



INDISPENSABLE

THE
BASICS
OF
CHRISTIAN
BELIEF

DAVID P. CASSIDY

Foreword by Scotty Smith

You will be filled with awe as you read this book. I really appreciated the authenticity of the author as he looked realistically at the offensiveness and diminishing effects of sin and the power of God's life-giving grace. I believe that it will strengthen many.

—**Alex Afriyie**, Senior Pastor, London Network Church,
London

David Cassidy, a trusted leader with extensive pastoral and international experience, is adept at working across denominational lines and with diverse evangelical leaders. He has much to say that will be of profit to many people, no matter their background or their standing in relation to Christ.

—**Al Barth**, Vice President and Global Catalyst, Redeemer City to City

What a refreshing book! . . . *Indispensable* is just that—both indispensable and a treasure. It reminds Christians about what is really important (and we need to be reminded about) and allows searchers to see the essence of the Christian faith clearly. Read this book and give it to your friends. You and they will rise up and call the author blessed.

—**Steve Brown**, Author; *How to Talk So People Will Listen*;
Founder, Key Life Network

This really is classic Reformed theology at its very best. And [it's] all . . . presented with the humility, grace, and personal charm that is the trademark of David's preaching. Though structured around Christian basics, his book will challenge and delight you wherever you are in your spiritual journey.

—**Ray Cannata**, Senior Pastor, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New Orleans; Coauthor, *Rooted: The Apostles' Creed*

David Cassidy is unique; he's simply not like most pastors. . . . He is well traveled, widely read, smart, and a magician in the kitchen—and the melding of those ingredients, together with a heavy diet

of adversity, has produced a man who can serve a feast of wisdom. That wisdom is lavishly offered in *Indispensable*—which, simply put, is rich nourishment for the soul.

—**Ray Cortese**, Pastor, Seven Rivers Presbyterian Church,
Lecanto, Florida

David Cassidy's book . . . brings compelling clarity in a confusing time. It delivers the core of Christianity, wrapped in interesting anecdotes and poignant stories from the author's own life. . . . *Indispensable* helps to tell the best possible story—the true story that is the last hope of a lost world.

—**Nancy French**, Coauthor of *God's Double Agent* and *For the Right Reasons*

A good apologist is first and foremost a faithful witness. In this remarkable book, David Cassidy acknowledges that knowing good arguments is not enough. Instead he has listened carefully to the questions that nag at all of our hearts and minds, and he offers testimony of how he himself has found substantive, sound, and satisfying answers. Highly recommended.

—**George Grant**, Author, *The American Patriot's Handbook*;
Pastor, Parish Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee

What a great resource! *Indispensable* offers brief but colorful and compelling explanations of essential truths such as union with Christ, the purpose of the sacraments, the necessity of the body, and the reality of suffering in the life of a believer—the kinds of topics that are usually reserved for longer theological tomes that most ordinary believers simply won't read.

—**Nancy Guthrie**, Bible Teacher; Author, *Seeing Jesus*

Through the years I have observed David Cassidy to be both brilliant and pastoral—a rare and enviable combination. His insights consistently take me somewhere I would not otherwise have gone. . . . Whenever he speaks, I am all ears. . . . This is the kind of book

that we want folks to read at our church. It is real. It is raw. It is honest. It offers Jesus. And it is beautiful.

—**Mike Khandjian**, Pastor, Chapelgate Presbyterian Church,
Marriottsville, Maryland; Author, *A Sometimes Stumbling Life*

David has the rare ability to take profound biblical truths and apply them to my life. In *Indispensable*, he teaches me that the fundamentals of the Christian faith are absolutely necessary as I walk through the trials, sorrows, and challenges of life. . . . David winsomely portrays God's indispensable truths in the life and fabric of the church. I heartily recommend this book.

—**Jay Kyle**, Vice President of Asia Pacific and Latin America,
Redeemer City to City

This book serves as both an excellent introduction to Christianity for those outside the kingdom of God and a warm reminder of what's truly indispensable about our faith for those who already know and worship Jesus. A deeply encouraging book.

—**Eric Landry**, Senior Pastor, Redeemer Presbyterian Church,
Austin, Texas; Executive Editor, *Modern Reformation* Magazine

If, like me, you have no time for optional frills but are open to the classical Christianity through which millions have found reality with God, this book will satisfy you. I wish everyone . . . would read this book!

—**Ray Ortlund**, President, Renewal Ministries; Council
Member, The Gospel Coalition

I am thankful for David Cassidy's pastoral ministry and for this book, which holds high the essentials of the Christian faith and does so in a way that presents Scripture as both important and inviting.

—**Russ Ramsey**, Pastor, Christ Presbyterian Church, Cool
Springs location, Franklin, Tennessee; Author, *Retelling the
Story Series*

What an amazing labor of love by my friend, David Cassidy! This scholar-pastor has written a systematic theology that informs the mind, stirs the heart, and guides the will. Whether you are a professional theologian, a seasoned pastor, an engaged layperson, or a searching unbeliever, this book will bless you.

—**George Robertson**, Senior Pastor, Second Presbyterian Church, Memphis, Tennessee

Among the handful of books I regularly share with new Christians and with those who are exploring the Christian faith, *Indispensable* is poised to become a compelling, trustworthy go-to. . . . I highly recommend that you not only read *Indispensable* but also share it liberally with others.

—**Scott Sauls**, Senior Pastor, Christ Presbyterian Church, Nashville; Author, *Befriend* and *Irresistible Faith*

A gifted speaker reveals that he is a gifted writer—with a superb turn of phrase and accessible language at every turn. His writing is littered with quotable nuggets. As it says on the cover, this book is truly *Indispensable*.

