

Selected Excerpts from *It's Not What You Think: Why Christianity Is About So Much More Than Going to Heaven When You Die* By Jefferson Bethke

It's Not What You Think

My first memorable encounter with the gospel was when I was in middle school. All around me other middle school kids were crying and hardly anyone was standing. It was a powerful moment—so much so that even now when I think about it, a range of emotions comes over me.

I was at a Christian youth camp.

It was the last night of that camp when everyone “asked Jesus into their hearts.” The piano was playing softly while the camp speaker asked all the kids to bow their heads and close their eyes. He would then say, “Okay, whoever wants to receive Jesus, repeat after me. . . .”

Sound familiar? Welcome to 1990s evangelicalism.

Considering how common that experience was for people back then, there's something that has always struck me: *Why is it that a similar situation, when read as if it were part of the gospel narrative, feels weird or off base?*

Imagine you pick up the Gospel of Luke, and you see a bunch of red letters (the words of Jesus). You start reading those red letters, and it says, “All righty, everyone, bow your heads and close your eyes. The worship leader is going to come play some soft piano music behind me, and if you think you want to follow me, just put your hand in the sky. Don't worry: no one is looking.” And when someone raises his hand, Jesus says, “I see your hand; God sees your heart.”

It's almost comical, isn't it? Jesus' exhortations to his listeners were almost exactly the opposite. His declaration to follow him bled grace—to the point of bleeding himself—but in that grace he said, “*Follow me.*” The abandon, the unknown, the reference to a first-century torture device, all crashed into that two-word phrase, *follow me*. We privatize our faith, when Jesus calls us to follow him publicly.

How did we get so far off base? How come our gospel doesn't really seem much like Jesus' gospel?

Here's a scarier question: at what point is a religion only wrong in a few areas but still the same belief system, and at what point is a religion so unrecognizable to its founders they'd call it a different religion entirely? Have we reached that point in Western Christianity?

I can't help but look at the Scriptures and the Christianity I've lived and breathed most of my life and think, *Really? Is this it? What happened?* The truth is, we are living in a really, really bad story. And a lot of us are not only living in it, but telling others, “If you come to Jesus, you can escape this world.” (Yet didn't Jesus say he came to restore this world?)

When I was a kid, this thing called *heaven* was always spoken of as somewhere far away up in the sky. I always imagined heaven being a place far, far away with winged babies playing harps and floating on the clouds. Now honestly, that doesn't sound like a place where I want to be for eternity. It sounds terrible and boring. In fact, if I ever saw a naked chubby baby with wings, I'd probably run as fast as I could the other way; I wouldn't say, “Oh, I sure want to go there when I die.” What if there's *better* news than the good news that Christians are going to heaven when we die? What if God wants to give us heaven right here? In our families? Our jobs? Our meals? Our art?

The Kingdom's Not Where You Think

Many of us think that when we start following Jesus, that's the end. We want the wedding, but we don't want the marriage.

When, in fact, saying yes to Jesus is the beginning. Just as we do in marriage, we are to reorbit, reorient, and come under God's reign and rule and his way of doing things.

Life isn't about going to heaven when you die, it's about making heaven true on earth in every facet and level of our relationship with God, others, and self. The Christian life is asking, how can I make what's true of Jesus and his gospel true in whatever aspect of my life?

Sabbath is Not What You Think

One really fascinating thing I don't hear many preachers talk about is that even though the Sabbath was the seventh day of creation, it was Adam and Eve's *first* day of life.

Put yourself in Adam's shoes. He wasn't there for the moon and the stars. The animals. The plants. He was the crowning act of creation. When God breathes life into his nostrils, he becomes a living being. Then God rests. From Adam's perspective, the first full day he saw as a human was a day of rest. The day of filling.

God did all the work, and Adam got to start with rest. Only after he'd been properly filled could he live up to his vocation as a garden-cultivating image-bearer. For God it was six days of work and then rest, but for Adam his first day was rest and then only then could he truly work. That sounds a lot like the cross, doesn't it? Jesus does all the work, and we are called to enter into that rest. Our first day, the first moment we open our eyes, is supposed to be a day and moment of rest.

Is the Sabbath seen as a beginning to the week or an end to the week? A lot of us, if we are working anxiously, can't wait to have a day off. That is fine, but I've noticed a different depth about my walk with Jesus every week when I set the precedent of observing the Spirit of Sabbath. Start with rest, then work. Don't work, then hope to get rest.

