

FOREWORD *by* NANCY GUTHRIE

A NARRATIVE *of the*  
LIFE, DEATH, *and* RESURRECTION  
*of* JESUS CHRIST



BEHOLD  
*the* KING *of*  
GLORY

R U S S   R A M S E Y

“*Behold* means *see* with fresh understanding. Read this book to be renewed in your hopes—for today, for tomorrow, forever. Share this book with others, or read it to your children, so they may behold Christ too. Ramsey has succeeded at capturing and displaying the drama of Jesus—incarnate, dead, and risen—with memorable force.”

**Robert W. Yarbrough**, Professor of New Testament, Covenant Theological Seminary

“Russ Ramsey’s solid biblical teaching and storytelling are treasures that have deeply impacted my journey as a Christian working in Hollywood. His writing creates a deep hunger for God’s Word. This is a book I will give friends to help them understand what I believe about the meaning of the cross.”

**Korey Scott Pollard**, TV Producer and Assistant Director, *A to Z*, *Grey’s Anatomy*, *House M.D.*, *CSI*, *Monk*, *Rizoli & Isles*, *Nashville*, *Lie to Me*

“There is a graceful simplicity to Ramsey’s prose—and to his retelling of the old familiar story—that enables him to truly move his readers with the potency of gospel. Here is a quiet voice that can shake stone.”

**N. D. Wilson**, author, *Death by Living* and *Boys of Blur*

“I don’t know anyone who can make the stories—and the Story—in Scripture feel as present, as alive, and as sweeping as Russ Ramsey. His prose, his grasp of history and theology, not to mention his love of Jesus, do more than merely draw me into *his* book—they makes me want to read the Bible.”

**Andrew Peterson**, Singer, Songwriter, Author of *The Wingfeather Saga*

“Ramsey has written a captivating narrative of the life of Jesus in a biographical style that captures the life of Jesus so vividly, at times you’ll wonder if Ramsey sat down and spoke with all the people involved in the story. It’s the story of a real man who walked this earth and died on a cross bearing the wrath we deserve. Historical and faithful to Scripture, *Behold the King of Glory* is a wonderful Bible-reading companion for the Lenten season.”

**Trillia Newbell**, author, *United: Captured by God’s Vision for Diversity and Fear and Faith*

“With a writer’s imagination and skill, a theologian’s backbone, and a disciple’s devotion, Ramsey weds knowledge to emotional resonance and information to immanence in this moving account of Jesus’s life. You will grow and delight as you travel with him.”

**Dan Doriani**, Vice President of Strategic Academic Projects and Professor of Theology, Covenant Seminary

“Many of us have wondered at some point, ‘What would it be like to live when Jesus did?’ With purity to biblical truth and perceptive insight into how the human heart works, Russ Ramsey answers that question. He tells the story of Jesus dwelling among us—a story filled with political intrigue, baffling miracles, relational complexities, and heartbreaking suffering—by presenting old truths in engagingly fresh ways. Read this book! And then share it with others who need to witness Jesus anew.”

**Jani Ortlund**, Executive Vice President, Renewal Ministries; author, *Fearlessly Feminine* and *His Loving Law, Our Lasting Legacy*

“It gives me great pleasure to endorse the life and writing of Russ Ramsey. We have been in the trenches together caring for the ‘called out ones.’ Russ gave us gospel immersion and fruits of deep care with *Behold the Lamb of God*. He continues this life-giving pattern of grace and service with this new, beautifully written book pointing to the Hero King Jesus.”

**Charlie Peacock**, author; teacher; Composer/Producer, AMC Drama, *TURN*; record producer for The Civil Wars, Switchfoot, and The Lone Bellow

“Ramsey’s ability to knit the accounts of the gospels into a highly readable, easily accessible, and grace-saturated narrative is a blessing for all. Telling the story of Jesus in bite-sized readings that can easily accord with anticipation and celebration of the Easter season makes this book a special gift.”

**Bryan Chapell**, President Emeritus, Covenant Theological Seminary; Senior Pastor, Grace Presbyterian Church, Peoria, Illinois

“This book throws open the curtains on Jesus and invites us to taste and see the *only* love that is better than life. This isn’t a great book just for the season of Lent, but for every season of life.”

**Scotty Smith**, Teacher in Residence, West End Community Church, Nashville, Tennessee

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*of* JESUS CHRIST



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R U S S   R A M S E Y

FOREWORD *by* NANCY GUTHRIE

■ ■ CROSSWAY  
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

*Behold the King of Glory: A Narrative of the Life, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ*

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For Chris, Maggie, Kate, and Jane.  
You give so much more than you take.  
This book is for you.  
I pray you would come to know Jesus better  
through my life than my writing.





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# Foreword

Some people really know how to tell a story. They have the unique ability to make the hair on our necks stand up and to cause lumps to form in our throats by their rendition—even when we’ve heard the story before, perhaps many times before. That’s Russ Ramsey. And the beautiful thing about the story Russ has to tell and the unique gift with which he tells it is that this is not just any story. This is *the* story. This is the story of the One who existed in eternity past, the One who made all there is and then entered into his creation as one of us. This is the story of his coming to his own and his own receiving him not. It is the story of his seeking after the lost, healing the sick, casting out demons. It is the story of his setting his face to go to Jerusalem to die. Oh, what a story.

I grew up singing the song written by Fanny Crosby:

Tell me the story of Jesus,  
Write on my heart every word;  
Tell me the story most precious,  
Sweetest that ever was heard.

As the years go by, this song remains in my head and this desire continues to beat in my heart. Perhaps it does in yours too. Perhaps you are like me—someone who grew up hearing the story, or more accurately, the *stories*. I am so very grateful for growing up in the church where I learned stories from the Bible week by week. But for much of my life I didn’t have a clear sense of how to put the smaller scenes together in a way that allowed me to grasp the flow and intent of the story. I didn’t understand what Jesus was saying when he announced at the beginning of his ministry that the kingdom of God was at hand and how that reality colors everything that is to come. I didn’t sense the gradual deepening of understanding of who Jesus is in the minds and hearts of the disciples. I didn’t feel the drumbeat of Jesus’s steady march toward the cross that



builds throughout the narrative. If you can relate to my experience, you'll find that this book will help you to grasp the flow of the life and ministry of Christ even as it gives you a fresh perspective on familiar events and interchanges. If you're like me, you'll find yourself thinking, "I never saw that before," all along the way.

