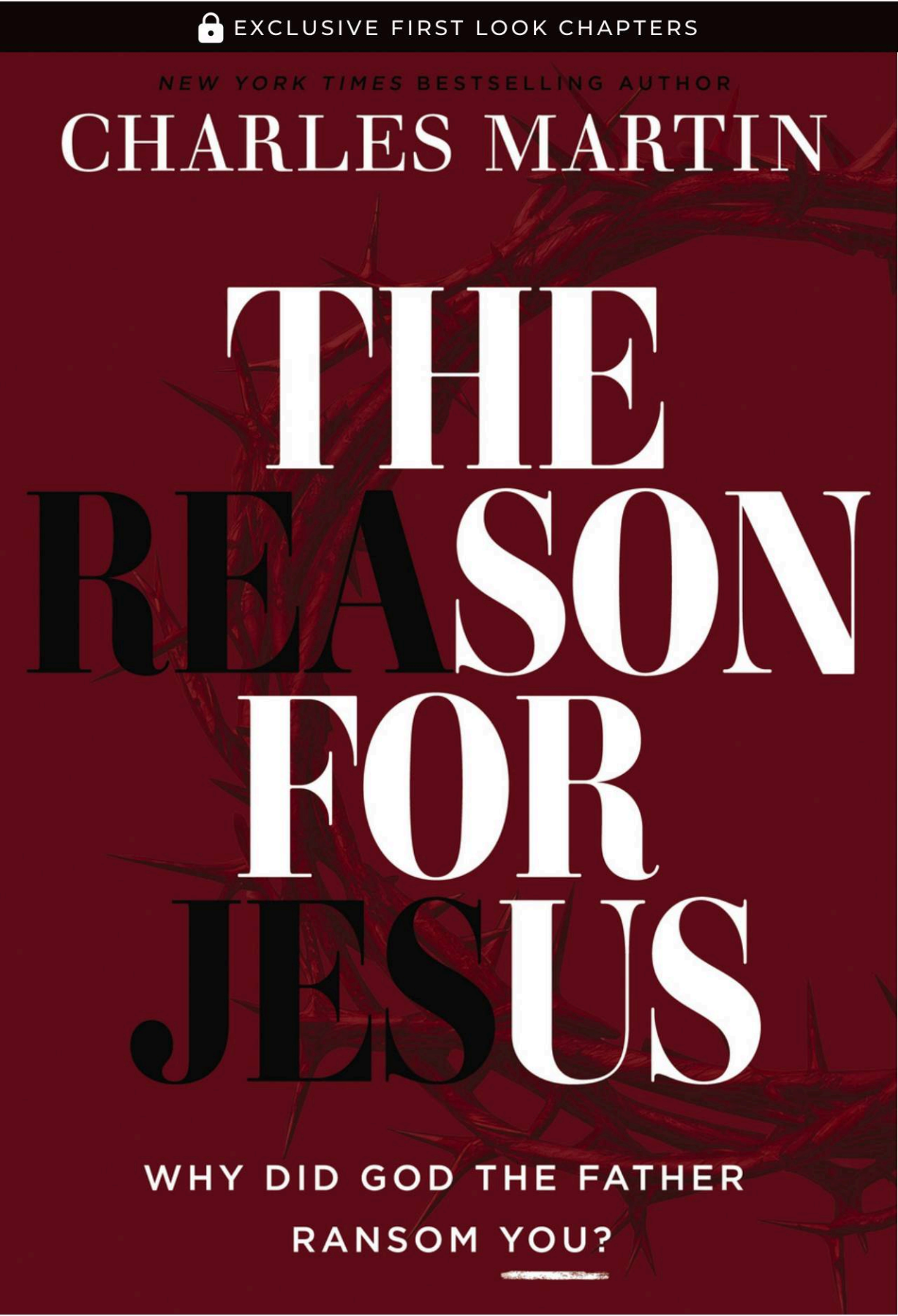

EXCLUSIVE FIRST LOOK CHAPTERS
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
CHARLES MARTIN
THE REASON FOR JESUS
WHY DID GOD THE FATHER RANSOM YOU?

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CHARLES MARTIN



W Publishing Group

An Imprint of Thomas Nelson

The Reason for Jesus

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ISBN 978-1-4003-5963-9 (audiobook)

ISBN 978-1-4003-5962-2 (ePub)

ISBN 978-1-4003-5960-8 (HC)

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HarperCollins Publishers, Macken House, 39/40 Mayor Street Upper, Dublin 1, D01 C9W8, Ireland (https://www.harpercollins.com)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2026939424

Cover Design: James Hall
Interior Design: Mallory Collins

Printed in the United States of America

$PrintCode

For my mom and dad—who loved me
with the love of the Father.

Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me. I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.

–John 17:24–26

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father.

–Isaiah 9:6

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

–1 John 1:1–4

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WHAT IS THE REASON FOR JESUS?

The question is *not* Did a man named Jesus live and do all the things the Bible said He did two thousand years ago? That's pretty well documented. There were eyewitnesses. And according to the Bible, Jesus died a gruesome death on a cross on Calvary where He:

- saved sinners
- made propitiation
- shed His blood
- satisfied the wrath of God
- destroyed the works of the devil
- ransomed mankind
- set the captives free
- took away the sins of the world
- secured an eternal redemption

This is what He did. And if it is true, (and I believe it is and He did), then it begs the question: *Why?*

Why did Jesus do these things?

Why would a man die the death He died in exchange for another—especially when that other is an evil person? A sinner?

Some say He died so we can punch our ticket out of hell. Or so He can

park us on a cloud, feed us bonbons, teach us to sing "Kumbaya," and shoot arrows at unsuspecting lovers.

But why would a man die a death like that for so insignificant a reason? Makes no sense. There must be more. There must be a singular reason, and it must be profound. It must be worth dying for . . .

So, what . . . really . . . is the reason for Jesus?

CHAPTER 1

Twelve-Year-Old Jesus

Luke 2:41–50

It's AD 12. Jerusalem. The Passover is over. Long caravans of families and animals exit the city of the great King.[1] Returning home. Mary and Joseph walk somewhere in the fray.

> Now his parents went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up according to custom. And when the feast was ended, as they were returning, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. His parents did not know it.[2]

A day's journey outside of Jerusalem, Mary turns to Joseph, "Honey, have you seen Jesus?" Joseph, realizing he has just lost their son, begins circulating through the crowd.

Moments later, Mary and Joseph realize they've lost Jesus. If you're a parent, this should encourage you. The parents, chosen by God, to care for the only Son of God, didn't get it right all the time. Also, Jerusalem sits at about 2,500 feet of elevation. Higher than most places in Israel. So they've spent the last day walking downhill and are now looking at an uphill day to find their son.

> But supposing him to be in the group they went a day's journey, but then

> they began to search for him among their relatives and acquaintances, and when they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem, searching for him.[3]

Three sleepless nights pass. Mary is not doing well.

