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His Highest Glory, My Deepest Joy: Discovering Satisfaction at Its Source

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HIS HIGHEST GLORY; MY DEEPEST JOY: DISCOVERING
SATISFACTION AT ITS SOURCE

By

Bethany Addington

Honors Capstone Project

Submitted to the Faculty of

Olivet Nazarene University

for partial fulfillment of the requirements for

GRADUATION WITH UNIVERSITY HONORS

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BACHELOR OF SCIENCE

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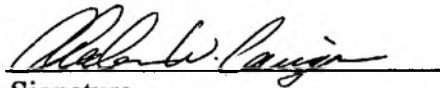
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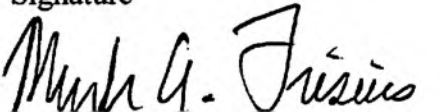
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ABSTRACT

This independent study project is a narrative devotional book written for a 16 to 25 year-old target audience. The book is primarily composed of autobiographical narratives, exegetical essays, and a small variety of poetic compositions. The literature examines several topics related to the satisfaction, purpose, and joy found in ever-increasing knowledge of Christ. To that end, this literary work ultimately seeks to communicate the unmatched fulfillment of relationship with Christ in a manner that is easily understood and applied, particularly to the lives of young Christians. The project is structured largely around an examination of the narrative of the Samaritan Woman in John 4, paralleled with my own experience of discovering profound fulfillment in relationship with Christ. The book also incorporates important truth presented in the book of Ecclesiastes regarding the common human experience of seeking satisfaction in every source “under the sun.” An examination of the life of Paul both before and after his encounter with Christ serves to illustrate the supremacy of relationship with God over slavery to the Law. Finally, a description of the genuine worship which flows naturally from the lives of those who have been profoundly satisfied in Christ provides readers with a clear illustration of the Christian life. In addition to the book itself, this project includes a summary of the author’s writing process, along with peer and professional critiques and reflections regarding the writing and editing processes.

Keywords: satisfaction, Samaritan woman, well, John 4, glory, joy, Apostle Paul, Solomon, Ecclesiastes

INTRODUCTION

I was sixteen years old when God ignited a passion in me that I had never experienced before. Through a youth ministry called Bible Quizzing, I had been studying and memorizing the letters of the Apostle Paul. Each afternoon as I recited Paul's powerful words about the profound depth of Christ's love and the unfathomable heights of God's glory, I found myself increasingly captivated. Paul's gift for communication through writing is undeniable, but there is an element to these letters that is unmistakably inspired by God Himself and breathed by His Spirit. Ironically, the most beautiful aspect of his own writing could not be credited to Paul in the least, for his words were simply the natural overflow of his life-changing personal encounter and ongoing relationship with the Most High God.

I have found that the Apostle Paul and I share this love of expressing the truth of God in writing, and that is the passion that lies at the heart of this project. As God is daily at work in me, transforming and deeply fulfilling me, the worship which naturally results is most often expressed with pen and paper. My prayer and purpose in every element of this project has been to use the gift that God has given me to reflect back to Him the glory and honor that is due Him, for I am finding more and more each day that my deepest and truest joy is in His fame.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

As mentioned previously, I originally drew much of the inspiration for my own writing style from the Epistles of the Apostle Paul. Paul is known for channeling his passion for Christ beautifully and poetically into his letters, and for applying his deepening understanding of Christian theology and doctrine to a wide variety of situations using meaningful illustrations and literary devices. Paul, having been trained in the Pharisaic tradition from a very young age, was well-versed in the interpretation of scripture and knew how to discuss religious topics in great depth.¹ Those reading Paul's letters, however, were not nearly so familiar with the discussion of complex theological matters and the application of those spiritual truths to real-life situations.² The common metaphors that Paul employs, such as allusions to the Olympic Games and illustrations of the Church as a physical body, enabled him to communicate the complexities of spiritual matters to a wide audience. These characteristics and methods of communication by way of illustration played a large part in guiding my own efforts to communicate theological truth to a young audience.

A study conducted by the Barna Group served to inform much of my strategy in writing for my target audience. According to the study, 16-29 year-olds are developing a growing frustration and disillusionment with the Christian Church in America. The following are some common perceptions linked with the evangelical Christian church, according to the study:

¹ Irwin Edman, *The Mind of Paul*, (New York: H. Holt and Co., 1935), 53.

² Gordon D. Fee, *The New International Commentary: Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1995), 105.

The study explored twenty specific images related to Christianity, including ten favorable and ten unfavorable perceptions. Among young non-Christians, nine out of the top 12 perceptions were negative. Common negative perceptions include that present-day Christianity is judgmental (87%), hypocritical (85%), old-fashioned (78%), and too involved in politics (75%) - representing large proportions of young outsiders who attach these negative labels to Christians. The most common favorable perceptions were that Christianity teaches the same basic ideas as other religions (82%), has good values and principles (76%), is friendly (71%), and is a faith they respect (55%).

Even among young Christians, many of the negative images generated significant traction. Half of young churchgoers said they perceive Christianity to be judgmental, hypocritical, and too political. One-third said it was old-fashioned and out of touch with reality.³

The study goes on to explain that many of these perceptions “were rooted in specific stories and personal interactions with Christians and in churches.” This is an alarming discovery and has no doubt contributed to the growing disinterest with the Christian faith that is increasingly prevalent among young people. They do not see anything in the Church that is worth their pursuit, nor are there effective examples of what it means to live a Christian life.

This research informs and gives shape to the goals of my project by accentuating the importance of representing the Christian faith as a dynamic and ever-deepening relationship with Christ, rather than merely an ideology, a political stance, or one of many equal spiritual avenues toward truth. It was important for me to represent both myself and my faith as authentic and even to share about my own struggles in a way which would illustrate God’s grace to work in us despite our weakness. Most

³ Barna Group, “A New Generation Expresses its Skepticism and Frustration with Christianity,” *The Barna Group Ltd*, 24 September 2007 [On-line]; Available from <http://www.barna.org/teens-next-gen-articles/94-a-new-generation-expresses-its-skepticism-and-frustration-with-christianity>; Internet; Accessed 8 March 2013.

importantly, though, my goal was to demonstrate that Christianity goes far deeper than any of these surface-level perceptions implies. Rather, genuine Christian life is radical, all-encompassing, life-altering relationship with the Creator of the universe and results in a lifestyle that is counter-cultural and Kingdom-oriented.

One of the fundamental concepts which underlies this devotional book is that of God's passion for His own glory. This is the driving force behind the life and ministry of Rev. John Piper, as declared in his book, Don't Waste Your Life. The book asserts that in every action throughout history, God's primary motivation has always been the exaltation and glorification of His own name.⁴ This doctrine stems from the reformed perspective which focuses largely on God's sovereignty and justification to act as He wills, in some cases even to the apparent detriment of humanity. While the Wesleyan tradition does not go so far as to affirm the reformed understanding that God causes destruction to take place for His own benefit, the concept that God acts in favor of His own name and for the accentuation of His character falls well within the boundaries of Wesleyan theology.⁵

The doctrine of God's passion for his own glory reaches its point of greatest clarity in Piper's well-known assertion that God's glory and our joy are the same thing. This idea was first introduced to me by Louie Giglio, an author and minister to university age students. In his book The Air I Breathe: Worship as a Way of Life, Giglio describes the reality that every human being spends each moment of his or her life in worship to something. We worship the things that we prize most highly and which bring us the

⁴ John Piper, *Don't Waste Your Life*, (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2003).

⁵ John Wesley, "The Unity of the Divine Being," *Sermons on Several Occasions*, Thomas Jackson, ed. (New York: H. Holt and Co., 1935), 53.

greatest degree of enjoyment.⁶ Both Piper and Giglio agree that, while we may find some degree of satisfaction in earthly pleasures and things, we are designed to receive our deepest and truest fulfillment from our Creator. The result is a life of worship which overflows from our continual, uncontainable satisfaction in Christ, to the ultimate glory of God.

In my research of this theological ideal, I find that this is one of the greatest points of contact between the reformed and Arminian traditions. The profound satisfaction which results in a constant exaltation of God's name and character is described and affirmed wholeheartedly by John Wesley as the primary aim of the Christian life. In his celebrated sermon, A Plain Account of Christian Perfection, Wesley writes,

One design ye are to pursue to the end of time—the enjoyment of God in time and in eternity. Desire other things so far as they tend to this; love the creature, as it leads to the Creator. But in every step you take, be this the glorious point that terminates your view. Let every affection, and thought and word, and action, be subordinate to this. Whatever ye desire or fear, whatever ye seek or shun, whatever ye think speak, or do, be it in order to your happiness in God, the sole end, as well as source, of your being.⁷

We find, then, that the profound satisfaction discovered in genuine, ever-deepening relationship with Christ, is the very definition of Christian perfection, and is the passion for holiness which has fueled the Nazarene denomination since its founding.⁸ Despite a myriad of theological variations and unique manifestations among the denominations of the global Church, this truth seems to lie at the very heart of the Christian faith as a whole. Its framework and implications are evident throughout the Old

⁶ Louie Giglio, *The Air I Breathe: Worship as a Way of Life*, (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 2003).

⁷ Mark R. Quanstrom, *A Century of Holiness Theology* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2004), 23.

⁸ John Wesley, "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection," *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson, Vol. 5, (Oxford: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1872), 203.

Testament and made perfectly manifest in Christ's life, death, and resurrection and His subsequent work by the power of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament. This project draws from all areas of scripture in order to highlight just a few examples of God's intent that we would discover our soul's deepest fulfillment as we delve ever deeper into relationship with Him.

THE WRITING PROCESS

When I first began this project, my goal was to compile many of the poems and essays that I had written throughout high school and college as a means of tracing spiritual growth during the critical years of a student's development. However, my initial goal proved to be somewhat misguided in that it presumed that I had already reached a stage of spiritual development which would qualify me to write extensively on the subject. Little did I know that much of the life experience and spiritual growth that would inform and shape this project had yet to take place in my own life.

The exegetical narrative regarding the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4 was the first major composition to be written and later became the framework of the entire project. As described in the book itself, the research done concerning this passage of scripture was as much for my own spiritual benefit as for the academic value. The Biblical story and the personal significance that it represents quickly became a major turning point in my life, and as a result, the project largely stems out that experience and chronicles the spiritual growth that it initiated.

An in-depth essay on Philippians 3:4b-14 constituted the majority of the reflection on the life of Paul included in this book. Paul represents an excellent illustration of the transformation that takes place when one is deeply satisfied in Christ. Paul's pre-Christian life demonstrates that even "faultless legalistic righteousness" offers no lasting fulfillment. It is only when Paul discovered genuine relationship with Christ that he began to taste the abundant life for which we are intended, forsaking his own claims to perfection in favor of the true righteousness that comes from God. Paul serves as a

parable of the entire premise of the book: that our genuine satisfaction in Christ naturally results in our wholehearted worship to the supreme glory and praise of God.

Paul's complete joy rooted entirely in the truth of God and His character served as the primary inspiration for another major portion of the book. This section describes the difference between fleeting happiness and the steadfastness of joy. The writing itself arose from the manuscript of a sermon on Romans 8:31-39. Paul's profound assurance in the faithfulness and love of God proved to be the foundation for his profound joy. This concept fit well within the framework of the Samaritan woman's story as Christ leads her to understand His powerful love for her. By stepping into her situation and helping her to realize that there was a greater spiritual reality which transcends physical circumstances, she began to discover the joy that guided and empowered Paul through countless difficult circumstances.

The Samaritan woman's need to be brought from the surface-level realm of physical need to the deeper realm of spiritual need leads both her story and the book to its hinging point. The chapter titled "God's Priority" which journeys through the various implications of the doctrine that God acts, first and foremost, for the glorification and exaltation of His name. At first this seems to shed a rather arrogant light on God, but deeper research reveals that God's self-revelation is the crux of the salvation story in general, and of each personal testimony in particular. This serves to reinforce the notion that God's glory and our satisfaction are altogether indistinguishable.

In order to tailor the language and content of this project to meet the needs of my 16-25 year-old target audience, I researched a number of studies that have been

conducted in relation to this age group and the characteristics of its engagement with spiritual and religious ideas. Chap Clark's book, Hurt: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers provided some especially helpful insight into the minds and lives of the young people for whom I was writing.⁹ Clark's book repeatedly emphasizes—both implicitly and explicitly—the value of sincerity in forming meaningful relationships with young people. Clark's own research was conducted by forming genuine, caring relationships with teenagers and, in doing so, earning the right to become a part of their lives and hear about their struggles.

Though writing a book is certainly different from forming actual, interpersonal relationships with my readers, this concept of the importance of authenticity in communicating with young people heavily influenced the style and overall content of my writing. The inclusion of my own testimony was the primary method through which I hoped to connect genuinely with young readers and to elicit a genuine response. The use of tangible, real-life examples and images are intended to solidify commonly misunderstood or misinterpreted spiritual concepts. Some portions of my own story remain unresolved, and I tried to maintain that tension in the book as well. My goal was not to tie up every loose end with a clean resolution, but to convey the most realistic picture of Christian life as possible. It is my hope that my experiences—both positive and negative—might provide encouragement and support to others within my age group as they wrestle through difficult spiritual matters and test the firmness of their foundation in Christ.

⁹ Chap Clark, *Hurt: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 39.

LESSONS FROM A SAMARITAN: AN EXCERPT

The devotional book is largely structured around the narrative of the Samaritan woman and the exegetical research I conducted regarding her story. While the story of the woman at the well is woven throughout the majority of the manuscript, here I have included the original exegetical narrative extracted from the book as an excerpt:

Meeting at the Well

There is a fascinating theme that runs throughout the Old Testament when it comes to meetings at the well. For example, in Exodus 2, after Moses has fled Egypt and has stopped for a break at the well in Midian, seven daughters of a local priest come out to retrieve water from the well. Some shepherds keep driving the women away from the well until Moses stands up, comes to their rescue, and waters the women's flocks for them. The women, of course, are quite grateful, and Moses eventually marries Zipporah, one of the women he rescued that day.¹⁰

There is a similar story that comes out of Genesis 24 in which Abraham is nearing the end of his life, and before he passes, wants to be sure that his son Isaac has a suitable bride from Haran, Abraham's homeland.¹¹ Abraham calls his servant, asks him to travel all the way to Haran to find a wife for Isaac, and makes him put his hand under Abraham's thigh and swear to fulfill this wish (sort of like an Old Testament pinkie promise). So he travels to Haran and sits down at the local well. Unsure of his wife-selecting qualifications, the servant prays that God would help him find the right woman

¹⁰ Arthur Walkington Pink, *Exposition on the Gospel of John*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975), 168.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 167.

for Isaac by giving him a sign. The servant would ask for a drink of water, and if the woman agreed and volunteered to water the camels too, he would know that this was the woman God had prepared for Isaac. So the servant sits down, and soon enough a beautiful young woman named Rebekah comes along, whom the servant asks for a drink. Rebekah agrees and says, “And I’ll water the camels, too!” Bingo! Tell her what she’s won! The servant gives her a bunch of jewelry, and after explaining everything to her family and meeting some resistance with Rebekah’s parents, she miraculously agrees to go all the way back to Canaan to marry a man she’s never met. The kicker? Genesis 24:67 says that Isaac loved Rebekah. True love between a husband and wife in the Old Testament was not a given, especially when the couple had never even met. Men needed sons, and women needed provision; love was not an important factor in the marriage equation. In short, this story is special; it is pure, mushy romance. And do you know who later became the son of these two lovebirds? Jacob, the very man for whom the well in Samaria is named.

Speaking of Jacob, he was not left out when it came to romance at the well. In Genesis 29, Jacob is on the run from his brother, Esau, and comes to a town where some relatives live. He meets up with a few of them—you guessed it—at a well.¹² There are several shepherds there preparing to water their sheep, but there is a huge stone covering the well. Soon, a shepherdess named Rachel shows up, and Jacob immediately walks over to the well and rolls the huge stone away from it *by himself*. Show off. You see, Rachel was gorgeous, and Jacob noticed. How do we know? As if rolling a humongous rock out of the way wasn’t obvious enough, the Bible says that immediately after his

¹² Ibid., 166-7.

macho display of manliness, Jacob stands up, walks over to Rachel, and kisses her. Jacob: King of first impressions. Jacob goes back home with Rachel, stays for about a month, and then asks for her hand in marriage.

The Bible says that Jacob did all this because he was in love with Rachel! Again, let me emphasize that this idea of being “in love” does not occur very often in the Old Testament at all. Our friend Jacob had it bad. Instead of offering a normal dowry in exchange for Rachel’s hand in marriage, Jacob offers to work for her father for seven years! He meant business; he was not going to let himself be outbid. So he worked the seven years, and when it was finally time to marry his beautiful bride, Rachel’s father subbed Rachel’s less attractive (to put it gently) older sister in for Rachel so that Jacob married the wrong woman! When Jacob found out, he was incredibly upset. But again, he was not going to let Rachel slip through his fingers. He was in love! He agreed to work another seven years in order to finally have Rachel as his bride. Now if that doesn’t sound like something you’d see on a Lifetime romance movie, I don’t know what does. All because of a chance meeting at a well...

I was astounded to discover that there is so much romantic history that takes place at the wells throughout the Old Testament, and two of these stories are directly related to Jacob, the original owner of the exact well that the Samaritan woman used day in and day out. The more I thought about it, the more Jacob and the Samaritan woman seemed to have in common. Jacob, who stole his brother’s birthright and cheated his own father into blessing him with the oldest son’s blessing, spent years running away from the mistakes he had made early in life. Later, Jacob cheated Rachel’s father and was forced to flee from him too. Pretty soon, Jacob’s life had become all about avoiding the past; escaping

failures, broken relationships, and searching tirelessly for something that would bring him peace. Whether the Samaritan woman realized it or not, Jacob himself could identify quite well with her situation.

In her exchange with Jesus in John 4, the woman claims Jacob as her ancestral father as an affront to Jesus and His Jewish heritage. In making such a statement the Samaritan woman reveals that she is acquainted with the history of the Jewish people. She was, after all, partially Jewish herself.¹³ I just have to wonder if, on her way to the well in the extreme heat of midday, the Samaritan woman ever thought about the romantic way Jacob met Rachel at a similar well one day, or the way Jacob's mother was chosen for Isaac at a well just like the one she was about to visit. Perhaps she even thought about the way Moses stood up to protect Zipporah and her sisters and rescued them from the wicked shepherds. Maybe some days she entertained hopeful thoughts: "Today could be the day he will meet me there. Today could be the day that I'll be swept away from here to start a brand new life. Could today be the day that I am finally rescued?" I can imagine that the more days she dared to ask those questions as she trudged to the well, the more embittered she became when she was met, not with romance, love, and acceptance, but with the same judgmental glances and hateful whispers she had intercepted the day before. And the day before that. And the day before that.

