



Sneezing Jesus

How God Redeems
Our Humanity

BRIAN HARDIN

This book is sweet, savory, spicy, and spiky all at the same time—a gentle masterpiece on the Jesus story that is breathtaking in its fresh insights and original voice.

LEONARD SWEET

Author, *From Tablet to Table*; professor; founder, preachthestory.com

Sneezing Jesus is inviting, compelling, revealing, instructive, hopeful, and inspiring. Brian's insights and arresting storytelling gave me fresh passion to worship Jesus and to participate in bringing His Kingdom to all those around me. What can I say, really, except that I love this book? I was changed in ways I long to be changed.

STASI ELDREDGE

Bestselling author, *Captivating* and *Becoming Myself*

Brian takes some well-worn and well-traveled Scripture and brings refreshing insights to it. Being truly human as a Christ follower means a much greater awareness of who really is within us. Allowing Him to infuse every moment with the consciousness of His presence changes us and those around us. This book is refreshing, stimulating, and challenging in our journey with Jesus and fellow believers.

REV. DR. HARRY L. THOMAS JR.

Cofounder, Creation Festivals

We tell our children, “You can be anything you want to be.” But what if we told them, “Be like Jesus and you will be everything God made you to be”? *Sneezing Jesus* is an intriguing study of Jesus' life that reveals our purpose as believers.

DR. JOHN HULL

Lead pastor, Eastside Baptist Church, Marietta, GA; contributor,
100 Huntley Street

Want to refresh your faith? *Sneezing Jesus* will cause you to gaze upon Jesus and see things you have never noticed before. This delightful portrait of our wonderful Savior is a joy to read. *Sneezing Jesus* caused me to fall deeper in love with Jesus.

TOM DOYLE

Author, *Standing in the Fire* and *Killing Christians*

It was so good for my heart to walk the human road that Jesus walked and absorb the intention of His humanity. A simple, beautiful portrayal of our intended relationship with the Divine.

ROBERT BEESON

Founder, Essential Records, iShine, and Solo Parent Society; former SVP, Sony/Provident; author, *Going Solo*

Few writers can put skin on God, making Him real and approachable. Brian is a master at allowing his reader to touch Jesus while at the same time instilling in them a deep reverence and awe for the creator of the universe. *Sneezing Jesus* is a must-read!

ADAM STADTMILLER

Pastor, La Jolla Christian Fellowship; author of *Praying for Your Elephant*

Sneezing Jesus opens our hearts and minds to the simple, powerful fact that Jesus has “been there, done that.” This book will leave you wanting more, believing for more, and expecting more in your life with Jesus. I’ll never look at sneezing the same again.

MARK RAMPULLA

Lead pastor, Southview Church, Spring Hill, TN

Sneezing Jesus will inspire Christians, whether leaders or church members, to walk intimately with our Lord. Discover how Jesus will redeem our individual humanity—flaws and all!

HARRY R. JACKSON JR.

Senior pastor, Hope Christian Church, Beltsville, MD; bishop, International Communion of Evangelical Churches

Trying to capture the humanity of Jesus while keeping clearly in view his divinity is no small feat, but *Sneezing Jesus* accomplishes that with rare clarity. Brian helps us grasp Jesus’ humanity in a way that is both inspiring and vividly human.

DR. RAY MITSCH

Chair, Department of Psychology, Colorado Christian University

When heaven and earth meet, the boundary lines are indistinguishable. The collaboration between the divine and human are seamless in Jesus—and what our normal is supposed to be. I encourage you to grab this book.

DARREN TYLER

Conduit Mission founding president and lead pastor of Conduit Church



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Prologue

On flesh and words

IF YOU WERE ASKED to describe Jesus using only one word, what would it be? Does such a word even exist?

Would it be Savior? God? Shepherd? Companion? Rabbi? Healer? Leader? Prophet? Carpenter? Son? Lamb? Teacher? Wise? Innocent? Obedient? Honest?