Think about those three days. What are they doing? What is Jesus doing? Also, try not to superimpose your and my childhood rebellion onto Jesus. He was sinless. So all the stuff we did that got us into trouble, Jesus didn't do. He didn't think like us. Yes, He was a boy, but not a sinful one. So, ask, what was He doing? And why?

> After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.[4]

Twelve-year-old Jesus is currently taking the brightest and best intellectuals Israel can muster, to school—men who have memorized the Torah, the keepers of the Law of God. Imagine the moment when Mary and Joseph turn the corner. See their son sitting quietly. Listening. Asking questions. Grace and truth pouring from His lips. What went through Mary's mind? What's she going to do? Ground Him? Spank Him? Take away His phone?

> And when his parents saw him, they were astonished.[5]

I've always laughed at that translation. "Astonished." Christy and I are the parents of three boys, and if I had been unable to find one of them for three days, I don't think "astonished" would quite get at my condition.

> And his mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been searching for you in great distress."[6]

I don't know what "great distress" looked like for Mary, but I would imagine that when she spoke to Jesus she did so with an elevated voice, and

her bloodshot eyes were wide. Maybe she grabbed Him by the arm and shook Him a little, "Son, where have you been!"

Jesus is surprised. Genuinely. And His response is not sarcasm. Jesus didn't do sarcasm. Sarcasm is rooted in insecurity and mocking indifference. Jesus was neither. "And he said to them, 'Why were you looking for me?'"[7]

It's an honest question. He can't understand why they didn't know where He was and what He'd been doing. In His mind, they should've known.

Then He says this: "Did you not know"—again, the inference is that they should've known. Finally this, "that I must be in my Father's house?"[8]

And thus it begins. Two words that shake the stratosphere. "My Father's . . ."

You could have heard a pin drop.

Mary and Joseph are stunned. As is depicted in the next verse: "And they did not understand the saying that he spoke to them."[9] Of course they know who Jesus is and where He came from. They were there. If anyone believes that Jesus is the only begotten Son of God, it's these two. They know something the rest of us don't. But this doesn't mean they've got it all figured out. They don't know the how or the when. Only that He is. Further, they don't really know what Jesus knows.

Look back at the words of Jesus. He asks a question. "Did you not know?" How can He ask the question? What gives Him the right? If it is an honest question, which it is, Jesus is assuming they would know where He was all along. By asking the question, He is pointing to the answer. But where is it?

I don't quite understand how this worked, but Jesus was and is wholly God and wholly man. How that worked itself out in the day-to-day, I have no idea, but here's the point: The 100 percent wholly God part spoke the Law to Moses. Twelve-year-old Jesus knows it by heart, because it comes out of His mouth fifteen hundred years prior. That might mess with your head a little bit.

We can infer from how He asks that, to Jesus, the answer is obvious. He acts as if He has a right to assume they would know where He was all along. Something in His question points to the answer. I think the answer lies in Deuteronomy 16.

In Deuteronomy 16, the Lord gives instructions on the where and the

how and the time of the Passover. He spends an entire chapter and ends with this: "And you shall cook it and eat it at the place that the LORD your God will choose. And in the morning you shall turn and go to your tents."[10]

Said another way, "In the morning, you shall go home. To the house of your father." Which Jesus did. Which is why He follows the questions with "that I must be in my Father's house."

Remember this. Jesus was being obedient. This matters a lot. I'll come back to this.

These two words, *My Father,* are world rocking and paradigm shattering. Mary and Joseph are both good, observant Jews who love the Lord their God, and yet, they have no context for this. Rabbis don't do this. In fact, it's arguable that no rabbi has ever called God his "Father." Why? It's one thing to be the Son of God; it's another thing entirely to say that you are. To claim to be.

Which is a real no-no according to Jewish law.

Is this really a big deal, or am I overdramatizing it a bit? You decide, but twenty-one years from this moment, these same people will gather on this same mountain, and they'll brutally and savagely murder the man this boy becomes. Why? The Jewish rulers explain this when they stand before Pilate: "We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has made himself the Son of God."[11]

A year or two later, His disciples ask, "Lord, teach us to pray."[12] So He does: "Our Father, who art in heaven . . ." The disciples have no box for this. *"Is He serious?"*

Three years in, and Philip asks, "Lord show us the Father, and it is enough for us." To which Jesus responds, "Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father."[13] This is an outrageous claim. To some, preposterous.

Finally, we come to the garden. He's on His face. Sweating blood. The hour has come. The end is here. The Cross lies just over that hill. What does Jesus say? In that moment, He cries out, "Abba, Father . . ."[14] Hours later, whipped, shredded, and pierced, He pushes up on the nails and cries out, "Father, forgive them . . ."[15] Then, having been shredded, and drowning in His

own lung fluids, He speaks these words, and they will be the last He utters that side of the grave, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!"[16]

But it doesn't end there. Death can't hold Him. So, He returns. Mary finds him. Mistakes Him for the gardener. "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away."[17] She's heartbroken. Holding on by a thread. He drove seven demons out of her. If He lost on the Cross, are they coming back? Then she hears this: "Mary."[18] And the veil is removed. The Light returns. It's Him. It's Jesus. She launches at Him like a spider monkey. Wraps her arms around His neck. Weeps snot and tears across His shoulders—the shoulders of the King of all kings. The Creator of all things. "Rabboni!"[19] He holds her. In my mind, He chuckles. He, too, is glad to see her. He was headed home but routed through here because He knew her heart was broken. Then He says this, "Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"[20]

Do you see the thread? The one constant?

More importantly, do you see what Jesus is doing?

CHAPTER 2

Fifty-Six-Year-Old Charles

John 14:8–11

January 1, 2025. Daybreak. I was sitting at the firepit on our farm. Bible on my lap. Coffee in hand. Everyone else was sleeping. I was looking back. Looking ahead. Trying to listen. Honestly, I was distracted.

I've known the Lord a long time. This does not mean I've always been obedient, but I've known Him. And yet, for some reason as I sat there, I felt that I heard Him say: *Charles?*

Pause. When I was a kid and my dad and I would go anywhere, he would place his hand on the back of my neck, resting atop my shoulders. It probably started as a way to control my movements. I had a little trouble sitting still and a lot of trouble following orders. So, the hand on the neck was Dad's insurance policy that I would not run out into the street or wherever. As I grew older, the hand on the neck became something else. And it came to say something else. It said, "This is my Son. I love him like crazy. I gave him my name. And I cannot tell you how proud I am of him." He did this throughout his life. Up until his death.

When the Lord spoke to me at the firepit, I felt a hand rest on my neck.

A pause. His voice was kind. Tender. The tone expressed an invitation. *When you think of Me, do you think of Me as your Father?*

The question surprised me. I was not quick to answer. Finally, I said, "Yes,

Lord." I wanted to add, "You know that I do," but I thought it best not to tell Him what He already knows.

He was quiet a second. The hand still speaking. Then He said this: *You sure?*

His words brought me back to my own. And it was only then that I saw the disconnect. My own words betrayed me.

