

Caught Off Guard

Encounters
with the
Unexpected God

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PREFACE

“Bill, I know it in my head, but not in my heart!” Maria described her frustration with the gap between what she knew about God and the Christian life and how she actually lived. Maria had been a Christian for nearly a decade. She loved Jesus and was active in her church. Yet too many times, all the good theology she knew did not seem to affect her life. Instead, she found herself doing and saying things that embarrassed her. She found it hard to care about people. And, hardest to admit, she did not find God as attractive as he was supposed to be. The Christian life just did not seem to work very well for her.

KNOWLEDGE THAT’S NOT LIVED

Maria is not alone. Many people have the same frustration. They know what is true, but for some reason the truths they know and love don’t find their way into their daily life. Instead, their faith exists in a separate sphere from the daily grind of diapers and deadlines. The young woman who worries about her reputation can provide rich details about the blow it is to her ego to stuff envelopes for an advertising agency. Yet she never mentions the God who gave her that job and who intends to use it to challenge her fear of others’ opinions.

Or consider the man who fears that powerful people will somehow hurt him and his family. It never occurs to him to bring this fear to Jesus and learn that Christ’s love really does cast out fear. Instead he feverishly plans ways to limit his exposure to threatening people. He would be shocked to realize that in daily conversation he sounds like an atheist, making no reference to the Lord he prays to and serves.

This is my problem too. How is it that I can teach and counsel these things and yet hear my daughter say to me, “Daddy, how come you never talk about Jesus anymore but only what to do next to fix the house?” I too know it in my head, but not always in my heart.

No doubt there are times when you also experience the conflict between head and heart. You know that God and the things he says are good, yet you struggle to believe and obey him. Trusting him and responding righteously don’t seem to make much sense in the moment of difficulty. For example, reacting defensively to a critical spouse seems more sensible than turning away wrath with a gentle answer. Slandering a coworker who has taken credit for your work beats turning the other cheek. Worrying about job security seems more appropriate than trusting

God to care more for you than for many sparrows. Your conscience tells you that what you are doing is wrong, but you can't stop yourself. You know it in your head, but not in your heart.

Let's put it slightly differently: Sometimes people know things *about* God more than they actually know him. They have correct information, but they know them in a Trivial Pursuit kind of way, as interesting factoids with little relevance to daily life. Our ability to answer questions about God increases as we attend church, small groups, and Sunday school, but our experience of God does not necessarily deepen. And whenever knowledge outstrips experience, it is useless in the face of life's difficulties.

Let me tell you about a friend of mine we'll call Ron. I've known Ron for nearly twenty years. We've lived in the same house, been in each other's weddings, and attend the same church. Ron is a terrific guy who married a wonderful lady. Together they lovingly parent their adopted children. He is an elder, mission trips leader, and former youth pastor. Because he connects with teens like few can, he is regularly welcomed into their homes and lives. Ron is a great guy, with a carefree, spontaneous side. His love for Jesus is easy to see.

Now you know some interesting – and true – things about my friend. But you don't know Ron. If you had a flat tire in the middle of the night an hour away from Ron's house, would you call him for help? Of course you wouldn't! He might be a great guy, but you don't know how he would respond to you. You have no personal knowledge of his heart, his attitude toward people in trouble, or his typical responses. You have only heard about him, so he wouldn't enter your mind if you needed help. You need a trusting relationship with him to have confidence in his help.

The same is true of our relationship with Christ. If all you know are interesting facts about him, he will not enter your mind when life's unpleasantness confronts you. At best, he will be a pleasant afterthought to bring you comfort, but not any kind of meaningful help.

For instance, some people talk about God's omnipotence, yet they have no confidence that he brings this power into their lives when they feel out of control. Others know and talk about how Jesus forgives sins, but they walk around with a guilt that never seems to go away. Still others answer correctly that he does not harbor grudges, but they are afraid to come to him after they have yelled at their kids for the forty-seventh time. They know he is a friend of sinners, but they don't have confidence that he wants to be their friend.

The things they know are correct, but it is a formal knowledge devoid of connections to real life. It's not the kind of knowledge they

can base their life on. They don't have confidence that he is alive and active in their lives.

Now let me tell you about the time I had a tire and a spare tire go flat in the middle of the night. How, when I called Ron and got his answering machine, he called back almost immediately. How, without grumbling or hesitation, he got up and drove forty-five minutes to pick me up. How he greeted me with a smile, jollied me up with his infectious humor, and drove me another forty-five minutes home. How he graciously slept on my family's couch, took me to buy another tire the next morning, drove me back to my car, waited to see that everything was okay, and then returned home, happy to have helped.

Now you're starting to get a feeling for the man. Not only do you know interesting, abstract truths about him, you've heard what he is like when the pressure is on. You've seen how he treated me, which shows you his heart toward me when I'm in trouble. The next time you get in a jam, you may even think about my friend and wish that you knew someone like him.

