative pastor with a gift for illuminating the Gospel through engagement with popular culture. The beautiful reflections in this book both inspire and lead us to aspire to greater faithfulness. Read and enjoy!"

—**L. Gregory Jones**, Williams Professor of Theology and Ministry, Duke Divinity School

Also Available: DVD, Leader Guide, Youth Study Book, Children's Leader Guide,
Worship Resources



Matt Rawle is Lead Pastor at Asbury United Methodist Church in Bossier City, Louisiana. Matt is an international speaker who loves to tell an old story in a new way, especially at the intersection of pop culture and the church. He is the author of a new series of books titled *The Pop in Culture*. The series includes *The Faith of a Mockingbird*, *Hollywood Jesus*, *The Salvation of Doctor Who*, and *The Redemption of Scrooge*.

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