Usually when He asks a question like that it's best to keep my mouth shut. Like the "Where are you?" question He asked Adam and Eve, He knows the answer.[1] He's not asking for His benefit. He's asking for mine. So, as I sat there staring into the flames, I realized that if I really knew Him as Father, I'd act like a son. Like an heir. And if I did, I began to ask myself, "What about me would be different?"

My answer? "Everything."

But look at my response. One word is telling. *Lord*. Now, hold it. This is a good thing. A very good thing. Nothing bad here. The God of this universe and every other is, absolutely, my Lord, my God, and My King, and when He named Himself to Moses in Exodus 34, God called Himself "LORD, LORD God." So, I'm certainly not wrong. As much as I know my own heart, He is all of these, and I am so grateful He is. But that does not answer His question: My Lord was asking me if He is my Father. Because it is possible to be submitted to a Lord without ever knowing the intimacy of a Father. Slaves have a Lord, but they don't sit at the dinner table with Him. Only children do that.

According to the Bible, and according to His Son, intimacy is what the Father wants. Intimacy with you and me. It's a crazy notion. Inconceivable, even. So sitting by the fire, I began to ask myself, "Lord, I don't know. I thought I did. Maybe?"

His response was quick: *If you really knew Me as your Father, would you think differently about Me? Speak differently to Me? Talk differently with Me? Spend time with Me differently?* I knew better than to speak, so I didn't. He continued, *If it is true that I erased your sin debt, adopted you, have given you an inheritance, and have prepared a place here for you with Me, then, at a minimum, shouldn't that change the way you think about Me and us?*

I had no answer.

He continued, *What would you worry about?*

Still nothing.

What would keep you up nights?

Crickets.

Let Me ask it this way—is there anything about you of which I am ashamed?

I knew this answer. "No, Lord."

He chuckled. *Okay. If I am who I say I am, and you are who I say you are, then what does that make us?*

I've read the Bible a lot. Many times through. Written books on Him and His Word. As much as I know my own heart, I love Him. And yet, I'd never considered this. He used the word, *us*. Right about here, I started crying. I'm crying now.

Also, as this conversation played out, and as it became more and more obvious that I had no response to anything He asked, I didn't want to run away. Didn't want to crawl under a rock. He didn't make me feel that way. He was pulling back a curtain. Revealing Himself. It was an offering, not a beatdown. He was putting His arm around my shoulder, not poking me in the chest.

I began to sense that, yes, He wanted something from me, but more importantly, He wanted something for me. As I ran His question through my mind, I saw something in me that I did not like. At all. And the more He talked, the more apparent it became. Somewhere in here, for reasons I can't explain, I heard the echo of His Son, "And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end will be saved."[2]

The words *grow cold* echoed inside me. Stung me a little. It was true. I could feel it. My love had grown a little cold. And then, *will be saved*. Which got me to thinking, when someone saves you, they do what you cannot. Otherwise, you wouldn't need to be saved. Logically, when we are saved from anything, that saving saves us from something to something. From drowning to not drowning. From stepping in front of that car to not stepping in front of that car. From death to life. Finally, *endures* caught my eye. I used to be an athlete. Once knew a thing or two about endurance. In my athletic career and training, to endure meant having finished the race. Having not quit. But that's not what that word means. It means to endure like Jesus. And He didn't just

stumble across the finish line. He crushed it, having destroyed the works of the enemy, with His love fully intact.

Which brought me to a rather simple question: How did the Son of God learn love like that?

The answer is in the question.

I couldn't get His question out of my mind. Because He knew this, He repeated it. This time He leaned closer and whispered: *If I am who I say I am, and you are who I say you are, then what does that make us?*

I'd like to tell you I had some cute answer for Him. Some quick, pithy comeback. I did not. Honestly, what could I say? As I looked at us in that conversation, I felt as if He was sitting alongside me, head tilted, eyebrows raised. Like a Father instructing a son. Like Jesus on the beach with Peter. "Do you love me?"[3]

I thought maybe a delay tactic might be in order. Throw Him off a bit. So, I tossed up half an admission: "If I knew You as Father, I'd probably love differently." Childish, I know.

Another head tilt. Half a smile. I was starting to get the point.

Please don't put too much emphasis or criticism into my suggestive body language of the Ancient of Days and the King of all kings. Trust me, when I stand before Him, I won't be standing. I'll be on my face. Nose pressed to the carpet. Hands raised. When He turns His attention to me, I have no illusions of my ability to breathe, much less speak. But this is the point I'm making. As crazy as it sounds, God Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, the Great I AM, wants you and me to come to Him with the hope and expectation of a child.

Not like worms who are about to get scorched, but as sons and daughters to a loving Father who gives good gifts. "Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."[4] If He doesn't want us to do this, why tell us to do this? When the apostle John writes his Revelation, we find that the door to the throne room is open in chapter 20. John, and we, can see in. Think about that a minute. This is the epicenter of everything. Where all the decisions are made. And yet, the door is open. To us. We have access.

Given who God is, and who we are, does this make any sense to you? Because it makes no sense to me whatsoever—but I believe it.

That's when the slideshow really started. Slides of Jesus. Walking with His disciples. And every time I saw Jesus through His words, He was speaking about the Father. So I did a cursory word count. In the Gospels, Jesus speaks of the Father more than 165 times. More than the kingdom. More than money. More than any other topic. This does not mean those mean less. But it does mean He's trying to tell us something. This repetitiveness is akin to beating us over the head with a two-by-four.

I closed my Bible and was overwhelmed by a feeling that God, my Father, wants not only to teach me something, but to invite me into something. And the invitation is not just an intellectual exercise. He wants an encounter with my heart. The very epicenter of me. Where I live. Where the knowing takes root. Don't take this too far and don't get grossed out by the analogy, but when I dated my then-girlfriend, Christy, we knew each other at a certain level. I'd hold her hand. Occasionally she'd let me kiss her. Then, thirty-three years ago, we married and "knew" each other. I know that grosses out our kids, but that's how they got here, so they can get over it. The point is this—the latter "knowing" is exponentially different than the first. They're not even on the same plane. And God created both the first knowing and the second. You ever wondered why He did that? He doesn't want to just date us. Try not to think about it in sexual terms; think about it in terms of an inhale. The Father wants to know us at our deepest.

Yes, God Most High wants us to surrender to Him as Lord, *and* He wants us to "know" Him intimately as Father.

But how do we know Him? And how do we get there?

This book is my best attempt at that answer. And without the Holy Spirit, it'll never happen—so you should know from the beginning that I'm praying like crazy that the Holy Spirit will sit next to you, right now, as you read, and reveal the Father to you.

When we look at the life and words of Jesus, the Father reveals His heart for us, and it is in and through the person of Jesus that we know the heart of

the Father. Return to John 14 when Philip said to Jesus, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us." Jesus said to him,

> Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father"? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works themselves.[5]

I want to draw your attention here—"The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority." This means God the Father commanded the Son to say exactly what He said. Which He did. This means, if you've seen Jesus, you've seen the Father. They are One. And not only are they "One," but that revelation is "enough for us." No, I don't really understand this. Honestly, the whole one-God-in-three-persons thing makes my head hurt, but I believe it's true, and I also believe that if we press in and ask Him to reveal Himself to us, He will. As Father. Son. And Spirit.

