

AUTHOR OF THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER **RADICAL**

A CALL TO **DIE**. A CALL TO **LIVE**.

# FOLLOW **ME**



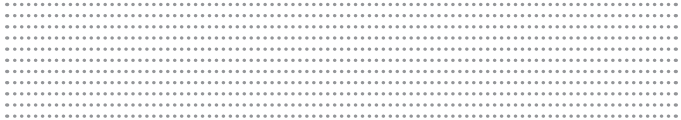
DAVID  
PLATT

INTRODUCTION BY

**FRANCIS CHAN**







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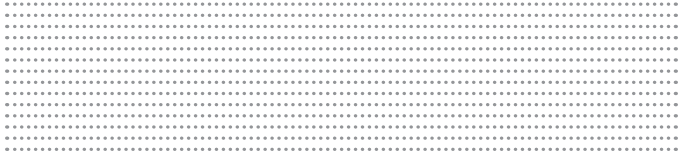
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# INTRODUCTION



## **MY PERSONAL JOURNEY**

I did what everyone expected me to do. I planted a megachurch. I wrote a bestseller. I started a college, planted other churches, and spoke at conferences. But there was a big problem: I lacked peace. Based on what I read in the Word, there were too many inconsistencies. My lifestyle did not resemble the life of Jesus, and the church I read about in Acts seemed so foreign. I realize that Jesus lived in a different culture and that Acts was written about a unique time in history, but I am convinced that certain qualities should always be true of Christians and the church.

It was no surprise to my wife, Lisa, and me when we sensed the Lord leading us on a new adventure. After seventeen years of fruitful ministry in one city (our entire married life), we left some deep and irreplaceable friendships to enter the unknown. I don't recommend this to everyone. It is not God's plan for every person, but it was for us. Simi Valley no longer seemed like the place I was most needed for the spread of the gospel. That was enough for us. Shouldn't all of our decisions be based upon what is going to have the greatest impact for God's Kingdom?

I wrestled with the number of Bible-teaching churches in this small city. I struggled with having so many godly leaders in one church while other cities were lacking or completely overlooked. I was frustrated with my own inability to motivate people to structure their lives around disciple making. I could fill a room and preach a sermon, but I couldn't figure out how to compel the people to leave that room and actually make disciples. I could generate excitement, but not urgency. I knew Jesus wanted more for his church, but I didn't know exactly what, and I didn't know how to lead them there.

Looking back, I can see now that part of the problem was my example. We all know that it's difficult to teach our children to do something we are not modeling. I told people to make disciples while I spent my days dealing with problems and preparing sermons. I wanted the people to share their faith regularly even though I rarely did. I expected the church to live adventurously while I continued my routine.

Peace began flooding back to me when we sold our home, packed up the family, and headed for Asia. It's weird how uncertainty can actually bring peace while ease causes the opposite. We chose Asia because I heard so many stories about the faith of the believers there. I wanted to witness it firsthand and see if the Lord was calling me there. I thought I might fit in better overseas and be better utilized in a different culture. Regardless of the outcome, I was enjoying the process. It was a rush to be in foreign countries, praying with my family, and asking the Lord if he wanted us to stay. In many ways, it was a dream come true.

We learned a lot while we were in Asia, but I concluded that

the Lord was not done with me in America. He wanted me to take what I had learned from the believers in China and India and apply it here in the States. Their passion and commitment reminded me of what I read in the Scriptures. They displayed New Testament Christianity in the twenty-first century. They showed how rapidly and effectively the gospel spreads when every believer makes disciples. I am convinced that their mentality and approach to church could be just as transformative in the States. But we would have to be willing.

So I'm back in the United States. I'm still unsure of God's overarching plan for me, but this has been one of the best seasons of my life. I spend most of my days in San Francisco with a group of friends who go from person to person, explaining the gospel to anyone who will listen. A church is developing where disciple making is central and unity is natural. We are quickly becoming a family. I have found that it is much easier to put aside disagreements with fellow soldiers who sacrifice to make disciples.

I have more peace about my pursuit of those who don't know Jesus (I'm less of a coward). I have seen tremendous spiritual growth in my children. I love watching them share their faith and hearing their excitement when they witness the supernatural. We have seen God answer many prayers supernaturally. We are less attached to the world and more focused on eternity. My wife and kids are becoming more like Jesus, and our lifestyles more congruent with the New Testament. As my sixteen-year-old put it after our first outreach, "It felt like we popped out of the Bible."

The church I am a part of is a work in progress, but it is headed in the right direction. It is becoming more and more like what I see

in Scripture. There is life, love, sacrifice, commitment, and power. Much of my time is spent actually making disciples, and ministry is making sense within this framework.

For too long, I wrestled with the simple math. Things made sense when I managed fifty people and saw them reach out to five hundred. I felt like a successful manager. It made sense when I was entrusted with five hundred workers and saw them reach five thousand. But that's when the system crashed. I was given the huge responsibility of leading five thousand workers. That's a massive workforce! And while we saw some good things happen, I didn't keep the workers multiplying. The growth we saw did not make sense considering the size of the army. The math didn't add up. I was wasting resources.

The issue is not about having a small church or a big one. It is about how to keep the great commission at the forefront of every believer's mind. It is about helping the church go beyond "come and listen" to "go and tell." It is about believers experiencing real life and about the church of Jesus shining brightly.

