

“If you’ve been searching for a clear explanation of the core message of Jesus, look no further. Here is a book of fascinating stories, some old, some new, that will take you to the heart of what Jesus called ‘good news.’ The search for spiritual peace is universal. Finding an end to inner restlessness is much less common. This is a helpful guide to experiencing the missing peace of life’s puzzle.”

—Marcus Brotherton, author of the award-winning *Feast for Thieves*

“One of the greatest needs in our world is for people in touch with the living God to share their faith. This book is going to be a great help to people all over the world who are willing to do that. Please not only read it but pass it on to someone else.”

—George Verwer, founder of Operation Mobilisation

“It’s not Jan’s knack for stringing words together—though he’s certainly good at it—that makes this book a treasure. It’s his knack for pinning down exactly why so many Christians feel frustrated with a life that seemed to promise so much more. This book is going to help a lot of people.”

—Mark Atteberry, award-winning author  
of *The Samson Syndrome*

“In *Still Restless*, Jan Hettinga provides a compelling and eminently readable response to what some have called ‘the insufficiency of all things attainable,’ which has become the chief malaise of contemporary culture. With powerful, practical stories from his many years as a spiritual leader and teacher, he leads the reader on a gentle journey toward satiating the inner restlessness that stalks so many people today by inviting them to find rest in Jesus and his kingdom. Jan helps us identify the sources that spawn our spiritual restlessness and then deftly leads us on the journey to finding the source of satisfaction for this holy longing. I highly recommend this book to everyone who longs to be restless no more!”

—Dr. Sam Rima, lead pastor of North Seattle Alliance Church  
and author of *Overcoming the Dark Side of Leadership*  
and *Leading from the Inside Out*

“In life and in writing, Dr. Jan Hettinga is a gifted and humble man who loves Jesus and draws great wisdom from God’s Word. In *Still Restless*, Jan beautifully melds powerful stories from Scripture with those of his own life in ministry. By example, Jan demonstrates how to give clear, thoughtful answers to complex life issues by relying on the wisdom found in the kingdom gospel of Scripture. This book is an inspiring guide for those who have attempted to play God in their own lives or at least have sought to slow his advances. For those of us in ministry, *Still Restless* holds up a mirror to our own motivations, while allowing us to become better prepared to respond to those who seek God or have yet failed to recognize that they need him. I strongly recommend this book to all who know Jesus as Lord, and to those who have yet to meet him. Yes, that means everyone.”

—Gary Irby, director of Seattle Church Planting and  
Northwest Baptist Church Planting

“The kingdom message is not just another gospel technique, it is the way Jesus chose to connect with those he met. Eleven men understood this message and changed the world. Our work here is not done! Imagine what the church would look like today if this message were shared in the pulpit and lived in the marketplace. As long as there are lost souls and broken hearts, may the church feel restless as well. Thank you, Jan, for being obedient.”

—Lee Harris, Kingdom Builders Ministries

“*Still Restless* is written from a pastor’s heart. Nestle in, and let Jan Hettinga unlock the Scriptures and take you to the God who is, who may be different from the God you’ve known.”

—Laurie Short, author of *Finding Faith in the Dark*

# STILL RESTLESS

*Conversations That Open the Door to Peace*

Jan David Hettinga

 Kregel  
Publications

*Still Restless: Conversations That Open the Door to Peace*

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*Epigraph:* Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), 390.

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*For my children,  
Nathan, Holly, and Jeremy,  
who found their home in God's kingdom.*



A lady I know . . . refused to talk about life beyond death with her children because, she said, she didn't want them to be disappointed if it turned out not to be there. Well now. . . . If there is no afterlife they certainly won't be disappointed. If there is, they may find themselves badly prepared. The only possible way they could be disappointed is if they do continue to exist.

If, indeed, what happens at physical death is the cessation of the person, then approaching death is, at worst, like going to the surgeon. It is unpleasant, but at least it will be over soon, and there will then be no pain, no suffering, no regrets. No you. No anything, so far as you are concerned.

The truly brave person is surely the one who can cheerfully face the prospect of an unending existence. Suppose you are never going to stop existing and there is nothing you can do about it—except possibly make your future existence as desirable an existence as possible? That would call for real courage.

—Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*





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# FOREWORD

When I was young I had a drug problem. My parents *drug* me to church every weekend. It made sense. After all, I was the son of a pastor who was trying his best to lead congregations into much needed personal, congregational, and community change, so church became a family endeavor. Every Sunday morning Mom would throw the four of us in the back of the Country Squire station wagon in our Sunday best (I am still in counseling for the plaid bow ties and suits), give us the “behave” lecture, and send us off to class.

My dad was great at his job. Everywhere we went, the churches he led grew. In fact, he got the reputation of being a great fundraiser and became the leader of choice any time a church needed an expansion campaign. He rose very quickly in the ranks of our denomination and, as a result, was in great demand all over the state. I was very proud of my dad. Yet somewhere in that journey of ministry success, I got lost. I can’t say that it was my dad’s fault—I don’t think it was. But the result of that season was unsettledness in my experience with church. You could even say I was cynical about church, but still curious about God. I was restless.

We all have unique experiences with God and church, but mine felt, well, personal. Outside our home my father's public persona was one of great confidence and compelling will; at home I saw and experienced the wear and tear of ministry on my family. I would listen through the walls as my mom and dad would wrestle with the issues of church. High expectations, constant meetings (they were called *committees* back then), and difficult personalities had a growing negative effect on my family and ultimately on my faith.

By the time I graduated from high school, I made the decision to go a different direction. I was done with church. I had played the game long enough. I wanted more from life than a perfunctory routine. After eighteen years of observation and participation I decided that feeling close to God wasn't worth the cost of having to look like I had it all together—even if it was only for an hour on Sunday. I had an opinion about church: it didn't work. I even came up with a term for my experience; in conversation I would say that I was “church-damaged.” I wanted a better life and my sense was that my church experience didn't contribute to that goal. So when I left for college, with all the wisdom and experience of an eighteen-year-old, I left church.

But God wasn't done with me.

It was during my freshman year at Virginia Tech that I met John Heyward. John was also a civil engineering student at VT who was a couple years ahead of me in the program, but light-years ahead of me in faith. John had discovered Christ at this very secular university (which sounds unlikely, but it happens all the time!). His faith was real and rich. His life, attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors were completely transformed by his newfound faith—so much so that he couldn't keep it to himself. In his enthusiasm, he formulated a plan to reach the entire campus with his message. He made the decision to call all 23,000 students on campus and ask if they would like to know Jesus personally! You would think that this random phone call strategy would have very little

possibility of success. But then again, you weren't the first person he called . . . I was.

The phone rang on a bitter cold day in early January of my freshman year. I remember the exchange like it was yesterday. "My name is John and I have a four-point outline of the New Testament. Would you like to go through it?"

As I listened to those words, the pains of past church involvement flashed through my mind. I had gone to school to get away from religion. I was done with church and church people. My decision was settled and I had moved on to other more promising pursuits—girls, friends, fraternity life, and a degree that would ensure my ability to afford a fun-and-games lifestyle. Church had no place in my plan. My response was short and clear. "Nope," I replied.

To my surprise, this answer was not enough to shut down John's determination. My parents had always taken the sales calls at our home, so I did not know that I was supposed to hang up and move on with my life. This gave John time to throw in three words that would change the course of my life.

"Well, why not?" he asked.

Honestly I had never given that much thought. No one had ever challenged me to get below the surface of my church experience. I don't ever recall a conversation about faith outside the Sunday school room (which later I would discover is the norm for many church people). This conversation was outside my religious routine and I found myself in unfamiliar territory. So I gave the only answer I could find. "Well, I'm a pastor's kid and I probably know it already." *That should be enough to shut him down*, I thought.

"Really? That's great! I am new at this Christian thing and I have lots of questions. Can I come over and talk to you about it?" John replied.

*Talk about our faith? Who does that?* Yet the excitement in his voice at this point shocked me and somehow I found myself

agreeing to meet with this guy I didn't know to talk on a subject that I no longer had any interest in.

That conversation with John changed the course of my life. In the twenty minutes we had together I discovered something about myself. I discovered that although I had church experience, I had no experience with God. I had been in church all my life, but I had not met God. I didn't know Jesus, just some random facts about him. Church was a routine, a ritual, mere religion. John talked about Jesus as if he was in a relationship. I had no idea what he was talking about or how to relate to his experience. Yet when he left my room, my heart was stirred to think, *what if there is something more to this Jesus thing?*

Over the next several months I met with John on a regular basis. His faith was vibrant and his passion for God was real. It seemed like almost daily he would walk into my dorm room, Bible in hand, and say, "Look what I found in God's Word!" His enthusiasm was contagious and I found myself opening my Bible (the one I got at confirmation when I was eight but never opened—yeah, it had been packed in with my college things—thanks, Mom). For the first time in my life, I began reading it for myself. I was restless, but now in a good way.

