THE DAILY BREAD

The Acts of the Apostles



Encountering Jesus

A FORMATION BOOK BY

Kendall Peterson

The Everyday Apostle

INTRODUCTION

The Stained-Glass Problem

Ask a hundred Catholic men to describe Jesus, and most of them will give you, in some form, the same answer.

He was a kind man. He healed people. He taught love. He died on a cross for our sins. He rose on the third day. Now He is in heaven, where He hears our prayers.

All of that is true. None of it is wrong. And yet, in a certain way, it is not Jesus at all. It is a kind of picture of Jesus, the way a stained-glass window is a kind of picture of a person. Beautiful. Reverent. Two-dimensional. Translucent rather than solid. The kind of figure you bow to but do not, in any normal sense, know.

The Jesus most modern men carry around inside is a stained-glass Jesus. He is calm, robed, faintly glowing. He stands in a meadow with sheep, or hangs on a cross, or floats above a tomb. He has no sense of humor. He has no opinions about things. He has no calluses on his hands and no dust on his feet. He has, in fact, no body in any meaningful sense, because everything about him is iconographic rather than personal.

This Jesus is impossible to relate to as a man, because he isn't one.

> *The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. — John 1:14*

The actual Jesus was a particular human being. He had a face that, if you saw it across a crowded marketplace, you would recognize. He had a Mediterranean Jewish complexion. He had a beard. He had a body that got tired and hungry and bruised. He laughed, regularly, at things His friends said. He wept, openly, more than once. He lost His temper publicly, once, in the Temple, and overturned the tables of the moneychangers. He had close friends He called by name and other people He found exhausting. He had political opinions and religious opinions and a sense of irony. He prayed all night sometimes. He worked with His hands for thirty years before He ever preached a sermon.

That man is the One you are supposed to be in a relationship with. Not the stained-glass figure. Him.

This book is an attempt to introduce you, or perhaps reintroduce you, to that man. We will look at His world, His work, His teaching, His emotional life, His friends, His death, and His Resurrection. We will spend four chapters with the four Gospels, because each one is a deliberate portrait of Him from a different angle, and you need all four to see Him whole.

The aim is not new information. Most of what is in this book you have heard before. The aim is to move Him, in your inner life, from icon to person. Because the people whose relationship with Jesus changes their lives are not the people who know more about Him. They are the people who know Him.

He is not in a window. He is in the room.

CHAPTER ONE

The Man Who Got Tired

The Word Became Flesh

Start here. It is the place most modern men have to start, because most modern men have absorbed, without knowing it, a kind of practical heresy about the humanity of Jesus.

The heresy is that Jesus was God in a human costume. That He went through the motions of being a man, but His real existence was elsewhere; that when He pretended to be tired, He was secretly not tired; that when He prayed, He was performing for our benefit; that the suffering on the cross was a kind of holy theater. The technical name for this ancient heresy is Docetism. It was condemned by the Church in the first centuries. It is still very much alive in the average Catholic imagination.

It is wrong. The Council of Chalcedon, in 451, gave the Church the precise language: Jesus is *fully human and fully divine*, two natures united in one Person, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation. Whatever it means to be human, Jesus was. Not metaphorically. Actually.

This means He got tired.

In Mark's Gospel, after a long day of teaching crowds, Jesus and the disciples get in a boat to cross the Sea of Galilee. A storm comes up. The boat is taking on water. The disciples are panicking. And Jesus is asleep. Not pretending to be asleep. Asleep. He is so exhausted from the day that the sound of a storm on a small boat does not wake Him. They have to shake Him awake.

In John's Gospel, walking through Samaria in the heat of the day, Jesus stops at a well. The text says, with that flat directness John has: *Jesus, tired from his journey, sat down by the well.* While the disciples go into town to buy food, He sits there. He is hungry. He is thirsty. He is hot. He is a Mediterranean man who has been walking since dawn. The Samaritan woman who comes to draw water meets a man whose body is tired in exactly the way her body, on an ordinary day, would be tired.

> *Jesus, tired from his journey, sat down by the well. — John 4:6*

He got hungry. He fasted forty days in the desert and the Gospels note, dryly, that *He was hungry.* The wording assumes you can imagine what forty days of hunger does to a man, because Jesus was a man to whom it did the same thing.

He got thirsty. His last words from the cross, in John's account, are *I thirst.* He says this two hours into a crucifixion, dehydrated, bleeding, lungs failing, and He says it because thirst was a real sensation in His real body.

He felt physical pain. He felt fear. In the Garden of Gethsemane, on the night before His death, He sweats blood. This is a documented medical phenomenon, *hematidrosis*, that happens to people under extreme psychological distress. The capillaries near the sweat glands rupture. Jesus, knowing what was coming the next day, experienced fear at the level a human body can register only in extremity.

Why This Matters

If Jesus did not actually have a human body, with all of its limitations and indignities, the Incarnation did not happen. God did not really come close to us. The cross is theater, not sacrifice. The Eucharist is a symbol, not a Body. The whole thing collapses.

If Jesus *did* actually have a human body, with all of those limitations, then He understands yours. Your tiredness is not foreign to Him. Your hunger is not foreign to Him. Your fear in the doctor's office is not foreign to Him. The headache you have tonight, the sore back, the sleeplessness, He has been there in His own body. When you pray, you are praying to Someone who knows what you mean from the inside.

The starting point of any real relationship with Jesus is the recognition that the Person at the other end of the prayer once had calluses, dust between His toes, and the specific human experience of being thirty-three years old.

