



JESUS NO EQUAL

A PASSIONATE ENCOUNTER WITH THE SON OF GOD

BARRY ST. CLAIR



JESUS NO EQUAL[®]

A PASSIONATE ENCOUNTER WITH THE SON OF GOD

DEDICATION

To the younger generation, whose passion for Jesus will take them all over the globe so that “every people, tongue, tribe, and nation” will encounter Him.

The current movement of God that is pointing students to Jesus Christ has not happened by accident. God works as He wills and when He works, He uses people. This book is dedicated to those youth leaders who have relentlessly pursued their dream to see a ministry on every campus in America and every student reached for Christ: Paul Fleischmann, Dave Busby, Rolly Richert, Doug Clark, Doug Tegner, Billy Beacham, Chuck Flowers, Richard Ross, Monty Hipp, Sue McAllister, Rich Malone, Mike DeVito, Kevin Harlan, Allen Weed, Ginny Olson, Chris Renzelman, Benny Proffitt, Chuck Klein, Bo Boshers, Lynn Ziegenfuss, and many others who have remained true to the cause.



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BARRY ST. CLAIR

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The quotation on the back cover, a favorite of Barry St. Clair, is an adaptation of a quote by Thomas Brooks: "Miss Christ and you miss all."

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As I ran around the toddler room with a little car in my hand, I spotted another boy who looked a lot like me. I waddled over to say “Hi!” I don’t remember ever shaking his hand, but I do remember his name . . . Bryan Clark. When my mom picked me up, all I could talk about was my new friend. Little did I know that Bryan would become my best friend through high school. Other friends have come along but none of them could fill the friendship that Bryan and I have shared. He has always been my best friend.

We all have stories like this one . . . stories of how we have found a friend who is always there for us, someone we can see and touch. Remember how it was when you found a girl or guy you really liked? You got a smile on your face just thinking about that special someone. Guys, remember how you talked about the girl to all your buddies in the locker room? Girls, remember how you giggled with your friends about how cute he was? Then the big moment finally arrived. You got to talk to the person and you felt those huge butterflies in your stomach. It seemed as if you were floating and you couldn’t come down. That’s exactly how it can be in your relationship with Jesus.

We are a generation of teens falling in love with Jesus, a generation that is experiencing Jesus, one heart at a time.

Barry St. Clair is my friend. I have known Barry for a few years and have seen firsthand his great passion for Jesus. He has made me want to know Jesus more deeply. Barry is a man who knows what it means to love God. He has experienced the ultimate friendship with the Savior. In this book, Barry invites you to take the ultimate road trip to discover a friend who is closer than a brother. It takes faith to fall in love with someone you cannot physically see or touch, but if you are willing to take the risk, Jesus Christ will become your best friend.

I am convinced of this one thing: There is something very different about my generation. We know what it means to be hurt. The Columbine tragedy defined that pain forever. The world is asking how we will make it. The only answer I have is Jesus. This book is a tool to help you fall more in love with Him.

JOSH WEIDMANN, STUDENT LEADER

“Who is Jesus Christ? Can He really affect my life today?”

In his book *Jesus No Equal*, Barry St. Clair addresses these questions head-on with experience, sincerity, and a dose of humor. This book shows how our relationship with the Son of God affects all areas of our lives. If you are ready to be challenged by the radical life of Jesus, then this book is for you!

Jesus No Equal traces Christ's coming—His birth, life, ministry, death, and resurrection—and then shows the role He desires to play in our lives today. Can we really trust Jesus with our dating life? Can we trust Him with our relationship with our parents? Will He truly guide my life in this century? Can He use me to impact my generation? This book helps us to honor and love Jesus more and then gives us specific and practical ways to do that.

In a world that encourages compromise and mediocrity, we must be equipped to make a difference. *Jesus No Equal* gives us the tools we need to stand strong. Barry has created a unique blend of how Jesus not only satisfies the heart, but also the mind. It has truly hit the mark on what it means to be a disciple of Jesus in the twenty-first century!

**JOSH AND SEAN MCDOWELL,
JOSH MCDOWELL MINISTRIES**

After completing *Jesus No Equal*, the *Jesus No Equal Journal* provides you with forty-two days of insights and journaling for the next steps in your passionate encounter with the Son of God.

The *Jesus No Equal* Leaders Guide is available through Reach Out Youth Solutions at www.reach-out.org.

We loaded up the car and headed south. My son Jonathan and I had planned a road trip. It included skipping a couple of days of school at the end of his senior year. (Something about getting out of school made it more exciting!) We traveled light, had some great snacks and drinks, popped in some CDs. We rolled the windows down and let it rip.

For three days we hung out at the beach and the pool, caught the rays, ate at places like “Jack’s Shrimp Shack,” went for long runs, went out late to get milkshakes, and slept in later than usual. We laughed a lot and had some serious talks. But our main purpose for the trip was to spend time together focused on Jesus Christ.

Going someplace together and hanging out is fun. Being together made us better friends. But having Jesus as the focus of our conversation made it the ultimate road trip!

The purpose of this book is to take the “ultimate road trip.” You may decide to embark on this journey during your summer vacation. But no matter when you take the journey through *Jesus No Equal*, you will experience the two huge goals of any road trip: fun and friendship. Our desire is to have a fun time every day building a friendship with Jesus Christ.

It won’t be the first road trip taken with Jesus. In one account in the Gospel of Luke (24:13-35), two men went on that ultimate road trip. Along the way they realized some very important things about Jesus of Nazareth. Toward the end of the trip, “*their eyes were opened*” and they recognized that Jesus had been with them all the time!

On the road they discovered several really neat things about Jesus that radically affected their lives. We can discover those same things. They found out that Jesus is:

- = **A prophet (v. 19)**
- = **A man—Jesus of Nazareth (v. 19)**
- = **A man of powerful words and actions (v. 19)**
- = **A man who was dead (v. 20)**
- = **A man who came back to life (vv. 21-24)**
- = **A man who expressed God’s glory and changed lives (vv. 26, 32)**

By the time they got to the end of their trip, “*their eyes were opened, and they recognized him*” (v. 31). That sure is what I would like to see happen to you as you hang out with Jesus—that your eyes would be opened as you discover something new about Him every day, and that you will recognize Him and experience Him for who He really is—the One who has NO EQUAL!

Load up the car and let’s get rollin’!

TAKE THE BIG CHALLENGE

This book is designed to challenge you deeply! More than anything else it will challenge you to know and follow Jesus Christ. The brilliant author C.S. Lewis made the challenge clear:

***“A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse.”*¹**

Jesus wants you to know Him for who He really is, not who you think He is, who you want Him to be, or who your friends think He is. And once you know Him, He wants you to follow Him passionately. But it's not always easy to become friends with someone whose face you can't see and whose voice you can't hear and whose hands you can't touch.

That's the reason for this book—to help you know Jesus more intimately and follow Him more passionately—to have an intense encounter with the Son of God. So how can you use *Jesus No Equal* to help you do that? How can you max out this book?

The challenge to you is to spend at least twenty minutes a day discovering Jesus. To do that will take everyday effort on your part. Take the following steps each day in your journey to really get to know Jesus:

- = Pray before you read each chapter. You can use this prayer: “Jesus, help me to know You better.”
- = Think about what you read. Write down your discoveries. Each chapter is designed for you to think about what you are discovering about Jesus. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you understand His Word, and then apply it to your own life.
- = Look for places you see Jesus during the week. Either at the end of the day, every few days, or at the end of the week, reflect back and jot down all the places you have

seen Jesus at work: in creation, in your home and family, in your friends, in circumstances, in answered prayers, at church, and anyplace else He is working.

- = Tell your friends about Jesus by going through this book with them. Get another copy of *Jesus No Equal* from your youth leader or order it at a bookstore, give it to a friend and then meet with him or her once a week to talk about what both of you are discovering about Jesus.

Count Zinzendorf, one of the great followers of Christ in the 1700s, made this statement: "I have but one passion; it is He [Jesus], He alone."

My hope for you and your generation is that those will become your words. My dream for you is that Jesus, who has no equal, will become so much a part of your life that you will know Him, honor Him, follow Him, and reflect Him in such a way that He uses you to change the world!

ONE SOLITARY LIFE

Here is a man who was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in another obscure village. He worked in a carpenter shop until He was thirty. Then for three years He was an itinerant preacher. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never owned a home. He never had a family. He never went to college. He never put His foot inside a big city. He never traveled two hundred miles from the place where He was born. He never did one of the things that usually accompanied greatness. He had no credentials but Himself. He had nothing to do with this world except the naked power of His divine manhood. While still a young man, the tide of popular opinion turned against Him. His friends ran away. One of them denied Him. He was turned over to His enemies. He went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed to a cross between two thieves. His executioners gambled for the only piece of property He had on while He was dying—and that was His coat. When He was dead, He was taken down and laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend.

Nineteen wide centuries have come and gone, and today He is the centerpiece of the human race and the leader of the column of progress. I am far within the mark when I say that all of the armies that ever marched, all of the navies that were ever built, all of the parliaments that ever sat, and all of the kings that have ever reigned, put together have not affected the life of man upon this earth as powerfully as has that One Solitary Life.

AUTHOR UNKNOWN

BLIND DATES AND A GREAT INTRODUCTION

MY FIRST BLIND DATE: a wipeout! When the guys told me about my date, I got excited. Their description: fine-looking, lots of fun, and a great personality (that last one should have been a hint)!

At 8 p.m. we drove over to meet our dates. I tried to be cool, but I was nervous. Sweaty palms and pits were a dead giveaway. As we waited for our dates, this gorgeous girl came out. She's the one, I thought as my heart pumped faster. But she wasn't. Neither was the next beauty who came through the door. Or the next one. Then someone came out who looked like a cross between the dorm housemother and the janitor. That was my date!

Disappointed didn't even come close to describing how badly I felt. And I could tell pretty quickly that my date wasn't that impressed with me either.

As I reflected later, I could have had an enjoyable evening if I hadn't built up false expectations. I've found that people have false expectations about Jesus too. Those expectations affect what a person thinks about Him—sometimes forever.