Or maybe *real*. After all, Jesus was deeply tangible. He had a way of describing reality that was masterful and unsettling at the same time. Even today His words call Wisdom from the fringes and give her permission to dance in the sun. And Jesus consistently told people that how they perceived reality was not actually how things really were. He called out the plot behind the story and spoke to what was really going on behind the overlay of culture and fear. He spoke the language of the heart.

But still—He's so much more than even that, isn't He? I confess that boiling Jesus down into one word feels impossible. Much of this is because we each experience Jesus

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differently, depending on our own story of Him and our story with Him. For me, there really is only one word that describes my understanding of and relationship with Jesus—only one that snaps all others into place:

Human.

Jesus is the reality of God's desire to be included in the human story. It was an ache so deep and a love so vast that He was willing to step out of perfection and join the fray as a human being. Isn't that compelling? Jesus loved us enough to saddle Himself with indigestion and urination and all manner of humanness. He laughed with a human voice and saw through human eyes. In order to be Emmanuel—God *with* us—Jesus sneezed. He was one of us. And His very humanity tells us profound things about who *we* are, and about God's heart toward us in our humanity.

Much of the time, the part of Jesus' life we focus most on is His death. But He isn't just a means to an end. He isn't the cream we buy and apply twice a day to get rid of our sin rash. God didn't just come here to die and be resurrected. It didn't take Him thirty-three years to work up the courage to go to the cross. Most of what Jesus did had nothing to do with saving the world. He stayed among us a long time as one of us, and that time had a purpose. He came to show us what humanity is supposed to look like.

Which is interesting, isn't it? We spend a lot of our lives wanting to be anything but human, trying to be anywhere but here, and doing everything we can to de-flesh ourselves. We want to get out of this sin-infested cesspool and enter

PROLOGUE

eternity with God, where we no longer have to struggle to live and behave. But Jesus' humanity teaches us something extraordinary: *Right now* is part of eternity. This sin-infested cesspool of humanity is our species. Right now matters. Being human matters.

Now, I am in no way attempting to diminish Jesus' divinity. Quite the contrary. If Jesus is not divine, the hope of eternity through Him is meaningless. But we often focus wholly on the divinity of Jesus while subtly diminishing His humanity. And this gives an incomplete picture of Jesus, in whom we see the human and the divine occupying the same space at the same time.¹ There is no evidence that Jesus' plan was to become the caricature of a supernatural superperson. What we find in Jesus' humanity is less about supernatural ability and more about normal humanity. In living with humans as a human, Jesus was showing us what it's supposed to look like to be people: people who are fully alive, whole, and human—who are utterly dependent on and deeply intertwined with God.

What if we were to look at Jesus as the most normal human who ever lived? What if we realized that the process of sanctification—of being set apart, of becoming more like Jesus—doesn't mean escaping our humanity but rather becoming fully human again?

This book is my humble attempt to make the flesh become word—to help us see Jesus for who He was and is. This is the Jesus I know. These are some of the things I've learned from the human God. This is my love story, and the

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love story offered to us all. And together we're going to look at Jesus through the lens of the Gospels and explore the reality of His humanity and what it says about our own.

May we all be delighted and surprised at the beauty of the Savior. And may we all find in Jesus, the human God, just what life could be.

01.

Advent

On brokenness and wholeness



*God's movement is often abrupt and
unsettling rather than predictable and settling.*

MICHAEL JOSEPH BROWN

LONG AGO, in a land far away, there was an unspoiled garden created for a special purpose: to cradle and nourish the most captivating of God's creatures—humans. Among all the intricate life born out of creation—the plants and the insects, the birds and the beasts—these human creatures were unique. They were God-like, crafted in the image of their Creator. God had, indeed, breathed His own life into them, offering them living souls.¹ And to these exquisite creatures, God bequeathed the earth in all its elaborate wonder.

