



PRIMAL

A Quest for the Lost Soul of Christianity

MARK
BATTERSON

Best-selling author of *In a Pit with a Lion on a Snowy Day*

Praise for
Primal

“Mark weaves us through the Great Commandment with insights that are both winsome and wise, piquing both curiosity and conviction. He calls us to a discipleship free of the trappings of shriveled self-concern, drawing us to give ourselves, with abandon, to others as we heed Jesus’ call to love God above all. This book will fuel clarity of call and persevering strength for those who will journey in obedience to the Gospel—in its wholeness of justice, mercy, and faithfulness—for a lifetime.”

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—SHAUN ALEXANDER, 2005 NFL MVP, acclaimed speaker, and author of award-winning book *Touch Down Alexander*

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BOOKS

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The names of some individuals whose stories are told in this book have been changed to protect their privacy.

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To my grandparents Elmer and Alene Johnson...
Your prayers outlive you.

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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.



PART 1

THE HEART
OF CHRISTIANITY

The Tribe of the Transplanted

If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we should find in each man's life sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility.

—HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW

Several years ago I had the privilege of attending the National Prayer Breakfast held annually at the Washington Hilton Hotel. The breakfast is a bipartisan gathering of leaders from all branches of government and both houses of Congress as well as delegations of leaders from foreign countries. The speaker that year was Bill Frist. Prior to his tenure in the U.S. Senate, Dr. Frist performed more than 150 heart transplants as a thoracic surgeon. During his remarks, he talked in reverent tones about the moment when a heart has been grafted into a new body and all the surgical team can do is wait in hopes that it will begin to beat. At that point he stopped speaking in medical terms and starting speaking in spiritual terms. He almost seemed at a loss for words as he described that miraculous moment when a heart beats in a new body for the first time. He called it a *mystery*.

Heart transplants are a marvel of modern medicine, but the heart goes way beyond what medicine can explain or understand. It is more

than a physical pump. It doesn't just circulate five thousand quarts of blood through sixty thousand miles of blood vessels day in and day out. The heart has a mind of its own. Studies suggest that the heart secretes its own brainlike hormones and has cellular memory. So a heart transplant isn't just physical, it's metaphysical. Heart transplant recipients don't just receive a new organ, they receive cellular memories.

In his book *A Man After His Own Heart*, Charles Siebert shares a scientific yet poetic depiction of a heart transplant he observed at NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital in New York City. Not long after, Siebert attended an annual banquet for transplant recipients, and he was deeply moved by their profound appreciation for life. They spoke in reverent tones about the second chance at life they had been given. They humbly acknowledged their responsibility to honor the donors. And many of them talked about new desires that accompanied their new hearts.

Siebert concluded—and his research is backed up by numerous medical studies—that transplant recipients don't just receive a new heart. Along with that new heart, they receive whole new sensory responses, cravings, and habits.

Siebert called this group of heart recipients “the tribe of the transplanted.”

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.¹

COUP DE COMPASSION

A life may be filled with lots of amazing moments, but nothing even begins to compare with that miraculous moment when you give your heart to Christ. That single decision sets off a spiritual chain reaction with infinite implications. A new child is adopted into the family of God. A

new name is written in the Lamb's Book of Life. And an old heart is exchanged for a new heart.

When you give your heart to Christ, Christ gives His heart to you. And you become a part of the tribe of the transplanted. That new heart gives you a new appreciation for life. You humbly acknowledge your responsibility to honor the donor. And the cellular memories that come with that transplanted heart give you whole new sensory responses, cravings, and habits. You literally feel different. Why? Because you feel what Christ feels. And chief among those sanctified emotions is compassion. Your heart begins to break for the things that break the heart of God. And that is the heart of what it means to love God with all your heart.

It is a sad commentary and sadder irony that Christians are often viewed as heartless. And I think it's because we've engaged our culture mind-first instead of heart-first. Let me explain. I believe that Scripture is the inspired Word of God, right down to the jot and tittle. That means that even word sequence is significant. And when Jesus reveals the four primal elements of love, the heart comes first. I'm afraid that the Western church has tried to engage our culture mind-first instead of heart-first. But minds often remain closed to truth until hearts have been opened by compassion. There is certainly a place for logical, left-brained explanations of faith. But compassion is the ultimate apologetic. There is no defense against it.