Now that we know about the profound hopelessness that the Samaritan woman was feeling in light of her painful past and about God's incredible grace that desired to

¹³ Craig S. Keener, *Bible Background Commentary*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 273.

meet her in the midst of it, we have a whole new set of lenses through which we can view her interaction with Jesus at the well:

John 4:4-9: Now He had to go through Samaria. So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about the sixth hour. When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, 'Will you give me a drink?' (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.)

The Samaritan woman said to him, 'You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?' (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)

Before this moment, I had always found the Samaritan woman's response to Jesus so completely disrespectful. When someone who is about two hundred rungs above you on the social ladder asks you for something, the last thing you should do is respond, "Why are you asking me?" Let's try to put ourselves in the Samaritan woman's shoes here. Men in her day were considered far superior to women, and Samaritans were absolutely hated by the Jews. Jewish teachers would spare themselves even the tiniest potential for reproach by refusing to talk to women at all.¹⁴ But here's a Jewish man—a rabbi, of all things—just waiting at the well (sound familiar?) and he starts talking to a Samaritan woman. This is such a big no-no. And a really naïve woman might be thinking in the back of her mind, "It's happening! He's asking me for a drink! It's just like what happened to Rebekah!" But the Samaritan woman has been through all this in her head more than a few times, and she knows she's no Rebekah. She's older, and she's done the unthinkable, has been married five times, and is now living with her boyfriend. She's used up, worn out, and worthless. Jesus' little throwback to the nauseatingly romantic

¹⁴ Ibid., 242.

Old Testament love stories is much more like a painful jab than a spark of hope. Now I was beginning to understand the cold and bitter attitude that caused her to react the way she did. She was hurting—really hurting. I’m sure that’s why Jesus ignored her sharp response and kept the conversation rolling:

John 4:10-12: Jesus answered her, ‘If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.

‘Sir,’ the woman said, ‘you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his flocks and herds?’

That response sure sounds an awful lot like, “Yeah? You don’t even have a bucket, buddy. Who do you think you are? You think you’re better than Jacob?” Little did she know that the man she’s attempting to put in his place is the One who created Jacob. She didn’t have the slightest clue what she had set herself up for when she made that comment. Jesus could have said, “I’m so glad you asked! As a matter of fact, I AM greater than Jacob. I knew about Jacob (and everyone else on the planet, for that matter) even before the world was created, and I planned every day of his life. I guided Abraham’s servant and selected Rebekah to be Jacob’s mother at a well just like this one, and I knit him together in her womb, detail by intricate detail. So yes, I do think I’m greater than Jacob. Thanks so much for asking.” That would have ended the conversation pretty quickly, but that’s clearly not what Jesus wanted. He simply brushed off her accusing remark and continued:

John 4:13-15: Jesus answered, ‘Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst.

Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.’

The woman said to him, ‘Sir, give me this water so that I won’t get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.’

Finally! She’s slowly but surely becoming engaged in this conversation. Jesus’ persistence and patience is beginning to break through her cold defenses. It’s not too hard to understand why she took the bait here, either. Every trip to the well was a chance for her ugly past and her loneliness to stare her straight in the face. The thought that she might never need to return here again was surely more appealing than you and I could ever understand.¹⁵ In her eagerness to learn how to avoid the well, the woman had inadvertently exposed a tiny bit of the pain that she faced every day during that trip. And Jesus boldly decided to dig even closer to the root of her bitterness:

John 4:16-17a: He told her, ‘Go, call your husband and come back.’
‘I have no husband,’ she replied.

Kind of amusing—she thinks she’s going to skim around this subject quite easily and just get straight to the living water she’s interested in. Not to mention that this is a convenient opportunity to let this stranger know that she’s available. The response she receives isn’t quite what she anticipated:

John 4:17b-18: Jesus said to her, ‘You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.’

Ouch! That conversation got pretty personal pretty quickly. You may wonder how Jesus could just go for the jugular like that. I know I did. Some scholars say that there has

¹⁵ Arthur Walkington Pink, *Exposition on the Gospel of John*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975), 196-7.

to be more conversation that happened there, and others say that there are details left out that would show this to be a less offensive or painful statement than it appears to be.¹⁶

We can only say for certain that, up to this point, Jesus has demonstrated incredible love and patience toward the Samaritan woman, and by that fact we know that his purpose isn't to hurt her. Instead, this question allowed the Samaritan woman to finally recognize Jesus as a man with divine authority, which in turn caused the conversation to move beyond the realm of the physical to address the spiritual.

Now that Jesus has brought the Samaritan woman's deepest and most sensitive secret into the blinding light of His divinity, it seems she's ready to move on to another subject, and quickly.

John 4:19-20: 'Sir,' the woman said, 'I can see that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.'

Many commentaries suggest that the Samaritan woman uses this complex theologically charged question to take a step back, get her personal business out of the spotlight,¹⁷ and replace it with something much more neutral and superficially "spiritual."¹⁸ Perhaps by flattering Jesus and giving Him such a profoundly spiritual and controversial topic to chew on, she can distract Him from the long lecture on adultery He surely is ready to give her. If that is her thought process, I certainly can't blame her. I wouldn't want to have that conversation with a stranger either—especially with a man who has just proved Himself to have spiritual insight and authority. But I am intrigued

¹⁶ Leon Morris, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel According to John*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 264-5.

¹⁷ Craig S. Keener, *Bible Background Commentary*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 267.

¹⁸ Arthur Walkington Pink, *Exposition on the Gospel of John*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975), 201.

that she doesn't become angry or upset, nor does she return to her bitter, closed-off attitude. Instead she does something that I find admirable: Before anything else comes out of her mouth, she acknowledges that Jesus has spiritual authority. It may not sound like much, but I think it demonstrates a heartfelt humility and a trust that requires no defenses. I wonder how our lives might change if, in every situation we face, we could carry in our hearts the resounding confession, "Lord, I can see that You are God..."

The Samaritan woman's willingness to honestly confess the spiritual authority that she recognized in Jesus laid the groundwork for the rest of their conversation. This encounter is very likely the first civil exchange the Samaritan woman has ever had with a Jew. Surely this is her first conversation with a prophet! How often does that opportunity come knocking? Samaritans were considered half-breeds and rejected by the Jewish community, though they shared much of the same heritage. The Jews and Samaritans differed in opinion on several crucial issues, one of which was the question of worship. Of all the issues she could have chosen, this is the question she asks. Perhaps she's been chewing on this one for some time. Jesus, though He clearly knows how to cut to the chase, does not dodge this question or return to the topic of the failed marriages. The One who knows every thought of this woman's heart chooses to give validity to her question by answering it. If she was not interested at all in the question, I am convinced that Jesus would not have taken the time to answer:

John 4:21-24 Jesus declared, 'Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth,

for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.’

There was her answer. God’s connection to us is not a delicate balance or a complex equation. It has nothing to do with where we worship. Or how we say our prayers, or how much ministry we do, or how we spend our “devotion” time. He doesn’t favor anyone, and no one is ever left out. Our relationship with our Creator is simply that: a relationship—a matter of spirit and truth. It requires no balancing act, no complex equations, no mask-wearing, no dressing up, and no acting. It’s not bought or won or earned, and it’s not about emotion. It’s about relationship—true, loving, honest relationship.

By the time Jesus finally delivers this life-giving message that God is One who desires to know us thoroughly, to satisfy us deeply, and to sustain us absolutely, the Samaritan woman is ready to reveal the hope that has sustained her all this time.

John 4:25: The woman said, ‘I know that Messiah’ (called Christ) ‘is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.’

What an incredible answer. This is the woman that everyone believes is a screw-up. Everyone has labeled her and written her off. She’s the woman who is without friends and who lacks the fulfillment she’s searched so desperately for. She finds herself making the same trip to the same well every single day, each time being reminded of everything she’s ever done wrong. She has walked up to that well day after day for who knows how long, and after all those empty journeys, this wounded woman has the strength to look a complete stranger in the eye and confess, “I know that my Messiah is coming. I don’t know when and I don’t know how, but I’m holding on to this promise. And when He

comes, He's going to have answers. And He's going to explain all of this to me." In this moment that she's been stripped down, her barriers broken through, and all her shame exposed, this woman reveals exactly what has driven her to keep going all this time. This is the hope that carried her through her daily routine and brought her back to the well day after painful day: "Messiah is coming. He'll explain everything. Messiah will come." Her beautiful faith did, in fact, lead her to a romance far greater than Moses' or Isaac's or even Jacob's:

John 4:26: Then Jesus declared, 'I who speak to you, I am he.'

The Lover; the Pursuer; the Rescuer waiting for her at the well that day was Messiah Himself. Perhaps, after all those empty visits to the well, after all those moments she'd felt forgotten and abandoned, when each step she took in the scorching heat brought her a little closer to believing she'd never be truly fulfilled—perhaps after all of that, there was no need for explanation after all. Perhaps simply to have Messiah there was enough. And the truth He offered was even more beautiful than she had hoped! He was not waiting there for a beautiful young girl; a flawless bride of a rich heritage. He was waiting for her. He wanted to reenact the Old Testament romance with her. He wasn't deterred when her response to His request for water was completely ungracious. He was unfazed when she doubted His abilities and accused Him of an inflated ego. He wasn't persuaded to maintain a surface-level conversation, and He wasn't put off by the imperfection He found beyond the barriers she had put up. He was committed to His pursuit—to this divine romance. He required no superficial perfection in her; He only desired what was real—spirit and truth. And He found just that in her simple, three-word

confession: “Messiah is coming.” And thus, a romance was born; a love story infinitely more beautiful than any human romance could ever be.

Our Creator knows us intimately, and He does not let a single ounce of that knowledge go to waste in His pursuit of us. He challenges, engages, pursues, and romances us in ways that are completely unique to who we are and what we thirst for in relationship. For some, that longing is for affection—for a suitor, provider and protector. For others, it is for approval and validation. For all of us, it is unconditional love—a need that is met extravagantly in Jesus Christ. You see, the cross completely changed the face of love. It isn’t the same thing it was the day that Jacob met Rachel. On the cross, God proved Himself to be the ultimate Lover—One who loves beyond any merit or weakness, beauty or flaw, purity or marred reputation. This is a Love that recognizes the inherent beauty and value in each soul, for it is the Love that cared deeply enough to create it. We no longer have to prove our worth through what we can achieve, or defend our value with a spotless past and unblemished character. That requirement of us was crushed when the veil of the Temple was torn in two at the moment that Messiah declared, “It is finished.” This Love doesn’t require flawlessness, or guiltlessness, or surface-level cosmetics, but simply desires a genuine romance between our spirit and His; a love story expressed in His rescue, romance, and pursuit of each of us. And our hearts’ response is a life of fulfilled worship—in spirit and in truth.

If you’re still looking for a picture of the worship in spirit and truth that genuine relationship with Jesus elicits, just notice how the Samaritan woman responds when she discovers that she has been pursued and romanced by Messiah Himself:

John 4:28-30: Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, ‘Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?’ They came out of the town and made their way toward him.

She couldn’t even begin to contain the joy that was welled up inside of her. She, like Jacob, finally knew the delight of meeting God face to face, and suddenly everything was different. She ran straight into town, right up to the very people she had been skillfully, painstakingly planning her routine to avoid. She had nothing to hide from them anymore. “There’s a man out at the well that you all need to come meet! He knew everything I’ve ever done wrong!” It’s a pretty strange testimony, I know. Jesus met this woman with such incredible, magnetic grace, that even her exposed failures were a source of joy. The only One whose opinion really mattered had met her at the well in the scorching noonday heat just to show her that she was worthy of love—a greater love than she had ever dared to imagine. She had been stirred up and plunged deep into a relationship with the One who loves absolutely and unconditionally, and the change in her that day was completely undeniable. Those who had previously thought so little of the Samaritan woman heard her strange testimony and immediately stopped what they were doing and rushed away to see Jesus. That is worship in spirit and truth, ladies and gentlemen! After experiencing a power and love so real and genuine, the Samaritan Woman simply let her joy, fulfillment, and newfound hope pour out of her. It was her natural response to coming face-to-face with Messiah—the Lover she had been waiting for and hoping in for so long.

Intriguingly, I found that the Greek words translated, “leaving her water jar” can also be translated, “divorcing her water jar.” Surely this is the most beautiful, symbolic

way of describing the amazing exchange that took place at the well that day. This water jar was absolutely vital for her day-to-day survival. But today was no ordinary day. She had a message, and she couldn't have anything—no matter how valuable—slowing her down. This woman had a personal, moving, life-changing encounter with Messiah Himself, and she was never going to be the same. She was done looking for fulfillment in all the wrong places. She was done going from one man to another, hoping to find genuine love, value, and acceptance. She was deserting that kind of water that she had always thirsted after, and was exchanging it for the living water that Messiah had poured over her—water that would quench her deepest thirst forever.¹⁹ Now she only had one more divorce to file, and that was with that old water jar, the symbol of the way things used to be. She wouldn't be needing it now. I love it. Apparently so did most of the town of Samaria:

John 4:39-42: Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, 'He told me everything I ever did.' So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them and he stayed two days. And because of his words many more became believers.

They said to the woman, 'We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world.'

The story of the Samaritan woman is an incredible parable of God's faithfulness. This hurting woman, who had been tossed around and beat up by life's circumstances, left alone and unwanted as a result, became the very instrument that Messiah used to bring nearly an entire city of Samaritans to faith. In reality, they all knew what it was like

¹⁹ Arthur Walkington Pink, *Exposition on the Gospel of John*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975), 212.

to feel discarded and unwanted, and to be treated as second rate human beings. They were Samaritans, born into a heritage that was looked down upon. And in a breathtakingly beautiful and redeeming way, God used a woman who completely embodied what it means to be alienated, forgotten, broken down, and beaten up to demonstrate to us all that His love and grace extend as far as our sinful hearts can distance us, and further still. This woman serves as a beautiful illustration of the fact that we are brought into deeper, purer relationship with God each time we, with our endless failures and delinquent hearts, find ourselves broken down and laid bare before Him, met only with grace like the ocean and love like the sky.

PEER AND PROFESSIONAL EVALUATION

The project underwent countless revisions as I sought to compile the major components into one cohesive work. Throughout the process I received feedback from 6 people, including students within the 16 to 25 year-old age range of my target audience, as well as professionals in Olivet Nazarene University's School of Theology and Christian Ministry. These critiques assisted me in determining what language was most age-appropriate in discussion of theological concepts and helped me to create a clear focus throughout the book.

One critique in particular resulted in a major revision of the entire manuscript. Originally the narrative of John 4 was included in a single chapter in the form of the excerpt above. After reading that draft of the project, Dr. Mark Quanstrom, a professor of Theology, suggested that I introduce the story of the Samaritan woman earlier and weave the narrative throughout the rest of the book. In this way, the parallels between my own story and the Samaritan woman's narrative would be much more apparent to readers. The changes seem to have greatly improved the overall project and contributed to the linear nature of the narrative form.

After making the changes suggested by Dr. Quanstrom, I asked several people to review the newly structured project and to offer critique. The first reviewer, a 37 year-old female, noticed that the section which discussed the life of Solomon and his pursuit of fulfillment seemed incongruous with the section of the book in which it had been set. She noted, "The section right before it and most of the sections after it talk about the Samaritan woman, but that section in the middle just talks about Solomon. I wasn't sure if

I skipped a part of it or just missed a key point.” In order to correct the problem, I moved the discussion of Solomon’s desire for fulfillment to the opening chapter of the book before the Samaritan woman is introduced. As a result, Solomon’s pursuit of fulfillment now parallels my own discovery of a persistent desire which no earthly endeavors had quenched.

A major consequence of interspersing the narrative of John 4 throughout the book is that it made my own testimony which runs parallel to the Samaritan woman’s story a greater focal point than I had originally intended. Throughout various discussions with my advisor, Chaplain Mark Holcomb, I had been encouraged to include my personal experience as a means of engaging with my readers and identifying with common struggles faced particularly often by college students. He advised me that, if my testimony was incorporated well, it would provide hope for those in the midst of struggles similar to the ones I had faced, and would be an encouragement and meaningful reminder of God’s faithfulness to those who had overcome difficult circumstances.

After they had read the transformed manuscript, I asked three evaluators to address my concern regarding the inclusion of my personal experience. The consensus among the three was that the centrality of my own testimony corresponding with the testimony of the woman at the well seemed to strengthen the overall message of the text.

One reviewer, an 18 year-old male, provided the following feedback:

Honestly, I really enjoyed it. You did a good job of "journeying" from your story to the culmination of your point, while staying somewhat focused within the framework of the Samaritan woman's story. I thought it was coherent and well presented in its present form. I particularly liked the poem/essay interludes. They helped break it up and make it less of a typical testimony/devotional.

When asked to evaluate whether the use of my own testimony to the degree that it's included detracts from the message in any way, this reviewer suggested a couple of changes related to a particular poem included toward the end of the project:

If anything in the story comes close to taking too much focus off the main thing, it's that section right before your final point. I do think it is necessary in some capacity, as it's the real life illustration of the intellectual/spiritual journey of your thesis, but it could maybe be shortened or revised to somehow make it less about your side of things, and more about what is true of God.

I found this critique to be incredibly helpful and used this recommendation to guide my editing of that section in particular, as well as in my final editing of the entire project. My intent in including my own story was to demonstrate sincerity to anyone who might be experiencing similar difficulty while being careful not to shift the focus away from God and toward myself. My hope is that, in the final draft, my testimony serves only to accentuate God's grace and redemptive action.

My youngest reviewer, a 17 year-old female, offered several suggestions which contributed a great deal with regard to the age-appropriateness of the project. She noted instances in which complex theological language ought to be explained in greater detail or replaced with simpler terms. In addition, she suggested adding additional background information which would ensure that readers with limited knowledge of scripture would understand the importance of the Bible stories referenced within the work. This critique served to guide a revision of the chapter which discusses the life of Solomon. After receiving this reader's critique, I expanded the chapter to include the account in which Solomon received wisdom from God and was promised many other blessings as well.

This helps to provide more solid framework for the chapter and for the overarching concept of human need for satisfaction in God.

Overall, the critiques helped to provide me with perspective throughout the writing process and played a strong role in guiding my editing as well. Professional evaluations helped to ensure that the content of the book is theologically consistent and Biblically accurate. The reviews of high school and college students provided insight into the effectiveness of the book in clearly communicating important theological truth with my target audience. Critique provided during the final stages of writing and editing helped me to view the project as a cohesive whole and to streamline the content into a more linear narrative.

Chapter 1: Chasing After the Wind

In his first work of fiction, Pilgrim's Regress, C.S. Lewis wrote, “what does not satisfy when we find it, was not the thing we were desiring.”²⁰ The concept certainly seems simple enough, but I have to admit that I’ve had both the miserable misfortune and the grace-guided privilege of learning this lesson for myself many times over. All my life I have been goal-oriented, setting high standards of achievement, even involving myself in numerous ministry opportunities, believing that just one more accomplishment might finally unleash lasting satisfaction.

