

## INTRODUCTION

More words about Jesus are helpful *only* if they bring us to an experience of him.

We don't need further speculation or debate. We need Jesus himself. And you can have him. Really. You can experience Jesus intimately. You were meant to. For despite the vandalizing of Jesus by both religion and the world, he is still alive and very much himself. Though nowadays it takes a bit of uncovering to know him as he is.

For to have Jesus, really have him, is to have the greatest treasure in all worlds.

And to love Jesus—that is to settle the first question of human existence. Of your existence. Everything else flows from there.

Now, loving Jesus will not be a problem when you know him as he truly is.

This participant's guide is designed to be a companion for an individual or small group that is using the book *Beautiful Outlaw* by John Eldredge. We suggest you read the book and compliment your reading with the video series.

The eighteen sections of this guide dovetail with the seventeen chapters and the epilogue of the book.

If you're viewing the video series without the book, you may choose to go through the entire participant's guide or to limit your study to the section that corresponds to each video episode.

Our guidance is pretty simple, actually.

Before you begin, a simple prayer at the outset will loose encounters like a landslide:

*Jesus, I ask you for you. For the real you.*

Then read a chapter or watch a segment of the video series (as a group if you're in one) in a setting that is as comfortable and as free from distractions as possible. Listen. Allow your heart to be moved as Jesus uses the words on the page and in the video to stir and direct your heart.

Then react to the material, think about it, and talk about it. We've suggested a few questions to help guide your reflection and your group's conversation.

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End your time with prayer or personal journaling.

Remember, some of your best reflections, conversations and applications will come after your study/small group time. Listen and watch expectantly for Jesus both to show himself to you as well as to invite you into the extravagant life he has for you.

These materials have one purpose: to help you and those you know experience Jesus as he truly is. May it be so.

CHAPTER ONE  
*The Playfulness of God and the Poison of Religion*

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Religion gives the *impression* of having Christ, while it inoculates you from experiencing the real thing.

Does the thought of Christ being “playful, funny, so human, so hopeful, so unreligious” strike you as a breath of fresh air or does it sound a little irreverent? Put words to your thoughts.

After all the nonsense that is repeated about Jesus being a gentle peacemaker, reading the Gospels is really quite a shock. We discover a Jesus who is in fact frequently embroiled in conflict—most of which he provokes himself (like healing on the Sabbath). And every single one of these clashes is with very religious people.

How have you thought of Christ? Have you thought of him as the gentle peacemaker or as the provoker of conflict? What about playful or religious?

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Jesus' opponents are all people we would consider to be highly invested in doing religion right. They certainly considered themselves to be so.

What is it about Jesus that provokes the religious people so? Have you experienced the playfulness of Christ or the poison of religion? How so?

Jesus came to reveal God to us. He is the defining word on God—on what the heart of God is truly like, on what God is up to in the world, and on what God is up to in your life. An intimate encounter with Jesus is the most transforming experience of human existence.

## Chapter Two

### *The Missing Essential—His Personality*

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What comes to mind when you think of Jesus? Is Jesus near, or is he far? Is he close at hand, right here at your elbow, or is he distant and engaged in loftier things? Does he have a sense of humor? What words would you use to describe him?

Reading the Gospels without the personality of Jesus is like watching television with the sound turned off. You get a very dry, two-dimensional person doing strange, undecipherable things.

Personality is what distinguishes real music from elevator music. Both are made up of notes; only one is worth listening to. Think of the people you have most loved and trusted—*why* did you love and trust them so? Was it because of one quality, or was it the funky, endearing combination of all those qualities that together made them who they were?

Personality is what makes someone someone and not everyone, or anyone.

What is the personality trait or traits of Jesus your “particular brand of church” or circle of friends emphasizes? Is it an inviting picture? Is it a true picture?

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Good grief—your hamster seems to have a more fully developed personality than most portraits of Jesus.

In your own words, describe the qualities and personality of the Jesus you know or would like to know.

What is missing in our Gospel reading—and in our attempts to “read” what Jesus is saying and doing in our own lives right now, this week—is his *personality* undraped by religion.

## CHAPTER THREE

### *Is Jesus Really Playful?*

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Is Jesus playful? Does he have a sense of humor?

