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JESUS

Why Directors Should Wear Makeup

Several years ago, some friends and I ventured out to the local Cineplex to see a movie by a young director named M. Night Shyamalan. I was going, in part, because someone had told me that “M. Night” was going to be the next Alfred Hitchcock. (If you have followed his career path since then, you know that this did *not* prove true. Like, at all. But I digress.) At the time, I had never seen a Hitchcock movie, but I pretended to be impressed.

I don’t remember much about the film itself, but as we drove to the theater I do remember someone mentioning that one of Shyamalan’s trademarks was to cast himself as a kind of minor character in many of his films. In other words, he wasn’t content to write or direct a particular movie; he also wanted to find a way into the script. He wanted to be *in it*, if only for a moment.

And I suppose that's understandable. After all, it is one thing to yell "Cut!" and write dialogue and position cameras, but it's quite another thing to be *in* the movie. It's something else entirely to get up from your fancy director's chair, set down your clipboard (I imagine directors with clipboards), and step into the story. It's one thing to direct, but it's quite another thing to crouch on the makeup of an actor and play a part.

Strange as it sounds, this is precisely the sort of thing that Christians believe took place with the out-of-wedlock birth of a baby boy named Jesus. In Jesus, the Scriptures claim that the Author of God's Story, the Director himself, got up from his cushy seat and stepped into the plotline. In Jesus, the Master Painter set down his brush, and quietly strode onto the blood-and-paint-smearred canvas.¹ The Artist took up residence within the artwork.

Yet the question we must answer in this chapter pertains more to what *difference* this brief appearance actually makes. Was Jesus little more than an extra on the movie screen of human history—a brief blip on the radar? Or was he more? Was his incarnation merely a divine cameo in an otherwise tragic plotline? Or was it something greater? *What difference does this Jesus make in the way our movie ends?* This is the question on which the entire story hinges.

But before attempting to answer, perhaps we should start the Jesus-chapter where God starts it. Not with grandiose religious theories, or high-flown rhetoric, but with a trembling teenage girl, alone and pregnant.

Birth: The Plastic Paperweight

When I was still in my youthful early twenties, I took some time on a frigid December evening to do something I have never done. After dinner with Brianna, I put on my fake cow-hide coat, left the warmth of our apartment, and set out on a mission.

After a couple minutes of white-knuckled driving, I parked our teal Chevy Cavalier outside the neighborhood Walgreens, rummaged the glove box for a cyanide capsule (in case things went south), and walked nervously into the glare of fluorescent lighting and the familiar trills of Kenny G *The Holiday Album*. (Retail stores are required by law to play Kenny G's Christmas records. It's a conspiracy, and I have my theory as to what dark lord is behind it.)

This was it.

Upon entering, I scanned the store for anyone I might know—anyone from church or the gym. No one looked familiar. But you can never be too sure. Walgreens is full of hiding places. You never know when someone might pop up like a jack-in-the-box from behind the makeup counter. I fingered the cyanide. Then I swallowed hard, conjured the *mojo* of Jack Bauer, and headed for the one aisle I had always avoided. It's the aisle that strikes fear in every red-blooded American male. It's the aisle with the female accoutrements.

In a few seconds, I brushed past an assortment of unknown products until finding myself face-to-face with a series of shelves auspiciously labeled: "Home Pregnancy Tests." Was I really doing this?

After gathering my courage, I suddenly realized a problem that I had never expected. There are precisely 467 different kinds of home pregnancy tests, each with a compelling medical argument for why that device is the scientifically superior product for you to pee on.

I felt my cheeks getting hot. Just then a woman shuffled past me. I could read her expression. *You poor boy*, she was thinking, *your life is about to get so complicated*. That was the clincher. My hand shot out like a lizard tongue and I grabbed the closest test I could get my fingers on. I gave the mystery lady the fake smile I used in my senior pictures, and I beat it for the checkout. I paid cash and left with the words of an ex-president ringing in my ears: mission accomplished.

That week I wrote out our church's Christmas sermon with the world's strangest paperweight sitting on the corner of my desk. You might say it was my *inspiration*. After unwrapping the little plastic stick, I placed it just to the right of my laptop. Then I proceeded to reread the stories of Jesus' birth.

In reality, Brianna and I were not (yet) pregnant, and we never thought we were. I had purchased the magic wand for another reason. I bought it because for some reason I needed a tangible reminder that amid the happiness of the holiday season—the recycled Kenny G and the children's plays with blue bathrobes—a grittier reality undergirds the Christmas story. It's the reality of an unplanned pregnancy and an unplanned Visitor. That's why I bought the test. I needed the plastic paperweight to remind me of what it might be like for a shell-shocked teenager to stare down at the double

pink lines and wonder: *How in the world am I going to explain this?*

Royal Birth, Royal Scandal

The mother of Jesus could relate to this question. As a Jewish girl in the first century, Mary would have known the punishment for such supposed *indiscretions*. She could be legally executed. And it was a possibility that might loom larger should the small-town rumor mill suggest that it was a Roman soldier, and not a Hebrew boyfriend, who was behind it. This wasn't a story for a greeting card. Things looked bad for Mary. In a small town, she would be doomed to a life as the black sheep with the bastard baby.