### **MAKING EVERY DAY A MISSION TRIP**

Have you ever been on a short-term mission trip? Wasn't it fascinating? For a few days you explored a foreign country with a group of believers and were focused on ministry. You laughed together as you ate strange foods and tried to speak the language. You wept as you witnessed extreme poverty. Maybe you even suffered through sickness, harsh conditions, or actual persecution.

As nice as it was to return to the comforts of home, there was also a letdown. You were back in the "real world." There was a

peace you felt when you did Kingdom work, and then it faded. You returned to a routine in which you felt like much of what you do has no eternal value. But what if it was possible to prolong the excitement and peace? What if life could be one continuous mission trip? Is this even possible in the “real world”?

Not only is it possible, it is what God wants for us.

Do you remember the verse that many of us heard when we first believed? “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”<sup>1</sup>

The life God has for us is one of abundance. It is meant to be full, not repetitive. He wants us doing things that have eternal impact. He wants us busy expanding his Kingdom in one way or another, today and every day. This doesn’t mean that every Christian should quit his or her job and move to a foreign country. But it does mean that we need to figure out how to make each day count for his purposes.

Paul said it like this: “No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him.”<sup>2</sup>

Don’t most of us do the opposite? We busy ourselves with “civilian pursuits” and occasionally jump into the battle when we feel compelled. Kingdom service is something we visit on a mission trip, day of service, or prayer meeting. Being entangled in the civilian lifestyle has become the accepted norm. It is even applauded so long as we can point to some occasional Kingdom activity. But doesn’t Scripture tell us to live differently? And wouldn’t your life be more “abundant” if you could figure out a way to be on the battlefield every day?

You may be looking at your life and assuming you have no

options. Isn't a person with bills, family, and responsibilities destined to be "entangled in civilian pursuits"?

Absolutely not. You and I were made for more.

**WHERE THERE'S A COMMAND, THERE'S A WAY**

Jesus would never give us an impossible command. Whenever he allows temptation, he provides a way of escape.<sup>3</sup> Whenever he gives us a task, he provides us with the power to accomplish it.<sup>4</sup> Giving us a command without also giving us the power to obey would make life frustrating, not *abundant*.

Completing tasks with excellence is one of the joys of life. We love it when we ace a test after studying like crazy or win a game after competing with all we have. We are envious when we watch an Olympic athlete win the gold after years of dedication. We love seeing hard work pay off.

God created us to do good works.<sup>5</sup> And here's the crazy thing: not only does God give us commands, not only does he give us power to obey those commands, but he also rewards us when we've done what he commanded us! That is the abundant life.

Probably the most memorable task he gave was in Matthew 28. It stands out because of the dramatic fashion in which he gave it. *He rose from the grave*, and then prefaced his command with the words, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." No one in his right mind would ignore the next words out of Jesus' mouth:

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of

the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.<sup>6</sup>

Jesus wanted followers from every nation on earth, so he commanded his disciples to reach them and train them. And that's exactly what they did—but this work is still not finished. He expects us to follow in their footsteps and structure our lives so that our actions revolve around completing this mission.

The church began in Acts 2 when three thousand people were converted. By AD 100, estimates claim twenty-five thousand followers. By AD 350, estimates claim over thirty *million* followers.<sup>7</sup>

How could the church grow at this incredible rate, especially under persecution? The early followers saw their obligation to make disciples. We see the same mind-set with the church in China. So we shouldn't be surprised to learn that the results are also the same. China claimed one million followers in 1950. In 1992, the State Statistical Bureau of China indicated that there were seventy-five million Christians.<sup>8</sup> Is it so impossible to believe that Christians could have this same disciple-making mind-set and experience the same type of revival here in America?

Ultimately, it doesn't matter if you like this strategy or not. We don't really have an option. That is the point of a command.

You take a big chance if you ignore an assignment given to you from your boss at work. Most of us would never consider it. So how can we ignore the King of the universe who will one day return as Judge?

The command can feel overwhelming. Many already live busy lives and at times feel like they are on the brink of meltdown. How

could Jesus, who said, “My yoke is easy and my burden is light,”<sup>9</sup> throw such an enormous burden upon us? The answer is to consider who you are “yoked”—or joined together—with. Picture the imagery of two oxen placed under one yoke. Now picture yourself yoked with Jesus! Who wouldn’t want that? Isn’t this more of an honor than a burden?

Jesus ends his command by comforting us: “And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”<sup>10</sup> He promises to accompany his workers until his work is done. This is what gives us peace, confidence, and even anticipation.

### **MISSING OUT?**

When people say that they don’t “feel close to Jesus,” I ask them if they are making disciples. After all, his promise to be with us is directly tied to his command to make disciples. While every Christian wants to experience the power of the Holy Spirit, we often forget that the Spirit’s power is given for the purpose of being his witnesses.<sup>11</sup> Experiencing God, which is the longing of every true believer, happens when we are being his witnesses and making disciples.

There’s nothing more exciting than experiencing the power of God firsthand. We would all love to stand with Elijah as he called down fire from heaven or to walk with Daniel through a den of lions or to see Peter and John tell a crippled man to stand up and walk. But these miracles happened when God’s servants were being his witnesses in dangerous situations. We miss out on seeing the Spirit’s power when we refuse to live by faith. We miss out on experiencing Christ when we don’t speak up for him.



What's most tragic is that we could be experiencing God but instead we are experiencing guilt! Our fear of following him into a life spent making disciples leaves us feeling disappointed in ourselves.

Don't you struggle with this kind of guilt?

