

**GETTING**

GIVING UP SPIRITUAL VITAMINS  
AND CHECKLIST CHRISTIANITY

**JESUS**

**MATT JOHNSON**

**WRONG**

“We seem to accumulate all kinds of bad ideas about Jesus, like so many sticky notes attached all over him, until we can no longer see him beneath our labels. We also tend to be unaware that we’ve done this until someone like Matt comes along and helps us to see ourselves and Jesus more clearly. Matt has paired his clever writing style—which I’ve long admired—with his years of real-world theological reflection and self-examination to offer us an entertaining read with piercing theological insight. Enjoy.”

**Mike Wilkerson**, President of Redemption Groups Network; author of *Redemption: Freed by Jesus from the Idols We Worship and the Wounds We Carry*

“I don’t know when I’ve laughed so hard, thought so deeply, and repented so much while reading a book. *Getting Jesus Wrong* is an amazing life-altering book. When I said “life-altering” everything you thought I said is wrong. Read it, find out why and give this book to everyone you know.”

**Steve Brown**, Key Life radio broadcaster; author of *Hidden Agendas* and *How to Talk So People Will Listen*

“The usual ‘answer’ to disillusionment with evangelical and Pentecostal church life is growing resentment, actual personal despair, and almost inevitable distancing. But it doesn’t have to be this way! Matt Johnson’s book helps disillusioned Christians find the Real Thing underneath all the stressing surface things. The Real Thing is God’s grace to the shattered human, the poor guy who’s been done to death by the Law. Matt Johnson has lived this hopeful story. He’s funny and honest and true.”

**Paul Zahl**, Retired Episcopal minister; former Dean/President of Trinity Episcopal School for Ministry in Pittsburgh; author of ten books

“For a relatively young author, Johnson reflects a rare spiritual maturity. He writes as one who has found new hope after spiritual fatigue, having been being tricked over and over again by communities and movements that advertised their commitment to good news but end up saddling followers with burdens neither our ancestors nor we could bear. He does this with a refreshing, candid, but never gimmicky style. Many who’ve been part of the American Christian experience will find his story familiar. For those who don’t, it offers helpful insight into how many people from the author’s generation have experienced Christianity in our times. In exposing the many forms ‘latent theology of glory tendencies’ can take, he’s neither snarky nor condescending; rather, he invites us to join him in an exercise of self-assessment, and a journey to the foot of the cross. I recommend this book to anyone seeking restoration after being worn down by law-based religion.”

**Jeff Mallinson**, Professor of Theology and Philosophy,  
Concordia University; cohost of *Virtue in the Wasteland*, a  
podcast; author of the forthcoming book, *Sexy: The Quest  
for Erotic Virtue in Perplexing Times*

“In his excellent, easy-to-read book *Getting Jesus Wrong*, Matt Johnson has outlined many of the pitfalls of evangelicalism and the draw of our hearts toward false Jesuses. I identified with each one and the despair that came with believing in them. I highly recommend sitting down with Matt for awhile and thinking through the biblical Jesus—you are going to find some good news here.”

**Marci Preheim**, Author of *Grace Is Free, One Woman’s  
Journey from Fundamentalism to Failure to Faith*

“I’ve known Matt for nearly twenty years and have always enjoyed his intelligence, perspective, and sincerity. We’ve shared shoddy stages, stinky vans, hacky podcasts, and many, many hours of conversation. That being said, two things stand out for me after reading *Getting Jesus Wrong*: 1) Matt’s a better writer than I am, and 2) For all he knows, he has no idea how

timely and needed this was for me. So much joy in remembering that . . . it IS finished. Enjoy!”

**Mark Salomon**, Author of *Simplicity*; vocalist for the bands Stavesacre, The Crucified, and White Lighter; host of the *Never Was* podcast

“I met Jesus twenty years ago and, to be honest, I’ve gotten Jesus wrong more times than I care to admit. The reasons are either bad teaching that I received or projecting my own ideas onto him. My friend Matt has written something that I wish I would’ve read early on in my faith, as it would’ve steered me in a far more biblical direction.”

