

simply Jesus and you

Experience His Presence & His Purpose



Joseph M. Stowell

simply Jesus
and You

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Multnomah Books

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— PART ONE —
*It's All
About Him*

 Hands down, Jesus has drawn more attention and interest than anyone who has ever breathed the air of this planet.

At this very moment, the name of Jesus is the central issue of life for millions and tens of millions in houses, apartments, markets, and high rises on every continent and in every nation.

Jesus—the *real* Jesus—appeals to the inner longings of every heart, offering both strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow. In fact, He claims to have come for that very purpose.

He not only enhances life, He replaces it, trading temporary biological life for permanent eternal life. He not only cancels hell, He guarantees heaven.

So, when we think of connecting with Him, it's no wonder that we begin to tally up in our minds all the wonderful things He will do for us. What a list! Forgiveness,

peace, purpose, guidance—those are attractive offers in anyone’s book! When you finally cut through the fog of pride that deceives you into thinking you can do life on your own, the first person you see in that patch of blue sky is Jesus. A compelling option? No, a clear necessity.

But what does it really mean to enter into a relationship with God’s Son? What does it mean to invite Him into our lives?

Does He become one of a half dozen coping mechanisms we fall back on in times of crisis? One of many resources we plug into our lives at various times to make life all that we hope it will be?

He’s more than that. So very much more.

He is God...the One we were built for in the first place. He is the emerging King of a new eternal order, and we have the unspeakable privilege of serving Him, glad subjects at the dawning of a new day. And, when we fully understand Him, we realize that He *alone* is the answer to all that we need and want.

A relationship with Jesus is not about us. It’s about Him. He didn’t die for us to advance His cause or hawk His wares. He died for you because He loves you, and seeks to welcome us into a growing and satisfying fellowship with Him. And it is in the confines of that fellowship that He graciously and generously

bestows the blessings and benefits that only He can provide.

Maybe you already knew that.

Most likely you did.

But somehow...it all seems to get lost in the distractions and distortions of life on our own terms. We believe that we need Jesus and money. Jesus and a good job. Jesus and friends. Jesus and a marriage partner. Jesus and a good self image. Jesus and fun. And so we end up living in hot pursuit of everything but Him. Knowing that we “have Him” and that He has secured our eternity, we tip our hat to Him in a worship chorus or two and an occasional check in the offering plate and then go on to capture life as we would like it.

Let me hasten to say that Jesus has nothing against you having money, friends, marriage, and fun. *Every* good gift comes from above, James tells us. It's just that you can't have a personal experience of the kind that He offers if all of your personal agendas are competing for “first-love” territory in your heart.

Worse yet, trying to live a consistently effective life as a follower of Jesus can work against us if we're not careful. When our Christianity becomes defined by the boundaries of rules, doctrine, and church tradition, we are easily duped into believing that the essence of our relationship with Jesus is staying in the confines of what we call being “a good Christian.”

And that's wrong.

In fact, it's miles from the truth.

Nothing could be further from the reality of what it means to experience Jesus in His fullness in our lives.

Paul Heibert says that for most of us, Christianity is about staying within the boundaries. Challenging that, he declares that the true essence of Christianity is Jesus at the center of it all. A true Christian (while blessing and keeping the boundaries) lives in pursuit of a deepening personal relationship with Him.

When our faith is all about the rules and regulations, then our Christianity becomes institutionalized, project and performance based, and burdensome.

It also becomes B-O-R-I-N-G.

When that happens the lure of more exciting options for life will loom large and seductive, turning our hearts away.

I've done a lot of things for Martie in our married life. I've tried to be a good husband. I've changed diapers, washed dishes, vacuumed rooms, picked up socks, and who knows how many other things. And when Martie asks me why I do all of this for her, I look as deeply into her eyes as possible and assure her that all that I do is because...I am committed to the institution of marriage.

Right? Amen?

Not really.

Important as the institution of marriage certainly is, I do all that kind of husband stuff for her...because I love her and deeply desire to satisfy her with that love.

For me, marriage is not a structure to support...it is a relationship to pursue and enjoy.

It's just like that with Jesus!

In fact that's how most of us started this adventure of faith with Him. It was Him and His love for us that won our hearts. We found Him to be wonderfully compelling and wanted more and more of Him.

And those were good days. Glorious days.