And with this gritty reality, we glimpse the paradox that marks the beginning of the Jesus chapter: two themes set side by side. We are told *first* that this event will be a *royal birth*, the birth of a king. And at the same time, we told also of a *royal scandal*. This child's birth will give rise to rumors of the kind that travel faster than a brushfire. Two realities, laid side by side:

Royal birth.

Royal scandal.

In Luke's gospel, the words of the angel hint at both. While Mary sits quivering from the shock of an angelic visitor, God's messenger delivers a news flash: You will get pregnant before sex and before marriage. You will give birth to a boy and his name will be Jesus:

"He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the

throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end." (Luke 1:32-33)

His *kingdom*. There is the reminder. This is to be a royal birth. But it is couched in royal scandal.

And as the pregnancy plays out, the two themes continue. The local despot, Herod the Great, hears the royal rumor and acts decisively. Kingly gossip must be quashed, and Herod—who would kill both sons and wives for less—is hardly squeamish. Bethlehem becomes a bloodbath. Royal birth. Royal scandal.

Later, court astrologers (Magi) come from kingdoms in the East. They are looking for a child whose birth has produced the kind of night-sky pyrotechnics usually reserved for Roman Caesars. (Translation: they have seen a star.) And for the ancients, stars did more than twinkle. For the ancients, stars screamed royal messages: "Take heed! The old order is changing! A new King has been born!"

Because this was the meaning of the star, it was only natural to bring gifts, not for a baby shower, but for the coronation of a new crown prince. It was a rogue coronation, like the one the prophet Samuel held for David. It was the kind of baby shower that could get you killed; and for Jesus, it almost does.

Jesus' family flees to Egypt. But even this road trip serves to underscore the royal birth and scandal. For the family of Abraham, the symbolism was hardly subtle. Egypt was the ancient land of slavery, the land where Yahweh heard his people cry and led them out

of bondage. So for all who heard of Jesus' flight to the nation of the Nile, the meaning was clear: the would-be king was retracing the steps of men like Moses and Joshua. He was reliving Israel's story, but with fidelity. The trip to Egypt was an exodus in miniature. It was an exile, followed by return. The crown prince was taking on the role of his ancient forefathers. In time, he would leave Egypt for the promised land, and for all who later heard of this, the next step would seem obvious: first comes exodus; then comes *conquest*.

In other words, there was going to be a fight. For all who heard the tale of the special baby born in Bethlehem, this stark conclusion would remain the overriding take-away. From the manger forward, all the tension builds toward this conclusion. You cannot have two kings. You cannot have two masters. *There was going to be a fight.*

Shakespeare could have told us this. And, in a way, the beginning of the Jesus chapter reads like a Shakespearian play. It reads a bit like *Macbeth* or *Hamlet*. There are rival claims to kingship, and as Shakespeare knew well, rival claims can end in only one way. At the end of the play, someone (or more likely, many someones) must lay dead. At the end of the story, either Caesar, or Herod, or Jesus himself must lie in a pool of cooling blood. That's how these stories always end. *There was going to be a fight.* That's the dark shadow behind the Christmas story.

Yet as we leave the royal birth and scandal of Jesus' birth, we are left with questions: When will this fight take place? What will it look like? And who will win? These are the crucial questions, but they can be answered only by a look forward into Jesus' adult life and ministry.

Meeting Mac

Somewhere in the middle of my own transition into adulthood, I met Mac. I remember it because it was the beginning of my first semester in a new school on the East Coast. At the time, I was standing by the day-old lettuce in the cafeteria salad bar, holding a plastic tray, and trying not to relive bad memories from junior high. (You know the ones. *Dear God, please let me sit with the cool kids.* It's proof we're all born sinful.) I was twenty-two years old but somehow that nauseated feeling of the first day of school was still tucked beneath my ribcage.

To be honest, I've never been good with mingling. While speaking in front of several hundred people is no big deal, having to actually converse with human creatures makes me anxious. And I'm even worse when it comes to meeting new people, which explains why I spent the previous week's mealtimes sequestered in my dorm with a fridge of TV dinners. But I was here now, by the day-old lettuce, and it was time to be social.

About this time, I noticed a guy in the oversized red T-shirt sitting in the corner of the room. It was Mac, but I didn't know it yet. All I knew was that the people at his table seemed to be enjoying themselves. So with a deep breath I said good-bye to the lettuce, pulled up a plastic chair, and was sucked into a conversation that would continue for the next two years.

It didn't take many lunches to realize Mac was one of the most quick-witted people I had ever met. He was hilarious, and people were drawn to him. I think most

of us know someone like that, someone who could have done stand-up comedy or *The Daily Show*. Mac was like that.

Then there was the T-shirt. He seemed to always have it on. Or perhaps he owned one for every day of the week. It was red, a little faded, and it had only one thing on it. Right in middle of the front side, was a larger than life portrait of one Ernesto “Che” Guevara.