I've already detailed the perception problem that Christianity has. Now let me personalize the problem. The problem isn't Christianity at large. The problem is you and me. The problem is that we're not great at the Great Commandment. Or in terms of the heart, we're not as compassionate as we could be or should be. That's the bad news. But here's the good news: Although you may be part of the problem, you can become part of the solution. You can change the face of Christianity, but it will require more than a face-lift. It starts with a change of heart.

Have you given your heart to Christ? All of it? If not, why not do it right here, right now? Stop reading and start praying. How? From your heart. God doesn't just hear your words. He hears your heart. He isn't impressed with words, but He is moved by a heartfelt prayer. And I promise you this: if you give your heart to Him, He'll give His heart to you. And when He does, you'll become part of this coup de compassion that started at the cross two thousand years ago. The compassion that Christ showed us at Calvary will become the driving force of your life.

NAMELESS NUMBERS

One of the most profound books I've ever read is *Man's Search for Meaning* by psychiatrist Viktor Frankl. In the book, Frankl documents his experiences as a Holocaust survivor. He was loaded onto an overcrowded railroad car with other Jewish prisoners and treated like an animal. When he arrived at his designated concentration camp, he was stripped of his clothing, his pictures, and his personal belongings. The Nazis even took away the prisoners' names and gave them numbers. Frankl was number 119,104.

Numbers are dehumanizing. Numbers are desensitizing.

Every year, fifteen million children die of starvation. When you break that number down, that is more than forty thousand children per day or nearly twenty-nine children every sixty seconds. But here's the problem: We don't know their names. We only know their number. And numbers are numbing. It's so easy for us to ignore suffering when it doesn't have a name or a face, isn't it?

Not long ago, Lora and I were in New York City for some meetings. During our downtime, we visited Ground Zero. In some ways, 9/11 seems like a false memory. It's hard to believe it actually happened. But when you visit Ground Zero, it almost seems like it happened yesterday. Lora and I quietly walked through the museum dedicated to the victims, and I'll

never forget one exhibit. It contained the personal effects of one of the victims, Al Braca. His wallet, his keys, and a bank deposit slip dated September 11, 2001, were recovered from the wreckage. It's hard to describe, but somehow those personal effects personalized the tragedy for me.

Then I saw a display with the names of all the victims. As with seeing the names of fallen heroes engraved on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, it turned a number into a name. Then a mosaic filled with pictures of victims put a face with a name. I happened to notice a swim cap along with the picture of a victim who had obviously run a triathlon. It impacted me deeply because I had just run a sprint triathlon with my son Parker, and I couldn't even imagine what I would have felt if my son had been one of the victims. I think it gave me a glimpse of what the heavenly Father must feel. The reason the heavenly Father identifies so deeply with our pain and suffering is that He watched His own Son suffer and die. His Son was the innocent victim of supreme injustice.

NOT OKAY

I recently attended a Civil Forum on Global Health sponsored by Saddleback Church and held at the Newseum in DC. The focus of the forum was on how churches can leverage their God-given resources to fight what Rick Warren calls the five global Goliaths: spiritual emptiness, self-serving leadership, extreme poverty, pandemic diseases, and rampant illiteracy.²

The event was timed to coincide with World AIDS Day, and we watched a video documenting the devastating effects of AIDS. Eight thousand people will die from AIDS today. Then, after all the stories and numbers and faces, the documentary posed this question: "Are you okay with this?"

United Nations health and food organizations calculate that twenty-five thousand people throughout the developing world die every day from

starvation and malnutrition. Are you okay with this? There are a hundred thirty thousand children up for adoption at any given time in the United States, and millions more children worldwide are without families. Are you okay with this? A child dies from drinking contaminated water every twenty-one seconds.³ Are you okay with this? That question can be and must be asked of all suffering and every injustice. Are you okay with this?

Most of us *are* okay with it. And we're okay with it simply because it's an issue without a name or a face. We've never held someone who is starving to death. No one in our family has needlessly died from contaminated water. We don't know anybody who has been kidnapped and sold into slavery. And none of our family members sleeps on the streets. But once the issue has a name and a face, it changes everything, doesn't it? God knows each of those names. God knows each of those faces. And it breaks His heart.

So let me ask the question: are you okay with this?

If you are in Christ and Christ is in you, you cannot be okay with suffering or injustice or starvation. Why? Because His heart is in you. And His heart beats for the suffering, the victim, the poor, and the needy. If you are a Christ follower, then you have been drafted into an army of compassion that knows no enemy but those things that break the heart of God. And it's not okay to not do something about them.