In junior high I taught Sunday school and Vacation Bible School—I even ran my church’s Children’s program for a year. I played volleyball and basketball, sang in the choir, and acted in school plays. I won several essay and poetry contests and even had a couple of poems published. As soon as I reached that magical 13th birthday, I took a Saturday afternoon babysitting course, earned my CPR certification, and passed out fliers around my neighborhood offering babysitting services in order to start earning money for savings. In high school I joined drama club, academic decathlon (yes, it’s as nerdy as it sounds), Spanish club, chorus, and forensic public speaking. I made high honor roll every semester and was inducted into the National Honor Society, a community service organization of which I later became president. I was salutatorian of my graduating class, and was awarded “most likely to succeed” and “most respected” among my high school peers.

²⁰ C.S. Lewis, *The Pilgrim's Regress*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), 97.

As senior year drew to a close, I looked back at all the things I had accomplished up to that point, and with great disappointment I realized that I had never actually attained any of the lasting satisfaction and fulfillment that had motivated me to strive for so much. In fact, I still felt as though I had failed to do much of anything of any consequence. I had this deep, penetrating sense that I had missed something huge, and no award or recognition could take its place. I now know that this overwhelming feeling was the Spirit of God drawing me to begin my search for true satisfaction in Him.

Interestingly enough, the more I've reflected on my own persistent desire for fulfillment, the more I've recognized that same gnawing desire in most everyone around me. Even taking a look at Scripture, we find that the search for ultimate satisfaction has persisted as long as humanity has been in existence. We see it first in the Garden, when Adam and Eve, not content to eat from all the other trees in Eden, stepped outside of God's guidelines in order to seek contentment on their own terms. Their son, Cain, also fell prey to the desire for self-gratification, choosing to murder his brother for meeting God's standard of sacrifice rather than to offer an acceptable sacrifice himself. From that moment on and throughout every page of history, each of us has, in one way or another, tasted the bitterness that our misguided endeavors for satisfaction have wrought.

Perhaps no one can testify more profoundly to this end than Solomon—King of Israel, possessor of great wisdom, and pursuer of deep satisfaction. Solomon was one of a handful of people in history who has ever had the opportunity and the resources to pursue all of his desires and impulses to their ultimate end.²¹ God had appeared to King Solomon one night in a dream and told him to ask for whatever he wanted. Solomon answered

²¹ Jacques Ellul, *The Reason for Being*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 20-1.

perfectly, asking God for the wisdom and discernment necessary to rule faithfully. 1

Kings 3:12-13 shares God's delighted reply:

I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be. Moreover, I will give you what you have not asked for—both wealth and honor—so that in your lifetime you will have no equal among kings.

Most of us find ourselves believing that 'if only I could get that promotion, if only I could find the right person, if only I could let loose a little more, if only I could earn that degree, or buy that new car, or get a leg up on the competition, or make a bigger name for myself...if only.' Not too much, just a little bit more. Solomon's wealth, his power, and his wisdom were without limit. For Solomon, there was no "if only" about it. They say that the gap between 'more' and 'enough' never closes, and according to the book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon's life goal became a quest to disprove that theory. His life was to him like a grand experiment, trying a thousand ways to discover that delicate formula that could finally unveil lasting satisfaction and fulfillment.

With every new relationship, business venture, intellectual plateau, and personal pleasure, Solomon became increasingly consumed with this unquenchable desire to quench desire itself. The more he chased after contentment, however, the more evasive it became and the more empty and useless Solomon felt. Finally, in Ecclesiastes we find the broken and dejected pleadings of a man who wants desperately to spare his readers the utter emptiness that comes from a life that knows only how to whisper 'if only.' "It's all meaningless," the desperate author warns his readers, "like chasing after the wind." His refrain gains fresh intensity each time it's repeated: "*There is nothing new under the sun...Everything is meaningless under the sun.*" True novelty—perpetual novelty is

nowhere to be found under the sun. This is not speculation, or mere conjecture, or even a well-educated philosophy. This message is the desperate plea that flows out of the personal experience of a man who devoted his life to the capture of contentment, and after chasing it to the ends of the earth, runs back frantically to warn those following behind him that there is nothing to be found there but utter meaninglessness.

Solomon's conclusion is that our best shot at any kind of satisfaction is to find joy in the monotony of our fleeting lives; to humbly recognize God's transcendence and supreme power and our relative powerlessness.²² We live, and die, and are forgotten; He endures forever. He creates, and we cannot add or detract from a single thing He has done. He is power and strength and wisdom and glory defined. If only He may grant us the knowledge to understand. Solomon asserts that the deepest satisfaction available to us is to recognize and accept and rejoice in who we are (and aren't) in light of who God is, and has been, and will be for eternity. Satisfaction cannot be grasped by our efforts to be more or other than what we are; it is only within our grasp when we strive to fulfill the role that God has given to us.

Just as a student cannot effectively learn if he is continually trying to convince himself that he is a teacher or principal or janitor, so we lose the fullness of the joy offered to us in our humanity when we refuse to accept or embrace what it means to be human. Humanity works, humanity rests. Humanity struggles, humanity overcomes. Humanity weeps, and humanity laughs. We are born, and we grow old. We live, we learn, we collect, we contribute, we construct, we produce, we wither, we pass away. We are replaced with fresh humanity. Our hope is not found within ourselves. That need not

²² Ibid., 291.

upset us, only inform us. The desire of Truth is not to deflate, but to mature; not to depress, but to stimulate authentic growth. It desires not to destroy, but to impart deep, rich, abundant life.

The common phrase running through Solomon's message is "under the sun." In the earthly realm, the sun is the highest source of life and energy and warmth. Despite the world's absolute dependence on the sun for all of these necessities, Solomon calls us to lift our eyes above the realm of the sun in our search for meaning and fulfillment. Solomon's most valuable wisdom is summed up in a single, simple truth: The only true novelty—the only everlasting joy and all-satisfying fulfillment—belongs to another realm entirely. God gives life even to the sun itself from where He sits enthroned in His glory. Our inclination is to look for life in every source under the sun, but we will never find in any created thing any fulfillment like the abundance that is available to us in the Creator.²³

²³ Ravi Zacharias, *What Is Worthwhile Under the Sun?*, Ravi Zacharias International Ministries, 1999, compact disk.

Under the Sun

*There's a wisdom so potent, so alluring and sure,
Seekers drawn from the east and the west,
Its message is simple, but perplexes the heart:
"Under the sun, this is all meaningless."
All the vast wealth of knowledge I've strived for so long;
I've nurtured, evolved, cultivated,
Now to discover wisdom is little more
Than meaninglessness further illuminated.*

*So I'll drown it in pleasure in all of its forms,
Take the edge off this double-edged knife.
I'll be dangerous, spontaneous, make a sport out of death,
And in doing so, perhaps I'll taste life.
When I've indulged every whim, catered every desire,
And I'm drunken with blind, careless laughter,
A sobering vacancy quickly reveals,
It's the wind that I've been chasing after.*

*Sell my life for the promise of an American Dream,
Tug my bootstraps and fall into line.
Put my pennies away in my beloved 401k,
Tell myself I'll come back from behind.
At the end of my life I'll settle back and enjoy
My lifeblood; all this treasure I prize,
But my stockpile will land in the hands of another,
Just as soon as the life leaves my eyes.*

*Perhaps spending life to be known and esteemed,
Will gain great prestige for my name.
I'll do what it takes to be someone remembered,
Invest myself into my fame.
But what have I to do? Where have I to go?
We all are forgotten in time.
The wise and the fool reach the same dark threshold,
No matter which staircase we climb.*

*Under the sun I've found nothing is new,
Though I'm hardly deterred from the chase.
I'll pursue every novelty, drink every well dry,*

*Before I'll look into Your face.
I run hard after wealth, after wisdom and fame,
They'll fulfill for a moment or two.
After every wind leads me where I've been before,
My exhausted heart finds rest in You.*

*In my endless endeavors to quench this deep thirst,
I've learned to call such pursuits loss.
For there's no satisfaction for this tired, weary heart,
That exists apart from Your Cross.
Earthly treasures made rubble in light of Your grace,
Now my heart is fixed only on You.
I'm now clinging to One who first clung onto me,
For under the Son all things are made new.*

Chapter 2: First Love

For much of my life, I—like Solomon along with the majority of humanity—had succumbed to the temptation to look for satisfaction in everything “under the sun,” but I hadn’t always been so misguided. I had accepted Christ as a meek, intrigued little five-year-old in the privacy of my living room as I waited for my favorite movie to rewind. (Pebbles the Penguin, for those of you who care to know.) During a car ride home from a visit to my grandparents’ house, I had heard my older brother talking with my mom about salvation—how to receive it and what it means. Everything they were saying resonated deeply in my five-year-old soul in a way that nothing ever had before, and somehow I knew that I had stumbled upon something incredibly valuable. I found a private place as soon as we arrived home, followed the instructions I had overheard, and with a deep sense of wonder and genuine gratitude, I asked Jesus to live inside of me and to forgive me for the ways I had done wrong.

Five years old is pretty young, and I’ll be the first to admit that I didn’t understand all of the theological implications of my decision as I crouched next to the VCR and whispered my prayer that day, but I knew with great confidence that Jesus heard me and delightfully obliged to call me His daughter. I could feel it, and as silly as it may sound, it changed my little five-year-old life. As time went on, I began telling my friends in kindergarten and in my neighborhood all about what it’s like to live with Jesus in my heart and the ways that I could see His love evidenced in my life. Even as a little girl I recognized the good things in my life as blessings especially for me from God. Sunny days, a trip to the pool, a new friend, and a good night’s sleep were all, first and

foremost, gifts from God. He was tangibly real to me, and everything about life seemed naturally and obviously to revolve around Him.

I'm not sure what happened between ages six and sixteen, but I do know that over the course of those years, I lost that valuable sense of God's realness and the awareness of His participation in every moment of my life. Maybe the discoveries that some people will never get along and that adults really aren't perfect made me question God's control. Maybe it was the fact that I was a shy, awkward kid whose prayers of one day being a bubbly blue-eyed blonde seemed to fall on deaf Divine ears. Maybe it was my desire to be a grown-up and to view my relationship with God in the same mature, calculated, logical way that adults do. I really don't know, but somehow my efforts shifted from really knowing God and sharing Him with others to merely looking like a great Christian, and trying to make others want to look like great Christians too.

This mindset of Christian role-playing started out on the elementary school playground, but I am sorry to say that it made the trip to the high school cafeteria unscathed. Thanks to my fool-proof plan, I was always known as the 'goodie-goodie'—the quiet intellectual with the perfect reputation, who rarely said anything hurtful to or about anyone. The problem was that my plan did not actually make me a good person. It only made me *seem* like one. I soon found myself balancing a string of façades that I thought could bring me the popularity, respect, recognition, and success that had become my life's ultimate goals. I had no idea which of my acts was the real one, and I only ended up feeling increasingly lost and misunderstood the longer I let it go on.

Years passed and I became more and more exhausted with all my effort to carefully and meticulously do and be everything that I should do and be. Soon my persistence wore paper thin and my confidence and emotional stability quickly followed suit. My inadequacy was beginning to show through, threatening more and more each day to reveal my best kept secret: I did not have everything together; I was not the perfect Christian. I may not have known how to say it, but what I so desperately needed was simply to be satisfied, and no façade, reputation or standard of achievement was working for me. I was stricken with a hunger that I just couldn't seem to nourish, no matter what I tried. What little satisfaction there was to be found in each new achievement, approval, or recognition became increasingly short-lived. I was dying of a thirst that no earthly well could quench.

By the time my sophomore year of college rolled around, I was falling apart at the seams—physically, emotionally, spiritually—and I was fighting with everything I had to maintain my composure, to keep my head above water in my daily commitments and relationships, and to reconcile the fact that a loving God could seem so distant at a time like this. It's difficult to put into words what I was going through at that time, except to say that I had never experienced a pain like it and I never saw it coming. I was devastated, and it seemed that, although I brought my needs and those of my family before God and asked Him to change the circumstances, things became continually worse until I found myself plunged into a deep depression.

I can't even begin to explain how confused and betrayed and angry I felt. I had always been as obedient as I could; I had committed myself to this God that I apparently didn't know as well as I thought I did, and I had built my whole life on a Foundation that

I thought was solid, though it now seemed to be anything but. I couldn't help calling God out on it. If He was, in fact, the God He claims to be, He certainly would not be afraid of my questions—even the ones that break my heart to ask. So I asked them, if only because I didn't know what else to do. I wanted so much to be faithful, but I had no clue what faithfulness ought to look like in a moment like this. Never in my life had I felt so lonely and utterly broken.

Fighting the Current

*I feel like I'm swimming upstream,
Waiting for the next thing that will send me back down the river.
Struggling against the current
Over and over.
And I just have to ask myself if I took a wrong turn somewhere.
Am I on the wrong page?
(Or in the wrong book, for that matter?)
And if that's the case, then everything I once thought was certain,
Just isn't.
And I spent so much time investing in certainty,
So that I'd never have to be here,
Swimming in a current and wondering where my next breath will come from.*

*So now what?
Does the fact that a current exists mean that I shouldn't be in the river?
Am I really to believe that I am "counted worthy" of this struggle?
Would a loving God allow such fear and desperation?
Could even an ounce of beauty come from this ugliness?
Perhaps if I could swim this current with grace and skill...
But all I can do is wrestle the water and choke through the waves.
Could what I'm going through and the way I'm handling it,
Do anything positive for God or for His kingdom?
Or is it silly to even ask that question?
Am I wrong to question anything at all right now?
Or should I have been asking more questions all along?*

*I must have taken a wrong turn.
Did I commit some serious offense without even knowing it?
I really hope so.
Repentance would be so much easier
Than being caught in this whirlpool of questions with no answers in sight.
It's so hard to talk myself through this with cool, calculated theology,
When I feel as though this storm is about to end me.*

*I always come back to the same question,
And it rocks me violently back and forth
Like the waves that keep beating me down:
"What does faithfulness look like in this moment?"*

*Putting aside my questions about the past—
Asking what I could have done better,
Or where I may or may not have gone wrong—
Regardless of missed opportunities or missteps,
What would it look like in this very moment,
To exude the kind of obedience and faith
That my soul so longs to give You?
There's a physical aching in my heart;
I only want to hear You, to receive direction,
To have even a single moment of clarity,
And to know with certainty that I am moving closer
To where You want me to be.*

*This rising tide of theological concepts and calculating reason,
Can't navigate me through these flood waters,
Or even to a peaceful conclusion.
They are powerless to draw me closer to anything solid,
Or to ensure me that You're still here.
And all my careful examinations of the past,
Only attack and condemn and confuse,
They only carry my attention further and further
From what You would have me do
Right now, in this moment.*

*So when all my questions have run their course
For the 137th time today,
I'm left with that same, burning, aching question.
What can I do to be faithful
When I've not been called to action?
How can I begin to step out of the rubble,
When the only order I've been given is to stand?
I would change the entire direction of my life in an instant,
If that's what You asked of me to step out of this pain.
But now I find myself in the depths of the hardest trial I've ever endured;
This season in which You're apparently asking me simply to be still.
No further direction;
No dramatic change of plans;
No end in sight.
Just to keep my eyes trained on You
And to keep on swimming.*

Chapter 3: When the Current Takes You Under

It was in the midst of that time of desperate uncertainty and questioning that God answered my cries and spoke fresh Truth into my life, though I hardly expected the way He would go about it. It was through the story of the Samaritan woman at the well, found in John chapter 4. Maybe you know of her—she’s the one known for having had five husbands and a live-in boyfriend. She’s the one who went to get water from the well during the absolute hottest time of the day to avoid all the judgmental glances and gossip-saturated whispers. She’s the one who had no friends, and whose daily trek to Jacob’s well was a consistent reminder that her mistakes had slaughtered her reputation and her past would always cast a cloud over her future.

I had no idea why God kept throwing her in my lap like He was, but it was impossible to deny. Within a week’s time, everything from sermons, class discussions, and group conversations, to radio broadcasts, television shows, and a long list of other “coincidences” brought this woman and her story to the center stage of my life again and again. God really couldn’t have made it any clearer that week. My problem was that I had no idea what this woman was supposed to mean to me. I read the story over and over, looked up Greek word meanings, and studied commentaries, but I really wasn’t getting it. Surely God wasn’t suggesting that I had something in common with this lady. But truthfully, there are only two people in the story...and quite obviously I’m not Jesus.

Can we just be real for a minute here? We meet a woman today, and the minute we find out she’s had five failed marriages and has decided to skip the whole “wedding formality” altogether with her most recent man, is the exact minute that many of us start

concocting an excuse to go mingle with someone a little less...rough around the edges. Most of us really don't need to hear sob stories about what went wrong and why things didn't work out five different times. It's pretty safe to assume that there's a major problem going on with this woman if five separate lifelong commitments to *five* separate husbands all fell through. And that's the way society looks at this situation today.

Now let's throw back for a minute to the times when even public conversation between men and women was discouraged, especially with a woman of her reputation. Women couldn't be educated and certainly couldn't hold any kind of authority. Their purpose for living was to get married (and not divorced, mind you) and to have children. Those children would preferably be sons, of course. If a woman was barren, she was incapable of performing her most important duty as a wife and if a woman was without a husband, she had no dependable means of supporting herself. All she could do was beg, pick up scraps of food in the fields after they were harvested, or even prostitute herself to earn what she needed to live. This woman, in one way or another, was stripped of her entire means of support and security five times.²⁴

We don't know the circumstances of her failed marriages, but with everything in perspective, it seems plausible that the woman did not initiate all of these divorces. After all, her husband was her lifeline. Regardless, some scholars believe she did choose to divorce her husbands, to run away from them and marry other men, or at the very least, that she had not married and divorced legally.²⁵ And you know what? I almost prefer to believe those things about her. The more mistakes she was responsible for, the more

²⁴ Craig S. Keener, *Bible Background Commentary*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 272.

²⁵ Leon Morris, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel According to John*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 264-5.

incredible God's redemption in this story is. In any case, it's important to note that the details of her divorces are not given. It makes sense, too, because her past is not at all meant to be the focal point of her story. Hers is a story about looking forward. You'll see.

But first, to get the full picture of the Samaritan woman's experience, let's dig even deeper into the circumstances that accompanied her to the well that day. They say that when a man loses his job, it can cause enormous challenges as he struggles to understand that, even without a means of income, he is still a valid human being in and of himself. His livelihood is not what gives him value. Women are much the same way, except that women are said to find their identity in men and romantic relationships. Even in Song of Solomon (the "romantic relationship" corner of the Bible), the Beloved female character repeatedly urges the Daughters of Jerusalem (her younger female peers), *do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires*. This is a wise warning not to rush into a relationship hoping for a sense of identity and self-worth without allowing a foundation of trust and genuine friendship to develop first. If that foundation is not there, a relationship can crumble easily, and added to the urgent desire to find value and meaning is a freshly inflicted wound and a growing belief that 'I need to do more and give more and be more in order to deserve love and acceptance.'