How to Begin

Read Mark's Gospel this week, paying attention to His body. Where He goes. How He moves. When He sits. When He sleeps. When He touches people. Mark, the shortest Gospel, is also the most physical. It will give Jesus back His body in your imagination, and that is the first step toward meeting Him as a person.

C H A P T E R T W O

The World He Walked Into

A Specific Man in a Specific Place

He did not appear in some generic mythological landscape. He was born in a particular town, under a particular government, into a particular religious world, speaking a particular language. If you do not know any of these particulars, He will tend to float, in your imagination, in a kind of unreal everywhere. The cure is to remember where He was actually standing.

The Land

Palestine, the strip of land between the Mediterranean and the Jordan, was about the size of New Jersey. Most of the Gospels take place in two regions: Galilee in the north, where Jesus grew up and did most of His public ministry, and Judea in the south, where Jerusalem is.

Galilee was poor, agricultural, and looked down on by the religious establishment in Jerusalem. The Galilean accent was mocked the way a strong rural accent is mocked anywhere. When Jesus called His first disciples from the fishermen on the Sea of Galilee, He was calling working men who would have been considered unsophisticated by the priests in the capital. When the soldiers in the courtyard heard Peter speak and said *Surely you are one of them, your accent gives you away,* they meant Galilean.

Judea was wealthier, more religious, more political. Jerusalem held the Temple, the center of Jewish religious life. Jerusalem also held the Roman governor′s residence and the headquarters of the religious authorities. It was the place where things were decided, and where dangerous men were executed.

The Politics

Rome had occupied Palestine for about ninety years by the time Jesus began His public ministry. The occupation was not gentle. Roman soldiers patrolled the streets. Roman taxes were collected, sometimes brutally, often through Jewish collaborators called publicans, who were despised. The Roman governor, in Jesus′s time, was Pontius Pilate, a mid-level functionary with a reputation for cruelty.

Crucifixion was Rome′s signature execution. It was reserved for slaves and political enemies, designed for maximum public terror. A crucified man often took two or three days

to die, hanging where everyone could see him, as a warning. Jesus had walked past crucified men since boyhood. He knew exactly what it was.

The Jewish people lived under this occupation with a constant undercurrent of resistance. Some, the Zealots, wanted armed revolt. Some, the Sadducees, made their peace with Rome in exchange for keeping their positions. Some, the Pharisees, sought to preserve the Jewish way of life through scrupulous observance of the Law. Some, the Essenes, withdrew to the desert. Almost everyone hoped for a Messiah, a deliverer, a king from the line of David who would restore Israel.

Into this world walked a Galilean carpenter who started saying the Kingdom of God was at hand and that He, in some sense, was the One they had been waiting for. Both the Romans and the religious authorities were going to have a problem with Him.

The Language and the Culture

Jesus spoke Aramaic, a Semitic language related to Hebrew, used in everyday life. He read and prayed in Hebrew, the language of Scripture. He likely had at least some Greek, the common trade language of the empire. He may have known a little Latin. He was a tradesman from a small town, but He was literate, knew His Bible deeply, and could hold his own with the most educated men in Jerusalem.

He ate flat bread, olives, fish, lentils, and figs. He drank wine, sometimes mixed with water. He slept on a mat. He wore a tunic and an outer cloak. He walked everywhere, sometimes thirty miles in a day. He bathed in lakes and rivers. He prayed three times daily, like every observant Jew, in addition to the long nights He sometimes spent alone in prayer.

> *In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled. This was the first enrollment, when Quirinius was governor of Syria. — Luke 2:1-2*

Luke begins his Gospel that way for a reason. He is establishing that this is history, not myth. There was a real census, under a real governor, under a real emperor. Jesus was born into all of it.

Why This Matters

The more concretely you can imagine the world He walked into, the harder it becomes to keep Him stained-glass. You start to see a Galilean man in a dusty tunic, hot and tired, walking the road from Capernaum to Jerusalem. You see Him sitting down on a hillside.

You see Him stooping to write something in the dirt with His finger. You see Him on a wooden cross outside a real city in a real summer, surrounded by Roman soldiers who had done this many times before.

That is the man you are following. Not a symbol. A specific Galilean Jew named Yeshua bar Yosef, who lived from approximately 4 BC to 30 or 33 AD, and whose life turned out to be the hinge on which the entire history of the world swings.

C H A P T E R T H R E E

The Carpenter and the Rabbi

Thirty Years and Three

Here is one of the most underappreciated facts about Jesus: He spent ninety percent of His earthly life doing something the Gospels do not describe.

He was born around 4 BC. He began His public ministry at about age thirty. He died around age thirty-three. Of those years, three years are recorded in detail in the Gospels. Three. The other thirty are summarized in a few verses.

What was He doing for those thirty years? He was working.

The Carpenter

The Gospel of Mark identifies Him as *the carpenter* (Mark 6:3). The Greek word is *tekton*, which is broader than what we mean by carpenter; it covers anyone who builds with hard materials, wood and stone. In a small village like Nazareth, with no permanent forest nearby, the local *tekton* probably worked more in stone than in wood. He built roofs, walls, doors, tools, plows, yokes. He repaired things. He took commissions in the surrounding villages.

We can be reasonably confident that He worked alongside His foster father Joseph from boyhood, learning the trade in the way every village boy learned his father′s trade. Joseph disappears from the Gospel record after Jesus′s twelfth year. By the time Jesus′s public ministry began, Joseph was almost certainly dead, and Jesus would have been the head of the household, the eldest son, the one supporting His mother and probably extended family.