**Alex Early**, Pastor of Preaching & Theology, Redemption Church, Seattle, WA; author of *The Reckless Love of God* and *The New Believer’s Guide to the Christian Life*

“Reading Matt’s manuscript out loud to my husband as we drove cross country, there were long pauses as Matt’s well-written words resonated. Too many times we were forced to agree . . . ‘that’s us.’ Matt’s transparent sharing about how often he got it wrong about Jesus, all in light of a church failure that broke a good many hearts, are wise words to ponder. As the saying goes, wisdom is learning from others’ mistakes. Thanks, Matt, for your efforts to make us wise!”

**Judy Dabler**, Founder of Creative Conciliation

“*Getting Jesus Wrong* speaks directly and honestly to those who can no longer ignore or participate in the structures and systems that prioritize the control and conformity of the law over the freedom of the gospel. This book is funny and personal, as well as theologically rich. Author Matt Johnson’s transparency about his own failures lends both credibility and insight into how the law and gospel interact in all of our lives.”

**Matt Carter**, Founding member of the band Emery; cohost of *The Bad Christian* podcast

“What kind of ‘Jesus’ do you believe in? Is he the Jesus you and others around you have imagined for your own life stories? Or is he the radical Savior-King who messes up your life and saves you—really saves you, not only from his judgment but from yourself? This is a fun book to read. More than that, it’s spot-on, filled with the Bible’s central message. Tired of chicken-soup-for-the-soul spirituality? Then read this book!”

**Michael Horton**, Professor of Theology, Westminster Seminary California; cohost, *White Horse Inn* broadcast/podcast

“We live in an age when people aren’t so much interested in what is true as they are in what works. And to their minds, what doesn’t work is the boring same-old-same-old story of Jesus, God’s perfect Son who fulfilled all the Law in our place, died the death we all deserve, and then rose to new life again, so that we can know we’re lovingly forgiven, adopted, and cherished. Because we’ve yawned at the gospel, Jesus has been refashioned into a person who offers more practical help: he’s given to you so that you can love yourself more, be a really great you, and be part of our really great movement. Matt Johnson struggled under the tyrant of that sort of Jesus until he discovered the wonder of the real Jesus—the One who dispenses both Law and Gospel. This book is a strong antidote to all the ‘wrong’ Jesuses out there. I encourage you to read it and share it with friends. You’ll be glad you did.”

**Elyse M. Fitzpatrick**, Author of *Because He Loves Me*

“Apparently it was Voltaire who originally quipped that ‘In the beginning God created man in his own image, and ever since, man has been trying to repay the favor.’ What sounds like a clever witticism is actually a devastating truism, the all-too-real consequences of which Matt Johnson unpacks here

with both courage and a great sense of humor. *Getting Jesus Wrong* is a terrific—dare I say, ‘glorious’!—resource for anyone who’s ever thought about (let alone believed in) Jesus, and one that I plan to hand out with abandon.

**David Zahl**, Editor of *The Mockingbird Blog*; author of *A Mess of Help*; coauthor of *Law And Gospel*



# GETTING JESUS WRONG

Giving Up Spiritual Vitamins  
and Checklist Christianity

**Matt Johnson**



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# The Problem

“And he asked them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Peter answered him, ‘You are the Christ.’” (Mark 8:29)

“Philip said to him, ‘Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us.’” (John 14:8)

Writing this book has been surprising. I hadn’t set sail for self-discovery, but here’s what I found: I’m a crappy Christian. Not only that, but the life of faith often does not feel good. Or fulfilling. I don’t know, maybe I’m doing it wrong. In reality, I’m probably a much better pagan than a follower of Jesus. And how about you? Don’t be shy. It’s OK to admit it; this may be the open door to getting free of a stifling religion. So you’re a crappy Christian. Don’t worry; there’s a Savior for that.

Writing a book is like rolling a giant rock up a hill. Outlining, editing, going on an archaeological dig for descriptive words—it’s all part of sweating it out. Once gravity takes over, the rock bowls you over and you have to start all over again. The part where I discovered I was really a pagan (instead of the excellent Christian that could tell you how to get it right) just added insult to injury. You see, I set out to write a snarky spiritual corrective to all y’all’s *bad* theology. I know. Pretty judge-y, right? Since all you nitwits out there believe wrongly, I was going to set the record straight. Turns out, I’m the nitwit.