What in nature, in life, or in the stories of Jesus make you laugh?

You were meant to laugh. After all—it was God who gave us a sense of humor. Do you really think Jesus came to take it away?

Think of the crowd Jesus dined with. These rabble-rousers quickly earned Jesus a reputation as a drunkard and a glutton, and it wasn't because they served water and crackers. This was a wild group, and surely such a crowd got rolling in laughter from time to time, if only from the joy they were experiencing being with Jesus. Now, surely the creator of these colorful characters didn't sit there frowning, looking pious, Mr. Killjoy, Mr. I'm-Above-All-This. Imagine his own happiness at having these very lost sheep back at his side.

But the religious tight-shorts didn't like it one bit.

Why are we hesitant to laugh, to joke, and to acknowledge God's sense of humor ... his playfulness?

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The forever and always present Christ has a playful side. How does that affect your view of him? How might that change your view of day-to-day events and circumstances?

Well, he created laughter. How have we missed this? Ask yourself, Is this the Jesus of my friends? My church? Is this the Jesus we pray to? Is this what I look to expect from Jesus?



## CHAPTER FOUR

### *Fierce Intention*

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Jesus is a man on a mission. The same man who could be so playful is also a man on fire. If you would know Jesus, you must know that this—his fierce intentionality—is essential to his personality.

What does the thought of Christ having “fierce intention” stir up in you? Does the thought of Christ being fierce and aggressive strike you as frightening, a little irreverent, or a breath of fresh air?

Is the fierce intention of Christ something you've experienced?

Yes, there is a leisureliness to Jesus. He'll stop whatever he's doing to attend to someone in need. The man never, ever seems to be in a hurry. But his manner can be appreciated only in light of a deeper river flowing in him, this fierce intentionality. Otherwise, you get those popular and ridiculous portraits of Jesus as the wandering storyteller, no more controversial or dangerous than a clerk in a health-food store.

This is our Jesus.

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Why does the religious fog/spirit try to obscure this fierce and intentional Jesus with a more passive, pale, turn-the-other-cheek Jesus?

Why would you want, or not want, a relationship with a fierce and aggressive God?

Fierce and intentional. This is a breathtaking quality—especially when compared to our present age where doubt masquerades as humility, passivity cloaks as rest, and emasculated indecision poses as laid-back enlightenment.

Oh, Jesus could be soft and he certainly was humble, but his fierce intentionality is riveting to watch.

**CHAPTER FIVE**  
*The Most Human Face of All*

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Something has crept into our assumptions about Jesus that makes it almost impossible to relate to him, not to mention love him. It's the notion that Jesus was really "pretending" when he presented himself as a man. We who worship Jesus Christ hold fast to the belief that he was God. "Very God of very God," as the Nicene Creed states. The heroic actions and miraculous powers of Jesus' life attest to it. So, when we read what we would call the more human moments, we feel that Jesus was sort of...cheating.

Have you thought of Jesus as really, really human in ways just like you? Why might we be hesitant to think of him as fully human?

It will do your heart good to discover that Jesus shares in your humanity. He was, as the creeds insist, fully human. (Yes, yes – more than that to be sure. But never ever less than that.) I'm sure the chipmunks made him laugh. The Pharisees sure made him furious. He felt joy, weakness, sorrow. The more we can grasp his humanity, the more we will find him someone we can approach, know, love, trust, and adore.

"He is a man in a way that we have forgotten men can be: truthful, blunt, emotional, nonmanipulative, sensitive, compassionate." (Brennen Manning, *Abba's Child*)

Have you found this description of Jesus to be true in your experience? How might knowing that Jesus shares your humanity be good for your heart in ways you haven't yet experienced?

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Is Jesus, as you've known or thought of him, approachable at any time and under any circumstance?

Jesus' humanity will cause you to fall in love with him all the more. His personality, his remarkable qualities—those we have touched on, those we are about to explore—they burst with color and brilliance like fireworks because of his humanity.

## CHAPTER SIX

### *EXTRAVAGANT GENEROSTY*

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An artist is revealed in the work he or she creates and in the abundance of the work created.