SYMPATHY BREAKTHROUGHS

One day while fighting in the Spanish Civil War, George Orwell had a face-to-face encounter with the enemy he'd come to kill. The famed English author had gone to fight fascism, but as an enemy soldier ran by him half naked, holding his pants up in the air, Orwell refused to shoot. He

later reflected, “I did not shoot partly because of that detail about the trousers. I had come here to shoot at fascists; but a man who is holding up his trousers isn’t a ‘fascist,’ he is visibly a fellow-creature, similar to yourself, and you don’t feel like shooting at him.”⁴

In his documentary on twentieth-century wars, Jonathan Glover refers to moments like this one as *sympathy breakthroughs*. Even in the context of war, there are acts of compassion that supersede the conflict. Most of the sympathy breakthroughs, according to Glover, are triggered by eye-to-eye contact, and that eye-to-eye contact short-circuits hand-to-hand combat. For what it’s worth, according to the research of U.S. Army lieutenant colonel S. L. A. “Slam” Marshall, only 15 percent of World War II riflemen fired at the enemy during combat.⁵

Have you ever experienced a sympathy breakthrough? A moment when your inclination to hate was overcome by your will to love? A moment when proactive compassion overrode reactive anger? A moment when you cared more about someone else’s pain than your own? Those are the moments when you recapture parts of your soul that you have lost. Those are the moments when you learn what it really means to love God with all your heart.

I recently received one of the most scathing e-mails ever to grace my in-box. The irony is that it came on the heels of what I thought was a great sermon (if I say so myself). I had preached my heart out, and I think I said what God wanted me to say. But no sooner had I gotten home than I got this e-mail laced with insults and attacks on my message and ministry. Now, before you throw me a pity party, let me say that I get far more complimentary e-mails than critical e-mails. And I’ve learned that criticism can be a healthy thing. If you don’t let it harden your heart, you can actually learn something from it. And it keeps you grounded. Honestly, this e-mail reminded me that I preach for an audience of One. If I say

what God wants me to say, then all the criticism in the world doesn't matter. And if I don't say what God wants me to say, then all the compliments in the world don't matter.

Having said that, let me say this: I was more than a little ticked off. Part of me wanted to preach another sermon for *that* audience of one—a hellfire and damnation sermon. The e-mail cursed me, and I wanted to curse back. Then, by the grace of God, I got an e-mail from the father of the person who had written the first e-mail. I discovered that his son had recently been in a tragic accident that killed four of his friends and he himself had barely survived. When I discovered that detail, it totally changed my perspective. Nothing is as disarming as discovering the suffering or sorrow in another person's past. Instead of going on the warpath, I made peace. Instead of reacting in anger, I reacted in compassion. Why? Because my heart broke for him the way God's heart must have broken for him when the accident happened. And to be perfectly honest, I'm not sure how I would have responded if I had gone through a similar experience.

I'm not saying you aren't responsible for your actions. And your pain doesn't give you a free pass to say whatever you want to say however you want to say it. But just as you are responsible for your actions, no matter how right or wrong they are, you are also responsible for your *reactions*. And compassion is always the right reaction. I'm not saying there isn't a place for rebuking, correcting, and exhorting. Sometimes that's the most loving thing you can do. But even those things can be and must be done in the spirit of compassion.

In my experience, it's much easier to act like a Christian than it is to react like one. Anyone can put on an act. But your reactions reveal what is really in your heart. And if you love God with all your heart, you won't just act like it. You'll react like it.

EQ

In his groundbreaking book *Emotional Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman asserts that IQ accounts for only 20 percent of the factors that lead to career success.⁶ Goleman argues that emotional intelligence (EQ) is more important than IQ when it comes to work and the workplace. And as an employer, I would agree. I don't care about your GPA. The number-one thing we look for in potential hires at National Community Church is a sense of humor. If you can't laugh at my jokes, we can't work together. And I'm not joking. Seriously, life is too short and ministry is too hard. I want to work with people who know how to have fun. I want to work with people who have a great attitude. I want to work with people who don't just care about the work but who care about the people they work with.

Emotional intelligence is a multidimensional capacity that includes a wide range of abilities, including motivating oneself, persisting in the face of opposition, controlling emotional impulses, and regulating moods. But there is one dimension of emotional intelligence that Goleman says is absolutely foundational: empathy. Empathy is feeling what another person feels. And it's not just a dimension of emotional intelligence, it's a dimension of spiritual intelligence (SQ).