But somehow in the process of our pursuit of Him, for whatever reason, we lapsed into orbit around Him. And orbiting Jesus isn't bad. We keep Him in view and we take note that others are in orbits wider and farther out than ours. We're still in His universe, still within reach of His light and His love.

But...an orbit means you keep a certain distance. A protective distance. Because we know that if we drew too close, He might very well challenge or threaten our preferred way of life.

But Jesus doesn't look better from a distance.

And orbits through space can get lonely and empty.

...It's proximity to Jesus that satisfies.

So welcome back to the pursuit! It's an adventure that you will not regret. If your heart has told you there must be something more to following Jesus than orbiting around His brightness at a safe distance, you are right.

Take a risk...and enter into His fullness.

Chapter One

Experiencing Jesus



Paul said that it was the throbbing ambition of his life to experience Jesus... Is it yours?

When my assistant told me I'd been invited to the White House, my heart picked up a little speed.

I wonder if I'll get to meet the president.

Like everyone else, I'd read a lot about him and seen him countless times in pictures and on TV. I'd followed his political career with more than a little interest. In fact, I had voted for him. If someone had asked if I knew much about him, I could have launched into a rather extensive description of his background, his political philosophy, and his policies.

But this was different.

I was on the verge of actually experiencing him. Personally.

Wearing my best navy pin-striped suit, a starched white shirt, and a “presidential” tie, I stopped long enough at the airport to get my shoes professionally shined. I could hardly keep myself from telling the man bent over my feet, *Do a good job—these shoes are headed for the White House.*

I felt sobered as I walked into the grand foyer of our president’s home. *These truly are the halls of power*, I said to myself. *Behind closed doors in this very house wars have been declared—history made.*

I found myself seated on the front row in the East Room. The small gathering hushed as a commanding voice announced, “Ladies and gentlemen, the president of the United States.” We stood as he walked in briskly and took his place on the low platform. I couldn’t take my eyes off of him. I was in his presence and found myself intrigued by his every move. Later, in a very brief conversation, I was surprised at how engaged he seemed. If only for a moment, he looked into my eyes and gave me his attention.

Frankly, having experienced the reality of his presence, I will never view our president in the same way again. I went away wishing I could know him better.

On my way home I found myself thinking that my experience with the president is a lot like our relationship with

Jesus. We can know a lot about Him, or we can enjoy the privilege of a personal encounter. Best of all, He has already invited us to experience Him personally. The choice to respond is ours. It's a choice that determines the difference between religion as usual or the satisfaction of connecting with Jesus, the One we were created to enjoy.

 We all know who Jesus is.

In the last two thousand years, no other individual has commanded such attention, honor, and respect. Our entire Western civilization—from its laws to its ethics—has been marked and molded by His teaching. For over two millennia, history's greatest works of art have centered on His life, death, and resurrection. Enduring musical masterpieces have celebrated His worth and glory. But for those who have personally embraced the liberating reality of His forgiveness of sin and hope of eternity, He is so much more.

Or...at least, He should be.

We preach and teach about His will and His ways; tell His stories by heart; celebrate Him in worship; and serve Him with enthusiasm. Yet underneath it all (if we are truly candid), there is a gnawing sense that there should be something...well, more to this relationship.

Why is it that He often feels so far away? So historical? So church related? So other? The distance between knowing about Him and experiencing Him personally is vast. And the space between these two experiences separates the spectators from intimate participants.

Think carefully. It's a pretty safe bet that if you are reading this book you know at least something about Him. You know something about Him biographically and historically.

In your more lucid moments, you might even be able to talk a little theology. But as impressive as your knowledge about Jesus may be, the unfortunate reality is that most of us stop there. Seemingly satisfied that knowing about Him is enough, we have no clue that there is more.

And there is more.

The thought of a deep richness waiting for those who get beyond knowing about Him to actually experiencing Him has either escaped us or—worse yet—has been exiled to the vague regions of religious wishful thinking.

If that's your story, get ready.

The best is yet to come.

Jesus intends for you to experience the pleasure and reassuring peace of His presence at the core of your life. He wants to be more than just another volume in your encyclopedia of biblical facts. He didn't die for you to simply strike a deal

guaranteeing heaven. He died for you to make you His own and to grant you the unspeakable privilege of a growing intimacy with Him.

As Paul wrote to the early followers of Jesus...