## 2 GETTING JESUS WRONG

I hadn't really planned to share personal stories throughout this exercise. I'd rather flex some spiritual brain muscles with the hope that you'd notice my bulging intellect. But as I began telling stories, I realized I wasn't choosing how this book would be written; it was being chosen for me. And that meant I couldn't put my best foot forward.

I realize now that during my twenty-five-plus years as a follower of Jesus, I've had many ideas about him. I've chased movements and given my best shot at checking off discipleship lists. I've tried to be good, and I've been where the exciting Christian movements are happening. The problem all along was that as part of these ideas, I've always thought of Jesus as a sort of lucky rabbit's foot. I wanted him to give me answers from the owner's manual for life.

When I consider the last decade and a half, I've thought of Jesus as a life coach, as the deity who handed me a moral checklist, as a movement leader who was inviting me to become great by my association with him. He was a visionary leader with a brilliant plan to homogenize culture. Between you and me, I was using God for his gifts rather than loving him as *The Giver*. I was using god stuff (formulas for creating movements, personal discipleship programs, becoming an insider of an influential church) to ensure positive outcomes for my life. And all of that is a pagan enterprise.

Perhaps you've done similar things. Maybe you haven't had the same sorts of experiences I've had. You haven't been part of a "movement." You've never church hopped to chase the next exciting trend. But there is a pervasive, underlying message in many churches regardless of their theological flavor. And that message is basically, *you get what you give, good things happen to good people, and bad things happen to bad people*. Often churches have prescribed forms of "How to Live the Good Christian Life." It could be a discipleship program or a devotional practice. It may even be taking up the cause

of the poor or marginalized. These are all great things, to be sure. But don't we often leverage these things in our hearts to ensure that we've got enough in our personal virtue account? Are these things meant to buy us that get-out-of-jail-free card?

The truth is that trouble still invades our lives. And when trouble comes, of course we feel let down and depressed, but somehow our belief that being a Christian meant a life without trouble makes our burdens even heavier. Now we have guilt (why can't I face this trouble with a laid-back faith?), shame (perhaps this trouble is my fault; if only I had been a better Christian), and of course anger (at ourselves, God, the churches we attended, and the leaders we followed). As for me, I'm done pretending life shouldn't hurt. Hope and healing come when we get to a place where we can truthfully admit what our real struggles are.

Often the brand of religion we've associated with has told us to follow our hearts and that our faith would feel like every day was a day at the spa. When real life catches up, we're left scratching our heads. This is not what we signed up for. May I ask you a question? What's more common among human beings: success and mountaintop experiences? Or struggle, hardship, and pain?

Last I checked, mortality rates are holding steady at 100 percent and entropy is still a scientific fact. I know that sounds more like something Eeyore would say than motivational guru Tony Robbins, but we are better off coming to terms with the facts of entropy. For years my idea of being religious was taking my spiritual vitamins so life would be better.<sup>1</sup> What were those vitamins? Pray harder. Devote yourself more wholeheartedly. Give to the ministry! Volunteer! But this is self-help, not salvation.

While we still live in a messed-up world, hope is not something we can activate through spiritual activity or church associations. No, the core of the Christian faith is about objective

hope that lives outside of our personal experiences and hearts. Objective hope is found in the miracle of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The self-help brand of Christianity has a fatal flaw: hope for life is supposed to be found in what believers actualize for themselves. We hear these catchphrases all the time: “Find the hope within,” “Reach for the stars,” “Never give up on your dreams,” and the list goes on. The problem is that slapping these slogans onto Christianity doesn’t work. Because the core of Christianity is the story of a Savior that . . . well . . . saves! The gospel is *not* a coach giving spiritual advice.

Unfortunately, the human heart has a default mode that mucks up our spirituality. As John Calvin has said, “The human mind is, so to speak, a perpetual forge of idols.”<sup>2</sup> In the words of Brennan Manning, “It is always true to some extent that we make our images of God. It is even truer that our image of God makes us.”<sup>3</sup> So often we project our hopes and dreams onto the divine will and then remake and rename our Savior. I’m guilty as charged.