You read the Bible and believe that Jesus is the only way to heaven. You fear that those who die apart from Christ face a horrifying future. Yet for whatever reason, you've made little effort to warn your family and friends. You have neighbors, coworkers, and others you pass by daily without saying a word to them about Jesus.

You look at your life and think, *This doesn't make sense! Either I don't really believe the Bible, or I'm extremely unloving. I'm more concerned about being rejected than I am about someone else's eternal destiny.*

Much of my life was plagued with guilt because I knew that my actions did not make sense in light of my beliefs.

God doesn't want us to live this way. He wants us free from guilt and full of life. But the solution is not to ignore our guilt, nor is it to justify our actions, comparing ourselves to others who are just as complacent. The answer is repentance. Change.

I see a trend in many churches where people are beginning to *enjoy* convicting sermons. They walk out feeling broken over their sin. The distorted part is that they can begin to feel *victorious in their sadness*. They boast, "I just heard the most convicting message, and it ruined me!" The focus is on the conviction itself and not the change it is meant to produce—change that doesn't necessarily follow when we stay focused on conviction. Guilt is not always a good thing. It is only good if it leads us past sorrow to the joy of repentance.

Remember that the rich young ruler walked away sad, while Zacchaeus (who was also rich) leaped out of a tree with excitement.<sup>12</sup> The difference between the two was repentance. The rich ruler was sad because he wasn't ready to let go. Zacchaeus let go of his pride and possessions to joyfully follow Jesus. This is what Christ wants for us.

It's time we trade our guilt and sorrow for the joy of the Lord. No regrets.

For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.<sup>13</sup>

### **FINISH STRONG**

We've all made our mistakes, and dwelling in the past can destroy us. The solution is to make the most of the time we have left on this earth.

Paul made an amazing statement in Acts 20:

I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.<sup>14</sup>

Wouldn't you love to be able to say that! Paul could live with himself because he didn't back down. He said all that he was supposed to say! When his life was nearly over, he could say with integrity,

The time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the

faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.<sup>15</sup>

Like the Olympic athlete waiting to receive his gold medal, Paul's work was done. Now he was just waiting for his "crown." Paul completed the assignment he was given. Much like Jesus, who said, "I . . . accomplished the work that you gave me to do."<sup>16</sup>

Right now, imagine yourself saying those words to God!

Could there be anything better than approaching his throne, knowing that you finished what he asked of you? It's hard to believe that we could actually hear the voice of Jesus acknowledging *us* to the Father, but he promised it:

Everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.<sup>17</sup>

It is time for all of us to stop denying him. We have missed out on experiencing his presence and power for too long. It is time to move past our fears and get to work. The book you hold in your hands is all about living your life with peace as a disciple of Jesus and ending your life with confidence as you make disciples of Jesus. This book is about the exhilarating journey of eternal life that awaits every person who truly responds to Jesus' simple invitation: "Follow me."

I first met David Platt backstage at a conference where we were both preaching in early 2011. As we looked out over the crowd of thousands, we talked about how amazing it would be if we could somehow encourage and equip this crowd to make disciples. We both agreed that a book should be written to explain the need and hopefully mobilize the masses. I am so grateful that this book has been written.

These are exciting times. There are thousands in America who see the problems in the church and are committed to bringing change. True followers are rising up who refuse to be spectators or consumers. Jesus told us to go and make disciples, so we refuse to sit and make excuses.

I pray that you will join the growing number of believers who are committed to making disciples, who actually make disciples, who tirelessly make disciples until every nation has had the opportunity to follow Jesus.

What other option do we have?

*Francis Chan*



CHAPTER 1

# UNCONVERTED BELIEVERS

## **IMAGINE A WOMAN NAMED AYAN.**

Ayan is part of a people who pride themselves on being 100 percent Muslim. To belong to Ayan's tribe is to be Muslim. Ayan's personal identity, familial honor, relational standing, and social status are all inextricably intertwined with Islam. Simply put, if Ayan ever leaves her faith, she will immediately lose her life. If Ayan's family ever finds out that she is no longer a Muslim, they will slit her throat without question or hesitation.

Now imagine having a conversation with Ayan about Jesus. You start by telling her how God loves her so much that he sent his only Son to die on the cross for her sins as her Savior. As you speak, you can sense her heart softening toward what you are

saying. At the same time, though, you can feel her spirit trembling as she contemplates what it would cost for her to follow Christ. With fear in her eyes and faith in her heart, she asks, “How do I become a Christian?”

You have two options in your response to Ayan. You can tell her how easy it is to become a Christian. If Ayan will simply assent to certain truths and repeat a particular prayer, she can be saved. That’s all it takes.

Your second option is to tell Ayan the truth. You can tell Ayan that in the gospel, God is calling her to die.

Literally.

To die to her life.

To die to her family.

To die to her friends.

To die to her future.

And in dying, to live. To live in Jesus. To live as part of a global family that includes every tribe. To live with friends who span every age. To live in a future where joy will last forever.

Ayan is not imaginary. She is a real woman I met who made a real choice to become a Christian—to die to herself and to live in Christ, no matter what it cost her. Because of her decision, she was forced to flee her family and became isolated from her friends. Yet she is now working strategically and sacrificially for the spread of the gospel among her people. The risk is high as every day she dies to herself all over again in order to live in Christ.