It wasn't long before I realized my need for a savior. As a nineteen-year-old, I acknowledged Jesus as the one who died for my sin. More importantly, I committed to trust his wisdom and leadership in every area of my life. That second decision proved crucial for me. I didn't want the level of faith I had seen all my life in church; I wanted a vibrant, life-changing, personal experience that would transform me and bring out the best of God's design in me. I went beyond making a decision to believe; I became a committed follower of Jesus Christ.

Thirty-two years later, I am still on that journey and my passion for the Christ-led life continues to grow. I look back and see the restlessness of my soul in those early years and the frustration of being religious but not pursuing a relationship with God. I

am dumbfounded as to how I almost missed the point of church. Jesus didn't want to just get me into heaven after my life was over. Instead he wanted to get heaven into me while I live. God wants all of us to experience a fullness in life that only comes from him. And to my surprise, God's chosen instrument for moving us from making decisions to being disciples is . . . the church. My early church experience taught me that proximity doesn't promise maturity. Geography doesn't guarantee growth. I had to make an intentional effort to move forward in my faith.

What about you?

For those of you who are exploring Jesus for the first time, you will realize that God is not mad at you . . . he is mad about you! For those of you stuck in a spiritual funk, I hope this reading will refresh your faith. For those who approach life from the intellectual side, allow the words of this book to challenge your thinking and give you fresh perspective. If you, like me, would label yourself "church-damaged" by past experience, I pray that this book will erase the cynicism and mend the broken pieces of your soul.

Regardless of your experience, Jan Hettinga has a delightful way of challenging our status quo and getting us moving toward the healthy restlessness that God wants all of us to experience in life. Why should we settle for survival when God wants to do a significant work in and through our lives? The decision that many of us made to acknowledge Christ as Savior is not a finish line but the starting gate to the greatest race a human being can ever be a part of. Yet to experience all that Christ has for us will take more than our intention. It will require our attention.

I pray that this book will help you break down the barriers that are preventing you from experiencing the fullness of life that God desires for you.

Scott Ridout  
President, Converge





# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

At first a book is an idea, a brainchild of the imagination. Then it becomes a discussion with trusted friends. And finally it is hard work.

My wife, Scharme, would not let me give up on this book. She resurrected it after each death and burial.

My friend and literary agent, Greg Johnson of WordServe Literary Group, Ltd., has always believed in my life message. He is a classic encourager.

Marcus Brotherton worked with me to get a professional proposal put together. Teaming up with him was a dream come true.

Judith Couchman agreed to the tough labor of editing the manuscript. It was like having private writing lessons. Her experience and skill made this a far better book.

My gratitude extends to these and others who read the work and made helpful suggestions.



## INTRODUCTION

# SHOPPING FOR SPIRITUALITY

My wife and I were “in the market” for a car, after saving up for years. We drove from dealer to dealer, examining and test-driving at least a dozen different cars. It wasn’t long before we got seriously confused with TMI (too much information). We needed help.

What started out as an adventure morphed into frustration. We faced an unexpectedly steep learning curve, and we didn’t have time to drive and compare so many makes and models.

We favored one, but after trying another we realized its advantages and strong points too. After several changes of mind, we needed to find and trust an expert on late model vehicles. But who? This wasn’t my usual approach to shopping.

When I shop for an item I expect to encounter biases. A salesperson represents a store’s product line, trained to present its brands as superior to the competition. I listen to the pitch, watch

the demonstration, and then sometimes go online to examine the options before making a decision. That is, if time permits. After examining at least a few available choices, I make a partially informed decision and hope I'm happy with it.

Because you're reading this book—or at least flipping through its pages—you're probably searching for an adequate spirituality. Your quest for a functioning, satisfying inner life may take you to books, assorted websites, and brand-name religious groups. As if on a spiritual shopping trip, you're checking out the options. And like those store sales personnel, I'm confident this guidebook contains the essentials for one option: the teachings of Jesus Christ, the founder of Christianity.

