

Stories—whether fictional, mythic, historical, or autobiographical—allow me to visualize how certain ways of living might work if I tried them in my own life.
Daniel Taylor

Let's talk...

We're sitting in a corner booth in a local diner. You are seated at the next table, and you can't help but overhear my conversation with a man in his mid-twenties. "Joe" has some cultural experience with religious people, but he wasn't raised going to church. He doesn't know much about the Bible, but he understands and he loves life. He isn't afraid to ask hard questions. You're invited to listen in on our conversation.

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What's up, Joe?

Not much. What's up with you?

I'm writing another book.

What's it about?

It's about God's love for this world, you know, big picture kind of stuff.

I don't see much love and I'm not even sure God exists. I don't think there is a big picture. All I know is here and now.

Wow. We have three issues on the table and we are just starting! I'll try to phrase things to include your concerns. Will you give me thirty or so minutes and let me try it out on you?

Only if you buy a lot more coffee.

Done deal. Let me tell you a story. This is the story that runs right through the middle of the Bible. Be patient with me, this gets kind of complicated.

A very long time ago, God created the universe — everything that is. We don't know much about God at this point of the story; so let's call God "Someone." Someone created the heavens and the earth. It doesn't say how Someone did it; just that Someone did it somehow. We don't know how long it took, but it seems to have been done in a thoughtful and orderly way. In the sixth phase or "day" of creation, Someone made a man and a woman. Someone announced to anyone listening who this man and woman were meant to be: They were created to represent Someone to

the rest of their world. Someone blessed them and gave them this command: Multiply and have gentle dominion over everything around you.

Someone's a dumb name. Just call God "God." What's does "blessed" mean?

It is kind of hard to say at this point of the story. But it means something like God assured them that they were loved and that they really had been given the power to do what God wanted them to do.

God encourages them? Most of what I hear from my religious friends is anything but encouraging. Their God is a control freak with lots of rules and not many reasons for them.

I wish I didn't know what you are talking about. Many religious people have poor ideas of who God is and what God wants. That's part of the reason I'm writing this book. But let me come back to the story? Imagine a coach who has the power to create a team from scratch and design each player on the team to win the big game.

What game does God want us to play?

Let's see if we can guess from what comes next: God rest from creating and declares a day of rest for everyone else.

You're kidding. I've never had anyone start by giving me the day off. Why does God need a day off?

Don't equate a day of rest with a day off. God really wants everything in the world to have a chance to rest and celebrate our relationships. Basically, it seems that God thinks we all play and work better when we have time to remember what life is really about.

Okay, but what's this talk about dominion? What did you call it — gentle dominion?

God put the man in the middle of an amazing garden. There were lots of trees, plants, rivers, and all kinds of tame birds and animals. I'll say more about that in a minute. God gave the man the tasks of tending the garden and naming the animals.

Sounds like a lot of work.

I think it was different than we imagine, because it wasn't about weeding and watering. There weren't any weeds yet, and God did the watering.

So tell me about naming the animals.

It seems that it was up to the man to give the animals names that fit them. I can't say much more than that, because we just don't know anything else about this part of the story. After naming the animals, God makes the woman so that the man would have appropriate company.

"Appropriate company." Is that what she's called? Wait. I thought she was already there.

The Bible starts with the big picture and then goes back and gives a partial play-by-play of what happened in that sixth day. Go with me on this one. God makes the woman and gives the man and woman to each other as partners and teammates in playing the game.

You haven't told me what the game is yet.

It isn't called by just one name. But I think you can recognize it from the rules.

Rules? I knew there would be rules. God IS a control freak.

Don't panic, every game has rules. God's game had only a few rules: Show the rest of creation what God is like by tending the garden, by calling things as they really are, and playing well with your teammates. Pay attention when God wants to walk and chat with you. And take time to rest and celebrate all of God's gifts within your world.