I had to pretend at first to know who Che was. I thought initially that he looked a little like a grown-up version of Benny “the Jet” Rodriguez from *The Sandlot*. But that didn’t explain the communist beret. Benny would never wear that. The truth was, I didn’t have a clue about Che. But judging by the hat and the big red Commie star, I was pretty sure he wasn’t Ronald Reagan’s younger brother Roy.

The portrait on the shirt showed a man with a scruffy beard, a proud square jaw, and an implacable far-off expression. He looked a like a young Fidel Castro, which, to a conservative kid from Kansas, was a little disconcerting.

I later learned that Che was a Marxist revolutionary. He was, in essence, a Communist insurgent. Yet to his followers, Guevara was a freedom fighter. To admirers, Che was a Robin Hood who moved through forgotten parts of the world, planting seeds of political change. To most Americans, he was little more than a violent and murderous thug. Opinions varied.

I never learned how Mac *really* felt about Che. I suspect that he wore the shirt partly just to mess with conservative faculty members who might get ruffled

when they saw the rebel leader walking proudly around their evangelical seminary. Yet as I began to read some of the varying accounts of Guevara's life, I found that even his enemies had to admit that he was a compelling leader. People were drawn to him, partly because he had left a comfortable life as a doctor to adopt the precarious existence of a revolutionary. His movement grew, and by his early thirties the CIA was actively plotting to kill him. The fear was that his violent Marxist tendencies would open the way for a communist foothold throughout the developing world. And for the United States, this was *no bueno*. A dictator could be paid off, but someone like Guevara was another story.

Che was a marked man, and by 1967 he was tracked down and killed while leading a violent revolution in Bolivia. To this day the questions and rumors about his life continue to swirl. Some see him as a hero, others as a violent crackpot; some as a modern Robin Hood, others as an *Al Qaeda*-like insurgent. Opinions still vary.

Whatever the true nature of Che's legacy (and I am hardly one of his fan boys), the fact remains that to his followers, the man on the T-shirt offered something many of us take for granted. He offered ordinary people an opportunity to be a part of a decisive movement, a revolution, to turn the tables on the way it's always been and make way for a new future in which even the nobodies could be a part.² That's what revolutionaries have always offered. And that's where Jesus of Nazareth comes in.

A Revolutionary Life

Unfortunately, many of us have been led to think of Jesus in ways that hide the revolutionary nature of his life. This happens in two ways. On the one hand, the secular culture has led us to think of grown-up Jesus as a kind of a first-century Oprah. He was a compassionate if somewhat effeminate man who delivered good advice and tried to help people. According to some portraits, he spent much of his time cuddling baby lambs and offering a gospel of warm fuzzies to a world with low self-esteem.

For evidence of this view we need only look to polls showing that while the general public *strongly* dislikes the church, they're still *ga-ga* for Jesus. Some writers use these statistics to prove that the church is chock-full of mean-spirited fundamentalists. There are some of these to be sure. But the stats on Jesus' popularity probably reveal more of the way in which he has become a blank canvas onto which we project whatever qualities we find personally appealing. For the culture, Jesus is one cardigan shy of a first-century Mr. Rogers. He's *nice*. But then again, nice people don't normally get themselves executed for crimes against the state.

In other words, Oprah-Jesus never existed.

On the opposite extreme, we've been led by some in the church to think of Jesus' life in purely spiritual terms. He was, from this perspective, a kind of benevolent ticket scalper, dispensing free passes to the afterlife. He was a spiritual real-estate developer selling heavenly McMansions someplace north of Del Boca Vista. For this

Jesus, the goal was simple: he *came* to earth so we can *leave* it—and go to heaven when we die. End of story.

But as with the Jesus of pop culture, there are problems with this Jesus too. One problem emerges when we notice that the Jesus of Scripture spends much of his time talking about what it would look like for the kingdom of heaven to come *here*, not *up there* in Del Boca Vista. He prayed: “Thy kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven.”

In other words, the Jesus of Scripture wasn’t just selling heavenly condos, he was also sparking a this-world revolution. That’s why most of his messages describe what it looks like when God’s kingdom takes root among us. The Jesus of Scripture said it this way: *the kingdom of God* is like this:

It’s like a *mustard seed*, starting small but growing large. (see Mark 4:30–32)

It’s like a *priceless pearl*, worth giving all to possess. (see Matthew 13:45–46)³

It’s like a *net*, that separates good fish from bad. (see Matthew 13:47–49)

This is the nature of the kingdom. It’s cryptic. Yet one thing is clear. In a land that *already* had a king (Caesar, Herod, etc.), new kingdom talk was very, very dangerous. New kingdom talk was new king talk and while it could get you followers, it could also get you killed.

In many ways, new kingdom talk is the message mouthed by revolutionaries across the centuries. It was the message of people like Che Guevara, Thomas Jefferson, and William Wallace—but with *one crucial*

difference! Instead of encouraging his followers to take up arms, the rebel Lord from Nazareth was encouraging an even more radical uprising. Now a word on that.