In this time, before time was being counted, these humans lacked nothing. The world was without conflict. Everything was in harmony. All was perfect and whole, as it was intended

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to be. This essential state of being would later have a name: *shalom*. God's peace and order were perfect in all places, at all times, and in all things. Wholeness was completely normal.

Upon these human creatures, God bestowed incredible abilities. In collaboration with their Creator Father, they could in turn create other life after God's image. God also gave them the gift of a will, one of the most powerful of all gifts, which allowed them the choice to enter into relationship with their Creator—the essence of true love. And true love it was.

These human creatures were a seamless and perfect transition between the physical and the spiritual. They could at once be present in their humanness and commune with their Creator in spirit. The soul of the divine and the physicality of the human occupying the same space at the same time was, like *shalom*, completely normal. God was within them and around them, and they knew and experienced nothing but perfection.

Unfortunately, it was not to last.

Among the swaying grass and intricate forestry of the garden, God placed two specific trees. One became known as the tree of life, and God's children were invited to eat their fill of its fruit and enjoy life eternal. The other tree was known as the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This one was forbidden. In all of creation, the fruit of this tree was the one thing God asked His children not to partake of.

Although the Creator had prohibited His children from eating this fruit, He did not take away their ability to choose

otherwise. Love isn't love if there's no way out. And allowing this choice created a vulnerability. After all, loving and collaborative relationships require this kind of trust.

A time came when the first man and woman found themselves before the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, absorbing a deception that would bring devastating results. Satan told them that if they ate the fruit dangling before them, they would become like God. In perhaps the cosmic irony of all time, they had somehow forgotten that they already were.

And so they ate. The juice of rebellion that flowed into their bodies was fatal to their souls. A breach was opened. Trust was broken. The misused gift of will and choice shattered the intimate love and trust between Creator and created. With one decision, humankind created a new reality for itself—one that had never been intended, one that fractured humanity at its core. No longer were humanity and divinity intertwined in a state of shalom. Eden had fallen.

Armed with the knowledge of good and evil but separated from divinity, humans forged their way forward, only to systematically discover their powerlessness. Hate was born. Conflict was created. Murder was committed. Death was introduced.

As humankind tried to find its way back to shalom on its own terms, the consequences of the breach between the human and the divine became more and more apparent: Humanity had fallen into inhumanity.² They had become subhuman, like animals, separated from God. The human

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soul was empty. Every attempt to fill the void created further devastation on a planet meant to be filled with the unfiltered glory of the Creator. Humanity became entombed in its own knowledge of good and evil. But the knowledge could not lead it back to its Creator, and so humanity began to forget who it was. All was lost.

And yet—the Creator Father had not abandoned them. He was waiting, watching, preparing to redeem the whole devolved mess. But a rescue would require something daring, painful, and unspeakably vulnerable. One day, at the precise moment of His choosing, God would invade the earth to rescue a species He had fashioned in His own image—an image He would not surrender to the darkness. And the invasion would be so counterintuitive, most wouldn't even understand what had happened until the victory was already won.

And that's what brings us to Jesus.



Mary was about fifteen years old, and she was engaged to be married. On this day, a day like any other, she had much to contemplate: leaving home, joining a new family, creating a new home, having sex for the first time, becoming a woman. But she had no idea that her world—and the human story itself—was about to change.

“Hello, favored woman. The Lord is with you.”

The speaker's name was Gabriel. He was a chief among the angels of God.

Mary, startled from her daydream, couldn't figure out

what this strange man was trying to say—or who he was. To reassure her, Gabriel began to state his business.

“Don’t be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. I have great news! You’re going to be a mother! The baby will be a boy, and you will name Him Jesus. He’ll be a King! He’ll be known as the Son of God, and His Kingdom will never end!”

Mary’s blank stare revealed her confusion. Was he talking about the children she would have with her beloved Joseph? He must be. But who was this stranger? What if someone saw her talking to him? It was highly irregular for her to be approached by a man who wasn’t in her family—and this man was saying crazy things. What was going on?

