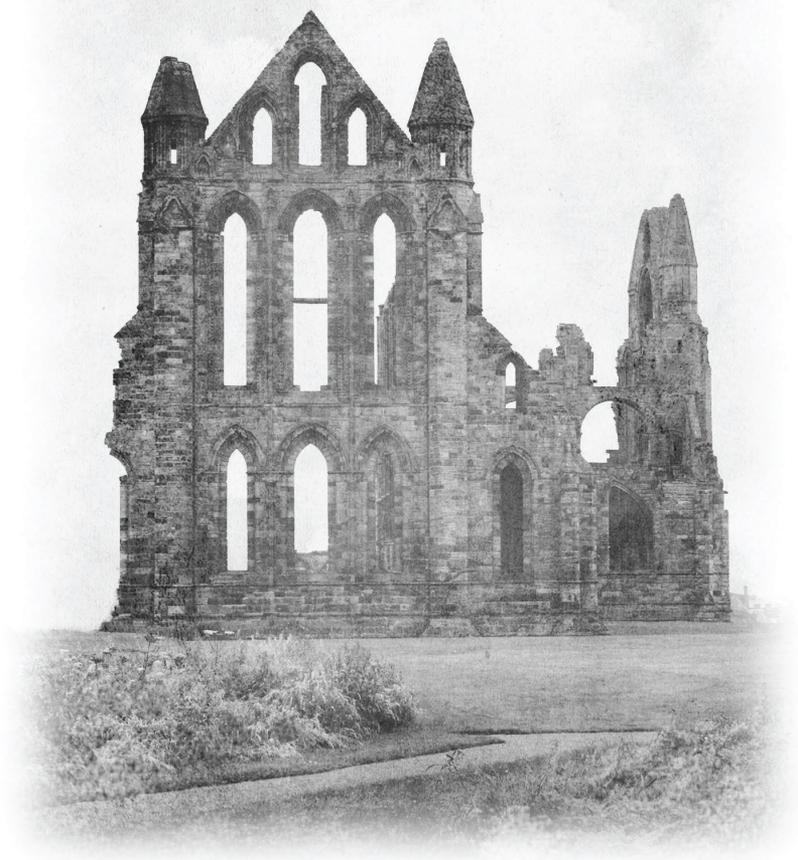


*chasing* GOD



ANGIE SMITH

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INTRODUCTION

# Caedmon

*Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you;  
how much less this house that I have built!*

~ I KINGS 8:27



One can hardly deny the appeal of a good chase. It's beautiful in concept: we seek after that which eludes us, longing for something just out of reach. Anticipation builds as our hearts beat faster, wondering if we are about to turn the final corner and catch the object of our affection.

Our minds are wild with possibility and we're intoxicated by the sense of adventure. Before we know it, we've forgotten the objective because we're caught up in the thrill of wondering.

Either that, or we simply give up and forego the chase altogether because we're exhausted and discouraged.

It can only end in one of two ways: either we *catch up* or we *give up*.

And despite the outcome, it's safe to say that our running was based on the presumption that we want something more than it wants us.

*For most of my Christian life, I have been chasing God.*

I have piled up commentaries, memorized scholar's words, and watched how others walk with Him, all the while keeping journals of the bread crumbs I think He's leaving for me as I go.

I've stacked up the "required" pile with false obligations and bloated assumptions, and I've scorned the mystery with my desperate need for control.

I know I'm not alone.

We try to fill in the gray instead of living in the black and white. We shape theology to suit our taste, our times, our situations, and our desires. It's the mess we've made by desiring to understand Him more than we want to know Him, and we're growing more exhausted than inspired every day.

The goal of this book is not to present you with a formula for living out Christianity. It's to offer my thoughts on the difference between looking *for* Him and looking *at* Him.

And maybe you, like me, have been spending your time going after the wrong objectives (without realizing it) and it's left you weary of the whole process. What was meant to be a gift has become an obligation, a source of guilt, or a way to fight fear.

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I assure you, I have been there. And it took quite a bit of time on my knees before I realized I was needlessly exhausted and unsure of my role as a follower of Christ. Don't misunderstand me; we are not called to be passive in our journey with Christ. In fact, being a disciple of Christ necessitates that we press forward until we can hardly believe we can do it anymore. The problem comes when we use our energy in ways He never asked us to because we're more concerned with our own feeble sketches of God than we are with *God Himself*.

We rely on our standards, our rules, our opinions, our agendas, and our measurements of holiness instead of His. And as the books pile one on top of another, so do the questions.

*It's the difference between following and chasing.*

The key that finally turned the door of my faith was understanding that we are called to one and not the other.