I feel confident because I accept these teachings as the foundation of an effective lifestyle for myself. Through the years I've researched and integrated these truths into my life, and helped others follow Christ too. Now I'm presenting his teachings in book form, to help you make a solid choice as you evaluate Christianity. At the same time, this is not a comprehensive study of all Christian teachings and principles. Rather, it focuses on Jesus Christ and his actual message, recorded in source materials that evolved into the Bible. And it offers an end to the disquiet and angst of a restless longing for something . . . more.

The offer was there in Jesus's day, and it's still there today. To shed light on the biblical teachings as they relate to contemporary life, I have chosen to use stories of people I have met. In order to do that and respect their privacy, I have rearranged details of their identity. Sometimes I changed their gender, their age, or their life situation. Sometimes I morphed two or even three similar stories together. Their identities are protected, but, be assured, these conversations with their emotions and personal reactions and responses did take place in real lives. Their stories demonstrate that all of us have issues when it comes to God. We can identify with each other's journeys and learn from one another's choices and resulting outcomes.

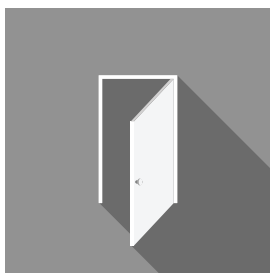
As you read, you'll encounter my biases and presuppositions. I

am a Christian. I want to explain the Bible, and especially Christ's teachings, as the best answer to life's biggest questions: Does my life hold meaning and purpose? What's gone wrong with our world? Is there a God? If so, of all the ones available in the religious marketplace, which one is he? Is it possible to know the true God and to relate to him? If God exists, what does he expect of me? Can he resolve my problem of restlessness?

When you cut through more than twenty centuries of religious language grown up around and sometimes cluttering Christianity, you'll find a cluster of sound, core ideas. And remarkably, a simple belief system. I encourage you to check the Bible references as you read, to discover what this sourcebook really says. Then, like a well-informed shopper, you can choose for yourself—based on what Christ really claims rather than what other people think or tell you to believe.

Jesus presents clear instruction about accessing a satisfying personal faith. He calls it the *gospel*—the good news—of the kingdom. He points to a door to peace for life now and forever, but few choose to enter it (Matt. 7:13–14). After reading this book, you'll understand why some people turn away and others step forward—and you can make your choice. The deep restlessness of the soul can be left behind and inner peace can come to stay.





## PART ONE

# SOURCES OF RESTLESSNESS

There is no meaning in anything if the universe has not a centre of significance and an authority that is the author of our rights.

—G. K. Chesterton, *What I Saw in America*

Nothing upsets us more than to be told . . . that “our purposes differ from those of the Almighty.”

—Abraham Lincoln, quoted in Walter B. Wriston,  
*Risk & Other Four-Letter Words*

There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, “Thy will be done,” and those to whom God says, in the end, “Thy will be done.”

—C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*





# ONE

## RESTLESS ABOUT GOD

I don't need to close my eyes to remember.

So many names, faces, conversations—people I met in forty-plus years of pastoral ministry. People who sat in my office, or talked to me in the lobby after a morning service, or phoned me at home to pour out restless hearts. Saint Augustine, the fourth-century theologian and philosopher said it well: “Our hearts are restless, O Lord, until they find rest in Thee.”<sup>1</sup>

Early in my office one evening a young university professor visited me. Not yet thirty, Allan held a string of degrees and had traveled the fast track to a position at the University of Washington. He and his wife had recently married and both qualified as young intellectual giants. Their future looked bright, except for one problem.

Restlessness.

---

1. Augustine, *Confessions*, edited and translated by Philip Burton (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001), book I, chapter 1.

“We’ve been attending your church lately, but I’m not sure exactly why,” Allan said. “I guess you could say we’ve been searching for something beyond ourselves, but we don’t know what that is, or even how to articulate what we’re looking for. We just know there’s got to be something beyond what we have now.”

I responded, “It sounds like you’re looking for God. You want to discover God for yourselves, is that it?”

“Maybe,” he said. “But I doubt if he can be known. If God exists, then he must be beyond size, intelligence, or goodness. Surely it’s beyond the capacity of human minds to understand him.”

Many people have the same kinds of doubts.

