"SHAYNE HAS INDEED FOLLOWED JESUS INTO THE THORNY PLACES. BEFORE YOU FINISH THE FIRST CHAPTER YOU WILL BE INSPIRED TO DO THE SAME!" ANDY STANLEY NORTH POINT MINISTRIES

BRIARPATCH



ТНЕ

FEARLESSLY FOLLOWING JESUS

INTO THE THORNY PLACES

SHAYNE WHEELER







Shayne Wheeler is a pastor who refuses to allow theology to get in the way of ministry. Anyone who knows Shayne knows he exemplifies the subtitle of this excellent book. He has indeed followed Jesus into the thorny places. Before you finish the first chapter, you will be inspired to do the same!

ANDY STANLEY

Founder, North Point Ministries

Following Christ can be a messy and challenging journey because we often find ourselves in prickly and confusing places with the most unlikely people. *The Briarpatch Gospel* provides a window into Shayne Wheeler's piece of the patch, and an invitation to jump on in and join the adventure. This is not about playing it safe or seeing the purpose of life as merely being nice and doing a little good here and there. This is about taking God and God's world seriously—and it's how I want to live.

STEPHEN A. HAYNER

President, Columbia Theological Seminary

Shayne Wheeler ministers not in the safe (but shrinking) enclaves of the traditional and the conservative, but instead within the progressive, secular, post-Christian culture. This book is the distillation of many encounters Shayne has had with people in his neighborhood. All readers who want to do the same kind of ministry can learn much from overhearing these conversations. And those who do such work will also find encouragement here when they are criticized by both the hostile skeptical and the hostile devout.

TIM KELLER

Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York City

In *The Briarpatch Gospel*, Shayne Wheeler takes us on a journey underneath the superficiality present in much of American Christianity. It's a raw and honest invitation to face the dark, uncertain, and thorny places of our lives, along with a promise that Jesus is already there—waiting for us.

DANNY WUERFFEL

Heisman Trophy winner and executive director of Desire Street Ministries

Shayne Wheeler's narrative of how his church learned to follow Christ into areas of fear and challenge—"the briarpatch"—is just what the doctor ordered. I was personally challenged to new depths of honesty and faithfulness in ways I did not expect. Bravo for a book that deeply connects a theology of missional identity, and our unique Christ-centered calling, with the rise of the post-Christendom generation.

JOHN H. ARMSTRONG

President, ACT 3, and author of Your Church Is Too Small

As the messy edges of morality fray and the ever-stretching boundaries of our Christian consciousness expand, there is an urgent need for clarity in conviction and theological dialogue around today's most pressing concerns. Honest, pastoral, confessional, and prophetic, Shayne Wheeler courageously brings his readers into these murky waters. *The Briarpatch Gospel* is fresh and timely, an important contribution to the emerging conversations of our Christian identity and what compels us to engage today's greatest human needs.

CHRISTOPHER L. HEUERTZ

Author of Unexpected Gifts: Discovering the Way of Community

Shayne Wheeler writes like he preaches—earthy and edgy—just enough to make the religious people nervous and the irreligious interested. This dispatch from the briarpatch is a provocative book for both, a page-turning debut filled with wisdom and encouragement.

SCOT SHERMAN

President, Newbigin House of Studies

This unusual book has thrilled me afresh with the sheer magnitude of what God has done in Christ. (And I've been around a long time.) Shayne Wheeler is a rare combination of one with a profound understanding of the New Testament message, irrepressible storytelling, and a mischievous sense of humor; but in all he exalts the grace and love of God. He is an artist with words, with a wealth of literary resources. But what gives this work depth is that he has suffered, and so runs deep. Read this book and be transformed.

ROBERT THORNTON HENDERSON

Author of The Church and the Relentless Darkness

The Briarpatch Gospel is a conversation igniter for real people with real questions about the most tension-filled topics holding people back from true faith. I recommend it to anyone who wants to move past shallow talk and dig deep into the messiness of love and community.