I am sitting on the beach this evening, watching the swells roll in toward me. Each wave builds as it approaches, ascending, taking shape, deep greens below sweeping upward into translucent aquamarine. A sculpture in motion, curling forth like shavings from a jade carving. The sheer elegance is enough to take my breath away. The wave I'm fixed upon crashes to the sand like a work of art toppling from its pedestal, but before I can feel the loss another is rushing to take its place, sweeping upward, forward, utterly mesmerizing beauty. Then comes another, then another, and another, in an unending processional.

I look down. Scattered at my feet lie a thousand shells, delicate, intricate, the work of a jeweler. An artist with very small tools and exceptional eyesight. If all this is the work of an artist's hand, what does it tell us about the artist? Creation is epic and intimate. He is epic and intimate. Everywhere around me, an obsession with beauty and attention to detail.

But most of all, I am thunderstruck by the abundant generosity strewn around, constantly rolling in. It's as if someone took the family silver and ran down the beach, tossing handfuls here and there like a madman.

In your own words, describe "extravagant generosity." What kind of person is extravagantly generous?

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What would you personally point to as an example of the extravagance of God?

Imagine walking through a rain forest. Diving over a coral reef. Simply look through a microscope at a drop of pond water. Creation is pulsing with life. It is the life of Jesus, given generously for the life of all things. He is called "the author of life" This is the life he offers us; this is the extravagance with which he offers it. Jesus doesn't only give his life for mankind, he also gives his life to mankind. It is showered upon us daily like manna.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### *Disruptive Honesty*

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Remember, Jesus is not strolling through the Israeli countryside offering poetry readings. He is on a mission to rescue a people who are so utterly deceived most of them don't even want to be rescued. His honesty and severity are measured out precisely, according to the amount of delusion and self-deception encasing his listener. When a soul is encrusted with pride, bigotry, self-righteousness, and intellectual elitism—as was his dinner host—then that shell does need to be struck hard at times in order to cause a crack that might allow in some light. Jesus strikes with the precision of Michelangelo.

Poet or Navy Seal on a mission? How have you viewed the purpose of Christ's coming?

If Christ came to dinner with you and your friends, what do you fear or hope he would do or say?

The man shoots straight. Sometimes he's playful; sometimes he's fierce; the next moment he's generous. This is the beauty of his disruptive honesty—you can count on Jesus to tell you the truth in the best possible way for you to hear it.

Would this be one of the reasons why we struggle to spend time with Christ or to listen to his thoughts on our life, world and relationships—because he'll tell us the truth?

What would it be like to have someone in your life that knows you intimately, loves you regardless, and is willing to be completely honest with you? Yes, it would be a little unnerving, certainly disruptive—but doesn't part of you also crave it?

**CHAPTER EIGHT**  
*A Scandalous Freedom*

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One of the stories of Christ involves a leper approaching him and asking to be healed. Picture this man as someone in the late stages of AIDS—emaciated body, nearly bald, wheezing, face ravaged by ulcers. In Israel at that time, to get within a stone's throw of someone so diseased was to jeopardize your own righteousness and reputation.

The man comes near Jesus—but not too near. What does Jesus do? He reaches out and touches him.

Wouldn't you, if you were God's Son, be more concerned about your reputation and the perception of others than Jesus appears to be? Why isn't he?

Jesus doesn't seem to care. Or better, he cares very deeply about the right things.

What does Jesus' scandalous freedom in living and relating to others stir up in you?



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Jesus sets before us a deeper, truer view of holiness. The issues are first and foremost internal (our motives), before they are ever external (behaviors). You can murder someone without ever pulling a trigger. You break the Sabbath if come Sunday night you're exhausted. All those external "rules of men" do nothing to promote a genuine holiness. But they do make people Pharisees. By the truckload.

Remember, "Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:20). The only possible way that can happen is through an internal revolution, a changed heart. When we have a heart like Jesus'.

Is heart-change really possible? Is it offered and available to you?

Describe the scandalously free life you'd love to be living. How would living free disrupt your world?

The more you fall in love with Jesus' genuine goodness, which is true goodness, the more you will absolutely detest the counterfeit of a false piety and a shallow morality. As he did. Jesus has a wild freedom born out of a profound holiness.

## CHAPTER NINE

### *Cunning*

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Jesus is holy and cunning.

Is cunning a word you would ever use to describe Jesus? Why or why not?