As we grow in our love relationship with God, we begin to empathize with God. We feel what He feels. Then we begin to sympathize with others. We experience sympathy breakthroughs as we see the image of God in others. And when those empathetic feelings turn into compassionate actions, they set off chain reactions with eternal ramifications.

Don't underestimate the spiritual significance of even one act of compassion done in the name of Christ. That one act of Spirit-prompted compassion can change the course of history. That is precisely what happened in an Egyptian dungeon three thousand years ago.

But before I share the story, let me share a little backstory. Consider the story of Joseph through the filter of emotional intelligence. As a teenager, Joseph had a zero EQ. He wasn't just emotionally immature, he was emotionally ignorant.

Joseph reported to his father some of the bad things his brothers were doing.⁷

I'm sorry, but if you're still a tattletale at seventeen, you've got EQ issues. And evidently it ran in the family. His father, Jacob, wasn't exactly an emotional Mensa member either. The entire family was emotionally dysfunctional because Jacob played favorites with his children. And one act of favoritism—giving Joseph a coat of many colors—ripped his family apart.⁸

One day Joseph dreamed that his brothers would bow down to him, and he was so self-absorbed that he thought his brothers would actually appreciate his dream. Not so much. Joseph must have missed class the day they talked about “inside thoughts.” He should have kept this dream to himself, but he couldn't keep his mouth shut. He told his brothers that they would one day bow down to him. Jealousy turned into such intense hatred that his brothers faked his death and sold him into slavery. Joseph landed in Egypt and went to work for one of Pharaoh's chief officers, Potiphar. Then things went from bad to worse. False accusations of conduct unbecoming landed him in an Egyptian dungeon.

Have you ever noticed the way suffering helps us become less self-absorbed? A little suffering can produce a lot of compassion. And that is what happened to Joseph. God turned a dungeon into a classroom where Joseph learned some lessons in empathy and sympathy. He got an education in emotional intelligence.

COUNTERFACTUAL THEORY

While they were in prison, Pharaoh's cup-bearer and baker each had a dream one night, and each dream had its own meaning. When Joseph saw them the next morning, he noticed that they both looked upset. "Why do you look so worried today?" he asked them.⁹

Did you catch it? Joseph "*noticed that they both looked upset.*"

He noticed that they looked upset—so what? Well, it may not seem like much at first glance, but that one instance of emotional intelligence saved two nations from extinction.

Let me explain. Noticing a worried look speaks volumes about how much Joseph had matured emotionally. Joseph had enough problems of his own, right? If I'm in prison for crimes I didn't commit, I'm going to be feeling sorry for myself. I don't have the time or the energy to care about anybody else. But Joseph had developed an acute emotional sensitivity to the people around him. It's hard to believe this is the same person who couldn't read his brothers' body language when his life depended on it. But more than a decade later, he is so tuned in to the emotional states of those around him that he notices discreet facial expressions revealing an ounce of anxiety. Why? Because he's now on the far side of suffering and injustice and pain. And Joseph doesn't just discern the subtle emotional clue; he experiences a sympathy breakthrough. He is compassionate enough to get involved.

What was behind the upset look of the cupbearer was a strange dream. And when the cupbearer shared his dream, Joseph interpreted it. Three days later, the dream came true when the cupbearer was released from prison and reinstated in his office. Initially, the cupbearer forgot all about Joseph. But several years later, when Pharaoh had a strange dream

that none of the Egyptian magicians could interpret, the cupbearer remembered Joseph. At the cupbearer's suggestion, Joseph was summoned to interpret the dream. He not only interpreted Pharaoh's dream, he landed a job in Pharaoh's administration.

A single act of compassion in an Egyptian dungeon years before led to a supernatural synchronicity, which led to the salvation of two nations. How? Well, Joseph was appointed chief of staff by Pharaoh. During the seven years of plenty that he himself had predicted, Joseph stockpiled enough grain to sustain Egypt through seven years of famine. But he didn't just save Egypt, he also saved Israel. During the famine, his father and brothers found safe haven in Egypt. And it was in Egypt that the family of Jacob turned into the nation of Israel.

