



HONESTLY

GETTING REAL ABOUT JESUS AND OUR MESSY LIVES



DANIEL FUSCO

PRAISE FOR DANIEL FUSCO'S *HONESTLY*

Raw and real. Those are the words I would use to describe Daniel Fusco's book *Honestly*. No matter what you're dealing with, *Honestly* shows how God wants to do new things in and through you. I so appreciate Daniel—his passion, joy, and commitment to the gospel. It's evident in this book.

KEVIN PALAU

Author of *Unlikely*

Sometimes when I am fast-forwarding through a commercial break while watching a TV show that's recorded on my DVR, something catches my eye that makes me stop, rewind, and actually watch an ad or a movie trailer. That is how I see this book by my friend Daniel Fusco: In a sea of regularly scheduled static, the words on these pages are disruptive and worth pausing for. He is willing to "go there," and you will be glad to let him take you—not to merely pay lip service to the great ache of our hearts or to put a Band-Aid on a bullet hole, but because acknowledging the elephant in the room that is our messiness allows Jesus to deal with it. This is a book that needed to be written, needs to be read, and must be allowed to read you—honestly.

LEVI LUSKO

Pastor of Fresh Life Church, Montana, and author of *Through the Eyes of a Lion*

Daniel Fusco is a breath of fresh air in a stale room; he gives us what we all need to survive this side of resurrection—not trite, formulaic answers, but *honesty*. His raw, candid transparency is great, and mixed with his hopeful love of life, it's a beautiful read.

JOHN MARK COMER

Pastor for teaching and vision at Bridgetown: A Jesus Church, and author of *Loveology* and *Garden City*

Daniel Fusco is an incredible friend and an amazing pastor. *Honestly* is a great title for his book because it perfectly describes who Daniel is: He's the real deal. We live in a world that has been broken by sin. As a result, life gets messy—sometimes even downright nasty. Daniel does a great job helping Christians develop a theology that

informs them Jesus is not only greater than the mess and nastiness that life can bring, but He can also use that mess to make you into a masterpiece. Every person who follows Jesus will be encouraged and challenged by reading *Honestly*.

PAT HOOD

Pastor of LifePoint Church in Smyrna, Tennessee, and author of *The Sending Church*

Daniel Fusco takes dead aim on cliché Christianity, without creating any of the collateral damage of cynicism that so often accompanies our well-intentioned attempts to challenge an unexamined faith. *Honestly* is honest, humorous, and always challenging. I recommend it.

LARRY OSBORNE

Author and pastor, North Coast Church, California

Do you long to understand the trials and messiness in your life? If so, you'll want to read *Honestly* by Daniel Fusco. He gets real by unpacking biblical truths to help our messy lives make sense, and how God can use our messes to bless others. This is a must read.

DAVE FERGUSON

Lead pastor of Community Christian Church, Chicago, and lead visionary of NewThing

I started my Christian walk in the midst of a terrible mess! I had just lost my father. As a result we had lost the family business, and we were falling into serious poverty. It was one of the darkest times of my life, and I was only twelve years old. Yet Jesus' resurrection power was so real to me and my family in the middle of it all. Having experienced God's transforming power in the midst of those hard times, I can say "Yes!" and "Amen!" to Daniel Fusco's wonderful new book, *Honestly*.

LUIS PALAU

World evangelist, author of *Out of the Desert*

I love how real and authentic Daniel is. His heart is so open and his way of communicating is totally disarming, all the while addressing profound and necessary spiritual truths and encouraging you to dive deeper and deeper into Jesus.

JEREMY CAMP

Songwriter and recording artist

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GETTING REAL ABOUT JESUS AND OUR MESSY LIVES

DANIEL FUSCO
with D. R. JACOBSEN

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SHOUT OUTS

TO MY FAMILY:

I wouldn't be who I am today without you. To all the Fuscus and Cappadonas and the other six thousand relatives in my extended family, thank you for your overwhelming love and large personalities. Grandpa, Grandma, Dad, Trisha, and Jodi, I am grateful for each one of you. You mean so much to me. Plus we are blessed with Marianne, Jim, Hal, and all the kids! Our family is amazing! And Lynn, Obadiah, Maranatha, and Annabelle, next to Jesus you are the best thing that has ever happened to me. You have my whole heart, always.