I tend to believe that most of us are good with the Son part. Some of us are even comfortable with the Spirit part. But how many of us can honestly say we're comfortable with God as Father? That we "know" Him. Intimately. That we talk *with* Him. I think that number is smaller.

Here's the truth of me: I'm prone to wander. I like shiny things. I'm selfish. I don't love well sometimes. Sometimes, much of the time. Like all of us, I'm a rebel, born an orphan, once held captive in the kingdom of darkness, unable to rescue myself, with more than my fair share of Romans 7 sin venom flowing in my veins. But then something happened. Grace. Proving there is still more grace in Jesus than sin in me. And like Lazarus, I walked out of a tomb. But He didn't just call me out to leave me there wrapped in graveclothes. He adopted me into the household of God. And when He adopted me, He did so as my Father, so when He talks to me, He calls me "son." Does this make any sense to you? Because, honestly, it blows me away. Why on earth would an infinite God do that with finite, rebellious, mutinous, blackhearted dust like me? Why

would that God rescue this sinner and then bring him home to live with Him? Honestly, it's nuts. But here's the thing: He did, and I'm not special. Least not any more so than you. And while you, too, were born a mutinous rebel, you can be adopted. The question is Why? Why would He adopt us?

Maybe this book is also the answer to that question.

Maybe you were a child some time ago, but you, like the rest of us, wandered off course and just need to be reminded of what the arms of the Father feel like. You need Him to shake off your shame and pull you up into His arms. Brush the hair out of your eyes. Wipe your snotty nose. Tell you that He's proud of you and loves you like crazy. Or maybe you've never surrendered to the Lordship of Jesus, which means you're still a slave to the king of darkness but you've seen a great light and you want out of that kingdom and into the Father's house. No problem. He's made a way. Whatever your condition, His desire is that you would come home. To Him.

Sometimes when I speak this God-is-my-Father message, I watch people's eyes glaze over. The angle of their shoulders reveals their disinterest. They think they've heard it before and have it all figured out. Or they have no box for this, and in some ways it's too much to hope for, or they don't care. Something and someone has convinced them it doesn't matter. Doesn't pertain to them. It's as if they extend a stop-sign hand: "Hey, I'm good with Jesus, and truth be told, I'm just here for the salvation. Not to mention, it looks hot in hell and I'd rather not end up down there. But stop with the Father stuff because my dad was not a good man, and it's just more than I can take in right now."

I am not diminishing salvation, God forbid. Please hear me, we all need saving. But Jesus didn't come just to save us. Look at the word. *Sozo*. It means "to save, deliver, protect, heal."[6] That means, logically, He is saving us—delivering us—from something and to something. Or someone. And according to the Bible, He's saving us from an eternity apart from Him to an eternity with Him. This means salvation is not the end goal. If it were, the Israelites would still be wandering in the desert. He brought them out to draw them in. He told them so: "You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself."[7] And He didn't have to. He could have parked them in the desert and said, "Peace out. You do you, boo."

This means, He is the destination. His very presence. But logically, it would make sense that He would first save us then draw us to Himself. God the Father does not see redemption as the end goal. He redeems to reveal.

What is that revelation? Himself. As Father.

Many of us have accepted salvation, surrendered to the Son, but do we know the Father? Like, really? You might think I'm splitting hairs. But Jesus Himself made this distinction—and the religious rulers of the day killed Him for it.

And if it mattered then, should it matter now to us?

I think so. I think it might matter most of all.

Have you ever asked yourself, "What is the single greatest revelation of Jesus?" The question itself almost sounds blasphemous, but is there one thing He said that mattered the most to Him? That maybe He tried to hammer home by saying it over and over and over? So all of us thick-headed, stiff-necked people might actually get it? Don't get too axle-wrapped over my question. I'm not diminishing any of the words of Jesus, and we need every revelation of Jesus. But just look at all of His words. Look at them from a frequency perspective. What did He talk about most often? What did He keep coming back to time and time again? Or rather, who? Try this: Ask any version of AI what word He used most. Not phrase. But word. And if you dig further, there's not a close second. That word is not *kingdom* and it's not *money*, although He talked about those a lot. Jesus risked His life to speak the very message that would get Him killed.

Father.

If you were CEO of Jesus, Inc., would you have done a better job of crafting the message? "Look here, Boss, could we tone down the patriarchal rhetoric? We got a good thing going here, lots of folks getting healed, and Rome is no doubt worried, but You're sabotaging it every time You tell these people that God is their Father. So, just, maybe pull it back a little. You know, rein it in?"

I write fiction for a living, and rule number one in any series is "Don't kill your protagonist."

So let me bring it back around: If Jesus really is the Son of God, why did the Father kill Him? Because He did. Straight up, the Father killed the Son.

And He didn't just off Him by kicking Him in the head with a mule. He crucified Him. You ever studied a crucifixion? What was so important to the Father that He was willing to brutally crush His own Son?

You should let that question sink in.

There must be a reason. Which begs the question: What is the reason for Jesus? Better yet, What was God's reason for Jesus?

To save sinners?
Make propitiation?
Shed His blood?
Satisfy the wrath of God?
Destroy the works of the devil?
Ransom mankind?
Take away the sins of the world?
Give eternal life?
Seek and save the lost?
Secure an eternal redemption?

Yes, Jesus absolutely did all these things. In fact, He's doing them still. And I thank God that He did them then and is doing them now.

But why? Why did Jesus do these things?

So we can punch our ticket? So He can park us on a cloud?

I don't think so, and neither did He. Or rather, does He.

Jesus gives us the reason for Himself in His own words. And if we read too quickly, we'll skip right over them.

When our boys were little and we would go anywhere, they'd reach up and grab my hand. Sometimes I initiated it to control their movements. They could be squirrels. Other times, they'd initiate it. For them, it was safety. Security. Comfort. And it was identity. When they were walking with me, the hand-in-mine thing told them something. And it told the whole world. It said, "I'm his. This is my dad. We're pals." So, hand in hand, we'd walk. Everywhere. I had no shame. They had no shame. It was as natural as breathing. I don't know when that stopped. Preteens maybe. But it did. Now, granted, it might be weird

if they did it today. They're in their twenties. Grown. Married. Children. But why? Why would it be weird? I'm still their father. They're still my sons. For the record, I do put my arm on their shoulders and pull them to me. I think that says the same thing. And I think they like it when I do.

I think our heavenly Father looks at us the same way. When did we stop reaching up and taking His hand? He's never quit offering it. He's still our Father. Why would we not?

I'd like to encourage you to take His hand as you read through these pages. It may sound childish, but this is Jesus, and when He says this, He's not only talking to the people standing around Him, but He's also talking to us: "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."[8] He's inviting you into something. To turn and humble yourself like a child, thereby becoming like a child. Maybe you've already done this. Already been there. Maybe you're there now. Maybe you're returning. Or maybe this is your first time. Whatever, His invite remains.