People like Clarice and Brandon, parents of young children. I met this couple at their house for coffee after they tucked the children into bed. Brandon worked at a secure job as an engineer at Boeing. Clarice lived her dream as a stay-at-home mom. Busy and tired, they keenly focused on organizing their lives around soccer and suburban living, their work and house, trips to the grocery store and vacations to visit grandparents. They lived the American dream. However, they couldn’t enjoy life for fear it would fall apart. They worried the good life might not last.

“I’m so anxious all the time,” Clarice said. “It’s like we’re working so hard to build this kingdom of home and family. But I’m always worried the other shoe is going to drop. Like something bad is going to happen. I just know it. If God is out there, does he really interact with us? Does he really care?”

Did you catch the word *kingdom*? File that word away for later.

I remember Katie, an intelligent and capable young woman who couldn’t fathom why a good God could allow so much suffering in the world. She wanted results. She insisted on a God who ended tragedy and suffering on a global scale. Until then, Katie would try everything she could to hasten this along. Still, she couldn’t understand why God didn’t intervene sooner and more often.

I talked with Connor, just released from a halfway house. Connor believed he’d done too much wrong in his life for God to accept

him. A rebel to the core, Connor assured me he “had no problem with God,” but God probably “had a problem” with him. “Is there a way out of the hole I’ve dug?” he asked.

I spoke with Lucas after he landed in the hospital. A gifted young football player, his life and identity revolved around sports. He possessed the size, skill, and speed to join the NFL, but a spinal cord injury shattered that dream. “I don’t know who I am anymore,” he said. “I don’t know what to do or where to go or what’s important in life anymore. Why would God ever allow this to happen to me?”

I listened to Gabe, a middle-aged man who had attended church since birth. He knew everything about religious life, but still felt far away from God. “Surely the church should show me the answer,” he said. “Why would the church fail to help me figure out what’s missing in my life?”

I felt compassion for Natalie, divorced twice by age thirty-three and desperate to marry again. Natalie thought if she found the right husband life would fall into place. If God cared, then surely he would answer her prayer. Wouldn’t he?

So much restlessness. So many people searching for something beyond themselves, something to improve life or make more sense of it. But they couldn’t identify this “something,” or how to gain it if they recognized it.

### ***People build kingdoms that crumble.***

The problem of restlessness can be summarized like this: every person seeks security, significance, and purpose. Each of us craves a happy, meaningful life. So we construct a kingdom. Everybody builds a kingdom. Everybody.

Think of a kingdom as a way of organizing life, a system to make sense of the world. It’s a way of living we set up and run ourselves. In a personal kingdom we take control, and we like it that way, thanks.

We articulate a kingdom in these ways, and more:

- When I earn enough money, I'll feel truly secure.
- If I marry the right person and we build a home together, I'll be happy.
- Because I'm smart, and surround myself with brilliant people, I'm significant.
- My family's prominence in society makes me influential and respected.
- A great career and growing reputation mark me as somebody important.
- Winning at whatever I set out to accomplish proves I'm successful.

A kingdom rises up when we hold something tightly in our hands. It could be our ambition, athletic ability, car, career, children, education, home, spouse, or wealth—even a rank or reputation and the influence it garners.

Once we construct a kingdom, we cling to and defend it when attacked. Our kingdom works for a while because it delivers what we hoped for. But then our carefully constructed, controlled world eventually crumbles and falls apart. Our kingdom never lasts because it can't; it's built on earthly values that disintegrate.

Life changes, and so a kingdom transitions. Sometimes life changes simply because one season ends and we head into another. But other times life changes because of difficulty. Maybe a tragedy descends. Or an accident. Or an overwhelming pressure. Something that's too tough to handle. That's usually when a kingdom exposes its frailty.

That's also when we grow restless. Worried. Fearful. We grab and clutch things, hoping to hold on to a kingdom and keep it from collapsing. We wonder what else exists out there, and what we might do to get it. Sometimes we act out, attend counseling, or take drastic steps. Maybe we get divorced, hoping for relief from

conflict, or turn to the bottle or porn or gaming or gambling or another numbing, addictive behavior. These behaviors are symptoms of a crumbling kingdom.

***Life isn't working out the way we hoped it would.***

I believe this restlessness that sometimes results in taking drastic measures can lead us to God, and eventually to Jesus, his Son.

I mention this solution up front because we vary in our opinions about Jesus—we seekers and skeptics and others who long to know the truth. Some settle well with Jesus, his identity and what he did. Others stay far away from him and like it that way.