—**Daniel Singleton**, Editor, *Faith With Its Sleeves Rolled Up*; National Executive Director, FaithAction

David Cassidy spells out what is indispensable to the Christian life, reminding us in every chapter that the truth of Christ is not an answer to a question. It's an entirely new way of being—a new life. This is an ideal book for those who are just starting on the way—who want to know what they believe—and for all those interested in helping anyone in that pursuit.

—**Rankin Wilbourne**, Lead Pastor, Pacific Crossroads Church, Los Angeles; Author, *Union with Christ*

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P U B L I S H I N G
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For "T":
beautiful, brave, and bold.

*I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen, not only
because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.*

—C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*

*Grant me, O Lord my God, a mind to know you,
a heart to seek you, wisdom to find you, conduct pleasing to you,
faithful perseverance in waiting for you,
and a hope of finally embracing you. Amen.*

—Prayer of Thomas Aquinas

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FOREWORD

David Cassidy and I met in downtown Franklin, Tennessee, over twenty-five years ago at the four-corner intersection of gospel beauty, Spirit renewal, compassionate orthodoxy, and robust worship. My young church family was riding the waves of a wonderful work of God, and David could taste redemptive salt-spray all the way up in Paducah, Kentucky. He came to see for himself what was going on.

Not long after my first cup of coffee and heart-engaging chat with him, a total stranger became a treasured friend. And in a twist that neither of us could have ever anticipated, David was called to be my successor as senior pastor of Christ Community Church in Franklin. This story brings me happy tears and incredible joy every time I tell it.

Now, this is a foreword for David's new book—not a toast or, thankfully, his eulogy. And I would offer a glowing endorsement of *Indispensable* even if I didn't know and love David. But I *do* know him, and I can't separate his heart from his art. I enjoy a ringside seat as the contents of this book are being lived out right in front of me, in a community and city that I love.

What do I love most about David's new book? First of all, the title simply rocks. I have longed for a just-the-right-size book to give to non-believers and believers alike—one that would cut to the redemptive chase and present the heartbeat of Christian belief in a concise, inviting, and intelligent manner. *Indispensable* is that book. I don't want a book called *Exhaustive*, because it'd be too big and expensive, and I wouldn't trust any author who claimed such expertise.

You will find *Indispensable* perfect for reading with neighbors or friends who are interested in exploring why we refer to the gospel of Jesus Christ as good news. It's also a great book to use in discipling relationships with believers at any level of spiritual maturity.

Second, I love the focus and contents of *Indispensable*. As someone who loves to travel, David has surveyed the vast geography of God's grace and culled thirteen topics that represent the Alps of Christian belief. I'm sure he debated long and hard before settling on these thirteen chapters—but he chose wisely. If anything, this overview of gospel spirituality simply makes me hungry for my friend's next book.

Third, I love the taste and aroma that fills all thirteen of these chapters. As a gifted chef, my friend knows how to combine the right spices, heat, and time for whatever dish he's preparing, for the culinary enjoyment of those who gather around his table. *Indispensable* isn't just a book of truth. It's a banquet of beauty. It invites all of us to taste and see that the Lord is good.

It's one thing to fill a shopping cart with the right ingredients, but it's quite another to combine them in a way that is welcoming, nourishing, and satisfying for others. This is why I mentioned that I can't separate David's art from his heart. As I read each chapter of *Indispensable*, I hear David's room-filling laugh, I feel the fire of his convictions, I enjoy the

Foreword

breadth of his Renaissance-man learning, and I am convicted by the God-smitten heart that beats in his chest.

But above all, this book makes Jesus more beautiful, God's grace more accessible, and the gospel more *indispensable* to me.

Scotty Smith

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There's a lot of interweb noise these days about "self-publishing"—but surely that's as inaccurate a description of the process of book writing, printing, and distribution as might be imagined. The number, for instance, of people who were involved in this little project, as well as their giftedness, really is quite significant, and it would be very unbecoming to fail to note their contributions.

This book wouldn't have happened were it not for my Texas friend Steve Webb, who first contacted me about doing a project for P&R. I also have to thank the good people at P&R for taking the risk of helping me to develop and publish this book, noting most especially the remarkable editorial skills of Amanda Martin, the "vocabulary whisperer." She brought my "power words" into harness with her skillful hand and made this work presentable and understandable. Thank you, Amanda! I also have to mention my gifted and dedicated assistant, Tyler Bingham, who patiently combed through the manuscript and chased down countless citations. She was preceded in that work by my friend Neil Andrews, who, together with Diana Batarseh, handled the song-lyric copyright issues.

Acknowledgments

That was tedious work—but Neil and Diana always brought immense joy and a careful eye to the process. My thanks as well to Wes Garner for chasing down some of the particularly elusive citations.

In some ways, preaching is an act of thinking aloud—an always dangerous practice!—and so I have to thank the gracious congregations in Great Britain, Kentucky, Texas, and Tennessee for their patience with me in the ministry as, over the years, I preached through the issues that ultimately led to this book. The members of the churches I’ve served have always taught me more about the gospel and the faith than I ever taught them, inspiring me and allowing me the space and time to explore the riches of Scripture. They were first on the scene to rejoice whenever in the course of that work I got to yell, “Eureka!” Without those congregations this book would never be a reality, because they have always been the only people I was trying to serve. My one purpose has always been simply to labor at building up churches in faith, hope, and love. The chapters here are the result of my care for them, offered now with hopes for their continued benefit as well as for that of a wider readership.

Thank you to my colleagues Ken Leggett and Charles Johnson, who, together with the aforementioned Diana, reviewed the manuscript and offered valuable corrections, insights, and suggestions for clarification. Thank you as well to the session and diaconate of Christ Community Church for allowing me the time to work on this project—you know how very much I love you all and how grateful I am for the privilege of serving with you.

The debt that I owe my dad and mom is manifold, and this is especially true in regard to this book. Mom taught me to read. Then Dad taught me to read C. S. Lewis via *The Screwtape Letters*. Both taught me the basics of Christianity—not

Acknowledgments

simply by what they said but by the way they lived. My mother has already finished her journey, and my dad still runs his race right here—I'm glad we will all share eternity together and that you loved well and long a deeply flawed son.

