

J E S U S

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N O T H I N G

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E V E R Y T H I N G

TULLIAN TCHIVIDJIAN

Jesus + Nothing = Everything

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CONTENTS

A Note to the Reader	10
Acknowledgments	11
PART ONE: EVERYTHING	
1 God's Mercy in My Misery	17
2 Wanting It All	25
PART TWO: NOTHING	
3 Still Searching	35
4 Black Holes	45
PART THREE: JESUS	
5 Jesus, All and More	59
6 News—the Biggest and Best	73
PART FOUR: NOTHING	
7 Fully Exposed	89
8 Out of the Shadows	105
PART FIVE: EVERYTHING	
9 Everything Now, and More Coming	129
10 Our Full Response	151
11 In the Now	165
12 All Glorious	193
Twenty-Six Books on the Gospel	207
Notes	211
General Index	215
Scripture Index	217

GOD'S MERCY IN MY MISERY



Never had I experienced anything so tough. I could hardly eat, had trouble sleeping, and was continually battling nausea. I felt at the absolute end of myself.

God, what in the world are you doing?

I needed resurrecting.

It was the summer of '09, the low point in the most challenging and difficult year of my life. Thankfully, at the end of June, as we always did, my family and I left home to go on vacation for a couple of weeks. Never had I needed it more.

SO DIFFERENT

The contrast then with what my life had been like only twelve months earlier could hardly have been more stark. The year before, I had been pastoring New City Church, a thriving, five-year-old congregation I'd started just north of Fort Lauderdale, Florida. We had hundreds of people attending two morning services at New City every Sunday in our rented high school facility, and we sensed how much we were growing together in our commitment to serving the liberating power of the gospel to one another and our needy city. Understandably, we had plenty of confident expectations about our future together.

Just as understandably, another congregation a few miles south of us was facing its future with lots more questions, clouded with uncertainty. Coral Ridge Presbyterian in Fort Lauderdale was a church my family had attended for part of my childhood, when we first moved to South Florida in the 1970s. Founded a half-century ago by Dr. D. James Kennedy, Coral Ridge had become nationally known through its televised services (reaching as many as 3.5 million viewers weekly) and through Dr. Kennedy's widely followed Evangelism Explosion movement. The church's landmark worship facility—topped by a 300-foot spire and featuring a pipe organ with 6,600 pipes—had been dedicated by my grandfather Billy Graham, in February 1974 (I was nineteen months old). But by the twenty-first century, attendance there was in decline, and a further blow came with Dr. Kennedy's death in 2007.

Eventually, as Coral Ridge pursued its search for a successor to the only senior pastor the church had ever known, my name surfaced in the discussion. Over a period of several weeks, I was contacted a couple of times by people representing Coral Ridge's leadership, asking me to consider being one of the candidates for the position. That was honoring as well as mind-boggling. But after praying about it, and asking others to pray as well, I realized my interest level in pursuing it was zero. I knew I was already at the post where God had assigned me, and where he was doing a great work. I couldn't imagine stepping away.

As the months went by, a new and intriguing idea came into the picture. What if Coral Ridge and New City were to merge? Through some startling developments and conversations late in 2008, groups from each church began to sense that this idea had God's fingerprints all over it. Soon the elder teams of both churches were sensing that carefully exploring such a merger was the right thing before God for us all.

On a mid-January Sunday in 2009, both congregations heard

a public announcement about the potential merger, a plan that would install me as senior pastor of the new combined church. At the time, Fort Lauderdale's leading newspaper reported that the Coral Ridge congregation greeted the announcement with "gasps, then applause." But at New City, there were tears. I emphasized to them my conviction that God was asking us to put what we loved on the altar.

In the weeks ahead, there were plenty of people inside and outside both churches who wondered whether such a merger could ever really succeed. Even the Fort Lauderdale newspaper pointed out obvious contrasts, describing me as a pastor with a "scruffy face," "tan skin," and "a taste for surfing" and "mainstream music"—not exactly the image that a well-established church like Coral Ridge had developed over its five decades.

The newspaper quoted me as saying that Coral Ridge's willingness to consider the merger was a positive sign of their flexibility: "For anyone who thinks Coral Ridge can't make any changes, this unconventional move demonstrates that they can and are willing to."

Nevertheless, I had as many questions about it as anybody else.