Either direction, ultimately Jesus answers restlessness. We each hang on tightly to a “kingdom.” We replace God with something, letting it eclipse his loving role in our hearts. But to truly make life work—to overturn this restlessness and find what we’re longing for—we must exchange our kingdom for God’s kingdom. We give our kingdom back to its rightful owner.

This isn’t easy. It requires humility, an inner attitude that doesn’t present itself naturally.

It requires change, what the Bible calls repentance.

Ouch. That’s a hard word. Some would say an archaic word. Even a spiteful word. But it’s a word God uses. It means I release my life to God and let him lead. I agree with him that my own personal kingdom doesn’t work. I acknowledge he is God, not me. Or to use kingdom-oriented terminology, I step off the throne and let him be king.

The heart of Jesus’s message travels the path to peace and God’s kingdom. Jesus wants to give us our lives back, the lives we waste in attempts to set up kingdoms. His model prayer, the Lord’s Prayer, simply and profoundly expresses this step of surrender: “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10). The term *earth* includes us: our bodies, minds, and

souls. God's will "done on earth" means my earth and your earth, not just the planet Earth. Therein lies the solution for the restless problems in human history and individual lives.

When God takes over, his kingdom arrives and his will cultivates a way of life. Instead of fighting against God's best for us, like rebellious teenagers, we give up and give in. We invite him to take charge in the heart's throne room. Everything functions according to his original design. Life focuses on a relationship with God rather than on conflict. His kingdom is the best possible residence for us.

***A voice speaks to our restlessness.***

Many people think of God only as "big." Throughout the centuries, theologians have called this incomprehensible bigness of God "immensity." For understandable reasons, God's immensity seems like an insurmountable barrier to people who seriously want to know him.

But Jesus changes this because we can approach him. Remember high school English class and Mark Twain's classic novel *The Prince and the Pauper*? The storyline about a king who leaves his palace and lives disguised among ordinary people captivates imaginations. In this famous novel, the Prince of Wales (Edward VI) disguises himself and dwells among the people of his kingdom. Mark Twain's tale offers the adventure of a lost heir to the throne, finally recognized and crowned.

That novel compares to Jesus's story. He's the King of everything who set majesty aside and deliberately became a man, God-in-the-flesh. He left the palace and throne of heaven so a human mother could deliver him as a defenseless, vulnerable baby. It's the story of God stepping away from his immensity, away from looking too big for us.

If we only think of God as a Supreme Being, it's easy to consider him unapproachable. But in Jesus's story, God intentionally turns

accessible and available. God-in-Jesus likens to God next door to us. Jesus is God with skin on, God observable, God touchable, God down to earth. God knowable.

With this realization, life can take a good turn. Because when Jesus connects humanity to God, we hear the unthinkable.

We hear a voice.

This voice offers music to the soul, resonating deep within and calming restlessness. The voice talks about how God, according to Jesus, expresses more interest in us than we in him. Jesus invites us home to the realm he calls the kingdom of God.

The voice simply says, Talk to me.

***It's good to know who wants to talk to us.***

Today when we think of leaders, we often expect dominance, managed images, scripted charisma, and an aggressive willingness to win. But Jesus presents a welcome and refreshing change. Think about him for a moment.

In the thirty-three years Jesus lives in a human body, he accomplishes his mission. He reveals God's heart and communicates his message in an understandable size. As a human, Jesus removes the basis of our distrust. God's angels announce his arrival as a baby and then vanish. He lives like any other baby from a poor family: no privileges, silver spoons, royal advantages, displays of rank or wealth, or his heavenly Father's mega-influence.

Look at the facts of Jesus's life, recognized by both secular and Christian historians:

- Born in a stable. When Jesus's earthly father and pregnant mother travel to Bethlehem for a census count, they can't find lodging. Joseph and Mary finally settle into a roughshod stable for the night, and she delivers Jesus among farm animals (Luke 2:1–20).