Ayan’s story is a clear reminder that the initial call to Christ is an inevitable call to die. Such a call has been clear since the beginning of Christianity. Four fishermen stood by a sea in the

first century when Jesus approached them. “Follow me,” he said, “and I will make you fishers of men.”<sup>1</sup> With that, Jesus beckoned these men to leave behind their professions, possessions, dreams, ambitions, family, friends, safety, and security. He bid them to abandon everything. “If anyone is going to follow me, he must deny himself,” Jesus would say repeatedly. In a world where everything revolves around self—protect yourself, promote yourself, preserve yourself, entertain yourself, comfort yourself, take care of yourself—Jesus said, “Slay yourself.” And that’s exactly what happened. According to Scripture and tradition, these four fishermen paid a steep price for following Jesus. Peter was crucified upside down, Andrew was crucified in Greece, James was beheaded, and John was exiled.

Yet they believed it was worth the cost. In Jesus, these men found someone worth losing everything for. In Christ, they encountered a love that surpassed comprehension, a satisfaction that superseded circumstances, and a purpose that transcended every other possible pursuit in this world. They eagerly, willingly, and gladly lost their lives in order to know, follow, and proclaim him. In the footsteps of Jesus, these first disciples discovered a path worth giving their lives to tread.

Two thousand years later, I wonder how far we have wandered from this path. Somewhere along the way, amid varying cultural tides and popular church trends, it seems that we have minimized Jesus’ summons to total abandonment. Churches are filled with supposed Christians who seem content to have casual association with Christ while giving nominal adherence to Christianity. Scores of men, women, and children have been told that becoming a

follower of Jesus simply involves acknowledging certain facts or saying certain words. But this is not true. Disciples like Peter, Andrew, James, John, and Ayan show us that the call to follow Jesus is not simply an invitation to pray a prayer; it's a summons to lose our lives.

Why, then, would we think that becoming a Christian means anything less for us? And why would we *not* want to die to ourselves in order to live in Christ? Yes, there is a cost that accompanies stepping out of casual, comfortable, cultural Christianity, but it is worth it. More aptly put, *he* is worth it. Jesus is worthy of far more than intellectual belief, and there is so much more to following him than monotonous spirituality. There is indescribable joy to be found, deep satisfaction to be felt, and an eternal purpose to be fulfilled in dying to ourselves and living for him.

That's why I've written this book. In a previous book, *Radical*, I sought to expose values and ideas that are common in our culture (and in the church) yet antithetical to the gospel. My aim was to consider the thoughts and things of this world that we must let go of in order to follow Jesus. The purpose of this book, then, is to take the next step. I want to move from *what* we let go of to *whom* we hold on to. I want to explore not only the gravity of what we must forsake in this world, but also the greatness of the one we follow in this world. I want to expose what it means to die to ourselves and to live in Christ.

I invite you to join me on this journey in the pages ahead. Along the way, I want to pose some particular questions about common phrases in contemporary Christianity. My goal in considering these questions is not to correct anyone who has ever



used certain words, but simply to uncover potential dangers hiding behind popular clichés. Even as I ask such questions, I don't assume to have all the answers, and I don't claim to understand everything that following Jesus entails. But in a day when the basics of becoming and being a Christian are so maligned by the culture and misunderstood in the church, I do know that there is more to Jesus than the routine religion we are tempted to settle for at every turn. And I am convinced that when we take a serious look at what Jesus really meant when he said, "Follow me," we will discover that there is far more pleasure to be experienced in him, indescribably greater power to be realized with him, and a much higher purpose to be accomplished for him than anything else this world has to offer. And as a result, we will all—every single Christian—eagerly, willingly, and gladly lose our lives to know and proclaim Christ, for this is simply what it means to follow him.

### **PRAY THIS PRAYER**

I have a friend—let's call him John—whose first exposure to the concept of hell was during an episode of *Tom and Jerry* when he was young. During one particularly vivid scene, Tom was sent to hell for something bad he had done to Jerry. What was intended to be a humorous cartoon scared John to death, and he later found himself at church talking with an older man about what he had seen.

The church man looked at John and said, "Well, *you* don't want to go to hell, do you?"

"No," he responded.

"Okay, then," the man said, "pray this prayer after me. Dear Jesus . . ."

John paused. After an awkward silence, he realized he was supposed to repeat after the man, and so he hesitantly responded, “Dear Jesus . . .”

“I know I’m a sinner, and I know Jesus died on a cross for my sins,” the man said.

John followed suit.

“I ask you to come into my heart and to save me from my sin,” the man said.

Again, John echoed what he had heard.

“Amen,” the man concluded.

Then the man looked at John and said, “Son, you are saved from your sins, and you don’t ever have to worry about hell again.”

Surely what that man told my friend in church that day was not true. Surely this is not what it means to respond to Jesus’ invitation to follow him. Yet this story represents deception that has spread like wildfire across the contemporary Christian landscape.

*Just ask Jesus into your heart.*

*Simply invite Christ into your life.*

*Repeat this prayer after me, and you will be saved.*

Should it alarm us that the Bible never mentions such a prayer? Should it concern us that nowhere in Scripture is anyone ever told to “ask Jesus into their heart” or to “invite Christ into their life”? Yet this is exactly what multitudes of professing Christians have been encouraged to do, and they’ve been assured that as long as they said certain words, recited a particular prayer, raised their hand, checked a box, signed a card, or walked an aisle, they are Christians and their salvation is eternally secure.

It’s not true. With good intentions and sincere desires to reach

as many people as possible for Jesus, we have subtly and deceptively minimized the magnitude of what it means to follow him. We've replaced challenging words from Christ with trite phrases in the church. We've taken the lifeblood out of Christianity and put Kool-Aid in its place so that it tastes better to the crowds, and the consequences are catastrophic. Multitudes of men and women at this moment think that they are saved from their sins when they are not. Scores of people around the world culturally think that they are Christians when biblically they are not.