So considering this lesson in gender identity crises, imagine the rollercoaster of self-image, identity confusion, and personal value a woman would endure over the course of five failed committed relationships. Just try to put yourself in the shoes of a woman who believes that her genuine fulfillment will be found in a love relationship; a woman who pours herself into finding love and becoming loveable, and yet finds herself watching relationship after relationship fall utterly to pieces right along with her

reputation. By the time we meet her, the Samaritan woman has seemingly given up on the commitment of marriage and has resigned herself to a loosely-bound relationship that will inevitably fall apart sooner or later. It's obvious that others in her town have concluded that she is to blame for her relationship failures, and considering the fact that she chooses to endure the severe heat of mid-afternoon to avoid those people, it seems she has lost her will to prove her personal value and defend her dignity. Maybe she has even begun to agree with their judgmental assumptions.

By the time I realized all of this about the woman at the well, I wasn't feeling quite so disgusted with her. I still had no idea what her relationship to me and my situation might be, but at least there might be more to her than her terrible reputation. In fact, I had begun to feel quite sorry for this woman and the emotional scars she had sustained. Her deep desire for value, identity, and self-worth seemed to be an amplified version of the struggle that I saw in myself and in so many of my peers. The major difference between our struggle and hers was that this woman seemed to have no one at all to identify with her pain. I can only imagine the loneliness that must have consumed her as her thirst for true acceptance led her further and further away from true satisfaction.

Though I had enjoyed the deeper perspective of the Samaritan woman's situation, I was ready for a call to action. "I'll do whatever it takes to dig myself out of this chaos," I prayed, "just say the word, God." The only problem was that He wasn't saying any words. He just kept bringing up the same story of this sad, dejected woman at a well. I had come to know her and even to respect and identify with her to some degree, but my

pity for some misunderstood woman who lived two thousand years ago did very little to bring hope to my current situation.

After about two weeks of being continually confronted with her story, I was still completely oblivious to her connection with me and it was really starting to frustrate me. Here I was in the middle of the darkest period of my life, struggling desperately to make it by and straining to hear God's voice in the middle of all the confusion. Why wouldn't He just quit playing games? One day as I sat in my car and ruminated about everything that was happening in my life and about God's apparent silence, my total frustration boiled over. Before I had even given my mouth permission, I blurted out, "How long do I have to wait, God? I'm being faithful, I'm praying, I'm studying this story and I'm trying to understand Your point, but I'm tired of doing this day in and day out. I'm tired of waiting for You."

I sat in silence for a few moments staring at my steering wheel and waiting for some sort of reply, which I half expected to be a lightning bolt or a heart attack or something. It's one thing to hold a thought somewhere in the back of your mind, but to speak it out loud, especially to God, is another thing entirely. Granted, He knows every thought even before I think it, but those thoughts become solidified somehow when they're spoken. Suddenly—finally—I felt His voice. It was quiet as a whisper and fleeting as a thought, but it felt like a downpour after a devastating drought. "How many days do you suppose the Samaritan woman travelled to the well and back all alone in the heat of midday before the day that I met her there?"

As my parched heart absorbed that thought, I realized that perhaps I could identify with the Samaritan woman far more than I realized. After only a few short months of waiting for my circumstances to change, I was on the verge of giving up hope that God would ever keep His promises to me. I was the Christian girl, the goodie-goodie, the master of religiosity, but I could hardly find in myself the drive to keep trusting in a God that simply didn't seem to be holding up His end of the bargain. But something in this lonely, rejected, sinful woman chose to continue going to that well day after painful day. What would drive her to continue putting herself through that misery—both physically and emotionally—each and every day? What was the point? Maybe it was time for me to take another look at this story. Maybe it was time to humble myself and consider that I might be able to learn something from the Samaritan woman's example.

I Was Wrong

*So here I am again,
Thinking back on all the times I've been
So sure of what I want,
So sure of what I need,
So sure of what I deserve.
And don't deserve.
...And I was wrong.*

*A million times I've forgotten
How much You've done for me;
How much You've brought me through.
A million times I've chosen
To handle life myself;
Do it all without You.
...And I was wrong.*

*How easy it is to claim independence
When life seems to smile on me.
How often I claim victories for myself
When, in truth, they had nothing to do with me.
...I was wrong.*

*How terrible is the realization
That I've failed again to trust Your word.
How hopeless, how unworthy I am
To receive Your grace again, Oh Lord.
... Heavenly Father, I was wrong.*

*After all my empty promises,
That I was through with worthless things,
And after all the praises I have sung,
That now seem a mockery to sing,
...How can You forgive me? I was so wrong.*

*Now I am sure that there is no grace left for me.
Surely I have no room left for mistakes.
Surely even a God so great as you
Has no use for such rebellion and disgrace.
...But you rushed in to show me I was wrong.*

*In an instant You come
To meet me in this place.
How quickly You breathe forgiveness
And warm me with Your grace.
...All I can whisper is "Forgive me, God. I was wrong."*

*I feel Your loving arms around me,
I sob as Your words flood my heart.
"Dear child, when you've reached the end of yourself
Is when I can make my start."
...Lord, how could I have been so wrong?*

*How could I have thought for a moment
That the Maker of the stars; the earth; the sea,
Could possibly be powerless
To make me what He wants me to be?
...I couldn't have been more wrong.*

*My life is in Your debt, Oh God,
My rock; sweet Redeemer; even friend.
I give my life to be all that You'll make it
And in You I'll have no end.
...To give any less would be wrong.*

*So here I am again,
Thinking back on all the times You've
So freely poured Your blessings over me,
So faithfully provided for my needs,
So graciously given me what I could never deserve,
And the love I thought I could never receive.
...Looks like I was wrong.*

Chapter 4: Meeting Me at the Well

As I began to investigate the story of the Samaritan woman with a new outlook, I was intrigued to find that there is a fascinating theme that runs throughout the Old Testament when it comes to meetings at the well. For example, in Exodus 2, after Moses has fled Egypt and has stopped for a break at the well in Midian, seven daughters of a local priest come out to retrieve water from the well. Some shepherds keep driving the women away from the well until Moses stands up, comes to their rescue, and waters the women's flocks for them. The women, of course, are quite grateful, and Moses eventually marries Zipporah, one of the women he rescued that day.²⁶

There is a similar story that comes out of Genesis 24 in which Abraham is nearing the end of his life, and before he passes, wants to be sure that his son Isaac has a suitable bride from Haran, Abraham's homeland.²⁷ Abraham calls his servant, asks him to travel all the way to Haran to find a wife for Isaac, and makes him put his hand under Abraham's thigh and swear to fulfill this wish (sort of like an Old Testament pinkie promise). So he travels to Haran and sits down at the local well. Unsure of his wife-selecting qualifications, the servant prays that God would help him find the right woman for Isaac by giving him a sign. The servant would ask for a drink of water, and if the woman agreed and volunteered to water the camels too, he would know that this was the woman God had prepared for Isaac. So the servant sits down and soon enough a beautiful young woman named Rebekah comes along, whom the servant asks for a drink. Rebekah agrees and, without missing a beat, she adds, "And I'll water the camels, too!" Bingo!

²⁶ Arthur Walkington Pink, *Exposition on the Gospel of John*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975), 168.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 167.

Tell her what she's won! The servant gives her a bunch of jewelry, and after explaining everything to her family and meeting some resistance with Rebekah's parents, she miraculously agrees to go all the way back to Canaan to marry a man she's never met. The kicker? Genesis 24:67 says that Isaac loved Rebekah. True love between a husband and wife in the Old Testament was not a given, especially when the couple had never even met. Men needed sons, and women needed provision; love was not an important factor in the marriage equation. In short, this story is special; it is pure, mushy romance. And do you know who later became the son of these two lovebirds? Jacob, the very man for whom the well in Samaria is named.

Speaking of Jacob, he was not left out when it came to romance at the well. In Genesis 29, Jacob is on the run from his brother, Esau, and comes to a town where some relatives live. He meets up with a few of them—you guessed it—at a well.²⁸ There are several shepherds there preparing to water their sheep, but there is a huge stone covering the well. Soon, a shepherdess named Rachel shows up, and Jacob immediately walks over to the well and rolls the huge stone away from it by himself. Show off. You see, Rachel was gorgeous, and Jacob noticed. How do we know? As if rolling a humongous rock out of the way wasn't obvious enough, the Bible says that immediately after his macho display of manliness, Jacob stands up, walks over to Rachel, and kisses her. Jacob: King of first impressions. Jacob goes back home with Rachel, stays for about a month, and then asks for her hand in marriage.

The Bible says that Jacob did all this because he was in love with Rachel! Again, let me emphasize that this idea of being “in love” does not occur very often in the Old

²⁸ Ibid., 166-7.

Testament at all. And our friend Jacob had it bad. Instead of offering a normal dowry in exchange for Rachel's hand in marriage, Jacob offers to work for her father for seven years! He meant business; he was *not* going to let himself be outbid. So he worked the seven years, and when it was finally time to marry his beautiful bride, Rachel's father subbed Rachel's less attractive (to put it lightly) older sister in for Rachel so that Jacob married the wrong woman! When Jacob found out, he was incredibly upset. But again, he was not going to let Rachel slip through his fingers. He was in love! He agreed to work another seven years in order to finally have Rachel as his bride. Now if that doesn't sound like something you'd see on a Lifetime romance movie, I don't know what does. All because of a chance meeting at a well...

I was astounded to discover that there is so much romantic history that takes place at the wells throughout the Old Testament, and two of these stories are directly related to Jacob, the original owner of the exact well that the Samaritan woman used day in and day out. The more I thought about it, the more Jacob and the Samaritan woman seemed to have in common. Jacob, who stole his brother's birthright and cheated his own father into blessing him with the oldest son's blessing, spent years running away from the mistakes he had made early in life. Later, Jacob cheated Rachel's father and was forced to flee from him too. Pretty soon, Jacob's life had become all about avoiding the past; escaping failures, broken relationships, and searching tirelessly for something that would bring him peace. Whether the Samaritan woman realized it or not, Jacob himself could identify quite well with her situation.

In her exchange with Jesus in John 4, the woman claims Jacob as her ancestral father as an affront to Jesus and His Jewish heritage. In making such a statement the

Samaritan woman reveals that she is acquainted with the history of the Jewish people. She was, after all, partially Jewish herself.²⁹ I just have to wonder if, on her way to the well in the extreme heat of midday, the Samaritan woman ever thought about the romantic way Jacob met Rachel at a similar well one day, or the way Jacob's mother was chosen for Isaac at a well just like the one she was about to visit. Perhaps she even thought about the way Moses stood up to protect Zipporah and her sisters and rescued them from the wicked shepherds. Maybe some days she entertained hopeful thoughts: "Today could be the day he will meet me there. Today could be the day that I'll be swept away from here to start a brand new life. Could today be the day that I am finally rescued?" I can imagine that the more days she dared to ask those questions as she trudged to the well, the more embittered she became when she was met, not with romance, love, and acceptance, but with the same judgmental glances and hateful whispers she had intercepted the day before. And the day before that. And the day before that.

²⁹ Craig S. Keener, *Bible Background Commentary*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 273.

Sunsets, Snowflakes, and Promises Kept

Last night I walked outside and saw the first few snowflakes of winter falling to the ground. I love snow in December, but I was a little caught off guard by how excited I was. Snow never seemed more beautiful to me than it did last night. Maybe it's because of some things I've been thinking about lately.

A snowflake is actually formed when moisture freezes to a particle of dust or dirt in the air. The water freezes into crystals of all kinds of unique shapes and gravity pulls the flakes to the ground. The snowflake could never exist without the impurities to build on. So in actuality, as I stood among the beautiful, sparkling snowflakes last night, I was also standing in a whirlwind of dust and dirt. Not exactly the epitome of poetry, but it's true just the same.

Sort of like last Sunday evening as I drove through Illinois on my way back to school. Watching the sun slowly setting reminded me of an off-the-cuff remark made by my geology professor last year. After he had finished explaining some geological concept about which he was especially excited, a student playfully asked him if he ever simply enjoyed the beauty of nature without thinking about it in scientific terms. He thought for a moment and responded, "Well, not really. When I see a really beautiful sunset, I can't help but realize that the colors are made especially bright by the sun's reflection off the pollution and other impurities in the air. That doesn't ruin the beauty for me, though. It kind of enhances it."

I remember wondering how the beauty of a sunset could possibly not be ruined by thinking of it in terms of pollution and light reflection. What's beautiful about impurities in the air? How does the thought of pollution not destroy an otherwise magnificent sunset? Sunsets were intended to be thought of in terms of their purity, I thought. But last Sunday as I watched the sky turn from pale blue to deep yellow, and then to brilliantly wild colors of pink and purple and orange, I began to understand what's beautiful about an incredible sunset made particularly stunning by the smog of Chicago. Or a tiny sparkling white snowflake that originated with a little moisture and a particle of dirt.

There's something incredibly encouraging about the fact that, in order to make something breathtakingly beautiful, God doesn't need material that's pure or clean or pristine or even wanted. He creates whole

landscapes covered with brilliant white snow out of millions of dust and dirt particles. And with the help of engine exhaust and poisonous gas and other contaminants, He paints the sky with colors so extraordinary that no camera or painted image could ever do them justice.

And if God cares enough to paint a sunset using the exhaust of vehicles driven by people who are far too busy to notice the masterpiece melting into the landscape in front of them, and if He's creative enough to use the dirt that we consider worthless to create a fresh blanket of snow so pure that it nearly blinds us when the sun accentuates its brilliance, then I just have to believe that He cares enough to do the same in me. I have to believe that He will take the things in my life that seem worthless, shattered, and completely unsalvageable, and turn them into something more extraordinary than I could have dreamed. Please know, I would never wish for more smog, or more dust, or more heartache or pain. But I am painfully aware that these are inevitable. And my God reassures me, in sunsets and snowflakes, that from the worthless, wasted, and wounded, He will create beauty beyond measure.

Chapter 5: Traversing the Canyon

Already God was using the story of the Samaritan woman to teach me an incredibly important lesson about His faithfulness, even in the midst of incredible pain. You see, I had been functioning as though the resolution of my story—the “happily ever after” part—is the element of the story in which God proves His faithfulness. In fact, many Christians view their stories that way. It’s true—when God intervenes and changes dire circumstances, He shows Himself to be faithful in a really powerful way. He restores order to chaotic situations, He heals sickness, He mends brokenness, and He brings us out of our struggles faithfully. Those are all wonderful examples of His faithfulness. But if the primary value of our story lies in the resolution of the conflict, then we have a little bit of a problem: If it’s the “happily ever after” that proves God’s love for us and His faithfulness, where does that leave us when our story is in the thick of its conflict? What does that mean for those whose stories seem to have no happy ending? If God’s faithfulness is demonstrated by a peaceful resolution, what can we say about God’s love in the midst of the pain we face?

Jesus made His way through Samaria with His precious sister of Samaria in mind, and He made sure that when the time came He was sitting at the well waiting for her. By the time she arrived that day, Jesus was ready to show her just how much He genuinely cared for her; He was ready to step into her story and walk with her through it. The truth is that God isn’t just faithful at the end of the fairytale; He’s faithful through every single element of our story. In the same way that Jesus met the Samaritan woman in the middle of her pain, He meets us right in the middle of ours. Relationships are messy and complicated, but Jesus isn’t afraid to get into the mud with us. He’s no fair-weather

friend. In the highs and lows, the victories and losses, the resolution and the tangled mess of conflict—God is with us and shows us His love in brand new ways. Every twist in the plot finds us in a totally new scene, and every step of our journey finds us in a brand new place, taking on new heights or depths that we have never known before. As our circumstances and the scenery of our lives continually change, each new vantage point enables us to view God’s love, faithfulness, and grace working in a way that we could never have understood before that moment.

A father holding his newborn daughter for the first time knows something far more about the love of God for humanity than he could ever have grasped before that moment. A man watching the love of his life walk toward him down the aisle discovers firsthand the passion Christ has for the Church. The mother enduring the heartbreak of losing a son experiences the depths of God's comfort offered to the brokenhearted in their darkest hour. Those who have been abandoned learn the special affection that God has reserved for the fatherless and the widow. Because God is unshakably determined to demonstrate His love to us at all times, every experience—even our most difficult trials—are an opportunity to have joy.

That does not mean that we are expected to pretend that our story is happy when it isn't. We all experience pain and struggle and difficulty in all kinds of forms, and God does not ask us to be anything other than authentic about what we are feeling. But remember that joy and happiness are different things. Happiness is an emotion that is rooted in our circumstances—what we're feeling in relation to what we're facing. Happiness operates based on what has already come to pass. Thomas Jefferson wrote in

the Declaration of Independence that all men are entitled to the pursuit of happiness. That's pretty insightful—happiness is something that we pursue.

Imagine one of those balancing acts in which the acrobat has several plates, each balancing and spinning on a long rod. He runs from plate to plate, carefully steadying and spinning one plate in order to buy enough time to go and steady the others. After plenty of effort, he may find that all the plates are spinning steadily enough that he can stand amidst them victoriously for a few brief seconds before they all start to wobble again, threatening to crash to the ground. Anyone who has ever really pursued happiness can relate to the metaphor. We do our best to balance physical health, family, social lives, careers, finances, emotional stability, and spiritual well-being, and every now and then we find everything nearly perfectly balanced, and we call it happiness. It's an emotion that is magnificent when we can finally capture it, but it is incredibly fleeting.

Joy, on the other hand, goes much deeper than emotion. While happiness flees at the first sign of trouble, joy simply can't be chased away. Joy is able to stand up against opposition because it doesn't act in response to present circumstances. You see, joy lives and acts with expectation and an awareness of a bigger reality than what we can see. Simply put, where happiness looks backward, joy looks forward. And for that reason, even when happiness flees, joy endures.

I grew up going to school in Wisconsin, and there's a special time of the school year in Wisconsin that is especially full of joy. It comes in late January every year like clockwork—snow day season! Once in a while during this best part of the school year, we would hear forecasts of a huge storm coming in the next day, and suddenly the whole

school was living in a bigger reality than what we could see through our classroom windows. Outside the streets and sidewalks were clear, but our incredibly glad hearts knew that this wouldn't be the case tomorrow. On those days, students seemed to perk up a bit more in class. There wasn't nearly so much complaining about homework and tests. Even the teachers had an extra bounce in their step and a hint of a grin as they casually mentioned that "we might get to sleep in tomorrow." That's exactly what joy is like: Living and moving and acting based on a reality that is bigger than what we can see.