In the pages of this book, my desire is to walk you up to God the Father and leave you there. To bring you to Him. My hope and prayer is that when we get there, you will reach out your hand and take His. And don't worry. You don't have to hold on to the Father. He'll hold on to you. You can trust Him. He's never lost anyone.

We know *what* Jesus did. That's pretty well documented. The question I hope you're asking during all of this is, "Why did Jesus do what Jesus did?" Or, "What, really, was and is the reason for Jesus?"

The answer to this question could very well change everything about everything about everything. That morning at the firepit, God Most High, the Ancient of Days, the Lord of Hosts, the Great I AM, through the tender prompting of His Spirit, led me deeper into the words of His Son. And what I found surprised me. Actually, it did a good bit more than that. It wrecked me. Brought me to my knees. My face pressed to the carpet. Hands raised. Tears dripping off my face. It was and is the single greatest revelation I've ever known. I have spent the time from then until now asking Him to reveal Himself to me as He wants to be known by me. And that revelation? Well, I don't want

to spoil it for you, but every time I asked the Father to reveal Himself to me, He pointed to the Son.

A note about these "Pray with Me" prayers. When we pray God's Word back to Him, we are totally and completely in agreement with His will. We can't go wrong.

PRAY WITH ME

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.[9]

Father, this was easier when I was a kid—reaching up and taking Your hand. Now it feels weird. I know, I'm the problem. Not You. You haven't changed. I have. I want to humble myself before You. Like a child. Help me do this please. Restore in me the child's heart that can reach up and take Your hand without shame or second-guessing. Please remove any barrier in me that would keep me from doing this. Father, please reveal Yourself to me as You want to be revealed. Your Son taught me to pray to You as my Father. I want that. I don't really feel it right now, but I want it. Please open Your words and cause my heart to hear them how You intend them to be heard and understood. If You want me to know You as Father, and I believe that You do, then please Father me. There's a part of me that feels I must "do" something. Get myself cleaned up. Put on my best clothes. Hide the parts I'm ashamed of. But that's not

Your heart for us. You don't care what condition we come in. Clean, dirty, strung out, hungover—I'm pretty sure You'll take us any way You can get us. So please, take me by the hand, and walk me: From death to life. Slave to free. Orphan to heir. Outside to in. Broken to whole. Rejected to accepted. Rebel to child. From a long way gone to all the way home. From cold and lonely to the arms of my Father. Because I believe when You do, it will change everything about everything about everything. Forever. In Jesus' name.

PART 1

THE CRUCIFIXION

JOHN 19:30; LUKE 23:46

It's the ninth hour. 3:00 p.m. It's been dark since noon. The sun's light is failing. People in Jerusalem are studying the sky, scratching their heads. The curtain in the temple, a woven linen divider some sixty feet long, thirty feet high, and four inches thick—so heavy it required three hundred priests to move—has been torn in two. From top to bottom. Suggesting man did not do this. On a well-traveled road, on the outskirts of town, out where they burn the trash, a man named Jesus of Nazareth hangs on a cross. He is naked, and before hanging Him here, someone got ahold of Him with a cat-o'-nine-tails. He's shredded. Unrecognizable. He smells of urine and blood. Above His head, Pilate had these words inscribed: "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews."

At His feet, the soldiers gamble, hurl curse words at Him, and when He says, "I thirst," they shove a sponge on a stick into His mouth, soaked with feces-laced vinegar. It's called a *tersorium*. Soldiers used it for toilet paper. It was one of the mechanisms that helped keep the Roman army sanitary.

This man Jesus has been at it for six hours. One more failed revolutionary who tried to take on Rome, He is pierced, shredded, reduced to hamburger, and unrecognizable. By now, His lungs are full of fluid. He's drowning. You can hear the gurgle. Summoning the only strength that remains, He pushes up on the nails and quotes Psalm 31:5, calling out in a loud voice—"Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!"[1] Then with His last breath, He says—"T*etelestai*." Or, "It is finished."[2] Having said this, He bows His head, exhales, and gives up His Spirit.

Those standing close listen as the last of the air leaves His body.

Jesus, the Son of God, the One who created everything you and I can see, taste, touch, feel, and imagine, and everything else we can't, who upholds all things by the word of His power, the only sinless man ever to live . . . is dead. His lifeless body hangs limp. Blood drips from His toes onto the earth below. His eyes remain strangely open. Dull and clouded, there's no life in them. On

the hillside around Him, dogs scurry about. Begging for scraps. Peeing on rocks.

Elsewhere, in heaven, all the host, hundreds of millions of angels, bow in silence. Jesus alone has done what no one else could. He who knew no sin has become sin. The only begotten Son has drunk the Father's cup of wrath. Drained the last drop. Tears fall from their faces. Their hearts ache and their eyes are trained on the Son of God, the Son of Man.

Below, in the kingdom of darkness, the party of all parties begins. They did it. They finally got Him. Junior is dead. The party, slated to run on and on for millennia, will only last three days, but they don't yet know this.

On the throne, the Father watches the Son, and weeps. But He does not blink.

The soldiers go on about their business. One of them shoves a spear into Jesus' chest, whereupon blood and water flow. Reminiscent of a birth. To speed things along, they break the legs of those hanging alongside Jesus. Probably the tibia and fibula. With broken shins, the men can no longer push up to breathe. Death comes quickly. The crowd dissipates. Some return home beating their breasts. A centurion, standing at the feet of Jesus, when he had seen what had taken place, praised God and said, "Certainly, this man was innocent."[3] All Jesus' friends, those who had followed Him from Galilee, huddled at a distance. Watching. Shaking their heads. Hearts cracking down the middle.

Mary, Jesus' mother, returns to her new home. The home of the apostle John, who will now care for her. As they walk, she hears the echo of Simeon, spoken when she and Joseph presented Jesus to the Lord in the temple some thirty-two years ago: "Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed."[4] In this moment, that sword has gone clean through her chest. She is inconsolable.

Joseph of Arimathea, a secret disciple of Jesus, goes to Pilate and asks for the body. Pilate is glad to be rid of Him, so he agrees. Nicodemus, a Pharisee and ruler of the Jews whom Jesus referred to as "the teacher of Israel," who asked Jesus how a man could be born again, accompanies Joseph, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes weighing about seventy-five pounds. With which the two intend to prepare the body for burial. So Jesus won't stink.

The two of them approach the Cross and . . . take down the body of Jesus. And somewhere in here, one of them reaches up and closes His eyes.

I've often wondered how. Did Joseph lift Jesus' body while Nicodemus dis-impaled His hands and feet from the nails? Or did they do it the other way around? I tend to think Joseph lifted Him, but I can't tell you why. It's just a thought.

Under the haughty laughter and dismissive four-letter epithets of the soldiers, the two men cart off the limp and bloody body of Jesus. Again, I'm not sure how. Did they fireman-carry Him? Put Him on a gurney? Lay His body over a donkey? I have no idea. I just know they did. And in this moment, He is dead weight.

