

THE
Signature
OF
Jesus

THE CALL TO A LIFE MARKED
BY HOLY PASSION AND RELENTLESS FAITH

Includes a Personal Retreat Guide

BRENNAN
MANNING

author of *The Ragamuffin Gospel*

THE
*S*IGNATURE *of*
JESUS



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To Hillery and Ed Moise,
with gratitude
for Biloxi and Galveston,
N'awlins and Houston,
for blackened red fish and Cajun custard,
but most of all
for the signature of your love on my life.

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An
OPENING
WORD

I N THIS BOOK I have given my heart and my language to be what it is: crude and soft-spoken, blunt and compassionate, whole and stricken, honest and provocative, drawn from the casks of life.

The prophetic word unflinchingly summons the church back to the purity of the gospel and to the scandal of the Cross. In his numerous letters Paul confirms that to follow Jesus is to take the high road to Calvary. Littered along the Calvary road will lie the skeletons of our egos, the corpses of our fantasies of control, and the shards of self-righteousness, self-indulgent spirituality, and unfreedom.

The greatest need for our time is for the church to become what it has seldom been: the body of Christ with

its face to the world, loving others regardless of religion or culture, pouring itself out in a life of service, offering hope to a frightened world, and presenting itself as a real alternative to the existing arrangement. “The church that is worthy of the name is a band of people in which the love of God has broken the spell of demons and false gods and which is now making a dent in the world.”¹

I want neither a blood-’n’-guts religion that would make Clint Eastwood, not Jesus, our hero; nor a speculative religion that would imprison the gospel in the halls of academia; nor a noisy, feel-good religion that is a naked appeal to emotion. I long for passion, intelligence, and compassion in a church without ostentation, gently beckoning to the world to come and enjoy the peace and unity we possess because of the Spirit in our midst.

The signature of Jesus, the Cross, is the ultimate expression of God’s love for the world. The church is the church of the crucified, risen Christ only when it is stamped with his signature; only when it faces outward and moves with him along the way of the Cross. Turned inward upon itself in bickering and theological hairsplitting, the church loses its identity and its mission.

At the dawning of the twenty-first century, what separates the committed from the uncommitted is the depth and quality of our love for Jesus Christ. The superficial among us build bigger barns in the euphoria of a prosperity gospel; the trendy follow the latest fad and try to hum their way to heaven; the defeated are haunted by ghosts from the past.

But the victorious minority, unintimidated by the cul-

tural patterns of the lockstepping majority, live and celebrate as though Jesus were near—near in time, near in place—the witness of our motives, our speech, and our behavior. As indeed he is.

Fidelity to the Word will take us along the path of *downward mobility* (Henri Nouwen's famous phrase) in the midst of an upwardly mobile world. We will find ourselves not on the path to power but on the path to powerlessness; not on the road to success but on the road to servanthood; not on the broad road of praise and popularity but on the narrow road of ridicule and rejection.

To be a Christian is to be like Christ. Somehow we must lose our life in order to find it. Christianity preaches not only a crucified God, but also crucified men and women. "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Galatians 6:14). There is no discipleship without the Cross. I am not a follower of Jesus if I live with him only in Bethlehem and Nazareth and not in Gethsemane and on Calvary, too.

Are you called to a life of radical discipleship? To the poverty of Mother Teresa? To the prayer of the Desert Fathers? To the martyrdom of Dietrich Bonhoeffer? To the celibate lifestyle of Jesus and Paul? To a prophetic career? To full-time ministry on behalf of the downtrodden and disenfranchised? Am I?

As you think about these questions and read this book, you'll need both honesty and discernment. Not everyone is called like the rich young man to the radical renunciation of literally everything (see Mark 10:17–30).

Walter Burghardt notes:

Jesus never told Lazarus and his sisters, Martha and Mary, to give up all they had. He did not announce to Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea that they were excluded from the kingdom. Rich Zacchaeus proclaimed, “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor” (Luke 19:8)—not all, just half. And still Jesus told him, “Today salvation has come to this house” (v. 9). Zacchaeus’s response is good enough to inherit the kingdom. This mirrors John the Baptist replying to the crowds, “What should you do? If you have two coats, give away. . . one” (Luke 3:11).²

There are varying degrees of discipleship. Shortly after my conversion, I began secretly to envy the generosity of spirit, the profound prayer, and the spiritual gifts of others in the church community. It was an unforgettable experience of deliverance and liberation when, one day in prayer, my eyes fell on the words of the Baptist: “A man can receive only what is given him from heaven” (John 3:27).