Our joy isn't rooted in what we are feeling, but in what we know to be true despite our circumstances. That is something that the Apostle Paul understood impeccably well. When Paul was weak, he rejoiced! It meant that others would get to see God's power even more clearly in contrast. When Paul was persecuted, he rejoiced! He was able to identify on a really personal level with the sufferings of Christ. When he was imprisoned, he rejoiced! Now the prisoners and guards would get to hear the gospel! And when they let Paul go free, he rejoiced! Now he could continue his mission to plant churches all over the world! You see, Paul understood this concept of joy in a profound, life-shaping way. It seemed that the more suffering he faced, the better he understood what joy was really all about.

Paul's joy wasn't related to some positive event that had already come to pass. His joy was rooted in the confident knowledge that God is at work in every single circumstance—whether pleasant or unpleasant, whether anticipated or completely unforeseen—to redeem what has been broken or warped or misused and to make everything work for the good of those who love Him. Paul found the incredible peace that is available to us in the knowledge that God is in control, that He is on our side, and that

nothing will ever separate us from His love that always protects, always hopes, and always perseveres. That knowledge is what makes joy so unshakable. Unlike happiness, joy can withstand even the most difficult and painful circumstances. Unlike happiness, joy doesn't have to be doggedly pursued. Where happiness flees, joy endures.

Imagine that you are going to take a trip to go hike the Grand Canyon. You buy the plane ticket, rent the equipment, plan the route, and meticulously line up all the details of the trip. Finally the day of the trip arrives, and you show up with all your gear packed, ready to hike. As you stand at the mouth of the Grand Canyon, you take in the incredible view of this massive, cavernous, natural wonder sprawled out in front of you. Just before you step forward and begin your long journey across the chasm, you instruct the person next to you to put a blindfold on you. When the blindfold is securely in place, you slowly make your descent into the gorge and go on to spend the whole day hiking blindly, carefully feeling your way down into the canyon, past huge boulders, and up steep cliffs. And when you finally reach other side of the canyon, you finally remove the blindfold, turn around, and take in the exact same view you enjoyed at the beginning of the day just before you put the blindfold on.

That would be absurd, wouldn't it? Why would you go through all of that preparation and spend all of that time and energy without experiencing what it's like to peer up from the bottom of the canyon or down a steep cliff as you climb? What's the value of the experience if we go through so much preparation and spend so much energy and effort only to enjoy the same singular, superficial view we could have found sitting at home perusing pictures of the Grand Canyon on Google? Why would anyone neglect to take in all that such an experience has to offer?

If we spend our whole journey longing for redemption in the form of a happy ending or a final resolution, we miss out on the superior redemption that He yearns to give us all along in the form of divine comfort, peace, strength, provision, and soul-satisfying relationship. We cheat ourselves out of such an intimate and valuable knowledge of God's love for us when we allow ourselves to believe that happy endings are the only evidence of His faithfulness. When we stop being so concerned with reaching a destination in which we're comfortable or safe or even happy, we find that His faithfulness and character are exhibited in every moment of our story and in a myriad of beautiful ways, so that despite our circumstances, we find overwhelming joy in discovering God's faithfulness, always deeper and always more intimately than before.

You're Always

*Yesterday,
When everything was so uncertain,
You, God, asked only for my trust,
And I was so unwilling.*

*But today,
I understand what I couldn't yesterday,
And I see that the whole time You knew.
You always know.*

*Yesterday,
When the future loomed before me like an unconquerable mountain,
I wondered where my God was, and why He was not there to save me.
And I was so weak.*

*But today,
As those mountains shrink to mere stepping stones to the future You've created for me,
I can see that You hold my life and all that I am in Your hands.
You always hold me.*

*Yesterday,
I saw everything changing, life as I knew it began to crumble.
And I began to wonder if my God really knew what He was doing; if He was really there.
And I was so restless.*

*But today,
You bring along just the right friend; just the right song; just the right verse,
And I see that You, my Creator, are incapable of mistake, and You give me peace.
You've always been my Peace.*

*Yesterday,
When the lies of this world surrounded me and convinced me that You're not enough,
I wondered how I could've been so mistaken; how You could let me down.
And I was so faithless.*

*But today,
When I was all alone and empty, having selfishly accused a Holy God of so much wrong,
In the light of Your Truth I see that You never left me; You never will.
You're always there.*

*Yesterday,
When I sought fulfillment in everything I know I don't need,
You stood with Your arms of love and forgiveness open wide.
And I turned my back; I was so ignorant.*

*But today,
I find myself broken again, and still You're beside me—right where You've always been,
I can see that You never change; Your love and grace are endless and enduring.
You're always endless.*

*Yesterday,
As I drove to church, dressed in hypocrisy and selfishness,
I wondered to myself what You would do for me, and whether it would be good enough
for me.
And I was so misguided.*

*But today,
As I look back on how You've captured me over and over with Your love,
I can see that I owe you my life. You've saved me from myself.
You always save.*

*Yesterday,
As I wrestled with what You've asked of me,
I allowed myself to forget that all You do and all You ask is for my own benefit.
And I was so calloused.*

*But today,
Having chosen, after all, to follow You,
I can see that Your plan is immeasurably more than I could have orchestrated.
You Yourself are Immeasurably More.*

*Yesterday,
I was so small, so weak, so helpless and misguided.
I thought that fitting in, being successful, having everything else was so important.
And I was so insecure in all that I was not.*

*But today,
As You remind of me the immensity of Your plans for me, and how valuable I am to You,
I can see that I have security and value and purpose in all that You are.
You've always been my security; my value; my purpose.*

*Yesterday,
I was unwilling. I failed. I was restless, wrong, insecure, and ignorant.
I rejected You—the only Source of life, Who provides all I need and immeasurably more.
And I was so broken by my own imperfection.*

*But today,
Your joy awakens me in the morning. All through my day Your grace refreshes me.
Your love encompasses me and reminds me that yesterday is yesterday.
I see that I'm nothing without You, and I've never been so content in my nothingness.
After all, You've always been my everything.*

Chapter 6: Wrestling With God

Now that we know about the profound hopelessness that the Samaritan woman was feeling in light of her painful past and about God's incredible grace that desired to meet her in the midst of it, we have a whole new set of lenses through which we can view her interaction with Jesus at the well:

John 4:4-9: Now He had to go through Samaria. So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about the sixth hour. When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, 'Will you give me a drink?' (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.)

The Samaritan woman said to him, 'You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?' (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)

Before this moment, I had always found the Samaritan woman's response to Jesus so completely disrespectful. When someone who is about two hundred rungs above you on the social ladder asks you for something, the last thing you should do is respond, "Why are you asking me?" Let's try to put ourselves in the Samaritan woman's shoes here. Men in her day were considered far superior to women, and Samaritans were absolutely hated by the Jews. Jewish teachers would spare themselves even the tiniest potential for reproach by refusing to talk to women at all.³⁰ But here's a Jewish man—a rabbi, of all things—just waiting at the well (sound familiar?) and he starts talking to a Samaritan woman. This is such a big no-no. And a really naïve woman might be thinking in the back of her mind, "It's happening! He's asking me for a drink! It's just like what

³⁰ Ibid., 242.

happened to Rebekah!” But the Samaritan woman has been through all this in her head more than a few times, and she knows she’s no Rebekah. She’s older, and she’s done the unthinkable, has been married five times, and is now living with her boyfriend. She’s used up, worn out, and worthless. Jesus’ little throwback to the nauseatingly romantic Old Testament love stories is much more like a painful jab than a spark of hope. Now I was beginning to understand the cold and bitter attitude that caused her to react the way she did. She was hurting—really hurting. I’m sure that’s why Jesus ignored her sharp response and kept the conversation rolling:

John 4:10-12: Jesus answered her, ‘If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.

‘Sir,’ the woman said, ‘you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his flocks and herds?’

That response sure sounds an awful lot like, “Yeah? You don’t even have a bucket, buddy. Who do you think you are? You think you’re better than Jacob?” Little did she know that the man she’s attempting to put in his place is the One who created Jacob. She didn’t have the slightest clue what she had set herself up for when she made that comment. Jesus could have said, “I’m so glad you asked! As a matter of fact, I AM greater than Jacob. I knew about Jacob (and everyone else on the planet, for that matter) even before the world was created, and I planned every day of his life. I guided Abraham’s servant and selected Rebekah to be Jacob’s mother at a well just like this one, and I knit him together in her womb, detail by intricate detail. So yes, I do think I’m greater than Jacob. Thanks so much for asking.” That would have ended the conversation

pretty quickly, but that's clearly not what Jesus wanted. He simply brushed off her accusing remark and continued:

John 4:13-15: Jesus answered, 'Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.'

The woman said to him, 'Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.'

Finally! She's slowly but surely becoming engaged in this conversation. Jesus' persistence and patience is beginning to break through her cold defenses. It's not too hard to understand why she took the bait here, either. Every trip to the well was a chance for her ugly past and her loneliness to stare her straight in the face. The thought that she might never need to return here again was surely more appealing than you and I could ever understand.³¹ In her eagerness to learn how to avoid the well, the woman had inadvertently exposed a tiny bit of the pain that she faced every day during that trip. And Jesus boldly decided to dig even closer to the root of her bitterness:

John 4:16-17a: He told her, 'Go, call your husband and come back.'
'I have no husband,' she replied.

Kind of amusing—she thinks she's going to skim around this subject quite easily and just get straight to the living water she's interested in. Not to mention that this is a convenient opportunity to let this stranger know that she's available. The response she receives isn't quite what she anticipated:

³¹ Arthur Walkington Pink, *Exposition on the Gospel of John*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975), 196-7.

John 4:17b-18: Jesus said to her, ‘You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.’

Ouch! That conversation got pretty personal pretty quickly. You may wonder how Jesus could just go for the jugular like that. I know I did. Some scholars say that there has to be more conversation that happened there, and others say that there are details left out that would show this to be a less offensive or painful statement than it appears to be.³² We can only say for certain that, up to this point, Jesus has demonstrated incredible love and patience toward the Samaritan woman, and by that fact we know that his purpose isn’t to hurt her. Still, in a conversation with a woman so broken, calloused, and vulnerable, what purpose could such a seemingly insensitive question serve?

Keeping in mind that this conversation is taking place at Jacob’s well, and in light of the fact that both Jacob and his parents met because of interactions at a well just like this one, perhaps a closer look at Jacob’s story might shed some light here. When we met Jacob earlier, he was on the run from his brother and happened to run right into the love of his life. But why he was running in the first place?

After Isaac and Rebekah’s fairytale meeting and marriage, Rebekah became pregnant with twins, the younger of whom was Jacob. Jacob’s older brother Esau was their father’s favorite—he was strong and tough and manly. He was a robust and skillful hunter. He was so masculine that even his name literally meant “hairy!” As Isaac lay on his deathbed, he called to his beloved son Esau and told him to go out and prepare to receive his blessing. Rebekah heard this and quickly disguised Jacob with camel skin and

³² Leon Morris, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel According to John*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 264-5.

sent him in to steal his brother's blessing. It worked like a charm, and soon Jacob had finally received the affirmation of his father, though only technically. From that point on, Jacob had to run for his life for fear that Esau would kill him.

Fast forward about twenty or thirty years, to the part of the story recorded in Genesis 32. God has finally called Jacob to go back home and face Esau. As Jacob heads toward his homeland, he sends messengers ahead of him to tell Esau that he is coming home and to offer more than five hundred livestock as a peace offering. The messengers return to Jacob with an alarming message: *We went to your brother Esau, and now he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him.* Now desperately fearing for the lives of his family and his servants, Jacob separates the servants into two groups hoping to at least spare half of them and sends his family to seek safety on the other side of a nearby stream. Finally, for what he realizes may be the very last night of life, Jacob separated himself from the group to be alone.

On this night of terror and desperation, just before Jacob is to confront Esau in an attempt to salvage their broken relationship, Jacob is alone in the wilderness for the night and finds himself wrestling with a man. For the entire night the struggle continues, until finally, just as daylight is beginning to break, the man touches Jacob's hip—barely grazes it—and it is completely wrenched out of its socket! Jacob realizes at once that the Man he has been wrestling is divine; by lightly touching his hip He's given him a limp! Genesis 32:30 says, *So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared."* This is a beautiful story, but I can't help wondering why God would even bother to wrestle Jacob. This is clearly a no-contest battle. He could

completely disable Jacob or even kill him if he so desired. Why would he choose to let Jacob fight back?

This is where the stories of Jacob and the Samaritan woman coincide. In both cases, the human character is having an intense altercation with God. And in both cases, God astoundingly chooses not to defeat or destroy His opponent, but to engage with them. Without demonstrating superior strength in some way, Jacob would never have realized that he was in a tussle with His own Creator, and this conflict would never have become more than a simple wrestling match. But by simply touching Jacob's hip, God revealed Himself unmistakably to Jacob and brought him from the realm of physical battle to a place of spiritual deliberation. The same is true of the discussion between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. The shock of Jesus' boldness in declaring her personal situation not only served to reveal Jesus' spiritual authority, but finally allowed the Samaritan woman to move from thinking in terms of physical water and thirst to understanding the spiritual implications of the living water offered in Christ. A genuine interaction with God can't take place until we finally begin to understand exactly Who it is that we are wrestling. So often we pray for our circumstances to change, but fail to see that our struggle is rooted in a far deeper realm than we realize. God's self-revelation in the midst of our circumstances is the first step to addressing and satisfying our deepest spiritual needs.

Don't You Know?

"God," I accused,

"Don't You know?"

Don't You know how much You're letting me down?

Have You forgotten to give me what I need?

Have You not seen my faithfulness?

Don't You love me enough to see what I'm going through--

How I need more than just You?

Don't You know I need more?

Don't You know?"

"My child," You whispered,

"Don't you know?"

Don't you know that with mere words I spoke creation into existence?

Don't you know that I call each star and planet by name?

Don't you know that I created life itself?

Don't you know that I hold the oceans in the hollow of my hand?

Don't you know that I tell the dawn when to break

And at my command the moon rises and the sun sets?

Don't you know?

Don't you know that the creativity and diversity that created

Both roses and reptiles; clouds and Redwoods; spider webs and laughter—

That very same power knit you together in your mother's womb?

Don't you know that I thought of you before I spoke the stars into the sky?

Don't you know that before light dawned on the earth,

With anticipation I made plans for you--

A beautiful, unique, loved creation,

And thought of your name and your personality and your heart?

Don't you know?

Don't you know that I love you?

Don't you know that I've been here the whole time?

When you look back at all we've been through—

Life, with its tragedies and victories;

Its smiles and tears and laughter--

Don't you see that I've guided you?

Don't you see that I've never let you fall from My hand,

And I've held you and carried you through?

Don't you see that I've been drawing you closer to Me?

*Don't you know that your loving Creator
Will not fail to give you all that you were created to need?
My child, I will go beyond your wildest expectations.
Don't you trust that I know what's best for My own creation,
And that I want the best for you more than anything else?
I AM what is best for you, My child.*

*Don't you know?
Don't you know that I left a perfect and glorious heaven
And came to a world full of darkness and hate—your world—
Because, more than anything, I wanted to save you from it?
Don't you know that,
In the face of your fear,
In the face of your unbelief,
In the face of your rejection,
All I wanted was to rescue you?
All I wanted was to give you the very best.
All I wanted was to give you Myself.
All this time I've pursued you with My love,
Trying to help you to see just how much you mean to Me.
Don't you know that?*

*Don't you know?
Don't you know how much I just want to be with you;
To comfort and love you and show you Myself?
Don't you know that I love everything about you?
I love your eye color—there's none quite like it.
I love your smile—it makes me smile.
I love your laugh—when it rings out, it's unspeakably beautiful.
I love your heartbeat—moment by precious moment, I tap out its unique rhythm.
I love how passionate you are—even when it isn't for me.
I love your hands—I have wonderful plans for all that they will do.
I love your intelligence—you see the world uniquely and beautifully.
I love your personality—it's you by design.
I love your expression—your voice is your own.
I love your walk—and I love to walk with you.
I love your story—I wrote it.
I love YOU, my child.
Don't you know that?*

*Don't you know?
Don't you know that I would never leave you?
Don't you know that it pains me to see you in pain?
Don't you know that I've seen every tear, and I've shared in your hurt?
Don't you know that I want to take that from you,
And show you all you were made for?
Don't you know that I've created you to do great things?
Don't you know that all it requires is your trust?
Don't you know that you're beautiful and valuable and loved?
Don't you know, my child?
Don't you know?"*

*"God," I managed, "I know.
Forgive me—I let myself forget.
But now I remember, and I'm overcome.
Break me of everything that holds me back from You, Father.
Help me to let go of everything that keeps me from knowing,
Both in my head and in my heart,
That You, my God,
Keep every promise forever.
And in everything I face,
You are molding me, making me, completing me,
To be all that You see in me,
Though I couldn't deserve it less.
Forgive me, God,
For finding such a beautiful promise inadequate.
Forgive me for every breath I've wasted in worship
To anything or anyone less than You,
For You—You alone—are the Strength of my heart and my Portion forever."*

Chapter 7: God's Priority

Perhaps in order to better understand what is going on in God's interaction with the Samaritan woman and with Jacob, we ought to ask ourselves what motivation is driving His action in these stories. What is God's priority after all? What makes Him tick? What is the heartbeat of His mission, above all of His good purposes, underlying every action in history? What drives the heart of God to do what He does? Have you ever thought about it? We Christians sing songs asking that He would break our hearts for what breaks His; we pray that He would bring us into step with Himself and that He would match our desires with His. So what exactly are they? More specifically, what is the fundamental motivation which drives them? What is His top priority?

I've presented this question to many of my friends and the more I think about it, the more I realize what an important question it is. Our answer reveals a lot about our understanding of God's character. It's what led A.W. Tozer to assert that "what comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us."³³ When first confronted with the question of God's "top priority," most people I've asked have thought for a few moments before responding with a half-certain statement—something to the tune of, "Well, I think God's priority is to save us, have a relationship with us, and show us how much He loves us."

I have to affirm that offering salvation to us and forming deep, soul-satisfying relationships with us is certainly *a* priority of God. If it weren't, Christ definitely wouldn't have been moved to leave heaven—the surging center of complete peace, joy,

³³ A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1978), 1.

and fulfillment—and enter a broken, hateful, pain-stricken earth. That’s not something that is done half-heartedly. Jesus’ decision to wrap Himself in human flesh and experience life the way that you and I do is in itself a sacrifice requiring commitment and determination that is far beyond our comprehension. Add that to His willingness to endure murder on the cross on our behalf, and we’re talking about a sacrifice so utterly incomprehensible that it can only be explained as the work of a God who loves so recklessly, extravagantly, and intimately that He would do everything imaginable and more to sustain relationship with His creation. So, absolutely, demonstrating that life-altering love, and enacting it in us has unarguably been a significant priority of God throughout history. Admittedly, though, that hasn’t been *the* priority. Or more accurately, it isn’t the whole priority.