Parables on CNN

When I'm working (as I am now) on my laptop, I can easily minimize this document and move to something called the internet. (Or as a former U.S. president put it: the *intra-nets*.) And once on the *intra-nets*, I can check or send an e-mail, order something off of Amazon, or, as I do more frequently, I can check the headlines.

Unfortunately, when I do check the headlines, I am usually greeted by a particular kind of image: the image of the battlefield. A car bomb in Riyadh, an IED in Baghdad, a suicide bomber on the West Bank. There are atrocities too numerous to count, some of which originate not far from the Middle Eastern landscape where Jesus walked and taught. Indeed, one might even suppose after viewing the news that although much has changed since the Author stepped into the story, many things remain the same. Sectarian violence belongs firmly in the latter category.

And so it is while viewing the headlines that we are forced to marvel again at the revolutionary message of Jesus.

We marvel because from the moment his life began it seemed that Jesus was destined for a fight. The birth stories tell us this much, and his ministry reinforces the feeling. It begins with his baptism and symbolic crossing of the Jordan River (the same river crossed by the Old

Testament warrior *Joshua*—whose name in the Greek is identical to that of Jesus). It continues as he calls twelve disciples (one for each tribe that conquered the Canaanites). And it climaxes with a ministry that centers on the coming of the so-called kingdom of God.

The miracles, the prophecies, the pointed parables—all seemed to be signs that the violent day of the Lord was finally at hand. And on this day, *there was going to be a fight*. Revolution was at hand, and what else could this be but the run-up to the final battle in which the Messiah would drive out the pagans and reclaim the land? This was it! Soon the new *Joshua* would honor his violent namesake. The Son of the shepherd-king would rally his mighty men, blood would flow, and embarrassed foreigners would stream to Jerusalem to learn the Torah and become repentant Jewish converts (see Jeremiah 3:14–17).

And yet . . . almost as quickly as this hope emerges, the unpredictable Rabbi starts going off the revolutionary reservation. He starts saying things that bring the nature of the movement into question. Things like: love your enemies, turn your cheek, and pray for those who persecute you (see Matthew 5:39, 44). He starts talking about how he is going to die, and what is worse, he starts criticizing the religious do-gooders and hanging out with sinners! This is not what was expected.

Beards and Kilts

To grasp how bizarre Jesus' behavior must have seemed, you might imagine a scene from the old Mel Gibson

movie *Braveheart*. In this scene, you see William Wallace racing back and forth on horseback, in front of his army. (And you know it's him because, let's be honest, only one guy wears blue face paint like a medieval Smurf.) But this time, instead of giving a rousing pep talk that would make even a suburban basement-dweller go out and buy a kilt, Wallace takes a different course. This time, you hear Mel Gibson's quasi-Scottish accent say something like: "You've heard it said, 'love your countrymen and hate the *British*.' But I tell you: love the *British* and pray for them!"⁴

End of speech. Cue the Celtic whistle thing.

Of course, in the original version, this is where all the Beards and Skirts start cheering and waving weapons like half-soused Raiders fans. But in the revised version—the one you're watching now—that doesn't happen. In the revised version, the guys in beards in skirts just stare at Smurf-face on his big dumb horse. They just gawk at him in eerie silence. Then a single brogue-ish voice yells the question everyone is thinking: "What the heck was that?! I thought we came to fight!"

I picture the Jewish Zealots asking Jesus a similar question. "I thought you brought us here to fight?! You've been talking of a new kingdom on earth, as it is in heaven. So what's all this psycho-babble about loving your enemies and letting them kill you?!" Peter asks a question like this, to which Christ promptly calls him Satan—something Oprah-Jesus would never do (see Matthew 16:23).

In the end, we're all left wondering along with the crowds and the disciples and the guys in beards and

kilts: Where did this revolution go wrong? How could the man with the royal birth and the revolutionary life *not* do what everyone expected? How could he not raise an army, storm the gates, and usher in God's kingdom? How could he say and do so much, only to walk away from the battlefield like a yellow-bellied coward? The sentiment of Peter's question hangs like a pall over the end of Jesus' ministry: we thought there was going to be a fight!

Of course, if you've read the New Testament, you know a fight is coming. By the end of Jesus' life, blood will spill and soldiers will do what soldiers have been trained to do. There will be a fight. But it won't look like anything George Washington or Che Guevara or William Wallace would have expected. Because in *this* story, the battle is won by a naked, groaning Jew, who is hammered to a Roman cross.

Death—It's Bad

This is perhaps the most important part of God's whole Story. But before addressing the crucifixion, we need to identify a basic theological truth. Get ready for it. Here it is: *death is bad*. Profound, right? Yet true. Folks can write poetry about its inevitability or wax eloquent by couching it in songs or eulogies, but when it comes down to it—in the Bible—death is *bad*. End of story. Paul calls it the final enemy (see 1 Corinthians 15:26). And, in case you're wondering, enemies are bad too.