That doesn't sound too bad. Name that game... maybe "Living a really peaceful life?" But seriously, what do you do for excitement in the garden? Sounds kind of monotonous. Six days of trouble free gardening, one day of rest; six days of gardening, one day of rest. Wait a minute! God walks and talks with the man and the woman? How does that happen? And how often does that happen? What do they talk about?

Good questions! I wish I could give you really certain answers. Apparently God can take a human form when needed. And it seems like God came to chat and walk every day when the evening breeze came in. It also seems like God was really glad to spend time with the man and the woman.

That's a lot of time with God!

I think that is what God wants: Daily blessing, daily help so we can play better, and daily time just talking about how we much love each other and enjoy being together. This is the game of life, well-played and filled with joy.

Okay. It still doesn't sound really exciting. Maybe they got to organize and train the big cats for racing? That would have been fun! There had to be something more exciting than just picking the fruit and vegetables. Christianity has always sounded boring to

me. I could ask a lot of questions about this. But something is bugging me: Why isn't life like that for me right now? In fact, I don't know anyone living like that. Something must have gone wrong. How did we get from there to this mess?

Great question! I can see you're into this. We don't know how much time went by. But eventually, a talking snake shows up and starts a conversation with the woman.

You're kidding. Now we're in fantasyland. I didn't see the whole talking snake thing coming. Who taught a snake to talk?

It's kind of a surprise, and I didn't see it coming the first time either. Much later in the story you learn the snake is God's bitter enemy. But let's stay with the story in the garden.

Okay, but I'm interested in this whole snake thing. Don't forget to come back to it.

I won't forget. So the snake starts a conversation with the woman and reminds her about one of the trees in the garden. There were two special trees in the middle of the garden: One tree had fruit that could give them life. The other tree had fruit that could give them the knowledge of good and evil. God warned them this second fruit came with a price: If they ate it, they would die. We don't know what the fruit of either tree looked like. All we really know is that God told the man and woman not to eat the fruit of the second tree.

Why didn't God want them to know about good and evil?

That is a really good question. I wish I could give a precise answer. They knew something *about* good and evil already because God said, "Don't eat from this tree." Of course there is all the difference in the world between knowing about something, and experiencing it for your self. My best guess right now is that God thought they weren't ready to experience the loss or pain or even death that comes with any real encounter with evil in life. We don't know. Maybe in another seven weeks or seven years God would have prepared them to suffer their encounter with evil. We just don't know. We're guessing. Let's get back to the story.

God's enemy was really sneaky and suggested to the woman that the fruit from the second tree would give her as much knowledge as God. Here is the trick or lie: She would know everything that God knew about good and evil.

The woman thought this would be a good thing, and so she took a bite. She gave it to the man and he took a bite. And everything changed.

What does everything mean?

When they broke God's only "do not" rule, they understood that they were naked and they became ashamed. This was their first hint that the whole game had changed.

You didn't say anything about them being naked before! Why were they ashamed?

It is really hard to say. My best guess, based on the rest of the story, is that they were radically changed by their disobedience. The man probably looked at the woman in a whole new way. She saw his lust and didn't like it very much. He saw her reaction, and knew he was wrong. She saw his hurt, and knew their relationship wouldn't be the same. The whole relationship began to melt down. In any case, they made clothes out of fig leaves and, when they heard God coming, they hid themselves in the garden.

God called for them and finally found them. Seeing their fig leaf clothes and ashamed faces, God asked the obvious question: Did you eat from the forbidden tree?

I'll bet God was pissed! Why didn't God kick them off the team?

What happens next is really sad. The man blames the woman for giving him the fruit. The woman claimed that she was tricked by the snake. The snake stops talking. And nobody takes responsibility for what has happened.

I recognize that pattern. I see it almost every day at work. Something expensive breaks and nobody takes the heat. That's bad teamwork. What does God do?

God knew their friendship could not be as it was. The man and woman thought they knew right from wrong. Their acts of blaming and evading responsibility showed how much they needed practice for the new game they were playing. God knew that if there were no consequences then the man and woman would never really learn to judge good and evil. They were going to have to learn about good and evil through hard experience.

