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AMONG  
US

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LIKE JESUS

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DEDICATION

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*F*or Jill

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## Introduction

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# WHO IS JESUS?

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IN 1991 MY WIFE, JILL, ASKED ME, “DO YOU LOVE me?” WE had been going through a hard time, but hard times weren’t unknown to us. We have six children whose ages at the time were 2, 5, 8, 12, 14, and 16. Our eight-year-old, Kim, is disabled—unable to speak, unable to do many things other children do. Sometimes Jill got so tired that she’d fall asleep during dinner.

It had been a long day, and I thought she just wanted me to reassure her that I loved her. “Of course I love you,” I said. But then she asked me again, “Paul, do you love me?” The third time she asked, I got irritated with her. Of course I loved her. Didn’t I help out with the kids? In the morning I dressed the little guys and got them breakfast. In the evening I read to them and put them all to bed. I helped constantly. Case closed. That night I went to sleep fuming at Jill, still making a list of all the ways I loved her.

I didn’t tell Jill, but her question gnawed at me. What does it mean to love someone? What does love look like?

As I thought about love, I began to think about Jesus. After all, Jesus is supposed to be the most merciful and self-giving person

who ever lived. I decided to study his life to see how he related to others. What was he like? How did he treat people?

And slowly by slowly, as they say in Africa, I began to understand what it really means to love.

## WHO IS JESUS?

Regardless of your background, Jesus is hard to ignore. Almost two billion Christians claim to follow him; more than one billion Muslims honor him as a prophet. Leading Jewish theologians esteem him as a great rabbi. His image can be found in Hindu temples. Many cult leaders claim to be a reincarnation of the spirit of Jesus.

Jaroslav Pelikan, professor emeritus of history at Yale University writes:

Regardless of what anyone may personally think or believe about him, Jesus of Nazareth has been the dominant figure in the history of Western culture for almost twenty centuries. . . . It is from his birth that most of the human race dates its calendars; it is by his name that millions curse and in his name that millions pray.<sup>1</sup>

Despite all the attention Jesus gets, most people have little idea of who he is as a person, even those who worship him. I have often asked Christians, "When you get to heaven, what person in the Bible would you like to meet?" Only one out of several hundred has mentioned Jesus. I think the word "person" throws them off because they aren't used to thinking of Jesus as a person.

When we see Jesus portrayed, he often comes across strangely. Hollywood frequently pictures Jesus in slow motion. In most films Jesus talks slowly, walks slowly, and moves slowly. He also stares.

My ten-year-old daughter, Emily, and I were watching one of the better Jesus films, and we noticed that he never blinked! The other actors did, but Jesus never did. Our eyes began to hurt every time the camera focused on Jesus' face.

I decided to study Jesus with fresh eyes, forgetting what I already knew—or thought I knew—about him. I wanted to experience what Albert Einstein did when he read the Gospels. He reflected:

I am a Jew, but I am enthralled by the luminous figure of the Nazarene. . . . Jesus is too colossal for the pen of phrasemongers, however artful. . . . No man can read the Gospels without feeling the actual presence of Jesus. His personality pulsates in every word.<sup>2</sup>

Einstein was not a follower of Christ but he felt the wonder of the real man in a way many miss. As I read and studied the Gospels, I began to experience Einstein's sense of wonder. I hope you do too.

## WHAT ARE THE GOSPELS?

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, the Bible's four accounts of Jesus' life, are called *gospels*, a word that means *good news*. They each carry the name of the author, and were written over 1,900 years ago in Greek, the language of the Roman Empire. Like modern biographers, each author provides his own unique perspective and includes scenes or details that other authors don't. When we put their accounts together, we get a rich, three-dimensional picture of Jesus. Like documentary videos, scenes are often described in such vivid detail that we can visualize exactly what's happening: the setting, the circumstances, the people, and how Jesus treated them.

Matthew, a former tax collector and one of the original twelve

followers of Jesus, wrote an eyewitness account. Tax collectors in the Roman Empire were usually well educated and fluent in both their native language and Greek. The government auctioned off the job of tax collector to the highest bidder. The winner of the auction recouped his expenses by charging more than was required, thereby alienating the general population. Think of Matthew as a very smart, former used-car salesman. Though he's been changed by Jesus, he could still read people like a book. There are hints of this in the details Matthew provides about Judas (the disciple who betrayed Jesus).

Written about thirty-five years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, Mark's account was most likely derived from Peter, a former fisherman and the leader of the twelve disciples. Like Peter's personality, Mark's story is fast-paced and passionate, and it captures the shocking impact Jesus had on people.

Luke, a doctor and a traveling companion of Paul (one of the leaders in the early church), based his chronicle on the testimony of eyewitnesses. His book breathes compassion for the "little" people and the powerless: outcasts, women, children, the poor, and the disabled.