In the place where He was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden was a tomb in which no one had ever lain. It's getting dark, so they carry Him to the entrance, and then the two men carry the doornail-dead body of Jesus into the small, hand-carved cave. Once inside, they wrap His body in linen, using all the spices Nicodemus has brought, in accord with Jewish burial practices. Their problem is the sun. It's going down. Sabbath is starting. They don't have much time, so they hurry.

I imagine it was quiet and they didn't speak much. They were wrapping the stone-cold dead body of the Son of God. The first, only, and last men ever to do this.

Once finished, what then? In my mind, they kneel, bow, and cry. Why do I think this? How could they not? They asked to take Him down. They know who He is. They believe. Somewhere in that quiet tomb, it hits them that this really was and is the Son of God, and what He did on that tree, He did for them. And they know they're not worthy. And so as they bow, they bow to Him as Lord, and God, and King, and Savior of the world. In their minds, there's no doubt. At least not anymore.

They stand, back out of the tomb, and the unruly soldiers roll a massive stone over the opening and seal it with a spike so no one can roll the stone back and steal the body, giving His followers the chance to start a myth.

Having prepared the body, they shuffle home, leaning on each other.

Three days pass. Friday night. Saturday. And Sunday morn. At which

point, Mary Magdalene, who can't take it anymore, walks in the predawn light to the tomb. Jesus drove seven demons out of her, and she has now convinced herself that since He couldn't defeat death, all seven are coming back and her condition will be worse than before. She's both heartbroken and bracing for the worst. She creeps into the garden. Weeping. She's a wreck. Hasn't slept in three days.

But when she gets to the place where they laid the body, there's a problem. The Volkswagen-sized stone that had been sealing the entrance, has been rolled backward. Completely. And that Roman seal has been broken. Who would dare do such a thing? Then, looking inside the tomb, her worst fears are realized. The body is gone. The tomb is empty. The only thing remaining is the bloody head covering, which is neatly folded and placed where his head had lain. And some linen clothes.[5]

Mary runs back to town, finds Peter and John, and shouts both out of breath and in anger, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him."[6] Peter and John race to the tomb and find it just as she has said. Empty. Linen cloth folded.

Not understanding what is going on, they leave Mary there. To mourn alone. Weeping outside the tomb. Then for some reason, she stoops and looks inside the tomb. When she does, she sees two angels in white, sitting where the body had lain. One at the head and one at the foot. Much like the two angels atop the ark of the covenant. One on either side of the mercy seat. They say to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" Which is strange, because they know why, but they ask anyway. Mary responds, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him."[7] Without waiting for a response or an explanation, she turns and ducks back out of the tomb, where she is ready to go to fisticuffs with the unruly soldiers who no doubt stole His body. But before she takes two steps, she bumps into a man she assumes is the gardener. The gardener then repeats the question, "Woman, why are you weeping?" and follows it with, "Whom are you seeking?" He, too, knows the answer, but He asks anyway.

Mary, about to lose her ever-loving mind, says, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away."[8]

This next moment is one of the greatest in the history of the world and is certainly the greatest in Mary's life. Because He who was dead, now speaks.

"Mary."[9]

The word rattles around Mary's brain and finally settles. *He just called me "Mary." How does he know my name, unless . . .*

In the next millisecond, Jesus removes whatever veil He used to conceal Himself, and Mary can see Him for who He is. The Lord, the One who delivered her, healed her, saved her, made propitiation for her sins, and redeemed her, stands before her. Alive and breathing. Jesus has defeated death, hell, and the grave. It can't hold Him. It doesn't. The Lion of Judah, the root of David, has conquered.[10]

The image registers and Mary comes unglued. She jumps on Jesus like a spider monkey and shouts, "Rabboni!" at the top of her lungs. Evidently, she's squeezing the new life out of Him because He says, "Do not cling to me . . ."

But He doesn't stop there. He continues with, "for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"[11]

Stop right there. Helicopter up. The Cross stands over our shoulder. Splintered. The tomb at our feet is empty. Neither can hold Him. Jesus, the only begotten Son of God, the Lord, I AM, is risen. "Why do you seek the living among the dead?"[12] If this is true, and it is, then it is worth asking, where did He go? And why did He go there? Or maybe better yet, what on earth just happened?

During His earthly ministry, Jesus is recorded in the Gospels as having said, "Follow me" more than twenty times. Most of us tend to look at that commandment as an earthly one. And it is. But what if it's more than that? If we truly follow Jesus, He will take us where He is going. How do we know this? This is Paul to the Ephesians (he's quoting Psalm 68:18): "Therefore it says, 'When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.'"[13]

Logically, this means that for those of us who follow Him, we go where He goes. Even when we leave this earth.

So, where did He go? Really. What, or who, is the destination? Seems like

that would be important. And while we're at it, why exactly did He have to die in the first place? If He really was and is who the Bible says He is, it seems like an awful waste of innocent blood. Why endure the torment? I mean, can't He just start hurling lightning bolts at all the bad people, creating stains where their souls once stood? Just clean house, do away with all the riffraff.

To answer the questions, "Why did Jesus do what Jesus did?" and "What was and is the reason for Jesus?" we've got to back up. All the way back. Into the life and words of the only begotten Son of God.

When I wrote *It Is Finished*, I wanted to take a long, hard look at the life and death of Jesus and what both meant and mean for you and me. So we spent forty days returning, a pilgrimage of sorts, every day, to that splintered, bloody tree. (If you haven't read that book, you should. I know that sounds like I'm making it about me. I'm not. He met me there. And He'll meet you. It's just who He is.) Not because He is still hanging there—He's not, He is risen—but because "it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul."[14] Without the blood—without the death of Jesus—there is no atonement. But with it, there is. So, having made atonement, what then? Where'd He go? What'd He do?

We don't have much detail on those three days in the tomb. Peter says, "For Christ also suffered once for sins," this is the Cross, "the righteous for the unrighteous," that would be Him for us, the great exchange, "that he might bring us to God," we'll come back to this, "being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit," this is important so now read what comes next, "in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison," so having been murdered, He climbed down off the cross—in the Spirit—and went somewhere and preached to some other spirits, but who? "Because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water."[15] So, somehow, spirits of people who lived in the time of Noah, had been held somewhere not here since the flood, and at His death, Jesus—in the Spirit—went and preached to them. The Bible doesn't say why, only that He did. Having done that, He returned. To Mary. In the garden. But back up, into verse 18. Jesus suffered once. On the cross. For our sins. Righteous for unrighteous. Him for us. Then what does it say? "That He might bring us to God."

And there it is.

Let's look at this in its most simple form: He suffered *so that* He could bring us. Where? And mind you, He's just defeated every enemy. He's the Ruler of this universe and every other. In fact, He created this universe and every other. He thought us up. Fashioned us. Breathed life into our lungs. He can do whatever He wants. So, what does He do?

He walks out of the tomb, takes us by the hand, and brings us to God. His Father. And ours.

My question is this: Why? Why does He bring us to God?