Now God is thinking like a coach again.

I agree. God cursed the serpent for his role in deceiving the woman. We don't know if this serpent was ever on the coach's team, but he's definitely off now.

No kidding. He ruined a pretty sweet game.

God turned to the woman and said her pain would be multiplied in child bearing. Her desire would be for her husband and he would rule over her. God also gave her a promise: Someday, one of her descendants would crush the head of the snake. The game was different, but it wasn't yet lost.

God spoke to the man and told him his work would no longer be as pleasant. In fact, he would find resistance at almost every point. His destiny was to toil, sweat, and finally return to the ground from which he came. I think you've experienced some of this?

Those are heavy consequences. Are you telling me I'm suffering today because of what some guy did a zillion years ago?

Not exactly. It wouldn't seem fair to us if we were punished for what the first couple did. But ask yourself this question: Would you have done any different? I'm not any wiser than them. I probably would have done the same thing.

Okay, I see your point. But why did everything have to change?

Our suffering today is linked to their disobedience because God's creation was changed by their poor choice. They had dominion and misused it. It is hard to say exactly what this change was, but think of God's work being warped, twisted, or even just slightly bent, and you won't be too far off. All kinds of tensions and seemingly random forces were put in to play in this warping. In our experience, creation becomes a much less hospitable and even violent place.

Are you talking about earthquakes and stuff?

Earthquakes, volcanoes, floods... Yes. All that stuff expresses the tensions and futility introduced in that one shifting moment. God allows it and even uses it. But let's get back to the story. What happens next is as strange to us as the talking snake!

Remember, you're coming back to that snake thing.

Okay. But what God does next is truly amazing. God takes an animal, kills it, cleans the hide, and makes clothes for them. And then God actually dresses them.

God kills an animal? I don't like that at all.

The Bible doesn't give much for details here. Our best guess is that God teaches them about sacrifice. God places their hands on its head, allows them to identify with it, and then kills it to show them sin is costly and leads to death. But please don't miss the big idea here: God coaches them and sets an example by serving them even after their disobedience. Of course God also locks them out of the garden so they can't eat of the Tree of Life.

Why does he do that?

Two reasons: Part of their consequences is that their lives will be difficult and lived with a very different experience of creation. They can't stay in the garden after what

they have done. Remember, death was also part of their consequences, and so they couldn't be allowed to eat from the Tree of Life.

So that's it? That can't be the whole story. Does it end in tragedy? "Life sucks and then you die?" And what about the snake?

Of course that can't be the end of the story. Do you remember why God created humans in the first place?

You said it was to celebrate relationships and to represent God to the rest of the world. You said it again in the rules for the garden. Do these rules hold outside of the garden?

Good question! We can add God's own example when dealing with their disobedience. God calls things the way they really are — God coaches or tutors them. God also sets an example by humbly serving those who broke His rules. God shows them remarkable kindness. I think God's Grand Story is only a tragedy if humanity fails to understand who they are and fails to perform their mission. The question becomes, how is God going to do get humanity to embrace their mission?

Okay, I'll bite. How does God do this? From what I can see, your God is failing. Most of the religious people I know don't see God as a coach and servant. They're mostly hypocrites who think they're better than the rest of us.

I wish I could argue with what you see. When people tell me they don't believe in God, I often ask them to tell me about the God they don't believe in.

That is a surprising question. What do they say to that?

They get a funny look on their face, and then they tell me about a "god" that I can't believe in either. As humans, we put our stuff on God: We understand and even remake God in our own twisted image. We use this "god" to support our projects and our own preferred status quo. And then we offer this idol to the world and ask them to worship it.

You're more suspicious of God than I am! How did this happen?

I've studied history. In the first couple centuries after Jesus, many of his followers were tortured and killed as "atheists" because they couldn't worship the gods of Rome. As Christians came to power, they reinterpreted God in imperial terms to justify their imperial government. The ideas of God tutoring and serving us were all but lost.