Some of us have been so traumatized by life that simple survival, one day at a time, is our sole concern. Others have been so soiled by circumstances, scarred by physical and emotional disabilities, or bruised and battered by the vagaries of life, that they are barely able to look beyond their own needs. For example, William Barry thinks of the man from whom a legion of demons was expelled. After the cure, “as Jesus was getting into the boat, the man who

had been demon-possessed begged to go with him. *Jesus did not let him*, but said, ‘Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you’” (Mark 5:18–19, italics added). The man apparently did not bemoan this “rejection” as an injustice. Rather, “the man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him. And all the people were amazed” (v. 20).³

Apparently, this man was not called to radical discipleship. Yet he was called, as we are called, to listen attentively to God’s first word to us. This word is the gift of ourselves to ourselves—our existence, our nature, our personal history, our uniqueness, our identity. All that we have and are is one of the unique and never-to-be-repeated ways God has chosen to express himself in space and time. Each of us, made in his image and likeness, is yet another promise he has made to the universe that he will continue to love it and care for it.

However, even when faith persuades us that we are a word of God, we may remain ignorant of what God is trying to say through us. Thomas Merton wrote, “God utters me like a word containing a partial thought of himself. A word will never be able to comprehend the voice that utters it. But if I am true to the concept that God utters in me, if I am true to the thought in him I was meant to embody, I shall be full of his actuality and find him everywhere in myself and find myself nowhere. I shall be lost in him.”⁴

With endurance and perseverance we must wait for God to make clear what he wants to say through us. Such waiting involves patience and attention, as well as the

courage to let yourself be spoken. This courage comes only through faith in God, *who utters no false word*.

One of the stunning lessons of the Bible is God's free use of fragile human beings to accomplish his purpose. He does not always choose the holy and devout or even the emotionally well-balanced. The venerable Liebermann, a powerful nineteenth-century missionary, was a manic-depressive who could not walk across a bridge without a compulsive desire to jump off! "The Holy Spirit is the bearer of gifts and these gifts are sometimes lavished in peculiar places."⁵ God bestows his grace abundantly but unevenly. He offers no explanation why some are called to radical discipleship and others are not.

Because we all are privileged but unentitled beggars at the door of God's mercy, those called and graced to radical discipleship have no reason to boast: "But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong" (I Corinthians 1:27).

The gift of radical discipleship is pure grace to those who have no claim to it, for the deepest desires of our heart are not in our control. Were this not so, we simply would will those desires and be done with it. The courage to live as a prophet and lover is beyond human reach. Without the grace of God, we cannot even desire God. Without the grace of God, I cannot walk the talk of Christ. All my goodwill and grim resolve could not keep me sober. In every AA meeting room in the country hangs the sign, "There, but for the grace of God, go I."

This theme is powerfully illustrated in J. D. Salinger's

novel *Franny and Zooey*. Bessie has been badgering her son Zooey to get professional help for his sister Franny. Zooey gives careful thought to the matter. Finally he says, “For a psychoanalyst to be any good with Franny at all, he’d have to be a pretty peculiar type. I don’t know. He’d have to believe that it was through the grace of God that he’d been inspired to study psychoanalysis in the first place. He’d have to believe that it was through the grace of God that he wasn’t run over by a . . . truck before he ever even got his license to practice. He’d have to believe that it’s through the grace of God that he has the native intelligence to help his . . . patients at all. I don’t know any good analysts who think along these lines. But that’s the only kind of psychoanalyst who might be able to do Franny any good at all.”⁶

What Jesus longs to see in radical disciples is what he saw in little children: a spirit of sheer receptivity, utter dependence, and radical reliance on the power and mercy and grace of God mediated through the Spirit of Christ. He said, “Apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5).

As my last book, *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, addressed the theme of radical grace, so *The Signature of Jesus* addresses radical discipleship. Discipleship is our response to grace. Whatever measure of grace we have received and to whatever degree of discipleship we are called, every Christian stands under the Cross of Jesus Christ, wherein we find salvation.

However hidden and undramatic your witness may be, I pray that you will be daring enough to be different, humble enough to make mistakes, courageous enough to get burnt in the fire, and real enough to help others see that

prose is not poetry, speech is not song, and tangibles, visibles, and perishables are not adequate for beings signed with the blood of the Lamb.