One of my favorite branches of history is counterfactual theory. It asks the *what if* questions. What if Joseph hadn't noticed the cupbearer's upset look? Well, he wouldn't have had the opportunity to interpret the cupbearer's dream. And what if he hadn't interpreted the dream? The cupbearer would not have known Joseph could do that. And without that relational link, Joseph would never have met Pharaoh. Joseph would have died in that dungeon. Egypt would not have survived the famine. And Joseph's family, the nation of Israel, would have starved to death in Canaan. End of story. But that *isn't* the end of the story, because Joseph *did* notice that upset look. And his act of compassion toward a fellow inmate did more than save his life. It did more than save two nations. It led to your salvation and mine. Hundreds of years later, a descendant of Joseph's brother Judah was born in a small village called Bethlehem. And it was His primal act of compassion at Calvary that led to our salvation.

Never underestimate a single act of compassion, no matter how small. It can change the course of history in ways that only eternity will tell.

FIVE BUCKS

I recently gave a devotional talk for some World Vision staff. Their DC office is located just a few blocks from Ebenezers, our church's coffee-house on Capitol Hill. Over the years, I've had a number of friends who have worked in World Vision's domestic and field offices, so I am familiar with and have tremendous respect for their organization. Roughly a hundred million people in about a hundred countries receive physical, social, and spiritual support from World Vision every year. But here is what really challenges me and inspires me: it all started with five dollars of compassion.

In 1950, the founder of World Vision, Bob Pierce, was in Korea. He felt helpless as he watched children orphaned by the Korean War standing in endless food lines. One day one of those little children dropped dead because there wasn't any food at the front of the line. It broke Bob's heart. He experienced a sympathy breakthrough. And his decision to do something about it became the defining moment of his life.

I suppose Bob Pierce could have walked away from that food line that day and forgotten all about it. That is what most of us do when we read about tragedies in the morning newspaper or watch them on the nightly news. The last thing that crosses most of our minds is actually doing something about it. Most of us let what we cannot do keep us from doing what we can. Not Bob Pierce. He made a resolution: "We're going to get food to the front of the food lines. If it kills me, we're going to do it." Getting food to the front of the line became his God-ordained passion. Bob flew back and forth between the United States and Korea, raising awareness and raising funds.

Then, on one of those trips, Bob met a little girl named White Jade, who had been beaten and disowned because of her decision to follow

Christ. All Bob had in his pocket was five bucks, and he gave it to her. But that's not all he did. He also pledged to send her money every month. That Spirit-prompted act of compassion became the catalyst for what would become World Vision's child sponsorship program.¹⁰

Let me ask you a question: what will kill you if you don't do it?

What makes you glad or sad or mad? What puts a holy smile on your face? What causes your spirit to sob uncontrollably? What makes you pound your fist on the table out of righteous indignation? Somewhere in the mixture of that gladness, sadness, and madness is your God-ordained passion. Or maybe I should say *compassion*, because you are feeling what God feels. And once you identify it, doing something about it isn't optional. You can't *not* do something about it.

IF THE SHOE FITS

I recently spoke at a leadership conference, and one of the other speakers was Blake Mycoskie. Blake is the chief shoe giver at TOMS Shoes. And he graciously gave every speaker at the event a pair of TOMS shoes. I love the shoes. But here's what I love even more: I love the fact that when you buy a pair of TOMS shoes, you are giving a pair of shoes to a child in a third-world country. For every pair of shoes purchased, a pair of shoes is given away.

Their mission is simple: one for one.¹¹

In 2006, Blake was touring Argentina when he noticed that many of the kids didn't have shoes. He could have gone back to the United States and gone about his business. Instead, he started a business with a mission of putting shoes on the feet of those children. He returned to Argentina later that year with ten thousand pairs of shoes. Their projected shoe drops this year? More than three hundred thousand pairs of shoes.

Blake identified a need. He personalized it. Then he decided to do

something about it. It didn't start out as something big. It started out as something small. But that is how primal movements begin. Someone decides to do something about something that makes him glad or sad or mad. For Blake, it was barefoot children who broke his heart. And he literally put shoes on his faith.

I have no idea what makes you glad or sad or mad. But I do know this: if each of us simply took ownership of our unique, God-ordained passions, we'd start a coup de compassion the likes of which has not been seen since the first century.

There is a Bob Pierce reading this book. I know it. There is a Blake Mycoskie reading this book. I'm sure of it. There is a God-ordained passion that makes you glad, sad, or mad. There is something that breaks your heart because it breaks the heart of God. The only question that remains is this: what are you going to do about it?