In other words, before He was the Messiah of the world, He was a tradesman. He worked with His hands. He had calluses. He had specific muscles developed by specific tools. He had the smell of wood and stone and sweat on Him at the end of a working day. He paid the local taxes. He was, by any external measure, an unremarkable working-class Jewish man in an unremarkable Galilean village.

This was not a phase He passed through reluctantly. It was thirty years of His life. Whatever sanctification of ordinary work means in Christian theology, it means at least this: that God, becoming a man, deliberately chose to spend the great majority of His earthly existence in obscure manual labor.

If you work with your hands, or work a job no one outside it knows about, you have a Lord who knows exactly what that is. He spent three decades doing it before He ever did anything anyone considered remarkable.

> *Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary? — Mark 6:3*

The Rabbi

Then, around the age of thirty, He stopped. He went down to the Jordan, was baptized by His cousin John, spent forty days in the desert, and came back as a teacher.

He was not officially trained as a rabbi. He had not studied under one of the famous schools in Jerusalem. By the standards of His culture, He was an amateur. He had no credentials.

He taught anyway. And His teaching was different from what the people had been hearing.

The standard rabbi taught by citing authorities: Rabbi So-and-so said this, Rabbi Such-and-such said this, the tradition is divided on this point. Jesus did not do that. He taught as Himself. *You have heard it said… but I say to you.* The crowds noticed immediately. Mark records: *They were astonished at His teaching, for He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.*

His teaching style was distinctive in other ways. He told parables. Short, vivid stories drawn from rural Galilean life: a farmer scattering seed, a woman searching for a lost coin, a man hiring workers for his vineyard, a son leaving home with his inheritance. These were not illustrations of points He had already made. They were the teaching itself. The hearer was meant to enter the story, find himself in it, and discover something he could not have been told directly.

He used paradox. The first shall be last. Whoever loses his life will save it. The Kingdom is like a mustard seed. He used hyperbole. A camel through the eye of a needle. A plank in your eye. He used questions, often answering questions with questions, which is itself a rabbinic technique but which He took to a level no one had quite seen before.

He was funny. The Gospels do not say "and Jesus laughed," because laughter is not a Greek narrative beat the evangelists thought to record, but His teaching is full of jokes. The man with a plank sticking out of his eye trying to help his neighbor with a speck is a visual gag. The camel through the needle's eye is a visual gag. The Pharisees straining out gnats and swallowing camels is a visual gag. He was a Galilean carpenter who turned out to be one of the great teachers in human history, and part of why people listened to Him was that He was, by all accounts, sharper and funnier than anyone they had ever heard speak.

How to Begin

The next time you read a parable, do not analyze it. Sit in it. Pick the Prodigal Son, or the Good Samaritan, or the Workers in the Vineyard, and read it slowly, three or four times. Imagine the scene. Notice who you are in the story. The Person who told this story is the One we are about to spend four chapters trying to see from four different angles. He was the best teacher you will ever have. He still is.

C H A P T E R F O U R

Matthew's Portrait

The King and the New Moses

There are four Gospels. There could have been one. There could have been twenty. The early Church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, settled on four. The reason is that Jesus is not the kind of Person a single portrait can capture. You need four angles to see Him whole, the way a sculptor needs to walk around a statue to see it.

The four are not contradictory. They are complementary. Each evangelist had a particular audience, a particular emphasis, and a particular angle of light. The first one we will look at is Matthew.

Who Wrote It and Why

Matthew was one of the Twelve. He had been a tax collector in Capernaum, a working-class Jewish man with a desk job, before Jesus called him at the customs booth and he got up and followed without a word. His Gospel, written probably in the 70s or 80s of the first century, was aimed at a primarily Jewish-Christian audience.

This shapes everything about it. Matthew is writing to Jews. He is making a case that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah of the Hebrew Scriptures. He cites the Old Testament more than any other Gospel; you can almost feel him pulling on his readers' sleeve every few verses, saying, *Look, look, this was prophesied. This was promised. This is Him.*

Jesus as the New Moses

Matthew opens with a genealogy. To a modern reader this is dry. To a first-century Jew, this is the headline. Jesus is *the son of David, the son of Abraham.* He stands in the royal line of Israel. He is connected, by blood and by promise, to the entire story of God's people.

Then Matthew gives us the infancy narrative: the magi, the star, the flight into Egypt, Herod slaughtering the children, the return from Egypt. The Egypt-and-return pattern is deliberate. Matthew is showing us a new Moses. A baby threatened by a wicked king, hidden, brought out of Egypt to lead His people. *Out of Egypt I called my Son.*

The pattern continues. Moses came down from Sinai with the Law. In Matthew, Jesus goes up the mountain and gives the Sermon on the Mount. Moses gave five books of Torah. Matthew structures his Gospel around five great discourses of Jesus. The parallel is intentional and unmistakable.

But Jesus is not merely Moses-redivivus. He is Moses's Lord. He says, repeatedly, *You have heard that it was said… but I say to you.* This is a startling claim. He is not adding to Moses or interpreting Moses; He is putting Himself, on certain points, above Moses. To a Jewish audience, this is either blasphemy or a claim about His identity so deep that the categories cannot hold it.

> *You have heard that it was said to the men of old, "You shall not kill"… But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment.* — *Matthew 5:21-22*

The King

Matthew's other great theme is kingship. Jesus is the King of Israel, the long-promised Davidic ruler. But the kingship He embodies is not the kingship His people expected.

