

Astonishing

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Finding yourself, your purpose,
and your peace through a
more accurate view of Jesus

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ASTONISHING

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Introduction

Since the day I met Jesus, I've been writing this book. Initially I didn't use pen and paper or type on the keyboard of a computer. This book began in the corners of my heart, then dominated the questions walking through my mind. Finally, it ended up in journal entries scribbled in notebooks over the last 20 years.

As a teenage kid, I would wake up before the sun every morning, open the Bible, and write down my thoughts and questions.

Why did Jesus have to die?

What was the meaning of his resurrection?

What's the point of the Old Testament stories?

How does it all fit together?

At my house today, I've got a large wooden chest filled with old notebooks. Half of what's in them doesn't even make sense to me now, but I can't bring myself to throw them out. They represent to me something sacred, something I find difficult to put into words.

In every notebook, there's a piece of my story. They are filled with thoughts and feelings that outline my progressive understanding of what Jesus actually accomplished when he came to Earth, died on the cross, and rose again.

I know I still have a long way to go. But I've come to believe that this truth of the gospel is the most important identity-defining, life-altering truth in the universe. It can't be known simply through the accumulation of information. These truths must be personally encountered. They

must speak to you, shout at you, and eventually rewrite the script of your heart. Only the Spirit of Jesus can do that, but I've found that he's more than willing.

The prophet Jeremiah records the thoughts of God when he writes, "You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart." (Jer. 29:13) In other words, there is a formula to finding God. He can be found every time the formula is followed. Seek with all your heart. Make your pursuit of him more important than food or sleep or success, more important than anything. Seek him, and if you do, God will be found by you.

I wrote this book with the hope that if you haven't already, you would go buy yourself a notebook after you read what I've written. Consider this a small appetizer to the main course of the greatest study of your life. The more your heart understands what Jesus did, the more you will understand God, understand yourself, and understand the world around you.

My prayer is that this book makes you hungry. I pray that a new light is turned on, a new joy is realized, and a new hope settles down in the bedrock of your heart. I pray that this challenges your assumptions and awakens your appetite to fully discover the person and work of Jesus.

In the Gospel of Luke, Chapter Five, the author records one of the many miracles performed by Jesus. In this instance, a paralyzed man is lowered down through a roof right in front of where Jesus is teaching. Jesus forgives his sins, then heals his body. The response of those who witnessed the miracle is noteworthy.

"And amazement seized them all, and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, 'We have seen extraordinary things today.'" (Luke 5:26)

When was the last time you were seized with amazement? When was the last time you felt like that about God? Open your heart and ask him to do a profound work on the inside. He won't let you down.

1

The Beauty

You joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.

—Hebrews 10:34

I can't dance. I'd like to think that I can, and there have been moments in my life when I've convinced myself that I'm actually pretty good. But they don't last long. The reality is, I just don't have it. Most of us "can't dancers" end up congregating on the sidelines once the dancing gets going.

Maybe you've been there. You find yourself at a party or a wedding, and you may join in with the crowd for a few minutes. But you know your limits, and if the floor clears and eyes are on you, it's slow dance or no dance.

I was at a wedding recently hanging in the corner with a few other "can't dancers" when one particular woman took to the dance floor. She started moving her hips and swinging her arms like she just got hired for a 1980s Janet Jackson video. It wasn't pretty. It wasn't seductive.

It was ... well ... awkward.

At first, I assumed that she was not aware of her obvious lack of skill. We all have blind spots in our self-awareness. But the longer she danced, the more intrigued I became. A smile broke out over her face, and her

movements grew more exaggerated. Soon, almost the entire wedding party had stopped dancing, but this one woman kept on going, unhindered by the dozens of eyes that were now locked on her. Didn't she know how ridiculous she looked? Didn't she know she couldn't really dance?