"FASTEN YOUR SEATBELTS"

I had to admit that at New City I sometimes felt the desire to move faster, higher, and farther than we'd so far attained in our congregation. I had dreams and ambitions about what I wanted us to become. But a big part of me also wanted to see the door firmly closed to the possibility of any merger with Coral Ridge, especially given how widely the two congregations seemed to differ in culture and mind-set and expectations.

When I talked to my grandfather about it, he told me, "All this scares me, but I trust God to act."

And God was acting. I sensed clear indications that he was

pushing this forward. So did the elder teams in both churches, who in March agreed unanimously on the merger plan that a joint team from both churches had drafted. That same month I preached for the first time at Coral Ridge, and this was followed by a congregational vote. More than 90 percent of the Coral Ridge congregation cast their ballots in support of the merger. On Easter Sunday, both congregations began meeting together for the first time. A month later, on May 10, 2009, I was formally installed as senior pastor of the combined church.

The next day I offered the congregation a written message, through my blog, entitled “Come Die with Me.” I first recalled my impressions of the previous evening:

As one new church, we celebrated God’s promise to build his church. Through the praying, praising, preaching, and taking of vows, God came near and reminded us that it’s all about him and his glory, his fame, his renown. God’s presence was indeed thick and unmistakable.

I reviewed the main thrust of a sobering message given us that evening by my friend John Wood, a Presbyterian pastor from Tennessee:

With God-fueled fire in his eyes, he reminded all of us that bearing fruit requires death. Jesus said we must die in order that we might live. Daily Christian living, in other words, is daily Christian dying: dying to our trivial comforts, soul-shrinking conveniences, arrogant preferences, and self-centered entitlements, and living for something much larger than what makes us comfortable and safe. *God does everything through people who understand they’re nothing. And God does nothing through those who think they’re everything.*

Then I built on John’s point in expressing my expectation of God’s great work in our future together at Coral Ridge. And I extended an invitation:

I believe this one new church will thrive beyond anything we could ever ask or imagine if it's packed with gospel-intoxicated people: people who understand that since Christ laid his life down for us, we must lay our lives down for others. . . . A gospel-saturated church is a church filled with people who give everything they have because they understand that *in Christ they already have everything they need*. . . .

So, having been duly installed and charged, I invite all of you to spend your life dying with me.

Let this one new church show the watching world what human life and community can look like when a pack of God-centered missionaries spend their life seeking to serve rather than be served.

My closing line: "Fasten your seatbelts."

All that—including the final admonition—were words I would need to urgently remember in the weeks and months ahead. Although I'd expected some tough times to crop up as two very different congregations merged into one, I had no idea how ugly and messy it would become.

CRESCENDO OF PAIN

With the merger and the leadership transition, a small but vocal group of long-time Coral Ridge members immediately began voicing opposition to practically any and every change we initiated or even considered at the church. Blogs were posted, notes and letters were circulated—some anonymously—with false accusations about me. Just three months after I arrived, a vigorous petition drive was started to get me removed, and it gained steam. Some people began lamenting the huge mistake they'd made in agreeing to the merger, and they grumbled that the whole thing had turned into a "hostile takeover." Their tone was frequently heated and vicious. Battle lines were drawn, rumors raced, and the spirits of those who supported me

sagged. There was a crescendo of misunderstandings, frustration, and pain.

I continued in my determination to bring about what we believed were needed changes at the church, but the virulence of the opposition to them was almost more than I could bear. I was undergoing the shelling of my life—and I was plenty ready to quit and escape elsewhere. I was informed of possible other job offers from around the country, and believe me, they were tempting. It would have been so easy just to walk away from the turmoil I was in and never look back.

All that is what I was going through when, mercifully, vacation time rolled around in June 2009.

On our first morning away, I woke up still saturated with the misery that had been intensifying for so many weeks. I opened up my Bible; in the reading plan I was following, it so happened that the day's passages included the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Colossians.

As I read those verses—the glorious message of which we'll investigate together in the pages to come—my eyes were opened. God's Holy Spirit helped me see the incredible sufficiency of Christ and the gospel. I could see it with greater clarity and deeper personal application than I'd ever experienced. I sensed my miserable chains falling away.

My true situation came into focus. I'd never realized before how dependent I'd become on human approval and acceptance until so much of it was taken away in the roiling controversy at Coral Ridge. Before, in every church I'd been a part of, I was widely accepted and approved and appreciated. I'd always felt loved in church. Now, for the first time, I found myself in the uncomfortable position of being deeply disliked and distrusted, and by more than a few people. Now I realized just how much I'd been relying on something *other* than—something *more* than—the approval and acceptance and love that were already mine in Jesus.