WRONG IMPRESSIONS

The way I met my blind date is the way many people are introduced to Jesus. They have been told certain things about Him that have given them all sorts of wrong impressions. The difference between my blind date and the wrong impressions people have about Jesus: people usually hear all bad things about Jesus, when the truth is that He is absolutely good. Wrong impressions make it hard for people to appreciate the real Jesus.

WRONG IMPRESSION #1: “GOD IS OUT TO GET YOU.”

Many people think of God as the celestial Scrooge who sits in the sky with His big stick. Every time you get out of line—whack! whack! whack!—He clobbers you. And if you decide to do what He wants, He will send you to “Bunga Bunga Land” to preach on a street corner.

WRONG IMPRESSION #2: “FOLLOWING JESUS MEANS YOU ARE A WIMP.”

Some people think of Jesus as this weak, pale Jewish fellow who died two thousand years ago. The assumption: “Following Jesus means I must wear a dorky-looking suit and tie, carry a fifty-pound King James Bible, and hang a sign on my back that says, ‘Beat me up; I’m a Christian wimp.’”

WRONG IMPRESSION #3: “FOLLOWING JESUS MEANS KEEPING TONS OF RULES.”

Ask the average person on the street what it means to be a Christian and he will probably answer, “Christianity is a bunch of rules.” Too many people think that following Jesus means to stop doing the ten things they like most and to start doing the ten things they hate the most.

WRONG IMPRESSION #4: “FOLLOWING JESUS IS AN EMOTIONAL HIGH.”

If a person cries, gets “a warm feeling in his heart,” jumps up and down at a concert, or experiences an awesome week at church camp, then that person is a follower of Christ. Not really. A follower of Christ can have strong emotions, but following Jesus is much more than emotions.

WRONG IMPRESSION #5: “FOLLOWING JESUS MEANS GOING TO CHURCH.”

Contrary to popular opinion, God does not live in a box with a steeple where people go to visit Him every Sunday. As important as the church is, God is not limited to a church building. He is present where you live, eat, sleep, and work. Going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than going to McDonald's makes you a Big Mac!

Like my blind date, wrong impressions or misconceptions about Jesus can lead to disaster. We need to know Jesus for who He really is—and not miss knowing Him because of a wrong impression.

When you first heard about Jesus, what were your impressions of Him?

A GREAT INTRODUCTION

I walked into the school library and looked around for a place to sit. When I looked over to my right, there she was—the finest-looking lady I had ever seen. I wanted to meet her. I took a “check out” position behind a bookshelf, pushed some books around, and stared at her.

Big problem: she was with a guy. Taking the situation in hand, I walked right up and started talking to the guy she was with. He was a nice guy and had no choice but to introduce me. What a great introduction it was!

After a few minutes, Carol and I started talking. And I kept on talking to her . . . and talking . . . and talking. For all I know, the guy who introduced us is still in the library!

The next night I asked Carol out for a “study date.” Study date defined: carry your books, study for five minutes, then go out and have fun. That’s what we did. The more we talked, the more we enjoyed each other. Over the months the relationship developed from friendship to engagement . . . then to marriage and four wonderful kids.

This was totally different from the blind date. The difference? We started right—with a great introduction.

STARTING RIGHT

To start right with Jesus, we need a great intro, a solid relationship, and fun and enjoyable times together, deepening the friendship. In the process we get a much better understanding of who Jesus really is.

The reason we can have that kind of relationship with Jesus is because of the way He introduced Himself to us. How did He do that?

HE CAME FROM HIS FATHER.

“In the beginning was the Word [Jesus], and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning” (JOHN 1:1, 2).

HE CAME TO LIVE WITH US.

“So the word of God became a human being and lived among us” (JOHN 1:14, PHILLIPS).

HE LIVED LIKE ALL OTHER HUMAN BEINGS.

“And as Jesus continued to grow in body and mind, he grew also in the love of God and of those who knew him” (LUKE 2:52, PHILLIPS).

Jesus went through His teen years just like all of us. I wonder what teenage problems He suffered through. Legs that looked too long? Feet too big? Squeaky voice? Pimples? He grew up facing all of the same issues we face. When He got hungry, He wanted to eat. When He got thirsty, He wanted something to drink. If His sandals rubbed His toes, He got blisters. He even struggled with pleasing His parents (LUKE 2:41-51).

HE WAS A MAN’S MAN.

“Isn’t this the carpenter?” (MARK 6:3).

Jesus worked hard. He had calloused hands and hard muscles from His work as a carpenter. He didn’t worry about getting a little dirt under His fingernails.

HE CAME TO IDENTIFY WITH US PERSONALLY.

“Now Christ is the visible expression of the invisible God” (COLOSSIANS 1:15, PHILLIPS).

“The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being . . .”

(HEBREWS 1:3).

Jesus gave us an exact picture of God. He came so we could see who God is. When we look at Jesus Christ, that is exactly who we see—God!

And when He looks at us, He can see the potential of “God in us.”

He came and introduced Himself because He wants us to know Him!

CHECK YOUR INTRODUCTION

From what you just discovered, check the boxes that best describe how you view Jesus.

- Jesus was an afterthought of God.
- Jesus was a Band-Aid® God slapped on a messed-up world.
- Jesus was around from the beginning and part of God’s original plan.
- Jesus was a quick fix to counter the power of Satan.
- Jesus is a great reminder of what God is like.
- The Jesus who lived on earth was all God and all man.
- The Jesus who lived on earth was half-God and half-man.
- Jesus is so far above us that we can’t relate to Him.
- Jesus wasn’t anything like the kids of His day.
- Jesus could not possibly have had zits.
- Jesus was so perfect as a child that no one could relate to Him.
- Jesus was admired and respected by all.

- Jesus had all the same human desires we do.
- Jesus had some of the same human desires we do.
- Jesus had none of the same human desires we do.
- Jesus was God, so human desires were not even an issue.
- Jesus reminds us of God.
- Jesus was, and is, so much like God that we can look at Him and see God.
- Jesus and God were entirely separate from each other.
- Jesus existed after God did.

POWERFUL CLAIMS

On the busiest intersection in a city stands a man wearing a blue uniform, a beaked cap, and a whistle around his neck. When that police officer directs a tractor trailer to turn right, it turns right. However, if a senior at your school goes out there wearing a T-shirt and jeans and blows a whistle, he'll probably have some SUV leave tread marks on his face. The police officer may have no more physical strength and power than the student, but he has authority—the delegated power of the police department, his state, and the United States government.

Jesus had God's authority. That's why He could make the claims He did and then back them up. Right now, forget all the stuff you have heard about Jesus in the past. Check out some of His claims and see what He says about Himself.

JESUS CLAIMED HE CAN FORGIVE SINS.

Teaching in a friend's house one day, a crippled man was lowered into a crowded room through a hole his friends had made in the roof. Jesus told him, "*Your sins are forgiven*" (MARK 2:5).

Some of the religious leaders said He couldn't do that. Jesus' response: *"Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins . . . He said to the paralytic, '. . . get up, take your mat and go home'"* (MARK 2:9-11). And he did!

JESUS CLAIMED THAT GOD IS HIS FATHER.

When the Jewish leaders criticized Jesus for healing on the Sabbath, He said, *"He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him"* (JOHN 5:23).

JESUS CLAIMED TO BE THE ONLY WAY TO KNOW GOD.

Jesus' disciples were in a state of confusion when Thomas asked Him, *"Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?"* Jesus answered, *"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well"* (JOHN 14:5-7).

JESUS CLAIMED TO BE ETERNAL.

To a group of skeptical religious leaders Jesus made this claim:

"Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad" (JOHN 8:56).

When the religious leaders protested that it was impossible for Jesus to have known someone who died hundreds of years earlier, Jesus replied, *"Before Abraham was born, I am!"* (JOHN 8:58).

JESUS CLAIMED TO BE GOD IN HUMAN FORM.

The religious leaders asked Him to tell them if He was the Christ. His concluding statement to them was, *“I and the Father are one”* (JOHN 10:30).

Later, when one of His disciples asked, *“Lord, show us the Father,”* Jesus told him clearly: *“Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father”* (JOHN 14:8, 9).

Don't let anybody fool you. They will tell you that Jesus was a great moral teacher, a religious leader, or a holy man, but that there are many other ways to get to God. False! If these claims are true, then He is a whole lot more. In fact, He is in a class by Himself. How do we know if these claims are true?

PROOF POSITIVE

Throughout history people have made claims that they were God, or had a “special relationship” with God—Muhammad, Buddha, Confucius, David Koresh, and hundreds of other leaders of cults. The difference between Jesus and all other religious leaders is this: He fully backed up every claim He made!

It's one thing to claim to be God. It's another thing to actually prove it. Let's look at a few of these convincing proofs:

JESUS SAID, “I AM THE BREAD OF LIFE” (JOHN 6:35).

He said that after He miraculously produced bread to feed more than five thousand people (JOHN 6:5-13).

JESUS SAID, “I AM THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD” (JOHN 8:12).

Shortly after this statement Jesus healed a blind man. He wasn't just a little nearsighted or needed his contact lenses adjusted. He had been blind from birth. Jesus healed at least nine blind people in the New Testament.

JESUS SAID, “I AM THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE” (JOHN 11:25).

Jesus made this statement near the grave of His friend Lazarus, who had been dead for four days and whose body had already begun to smell. A short time later, at Jesus' command, Lazarus got up and walked out of the grave alive!

Jesus said He would rise from the dead after three days (MATTHEW 16:21).

According to Matthew 28, that's exactly what He did. Three days after He had been nailed to the cross, Jesus burst out of the grave!

YOUR INTRODUCTION

Have you had some wrong impressions of Jesus? If you have, we can make those right in the rest of this book.

Or maybe you have had a great introduction to Him. If so, you will get to know Him better as you go through this book.

If Jesus is who He says He is—God's Son who died on a cross to forgive your sins and rose from the dead to give you life—then pay any price, do whatever it takes to know Him!

DOWN TO EARTH

I'M A KILLER. I don't want to be, but I can't help it. Almost without realizing it, I bring destruction and death to an innocent, peace-loving family.

Here's the situation: the pavement in my driveway has some cracks in it. Some ants have built their homes under the concrete slab. I see them crawling in and out over the ridge of dirt they've built up around the entrance to their subdivision.