The magi come looking for *the king of the Jews* and Herod, the political king, tries to murder Him. The whole infancy narrative is a clash between two kinds of kingship: Herod's, which holds onto power by killing children, and the kingship of the child, who will hold the whole world but will refuse all such methods.

The climax comes at the Crucifixion. Pilate hangs a sign over Jesus's head: *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.* It was meant as mockery. Matthew reports it deadpan. It is also the truth. The crucified man is the King. The cross is the throne. The crown of thorns is the diadem. Matthew has been building toward this image the entire Gospel.

How to Read Matthew

Read Matthew when you need to see Jesus's *authority*. This is the Gospel that shows you who is actually in charge. The Sermon on the Mount lays out the constitution of the Kingdom He is building. The Great Commission at the end, *all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me, go therefore and make disciples of all nations,* is the most authoritative sentence anyone has ever spoken.

When you find yourself uncertain who is actually running things, when the news is dark, when the world looks unrulable, read the last paragraph of Matthew. *All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me.* That is the man you are following.

C H A P T E R F I V E

Mark's Portrait

The Servant in a Hurry

If Matthew is the King in His robes, Mark is the Servant in His sweat.

Mark is the shortest of the four Gospels. He gets through everything in sixteen chapters. He has no infancy narrative, no Sermon on the Mount, no long discourses. He starts at full speed and never slows down.

Who Wrote It and Why

The tradition is that Mark was the companion of Peter and that the Gospel is essentially Peter's preaching, written down. The audience was primarily Roman: Gentile Christians in the imperial capital, living under the shadow of Nero's persecution.

This shapes everything. Romans were a practical people. They wanted action, not philosophy. They wanted to know what kind of Man Jesus was. They were also, by the time Mark wrote, dying for the faith. They needed to know that the One they were dying for had walked the same road first.

The Pace

The most distinctive word in Mark's Gospel is *immediately*. It appears more than forty times. *And immediately He went into the synagogue. And immediately He healed the man. And immediately the spirit drove Him into the wilderness.* Mark's Jesus is constantly in motion. He is going somewhere. He has work to do. He does not have time for the kind of theological monologues we find in John, or the carefully arranged parable collections we find in Luke. There is too much to do.

This urgency is part of the portrait. Jesus, in Mark, is a man with a mission and a clock ticking. He knows where He is going. He is going to Jerusalem. He is going to the cross. The whole Gospel structure leads there. He keeps trying to explain this to His disciples and they keep not understanding.

The Suffering Servant

Mark's portrait is shaped by the Isaiah Servant Songs. Jesus is the One who came *not to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many* (Mark 10:45). This sentence is the thematic key to the whole Gospel.

The disciples, all the way through Mark, keep wanting Jesus to be a different kind of Messiah, the kingly one, the conquering one. Mark records, with quiet brutality, how badly they keep missing the point. James and John ask if they can sit at His right and left when He comes into His kingdom. They have no idea what they are asking. The right and the left, when He comes into His kingdom, will be occupied by two crucified thieves.

Peter, the rock, confesses that Jesus is the Christ, and then, in the next paragraph, rebukes Jesus for talking about being killed. Jesus turns and says one of the harshest sentences in the Gospels: *Get behind Me, Satan. You are setting your mind not on the things of God but on the things of men.* This is the Person we will follow not understanding Him.

> *The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many. — Mark 10:45*

The Suffering and the Silence

Mark has a strange feature that scholars call the Messianic Secret. Over and over, Jesus heals someone or casts out a demon and then strictly forbids them to tell anyone. Why?

Because in Mark, Jesus's identity cannot be properly understood apart from the cross. To call Him Messiah, King, Son of God, before the crucifixion, is to misread Him. You will think He is the conquering kind of Messiah, the political deliverer. Only after He is hanging on the cross, only after the centurion looks up at the dying man and says *Truly this man was the Son of God,* can the title be used without misunderstanding.

This is one of Mark's deepest insights. You do not know who Jesus is until you see Him on the cross. Everything before the cross is, at most, prelude.

How to Read Mark

Read Mark when you need to see Jesus *in motion*. When you have been overthinking the spiritual life, when you have been reading too much theology and praying too little, when you need to remember that He is a real Person doing real work, read Mark.

Read it in one sitting if you can. It takes about ninety minutes. It is the same length as a short movie, and reading it that way is, by some distance, the closest most modern readers will come to the original experience of being told the story. You will get up from it with the sense of having met a man who is going somewhere and is on His way.

C H A P T E R S I X

Luke's Portrait

The Friend of the Lost

Luke is the one who notices the people no one else notices.

He is the longest of the four Gospels. He is also the only one written by a Gentile, the only one with a sequel (Acts of the Apostles, also by Luke). He was a physician by training, a companion of Paul, a careful writer. His Greek is the most polished of the four evangelists. He had not been with Jesus during the public ministry. He interviewed people who had been, including, almost certainly, Mary herself, who is the source for the only nativity story that gives her perspective.

The Audience and the Tone

Luke wrote for a Gentile audience, possibly for a Roman patron named Theophilus, *most excellent Theophilus*, whom he names in the opening verses. His project was to set down an orderly account, having investigated everything carefully, so that Theophilus, and through Theophilus the wider Gentile world, would have certainty about what had actually happened.

The result is a Gospel that is warmer, more human, and more attentive to social outsiders than the other three. Luke is the Gospel of mercy.