So you are going to tell me who God really is? Why should I believe you?

Let me give you an acid test. Ask yourself this question: "For whom is this good?" If my answer is self-serving, then I have proved myself false.

This is more interesting than I thought it would be. Please continue.

Let me summarize several thousands years of history in a few minutes?

God chose Abraham and his family and tutored them to trust Him. God promised to bless all nations through Abraham. Mostly, they got things wrong. There was one brilliant moment, three generations after Abraham, when Joseph understood that he could treat his murderous brothers with profound kindness. Like God, he called things as they were, showed them forgiveness, and served them.

About 400 years after Joseph, God called Moses to deliver Abraham's family, now called Israel, from slavery in Egypt. God did this in such a way that His reputation would go before Israel and those who possessed their land would flee before Israel's return. God wanted to give them the land without a fight. God tutored them in the desert by giving them a new Law, including the Ten Commandments. The people were at first grateful, and then resentful of their new freedom. They rebelled again and again. Finally when they got to the edge of their own land, many of the people of the land had not fled, because God's reputation was diminished by 40 years of rebellion. Part of the consequences for Israel was that now they had to fight their way in. This took a long time, and when it seemed their victory was complete, their leaders messed up and led them into all kinds of trouble.

One of their prophets, a guy named Micah, asked the most important question you could ask a few years before 700 BC: What does God really want from us? The answer is simple and direct: "Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God."

That sounds like the rules from the garden again.

Exactly! Micah makes it so much clearer than I did. Unfortunately, not many people practiced what he was preaching. If we fast forward 700 years, and look back at Israel's history, we can say that for the most part, Israel failed to bless the nations. They didn't show the world what God was like. It still looks like a tragedy, doesn't it?

Okay. I'm listening to all this and wondering, when is God going to kick their butts? Don't coaches do that kind of thing?

Oh, God did! I skipped a lot of the butt-kicking stuff because Israel really didn't learn much from it. They never really got after God's mission of showing love and kindness to the world. So think about it: God gives humanity a couple thousand years and we never really get it right. What do you think God should do?

Why can't God just wipe them out and start over? Can't God just hit the restart button?

That would make God like us! And your solution makes perfect sense to me. But is that the most loving way to handle things?

Oh yeah, the whole love thing. Does God have to follow the rules of the garden?

That is a great question! God makes the rules. But if God wants us to show the world what God is like, and if the rules, especially as Micah stated them, summarize our behavior, then God needs to model them for us in order for us to learn anything really useful.

How's God going to do that?

That's the best question you've asked! The answer is really shocking. What if God was one of us?

Like in the song? "Just a slob like one of us, just a stranger on the bus, tryin' to make his way home..."

That's what I'm talking about. You know, it actually happened. Not quite the way Alanis or Joan sing about it, but it happened with Jesus. Let's take a break and I'll tell you about it.

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I'm back. It is a cool song, though isn't it?

Yep. It haunts me. Let me give you the real story? After two thousand years of recorded human failure, God takes human form in the baby Jesus. This is more than I can explain, so go with me on this: God becomes fully human in the baby Jesus. We have only a few details of his life before age 30. Some prophets in the Jewish Temple told his mother some about who he would be. His mom's name was Mary, her husband was Joseph. He was a carpenter and taught Jesus his trade. Joseph died before Jesus turned 30. Jesus was one of several children, some say the oldest, others say the youngest. The point is, he had family and they knew him thoroughly. He was raised in this good Jewish family in Nazareth, a small town in northern Israel. At about age 30, he goes to his cousin John and asks to be baptized.

Jesus got baptized? What for? In which church?

There weren't any churches yet, and so it happened in the River Jordan. John knew some of the prophecies about Jesus and he protested that Jesus should baptize him.

Jesus said it was necessary for him to fulfill all righteousness and asked John to baptize him.

What does "righteousness" mean?