In the coming chapters I’ll give snapshots of a few of these false saviors: Jesus as Life Coach, Jesus as the Giver of the Moral Checklist, Jesus the Movement Leader, or the Visionary. Maybe these Jesuses have been my false saviors, but yours have been others. Maybe we can find some common ground.

I became a follower of Jesus at the age of sixteen, and my first church home was a little Pentecostal church. In this church, I was supposed to be a good boy; I wasn’t. In my twenties, I attended a Calvary Chapel that said the same stuff, so I hid. I still wasn’t good. Until a few years ago, I was part of a “cutting edge” church that, during a near twenty-year period, helped forge an influential brand within neo-reformed evangelicalism and was on the forefront of a church-planting movement. But then it flamed out just shy of the twenty-year mark, due in large part to the corrosive effects of the megalomania

of its leadership and congregation. I could blame the higher-ups in leadership, but it was people like me that gave them a platform in the first place.

Each church experience shares a common thread: I was chasing after a movement of the spirit in an effort to normalize and capture a significant moment—a moment of excitement over church growth or cultural influence. Maybe there's a better way of putting it: I was chasing after an image I'd projected onto God. Turns out, that image was stick and carrot. And the stick and carrot inevitability lead to the cliff's edge of pride and despair.

Since I've come to terms with the stick and carrot of this false image of God, I've discovered the way out of the vicious cycle: death and resurrection. By death I mean both the little "d" deaths we experience throughout life and the inevitable big "D" death. This may all sound a little too cranky and dark. For the record, I do believe that belonging to Jesus makes a positive day-to-day difference in the lives of believers. But we simply can't expect life to be a string of mountaintop experiences. Expecting these types of experiences is corrosive to our souls because much of life is lived in a valley.

The bored, fickle human heart is always on the prowl to latch onto what's new and exciting. These same impulses are common among Christians. We want some kind of tactile proof that the Christian faith "works" and can deliver personal transformation so we can boast of our spiritual feats, apart from Christ. Well, we're in good company. Even Jesus's disciples—the twelve men who had spent three years with him—continually missed the point of who he was and what he was up to. They wanted a king to overthrow the Romans and restore their people to cultural, political, and religious significance. They thought they needed a powerful military leader unafraid of storming the castle. Instead, they got a Savior who died on a cross.

Think of the transfiguration account in Matthew 17:1–9. Jesus ascended a mountain and took James, John, and Peter along with him. Moses and Elijah appeared, and there was a spectacular Holy Ghost light show. Peter was overcome by the moment and said, “Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah” (verse 4). Like Peter, we long to hold on to a glorified image of life (all made possible by Jesus, of course). We long to make permanent the fleeting moments of glory. But as we scramble to capture the glory moment, we have this way of co-opting it. Rather than worship the glorious one, like Peter we imagine the side benefit we’ll glean for ourselves. But notice that Peter’s mountaintop experience came as a surprise—it wasn’t a repeatable experience.

Likewise, experiences of glory we have in our own lives don’t last long, and soon the regular rhythms of life demand us to come down off the mountain and walk the normal paths of life again, where we get dirty.<sup>4</sup> This glory moment wasn’t something Peter could domesticate, duplicate, or hang on to, and neither can we.

Of course, this impulse to cling to mountaintop experiences is not new. As Martin Luther, the sixteenth-century church reformer, so aptly put it, in all our spiritual aspirations, we become theologians of glory.<sup>5</sup> That is, human beings have to ultimately see themselves as “doer and maker.”<sup>6</sup> We need God’s help, of course, but we are the ones to finally enact the principles, morals, or qualities God has given us. We human beings

. . . find that putting [our] faith in the promises of God alone is too unsatisfying and too risky. It is like putting all their eggs in one basket. This is not to say that God cannot be involved or part of the picture. But we want to minimize the risk, and so we want to keep one hand on the wheel, or have a backup system in

place, to be a part of a cooperative partnership where we rely partly on God and partly on ourselves. This would allow us to exercise a certain amount of control over our own destiny . . . these attempts [are called] “theologies of glory,” in which human deeds elicit and thus predict (at least in part) God’s deeds.<sup>7</sup>

We tend to see life as an upward progressing journey from one spiritual mountaintop to another, even where our successes in life are actually God’s favor toward us. We love this narrative of progressing upward, our culture celebrates it, and many of our churches feed it. In hindsight, I’ve come to find in my own life that Luther’s description of the glory story is what framed all my past churchly pursuits. The glory story comes in many forms, but it has one common denominator: it ascribes the very best of who we see ourselves to be, or the aspirations we believe that God has for us, and projects them back onto God.