He [God] is the one who invited you into this wonderful friendship with his Son, Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 1:9, NLT)

And think of this invitation that Jesus extends to all of us who will respond...

“Look! Here I stand at the door and knock. If you hear me calling and open the door, I will come in, and we will share a meal as friends.” (Revelation 3:20, NLT)

This is incomparably better than an invitation to the White House. The eternal God of the universe has called us into fellowship—friendship, companionship, close contact—with His Son. Jesus never intended to connect only with your head; He lives to connect with the entire you. In fact, He sent us the Holy Spirit to make the total connection possible, and gave us His Word to show the way. And, regardless of who you are or how you have chosen to live

your life, you can know the pleasure of His presence.

Up close and personal.

And just in case you think that a closer relationship with Jesus is about some kind of rigid morning routine, some tedious-but-essential religious exercise, think again. While regular Bible study and cultivating a life of prayer are indispensable, there is far more to a personal experience with Jesus.

- *It's about a deep and abiding sense of His nearness on the journey.*
- *It's about an unshakable confidence that only His abiding presence can give.*
- *It's about courage in the face of previously intimidating encounters.*
- *It's about access to wisdom and unfailing guidance.*
- *It's about a closeness that enables your spirit to commune with Him, anywhere, anytime, regardless.*
- *It's about meeting Him in places you may have never dreamed of...in the most heated of seductions, in the midst of suffering, and in acts of unflinching surrender.*

There is a marvelously mystical aspect to all this. You can't wrap words around it. You can't put it in a box and tie

it up with a red ribbon. When you try to fully define it, you degrade it.

Jesus is never predictable. Just totally available. He doesn't play hide-and-seek. In fact, He consistently rewards anyone who diligently pursues Him (Hebrews 11:6). But to many of us, tasting of that reward seems so illusive. Could it be we simply don't know how to seek Him or where to find Him?

I'll never forget the frustrating experience early one Sunday morning when I was supposed to pick up an elderly relative who had come into Chicago on the train from Milwaukee. The whole purpose of the exercise was to find her and get her safely to our house. I showed up on time, but where was she? Certainly not where I thought she would be. I checked the monitor and the train was already in. With a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach, I scoured the early morning loneliness of Union Station...to no avail.

I was about ready to leave when I happened to glance down a hallway toward the baggage area. There she was, luggage at her feet, patiently waiting for me to arrive. She'd been there all the time. And to my chagrin, she was right where she should have been! I had been looking in all the wrong places.

The great news is that Jesus is there, patiently waiting for you. In fact, He not only waits, but is also at this very moment busily pursuing you. The fact that you are reading

this book is no accident, no coincidence. It's just another one of the countless ways He hopes to get your attention.

It's time to connect.

The following lines of Scripture have captured my heart in recent days. Don't skip over them. Don't let your mind wander. If you really want to experience Jesus, you must read these words slowly and thoughtfully...until they have gripped your heart.

I once thought all these things were so very important, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done. Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the priceless gain of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I may have Christ and become one with him. I no longer count on my own goodness or my ability to obey God's law, but I trust Christ to save me. For God's way of making us right with himself depends on faith. *As a result, I can really know Christ and experience the mighty power that raised him from the dead.* I can learn what it means to suffer with him, sharing in his death, so that, somehow, I can experience the resurrection from the dead! (Philippians 3:7–11, NLT, emphasis added)

More than any other writer, Paul spoke most passionately about experiencing Jesus. It was his singular quest in life.

Everything else became peripheral—rubbish—compared to knowing God’s Son. And in this text, when he speaks of giving everything up to know Jesus, he uses the Greek word that means *to know by experience*.

But here’s the thought that sets me back on my heels. Paul had already experienced Jesus in far more dramatic ways than anyone before or since. On the Damascus highway, Jesus appeared to Paul in a bolt of white fire and spoke to him in person. Sometime later, Paul found himself swept up into the “third heaven,” where he had an extended season of personal experience with Jesus.

Yet what did Paul want with all his heart?

He wanted more.

He was still so taken with Jesus that the entire focus of his life was to experience more of Him. Which only proves that once you get a taste, you can never get enough of Him. Having experienced Jesus makes even the brightest treasures of life look dull by comparison.

Do you wonder if this is for you? Wonder no longer! He is at the door of your heart, wanting to come in for some serious fellowship.