Jesus lived in "right relationships" with both God and all humanity. We're back to Micah's version of the rules for the garden: "Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God." I think that is the best way for us to understand "righteousness." What could be more humble for God? In any case, when John baptized Jesus, God spoke from heaven and called him His beloved Son and said He was pleased with him.

Time-out. I thought you said God became fully human in Jesus. What's going on here?

I expected that question. I can't fully explain this to you. What I can say is that God created this universe. In our reality, we don't know how God can be fully human in Jesus and speak from heaven at the same time. Deep Christian thinkers use the idea of "Trinity" to talk about who God is in God's reality, and who God shows himself to be in our reality. In our experience, God is called Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God is named as three persons in relationship with each other and who can act together.

I'm getting lost...

I know. This is deeper than deep. Can we let this idea hang out there without a full explanation? Let's admit for the short term, that God's experience of reality may be radically different from ours and get on with the story?

Shaking his head no, Joe agrees: *Okay, we can come back to that another time.*

Thanks. On with the story: Jesus headed out into the desert for 40 days...

I didn't see that coming either. What's he doing on the desert for 40 days?

We don't have a lot of detail here. It looks like he was fasting, praying, and facing temptations from the snake!

Excellent. The snake's back!

Actually, it's not all that great. The snake, also called Satan or Adversary, tried to trick Jesus the same way he did the first man and woman. It seems he thought he could ruin Jesus' mission by getting him to go against God's rules.

I thought you said God became human in Jesus? Wasn't the snake being kind of stupid?

Good point. I don't think our enemy has an unlimited number of tricks and he went with his best shot. Back to the story: We are only told about three of the temptations. Jesus answered all three by reminding his enemy of what God really wanted. Jesus stayed in a right relationship with God—the one he calls "Father."

What do you mean by calling the snake "our enemy."

Stay with me on this. Remember, I already promised to come back to the whole snake thing.

Again? I thought this was it.

Yes, and no. Let me explain? God's enemy, the first man and woman's enemy, Jesus' enemy, our enemy—take your pick—he hangs around in the story and becomes a total nuisance. The good news is that when Jesus resisted him, he did so for all of us. But that's getting ahead of where we are in the story. Give me a few minutes to summarize what Jesus did?

Okay, but I'm still going to ask questions.

Very well. Jesus began teaching what he called the good news: God's kingdom is near. Okay, I saw that look. Kingdom here means God's reign or rule. Don't judge it until you hear what it's about. In fact, Jesus invites us to change our mind about the way God is king because most of us misunderstand this. God's rule is about giving poor people goods news, proclaiming freedom for captives, healing the blind, releasing the oppressed, and announcing that this is the time of God's favor for all people. Jesus backed this up by directly counteracting the work of the snake by healing people and even raising the dead.

But "God as king" sounds like "God is the boss of me" or "God's going to spoil all my fun." I'm asking your question: For whom is this good?

Jesus didn't teach that God was going to spoil ALL of our fun. Remember, many of our desires were "bent" by human failure in the first garden. God's kingdom will eventually straighten out all of the things that were bent. As we learn to follow his teachings and seek the kingdom of God as our first priority, our deepest healthy desires will be satisfied. Those things that make us less human will be stripped away and we will actually enjoy life more because we are living and fulfilling our human destiny.

But talk of human destiny is just another way of manipulating people...

You're right. Most of the time it is oppressive. But Jesus came to release the oppressed, and so there must be a way of understanding this that doesn't lead to more oppression. Jesus told us his way while correcting two of his followers.

Okay, I'm listening.

As Jesus neared the end of his teaching ministry, his followers began to figure out who he really was. He was God's anointed: "Messiah" in Hebrew or "Christ" in Greek.

Christ isn't his last name?

No. It's his title. He was anointed to be the king in God's kingdom. As his followers figured this out, they started to try to edge each other out in what they thought would be some kind of system of rank and privilege. Two of his closest followers came and asked to have more authority than any other followers. Jesus told them they were not going to exercise authority by oppressive power but by humble service: The greatest must be the servant of the least. Get ready, because what Jesus said next is huge: Jesus is God's anointed king, and so he must set the example for us. He came to serve us and give his life to buy our freedom. Do you see how different this is? Our king came to serve us and set us free.