The Sabbath evolves after the exodus. After God takes the Israelites out of Egypt, he gives them the Torah. The Sabbath commandment is first found in Exodus 31, but it is revisited in Deuteronomy 5. There God explains that it's because they are to remember that God brought them out of their slavery in Egypt. He tells them to take a day off every seven days because they are no longer slaves. They are free. So the second purpose of Sabbath is that it reminds us that we are free.

If we aren't sabbathing, the question is, are we free? Or are we slaves to performance, to our phones, to being needed, to being in the know, to pleasure, to addiction?

A Sabbath is a day to celebrate and remember we are free people. We aren't under the empire anymore; we are under the kingdom. We aren't commodities; we are people. We aren't brick-makers; we are image-bearers. And when we remember, we free ourselves to have true community.

When we are commodities, other humans are competition. When we rest, other humans are neighbors. Growing up I always thought that if I wanted to be a Christian, I'd have to give up on fun. It was dismal, dark, and sacrificial. It is at times, but on the flip side it's also a faith of celebration. Christianity is one huge party. He's here! God is among us! Look what he's done! He's saved us! So let's celebrate. And sabbathing is doing exactly that. It is setting aside one day a week to party. To dance. To eat. To sing. And to love.

The Sabbath command is the fourth command. It looks back on the three about God and looks forward to the last six about how to treat people. It's the link between honoring God and loving people. And a true party does both of those things. It honors God, and it honors people.

Whenever Alyssa and I have a special dinner, we've started to do a prayer and a toast. A prayer to honor God, and a toast to look our guests and friends in the eyes and honor them. Sometimes it's nothing more than just saying we're thankful they are in our lives. But even a small dose of love can bring life in the same way the tiniest match can bring light in a dark room.

The Table's Not What You Think

The Gospel of Luke describes two guys who are walking on the road to Emmaus, recounting all that transpired over the last few days. They were probably trying to process what had just happened. While they were talking, Jesus joined them, yet "their eyes were kept from recognizing him."

Jesus asks what they are talking about. They then almost sarcastically shoot back, "Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?"

Where have you been, bro?

They even go on to admit they had high hopes for Jesus and "hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel." They believe that was crushed the minute Jesus died. Jesus' words then become very sharp to the two guys: "Foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets had spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?"

Translation: Are you guys stupid? The Messiah was supposed to die the whole time! (Maybe he could've cut the guys some slack since up to that time almost no one in all history had read the Prophets expecting a crucified and strung up Messiah. This reminds us that there are ways to read the Bible and completely miss Jesus.)

Jesus then "interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself."

In Jesus' day, the complete Bible was what Christians call the Old Testament or what modern Jews call the Hebrew Bible or *Tanakh*. So Jesus himself, God in flesh, explained the *entire* Old Testament to them. Jesus literally began on page 1, and walked them through to the end, and showed how he was the answer the whole time, without them knowing who he was.

The very Creator of the universe was the one explaining the Scriptures to these guys. They weren't left guessing anymore. God himself was saying, "Look! This should've happened the whole time. Let's start on page 1 and I'll show you all the way through." You'd think their minds would have been absolutely blown and they would have started seeing the matrix numbers running down the screen with scriptural truth, but nothing seems to happen.

They keep walking, and when they get close to Emmaus, they saw Jesus was going farther, so they asked him to stay with them for the night. In Middle Eastern culture it was an honor to have someone stay with you, especially if they had farther to go and it was getting late.

The first thing they did was sit at a table and have a meal. But something crazy happens: "When he was at the table with them, he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognized him."

Jesus walks through the entire Bible with these two guys and nothing happens. Then he rips a piece of bread in half, and they immediately recognize him.

They even go on to say after that, "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road?"⁷ This almost makes our Western minds short circuit. The heart change, the opening of eyes, the revelation, the epiphany, whatever you want to call it—it didn't happen when they got all the facts; it happened when they sat at the table. It happened when they ate a meal. When there was relationship.

It's hard not to believe the table and a meal is important to Jesus and the Scriptures after hearing a story like that. But what's funny is that a lot of us would much rather have our eyes opened in the first scenario.

Our dream version of Christianity is having all the answers. Can't Jesus just show up in my room visibly and audibly tell me what to do and believe? News flash: he did to two guys, and it didn't help as much as we'd think.

Yet when they sat down with him, their lives changed.

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