

HOW CERTAINTY KILLS FAITH—
AND WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE FINALLY LET
LOVE WIN.

DEAD RIGHT



www.thepresencenetwork.org

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Dedication

**For our dear friends,
Bob and Janice Nastav**

Some books begin with a carefully developed idea.

This one began with a conversation.

Not long ago, I had the privilege of sitting with our dear friends Bob and Janice Nastav—two beautiful people who have spent much of their lives seeking, questioning, listening, and refusing to settle for answers simply because someone told them they were supposed to be certain.

They know something about disillusionment.

They have watched what can happen when truth becomes something people possess rather than something they continue to seek. Yet their questions have not made them cynical. They remain seekers—curious, thoughtful, compassionate people still willing to wonder whether there might be more to see.

Janice carries that same creativity into Marcella's on Main, the beautiful little gift shop she owns, and together Bob and Janice have created a life and family filled with character, love, laughter, challenges, and grace.

During one our conversation the day after our meeting together, Janice said something almost in passing. I don't remember the sentence exactly. But I remember two words: **Dead right.**

Something about people needing to be *dead right*.

Those two words would not leave me.

Before long, a question exploded in my mind:

How many times have we been dead right—only to discover that we were dead wrong?

And suddenly there was a book.

So Bob and Janice, this book belongs partly to you.

Thank you for the conversation.

Thank you for the questions.

DEAD RIGHT

Thank you for remaining seekers.

Thank you for reminding us that questioning what we have been told is not necessarily the abandonment of truth.

Sometimes it is evidence that truth still matters enough to keep searching for it.

And thank you, Janice, for two little words spoken in an ordinary conversation that somehow opened the door to everything that followed.

Dead Right.

Who knew two words could cause this much trouble?

With our love and gratitude,

Carlo & Amy Griseta

INTRODUCTION

DEAD RIGHT - When Certainty Becomes the Enemy of Truth

There are few things more dangerous than being wrong.

Except perhaps being certain.

Most of us can remember something we once believed without hesitation—something we defended, taught, repeated, argued about, perhaps even built portions of our lives around—only to discover later that we were mistaken.

Not slightly mistaken.

Dead wrong.

The unsettling part is that while we believed it, we weren't uncertain.

We were dead right.

We had evidence.

We had experience.

We had tradition.

We had authorities.

Some of us even had Bible verses.

And yet we were wrong.

History is filled with things humanity once “knew.”

We knew the earth was the center of the universe.

We knew illnesses were caused by things we later discovered had nothing to do with them.

We knew certain races were inferior to others.

We knew slavery could be justified.

We knew women were intellectually and emotionally unsuited for leadership.

We knew children should be seen and not heard.

We knew grief followed predictable stages.

DEAD RIGHT

We knew people struggling emotionally simply needed to toughen up.
And religious people have had their own impressive collection of certainties.
We knew who God accepted.
We knew who God rejected.
We knew who was going to heaven.
We knew who was going to hell.
We knew which denomination had the truth.
We knew exactly what particular passages of Scripture meant.
We knew what God thought about people we had never bothered to know.
And sometimes we were willing to destroy relationships defending those conclusions.
We were dead right.
Until we weren't.
Perhaps one of the greatest signs of maturity is not finally possessing all the right answers.
Perhaps it is becoming less frightened of discovering that some of our answers were wrong.
Because truth has nothing to fear from examination.
Only certainty does.
This book is not an argument for believing nothing.
It is an invitation to hold what we believe with enough humility that truth is still permitted to surprise us.
It asks a disturbing question:
What if some of the things I am absolutely certain about today are the very things I will someday wish I had questioned?
And an even more uncomfortable one:
What has my need to be right cost me?
A friendship?

A marriage?

A child?

A church?

A community?

My curiosity?

My compassion?

My ability to hear another person?

Perhaps even my ability to hear God?

There is a peculiar irony in defending truth so aggressively that we become incapable of recognizing it when it appears in a form we did not expect.

Jesus encountered this repeatedly.

Some of the people most resistant to him were not people without convictions.

They were people overflowing with them.

They knew the Law.

They knew the traditions.