A king who sets his people free? Now I've heard everything! And this is not the impression I get from the religious people I know. They're all about rules: Thou shalt and thou shalt not...

Thou shalt not confuse today's religious people with Jesus! Jesus summarized what God wants from us with only two rules: "Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength" and "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Okay, but aren't you contradicting yourself? These are different from the rules in the garden. I thought we were supposed to show the world what God is like.

I understand why you might think this. But look a little deeper: Isn't this another way of saying the same thing? Most of us need to hear things said a bunch of different ways before they begin to sink in. The rules from the garden, Micah's version, and Jesus' summary all line up and call for the same behaviors. Our deep relationship with God allows us to truly love and serve others.

Remember who Jesus is: God becomes fully human in Jesus and so his words and actions show us what God is like. Jesus is the clearest image of God people will ever see. What did Jesus come to do? He came to serve us. Is this ringing any bells for you?

Was Jesus the one walking and talking with the first man and woman in the garden? Did he serve them too?

Most people interpret the Bible that way. Good for you. You are connecting dots it took me years to even see. Let me give you another key to understanding Jesus. He

understood who we are. He knew that by ourselves, we could only be bent and imperfect. He called us to see this in the way we think and in the way we act. Even if we look good on the outside, our motives can stink. He exposed our failing by calling us to love even our enemies as perfectly as God loves His.

God loves His enemies? Wait, we've got to be perfect too?

Yep. Perfect. 99 out of 100 is a failing score.

You said Jesus understood! This sounds like we're all going to Hell.

Let's not talk about Hell yet. I'll come back to it. I agree our failure sounds bad for us but there is some really good news.

What is it?

Humans have had thousands of years to prove that, by ourselves, we can only be imperfect and bent. Knowing this, God became fully human in Jesus and fulfilled the requirement of perfection for us. Here is the best news in all of the world: Jesus kept all the rules for us. He lived in right a relationship with both his Father and with humanity. As we trust and follow him, God allows us to share his destiny.

What does that mean?

God loves us as much as He loves Jesus and wherever Jesus is or goes, we will be with him. Whatever happens to Jesus happens to us. We follow our king. Understanding this gives us a new kind of freedom.

I don't get it. I have no clue what you are talking about.

Good. Help me keep this real. Jesus obeyed all the rules for us. God gives us the gift of his right relationships and ties our destiny to his. The Bible puts it in a very precise way: We are placed "in him." In another place it says we are transferred into his kingdom. Because our future or destiny is tied to what happens to Jesus, we are free to act in this world in a very different way. Rather than pretending we're perfect, we can admit we don't measure up and invite people to join us in our brokenness. Jesus told us we are blessed when we recognize our spiritual desperation.

What good is that?

We are freed from any performance anxieties. Admitting our desperation means we can truly seek right relationships and be peacemakers. We can admit our failures and ask people to join us in the process of seeking healing and wholeness.

How does that show the world what God is like?

Having been forgiven, and having been treated with kindness, we begin to discover that God truly loves us. As the reality of this love sinks in, we become free us to trust God, to share God's love, to love others with the same kind of love. We love with God's kind of love, because God first loved us.

So come back to God's enemies: How does God love them?

Thanks. I needed to come back to the story. Here's what happens: Jesus taught and healed and blessed many, many people. He made enemies of those who liked the status quo — the way things were. He warned the authorities about the consequences of their actions. He told the truth about what was in their hearts. Within three years, they had everything lined up to kill him. Although he had done nothing wrong, they arrested him in the middle of the night. They put him through a very irregular trial, beat him almost to death, and then sentenced him to die. His death was by crucifixion — a kind of living torture that eventually suffocated its victims. Here's one of the hardest things I have ever tried to get my head around. Hanging on the cross, Jesus prayed to his Father and asked God to forgive his torturers. He still loved them.