We stare at the rest of the pew, wondering why we aren't as far along as they are, secretly resenting those who unwaveringly claim their faith while we enter another Bible study group, hoping something will stick.

*If I just do this, I'll catch Him.*

My misguided understanding of responsibility, control, and ability led me to despair of all the wrong failures and to celebrate successes that God Himself doesn't recognize as such.

*It's what happens when you try to use religion to fill in the gaps of your faith.*

Religion is what we build with our own hands when we can't stand to feel like observers. And when it crumbles, we blame God. We have determined the man-made ceiling to be our own instead of the heavens themselves, and we have allowed our insatiable hunger for understanding to strangle the mystery we're supposed to embrace.

On the cover of this book, you'll see an image that has become a visual representation to me of what I've learned in the past few years. It is what remains of a Benedictine monastery built in AD 657 called "Whitby Abbey." It sits on a cliff overlooking the North Sea to one side and the small New Yorkshire town Whitby on the other.

It was made famous for a number of reasons: most notably that it was home to Caedmon, the earliest English poet whose name is known. According to the well-known writer and scholar Saint Bede, Caedmon was an illiterate lay brother who tended to the animals on the property. Caedmon was not well-versed in religion and one night as a harp was being passed around in a time of worship, he left the monastery to sleep outdoors with the animals because he was ashamed that he knew none of the songs nor even how to sing.

It was there in the fields that he had a dream in which someone approached him and asked him to sing "the beginning of all created things." At first he refused, but then composed a short poem, seemingly without the human capacity to do so. This hymn is recorded as the oldest English poem in existence, and is spectacular in its simplicity and inspired recognition of God. While Caedmon went on to live a long

## INTRODUCTION

and devoted life to Christ, penning many other spectacular works, he is most remembered for the words given to him in the middle of the night on a hillside in England:

*Now [we] must honour the guardian of heaven,  
the might of the architect, and his purpose, the  
work of the father of glory.  
As he, the eternal lord, established the beginning  
of wonders;  
he first created for the children of men  
heaven as a roof, the holy creator.  
Then the guardian of mankind,  
the eternal lord, afterwards appointed the  
middle earth  
the lands for men, the Lord almighty.*

He is the Architect, and our lives were given only to thank Him for His creation. When we spend our time gazing at the church ceiling instead of His sky, we fail to do so.

Centuries later, only a fraction of what men created remains, as will always be the case.

It stands exactly as it should now.

Walls around to remind us of what was laid on solid foundation. Guides to keep the boundaries where they should rightfully be. A legacy of stories of ages past, of saints that walked before us, and the general shape of what God intended as the church.

One day I want to go there to see it. I imagine I would let my fingers trace the stones and think of what it must have

been like to worship within the walls. I would surely think it was magnificent in form, and would appreciate the skill and dedication that went into the labor.

But I would see it for what it is—the skeleton of something that still lives.

I would enjoy the building, yes. But then I would lay on what was once the floor of a great cathedral, and looking up I would see only the night sky where a roof once blocked its splendor, and I would thank Him for loving me enough to teach me that I have long studied the wrong view.

I understand why Caedmon ran that night, and I probably would have as well.

I know little of the music, it seems. I always feel like the one who doesn't quite get it; the one who missed the part where everything lined up and the questions stopped. Maybe you feel the same, and you've come here beside me in the still of night because you want to hear from the Creator instead of the created.

If that's the case, I hope you'll hear the sounds that came to me when the melodies ceased, and the voice that whispered hope when the darkness fell.

The tender words of a loving Father, piercing the emptiness with His presence:

*Stop running like mad because you don't  
know the music; lay in the wild grass while the  
stars dance instead.*

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*Forget what they've told you about Me and stop thinking it's something you have to perform. You could spend your entire life doing that and never know any more of Me at all. You'll miss the point, miss the beauty, and miss the sky I painted above you.*

*It's a beautiful night to realize what it's really like to be loved.*

*Stop chasing the song, child, and let Me teach you to sing.*



CHAPTER 1

# Monday

*Ultimately the man who comes to obey God will love Him first . . .  
Let us therefore learn that the love of God is the beginning of religion,  
for God will not have the forced obedience of men,  
but wishes their service to be free and spontaneous . . .  
Lastly we learn that God does not linger over the outward sign of  
achievement but chiefly searches the inner disposition [motive],  
that from a good root good fruits may grow.*

~ JOHN CALVIN

---

**W**e lived at the top of a winding hill, and from the balcony off my bedroom I could see a good part of the city. Especially at night, when it was all lights and silence except for the occasional plane flying overhead.