Whenever I teach this or talk with folks about this, it's about right here that I bump into a problem. Or an objection: "Hold it there, Charles. My experience with your God is that He's just angry. An indifferent tyrant. Ready to burn us to a crisp. Wants to crush us like ants under His thumb. Or heel. He carries lightning bolts in His quiver and hurls them at will following up with earthquakes, tornadoes, and hurricanes. He really doesn't have time for us and He certainly doesn't love us, at least in whatever way we understand love." Usually when I try and dig into the wound out of which they're speaking, I find that their earthly dad was a jerk. And if he'd been my dad, maybe I'd think this way too. Fortunately for me, and you, my dad was not a jerk. But more on him later.

I want to go back to the garden and Mary. What does Jesus say to her? "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."[16]

What do we do with this? Are these just the ramblings of some drunk fool who went on a three-day bender? Or maybe the philosophical writings of a long-haired junkie after a bad ayahuasca trip? Listen to what He's saying. God is not only His God but also His Father and . . . He's ours.

This is mind-blowing.

If Jesus just did what the Bible says He did, defeating death, hell, and the grave, forever, then shouldn't we pay attention to the first few words He speaks after He steps out of the tomb? Seems like they would matter about as much as those words He spoke from the cross.

Let's break it down to brass tacks. Jesus did something. The cross. Okay. But why? Seems like that answer would matter. Then He went somewhere. Where? And He took a bunch of us with Him. Why?

The death of Jesus is not the end of the story. I thank God for the shed blood of Jesus. But Jesus didn't stay there. He's not still hanging on that tree. He rose. And then He went where He wanted. He returned to His Father. No one made Him. No one could. He made a choice, and His first choice, after easing Mary's broken heart, was to return here for forty days to encourage His friends; and then He walked back through the garden where He was arrested, climbed up a hill, and stepped into His Father's chariot—for the return trip home. Why?

To be with His Father.

Further, He doesn't go alone. He brings us with Him. At least those of us who believe in His name. This blows my mind. I cannot wrap my head around this, but I'll come back to it. Point is, He did.

So, why go to the Father? Why, of all the places in all the universes, is God the Father the destination? I mean, I know He's God and all that, but Jesus is Ruler of all things. Everyone bows to Him. There's no place He can't go. In fact, He made all the places. Seems like He might want to take a vacation. Travel a bit. See the edge of space.

But not Jesus. Just as He had His face set like a flint for the Cross, He now has cast His mind to home. And more importantly, His Father. In fact, He can't wait. The clock is ticking.

My question is this: What's so special about returning there? What draws Him? And what does that tell us?

PRAY WITH ME

As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill." I will tell of the decree: The Lord said to me, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you." . . . Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him.[17]

Father God, I know You set Your only begotten Son on a hill we call

Calvary. Today, right here, right now, I want to take refuge in Him. And when I do, according to His Word, He wants to take me somewhere. For the record, I am willing to be willing to go. And while it sounds weird, I'm not sure I know how, but as much as I am able and with Your help, I want to obey Your Word. I want to "kiss the Son." In doing so, I am recognizing You, Jesus, and You alone, as King. No one else can take me where You can and will. You command us to follow You. Which is my heart's desire. No matter where You go. In Jesus' name.

CHAPTER 3

Do You Meet the Condition?

Mark 14:35–36 and Genesis 22

It's nighttime. Garden of Gethsemane. An olive garden on a hillside. Here they crush the olives. This is where the oil flows. Opposite sits Jerusalem. The city of the great king. Candles flicker. The air is cool. He can see His breath. The disciples are sleepy after several glasses of wine at the Passover dinner. They snore quietly. Jesus does not.

He's on His face. Flat out. In agony. And as He pleads with God, great drops of blood fall to the earth.

The crushing has begun. Blood flows.

Jesus is staring at the cup of God's wrath. The cup holds the sin of all mankind for all time. Stored up for all of humanity since the beginning of time: "And going a little farther, he fell on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. And he said . . . 'Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.'"[1]

As His lips touch the cup of the Father's wrath, Jesus, the only begotten Son of God, begotten not made, He who knew no sin, is becoming sin in this moment. Look at His posture. Now listen to His words: "Not what I will . . ." This has always struck me. Jesus could have whispered, or blinked, or snapped, and a hundred million angels would have appeared in battle array. Cutting off heads. But that was not the Father's will. Even though that's what we deserve.

I think we often take Jesus' obedience for granted. *He was the Son of God. It was easier for Him.* I've heard this, but I don't think so. Nothing about the Cross was easy. Jesus was 100 percent God and 100 percent man. I don't know how you fit 200 percent into one person, but He did. "For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell."[2] Because of this, I tend to think we take Jesus' obedience for granted. As if He had no other choice. But His obedience was not a foregone conclusion. Jesus chose the Cross; it wasn't forced on Him. Remember this as you read. It matters a lot.

Notice where Jesus is at this moment. This, too, strikes me. He is in a garden on the shoulders of a hill known as Mount Moriah. It's a storied place. Eighteen hundred years prior, Abraham was commanded by God to sacrifice his son on an altar. And that altar was on this mountain:

> Now it came about after these things, that God tested Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." Then He said, "Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you." So Abraham got up early in the morning and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him and his son Isaac; and he split wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place of which God had told him. On the third day Abraham raised his eyes and saw the place from a distance. Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey, and I and the boy will go over there; and we will worship and return to you." And Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. Isaac spoke to his father Abraham and said, "My father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." And he said, "Look, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Abraham said, "God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." So the two of them walked on together.[3]

Every time I read that, I can't get over: "Abraham rose early. . . ." If God commanded me to kill the person I loved most in this world, to offer him or

her up in sacrifice to Him, would I have risen early? Or would I have found a reason not to? Maybe slept in for a few decades?

Also, notice the son carried the wood and the father carried the instrument of death. Sound familiar?

Abraham was seventy-five when God promised him a son. Twenty-five years later, that son was born. How old was Isaac in this moment? Tough to say. Most commentators agree he was somewhere between four or five and thirty-seven. There are many reasons for this age range. But most agree he was at least in his teens. Some even suggest he was thirty-three. The same age as Jesus as He sweats blood in this garden.

Whatever the case, Isaac's father is well over one hundred. What teenager could not fight off a centenarian? Isaac could have fought back. Overpowered Abraham. Yet he didn't. Isaac obeyed—even when he didn't understand. Now look back at that Scripture, at Isaac's first recorded words. "My Father."

Where have we just heard that?

Back to Gethsemane. As Jesus prays, God Himself is providing the lamb. And that lamb is Jesus. The Son is soon to carry the wood. The Father will bring the knife. Hours from now, the Father will offer the Son in the same way and on the same mount as Abraham did eighteen centuries prior.

But none of this happens if Jesus doesn't do something. He's not a robot who can't get out of His own program. The redemption of mankind hangs in the balance, predicated on one thing. In order for you and meant to suffer the wrath of God which we justly deserve, Jesus must *obey* His Father—and go to the cross. If Jesus doesn't go through with this blood-sweating moment and walk to the cross, then you and I pay for our own sin. That cross on that hill is our cross—where we get what we got coming. That should be our death. Jesus took Barabbas' place. And we are all Barabbas. By the way, *Bar-abbas*, means "son of the father."