But maybe you are someone who doesn't have this history with the stories of the Bible. What a gift this book will be to you. I feel a little jealous for the newness of some of the discoveries you will make along the way. You will find your mind challenged and your heart touched as *Behold the King of Glory* blends the unique contributions of the four Gospels into a cohesive and compelling narrative, helping you to see Christ in a way you may not have seen him before.

In the pages that follow, Russ Ramsey skillfully and carefully paraphrases the biblical text and infuses it with historical context to convey a vivid sense of each scene. He invites us to do what the Scriptures invite us to do again and again, which is to behold the King of Glory. To behold is to gaze at intently, not to glance at casually. This book not only invites you, it also assists you in fixing your gaze on our great King.

Into eternity all of those who are the King's glad subjects will be giving honor and glory to him who sits on the throne. So let's begin to behold his beauty now. May the greatness and goodness of our King become sweeter to your soul with every page you turn.

Nancy Guthrie  
Nashville, Tennessee

# Preface

## *The Books That Could Be Written*

Jesus's disciple John was a writer. When John sat down to write, he clearly cared not only about the content he meant to convey, but also about the way he put it all together. John was an artist. The story he set out to tell in his Gospel is the most ambitious story there is—how God created and redeemed humanity. Imagine sitting down to write that story. How would you start? When would you be finished?

Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, John opened his Gospel with the ambition of a man who was going to do his best to give us as much of the scope of this story as he possibly could. If you don't believe me, just look at how he begins. He takes us all the way back to the dawn of time: "In the beginning was the Word . . ." <sup>1</sup> Ambitious.

When John comes to the end of his story, he reveals what every writer denies at first but eventually acknowledges—he lives in a world of limits. For any story we set out to tell, we end up telling only some of it. There is nothing for it. So as ambitious as his opening line might have been, John ends his Gospel acknowledging the reality of limits: "Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written." <sup>2</sup>

I believe John's Gospel is exactly what the Holy Spirit meant for him to write, without error and more than sufficient to reveal the One who was the Word, present at creation and solely suited to accomplish our redemption.

I also believe, though, that as John wrote, he grieved the stories he had to leave out for the sake of the narrative he meant to tell. I wonder with joyful fascination what stories ended up on his editing room floor

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<sup>1</sup> John 1:1

<sup>2</sup> John 21:25

as discarded bits of vellum and parchment. And I wonder what stories remain that he thought about cutting, but then just couldn't bear to.

My hope is that this book would serve as a faithful servant of Scripture. I've packed this book with hundreds of Scripture references. Let me explain how I use them. Throughout this book I paraphrase pretty freely in order to maintain a unified voice. Rarely do I quote Scripture directly or at length. This applies to character dialogue. If a character says something and there's a Scripture reference next to his or her statement, that doesn't necessarily mean I'm quoting the original text. I'm probably not. More than likely I'm paraphrasing and distilling a larger moment in Scripture to work within the limits of this book. The references I include are there to lead you to the stories Scripture unfolds with perfect sufficiency.

While I'm on this point, I should note that I engage in some speculation in this book, imagining how certain conversations happened, how particular characters felt, and what various scenes looked like. I have tried to limit my speculations to reasonable inferences that wouldn't redirect the Bible's narrative arc. I've avoided inventing characters or manufacturing extrabiblical encounters. I've tried to keep my speculative input within the natural and plausible lines of human nature.

For example, Scripture tells us nothing about how the nobleman from Capernaum felt as his son lay dying.<sup>3</sup> But as a father of four, I imagine he must have felt some of what I experienced when one of my own children had a health scare—helplessness, worry, desperation. I've attributed some of these feelings to the nobleman on the basis that any father would certainly be enveloped in a flurry of emotions like these. When I speculate, it is in the hope that this journey through the pages of Scripture will capture your imagination in ways that will serve your life-long study of the Bible.

Most of the editorial choices I made about what to include (and what to leave out) were based on my desire to offer a story that would drive readers relentlessly to the empty tomb by way of the cross. Exploring the political and religious conditions of the day were crucial for this objective. After all, God in his wisdom sent his Son into the world of Herod Antipas, Pontius Pilate, Caiaphas the High Priest, the Pharisees, and the Sanhedrin—who together became the fuel God used to propel this narra-

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<sup>3</sup> John 4:46–54

tive toward Golgotha. I wanted to unpack their significance, and I wanted to show God's providence in sending his Son into our world at that time.

So while I have poured myself into the telling of certain stories, I have also left many beloved stories untouched. I've glossed over some better-known characters (like the woman at the well in John 4) while taking pains to expound on others who were given far fewer verses (like John the Baptist). I assure you I did this under protest. I wanted to write about all of it—every person, every conversation, every miracle, every conflict. Oh, the books that could be written.

*Behold the King of Glory: A Narrative of the Life, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ* was written in a world of limits. I set up some rules for myself as I wrote. This book would have forty chapters—one for each day of Lent if people wanted to use it as a Lenten devotional. The chapters would be between 1,500 to 2,000 words each. I would try to find a voice similar to John's, who walked that line of never being overtly self-referential even though he was undeniably writing the story of his own life as a follower of Christ. As with John's Gospel, my narrative would stay in the third person, making no direct eye contact with the reader until the end.