IN FULL COLOR

In my misery I demanded an explanation from God. After all, I had done what he asked me to do—I had put “my baby” on the altar. And now this? Like Jonah in the belly of the great fish, I was arguing with God and making my case for why God owed me rescue. Worn out, afraid, and angry, I insisted that God give me my old life back. The gentle but straightforward answer from God that I received from the pages of Colossians that morning was simple but sobering: “It’s not your old life you want back; it’s your old idols you want back, and I love you too much to give them back to you.”

I was being challenged by God to more fully understand exactly what I *already* had in Christ. For far longer than I recognized, I had been depending on the endorsement of others to validate me—to make me feel that I mattered.

God began rescuing me from that slavery by forcing me to rediscover the gospel.

I was learning the hard way that the gospel alone can free us from our addiction to being liked—that Jesus measured up for us so that we wouldn’t have to live under the enslaving pressure of measuring up for others.

His good news met me in my dark place, at my deepest need. Through his liberating word, I was being transformed, freed, refreshed.

I started learning to see the many-faceted dimensions of the gospel in a more dazzling way. It’s almost as if, for me, the gospel changed from something hazy and monochromatic to something richly multicolored, vivid, and vibrant. I was realizing in a fresh way the *now*-power of the gospel—that the gospel doesn’t simply rescue us *from* the past and rescue us *for* the future; it also rescues us *in* the present from being enslaved to things like fear, insecurity, anger, self-reliance, bitterness, entitlement, and insignificance (more on all this later). Through my pain, I was

being convinced all over again that the power of the gospel is just as necessary and relevant *after* you become a Christian as it is before.

In our new congregation, there would still be hardships ahead. In many ways, the worst struggles were still in front of us, weighing heavily on my heart, on my family's hearts, and on the hearts of so many in the church. But through those adversities, I would come to depend on God as never before. When that difficult year was over, I'd be able to look back and realize that *God seemed bigger to me than ever*, while I'd never been so small.

He had stripped me down—wrecked me afresh! And when he does that to a person—when you actually feel like you have *nothing*—Jesus becomes more to you than you ever could have hoped or imagined.

That June morning was when *Jesus plus nothing equals everything*—the gospel—became for me more than a theological passion, more than a cognitive catch-phrase. It became my functional lifeline. Rediscovering the gospel enabled me to see that:

because Jesus was strong for me, I was free to be weak;
because Jesus won for me, I was free to lose;
because Jesus was someone, I was free to be no one;
because Jesus was extraordinary, I was free to be ordinary;
because Jesus succeeded for me, I was free to fail.

This began to define my life anew in bright and liberating ways.

I believe God wants this liberating truth to define your life as well, and also to define the life of the church.

So, together let's explore the liberating explosion of *Jesus plus nothing equals everything*.

2

WANTING IT ALL



The phrase on this book's cover just sounds right, doesn't it? There's a certain ring to it as the phrases build:

Jesus . . .
plus nothing . . .
equals everything.

I'll even wager you've given those words a quick and appreciative nod. It's just not a statement you'd ever be much inclined to disagree with—on its surface, at least. But what does it *really* mean? Why should it merit any further thought, let alone intense scrutiny? How could it possibly help you and me?

It's a statement that's set up as an equation, of course, but what this expression leads to at the end is not so much a sum as an attainment, a destination, a realization—an *experience*. So, to analyze it more closely and understand it more fully, let's try starting at the end of it—with the "everything." That's where we'll focus in these opening pages; then we'll carefully work our way backward toward the statement's beginning. We'll see what we discover along the way. And then, with new and deeper insight (I hope and pray), we'll proceed through this proposition from front to back, further milking it for all its worth. So, topically speaking, here's this book's basic outline:

- a) Everything
- b) Nothing
- c) Jesus
 - d) Jesus
 - e) plus *Nothing*
 - f) equals *Everything*

And now, fasten your seatbelts, because one thing I'm sure of: *Jesus plus nothing equals everything* is a truth that no one on earth grasps fully enough as yet. It's a profound reality just begging to be pried open so that we find amazingly more to love and enjoy about it.

EVERYTHING? REALLY?