It's not a pretty sight when I back out of the driveway. I look back to see all of these little guys strewn across the pavement. They've been crushed. A few have gotten caught in between the tire treads and are hanging on for dear life. The rest of the survivors frantically zigzag back and forth. They have no idea what hit them. The thought occurs that I could call the ant paramedics. On second thought, I could try yelling at the little critters: "Avoid the pain! Move your house three feet to the left!" But the fact is, I'll never be able to communicate with those ants.

The only way I could make them understand would be for me to become one of them.

That's exactly what Jesus did!

CAMPING OUT

Jesus came to earth because He wanted to communicate with us on a level we could understand. John, the disciple of Jesus, zeros in on how Jesus came to communicate with us: *“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth”* (JOHN 1:14).

When John used the words “made his dwelling among us,” he meant literally, “pitched his tent.” Imagine that! God sent Jesus to pitch His tent with us so we could get to know Him. He camped out with us because He wanted to communicate with us about who He is, who we are, and how we relate to Him.

So what did Jesus do while He was hiking and camping on this earth? In his letter to the Galatian Christians, the apostle Paul explains what He did: *“But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, ‘Abba, Father.’ So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir”* (GALATIANS 4:4-7).

We find here three “down to earth” expressions of what God did in Christ, three significant ways God camped out with us in Jesus:

- He came to a cradle (v. 4—He was born of a woman).
- He carried a cross (v. 5—He redeemed us).
- He captured a crown (vv. 6, 7—He made us sons and heirs).

A CRADLE

Excitement filled the house. We had known for nine months that we were going to have a baby. Now the time had arrived. We left the house for the hospital in the morning. At four o'clock in the afternoon, the nurses wheeled Carol into the delivery room. We had decided that if the baby was a girl, we would call her Katie. If we had a boy, his name would be Scott. (We had confidence it would be one or the other!) Carol worked really hard at bringing that baby into the world. Suddenly the nurse began to yell, "It's a Scott! It's a Scott!"

What is she talking about? Then it hit me. I'm a father! I have a Scott! (Later we had a Katie, then a Jonathan, and fourteen years after Scott, we had a Ginny!)

That's how exciting it must have been when Jesus was born, right? Wrong.

A tired young mother-to-be, probably still a teenager, made an exhausting journey to Bethlehem from Nazareth and arrived in the overcrowded, dusty town just when her baby was due.

Imagine Joseph and Mary—a young couple engaged to be married—who find out that Mary is pregnant. On top of having a baby out of wedlock, Joseph is not even the father. Joseph loved Mary and, gentleman that he was, decided to break up with her quietly. That is, until God sent a messenger to tell Joseph that the child had been conceived (get this!) by the Holy Spirit (MATTHEW 1:18-21).

Adding to the trauma, they had to go to Bethlehem from Nazareth for a census. That meant they had to travel about eighty miles on donkeyback. But they had no choice. The Roman government demanded that they go.

The night when they arrived in Bethlehem, it looked like the halls of your school when classes change—wall-to-wall people. The place was a madhouse. Joseph tried

to find a room—and quickly! He knew that Mary was ready to deliver the baby at any time. He was told at every place, “NO VACANCY.” When he tried to explain to one innkeeper that the baby was on the way, the best the innkeeper could do was let Joseph use his stable, probably a cave behind his inn.

Do you get the picture? No new baby bed or furniture. No freshly painted room. No Pampers. No sterile hospital with doctors and nurses. Nothing but a cold, smelly, dirty stable. With perhaps only a few animals to watch, Jesus Christ was born. If God had not announced the occasion to some shepherds in the fields nearby, no human being other than His parents would have noticed the tiny, wiggling form that Mary wrapped in a cloth and placed in a feed trough. What a way for the Son of God to enter the world!

Imagine Mary, exhausted and cold, caressing the tiny hands of her nursing child—hands that one day would reach out and touch blind men’s eyes and make them see. In that dark, cold cave that night, the tiny feet that would one day walk the hills of Galilee kicked softly in the manger straw. They were the same feet that one day would turn toward Jerusalem and face death on a cross.

The squeaky noises from Jesus’ mouth expressed the first earthly sounds of the One who would one day say, *“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me”* (JOHN 14:6).

This tiny baby, wrapped in a blanket in a manger, was God’s Son—the link between a loving Father and a lost world. God became a man. For what purpose? To communicate God’s love to people like you and me who could never understand it in any other way.

WHAT DOES THAT CRADLE MEAN TO US?

The same God who brought about the miracle of Jesus’ birth wants every person to experience a new birth. “I’ve already been born!” you say. Naturally! Once! But Jesus says we need to be born a second time, supernaturally. He tells us we need to be

born spiritually just as we were born physically. Check out what He said. Once a man named Nicodemus asked Jesus how to have eternal life. Jesus replied, *“I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again”* (JOHN 3:3).

When a person experiences spiritual birth, that person's life is changed. No way your life is going to stay the same!

Let's get this straight. When a person is born again, it does not mean joining a church, becoming part of a youth group, going through confirmation classes or catechism, “turning over a new leaf,” or becoming religious.

What it does mean is LIFE! When Jesus told Nicodemus that he needed to be born again, He was talking about entering into a dynamic, personal relationship with the living God—inviting Jesus to enter into a person's life and take control, changing it from the inside out. Once that happens, that person will never be the same again.

John said it well: *“Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision . . . but born of God”* (JOHN 1:12, 13). A person is born again when he or she receives Jesus into his or her life.

Jesus said it best: *“Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me”* (REVELATION 3:20).

Jesus stands at the door of each person's life and knocks. In fact, He stands at the door of your life and knocks. If you let Him live inside you, you are born again. If you don't open the door of your life, then you are not born again. It's that simple.

Understand that Jesus won't beat the door down. He responds to you as a gentleman. If you don't want to open the door, that is your choice. But if you do open it, He promises to come in. And when He does, you have LIFE!

A CROSS

“Randy,” I asked, “suppose someone came along and kidnapped your girlfriend, Susan, then sent you a note saying that if you paid so much money, she would be set free. How much would you pay to get her back? Ten dollars?”

“Sure,” Randy said.

“What about twenty-five?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“What about a hundred? Five hundred? A thousand? How about a million?”

“Sure, if I could get hold of that much, I’d pay a million,” Randy replied.

In an even bigger ransom deal, the apostle Paul wrote, *“But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons”* (GALATIANS 4:4, 5).

“Redeem” means to buy back, to make an exchange for something you consider of great value. Paying the ransom, as Randy was willing to do to get Susan back from the kidnapers, gives us the idea expressed in the word redeem.

Mankind was captured by sin and headed straight to hell—to be eternally separated from the love and presence of God. But Christ came to buy us back. And what a price He paid! If we want to know how much God was willing to pay to redeem us—to buy us back—all we have to do is look at Jesus on the cross.

Imagine the agony and pain in God’s heart as He and Jesus counseled in heaven over man’s condition. Imagine the Father’s anguish when He decided what the price would be—that His only Son should come to earth to be spat on, beaten, mistreated,

scourged—beaten half to death while tied to a post—mocked and, finally, nailed to a cross.

My former wife, Carol (she died a few years ago), and I were blessed with four children. I love them dearly. I also love teenagers. But I'm glad no one has ever asked me to give the life of one of my children so that another teenager could live. I love students, but none of them means so much to me that I would offer my own child to die for them.

Maybe that gives us some idea of the depth of the love God has for us. He willingly gave His only Son to die for us so that we might be bought back—and brought back—to Him. He loved us that much. If we can see how much God loves us, as He demonstrated on the cross, then instead of living as though Jesus never died, we will want to live for Him.

HOW DO WE LIVE BECAUSE OF WHAT CHRIST DID ON THE CROSS?

How do we then live in light of the fact that Jesus paid the price to buy us back with His own life? The apostle Paul gives us a cool clue: *“And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind he will accept. When you think of what he has done for you, is this too much to ask?”* (ROMANS 12:1, NLT).

The same word that is used here of Christ's sacrifice is used of our sacrifice. Jesus died on the cross for us. He wants us, in turn, to die to ourselves.

What does it mean to “die to ourselves”? To answer that question, we must ask what it is within each of us that raises its ugly head and says, “I will do it my way!” What is it? Your temper? A bad attitude toward your parents? Selfishness? A desire for attention? An addiction to “your stuff”? Impure sexual desires? Hurt and bitter feelings? All of those things we need to die to.

To do that, Jesus asks that we offer ourselves—the good, the bad, and the ugly—to Him. Instead of “I will do it my way,” Jesus wants us to do it His way. When we get so sick of ourselves that we want to die to ourselves, then He will live through us.

A CROWN

Imagine getting everything you want and as much as you want: five hundred new DVDs, one thousand new CDs, as many iPods as you want, a hundred new shirts, fifty pairs of jeans, and ten new sports cars. That’s what it would be like if you were the son or daughter of a king. And you are! You get to wear a crown.

God calls believers His children—sons and daughters. Check out Galatians 4:6, 7: *“Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, ‘Abba, Father.’ So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.”* Even though God does not give us all of our material wants, because He knows that’s not good for us, He has promised to give us everything we need because we are His sons and daughters.

Doug was a kid who lived next door to us. He came over a lot. Once he came over and said, “Hey, Barry, will you give me a dollar?” What did I say? It probably depended on the mood I was in. I might have said, “Go home. Don’t be a jerk. Ask your own dad for a dollar. You’re not my son.”

I have a son named Jonathan. What if he came to me and said, “Dad, can I have a dollar?” What would I say then? “Okay, here son. Take it.” I give the money to him because he is my son.

God says we are His kids. He wants to treat us like sons and daughters. We are His heirs—the King’s kids.

As Jonathan's dad I don't give him everything he asks for. I know he doesn't need some of it. And I know some of it wouldn't be good for him. In the same way, God knows that some of the things we ask for aren't really needed or they aren't good for us. And wisely, He withholds these things. But God the Father has given us everything we will ever need in Jesus Christ.

God gave us something far more valuable than I could ever give my son. He put our names in the will of His Son, Jesus. We are God's heirs. When Jesus died, all that He had became ours. We get to wear the crown! The apostle Paul expressed it like this: *"How we praise God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms because we belong to Christ"* (EPHESIANS 1:3, NLT).

The apostle Peter told us that when we wear the crown, *"His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness"* (2 PETER 1:3).