We fashion our own ideas of who God is. Each of us is prone to our own biases and ideas of God’s program for our lives in ways—the biases and ideas we most identify with. Take a closer look at kitschy images of Jesus, and it becomes clear that we often worship a savior of our own imaginations and personal preferences. Not only you—I’m included in the “we.”

Consider that Jesus is a real flesh and blood human being who had preferences while he lived on earth, just as each of us does. Did he like his steak cooked well-done or rare? Would he have preferred paper or plastic at the checkout line? Is Jesus generally more conservative or generally more liberal? If Jesus were here in the flesh right now, would he tend to agree more with broadcast commentators on NPR or Fox? As it turns out, folks on opposing sides of the political fence all claim Jesus as their own. In 2012, a scholarly study came out that attempted to answer how Christians can come to such opposing conclusions when they look at political issues through the eyes of their faith. The basic gist of the study was that Christians

characterize Jesus in their own image and project their politics and priorities onto the divine will.<sup>8</sup>

Beyond political perspective, consider personality traits like whether Jesus trends more as an introvert or extrovert. As for whether Jesus prefers evenings at home curled up with a book by the fire or whether he's always on the lookout for the hottest party spot, well, it really depends on your temperament. One well-known Christian professor and author actually gives his students a simple psychological test that asks questions like "Is Jesus a worrier?" Later in the text it asks similar questions, like "Are you a worrier?" The test reveals that with a large enough sample, we all think Jesus is a whole lot like we are.<sup>9</sup>

Compare this with the type of Christian leaders you respect. Some identify with mild-mannered, sagely but well-spoken leaders with good bedside manner who are focused on social justice. Others identify with influential, aggressive, culturally savvy movers and shakers. In 2010, the *New York Times* ran an article about an up-and-coming trend among young evangelicals using their interest in mixed martial arts fighting as a tool for evangelism.<sup>10</sup>

John Renken is a pastor and a member of a fight team called Xtreme Ministries, a small church near Nashville that doubles as a mixed martial arts academy. Mr. Renken, who founded the church and academy, doubles as the team's coach. The school's motto is "Where Feet, Fist, and Faith Collide." (Now if that's not a perfect faith-infused Jackie Chan movie title, I don't know what is.) Mr. Renken's ministry is one of a small but growing number of evangelical churches that have embraced mixed martial arts—a sport with a reputation for violence and blood that combines kick-boxing, wrestling, and other fighting styles—to reach and convert young men, whose church attendance has

been persistently low. Mixed martial arts events have drawn millions of television viewers, and one was the top pay-per-view event in 2009.

Recruitment efforts at the churches, which are predominantly white, involve fight night television viewing parties and lectures that use ultimate fighting to explain how Christ fought for what he believed. Other ministers go further, hosting or participating in live events.

The goal, these pastors say, is to inject some machismo into their ministries—and into the image of Jesus—in the hope of making Christianity more appealing. “Compassion and love—we agree with all that stuff, too,” said Brandon Beals, the lead pastor at Canyon Creek Church outside of Seattle. *“But what led me to find Christ was that Jesus was a fighter”*<sup>11</sup>(emphasis mine).

Beals’s quote says it all. The Jesus he identified with was a fighter, just like him.