Most of all, thanks to Toni for her wisdom, faith, love, constant encouragement, and indispensable devotion to Jesus and his mission.

Every one of the people above has been utterly *indispensable* to the writing of this book. I am your grateful debtor.

Finally, thanks be to God, for from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. If anyone at all is helped by the words I have written, it can only be because God is merciful and kind. He is the God who condescends to draw straight lines with crooked sticks—who is always doing deep things in human hearts that make us all exclaim, “Only God could have done that!”

INTRODUCTION

The Indispensable Presence

*Christianity . . . , if false, is of no importance, and,
if true, of infinite importance. The one thing it
cannot be is moderately important.*

—C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock*

I will be with you.

—*Jesus Christ*

A few years ago, I met a Russian Christian named Alexander Ogorodnikov—a dissident during the years of the persecution that was inflicted on Christians by the Soviet Communist state. He was in Cambridge to lecture, and, together with some friends, we talked late into the night. What he shared with us is something that we all need to hear.

Alexander had been imprisoned in Siberia for his faith. On one particularly grim night in the prison, the guards had isolated him, stripped him, broken the windows of his cell,

and turned off all heat. They expected the Siberian night to do their work for them and kill him. Freezing and alone, Alexander felt the prayers of other Christians come over the walls and down the hall to the cell where the guards had left him. “These prayers surrounded me and warmed me,” he said. “In the morning, expecting me to be dead, the guards found me not only alive but well and warm. God was with me through the prayers of his people.”

God was with me.

What an astonishing statement. I wonder if we believe that is still possible. Do we have faith that God will be near to us and real to us in this age of advancing technology and declining love and intimacy? Do we know what it means to be a Christian, to have faith, and to persevere in that faith in the face of pain and disappointment? I ask these questions because many of the Christians I meet hold to a strange imposter of the faith—a substitute for the Savior himself. The gods of success and accumulation and pleasure are center-stage, even in the churches—a message of baptized self-salvation that guarantees prosperity and freedom from all troubles, rather than a true sufficiency found in Jesus himself and a faith that holds on more tenaciously than the problems that seek to undo it.

I ask these questions because they are questions I have wrestled with, too. The Christian ministry has brought me face-to-face with the worst pains and nightmares that we fear. During my years in the pastorate, I have helped to clean up after suicides, sat with a grief-stricken man and woman whose five-year-old grandson had just drowned in their pool, watched a two-year-old battle cancer and lose the fight, and buried my wife’s best friend, who was killed in a horrifying auto accident. I have given up the baby I was in the process of adopting, because the birth mother changed her mind

(which was always her right). I've watched my wife struggle with a disease that is known to kill and paralyze. I could mention many more instances of grievous human suffering—more than enough to counterbalance whatever joys I have seen as well.

In addition, I have faced the private horror of my own sins and wondered about the authenticity of my own feeble faith. Others have seen and experienced far worse suffering; but for my part, I have seen enough to make me question God's care for me, for those I love . . . and frankly for our entire sin-soaked world, which drips in blood from violence and cries in pain from hunger and neglect. We appear to be immersed in a culture that loves death, worships mere celebrity, seeks power at all costs, and will stoop to everything from torturing animals to honoring animal instincts with the status of virtue. God with us? Really?

During one especially dark time, my wife was dying, as far as anyone could tell, and I had no real reason to hope she would recover. Even if she did, our lives would be forever altered. The old doubts and questions rushed in as I cried into my coffee in a hospital cafeteria in Austin, Texas. I needed some air . . . and a better cup of coffee.

Heading out the door, I saw something I hadn't noticed on the way in: the door to the chapel. I went in and, directly in front of me, saw a small crucifix—a cross with Jesus hanging on it in agony. The cross. The crucified. Frankly, that's the only God who I find credible and even beautiful, and he's the one who keeps meeting me in those dark places. The crucified God. Do you ever think about him?

If I am to have faith at all, it will never be in some absentee God or some pitifully weak cosmic "invisible friend"—not in some impersonal force or fate, but in a God who knows our suffering because he made it his own.

“IT IS FINISHED!”

At the heart of the Christian message are the explosive words Jesus uttered as he died on a Roman cross in the first century. “It is finished!” he exclaimed (John 19:30)—and at those words the earth shook, time as we know it split in two, and the relationship between God and people changed forever.

In essence, “It is finished” was Jesus’s own declaration that the debt his people owed for their treason against God had been completely satisfied by his perfect life and sacrificial death. Their debt was paid in full. In his love for us, he paid the penalty that we couldn’t possibly discharge. He lived the life that we should have lived but couldn’t and died the death that we deserved to die but didn’t. Those words and that cross, a symbol of fear and horror to ancient people, became the Good News—indeed the best news that anyone had ever heard. “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them,” Paul would later write (2 Cor. 5:19). The sign of fear became the emblem of hope, and the words of a dying man were a life-giving announcement from God himself.

How could this be? Because after uttering those words as he hung on a cross on a Friday afternoon, Jesus rose from the dead on Sunday morning. Jesus’s resurrection wasn’t merely God’s exclamation point on Jesus’s words, or even the vindication of Jesus and his suffering. In the resurrection, God announced the defeat of death and the grave; he liberated people who through the fear of death had been living as slaves; he reversed the curse of the catastrophe that had befallen and bedeviled the human race and the planet and entire cosmos.

Because of what Jesus did on Friday afternoon and what happened to him on Sunday morning, we can be certain that

our sins are forgiven, that we are beloved of God, that our hope for the eternal future is secure, and that our world, broken and bruised by the wounds we inflicted on it, will be healed and restored. This is the indispensable heart of Christianity.

“IT IS DONE!”