I developed these rules while writing the companion to this book: *Behold the Lamb of God: An Advent Narrative*, a twenty-five chapter (one for each day of December if people wanted to use it as an Advent devotional) telling of the epic arc of Scripture from the garden of Eden to the manger in Bethlehem. Together, *Behold the Lamb of God* and *Behold the King of Glory* tell the story of the need for, the coming of, and the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

I love the Gospels more than any other writings. I give my life to the study and expression of Scripture, and it is one of my greatest joys to be able to say that. The story told in these pages is my story. Every picture of brokenness in these pages is in some measure the story of my own brokenness. Every need that rises to the surface is in some way a need I share. Every tendency toward rebellion, every cry of desperation, every prayer for forgiveness, and every hope of redemption rings true in me. I write not as a removed researcher, but as an eyewitness to the impact this story has had on my own life and the world I inhabit. This is the story of how God loved and rescued me. I pray the same would be true for you.





# Acknowledgments

To the following I owe a debt of deep gratitude.

Lisa, Chris, Maggie, Kate, and Jane. Thank you for loving me so well and for sharing me with the various coffee shops and libraries of Nashville so that I could write this book. Your support and affection are among the best gifts God has ever given me.

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He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

COLOSSIANS 1:15–20

# 1

## Life for the Dying

JOHN 4:43–54



No father should have to watch his own son die.

The road from Capernaum to Cana ran uphill the entire way, pulling at the already burdened nobleman's steps. He concluded there was only one option that might save his dying son, and that solitary hope had him moving away from the boy as quickly as he could move. It was all he knew to do.

If he hurried, he could cover the twelve miles between Galilee's shores westward to Cana before evening. Though his culture considered it unbecoming of a grown man to run, time was against him. Regardless of what anyone thought, he needed to keep moving, and in this moment neither his wealth, nor his age, nor his position mattered. He was desperate.

From humble beginnings, the nobleman had risen to a position of midlevel importance in Galilee as a servant of Herod Antipas—son of Herod the Great. It was Herod Antipas's world. The nobleman was only living in it. Back before Herod the Great died, he divided oversight of his part of the Roman Empire between three of his sons: Philip, who oversaw the northeastern lands of the Golan Heights; Archelaus, who became king over Judea, Idumea, and Samaria; and Antipas, who assumed the lesser title of Tetrarch over the regions of Galilee and Perea.

Though Archelaus was older and presumed to have the greatest leadership potential of the three brothers, Antipas was driven to command respect. Knowing it would not simply be given, he was determined to earn it. The Galilee he inherited had become politically unstable, a haven for dissidents and outlaws. To Antipas, this was as much an opportunity as it was a problem. He wouldn't just rule Galilee. He would transform it.



Following in his father's footsteps, Antipas did the only thing he knew would gain notice: he built. Early on he rebuilt the war-ravaged Sepphoris into his capital city, which became home to over fifty thousand people. Not too long after that he moved his capital to the glimmering shores of the Sea of Galilee, establishing the great city of Tiberius, with its stadium, hot-springs bathhouse, temple, and royal palace. Under Antipas's leadership the entire region was reborn.

This was the nobleman's Galilee. Though his title was modest, it conveyed that he was a man of influence and affluence—a royal by right of his service to his king. But even if he could call upon all the resources of Rome—all its wealth, its intellectual potency, its political power—the one thing he wanted most, Rome could not provide.

He wanted his son to live.

His mission carried a sad irony. The same Rome that had given him his esteemed position in the world had also been responsible for the deaths of so many sons whom fathers just like him would have given anything to save. Only a few decades earlier, Antipas's father ordered the execution of all Israelite boys under the age of two in the hope of killing the one many whispered would be Israel's promised, coming Deliverer—the one they called the King of Glory.<sup>1</sup>

Though Herod had no way to know if he had succeeded, his cruelty heaped sorrow upon countless mothers, fathers, brothers, and sisters across the land. How many prayers went up in those days for the sons Rome took? How many fathers searched for a reason to hope and found none?

The world was a hard and broken place. The allure of wealth and power, which always seemed to cost men far more than it gave, didn't matter to the nobleman anymore. Now he was just a father throwing up prayers to whoever occupied the heavens above as he made his way to the little village of Cana, hoping to find the only man on earth he imagined could help—Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus had made a name for himself at a wedding in Cana not too long before the nobleman's son took ill. Jesus was there with his family when, to the host's great embarrassment, the wine ran out. Knowing her

<sup>1</sup>Ps. 24:7–10; Matt. 2:1–6, 16–18

son, Jesus's mother asked him if there was anything he might be able to do to rescue the feast. Jesus gathered the servants and told them to fill the ceremonial washing jars with water. Somehow, though no one could explain it, the water became wine—good wine.<sup>2</sup>

News of this miracle spread quickly. But the miracle itself wasn't what set the nobleman off on his quest to find Jesus. It was how people said he did it: quietly. Had he been a charlatan out to make his living by tricking people, Jesus would have made the miracle primarily about himself and maybe even charged people to see it. Instead, the story went that he sought to deflect attention from himself.

Jesus had been away from the region for some time now. But reports steadily made their way back to Capernaum that Jesus was still performing other signs and wonders in and around Jerusalem. It was hard to know which of the stories were true and which were inflated composites of third-party anecdotes. Taken on their own, some seemed more credible than others. But taken together, they presented Jesus as a man who loved the hurting, healed the sick, and welcomed the destitute. This stirred in the nobleman the courage to hope since he himself was hurting, his son was sick, and the entire world around him seemed to be a fractured mess.

The nobleman thought if anyone could save his son, it would be Jesus. As soon as the village came into view, he began asking everyone he met if they knew where he could find the man from Nazareth. It didn't take long. Seeing Jesus, it occurred to him that the course of his life seldom put him in the position he now found himself. He was in need. There was nothing he could offer Jesus in exchange for what he was about to ask from him. All he had were his words and a little bit of hope.

The nobleman spoke to Jesus with concise humility, "Sir, my son is dying. Will you help us?"

Jesus looked at the man, and then at the people gathered around whose interests were now suddenly piqued. He said, "Unless you all see me perform signs and wonders, you refuse to believe in me. Is this what you want from me? A sign?"<sup>3</sup>

The nobleman hadn't expected Jesus's rebuke. He wasn't asking for

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<sup>2</sup> John 2:1–11

<sup>3</sup> John 4:47–48

a show. Still, Jesus raised the crucial question: what did he want, really? Did he want Jesus to do a trick for him? No doubt many of those gathered hoped for just that. They had heard about the water becoming wine, and they wished they had been there to see it. They would love an encore.