JEFF SHINABARGER

Founder, Plywood People, and author of *More or Less: Choosing* a *Lifestyle of Excessive Generosity*

Too often, the church has offered false sanctuary behind walls of greeting-card platitudes, pretty buildings, tidy selfhelp programs, and pat answers. Shayne Wheeler shows us the uncomfortable truth that Jesus is calling us to come out from behind the walls we build and join him in the briarpatches of the world, where he delights to meet us. Do we really trust Jesus enough to follow him into the thickets of life? Will we move toward the pain, or flee from it? Is the briarpatch the place for you? Yes, if you will trust and go. Shayne offers an encouragement: You don't journey there alone. He has stumbled into the dark tangle of thorns, and he knows—it's the only way to really meet Jesus and his family.

RAY CANNATA

Senior pastor, Redeemer Presbyterian Church of New Orleans

I am thankful for *The Briarpatch Gospel*. Wheeler writes with depth and simplicity, transparency and humor in describing God's disruptive grace. He tells his own story in a way that embraces skeptics and strugglers as he invites us into a beautifully woven narrative that compels us to keep reading until finished, while being nourished all along the way. We will use this book in our church in the years to come, and I will count it among my favorites.

MIKE KHANDJIAN

Senior pastor, Chapelgate Presbyterian Church, Greater Baltimore, Maryland

Shayne Wheeler tackles the messier issues of life head-on because he knows it's in life's messiness that we find God, and it's in the broken places where we find God's healing. *The Briarpatch Gospel* reminds us that Christianity was never meant to be a religion of safety and comfort and that God calls us to carry our light into the darkest shadows where it can actually be of use. We don't have to fear the hard questions, even if we don't always know the answers.

JOSH JACKSON

Cofounder and editor in chief, Paste magazine





BRIARPATCH

GOSPEL

ТНЕ

FEARLESSLY FOLLOWING JESUS

INTO THE THORNY PLACES

SHAYNE WHEELER

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THE PROBLEM OF THE BRIARPATCH

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CHAPTER 1

YOU ARE HERE COMING TO GRIPS WITH OUR FEAR

A ship is safe in harbor, but that's not what ships are for. WILLIAM SHEDD

A dead thing can go with the stream, but only a living thing can go against it. G. K. CHESTERTON

I was three weeks out of seminary and working as a youth pastor in Virginia when I first went to New York City, leading a mission trip to hand out gospel tracts in Brighton Beach, near Coney Island in Brooklyn. We were an idealistic group, convinced that our finely crafted leaflets had the potential to reach hundreds, if not thousands, of hard-hearted New Yorkers for Christ. We had ten thousand tracts, so our goals for transforming lives and changing hearts wouldn't exactly measure up to Billy Graham's famous sixteen-week revival in 1957, when millions heard the gospel at Madison Square Garden, Yankee Stadium, and Times Square. Still, we figured that a few thousand conversions would suffice. Within hours, my high-flying dream of evangelistic stardom had begun to stall as, one after another, the disinterested denizens of Brighton Beach accepted one of our tracts, gave it a quick glance, and dropped it without even breaking stride. The discarded leaflets began to pile up in the trash cans and blow like forsaken tumbleweeds on the streets of this bustling city. Rather than capturing a city for Christ, we were creating more work for the New York City sanitation workers. By the end of the day, my evangelistic fervor was in a steep death spiral.

Welcome to earth, Shayne. I hope you enjoyed your flight.

By the third day, embarrassment had given way to a growing cynicism. We decided to move our team out to the famous boardwalk, where folks would presumably be more jovial, friendly, and open to our efforts.

This was not a good move.

The unrepentant littering continued. One young member of our team approached two men who may have been members of the Russian mafia. After treating him to a litany of profanity and threats, one of the men pulled back his jacket to reveal a holstered handgun, not so politely inviting our teenager to walk away and not return.

Things were not going as planned.

Disillusioned, I stopped near a bench overlooking the ocean, where an elderly gentleman in a well-worn fedora sat watching the waves, a wooden cane hooked on the backrest. Judging him unlikely to be hiding a gun under his faded green summer jacket, I sat down to lick my wounds.

A saline breeze had begun to move onshore. "Rain is coming," he said in heavily accented English. "Uh-huh," I replied. "What brings you to boardwalk?" "These stupid tracts." "What are they about?" "Jesus," I muttered. "You think Jesus is stupid?"

"We've handed out thousands of these, and most have ended up on the ground. It feels no different than if they were restaurant coupons or flyers for one of the strip clubs."