That ultimate recovery of everything that has been lost, the healing of everything that is now broken, is at the core of Jesus’s words at the end of history, recorded in Revelation. “It is done!” Jesus cries (Rev. 21:6), putting the final touches on redemptive history and bringing to a bright and brilliant conclusion the loving work he undertook so long ago. It’s the ultimate Hollywood ending: the Champion vanquishes evil and gets the gal. The church is his bride, and we are invited to the “marriage banquet” to live in the celebratory love of our Savior for all eternity. In Tim Keller’s words, it’s the day when through “the Gospel, because it is a true story . . . all the best stories will be proved, in the ultimate sense, true.”¹

INDISPENSABLE CHRISTIANITY: LIVING IN THE SPACE BETWEEN

We live in the space between “It is finished” and “It is done.” What God has finished through Jesus’s death and resurrection, and will bring to culmination in the coming kingdom of Jesus, is cause for immeasurable joy and thanks. We have faith in what God accomplished on the day Jesus cried, “It is finished.” We also have faith that the day will come

1. Timothy Keller, *Hidden Christmas: The Surprising Truth Behind the Birth of Christ* (New York: Viking, 2016), 28.

when we hear Jesus say, “It is done.” What we have to figure out is how to live by faith in between those two days—in the space between the *now* of “It is finished” and the *not yet* of “It is done.” We live in the meantime—and it’s an awfully mean time at times.

Given our place in this story, the question that was asked so well by Francis Schaeffer arises: “How should we then live?” How do we live here and now in the light of gospel promise and gospel hope? After all, so much pain surrounds us, and our world groans under the weight of tremendous injustice. Poverty remains unchecked in much of the world; weapons of mass destruction may be unleashed; disease and plague prey on many; the planet itself is undergoing significant shifts that affect people and animals of all kinds. Violence fills the streets and screens. Chaos and tragedy befall all. Earthquakes and tsunamis swallow cities. Sexual violence and confusion abound. Opiate addiction and suicide are on the increase. Christians are beheaded and crucified by Islamic extremists. Advances in science inevitably raise challenging issues, from pursuing “designer children” and abortion to extending a life when the body and brain seem to be past their expiration dates. We find ourselves baffled by questions that seem unanswerable.

We see our children abandoning the faith that prayerful parents sought to nurture in their souls. We see marriages of many years unexpectedly dissolving and once-full churches emptying out. We see charlatan preachers offering magic cures and quick fixes that seduce the unguarded and produce in many others a jaundiced cynicism about the church. We see the places that we expected to be shelters in the storm turned into harbors where dangerous men with dark hearts prey on vulnerable children.

When we look within, we see our own legions of lust,

fear, greed, anger, and despair still standing strong at the gates of our minds—and calling for reinforcements.

How do we live in such a time as this?

“I AM WITH YOU ALWAYS”

In point of fact, as vexing as this is, the situation these days is no different than it has ever been. Violence and warfare, poverty and disease, persecution and perversion, hypocrisy and hype have marred our world since the human story began. The church has endured challenge for two thousand years, and it will continue to do so. In fact, it has faced these threats and welcomed them, discovering through its martyrs the courage of resilient faith. Along its often difficult journey, the church has, in its better days, embraced the call to care for the weak and sick and, through its educational endeavors, offered light to drive back the darkness of ignorance and fear. The church has reclaimed areas that it once lost. Even when it is displaced in one region, it continues to expand in others.

How should we then live? Perhaps the question can arise from a more hopeful place. A heart-changing experience of Christ’s powerful presence in our lives is essential for us in the meantime. By this I don’t mean a light-hearted, jovial approach to the faith that smiles and says nothing in the face of trials or that chooses to dance when weeping is called for. What I do mean is a living awareness of the nearness of Jesus in our deepest trial and sorrow, of his grace for us in our great need, of his strength that matches our well-known weakness. It means that we live with the awareness that he is with us in all places and at all times. That’s especially true when we may not have a sense of his nearness.

Think of Joseph, the son of Jacob, whose dream led to the deliverance of so many people—including his own brothers,

who treated him with such treachery. Joseph waited so long for his vision to be fulfilled. “The LORD was with Joseph,” the Scriptures say (Gen. 39:2) as they record his years of rejection, imprisonment, and humiliation. God was with him!

Or consider the friends of Daniel, who were thrown by King Nebuchadnezzar into the flames of a furnace in Babylon for their refusal to bow down and worship an idol (see Dan. 3). Peering into the conflagration, the king saw not only the three men whose deaths he’d ordered alive and well, but also another presence who was walking with them in the flames.

Between “It is finished” and “It is done,” we live, Peter tells us, as exile people—as those who are on a journey to our home and are living that journey before the eyes of others (see 1 Peter 2:11–12). And on the journey, God is with us.

The great poet T. S. Eliot was not unfamiliar with despair and painful loss. He also knew that, as we go through life’s bitter struggles and challenges, we are not alone. Recounting the terrors that befell the members of Shackleton’s expedition to the Antarctic and their recorded experience of an unaccounted-for companion as they trudged through the howling wind, Eliot wrote,

Who is the third who walks always beside you?
When I count, there are only you and I together
But when I look ahead up the white road
There is always another one walking beside you
Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded
I do not know whether a man or a woman
—But who is that on the other side of you?²

2. T. S. Eliot, “The Waste Land,” in *Collected Poems: 1909–1962* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1964), 67.

We have a long road ahead, personally and collectively. We have suffering to endure and doubts to be overcome. We have difficult questions to answer and difficult seasons ahead for whole nations, churches, and families. Disease will make its presence felt. Doubts will crowd in. Death will lurk close at hand. Cultural collapse in the West shows no signs of abating—the winds will blow; the rain will beat down; the floods will rise. One cannot help but think that there is, in James Taylor's words, more "fire and rain" on the horizon.