But wait! What would happen if I told you three more stories about Ron gladly helping others – including someone he hardly knew? I would not simply tell you what he said or did, but I would also describe his concern for the people he helped. Then let's say I gave you Ron's phone number and promised that he would welcome your call. Now if you were in the Philadelphia area with car trouble, he just might come to your mind! Chances are you might even call him. Because you saw his heart in action for people in similar situations, you would begin to believe he might do the same for you. Seeing him as someone who did not turn others away would affect how you would reach out to him.

That's my hope for this book. I want to tell you stories about God that show you his heart for people in distress. I want you to see his concern for people in trouble – including those who have brought their problems on themselves. People who sin big, are scared of life, who resist wise counsel, who shy away from the Lord, and are angry with him. In short, people who have no reason to expect his mercy or help. Yet people who get what they don't deserve in a good sense, because God is so much better than any of us believe. Because they experience his goodness, these people's lives are radically changed. They have come to know it in their hearts, because they've seen his heart expressed in his actions.

My goal in this book is to flesh out our knowledge of God in the midst of daily struggles. I hope that you will see more deeply and clearly the wonderful grace and goodness of God. Instead of being vague generalities,

I hope that “grace” and “goodness” will develop richer content that impacts you, right in the middle of careers and groceries. As you see how God responds to difficult people, I hope you will understand how he will connect with you when you’re in trouble.

As I have studied, written, and spoken about our very good God, a deeper, livelier confidence in this Redeemer has grown in my heart. I have been overwhelmed by how wonderful he really is. He is big enough even to handle a mess like me! In seminary, mature preachers admonish their students, “Preach grace until you get it.” As I have worked on this book, I can affirm the value and wisdom of that admonition.

In her series of books on ancient Rome, Colleen McCullough sketches the budding romance between Julius Caesar’s daughter Julia and Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus.¹ Magnus was the idol of his day, so renowned that many young women bought small plaster busts of him so that they might dream of him incessantly. In an attempt to forge an alliance with Magnus by marriage to his daughter, Caesar invited him for dinner. Julia appeared taken with Magnus, but afterward she went to her room and unaccountably, to Caesar’s mind, threw her bust of Magnus into the trash as though she wanted nothing more to do with him. Crestfallen over this unexpected development, Caesar sought his mother’s counsel. She rescued her son’s dashed hopes by explaining that, far from wanting to rid herself of Magnus, Julia was no longer content to settle for a figurine. She wanted the real thing.

As you read this book and watch God come near his people, I hope that you too will crave the real thing. I hope that you will be less satisfied with talking theology and long instead to know this God who longs for you.

¹ Colleen McCullough, *Caesar’s Women* (New York, NY: Avon Books, 1997) pp. 717-721, 770-777.

on your own

At the end of each chapter you will find questions designed to help you interact with what you've read. Since part of the heart-head disconnect stems from a failure to apply the knowledge of God we already have, I want to suggest ways to apply the thoughts to your life.

1

Begin by acknowledging to God that, in some areas, your knowledge of him is abstract and theoretical. It might be helpful to identify aspects of God's character that you find hard to grasp, such as his sovereignty, his goodness, his forgiveness, his mercy, or his justice.

2

Where do you have trouble connecting your faith to your life? For instance, does God form part of the picture when people sin against you, when your health is poor, when your plans are disrupted?

3

Rather than thinking about this by yourself, it may help to ask people who know you to point out the things that seem to upset you most easily, or the situations that cause you to struggle.

4

Ask Jesus to renew your desire to know him personally, not just talk about him. In prayer, consider how life might be different: "If I knew God more fully, then I might dare to"

Part I

God shows you his heart

To many people who struggle with knowing God, he seems cold, aloof, and impersonal. He seems to be a God of towering, transcendent might who neither notices their distress nor cares to act on their behalf. He is a God who can't be bothered with them because they've given him no good reason to get involved, a God who is only near and personal to the godly. Nothing could be further from the truth! This first part focuses on how God draws near to the radically undeserving.

1

Do you feel lost and confused?

Brandon was lost. Only a few minutes ago, he had been playing with his older sister; now she was nowhere in sight. His mom was missing too. They had all been shopping, but that quickly got boring for Brandon. He and Teresa had started a game of hide-and-seek among the clothes racks. Teresa hid first and Brandon quickly found her. Then it was his turn. Brandon was a champion hider. Being only two-and-a-half enabled him to stand inside the racks on the lower cross bars so no one could see his legs. Completely hidden by the clothes, he was undetectable.