Our best opportunity to understand God’s ultimate priority is to hear what He has said about Himself in Scripture. God boldly declares in Isaiah 42:8, *I am the LORD; that is my name! I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols.* This leaves absolutely no room for argument or excuse. It could not be stated any stronger or with any more clarity. He is Yahweh, Creator and Sustainer of all that exists, and He *will not* share His praise or His fame. No negotiation. That’s a pretty forceful statement! And, as matter of fact, that’s not the only one like it. Throughout the Old and New Testaments, God’s action is described as being “for His name’s sake” or “for His glory” hundreds and hundreds of times. *I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins,* God declares in Isaiah 43:25. A fervent prayer of David in Psalm 79:9 reads, *Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of your name; deliver us, and atone for our sins, for your name's sake!* 1 John 2:12 declares, *Your sins are forgiven*

for his name's sake. In John 12:27b-28, Jesus speaks of His coming crucifixion: “*It was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!*” Then a voice came from heaven, “*I have glorified it, and will glorify it again.*”

What does it mean for God to do things for the sake of His own name and His own glory? It means that, in everything He does, God intends to put the spotlight on Himself and to exhibit His immeasurable power. He is at the very core of everything that exists. His whole creation—from galaxies and oceans to rose petals and garden snakes—serves to remind us of that fact. God’s ultimate purpose—His very highest priority—is His own glory; His passion is His fame. More than anything else, God wants to point all of creation to Himself. He wants to put Himself at the forefront of all attention, to establish Himself at the center of the universe and make Himself famous above, beyond, and before every created thing.³⁴

At this point we may be getting a little uncomfortable. God’s top priority is to make Himself famous? Forgive me for saying so, but all this talk of God demanding attention for Himself seems more reminiscent of a toddler’s temper tantrums or of an attention-seeking teenager’s Facebook status update than of the radically loving, star-breathing, all-powerful Creator of the universe. C.S. Lewis shares in his Reflections on the Psalms that for a long time he was put off by Christianity, because the Christian God’s preoccupation with His own glory was “like a vain woman wanting compliments.”³⁵ Why would God act so insecure? The Apostle Paul informs the people of Athens in Acts chapter 17 that *[God] is not served by human hands, as if He needed*

³⁴ John Piper, *Don't Waste Your Life*, (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2003), 27-28.

³⁵ C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1958), 90-98.

anything; He Himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. If God is all-powerful and doesn't need our attention or praise or approval, why does He put so much effort into making Himself famous? Is He prideful and arrogant? Is He so petty as to simply want the world's constant attention? Worse yet, does His power or purpose in the world depend on our acknowledgement of Him?

Imagine you are on your honeymoon in South America. As you and your lawfully wedded spouse swim out into the crystal clear water, all of a sudden you are viciously attacked by a shark. You hardly know what has happened as your body goes into shock. The frantic cries for help, the overwhelming pain of your injuries, and the sight of so much blood become a blur of panic racing through your body. There are voices all around you, but none in a language you understand. The onlookers are trying to wrap your wounds, but the cries of your new spouse inform you that the situation remains far outside their control. Suddenly, a few words you can understand emerge out of the jumbled, hysterical mess. Someone is speaking in English. His breathing is labored—he's sprinted a distance—but as the breath comes to him he tries to explain. "Please... I can help. I'm a doctor... a surgeon..." The crowd pays little attention to him for a few moments. He becomes more and more insistent, urging those gathered around you to allow him to take over. Soon enough the crowd makes room, and as the doctor begins to call out orders to the onlookers, he quickly and skillfully works to stop your bleeding and prepares you for medical transport.

The next day, the story makes headlines all over the country. News reporters flock to the hospital to which you've been airlifted and beg for an interview. Your spouse is given a copy of the national newspaper and translates the title, which reads: "Know-It-All

Surgeon Shows Off On Remote Beach Front.” The report explains the story in detail and contains several quotes from onlookers complaining about the attention-starved doctor and his arrogance in taking over at the scene of the accident the previous day. “It was really a disgusting show of pride and self-importance,” one woman is reported to have said. “If only he hadn’t been so full of himself, we could certainly have gotten the situation under control ourselves.”

Sounds plausible, right? Wrong! This man is a hero! The story is a sensation! People can’t stop talking about how lucky you were that he was there and that he was able to step in at that moment. His face is plastered on every newspaper and television news report in the country, and rightly so. You owe him your life! The actions of this man were not arrogant in the least. Suppose he had stood at the back of the crowd, timidly mentioning, “Sorry to bother you all, but I, uh...went to medical school...and well...I practice medicine. If you need any help, I could probably be of some assistance. If not, that’s completely fine. Just let me know.” What kind of doctor would he be? That would be uncaring and, frankly, stupid—a waste of precious time. False humility and reticence have no place at a time like that. Instead, a surgeon must have the sense to recognize the severity of a situation and possess the self-awareness that his medical knowledge and skill make him the best person to handle it. And no doubt about it, in that moment, you need the very best.

A surgeon, who has spent years studying the human body and practicing medicine, knows the body well enough to save a person on the verge of death. Imagine how much better the One who knit that body together in his mother’s womb must know it. The Artist responsible for your unique eye color, the Designer of your personality, the

Constructor of your intellect, the Shaper of your smile, the Teacher of your talent, the Poet that taps out the rhythm of your heartbeat and distinguishes it from all others—consider how intimately and thoroughly He knows you. The Creator knows His creation better than anyone else can know it. He is in every way the very best for us. At any given moment, we are in every way completely reliant on His power simply to survive, and He knows it. After all, “He Himself gives all men life and breath and everything else.” Every moment that we draw breath is a moment of total need and dependence that far outweighs the gravity of a shark attack—a need so profound that we could never begin to comprehend it.

The life of Solomon, as stated earlier, revolved entirely around his all-consuming desire to find total satisfaction. It wasn't just that Solomon wanted contentment—he deeply and intensely needed it. As a matter of fact, we all do. It seems to me that we are simultaneously aware and altogether unaware of this intense need. It's not just evident in Solomon's life; trace the life of any given individual, and you will quickly and easily find a path littered with relationships, undertakings, accomplishments, possessions, habits, hobbies, and addictions with which he or she has tried and failed to find a sense of total fulfillment, purpose, or happiness. Some of these “treatments” do seem to ease the discomfort and perhaps even numb it completely so that we forget about the wound for a while. Soon enough, though, despite our most adamant denial, we find that our latest business endeavor, or romantic relationship, or athletic achievement, or whatever it may be, has done nothing to heal us and in fact has only wasted precious time and left us in an even worse condition than before. Our panic level rises as we realize we are another year (or athletic season, or semester, or business quarter, or detox period, or Black Friday)

older and still have not accessed the total healing that surely another championship, or promotion, or scholarship, or big screen television would offer.

Obviously, like Solomon, we sense that a need is there, but we are so blinded by the intensity of that need that we can't remove ourselves from it enough to diagnose it. A doctor understands the severity of the wounds sustained in a shark attack and the exact steps and precautions to take in caring for such an injury. All that the victim himself can think in that desperate moment (if any coherent thought is possible at all) is that there is indescribable, unbearable pain that he or she will do anything it takes to escape it. And until it subsides, nothing else matters.

I don't know about you, but I can't imagine serving a God who is too shy or too polite or too concerned with false humility to step forward in those moments of intense need and declare Himself to be Who He is—the very Fulfillment for which we are so desperately searching. It is only through God's grace to us that we are sustained each day, and it is only in relationship with Him that we are truly fulfilled. Our need for Him is part of our identity. If God were indeed to sit passively by and allow our desperate condition to worsen as we look to everything and everyone else to fulfill our deepest needs, all the while knowing that only He can fulfill, it would be altogether unloving; it would be against His very nature. God's passion to place Himself at the center of our attention, His desire to make Himself known to every creature on earth, and His priority to demonstrate His supreme power in all of creation is far from an act of arrogance. For that matter, God is not capable of arrogance. He is infinite power and love and holiness and justice and mercy and strength! By definition, God cannot be overestimated. On the contrary, God's

passion for His own glory is rooted in honest, perfect self-awareness, and it is an act of profound love for all of creation in general and for all of humanity in particular.

The life-saving surgeon on the coast didn't step forward simply because he wanted to prove his skill to the onlookers, or because he needed an accolade, or because he wanted a newspaper clipping that his mother could frame and hang on the wall and brag about to her Bridge Club. There was a victim in need of rescue, and because the surgeon had been inclined to study and practice medicine, his natural response was to make himself known as the most qualified person to handle the crisis. In the same way, God doesn't act "for His name's sake" because He needs our attention, or because He wants to impress someone, or for any reason other than that He, as Creator and Sustainer, is supreme over every created thing; as such it is His very character to step forward in the midst of our need. This could not be better news for those who love and trust God, for it is to our supreme benefit that He acts in accordance with His character.

The Best Prayer I Know

In my very best moments, God, I catch a small glimpse of reality. In those rare, fleeting moments I am overwhelmed by the crystal clarity of this single, supreme truth: that everything and everyone in this universe exists for You, because of You, and entirely dependent upon You in every conceivable way. You are the Nucleus around which every created thing orbits. You are the Root that gives life to life itself, the Mind which by mere thought brings everything into existence, the Law which gives order to the universe. You are the Father that nurtures and intimately knows each child, the Friend who defines and embodies Love itself. Apart from You—apart from the I AM—nothing is.

In light of this eternal confession, Lord, the best prayer I know to pray is simply that You would help me to see. Dear Father, please help me to see. Be the lens through which I view the world, so that I may perceive reality as it is in truth, and not as my blind eyes mislead me to believe. Jesus, I want to see and value everything in this life in proportion to its ability to direct my attention back to You. I want You to be supremely glorified in all my affections, Lord. Consume me with an unquenchable desire to lift Your name high and to know You with ever-increasing intimacy. The very breath in my lungs is enough reason to sing Your name for eternity. May Your matchless name be praised today and forever; may heaven begin now. Amen.

Chapter 8: Spirit and Truth

God's desire to reveal Himself is demonstrated beautifully in the story of the Samaritan woman. She finds herself at the same old well one day with a man who seems genuinely interested in getting to know her, and she can't help but find herself drawn deeper and deeper into the conversation. Finally, she's presented with the perfect opportunity to highlight her singleness—just in case this man is interested. Then, without warning, she hears the details of her past and present relationships spilling out of this stranger's mouth. She's suddenly beginning to realize that there has been a great deal going on in this conversation underneath the surface. Now that Jesus has brought the Samaritan woman's deepest and most sensitive secret into the blinding light of His divinity, it seems she's ready to move on to another subject, and quickly.

John 4:19-20: 'Sir,' the woman said, 'I can see that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.'

Many commentaries suggest that the Samaritan woman uses this complex theologically charged question to take a step back, get her personal business out of the spotlight,³⁶ and replace it with something much more neutral and superficially "spiritual."³⁷ Perhaps by flattering Jesus and giving Him such a profoundly spiritual and controversial topic to chew on, she can distract Him from the long lecture on adultery He surely is ready to give her. If that is her thought process, I certainly can't blame her. I wouldn't want to have that conversation with a stranger either—especially with a man

³⁶ Craig S. Keener, *Bible Background Commentary*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 267.

³⁷ Arthur Walkington Pink, *Exposition on the Gospel of John*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975), 201.

who has just proved Himself to have spiritual insight and authority. But I am intrigued that she doesn't become angry or upset, nor does she return to her bitter, closed-off attitude. Instead she does something that I find admirable: Before anything else comes out of her mouth, she acknowledges that Jesus has spiritual authority. It may not sound like much, but I think it demonstrates a heartfelt humility and a trust that requires no defenses. I wonder how our lives might change if, in every situation we face, we could carry in our hearts the resounding confession, "Lord, I can see that You are God..."

The Samaritan woman's willingness to honestly confess the spiritual authority that she recognized in Jesus laid the groundwork for the rest of their conversation. This encounter is very likely the first civil exchange the Samaritan woman has ever had with a Jew. Surely this is her first conversation with a prophet! How often does that opportunity come knocking? Samaritans were considered half-breeds and rejected by the Jewish community, though they shared much of the same heritage. The Jews and Samaritans differed in opinion on several crucial issues, one of which was the question of worship. Of all the issues she could have chosen, this is the question she asks. Perhaps she's been chewing on this one for some time. Jesus, though He clearly knows how to cut to the chase, does not dodge this question or return to the topic of the failed marriages. The One who knows every thought of this woman's heart chooses to give validity to her question by answering it. If she was not interested at all in the question, I am convinced that Jesus would not have taken the time to answer.

Her question asks, "Are we the ones who are wrong about this? Are we the ones worshipping in the wrong place? Is that what I'm doing wrong? Does God only favor

their worship, like they claim He does? I can't help the heritage that I was born into; I can't help that I'm a Samaritan." I could completely identify with the Samaritan woman here, on both points. In this utterly broken season of my life, I was asking God day after day whether I was praying the wrong way, or whether I should be studying the Bible more, or doing more ministry, or more meditation, or more fasting...I figured that there must be some complex equation for the kind of spiritual life that would compel God to hear and answer me. But there were factors I just didn't have any control over, and it really didn't seem fair that God would impose this "spiritual chemistry" on me without giving me the tools I needed to balance it. Somehow, I had to determine which area of my spiritual life was out of balance, and I was hopeful that when I had achieved an acceptable standard of spiritual excellence, God would flood His presence right back into my life. The Samaritan woman's question resonated so deeply with me, because it was the exact question that I would have asked; that I had, in fact, been asking. Jesus' response was as much to me as it was to her:

John 4: 21-24: Jesus declared, 'Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in Spirit and in truth.'

There was her answer. And there was mine. God's connection to us is not a delicate balance or a complex equation. It has nothing to do with where we worship. Or how we say our prayers, or how much ministry we do, or how we spend our "devotion" time. He doesn't favor anyone, and no one is ever left out. Our relationship with our

Creator is simply that: a relationship—a matter of spirit and truth. It requires no balancing act, no complex equations, no mask-wearing, no dressing up, and no acting. It's not bought or won or earned, and it's not about emotion. It's about relationship—true, loving, honest relationship.

Mistakes, Tax Breaks, and Dead-End Destinations

Lord, I can't imagine how it feels to be taken for granted the way I've taken You for granted. All this time You've wanted real relationship with me—to really know me and to let me really know You. You've wanted to walk next to me, to be a part of each step, to talk with me, to help me understand Your heart, to share life with me, to simply be present. You desire to speak into every moment, giving special significance to even the most insignificant among them. God, I've been missing it. In all my religious attention to detail, my careful schedules and pious planning, I've been missing it.

You linger near me all day long, romancing me with everything from scenery to song lyrics; from stories to friends, family, and strangers alike. The same inherent beauty of these graces is found in everything You've created. They evidence Your incredible, extravagant love all day long, but hardly elicit a single word of gratitude from me anymore. Now and then I'll throw You a glance, rattle off a couple requests, perhaps read some Scripture, and spend a few moments making small talk before moving on to the next of many important things on my schedule, feeling pretty good about how spiritual I've come to be. I'm a master, after all; I hardly even have to try anymore.

But You, God, are all in; You have always been all in. This relationship between You and I has never been a casual one for You. You don't pursue unintentionally, You don't love on accident, and You don't lay down your life casually. You know my thirst for true life—meaningful, satisfying life—and you know exactly how life-giving this relationship could be. So You do what You can every day to get my attention; to show me in a thousand different ways just how deep and satisfying Your love is, and how much more You have for me if only I could pursue Your heart with just a fraction of the passion with which You've pursued mine. But soon enough I'm off and running, chasing after my own version of abundant life. As I'm drifting off to sleep at night I close my eyes and confess my emptiness, but never wait for Your reply. I complain that I'm dying, but won't quiet myself long enough to learn to trust You for life; I'm so thirsty, but I keep drinking sand.

I can't imagine what that's like for You, Lord. You're thinking so much bigger for me than I've ever thought for myself. You have a vision of all that this relationship can be, and no matter how many times I've

*missed it, You are committed to being right here. You have plans—
incredible, incomprehensible plans—of the places that we could go
together, the things that You could accomplish with my hands and feet, if
only I'd let them be Yours. And the story You'd write with my life would be
a series of memories so intimate that only You and I could really know the
depth of their meaning—a meaning would last into eternity, reaching far
across time and space, but rooted deeply in relationship, just Yours and
mine.*

*Meanwhile, here I am, rushing frantically up to You, asking
impatiently if You could just give me the directions I need to make it to the
next benchmark. I'm sold out for You and that ought to exempt me from
these waiting and guessing games, I say. Spirituality of my caliber ought
to count for something. You patiently try to explain that You want this to
be something that we share—something we can walk through together—
but I hardly hear a word. I'm too busy trying not to sound irritated as I
remind you that I can't call the winning plays if I don't have Your game
plan.*

*What is this? Is this really me? I say I'm sold out, but to what? To
some butler in the sky? Some divine GPS navigation system? Is this what
I've chosen to live for? Worse yet, is this what I'm trying to persuade
others to live for? The Creator of the universe—the One who breathes
planets into motion and paints sunsets in the sky, Who knew my name
before the stars were hung in their places, Who has me memorized right
down to the beats of my heart and the hairs of my head—this Creator
loved me enough to die on my behalf, to pursue me with His unfailing love,
and to patiently walk behind and before me through all my wandering and
arrogant pride, guiding me back to His arms every time. And here I am
treating this relationship as though it's a means to an end—like desiring
marriage for the sake of the wedding ring and tax breaks. I've been acting
as though there's some far-off destination I'm trying desperately to reach,
and this relationship with Messiah Himself is valuable only in proportion
to its ability to get me there. Where in the world do I think I've been
going? What a paradox: All my life, in all my desperate pursuit of dead-
end destinations, the only Destination worth my pursuit has been in
pursuit of me.*

Chapter 9: The Secret of Being Content

Jesus' explanation to the Samaritan woman next to the well that day revealed a religious misunderstanding that was incredibly prevalent at that time. Incidentally, it's a misconception that had once completely governed my own life, too, until God began to reveal to me the supremacy of relationship with Him over my own self-serving religiosity. Early in high school I had joined a youth ministry called Bible Quizzing—a competition in which students study certain books of the Bible each year and meet monthly to compete over the material being studied. At the start of my junior year, my coach suggested that I memorize all of the material being covered in competition that year—the books of Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. It's hard to describe what it was like for me during the process of memorizing that Scripture. My primary motivation for memorizing the Scripture was simply to get an edge on the competition and to have my name called at the awards ceremonies. But as chapter after chapter of Scripture was committed to memory, I could sense that there was a Power much greater than my own effort at work in me.