Will the house stand? That all depends, as Jesus said, on whether or not we build our lives on the truth of his Word and commit our lives to that Word as the path we will travel (see Matt. 7:24–27). If we do, then the experience of Eliot will belong to others, too. As they see us walking in the Way, they too will note the presence of another. Nothing then could be more indispensable than a vibrant and deeply rooted Christian faith. We first start to make this faith our own by turning our gaze on the wonder of the one who promises to be Immanuel—God with us.

1

JESUS CHRIST

The Indispensable Answer

*Somebody as intelligent as Jesus would've been
an atheist if he had known what we know today.*

—Richard Dawkins, interview with *The Guardian*

At the name of Jesus every knee should bow.

—Paul the Apostle

Without money and arms, [he] conquered more millions than Alexander, Caesar, Mohammed, and Napoleon; without science and learning, he shed more light on things human and divine than all philosophers and scholars combined; without the eloquence of schools, he spoke such words of life as were never spoken before or since, and produced effects which lie beyond the reach of any orator or poet; without writing a single line, he set more pens in motion, and furnished themes for more sermons, orations, discussions, learned volumes, works of art, and

sweet songs of praise, than the whole army of great men of ancient and modern times.¹

Everybody has an opinion on Jesus. He's unavoidable. He's so wise and good that even those who don't confess the faith that he taught want him on their team. What do you make of Jesus?

Jesus of Nazareth burst onto the scene around AD 30 in Roman Judea, a small nation dominated by a foreign power and its puppet king. The Jews of Judea were a remnant who lived mostly in and around Jerusalem but were also scattered in considerable numbers across the first-century Mediterranean world. Despite many divisions within their community, they held a shared hope: that one day a deliverer would arise to rescue them from their enemies and reunite them in God's kingdom. They called that person *Messiah*—*Christ*, in Greek.

How did Jesus come to be regarded as that promised Messiah by a great many of the Jews, and later by millions more who were convinced by that very Jewish message about him? How did this man who marshaled no army, was executed as a criminal, and wrote nothing but a few unrecorded words in the dirt come to be regarded as the Savior of mankind?

Many men had sought to claim to be the Messiah, but no one had fulfilled the ancient hope in the eyes of the multitudes. No one, that is, until Jesus came to preach in their cities and towns. The people encountered him as one of their own—a neighbor, an extraordinary and mystifying figure who created peace and tension, who brought profound threat as well as profound relief. They didn't see him at first as God or even as the Messiah. They didn't see him through the eyes

1. Philip Schaff, *The Person of Christ: The Miracle of History* (New York, 1866), 48–49.

of the church or through the eyes of history. They did see him as a teacher with unspeakable wisdom. They saw him as a visionary who spoke of “seeing” the kingdom of God and of what it meant to live in that kingdom.

But they also saw something more. Jesus had the power to perform miracles, and that took things to a different level. They knew that through their long-expected Messiah, as he had with Moses and Elijah long beforehand, God would return with signs and wonders to save his people. So, when the people heard Jesus and saw the miracles that he performed, they started asking one supreme, astonished, and sometimes indignant question: “*Who is this?*”

“Who is this, who even forgives sins?” (Luke 7:49 ESV)

“Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!”
(Mark 4:41 NIV)

The whole city was stirred and asked, “Who is this?” (Matt. 21:10 NIV)

Who indeed!

“*Who do you say that I am?*” Jesus asked (Matt. 16:15). How we answer determines our destiny, just as it determined the destinies of those who first heard the question so long ago.

TAKING JESUS SERIOUSLY

We must start with Jesus, because without him there is no Christianity. The truth of Christianity rests on the reality of his identity. If Jesus is who the Scriptures claim, then your decision whether to follow or ignore him carries the greatest possible consequences for life—now and forever. In the same

way, if the claims that he made about himself and that others made about him are false, then Christianity is of no more consequence than a religion that worships doorknobs. Doorknobs can at least open doors—whereas dead men whose words are lies, no matter how lovely they are, are not much good for anything at all.

Huston Smith, one of the greatest scholars of comparative religion in our time, wrote that only two religious figures in human history were so utterly different from everyone else, so completely set apart, that people asked them, “*What are you?*” Those two are the Buddha and Jesus. Buddha answered, “I am awake” and continued to direct his disciples to look away from him. Jesus answered, “I am the Way,” instructed his disciples to fix their eyes on him, and received their worship.² No mere man would do such a thing, especially a Jewish man within the cultural context of Jewish monotheism that revered God and his worship in emphatic, even violent terms. Jesus is nothing like others who claimed to be a Messiah—and there were many. He appears on the scene as an entirely different kind of person. In the category of religious leaders in history, Jesus is utterly unique.

The uniqueness of Jesus is vital to grasp from the start. There has never been anyone else like him. “The great Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev said that a wind of freedom blows through [Jesus’s] teachings that frightens the world and makes us want to deflect them by postponement—not yet, not yet! H. G. Wells was evidently right: Either there was something mad about this man, or our hearts are still too small for his message.”³

2. See Huston Smith, *The World’s Religions: Our Great Wisdom Traditions*, rev. ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 82.

3. Smith, 326.

Don't dismiss Jesus with faint praise, calling him a great teacher or reducing him to a messenger who is no more divine than any other religious leader. Those whose hearts have been captured by Jesus would sacrifice everything in order to pursue what Paul called "the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (Phil. 3:8 NIV). Even if you choose to reject Jesus, it's important that you recognize the truth about him and reject *that*, rather than rejecting a mythical Jesus who bears no resemblance to reality.

Singer-songwriter Leonard Cohen wrote, "Any guy who says 'Blessed are the poor. Blessed are the meek' has got to be a figure of unparalleled generosity and insight and madness . . . a generosity that would overthrow the world if it was embraced because nothing would weather that compassion."⁴ And, in fact, ultimately the world of the first century didn't weather Jesus's compassion. It rejected Jesus's message of mercy, nailed him to a cross, and killed him.