The LORD had said to Abram, “Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you.

“I will make you into a great nation
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you.”

So Abram left, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran. He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.

Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. The LORD appeared to Abram and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.” So he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him.

GENESIS 12:1-7

Chapter One

FROM HARAN
to CANAAN

*A*S ABRAM LEAVES HARAN—"your country, your people and your father's house"—he embarks on a journey he has never made to a land he never has seen. He sets out, not because he can predict the role he is to play in the history of salvation, but simply because of his personal experience, the spiritual experience of God speaking to him. There is no program he can detail; no insight into history with which he can support his decision; no model through which he can obtain a psychological identity. Spiritual experience has become a summons: It is God who directs. And the future is God's.

God will, in time, show him the land.

God will have him father a nation.

Only God will make his life into a blessing for all the wretched and blundering children of this earth.

What is decisive at this moment for Abram is not a vision of the next twenty years, but a quality of religious experience, a present influence of God. This touches the core of faith: to believe in a personal God who calls me and leads me. Abram obeys that call. For the time being, the call is enough. Had he demanded to know more of the details and practicalities of the game plan, he would have demonstrated the antithesis of faith, for faith is never based on human assurances.

In the New Testament, Zechariah, who wanted to be sure, insisted upon some divine guarantee before yielding to God's word (see Luke 1:18). That is not faith.

The journey of the man who would become known as Abraham is a paradigm of all authentic faith. His is a movement into obscurity, into the undefined, into ambiguity, and not into some predetermined, clearly delineated plan for the future. Each future determination, each next step discloses itself only out of a discernment of the influence of God in the present moment. "By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, *even though he did not know where he was going*" (Hebrews 11:8, italics mine). The reality of life for Christian men and women requires that they leave what is nailed down, obvious, and secure, and walk into the desert without rational explanations to justify their decisions or guarantee their future. Why? Solely and simply because God signals this movement and offers it his promise.

It is instructive to remember that prior to his encounter with the one true God, Abraham, like everyone else in his tribe and country of Haran, had held many religious beliefs. (Even an atheist has them, for not to believe in God is, in itself, a religious belief.¹) What happened to Abraham was that he was summoned by God from these religious beliefs to faith—an enormous step.

For contemporary Christians, there is an essential difference between belief and faith. Our religious beliefs are the visible expression of our faith, our personal commitment to the person of Jesus. However, if the Christian beliefs inherited from our family and passed on to us by our church tradition are not grounded in a shattering, life-changing experience of Jesus as the Christ, then the chasm between our creedal statements and our faith-experience widens and our witness is worthless. The gospel will persuade no one unless it has so convicted us that we are transformed by it.

After two thousand years of church history, why is our world's population less than one-third Christian? Why are the personalities of many pious Christians so opaque? Why did Friedrich Nietzsche reproach Christians for “not looking like they are saved”? Why do we so seldom hear in our day what the old lawyer said of John Vianney, “An extraordinary thing happened to me today: I saw Christ in a man”? Why don't our contagious joy, enthusiasm, and gratitude infect others with a longing for Christ? Why are the fire and spirit of Peter and Paul so conspicuously absent from our pallid existence?

Perhaps because so few of us have undertaken the journey of faith across the chasm between knowledge and

experience. We prefer to read the map rather than visit the place. The specter of our actual unbelief persuades us that it is not the experience that is real but, rather, our explanation of the experience. Our beliefs—which William Blake called “the mind-forged manacle”—distance us from the grip of personal experience.

Daniel Taylor writes:

The secular world of ideas plays the doubting game almost exclusively and is usually scornful of anyone who doesn't. Ironically, however, the church also plays this game to a great extent. The mystery of the gospel, the paradox of the incarnation, and the wondrous enigma of grace are freeze-dried into a highly rationalized and/or authoritarian system of theologies, codes, rules, prescriptions, orders of service, and forms of church government. Everything is written down, everything is organized, so that all can be certain and those in error detected.²

The movement from Haran to Canaan is the journey across the chasm. We have to pass definitively beyond beliefs to faith. Yes, we are called to believe in Jesus. But our belief summons us to something greater, to *faith* in him. Faith that will force us to pursue the mind of Christ, to embrace a lifestyle of prayer, unselfishness, goodness, and involvement in building his kingdom, not our own.