"Yes. Everybody is selling something," the man agreed. "But if your Jesus is so important to you Christians, why do you make us read? You say he lives in you—so why you don't show him to us?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"You give me piece of paper that says your belief about Jesus, but you don't know me. Why don't you want to know me? A paper is just paper. Your paper is no different than other piece of paper, so why should I read a paper from a stranger? If you are Christian and Jesus is in you like you say, do not bother me with paper. Do not be stranger."

"Okay," I replied, uncertain of what to say next.

"Hello. I am Ilya," he said, holding out his hand. "From Russia."

I had a feeling he was going to teach me a thing or two about Jesus, and I wasn't sure I was going to like it. Control is not something I surrender easily.

"I'm Shayne, from . . . well, I guess I am from Virginia now."

Having emigrated from Russia many decades before, Ilya

had raised his family in the eclectic, crowded neighborhood of Brighton Beach. We talked for more than two hours about family and grandkids, retirement, health, neighbors, and our wives. We talked about Jesus, too. Ilya was Jewish and had heard a lot about Jesus over the course of more years than I had been alive. He had lots of questions, some of which I could answer. Many I could not, despite my advanced theological degree.

I had never had such a muddled, or meaningful, discussion about Jesus. My seminary answers often sounded platitudinous and even hollow. Yet as Ilya and I talked, Jesus was there, sitting with us in the pregnant pauses and cul-de-sacs that littered our conversation. He had never been more present and alive to me, and I found myself wishing I knew him better.

"Rain is here," Ilya said as he raised his eyes to the gathered clouds. "I must go. We both have much to think about. Getting to know you made your Jesus more real to me, and I thank you. Good-bye, friend." He tipped his fedora and was gone.

Who knows what ever became of that conversation in Ilya's life, but I knew something had changed in me.

I had traveled all the way from Virginia to Brighton Beach, ostensibly to introduce people to Jesus—to change their lives by means of a carefully worded and expertly designed pamphlet—but it seemed that I was the one who needed the introduction, or at least a reunion.

I first met Jesus when I was in college, through a group of people who loved and cared for one another in a way I

didn't know was possible. Jocks and jesters, nerds and rebels, I found them to be a weird Breakfast Club community of true friendship and affection, held together by their common identity as Christians. It was weird. *They* were weird. But I was intrigued.

They called themselves the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, and they met on Thursday evenings in the basement of one of the dorms. The friend who invited me said that only a few were actually athletes, and you didn't even have to be a Christian to come. Nevertheless, I quickly realized that Jesus was real to this diverse gathering of college students—not in a creepy, cultish, one-dimensional way, but something deeper, like it made them better people, more peaceful and kind and full of joy. The life of Jesus just seemed to be in them, and I gradually absorbed that life into my own.

At the time, I couldn't have given an account for the theological basis of sin, repentance, or substitutionary atonement. I would have stuttered cross-eyed if you had asked me about the factual truth of the Resurrection or the reality of the Trinity, but I knew Jesus and I knew he had changed me. I knew that God had spoken his benediction of grace over me—that he had welcomed me into his family, warts and all, and called me his own. I knew that, through Jesus, God hadn't just forgiven me, he also loved me like his own child. This was easy for me to accept because my father had always loved and accepted me, even though I wasn't perfect and often needed correction. I knew that nothing could cause my dad to stop loving me, and now I knew I had the same kind of love from God. It was real. Palpable. I could feel it in my bones.

Yet here I was, eight years later, on the streets of Brooklyn, relying more on propositions and formulas, slogans, and thinly veiled intimidation—"God will get you in the end if you don't straighten up and get right with Jesus"—to try to get people's attention. Jesus had become more of a ticket out of hell than an invitation into a rich and loving life with God. What happened to the life and the joy, the simplicity of knowing that Christ was living in me? I had fancied myself as brave and bold to venture into big, bad Brooklyn, armed with theologically sound literature. But that wasn't courage; it was cowardice. I was hiding behind my pamphlets and the impersonal anonymity of the big city, afraid to let the Jesus within me breathe and be seen, simple and unadorned.

As I hoisted my backpack onto my shoulders, the tracts that now weighed me down seemed unloving and cruel. As awkward and unprepared as I had felt while talking to Ilya, I realized that our conversation had at least been *real*. And I hadn't even shown him one of my flyers. With a newfound determination, I resolved that never again would I hide behind my fear of not having all the answers or pretend to know more than I do. That day at the boardwalk was my first step away from cowardice and my first step toward a journey that would lead me into a vast and unpredictable briarpatch of questions, doubts, and fears, of untidy relationships and heartbreaking stories.