But who did the nobleman think Jesus was? Did Jesus need to come to his son's bedside, put his hands on the boy's head, or speak a blessing? What did he want from him?

The nobleman said, "I want my son to live. That's what I want. I want him to live. I want him not to die. But I can't stop the death that is coming. So please, help me. Come to Capernaum. Please. Save him."

Seeing the sincerity of his hurt, Jesus said, "Yes. Go on home. Your son will live."<sup>4</sup>

Jesus's words alone would have to suffice because his answer made it apparent that he would not be making the trip to the boy's home in Capernaum. There would be no bedside visit, no incantation, no trick. Just these few words. The nobleman would have to accept that Jesus's word was as good as his presence.

So he departed robed in the logic that if Jesus actually possessed the supernatural ability to heal his son, then surely he could bring that healing with nothing but a word.

As the nobleman hurried back, one of his servants met him on the road. Breathless, the servant said, "He's getting better. He's getting better!"

The nobleman's eyes lit up; "What? When?"

The servant said, "Yesterday, about an hour past noon." It was the same moment when Jesus had promised that the boy would live.<sup>5</sup>

For all his nobility and the wealth that came with it, the most valuable title the nobleman held in that moment was "father." His son was alive and recovering, and Jesus of Nazareth had saved him. There was no question in the father's mind about that. When he got home, he told his entire household the story of how he had asked Jesus for this miracle and the way in which it was granted. They all marveled at this Nazarene who had given them such a precious gift. He had given life to the dying.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> John 4:49–50

<sup>5</sup> John 4:51–52

<sup>6</sup> John 4:53

# Wild with the Hope

MATTHEW 4:1–11



The details surrounding Jesus's birth became part of the lore of his community. Born in Bethlehem but raised in Nazareth, west of the Sea of Galilee, some said he was conceived while his mother was still a virgin and that his birth was a miracle from God, heralded by angels themselves.<sup>1</sup> Others assumed that the timing of his arrival—so soon after his parents' wedding—meant that if he wasn't an illegitimate son, then at the very least temptation had gotten the best of his parents before they wed.

Still, it was hard to deny that there was something unusual about Joseph and Mary's son. Even from a young age, his wisdom, understanding, and learning mystified the religious leaders when they heard him speak. His own community regarded him as a man who had found favor with God.<sup>2</sup> As his parents watched Jesus mature, they couldn't help but see his Nazareth years as a time of preparation for a calling they knew would inevitably lead him away from them.

Jesus was around thirty years old when he left Nazareth to begin his public ministry.<sup>3</sup> The first thing he did was journey to Bethany beyond the Jordan to find his cousin John.

John was a preacher who lived in the wilderness proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.<sup>4</sup> Dressed in a camel hair coat like the prophet Elijah, he looked like the child of a feral, violent land, but he spoke as one privy to the mysteries of God. People from all over were drawn to hear him.

<sup>1</sup> Luke 1:26–38; 2:8–21

<sup>2</sup> Luke 2:41–52

<sup>3</sup> Luke 3:23

<sup>4</sup> Luke 3:3

His message was simple and pointed: “Hope is here. The Lord is with us.” Many in Israel responded to John’s message by coming to confess their darkest secrets—to begin again a conversation with the Maker who promised to never forsake them.<sup>5</sup>

It had been a long time since the people of Israel had reason to think God was near, let alone active. Their recent history was a sad tale of sifting through the rubble of exile. Yes, they had come home. But like Job, though they were able to reconstruct much of what fell to the Babylonians and Assyrians who had carried them off, what they rebuilt could not replace all they had lost.<sup>6</sup> Neither could it take away their grief. They were poor in spirit—mourners, meek and hungry for righteousness. Estranged from comfort and unsure of their inheritance, they wanted to see God, and if not God himself then at least traces of his presence with them.<sup>7</sup>

Generations earlier, when their ancestors followed Joshua across the river where John now stood, they passed from being slaves in the wilderness to a mighty kingdom built on the promises of their God.<sup>8</sup> But now, every Roman sword that clinked against the armor moving through their streets and alleys reminded them that they had again returned to the wilderness of oppression. So when John emerged from the wild, proclaiming the nearness of God, many regarded him more as a guide than a stranger. They came to John, and he led one person after another down into this river that ran through their history as a people—one bank marking who they had been and the other who they would become. And in those waters, between those banks, he baptized them.

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John grew up with the stories of how God opened his own mother’s barren womb to bring him into this world. He knew he was born to proclaim the salvation of the Lord.<sup>9</sup> He also knew that the Lord had given his mother’s cousin Mary a son of her own—only Mary’s miracle wasn’t that she overcame barrenness to conceive. It was that she conceived while she was yet a virgin.

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<sup>5</sup>Deut. 31:8

<sup>6</sup>Job 42:10–11

<sup>7</sup>Matt. 5:2–6, 8

<sup>8</sup>Joshua 3

<sup>9</sup>Matt. 3:11

Back when Mary was pledged to marry Joseph, the angel of the Lord appeared to tell her that the Lord was giving her a boy and he would be called the Son of the Most High God. God was going to give this child David's throne where he would reign forever over the house of Jacob, and his kingdom would never end.<sup>10</sup> Mary would carry in her womb the King of Glory, the Savior of the world.

John's mother, Elizabeth, used to tell him about the time Mary, whom she sometimes referred to as "the mother of my Lord,"<sup>11</sup> came to visit and how when she entered their house, John leapt inside Elizabeth's belly. It was as though he couldn't wait to begin proclaiming the Lord's salvation, she told him.

John knew this was his path. He would never be wealthy. He would hold no position of power. He was the courier of the news that God was giving his forgetful creation the Savior he had promised so long ago.<sup>12</sup> John's purpose was to run wild with the hope that the Messiah had come.

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Jesus found his cousin baptizing at the river. When John saw him, he stopped and stared.

Jesus said, "Baptize me, John."