When God called Abraham to abandon the security of the world familiar to him, he also asked Abraham to for-

sake his polytheistic religious beliefs. All his previous concepts of God faded away. The same process is necessary for us. When we encounter the God revealed by and in Jesus Christ, we must revise all our previous thinking about God. Jesus, as the revealer of the Godhead, defines God as love. In light of this revelation, we have to abandon the cankerous, worm-eaten structure of legalism, moralism, and perfectionism that corrupts the Good News into an ethical code rather than a love affair.

Jesus lanced the infection of religious belief that had lost its soul and did not even know it. The Pharisees had distorted the image of God into some remote bookkeeper who is constantly snooping around after sinners (and one day will nail us if our accounts are not in order). The Pharisees were so busy refining and finessing the formulas of religion, so assiduous in studying what they believed, that they forgot the reality their beliefs signified. They had believed for so long but their faith had dulled. They had awaited the Messiah for so long, their expectancy was blunted.

And yet, despite Jesus' condemnation of pharisaic religion, the spirit of legalism, "like the vilest seed of the overgrown Garden, has flourished on the trellis of the centuries."³ Many Christians remain afraid, for they still cling to an idea of God very different from that preached by Jesus. They remain in Haran with their old belief system intact. They believe they can save themselves by holding still and not breathing or by embarking on fasts, vigils, or heroic enterprises, hoping to coax approbation from God.

Again and again Jesus stated that fear is the enemy of life.

“Don’t be afraid; just believe” (Luke 8:50).

“Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32).

“Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid” (Matthew 14:27).

Fear breeds a deadening caution, a holding back, a stagnant waiting until people no longer can recall what they are waiting for or saving themselves for. When we fear failure more than we love life; when we are dominated by thoughts of what we might have been rather than by thoughts of what we might become; when we are haunted by the disparity between our ideal self and our real self; when we are tormented by guilt, shame, remorse, and self-condemnation, we deny our faith in the God of love. God calls us to break camp, abandon the comfort and security of the status quo, and embark in perilous freedom on the journey to a new Canaan. But when we procrastinate out of fear, this represents not only a decision to remain in Haran, but also a lack of trust.

My own faltering faith caused me to procrastinate regarding God’s call to marry Roslyn. I postponed the decision for three years (which was a decision itself) hoping that God would grow weary of waiting and the inner voice of Truth would get laryngitis. Before leaving the familiar landscape of the Franciscan life, I wanted God to sketch out definite lines so that I might know explicitly where I was going. Of course, authentic faith eludes such certainty. It means we cannot cling to anything. We always must leave something behind and not look back (see Luke 9:62). If we refuse to keep moving and insist on signs and

tangible proofs, we diminish our faith, and that means unbelief. Ironically, throughout the entire process my religious beliefs remained steadfast and unwavering.

The God of Abraham, who is the God and Father of Jesus Christ, is not a threat. The certainty that he wants us to live, to grow, to unfold, and to experience fullness of life is the basic premise of authentic faith. Yet my reluctance to pray the prayer of abandonment of Charles de Foucauld—“Father, do with me whatever you want”—reveals that I am still in the iron grip of skepticism and fear: *Letting God have at me may jeopardize my health, my reputation, and my security. He might strip me of my red suspenders and Rolex and send me off to Tanzania as a missionary. If he would just let me stay in the temple of my familiar, I would entrust myself to him wholeheartedly.*

Biblical faith is an attitude acquired gradually through many crises and trials. Through the agonizing test with his son Isaac (see Genesis 22:1–19), Abraham learns that God wants us to live and not to die, to grow and not to wither. He knows that the God who called him to hope against hope is reliable. “Perhaps this is the essence of faith: to be convinced of the reliability of God.”⁴

Louis Evely tells the story of an old woman who read Renan’s *Vie de Jesus* and many other “breviaries of skepticism.” She declared, “I simply can’t believe that Christ is God. If he were, he’d have given me some proof, for I’ve wanted so sincerely to believe in him.” She had not wanted to believe at all; she wanted to *know*, to discover some fact that would satisfy her intellect. But real faith does not reside in the intellect alone. The Truth who is Christ is not something purely rational. When we love

someone, a thousand arguments do not make one proof, nor do a thousand objections make one doubt.⁵

If there is one thing I have learned in the gathering mist of midlife, it is that the journey from Haran to Canaan is a personal one. Each of us bears the responsibility of responding to the call of Christ individually and committing ourselves to him personally. Do I believe in Jesus or in the preachers, teachers, and cloud of witnesses who have spoken to me *about* him? Is the Christ of my belief really my own or that of theologians, pastors, parents, and Oswald Chambers? No one—parents, friends, or church—can absolve us of this ultimate personal decision regarding the nature and identity of the son of Mary and Joseph. His question to Peter, *Who do you say that I am?* is addressed to every would-be disciple.

