

Two Thousand Stairs

The farther backward you look, the further forward you are likely to see.

—WINSTON CHURCHILL

We hopped on a double-decker bus and headed toward the heart of Rome. Lora and I had spent a year planning the trip, but nothing prepares you to stand in the very place where Caesars ruled an empire or gladiators battled to the death. As we walked the Via Sacra, we were stepping on the same two-thousand-year-old stones that conquering armies marched on. Of course, I'm guessing they weren't licking gelatos. Our three days in the Eternal City went by far too fast. And I wish we hadn't waited until our fifteenth anniversary to take the trip.

Few places on earth are as historic or romantic as Rome. We thoroughly enjoyed strolling the ancient streets, people-watching in the piazzas, and eating leisurely meals at sidewalk cafés. And like good tourists, we also hit all the must-see travel-book destinations. We threw pennies over our shoulders into the Trevi Fountain, enjoyed an unplugged concert by an electric guitarist outside the Colosseum one moonlit evening, and took a three-hour tour of St. Peter's Basilica. And all the sites lived up to their travel-book billing. But one of the unexpected highlights of our trip was an unplanned visit to a rather nondescript church off the beaten path. It wasn't referenced in our travel guides. And if it hadn't been right around the corner from our hotel, we would never have discovered it. The Church

of San Clemente was named after the fourth pope, who was martyred for his faith. According to legend, anchors were tied around his ankles and he was thrown into the Black Sea.

From the outside, the church appeared weather-beaten and time-worn. But the frescoes, statues, and altars on the inside were remarkably well preserved. We quietly explored every nook and cranny of that twelfth-century church. Then we discovered that for five extra euros we could take an underground tour. As was the case with many of the ruins we visited in Rome, there were several layers of history in the same place. The Romans had a habit of building things on top of things. Some emperors, for example, would tear down their predecessor's palace and build their own palace right on top of it. Such was the case with the Church of San Clemente. The twelfth-century church was built over a fourth-century church. And beneath the fourth-century church were catacombs where second-century Christians secretly worshiped God before the legalization of Christianity by Constantine in 313.

I'll never forget my descent down that flight of stairs. The air became damp, and we could hear underground springs. We carefully navigated each step as we lost some of our light. And our voices echoed off the low ceiling and narrow walkway. Almost like the wardrobe in the *Chronicles of Narnia*, that flight of stairs was like a portal to a different time, a different place. It was as if those stairs took us back two thousand years in time. With each step, a layer of history was stripped away until all that was left was Christianity in all its primal glory.

As we navigated those claustrophobic catacombs, I was overcome by the fact that I was standing in a place where my spiritual ancestors risked everything, even their lives, to worship God. And I felt a profound mixture of gratitude and conviction. I live in a first-world country in the twenty-first century. And I'm grateful for the freedoms and blessings I enjoy because of where and when I live. But when you're standing in an

ancient catacomb, the comforts you enjoy make you uncomfortable. The things you complain about are convicting. And some of the sacrifices you've made for the cause of Christ might not even qualify under a second-century definition.

As I tried to absorb the significance of where I was, I couldn't help but wonder if our generation has conveniently forgotten how inconvenient it can be to follow in the footsteps of Christ. I couldn't help but wonder if we have diluted the truths of Christianity and settled for superficialities. I couldn't help but wonder if we have accepted a form of Christianity that is more educated but less powerful, more civilized but less compassionate, more acceptable but less authentic than that which our spiritual ancestors practiced.

Over the last two thousand years, Christianity has evolved in lots of ways. We've come out of the catacombs and built majestic cathedrals with all the bells and steeples. Theologians have given us creeds and canons. Churches have added pews and pulpits, hymnals and organs, committees and liturgies. And the IRS has given us 501(c)(3) status. And there is nothing inherently wrong with any of those things. But none of those things is primal. And I wonder, almost like the Roman effect of building things on top of things, if the accumulated layers of Christian traditions and institutions have unintentionally obscured what lies beneath.

I'm not suggesting that we categorically dismiss all those evolutions as unbiblical. Most of them are simply abiblical. There aren't precedents for them in Scripture, but they don't contradict biblical principles either. I'm certainly not demonizing postmodern forms of worship. After all, the truth must be reincarnated in every culture in every generation. And I am personally driven by the conviction that there are ways of doing church that no one has thought of yet. But two thousand years of history raises this question: when all of the superficialities are stripped away, what is the primal essence of Christianity?

In the pages that follow, I want you to descend that flight of stairs with me. I want us to go underground. I want us to go back in time. Think of it as a quest for the lost soul of Christianity. And by the time you reach the last page, I hope you will have done more than rediscover Christianity in its most primal form. I hope you will have gone back to the primal faith *you* once had. Or more accurately, the primal faith that once had you.

THE FAR SIDE OF COMPLEXITY

My kids are at that stage in their mathematical journey where they are learning about prime numbers. That means that, as a parent, I am relearning about prime numbers (along with every other math concept I have long since forgotten). A prime number is a number that is divisible only by itself and the number 1. And while an infinitude of prime numbers exists, the only even prime is the number 2.