John resisted. "Me baptize you? You should be the one baptizing me."

But Jesus said, "John, this needs to happen. We're at the beginning of something new, something greater than you can see. Let me stand in the waters of forgiveness with you. This is part of how we fulfill the reason we're here."<sup>13</sup>

Though John didn't know when, he knew the day would come when the Savior of the world would step from the shadows of his preparation into the public eye. Seeing Jesus wade down into the water toward him, John suspected that day had now come. So he baptized the One whose trail he had come to blaze.<sup>14</sup>

What happened when Jesus came up out of the water was unlike anything anyone had ever seen. A brightness grew and shadows shrank

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<sup>10</sup> Luke 1:32–33

<sup>11</sup> Luke 1:43

<sup>12</sup> Gen. 3:17

<sup>13</sup> Matt. 3:13–15

<sup>14</sup> Luke 3:4

until light flooded the valley and a voice from the sky spoke: “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”<sup>15</sup> Fear and awe gripped those gathered as they then saw the Spirit of God descend like a dove and come to rest on Jesus. Any questions John might have had about Jesus’s true identity dissipated. Those gathered witnessed an unprecedented display of divine convergence: the Father sent his Spirit to glorify his Son. The people searched for some way to understand what this meant.

But Jesus understood. He had come to this river as someone unknown to the world. In those waters God himself set Jesus apart in a divine affirmation of a purpose greater than anyone could imagine. When Jesus stepped out of that river, he knew he was entering into a life of opposition and sorrow. As the old cleric Simeon told Jesus’s mother years before, Jesus would reveal the hearts of all mankind.<sup>16</sup> The light that flooded the Jordan valley would go with him wherever he went, shining in every dark corner of every dark heart, exposing every dark secret in a world that had grown quite fond of its shadows. So it would come as no surprise that he would be opposed.<sup>17</sup> Still, the level of hostility coming his way would be greater than anyone could imagine. And it would change the world.

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The first opposition Jesus faced when he left John at the river wasn’t political or social. It was spiritual, and it was dangerous. The Spirit that descended on him in his baptism drove him out into the wilderness, where he was tested for forty days. The desert had long been a place of struggle and testing for the people of God, as it had also been a place where God often met them. Out among the snakes and wild beasts, this was the sort of solitude that revealed a man’s true resolve.<sup>18</sup>

The Tempter, sometimes a subtle serpent, sometimes a roaring lion, came to Jesus in the wilderness not as a predator, but as a negotiator.<sup>19</sup> He knew Jesus’s power well and had no inclination whatsoever to test it. Rather, he came to see if he might strike a deal. There was something Jesus had come to do—something no one else could accomplish. Jesus

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<sup>15</sup> Matt. 3:17

<sup>16</sup> Luke 2:25–32

<sup>17</sup> John 3:19; Luke 2:34

<sup>18</sup> Matt. 4:1; Mark 1:12–13

<sup>19</sup> Gen. 3:1; 1 Pet. 5:8

knew what it would cost him. He had come to offer himself up as an atoning sacrifice for the sins of the people of God—to live the life of perfect righteousness they had all failed to live before God and to die in their place as their sinless sacrifice.<sup>20</sup>

The Tempter also knew Jesus's objective, and more than anything he wanted to prevent it. Maybe he could persuade Jesus that there was a way to achieve the better parts of his mission without having to endure the worst. Knowing that Jesus's frame was weakened by hunger, the Tempter began to test him by playing to his basest appetites. "Why are you hungry? If you are the Son of God and if you have command of the physical realm, why not eat? Why deny yourself? You should turn one of these stones to bread. You can, you know."<sup>21</sup>

But knowing that his entire life would require continual self-denial on behalf of a people who were governed by their appetites, Jesus said, "I don't live on bread alone. My food is to do the will of my Father who sent me."<sup>22</sup>

The Tempter considered Jesus's response and then took him to the pinnacle of the temple and said, "You know that if you threw yourself down from here, God would send his angels to catch you. Nothing can hurt you."<sup>23</sup>

The point of this test wasn't so Jesus would imagine the exhilaration of leaping off the pinnacle only to see the angels swoop in to catch him. The Tempter was baiting Jesus to speculate about how unnecessary the pain of death really needed to be, if he would only entertain the possibility. Weary as he was, perhaps Jesus would consider, even if only for a moment, the appeal of self-preservation.

But this wasn't a game to Jesus. He told the Tempter, "It is written, 'You shall not put God to the test.'"<sup>24</sup>

The Tempter came back a third time, taking Jesus to a high place where he could see the kingdoms of the world in all their splendor. He said to Jesus, "Bow down and worship me, and all these kingdoms will be yours. They are mine to give, and I will give them to you."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>Heb. 10:1–18

<sup>21</sup>Matt. 4:3–4

<sup>22</sup>Deut. 8:3; Luke 4:4

<sup>23</sup>Matt. 4:6

<sup>24</sup>Matt. 4:7

<sup>25</sup>Luke 4:5–7



This offer of dominion over the kingdoms of the world was the first time Jesus and the Tempter were actually talking about the true nature of Jesus's mission. He had come to establish a new kingdom. This didn't need to be a fight, the Tempter suggested. All Jesus needed to do was bow down and worship him, and he would just hand the world over.

Jesus said, "Leave me, Satan. You know what I know—we are to worship the Lord God alone."<sup>26</sup>

The authority Satan offered Jesus wasn't his to give. Jesus had come to establish his dominion over every corner of the world, and through a fierce revolution he would take it all as creation's rightful King. Jesus wasn't there to make a deal with the Devil. He had come to defeat him. Forever.

The Tempter knew he was getting nowhere. But he also believed there was still time. He and Jesus would tangle again. Maybe next time Jesus's resolve would be weaker. Holding onto that flicker of hope, the Tempter departed.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Deut. 6:13; Matt. 4:10

<sup>27</sup> Luke 4:13

# Behold the Lamb of God

JOHN 1:19 – 51



If Jesus's baptism was the affirmation of God's call on his life, then the following weeks in the wilderness were a test to see if he could be enticed to abandon it.