This truth came home for me with crushing force a few years ago when I stood next to the bed of my brother-in-law and watched him die. Daniel was only

thirty. He was funny, young, and handsome. He was a loving husband to my youngest sister, who is perhaps the strongest person I know. They were still newlyweds. His death, and the terrible decline that preceded it, are the worst things I have ever witnessed. ALS is insidious. And despite endless ice buckets dumped on countless heads, no cure exists.

Watching Daniel die changed me. And while I have no claim to the depth of grief borne by his more immediate family, his passing stole some measure of my innocence. In movies, death is valorized and sanitized, but there is one thing the films get wrong: death's color. On screen, the deceased look like they are merely sleeping. But Daniel did not look like that. While he died painlessly, I could not join others in kissing his face, holding his hands, or stroking his hair. I just wanted to get out of there—to flee the room, avert my gaze, cover up his body—anything to escape the pallor that had replaced his former complexion. The image scarred me. For as the theologian John Zizioulas writes: “There is no greater contradiction than a dying being.”

That is why I wriggled uncomfortably in my chair last month as I heard a graduation speaker (and pastor) affirm the words of the late Steve Jobs: “Death is very likely the single best invention of Life. It is Life's change agent. It clears out the old to make way for the new.”

This may sound nice at first, but when applied to actual people—a son or daughter, a spouse or friend—it is insulting and absurd. It is wrong because it treats human beings like excess inventory at a used car lot. *Act now! Older models must go!* Death is not Life's best

creation, and while Jobs said it, he didn't actually believe it. If he had, he would not have fought so furiously (and valiantly) to fend off this great "invention."

For those who mourn—and there are many—such platitudes don't wash against the image of a departed loved one. The bony hand of death cannot be manicured. It is always ugly, always cold, always an offense. While we are often glad to know that a loved one is no longer suffering, it is not death we celebrate; it is the cessation of pain, and their presence with God. Death remains an enemy combatant. It is an intruder into God's good world. It's bad.

So the obvious question is: Why would Jesus' death be any different? Why would a violent execution be good news to anybody? What makes Jesus' death any more beneficial than say, the senseless snuffing out of teenage life along a lonely highway? Why don't we immortalize that scene in tiny 14-carat artwork—the last second before the two cars collide, on a dainty silver necklace? Why don't rappers tattoo *that* scene on their biceps? What is it about the cross that is so singular that it forms the pulsing, hope-filled center of God's Story?

The most obvious answer is that Jesus' death was *temporary*. Jesus' death, you might say, *didn't stick*. He came back. According to the Scriptures, Jesus didn't stay dead, and that makes him at least unique. But to answer the question like this is really to avoid an answer. It is to simply skip over death in favor of a happier subject: resurrection. And that is something we must not do. We must confront the cross head-on and ask the difficult

question: If death doesn't fix things—if it's *bad*—then what exactly happened on Golgotha?

Hints and Hushed Whispers

Not surprisingly, there are some hints within Scripture that tell us something about why Christ's execution is different from the others throughout human history. Hundreds of years before Jesus, a prophet named Isaiah wrote of a so-called Suffering Servant who would take upon himself the sins and hurts of God's people in order to bring about redemption.

The Servant would be “pierced for our transgressions”; he would be “crushed for our iniquities”; and his “punishment” would bring us peace. He would be cut off from the land of the living, and be assigned a grave with the wicked, though he had done no violence. But this would be no random, senseless death. According to Isaiah, the Servant's death would be a kind of sacrifice—an act of atonement for all the evil and violence that had seeped under the door into God's good world. It would be as if this Servant were actually taking all the ugliness onto himself so that the penalty for sin might be averted from God's people. It would be as if he were throwing himself on the grenade and absorbing the explosion (see Isaiah 53).

Yet this picture of Christ's death raises questions. For instance: How does the punishment of an innocent person fix anything for the guilty? How is that good news? To use a loose analogy, if I get busted for a serious crime, say, beating my wife or defrauding the elderly, how

does it solve anything if Mother Teresa (or some other exemplary person) agrees to go to jail on my behalf? You might say that this *solution* sounds even worse than the crime itself.

So what qualifies Jesus to take the rap for us? Perhaps the beginning of an answer can be traced back to where this chapter began, with the idea of an author stepping into the artwork in order to relive the human drama in our place. Think of it like this: to change the course of any story, one needs not only a *writer* but a *character* as well. And as the God-man, Jesus fills both roles. Because sin is first and foremost a crime against God, it is only as God himself that Jesus can conquer and forgive it. Yet because death was a penalty for human sin (Adam's and our own), it is only as the true Adam (the representative of the entire human race) that Jesus can step into the void on our behalf.⁵

Christ may rightly bear our penalty because somehow all humanity is bound up *with* him through a mysterious connection. For this reason, Paul can even claim that he was “crucified *with* Christ” so that he no longer lives, but Christ lives in him (Gal. 2:20). To be united with Christ means that what happened to him has happened to us at some deep level—because we are joined together with him.