Probably the best statement comes from Romans 8:16, 17: *"For his Holy Spirit speaks to us deep in our hearts and tells us that we are God's children. And since we are his children, we will share his treasures—for everything God gives to his Son, Christ, is ours, too. But if we are to share his glory, we must also share his suffering"* (NLT). We get to wear the crown!

Why did He come? Jesus came in human form to identify with us. And He gave His life on the cross to redeem us so that we could inherit everything we need to live for Him.

Sound good? It's better than you think! But remember one thing—before the crown comes the cross. And that aspect of what Jesus did merits closer examination.

ULTIMATE ACTION HERO

“HASTA LA VISTA, BABY!” warned one of the great action heroes of all time—
“Ahnold” Schwarzenegger.

But Bruce Thomas, working with young people in Romania, tells a story that shows us who the Ultimate Action Hero really is:

“As the boys rushed me up to see their dormitory at the ‘Casa de Copii’ in Otelu-Rosu, I was almost out of breath. It was hard to believe that this was once a run-down bordello and bar that now housed around seventy orphaned children and staff. As we turned to go down the hall, Marius, who is eleven, insisted that I go into his room first. As we walked in, he and a herd of other boys, all clinging to my arms, slid the door closed behind them. As the door slid shut, it revealed a picture that I will never forget. The boys had been collecting these ‘action hero’ cards and had placed them in kind of a shrine on their wall. There were pictures of all of the great, muscle-

bound action heroes of all time—Sylvester Stallone, Chuck Norris, Bruce Willis, Bruce Lee, Jean-Claude Van Damme and, of course, ‘Arnold’ Schwarzenegger.

“But it was evident that those guys were not the main attraction in this shrine of hulking heroes. Marius had placed an 8 x 10 picture of the Ultimate Action Hero right in the middle of them. You guessed it. Right there in the place of honor was a huge ‘Bleeding Heart’ picture of Jesus. He kind of looked out of place at first, but the more I thought about it, the more I realized that this setting was perfect for Him.

“Jesus really is the greatest action hero of all time. Of course, turning over a table or two wouldn’t exactly qualify Him in today’s market as the toughest good guy in town. But because He is the original ‘good guy,’ the newcomers have used a lot of His original material to make names for themselves. For example, Schwarzenegger’s famous ‘I’ll be back’ line is an obvious quote, taken out of context, from the Lord Himself. And all of the dynamic explosions on film haven’t yet matched the walking-on-water incident or even come close to the raising-from-the-dead scene yet.

“But there were obviously a lot of differences between Jesus and this group of he-men too. Jesus was not a violent man and didn’t blow anybody away. That was not His character or style. And though He didn’t spend every waking moment at the gym, He did spend a lot of time building His Body!”

MORE THAN MUSCLE BOUND

Somehow people have seen Jesus as a wimp, as dull and boring, or as a narrow-minded fundamentalist with a long list of do’s and don’ts. That’s not Him at all. A true picture of Jesus reveals that He isn’t a wimp, but the Ultimate Action Hero.

During the three short years of His ministry, what made Him stand so far above all the other action heroes who ever lived? We can put these pictures of Him on our wall:

PHOTO NUMBER ONE: COME SOME DAY

Written more than seven hundred years before Jesus was born, the book of Isaiah foretold the Messiah who would come some day. Look what this Messiah would do when He comes:

“The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor” (ISAIAH 61:1-3).

According to Isaiah, what was the Action Hero Messiah going to do?

- Preach good news to the poor
- Bind up (heal) the brokenhearted
- Proclaim freedom for the captives

As He does these things, people who are grieving will be comforted. Those whose lives have turned to ashes will see beauty in those lives again. The ones who mourn will again be happy. Those who experience despair and depression will enter into enthusiastic praise.

Those who encounter the coming Messiah and the ministry He has to offer will become “oaks of righteousness.” What’s an oak of righteousness? An oak is a strong tree with deep roots. Righteousness means entering into a right relationship with the Messiah. That relationship leads to right thinking that results in right behavior.

People whose roots go down deep in their relationship with the Messiah will grow up strong and tall to show others how incredible He is.

Wow! That doesn't look too shabby! To a generation that has experienced tremendous grief, pain, depression, and destruction of its hopes and dreams, the Messiah wants to turn all of that around and change us into "oaks of righteousness." Tack that photo on the wall!

PHOTO NUMBER TWO: UNROLL THE SCROLL

Speed ahead seven hundred-plus years to a large gathering in a small town. The hometown boy had returned. Invited to read the Scripture in the synagogue, He unrolled the scroll and read these words: *"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor"* (LUKE 4:18, 19).

Vaguely familiar? He read from Isaiah 61:1, 2. After He finished reading, He rolled up the scroll, gave it to the attendant and sat down. Everyone had their eyes fastened on Him. Then He told them: *"Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing"* (LUKE 4:21).

Deathly silence. No one moved. No one spoke a word. You could hear a pin drop. Then those people got furious. They drove Him out of town and took Him to the edge of a steep hill so they could throw Him off the cliff.

Jesus proclaimed Himself the Messiah. They did not like it one bit. But that didn't matter. The question is: Did He do the things the Messiah talked about? Did He preach good news to the poor, bind up (heal) the brokenhearted, and proclaim freedom for the captives? Did He do all that? All we have to do is thumb through the pages of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John to see that on page after page we see Jesus preaching the good news, healing the sick, and delivering the oppressed.

When John the Baptist (another great action hero, by the way) heard about this from his prison cell, he sent someone to ask Jesus about it. Jesus told them to go back and tell John what they saw and heard: *“The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor”* (MATTHEW 11:4, 5).

At another point Matthew wrote: *“Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed, and he healed them”* (MATTHEW 4:23, 24).

Later, Matthew gave a similar description, but this time he shows us what drove Jesus to do what He did. Can you find it? *“Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd”* (MATTHEW 9:35, 36).

This only scratches the surface of Jesus’ ministry of preaching, healing, and delivering—all in only one of the four Gospels! Hundreds of parables, stories, healings, and miracles cover the pages of the Gospels. For example, we know that Jesus healed at least nine different blind people, many who had not been able to see from birth.

At the end of the Gospel of John we get an idea of how much Jesus did beyond what was written down: *“Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written”* (JOHN 21:25).

One action hero said: “You gotta say what you mean and mean what you say!” If that’s true, then Jesus was the greatest preacher, teacher, miracle-worker, and healer of all time! He said what He meant and meant what He said. Put a pin in that picture and stick it to the wall!

PHOTO NUMBER THREE: MAKE A COPY

It’s one thing for Jesus to do all this amazing stuff; after all, He is the Messiah. But He taught His disciples to do it too! What they did is like a photocopy of what Jesus did. The Ultimate Action Hero multiplied Himself.

Jesus showed them how to preach good news to the poor, bind up the brokenhearted, and proclaim freedom for the captives.

Then He set up a mission trip for them. He called them together for a little orientation. Among other things, Jesus told them, *“As you go, preach this message: ‘The kingdom of heaven is near.’ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give”* (MATTHEW 10:7, 8).

Then Jesus sent them out two by two. What did they do? *“They went out and preached that people should repent. They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them”* (MARK 6:12, 13).

Like a CD that gets stuck and plays the same song over and over, the same topics keep coming up again and again—preaching, healing, and delivering. But now instead of Jesus doing it all, He gave His disciples the authority to do it. That meant the ministry of Jesus could spread beyond one person to many. At this point, the pictures to tack on the wall start to multiply!

PHOTO NUMBER FOUR: SPREAD THE FUN

Now we get to the exciting part. Fasten your seat belt. Grab your hat. Put on your sunglasses. Roll up your bulletproof windows. You're about to get blown away. Jesus did almost all of His ministry by:

- Preaching the good news
- Healing the sick
- Delivering the demon possessed

Then Jesus taught His disciples to minister to people by doing the same. Are you on the edge of your seat? Get ready! Jesus wants you and me to help the people around us by:

- Preaching the good news
- Healing the sick
- Delivering the demon possessed

“C’mon. You’re kidding me! I could never do that!” we say. Not so fast. Jesus told us we could and we should. *“I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father”* (JOHN 14:12).

Who is “anyone”? I did an in-depth study of this in Greek and I discovered that anyone means . . . anyone! So “anyone” includes not only pastors and missionaries, not just adults, but you and me. It includes anyone who believes in Jesus and seeks to do His will. He tells us to ask for anything in His name and He will do it (JOHN 14:13, 14).

Then He put the icing on the cake: *“He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.”* Greater than Jesus? Give me a break! No. These works are not greater in quality. How could we ever do anything with more quality than Jesus? But we (all of us together) will do them in much greater quantity. That

means all Christians get in on the action. Following Jesus is not a spectator sport. It all started (not ended) when Jesus ascended to the Father and released His Holy Spirit to live inside of us. The greater things we would do would be accomplished because of the strength of the Holy Spirit. Now we have His power and His authority to do the same ministry that Jesus did.

Does it work? You bet! Just look at these real examples:

PREACHING

Steve, a ninth-grader, let Jesus take control of his life over Christmas break. He made a commitment to go back to his school and stand strong for Jesus. He made a “Ten Most Wanted List”—writing down the names of students for whom he wanted to pray and witness. Within two months nine of the ten had decided to follow Christ. The tenth one received Christ two years later. Within two months more than sixty students were meeting for a junior high Bible study. They shared the good news of Jesus with every student in their school!

HEALING

My daughter Katie’s good friend Pat got pneumonia. He went from a cough to an aggravated cough to pneumonia to intensive care in the hospital, where he hovered between life and death for weeks. The battle was on for his life. Students prayed by the hundreds, some at the hospital and some at school. They prayed for weeks on end. Finally, the breakthrough came and he had a remarkable recovery. He was supposed to be in rehab for two months. Amazingly, he was finished in only four days! God, not the students, performed the healing, but He responded mightily to the intercession of so many people.

DELIVERING

A student I know in Charlotte, North Carolina, had become so depressed that he decided to commit suicide one night. Some high school friends of this student live in Atlanta. They heard he was depressed, so they met together to pray for him. Only later did they learn that the very hour they prayed was the exact hour he was close to killing himself. But during that hour he made a radical turn and did not commit suicide. We need to be careful not to assume that all depression is brought on by demon possession. Often there are emotional and physical factors as well. But in some cases it is brought on by the power of Satan and calls for persistent prayer on the part of God's people for deliverance.