I would stand with my toes between the metal bars and look down the streets and then out at the water in the distance. I would imagine that I was part of a grand adventure,

and that my life was encapsulated in an epic story. It felt better than loneliness.

The truth was that none of the people in the houses I could see knew my name and they didn't speak the language I spoke. We were strangers in a foreign country, doing our best to blend into the Japanese culture with our bright red hair and awkward accents.

Our apartment building had only three floors, with one family on each. We were in the middle, right below Yenny and her family and right above another European family who we befriended mostly because their video game selection overshadowed their attitudes. We would play Lode Runner on the "Family Entertainment System" until my mother would phone down and tell us supper was ready. Aside from those two families, there was no one who spoke English within walking distance. During the daylight hours you could hear all the laughter and chatter of families while they strung up laundry and watched their kids play. They would nod and wave, and we would do the same, but we didn't know each other's names.

We bowed our heads and smiled, but we didn't share life.

So much kindness, but still a deep sense of "not belonging," and always wondering what everyone thought of the little American girls who stared off the balcony.

But Yenny was very nice. And I liked to go up to her floor on weekends when her parents would make pancakes and we would play "orphans" and hide under her bed. She had a lot more imagination than she did toys, and she was perfectly content with that.

On Christmas morning one year, I called her up to ask her what Santa had brought her. She explained that she had gotten a few good gifts and one “really special one.”

I was expecting a new tape deck or “Teddy Ruxpin,” but as soon as I asked her what it was, she said excitedly, “A BIBLE!”

I wrapped things up with her and hung up the phone, explaining to my family that evidently Yenny hadn’t acted right this year because Santa had basically forgotten her.

My sister asked what she got, and I told her.

She shook her head sadly from side to side.

“That’s it? A Bible? Awful . . .”

“I know.” I replied solemnly. “And she seems like such a good kid.”

“Was she crying?” Jennifer asked.

“No.” I shook my head, incredulous at the reality. “She was *excited*.”

“Well don’t tell her about our Cabbage Patch dolls.”

“I won’t. It’ll be too much right now.”

Later that night Yenny asked me to come up so we could show each other our gifts. I brought a board game and some candy from my stocking because there was no need to pour salt in the wound of her punishment. I mean, clearly Santa did love me the most, but I didn’t want her to get all upset. There’s always next year, you know?

“Come on in!” Her mother smiled, the door open wide. Yenny stood behind her and motioned for me to come in as she darted down the hallway to her room.

She asked me about my loot and I laid it out cautiously, downplaying the abundance of stuff I had left at home.

I cleared my throat.

“And what about you? You said you got some chocolate, right? And a, umm, a Bible?”

Her face lit up.

I can see her now, sitting with her back to the window and the city sparkling down below as she reached under her bed and pulled out a box with her name on it.

The wrapping was torn, but still covered a good bit of the gift, so I could tell she had saved every bit of it. I thought about the way we tore through ours like a hurricane, filling black trash bags and grabbing at whatever was left with our names on it.

She slid it out and opened the box, revealing a hardback Bible with images of different characters on the cover. She smiled and handed it to me. “Isn’t it beautiful?”

It was beautiful. I mean, as beautiful as a Bible could be. Which was obviously not as beautiful as a doll that told you when she needed to nap and eat. But still, I wanted to be encouraging.

I opened the pages and scanned the stories, asking her to tell me what some of them were about. She obliged willingly, all the while reminding me it was the first one that was just hers.

I handed it back to her and watched her leaf through the pages slowly, taking it in again. I knew in that moment that Yenny didn’t think she had gotten the short end of the stick.

And I also started to realize she saw her gift as more than a pretty storybook.

After a few minutes she tucked it back in the box and we played the way we always did, but I was distracted by the memory of her staring at the words with life on her face. I wondered what she saw there, and why it made her so happy.

It was the first experience I can recall having with the Bible.

A little girl in a big city, clinging to the few people that God had put in her midst.

I wish I could go back for a moment and watch that little girl climb down the twenty-two stairs to her apartment after hugging her friend good-bye. I wish I could see her slide open the balcony door as she did every other night, but this time having a new question for the night.

*“What makes her love that book?”*

Because the truth of the matter is that the little red-headed girl would grow to be a woman who loved the same Lord, and who treasured His Word like the finest gift under any Christmas tree. And there’s a part of me that would long to whisper to her as she looked as far as her eyes could see—to tell her all that she could see and all she would ever know in this great life was breathed by the One who spoke the words in the book just one floor above her.

And maybe she would know, even then, that the nights and the languages and the loneliness and misunderstandings were for her good. They would teach her things she would rely on later.