But what is the source of this mysterious connection? Perhaps it goes back to our origins. Because all humans were fashioned in Christ's “image” (Gen. 1:26), the Son is the rightful head of the entire human race. And in the Bible, the head often acts on the behalf of the whole. We see a picture of this reality in the way a king might stand

in for his people—in their place—like David going out to meet Goliath on behalf of Israel. In modern terms, we see another loose analogy in the way the head of a company may willingly take the fall for a wrong done by a low-level employee. In the Bible, the people are bound up with their head. And for this reason, Christ may rightly pay the penalty for human evil—enduring even the ultimate exile (death) on our behalf. In so doing, he not only pays the price for sin, he also wins the victory as he conquers it. In so doing, he also sets the ultimate example of love that calls forth imitation.⁶

John's gospel paints a heart-wrenching portrait of this very truth. Toward the end of John's narrative, a bruised and bloodied Jesus is trotted out before a mob. He is clad only in a silly purple cloak and a thorny crown. They are mocking him. "Here's your poser-king!" is the intended jest. "Here's the fool who thought he could take the throne!" Yet even here, amid the mockery, Pilate's introduction of the dress-up king says it all. In the Latin language, his statement can be boiled down to just two words: *Ecce homo*. "Behold the man."⁷

He doesn't ask them to behold *a man*. He says, behold the man. Behold *the* human. And without knowing it, the Roman thug has identified Jesus for who he really is. He is the true representative of the entire human race. He is the true Adam whose actions will affect the world in an even more dramatic fashion. He is also the true Israel who will now fulfill the calling of the covenant. Behold *the* man. And behold the king! Like David his forefather, Jesus is going to battle without armor, on behalf of the people, and their fate is bound up inextricably

with his own. This is the fight we've been waiting for. It is the decisive battle to secure salvation for God's people. Behold the man!⁸

In the searing image of a bloody king, we begin to glimpse the true meaning of the cross. There is love and logic there, if only in hints and hushed whispers. The cross is where God acted decisively to deal with the evil infecting his good creation. He acted. And he did so through the only vessel strong enough to bear the blow: his Son, the second Adam, the Author-Actor who did what only God could do and paid what only man could pay. Behold the man!

This is but one facet of the cross's meaning. It was the field of combat where an unlikely revolutionary—God in human flesh—secured the Creator's victory for all time. What happened there dwarfs our theories and defies our every attempt to distill its meaning. Yet if we believe the Scriptures, the crushing, freeing claim of the Bible is that one dark Friday, the Author of God's plotline allowed the cruelest twist of plot to waste itself on him. And because of this, the early followers of Jesus came to believe that in a very real sense, evil had been swallowed up in love. It is paradoxical that we could live forgiven because God died condemned. It is madness in a way. Yet as even Nietzsche knew: "There is always some madness in love. And there is always some reason in madness."⁹

The cross reminds us this is true. It tells us that our sin is serious. It is so ugly that God would have to die to make it beautiful. But the Jesus chapter doesn't end just yet.

Resurrection: Bootlegs and Black Dirt

I still have a weathered, old recording of a Rich Mullins concert. And somewhere in the middle of the concert, there is a point when Rich starts to tell a story about how his father passed away, of all places, in the family garden.

It's a sad story, and as Rich starts telling it you can hear the audience voice their sympathy (because, as you know now, *death is bad*). But in his odd way, Rich corrects the crowd for their lack of understanding. He says that when you get down to it, his father died rather well. He died well, Rich says, because the last thing he saw before meeting Jesus was the face of his lovely wife, pulling weeds beside him, and the cool black dirt of the garden he loved to tend.

I don't have a garden. But if I did, I don't think that's where I'd like to die. Still I do like the idea of having Brianna's face be the last thing I see. Because Brianna's face has always seemed radiant to me, and I figure it might lessen the shock of seeing heaven.

But they buried Jesus in a garden. And for the longest time that didn't seem the least bit interesting to me. Some years ago, though, I was reading another writer who made a very good point. He said that it makes sense for Jesus to reclaim life in a place like this, because creation starts *in a garden*. And if God really is putting the universe back together one atom at a time, then a garden would be a splendid touch of irony. In fact, it would almost make you think that God is a Storyteller at heart.¹⁰

Sir, Are You the Gardener?

So Jesus is resurrected, of all places, in a garden. And he appears first to a flustered woman named Mary. She's flustered because she has come to prepare his corpse for permanent burial. But now she sees it isn't there. Someone has heisted it away! She starts to weep. And so it is through salty tears that she sees Jesus and confuses him for the gardener.

Or does she?

I find it interesting that the resurrected Jesus doesn't correct Mary's words. He doesn't say, "No, actually, Mary, I'm *not* the gardener; my name is Jesus. Remember? We used to hang out!" He doesn't say that at all. Instead, he says her name: "Mary."

And she knows it's him.