This list of action examples could become lengthy. Students, not satisfied with the status quo, call on God, take action to experience the ministry of Jesus, and see the power of God demonstrated before their very eyes. And you can too! When you jump into the action, you will have to reserve a whole wall to hold all the Ultimate Action Hero pictures. And you will be in each one—with the Ultimate Hero Himself!

BODY BUILDING

My friend Bruce finished his story like this:

“I read something Arnold Schwarzenegger wrote that challenged me to ‘build myself up’ for this battle. He said:

““In Austria when I was 15 years old and was just getting started in body building, the only way I could learn was to listen and copy the more advanced bodybuilders training in the gym. Looking back I can see how little any of us knew at the time. All we had to go on were some basic principles that had been passed on from one to another and written about in magazines. We studied these magazines with such intensity it nearly burned the print right off the pages. I had to learn about

training, diet, nutrition . . . and all the other elements of training by trial and error. It took a lot of effort and a very long time. However, my ambition to become a great bodybuilder has been the driving force in my life, and so I learned what I had to do, whatever the cost.'

"I think Arnold's plan is similar to Jesus' desire for us. Jesus wants to be the driving force in my life, and yours too! He has designed us to preach, heal, and deliver just like He did. To get in on that we must learn how to do it—whatever the cost!"

Now it's time to swing into action. Hasta la vista, baby!

BRIDGING THE GAP

THE PRISONER STOOD WITHOUT SPEAKING as the soldiers stripped him to the waist, tied his hands together, and bent his body across a rail. One of the soldiers picked up a whip made of leather strands into which bits of metal or bone had been tied at the ends. Then began the ordeal commonly known as “the halfway death,” so called because it was intended to bring the victim just short of dying.

It was a form of torture peculiar to the Romans. The Jews did it differently. Their law limited flogging to a maximum of thirty-nine strikes of the whip. But the Romans had no such rule. They flogged till the man doing the whipping got so tired he couldn't go on.

After the flogging, his back flayed open like a newly plowed field, the prisoner was led to the palace of the Roman governor. A company of soldiers, perhaps as many as six hundred, had gathered. They draped a purple robe, symbol of royalty, around the prisoner's shredded back so that the blood, as it coagulated, stuck to the fabric.

Someone had broken a branch from a thornbush and fastened the ends together to form a crown. The soldiers placed it on the victim's head, jabbing the long thorns into his scalp. To complete the mockery, the soldiers struck his head with a rod, spit on him, and bowed down to him shouting, "Hail, king of the Jews!"

The prisoner reeled, half-conscious, before the jeering soldiers. A day of unimaginable punishment had just begun for the prisoner they called Jesus of Nazareth.

PLACE OF THE SKULL

That same morning, a hideous procession wound its way through the crowded streets of Jerusalem. A heavy wooden beam had been lifted onto Jesus' bruised and bleeding shoulders. Weak from blood loss, pain, hunger, and lack of sleep, He stumbled forward. He carried on His back what was to form the horizontal beam of His cross.

Somewhere along the way, Jesus stumbled and fell. A man named Simon happened to be passing by, and the soldiers forced him to carry the crossbeam.

When the procession reached Golgotha, a hill known as "The Place of the Skull," the soldiers nailed Jesus to a cross. They hammered a spike through each wrist, between the two long bones of the forearms. Next, they nailed His feet to the cross. Jesus' flesh ripped as the soldiers stood the cross upright and dropped its base into a hole in the ground.

By three o'clock that afternoon, Jesus' crucifixion, an ordeal which the Roman historian Cicero called "the most horrible torture ever devised by man," had ended. The man who claimed to be the Son of God was dead. And the question screaming in the minds of His followers was, "Why?" Why had it happened?

To understand, we move ahead some two thousand years to an isolated spot in the American Rockies. Five teenagers, from fifteen to eighteen years of age, stand looking over a cliff.

They are backpackers. Nearing the end of a three-day hike, their path has been blocked by a canyon, some 100 feet deep and 30 feet wide. Since the five know of no other way to reach their destination, they begin trying, one by one, to cross the canyon.

MAKING IT ON HIS OWN

The first hiker to try crossing is Alex Athlete. Alex is tall, with muscles rippling all over his body. He's considered the big jock on campus. Nobody can match him in athletic skill or strength. Alex has a philosophy about life that goes something like this: "I'm a winner. I've got what it takes. I can do it because I try harder."

Alex does twenty-five sit-ups and twenty-five push-ups to get warmed up for the jump. He puts on his \$150 jumping shoes and starts his approach run. By most standards, Alex's jump is impressive. He makes it about 28 feet, but not far enough to get across. He crashes to the bottom of the canyon. Splat!

FAKED OUT BY HER BRAIN

If Alex couldn't make it, perhaps another of the five hikers can—maybe Brandi Brain. Brandi is so clever in math that it doesn't take her long, with her pocket slide rule and her book of logarithmic tables (which she always carries backpacking), to figure out that the canyon is 30 feet, $3 \frac{5}{16}$ inches across.

She also knows her exact body weight. So, according to the laws of velocity and momentum, Brandi computes exactly how fast she needs to run, exactly what the wind resistance is, exactly how far, and at what angle she has to jump to get across safely.

But something—perhaps only Brandi could figure out exactly what—goes wrong. Despite her calculations, she makes it only 16 feet, 5 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches. Brandi joins Alex at the bottom of the canyon. Splat!

WHERE MONEY FAILS

Monty Moneybags is next in line, and he looks a little worried. That's unusual. Monty has never had to worry about anything. He's always had enough money to take care of most problems. All he's had to do is call Mom, and she'd come running with the car or the checkbook, or whatever else it was Monty wanted.

Monty's money has opened a lot of doors for him, but when it comes to crossing the canyon, he does no better than his two friends. Monty buys the best jumping equipment money can buy, but that doesn't do the job. He ends up on the bottom with Alex and Brandi. Splat!

POPULARITY AT ANY PRICE

With their three fellow hikers lying lifeless at the bottom of the cliff, you'd think the other two backpackers would turn back. But not Calvin Clone, who's next in line. Calvin always follows the crowd. If the other guys smoke, so does Calvin. If they get drunk, he does too. If they fry their brains on dope, Calvin joins right in. If they go to church, he goes too.

The other guys jumped, so Calvin thinks over the situation—for about two seconds—then takes the plunge. So long, Calvin. Splat!

“GOOD GUYS” FINISH LAST

The wind is really whipping down the mountainside now. The last hiker, Rachel

Religious, pulls her jacket around her as she considers her predicament. Rachel has always had answers for everything—pat answers, perhaps, but answers. She proves almost every Sunday what a good girl she is. (The rest of the week doesn't count, in Rachel's way of thinking.)

Rachel's also active in her youth group. She's fairly certain that all her church going will pay off when she takes her turn at the jump. What Rachel doesn't know is that she's no better off than Alex Athlete, who trusted in his physical strength; or Brandi Brain, who trusted in her brains; or Monty Moneybags, who trusted in his money; or Calvin Clone, who relied on his friends. Being a "good girl" might impress a lot of people, but not 30-foot canyons. Rachel joins her friends at the bottom. Splat!

THE WIDE GAP

So, what does this little make-believe tragedy have to do with why Jesus died? Let the mountainside canyon represent the gap that exists between God and humans. Then let the efforts of Alex, Brandi, Monty, Calvin, and Rachel stand for human efforts to bridge the gap. And you begin to see the connection.

A tremendous gap stands between God and us, between His holiness and our selfishness. If we could see the holiness and absolute purity of God, we would understand how sinful we are and the difficulty involved in bridging the gap. We would understand why it's impossible for us to bridge the gap on our own.

The Old Testament prophet Isaiah saw in a vision a glimpse of God sitting on His throne in heaven. Just a glimpse was all Isaiah needed to realize how sinful he was. *"'Woe to me!' he cried, 'I am ruined!'"* (ISAIAH 6:5).

When Simon Peter realized that Jesus was God's Son, he said almost the same thing: *"Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!"* (LUKE 5:8).

What Peter had to learn is this: God is holy, but He is also love. He proved that love by offering His Son to die on the cross. A 30-foot canyon is nothing compared to the wide gap which God's love and holiness had to span to reach sinful humans like ourselves.

Money can open doors. It can buy the right kinds of clothes. But it can't make anyone right with God. Ditto for physical strength, brainpower—and even being a “good girl.” People can't buy or earn what God alone is able to give.

EXPENSIVE BRIDGE BUILDING

Peter wrote, *“For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God”* (1 PETER 3:18). *“He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness”* (1 PETER 2:24). God bridged the gap. But what a cost!

Because salvation is free as far as man's part is concerned, we could get the impression that it didn't cost anything. But one look at Jesus on the cross shows what a tremendous price God paid. If we saw a realistic picture of Jesus' death, it would be too gross to look at. And yet the spiritual pain Jesus experienced on the cross was even greater than His physical pain.

Why did He allow it? Simple. He went through that pain so that you and I would not have to. Two statements Jesus made while on the cross help explain this reality:

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken Me?” (MATTHEW 27:46).

As Jesus hung in agony on the cross, God the Father turned His back. For the first time ever, Jesus was totally separated from His Father's presence—flung to the bottom of the canyon, going through hell so you and I wouldn't have to.

At this point Jesus took on Himself all our sin—the garbage in our lives. As a result, His fellowship with God the Father was broken. Think about the sinful things you've done. And realize that God's Son was forsaken by His Father in order to take care of your sin problem. Unbelievable!

It's impossible for us to fully understand how much it cost Jesus to bridge the gap. But understand this: He did it for you.

“It is finished” (JOHN 19:30).

This final statement of Jesus on the cross was not a confession of defeat, but of victory. The canyon had been bridged! Jesus had paid the full price for mankind's sin and selfishness. Because of that payment, you and I can be totally forgiven and accepted by God. *“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness”* (1 JOHN 1:9).

Not only did Jesus' death provide forgiveness, it also provided freedom from guilt: *“Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus”* (ROMANS 8:1).

Not only was sin forgiven and guilt taken away, the curse of death was broken. The story doesn't end with Jesus' death. Three days later He burst out of the grave.