I would also tell her that the planes she counted every night carried people all over the world, and that one day she would take her seat on many of them. She would have cried from fear, but I would reassure her.

*One day you'll know why she wrapped it up that way, and you will understand the tenderness of the pages turning. You'll find the refuge you've tried to create for yourself.*

*And one day, many years from now, He will be Your hope.*

She would have seen the city differently—not just as a child, but for years to come.

I know the curiosity that burned in her, and it was only recently that I felt it again. I was taller, though not much, and my toes pressed into wet sand while waves kissed my feet and tugged me forward over and over.

I wasn't playing games about being an orphan or trying to beat a high score, but I was still on the second floor pretending instead of allowing the reality of God to be bigger than the dreaming of Him.

I was acting like a Christian, doing things Christians did, and generally succeeding at being “A Christian.” At least, on paper.

But my fingers didn't cling to the words the way hers did, and a good part of my mind wondered things I was scared to even say out loud. *What if none of this is real? What if I'm not doing it right? What is it that makes faith look more like a treasured gift than a consolation prize? What makes this dance feel true to my spirit, and where do I look for the answers?*

*Others have met Him; they've been in His presence. They've been consumed by His love for them, and I don't know how.*

It's not for lack of trying, either. If chasing God was an Olympic sport, I feel certain I would be on a Wheaties box within a matter of months. Effort. More effort. Doing. More doing. Trying. A little more trying. Have I mentioned trying? Okay, good.

Despite that, I hadn't grown closer to Him because I had a faulty understanding of my role and His. Truth be told, it's a pattern that would have continued were it not for the answer that came to me in a moment of desperation.

*How do I find You, Lord?*

I didn't hear His voice audibly, but I understood what He was saying and it rattled me deeply. Three words that would change my entire approach to Christianity, and would allow me to be His in the way He always intended for me to be.

Stop.

Chasing.

*Me.*

I didn't know for a long while what that meant or what it would look like, but I knew He had given me a song, and for the first time in my walk, I was more concerned with singing than I was the people who passed the harp around.

What seemed at first to be a case of semantics quickly proved to be the key that unlocked my faith.

*We aren't supposed to chase Him.*

The parts of our walk that feel like a hunt are the areas where we've confused man's idea of God with God Himself.

They're the places where we've looked at the wrong measuring tool to tell us how we're doing, and then promote frustration and the sense that we're way behind the pack.

We're going to unpack this in the coming chapters, and I'm going to encourage you to just let the Lord speak as you read, showing you the ways you may have convinced yourself to pursue God without God actually asking you to do so. It's a new way of thinking about the journey, and in order to begin, we have to go all the way back to the start and see where we've allowed skewed interpretations to send us running after what we perceive to be the right goal.

Even the very concept of "salvation" might be a little muddy to many of us, so it's good to just take a step back and study what Scripture says about it. Maybe you're nothing like me in this area, but honestly, I didn't really get it at all. It felt a bit like a club where I had to learn a secret handshake and a password, and I was so confused about why that was the way the God of the universe had set things up.

I realized that even from the very beginning of my Christian life I was doing things that I thought I was supposed to, yet they weren't reassuring me or making me feel like I was a "member."

Trust me. By the end of this book, you'll understand how VERY confused I was about all the "Christianese," and how pitiful my attempts were to look like the rest of the bunch. But when I felt the Lord urging me to write this book, it was because I really understood what it was like to long for Him but not know Him.

And maybe (Maybe? Please?) you've wondered some of the same things.

He's God. Not a formula.

This book was inspired by my own bumbling attempts to understand what the Christian walk looked like. I was so concerned with fulfilling the *requirements* that I missed the heart of the gospel.

In other words, I used religion to fill in the gaps of my faith.

I was too tangled in the details to recognize the point, and it wasn't the way He intended our relationship to be.

Let's sit with the Word and ask the Lord to give us a fresh glimpse of His calling on our lives. And while we're at the beginning, let's also make a little commitment to each other. This isn't about denominations or legalism, it's about a genuine desire to know, understand, and obey the Bible. You might not agree with everything I'm going to present to you, and that's okay. You're allowed to be wrong.

Do tell me you're giggling and not grabbing that last paragraph to post online, completely out of context.

Because to take one sentence out of context and run with it would be irresponsible, wouldn't you agree? It renders the big picture irrelevant, and pits us against things we don't even have exposure to.

I've done it myself many times.

And so have you.