### **“I NEVER KNEW YOU”**

Is that possible? Is it possible for you or me to profess to be a Christian and yet not know Christ? Absolutely. And according to Jesus, it's actually *probable*.

Do you remember his words near the conclusion of his most famous sermon? Surrounded by people who are actually referred to as disciples, Jesus said,

Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?” Then I will tell them plainly, “I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!”<sup>2</sup>

These are some of the most frightening words in all the Bible. As a pastor, I stay awake some nights haunted by the thought that

*many* people sitting in church on Sunday may be surprised one day to stand before Jesus and hear him say to them, “I never knew you; away from me!”

We are all prone to spiritual deception—every single one of us. When Jesus says these words in Matthew 7, he’s not talking about irreligious atheists, agnostics, pagans, and heretics. He’s talking about good, religious people—men and women associated with Jesus who assume that their eternity is safe and will one day be shocked to find that it is not. Though they professed belief in Jesus and even did all kinds of work in his name, they never truly knew him.

Such deception was probable among first-century crowds and is probable in twenty-first-century churches. When I read Matthew 7, I think of Tom, a successful businessman in Birmingham who started attending the church I pastor. Tom has spent his entire life in church. He has served on just about every committee that any church has ever created. One of the pastors from Tom’s former church even called one of our pastors to tell us what a great guy Tom is and how helpful Tom would be as a member in our church.

The only problem was that although he had served in the church for more than fifty years, Tom had never truly become a follower of Jesus. “For all those years I sat in the seats of churches thinking I knew Christ when I didn’t,” Tom said.

Jordan is a college student in our church with a similar story. Listen to her journey in her own words:

I prayed to ask Jesus into my heart at the age of five. This prayer temporarily served as a “Get Out of Hell Free” card

while I continued to walk in sin. I looked better than all the other students in my youth group, so this served to validate my faith. If this validation was not enough, my parents, pastors, and friends told me I was a “Christian” whenever I questioned my faith because I had prayed that prayer and I looked nice on the outside, so they knew for sure I was “in.”

But my heart was still not open to understanding grace. It was obvious that the prayer I prayed before was probably not going to cut it. So what did I do? I did what anybody would do who was not yet willing to admit their total brokenness and depravity before a holy God: I “rededicated” my life to Christ (a term that was not coined in Scripture, I assure you).

Yet I was still dead in my sin and not repentant. I still thought my good works committed in the past and those I would continue to do in the future counted for something. I could save myself; I was sure of it. I led Bible studies and went on mission trips, but none of that mattered. I was still by nature a child of wrath.

During my freshman year of college, I was finally confronted with the extreme tension that rested between my sinful self and God’s holy nature. For the first time, I understood that the point of the cross was to justify the wrath of God that should have been directed toward me. I fell on my knees in fear and trembling and adoration and tears and confessed my need for Jesus more than I needed anything else in the world. Now I am pleased to

confess that “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.”<sup>3</sup>

After years in the church, Jordan underwent a massive transformation in her life from knowing *about* Jesus to living *in* Jesus. She went from working for Jesus in an attempt to earn God’s favor to walking with Jesus out of the overflow of faith.

I don’t think Tom’s and Jordan’s stories are unique. I believe they express a pandemic problem across contemporary Christianity. Masses of men, women, and children around the world just like Tom and Jordan are sitting comfortably under the banner of Christianity but have never counted the cost of following Christ.

### **THE HARD ROAD**

This is why Jesus’ words in Matthew 7 are so critical for us to hear. He exposes our dangerous tendency to gravitate toward that which is easy and popular. Hear his warning: “Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, there is a broad religious road that is inviting and inclusive. This nice, comfortable, ever-so-crowded path is attractive and accommodating. The only thing that’s required of you is a one-time decision for Christ, and you don’t have to worry about his commands, his standards, or his glory after making that decision. You now have a ticket to heaven, and your sin, whether manifested in self-righteousness or self-indulgence, will be tolerated along the way.

But this is not the way of Jesus. He beckons us down a hard road, and the word Jesus uses for “hard” is associated in other parts of the Bible with pain, pressure, tribulation, and persecution. The way of Jesus is hard to follow, and it’s hated by many.

Just a few chapters after these words in Matthew 7, Jesus told his disciples that they would be beaten, betrayed, mistreated, isolated, and killed for following him. “Be on your guard,” Jesus said, “[for] they will hand you over to the local councils and flog you in their synagogues. On my account you will be brought before governors and kings. . . . Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child. . . . All men will hate you because of me.”<sup>5</sup>

On another occasion, right after Jesus commended Peter for his confession of faith in him as “the Christ, the Son of the living God,” Jesus rebuked Peter for missing the magnitude of what this means. Like many people today, Peter wanted a Christ without a cross and a Savior without any suffering. So Jesus looked at Peter and the other disciples and said, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.”<sup>6</sup>

Shortly before Jesus went to the cross, he told his disciples, “You will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me.”<sup>7</sup> In each of these passages in the book of Matthew, the call to die is clear. The road that leads to heaven is risky, lonely, and costly in this world, and few are willing to pay the price. Following Jesus involves losing your life—and finding new life in him.

Not long ago, I was serving in North Africa alongside persecuted

brothers and sisters. I talked with one man who just months before had his leg shattered in a church bombing. I talked with a pastor who shared with me how women in his church were being kidnapped, abused, and raped for being Christians. I had dinner in a family's house where just two blocks away a follower of Jesus had been stabbed in the heart and killed.