I learned a dramatic lesson in the meaning of Jesus' resurrection when a high school friend was dying of cancer. This friend, with whom I had run track, had shriveled to ninety-six pounds. I visited him in the hospital and then talked with his mother.

“Barry,” she asked me, “where is God?”

At that moment, I had no answer. Then later I realized, He's in the same place He was two thousand years ago when His own Son was dying. For the first time, I really understood that in Jesus Christ the sting of death is removed. Jesus finished off death!

Toward the end of the movie *Ben Hur*, the camera focuses on the cross, then on Jesus' feet. Blood and rain drip down His legs and fall into a puddle below the cross. The puddle turns red. Then it overflows and runs down the hill. The hill slowly turns red. Finally, the blood flows into a river that turns red, then into the ocean—and it too turns red. The scene symbolizes the fact that Jesus died for the whole world.

He died for His critics and enemies who stood gloating that day because they'd managed to see Him killed. He died for the bystanders who really didn't care about Him one way or the other. He died for the small group of His followers who stood beneath the cross watching Him die. And He died for you and me.

RIP-OFF OR REALITY?

ANYONE CAN KILL ANOTHER PERSON. But what about bringing someone back to life?

For years, several world superpowers have had weapons equal to thirty-five tons of TNT for every person in the world. But that's mickey mouse stuff compared to the power it would take to bring someone back from the dead.

Jesus claimed access to that kind of power. He told His disciples, *“Listen, we are going down to Jerusalem. I will suffer and die there, but keep cool because three days later I will rise again”* (MATTHEW 16:21-26; MARK 8:31-37; 9:9; LUKE 9:18-25, AUTHOR'S PARAPHRASE). He made it plain that everything He said and did would hinge on the resurrection.

Jesus' bodily resurrection from the dead is absolutely critical to the validity of Christianity. The apostle Paul said, *“And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching*

is useless and so is your faith" (1 CORINTHIANS 15:14). Jesus' resurrection establishes His uniqueness. No other religious leader has ever claimed to rise from the dead. If we could visit the graves of Buddha, Muhammad, Confucius, or numerous others who started religious movements, we would find their skeletal remains. But at the tomb of Jesus, all we find is an empty grave.

Of equal importance is the fact that if Jesus' resurrection is reality, then He has the right and the power to change your life and mine. Jesus said, *"I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die"* (JOHN 11:25, 26).

Did Jesus Christ really rise from the dead? The evidence says yes! But that doesn't mean that the validity of Christianity can be proven like the latest scientific theory. God cannot be crammed into a test tube. However, faith in Jesus Christ and in the reality of His resurrection does not have to be "blind faith" either. The historical evidence stacks up solidly on the side of the belief that Jesus was literally raised from the dead.

THE WITNESS OF THE SCHOLARS

Some people believe that all educated persons consider the resurrection a myth. The fact is that many great thinkers have defended the truth of Jesus being raised from the dead. In fact, for 429 years after Jesus lived, no one wrote a single word disputing the reality of the resurrection.¹

Professor Thomas Arnold, once chairman of Modern History at Oxford University, said, "I have been used for many years to studying the histories of other times, and to examine and weigh the evidence of those who have written about them, and I know of no one fact in the history of mankind which is proved by better and fuller evidence of every sort, to the understanding of a fair inquirer, than the great sign which God has given us that Christ died and rose again from the dead."²

Lord Lyndhurst, one of the greatest legal authorities in English history, wrote, “I know pretty well what evidence is; and I tell you such evidence as that for the resurrection has never broken down yet.”³

Simon Greenleaf was a great professor of law at Harvard University. His books are still studied in law schools today. Two students challenged Greenleaf concerning whether the resurrection of Jesus would stand in a court of law. Greenleaf took the challenge and said, “The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the most established fact of history.”⁴

Frank Morison, a journalist, engineer, and rationalist, thought Jesus’ life had been a good example for the world, but he could not buy the “resurrection myth.” He set out to disprove it, and finished his research a believer.⁵

Lord Lyttleton and Gilbert Benjamin West were professors at Oxford University. They took a six-month study leave and set out to disprove the resurrection of Jesus Christ and conversion of Saul, later the apostle Paul. Concluding their research, they both admitted that the resurrection and Saul’s conversion could be substantiated from a scholar’s standpoint. They then gave their lives to Jesus Christ. On the flyleaf of the book they co-authored as a result of their study, they wrote, “Blame not before thou hast examined the truth.” In other words, don’t reject until you have examined the evidence.⁶

Josh McDowell, speaker and author, faced up to the resurrection issue during his college days. Several of his Christian friends challenged McDowell, who was not a Christian, to intellectually examine the claims of Christ. After studying the evidence, he came to the conclusion that he would have been “intellectually dishonest” with himself if he did not believe.⁷ He now travels worldwide sharing his insights on the validity of Jesus Christ as the Son of God.

McDowell has this to say about the resurrection: “A believer in Jesus Christ today can have complete confidence, as did the first Christians, that his faith is based not on myth or legend, but on the solid historical fact of the risen Christ and the empty

tomb.”⁸

From an historical viewpoint, educators, lawyers, and scientists alike have confirmed the validity of the resurrection. The witness of a vast number of scholars indicates that Jesus is alive.

But that’s only the beginning. Let’s check out some of the facts of the actual resurrection event.

THE UNDISTURBED GRAVECLOTHES

“Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, ‘They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!’

“So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus’ head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed” (JOHN 20:1-8).

What did they see? Whatever it was must have been significant because these few Bible verses mention three times that Peter and John “saw.” The word used for saw means “to see and understand.” They saw the wrapping with no body in it. They saw the burial cloth that had been wound around Jesus’ head “folded up by itself.” With this evidence in front of them, they saw and believed.

THE EMPTY TOMB

Matthew 27:57-66 records the many precautions that were taken in the burial of Jesus' body. The Jewish authorities were afraid Jesus' disciples would steal the body, then claim He was alive. They took several steps which, along with some of the normal burial procedures, would ensure that Jesus stayed in the tomb—or so they thought.

First, they put Him in a *“new tomb”* (v. 60) carved out of solid rock. Inside were several stone slabs recessed into the walls of the cave. Eventually a body was to be placed on each slab.

Second, Jesus' body was wrapped in a *“clean linen cloth”* (v. 59). The body was brought in and laid on one of the stone slabs. According to the Jewish burial custom, the people who buried Jesus also brought about seventy-five pounds of spices (JOHN 19:39, 40).

With yards of linen cloth, they wrapped the body, placing the spices and a gummy substance on the wrapping. They wrapped the cloth around the legs, then around the trunk up to the neck. Then the spices and gummy substance hardened. At this point, Jesus probably weighed about a hundred pounds more than His normal body weight. He was a mummy! Imagine how hard it would have been to get out of those wrappings.

Third, a big stone was rolled against the door. We don't know just how much the stone weighed, but some authorities speculate it was as much as two tons. Almost all agree it would have taken at least three or four men to move it once the stone was placed in the tomb entrance.

Fourth, the tomb was made *“secure by putting a seal on the stone”* (v. 66). Cords were stretched and fastened across the stone. The Roman emperor's official insignia

was inscribed in clay or wax on the outside of the tomb. If anyone broke the seal, it meant death. Jesus wasn't supposed to get out!

Fifth, the Romans placed a guard (v. 65) around the tomb. Josh McDowell observes that many people picture the “guard” as two skinny guys holding wooden spears and wearing miniskirts. But the real picture is of a sixteen-man security unit with each man responsible for six square feet of territory! These were Roman soldiers—the best in the world. Their methods are still used by the military today.

WHAT REALLY HAPPENED?

So what happened? There are a bunch of theories:

THE FIRST VIEW IS THAT THE ROMAN AND JEWISH LEADERS TOOK THE BODY.

Why would these leaders who had killed Jesus want His body removed? They wouldn't. They wanted to protect their careers and they knew that if Jesus' body was missing, all of Palestine would be in an uproar. They wanted to keep the body in the tomb.

In addition, they certainly would have come up with the body after the disciples started telling everyone that Jesus was alive. In an effort to destroy Christianity, these Roman and Jewish leaders beat the disciples, jailed them, and told them not to say another word. All the authorities had to do was produce the body and the uproar would have been over.

But they couldn't produce it because they didn't have it.

A SECOND VIEW: THE DISCIPLES STOLE THE BODY.

That's what the Roman and Jewish authorities wanted people to think (MATTHEW 28:11-15). But remember the guards, the sixteen soldiers who were among the best in the world? If the guards allowed the emperor's seal to be broken, they would be brutally punished. One form of punishment called for a soldier's clothes to be taken off and placed at his feet. Then he was burned to death, his own clothes used for fuel. No way the guards were going to let Jesus' body get away!

Now, remember the disciples? Did they steal the body? Eleven scruffy guys coming to take on the best soldiers in the world? You've got to be kidding! They probably couldn't even toilet paper someone's house without getting caught. The matchup would be like a seventh-grade football team taking on the Super Bowl champs.

Imagine the disciples sneaking up on the guards. They steal the soldiers' swords and wipe them out. They push away the huge stone. They steal the mummified body and tell everybody that Jesus is alive. It takes a pretty vivid imagination to believe that!

The disciples could not have taken the body. First, they could never have overcome the Romans. Second, when persecuted and martyred for their faith in Christ, surely one of them would have admitted that the resurrection was a lie. Not one of them ever did.

A THIRD EXPLANATION IS THE "SWOON THEORY."

In his book *The Passover Plot*, Hugh Schoenfeld theorizes that Jesus never died on the cross. He was merely thought to be dead. He was taken down from the cross and put into the tomb. The coolness of the tomb revived Him. He got out and showed Himself to His disciples, and claimed to be risen from the dead.

Imagine it! Jesus went through all of the suffering described in the last chapter. Blood mixed with water poured out of His side, providing medical evidence of His death. Several people handled His body and raised no questions about His being alive. Jesus was wrapped in mummifying substances and put in a cold, dark tomb with no food or water. So He revives, gets out of His mummified case, pushes away the huge stone, overcomes sixteen of the world's best soldiers, walks to Jerusalem on nail-pierced feet, and appears to His disciples as the picture of health. No way, José!