- Lives with a scandal about his birth. The New Testament book of Matthew refers to the public disgrace Joseph tries to avoid when Mary, his fiancée, turns up pregnant and he is not the father (Matt. 1:18–25).
- Grows up lower class, in a tradesman’s family. Jesus’s earthly father works as a carpenter and so does he (Matt. 13:55; Mark 6:3).
- Lives in a small, rural town. Joseph and Mary live in their hometown, Nazareth, in the region of Galilee. They raise Jesus there (Luke 2:39).
- Learns in synagogue schools. History informs us a boy in the Jewish culture receives his education in the local synagogue.
- Lives on handouts from generous people during his ministry, the last three years of his life. Apparently most of his financial support derives from devout women (Matt. 27:55; Luke 8:1–3).
- Hangs around with the poor, the disenfranchised, the sick, the mentally disturbed, and the notorious outcasts of society. In fact, religious leaders heavily criticize his choice of companions (Luke 5:29–30; 7:37–39).
- Endures relentless opposition from the power brokers in his culture. All four of the biographical books in the New Testament report the ruling-class enmity toward Jesus. A strong example exists in John 11, after Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. The chapter ends with the religious leaders plotting to kill Jesus.
- Dies as a common criminal. Roman soldiers crucify Jesus between two thieves; this indicates that authorities consider him as guilty of capital crime as these criminals (Luke 23:32–33).
- Is buried in a borrowed tomb. Joseph of Arimathea lays the body of Jesus in his own new tomb (Matt. 27:57–60).

Clearly Jesus contrasts sharply with human arrogance, greed, and self-centeredness. Instead of using superior power and intelligence



to force an agenda, Jesus lives humbly. He cares for people's needs, consistently acting more like a servant than a master.

It sounds paradoxical, but as a result of this humility, most people who meet Jesus never figure out his true identity. He startles and puzzles them. He doesn't act presidential. He doesn't position himself in the corridors of power. Nobody arranges press releases or photo ops. Literally, no one expects God, downsized to our level, to behave this way. The empowered people instinctively regard him as an irritation and a threat to their ambitions. He requires removal. So they dismiss, reject, and murder him.

The Bible summarizes it: "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being" (Heb. 1:3). That means the Creator God is humble, self-giving, and the safest kind of leader—because that's who Jesus is. If you see Jesus, then the Bible claims you are seeing God.

### ***Is the kingdom we already have enough?***

While Jesus walks the earth, he talks to many individuals. Each conversation takes on a different form, because everybody's kingdom-control issue is unique. At the same time, these God-to-human conversations act like mirrors. We see glimpses of ourselves in the interactions, and probably at least one of them closely fits our personal profile.

Think of Jesus as a living photo album displaying snapshots of God the Creator. As we look through the album and view God revealed through Jesus, we can't help but compare his image to ourselves. God's safe, loving, compassionate nature contrasts with ours. Instead of compiling reasons to fear God, we recognize our souls as capable of dark and even dangerous behavior, thoughts, and attitudes.

In not trusting Jesus, we project onto him the attitudes and motives of our hearts. Yet when Jesus shows us the inner qualities

of God's heart, he shuts down our misplaced suspicion. We realize only our runaway self-absorption is dangerous.

When we compare our own kingdom in sharp contrast to the heavenly kingdom Jesus offers, we recognize the need to relinquish our restless control in exchange for the peace of his kingdom. What happens if we seriously ask God for his kingdom? That's the big invitation. We can pray for God's kingdom to come and his will to be done because his love, expressed in the sacrificial generosity of Jesus, makes it possible. Without Jesus, we remain shut out, stuck with our own crumbling kingdom instead of his.

Jesus offers his invaluable eternal kingdom in exchange for ours. But this presents a dilemma. We already hold a carefully constructed kingdom. We control a pile of stuff. To receive God's kingdom, he gently asks us to let go. We change our mind about who gets control and which kingdom to value and embrace. We open our hands and hold them up to Jesus like a grateful child receiving a good gift from a parent. We say, "God I want whatever you have for me. I trust your love. I know you have my best interest at heart. I want what you have planned and prepared for me."

That's true change, real repentance.

I personally discovered God looks for "non-compete" hearts. When I stopped trying to hold on to my kingdom and add his on top of mine, everything changed. At first I thought it would be smart to live both ways: keep mine and add on his kingdom. But he wouldn't play that game. I'm glad I accepted his invitation to forsake my control and rejoin the kingdom he created me to enjoy. I harbor no regrets about abandoning my kingdom and entering his by the choice he calls *faith*.

The Father in heaven loves open hands. When our self-sufficiency ends, we eagerly want his will to be done. This opens the floodgates of his generosity. God gives us far more than we could ever ask or think (Eph. 3:20).

God's kingdom answers our questions. He satisfies the heart. We live at peace. Our restlessness subsides.