Certain truths qualify as prime truths. Bible-believing, God-fearing, Christ-loving Christians will disagree about a variety of doctrinal issues until Jesus returns, whether that be pre-, mid-, or post-Tribulation. That is why we have hundreds of different denominations. But prime truths have an indivisible quality to them. And chief among them—the even prime, if you will—is what Jesus called the most important commandment. We call it the Great Commandment. It could also be called the Primal Commandment because it is of first importance.

*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul
and with all your mind and with all your strength.¹*

Jesus was a genius. He had the ability to simplify complex spiritual truths in unforgettable and irrefutable ways. I'm afraid we tend to do the

opposite. We complicate Christianity. That religious tendency to over-complicate simple spiritual truths traces all the way back to a sect of Judaism known as the Pharisees. Over the span of hundreds of years, the Pharisees compiled a comprehensive list of religious dos and don'ts. Six hundred and thirteen, to be exact.² Jesus peeled them back with one primal statement. When all of the rules and regulations, all of the traditions and institutions, all of the liturgies and methodologies are peeled back, what's left is the Great Commandment. It is Christianity in its most primal form.

Sounds so simple, doesn't it? If only it were as simple as it sounds.

Oliver Wendell Holmes, former chief justice of the Supreme Court, once made a perceptive distinction between two kinds of simplicity: simplicity on the near side of complexity and simplicity on the far side of complexity. He said, "I would not give a fig for simplicity on the near side of complexity."

Many Christians settle for simplicity on the near side of complexity. Their faith is only mind deep. They know *what* they believe, but they don't know *why* they believe what they believe. Their faith is fragile because it has never been tested intellectually or experientially. Near-side Christians have never been in the catacombs of doubt or suffering, so when they encounter questions they cannot answer or experiences they cannot explain, it causes a crisis of faith. For far-side Christians, those who have done their time in the catacombs of doubt or suffering, unanswerable questions and unexplainable experiences actually result in a heightened appreciation for the mystery and majesty of a God who does not fit within the logical constraints of the left brain. Near-side Christians, on the other hand, lose their faith before they've really found it.

Simplicity on the near side of complexity goes by another name: *spiritual immaturity*. And that's not the kind of simplicity I'm advocating. God calls us to simplicity on the far side of complexity. For that matter, He calls us to faith on the far side of doubt, joy on the far side of sorrow,

and love on the far side of anger. So how do we get there? Well, there are no easy answers or quick fixes. It involves unlearning and relearning everything we know. It involves deconstructing and reconstructing everything we do. It involves the painstaking process of rediscovering and reimagining the primal essence of Christianity. But the result is simplicity on the far side of complexity. And that is where this flight of stairs will take us if we have the courage to go underground.

THE PRIMAL PROBLEM

It goes without saying that Christianity has a perception problem. At the heart of the problem is the simple fact that Christians are more known for what we're *against* than what we're *for*. But the real problem isn't perception. We as Christians are often quick to point out what's wrong with our culture. And we certainly need the moral courage to stand up for what's right in the face of what's wrong. I live in the bastion of political correctness, where it is wrong to say that something is wrong. And that's wrong. If we have to choose between political correctness and biblical correctness, we must choose biblical correctness every time. But before confronting what's wrong with our culture, we need to be humble enough, honest enough, and courageous enough to repent of what's wrong with us.

I pastor a church in Washington DC that is nearly 70 percent single twenty-somethings. Unfortunately, our demographics are an anomaly. By and large, twenty-somethings are leaving the church at an alarming rate. According to some statistics, 61 percent of twenty-somethings who grew up going to church will quit going to church in their twenties.³ And the temptation is to ask this question: what's wrong with this generation? But that is the wrong question. The right question is this: what's wrong with the church?

My answer is simply this: we're not great at the Great Commandment. In too many instances, we're not even good at it.

That, I believe, is our primal problem. That is the lost soul of Christianity. If Jesus said that loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength is the most important commandment, then doesn't it logically follow that we ought to spend an inordinate amount of our time and energy trying to understand it and obey it? We can't afford to be merely good at the Great Commandment. We've got to be great at the Great Commandment.

The quest for the lost soul of Christianity begins with rediscovering what it means to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Jesus used those four kaleidoscopic words to describe four dimensions of love. And there is certainly overlap among them. It's hard to know where loving God with your heart ends and loving God with your soul begins. But one thing is sure: loving God in one way isn't enough. It's not enough to love God with *just* your heart or soul or mind or strength. We are called, even commanded, to love Him in all four ways. Think of it as love to the fourth power.

So the quest begins with rediscovery. But it ends with reimagination. Some truths can be deduced via left-brain logic. Others are better induced via right-brain imagination. Love falls into the latter category. So what follows is not a strict exposition of the Great Commandment. It's a reimagination of the four primal elements detailed by Jesus in the Great Commandment:

The heart of Christianity is primal compassion.