Everyone has an image of Jesus they prefer, a Jesus who values what they value: Tough-guy Jesus, Wise Sage Jesus, Bearded, Tattooed, Skinny Jeans Jesus, Khakis and Polo Shirt Jesus, Suit and Tie Conservative Jesus, or Social Revolutionary Jesus. On a deeper level, our personal images of Jesus reveal that we think the Christian faith is about furthering our hopes and dreams, and that Jesus is the primary catalyst for getting us where we want to be in life. This is another way of saying, in the words of Gerhard Forde, we all are “inveterate theologians of glory.”<sup>12</sup> When we operate within the glory-story paradigm, it reveals we’re in love with all the attractiveness of power, influence, success, or possessions, and we call it being “blessed.”<sup>13</sup> We’re encouraged by all the cliché slogans “reach for the stars” and “don’t give up on your dreams,” but then like

a flaky boyfriend or girlfriend, when we don't "feel the chemistry" anymore, when real life really falls apart, suddenly our relationship with Jesus is on shaky ground.<sup>14</sup>

But Jesus didn't set up shop on that mountain with Peter, and he didn't intend for us to live there either. God works in ways that are the opposite of our lofty imaginings. If we take the story of Jesus at bare-bones face value, he wasn't a great success. God sent Jesus into the world to be born in a barn. He was born into scandal (imagine the naysayers: "Yeah, right, Mary conceived of the 'Holy Spirit'"), he worked a regular job, he didn't study under a famous Rabbi, he claimed he was God, many people thought he was crazy or demon possessed, and he was executed like a criminal. In our day and age where only good things in life constitute being blessed, it would seem that Jesus was anything but.

It's only by faith that we can grasp that God reveals his character on the cross. On the cross, God subverted everything we intuitively understand about power. "Of all the places to search for God, the last place most people would think to look is the gallows."<sup>15</sup> Instead of demanding power for himself and presenting himself as a God who ". . . could knock heads and straighten people out when they got out of line . . .,"<sup>16</sup> God, in Christ, laid down his power and died for us.

But for many of us, coming to terms with the thought that great blessings come through great suffering is a tough pill to swallow.<sup>17</sup> Reformed church historian Carl Trueman recalls giving a talk on Martin Luther's theology of the cross and the pushback he received from a listener in attendance. "I was challenged afterwards by an individual who said that Luther's theology of the cross did not give enough weight to the fact that the cross and resurrection marked the start of the reversal of the curse, and that great blessings should thus be expected; to focus on suffering and weakness was therefore to miss the eschatological significance of Christ's ministry."<sup>18</sup>

It's most certainly true that we are blessed on account of Jesus, but that blessing is not yet fully realized in the now—it is a future hope that we cling to in the uncertain present. Not because Jesus hasn't done it all yet—he has. The cross is a historical event, and it has ramifications for the present. We have been justified, we are being justified, and we will be justified. At the same time, the cross is also the pattern of the Christian life where he meets us in death before he resurrects us back to life. He meets us not only in our final death, but the little deaths of life along the way—our struggles, failures, and sufferings in this world.

Jesus has already had his Easter (his bodily resurrection), but we're still waiting for our final Easter. That is, we still have to die and be resurrected. We live our lives in the shadow of the cross, awaiting his glorious return, and we live with the assurance that when we die in him, we are also raised in him.<sup>19</sup>

We don't need a faith that will make all our dreams come true as we set up camp on our mountaintop. We need a faith strong enough to handle the weight of our own death. Not just our final resting place death, but all the little deaths along the way. When work dries up or the scholarship doesn't come through, when our spouse walks away from a marriage, or a dangerous habit threatens to engulf our lives, we need a hope stronger than a God-sponsored optimism because when it comes down to it, we can't seem to live up to our own standards, and sometimes our dreams become nightmares. We need a sure hope beyond ourselves. But we seem to have endless ways of fooling ourselves with false hopes.<sup>20</sup> Thankfully,

true hope, the kind of trust that will not let you down in the end, will have to go against what your eyes have become accustomed to loving. You are addicted to placing your hope in whatever appeals to you, and then love and hope get terribly entangled. In that case, making the proper distinction in order to get

hope right is very hard. You fall in love with what your eyes see, and that is only the surface stuff—the slick, glitter, momentary appeal of a thing. Or what is even more dangerous, you start loving your highest morals, goals, and ideals. “Set your goals.” “Never give up.” “Don’t let anyone take away your dreams.” Those are all slogans meant to prop up the world’s faltering hopes in dying gods.<sup>21</sup>