I was doing my best to hold back my laughter. There is something deeply comical about an awkward dancer. She was out there flopping around, and I was trying not to relish the pleasure of watching someone else look like a drowning sailor. Then my emotions changed, and I started feeling a little bad for her. She was making quite a spectacle of herself. But pity faded as I watched the expression on her face. Her countenance portrayed something unexpected. I realized that she *knew* she couldn't dance.

She just didn't care.

What started as comedy and converted to pity had now become a strange jealousy. There I was, sipping on my third soda, standing in the corner, self-conscious and safe. And there she was, in the center of the room, happy and confident and free. It was as if her flailing arms and unhindered smile proved to everyone in the room that she knew something inside that was bigger than the staring eyes or the critical thoughts. Somehow, she was so secure that she didn't bother with the approval of the people around her. Somehow, *her internal reality had transcended the external circumstance*. And that was stunning. It even made her dancing... well... beautiful.

I was amazed by what happened next. Pretty soon, other people began dancing around her, and within a few minutes, nearly every awkward "can't dancer" was on the floor spinning and smiling and sweating. She had unlocked the room, and it ended up being one of the loudest, most celebratory weddings I've ever attended.

But I still didn't dance. I wanted to and almost did, but in the end, I stood in the corner pretending I had something significant to do on my phone. That was as wild as my night got. I still think about that moment

though, and I can see her right now spinning around smiling. For me, that night on the dance floor is an allegory of life. It's a picture of the person I want to be on the inside.

Because we all want to dance. We want to be unhindered. We want to live fully and freely. Most of us are spending our lives in a relentless pursuit of happiness, and we set our hopes on the improvement of our circumstances, expecting that to satisfy our hearts. Tragically, however, you can improve your job, your home, and your bank account, but these things don't guarantee an improvement in your soul. What we really need isn't happiness. What we really need is *joy*. And that's exactly what I hope to uncover in this book.

Joy is an internal reality that transcends external circumstances. It's the unique characteristic that marked the lives of the early Christians in the New Testament. In fact, once you start noticing the pattern, you see it everywhere amongst Jesus's earliest followers. In the Book of Acts, for example, we find Paul and Silas singing in jail. Singing? In jail?

Earlier that day, they were arrested for preaching about Jesus, beaten senseless, and thrown in prison in Philippi. At about midnight, when most people would be crying or complaining, these two men started singing. Their songs of praise were so powerful, the prison doors that held them swung open. (Acts 16:25–26)

In the Book of Hebrews, we're told of how the early followers of Jesus were persecuted for their faith. When Roman soldiers came and stole their possessions and burned their houses down, they "joyfully accepted" the results. (Heb. 10:34) Who does that?

Who sings after being unjustly beaten and thrown in prison? Have you ever met anyone who would smile and laugh as their home was ransacked and burned to the ground? Clearly these people knew something that most of us don't know. Their faith wasn't sterile and safe. It was alive and electric—even explosive. They could soar above the circumstances. They had real joy.

I remember years ago reading the story of Richard Wurmbrand, the Romanian pastor who spent over a decade of his life in prison, being tortured and enslaved for his faith in Christ. He talked about how, in the midst of suffering and loneliness, he discovered a well of joy that far exceeded any of life's comforts. He often found himself laughing and smiling even as he was interrogated, and his torturers were baffled by his behavior.¹

Is that really possible? Could we discover a joy like that? And what would life look like if we did? What did Paul and Silas have that we lack? What did Richard Wurmbrand have that so radically altered his point of view? The answer is more obvious than we may think. *The truth that lived inside of them was so great that it pulled their hearts above the circumstances.*

Above the circumstances—that's an amazing idea. The problem is that most of us have never internalized a truth that powerful—and if we're honest, we're not even convinced that something like that exists. The world we live in is a global neighborhood, with information at our fingertips, and it leaves most of us feeling like we've seen it all. It takes a lot to surprise us or amaze us these days. We aren't easily impressed. But amidst all of the external stimuli, there remains an internal ache for something more. Your heart is thirsty for *joy*, and circumstantial happiness just can't satisfy the craving.