The Lost and the Found

The keynote of Luke's Jesus is the recovery of the lost. The fifteenth chapter of Luke contains three parables in a row, all of them on the same theme: the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son. In each one, something is missing, someone searches, the lost thing is found, there is rejoicing. This is what Luke's Jesus is doing in the world. He is the searching shepherd. He is the woman with the lamp. He is the father watching the road.

Luke includes parables and stories the other Gospels do not have. The Prodigal Son. The Good Samaritan. The Pharisee and the Publican. Zacchaeus in the sycamore tree. The penitent thief on the cross saying *Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom,* and Jesus answering, *Today you will be with Me in Paradise.* These are some of the most beloved passages in the Christian tradition, and they are uniquely Luke's.

Women, the Poor, the Sick, the Foreign

Luke pays attention to people the rest of the ancient world barely registered.

Women are everywhere in his Gospel. Mary, given the longest speech of any woman in the Bible, the Magnificat. Elizabeth. Anna in the Temple. Mary Magdalene and the other women who followed Jesus and *provided for them out of their means* (a detail only Luke gives us, and one that quietly upends the assumption that the Twelve were the whole show). The sinful woman who washes Jesus's feet with her tears. The widow of Nain. The bent-over woman in the synagogue. The women who weep on the way to the cross.

The poor are everywhere too. Luke's version of the Beatitudes is sharper than Matthew's: not *blessed are the poor in spirit* but *blessed are you who are poor.* He follows it with *woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your consolation.* Luke makes Jesus's preferential love for the poor unmistakable.

The foreigners and outcasts get their place too. The Good Samaritan, a member of a despised ethnic group, is held up as the model of love of neighbor. The grateful leper who returns to thank Jesus is, Luke notes pointedly, a Samaritan. The centurion's faith puts the religious establishment to shame.

> *The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost. — Luke 19:10*

The Praying Jesus

Luke also shows us, more than any other Gospel, Jesus at prayer. He prays at His baptism. He prays before choosing the Twelve. He prays alone in deserted places. He prays all night. He teaches the Our Father in response to His disciples asking how to pray. He prays in Gethsemane. He prays from the cross. The portrait is consistent: His public ministry was sustained, throughout, by long hours of quiet prayer that almost no one saw.

This is one of Luke's gifts to the modern man. If you want to see how to live a life that pours out love for the lost without burning out, look at how Luke's Jesus prays. The two are connected. The compassion is sustainable because the prayer is constant.

How to Read Luke

Read Luke when you need to see Jesus's *mercy*. When you have failed badly. When you are convinced you are beyond reach. When you are about to give up on someone else. Read Luke 15, all of it, slowly. The lost sheep. The lost coin. The lost son. The Person who told those three stories in a row is the Person looking at you right now. He is doing exactly what He said the shepherd and the woman and the father were doing. He is looking for you. He is waiting for you. He is throwing a party.

C H A P T E R S E V E N

John's Portrait

The Word Made Flesh

The first three Gospels share so much material that scholars call them the Synoptics: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. They overlap, borrow, and tell many of the same stories.

Then there is John.

John is different. John has different events, different speeches, a different rhythm, a different tone. He was written much later, probably in the 90s, by the disciple Jesus loved, when he was very old. By that point John had been thinking about Jesus for sixty years. The Gospel is dense, contemplative, and pulses with a kind of cosmic depth that the Synoptics, with their more reportorial style, do not attempt.

The Cosmic Opening

The other Gospels begin with a genealogy (Matthew), an announcement (Mark), or a careful preface (Luke). John begins like this:

> *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him, and without Him not one thing came into being.*

Then, fourteen verses later: *And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.*

This is the entire claim of Christianity in two paragraphs. The Person who walked the dusty roads of Galilee is the *Logos*, the Word, through whom the universe was made. The God who said *let there be light* in Genesis 1 took on a human face in the man Jesus of Nazareth. The carpenter is the Creator.

John spends the rest of his Gospel showing us, in case we missed it, that this is what was happening the whole time.

The Seven Signs and the Seven "I AM" Sayings

John structures his Gospel around seven miracles, which he calls *signs*. They are not just demonstrations of power. They are pointers to who Jesus is. Water into wine. The healing of an official's son. The healing of the paralytic at Bethesda. The feeding of the five thousand. Walking on water. The healing of the man born blind. The raising of Lazarus from the dead. Each of these signs is followed by a long discourse that unpacks what the sign meant.

Alongside the seven signs are the seven great *I AM* sayings, which are the heart of John's portrait.

> *I am the bread of life. I am the light of the world. I am the door. I am the good shepherd. I am the resurrection and the life. I am the way, the truth, and the life. I am the true vine.*

The phrase is not casual. *I AM* is the name God gave Himself in the Burning Bush. Jesus, by using it of Himself, is claiming the divine name. The Jewish authorities knew exactly what He was doing; this is the immediate context of several of the attempts to stone Him. He is identifying Himself with the God of Israel.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. — John 1:1

The Glory in the Lowliness

John has a paradox running through his whole Gospel. The glory of Jesus is revealed not in spite of His humility but precisely through it. The moment of His greatest glorification, in John's vocabulary, is the cross. *Now is the Son of Man glorified,* He says at the Last Supper, the night before His execution. The Crucifixion, in John, is not defeat followed by Resurrection-vindication. It *is* the victory. The throne is the cross. The crown is the thorns. The glory is the lowliness.

This is one of the great revelations of John's Gospel. Power, in God's economy, looks like a man washing His friends' feet. The Maker of the universe, on the night before His death, takes off His outer robe, ties a towel around His waist, and kneels at the feet of His confused disciples, one of whom is about to betray Him and several of whom will soon deny knowing Him. He washes their feet. *Do you understand what I have done to you?* He asks. They don't, not really, not until much later.