TO MY WRITING TEAM:

I feel so blessed that God has put together this team. To Jenni Burke of D. C. Jacobson & Associates, thank you for believing in me and taking this journey with me. Your wisdom and tenacity are a gift. To David Jacobsen, you have taught me much on this journey. Thank you for partnering your heart and skills to coauthor this book with me. To Caitlyn Carlson, thank you for how much you have invested in this book and in me. Your belief and expertise have meant the world. To Don Pape, words cannot express how grateful I am for

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you. We are here right now because of you. Thank you for believing in me! And to the entire NavPress/Tyndale team, thank you for using your gifts as part of this project and every project. You are advancing God's Kingdom through the work you do.

TO MY CHURCH FAMILY:

I am eternally grateful to belong to such an amazing family of faith. Crossroads is an extraordinary community, and I am humbled and blessed to be a part of it. Let's keep simply responding to Jesus together to transform our community and our world. To the Servant Leadership Team, Executive Team, pastors/directors, and staff, thank you for being "all-in" on the work that God has entrusted to us. Your servant's hearts and joy inspire me.

TO MY GOD:

Thank you, Lord, for giving me an abundant life in Christ. Thank you for loving me even when I am unlovable. Thank you for the empowering of your Spirit for the work of ministry. Thank you for your grace and forgiveness. And for the mess—amen!

START HERE

I looked up from the magazine I was reading. John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme* was still blaring from the stereo. Dad was framed in the doorway of my bedroom, one hand in the pocket of his jeans. The hall light glinted on the top of his head.

"Hey, how's Mom?"

They'd been away all day, the two of them, visiting the doctor. Now that I thought about it, all day was too long for a trip to the doctor. Hadn't they left right after breakfast? I thought so. My sisters and I had stayed at the table, drinking a fresh pot of coffee, enjoying the feel of summertime freedom and swapping stories about our just-finished college semesters. What had I done the rest of the day, and why hadn't I paid attention to how long Mom and Dad had been gone?

I noticed my father's hand trembling, and he reached up and gripped the doorframe. The digital numbers on my bedside table read 9:13.

"Danny," he began. "Danny. She . . ."

He looked like he was trying to swallow something. My

magazine tipped out of my hands and slid off the bed and onto the carpet. Dad's hand white-knuckled the door frame.

"Dad, what's—"

"Your mom has cancer."

How had I crossed the room without moving? Dad's body seemed to slide down the door frame in slow motion. My father never cried, but he was crying now. And me beside him. His mustache and beard were thick with it, and his shoulders shook with it. With fear. We sat crumpled on the floor, and I held on to him, as we tried to hold on to hope. The sound of our sobbing became a metronome, counting out the seconds and then the terrible minutes of our new and terribly changed life—a life that only happened to *other* families.

Two years passed. Sometimes raced, sometimes crawled. Four semesters of college and chemo and radiation and Christmas Eves where we stuffed ourselves silly and pretended we were as happy as we'd always been.

Mom's brain lesions metastasized: lungs, bones, the rest of her brain. I shaved off my first head of dreadlocks to stand in solidarity with Mom and her new peach-fuzz look. Mom even got a wig and quipped, "I had to get cancer so I could be a fun blonde!" But honestly, we were trying to believe the best, even though we knew the worst was probably coming.

I was getting ready for my final year at New Jersey's Rutgers University. My twin sister, Jodi, would also be graduating from Rutgers and heading off to law school, while our older

sister, Trisha, was finishing her master's degree in vocal performance for opera. My grandparents, Anita and Anthony, lived with us to help care for Mom as my father continued to work. We spent a ton of time at home, especially after Mom came home from the hospital the final time to be on hospice. Our house was packed with people: aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, nephews, siblings, parents, and friends who were as close as family. We Fuscós did family right. Thick and thin, ups and downs, we were a *clan*, you know? Freakin' *smothered* in love. Wasn't nothing we couldn't fix with a meal, with wine, with talking late into the night, with laughter so loud it felt like it was inside your heart.

At least that's what we'd thought.

When Mom took her last breath—when Dad lay down beside her on the rented hospital bed and just shook like a leaf—I remember thinking . . . nothing. Absolutely nothing. Because it didn't compute. There was no category for this. If life was a well-lit room, then Mom dying was a power outage. Everything in my life went dark, and there was nothing to do but wait for the electricity to come back on.

Even though I knew the light *wouldn't* come back on, I waited anyway. Because what else could a boy do?

• • •

We all have these types of stories, don't we? For each one of us, there are certain things that just don't make any sense. You just look at your life, you look at your circumstances, you compare your life to others, and you think to yourself,

That's not what life's supposed to be about. That's not what's meant to happen.