In fact (caution: sweeping, bold-worthy statement is about to be made), I think the church has done a pretty good job of

taking things out of context at times. We love to quote verses but we don't necessarily know where or how they fit into the grand scheme of God's Word. We pick and choose and print them on our children's bedroom walls, but we can't say we've ever read that particular book of the Bible.

Obviously this is a huge generalization, but I've found myself doing this at times. Desiring truth but not really feeling like it's possible to attain it for myself. Yes, I can physically read the Bible, but how in the world am I supposed to understand what it says? There are smart people who can draw me pictures, right?

I'm asking the Lord to speak to you as you read. I hope the process of learning more about the true heart of God will bless you the way it has me, and I'm eager to walk alongside you in what I hope will be a fresh start in your faith.

With that said, I'm well aware that there's a lot of potential for confusion and questioning as we explore together what it means to have a relationship with God, so here's the heads-up before we start working our way through it all.

I don't have all the answers.

God does.

He gave us some of them.

Those are the ones we need to spend our lives studying.

The rest are for Him to reveal when He chooses, if at all.

But He has given us what we need to rest and we should not be nearly as unsettled in the mystery as we are settled in the promises.

Here are three words you are going to have to get used to saying if you're going to follow Jesus: *I don't know*.

I realize that's uncomfortable. In a few paragraphs, you'll see I'm the one who knocked everyone else down to get to the front of the "I need more information" line.

I'm seriously obsessed with checklists and the feeling of accomplishment and completion. I'm relatively intelligent according to standardized testing, and I think diagramming sentences is fun. I read a lot of books written by dead people (they were not in that state when said books were written), and I hold a Master's degree in developmental psychology.

In addition, I can solve the puzzle before the *Wheel of Fortune* contestants at least 60 percent of the time.

I'm a thinker. A learner. An evaluator.

In other words, I'm a likely candidate to chase God.

I'm one of those people who want to wrestle it to the ground until it submits in all its clarity. If I were being honest with you, I would say that I'm surprised I've ended up where I have with a God who leaves so much gray.

Ultimately, what I found was that the gray only hovers in the secondary issues, and I can live with that because what matters is in solid black and white.

But it wasn't always this way; in fact, up until the last several years I was doing a much better job imitating other Christians than I was God, and it wasn't working.

I read a lot of books about spiritual disciplines and I decided I was going to live them out as best I could. I tried to be creative with it because I didn't want to be one of those

boring rule-keepers, so I bought leather-bound journals and colorful markers. I made lists of behaviors I wanted to change, complete with Bible verses expounding on the reasoning.

I would pick a virtue for the day and focus on living it out. At the end of the day I would write down my successes and failures, and would make a plan for how to do better the next day. I know what you're thinking, and I assure you I had the same question.

*How could this possibly go wrong?*

*(Note: Reader, meet sarcasm. She is a friend of mine, and she likes to jump in periodically. I hope you'll love her like I do.)*

It was an intense amount of work, that's for sure. But it wasn't getting me anywhere. Still, I kept at it because I was sure I just hadn't found the right method.

Maybe it was the fact that I didn't have post-it notes with Bible verses on my mirror. Could be because I listened to secular radio on the way to work. Noted.

*Tuesday will be better*, I kept telling myself.

But Tuesday never came.

My faith was a perpetual Monday.

Get filled up at church on Sunday, figure out how to try and apply what I learned to my own life, and then spend a full day failing. *Really? This is the goal?* Because it feels like prison.

A prison I could escape from if only I could find the right key . . . *surely there's a way . . .*

In case you haven't picked up on this, I'm what you might call "determined." Or at least I like to say it that way because

MONDAY

it sounds much more lovable than its abrasive synonyms, “stubborn” and “prideful.”

I would scribble notes to myself during church because half the time I didn’t understand what the lesson was about and I knew I needed to do some digging in my own time.

I laughed when the congregation laughed, and I nodded when they nodded. I wanted to be like God, and I figured they were what that looked like in the flesh.

My motives weren’t bad; they just weren’t *right*.

*Just tell me what I need to do, here, and I’ll do my best.*

More post-its, more nodding, and more Mondays.

A lot of Christians live this way, but not a lot will say so because it means they are risking their status as good students.

Which, unfortunately, is the heart of the problem.

If I’m just trying to do as well as the other kids, I’m comparing myself to the wrong source. If I’m using knowledge as my gauge of righteousness, either end of the continuum I’m on will result in wrong thinking about God. I’m either too ignorant to ever be used or so convinced of my own knowledge that I ignore the lecture.

While I called Him teacher, I looked to the other students to tell me how I was faring in the school of faith.

I was exhausted. I felt like a failure. I just flat-out felt like I had missed the part where they handed out the manual.