We shouldn't lose sight of the fact that Jesus was put to death because he was a political threat to the powers of his time. Whoever Jesus was, he was not a "nice" person spouting lofty platitudes about peace; no, Jesus was a threat, despite his goodness—or, rather, precisely because of his goodness. Jesus was good but was considered as good as dead by his opponents, both religious and secular, because he was everything they weren't and the people knew it. For those leaders, it was "Jesus or me," not "Jesus for me"!

To the religious leaders of his day, Jesus was a dangerous radical, upsetting the temple establishment and creating the kind of social upheaval that would invite the ruling Romans to send in soldiers to slaughter the crowds, close the temple,

4. Jim Devlin, *Leonard Cohen: In His Own Words* (London: Omnibus Press, 1998), 58.

and possibly destroy Jerusalem. For them, it was better that Jesus be killed rather than countless others; it was better that Jesus be stripped of his public adulation before they lost their positions and authority. And it would be unwise for us to ignore their concerns. As Jesus's contemporaries and those who were responsible in some ways for the good order of large numbers of people, these religious leaders have to be taken seriously if we want a robust view of Jesus.

There can be little doubt that Jesus was radical, and deeply so—a person who subverted the accepted order of his time. The question then is whether the religious leaders' concerns about him were valid. In certain ways, they were. Jesus's rising popularity would have caught the attention of the Roman occupying forces, and they may well have seen in him the risk of a popular revolt. They were not likely to permit that situation to develop. Jesus's followers wrote that false accusations were made about him, sometimes out of jealousy. Given his sudden popularity and the size of the crowds that he drew, that is completely believable. The significant factor that undermines fears about him, however, is that Jesus never sought to lead a political movement or incite a violent uprising. Far from it. The idea that Jesus was a *dangerous* radical falls on the grounds that his enemies underestimated how radical he really was. They feared a military leader; Jesus said, "Put your sword away."

To tackle the important matter of Jesus's identity, it only makes sense to turn to his closest contemporaries: his earliest followers.

WHAT PETER SAID: THE ANOINTED ONE

We all know what it's like when a teacher asks a question that his or her students realize is tricky. They hesitate; they

hedge; they know that the teacher has an answer in mind, and they don't want to appear foolish.

“Who do you say that I am?” When Jesus asked that question, the same thing happened with his disciples. At first, they ventured the opinions of others. “Well, Jesus, some people say . . .”—finishing this with some colorful possibilities: Elijah, Jeremiah, John the Baptist back from the dead. Then suddenly, from the back of the class, one of Jesus's very first disciples gave a robust and unflinching reply. “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16).

Peter's reply wasn't the result of a Sherlock Holmes moment. His insight was God-given. “Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven,” Jesus told him (v. 17 ESV). God had showed Peter Jesus's true identity as the long-expected Christ. His answer not only brings a deep and hidden mystery to the light but also shows us the starting point for answering Jesus's question ourselves.

While many people might think of “Christ” as something like Jesus's last name, the word *Christ* is more a title than a name. It means “the anointed”—a phrase that shows up repeatedly in the Old Testament. Kings were anointed, as were prophets and priests. Israel's Messiah was the sum of all three: *the King*, *the Prophet*, and *the High Priest*. As King, Christ protects and governs his people; as Prophet, he brings God's truth through his Word; as a faithful High Priest, he makes us right with God by offering up his life on our behalf once for all and by constantly interceding for us without end. Christ cannot fail to bring to his side and into his eternal city all those for whom he died and rose again—those whom he has awakened by his truth.

In certain ways, Peter's confession of faith was a prophetic insight into what Jesus would accomplish through his mission. Peter didn't base his answer on what had already

happened, but instead declared Jesus's identity as a way of saying why he had come to begin with. Peter didn't grasp everything that this entailed, as his subsequent actions show, but his words that day help us understand how to respond appropriately to Jesus right now.

Sometimes we want a partial Jesus—we want Jesus the Priest, who gives his life to forgive us, but we push back against the idea of Jesus the King who governs us. Or we prefer Jesus the truth-teller but have little patience for Jesus's mercy and forgiveness when his truth exposes our falsehood. But Jesus cannot be so divided. You cannot have a Savior who is not also your King. You cannot have a Prophet who is not also your Priest. We have the total Jesus or no Jesus at all. Like Jesus's beautiful, indivisible garment for which Roman soldiers gambled when they crucified him, Jesus himself is an indivisible Lord.

This is a cause of immense joy and comfort when we stop to ponder it. The God of Truth is also the merciful Savior. The Lord of heaven is also our King who, unlike kings who demand that their servants die to protect them, instead dies on behalf of his people in order to deliver them from the forces of darkness. The Savior who dies is the King who rises to reign and to lovingly protect his people, bringing them safely into his kingdom, and who will come again in fiery majesty to extend the scepter of his rule over the entire cosmos, bringing all things into subjection to his love and mercy.

Jesus's miracles brought the people the conviction that they had, at last, found their long-expected Messiah. For, as in the days of Moses and Elijah long beforehand, God was showing up with signs and wonders to save his people.

WHAT JOHN SAID: GOD IN THE FLESH

Not everything that Scripture says about Jesus is meant to be easy, even if it is clear. The task of our faith is not to offer easy answers to difficult questions but often, in fact, to point to mysteries beyond our comprehension.

This is true of the opening of the gospel of John: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:1, 14). John uses a word in this passage that was loaded with meaning for the Greco-Roman world: the term *Logos*, which we translate as “Word.” *Logos* was believed to be the supernatural unifying power behind the visible world, and claiming the existence of *Logos* in the beginning would have affirmed the view of reality that John’s readers already held. John goes on, however, and writes of the *Logos* as “he.” That was a stunner. The invisible power behind the visible world was and is God, and God has come to us as Jesus Christ.