God's response to the Tower of Babel uprising was cunning—confusing the languages of the earth. It was certainly better than taking away the faculty of speech. Men could make some headway, but they would have a heck of a time uniting the world again in a rebellion against God.

Setting eternity in our hearts was cunning, so that every last one of us would be haunted all our days with unmet longings that would cause us to seek the only Fountain that can quench our thirst.

Sex was cunning. Given the selfishness and self-centeredness of mankind, how else to get people to commit to the daily-sacrifice-for-a-lifetime called parenting?

I think the movement of the Spirit in the church is cunning—first here, then there, keeping men from systemizing it, keeping the enemy from squelching it. It's like a game of rugby.

Now, perhaps this is nothing new to you; perhaps you've seen a bit of this before. But bring it into the present—do we love Jesus for his cunning? I don't recall a worship song with the word cunning in it. "Thou Art Cunning," or "Cunning, Cunning, Cunning."

Do we interpret his actions in our lives as perhaps part of some cunning plan? That delayed answer to prayer—is there something brilliant about the timing? Would it help us to rest if we thought so? When he answers our prayers with "No," do we see him sparing us some unseen danger? And when it comes to our own "imitation of Christ," do we approach our days wondering, How would Jesus have me be snakelike today? Doesn't it sound a little unchristian?

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Is the thought of Christ as cunning something new to you?

What keeps you from living your life and dealing with all that confronts you with cunning?  
Where do you need to be more cunning?

Jesus is holy and cunning—it's part of what makes me love him.

## CHAPTER TEN

### *Humility*

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“Humility” hardly begins to describe the incarnation. It boggles the mind. The eternal Son of God, “Light of Light, Very God of Very God...One Substance with the Father,” spent nine months developing in Mary’s uterus. Jesus passed through her birth canal. He had to learn to walk. The Word of God had to learn to talk. He who calls the stars by name had to learn the names of everything, just as you did. “This is a cup. Can you say cup? Cuuup.” Or, did you think baby Jesus came into the world with the vocabulary of Dictionary.com?

What thoughts have you given to the humility God showed when he became a man?

Remember—Jesus wasn’t faking it when he took on his humanity. Think of the implications. He who never tires, never slumbers, accepted the need for sleep. Every night. How deep was the exhaustion that kept him dozing right through the gale, waves crashing over the boat? Jesus ate, every day, breakfast, lunch, and dinner; he needed to. He had to trim his toenails. He who clothes the lilies of the field with greater glory than Solomon’s splendor had to do his laundry, squatting riverside, rinsing the dust from his worn garments like any other peasant.

What effect does the humility of Jesus have on your view of him?

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God—who is in all places at all times—has to get from one place to another like a guy who can't even come up with bus fare. The beauty of this is enough to make me weep.

I think three years of this kind of humble generosity and patience is pretty dang impressive. But Jesus has kept right on at it—for two thousand years. Teaching us, including us in the mission, sharing in the glory, being playful, being honest, helping us along. No wonder when he steps into the heavens to accept the throne the cry goes up, “Worthy! Worthy! Worthy! Make him king!”

This man is so worthy.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### *Trueness*

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“What people think of me” is a very powerful motivator. It is still shaping us more than we'd like to admit. It shapes our theology, our politics, our values.

The fear of man. Peer pressure. What will others think?

How much of your life is motivated by fear of man? Where, or in what ways, are you currently feeling this pressure?

Think of it—what would it be like to be entirely free from false guilt, free from pressure, free from false allegiances? Wouldn't it be absolutely extraordinary?

Jesus being true has the ability to navigate praise and contempt. Neither success nor opposition have power over him. One day the crowds love him, the next they are shouting for his crucifixion. Jesus is the same man—the same personality—through the whole swirling tempest. Jesus is free from the fear of man. It is something more than integrity, though it certainly encompasses that. He is true to himself, true to his Father, true to what the moment most requires, true to love. In this forest of fig leaves, where you are never sure you are getting the true person, there is nothing false about Jesus.

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Jesus is simply himself. Playful, cunning, generous, fierce—not one moment of it is contrived. He never plays to the audience, never kowtows to the opposition, never takes his cues from the circus around him. He is simply being himself.