When Jesus says her name, Mary realizes the truth behind the Gospels: the *Gardener* is Jesus, and he's alive. He's been resurrected. And a story this good starts to circulate faster than a rumor at a church picnic. Soon word spreads to the men (who, big surprise, do not believe the women). So Jesus appears to them too. And in all these instances the Savior does what only flesh and blood can do. He eats fish, he eats some bread, and he lets them touch him. He does what only humans can do, and then *he does some more*. You might say, he isn't less human than before; he's more human.¹¹ He passes through an unlocked door, he walks on water, and then, when you least expect it, he leaves.

And this leaving, as it often does, complicates things. It complicates matters because had the resurrected Jesus

simply stuck around, it would be easy for us to measure his importance. If he had just stayed and cured cancer, wrote a self-help book, or invented a longer lasting light-bulb, *then* maybe we could all believe in him. (Maybe. It bears noting that not all believed the first time.) But he didn't stick around. He left. And this leaving leads us to the question with which the chapter began: What difference does this Jesus make?

The Difference: Meals Matter

I am more and more convinced that the best way to answer tough questions is to just start talking about food. Yes, food. Because in the Bible *eating* is important. In the Bible, meals matter. And nowhere is this truer than at the end of the Jesus-chapter.

In the beginning of God's Story, a man named Adam shares a meal with his wife, Eve, and according to the writer: "their eyes were opened." When this happened, it seemed that a distance also opened in Adam and Eve's most important relationships. A painful fissure opened in their relationship with God, with each other, and with the created order. Their eyes were opened, and for the first time, humanity saw the naked ugliness of broken community.

Ironically, another eye-opening experience takes place just after Jesus' resurrection. In a story from Luke's gospel, two of Jesus' friends—a man named Cleopas and a woman, probably his wife (hint, hint)—are walking down the road. It is three days after the bloody crucifixion. And as the husband and wife are walking, they

Speak about how they had hoped this revolutionary named Jesus would bring about the renewal of Israel. In other words, they had hoped he would pull a Guevara, overthrow the Romans, and take back the land.

But he didn't. Instead, he got himself nailed to a Roman cross, and as far as anybody in the first century was concerned, that was the end. A dead Messiah was a failed Messiah. End of story.

So the husband and wife are walking and sulking when they are joined quite suddenly by none other than Jesus himself. But they don't recognize him. (Apparently Jesus is disguising his identity like Brad Pitt in a Hollywood burger joint.) In other words, it's Jesus, but he's *incognito*. Upon joining the husband and wife, Incognito-Jesus asks them what they are talking about, and it's then that they start in with the long, sad story of wasted hopes on a would-be Messiah.

It's a false story, of course, and by the time they're finished we sense that Jesus has had just about enough. So with that he launches into what must have been the greatest sermon ever given (none of which is recorded by Luke, thank you very much!). Beginning with Moses and the Prophets, Jesus explains how *all* of the Old Testament has been a kind of movie trailer leading up to his arrival. He is the suffering Messiah who had to die in order to fulfill the Scriptures. The whole plotline has been pointing forward to him.

He says this, and they're captivated. Their hearts are burning inside them. Yet all the time they're wondering: *Who is this dude?* After a while, the couple convinces Incognito-Jesus to share a meal with them. And it's

during this *meal* that the switch is finally flipped. As they take and eat the broken bread, Luke says: “Their eyes were opened” and they recognize the Savior (see Luke 24:13–35).

Two meals.

Two different parts of God’s Story.

One result: *their eyes were opened*.

In the first meal, a man and woman eat, their eyes are opened, and creation splits apart at the seams. In the second meal, a man and woman eat, their eyes are opened, and they recognize the resurrected Jesus sitting there in front of them.

In the first meal, eyes are opened and this signals the severing of life’s most meaningful relationships. In the second meal, eyes are opened and this signals, somehow, that *through Jesus* these relationships can be put back together.¹² Marriages, friendships, international feuds, issues of self-hatred, environmental atrocities—all may be made new. All may be set right. All may be healed, and there is no longer an excuse. Because of Jesus’ resurrection, “More can be mended than you know.”¹³

Because when God moves to rescue you before you think to ask him, something dangerous and compelling begins to happen inside of you. When God forgives your guilt through Jesus, you are freed up to do the same for others, even those who don’t deserve it!

The incredible reality is that through Jesus, new creation has broken into our world. It bursts our corporate boxes and religious wineskins to announce, with bullhorn in hand, the end of our exile from God! Just as the old exodus started at a table with bread and

wine, the new exodus starts with the same. It starts at a table with a non-violent revolutionary breaking bread with fair-weather friends and saying: “This is my body.” Redemption is something to be tasted—not something to be dispassionately examined in the sterile confines of the intellect.

Renewed creation starts with a death-row Messiah gripping a sin-stained cup and proclaiming: “This is my blood, poured out for the forgiveness of the many” (see Matthew 26:26–29; Mark 14:22–26; Luke 22:14–20; and 1 Corinthians 11:24–25). And with this offer, we have the opportunity to retake our place at God’s great table. With this offer, our eyes are opened, and we realize, trembling, *that no relationship is too far gone*. I’ll say that again: no relationship is too far gone! We must give and forgive. We must join Jesus in walking out of exile, not because of guilt, but because of grace. Through his shattered body and spilled blood, we have been reunited with God. And it is now our life’s calling to spread the revolution.