Over a period of time, I realized I had neglected the basic truths He had given as His standards in favor of a system that looked more manageable. It was no longer enough for me to

“get by,” and I knew that in order to really follow God I would have to do something I hadn’t even considered a viable option.

So I opened the Book I had tucked behind all the commentaries, and I told Him I wanted to know who He was.

As I discovered, this is not a request He turns down.

And as I also discovered, there is no going back once you ask.

---

The truth is that our journey with God isn’t really about living, and He never claimed it would be. It is, and has always been, a gradual death to everything we love outside of Him.

For obvious reasons, this has yet to become a bumper sticker craze.

We don’t want to feel like it’s going to be difficult, so we package it up in slogans and self-help lingo and we call it Christianity. We carefully scoot emphasis to the “overcoming” verses and dodge the bullets that might make us look like a bunch of lunatics who are willingly embracing a doctrine grounded in humility and suffering. Solid theology and good marketing strategies don’t necessarily go hand in hand. Which is why this tweet never happens:

*“Come to the retreat on Saturday if you can; we’re doing skits on depravity and desperation! #GoGod!!”*

And listen, I’m not suggesting we turn all gloom and doom, because that would be missing the point as well. What I do want to encourage is an approach to your Christian walk

that is based more on Scripture than an emotional high or stellar sermon series.

Don't worry.

This isn't a pounding-my-fists-and-getting-red-faced chapter. I don't ever pound my fists and I only get red-faced when I fall in public. Hypothetically, of course.

In fact, this chapter is quite the opposite. It's a conversation between you and a girl who realized she was wrong about what "following God" looked like. And she's not angry. She's grateful to have found the peace she spent so many years searching for. And she's still speaking in the third person, which is somewhat odd. Two sentences? Off-putting. Three? Borderline narcissistic.

I broke up with a guy once because he slipped into third person like it was a pair of cozy flannel pajamas. To that I say, "*No sir.*"

And here's the part where I move from "nutty ex" to "you need Jesus." Let's call that transition what it is, folks: *seamless*.

Truly, though, we will never know God without first recognizing our need for Him. I hasten to say the larger the gap between what He *actually* did for you and what you *believe* He did for you, the more likely you are to continue chasing Him.

At least when you're chasing Him you still have some sense of control, right? Yeah. I know. I have the post-its to prove it.

So let's make sure we're clear on what the Bible actually says is required in order for you to be a true believer of Christ.

That last sentence? Number 3,412,543,768 on the list of things I felt I might write about one day. I have to believe the Lord is enjoying the fact that I'm intermittently squirming and finding things to deep clean around my house in-between paragraphs.

My husband was already supportive of my writing, but he's even more-so now that he can see his reflection in the kitchen sink and use the color-coded diagram in the closet to locate his socks.

Let's just say this isn't my comfort zone.

I assure you, you're in good (and remarkably clean) hands.

I want to share what I understand to be the path on which God has called us to walk, but I have to acknowledge that not all of us are at the same stage of that walk. To some of you, it's going to look like I'm trying to rack up scrabble points, and for others of you it will be a yawn-worthy, simplistic explanation of concepts you were teaching in a foreign language before you could write your name. I get it. And I want you to know up-front that I'm aware of issues and have taken some precautionary steps in order to serve my audience.

Because it was important to me that I was seen as approachable, I decided to write this manuscript in English instead of what comes more naturally to me—the ancient Hebrew and Greek. So in the instances where it seems to you scholars that I am presenting the equivalent of a glorified Sunday school lesson, I need you to know it was a *choice*.

If you're interested in e-mailing me about the Hebrew/Greek transcripts, I will include my assistant's information

at the end of this chapter and you can contact her. She's very responsible so I assume you should receive a copy sometime between now and not ever.

New kids, *you're welcome*.

Now find a seat on the rug while I tuck my expositional-commentary-parallel-reference stuff away real quick.

(Note: If you don't appreciate a little humor in the midst of critically important theological issues, you may not have come to the same conclusion I have, which is this: I don't have to take myself too seriously in order to take God seriously.)

Okay. Let's go.

At its most basic level, a person is saved by the grace of God through the acknowledgment that he or she is a sinner who cannot earn God's favor, but is trusting in the sacrifice of Jesus to pay for his or her sins.

The moment you profess this is also referred to as "justification." Feel free to throw that around your next Bible study meeting.

Bonus points if you use the catchphrase, "It's just as if you never sinned." I don't take credit for it but I do think it's clever, and one of my favorite teachers used it once so I'm just passing along the goodness.