Let us take some time to reflect on the credibility of the One who calls us. He asks me to risk everything on his claim that he is the way, the truth, and the life. Unlike Buddha, Muhammad, and other founders of great world religions, he invites me not simply to believe in his teaching, but to place all my faith in him. Who is this Nazarene carpenter who dares to demand surrender to himself?

His family tree is less than impressive. In Matthew's genealogy of Jesus, the son of David, the son of Abraham, Matthew includes the names of a few women with shady reputations: Tamar, the daughter-in-law of Judah, disguises herself as a prostitute in order to get pregnant by him (see Genesis 38:12–30); Rahab is the famous prostitute of Jericho (see Joshua 2:1); and Bathsheba, who gave birth to a child following an adulterous act with King David who,

when he failed to disguise his own paternity, murdered her husband, Uriah (see 2 Samuel 11).

Obviously, God does not necessarily elect those of unimpeachable pedigree to do his work in this world.⁶ In their book *Toxic Faith*, Steve Arterburn and Jack Felton list twenty-one toxic beliefs of toxic faith. “God uses only spiritual giants” is prominent on the list:

Many fail to receive the blessings that come from ministering to others because of the belief that God uses only the perfect or the near perfect. . . . In my life as well as in Scripture, I have seen nothing but the opposite to be true. God often uses those who have major flaws or who have been through a great deal of pain to accomplish many vital tasks for his kingdom. . . . No one is too messed up for God to use.⁷

Yes, the genealogy of Jesus does not inspire messianic confidence. What of his birth? Obscure? Yes, absolutely, unimpressively obscure. The circumstances of his conception are jarring, to put it mildly. (“Well, just imagine yourself trying to tell someone that your son, whom they know to have been born seven months after your wedding, and whom they consider with good cause to be a threat to both civil and ecclesiastical law and order, was conceived by the Holy Spirit!”⁸)

Thirty years later this relatively uneducated Galilean peasant goes to the Jordan River to be baptized by John’s baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. His

career is launched. He becomes neither statesman nor economist, neither general nor renowned author, though he was certainly a storyteller and something of a poet. As he roamed about the countryside, his family decided he needed custodial care (see Mark 3:21). The religious leaders of his day suspected a demonic seizure (see Mark 3:22), and bystanders called him some very bad names. Eventually he was executed as a heretic, blasphemer, false prophet, and seducer of the people after due legal trial before the highest courts of the land.

This is God's Son? This is the man who calls me to dedicate my entire life to him? Who tells me life has no meaning apart from him?

That the source of our faith could be found in a man whose birth was obscure and therefore vulnerable to suspicion and who died the death of a criminal; that the substance of our faith should consist in the conviction that illegitimates, sinners, and criminals can say “Abba” to God; that hookers can enter into God’s kingdom before the religiously respectable—that is not a vision of faith accessible to speculation or common sense!

Simply reading the Bible cannot of itself yield the Christian faith commitment. Neither the beliefs of my parents, teachers, or church, nor the witness of friends, neither cult nor creed, neither code nor institution, neither books such as this one nor a thousand sermons by Billy Graham, Tony Campolo, and Chuck Swindoll can, of themselves, yield the Christian faith commitment.

The possibility of anyone's recognizing in the fragile humanity of Jesus the plenitude of God's power to save comes only from a miraculous

intervention of God. “Radical faith is not an achievement, for if it were we would will it and be done. Rather, it is a gift, and we are left to react respectively, to watch and to pray.”⁹ Paul, writing to the Corinthians, recognizes that the Spirit, handed over by Jesus, makes possible the most basic act of the Christian life: “No one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:3).