If we're honest, we want things to be easy in our relationship with God, and especially in our relationships at church. But it just doesn't work that way. Church, for many of us, is a place where real problems and struggles are covered in a veneer of genteel seersucker or khaki. Polite, superficial smiles mask the silent screams of struggle and pain because Sunday morning is just not the time or place to deal with the carnage of life—especially a life that has gone badly off the rails. But if the truth be told, the stories of the Bible can feel as lifeless and two-dimensional as a flannel storyboard, irrelevant to what we are experiencing in our fractured families, broken bodies, or emaciated souls. Nobody questions the blatant contradiction between our Sunday school façades and the inner turmoil of our fears and doubts. We would rather streak naked down the center aisle than ever confess that we sometimes question whether God is even real. Sound familiar? Welcome to the briarpatch. You are not weird. And life with Jesus will not make all your problems vanish.

The unfortunate reality is that we often feel more comfortable—more alive—at the local pub than at a church potluck, and it sometimes seems far more likely that we will run into Jesus downtown than at church. The image of Jesus being confined to an hour on Sunday morning or in a room politely fitted with matching pews (or padded chairs) and carpet, under outdated brass chandeliers and anchored with a pipe organ (or a stage for the band) just doesn't seem to match how the Son of God is portrayed in the Bible. Sure, he was a regular attender at synagogue, but he did some of his best work in the public places—at parties, with his friends, in the public square, among whores and crooks. And he probably didn't bathe very often. His life on earth was messy, and it ended brutally, on the cross, with a prickly crown of thorns pressed into his brow. Maybe he was trying to tell us something there. Perhaps that life is going to be unavoidably prickly and painful?

The gospel tracts were just one of the ways I had avoided wading into the thicket. I was certain there were others. Almost imperceptibly, my heart had been locked securely behind the gates of systematic theology and pat Sunday school answers, far from the real-time doubt and disillusionment of the people around me—far from the place where Jesus delights to meet us. In playing it safe, I had almost missed getting to know Jesus.

I realized that Jesus is in the midst of that jumbled thicket—the briarpatch—waiting for me to venture in. He's waiting for you, too. And if we follow him, we will find him. If we have the courage to enter the briarpatch, we will discover that Jesus is real and that his life, death, and resurrection matter—not just in the afterlife, but now. Here. In this place that he created, loves, and is renewing. We will discover that our lives matter—to the homeless man on the corner begging for a quarter, the bald lady at church going through chemo for the second time, or the gay man who loves Jesus but has been rejected by Christians so many times that he has finally given up trying. This is life in the briarpatch.

To be sure, the briarpatch is not for the faint of heart. There are risks involved. We will be shunned, even criticized, by the keepers of the Christian status quo. They will not appreciate the questions we ask, much less the answers (or lack of answers) we offer.

IS THE BRIARPATCH CALLING YOU?

Is the briarpatch where Jesus makes his home for you? If you are a Christian, the answer is yes. Your calling as a follower of Jesus is to do just that . . . follow! Jesus can, of course, be found in the sanctuary, but his presence is not limited to a scheduled hour between breakfast and lunch on Sunday morning. He sends us-tells us to "go into the world" in his name-and promises to be with us to the very end. Furthermore, he is revealed in the pages of the Bible and meets us in prayer. Reading the Scriptures and praying regularly are essential for all followers of Christ, and a journey into the briarpatch assumes that worship and study and prayer are vital and vibrant parts of your life. If not, believe me, walking with Jesus among the thorns and thistles will renew a desire and need for these things! But the point is, your spiritual life will be anemic without both. We meet Jesus in corporate worship and personal prayer, but we follow him into the briarpatch every day to bring love and healing to our world.

But what if you are not a Christian, or have long ago decided that Christianity is just not for you? Perhaps you have had your fill of boring, perfunctory songs and prayers. You just cannot stomach the churches full of some of the most self-centered, hypocritical bipeds who have ever lumbered across the earth. If this is what it means to be a Christian, you'll pass.