I don't understand that.

I don't understand it either. But I'm glad he did it.

Why?

He can also forgive me. His love is that real. Do you remember we talked about the game being changed by the first man and woman's disobedience? Creation was bent and the world became less kind?

Sure. It wasn't that long ago. What does this have to do with Jesus' murder?

He played by the rules of the garden in a bent world and it got him killed. More than that, he suffered the worst of human hatred and cruelty, and he still loved and forgave his enemies. He took our worst. He gave his best. He showed us what his Father is like. And he invites us to do the same.

You're kidding. Why would I want to have anything to do with that?

You wouldn't have to do it alone. Jesus didn't stay dead. He rose from the dead, and returned to his Father. About fifty days after his resurrection he gave the gift of the Holy Spirit into the community of his followers.

Okay. I'm almost afraid to ask. What does that mean?

The Holy Spirit was experienced first as a kind of energy that flowed through the community. This energy changed the followers of Jesus from the inside out. People felt as if they had a new birth. The Holy Spirit filled them, gave them gifts for serving others, and guided them into a deep community life. It took them a while to figure out that God was living in them through the Holy Spirit. Eventually they recognized this living presence was also God. I know it's deep — we're back to that Trinity idea.

This is getting long, I'm coffeed out, so I'm not even going to ask about that. Help me understand this whole community thing?

Basically, you have to track with what God has been doing all along. The first man and woman were called to show God's love and kindness to the rest of creation. They blew it. God called Abraham's family to do the same thing: to show the world God's character, kindness, love, and desire for friendship. Abraham's family was seldom successful in showing God's justice and mercy to the nations around them. After thousands of years of human failure, God became fully human in Jesus and showed us what our human mission of representing God's love, mercy, and kindness really looks like. Even before his death and return to his Father, he began to form a community to carry on his mission. With the gift of the Holy Spirit, he blessed this community with the power to actually do what he calls us to do.

Are you talking about the church?

I'm talking about the way the church is supposed to be. Paul, one of the earliest teachers called the church "the body of Jesus." Much of what Jesus does in this world now is done in and through his community of followers. We are the hands and feet of Jesus.

Why would God risk using people? They just screw things up.

God's purpose hasn't changed. God became fully human in Jesus so he could pay the price for our human failure and show us what his love is really like. Paul called Jesus the "new Adam," because his followers were to become a new race within humanity. This new race has the same mission!

The church is full of aliens? That explains a lot!

That's funny! Let's go with that idea: Since the old race failed to show God's love and kindness, God acted to form a new race — a new people. Peter, another one of the early teachers, called the church "aliens and strangers in the world." As aliens, they had experienced God's mercy. They were called to represent God's mercy to the world. Again, it's the same mission.

The church is supposed to be merciful? Why didn't someone tell the Inquisitors, Crusaders, witch hunters, and gay-bashers?

I agree the history of our community is littered with tragic misunderstandings of how to show God's love in this world. Remember, the leadership of our community is filled with broken people. I know that people judge the church by her works in this world. I also believe that if the full story of the community of Jesus could be told, the compassionate acts of everyday Christians would vastly out-weigh these more famous blunders. It's easy to attack the public record of the church.

Hey, I'm not attacking you!

Thanks. I know you're not. Can I share my sense of frustration? Our community has fought about so many things: organizational structure, doctrinal matters, and political agendas. It's all important stuff if it serves our mission. But we have often lost focus on why we are even here... Sorry. What I can say is that there is a renewed humility in many parts of the community and we are trying to get back to our basic calling and mission. Jesus was so very plain about our purpose: "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." We are called to lay down our lives for each other. We haven't been very good at this. And so many of us are asking, "What does it mean to love well?"

It's my turn to tell you, "That's a good question." What does it mean to you?