At first he could hear Teresa though she could neither see nor hear him. Brandon giggled quietly as she came closer toward him and then veered off. As she moved farther and farther away, Brandon heard her voice growing softer. Then it was quiet. Too quiet. Boringly quiet. Brandon decided to liven things up by revealing himself and winning the game. He peeked out, his face full of triumph. Jumping out, he announced, "I win, Terri!" But Teresa didn't scoop him up or tousle his hair. She was gone.

Brandon's triumph turned to puzzlement as he looked around and saw no one he knew. Slowly he walked around the display and still saw neither his sister nor his mother. Then he struck out through the maze of merchandise. Soon, hopelessly confused, he began to panic in earnest. "Mama, Terri! Mama, Terri!" he cried. His legs carried him along though he was blinded with tears. Brandon was desperate. He didn't know where to go or what to do. All he wanted was for his mother and sister to come looking for him. He wanted to be found.

BEING LOST

Have you ever been lost? I don't mean the ten-minutes-on-the-high-way-with-a-map lost. I mean absolutely-no-idea-which-way-to-go lost, where all the points on the compass are equally meaningful and, therefore, equally useless. In *Bonfire of the Vanities*, Tom Wolfe describes a man who takes a wrong exit in New York City and ends up in a dangerous section of the Bronx. Wolfe captures this man's progression from cavalier confusion to barely bridled fear to irrational desperation. Have you ever been there? Do you know what it's like to know you need something, know you can't provide it, and only wish someone would come to find you?

For many of us, being lost has nothing to do with geography. Lost is not a place; it is a daily life experience. We can go through the motions of daily life fairly successfully, yet all along we feel as though things are not right. We are deeply dissatisfied with life, yet we have little or no idea what is wrong and certainly no idea how to improve our lot. Thoreau's conclusion that "most men live lives of quiet desperation" describes us fairly well. Existential lostness is a nearly universal experience after humanity's fall.

DESPERATE AND LOST

Zacchaeus was lost.¹ In his hometown, on a road he knew well, he was desperately lost. He just didn't realize how far gone he was.

He wanted to see Jesus, but so did lots of other people. He couldn't get through the crowd, so he climbed a tree for a better look. We might suppose his vantage point was similar to hanging out on a balcony to watch a parade; he was up above the crowd and had a better view. But trees and balconies don't share the same status. Typically, climbing trees is not something that wealthy men of the world engage in. Trees tend to be reserved for children.

My children love to climb trees and I don't blame them. I did too when I was a boy. But an adult in a tree draws attention. If you drive down a street and see kids playing in a tree, you smile and keep going. But if you noticed a grown man up there, you would probably slow down and wonder what was going on.

There's something about post-adolescents in trees that suggests the dangerous (older bodies don't flex or heal as well as younger ones) and

¹ Luke 19:1-10.

the ridiculous. Zacchaeus, a wealthy, feared government official, set himself up to be ridiculed for the rest of his life. Embarrassing stories tend to develop a life of their own. Even today Sunday school songs immortalize this man's peculiar behavior! So here's this little man, who probably already had endured his share of insults regarding his height, providing raw material for new, embarrassing stories. Why is he doing this?

It could have been simple curiosity that drove him to go looking for Jesus, but curiosity is not enough to drive someone to such desperate behavior. I have never endangered my reputation for the sake of satisfying simple curiosity. Something else drove Zacchaeus. Despite his wealth, his life was not going well. We're not told what was wrong, but as you consider the lengths he went to, you realize he wanted something more – something that even his wealth couldn't give him. He was dissatisfied with his life and his dissatisfaction drove him to seek out Jesus. To mix metaphors, Zacchaeus was up a tree without a paddle.

Poor Zacchaeus! His money can't give him what he wants so he embarrasses himself to see if Jesus can. Doesn't your heart go out to him as he tries so hard to see the Lord? As with Brandon, you want to scoop him up and help him. But the crowd apparently didn't feel the same way. No one moved aside so the little guy could see. I wonder why?

Zacchaeus was a tax collector. Today, it's difficult for us to imagine what that meant to people then. I dislike paying taxes as much as (or possibly more than) the next guy, but I don't hate the people who work for the IRS. Nor would I try to keep one out of church or away from a public event. But even if I did, I'm still only one person; he could get around me. Here's a case, however, where an entire crowd collectively prevents one man from getting through. They really didn't like him. Whatever he'd done must have been really bad to get that reaction.

And it was. Tax collectors were not just civil servants, they were also professional thieves. Not only did they collect the tax Rome imposed, they imposed additional levies to feather their own nests. Their job gave them an opportunity to rob people using the weight of Roman authority. Zacchaeus stole from his own people. When Luke tells you he was a chief collector, and a rich one, he's making it clear that Zacchaeus had stolen a lot of money from a lot of people.

GREED'S REWARD

Rich people who live at the expense of others end up shrinking their own souls while they squeeze others' pockets. Sadly, the news media regularly reminds us that greed isn't restricted to fiction or ancient history.