John, another former fisherman and one of Jesus' most intimate friends, wrote his gospel last. As someone particularly close to Jesus, John gives us unique, close-up glimpses of him.

Are the Gospels reliable history? I'll let you judge for yourself. My only request is that you read them with an open mind, the way Einstein did. Einstein reflected about the Gospels,

No myth is filled with such life. How different, for instance, is the impression which we receive from an account of the legendary heroes of antiquity like Theseus! Theseus and other heroes of his type lack the authentic vitality of Jesus.<sup>3</sup>

C. S. Lewis, Oxford professor and a leading expert on myth, wrote:

I am perfectly convinced that whatever else the Gospels are, they are not legends. I have read a great deal of legend and I am quite clear that they are not the same sort of thing. They are not artistic enough to be legends.<sup>4</sup>

When we read a myth or legend, we instinctively understand that we are in the world of fable. We switch gears when we read it; in the words of the poet Coleridge, we “suspend disbelief.” But the Gospels are set in a real world of needs: wine running out at a wedding; hungry crowds with not enough food; fruitless fishing trips; and no money for the tax bill. Into this world quietly breaks the miraculous, which seems as ordinary as the hassles. In myth, extraordinary people in an extraordinary world do extraordinary things. In the Gospels, the extraordinary love and compassion of a remarkable man radiates and illuminates an ordinary world.

## A STUDY OF LOVE

This book examines how Jesus treated the people he encountered, because it's in “little moments” with friends and family that most of us reveal our true selves. Jesus is no exception.

Gandhi, a Hindu and national leader of India, enjoyed chiding Christians that they did not take seriously Jesus' call to love. Yet, what is more difficult to learn than love? How do you love someone when you get no love in return—only withdrawal or ingratitude? How do you love without being trapped or used by the other person? How do you love when you have your own problems? When do you take care of yourself? How do you love with both compassion and honesty? When you are compassionate, people

use you, but when you are honest, people get angry. What is love?

Most of us have lacked good models for love. We don't even know what's normal anymore. Let me suggest this: The person of Jesus is a plumb line to which we may align our lives. He satisfies our hunger for a hero—someone who is both good and strong—to change this world.

Jesus arrived at the home of his good friends, Mary and Martha, several days after their brother Lazarus died. Mary, in the passionate way of the ancient Near East, threw herself weeping at Jesus' feet. Overcome with grief, Jesus weeps with her. Several bystanders comment, "*See how he loved him!*" (*John 11:36*). In this book we'll join the bystanders of Jesus, look at Jesus, and *see how he loved*.

PART 1

LOVE

SHOWS

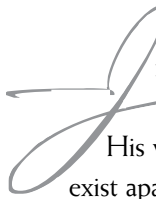
COMPASSION



# A MIND FULL OF SOMEONE ELSE

## LOVE LOOKS AND ACTS

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 JESUS LIVED 2,000 YEARS AGO IN A TIME VERY DIFFERENT from our own. His world was almost entirely Jewish; only an occasional Gentile appears in the Gospels. His was a world of close-knit families—individuals didn't exist apart from their extended families. All a person had was family and clan. If you lost them, you lost everything.

When Jesus is about thirty he gathers a group of disciples and begins walking from town to town throughout Israel, teaching people. One day while approaching the city of Nain, Jesus and the disciples encounter a funeral procession. Luke records what happened:

*Soon afterward, Jesus went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went along with him. As he approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out—the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the town was with her. When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, “Don’t cry.”*

*Then he went up and touched the coffin, and those carrying it stood still. He said, “Young man, I say to you, get up!” The dead*

*man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother.*

*They were all filled with awe and praised God. "A great prophet has appeared among us," they said. "God has come to help his people." This news about Jesus spread throughout Judea and the surrounding country. (Luke 7:11-17)*