*Justification* is a big word with even bigger implications for our lives. Why? What does that mean? Two thousand years ago, Jesus took the form of a man in order to be crucified on our behalf. When He died, He took with Him all the sins we've committed and have yet to commit, and His perfection

was accepted in place of our imperfection. It's what allows us access to Him, and without acknowledging it, we're lost.

Don't skim this because you've seen it all before. It's not a boring lecture. And if you're someone (as I am) who starts to tune out anything that sounds more like a pitch than a promise, trust me. I get it. I've been there, done that.

I'm not trying to sell you something here.

I'm reminding you that you've been *bought*.

Wherever you are, whatever you're doing—stop, breathe for a minute, and put aside anything negative that you carry with you about being saved, faith, the Bible, or God. Just until I finish, okay?

*We can never take the cross for granted.*

When we nod our heads and our hearts remain unmoved, we've taken it for granted. Our pride has shadowed the power of Calvary in our lives, and we are willfully allowing it to continue.

I know that sounds harsh, but it has to because truth doesn't always have soft edges.

With that said, I'm going to ask you to do me a favor before we go much farther.

I want you to remove the image you have of someone behind a pulpit, shouting about what you really deserve, spewing fear and condemnation while repeating the word *hell* over and over in increasing intensity.

Because I saw that happen on an episode of *Little House on the Prairie* once when I was a kid, and it's a miracle I ever set foot in a church again.

Or a barn. Or a general store for that matter.

And forget a school for the blind. The word *braille* sends shivers down my spine and I can almost hear Mary's blood-curdling screams in the middle of the night. I'm still not convinced that story line was worth the hours of therapy incurred as a result. There were a lot of those moments, looking back. Hey Ingalls? *I was nine*. I needed a good hair-braiding/dress-sewing episode, not the dead-eyed gypsy guy who comes to town peddling his freaky ware.

I'm over-sharing.

I can see that now.

What I'm saying is that we do a disservice to the kingdom of God when we present Him this way. When we are so caught up in hammering people into obeying just because they're too afraid to consider the alternative. And I'm pretty convinced that it's not an approach that's going to lead to a life dedicated to Jesus.

My job is not to scare you into doing what God tells you to do. And when people try to introduce you to Jesus with more threats than promises, there is reason to believe they haven't fully gotten their theology straight.

For the record, I do fear God. *A lot*.

But it's sure not because someone told me I had to.

*I fear Him because I am overwhelmed by His love and I see no other option.*

The fact of the matter is that if we were able to feel the full weight of what God had done for us, we wouldn't be shouting from pulpits.

In fact, we wouldn't be standing at all.

We would be face-down on the ground in worship, so consumed with the gracious, life-giving love of a Savior that we could scarcely catch our breath in the first place.

So for the rest of this book, I want you to tuck that image of an angry preacher away. It's impossible to embrace the one true God unless you know what underlies every single command in the Bible.

Pure and perfect love.

Not judgment. Not hatred. Not cruelty. Not a desire to punish us.

*Love.*

You might not be looking at this as anything new, and really, it isn't. But that doesn't mean you believe it the way you should.

You've probably heard it your entire life. God is love, God is love . . . where are we going for lunch?

So often, we sweep mercy under the rug of legalism, and in the process we bind up what was meant to free us.

We rely on the wrong things to make it all right, and they never will.

We exhaust ourselves with our own images of Him, and I don't necessarily think our intentions are always wrong. We can't comprehend the truth in all its wild simplicity, so we create a version of Christianity that appeals more to our sensibilities.

We spend more time arguing about God than we do experiencing Him.

We want to make our points, make up our minds, make our own decisions.

We would sooner shake the tree than eat the fruit we've been given, because it gives us a sense of ownership.

I'm afraid there are areas where we've allowed our desire for clarification to outshine biblical explanations. Salvation is simply too important a concept to allow misunderstanding, so I'm going to spend just a little time on where I think there's room for confusion, and then I'm going to tie up the chapter with an air-tight explanation of propitiation.

That last sentence isn't "definitely" going to happen. I'll just play it by ear depending on how y'all are feeling after snack time.

People refer to salvation in a lot of different ways. Some say they "accepted Jesus," or "got saved." Others refer to it as when they "asked Jesus into their heart," or "made Him their personal Savior." I'm going to be straight with you here, because we're on our second date (section, topic . . . whatever. We're in this thing together now, right?). There are a few things in this paragraph that make me itchy, and I'd feel better if we could talk it out a bit.

The first is that the phrase "ask Jesus into your heart" is not in the Bible. Like, at all.

There's also not an example given at any point in the Bible where someone repeats what is often called "the sinners prayer" in response to realizing their need for God. They don't do a "repeat after me" thing. Not once.