I heard the story of three Christians who had moved overseas from the United States to work at a hospital in this region. In a move that most people in the world (and many people in the church) would call foolish and unwise, they had left behind their comforts, careers, family, friends, safety, and security to share the goodness and grace of Christ in a land where it is forbidden to become a Christian. Day after day in that hospital, they met physical needs while sharing spiritual truth.

They knew there was opposition to their work, but nothing could have prepared them for the day when a man walked into their hospital with a fake bandage on his hand and a blanket bundled to look like a baby. He entered the office area and immediately unwrapped the blanket to reveal a loaded rifle. Beginning in the office and working his way through the rest of the clinic, he shot and killed all three of these brothers and sisters.

During my time in this country, the ten-year anniversary of that shooting was approaching, so we set aside time to remember these three Christians. Our commemoration happened to be near the grave of Oswald Chambers. Consequently, we thought it appropriate to read from Chambers's well-known devotional, *My Utmost for His Highest*, on that particular day. It was as if his words were written for the occasion. Chambers says:



Suppose God tells you to do something that is an enormous test of your common sense, totally going against it. What will you do? Will you hold back? If you get into the habit of doing something physically, you will do it every time you are tested until you break the habit through sheer determination. And the same is true spiritually. Again and again you will come right up to what Jesus wants, but every time you will turn back at the true point of testing, until you are determined to abandon yourself to God in total surrender. . . .

Jesus Christ demands the same unrestrained, adventurous spirit in those who have placed their trust in Him. . . . If a person is ever going to do anything worthwhile, there will be times when he must risk everything by his leap in the dark. In the spiritual realm, Jesus Christ demands that you risk everything you hold on to or believe through common sense, and leap by faith into what He says. Once you obey, you will immediately find that what He says is as solidly consistent as common sense.

By the test of common sense, Jesus Christ's statements may seem mad, but when you test them by the trial of faith, your findings will fill your spirit with the awesome fact that they are the very words of God. Trust completely in God, and when He brings you to a new opportunity of adventure, offering it to you, see that you take it. We act like pagans in a crisis—only one out of an entire crowd is daring enough to invest his faith in the character of God.<sup>8</sup>

Chambers's words, viewed through the lens of these three martyrs' lives, challenge us to consider the seeming madness of Jesus' words:

If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. . . . Any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple.<sup>9</sup>

To everyone else in the world, these words seem crazy. But to every Christian, these words are life. For the few who choose to abandon themselves to the will of God and put their trust in the character of God, following Jesus wherever he leads, no matter the cost, is the only thing that makes sense.

### **WHAT ABOUT BELIEF?**

Amid this emphasis on the cost of following Jesus, you might wonder about passages in the Bible where it seems that salvation involves simple belief. Jesus tells Nicodemus that “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever *believes* in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” Paul and Silas tell the Philippian jailer, “*Believe* in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.” According to the book of Romans, “If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and *believe* in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”<sup>10</sup> Based on these passages, you might conclude that believing in Jesus is all that’s involved in becoming or being a Christian.

This is absolutely true, but we must consider context in order to understand what the Bible means by belief. When Jesus calls Nicodemus to believe in him, he is calling Nicodemus to be born again—to begin an entirely new life devoted to following him. Likewise, when the Philippian jailer believes in Christ, he knows that he is joining a community of Christians who are being beaten, flogged, and imprisoned for their faith. The cost of following Christ is clear. In the same way, Paul tells the Roman Christians that to believe in the saving resurrection of Jesus from the dead is to confess the sovereign lordship of Jesus over their lives.

In each of these verses (and scores of others like them), belief in Jesus for salvation involves far more than mere intellectual assent. After all, even demons “believe” that Jesus is the crucified and resurrected Son of God.<sup>11</sup> Such “belief” clearly doesn’t save, yet such “belief” is common across the world today. Just about every intoxicated person I meet on the street says he “believes” in Jesus. Scores of people I meet around the world, including some Hindus, animists, and Muslims, profess some level of “belief” in Jesus. All kinds of halfhearted, world-loving church attenders confess “belief” in Christ.

We can all profess publicly belief that we don’t possess personally, even (or should I say *especially*) in the church. Hear the shouts of the damned in Matthew 7 as they cry, “Lord, Lord!” Jesus replies to them, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.”<sup>12</sup> Clearly, people who claim to believe in Jesus are not assured eternity in heaven. On the contrary, only those who obey Jesus will enter his Kingdom.

As soon as I write that, you may perk up and ask, “David, did you just say that *works* are involved in our salvation?” In response to that question, I want to be clear: that is not what I am saying.

Instead, it’s what *Jesus* is saying.

Now I want to be very careful here, because we could begin to twist the gospel into something it’s not. Jesus is not saying that our works are the *basis* for our salvation. The grace of God is the *only* basis of our salvation—a truth we will explore further in the next chapter. But in our rush to defend grace, we cannot overlook the obvious in what Jesus is saying here (and in many other places as well): only those who are obedient to the words of Christ will enter the Kingdom of Christ. If our lives do not reflect the fruit of following Jesus, then we are foolish to think that we are actually followers of Jesus in the first place.

### **DANGEROUSLY DECEIVED**

Consider a recent study which found that four out of five Americans identify themselves as Christians. In this group of self-proclaimed Christians, less than half of them are involved in church on a weekly basis. Less than half of them actually believe the Bible is accurate, and the overwhelming majority of them don’t have a biblical view of the world around them.