If that is you, there is hope. Real hope. Don't give up. All I ask is that you join me in the briarpatch and just see if you don't find the Jesus of the Bible—the real one, who loved prostitutes, hypocrites, and thieves. The one who hung out with the poor, the marginalized, and the disenfranchised. The one who railed against corruption, greed, suffering, and injustice. The one who invited *everyone* to come and find hope, meaning, and the life of God in him—without becoming myopic, self-righteous, religious fanatics.

This is the Jesus who made this world and called it "good." But what he made has fallen into disrepair and is often overrun with the brambles of suffering, sin, alienation, and shallow religiosity. The list could go on and on. But if Jesus is really the Redeemer he claims to be, he is not done with you and me, and he is not done with the world—as broken as it may be. He has come to rescue and restore, to bring healing and hope. He has come to put the world to rights, to clear away the brush and the brambles and restore things to how they were always supposed to be. Not only is he doing this, he invites us to join him.

But how?

It just seems too difficult and way too scary at times. So we settle for memory verses, "quiet times," potlucks, and sermons no longer than thirty minutes. I guess it's just easier that way. But what if we had the courage to follow Jesus into the thicket of his healing grace?

WELCOME TO THE BRIARPATCH

Sarah was new to Atlanta and had recently endured a hard breakup with her boyfriend. She had no friends in the city, was under tremendous stress in her new job, and quickly spiraled into a severe depression. Having grown up in church, Sarah could not remember a time when Jesus wasn't real to her—near and intimate. But now he seemed to have been swept away in the vortex of sadness that sucked all the joy out of her life.

She was in trouble, but admitting to such a desperate depression was terrifying. Christians are supposed to be happy, right? They are supposed to have faith and joy and hope. But all the memory verses now failed her and she couldn't muster the strength to pray.

She approached me one Sunday and simply said, "I think I need to talk to someone."

When Sarah told me her story, it was clear we were going into the briarpatch of her spiritual and emotional suffocation—a place of darkness where the birds no longer sing, the sun no longer shines, and God no longer cares. If you have ever loved someone who was enduring a season of depression—or been there yourself—you understand that it is more than just having "the blues." It is the "Dementor's Kiss" that can "drain peace, hope, and happiness out of the air" around you.¹ The nearer we draw to someone whose soul is struggling to breathe, the thinner the air becomes for us as well. But draw near we must.

After listening patiently to Sarah, I said, "I know it feels as if someone has put a blanket over your soul and God has turned his back on you. I've had times like that myself. But," I assured her, "God has not gone anywhere. He is with you. You will get through this, but you might need others to believe for you when you don't have the strength on your own."

She gave a slight nod, but her expression said, *Yeah, yeah. I hear what you're saying, but it's just not working for me.* "Come with me for a minute," I said. "I want you to meet someone."

I introduced Sarah to a woman who I knew would understand; someone who had been to the depths and back, someone with whom she could open up without fear of rejection or judgment. Over time, Sarah was invited to a community group of people her own age. She established some good friendships with people who loved her, prayed with her, and studied the Scriptures with her, even though she often wasn't much fun to be around.

A few weeks ago, when Sarah came forward for Communion, there was something different about her. She was smiling. The circumstances of her life hadn't changed a whole lot, but the thorns of her depression had not kept a group of ordinary Christians from loving her. As they engaged with Sarah in the briarpatch, Jesus had met them there. And the touch of his Spirit was evident.

Invitations into the briarpatch happen in all different ways and come in all shapes and sizes.

I met Charlie a few months ago, when he came to All Souls for the first time. I happened to walk past him just after the service ended, so I stopped and said hello. The fear that shot through his body when the preacher stopped to talk to him was almost visible. He seemed certain that the inquisition was about to begin.

Within five minutes, I learned that he had believed in Jesus longer than I had and was new to town. He didn't know anyone and was nervous about his new job. He also fully expected that we would not want him in our church. It took a great deal of courage for him to let down his guard, especially so quickly. But that's just what he did.

"See, Pastor, I'm one of those boys who likes to kiss other boys."

I tried to hold it together, but I just couldn't. "Wow!" I said as I began to laugh. "Is that how you tell people you're gay? I've heard it said a lot of ways, but that's a new one!"

He squirmed and let out a nervous laugh, and I could tell he was just waiting for me to ask some uncomfortable questions—was he celibate? did he have a boyfriend? had he read Leviticus?—and then explain why he wouldn't be welcome at our church unless he changed his ways. It was pretty clear he expected judgment and rejection.