This is why Jesus matters! He matters because by coming and living and dying and rising again, he paved the way for the most unconventional uprising in human history. It is a revolution of love. By stepping onto the stage, he did what Adam and Abram and Israel could not. He accomplished the great mission of Israel to be a light to the world and the way back to true communion. He paved the way for new creation to come screaming back into the old.

The truth is this: because the Author donned the makeup of the actors, neither Romeo, nor Juliet, nor you

or I must lay dead in the end. Because the Artist stepped into the artwork, the picture can be different. Because the Director set down the clipboard and walked into the screenplay, the plot can be forever mended.

Engage the Story

Having read about the Jesus-chapter in God's Story, it's time now to engage with it yourself. Read the following passages this week, reflect upon their meaning, and be prepared to discuss them with others:

- Luke 1:26–33; 2:1–20 (Jesus' birth)
- Matthew 3:13–7:29 (Baptism, temptation, and teachings)
- Mark 4:1–34 (Parables)
- John 4:46–6:59 (Miracles)
- Luke 22:14–24:53 (The climax of Jesus' earthly ministry)

Discuss the Story

1. Just when all seemed hopeless for Israel, a baby boy named Jesus was born in a forgotten corner of the Roman Empire.
 - Why was the birth of Jesus referred to as a royal birth and a royal scandal?
 - Why do you think the ruling authorities worked so hard to have the baby Jesus killed? What was so dangerous about this infant?

- Why do you think the violence and messiness of the original Christmas story get glossed over in favor of a sentimental greeting-card-style holiday?
2. Jesus led the life of a non-violent revolutionary. Yet this picture is often clouded by false images of Jesus, on the one hand, from the pop culture and, on the other hand, by some Christians. Discuss the following statement with this in mind.

On the one hand, pop culture has led us to think of grown-up Jesus as a kind of a first-century Oprah. He was a compassionate if somewhat effeminate man who delivered good advice and tried to help people. According to the portraits, he likely spent most of his time cuddling baby lambs and offering a gospel of warm fuzzies to a world with low self-esteem.

On the opposite extreme, we've been led by some in the church to think of Jesus' life in purely spiritual terms. He was, from this perspective, a kind of benevolent ticket scalper, handing out free passes to the afterlife. For this Jesus, the goal was simple: he came to earth so we could leave it. Thus, the churchy-Jesus usually asks us just one question: Do you want to go to heaven when you die?

- One problem with churchy-Jesus is the fact that the Jesus of Scripture spends much of his time talking about what it would look like for the kingdom of God to come "on earth" (Luke 11:2), not somewhere up in heaven. Have you ever thought about Jesus' message in this way? Why might we ignore this aspect of Christ's message?

3. The Scriptures also seem to make clear that Jesus was not only a non-violent revolutionary, but also *God in the flesh*.
 - What does it tell us about the depth of our predicament that the Author of the Story would have to step into the narrative to rescue the plot from sure disaster?
 - Read Philippians 2:1–8 and discuss it together.
4. When Jesus died a traitor's death on a Roman cross, his followers were both shocked and confused. Their basic assumption was the same as ours: death is bad. Death means your would-be Messiah was a failure.
 - Read Isaiah 53:3–5, 10–12 together. How does this passage shed light on the reason why Jesus had to die on behalf of God's people?
 - Reflect on this statement as a group.

Because sin is first and foremost a crime against God, it is only as God himself that Jesus can forgive it. And because death is first and foremost a punishment for human wickedness (Adam's and our own), it is only as a kind of Second Adam (the ultimate human representative) that Jesus can step into the void on our behalf. It is only as the true representative of the entire human community that Jesus can pay the penalty for human evil. And it is only as the true representative of God himself that his sacrifice can be successful.

- How does Pilate's scornful phrase "Behold the man" sum up Jesus' mission and identity?

5. Three days after Jesus' bloody death, God raised him back to life.

- Why is it important that Jesus would be resurrected in a garden?
- Mary believed in Christ's resurrection when Jesus said her name. Reflect on what it was that led you to believe in Jesus' resurrection. If you are not at a point of belief yet, talk about what makes believing in the resurrection difficult for you.
- How does the resurrection prove or *vindicate* Jesus' message during his ministry?

6. Read the story in Luke 24:13–31.

- How does the meal in this passage tie together with the story of Adam and Eve? What does this tell us about how God is using Jesus to put the world back together?
- Spend some time, as a group or individually, asking God to open your eyes to the truth about who Jesus was, and what he did for all of us. Think about this passage the next time you receive communion.
- Reflect on the following words in closing:

We must give and forgive. We must join Jesus in walking out of exile, not because of guilt, but because of grace. Through the shattered body and spilled blood, we have been reunited with God. And it is now our life's calling to spread the revolution.