The details are different, but life's equally messy for all of us.

I'm not talking about only the gut-punch stuff, either. As a college kid, I had to deal with my mom dying of cancer. That's an appalling example of life's messiness. But life's messiness isn't just the negative headlines—it's everything that keeps us unbalanced. Life is extraordinarily unpredictable. Things happen that we can't fathom—some of which we choose, and some of which are chosen for us. Changing jobs, dating and breaking up, moving, and having kids, all the way down to getting an awkward text from a friend or forgetting we're out of milk (or money).

Messiness is a universal concept, and the church in Ephesus in the mid-first century had its fair share. The apostle Paul had started the church there, and as he traveled and started other congregations, he kept a close eye on the established churches. Because travel took so long in those days, and he couldn't be everywhere at once, he had to write the churches letters to help them keep focused in the midst of life. The letter he wrote to the Ephesians was not precipitated by extraordinary circumstances, either—it was just normal life happening in Ephesus.

But they, like us, needed simple encouragement and direction.

Messiness describes the things we find ourselves dealing with on a daily, weekly, monthly, and even lifelong basis.

Things happen that don't seem to make much sense, and then they keep right on happening.

Here's the thing. Maybe you've been told that if you're a good Christian, everything will be sunshine and rainbows. Or that good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people. Perhaps a pastor or a parent has let you know, directly or by implication, that your messy life is no one's fault but your own. Maybe you've always lived around people who've told you—or you've even told yourself—that life *isn't* messy . . . and so anything messy just gets swept under the rug and ignored.

Or like so many others, you've chosen to flee “organized religion” because the pat answers, clichés, and lack of authenticity didn't jibe with the more mysterious and unpredictable parts of life. Maybe you asked the honest questions, only to be chastised or brushed aside.

Told you were sinning, even.

But you've got to know this: The Christian message is *not* that life isn't messy.

Honestly, it's the opposite. The Christian message doesn't claim that life is neat or tidy or straightforward. The Christian message says that life is—and always will be—exceedingly, frustratingly messy. You know it, and so do I.

So I promise you: Nothing I write in this book will contradict the root truth that life doesn't always make sense.

But there's another part to the message. It's just as true, and even more important.

Yes, life is messy.

And Jesus is real.

That's a big deal. That's the gospel. That word *gospel*, which is a churchy word for sure, means *good news*. And the fact that Jesus is real in the midst of life's messiness *is* good news. He's where everything that's healing and good and grace-filled begins and ends.

• • •

I met my friend Ilya in high school. He's a *nasty* drummer, while I play both the electric and upright bass. Together we formed a band called . . . Choda. (Don't ask.) Even though we went away to different colleges, our friendship remained strong and music connected us. While we were apart, we'd spend all our free time practicing our instruments, and all our free cash buying new albums. Then whenever we were back together on the weekends, we'd always play *grab bag*.

That meant we'd sit around, sometimes all night long, and play DJ for each other, sharing the music that we had been digging. I'd slot in a disc, find my favorite track, and we'd listen in silence. When the track ended, it was his turn to pick. Back and forth, for hours on end, song after song, group after group. Occasionally we'd hit pause if we needed to digest something super meaty, or we'd track back to hear a particular riff a third or a tenth time.

A lot of times we'd talk about the songs, analyzing what we were hearing, but other times we were silent. Enrapt. Our faces told the story, even if our voices didn't. I'd see his forehead scrunch up as he tried to process a brutally amazing

rhythmic syncopation, or I could feel my eyes bugging out when the band would extend the harmonic palette.

Then we'd hit the grease trucks for some late-night or early-morning eats!¹

Ilya and I decided one night that we were going to listen to Coltrane's *A Love Supreme* in its entirety. That was a rarity for grab-bag nights, but it was an album that deserved it. Plus the album was designed in four movements—Acknowledgement, Resolution, Pursuance, Psalm—and we wanted to hear the entire arc of the music, in our hearts, in one sitting. So we stationed ourselves on my hardwood floor, each leaning back against a chair. There was a reason we chose the floor over the chairs: We wanted to be *right* in front of my speakers. I had a sick stereo, including speakers the size of Jabba the Hutt. I twisted the volume knob, hit the play button, and settled back onto the floor, and a second later the eloquent sound of Trane's classic quartet embraced us.