They knew the boundaries.

They knew what God was like.

And then God stood in front of them—

and contradicted their interpretation of God.

Perhaps that remains one of humanity's greatest spiritual dangers:

We can become so certain about God that we fail to recognize God.

So, this is not a book about abandoning conviction.

It is about recovering humility.

It is about learning the difference between:

“I believe this is true”

and

“I cannot possibly be wrong.”

Those are not the same statement.

One is conviction.

The other may be captivity.

Because sometimes the most important words we will ever speak are not:

“I was right.”

They are:

“I was wrong.”

And strangely enough, those words do not have to represent the death of faith.

They may represent its resurrection.

Welcome to *Dead Right*.

A book about everything we knew for certain—

until truth taught us otherwise.

Chapter One

I Was Certain

Before we talk about everything, *they* got wrong, perhaps we should begin with everything, *we* got wrong.

Actually, let me make that even more uncomfortable.

Everything, *I* got wrong.

There have been things in my life I didn't merely believe.

I knew them.

I could explain them.

Defend them.

Teach them.

Find Scripture for them.

I could tell you why people who disagreed with me were mistaken and, if necessary, offer several Bible verses to prove it.

I wasn't pretending.

I wasn't being dishonest.

I sincerely believed what I believed.

That's what makes certainty so complicated.

Sincerity does not guarantee accuracy.

We can be completely sincere—

and completely wrong.

The Confidence of Yesterday

Think about yourself twenty years ago.

What did you believe about God?

About marriage?

About parenting?

About money?

About politics?

About success?

About failure?

About people different from you?

About yourself?

Now ask another question:

Do you still believe all of it?

Probably not.

Some beliefs matured.

Some expanded.

Some softened.

Some disappeared altogether.

There may even be things you once defended passionately that embarrass you today.

But here's the uncomfortable realization:

The person you were twenty years ago felt just as certain as the person reading these words today.

That should produce some humility.

Because if yesterday's certainty could be wrong, today's certainty deserves at least occasional examination.

“I Don't Know”

There are three words that become strangely difficult to say as we grow more knowledgeable:

I don't know.

Children say them easily.

Experts sometimes struggle.

Religious leaders can struggle even more.

People come to us looking for answers.

So, we give them answers.

What does this verse mean?

Why did this happen?

What is God doing?

Where is this person now?

Why didn't God heal them?

Why did the marriage end?

Why did the child die?

Why did the prayer go unanswered?

And somewhere along the way, mystery became uncomfortable.

So, we filled the silence.

Sometimes with theology.

Sometimes with tradition.

Sometimes with clichés.

Sometimes with Bible verses.

And sometimes we called our discomfort with uncertainty “faith.”

But faith and certainty are not necessarily the same thing.

Faith may actually require the courage to walk without certainty.

When Answers Become More Important Than People

Perhaps certainty becomes most dangerous when maintaining our position becomes more important than loving the person standing in front of us.

We have all seen conversations like this.

Someone shares their pain.

And instead of listening, we explain.

Someone tells us their experience.

We correct it.

Someone questions something we believe.

We defend it.

Someone says, “That teaching wounded me.”

And rather than becoming curious about their wound, we explain why the teaching is still correct.

We protect the doctrine while losing the person.

And somehow, we convince ourselves that this is faithfulness.

But what if being right about an idea while being wrong toward a person is still being wrong?

What if truth that cannot survive compassion isn’t truth at all—or at least not truth fully understood?

Jesus and the People Who Knew

One of the striking things about the Gospels is that Jesus does not seem particularly threatened by people who don’t know.

He sits with them.

Eats with them.

Touches them.

Listens to them.

Welcomes them.

The people who create the greatest conflict are frequently those who are certain that they already know.

They know who is clean.

They know who is unclean.

They know who belongs.

They know who doesn’t.

They know what Sabbath means.

They know what righteousness looks like.

They know who God approves of.
Then Jesus walks directly through their categories.
He touches people they wouldn't touch.
Eats with people they wouldn't eat with.
Defends people they condemned.
Welcomes people they excluded.
He doesn't simply challenge their behavior.
He challenges their certainty.
Perhaps that explains why Jesus could be so disturbing.
He wasn't merely offering new information.
He was revealing how much of what people believed about God had been filtered through assumptions about God.