The pollsters went even deeper, though, to identify men and women who are described as “born-again Christians” (as if there is any other kind). These are people who say they have made a personal commitment to Jesus and who believe they will go to heaven because they have accepted Jesus as their Savior. According to the research, almost half of Americans are “born-again Christians.”

But out of this group of “born-again Christians,” researchers found that their beliefs and lifestyles are virtually indistinguishable from the rest of the world around them. Many of these “born-again Christians” believe that their works can earn them a place in heaven, others think that Christians and Muslims worship the same God, some believe Jesus sinned while he was on earth, and an ever-increasing number of “born-again Christians” describe themselves as only marginally committed to Jesus.<sup>13</sup>

Many people have used this data to conclude that Christians are really not that different from the rest of the world. But I don’t think this interpretation of the research is accurate. I think the one thing that is abundantly clear from these statistics is that there are a whole lot of people in the world who think they are Christians but are not. There are a whole lot of people who think that they’ve been born again, but they are dangerously deceived.

Imagine you and I set up a meeting for lunch at a restaurant, and you arrive before I do. You wait and wait and wait, but thirty minutes later, I still haven’t arrived. When I finally show up, completely out of breath, I say to you, “I’m so sorry I’m late. When I was driving over here, my car had a flat tire, and I pulled over on the side of the interstate to fix it. While I was fixing it, I accidentally stepped into the road, and a Mack truck going about seventy miles per hour suddenly hit me head-on. It hurt, but I picked myself up, finished putting the spare tire on the car, and drove over here.”

If this were the story I shared, you would know I was either deliberately lying or completely deceived. Why? Because if someone gets hit by a Mack truck going seventy miles per hour, that person is going to look *very* different than he did before!<sup>14</sup>

In light of this, I feel like I'm on pretty safe ground in assuming that once people truly come face-to-face with Jesus, the God of the universe in the flesh, and Jesus reaches down into the depth of their hearts, saves their souls from the clutches of sin, and transforms their lives to follow him, they are going to look different. *Very* different. People who claim to be Christians while their lives look no different from the rest of the world are clearly not Christians.

Such deception is not just evident in the United States; it's prevalent around the world. As I was praying through the countries of the world recently, I came across Jamaica, a country that is supposedly almost 100 percent Christian. The prayer guide I use made this statement about Jamaica: "It enjoys one of the world's highest number of churches per square mile, but the majority of self-proclaimed Christians in Jamaica neither attend church nor lead a Christian life."<sup>15</sup> As I read this, my heart was overcome by the unavoidable conclusion that multitudes of men and women in Jamaica think they are Christians when they are not. They join scores of people in countries around the world who call themselves Christians yet don't follow Christ.

Spiritual deception is dangerous—and damning. Any one of us can fool ourselves. We are sinful creatures, biased in our own favor, prone to assume that we are something when we are not. The Bible says that the god of this world (Satan) is blinding the minds of unbelievers to keep them from knowing Christ.<sup>16</sup> Couldn't it be that one of the ways the devil is doing this is by deceiving people into believing they are Christians when they are not?

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF REPENTANCE

So how does a person truly become a follower of Jesus? What happens when the Mack truck of God's glory and grace collides with someone's life? The rest of this book is consumed with an answer to that question, but consider for a moment one word that summarizes Jesus' summons.

The very first word out of Jesus' mouth in his ministry in the New Testament is clear: repent.<sup>17</sup> It's the same word that John the Baptist proclaims in preparation for Jesus' coming.<sup>18</sup> This word is also the foundation for the first Christian sermon in the book of Acts. After Peter proclaims the good news of Christ's death for sin, the crowds ask him, "What shall we do?" Peter decidedly does not tell them to close their eyes, repeat after him, or raise their hands. Instead, Peter determinedly looks them right in their eyes and says, "Repent."<sup>19</sup>

*Repentance* is a rich biblical term that signifies an elemental transformation in someone's mind, heart, and life. When people repent, they turn from walking in one direction to running in the opposite direction. From that point forward, they think differently, believe differently, feel differently, love differently, and live differently.

When Jesus said, "Repent," he was speaking to people who were rebelling against God in their sin and relying on themselves for their salvation. Jesus' predominantly Jewish audience believed that their family heritage, social status, knowledge of specific rules, and obedience to certain regulations were sufficient to make them right before God.

Jesus' call to repentance, then, was a summons for them to renounce sin and all dependence on self for salvation. Only by turning from their sin and themselves and toward Jesus could they be saved.

Similarly, when Peter said, "Repent," he was speaking to crowds who not long before had crucified Jesus. In their sin, they had killed the Son of God and were now standing under the judgment of God. Peter's call to repentance was a cry for the crowds to confess their wickedness, turn from their ways, and trust in Jesus as Lord and Christ.

Fundamentally, then, repentance involves renouncing a former way of life in favor of a new way of life. God tells his people in the Old Testament, "Repent! Turn from your idols and renounce all your detestable practices!"<sup>20</sup> Similarly, in the New Testament, repentance requires turning from the idols of this world to a new object of worship.<sup>21</sup>

I remember a particular moment with a house church in Asia. We were meeting in a secret, isolated location on the outskirts of a remote rural village. The impoverished homes in this village were virtual warehouses for idols. Satanic superstition abounded as village residents were convinced that they needed a multiplicity of gods to protect and provide for them.