Isn't it interesting how this implied promise of *everything* is not something we instinctively resist or shy away from. When you first saw this book's cover, I doubt you reacted to the title by thinking, "But who even wants or needs 'everything'? *Barely enough* is all I care about—and maybe even less. *The minimal life* is what I'm after; keep it stunted, keep it slight, keep it small. Limits, deficiency, constriction, confinement—hey, I'm good with all that."

No, that's not at all what you thought. Because the human soul insists otherwise. Throughout history, philosophers and sages couldn't help noticing the hole that's in our hearts, the universal and insatiable yearning to experience *more*, to attain something higher, deeper, fuller, richer, stronger, wiser, safer, happier. Deeply and sincerely, we want to live larger than we do, and with an epic, sweeping perspective. We crave a full acceptance and favor, we crave a lasting affection and approval, we crave meaning and purpose, and we crave a freedom from our limitations and restrictions and failures.

Whatever security, happiness, relief, rescue, affirmation,

meaning, and sense of purpose we're privileged enough to experience—it still isn't enough. Something within us hungers for what we don't yet have. And whether or not we realize it, this drives our every pursuit. We crave the more—sometimes wildly and illogically, it seems, but consistently, recurrently. We'll try anything and everything to fill this vacuum we abhor.

Observing this phenomenon, the wisest of the wise have concluded that it points to God. Augustine caught this perhaps most famously and succinctly, sixteen centuries ago, on the opening page of his *Confessions*, where he told the Lord, "You made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you." Was any better description of humanity ever written?

Are you experiencing any restlessness in your life somewhere? I am. I'm sure we all are, if we're honest. Because we crave the *everything*.

Twelve centuries after Augustine, the brilliant mind of Pascal took up this same human predicament. "All men seek happiness," he noted; "this is the motive of every action of every man, even of those who hang themselves." (So perceptive, that man Pascal.) He then went on to cite humanity's endless sighs and groans as confirmation that nobody ever really satisfies this innate desire: "All complain—princes and subjects, noblemen and commoners, old and young, strong and weak, learned and ignorant, healthy and sick, of all countries, all times, all ages, and all conditions." Such universal dissatisfaction ought to convince us "of our inability to reach the good by our own efforts," Pascal says, but it's a lesson we fail to grasp: "And thus, while the present never satisfies us, experience dupes us," and so onward we stumble "from misfortune to misfortune."

Although, Pascal continues, "there was once in man a true happiness," nothing remains of this—except "the mark and empty trace, which he in vain tries to fill from all his surroundings, seeking from things absent the help he does not obtain in

things present. But these are all inadequate.” Why are they all inadequate? Pascal reaches the astute deduction: “Because the infinite abyss can only be filled by an infinite and immutable object, that is to say, only by God Himself.”¹

The *everything* we crave is so vast, so comprehensive, so deep, so high, that it extends even this far—to *God himself*.

OUR DILEMMA

In our own day, Paul David Tripp—counselor, pastor, and author—takes his own turn at examining all this. In *A Shelter in the Time of Storm*, he tells his reader about “the dilemma of your humanity”; then, with wise and loving care, he shows where this can lead:

You are clearly not in control of the details or destiny of your life, yet as a rational, purposeful, emotional being, you cry for a deep and abiding sense of well-being. In your quest, what you are actually discovering is that you were hardwired to be connected to Another. . . . In this way, every human being is on a quest for God; the problem is we don’t know that, and in our quest for stability, we attempt to stand on an endless catalog of God-replacements that end up sinking with us. . . .

There is a Rock to be found. There is an inner rest to be experienced that’s deeper than conceptual understanding, human love, personal success, and the accumulation of possessions. There is a rock that will give you rest even when all of those things have been taken away. That rock is Christ, and you were hardwired to find what you are seeking in him. In his grace, he won’t play hide-and-seek with you. In your weakness and weariness, cry out to him. He will find you, and he will be your Rock.

He is the rock for which you are longing, he is the one who alone is able to give you the sense that all is well. And as you abandon your hope in the mirage rocks of this fallen world, and begin to hunger for the true rock, he will reach out, and place you on solid ground.²

I'm reminded at this point of the famous words of C. S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity*: "If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy"—and don't we all?—"the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world."³ In Lewis's argument, that "world," of course, is eternal life in the presence of God our savior.

So, to summarize: Augustine says we're doomed to restlessness apart from God; Pascal sees an infinite abyss inside us that only God can fill; and we're all hard-wired for a quest after God, Tripp echoes. And all this is proven, Lewis argues, when our very own deepest desires go unfulfilled.