The Long, Slow Speeches

John also gives us long discourses we find nowhere else. The Bread of Life discourse in John 6. The Good Shepherd discourse in John 10. The Farewell Discourse from John 13 to 17, the last conversations of Jesus with His disciples before His arrest. These are not parables. They are sustained, meditative reflections that read more like overheard prayer than like teaching. They reward slow reading. John was an old contemplative when he wrote them, and they are the fruit of decades of sitting with what he had been a part of.

How to Read John

Read John when you need to see *who Jesus actually is*. When you have been thinking of Him as a wise teacher, a moral example, a kind man, anything less than God incarnate, John will not let you off the hook. The Person at the center of John's Gospel is the One through whom the universe was made, and He is calling you by name.

Read John 17, especially, His prayer the night before He died, in which He says, of His disciples and of all who would believe through them, *That they may all be one, even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You.* He is praying that you, by name and through history, be drawn into the same eternal life that He has shared with the Father from before the world began. That is what John's Gospel is for.

C H A P T E R E I G H T

The Man Who Wept and Lost His Temper

His Emotional Life

The four portraits give you four angles on Him. Now we need to talk about something none of them describes in the abstract but all of them assume: His interior life. He had feelings. He had a personality. He had a temper, a sense of humor, things that delighted Him and things that disgusted Him.

The stained-glass Jesus is serene. He glides through scenes with an unchanging gentle expression. The actual Jesus, as the Gospels record Him, is one of the most emotionally vivid figures in any literature ever written. If you read the Gospels with attention to His emotions, you start to see a man, not an icon.

He Wept

He wept openly more than once. The Greek text gives us slightly different verbs each time, which is striking.

At the tomb of His friend Lazarus, the Gospel of John uses *edakrysen*: *Jesus wept.* It is the shortest verse in the Bible (John 11:35), and it is one of the most important. He knew He was about to raise Lazarus from the dead within minutes. He wept anyway. Why? Because grief was happening, because His friend Martha was crushed, because Mary was weeping, because death is real and ugly and an enemy. Jesus does not bypass grief just because He knows the ending. He goes into it.

Approaching Jerusalem for the last time, Luke tells us, He wept again, this time with a stronger verb, *eklausen*: He sobbed. *Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace, but now they are hidden from your eyes.* He is weeping over a city that is about to destroy itself, that will destroy Him in a few days, and that within a generation will be flattened by the Romans. The grief is national, prophetic, paternal.

In Gethsemane, the night before His death, He prays with *strong crying and tears*, the letter to the Hebrews says. He is afraid. He sweats blood. He asks His friends three times to stay awake with Him, and three times they fall asleep. He prays alone.

He Felt Compassion

The Greek word the Gospels use most often for Jesus's tenderness toward the people He meets is *splagchnizomai*. It is a strong word. It comes from the noun for the inner organs,

the gut. It means something like *He was moved in His bowels.* It is not a tasteful, refined emotion. It is a deep, physical, almost wrenching feeling of pity.

He felt this for the crowd that came out to follow Him, *because they were like sheep without a shepherd.* He felt this for the widow of Nain, walking behind the coffin of her only son. He felt this for the two blind men outside Jericho. The translations soften the word, but the original is visceral. He saw suffering and His insides hurt.

He Was Amazed

Twice the Gospels tell us Jesus was *amazed*. Once at faith, in the case of the Roman centurion who told Him not to come into his house but just to say the word, *for I am a man under authority…* Jesus is reported, in a striking sentence, to have *marveled.* He turned to the crowd and said, *I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.*

The other time was the opposite. In His own hometown of Nazareth, where the people had watched Him grow up and could not get past Him being *the carpenter, the son of Mary*, Mark says He could do no miracles there *because of their unbelief, and He was amazed at their unbelief.* He was a man who could be surprised.

He Lost His Temper

He had a temper. All four Gospels record the cleansing of the Temple. He walked into the outer court of the Temple in Jerusalem, saw the moneychangers and the merchants selling sacrificial animals at extortionate rates, and made a whip out of cords. He drove them out. He overturned the tables. The coins went everywhere. He shouted: *My Father's house shall be called a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of robbers.*

This is not a gentle Jesus. This is a man with the fury of an Old Testament prophet, acting publicly in the most heavily guarded religious space in His country, willing to take on the entire commercial-religious establishment of Jerusalem. Almost no one in the moment doubted He was serious.

He was also fierce with the Pharisees. The seventh chapter of Matthew, the twenty-third chapter especially, contains some of the most cutting words ever spoken: *Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites… You are like whitewashed tombs… You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel…* He could be devastating when He chose to be.

> *You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel. — Matthew 23:24*

He Laughed

The Gospels never say *Jesus laughed*, because laughter is not a beat the evangelists thought to record. But His teaching is full of jokes. The plank in your eye. The camel through the needle. The Pharisees praying loudly on street corners so men will see them. The man who built his house on sand. He is making the crowd laugh, and the crowd is laughing, in the way crowds always have when a sharp teacher uses absurd images to make a point land.

He hugged children, He ate with sinners at long Mediterranean dinners that often lasted hours, He had a small circle of close friends He clearly loved. The picture is consistent: a warm, affectionate, often funny man, with a deep capacity for tenderness and a deep capacity for righteous anger, both at the disposal of His love for the people in front of Him.

