

## INTRODUCTION

### *It's Not What You Think:*

### *Why Christianity Is About So Much More Than Going to Heaven When You Die*

By Jefferson Bethke

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If you went to a public middle school, you probably read a few classics for English class. I remember reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Of Mice and Men*, among others. Hands down though my favorite novel was Lois Lowry's *The Giver* (which was recently made into a movie).

If you're not familiar with it, the basic premise is that an entire society is controlled by a group of elders who set up a system that strips all choices and emotions from humans' lives. Each human is forced to take an injection every morning that takes away these things.

Both the book and the movie communicate this is by everyone living and seeing only black and white as the normal standard. There's no color, no life, no joy. But because of the injections, and because *everyone* takes them, they don't know that's not normal. They believe the world is black and white, and that it's devoid of colors and the blessings that come with them, and it's simply the way to live.

The main character, Jonas, starts to dream and have faint visions in color. He couldn't even describe what he thought he saw, but when he stops taking his injections fully, *everything* begins to show up in color. It's so radically life giving and beautiful, he doesn't have language for what he's seeing. It's too vibrant and hypnotizing. Nothing changed about the world he is living in, except now his eyes have become able to perceive what was always there. He quickly and clearly realizes the world wasn't what he thought.

I believe the Western church has been seeing the world in black and white for some time, but we don't even realize it, not unlike the characters in *The Giver*. This has been caused by us forming Jesus in our own image, rather than letting Jesus form us in his image. We have domesticated, Westernized, neutered, and all together changed Jesus to an eternal Mr. Potato Head—ripping off the parts we don't like and adding what we think seems right. Recently, in my own study and journey with Jesus and the Scriptures, I started to realize there are certain things about the first-century world that make Jesus and the Scriptures more vibrant, beautiful, and compelling. When you understand his world, you begin to understand him. There are things that make no sense to us because we don't know what it was like to be a first-century rabbi or a Jew living in Judea under Roman rule.

But when we enter into the world of Jesus, and take him for who he was, the Bible begins to turn to color. Details we haven't noticed before jump out at us. Neither the Bible nor Jesus change; but stepping back into the first century gives us new eyes to see who he was, what he did, and why we are still talking about him today.

**I hope through these pages you might begin to see Jesus more vibrantly yourself. I'm not a pastor or theologian, and I don't have numerous degrees where people need to call me Doctor or Professor Bethke. But over the past couple of years I've fallen more in love with Jesus and the story of God and his church by unclicking the mute button twenty-first-century Westerners have put on first-century Jesus and by letting him speak on his own.**

Every morning as I walk with Jesus, I ask him to open our eyes more and more each day. Because when we see Jesus clearly, then we can follow him.

One of the scariest questions we have to ask ourselves is, what if we aren't seeing Jesus properly? What implication does that have for our lives? What if Jesus isn't who we think? I believe he's always catching us off guard, creatively challenging us, pursuing us, and loving us.

I've written these pages as someone who—like you—is on a journey to see Jesus more vibrant, alive, and for who he truly is more and more each day. Will you join me?