To get a scriptural focus on this built-in human hunger for everything, all it takes is a glance at a few Bible passages, though countless others would steer us in this direction as well.

Genesis 1 lays the strongest of foundations for man's link with *everythingness*. First and foremost is the fact of our being made in God's image, created after his likeness. That's a staggering truth, overflowing with richness and mystery. To be in some significant way *like God*—to actually represent him somehow, to in some way mirror him—what greater bond with vastness and greatness and momentous meaning could there possibly be than that?

Moreover, Genesis emphasizes that newly created man was assigned dominion "over *every* living thing that moves on the earth," while for food he had his choice of "*every* plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and *every* tree with seed in its fruit" (Gen. 1:28–29). Don't fail to appreciate the scope here. By divine design, man as originally created enjoyed a wide-horizon existence characterized chiefly not by limits but by the lack of them. His daily sphere was suffused with a very real sense of *everything*. And that everything included, most importantly, an unhindered relationship with God himself.

Flip over to the Bible's ending, and we see an unlimited

comprehensiveness emphasized again, this time for humanity's future existence—yours and mine. It encompasses the cosmos, and it's all fresh and new: “a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away” (Rev. 21:1). The Lord on his throne declares, “Behold, I am making all things new” (v. 5). Once more, don't miss the massive scope here.

We don't forget that between Genesis 1 and the last pages of Revelation there unfolds an epic story marked by incalculable tragedies. But grasp again what God will do for his redeemed people in the end: “[He] will wipe away *every* tear from their eyes” (Rev. 7:17). Pause there for a moment. Can we even begin to appreciate what that statement embraces and what it makes possible in our experience? “And death shall be *no more*, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain *anymore*, for the former things have passed away” (21:4).

MORE THAN TALK?

Yet Revelation 21 and 22 are future. For now, we can't quite get beyond the restlessness that Augustine relates, the abyss that Pascal observes, the quest for solid ground that Tripp writes of, and the unfulfilled desires Lewis mentions—all of it pointing Godward.

If those men are right, then there's an *everything*—a fullness, a completeness, a life-abundance—that is in fact available and attainable, and surely it's worth whatever effort to discover how to actually experience it.

But then, all around us our cynical, secular culture scoffs at all this we-so-desperately-need-God talk. To them, what Augustine and Pascal and the others speak of looks like self-flattering myth fulfillment—nothing more than quaint, sentimental nonsense.

“Oh no,” modern religious minds will quickly counter. “It's true—*God and God alone* can really satisfy.” For many or most of

these religious folks, however, isn't that response mere talk? Isn't it just a parroted platitude, a concept assented to but never quite thoroughly embraced? Isn't it right that these people's religious lives can end up looking as empty as anyone's—falling far short of demonstrating the satisfaction they claim their God supplies?

And lots of them know it. Deep down, they're only too aware of this inconsistency, so painfully disappointing. So they let their souls sink into a sad and weary resignation. What's the use? Why expect more?

Eventually, they may even lose all faith in the only-God-can-satisfy claim. They lose their proper sense of the *everything*.

Yet deep down, the desires are still there, of course, intense as ever.