The best and most logical explanation is the biblical one—the tomb was empty because Jesus Christ was raised from the dead!

THE TEN APPEARANCES

The Bible tells us Jesus appeared to people at least ten different times in the forty days after His resurrection. He was seen by as many as five hundred and by as few as one. He cooked. He ate fish. He talked. Some of His disciples even touched Him, the Bible says.

Could all these people who said they saw Him have had hallucinations? For that many people on that many occasions to have had hallucinations would break all the laws of psychology. No—Jesus is alive!

THE DISCIPLES' CHANGED LIVES

One of the greatest evidences for the resurrection is the changed lives of Jesus' disciples. Take Simon Peter for example. When Jesus was arrested, Peter let a young servant girl scare him into denying Christ (JOHN 18:15-18). After Jesus' death, Peter and the other disciples hid out, afraid for their lives (JOHN 20:19). But after witnessing

Jesus' resurrection, the disciples appeared before the same court that only a few weeks before had condemned Jesus to death.

Peter courageously challenged the court by saying, *"It [the healing of a crippled man] is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man [the cripple] stands before you healed. . . . Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved"* (ACTS 4:10, 12).

The court realized that Peter and John had changed. *"When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus"* (ACTS 4:13).

Take the brother of Jesus, James, as another example. All along he had thought that Jesus was one brick shy of a full load. (See Mark 3:20, 21.) If your brother went around saying things like, "I am the door," "I am the vine," and "I am God," you would think he was weird too! But then, convinced of the reality of the resurrection, James recognized Jesus for who He really is. Listen to how he begins the book he wrote that is now in the Bible: *"James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ"* (JAMES 1:1).

Mark serves as another example of a changed life. The author of the second Gospel was a young teenager when Jesus taught the crowds in Galilee. His life was changed by the power of the resurrection. Years later when he was an older man, he was asked to choose between denying Jesus' resurrection or dying—he chose death. According to tradition, his killers tied a rope to each limb of his body, then tied a horse to each rope. Then they pulled his body apart. Mark knew the truth and was willing to die for it.

Then there is Paul. How do we explain him? His passion was to persecute Christians. Radically changed by a resurrection encounter with Jesus, he proclaimed Jesus

throughout the world at a great cost to himself. His number one goal in life was *“to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death”* (PHILIPPIANS 3:10).

All of Jesus' disciples, except John, were killed for their faith in their Lord. People will lie to protect themselves. But people don't die for something they know to be a lie!

PERSONAL EVIDENCE

The miracle of changed lives is one piece of evidence that can be observed firsthand today. Hardened criminals become model citizens. Atheists become dedicated believers. Drug addicts are set free—and give Jesus the credit.

The changes in my own life have been less dramatic. But they are nonetheless a testimony to the power of the resurrected Jesus. In my teen years I was selfish, cocky, overly ambitious, hungry for popularity, and insensitive to people. Then the resurrection power of Jesus changed my life. One of the significant changes came in my family relationships.

One afternoon, when I was sixteen and my sister was thirteen, I was working on a science poster. Cathey brought me something to drink, and when she offered me the glass, I ignored her. She stood there for a moment and when I still didn't take the glass, she poured it all over my poster. I jumped up and slapped her. She ran into the house and I ran after her. I was going to hit her again.

From that point on, our relationship drifted farther and farther apart. Even when I tried to do something nice for Cathey, it never seemed to work out. Later, she began to have some difficult circumstances in her life. In the middle of that period she told my mom, “You know, Barry has really been a crummy big brother to me.” My mom told me what Cathey had said, and it broke my heart.

Since the science poster episode, I had received Jesus into my life, and my life had changed. I asked Him to show me how to have a good relationship with my sister. We talked and I confessed, “Cathey, I have been a crummy big brother to you.” I listed all of the ways I had failed her. Then I asked, “Cathey, will you forgive me?” With tears in her eyes, she put her arms around me and said, “Barry, I love you and I forgive you.” Immediately the barriers were gone—smashed by the resurrection power of Jesus Christ.

A DECISION THAT MAKES SENSE

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is no rip-off. It's reality. So many people reject the truth without examining the evidence. Add to the evidence for the resurrection hundreds of fulfilled Bible prophecies, the impact of Jesus' life and teachings, and His work in the world today—and believing in Jesus makes good sense.

Mentally accepting the evidence is not enough. Jesus is alive. Are you willing to let Him live in you? When you allow His resurrection power to control you, several things happen:

1. YOU HAVE THE LIFE OF JESUS IN YOU.

“You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ” (ROMANS 8:9).

2. YOU ARE A NEW PERSON.

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” (2 CORINTHIANS 5:17).

3. YOU HAVE ALL YOU NEED TO LIVE LIFE AT ITS BEST.

“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ” (EPHESIANS 1:3).

4. YOU NO LONGER HAVE TO FEAR DEATH.

“Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?’ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 CORINTHIANS 15:55-57).

5. YOU WILL LIVE WITH GOD FOREVER.

“I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life” (1 JOHN 5:13).

If you already have eternal life through Jesus living in your heart, you have access to His resurrection power. Pray for that power to control you so you can live for Christ, to change you so you can reflect Christ, and to empower you so you can make a difference in the lives of people every day.

If you do not yet have Jesus’ life in you, then turn from your self and turn to Jesus. Ask him to come into your life and change you now.

Discuss your decision with another follower of Christ or with a leader in your church.

By following the resurrected Christ you will live forever!

KNOWING JESUS

IF BEING COCKY AND SELF-SUFFICIENT when I was in high school wasn't bad enough, I also used people to accomplish my goals. That arrogant, know-it-all person was one side of me—the real side. The other side of me was the nice guy who was friendly to everybody and went to church every Sunday. I was a leader in the church youth group. I knew a lot about the Bible. And I could act religious when the situation called for it.

I was like the little boy who came running into his house one day yelling, “Mommy, Mommy, look!” He was carrying a dead mouse with him, dangling it by the tail. “I killed him, Mommy,” he blurted out. “I ran over him with my bike, then I hit him with my baseball bat, my soccer shoe, and my football . . .” About that time, the boy realized that the preacher had come to visit. Suddenly an angelic look came across the boy's face as he finished his sentence, “. . . and the little mouse went home to be with the Lord.”

That's the way I lived my life in high school. I could be religious when I was in church on Sunday. But Monday through Saturday, Christianity had little effect on the way I lived.

A lot of people live that way. It's easy for them to act like Christians in church. But the rest of the time, their lives demonstrate that they don't really know Jesus Christ in a personal way.

The apostle Paul knew Jesus! In his letter to the Philippians, Paul described the change that had taken place in his life. He said, *“But all these things that I once thought very worthwhile—now I've thrown them all away so that I can put my trust and hope in Christ alone. Yes, everything is worthless when compared with the priceless gain of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord”* (PHILIPPIANS 3:7, 8, TLB).

For Paul, knowing the facts about Jesus Christ wasn't good enough. He wanted a dynamic, personal relationship with Jesus. It's having that kind of relationship that makes Christianity come alive.

When you date someone, you can learn all kinds of facts about that person. But if it's someone you care for, having the facts is nothing compared with going out and spending time with him or her. You enjoy being with someone you care for.

When you receive Jesus Christ into your life, you begin a relationship with Him. Though it's important to know the facts about Jesus, what's most important is knowing and loving Him more and more as your relationship grows.

To have that kind of relationship with Jesus, Paul set some goals. They're found in Philippians 3:10. Paul wanted to know Christ, the power of His resurrection, the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings, and to become like Him.

GETTING PERSONAL

“I WANT TO KNOW CHRIST . . .”

Soon after I got to college, I discovered that I was no longer the terrific success I had been in high school. Since first grade, I had always played basketball. It was a major part of my life. But when I got to Davidson College on a scholarship, I discovered that my scrawny six-foot body didn't play so well against guys who ranged from six-foot-ten to six-foot-thirteen!

I tried hard. I continued to shoot, even though my giant teammates kept smashing the ball back into my face. I kept playing defense, even though my body got plastered to the court on a regular basis. Finally I began to suspect that the goal I had set of making all-conference wasn't very realistic. I've already mentioned what my social life was like during my freshman year—a total disaster—as illustrated by the blind date my second week at school.

I also had set some academic goals. I decided I was going to be at least a B student. Then my first test came—in history, the subject in which I had planned to major. I studied like crazy. But when the test results came back, I found out I had made a 74, a D. I had never made a D in my life. Being the “we try harder” person that I was, I decided I would just have to study more. I studied twice as hard preparing for the next test. So what grade did I get? Not a 74 but a 47! My academic goals were sliding down the tube fast. It was as if all the props I had depended on were being knocked out from under me.

I remember homecoming weekend. I was lonely, homesick, and depressed. The girl I had asked to homecoming dumped me at the last minute. And to make it even worse, just before school began that year my grandmother had died. I was closer to her than anyone else during adolescence.

Saturday morning, I stared out my dorm window and asked myself for the first time: “Who am I? What am I doing here? Where am I going?”

I had never seriously considered these questions before. One thing I finally realized was that I was not sufficient in myself. I began to search for answers beyond myself. In the following months, I looked for answers in intellectualism, in philosophy, in relationships, in athletics. The more I searched, the emptier I felt. I finished my freshman year feeling that the entire year had been a waste.

That summer I attended a camp in the North Carolina mountains. My first day there I met a beautiful girl and decided I wanted to ask her out. I asked her to go to church with me that night, and she agreed. After church, we took a walk down a lonely, dark road. We talked for a while, then I started to ease my arm around her to kiss her.

“No,” she said firmly.

No girl had ever done that to me before. Flustered, I did something dumb. I asked her, “Why not?”

“Because of Jesus Christ,” she shot back.

I remember standing there in the dark, scratching my head and thinking, *What does Jesus Christ have to do with kissing?* Only later did I understand that a relationship with Jesus affects every area of life—especially that area! This girl intrigued me. I saw something different in her, a quality of life I hadn’t seen in other girls I had dated. Somehow I understood that she knew Jesus Christ in a way I had never known Him.

At the same camp, I met a basketball player from the University of Tennessee. We spent a lot of time in the gym together. Soon I realized that he had that same relationship with Christ that this girl had. The two of them talked to me and influenced me to think seriously about my relationship with Jesus Christ.

