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INTRODUCTION

“What story?”

Impromptu speeches. Remember those? I do. I recall one time drawing a slip of paper from the hat that read “Boxing.” In the time it took me to walk to the front of my Dale Carnegie class (and a person can only walk so slowly), I had to decide what in the world I wanted to say in a speech about boxing. But in that class the teacher offered one magical piece of advice: Think of a personal story relating to whatever it said on the slip of paper.

So, when I reached the front, I turned around and told a story of the boxing matches that occurred between my brother Phil and me when we were kids. Our boxing “ring” was a blanket spread on the bedroom floor. Our “gloves” were two pairs of socks pulled over our fists. The only rule was, “Don’t hit too hard.” (I didn’t say we were bright.) And a vivid memory of the two of us inevitably rolling around on the ground, mad as hornets, turned into a poignant lesson about the big brother you fought with while your parents sighed and told you he’d be important to you one day. I know that if I could go back, I would try not to hit so hard. (Not bad, for 20 seconds’ notice.)

When it comes to speaking off the cuff, without preparation, how liberating it is to change the question from, What in the world do I have to say about that? to, Quick . . . what story can I tell? And that's where the premise for this book was born. It is an idea that has completely changed how I look at impromptu speaking on the topic of my Christian faith.

What story can I tell?

As I write, I'm relishing a conversation from just two days ago. A woman I had just met, named Kayla, was cutting my hair. I had a Christian book in my lap (which all by itself can start some interesting conversations), and she began telling me about the fights between her parents, actual physical fights, that she had witnessed when she was just eight or nine years old. She would get in the middle of them, if you can imagine what that was like. But what she remembers most from that time in her life was how a man once came into her room in the middle of the night and sat on the side of her bed. She could just make out his face. She's convinced it was Jesus.

Here her story broke off. She remembered her scissors and what was left of my hair. It was my turn. What should I say? What would you have said?

What would you have to say about a boxing match between a mom and dad? More important, what would you say to a woman who hides such a tentative faith in her heart and who has been waiting 20 years for someone to come along and explain this man to her? Do you say, "Let me tell you about a program we have at our church"? Do you give her a list of worship times? What in the world do you say? No, change that. What story do you tell?

You know, Jesus did go to a little girl in her bed. Did you know that?

No.

And I told the story about the concerned dad who was rich but would have given it all away for his sick little girl.

"Let's go to her," Jesus said.

But they got delayed, helping someone else along the way. The father's heart was breaking. Then the news came that it was too late.

"I'm afraid I've wasted your time," the father said to Jesus.

"No. No, you haven't. She's only sleeping."

I paused to ask if she had heard this story before. She had not and was clearly interested. So I told her the whole thing, right up to "*Talitha Koum*," which means, "Little girl, get up!"

And she did.

Kayla, I believe Jesus still comes to people who are dead—dead inside because they don't know love and they don't know God; they only have shame. God wants them to be alive and not be afraid, so he comes to them in his Word. The one who died on the cross for them draws near, saying: "Be of good cheer. Your sins are forgiven." And when people hear his voice in those words—when they only believe him—they live.

It was a remarkable conversation. In the most natural way, it traveled from there to the prayer Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, then to the moment Jesus turned his head away from the gall they offered him at his crucifixion, and at last to the upper room where the disciples gathered to grieve and to be ashamed and to figure out what they were going to do without Christ. After his resurrection, Christ's first words to them were, "Don't be afraid." All this I told Kayla.

And out of the suffocating fog of religion stepped her Savior.

There is power in the words and deeds of Christ to show us the evil in ourselves, power to smash apart our godforsaken complacency and to reveal our desperate need for his grace. Even more, according to the apostle John, "These

[words] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”¹

Through the use of divinely inspired narratives such as this, we give people something they’ll remember, something that gains entrance to their minds and that will stay with them, even when they don’t yet understand it. This is what it means to plant a seed. Something alive and waiting is hidden in the shell of the story.² The people don’t know what it is or what it means. And then, one day . . . they do.

“Little girl, get up!”

As a pastor and professor, I face challenging situations all the time. I walk into a room where someone has just died, or is about to. I’m invited into a marriage where something shameful has just been exposed. I see grown men cry because they’re about to fail and don’t know one thing they can do to stop it. And I get questions and challenges from intelligent and hurting people who are skeptical that there is a God somewhere loving them. You will find yourself in these situations too. If you don’t, just carry a book with the word *Jesus* in the title to your next hair appointment.