We didn't talk. *A Love Supreme* did all the speaking, and it spoke straight to our souls. I closed my eyes, to better hear the sounds pouring from the speakers. There were the shimmering cymbals of Elvin Jones, the hypnotic thump of Jimmy Garrison's bass, and the landscape of colors painted by McCoy Tyner's piano. Over it all came John Coltrane on the tenor sax, by turns authoritative and plaintive. Single notes seemed to stretch on and on, carrying me with them

¹After college, Ilya and I stuffed my minivan and a trailer full of our instruments, some clothes, and literally thousands of compact discs, and moved across the country to seek our musical fame and fortune. We ended up in Ashland, Oregon, before moving to the San Francisco Bay Area, and we . . . well, that's actually a tale that will have to wait for my next book. But trust me, two Jersey boys loose on the highways of America was the start of some killer stories!

like a tightrope across a chasm, only to morph into one of his patented sheets of sound that threatened to melt my face off.

It was beautiful, yes, but it went beyond beauty. It was *real*. It was tapping into something inside my soul that words couldn't reach, or at least at that point in my life *hadn't* reached. It was necessary and urgent and sad and messy and hopeful and honest.

And it was love.

Love incarnated in the body of songs, movements, solos and runs, and group explorations. A Love Supreme. Thirty-five minutes and forty-three seconds passed in a moment. Eternity had touched time, and we were there to witness it. To participate in it. With wide-open hearts.

Ilya and I sat frozen, silent, basking in the afterglow. It almost seemed the sudden silence in the room was bowing down to the sounds that had just filled it.

At last we managed to capture with words the feelings that were cascading like waterfalls through our souls.

“Oh man . . .”

“Whoa . . .”

Both of us were changed. For real, forever. We had gone under the waters of baptism, beneath the water of Trane's offering, and we had ascended with fresh vision. There was simply no way we could remain as we'd been. We were born again. And we knew—*knew*, in our bones and the depths of our being, without a doubt—that we'd devote our lives to figuring out how to make music like Trane had made. Not to be famous like him, not to copy him, not to just understand

music, but because we wanted to change people's lives with *our* music like he'd changed us with his.

We wanted to make music that moved the soul.

We wanted to create light that would shine in the darkness.

We wanted to gift beauty to a world that was all too often ugly.

Did we?

Yes—absolutely yes.

And no. No way, no how.

See, it's complicated. Yes, we created—and still create—music. And that music moves the soul and shines in the darkness and adds beauty to the world. But also . . . no. How could music really do all that? Can music feed the hungry and clothe the naked? Can music really fix what is perpetually broken?

Point is, *nothing* we do is completely free of the mess. Even the greatest works of art are messy. And to many listeners, certain kinds of jazz sound like they're *all* mess!²

Which is why life is a lot like jazz: one giant mess.

At least to the untrained ear.

But when we listen closely to life, we can start to hear the melodies in the midst of the mess. It takes study, and digging deep, and being patient enough to learn. And if we're lucky, or blessed, we discover something about the mess: Nothing *we* do is free of the mess, but sometimes in our mess we catch the tune of the Master.

²If we're talking about some of the jazz / like to play, and we're talking about my wife listening, then she'd be like, "Amen to the mess comment!"

Because here's the thing: Jesus really *did* feed the hungry and clothe the naked. He fixed what is perpetually broken. He can still do that today! But he does it by standing in the middle of the mess, holding that bass line and weaving together a song out of the cacophony of human life exploding all around him.

Life will always be messy. But Jesus will always be our beauty in the middle of the mess. Jesus is our Love Supreme.

• • •

When you're listening to a great jazz musician, you don't feel excited and satisfied when the song is over.

Like, no one goes, "Yes, I got from the start of the song to the end of the song!" In fact, when the final note fades, you're actually bummed. Because Trane, as he was affectionately called, took you on a journey and, in the process, revealed to you amazing, beautiful, and unexpected things. You would never have guessed from the beginning of the song, or even the middle of the song, where you would end up. Why? Because you experienced the process of improvisation.

It's been said that humans love the outcome, while God loves the process. (Therefore, God must love jazz, right?) And I want *Honestly* to be about experiencing the process.

Of living a messy life, and living it alongside Jesus.

Even improvised jazz tends to be highly structured. Yet no one *notices* the structure because the structure is not as

important as the experience. The structure is there to serve the experience, not the other way around.

So this book? It's a lot like a piece of improvised music. All of *Honestly* is based on Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Back in 2014, I had a blast walking through Ephesians with my church family at Crossroads, and over the course of eleven weeks, we looked at every verse of that great letter! And God did some extraordinary things in our church family and community during that series.³

But when it came time to put fingers to keyboard, so to speak, I wanted to do something different from "cleaning up" my sermons and putting them in a book.