I'm not kidding. Did you know that already? Well, good for you if you did. Because that little tidbit of information would have come in handy in every one of the fourteen million times I acted like that was my J.O.B. in order to get into heaven.

Maybe I'm the only person who thought this whole "Say what I say" thing was standard protocol for getting right with God. But it stressed me out a lot, because what if I said the prayer in the wrong order? What if I missed a key word?

Believing that your vocabulary solidifies your eternal standing is quite a bit of pressure, no?

If our lives were movies we could just stop and replay however we wanted, I would make a little video to include with this book. It would be a series of clips featuring me reciting different versions of the "sinner's prayer" at various points in the last ten years or so. There would be emo-ish music playing softly in the background to enhance dramatic effect. I'm just saying, it could work. I might see if there's a movie studio interested and also confirm that my doppelgänger Blake Lively is available before I proceed.

A couple scenes might feature me bowing my head in church, others might be me lying in bed in the middle of the night because I can't fall asleep until I know I'm in the clear, and more than a few would occur as my plane is taking off. Evidently runways inspire me to "recommit."

"Are we good? Did I do it right? I mean, You would tell me, right? Because sometimes I just wonder. So I'm going to go through the motions again to make sure it's settled."

For the record, it would be a very long video and Blangie would cry a lot.

Also for the record, *recommit* or *rededicate* isn't a biblical term either. Yeah. I know. I'm taking the T-shirt back ASAP.

When you feel like you have to keep “trying to get saved,” you're *chasing God*.

Salvation isn't about sets of words. It's an attitude of the heart. The words have no power in and of themselves; it's not a formula we have to perfect in order to be accepted.

So if you're worried you might not be saved because you didn't “do it correctly,” I have good news and bad news. It's actually the same news, but depending on how tightly you're gripping the belief that you can save yourself, you'll hear it more one way than the other. If we're worried about our part, the underlying issue is that we have a misappropriated sense of our own ability. The notion that our words could allow us access to God hinges on a principal that is wholly refuted throughout Scripture—that we have the power to save.

We don't.

On several occasions, I have seen the gospel presented as something not unlike a carnival ticket. You say the words, you get the ticket, and you ride the ride. It felt a little weird, but who was I to question God?

It wasn't until later that I realized I wasn't questioning God, but I had some serious reservations about a couple of the sellers. They were most likely the ones who were ripping tickets up at the end of the night and “praising God” for all the new converts they had brought to Christ.

In other words, they felt good about being a part of something as big as God, but they didn't realize He was so big that they couldn't be good if they tried.

I call this "trying to sell God," and it's faulty on a number of levels, including the fact that I could have at least come up with a snazzier title for such a huge concept.

To begin with, we don't hold those tickets. We don't open the door to heaven and let people in. We don't stamp hands or ask for more money. We don't threaten people if they don't do it our way, and we don't have a say in other people's eternal standing. Period. God can use our mouths to speak His words, but the credit doesn't go to us, it goes to Him.

We live in skin that loves applause, and we often bow to crowds that never saw us at all. Don't mistake being *used* by God for being *necessary* to God.

He is not waiting for you to make things right and do your part so the universe doesn't split in half.

In addition to the fact that we don't distribute "eternal wristbands," it is wildly irresponsible to give someone the impression that they can buy a ticket with their words.

*A gospel that comes to me courtesy of my own willpower is not the gospel at all.*

Do I have a role in the exchange? Sure I do. And it's not an insignificant one. The error is in believing we caused it, or that we ponied up to the counter with something to offer in order to make it a fair exchange. It is the free gift of God.

It doesn't matter what you say or do or feel or want or dream or imagine your role was. The reality is that He did

the beautiful thing you could never do. He chose us in spite of ourselves, and without that, we would never have found Him.

Get it right out of your head that there is something you can do so right that you'll "earn God." You won't. You can't. Ever.

"No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him" (John 6:44).

And it also leads me to believe that there are many people who, despite being professing Christians, are not actually saved.

Jesus warns His disciples about this as He explains, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 7:21).

God doesn't want us to be unsure of our salvation, but I also believe He warns us against believing we are saved because we repeated a couple words one time in a church service.

The best we can do is to accept His gracious offer, walking where His mercy has led. If we start out our journey with Christ with the impression that we were responsible for our own salvation, we've shifted the weight in the wrong direction.

Let us begin by remembering the sacrifice that made the steps ahead of us possible. With praise on our lips and conviction in our hearts, let us recognize the King as we set one foot in front of the other in response to His gracious love for us.