In what ways would you love to be like Jesus?

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### *Beautiful*

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Jesus is beautiful.

His ability to live with all these qualities we've seen, in such a way that no one quality dominates—as is so often the case in our personalities, eclipsing the richness of the others. To live in such a way that there is always something of an element of surprise, and yet, however he acts turns out to be exactly what was needed in the moment. Oh, his brilliance shines through, but never blinding, never overbearing. He is not glistening white marble. He is the playfulness of creation, scandal and utter goodness, the generosity of the ocean and the ferocity of a thunderstorm; he is cunning as a snake and gentle as a whisper; the gladness of sunshine and the humility of a thirty-mile walk by foot on a dirt road. Reclining at a meal, laughing with friends, and then going to the cross. That is what we mean when we say that Jesus is beautiful.

What, from your experience or understanding, would spur you to describe Jesus as beautiful?

But most of all, it is the way he loves. In all the stories, every encounter, we have watched love in action. Love as strong as death; a blood, sweat, and tears love, not a get-well card. You learn a great deal about the true nature of a person in the way they love, why they love, and, in what they love.

At this point, how would you describe Jesus to someone who knows nothing of him?



## Beautiful Outlaw Participant's Guide

How has your view of Jesus been challenged, altered, or affirmed?

The best thing we can do now is pause before we are saturated with more information about Jesus, and begin to discover him for ourselves. Experience him personally in these ways.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### *Loving Jesus*

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You are meant to have this Jesus, more than you have each new day, more than you have your next breath. For heaven's sake—he is your next day, your next breath. You are meant to share life with him—not just a glimpse now and then at church, not just a rare sighting. And you are meant to live his life. The purpose of his life, death, and resurrection was to ransom you from your sin, deliver you from the clutches of evil, restore you to God—so that his personality and his life could heal and fill your personality, your humanity, and your life. This is the reason he came.

Anything else is religion.

What is your reaction to John's thoughts above?

Do you share a similar passion or belief as this? If so, how did you come to that point? If not, put words to your relationship or beliefs concerning Jesus.

We are not meant to merely love his teaching, or his morals, or his kindness or his social reforms. We are meant to love the man himself, know him intimately, keep this as the first and foremost practice of our lives. First things first. Love Jesus.

What does loving Jesus look like? Can you describe the counterfeits of a genuine, personal and passionate love of Christ?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN  
*Letting Jesus Be Himself—With You*

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What if we could experience everything we've seen about Jesus in this book? What if that were available? Why, then, don't people talk more about this? Where are the encounters with this magnificent Jesus?

Do you find your heart wondering, Is this sort of thing Biblical? Is this real? How come I never experience Jesus like this?

We have been a little naive. We thought knowing God would come easily. We didn't account for the fact that we still live behind enemy lines. If knowing Jesus is the single most important thing that could ever happen to a person, then would it not follow that our enemy would have a very strong investment in keeping this from happening? So he'll throw whatever he can in the way.

What's been thrown at you that makes your relationship—your walk with God—difficult?

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Our experience of Jesus is limited most often by the limits we put on him!

As you've read through this book, think now about what limits you currently put on Christ. Name them.

Can you identify what limits you have put on him in the past?

The best place to begin and one of the most powerful things you could ever pray is this:

*I renounce every limit I have ever placed on Jesus. I renounce every limit I have placed on him in my life. I break all limitations, renounce them, revoke them. Jesus, forgive me for restraining you in my life. I give you full permission to be yourself with me. I ask you for you—for the real you.*

You'll probably want to pray that more than once as you go along.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN  
*Clearing Away the Religious Fog*

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The way a person gets angry and what they get angry about is a real clue to who they really are.

So—what about Jesus? What really fries this gracious, humble, immensely patient man?

If you will simply read the Gospels without bias, you cannot come to any other conclusion but that religion is the enemy—or in the hands of the enemy. Every hostile encounter Jesus has is with very “churchy” people. This spirit is the great enemy of our life with God, and it is this spirit that Jesus warned his boys about when they were whispering in the boat about the bread: “Be careful,” Jesus said to them. “Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees,” and then he says it again, to make sure they are paying attention: “Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (Matt. 16:6, 11).