This is one of the greatest truths that we must understand about Jesus, difficult to grasp though it may be: while Jesus is 100 percent human, he is also 100 percent God. John writes that God the Word took on flesh—our human nature—so that he might reveal his love and accomplish his saving mission to die for his people. Jesus is the God-Man.

This is what Christmas is all about. Far from the wild unwrapping of presents and the joyful parties and feasts that we associate with the season, Christmas celebrates God’s entrance into the world in the most surprising manner. God becomes one of us—a helpless baby, born in filth to a woman in poverty on the margins of the world, far from the corridors of power. Can that be true? Is it really true that Mary’s baby boy is also God come in the flesh? That’s what John is

saying. When we realize that this is the case, we cannot help but bow in wonder with the shepherds and offer our treasures in worship with the magi.

In the face of Jesus, we see the face of God. Jesus was not shy about affirming this. “If you have seen me,” said Jesus, “you have seen the Father” (John 14:9 CEV). On several occasions, Jesus used the forbidden phrase “I AM”—God’s unfathomable Name that was revealed to Moses—to describe himself. This is all the more shocking when we remember the culture in which these words were said and written. No sane Jewish man—and Jesus was exactly that—would have dared utter such things, knowing that, unless they were true, they were blasphemous. “Before Abraham was, I am” (John 8:58 ESV).

Here is an even greater shock. If Jesus is God become human, then the God who saves us is the serving, loving, sacrificing, humbly zealous person whom we see in Jesus—in Cohen’s words, “a figure of unparalleled generosity and insight and madness.” What a difference this makes! The Creator of the universe—the God of glory—is the humble God, the helpless God lying in the manger. From his first moments, he was identified with food for the hungry. Born in a stable in Bethlehem, a name that means “House of Bread,” Jesus was laid in a food trough, identified from his first moments among us with food—a hint of what was to come when he would one day say that he is the Bread that comes down from heaven and that his flesh is true food. He is the weeping God, the man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, our shepherd in the valley of the shadow of death. He is the God who stoops to wash our feet, the crucified servant God who suffers with us and for us. In the words of Isaiah, “Here is your God!” (Isa. 40:9 NIV). As author Brennan Manning writes, “God entered into our world not with the crushing impact of

unbearable glory but in the way of weakness, vulnerability and need.”⁵

God the Word becomes flesh—Jesus the Christ, born of Mary—so that he might make God’s glory known and win a fallen, broken world back to God. He reconciles the human race in his own body through his conception and birth and through his crucifixion and death. This God, the cross-bearing God, is the one who saves us by sacrificing himself.

The impact of this truth for faith is far-reaching. We Christians face an old dilemma that certain people use as a touchstone for rejecting Christian faith or even theism in a more general sense. It’s often called “the problem of pain,” and it goes something like this: “You Christians claim that God is both good and powerful—but when we see so much suffering and horror in the world, we have to ask why God, if he’s all-powerful, doesn’t put a stop to it. Either God is all-powerful and has the capacity to stop all suffering but refuses to put an end to the pain, and is therefore not good; or God is good and would love to put a stop to it but can’t, and is consequently not all-powerful. Your God is no god at all—at least not one we can accept—being either powerful but cruel or kind but impotent.” The cross of Christ stands as an answer from God to this pointed accusation about his character.

“I could never myself believe in God, if it were not for the cross,” wrote John Stott. “In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it?”⁶ Stott confesses that the problem of pain, while not satisfied by an answer that human philosophy wants to accept, is overcome in his soul because God—far from standing off in a distant corner

5. Brennan Manning, *The Relentless Tenderness of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 2004), 203.

6. John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 20th anniv. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 326.

of the universe to observe our pain in either malign indifference or impotent weakness—does indeed intervene and take to himself the full scope of human suffering and injustice at the cross. “God crucified” is the God who makes pain his own and overcomes the great source of all suffering: our decision to be our own gods rather than to trust him as loving Father.

If part of us reads this and exclaims, “How can these things be?” then we are in good company, for that’s exactly what Jesus’s own mother also said. If part of us grasps this truth and humbly bows in awestruck worship before Jesus, then, along with his disciple Thomas, who said to Jesus, “My Lord and my God!” we are also beginning to see the light, even if we cannot comprehend the why and the how of these things. God, after all, isn’t so much the subject of our study as he is the cause of our wonder. Rather than generating formulas for our thinking, he gives shape to our souls.

WHAT PAUL SAID: SON OF DAVID AND SON OF GOD

In his letter to the Roman Christians, the apostle Paul introduces his message as the gospel of God that reveals Jesus Christ as “a descendant of David according to the flesh, who was declared the Son of God . . . by the resurrection from the dead” (see Rom. 1:1–4). Like John, Paul clearly states that Jesus is fully God and fully man. The Savior of the world is a man, descended from King David, and a divine person as well—the Son of God who conquers death and sin.

Those of us who are familiar with Christian faith may on reflection find it unusual that Paul starts his gospel with a reference to King David. We more often present Jesus as the Son of God, and that is altogether fitting. What is behind Paul’s starting with David—Israel’s great shepherd-king?

To understand this, we need to know that the promises made about Israel's future Messiah very frequently referred to King David. David was Israel's great warrior-king, who killed Goliath and secured Israel's safety; he was their leader in worship and wrote many of the psalms; he was Israel's great prophet, who spoke through the lyrics of his songs of the future kingdom of God. His dynastic line lasted for hundreds of years, until his people were carried away into exile in Babylon.