These situations used to fill me with apprehension because I never felt prepared. Now just about every situation I can think of suggests to me a story that I can’t wait to tell. For several years my study of the Scriptures has meant collecting moments and words from the life of Jesus, the ones that especially move me, the ones that reveal God to me and clarify the big issues of my life. More and more I’ve been marrying these beautiful stories to all kinds of situations and questions that I’m likely to face in a world that sorrows under the long shadow of death. This has been my preparation.

Let the woman who wonders if God can really forgive her listen to the stones of accusation thudding in the dirt and the impossible words Jesus spoke to a woman caught in the act of adultery. “I don’t condemn you.”

Let the man struggling with doubt watch Peter sink under the waves. He was not walking on the water. All he could muster was a panicky "Lord, save me." It was enough. "Jesus reached out and caught him."

And what a holy pleasure to take people so terrified of death to the entrance of a first-century grave where a woman stood by and softly shed the tears of all the world. Her Lord was dead. She had nothing else, because there is nothing else . . . until one word turned her utterly around. He said, "Mary."

My prayer is that this marriage of skeptical questions with well-loved gospel stories might be your preparation as well. May you become more and more familiar with the magnificent, true story God lived in this world through Jesus, his Son, and always more aware of the answers that are alive in him.

Has someone questioned the hope that you have?

Do you want to be prepared to answer?

Then remember that little secret about speaking impromptu. The slip of paper you've drawn says "Jesus."

What story will you tell about him?

A word about this book . . .

I am well aware that the primary audience of this humble book will be Christians. However, you'll find that I've written as if speaking directly to honest-to-goodness skeptics. I've met many such people in my life and have come to care about them. Their faces were before me as I wrote.

My hope is that by writing as if my audience consists of people outside of Christ, this book will be all the more helpful for my Christian readers. These pages, therefore, suggest here and there the actual words you can say to such people and even the spirit with which you might say them.

If you should share actual portions of this book with non-Christians, you'll need to be aware of things that may need further explanation. (Who's Moses? Where is Galilee? Who's Paul?—those kinds of things.) It is a thrill to think you might offer this book to someone who needs it. However, please don't hand this book to a questioning soul as a substitute for the love and truth *you* can offer face-to-face and heart-to-heart.

If any skeptics should happen to read this work to the end, you have my admiration for the integrity of your search for the truth. Sadly, many do not really want to know it. Indeed, left to ourselves, our minds will exhaust themselves in erecting one barrier after another, always saying, "That may be so, *but what about . . . ?*"

If you find yourself asking instead, "Could this really be true?" you may be closer to God than you think.

And he to you.

That would make my joy complete.

In Christian love,
Mark Paustian



“Why Jesus?”

Roughly one thousand years before Christ, the king of Israel wrote a poem about a kingly despair. It begins, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” David wrote as though surrounded by a merciless, mocking crowd. As the painful, poetic words came pouring out, it was as though his bones were being pulled out of joint, as though wounds ran through both his hands and feet, as though an insatiable thirst overcame him while people nearby gambled over his last shred of clothing.

It sends chills.

King David was describing a crucifixion, even though, from his vantage point in history, he had never seen nor heard of one. This is what a crucifixion is like: the bones are pulled out of joint, the hands and feet are pierced, dehydration sets in with the deadly loss of blood. What is more, David was describing the very crucifixion of Christ himself, portrayed ten centuries in advance—the mocking of the crowd, “Let the Lord rescue him if he delights in him”; the gambling for his clothes; the despairing cry from the cross in the center, “My God, why?”

Some seven centuries before Jesus, a prophet named Isaiah gave the Chosen One’s name as *Immanuel*, which means “God

2 *Prepared to Answer*

with us.” His mother would be a virgin, the prophecy said, through whom the divine would embrace our humanity. His Father would be God himself.

The prophet Micah chimed in with the birthplace of the Chosen One (being careful to name the right Bethlehem): “From you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, will come one whose origins are from of old.” From Moses we learned his family line—a descendant of Judah—and his calling—“a prophet like me.” Daniel provided the time—490 years from the year of his prophecy. Had we read the ancient Scriptures, we could have known that wonders would fall from his fingers and brilliant stories from his lips. From the start we would have set our gaze on Galilee and along the Jordan River. One prophet saw him riding into Jerusalem like a king on a donkey. Another set the price of his betrayal at 30 pieces of silver. We could have known it would be a friend who would betray him. We would have heard ahead of time about the shredding of his back as if torn up by a plow, the wine vinegar they would offer him, the surprise of bones left unbroken, the piercing of his side, and even the rich man’s tomb where the world’s victim would be laid.

David sang the promise that no grave could ever hold the Chosen One.