The faith that Jesus inspired in his disciples had such a profound impact on them that the disciples found it impossible to believe anyone could be equal to him or greater, not even Moses or Elijah, not even Abraham. That a prophet or judge or Messiah should come after Jesus and be greater than Jesus was inconceivable. It was not necessary to wait for someone else. Jesus was everything. Jesus was everything the Jews had ever hoped and prayed for. Jesus had fulfilled, or was about to fulfill, every promise and every prophecy. If anyone is to judge the world in the end, it must be he. If anyone is to be appointed Messiah, King, Lord, Son of God, how could it be anyone but Jesus?

“Jesus was experienced as *the* breakthrough in the history of humankind. He transcended everything that ever had been said and come before. He was in every way the ultimate, the last word. He was on a par with God. His word was God’s word. His Spirit was God’s Spirit. His feelings were God’s feelings. What he stood for was exactly the same as what God stood for. No higher estimation was possible.”¹⁰

This was the experience of Jesus’ followers. Contemporary Christian faith resonates with the evaluation of the primitive church. In a real sense, Jesus is our

faith. As I wrote elsewhere, “We are not travel agents handing out brochures to places we have never visited.” We are faith-explorers of a country without borders, one we discover, little by little, not to be a place but a person. Our faith includes our beliefs, but it also transcends them, for the reality of Jesus Christ never can be confined within doctrinal formulations.

The question henceforth is no longer *Is Jesus God-like?* but *Is God Jesus-like?* This is the traditional meaning of the assertion that Jesus is the Word of God. “Jesus reveals God to us, God does not reveal Jesus to us.”¹¹ We cannot deduce anything about Jesus from what we think we know about God; we must now deduce everything about God from what we do know about Jesus.

Like Abraham, all our previous images of God fade away.



The gift of my own faith in Jesus Christ does not depend or rely upon any power outside of my experience of God’s grace. When beliefs replace actual experience; when we no longer *know* but come to rely on the authority of books, institutions, or leaders; when we let religion interpose between us and the primary experience of Jesus as the Christ, we lose the reality religion itself describes as ultimate.

Incidentally, herein lies the origin of all holy wars as well as the bigotry, intolerance, and division within the body of Christ. Nothing ever has failed for Christianity as

much as the Crusades. One grows dizzy counting the battles allegedly fought about the nature of “true” faith. Clashes of beliefs lie beneath the terrorism that makes the headlines every day, “and the intimidation that is exercised more anonymously but just as righteously to urge ordinary people into practices and sects that claim to have the secret combination to God’s treasure-house of favor.”¹²

After twenty-two years of living by secondhand faith, on February 8, 1956, I met Jesus and moved from Haran to Canaan—from belief to faith. It was noon. The Angelus bell from the cloistered Carmelite monastery sounded in the distance. I was kneeling in a small chapel in Loretto, Pennsylvania. At five minutes after three, I rose shakily from the floor, knowing that the greatest adventure of my life had just begun. I entered a new perspective accurately described by Paul in Colossians 3:11: “Christ is all, and is in all.”

During those three hours on my knees, I felt like a little boy kneeling at the seashore. Little waves washed up and lapped against my knees. Slowly the waves grew bigger and stronger until they reached my waist. Suddenly a tremendous wave of concussion force knocked me over backward and swept me off the beach, reeling in midair, arching through space, vaguely aware that I was being carried to a place I had never been before—the heart of Jesus Christ...

In this first-ever-in-my-life experience of being unconditionally loved, I moved back and

forth between ecstasy and fear. . . . The moment lingered on and on in a timeless *now* until, without warning, a hand gripped my heart. I could barely breathe. The awareness of being loved was no longer gentle, tender, and comfortable. The love of Christ, the crucified Son of God, took on the wildness, fury, and passion of a sudden spring storm. *Jesus died on the cross for me!*

I had known that before, but in the way that John Henry Newman describes as “notional knowledge”—abstract, faraway, largely irrelevant to the gut issues of life, just another trinket in the dusty pawnshop of doctrinal beliefs. But in one blinding moment of salvific truth it was *real* knowledge calling for personal engagement of my mind and heart. Christianity was being loved and falling in love with Jesus Christ. Later the words in the first letter of Peter would illuminate and verify my experience: “You did not see him, yet you love him; and still without seeing him, you are already filled with a joy so glorious that it cannot be described, because you believe; and you are sure of the end to which your faith looks forward, that is, the salvation of your soul” (1:8–9).