Stepping back, she stammered out the first words she could think of: “How? I’m a virgin.”

When Gabriel spoke again, something shifted inside Mary. Curiosity began to rise up in her. What if this really was an angel of God? Either she had lost her mind—or she was truly being visited by Heaven.

“The Holy Spirit will come upon you,” Gabriel said, “and the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby to be born will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God.”

He then spoke about her cousin Elizabeth. Mary was taken aback. How could he know Elizabeth was part of her family? How could he know about Elizabeth’s miraculous pregnancy? Could what he said be for real? And what could she do? All her life she’d loved God. And if this angel was from Him—he must be from Him!—and God was asking

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this of her, Mary, who was no one special from nowhere special . . . how could she say no?

The words spilled from her lips before she could catch them. “I am the Lord’s servant,” she said. And then, words that resonated from the center of her soul—“May everything you’ve said come true.”

And the angel was gone.

Mary slowly turned, looking for Gabriel, listening for his voice, but heard only the light breeze. The conversation had lasted but a minute. And while the world looked the same, everything had changed.

Imagine that first minute. Imagine that young peasant girl standing alone, the only human being in the world who knew anything had happened. This was how counterintuitively the Creator chose to invade the world.

The thoughts twisting and rolling in her mind must have been overwhelming. She had agreed to the most preposterous thing she’d ever heard. She had become vulnerable in a way that would alter the trajectories of everyone she loved. She did trust in the Lord and had offered herself with her whole heart—but trust was all that she had to hold on to. She wasn’t sure what had just happened.

The world began to spin. She could feel herself teetering when two thoughts brought her back to her senses:

What am I going to tell my father?

What am I going to tell Joseph?

For days those questions consumed her. She needed to tell someone, but what if her story proved untrue? She would be

punished severely for such a completely outrageous prank—or worse, she would be considered mentally unhinged. She battled between believing she'd been visited by an actual angel . . . and fearing she'd lost her senses.

The conversations, when they finally came, must have been awful. If my beautiful daughter told me she was unexpectedly pregnant, with the caveat that she'd not had sex at all and the father was actually God, I would have no small amount of skepticism. I would need an angel experience of my own.

And no one believed Mary at first. Joseph was brokenhearted—but he still loved her. He began considering plausible ways to keep the matter quiet, to avoid humiliating Mary publicly and destroying her and her family. At the same time, Mary was spirited out of town as quickly as possible, sent off to the hill country to visit Elizabeth. Mary hoped that visiting Cousin Elizabeth would be the breath of grace that she needed. And it was.³

But then, back in Galilee, everything changed. Amid heartache and betrayal, an angel went to Joseph in a dream—and Joseph was invited into the story in a rush of grace. The angel told Joseph that Mary was pure and true, that this baby was truly from God and of God. Mary was to be Joseph's wife, and Joseph was to name the baby boy Jesus. And this is what he would do as soon as Mary returned from the south.

Mary returned home during her second trimester. The adjustment was awkward at first, but everyone managed. Those who didn't believe Mary kept it to themselves. After

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all, Joseph was sticking by Mary, so what else was there to say? It wasn't the grand celebration that had been planned, but this was the best possible solution. Joseph and Elizabeth appear to be the only ones who believed Mary's story without reservation. So as the months went by, Mary grew a thick skin along with her expanding midsection. The baby was kicking now, and Mary was amazed and in love.

The announcement that everyone would be required to migrate to their ancestral homes for a census couldn't have come at a more inconvenient time. The baby was expected any day, but Joseph couldn't refuse to participate in the census. Much of his livelihood came from the Romans. And people knew him—he was a respected artisan with skills in both wood and stone. He couldn't just disappear. But he couldn't leave Mary either.