One woman in particular caught my attention during our meetings. She listened eagerly to everything I shared from God's Word, and it was evident that the Lord was drawing her to himself. At the end of the day, she expressed a desire to follow Jesus. We were thrilled.

The next day, this new sister in Christ came back and pulled



the church's pastor and me aside. She told us that her home was full of false gods she had worshiped all her life and that she wanted to get rid of them. The other pastor and I accompanied her to her house, and I was overwhelmed by what I saw.

Inside the small, dark, two-room home, black and red posters of false gods covered the walls. Demonic-looking clay and wooden figurines were resting on the floor and sitting on tables everywhere we turned. In the middle of one room, a large idol was mounted against the wall with its foreboding face staring directly at us.

We immediately began taking down the posters and taking hold of the idols, praying aloud for this woman and for God's blessings on her home for his glory. We brought every one of the idols back to the house where we were meeting, and we lit a fire outside. That day, we began our time in the Word amid the smell of smoldering gods.

This scene is an illustration of what happens in every person's life when we repent of our sin, renounce ourselves, and run in faith to Christ. We humbly see and gladly sear the idols of this world that we have worshiped. We turn from them to trust in Jesus as the one who we now realize is exclusively worthy of our exaltation.

When that woman became a Christian, it was obvious that she could no longer bow at the feet of false gods in her home, and she needed to get rid of them. Similarly, I think of Vasu, an Indian brother who used to give offerings and present sacrifices daily before a multiplicity of Hindu gods. Upon becoming a follower of Jesus, Vasu began to turn away from these idols. Or I think of Gunadi, a man who used to be a devout Muslim but recently trusted in Christ as Savior and King. In repentance,

Gunadi turned aside from the teachings of Muhammad to follow in the footsteps of Jesus.

In circumstances like these, repentance seems clear and obvious. Christians from animistic, Hindu, or Muslim backgrounds must turn aside from false gods in order to follow Christ, and repentance is evident in the transformation of their lives. But what about people in a predominantly “Christian” setting who aren’t bowing down before idols or offering sacrifices to false gods? What does repentance look like in their lives?

This question is extremely important, for it exposes a fundamental flaw in the way we often view ourselves. When we think of worshiping idols and false gods, we often picture Asian people buying carved images of wood, stone, or gold or African tribes performing ritualistic dances around burning sacrifices. But we don’t consider the American man looking at pornographic pictures online or watching ungodly television shows and movies. We don’t think about the American woman incessantly shopping for more possessions or obsessively consumed with the way she looks. We don’t take into account men and women in the Western world constantly enamored with money and blindly engulfed in materialism. We hardly even think about our busy efforts to climb the corporate ladder, our incessant worship of sports, our temper when things don’t go our way, our worries that things won’t go our way, our overeating, our excesses, and all sorts of other worldly indulgences. Maybe most dangerous of all, we overlook the spiritual self-achievement and religious self-righteousness that prevent scores of us from ever recognizing our need for Christ. We can’t fathom a Christian on the other side of the world believing that

a wooden god can save them, but we have no problem believing that religion, money, possessions, food, fame, sex, sports, status, and success can satisfy us. Do we actually think that we have fewer idols to let go of in our repentance?

For every Christian in every culture, repentance is necessary. This doesn't mean that when people become Christians, they suddenly become perfect and never have any struggles with sin again.<sup>22</sup> But this does mean that when we become followers of Jesus, we make a decided break with an old way of living and take a decisive turn to a new way of life. We literally die to our sin and to ourselves—our self-centeredness, self-consumption, self-righteousness, self-indulgence, self-effort, and self-exaltation. In the words of Paul, we “have been crucified with Christ and [we] no longer live, but Christ lives in [us].”<sup>23</sup>

And as Christ begins to live in us, everything begins to change about us. Our minds change. For the first time, we realize who God is, what Jesus has done, and how much we need him. Our desires change. The things of this earth that we once loved we now hate, and the things of God that we once hated we now love. Our wills change. We go wherever Jesus says, we give whatever Jesus commands, and we sacrifice whatever it costs to spend our lives in uncompromising obedience to his Word. Our relationships change. We lay our lives down in love for one another in the church as together we spread the gospel to the world.

Ultimately, our reason for living changes. Possessions and position are no longer our priorities. Comfort and security are no longer our concerns. Safety is no longer our goal because self is no longer our god. We now want God's glory more than we want

our own lives. The more we glorify him, the more we enjoy him, and the more we realize that this is what it means biblically to be a Christian.

### **THE JOURNEY BEGINS**

In the pages ahead, we will explore this revolution that occurs when a person comes face-to-face with God in the flesh and he says, “Follow me.” We will consider the magnitude of the “me” we are called to follow and marvel at the wonder of his mercy toward us. As we discover how God transforms disciples of Jesus from the inside out, we will see the Christian life not as organized duty but as overwhelming delight. We will debunk popular Christian slogans and politically correct positions that keep us from truly knowing and passionately proclaiming Christ. In the end, we will find ourselves joined with brothers and sisters around the world accomplishing a grand and global purpose that God set in motion before the world even began.

The journey begins, though, with truly understanding what it means to be a Christian. To say that you believe in Jesus apart from conversion in your life completely misses the essence of what it means to follow him. Do not be deceived. Your relationship with Jesus and your status before God are not based on a decision you made, a prayer you prayed, a card you signed, or a hand you raised however many years ago. And the Christian life does not ultimately begin with inviting Jesus to come into your heart. As we’ll see in the next chapter, that invitation comes from him.