How to Begin

The next time you read a Gospel passage, ask yourself: what is He feeling here? Not what is He teaching, but what is His face doing? What is His tone? What is the look in His eye?

Most of us were trained to read past these. We were taught to extract the doctrine and move on. Try the opposite. Stop at the look in His eye. Stay there. That is the Person you are trying to meet. The doctrine will keep. The face is the doorway.

C H A P T E R N I N E

The Cross and the Resurrection

The Hinge of the World

All four Gospels devote a disproportionate amount of space to the last twenty-four hours of His life. They begin and middle quickly. They slow down dramatically when they reach the Passion. The reason is that, for the early Church, this was not one event among many. It was the event. Everything else in His life had been leading there.

Gethsemane

The Garden of Gethsemane is at the foot of the Mount of Olives, across the Kidron Valley from Jerusalem. The name means *oil press*. It was, and is, an olive grove. He went there often. Judas knew where to find Him.

The scene in Gethsemane is one of the most psychologically intimate moments in the Bible. He is alone in the dark with eleven sleeping friends, knowing exactly what is coming the next day. He has seen crucifixions before. He knows what they look like. He prays three times for the cup to be taken from Him. He sweats blood. He is afraid.

He goes anyway. *Not my will, but yours, be done.* It is, possibly, the most consequential sentence ever spoken on this planet.

The Trial and the Cross

He is arrested, tried, condemned, mocked, beaten, and scourged. The scourging alone killed many men before they ever reached the cross. He survives it. He carries the crossbar through Jerusalem to the place called Golgotha, the skull, just outside the city wall. He is nailed to it and lifted up.

A Roman crucifixion was a specific engineered method of execution. The victim died, slowly, from asphyxiation. The arms were stretched out and nailed at the wrists. The legs were nailed at the heels. To breathe, the victim had to push himself up on the nail through his feet. As exhaustion set in, this became impossible, and the lungs filled. Death usually took one to three days. The Roman soldiers had done this so many times that they were efficient at it; the entire process from arrest to cross took less than twelve hours in Jesus's case.

He hung there for about six hours. He spoke seven times. Forgiveness for His executioners. Provision for His mother and for John. A promise to the thief beside Him. A cry of dereliction from Psalm 22. A statement of thirst. A declaration that it was finished. A final word: *Father, into Your hands I commend My spirit.* Then He died.

> *Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do. — Luke 23:34*

What This Was

The Cross was not a tragic accident. It was not the failure of a beautiful project. It was, the New Testament says everywhere, the project itself. *He came to give His life as a ransom for many.* The Cross was the reason for the Incarnation. The Man who got tired and hungry and afraid was on His way to it the whole time.

Why? Because something in the human race needed to be paid for, opened, fixed, healed. The technical theological vocabulary, atonement, redemption, propitiation, sacrifice, expiation, is the Church's attempt to articulate something the New Testament writers all knew had happened but knew was more than any single image could contain. He was offering Himself, as Priest and as Victim at once, to the Father, on our behalf, in our place, for our sins. He was breaking the power of death from the inside. He was opening heaven.

That is what happened on Friday afternoon outside Jerusalem in approximately the year 30 or 33 AD. It is the hinge on which the whole story of the world turns.

The Empty Tomb

He was buried that evening, in a tomb cut from rock, with a large stone rolled across the entrance and guards posted. On the third day, before dawn, the women came to anoint the body. The stone had been rolled away. The tomb was empty. An angel told them He had risen.

The Resurrection appearances are some of the most striking passages in the Gospels precisely because they are not the kind of story you would make up. Mary Magdalene mistakes Him for the gardener. He calls her by name and she recognizes Him. Two disciples walk seven miles with Him on the road to Emmaus without knowing who He is, until He breaks bread at supper and they realize. He appears in a locked room and shows His wounds. He cooks fish on the beach for the disciples after a night of failed fishing. He asks Peter, three times, *Do you love Me?*, undoing Peter's three denials.

He is the same man. He has the same face, the same voice, the same wounds. The wounds remain; they are not erased by the Resurrection but transfigured. He has a body, but a transformed body, that can pass through walls and yet eat a piece of broiled fish. He is, in the language of Paul, *the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep*. What happened to Him is what is going to happen to His followers. He is the leading edge of a new creation.

The Forty Days

He stayed on earth for forty days after the Resurrection, appearing to His followers in various places, eating with them, instructing them. At the end of the forty days, He ascended to the Father, with a promise that He would send the Holy Spirit and would return at the end of the age.

He has not returned yet. He has not been gone, either. The whole rest of the New Testament is the story of His continuing action, through His Spirit, through His Body the Church, through the sacraments He instituted, through every Christian He has ever drawn to Himself.

He is not in the past. He is not in a tomb. He is, right now, alive, attentive, present, and waiting to be met by you.

C H A P T E R T E N

How to Meet Him Now

From Story to Person

You have spent nine chapters with His life and four portraits of His Person. You know more about Him than most of His own contemporaries did. None of this, by itself, is the same as knowing Him.

How do you actually meet the living Person, today, in your actual life? The Church has been teaching this for two thousand years. There are four main doorways.

Scripture, Read for Encounter

Read the Gospels not as a textbook but as a place of meeting.

The classic Catholic practice is *lectio divina*, divine reading. You pick a short passage, ten or twenty verses. You read it slowly. You read it again. You pause where something stops you, a phrase that catches, a question that rises, an emotion you did not expect. You let yourself sit there. You ask Him about it. You stay until you have nothing more to say, then you stay a little longer.