If you would know Jesus, love him, experience him, you must pay very careful attention to this warning.

Maybe it is more revealing to ask: Do you share Jesus' anger at this religious stuff?

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This is what infuriates Jesus, so it ought to be what infuriates us. What was the last piece of religious nonsense you were angry with?

There is Christianity, and then there is Christian culture. They are not the same.

Loving the culture of church is not anywhere close to the same thing as loving Jesus. How would you distinguish the two? Have you experienced them both? Which do you prefer? Why?

The Pharisees loved their religious culture—the long prayers, the solemn garments, the honor bestowed upon them for being members of the clergy. But they hated Jesus.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN  
*Letting Jesus Be Himself—Encounters*

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We should expect to encounter Jesus anytime, anywhere, everywhere.

Such a simple and profound thought. Anytime? Anywhere? Everywhere? What does this truth stir up in you? Hope? Joy? Comfort? Fear? Anxiety?

Be open to the ways Jesus wants to come to you. Don't insist it be in exactly the way he comes to someone else. This artist is infinitely creative.

Don't let someone else's remarkable encounter with Jesus diminish the beauty of what you know of him. Hold fast to the treasures you have.

But, at the same time, you haven't experienced all there is with God. There is more. Much more. Those new possibilities are often opened to us through hearing the ways Jesus is working in other people's lives. Put down both the ashes and the stones. Let's discover more of Jesus, together.

Have you ever felt that your encounters with Jesus should look like someone else's? Or have you felt limited by the encounters others have had?

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In what ways, times, or places have you experienced Jesus in a way that feels unique and personal to you?

If we will get rid of the limits and the religious constraints, we will see him everywhere.



**CHAPTER SEVENTEEN**  
*Letting His Life Fill Yours*

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If you were to choose one word to describe the movement of Jesus through his three stunning years of public action, what word would it be?

The word I choose to describe Jesus is life. Pure, lush, exuberant Life. Life that proves to be unquenchable, unstoppable, indestructible. Now for a wonder of wonders—not only do you get Jesus, you get to live his life. Really.

There seem to be two basic reactions when sincere folks encounter the beautiful, scandalous life of Jesus: I can't possibly do that, or, I want to try to live like him. Which do you gravitate toward? Why that particular reaction?

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By the way, this is the point of encountering those things in your life you cannot handle—you are forced to turn to Christ. Did you really think you could be kind for the rest of your life without the inner help of Jesus? One day of kindness is a miracle. What about forgiving? Generous? Honest? Did you really think you could overcome your lifelong strongholds without some sort of Lazarus-like breakthrough? It simply isn't going to happen—not without the life of Jesus in you.

What quality of life do you possess? Is it a life you've created and maintained or is it his life?

What transformations do you long for?

Jesus, invade my life. Cleanse this temple. Produce your Cana in me. I give my humanity to you, to be restored by your humanity. I give my life to you to live your life.

**Epilogue**  
*One Last Thought*

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Surely you have noticed that we have entered a time of great suffering on the earth.

And Jesus warned us about this. Before his death, his teaching turned very sober—nothing that would make a best seller in this world of “tell me how to make life work now.”

How badly would you love a guide from God on “how to make life work”? Is there such a guide?

Be very, very careful and pay attention to how you interpret your suffering. Don't jump to conclusions. Interpretation is critical. Be aware of the agreements that you make. This is where the enemy can destroy you. Agreements such as God has abandoned me; it's my fault; I've done something wrong, and a host of others. If you've been making these agreements, you will want to break them. They allow a chasm to form between you and your Jesus.

How might you have misinterpreted events or circumstances in your life? What agreements or conclusions did you draw? How have those misinterpretations led to a chasm between you and Jesus?

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When his suffering overflows into our lives, God's promise is that his comfort will overflow to us as well. We can cry out for the comfort of God. Whatever your circumstances may be, he will heal your wounded heart; he will comfort. Cling to him. He is with you now. For his name is Faithful and True.

What are you looking forward to with Jesus?

It will do your heart good to let your hopes run in his direction. Meanwhile, make a practice of loving Jesus. Let him be himself with you. Let his life fill yours.

One of the ways we love him is to introduce others to him. There are a lot of folks out there who desperately need to know this Beautiful Outlaw.