“You Have Heard...But I Say”

Jesus repeatedly uses a fascinating pattern:

You have heard...

But I say...

Think about the audacity of those words.

You have heard this.

You were taught this.

This is how you've understood it.

This is what your community has repeated.

This is what has been handed down.

But I say...

Jesus was not afraid to disturb inherited certainty.

And perhaps following Jesus still requires allowing him to do exactly that.

What if discipleship isn't simply learning what Jesus taught?

What if discipleship also means allowing Jesus to dismantle what we thought we already knew?

The Bible in Our Hands

There is another uncomfortable reality we will explore throughout this book.

Two people can hold the same Bible—

read the same verse—

pray to the same God—

claim the guidance of the same Spirit—

and arrive at completely opposite conclusions.

History proves this.

Christians used Scripture to defend slavery.

Christians used Scripture to oppose slavery.

Christians used Scripture to deny women basic rights.

Christians used Scripture to advocate for those rights.

Christians have used Scripture to justify war.

Others have used Scripture to become pacifists.

Christians have used Scripture to exclude.

Others have read those same Scriptures and become radically inclusive.

The problem therefore cannot simply be solved by saying:

“The Bible says...”

Because before the Bible ever “says” something to us, it is being read through a human being.

And human beings have lenses.

Culture.

Fear.

Tradition.

Trauma.

Language.

Politics.

Family systems.

Religious systems.

Personal experience.

Desire.

Prejudice.

All of these can influence what we see.

Perhaps the question isn't merely:

What does the Bible say?

Perhaps another question must accompany it:

What am I bringing with me when I read it?

The Lens

A cataract doesn't change the object being viewed.

It changes the clarity through which the object is seen.

The tree hasn't changed.

The sky hasn't changed.

The face of the person standing before us hasn't changed.

But the lens has become clouded.

Perhaps much of spiritual growth is not God constantly changing what is true.

Perhaps it is God healing the lens through which we perceive what has always been true.

And sometimes that healing is uncomfortable.

Because we discover that what we called "truth" was partly truth—
and partly lens.

The Courage to Change

Changing your mind is often treated as weakness.

“You used to believe differently.”

Yes.

Perhaps I did.

But why should growth embarrass us?

A tree that looks exactly the same after twenty years is probably dead.

Living things change.

They deepen.

They stretch.

They shed what no longer serves life.

Perhaps faith does too.

There are things I believed because someone told me to believe them.

Things I believed because everyone around me believed them.

Things I believed because questioning them felt dangerous.

Things I believed because I thought God required me to believe them.

And there are things I eventually had to release.

Not because I stopped loving God.

But because I could no longer reconcile them with the God I was discovering in Jesus.

That distinction matters.

Sometimes losing a belief isn't losing faith.

Sometimes losing a belief is what allows faith to breathe again.

What If I Am Wrong?

There is a question capable of transforming almost any conversation:

What if I am wrong?

Not: “I am wrong.”

Simply: “What if?”

What if my interpretation is incomplete?

What if their experience contains something I need to hear?

What if the verse I am quoting means something more than I have been taught?

What if my tradition saw something clearly but missed something else?

What if the person I have categorized is carrying a story I know nothing about?

What if God is larger than my explanation of God?

Those questions do not destroy conviction.

They create humility.

And humility does something certainty rarely can.

It listens.

The Question We Will Carry

Throughout *Dead Right*, I want us to carry one question.

Not as an accusation.

As an invitation.

Whenever we encounter something, we are absolutely convinced about, quietly ask: **Could I be wrong?**

And perhaps an even better question:

If I discovered that I was wrong, would I want to know?

That may be the real test.

Because sometimes we aren’t defending truth.

We’re defending ourselves.

Our identity.

Our tribe.

Our reputation.

Our theology.

Our investment in having been right.

And the longer we have believed something, the more expensive changing our minds becomes.

But truth does not ask us to protect yesterday.

Truth invites us forward.