Another classic practice, especially associated with Ignatius of Loyola, is to enter the Gospel scene with your imagination. Pick a scene: the calming of the storm, the call of Matthew, the encounter with the woman at the well. Place yourself inside it. Where are you standing? What does the air smell like? What do you see on His face? What does He say to you, specifically, if you are in the scene? This is not making things up. It is using the imagination God gave you to encounter the living Christ in His own Word. The saints have done it for centuries.

The Eucharist, Received

If Jesus is who He said He was, the Eucharist is His Body. Not a symbol of His Body. His actual Body, under the appearance of bread. The Catholic Church has taught this without interruption for twenty centuries, and it taught it because Jesus said it Himself: *This is My Body. Take and eat.*

Go to Mass weekly at minimum. Receive Him, when you are in a state of grace, with full attention. Stay after Mass for a few minutes of thanksgiving, the way every saint in Church history has stayed. You have just received the Person at the center of all reality. The next ten minutes are not a small thing. Do not check your phone in the parking lot. Sit. He is there. Speak to Him. Listen.

If your parish has Eucharistic Adoration, go. An hour with Him in the monstrance, even an hour in which you cannot pray, even an hour in which you fall asleep, is one of the most consistently transformative practices in Catholic life. The saints all noticed. He is doing something in you that you cannot feel and would not believe if you saw it. Just show up.

Prayer, Spoken and Silent

Talk to Him. In your own words. About what is actually happening in your life. The traffic, the meeting, the kid, the worry, the temptation, the small joy. Not formal language. The language you would use with a close friend, because that is who is listening.

Then, sometimes, stop talking. Sit. Let Him be there. The hard part of contemplative prayer is not the silence; it is the wandering mind. The hard part is being willing, for ten or fifteen minutes, to not produce anything. To just be in the presence of the Person who, you might recall, is keeping you in existence at every moment.

The Rosary, prayed slowly, is another doorway. The mysteries walk you through the events of His life, with His mother as companion. The repetition of the Hail Marys creates a kind of background rhythm that lets the imagination move freely through the scene being meditated on. It is not, as outsiders sometimes assume, vain repetition. It is the way a good Catholic prayer life is built, one bead at a time, over years.

The Jesus Prayer, the simple repetition of *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner*, has been practiced in the Christian East for centuries and is increasingly known in the West. Said as you walk, as you wait, as you fall asleep, it gradually places His name on the deepest level of your interior life. The saints called this *praying without ceasing*, and it is, at the level of texture, what they meant.

Other People, as His Body

He is in your wife. He is in your children. He is in your difficult colleague. He is in the man you do not want to talk to in the parish hall. He is, He said Himself, in the poor: *Whatever you did to one of the least of these brothers of Mine, you did to Me.* This is one of the most arresting sentences in the Gospels and one of the easiest to forget. The next person you encounter, especially if that person is inconvenient, is a place of encounter with Christ.

He is also in His Church. The Body of Christ is not a metaphor; it is what the Church is. When you are in a parish, in a men's group, in a confessional, at a baptism, you are in a community whose head is the living Person of Jesus and whose life is His life. The Catholic life is, irreducibly, communal. You will not meet Him fully alone.

> *Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. — Revelation 3:20*

Patience

This is the work of a lifetime. He is not a problem to be solved in a weekend retreat. He is a Person to be known over decades. You will have stretches of dryness, of feeling nothing, of doubting whether anything is happening. You will have moments, sometimes years apart, when His presence breaks through and you wonder how you ever doubted it. Both are normal. Both are the spiritual life of a saint in the making.

Show up at the doorways. Keep showing up. The encounter is real, whether you can feel it on any given day or not.

CONCLUSION

Come and See

The first chapter of John's Gospel records a small scene that is one of the most important in any Gospel.

John the Baptist is standing with two of his own disciples. Jesus walks by. John looks at Him and says, *Behold, the Lamb of God.* That is all. The two disciples leave John and start following Jesus.

Jesus, walking, hears their footsteps behind Him. He turns and asks them: *What do you seek?*

They do not know what to say. They are not yet sure what they are seeking. They give the answer of a man who has not yet figured himself out. They say, *Rabbi, where are you staying?*

Jesus says three words. *Come and see.*

They went with Him. They stayed with Him that day. The text of John adds, with a precision that suggests it was burned into the memory of the disciple writing it: *It was about the tenth hour.* About four in the afternoon. One of those two disciples was Andrew. The other, John never names, but the Church has always understood it was John himself, the author of the Gospel, then a young man. He never forgot the time of day.

Everything in this book has been a long way of saying what Jesus said in three words.

Come and see.

He is not asking you to figure everything out first. He is not asking you to clean yourself up. He is not asking you to read more books, although you may; He is not asking you to settle every doctrinal question, although you may try; He is not asking you to feel anything in particular about Him before you come.

He is asking you to come.

> *Come and see. — John 1:39*

Pick a Gospel. Read it slowly this week. Show up at Mass on Sunday and stay through the consecration with your eyes on Him. Go to Confession on Saturday afternoon if you have not been in a long time. Sit in your car after Communion for ten minutes and just be with Him.

Do whatever the small next step is. He has been watching the road, like the Father in the parable. He has been waiting for you to come.

He is not in a stained-glass window. He is in the room. He is the living Person who walked the dust of Galilee, who wept at Lazarus′s tomb, who overturned the tables in the Temple, who slept through the storm, who broke the bread and gave thanks, who died for you, who rose, who is, right now, present and attentive and calling you by your name.

Come and see.

✦ ✦ ✦