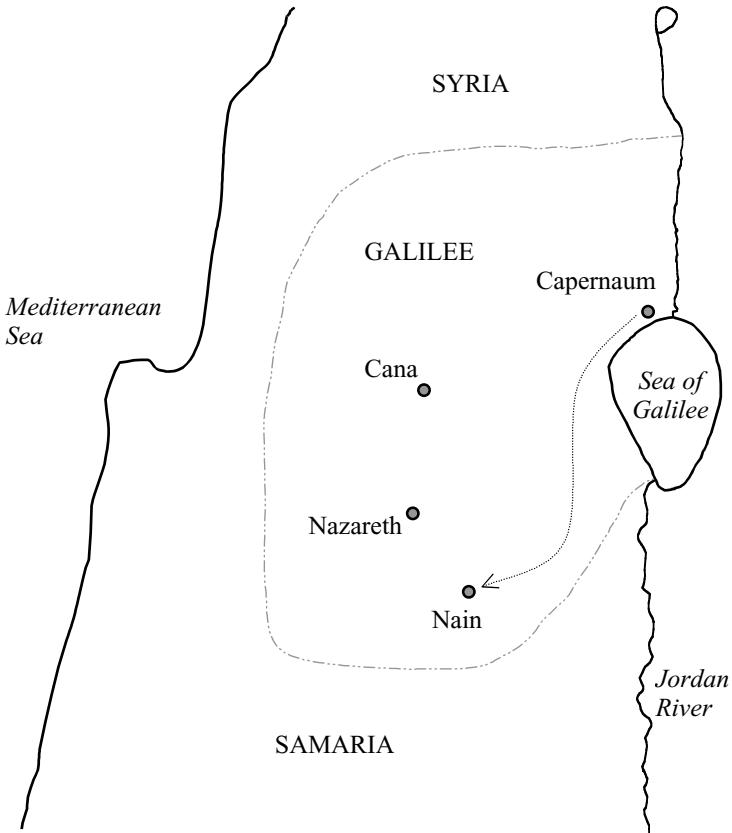
Nain is nestled in a beautiful valley in southern Galilee where the Jewish tribe of Issachar had settled. The Old Testament tells us that *the land is pleasant* (Genesis 49:15). Nain sounds like *pleasant* in Hebrew, but for this mother the day was anything but pleasant.

Her son—her only son—has died. And this is not the first time she has had to bury a loved one. She is a widow. The greatest joy for a Jewish woman was to bear a son; to lose a son, the greatest sorrow. The loss of her husband and only son means a life of poverty. With them she has lost the equivalent of her pension, Social Security, and Medicare. Guilt is likely compounding her despair, as the premature death of a child was believed to be the punishment for sin.<sup>1</sup> Possibly the town gossips were wagging their heads, wondering what she did to deserve losing everything.

Jewish funerals were usually held at six in the evening, after the day's work was done. Earlier in the day she'd laid her son's body on the floor of her home, groomed his hair, dressed him in the best clothes she could find, then placed his body on an open wicker basket, face up, arms folded. The town had gathered at her door to help bury her son. The women lead the procession because the Jews believed that a woman's sin brought death into the world, so women should lead it out—adding shame to sorrow. As the funeral procession winds through the streets, many symbolically share the mother's burden by taking their turn holding the basket. Paid mourners and flute players follow in the rear, chanting, "Weep with them, all you who are bitter of heart." Most of the five

hundred or so people from Nain would have come because this loss was so significant.<sup>2</sup>

## MAP OF NORTHERN PALESTINE



The graveyard is to the east of the city, along the road that winds its way down to Capernaum, Jesus' home base. The Greek text suggests that the crowd with Jesus is larger than the crowd coming out of Nain—probably more than a thousand people are with Jesus. Jesus arrives just as the funeral emerges from the gates of the city, and the two groups meet.

## HE FEELS WHAT SHE FEELS

The first thing Jesus does is look at the woman. *The Lord saw her*—not the crowd or the dead son. Jesus singles out the widow in the confusion of two colliding crowds. And when he sees her, *his heart went out to her* (Luke 7:13).

Compassion is the emotion most frequently attributed to Jesus. How can you tell that a person feels compassion? What did people see on Jesus' features in this scene? After all, compassion is quite subtle compared to anger or fear. When I ask people what compassion looks like, they say it's communicated through a person's eyes: They are soft and tender, attentive, concerned. The entire body pauses and listens, absorbing the feelings of another. Perhaps Jesus stops mid-sentence and becomes quiet, transfixed, as he looks at the widow. Or maybe his eyes moisten, and a tear rolls down his cheek. Whatever his reaction, it is noticeable despite the commotion and distraction of hundreds of milling people.

Jesus sees a woman who is half-dead. While we think of death and life as two separate categories, the Hebrews thought there could be an in-between state. In the Old Testament when Naomi returns home after burying her husband and two sons, she tells the town folk: "Don't call me Naomi [*means pleasant*]. . . . Call me Mara [*means bitter*], because the Almighty has made my life very bitter" (Ruth 1:20). Naomi was alive, but she felt dead. The widow, like Naomi, has entered a living death, cut off from life, from hope.

Jesus knows this, and he experiences her pain: *His heart went out to her*. Literally he was moved with compassion. Jesus enters this woman's world, feeling what it's like to be in her place.

## HE BRINGS HOPE

*"Don't cry,"* Jesus tells her. He feels her anguish, but he is not lost in it. He feels what she feels, yet is separate from her.

Someone might say that Jesus has interrupted her grieving process. Today's psychology tells us not to tell someone how to feel. But when my daughter scrapes her knee and comes in crying as if she is about to die, I tell her, *"Don't cry; it will be okay"*—because it really is going to be okay. And Jesus knows this woman has reason to hope and not weep.