So, before we examine history...

Before we examine religion...

Before we examine Scripture...

Before we examine the church...

Before we examine everybody else's certainty...

we begin here:

with ourselves.

With the possibility that somewhere among the things we currently know beyond question may be something we will someday look back upon and whisper:

"I was so certain."

And perhaps that confession will not mark our failure.

Perhaps it will mark our growth.

Because the opposite of being *dead right* isn't being *dead wrong*.

Perhaps it is simply being—

alive enough to keep learning.

Chapter Two

Everybody Knew

There may be no phrase more deserving of suspicion than this one:

Everybody knows.

Everybody knows the earth is the center of everything.

Everybody knows illness comes from bad air.

Everybody knows some people are naturally superior to others.

Everybody knows women aren't capable of certain responsibilities.

Everybody knows children should simply obey.

Everybody knows grief works this way.

Everybody knows people like *that* don't belong with people like *us*.

Everybody knows.

Until eventually—

everybody doesn't.

History is a graveyard filled with certainty.

Not merely ignorance.

Certainty.

People didn't always walk around wondering whether their assumptions were true.

They organized civilizations around them.

Created laws around them.

Built institutions around them.

Educated children according to them.

Preached sermons supporting them.

Punished people who questioned them.

And sometimes killed people who challenged them.

They were not merely wrong.

They were **dead right**.

The Comfort of Consensus

There is something deeply reassuring about being surrounded by people who believe what we believe.

When everyone around us agrees, agreement begins to feel like evidence.

Our family believes it.

Our friends believe it.

Our church believes it.

Our political party believes it.

Our professors believe it.

Our favorite television network believes it.

Our social-media feed confirms it.

Eventually we stop saying:

“I believe this.”

And begin saying:

“This is simply how things are.”

That transition is important.

Because once a belief becomes invisible, we stop examining it.

It becomes an assumption.

And assumptions are often more powerful than beliefs because we no longer realize we are carrying them.

A fish doesn't spend much time thinking about water.

It simply swims in it.

Human beings swim in cultures.

And every culture has water.

Looking Back Is Easy

It is remarkably easy to feel superior to people who lived before us.

We look backward and ask:

How could they possibly have believed that?

How could physicians have practiced medicine that way?

How could churches have defended slavery?

How could governments have denied basic rights to entire groups of people?

How could parents have treated children that way?

How could communities have tolerated segregation?

How could intelligent people have participated in such obvious injustice?

But perhaps we're asking the wrong question.

The more important question is:

What would I have believed if I had lived among them?

That's harder.

Because most of us imagine ourselves as the exception.

We imagine that we would have recognized injustice.

We would have spoken up.

We would have questioned the accepted wisdom.

We would have been courageous.

Perhaps.

But history suggests something uncomfortable:

Most people believe what the people around them believe.

Not because they're stupid.

Because they're human.

Which raises another question:

What do I believe today primarily because everyone around me believes it?

Now history isn't quite so comfortable.

The museum becomes a mirror.

When Intelligent People Are Wrong

We sometimes imagine that education protects us from error.

It helps.

But intelligence does not eliminate bias.

Highly educated people have defended terrible ideas.

Brilliant scientists have reached incorrect conclusions.

Respected physicians have recommended treatments later recognized as harmful.

Accomplished theologians have defended doctrines subsequent generations reconsidered.

Judges have upheld injustice.

Pastors have preached prejudice.

Professors have taught theories eventually abandoned.

Intelligence can help us discover truth.

But intelligence can also make us remarkably skilled at defending what we already believe.

Sometimes the smarter we are, the better our arguments become.

And a sophisticated argument can still defend a false conclusion.

When the Bible Was on Both Sides

Perhaps nowhere is this more sobering than slavery.

Christians who defended slavery did not necessarily believe they were rejecting Scripture.

Many believed they were defending it.

They quoted Scripture.

They constructed theological arguments.

They appealed to biblical passages about servants and masters.

They pointed to patriarchal cultures in the biblical world.

They insisted that those opposing slavery were allowing cultural sentiment to override the plain teaching of Scripture.

Think about that.