It may sound crazy, but I am convinced that there is a life of joy waiting for you. I believe that because I've sat at the table. I've tasted the wonder and the splendor, and the ache in my soul was both satisfied and intensified. If you want to experience real joy, you can't find it in your career or your relationships. You can't find it in your future plans or your family. As wonderful as these things are, they won't answer the cry of your heart. If you want to find joy, you have to find it in a story.

Not just any story, but one story in particular. That story is what the Scriptures call *the gospel*. The gospel in plain words means "good news."

It is what Christ accomplished for those who trust him. The gospel is what Paul and Silas were singing about in that jail cell. The gospel is what made those early Christians laugh and smile as they lost their homes. The gospel is the only truth that is actually *that* powerful.

This book was written in the hope that the beauty of the gospel could jump off these pages into your heart and do within you what only the gospel can do. Charles Spurgeon, a great preacher of another generation, said it like this:

The gospel is the sum of wisdom, an epitome of knowledge, a treasure-house of truth; and a revelation of mysterious secrets. ...Our meditation upon it enlarges the mind. And as it opens to our soul in successive flashes of glory, we stand astonished at the profound wisdom manifest in it. Ah, dear friends, if ye seek wisdom, ye shall see it displayed in all its greatness. ...Here is essential wisdom: enthroned, crowned, glorified.²

Astonished. Can you remember the last time you felt that? Do you know what it means to be astonished? Maybe you felt it as a kid when you went outside on a clear night and tried to count the stars. Or the time you stood on the edge of the Grand Canyon and were overwhelmed by its beauty. Or maybe you felt it that day when you met the love of your life, or the first time you held your newborn child. But have you ever been astonished by the story of the gospel?

Spurgeon says that the gospel is essential wisdom—crowned and glorified. Our meditation on it “enlarges the mind.” Those are big claims. How can the gospel be that good?

A More Manageable Size

If we're honest, for most of us the word “gospel” doesn't conjure up feelings of wonder and awe. It makes us think of something we already

know, and already feel like we have a handle on. We think, *Yes, Christians believe Jesus died for our sins and rose again. That's great... but what about real life? What about my problems? What difference does that story really make for me?*

The gospel for many of us feels old. It feels known—like the movies we watched dozens of times as kids. We *know* the gospel. But somehow we've bleached the story of its wonder, and our surface understanding shields us from seeing its beauty. Frederick Buechner wrote of the danger of a bleached gospel.

The preacher is apt to preach the Gospel with the high magic taken out, the deep mystery reduced to a manageable size. ... The wild and joyful promise of the Gospel is reduced to promises more easily kept. The peace that passeth all understanding is reduced to peace that anybody can understand. The faith that can move mountains and raise the dead becomes faith that can help make life more bearable until death ends it.³

The gospel, reduced to a more manageable size. This is what we know so well. Maybe this is why the requirements of a holy life seem so limiting and unrealistic for many Christians. Why would we give up the pleasure of the moment if there is nothing more compelling to pursue? What would drive someone to forsake all and run from the pleasures of sin? Only a gospel so beautiful that it makes sin's imitation look ridiculous.

It was Tyrone Guthrie, the great theatrical director, who once said, "We are looking for ideas large enough to be afraid of again." How true. We're all looking—whether we realize it or not. We are looking because we have a deep inner need for a story that ties the stories of our lives together. We need a truth that rings higher and stands taller than our own opinions. We need a love that is more stable and consistent than our

fragile attempts. The whole world is aching and longing for something so beautiful that it scares us, and inspires us, and calls us toward it.

The natural options all around us are not enough, and our world is getting tired of half answers. Sexual pleasure, faithful friendship, a perfect meal, inspiring entertainment, a sunset by the ocean—they all whisper to us. But not as *the* voice. They're only a reflection of the voice or an echo of it. They don't have the power to answer the deepest call of our hearts. The great questions still linger unsatisfied.

Who am I?

Who is God?

What is he like, and how does *he* view *me*?

Why am I here?

And why is my life significant?