And Isaiah even told why Jesus was to be led so silent, “like a lamb to the slaughter.” “For our transgressions,” Isaiah said. “The punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.”

(Please read Isaiah chapter 53.)



It’s a daunting task, this book. As I begin my search for words to describe the one I believe in and to put my finger on why I believe, I’m staring at a gruesome photograph. It’s the blurry, browning record of the lynching of a black

man in Alabama around 1906—his swollen face, his opened yet dead eyes, his bare feet dangling inches above the ugly, gleeful faces that are white like mine. Their racist chins jut forward in mock manhood. They brought along their boys, who are grinning too. The one on the rope doesn't hang there for anything he's done, so much as for how he looks.

It's a disturbing picture.

I'm imagining how it would sound to you if I tapped that picture, that swollen face, those dead yet opened eyes, and said, “This is God.” You would think the suggestion was absurd. It is absurd that this man might be the awesome Creator—the sort of God who would come into the world for this very rope and this very tree and these very men—that died to redeem us all because he loved us all. Of course, the one Christians believe was God saving the world wasn't a black man from early in the last century, but a Jewish man from a bit further back in history. Does this somehow make that belief make sense?

No.

I lay this picture side by side with that other death, that other lynching, to remember that it may sound no less absurd when I say such things about Jesus Christ. I turn from that repulsive photograph to a death more unthinkable, more innocent, more vicious, more public, so that while I write of it to you, I am really seeing it myself.

That swollen face, those pierced, naked feet lifted up above the ground—those belong to God? Is there something in me so wrong, so bad, that the only answer to help me is his death? Behind everything my eyes can see there hides an infinite Deity who would do such a thing for me?

I know how it sounds, but what if it were true? And just how might God let us know for sure? What if he wrote about it in excruciating detail before it happened, not rope burns and a tree branch, but pierced hands and a bloody spear?

4 *Prepared to Answer*

What if he wrote it into prior history, into the sacred literature and on pages already browning and cracking long before Christ was even born? What if we could read the what, the when, the where, and the how in Scriptures written centuries earlier, the dating beyond dispute? What if we found in those writings not only the who, “God with us,” but even the why?

“I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands.”³

Now think of this. Suppose that against staggering odds there was an actual person in history to whom the prophetic signs accidentally pointed. Let’s say there was by pure coincidence, early in the first century (not the second), someone in Israel (not India) from Bethlehem (not Bethany) from the line of Judah (not Levi) who was sold out, betrayed, flogged, pierced, and over three hundred “et ceteras.” What do you think are the chances that this random person would turn out to be anyone at all or have anything special to say? What if, against one in ten billion odds, this person just happened to be the greatest figure in human history, the one who divides the entire human story into a before and an after? What if these unique prophetic credentials just happened to belong to the one whose miracles were witnessed by thousands; the one of whom observers said, “No one ever spoke the way this man does”⁴; the one whose executors shuddered, “Surely he was the Son of God”⁵; and the one whose resurrection from the dead was the big, bold fact that swept through the world? What if the guns of persecution were held to the temples of those who shouted, “We saw him die, and he met us alive,” but they did not shrink back or deny what they saw? What if this man’s most outrageous claims—“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away”⁶—insist on coming true, even now in the quiet spot where you sit and read them? What if to this day millions of lives have changed from the inside out just by

people believing the news that they have forgiveness through pure grace and are bound for a shimmering glory that can somehow also be called home?

This is what I find: the phenomenon of prophecies that were always right and never wrong; the unimpeachable witnesses to the events of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection; and the colossal impact felt around the world and all across time—these lines all converge on a single human being.

I’d like you to meet Jesus.

To seriously compare him with other founders of other faiths is to have a sudden epiphany—there is no one like him. So, I ask you, how does it look to you now, this prophetic portrait of the lynch mob with faces too much like mine and, lifted up in their midst, the black-and-blue face of the Lord of life?

You already know the portrait’s title. Read it one more time: “For God so loved the world . . .”



In the earlier part of his life, Charles Templeton, a close friend of Billy Graham, was an evangelist. Yet later on he no longer believed the claims of Christ because of the very issues I’ll take up in this book. What is unforgettable about Templeton, however, is the way he still cared about Jesus and the nostalgic way he still spoke of him: “The greatest human being who ever lived . . . the intrinsically wisest person I’ve encountered . . . the least duplicity, the greatest compassion of any human being in history . . . the most important person ever born. Everything decent I know, I learned from him. There have been many wonderful people, but Jesus is Jesus.”

In saying that, his voice began to crack. And his words, just before tears flooded his eyes and his shoulders started to shake, were these: “I miss him.”⁷