People were using the Bible to defend the ownership of human beings.

And many were convinced that faithfulness to God required them to maintain that position.

Meanwhile, other Christians read the same Bible and saw something entirely different.

They saw liberation.

Human dignity.

The Exodus.

The prophets.

The teachings of Jesus.

The declaration that divisions of status could not determine our worth before God.

Same Bible.

Different lens.

That should humble every one of us who has ever said:

“I’m just believing what the Bible says.”

Maybe.

But so did they.

At least they thought they did.

The Bible Didn’t Change

This is where things become fascinating.

The passages were still there after slavery was abolished.

The Bible hadn’t changed.

Something in the reader had.

The lens changed.

Human dignity became more visible.

Cultural assumptions were challenged.

Questions that previous generations rarely asked became unavoidable.

And suddenly passages once used confidently to defend slavery no longer seemed capable of carrying the moral weight placed upon them.

What happened?

Did truth change?

Or did we begin seeing something we had previously been unable—or unwilling—to see?

That question will follow us throughout this book.

We Have Done This Before

Slavery is not the only example.

Scripture has been invoked to justify racial segregation.

Scripture has been used to limit women's participation in society and religious communities.

Scripture has been used to defend violence.

Scripture has been used to justify colonialism.

Scripture has been used to shame people experiencing mental illness.

Scripture has been used to tell abused spouses to remain in dangerous situations.

Scripture has been used to frighten children.

Scripture has been used to silence questions.

And often the people doing these things did not think they were being cruel.

They believed they were being faithful.

That may be the most disturbing part.

Cruelty performed in the name of cruelty is recognizable.

Cruelty performed in the name of righteousness can become sacred.

Once we believe God agrees with us, almost anything can become justifiable.

Certainty Has Victims

Ideas are not harmless simply because they are theological.

Beliefs eventually touch bodies.

They affect marriages.

Children.

Families.

Communities.

Laws.

Relationships.

People.

When our theology is wrong, somebody may pay for it.

Sometimes generations of people pay for it.

That is why humility isn't merely an intellectual virtue.

Humility can be an ethical responsibility.

Before declaring:

“God says...”

perhaps we should understand the enormous weight of those words.

Because adding God to our opinion gives our opinion tremendous power.

It becomes difficult to question.

Difficult to challenge.

Difficult to escape.

What might merely have been someone's interpretation becomes divine command.

And once God has supposedly spoken, the conversation is over.

Perhaps sometimes it shouldn't be.

The People Who Questioned

Thankfully, history also contains another kind of person.

The questioner.

The dissenter.

The reformer.

The person willing to say:

“Something about this doesn’t seem right.”

They are rarely appreciated initially.

Questioners disturb systems.

They interrupt certainty.

They ask inconvenient questions.

Why?

Who says?

Has it always been this way?

Does it have to remain this way?

Is this actually true?

Is this actually just?

Is this really what God desires?

Sometimes societies label such people dangerous.

Churches call them rebellious.

Families call them difficult.

Institutions call them troublemakers.

And occasionally history later calls them prophets.

The Heretic of Today

There is an uncomfortable pattern throughout human history.

Yesterday’s heresy sometimes becomes tomorrow’s common sense.

Not always, of course.

Some ideas deserve rejection.

Some challenges are simply wrong.

But occasionally someone sees beyond the boundaries of their generation.

They recognize something others cannot yet see.

And because they threaten the existing structure, they are rejected.

Which raises an interesting possibility:

What if being rejected by the majority doesn't necessarily mean someone is wrong?

Jesus himself should make Christians particularly cautious about that assumption.

The crowd is not always right.

Religious authority is not always right.

Tradition is not always right.

Our interpretation is not always right.

And—

this is equally important—

the person challenging all of them is not automatically right either.

The answer isn't rebellion.

The answer is discernment.

The Danger of the Pendulum

Once we recognize how frequently certainty has failed us, another temptation appears.

Cynicism.

Maybe nothing is true.

Maybe everyone is wrong.

Maybe every tradition should be discarded.

Maybe authority itself is dangerous.

Maybe the old is automatically false and the new automatically enlightened.