So what do we do with them?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

BLOG

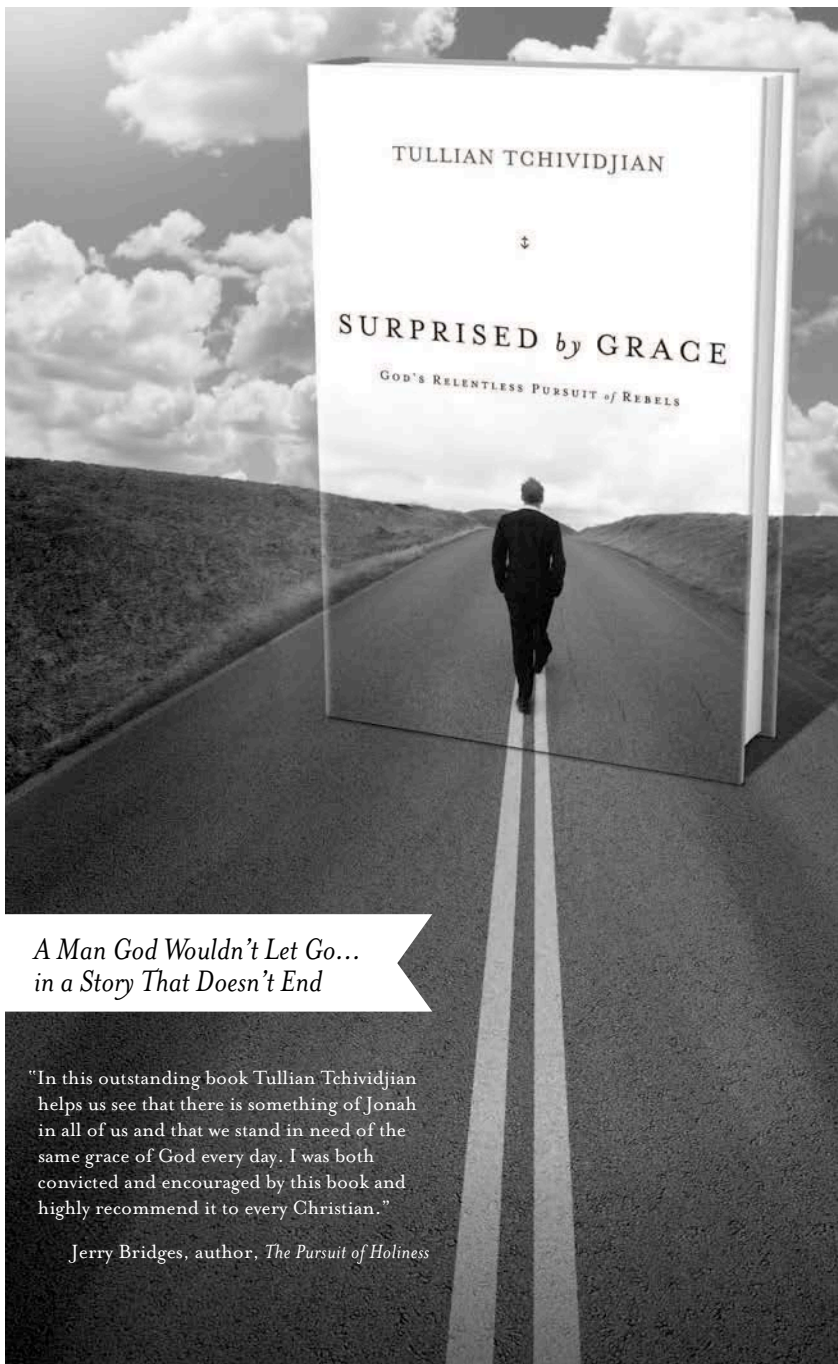
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*A Man God Wouldn't Let Go...
in a Story That Doesn't End*

"In this outstanding book Tullian Tchividjian helps us see that there is something of Jonah in all of us and that we stand in need of the same grace of God every day. I was both convicted and encouraged by this book and highly recommend it to every Christian."

Jerry Bridges, author, *The Pursuit of Holiness*

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"Tullian writes like he preaches, as a man consumed with Jesus and the life-giving power of God's grace."

+ JACK GRAHAM, Pastor, Prestonwood Baptist Church, Plano, Texas

"This book will push the gospel message more deeply into every corner of your life. Tullian understands like few others how the gospel shines like a beacon of hope in times of despair."

+ ELYSE FITZPATRICK, author, *Because He Loves Me*

"Tullian tells how he himself discovered the full magnitude of God's grace in the midst of difficult times and does so in a way that will bring relief, exhilaration, and freedom to struggling Christians."

+ GENE EDWARD VEITH, Provost and Professor of Literature, Patrick Henry College

"A page-after-page plea to the church not to be afraid of the glorious provisions and freedoms of the grace of Jesus."

+ PAUL TRIPP, author, *What Did You Expect?*

"Tullian not only apprehends aright the goodness of the good news but also communicates it with a passion that is infectious."

+ MARK GALLI, Senior Managing Editor, *Christianity Today*

"Deeply theological and yet profoundly personal, Tullian takes us right into the depths of the gospel of Christ alone and causes us to wonder in amazement once again at what has been done for us because of God's great love."

+ BRITT MERRICK, founder, the Reality family of churches

"A faithful and fresh exposition of Colossians from a pastor daring to take the gospel of God's grace as seriously as possible."

+ SCOTTY SMITH, Pastor for Preaching, Christ Community Church, Franklin, Tennessee

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