Tragically, followers of Jesus rarely have compelling answers to these questions. If we are honest, most Christians aren't *that* joyful. We're annoyed when we get stuck in traffic, complain about the current political issues, and constantly mention the unresolved problems in our lives. Most Christians are "can't dancers," standing on the sidelines.

When I think of Paul and Silas singing in prison at midnight, or early believers joyfully accepting the plundering of their property, the chasm between us and them becomes all too obvious. The world is begging for something astonishing, and that something is hidden in the cross. It's up to us to seek it and find it and live the gospel without reducing the deep mystery to a more manageable size. We have to see it, taste it, internalize it, and feed off the joy it supplies. When we do that, the gospel becomes absolutely irresistible.

I love *The Message* translation of Ephesians 1:11. It simply states, "It's in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for."

That's it. One man, one story, has the power to reveal so much. But in order to be deeply changed, we must deeply drink. We must explore the covenant, understand the atonement, embrace justification, celebrate adoption, and apply resurrection. Hidden in the gospel there really is enough joy to make all of life shimmer and glow. But the depths must be explored.

In my own journey with God, it was the wonder of the gospel that provided my first taste of real joy. It was like electricity in my heart. The truth made its way into my soul and began shaking everything in me. I remember thinking, "Could this be true? Could this be real? Could this be everything I've been hoping for all along?" I've got a long way to go in my journey, but I haven't been disappointed yet.

In his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul tells us that "faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ." (Rom. 10:17) That Scripture is why I wrote this book. I believe that right now, God is awakening his people to the majesty of the gospel. It's when we hear the word *about Christ*—what he accomplished, what he has made available, and how he has changed everything—that faith starts to multiply, grows taller and taller, and reveals the glory of God.

I think back on the woman dancing her heart out at the wedding that night, and there's something I didn't notice at first glance: the real reason she was able to let herself go. I understand now the secret of her confidence. She could dance so freely and not concern herself with the opinions of the crowd because by her side, with his face reflecting an approving gaze, was the man she loved.

Her eyes were locked on her husband, and it didn't matter how she looked to the watching crowd, because it wasn't their approval she was looking for. It only mattered how she looked to him. And she knew from his smile that *he* loved her.

The bride is complete when she lives in the approving gaze of the bridegroom. This is the secret of joy. This is the gospel. Could it be that the gospel

really is essential wisdom enthroned, crowned, and glorified? Could it be that our meditation on it actually does enlarge our minds? Could it be that Jesus is the husband of our hearts, and it's in him that we find the real secret to fully living?

There is a life full of promises kept, unwavering approval, and limitless love. There is a life of peace that actually *surpasses* understanding. Joy is not a fairy-tale myth; it can be found, and experienced, and it can grow. I want to invite you to join me on a great adventure. Let's explore together. Let's saturate our minds in what God has promised through the gospel, and discover what happens inside our hearts when we do this. I am sure of one thing: when you see it and taste it and remain in it, you can't help but be astonished.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

After reading the chapter, take time to reflect on the following questions. Then gather together with your small group and discuss your thoughts.

1. In your family when you were growing up, what did the “pursuit of happiness” look like? What did your family value or celebrate as success? How has your view of happiness or success changed over the years? What difference has Christ made in your thinking on this topic?
2. How can you relate to the person standing on the edge of the dance floor, unwilling to dance? Outline areas in your life where you have been hesitant to jump in. In your experience, what truths about God have been more difficult for you to embrace?
3. In this chapter, joy is described as “an internal reality that transcends external circumstances.” Can you think of a time when you experienced this type of joy? What do you think hinders you from freely living in joy?

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4. When truly internalized, the gospel is a source of astonishment, awe, and wonder. When was the last time you sensed this gospel-awe? What happened that inspired this awe?
5. Do you find yourself following a more reduced, manageable gospel? Why do you think that is so? In what ways has the good news of Christ become routine or normal to you? Why do you think this is the case? What can you do to reawaken your heart to the reality of what Jesus has done for you?