At last, drained, spent, feeling limp and lost in speechless humility, I was back kneeling at the seashore with quiet, calm waves of love sweeping over me like a gentle tide saturating my mind and heart in a tranquil mode of deep worship.¹³

On that day I knew God's love and power—the essence of Christian faith. We must know God's love and power with a knowledge greater than our knowledge because it is beyond the capacity of mere human knowledge. We must know this with the mind of Christ himself. This is the basic redemptive Christian encounter. This is the movement from belief to experience via the bridge of faith.

In order to commit ourselves to radical discipleship, in order to live with the signature of Jesus written on the pages of our lives, we need the strength and encouragement of other Christians. But our deepest need is for the inexhaustible power of the love of Christ. The miracle of Christianity is that this need is already met. Through a serious life of prayer we become aware that we already have what we seek. In faith we come into consciousness of what is already there (more on this later). The power dwells within us, so far exceeding our need that conscious contact with it sweeps us out of ourselves beyond anything we could have imagined or desired and into the reality that is Christ.

Recently, I was given a copy of a note found written in the office of a young pastor in Zimbabwe, Africa, following his martyrdom for his faith in Jesus Christ. I quote his letter verbatim:

I'm part of the fellowship of the unashamed. I have the Holy Spirit's power. The die has been cast. I have stepped over the line. The decision has been made—I'm a disciple of his. I won't look back, let

up, slow down, back away, or be still. My past is redeemed, my present makes sense, my future is secure. I'm finished and done with low living, sight walking, smooth knees, colorless dreams, tamed visions, worldly talking, cheap giving, and dwarfed goals.

I no longer need preeminence, prosperity, position, promotions, plaudits, or popularity. I don't have to be right, first, tops, recognized, praised, regarded, or rewarded. I now live by faith, lean in his presence, walk by patience, am uplifted by prayer, and I labor with power.

My face is set, my gait is fast, my goal is heaven, my road is narrow, my way rough, my companions are few, my Guide reliable, my mission clear. I cannot be bought, compromised, detoured, lured away, turned back, deluded, or delayed. I will not flinch in the face of sacrifice, hesitate in the presence of the enemy, pander at the pool of popularity, or meander in the maze of mediocrity.

I won't give up, shut up, let up, until I have stayed up, stored up, prayed up, paid up, preached up for the cause of Christ. I am a disciple of Jesus. I must go till he comes, give till I drop, preach till all know, and work till he stops me. And, when he comes for his own, he will have no problem recognizing me...my banner will be clear!

Perhaps the only honest measure of authentic faith is my readiness for martyrdom. Not only my willingness to

die for Jesus Christ and the sake of the gospel, but to live for him one day at a time.

The Cross is the permanent signature of the risen Christ. The signed lifestyle requires a faith devoid of sentiment, ecstasies, and vision. “We live by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7). While faith is a gift of God, it calls for rugged effort on our part if it is to bear fruit. Modern-day hermit Carlo Caretto writes, “God gives us the boat and the oars, but then tells us, ‘It’s up to you to row.’ Making positive acts of faith is like training this faculty; it is developed by training as the muscles are developed by gymnastics.”

This book is not a mincing pastoral, nor a series of well-behaved meditations for pious people. It is a book about being heroes and heroines for the sake of Jesus Christ—for the sake of no one less than Christ, and in such a fashion that only the eyes of Jesus need see. It is a summons to authentic faith and radical discipleship, to the purity of the gospel, to the high road to Calvary and the scandal of the Cross, to a life of freedom under the signature of Jesus.

In the last analysis, faith is not the sum of our beliefs or a way of speaking or a way of thinking; it is a way of living and can be articulated adequately only in a living practice. To acknowledge Jesus as Savior and Lord is meaningful insofar as we try to live as he lived and to order our lives according to his values. We do not need to theorize about Jesus; we need to make him present in our time, our culture, and our circumstances. Only a true practice of our Christian faith can verify what we believe. As the French

philosopher Maurice Blondel was fond of saying, “If you really want to understand what a man believes, don’t listen to what he says, but watch what he does.”

A simple suggestion: Each time you turn a page of this book, whisper the words, “Lord, increase my faith.”



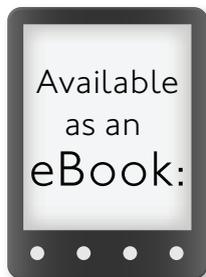
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