Instead, I looked him in the eye and said, "If you are a follower of Christ, you're my brother, and you're welcome here either way. I'm guessing I don't need to tell you what the Bible says about homosexuality because you probably know better than I do. But your being gay doesn't put you into some special category of sinner. It just means you struggle to follow Jesus, just like I do. You and I both are called to conform our lives to the righteousness of Christ, and you and I are both going to fail miserably at times. But I am willing to walk down that road with you for as long as it takes. And I want you to walk down my roads with me. As Christians, we are called to enter together into the mess and the mystery of following Jesus."

He was speechless. It may have been my cologne.

Finally, he muttered, "Okay."

"I need coffee," I said, pointing toward our lobby. "Want some?"

I don't pretend to understand what it's like to be a gay Christian.* But it's not necessary for me to understand in order to give my friendship to Charlie, any more than he needs to know my sins and doubts before deciding to be my friend. We don't have to have all the answers. We don't even have to agree on the questions. Following Jesus means only that we have the courage to love as he did, even when we don't understand.

When Jesus went to the homes of tax collectors, and when he associated with adulterers, prostitutes, lepers, and Samaritans, he was misunderstood and reviled—the religious leaders called him "a friend of sinners" (Matthew 11:19).

Was Jesus compromising the truth when he ate with tax collectors and sinners? No, he was demonstrating his love for them. And the one truth that really mattered—the same truth that matters in our day as well—is that we're all lost sinners in need of redemption, which comes only through the sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus. Our calling is to love other people as Christ has loved us (that is, while we were yet sinners), and allow the Holy Spirit to "convict the world of its sin, and . . . guide [us] into all truth" (John 16:8, 13, NLT).

The fact of the matter is that it would be much easier if there were no gays or liberals or divorced people or pagans at our church. It's awkward to meet a woman in church who used to be a man and try to figure out if you should refer to her (him) as "he" or "she." It would be much easier to avoid it altogether, ignore her and silently hope she decides to go

^{*} Some people believe that the term "gay Christian" is an oxymoron—that it's not possible to be both gay and Christian. But if the blood of Christ doesn't extend to *everyone* who calls on the name of the Lord, how can we say it covers *us* in our own fallenness?

to another church. Then again, it seems as if that would be like avoiding Jesus, too.

I saw Charlie again two weeks later. Fifth row, right on the center aisle. And he had brought his grandma with him.

Welcome to the briarpatch, Charlie.

YOU ARE HERE

I am certainly no titan of the faith, and I don't want you to think you have to be a Christian superhero in order to walk through the briarpatch. All you need is the courage to be yourself—the geek who has a gift for numbers and a passion for science fiction; the mom who considers it a success just to survive (without anyone getting hurt) until the kids go to bed; the executive who has been wounded by the church and wrestles with serious doubts, but can't get over the beauty of Jesus.

All you need is the courage to believe that God knew what he was doing when he made you, with all of your quirks, passions, idiosyncrasies, and general stupidity, and to extend the same faith, hope, and love to your friends and neighbors.

All you need is the courage to believe that your life matters to God—the way you befriend your neighbor who has just been diagnosed with cancer or listen to your coworker going through a divorce; the way you patiently love your teenager and hope for his or her eventual return to the human race, or struggle to forgive one of the many people who have wronged you. Such actions of grace and affection are the stuff of redemption.

All you need is the courage to acknowledge that life—your

life—really stinks sometimes and seems to oscillate between crisis and boredom and back again. They may never make a Lifetime movie about your life, but you are already living in the briarpatch, and this is where Jesus delights to meet you.

In the pages that follow, I will share some of my own experiences of the tragedy and tedium of life. And you may have your own stories that are far more acute and wearisome than mine. But here's the point: The briarpatch is where God shows up. It's where we meet Jesus. Somewhere along the way, we have bought into the idea that we must go to a particular place or through a ritualized routine in order to find God.