So why the Cross? Let me break it down. In a nutshell, God hates sin. Not us. But our sin. Can't stand it. Won't abide it at all, and for some reason, in His kingdom, because He is just, sin must be paid for. All of it. In its entirety. But because He is merciful He delays the payment. Here, in the garden of

Gethsemane, that delay is over. And because He loves us, He makes the payment on our behalf.

What kind of King does this?

Enter Jesus, who steps between us and that verdict and sentence of death and takes our place. Jesus dies instead of us. How is this even possible? How does Jesus do this? What drives Him? The only answer I can come up with is that He must know something we don't at a level we don't. When I flip the mirror and ask, "What would cause me to die in another's place? Voluntarily. As in, my life for theirs," there is only one answer, and it's not because someone made me.

Look again at Jesus' words: *"Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."*

When pressed, when faced with the Cross of Calvary and all that it will bring, what word does He speak? What does He choose to call to His Father?

"Abba."

Abba is the intimate name by which the Son calls the Father. There is no closer word to be shared between these two. But no sooner has it crossed His lips than He says this: "Yet not what I will . . ."

Stop.

Beginning at the age of twelve, and on through His public ministry, Jesus made known to us a name. He has spoken it repeatedly. That name is Abba. But when He says it, is He saying more than we think? Read between the lines. Read what He's implying. Every time He utters the word *Abba*, Jesus is saying: "Father, I will obey You . . ."

Before we go any further—please don't miss this: *Abba* is rooted in obedience. The bedrock upon which that singular word stands is: "Father, I will obey . . ." Jesus hints at this in Matthew 18 when He pulls a kid up on his lap: "And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them and said, 'Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.'"[4]

I want to focus on three phrases: First, "unless you turn." It means to change your direction. To change your mind. The same imagery is used in

Luke 15 and the parable of the prodigal. He turned. He changed his mind. He repented.

Second, "become like children." How does one become like a child? Said another way, what characterizes a child? Jesus answers this in verse 4—"Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." A child humbles himself or herself before his or her father. Humility is required. When I was a child in my father's house, what did I worry about? The only thing I worried about was whether or not the president was going to be on TV because if he was he'd preempt all three channels and I wouldn't get to watch *The Dukes of Hazzard.*

My father fed me, clothed me, housed me, protected me, taught me, disciplined me, and at night, he'd kneel by my bed, tuck me in, kiss me, and call me his son. I lacked nothing. It was "enough." And if I think back, I can remember moments when I was totally satisfied. I wasn't thinking about what else I wanted. It was more than enough.

Third and last, let's look at the phrase, "You will never enter the kingdom. . . ." In Matthew 18, Jesus is talking to arrogant, religious elitists. They think they are shoo-ins for the kingdom of God. They have the law, the prophets, the covenants, and they believe their self-righteous behavior has earned them a guaranteed backstage pass to heaven. But look at Jesus' words. They're conditional. It's an *if-then* statement. *If* you become, *then* you will enter. If you don't, you won't. If we turn and repent and humble ourselves, we can enter the kingdom of heaven. If we don't, we can't. It's really that simple. And they hate Him for it.

Jesus is sitting in front of these arrogant, seething men and trying to tell them that their righteous deeds don't earn them anything. If they want entrance into the kingdom, and a relationship with their Father in heaven, they must become childlike. Humble themselves. Turn. Repent.

Let's look at it another way. This is the prophet Micah speaking to the nation of Israel: "He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"[5] Who is just and kind and humble? A child. Now look at Proverbs 3. These are Solomon's instructions to his son: "Trust in the

LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths."[6] Who trusts with their whole heart? A child.

A child trusts totally and completely in his or her father.

Let's pause. Pull back the curtain. Jesus obeyed the Father. Why? What was His reason? Put a bookmark there; we're coming back to it. But before we leave this garden, flip the mirror. Let me ask you a rock-bottom question. I'll put it down here on the bottom shelf where it can punch us all in the teeth: Do you *obey* the Father? Like, really. Is your posture to the Father, "Not my will . . ." Or is it lip service?

You probably know the answer.

Why does this matter? Because if we don't obey Him, He's not our Father. If disobedience is our posture, our father is the prince of the power of darkness. he's the father of the disobedient, and he's in fact no father at all. He's a tyrant king in the kingdom of darkness. "King over all the sons of pride."[7] The same one Adam and Even chose when they disobeyed God in the garden. Don't let that slip by you—when Adam and Eve ate forbidden fruit, ultimately they were making a choice between two kings and two kingdoms. They're not equals but that's not relevant right now. In their rebellion, they chose a rival king and a rival kingdom. In the garden of Gethsemane, given the exact same choice, Jesus is obeying His Father. And here's the good news. Actually it's all good, but this is part of it. Because of the Cross, the Father credits us with the righteousness of His Son. We get credit for His sinless life. Not only that, but we get credit for His obedience. As crazy as it sounds, we get credit for the Son obeying the Father. Or said another way, we obey the Father through the Son. This is the mind-blowing, inconceivable gift that is imputed righteousness.

Back to you and me—do you want to be Fathered by God? Great, me too. But here's the thing: It's conditional. That's right. There's an *if-then* involved. The Father, through the Son, offers us a right standing before Him. He offers to cleanse us of all sin, and credit our account with the works of His Son. But to receive that free gift, you and I must meet the condition. Why? Because unlike the prince of the power of darkness, the Father is no tyrant. He's not going to force obedience on us. If He did, it wouldn't be obedience. That would be compulsion.

Which is the response of a slave. Not a son or daughter. To get credited with the Son's righteousness, you and I must turn, change direction, humble ourselves, and become like a child who trusts in the Lord with our whole heart. Who does justly, loves mercy, and walks humbly with our God. We must obey Him.

Obey. That's step one.

Maybe we should start there.

Okay. How do we do that?

PRAY WITH ME

But you, O LORD, are a shield about me, my glory, and the lifter of my head.[8] In peace I will both lie down and sleep; for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety.[9] But I, through the abundance of your steadfast love, will enter your house. I will bow down toward your holy temple in the fear of you.[10]

Father, for starters, I bow down. You alone are worthy of all worship and praise. You alone are holy. So today I give You all my praise. All my worship. Father, I repent of every sin committed by me or my ancestors that has distanced me from You. I repent. I'm so sorry. Father, for any time I or anyone in my family bowed down to any one or thing other than You, I am so sorry. Please forgive me and us. For anytime I or any member of my family sought power from any spirit other than Your Holy Spirit, please forgive me. That too is gross sin, and I repent wholeheartedly. Father, please be my shield, and lift my head so I can see You for who You are. Let me dwell in safety, with You, in Your steadfast, immovable, unchanging, inconceivable love. Let me enter Your house and live all my days in a right fear of You. Abba, I want to know You as Father. I want to turn. To humble myself. I want to do justly, and walk humbly. And I can do none of that without You. I need help. Please help. Please do that in me. In Jesus' name.