Though physically weakened from scrounging what little food and water the desert had to offer, Jesus did not spend that time alone. The same Spirit that came to rest on him at his baptism remained with him throughout those forty days and beyond.<sup>1</sup> When the trials ended and the Tempter left, Jesus began an exodus of his own through the crags and boulders of the Judean wilderness into the purpose for which he had been born.

And once again, he set out to find his cousin John.

While Jesus was in the desert, John stayed at the Jordan, preaching repentance and baptizing any who came to him. An air of expectancy had captured the imaginations of believers who were looking for the redemption of Israel.<sup>2</sup> John's ministry attracted many people who held this hope, and his allure caught the attention of the religious leaders in Jerusalem.

When Rome established control over the region of Israel, it shrewdly granted a measure of religious latitude to the Hebrew people in exchange for their cooperation. Rome conscripted Israel's religious leaders into making sure their people yielded to Rome, paid their taxes, and kept the peace. It became the responsibility of the Pharisees, chief priests, and

<sup>1</sup> Matt. 4:11; John 1:32

<sup>2</sup> Luke 2:38

teachers of the law to investigate any sudden swells of spiritual fervor among the people.

It was fairly common for dynamic personalities to emerge on Israel's fringes, inspiring the curious and hopeful with the promise of something new or the return to something old. Occasionally some of these leaders even took on disciples who would follow them through the better seasons of their influence. John had both popularity and disciples, but he seemed to connect with people through more than his charisma. So the Pharisees sent some of their scholars to ask him who he thought he was and where he hoped his ministry would lead.

"Are you the Christ?" they asked.

"I am not," he answered.

"Then who are you? A prophet? Do you think you're Elijah?"

John said, "I am the voice of one crying out in this wilderness, 'Make straight the path of the Lord.' I baptize the people who come to me with water, but there is One who has come after me who baptizes with the Spirit of God himself. His baptism is like a fire that consumes all that is not eternal. Though I am unworthy to untie the strap of his sandal, I stand here in these waters to announce to you that he has come. You don't know it, but he is here among us now. We've entered a new age. I baptize because the Christ has come, and his kingdom with him. That is why people come to me to repent of their sins."<sup>3</sup>

The scribes and teachers of the law returned to report that John thought Immanuel had come.<sup>4</sup> John believed God was in their midst, and many people seemed to trust him. On this they would have to keep a close eye.

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The next day, as John was baptizing in the river, he saw a familiar figure approach. With astonishment and joy, John pointed at the man and said, "I've given myself to this ministry so that Israel might know the Christ when he comes. Look. Here he is! This is the One I've been telling you all about."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> John 1:19–23, 26

<sup>4</sup> Isa. 7:14

<sup>5</sup> John 1:29

His eyes still fixed on Jesus, John said, “All my life I’ve known I was born to herald the coming of the Christ. And all my life I’ve known he was here among us, somewhere. But until recently I couldn’t have pointed him out with absolute certainty. I was waiting for a sign. The Lord told me, ‘Here’s how you’ll know the Christ. The one on whom you see my Holy Spirit descend and remain, this is the One who will baptize the hearts of men.’<sup>6</sup>

“Then just a little over a month ago I was here doing what I’m doing today and Jesus came to me for baptism. As I stand before you now, I tell you I have seen the sign the Lord spoke of. I have seen the Spirit of God descend on this man standing before you now. I have heard the voice of God say, ‘This is my Son, in whom I am well pleased.’ Look at him, everyone. Behold! Jesus of Nazareth is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.”<sup>7</sup>

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This name, “Lamb of God,” referred to a sober truth: Jesus had come to offer up his life as a substitute for a broken and sinful people.<sup>8</sup> Sharing in humanity’s flesh and blood, Jesus had come to die as a sacrificial offering for those who would trust him.

But his death would differ from the thousands of sacrificial lambs that had gone before him in one crucial way: his offering would be sufficient to atone for the sins of the world once and for all.<sup>9</sup> Jesus would satisfy the demands of the law of God perfectly. Just as through one man sin entered the world and death through that sin, so death spread to all men because all men had sinned.<sup>10</sup> But Jesus would set death in reverse through his righteous life and sacrificial death.<sup>11</sup> He would seize the power of death in his hands and deliver those who had lived their entire lives as slaves to sin.<sup>12</sup> His righteousness would reign, and by believing in him that righteousness would spread life to the otherwise spiritually dead.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> John 1:31, 33

<sup>7</sup> John 1:29, 33; Matt. 3:17

<sup>8</sup> 1 Cor. 5:7; Eph. 5:2

<sup>9</sup> Heb. 10:10

<sup>10</sup> Rom. 5:12

<sup>11</sup> Rom. 5:15

<sup>12</sup> Heb. 2:14–15

<sup>13</sup> Rom. 5:17

Very few were equipped to even begin to understand the implications of what John was really saying. Only three, in fact: John, Jesus himself, and the Tempter. This was the path John had come to prepare, the ministry Jesus was born to carry out, and the mission the Devil so desperately wanted to corrupt. How this would all unfold would remain to be seen, but one thing was certain—the Lamb of God had come and his ministry had begun.

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The next day Jesus passed by John again. John said to two of his disciples who were with him, “Look, there he is. The Lamb of God.” John’s disciples looked at each other. Their teacher had spoken often of the One who would come after him. They didn’t understand everything John saw in the man from Nazareth, but in light of his endorsement, they wanted to understand. So they gathered their things, left John, and began to follow Jesus.<sup>14</sup>

When Jesus saw them coming after him, he stopped and said, “What do you want?”

They asked him, “Where are you staying tonight?”

Jesus studied the two men for a moment and said, “Come with me and I’ll show you.”

Jesus’s new disciples were relieved to know they didn’t have to explain themselves then and there. They were in no position to articulate what they really wanted because they didn’t really know.<sup>15</sup>

By late afternoon they arrived at the place where Jesus was staying. As the conversation unfolded that evening, the disciples came to believe that Jesus was, in fact, the Messiah. One of the disciples, Andrew from Bethsaida in Galilee, was so struck by Jesus that he left the house to find his brother.