I wanted to improvise.

Like at a jazz gig (but with a lot less sweat), I wanted to improvise on the stunning themes of Paul's letter: the messiness of life, the crazy good news of Jesus, what we do about the mess as we relate to each other, and how we relate to God—and how God's love reigns supreme over and through all of it. I wanted to *explore*, and just like jazz players take their initial cues from a "lead sheet," I wanted Ephesians to be the lead sheet for this book.

Each chapter of this book has its own special truth bomb, waiting to explode in someone's heart and mind. The chapter that hits *you* will probably be different from the chapter that hits your friend. I'll be much happier if you *experience* this book rather than if you *finish* it. I would be overjoyed if, in

³If you're an "every verse in order" kind of person, you can give this book to someone else, and then listen to the entire sermon series called "Life Is Messy" at www.crossroadschurch.net.

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some way, this book helps you see the beauty of Jesus in the midst of your messy life. And my joy would overflow if you experience Jesus in fresh ways on your life's journey.

Before we start, here's my promise to you: I promise to be honest. As honest as I can be, on every page. Because life's too short for anything else.



PART I

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

1.1

ACKNOWLEDGE THE MESS

I, Paul, am under God's plan as an apostle, a special agent of Christ Jesus, writing to you faithful believers.

EPHESIANS 1:1

So here we are, in the middle of the mess.

Maybe you've lost your job. Or hate your job. Maybe your best friend abandoned you, or you've never had a best friend. Maybe you're pulling out your hair because your teenager is doing stupid stuff and you can't get him to realize it's stupid. Maybe your closest relationships are strained. Or worse, boring. Maybe you feel betrayed by your body or your parents or your church. Whatever the specifics, we all have stuff in our lives that seems to make zero sense. Things that hurt us or confuse us or make us doubt we'll ever be able to catch our breath.

That messiness goes along with being human. All of us were born as broken people into broken families living in a broken world. Life happens amid that rubble.

What a fun place to start a book, in the middle of the mess! But since I promised to be honest, we've got to start with what's wrong. We have to acknowledge that everything is not okay. That it's actually *less* than okay, a *lot* of the time.

Trouble is, like we talked about earlier, the Christian message sometimes gets hijacked. Ever been told that that if you're really tuned-in to God, your life won't be messy? That

everything will work out? Like the messiness is all pre-Jesus, and after you get saved life will always come up roses. But the honest truth is, that stuff isn't true.

Just remember, no matter how deep into the mess we get in this first part of the book, the message doesn't stop there. Good news is coming. Messiness, by itself, is not good news! But messiness that Jesus can work in and through? Absolutely good news!

You may not believe me. And you don't have to. But I bet at least part of you believes that, or wants to believe it, which is why you're reading this book. Because you're looking for someone to shoot straight with you about how messy and unpredictable life is. And I know firsthand. I'm a starter for team Life Is Messy.

If you're hurting today, or confused, or just plain tired, you've come to the right place. Remember that I'm right there with you. We're going to walk into this together. And not so we can have a pity party or rant about how unfair life is. We're after something bigger and far better. We're chasing something that's a mix of joy and wholeness and grace and peace. We're after something that's part contentment and part purpose.

And we're going to do it together, starting with acknowledgement. Life *is* messy, period.

After all, if life wasn't messy—if we could find peace on our own, without Jesus—the book of Ephesians wouldn't exist. (Or the whole rest of the Bible!) Paul never uses the words *life is messy* in his letter to the Ephesians, but he talks

an awful lot about how God speaks healing into the messy parts of our lives. Why not take the next twenty or so minutes, grab your Bible, and read through the entire letter. You'll see it clear as day.

So as we crack open the good news in Ephesians, we're going to discover that we aren't the first people, or even the billion-and-first people, to struggle with the messiness of life. Which means we have a lot to learn from Paul about how to live in the midst of it all.

Again, you're not alone. I'm right here with you in the messiness, and so is every other person who's ever lived.

Including Jesus, too, as we're about to discover.

RIFFING ON THE MESS

- What mess are you in?

1.2

PERCEPTIONS AND PRESENCE

*Because of the sacrifice of the Messiah, his blood
poured out on the altar of the Cross.*

EPHESIANS 1:7

I was watching this TV drama the other night, and I had to laugh. The premise wasn't *quite* as unbelievable as one of those Lifetime heartstring-tuggers, but it was close.

The show was about an unmarried teen mom and her