To me personally? I'm asking, "how I can love in the same way God loves?" But this is more than just my question. There is a new sense of this across many different denominations and international groups. I think many of the labels we have used in the past aren't very important today. Many of us are asking the same questions. We are united by our desire to find new ways to show God's kindness in the world. We are not very interested in rehearsing past misunderstandings and stalemates.

That's encouraging. Where is all this leading?

You've heard talk about the end of the world?

Oh yeah. Jesus freaks, Mayan calendar makers, and nuclear terrorists all have the same ideas.

Well maybe you're going to think I'm a Jesus freak? But I do believe he is coming back and that the world — as we know it — will radically change.

How so?

When Jesus came a couple thousand years ago, he showed us what his Father's love is really like. He established a community to carry on with his mission. I admit we

have had mixed success at best in helping the world understand God's character and kindness. But someday, perhaps in your lifetime, Jesus will return and complete his mission.

Okay, this is freaking me out, but tell me more. People have been expecting this forever, and it hasn't happened. Why in my lifetime?

One of the last things Jesus told us was that we must make disciples or followers in all nations. The Bible is being translated into every known language to encourage this. One group thinks we will complete this by 2038, and with the Internet spreading to even more remote parts of the world, we might just keep this commandment in your lifetime.

Ha! Did you keep any others?

We did multiply...

Okay, we all get credit for keeping one commandment. Why is it so important for Jesus to come back?

Jesus promised he would return and complete his mission. He will finally establish justice on this earth. He will take the warp and tension out of creation. The entire cosmos will be renewed! The Bible tells us that Jesus will raise the dead to life and judge each person according to his or her works.

That's not good. Why does he need to do that?

Do you remember why humans were created in the first place? God has a mission for us! Even when God creates a new heaven and a new earth, God's purpose doesn't change. God will help us fulfill our mission of showing God's character and kindness in the new creation. Those who trust God to help them do this will enjoy living out this mission for all eternity. Those who refuse to trust God, those who reject God's goodness and justice, those who really don't want anything to do with God's character or kindness get an eternal timeout.

Are you talking about Hell?

Yes. I don't know how literally to take all the talk about eternal fire and flesh eating worms, especially since another description seems to be about an eternity spent in "outer darkness." What I do know is that God will not force us to spend eternity in the presence of pure love when we have no appetite for it.

So what happens to the snake?

God makes sure he can't harass us any more. One way of reading the Bible tells us he gets vaporized in a lake of fire.

Toasted? Come back to the whole works thing. Does God weigh my good works against my bad works? How does that work?

We can't trust our own judgment about such things. We try to make God into some kind of cosmic bean counter. Deep down inside us, we hope we will fool God with an occasional random act of kindness. We can make great shows of generosity and still be stingy most of the time. God sees it all, not just our public face. The big question is where is your heart? Let me put that a couple different ways: What do you really want? Will you let God change you from the inside out? Do you want to show God's love, kindness and mercy in this world?

You're back to the whole mission thing again?

Yes I am. You look puzzled.

I'm more puzzled than I expected to be. If there is a God, I hope God is like Jesus. I think I get the love-thing in terms of showing kindness, forgiving your enemies, and serving others. Again, if it means becoming like Jesus, then it makes more sense to me than I thought it would. I'm puzzled because part of me really wants your big picture to be right. And I'm not sure what you get out of all this.

If I help you begin to make some sense out of all of this, I have the joy of knowing you are glad to be with me in carrying out God's mission in this very needy and broken world.

I think I've heard enough for now. How long is this book going to be any way? Is it all about God's mission of love in this world?

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(There are, of course, dozens of important themes left untouched in this conversation with "Joe." Some of these will be developed in chapters three through eleven. If you are wondering — Where did that idea come from? — scan the notes for chapters 3-11).



Greetings to all:

This is a fourth draft of Chapter Two. What else does it need? Where is this too much? Is it real enough? How does it sit with twenty-somethings? How do you think it would function as a stand alone booklet? Would it be a useful discussion starter?

Thanks in advance! James.