I certainly affirm the power and necessity of meeting God in corporate worship and pursuing him in private prayer, but what do you do when you just can't find the strength? What do you do when your path has been a protracted series of disappointment, disillusionment, and despair? Or when you're on a path full of sickness, betrayal, and loneliness, and the thought of mustering the spiritual or emotional energy to pursue Jesus seems impossible, like reaching the summit of Mount Everest—when you are out of shape, out of gas, and out of breath, wishing someone were waiting with a tank of oxygen to help you up this insurmountable religious peak, or you are paralyzed with the fear of slipping and falling into the dark crevasses on either side of you. Truth be told, you can't take another step, much less make it to the summit in hopes of experiencing the transcendent presence of God.

I have good news for you. Jesus isn't only on the summit. He's also in the deep valleys, on the windswept slopes, and in the cavernous crevasses. He's in the seemingly dark places of your exhaustion and confusion. He's in the briarpatch, amid all the tangle, thorns, and confusion, and it's where he does some of his best work.

But what does that look like?

We expect encounters with the living God to be earthshattering, but it wasn't that way (at least initially) for most of the people who met Jesus after he was raised from the dead. His disciples were having a despondent dinner, and Jesus walked in and asked for something to eat (Luke 24:35-43). Another time, they were having a really bad day at work, until Jesus arrived and showed them a better way (John 21:1-11). On a third occasion, two men were walking along a hot and dusty road between Jerusalem and Emmaus after they had witnessed Christ's crucifixion. Even as they wondered why God hadn't shown up, Jesus came and walked alongside them (Luke 24:13-27).

What is surprising—and encouraging—about such encounters is that they are so ordinary. If you were to make up a story about meeting Jesus in the flesh, what would he look like? I would have him glowing like the sun, maybe with some levitation, lightning in his hands and thunder in his voice. There would definitely be lasers. But that's typically not how it happens.

In 1995, singer Joan Osborne asked a pretty perceptive question: "What if God was one of us? Just a slob like one of us? Just a stranger on the bus?"² In the case of the New Testament, he was like one of us. What makes us think it would be much different now?

In the plight of the homeless, the abused, and the

disenfranchised in the struggle against injustice or the difficulty of loving people who are just so frustratingly different from us, God is there. In the heartbreak of betrayal or the crucible of sickness, God is there. He inhabits the difficult places in our lives and in the lives of others, so we need not be afraid to go there.

Maybe you're still waiting for lasers and lightning. You're waiting for a clear, booming voice from heaven before you have the courage to follow Jesus into the prickly underbrush of your everyday life. What you may not realize is that you've already been given what you need in order to follow him with confidence.

Ask yourself, why did God bother to raise Jesus from the dead? Why not just take Jesus straight back to heaven and bypass the corporeal interlude? Instead, Jesus was raised in a physical body and appeared to hundreds of people over the course of forty days. Why?

Because his death and resurrection were not just so you and I can go to heaven one day and in the meantime idle our lives away with halfhearted morality and unsingable hymns or feel-good praise choruses. It was not so we can get "churched-up" on Sundays and live in blind indifference or passive apathy on the days in between. The visitation of the resurrected Jesus was meant to signal to us that a new reality has been unleashed in the world. That the presence and power of Jesus are here *now*, and they are healing and restoring amid the barbs and briars that we call life. Christ's resurrection shows us that his life, hope, healing, and renewal are happening today, in this place, in our world. Sociologist James Davison Hunter says it well,

The Son of God . . . was both the actual presence and the harbinger of a new kingdom. Everything about his life, his teaching, and his death was a demonstration of a different kind of power—not just in relation to the spiritual realm . . . but in the ordinary social dynamics of everyday life. It operated in complete obedience to God the Father, it repudiated the symbolic trappings of elitism, it manifested compassion concretely out of calling and vocation, and it served the good of all and not just the good of the community of faith. In short, in contrast to the kingdoms of this world, his kingdom manifests the power to bless, unburden, serve, heal, mend, restore, and liberate.³

In other words, the resurrection of Jesus says, "Don't wait for heaven. I want you to experience and participate in my healing presence now. I am here, in this world and for this world. I am in the briarpatch. Won't you join me?" If Jesus came to heal the world, it makes sense that we would find him amid the bristles and barbs where people are scratched up and bleeding, where healing is most needed. If we want the fullness of Jesus' resurrection presence in our lives, we cannot be afraid to admit that we struggle and get lost in the tangle of suffering, doubt, and discouragement. Yet we cannot be afraid to step into the thorny thickets of our world because that is where the Savior of the world does some of his best work. And he invites us to join him.