“Simon, I have found the Messiah!” Andrew said. “Come with me. Come meet him.”

When Simon entered the house with Andrew, Jesus said to him, “You’re Simon, the son of John, aren’t you?”

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<sup>14</sup> John 1:35–37

<sup>15</sup> John 1:38–39

Without waiting for a reply, Jesus continued. “I’m going to call you Peter the Rock.”<sup>16</sup>

Andrew brought Simon to meet Jesus, but neither of them expected Jesus to greet Simon by giving him a nickname. Still, there was something about the way Jesus regarded Simon that suggested he saw something in him that warranted this name *Rock*.

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In a few days’ time there was a wedding in Cana that Jesus and his family had been invited to attend, so the next morning Jesus set out for the land of his childhood, the region of Galilee. His new disciples went with him. Along the way Andrew met up with Philip, another Galilean from Bethsaida, and he introduced him to Jesus.

Jesus said, “Come with me, Philip.”<sup>17</sup>

Philip followed, and in only a short time he responded to Jesus in the same way that Andrew and Simon Peter had—he believed. And as Andrew did with Simon, Philip set out to find someone he could tell. He found his friend Nathanael.

Philip said, “Nathanael, we have found the one Moses and the prophets wrote about. We’ve found the Christ—Jesus, Joseph’s son from Nazareth.”<sup>18</sup>

Nathanael, a Galilean from Cana, regarded Nazareth as a small, unimportant town. He wasn’t alone in this either. Many in that region felt little for Nazareth beyond disdain. Nathanael considered Philip’s words for a moment and shrugged. “Can anything good come out of that town?”<sup>19</sup>

But Philip persisted. “Just come and meet him.”

So Nathanael followed.

When Jesus saw Nathanael coming, he rose to meet him, saying, “Now here is an Israelite who speaks the truth!”

Taken back by Jesus’s winsomeness, Nathanael asked, “How do you know me?”

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<sup>16</sup> John 1:40–42

<sup>17</sup> John 1:44

<sup>18</sup> John 1:45

<sup>19</sup> John 1:46; 21:2

Jesus said, “I saw you under the fig tree, before Philip called you.”<sup>20</sup>

Nathanael was speechless. How could Jesus have known where he and Philip spoke? And what did this have to do with knowing him? Jesus was answering a different question than the one Nathanael asked. He was telling Nathanael that he knew more about him than Nathanael could imagine.

Though Nathanael came on strong with Philip, he knew his initial doubts about Jesus were wrong. Something good *had* come from Nazareth—or at the very least, someone interesting. He sensed that Jesus saw things others missed. Surprising even himself, Nathanael began to believe. He said, “If you are the Son of God, that makes you the King of Israel as well, doesn’t it?”<sup>21</sup>

Jesus said, “Nathanael, you believe in me because I told you something about yourself that we both know I shouldn’t have known. Isn’t that right? But listen, you will see me do greater things than this. Soon enough you will see heaven itself open up and the angels of God descending and ascending on the Son of Man.”<sup>22</sup>

Nathanael was struck by the solemnity of Jesus’s demeanor. What began as a playful repartee between these two had escalated to an apocalyptic description of Jesus mediating between heaven and earth—between God and man. And now he was telling them that if Andrew, Simon Peter, Philip, and Nathanael stayed with him, they would see the Lamb of God take away the sins of the world. They would see the King of Glory open heaven itself.

It was a lot to take in from a man they had all only just met.

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<sup>20</sup> John 1:48

<sup>21</sup> John 1:49

<sup>22</sup> John 1:51

# One Hundred and Fifty Gallons

JOHN 2:1–12



Mary kept her ears open, listening for the news of Jesus's arrival. It had been almost two months since she had last seen her firstborn, and she missed him. Though she didn't know all that had happened in his time away, she sensed that if and when he came back to her, things would be different.

Life weaves a tapestry that ties people together for a time, often to later set them off in different directions. It's the rhythm of relationships. For thirty years, Jesus and Mary walked the same streets and shared the same home in Nazareth. But that season had given way to something new. When Jesus left Nazareth to find John, it wasn't simply to pay his cousin a visit. It was to step into the life of an itinerate teacher.

Just as there are occasions that lead loved ones away from each other, there are also those that bring them together. So when the time for her friend's wedding drew close, Mary gathered up a few things and made the nine-mile journey from Nazareth north to Cana to celebrate the couple's union. They were part of her community, her people, her home.

It was sacred when two became one—a man taking the name *husband*, a woman the name *wife*. It mattered. They would gain the vision of a sworn partner for life—a loving witness to the joys, fears, hopes, and sorrows buried deep inside each of them. In ways they couldn't imagine, they would get married in order to fall in love. They would discover things about each other they would never have known otherwise.

Marriage was bigger than how either of them felt in any given



moment. It was an institution the two would come under. They set aside their rights to themselves for the sake of this new life lived as one. So when the promises were spoken, the community who loved them gathered to bear witness to this union where life's joys would be doubled and their burdens cut in half. They gathered to celebrate.

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When Mary and Jesus found each other at the wedding, he had some men with him she had never met. They looked to her son as their leader. She had never seen this before, though she always knew it was in him to lead. Seeing those men, still obviously unfamiliar with her son, following him confirmed what she always knew would happen: Jesus had stepped out of her home and into the world, and he would never come back.

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Weddings usually lasted several days. They were festive opportunities for the families involved to get to know each other, so they were not to be rushed. As long as the host had plenty of food and wine, guests would linger, enjoying the bounty and fellowship.

So when, at this wedding, the wine steward bent over to whisper into this host's ear, the host's eyes darted with panic and shame. He had done the unthinkable. He had run out of wine. If he couldn't come up with more, this party would end too soon, though the memory of why it ended would go on and on.

When Mary learned about the situation, she went to find her son.

"They have no wine," she told Jesus.

The disciples looked at each other. Did Jesus have a supply of wine they didn't know about? This wasn't even their wedding.