The soul of Christianity is primal wonder.

The mind of Christianity is primal curiosity.

And the strength of Christianity is primal energy.

The descent down this flight of stairs into primal Christianity will be convicting at points, but the end result will be a renewed love for God that is full of genuine compassion, infinite wonder, insatiable curiosity, and boundless energy. Anything less is not enough. It's not just unfulfilling, it's also unfaithful. The quest is not complete until it results in catacomb-like convictions that go beyond conventional logic. The goal is a love that, as our spiritual ancestors understood, is worth living for and dying for.

THE WAY FORWARD

My aim in this book is to take you to new places intellectually and spiritually so that you discover new ways of loving God. But I also hope this book takes you back to a primal place where God loved you and you loved God. And that's all that mattered.

I've discovered that when I've lost my way spiritually, the way forward is often backward. That is what we experience when we celebrate Communion, isn't it? Communion is a pilgrimage back to the foot of the cross. And going back to that most primal place helps us find our way forward. So before going forward, let me encourage you to go backward. Go back to that place where God opened your eyes and broke your heart with compassion for others. Go back to that place where the glory of God flooded your soul and left you speechless with wonder. Go back to that place where thoughts about God filled your mind with holy curiosity. Go back to that place where a God-given dream caused a rush of adrenaline that filled you with supernatural energy.

Every year our entire church staff goes on a pilgrimage to the Catalyst Conference in Atlanta, Georgia. During one of the sessions this past year, our team was sitting in the balcony of the Gwinnett Center listen-

ing to my friend and the pastor of LifeChurch.tv, Craig Groeschel. And he asked this question: “Does your heart break for the things that break the heart of God?”

I felt a tremendous sense of conviction when Craig asked that question. As I sat in that balcony, surrounded by twelve thousand other leaders, I heard the still, small voice of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit said to my spirit in His kind yet convicting voice, *Mark, what happened to the college kid who used to pace the chapel balcony seeking My face?*

There are few things I *hate more* or *appreciate more* than the conviction of the Holy Spirit. It is so painful. But it is so necessary. And I’m so grateful that God loves me enough to break me where I need to be broken. Can I make an observation? You cannot listen to just half of what the Holy Spirit has to say. It’s a package deal. If you aren’t willing to listen to everything He has to say, you won’t hear anything He has to say. If you tune out His convicting voice, you won’t hear His comforting voice or guiding voice either. As I was seated in that balcony, the Holy Spirit reminded me of the raw spiritual intensity I once had. He revealed how calloused my heart had become. And I realized that I had somehow lost my soul while serving God. And it wrecked me.

Does your heart break for the things that break the heart of God?

If it doesn’t, you need to repent. And that’s what I did that day. Our team is typically the first to hit the exit after the last session at conferences because, quite frankly, the first one to the restaurant wins. And we had reservations at one of my favorite restaurants, P.F. Chang’s. Love their lettuce wraps and spare ribs. I could almost taste them. But we couldn’t leave until we brought closure to what God was doing in the depths of our souls. So we delayed our reservation, found a conference room, and spent some time crying, confessing, and praying as a team. I think we were the last ones to leave the auditorium.

In the providence of God, I happened to be scheduled to speak at my alma mater in Springfield, Missouri, the next week. So a few days later I found myself in the chapel balcony where I had logged hundreds of hours pacing back and forth seeking God. It was during prayer times in that balcony when my heart began to break for the things that break the heart of God. It was there that God began to shape my soul to seek Him. It was there that God began to fill my mind with God ideas. It was in that balcony that God energized me by giving me a God-sized vision for my life.

Returning to that chapel balcony fifteen years later, I realized that in many ways I had become a paid professional Christian. My heart didn't beat as strongly as it once did. My pulse didn't quicken in the presence of God like it once had. So God took me back to a very primal place. And the Holy Spirit lovingly reminded me that the college kid with a huge heart for God was still somewhere inside me. I knew that getting back what I once had meant getting back to basics. It meant doing what I had once done. It meant rediscovering and reimagining what it means to love God with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength. And somewhere along the way, in my personal quest for my lost soul, I found it. Climbing those stairs into that chapel balcony was like descending those stairs into that ancient catacomb. God gave me back the compassion, wonder, curiosity, and energy I once had, along with an even greater appreciation for what I had lost and found.

Is there a personal catacomb somewhere in your past? A place where you met God and God met you? A place where your heart broke with compassion? A place where your soul was filled with wonder? A place where your mind was filled with holy curiosity? A place where you were energized by a God-ordained dream? Maybe it was a sermon that became more than a sermon. God birthed something supernatural in your spirit. Maybe it was a mission trip or retreat. And you swore you'd never be the same again. Or maybe it was a dream or a vow or a decision you made at

an altar. My prayer is that this book will take you down two thousand stairs back to that primal place—the place where loving God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength is all that matters.

The quest for the lost soul of Christianity begins there.