He led their colt out of Nazareth; Mary rode on its back with a couple of extra blankets to cushion her. An agile and light traveler could make the journey in about four days, but Joseph and Mary were neither agile nor light. Joseph worried about how and where the baby would be born—because the baby was certain to come before they made the journey back. When they finally tottered into Bethlehem, dusty and weary, all they wanted was something to eat and a place to sleep. Unfortunately, as the Bible puts it, “there was no room for them in the inn.”⁴

The hospitality business was booming, thanks to the census. It seemed as though everyone in the entire province had been displaced. No matter how much Joseph begged for

shelter for a very pregnant woman, there simply was nowhere to stay. Finally, one man took compassion on them: They could stay in his stable, which was a cave where animals were kept. Joseph and Mary were grateful to have a place to lie down. The cave wasn't so bad. And at least they'd made it to Bethlehem.

Joseph was talking about whether to leave Mary for a short excursion to find food when she felt the first real contraction. It tightened like a belt around her waist and radiated deep into her back. She held her breath until she finally had to cry out. She locked eyes with Joseph. The baby was coming.

Joseph unloaded their belongings and set about attempting to make the place slightly more sanitary. Mary tried to get comfortable, which was difficult on a dirt floor in an open cave filled with animals. But the animals cooperated. They knew instinctively that new life was coming.

And it did.

Before the night was over, the shrieking of Mary gave way to the tiny whimper of a newborn baby boy. In the most normal of ways, God had come to be with us.



This is how Jesus became a human being. This is how the Creator Father chose to become a person and dwell among us. It's how the prophecy of Immanuel moved from a concept into a reality. And while this tells us much about God's heart toward people, it also tells us much about ourselves.

If this were our story to tell, we would have imagined God

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arriving a little higher up the food chain, in full adulthood and total competency. It would make sense for Him to skip the messiness of infancy, the awkwardness of childhood. It would make more sense for Him to come to earth as royalty. But this is precisely what God didn't do. And this is the first clue that God's view of humanity is different from our own. Jesus would proclaim this message relentlessly throughout His ministry.

We shouldn't overlook this. God chose to slide through a birth canal and come helpless, naked, and screaming into the world like any other human baby—completely vulnerable. He wasn't born potty-trained. He had to have His bottom wiped. He probably peed on His mommy more than once. He suckled at her breast in order to be nourished. He had to grow in strength and learn balance before He could take His first steps. He took no shortcuts. In every way He was a human being. And that is the point. He was perfect, and perfectly normal. He was a human as humanity was intended all the way back in the Garden.

God chose to fully become one of us in every respect,⁵ and He came in a way that was baffling and unsettling. His coming twisted so many cultural norms out of shape—and perhaps it should similarly challenge us. God, who could have come to Earth in any way He wanted, chose to come as a peasant to a place few knew of. God chose to be ordinary.

Jesus was born into a family, and He grew up in the context of human relationships. He had a keen sense of the people around Him and their connection to the earth that provided

their home. He understood the bond between parents and children. He learned all the things children discover as they mature. He learned to work with wood and stone alongside Joseph—to get into the soil, craft with His hands, and create things. Creating was—and is—His nature. Relationship was—and is—His nature. And these things are the essence of what we are made of.⁶

But Jesus did more than identify with and embody our humanity—His very human arrival revealed the extent of humankind’s loss of identity. After all, God arrived through the scandal of an unwed pregnancy. He was born into relative poverty and total obscurity. Before He could talk, He was a homeless refugee. In all of humanity, there seemed to be no place for the Creator in whose image humans were made.

Our humanity was fractured long ago in a garden. At the Fall, we actually fell. We slid downward and backward away from the way we were created to be. We were never supposed to be separated from God. And the effects of this separation aren’t hard to miss in the world—which is to say that it’s not hard to see how far we have fallen.

And this is why Jesus’ arrival, the ordinary moments and details of His coming, are so important. Because although we look at Jesus’ arrival as an extraordinary event—and yes, the very fact that God came at all is *extraordinary*—we can’t forget the radical importance of the ordinary. That perhaps Jesus’ human life was more about what ordinary humanity was supposed to look like—that His life was largely spent reminding His creation what they were supposed to be from the start.