Jesus said, "What does this have to do with me?"<sup>1</sup>

This wasn't a rebuke. It was a fair question. This wasn't his wedding. He was no more expected to tend to the wine than any other invited guest. But Mary knew her son was resourceful, and that he cared about the needs of others. He always had. And he tended to carry himself as a willing host, ready to step in and lead when a leader was needed even

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<sup>1</sup> John 2:3-4

when the party wasn't his. Mary figured if he understood the need, perhaps he would find a way to meet it.

When she saw that Jesus had taken her request as his own responsibility, she told the servants, "My son can help with the wine. Do whatever he tells you."<sup>2</sup>

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The disciples and the wine steward waited for Jesus's instruction. A trace of grief ran across his brow. Something in this request had stirred deep waters. He said, "My hour has not yet come."<sup>3</sup>

They looked at each other, confused.

Jesus knew what power he possessed. It was the power the Tempter had brought up—the power to say to the physical world "let there be" and see it come to pass. This was an opportunity for Jesus to shine the light of glory upon himself.<sup>4</sup> The time had not yet come for this. But it wasn't that far off either. That time was coming, quickly. Just not yet.

Mary couldn't know the passion her request would awaken in her son. To Jesus, she was asking for the world. Yes, he could do something about their lack of wine, but the reason he could was because he was equipped to address every deficit known to man. He had stepped onto a road he knew would lead to his glory being put on full display, but not before unimaginable suffering. He knew that when this was all finished, there would be a celebration—a wedding. His own wedding. His bride would be radiant, perfect, and beautiful, lacking nothing. He wanted to give her so much more than wine. He wanted to give her himself—everything he was, everything he had.

All of this was coming. This he knew. Just not yet. There were still preparations to make. And he knew what it would cost.

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Near the entrance to the feast stood six large stone jars, each able to hold around twenty-five gallons. Filled with water, the jars were placed there so the arriving guests could wash their hands and so the hosts could

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<sup>2</sup> John 2:5

<sup>3</sup> John 2:4

<sup>4</sup> Gen. 1:11; Matt. 4:3; John 2:11

wash the vessels they used for the feast, according to their purification customs.<sup>5</sup>

Jesus said, “Fill these jars with water. Fill them to the top.” When they had done this, Jesus said, “Now draw some of that water and take it to the master of the feast.”<sup>6</sup>

The master of the feast took the cup from the steward and drank. Then he lowered the cup with a look of surprise. Everyone understood there would be various grades of wine at a feast like this. The best would be brought out first to train the taste buds. When that ran out, wine of a lesser quality would be substituted in the hopes that the better wine had done its job to trick the mind and dull the senses. The good wine’s job was to make folks much less particular about what filled their cups later as the feast went on.

But here near the end of the feast came the best wine yet. The master of the feast tasted it again. His lips formed a slight smile as he swallowed. He called the bridegroom over and said, “Where did this wine come from? You didn’t serve the best wine first? Why have you held this back until now?”<sup>7</sup>

The bridegroom said, “Let me taste it.” His first sip went down like a question. The second was not a sip, but a long pull that was more like a declaration: “Friends, enjoy yourselves. We have plenty of wine. And you have got to try this!”

The master of the feast asked the steward where he got the wine.

The steward said, “It arrived with one of the guests.”

“With whom?” asked the master of the feast.

“Jesus of Nazareth, Mary’s son,” the servant said.

The answer only raised more questions. Where did he get such high quality wine, and how did he come by one hundred and fifty gallons of it?<sup>8</sup>

“He made it. From water. Just now.”

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<sup>5</sup> John 2:6; Mark 7:3–4; John 2:6

<sup>6</sup> John 2:7–8

<sup>7</sup> John 2:9

<sup>8</sup> John 2:6

As the wedding wound down, the disciples found their faith in Jesus growing deeper.<sup>9</sup> But it wasn't simply because he performed a miracle. It was because he saw something in everyone he met that seemed to stir up traces of grief and love—as though they were captives and he was free, but only he knew it and only he could help. He could be playful. How could there not be some measure of mirth in the act of bringing one hundred and fifty gallons of fine wine to a party? But he was also a man of mysterious sorrow—and at this wedding it seemed to come awake. It was as though this marriage reminded him of something he needed to do—as though the wine came from a reserve intended for a different wedding.<sup>10</sup>

Jesus spoke of having “an hour,” but he said it with a solemnity that left his disciples wondering if they were supposed to be excited for it to come. Whatever it meant to follow him, they were beginning to understand that his path was heading somewhere, and if they were to follow, they would follow him to the advent of his “hour”—whatever that meant.

But his hour had not yet come—this much was clear. What had arrived was the end of the wedding. Jesus introduced his mother and brothers to his disciples, and together they set off for Capernaum, sixteen miles away on the northern shores of the Sea of Galilee, leaving behind a village full of questions, wonder, and a growing appetite for more.

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<sup>9</sup> John 2:11

<sup>10</sup> Isa. 53:3; Rev. 19:6–9

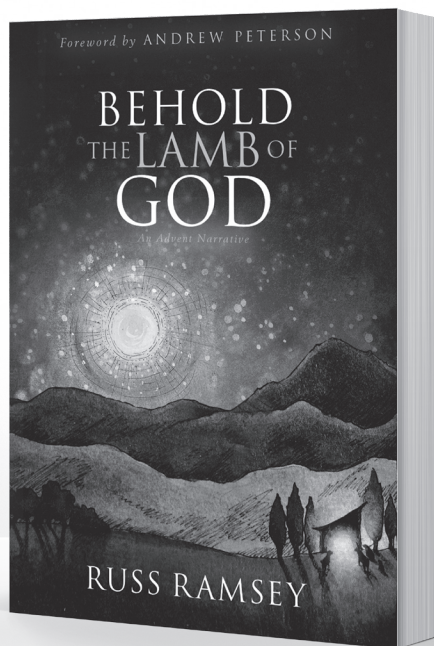
Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.

But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

J O H N 21:30; 20:31

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