In that search I made some great discoveries! God loves me. God loves me more than I love myself (and that was a lot!). God would love me if I were the only person in the world. God proved His love for me. Romans 5:8 says, *“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”*

My search led me to the Bible, and I began to grasp the truth of verses like this one: *“God showed how much he loved us by sending his only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him. This is real love. It is not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins”* (1 JOHN 4:9, 10, NLT).

The influence of my two new friends, my own searching, and the unseen working of the Holy Spirit led me to a decision. One night I knelt beside a chair and prayed, “Jesus, I know that you love me and that I need you. I have known about you, but I really want to know you. I ask you to come into my life and begin a relationship with me.”

And Jesus did come into my life! There was no thunder or lightning, no trumpets, no angels, only a calm peace that came over me. It wasn’t an emotional experience, but it was real. That was when I began to get to know Jesus.

POWER JAM

“I WANT TO KNOW CHRIST AND THE POWER OF HIS RESURRECTION . . .”

One day, about a year and a half after that prayer in my dorm room, this thought came to me: *Barry, maybe you shouldn't be playing basketball.* My next thought went something like this: *St. Clair, that's about the dumbest idea you've ever had.*

Everything in my life revolved around the game. I wanted nothing more than to play college basketball and, hopefully, to make all-conference. Quitting was out of the question. So I pushed the thought out of my mind. But the thought kept coming back: *Maybe you shouldn't be playing basketball.* One day I was reading the Bible and came across Matthew 6:33: *"But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."*

"Seek first what God wants," the verse seemed to say to me. And I had to admit, "Barry, you've been a Christian for a year and a half. But you've never offered to give up basketball to God—never."

God seemed to be asking, "Are you serious about Me?" I knew He wanted me to give up the most important thing in my life. Or at least to be willing to give it up. But I wasn't sure I was willing. Just the thought of giving up basketball made me sick.

For several weeks I struggled with the issue. I remember sitting in my parents' car one Saturday morning. We talked, cried, and prayed over this. I sensed that to obey God I needed to give up basketball—scholarship and all. It was serious business, but I believed God wanted me to do it.

And I did. That experience was a significant turning point for me. Right then I began to discover the resurrection power of Jesus Christ in my life. I began to grow spiritually—and to know Jesus—much more than ever before. The key to the new power I was experiencing was one simple word: obedience. God wanted me to obey Him, and when I did, I began to experience the kind of power in my life that He wanted me to have.

God wants every believer to experience the same power that raised Jesus from the dead! Jesus wants to change us. And He changes us through His resurrection power in us. Paul wrote, *"I pray that you will begin to understand how incredibly great his power is to help those who believe him. It is that same mighty power that raised*

Christ from the dead and seated him in the place of honor at God's right hand in heaven" (EPHESIANS 1:19, 20, TLB).

That power is in every Christian, because Jesus lives inside every believer. His resurrection power works in us as we obey Him. Jesus said, *"Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him"* (JOHN 14:21).

The fact that I quit basketball does not mean that's what God wants everyone to do! What He really wants is our hearts. For me, obedience to Jesus meant giving up the hours I spent eating and sleeping basketball. For someone else, it may mean making a relationship right with parents. It may involve a boyfriend or girlfriend, popularity, or some habit. But until we are willing to obey Jesus completely, we won't really know Him or the power of His resurrection.

The basketball story has a significant footnote: two years after I gave up basketball, the Lord gave it back to me. I had the opportunity to travel with Athletes in Action, an all-Christian team that competes against major colleges and universities. We used basketball to share the message of Jesus with people who came to the games. In one summer I traveled to five countries—Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the Philippines—playing fifty games in seven weeks. At every game, my teammates and I had the opportunity to tell fans and players about Jesus Christ.

Once I gave basketball over to God, He gave it back to me—not for my glory but for His! That's resurrection power at work!

“I WANT TO KNOW . . . THE FELLOWSHIP OF SHARING IN HIS SUFFERINGS . . .”

Some people have the idea that becoming a Christian makes all of life's problems disappear. So not true! God never promised that the Christian life would be “easy street.” In fact He promised just the opposite. *“For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him”* (PHILIPPIANS 1:29).

Many people discover that they have more problems after they receive Christ than before. That's because becoming a Christian brings us into conflict with the world. Following Jesus generally means taking life more seriously. We get involved in sticky situations like speaking out against injustice and standing up for truth when the truth is not popular. But on the positive side, these pressures push us closer to Jesus and cause us to grow stronger in Him. We may have more problems, but we also have the Problem Solver on our side!

Some years ago my first wife, Carol, and I were having a wonderful time at a beautiful conference center near Asheville, North Carolina. But I had a nagging, frustrated feeling that I couldn't shake. God seemed light years away from me. For several months before the conference, this miserable feeling had been gnawing at me, and it all came to a head during the conference.

The Lord brought to mind a certain sin in my past that I had never confessed to Him or tried to make right. I had thought about the incident before, but I had never admitted to myself that it was a problem. I hadn't even been able to tell Carol about it. This time I realized that the problem had to be taken care of.

First, I confessed the sin to the Lord. I knew He forgave me, but further action was needed. I told Carol what had been bothering me. “When I was in college, I cheated on some German tests. Deep down inside, for a long time, I’ve known that was wrong, but I couldn’t admit it. Now I know that if I’m going to be the person God wants me to be, I need to get this problem straightened out.”

When Carol and I returned home, I called the German professor. Talking to him was the last thing in the world I wanted to do. I was nervous; I had sweaty palms and sweaty pits! What scared me most was that I could lose my college degree—but I knew it was the right thing to do.

“Doctor,” I said, “I cheated on some of your tests. That was wrong. Will you forgive me?”

He said, “Yes, Barry, I forgive you.”

It was one of the hardest things I’ve ever done in my life. But I can’t express the feeling I had when I finished apologizing and hung up the phone. I felt as if a weight had been lifted. I almost floated out of the room. I was free!

Through this experience I began to understand a little bit about what the “fellowship of his suffering” is all about. Many people around the world suffer greatly, even at the cost of their lives, for the cause of Christ. Doing the right thing—what Christ wants—sometimes means Christians have to pay a price.

When we are willing to face up to the hard things and meet them head-on, God can deal with the problems in such a way that He sets us totally free from them. John 8:36 says, *“So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”* So many believers never experience freedom from the things that keep them bound. They stay in their miserable conditions because they aren’t willing to pay the price required to straighten out their problems. They’re not willing to

go through the cross—the suffering—in order to get to the resurrection—the power that sets people free.

But as Christians we have the privilege of identifying ourselves with the cross of Christ, as Paul did. He wrote, *“I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me”* (GALATIANS 2:20).

Identifying with the cross means more than wearing one on a chain around our necks. It means facing up to the problems that confront us daily. It means dealing with our problems and issues the way Jesus wants us to deal with them—no matter how much it may hurt. You never experience the resurrection until you go through the cross. You never experience the power till you go through the suffering.

CHIPPING AWAY

“BECOMING LIKE HIM . . .”

In stating his fourth goal, Paul said, I want to become *“like him [Christ] in his death”* (PHILIPPIANS 3:10). Some people believe that Paul was referring to the spiritual process of dying to self so that Christ’s resurrection power could work in him. Others believe Paul wanted so much to be like Jesus that he would consider it an honor to die physically in the same way Jesus died—on the cross. Either way, it’s obvious that one of Paul’s main goals was to be like Jesus.

Someone asked a famous sculptor to explain how he made a statue of a horse. The sculptor answered, “You just take a piece of granite and then chip away everything that isn’t a horse.” As we get to know Jesus, experiencing the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, God begins shaping us to be

like Jesus. He begins to chip away at certain areas of our lives that prevent us from being like Jesus. And sometimes it's painful. But the areas that God takes away are those that keep us from reaching the goal He has in mind for us.

God has a plan, a blueprint, for our lives. He wants to make us like His Son. *“For from the very beginning God decided that those who came to him—and all along he knew who would—should become like his Son”* (ROMANS 8:29, TLB).

That doesn't mean God clones us. To become like Jesus doesn't mean we lose our individuality. Just the opposite is true. He changes us so that we all resemble Jesus, but each with our own unique twist. We become His unique work of art (EPHESIANS 2:10). We discover our unique selves in Christ.

Cloned, no. Changed, yes. God is at work in us day by day to make us like His Son—knowing Him, experiencing His power, suffering for His sake.

Isn't that just like Jesus? He passionately pursues us so we can passionately pursue Him. Then as we do, the Jesus who has no equal changes us to become more and more like Him.

What do we do? We keep our eyes focused on Jesus and take the next step in the journey!

To continue your journey with Jesus get the *Jesus No Equal Journal* from your local Christian bookstore, Standard Publishing at www.standardpub.com, or Reach Out Youth Solutions at www.reach-out.org.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

1. *Mere Christianity*, by C. S. Lewis (New York, NY: The MacMillan Co., 1960). Used by permission.

CHAPTER FIVE

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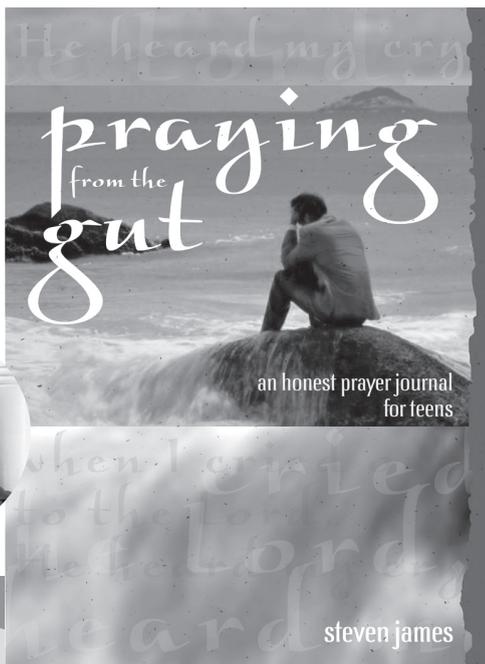
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*“My salvation and my honor come from God alone.
He is my refuge, a rock where no enemy can reach me.
O my people, trust in him at all times.
Pour out your heart to him,
for God is our refuge.”
—Psalm 62: 7, 8, NLT*

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