How absolutely fitting that the girl whose identity had been altogether wrapped up in personal achievement, in what others perceived of her, and in a false sense of religious piety, had been set to the task of memorizing the words of the Apostle Paul, a man whose life goals were once very much like my own—misguided and altogether incapable of delivering lasting fulfillment. Born with the perfect pedigree—a rare blend of authentic Jewish heritage and a respected role as a Roman citizen—Paul was raised in the rich

Hebrew tradition and had the incredible privilege of studying at the feet of Gamaliel, a well-respected Pharisee in the Sanhedrin.³⁸

In a time when the Jewish faith had become largely a matter of hierarchy and legalism, Paul himself became a member of the very highest caste of the Jewish faith—a Pharisee. The Pharisees prided themselves on their knowledge of the Law of Moses and their ability to keep it with special precision.³⁹ I had thought that my memorizing 5 short books of the New Testament would impress people, but I soon learned that my meager accomplishments couldn't even hold a candle to Paul. He memorized the first 5 books of the Old Testament as a young boy and committed himself to painstakingly keeping every single one of the 613 laws found in those Scriptures. Pharisees were relentless in their commitment to sound doctrine, extensive theological training, service in the Temple, adherence to a lengthy code of ethics, and observance of the Sabbath and special Jewish holy days. The Jewish faith for Paul had become all about rules, obligations, and commitments. The entire aim of Paul's life was to maintain this calculated, superficial perfection of the law. For all his hard work, Paul earned the right to the ultimate boast: "with regard to the law, I was faultless." Paul wrote to the Philippians that he had more right than anyone "to put confidence in the flesh." Yet, ironically, Paul's all-consuming commitment to religious "spotlessness" led him directly to the vicious persecution and violent murder of innocent followers of Christ.

Paul's own life, then, became a tangible example of the flagrant insufficiencies of legalistic, superficial, works-oriented righteousness. Despite his fervor, his pedigree, his

³⁸ Joseph Barber Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians*, (London: Macmillan, 1869), 146.

³⁹ Irwin Edman, *The Mind of Paul*, (New York: H. Holt and Co., 1935), 53.

outstanding education, and his prominence in the Jewish community, the ferocity and hatred that flowed naturally from his religious zeal were proof that Paul's righteousness was lacking something vital. It was not until his trip to Damascus one day to arrest some followers of Christ that Paul was confronted head-on with just what it was that he had been missing. Jesus Himself appeared to him, the very light of His glory temporarily blinding Paul. A man named Ananias prayed over Paul and baptized him, and with the restoration of his physical sight came a new spiritual vision that left Paul a radically changed man forever. The same fervor that had driven him to strive for prestige and honor in the eyes of others now drove him to preach and honor and glorify the name of Christ with a zeal that remains unparalleled to this day.

In the midst of a culture which was rooted so deeply in religiosity, Paul discovered the far-surpassing joy of relationship. There are no words which describe the profound impact of this discovery quite so powerfully as Paul's own:

Philippians 3:7-14: But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

Paul thoroughly and wholeheartedly understood what so few Christians throughout history seem to have grasped: the supreme aim of life is simply to know Christ. Jesus stepped into earth in order to bridge the chasm that had so long separated the creation from its Creator. Our very source of life itself—relationship with the Father is made possible by the powerful name of Jesus. We need not waste our time trying to earn it, nor feebly attempting to convince others that we deserve it. We need not deceive ourselves into believing that some sort of spiritual hierarchy exists, or that some of us are more or less in need of grace. We are all utterly broken and wholly at the mercy of a God who loves so wildly and relentlessly that He would give literally anything—even His own Son—for the precious opportunity to restore us to relationship with Himself.

Is it any wonder that Paul considered his former life of calculated rules and pious regulations to be worth no more than dung in light of such a love? They can achieve nothing for him; they can achieve nothing for us. There is no aim in life greater than that of knowing Christ and His reckless, radical love. Each moment spent striving toward any reality other than this is a moment that is utterly wasted. Jesus Christ became his everything—his Mission, his Motivation, his Foundation, his Source, the Lens through which he viewed life itself. To know Jesus Christ became Paul's heartbeat—the very heartbeat of him who declared, “I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through Him who gives me strength!”

Call Me Heavenward

Jesus, My soul longs for You, my body thirsts for You, in a dry and weary land where I am so prone to drink from every other well before Yours. You've given me this deep conviction that if I could only live with an acute awareness of Your constant presence with me, if I could only walk through life with my gaze set steadily on You, I would never thirst again. May my life's all-encompassing purpose be to simply know You more, to rest every moment in Your presence, to learn how to pray continually, and to daily lay all of myself before You. I want to know the intimacy and total surrender of being crucified with You, and I want to taste Your free, vibrant, resurrection life. I beg You, God, do not let me float through life complacently; I beg You to ignite a passion in me for Your name and Your glory that cannot be quieted or quenched. May this passion be the fuel that drives me deeper—always deeper—into everything You are. I can't bear the thought of living this life for anything less. Lord, I long for nothing more or less or other than just to know You more. In every moment, in every thought, in every interaction, I want to know You more. Be glorified in me forever. Amen.

Chapter 10: Messiah is Coming

The Samaritan woman may not have had the theological jargon to express it, but she understood the distinction between law and relationship profoundly. She knew that she had failed miserably when it came to the moral regulations of the Law. The attitudes of the other women in town, the heat of the noonday sun, and the loneliness of the well at midday were constant reminders of that. All that's left is to hope for redemption in something greater than the Law—something deeper and more personal. By the time Jesus finally delivers the life-giving message that God is One who desires to know us thoroughly, to satisfy us deeply, and to fill us absolutely, the Samaritan woman is ready to reveal the hope that has sustained her all this time.

John 4:25: The woman said, 'I know that Messiah' (called Christ) 'is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.'

What an incredible answer. This is the woman that everyone believes is a screw-up. Everyone has labeled her and written her off. She's the woman who is without friends and who lacks the fulfillment she's searched so desperately for. She finds herself making the same trip to the same well every single day, each time being reminded of everything she's ever done wrong. She has walked up to that well day after day for who knows how long, and after all those empty journeys, this wounded woman has the strength to look a complete stranger in the eye and confess, "I know that my Messiah is coming. I don't know when and I don't know how, but I'm holding on to this promise. And when He comes, He's going to have answers. And He's going to explain all of this to me." In this moment that she's been stripped down, her barriers broken through, and all her shame exposed, this woman reveals exactly what has driven her to keep going all this time. This

is the hope that carried her through her daily routine and brought her back to the well day after painful day: “Messiah is coming. He’ll explain everything. Messiah is promised. And He will come.” Her beautiful faith did, in fact, lead her to a romance far greater than Moses’ or Isaac’s or even Jacob’s:

John 4:26: Then Jesus declared, ‘I who speak to you, I am he.’

The Lover; the Pursuer; the Rescuer waiting for her at the well that day was Messiah Himself. Perhaps, after all those empty visits to the well, after all those moments she’d felt forgotten and abandoned, when each step she took in the scorching heat brought her a little closer to believing she’d never be truly fulfilled—perhaps after all of that, there was no need for explanation after all. Perhaps simply to have Messiah there was enough. And the truth He offered was even more beautiful than she had hoped! He was not waiting there for a beautiful young girl; a flawless bride of a rich heritage. He was waiting for her. He wanted to reenact the Old Testament romance with her. He wasn’t deterred when her response to His request for water was completely ungracious. He was unfazed when she doubted His abilities and accused Him of an inflated ego. He wasn’t persuaded to maintain a surface-level conversation, and He wasn’t put off by the imperfection He found beyond the barriers she had put up. He was committed to His pursuit—to this divine romance. He required no superficial perfection in her; He only desired what was real—spirit and truth. And He found just that in her simple, three-word confession: “Messiah is coming.” And thus, a romance was born; a love story infinitely more beautiful than any human romance could ever be.

Maybe all this talk about love stories and romance isn't for you. This fairy tale idea may not resonate with you nearly as richly or as personally as it did with the Samaritan woman. And you know what? That's on purpose! Remember Jacob? He grew up in the shadow of his brother, Esau, longing for the acceptance and favor of his father. Esau was muscular and masculine—a hunter. Jacob could never be the strong man that Esau was, and even when he tricked his father and stole Esau's blessing, Jacob knew that he did not have his father's genuine affection. Do you remember how God interacted with and engaged Jacob? They wrestled! What more masculine activity is there? And what could be more reminiscent of a father's interaction with his son? In giving Jacob the opportunity to showcase his endurance and strength, and in blessing him for it, God poured a fatherly affection over Jacob that his soul had always thirsted after.

Our Creator knows us intimately, and He does not let a single ounce of that knowledge go to waste in His pursuit of us. He challenges, engages, pursues, and romances us in ways that are completely unique to who we are and what we thirst for in relationship. For some, that longing is for love—for a suitor, provider and protector. For others, it is for approval, affection, and validation. For all of us, it is love; our basic need is unconditional love, and that need is met extravagantly in Jesus Christ.

You see, the cross completely changed the face of love. It isn't the same thing it was the day that Jacob met Rachel. On the cross, God proved Himself to be the ultimate Lover—One who loves beyond any merit or weakness, beauty or flaw, purity or marred reputation. This is a Love that recognizes the inherent beauty and value in each soul, for it is the Love that cared deeply enough to create it. We no longer have to prove our worth

through what we can achieve, or defend our value with a spotless past and unblemished character. That requirement of us was crushed when the veil of the Temple was torn in two at the moment that Messiah declared, “It is finished.” This Love doesn’t require flawlessness, or guiltlessness, or surface-level cosmetics, but simply desires a genuine romance between our spirit and His; a love story expressed in His rescue, romance, and pursuit of each of us. And our hearts’ response is a life of fulfilled worship—in spirit and in truth.

Chapter 11: The Posture of Worship

I was serving as a camp counselor a couple of years ago, and during a race one sunny day our map showed what my team presumed to be a shortcut. This off-road trail led us through a huge field of sunflowers. As the self-appointed camp photographer, I happened to have my camera with me, and being much more photography-minded than I am competitive, what was supposed to be a shortcut left me far behind my team, wildly snapping pictures of sunflowers from every conceivable angle. As I looked through the photos later, I began to notice something fascinating. The flowers certainly weren't all identical. There were sunflowers with gigantic leaves and enormous brown hearts that must have housed hundreds of seeds. There were short, stocky ones that barely peeked their heads above the leaves of the flowers surrounding them. There were sunflowers so tall that their stems bent severely under the weight of the flower itself. Some of the flowers had petals that curled inward to shade the seeds from the heat of the sun, while others had petals that stuck straight out in every direction as if to bask in the sunlight. Every flower in the field was extraordinarily unique, but the thing that fascinated me now as I looked through the photographs was that every single sunflower in the field pointed in exactly the same direction. Each flower stood with its face gazing directly into the sun.

The more I thought about it, the more meaningful it became. The sunflowers could never exist without the sun. Even with the richest soil, the ripest seeds, and the most refreshing water that the world could offer, the sunflowers would never amount to anything at all without the generous light of the sun (leave alone the fact that rich soil and refreshing water couldn't exist without sun-driven plant and water cycles). The sun graciously pours its light constantly, unyieldingly, into every cell of the flower. After all,

the sun has no reason to give sparingly—no matter how much light it gives, it never runs short on supply. All of this light penetrates every fiber of the flower, strengthening it and creating energy with which the flower can stand and flourish and grow into everything it is intended to be. And when it has reached the height of its potential, it stands with all of the others—tall and beautiful and golden—points its face up toward the very sun that makes its existence possible, and proudly calls itself “sunflower.” Fascinating.

Is the sole purpose of the sun, then, to give life to the sunflowers? Hardly, though I suppose it’s possible that the sunflowers might think so. And even though this is a gross underestimation of all of the millions of functions that the sun serves, and a completely outrageous overestimation of the value of sunflowers, you can hardly blame them for being so narrow-minded. All the sunflowers ever see is sunflowers! It doesn’t matter much what the sunflowers think anyway. Regardless of their miscalculations and ridiculous assumptions, the sun will never stop pouring the grace of its light on them. It won’t even withhold its light long enough to teach the flowers a lesson, although that would quickly do the trick (and once and for all rid the world of the arrogant, ungrateful flowers in the process). Obviously, the sun could never do that; it would be outside the very character of the sun. Its crowning characteristic, after all, is that it *gives* life—not just to sunflowers, mind you, but to everything on earth.

The Apostle Paul, by the power of the Spirit, understood this metaphor powerfully. In Ephesians chapter 3, Paul writes,

For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom His whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of His glorious riches He may strengthen you with power through His Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you,

being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

The sunflower metaphor is an imperfect one—comparing created things to the Creator of everything will never do Him justice. Still, the implications of this passage are absolutely incredible. When they are thoroughly being what they were created to be, sunflowers—namesakes of the sun and bearers of its image—stand tall and direct their full attention toward the sun. As the sunflower attracts the attention of passers-by, it quickly directs that attention on toward the sun as well, just as I experienced glancing through my photos. In the same way, Paul understood that humanity, which is made in God’s image, is created to live with our full attention directed toward God, *from whom His whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name*. We are associated with God by our very nature, having been made in His likeness. We are marked with the matchless name of His Son and are given the privilege to boldly identify ourselves with His name: Christian. From the deepest part of us, we are designed to direct attention and glory to God in the same way that sunflowers direct attention to the sun.

Of course, if a sunflower chose not to point its face toward the sun, it would not cease to be a sunflower. However, in doing so it would impede its ability to take the vital energy that the sun offers. The only way for a sunflower to receive all of the strength it is created to need is to stand tall with its face directed toward the sun. The sun’s ability to produce light or to give life is not affected in the least by the sunflower’s position. It is the sunflower alone that benefits by recognizing the supreme value of the sun. Likewise, Paul writes that he kneels before the Father, taking a posture of reverence, realizing that

He is the very source of our existence and the only One capable of meeting our needs. This is the posture for which humanity is created—not because it adds to God’s abilities or empowers Him in any way, but because it most effectively allows God’s power to fill and enable us. As we look into the face of our brilliant Creator, we tap into real, soul-satisfying life, and He is supremely glorified by our profound satisfaction in Him.

When you and I are genuinely delighted in something, it is undeniably obvious. Whether it is a career, a sport, a talent, a relationship, a movie, a possession, a song, or a cause, our satisfaction overflows, and those around us are the prime witnesses. If we are willing to wait hours in line for tickets to the latest film, if we can’t stop ourselves from talking about the latest technologies, if we pour all of our free time into a relationship, or if we sacrifice all of our free time for a career, there is no denying its worth to us. Genuine satisfaction is impossible to hide. We bring glory and fame to the things we delight in simply by the way we respond to them. The problem is that very often we substitute these small, fleeting joys for the ultimate Joy—the very life-giving Fulfillment for which we are created.

In Psalm 63, David writes, *O God, You are my God. My soul thirsts for You, my body longs for You in a dry and weary land where there is no water.* Though we naturally fix our sights horizontally on the things of this world in our search for satisfaction, David confesses that there is nothing here for us that can quench our contentment-parched souls. When we try to quench the thirst of our hearts with anything but Living Water, all too soon we drink those wells dry and are left only with more thirst. Ironically, it’s only when we remove our attention from ourselves and shift our attention vertically toward God, investing ourselves in His glory, that we find our deepest and truest satisfaction, just like

a sunflower pointing its head toward the very source of its life. It is then that we are altogether caught up in the divine cycle of satisfaction and joy: We are invested in lifting God's name higher, and each time we see Him glorified, we are filled with joy. As those around us witness our joy and satisfaction in Him, He is glorified in us all over again, and our joy deepens. And so it continues—the beautiful cycle in which God's highest glory is our deepest fulfillment and our most profound joy. John Piper, a well-known pastor, author, and speaker, declares:

We were made for the admiration of the excellence of Jesus. The greater your admiration, the greater the revelation of Christ's glorification... God made the world and fashioned the human soul so that Jesus would be glorified and we would be satisfied in the very same act of the soul, namely, glad-hearted admiration of the excellence of Jesus. We, satisfied in the intensity of our enjoyment of Him, and He, magnified and glorified in our being satisfied in Him... This means that in this universe, the intensity of our joy in the greatness of Jesus is a demonstration of the immensity of His beauty and worth. Jesus is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him. The universe exists for the glorification of Jesus in the admiration of His people. It exists to display the infinite worth of the Lamb in the white hot worship of His people.⁴⁰

This is the incredible thing about God's passion for His own glory—He has uniquely designed us so that, when we live in a posture of worship, acknowledging Him as the only One who sustains and fulfills us, we are continually fulfilled and our deepest thirst continually quenched. The more this beautiful phenomenon is fleshed out in our lives, the more God's top priority becomes our own priority, and we are filled with genuine and inexpressible joy by the things that make God supremely famous. Only a God full of infinite wisdom and love could be responsible for such a beautifully intricate

⁴⁰ John Piper, "Embracing Suffering" (lecture, Passion 2013 Conference, Atlanta, Georgia, January 3, 2013).

design as this. His glory is our highest good; His fame is our deepest fulfillment. Those things which are most praiseworthy about Him are the very things which most thoroughly quench our thirsts and satisfy our hunger. To simply draw our sustenance continually from Him and to find our satisfaction there is our purpose, for it is in our genuine satisfaction that God is most beautifully glorified in us.

From Seed to Sunflower

Something incredible happens the more You grow up in me. My life reorients itself toward You; my purposes shift and I begin to value created things in proportion to their ability to immerse me deeper in love with the Creator. Common graces become constant reminders of Your altogether uncommon love. The sunflower, for example, becomes even more than a tangible example of Your radiant beauty and creative power. I see myself in it, too. Like a single tiny seed drawn from the heart of one well-weathered flower, faith has been passed on to me, derived of a heritage too great to be fully known. That small seed of faith has been developed in safety and assurance, but now I have been sent out to discover life for myself. Now I must determine whether I will endure to become what I am created to be.

In the course of this process, I must be buried and broken, exposing what little genuine faith is to be found here. I must shed the shell that has encompassed, protected, and comforted it until now. All my life, that shell has been my world, and I've never known anything outside or beyond it. But for all it has done to protect and comfort me, to hold onto it any longer would be a hindrance and a lie—a desperate attempt to convince myself that what I've known and what I've been is all I'll ever need to know or be. The truth is, as long as I cling to the comfort of a seed, I can never be anything like the flower I am intended to be. So I'm broken out of my world. I'm buried, tasting death, in faith believing that this is the only way to step into the true life meant for me. It will be weeks, perhaps months, before I see light again. My tiny fragment of faith seems incredibly inadequate as I'm tucked inside the earth with all of my questions beside me. All I can do in that darkness is wait and hope and pray. But just in time, that precious glimpse of light comes, and I have no explanation except that, by Your grace, You have been a source of growth and strength for me, even when I was unaware.

As days and weeks have pass by, You daily provide all the elements that I need to thrive, together with a Spirit that grows up in me, giving me all the strength I need to keep pressing heavenward. Floods and winds come, threatening to overtake me. This is the nature of the world in which I'm planted, but as I remember my burial and rebirth, I know that I will not be broken. Before long, I begin to see a new beauty in myself, reflecting the very image of my Source, the One from whom my entire heritage derives its name. In the light of His glory, I have found my identity, my purpose, my value. The Sun has made me radiant with joy, and with my gaze trained always on Him, I find my place among all those who are learning to bring Him glory, simply by allowing Him to make us what we are; our deepest joy is in His fame.