But true hope rejects Jesus as life coach, guru, or cosmic vending machine. Instead, real, true, and lasting hope embraces that which we can’t always see. It goes beyond “don’t give up on your dreams” and what our eyes see, otherwise it’s no hope at all.<sup>22</sup>

The mountaintop that your heart, culture, or some leader has called you to may not exist. Worse yet, rather than a mountaintop, it may turn out to be a valley, or a flaming brown paper bag full of dog doo-doo left on the front porch of your already burnt-down house. These times of life are never what we sign up for, and they clash with our ideas of what we think a proper spiritual life ought to look like. While our loves and hopes are always directed toward the attractive and good, God’s love is directed toward what is unattractive: us. We love things in life because they’re beautiful to us. But we’re beautiful to God *because* he loves us. There’s a huge difference.

Here’s another reason why the Jesus of the mountaintop is no good for you, or for the church. If the mountaintop is supposed to be normative, those in the spiritual valley are out of luck. They will have to climb back up on the mountain so they can have assurance that God is really with them and makes a “real” difference in their life. But what happens when your body seizes up from exhaustion, you’re out of breath, and you can’t climb one more step? That’s not hope, that’s just a tragically missed opportunity. You weren’t strong enough. Tough luck.

Here's the good news: the mountaintop experiences of life aren't normative. If everything in our lives of faith were a mountaintop, then nothing would be a mountaintop. Jesus does not require that we ascend up to him; he descends to us (Deuteronomy 30:12–13). Following Jesus may include occasional mountaintop experiences in life, but most of the time, just like the disciples, we follow him through the highways and byways of life, and our feet get tired, blistered, and really dirty. But when the journey is too much, when we're down for the count, Jesus does not whip us into submission. He tends to our wounds. He shows mercy and compassion in our failure.

So come along with me on this journey. I'm going to introduce you to some old friends. Well, specters, really—the false ideas of Jesus that have haunted me and caused me a good bit of trouble, come to think of it. Each version of Jesus held out blessings and never quite delivered. At times the culture was to blame. Sometimes it was a crummy preacher. Often it was my own heart. And still my Savior—my real Savior—has hunted me down. When he caught me, he told me something unexpected: death is part of the deal, but it's not the last word because he is the resurrection and the life (John 11:25–26a).

In telling stories, my hope is that you'll connect the dots to your own disappointments and pains. Telling stories, naming things—it helps. It doesn't always make circumstances better, but I've found it helps me feel less isolated. Or crazy.

We'll do a tad bit of theology, and I'll try not to be a bore about it. We'll try and keep our heads out of the clouds and down on the ground where real life happens. In the process maybe we can learn a shared vocabulary that will help us make sense of some things.

As we go about this task, I am keenly aware of the possibility of “getting Jesus wrong” all over again. It's possible (probably inevitable) that a decade or two removed from now, I'll find ideas and theologies in these pages that are “wrong.” Ah,

well. We'll do the best we can, keeping an awareness that our faith matures along the way. But on each step of the way faith must be grounded in who Jesus is and what he's done. By faith we see what he's doing in the present by his Spirit, and we see the future hope that awaits us.

I'll tell some irreverent jokes along the way. It's true. We Christians can buy into some pretty dumb things sometimes. It's OK to laugh about it. And if you don't mind, I may have to do a bit of personal lamenting as well. Misery loves company, so feel free to join me. I suppose this is natural, given that I've had some wrong-headed ideas about things for two and a half decades.

So we'll poke fun, have our laughs, maybe even cry a bit. Or we'll take our time and repent of our old ways. Maybe you'll find out you're a crappy Christian just like me. Maybe it's time to admit the life of faith doesn't always feel like a party. But I sincerely hope you find . . . hope. Not hope in what is in your heart for God, but what is in God's heart for you.<sup>23</sup> Not hope in what you must do for God, but in what your Savior has already done for you. Hope that in the little "d" deaths of life, even the big "D" death, at the end of it all, he'll answer it with resurrection. Because resurrection is all we've got.