God made a promise—a covenant—with David to establish one of his sons on his throne forever. In the years leading up to the exile and the years that followed, prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel reminded the people of God's promise—that God would bring a King to them and, through that King, once again save them from the hand of their enemies. Isaiah foretold of a new and anointed King who would spring from “the root of Jesse,” David's father (Isa. 11:10). Jeremiah reiterated the covenant promise that God made to David and foresaw the day when a new “righteous Branch” would spring up for David (Jer. 23:5). Ezekiel prophesied that God would gather his scattered people into one flock and give them a loving shepherd like David (see Ezek. 34:22–24). For many centuries, Israel rightly anticipated that their long-expected Messiah would be the son of David—a new King in that line who would resurrect their hope and fulfill God's promises.

When we turn to the New Testament, we discover that Jesus was born of a descendant of David and was made the legal son of David's line by Joseph, the husband of Mary. Mary and Joseph journeyed to Bethlehem, the City of David, for Jesus's birth. Jesus is frequently hailed as the “Son of David”—the one who would bring mercy to the suffering. At the very outset of his life, the magi from the East were led by the star

to seek the one who was “born King of the Jews” (Matt. 2:2). At the very end of his life, Pontius Pilate hung on Jesus’s cross a sign indicating the crime for which he was executed: “The King of the Jews,” it read—in Latin, Greek, and Aramaic, so that *no one* missed the point (see John 19:19–20)! The tables are turned by the resurrection, and Paul announces to the Romans that Jesus is indeed the King, the Son of David.

We gain two great emphases from this. First, Jesus fulfills the promises that God made to his people. The very first of these promises was made all the way back in Eden, after humankind’s uprising against God, which was inspired by the serpent’s cunning. God immediately stepped into the disaster and promised that a descendant of the woman would be born to crush the head of the serpent, though in doing so he would suffer the bruising of his heel. The promise given to us right from the start is that our enemy would be defeated by a man whose conquest over the serpent would be complete in its scope but costly in its execution. He would suffer pain, he would be bruised, in order to vanquish this terrible foe. God promised Abraham that, through one of his sons, God would bless the entire world. He promised David that one of his sons would sit on his throne eternally. In Jesus’s crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and coming-again-in-glory, God brings to pass every promise he has made.

Second, Jesus’s enthronement at God’s right hand indicates that he is the Lord of all persons, places, and things in the entire universe. No aspect of creation is not subject to his authority. When we say, “Jesus is Lord,” we mean that there is no higher authority than Christ himself, the Son of David seated on the eternal throne of God, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Having noted Jesus’s full humanity, Paul also affirms Jesus’s full divinity—he is the “Son of God.” As Son of God,

he is Mediator between God and humankind, uniting us in himself and bringing us into communion with God. As a man, he arrives through birth, as do we all; as Son of God, he arrives from heaven, as no one else has done or can do. The Holy Spirit's raising Jesus from the dead backs up this outrageous claim, Paul notes.

Peter connected the phrase "Son of God" with Jesus's being the Messiah: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16). Paul does much the same thing. The Messiah, the Savior of Israel and the world, must be fully divine in order to deliver us from our tragic condition and to reveal the eternal God. He must also be fully human in order to fulfill God's promises and to satisfy the just demands of God's law on our behalf as our representative.

WHAT WILL YOU SAY?

We can now see a lovely composite sketch of God's Savior—of Jesus—and can more adequately answer the question "Who do you say that I am?"

Taking their cue from these passages, Christians across many cultures through the centuries have answered with one heart and voice, "Jesus is Lord." The followers of Jesus who I noted in this chapter all died for the testimony they gave—sometimes in a very cruel fashion. Tortured and then crucified or beheaded, they sealed the claims that they made with their own blood. They were willing to die in horrific ways because they could not deny what they'd seen and come to understand about Jesus. Their faithful witness should make us sit up and take seriously what they had to say. The way that they answer the question "Who do you say that I am?" should inform the way that we answer.

And how will you answer this question?

“Jesus, you are the Christ, my Messiah. Jesus, you are the God, the Word, come to make the Father known and to bring me into communion with him. Jesus, you are the Son of David—please reign over my life. Jesus, you are the Son of God and the Savior, the only one I can call Lord, the one who has come from heaven and will bring heaven’s kingdom here and bring me to the center of that great new civilization.”

I hope you can answer that way. Even if you cannot yet do so, I hope you will continue to read along and will discover with me next the indispensable basis for what we believe about Jesus.

When I was once confessing some real doubts about the viability of faith in an age of technology, a kind friend replied, “That’s all completely understandable, but what are you going to do with Jesus?” It turns out that Jesus is not only indispensable but also unavoidable! Pop culture tries to reduce Jesus to a celebrity—the kind of iconic figure we see on T-shirts: Elvis, Marilyn, Michael . . . famous people who are so large that only one name is needed to know who we’re talking about. Scripture doesn’t allow us this option when it comes to Jesus; it will not reduce him to a hero, good man, wise sage, social-justice warrior, cultural icon, or demi-deity to be added to the collection of other dashboard good luck charms. Jesus is not merely your “bestest friend,” in the words of Lana Del Rey⁷; as we’ve seen, he is infinitely more. It’s the “more” that we have to wrestle with.

7. Lana Del Rey, vocalist, “Body Electric,” by Lana Del Rey and Rick Nowells, track 4 on *Paradise*, Interscope Records, 2012.

FOR REFLECTION OR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. In what ways do people end up diminishing the significance of Jesus by sounding as if they are praising him?
2. Many of Jesus's contemporaries rejected him—and ultimately killed him. What was so offensive about him and his teaching?
3. Jesus asked, “Who do you say that I am?” How would you answer him?
4. Peter asserted that Jesus was the Messiah (Christ), the Son of God. What does the Bible mean by the term *Messiah*?
5. John claimed that Jesus was God come in the flesh. Why is this claim so vital to Jesus's mission to save the world?
6. How does the idea of God being revealed as the “suffering God” change your idea of his character?
7. Paul began his message about Jesus by identifying him as “the Son of David.” Name two or three ways in which Jesus being the Son of David impacts us now.
8. As a group, sing “Crown Him with Many Crowns” by Matthew Bridges.