Respect for the dead led to a right-of-way in traffic, so Jesus' crowd has likely divided and pulled off to the sides to let the widow and her dead son pass. At this point Jesus stops the funeral by quietly touching the coffin. Most men would stop a large crowd by shouting or waving their arms. People with less power tend to overstate it, like a teenager who slams the door because of a parental curfew. But people with real power tend to understate it, like a Caesar who decides life or death with only the slight gesture of a thumb. His action has the subtle majesty of an ancient king. What Jesus does next is pure, raw power for good. He says, *"Young man, I say to you, get up!"* The once-dead, young man obeys Jesus, sits up, and starts talking.

The crowd is *filled with awe and praised God*. *"A great prophet has appeared among us," they said*. After four hundred years of silence, a prophet had come. Less than three miles away and eight hundred years before, the prophet Elisha had raised an only son to life. Elisha had gone through many gyrations in his miracle, but Jesus effortlessly raised the widow's son to life. Someone greater than Elisha is here.

Word about Jesus spreads far and wide. People are reminded of God's power, and they worship him because of what they saw Jesus do. They sense they are no longer alone with their problems, because God is visiting them in Jesus.

## HE NEVER LOSES SIGHT OF HER

With the addition of the funeral procession, the size of the crowd has nearly doubled. Every eye is on Jesus. Nothing like this has happened before. It's even unusual for Jesus—only two other times does he do a miracle like this. The miracle is rife with possibilities—book deals, movie rights, and talk show appearances!

But Jesus' eye is on the widow. He takes her son by the hand, helps him off the basket, and walks him over to his mother. He's not thinking about himself and how he can benefit from this amazing display of power. He isn't distracted by his own miracle—he remembers the person. He cares for both the son's physical need and the mother's emotional need.

Jesus possesses both tenderness and power. Usually tender people lack strength and strong people lack gentleness. But Jesus shows both goodness and strength.

## NOT EFFICIENT

Charles Spurgeon was a famous preacher in London more than one hundred years ago. Though a caring husband and a gentle man, like all of us, he was flawed. His wife, Susie, once told about a time when she went with her husband to a large auditorium where he was to speak:

We went together in a cab, and I well remember trying to keep close by his side as we mingled with the mass of

people thronging up the staircase. But by the time we had reached the landing, he had forgotten my existence; the burden of the message was upon him, and he turned into the small side door where the officials were awaiting him, without for a moment realizing that I was left to struggle as best I could with the rough throng around me.<sup>3</sup>

Sound familiar? A large crowd, a frightened woman, and a religious teacher. Except here the teacher forgets the woman because he is thinking about what he wants to say. Jesus forgoes a sermon for the sake of a person. But Spurgeon ignored a person for the sake of a sermon. It got worse:

At first, I was utterly bewildered, and then . . . I was angry. I at once returned home, and told my grief to my gentle mother. She wisely reasoned that my husband was no ordinary man, that his whole life was dedicated to God and that I must never, never hinder him.

Then Spurgeon returned home, upset that he couldn't find his wife:

My dear mother went to him and told him all the truth. Quietly he let me tell him how indignant I had felt, and then he repeated mother's little lesson pointing out that before all things, he was God's servant.<sup>4</sup>

Did you notice how God got dragged in? Somehow God was the reason Spurgeon ignored his wife. So his wife gets lectured by both her mother and her husband for feeling hurt. God isn't revealed in Spurgeon's life through this incident; he's the excuse for not loving.

Spurgeon and I have a lot in common. When Jill shared her heart—both good and bad—I would “fix” her. One time when she was agonizing over Kim, I told her, “Why don’t you just give her to God?” Her reply shut me up: “I do. I do every day.”

Other times I was unaware of what Jill was feeling. I didn’t realize what having a disabled child had done to her friendships, her future, and her dreams. Even though I did things for her, I began to understand why Jill wondered if I loved her. I realized that I was good at “raising the dead son,” but I didn’t take time to look, to feel, and to walk with Jill. I was already looking for the next “dead son.” When I focused on the task and not Jill, she felt the difference. Jesus’ tenderness suggested to me a new, less “efficient,” way of relating.

Love, I realized, is not efficient.

When the Exxon *Valdez* spilled thousands of gallons of crude oil along Alaska’s shoreline, the company’s president dismissed the suggestion that he go and see the damage—implying that a trip would be a waste of his time. He had the power, but he lacked goodness. What might it have done to his heart to have gotten down in the muck and cleaned a few geese?

Jesus has shown us how to love: Look, feel, and then help. If we help someone but don’t take the time to look at the person and feel what he or she is feeling, our love is cold. And if we look and feel, but don’t do what we can to help, our love is cheap. Love does both.