Many people seek to better themselves at the expense of others. Can you name “ministers” who beg for money from people on fixed incomes to build lavish mansions for themselves? How about executives who plunder company profits and assets so that they grow wealthy while bankrupting the employee pension funds? Others trade stocks based on insider information – making a killing while your investments take a beating – effectively emptying your bank account into their own. You can do little against such people who knowingly undermine, impoverish, and hurt you.

Zacchaeus was a small man, but his was not a pitiable shortness. Rather, he was monstrous, a parasitic man who grew fat on the blood of others, fully aware that his theft made their lives significantly worse. He idolized money, but instead of getting what he wanted, he harvested the rotten fruit of the crowd’s hatred and his own dissatisfaction. He was getting what he had coming to him. Kind of served him right, didn’t it?

Yet out of the entire crowd, Jesus singled him out and chose to go to his home. Why? There must have been more deserving people present. Jesus could have had a decent meal without raising questions of conscience. Many in the town were probably eating dry, moldy bread that night because the money Zacchaeus stole from them went to fund Jesus’ dinner. Yet Jesus chose to break bread with this odious traitor.

What did Jesus see in the man that drew him – some redeemable trait, some inkling of love for God, or latent drop of humanity? Was that why Jesus moved toward him? If you look for such things in the passage, you’ll be disappointed.

Luke 19 notes none of these things as the reason Jesus demanded to eat with him. Many people were seeking Jesus; what made Zacchaeus stand out? Jesus explains his choice simply by saying that he came to seek and to save the lost (v. 10). The quality that drew Jesus to Zacchaeus was the fact that he was a lost man.

In seeking out Zacchaeus, God shows you his heart. So often we talk about what Jesus did or said but ignore his attitude toward us and what drives him. Your God is passionate. He’s on a mission. Jesus came to look for those who wander through life dazed and confused, often by their own fault. He searched them out intently, looking beyond those who clamored for his attention to locate those who had no hope. Jesus was not put off by Zacchaeus’s despicable sins. He did not recoil from him. Rather, Jesus saw his lostness and found him.

Jesus is the same today. The same grace that moved him to leave heaven and cross time and space to find one pathetic conniver half-hidden in a tree is the same grace that moves him to look for you. He looked for

you when you first came to know him and he looks for you even now. Desperate people – lost, confused, frightened – need to know that God searches for them.

That's good news. I don't have anything to commend myself to God to make him notice me. But I know he is compassionate toward people who struggle to make their lives work. That's what I need. I need a God who will come looking for me when I choose making friends with TV characters over spending time with my wife, when I throw myself into work to avoid demanding children, or when I lay around bloated by my lack of self-control, yearning to be entertained. I need a God who comes looking for me when I'm lost. And that's what I have.

Maybe you don't believe that Jesus comes and seeks you out. Sure, you know that it is true theologically. You certainly believe God searches for other people. You even agree that it might be hypothetically possible that he would look for you. But when you're floundering in your sins, feeling desperate, you don't believe he's working diligently to find you. You don't believe that anyone would want to look for you when you're hurting other people, lost in your sin, and don't know what to do.

If that's the case, it's time to fight the fight of faith. Will you allow yourself to believe that Jesus wants to find you right now? That he's looking for you this very moment and won't quit until he finds you? What does the faith battle look like? Often it's a simple acknowledgment: "Jesus, I don't really believe that you want to find me. Please help me believe. Please find me. I want to know that I matter enough to you that you would seek me out when everyone else pushes me away."

JOY ARRIVES

Being found made Zacchaeus a joyful man. Notice that nothing external about his life had changed. He was still a chief tax collector. He had still ruined people's lives. The crowd still hated him . . . he was still short! Yet suddenly he's joyful because Jesus loved him and had entered his life. Jesus alone produced an explosion of joy in him.

Have you lost your joy? Then you've likely forgotten, or little realized, how dreadfully lost you were. Perhaps you've forgotten how wonderful it is for the God of the universe to want to be your Father, Savior, and friend. Sometimes we treat him as the consolation prize: "Well, I don't have a girlfriend, a job I like, or a BMW, but at least I have Jesus." No wonder we have trouble being joyful! Joyless, dried-up people have forgotten where they've come from, which means they've forgotten how Jesus has treated them. Now they take him for granted.

Zacchaeus points the way for joyless people. Spend some time remembering how badly lost you were. Think back to the time before you knew Jesus and how kind he was in searching you out. Think back to your lostness this morning when you criticized your husband, picked a fight with your roommate, or swore at another driver. Then consider how good Jesus is to keep searching for you, knowing he will find you. When you meditate on the two realities of being lost and having a Savior who doesn't quit until he finds you, you can't help but experience joy.