Chapter 12: The Beauty of Redemption

If you're still looking for a picture of the worship in spirit and truth that genuine relationship with Jesus elicits, just notice how the Samaritan woman responds when she discovers that she has been pursued and romanced by Messiah Himself:

John 4:28-30: Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, 'Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?' They came out of the town and made their way toward him.

She couldn't even begin to contain the joy that was welled up inside of her. She, like Jacob, finally knew the delight of meeting God face to face, and suddenly everything was different. She ran straight into town, right up to the very people she had been skillfully, painstakingly planning her routine to avoid. She had nothing to hide from them anymore. "There's a man out at the well that you all need to come meet! He knew everything I've ever done wrong!" It's a pretty strange testimony, I know. Jesus met this woman with such incredible, magnetic grace, that even her exposed failures were a source of joy. The only One whose opinion really mattered had met her at the well in the scorching noonday heat just to show her that she was worthy of love—a greater love than she had ever dared to imagine. She had been stirred up and plunged deep into a relationship with the One who loves absolutely and unconditionally, and the change in her that day was completely undeniable. Those who had previously thought so little of the Samaritan woman heard her strange testimony and immediately stopped what they were doing and rushed away to see Jesus. That is worship in spirit and truth, ladies and gentlemen! After experiencing a power and love so real and genuine, the Samaritan Woman simply let her joy, fulfillment, and newfound hope pour out of her. It was her

natural response to coming face-to-face with Messiah—the Lover she had been waiting for and hoping in for so long.

Intriguingly, I found that the Greek words translated, “leaving her water jar” can also be translated, “divorcing her water jar.” Surely this is the most beautiful, symbolic way of describing the amazing exchange that took place at the well that day. This water jar was absolutely vital for her day-to-day survival. But today was no ordinary day. She had a message, and she couldn’t have anything—no matter how valuable—slowing her down. This woman had a personal, moving, life-changing encounter with Messiah Himself, and she was never going to be the same. She was done looking for fulfillment in all the wrong places. She was done going from one man to another, hoping to find genuine love, value, and acceptance. She was deserting that kind of water that she had always thirsted after, and was exchanging it for the living water that Messiah had poured over her—water that would quench her deepest thirst forever.⁴¹ Now she only had one more divorce to file, and that was with that old water jar, the symbol of the way things used to be. She wouldn’t be needing it now. I love it. Apparently so did most of the town of Samaria:

John 4:39-42: Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, ‘He told me everything I ever did.’ So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them and he stayed two days. And because of his words many more became believers.

They said to the woman, ‘We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world.’

⁴¹ Arthur Walkington Pink, *Exposition on the Gospel of John*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975), 212.

I'll admit that, as I was hiking through my own Grand Canyon a few years ago, I didn't quite understand what the Samaritan woman understood so naturally—that in light of God's life-altering grace and unconditional love, our deepest brokenness is redeemed and transformed to become our most incredible testimonies. It wasn't until about a year after my initial descent into the canyon that I began to reflect on my journey and to finally grasp the genuine beauty that had evidenced itself through Jesus' faithfulness to walk with me through each step of that experience. One day, it hit me like a tidal wave, and as I sat in the little prayer chapel on my college campus, I wrote feverishly in my journal:

The last year and a half has been such an agonizing struggle. It's been painful, frustrating, ravaging...and unspeakably valuable. This is the first time that I've ever tasted crisis—the first time that I've faced a situation that left me utterly broken and vulnerable, confronted head-on with the realization that I am totally at the mercy and grace of God. I realize now just how weak and susceptible and broken I am; I realize now just how much I need my Precious Savior, Jesus. Without understanding the sheer intensity of my need for Him, I never really pursued Him. I was immature—I am immature—and I had no clue how thoroughly and furiously Jesus loves me. There's so much that I haven't understood until now. But in my full-frontal exposure to my own weakness, I am, slowly but surely, beginning to see God's power made perfect in me.

These scars—these miraculously healed scars—have become a priceless testimony. God, in His steadfast, immovable love, chose to walk tenderly with me through every bitter moment, despite my utter faithlessness and my biting accusations. He stepped into the chasm I was in and He walked with me through every dark moment. In the deepest reaches of my pain, when I was certain the love of God could not stretch far enough to save me, I found that even then—especially then—He never so much as loosened His nail-scarred grip. With everything in me I trust the God who did not simply swoop down long enough to pluck me out of my darkness and disappear again, but who came on the scene and made my strife His own in the name of Love.

With incredible joy I am finding that God's priceless gift to me, out of the depths of this despair, is an immovable assurance—now reinforced with the proof of my testimony—that nothing can separate me from His unrelenting, unyielding, extravagant, limitless love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present (nor the past) nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, neither friends nor enemies, neither success nor failure, neither beauty nor brokenness, neither joy nor pain, neither daylight nor darkness, neither pulled-together nor completely unraveled, neither painful understanding nor confused questioning, neither total surrender nor bitter accusation, neither total elation nor complete despair, nor anything else in all of this creation will ever tear me from my loving Father's grasp; His arms are the safest, surest place in the universe. This knowledge has changed my life, and I'll cling to it for eternity.

The story of the Samaritan woman became for me an incredible parable of God's faithfulness. This hurting woman, who had been tossed around and beat up by life's circumstances, left alone and unwanted as a result, became the very instrument that Messiah used to bring nearly an entire city of Samaritans to faith. In reality, they all knew what it was like to feel discarded and unwanted, and to be treated as second rate human beings. They were Samaritans, born into a heritage that was looked down upon. And in a breathtakingly beautiful and redeeming way, God used a woman who completely embodied what it means to be alienated, forgotten, broken down, and beaten up to demonstrate to us all that His love and grace extend as far as our sinful hearts can distance us, and further still. This woman serves as a beautiful illustration of the fact that we are brought into deeper, purer relationship with God each time we, with our endless failures and delinquent hearts, find ourselves broken down and laid bare before Him, met only with grace like the ocean and love like the sky.

Suddenly, the idea that God would suggest a similarity between the Samaritan woman and I was the furthest thing from the offensive accusation I'd once considered it to be. It's true—I am just like her. I've known what it is to be broken and left out and plagued by my past—by all the things I will never be because of all the things I've been. I've beaten myself up time after time as I've trudged through life—to the well and back, to the well and back—knowing that I've blown so many opportunities to be who I should have been. I'm certainly no Rebekah. I've been used up and wounded. I've committed myself to many things, none of which have satisfied. I've looked Messiah in the face and, in my ignorance and bitterness, asked Him who He thinks He is asking me for things. I've experienced the grace that ignores my gracelessness and chooses to pursue meaningful relationship rather than put me in my place. I've begged Him to show me how I can avoid the moments that bring me the most pain, but I've come to see that those are often the times in which He romances me most. I've found power in acknowledging who He is, and who I'm not. I've even let Him tear my defenses down a few times, though surely not nearly often enough. I've begun to experience Love that romances me into deeper relationship and satisfies every thirst and longing of my heart. I've known the privilege of looking into His face and asking the questions that burn through me. I've known the peculiar beauty of having nothing left to hold onto but a single three-word promise: "Messiah is coming." I'm learning what it means to be a true worshiper; to let His love change me radically until everyone around me craves it. No, there is nothing ugly about being a Samaritan woman. That Messiah would consider me worthy of His grace, His time, His ministry, His love, His pursuit, and His romance the same way that He found her worthy that day at the well—surely there is no higher compliment.

Chapter 13: Unshakable Joy, Holy Confidence

When our joy is rooted in Who God is and in our knowledge that He is working all things together for our good, we live differently. Like the Samaritan woman so radically discovered, our circumstances cannot defeat us. They don't have power over us, because God has power over them! Our victories and failures, our blessings and our tragedies, the times of confident assurance and our moments of broken questioning—every passing minute carries precious potential for God's name to be glorified both in His unwavering faithfulness and in our ever-deepening knowledge of Him.

We, who know the soul-satisfying love of God and who know the joy of loving Him in return, have the opportunity to continually declare—regardless of life's triumphs and trials, obstacles and obstructions, brokenness and beauty—that we are confident in His promise to work all things together for our good. We proclaim it when we see that good on the horizon, celebrating God's faithfulness to provide everything we need and even more. We affirm it when we find ourselves in a season of waiting, anticipating what is to come and confident that He will keep every promise forever. Most profoundly, though, we have the privilege of acknowledging God's faithfulness when all we see is darkness; when all we have is an armload of questions, a broken heart, and a heavenly promise that, try as we might to feel it, no longer exudes the warmth of hope and peace it once did. Even then, in spite of our broken, battered hearts, we raise our heads and whisper, "He works all things together for my good. He loves me. And I love Him."

And the world watches. Believe me, the world watches. And though we struggle under the weight of our questions, aching for the day when this trial becomes a testimony

worth sharing, the world witnesses a testimony far more powerful than any Christian fairytale—a heart that believes so firmly, so unswervingly, so intentionally in the grace and sincere goodness of God that it chooses to hold onto hope, even when it seems that hope is no longer holding onto us. The power of that testimony is beyond words. In the face of obstacles and opportunities, struggles and victories, joy and pain, let us not become distracted from this beautiful truth: that in every single circumstance, we are held secure by a God who is unceasingly, unfalteringly faithful. It is this eternal truth that empowers us to stand with confidence even in the darkest of nights and declare that the sun has not disappeared.

When our hearts burst with joy, He is undeniably there. When our hearts are breaking, He is beside us still. He is present in every element of our story, and He Himself is the proof of His faithfulness. Even the deepest and most traumatic pain and the highest and most exhilarating happiness fade with time; God's faithfulness endures forever. Every passing moment, every experience, every circumstance, whether pleasant or unpleasant, carries enormous potential for good—a good that is deeply rooted in the eternal faithfulness and relentless love of God. With each step, let us allow the Holy Spirit to illuminate God's character and glory as it is demonstrated to us. Perceive it; take hold of it; seize it. Discover the deep and inexpressible joy waiting to be found there. And the enemy's attempts to steal, kill, and destroy will serve only to drive us further into the loving arms of our Father, to the supreme glory of His name and the profound satisfaction of our souls.

For Your Fame

*Jesus Christ, Lamb of God,
Words can't even describe how incredible You are.
You have given me life.
You had everything to give,
And in an act of incomprehensible love,
You willingly gave it all.
And we were Your reason.
You loved us as You hung there in unimaginable pain.
You loved us as You conquered death—my death.
You love us as we lift our hands in worship to all You are.
Your remains the same when we turn our backs on You.
You love us when we demand an explanation from You,
And when in shame we bury our faces in our hands before You.
You love us when we pass You by,
Searching every empty thing in life,
Looking for fulfillment in one bone-dry well after another.
When we deny the truth that You are the only One who fills us,
And when we refuse to let You in,
Then—Precious Lord, even then,
You love us still.
Dear Savior, Your love never changes.
It has no conditions or prerequisites.
It has no preconceived notions or favorites.
It just is. It endures forever.
I can't tell You how much comfort and hope that gives.*

*Jesus, Bread of Life,
You are everything to me.
You showed love in big ways and small ways,
And in doing so, You changed the world forever.
You forgave the adulteress,
Restored sight to the blind,
Brought healing to the deaf,
You sent the crippled leaping home.
And just as You breathed life into the dead man,
You breathe it into me.
My heart beats and my soul lives because of Your great love.
In that single truth I find all the reason I need
To praise Your name for eternity.*

*To call You my Savior, Redeemer, Comforter, and Best Friend,
Would barely scratch the surface of all that You are to me.
I can't tell You what joy I find in You.*

*Jesus, Beautiful King,
I pray that You would not let me forget all that You are.
I want to be transformed in such a way
That I can never go back to merely shuffling through the day.
I want to know You in a way that drives me to action,
That compels me to love extravagantly in Your name.
Jesus, I want to be more and more a reflection of You—
To have the privilege of showing those around me
Even a fraction of the love You've shown me,
To then step back and say:
"This is only the effect of my Savior.
This is only an overflow of what He has poured over me."
I give You my short life, my limited abilities,
My strengths, my weaknesses, and all that I have to give.
I pray that You would redeem and use them
To show those You love just how incredible Your grace is,
And just how powerful Your transforming goodness is.
I can't tell You what joy I've found
In surrendering and offering up my own meager, fleeting version
Of the infinitely valuable and precious life
That You laid down for me.
But I can tell You that, by the power of Your grace,
I will lay it down anew every day.
My life is Yours, Lord. Use it for Your fame.*

PERSONAL REFLECTION

I was about 15 years old when I was first told that I should write a book. It seemed like a completely silly notion at the time. What could I possibly have to say that could fill up a whole book? Little did I know that God's intent for my writing would have very little to do with anything that I had to say, and everything to do with what He desired to say both to me and through me. The challenge of writing this book, then, has not been in finding enough to say, but in learning to listen carefully for God's voice and organizing my jumbled, confused words of worship into a humble vessel that stands a chance of doing justice to incredible, precious, truth that it contains.

As I reflect on the process of completing this project, along with the culmination of lessons and spiritual growth that it represents, I am unspeakably humbled. It is representative of countless critiques, bits of encouragement, and middle-of-the-night inspirations, all of which were given at just the right time again and again. While deeply rooted in the original premise that our greatest fulfillment is found in relationship with Christ, the final product has taken on a completely different form and function than I originally anticipated or even hoped. There is no denying God's hand in it; this project has been a wonderful means of God's grace to me.

The completed book seems to me now to be an illustration of its own title: "His highest glory; my deepest joy." Writing has become a gift through which God continually reveals Himself to me and teaches me what it means to live in communion with Him. Each word of wisdom, truth, and insight inspired by God elicits a worship that comes as

naturally as breath when, in my very best moments, I set my gaze fully on Christ and am refreshed by the deep fulfillment that is found only in Him.

My prayer throughout the writing process has been that God will use this book to move the hearts of its readers in fresh and unexpected ways, compelling them to pursue Christ with renewed passion and drawing them deeper into all-satisfying relationship with Him.

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APPENDIX: WRITING FOR THE NEXT GENERATION

Prior to beginning this project, I conducted some preliminary research regarding youth and young adult culture and the needs presented to those within my 16 to 25 year-old target audience. One source which provided extensive information on the subject was a book written by Chap Clark, titled Hurt: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers. In his book, Clark puts into writing his observations, investigations, and thoughts collected throughout his career as a high school teacher, as well as during a six month participant-observer research study. By developing genuine relationships as well as asking pointed questions intended to strike at the heart of teen angst and loneliness, Clark was able to discover consistent weaknesses and struggles in the lives of teens. Clark's academic research and personal experience revealed that,

On the surface, the adolescent world appears to be relatively stable and healthy. Yet beneath the calm waters presented by the positive empirical data there is turmoil that is difficult, painful, lonely, and even harmful to our young.⁴²

The tendency to measure our well-being according to physical and surface-level observations is common among the majority of humanity, but as Clark discusses, this is particularly and increasingly challenging for young people in our current society. Students are led to believe that happiness lies in having the right stuff, wearing the right clothes, following the right trends, and hanging with the right people. As young people search desperately to fulfill their needs by these kinds of temporary pleasures, they find themselves more and more discouraged and often believe that they are alone in the dissatisfaction that they are feeling.

⁴² Chap Clark, *Hurt: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 39.

This book seeks to address this need in two primary ways. First, the inclusion of my own testimony serves as evidence that no young person is alone in his or her attempts to quench the desires of their hearts. The testimonies of Solomon and of the Samaritan woman reinforce this idea and broaden it to demonstrate that this thirst for satisfaction is common among males and females alike and has been so throughout history. In fact, our desire for something greater than what can be found “under the sun” is part of what it means to be human. This book seeks to name that deep yearning which is so often suppressed and hidden.

Second, this book is intended to serve as a vessel through which God may reveal Himself as the ultimate Source of the satisfaction for which humanity longs. The discussion of God’s desire to reveal Himself uniquely to each individual, as demonstrated in the stories of Jacob and the Samaritan woman, sheds fresh light on the character of God. In addition, these stories provide illustrations of His intent in interacting with humanity in general and with each of us in particular. Both of these stories focus on the fact that our need is not physical, but profoundly spiritual.

Of course, the goal of the book is to demonstrate that these spiritual needs are met ultimately in Christ, but young people are developing a growing frustration and disillusionment with the Christian Church in America. A study conducted by the Barna Group among 16 to 29 year-olds reveals common perceptions of Christianity:

The study explored twenty specific images related to Christianity, including ten favorable and ten unfavorable perceptions. Among young non-Christians, nine out of the top 12 perceptions were negative. Common negative perceptions include that present-day Christianity is judgmental (87%), hypocritical (85%), old-fashioned (78%), and too involved in politics (75%) - representing large proportions of young outsiders who

attach these negative labels to Christians. The most common favorable perceptions were that Christianity teaches the same basic ideas as other religions (82%), has good values and principles (76%), is friendly (71%), and is a faith they respect (55%).

Even among young Christians, many of the negative images generated significant traction. Half of young churchgoers said they perceive Christianity to be judgmental, hypocritical, and too political. One-third said it was old-fashioned and out of touch with reality.⁴³

The study goes on to explain that many of these perceptions “were rooted in specific stories and personal interactions with Christians and in churches.” This is an alarming discovery and has no doubt contributed to the growing disinterest with the Christian faith that is increasingly prevalent among young people. They do not see anything in the Church that is worth their pursuit, nor are there effective examples of what it means to live a Christian life.

The second half of this book seeks to address this issue by providing readers with a clear understanding of what it means to be a Christian. The study of the life of Paul is intended to provide a major distinction for Christian and non-Christian readers alike. In his misguided, falsely pious, legalistic life, Paul demonstrates a works-oriented mindset which is prevalent in the lives of many nominal Christians in America today. Conversely, Paul’s passionate, transformed, entirely Christ-centered life provides a perfect illustration of the life that God intends for His people and of the holiness to which we are called.

The narrative of the Samaritan woman provides further insight regarding the Christian life. Her story reveals that God pursues relationship with each of us regardless

⁴³ Barna Group, “A New Generation Expresses its Skepticism and Frustration with Christianity,” *The Barna Group Ltd*, 24 September 2007 [On-line]; Available from <http://www.barna.org/teens-next-gen-articles/94-a-new-generation-expresses-its-skepticism-and-frustration-with-christianity>; Internet; Accessed 8 March 2013.

of our moral standing, and it is after we have been satisfied with Living Water that we are obliged to respond in genuine, heartfelt, worship. As seen throughout scripture, God's grace both precedes and motivates our obedience. This what God desires for the Church—a life of sincere worship that is the direct result of ever-deepening relationship with Him and driven by His own transformational power at work within us.