But that is simply another form of certainty.

Dead Right is not an argument for replacing old dogmatism with new dogmatism.

It is an invitation to remain teachable.

Humility does not mean having no convictions.

It means allowing convictions to remain accountable to truth.

Imagine the Year 2126

Let's perform an experiment.

Imagine people one hundred years from now studying us.

Our medicine.

Our churches.

Our prisons.

Our politics.

Our educational systems.

Our economic systems.

Our treatment of the planet.

Our understanding of human consciousness.

Our attitudes toward aging.

Our treatment of the dying.

Our assumptions about mental health.

Our technology.

Our theology.

Our certainty about God.

What will they find astonishing?

What will they ask about us?

Perhaps:

“How could they possibly have believed that?”

And somewhere in 2126, someone may read something you or I confidently wrote and shake their head.

They may see what we couldn't.

Not because they're better people.

Because they are standing somewhere we were unable to stand.

Just as we stand somewhere previous generations could not.

The Question History Asks Us

History should not make us arrogant.

It should make us humble.

The lesson isn't:

Look how stupid they were.

The lesson is:

Look how certain human beings can become while being wrong.

And then comes the uncomfortable realization:

We are human beings too.

We have our assumptions.

Our blind spots.

Our tribes.

Our sacred cows.

Our cultural conditioning.

Our favorite interpretations.

Our unquestioned beliefs.

Our things everybody knows.

Which means somewhere among the things our generation currently regards as obvious truth may be tomorrow's astonishing error.

We simply don't know which ones yet.

And perhaps wisdom begins there.

Not with abandoning truth.

But with respecting it enough to keep searching.

Not with refusing conviction.

But with holding conviction without closing our hands around it.

Not with saying:

“Nothing can be known.”

But with remembering:

“Everything I know is being known through me.”

And I am still learning.

So whenever someone says:

“Everybody knows...”

perhaps we should become curious.

Because history has heard those words before.

And history has a rather unsettling habit of answering:

****“They were dead right.**

Until they weren’t.”**

Chapter Three

The Bible Clearly Says

Few sentences can end a conversation faster than this one:

“The Bible clearly says...”

I have said it.

Perhaps you have too.

Usually, we mean something sincere by it.

We mean:

This matters to me.

I believe Scripture carries authority.

I am trying to take God seriously.

I don't want to simply invent a truth that makes me comfortable.

Those can be honorable intentions.

But there is a problem hiding inside the word **clearly**.

If the Bible is always as clear as we claim, why have sincere people who love Scripture disagreed about it for centuries?

Not about insignificant details.

About enormous things.

War.

Slavery.

Women.

Divorce.

Baptism.

Communion.

Predestination.

Free will.

Hell.

Salvation.

Spiritual gifts.

Church government.

The end times.

The age of the earth.

Who can lead.

Who can marry.

Who belongs.

Who doesn't.

And frequently both sides say exactly the same thing:

“The Bible clearly says...”

They cannot both mean that their interpretation is self-evidently the only possible one.

Yet somehow we rarely hear ourselves saying:

“My understanding of the Bible is...”

That sounds less powerful.

Less certain.

Less final.

But perhaps more honest.

The Verse After “Clearly”

Something interesting often happens after someone says:

“The Bible clearly says...”

A verse follows.

Sometimes a single verse.

A sentence removed from a letter.

A line taken from an ancient story.

A command given to a particular people in a particular culture at a particular moment.

And suddenly that sentence is expected to settle a question the original writer may never have imagined being asked.

We call this being biblical.

But sometimes we aren't reading Scripture.

We're recruiting Scripture.

We already have a conclusion.

Then we find a verse willing to work for us.

The verse becomes evidence.

The conversation ends.

God has spoken.

Or has God?

Perhaps God spoke.

But then we interpreted.

Those are not necessarily the same thing.

The Bible Has a Context

Every biblical text came from somewhere.

Someone wrote it.

Someone received it.

Something was happening.

There was a culture.

A language.

A political reality.

A religious world.

An assumption about life.

Questions were being asked that may be different from ours.

Words carried meanings that translations cannot always reproduce perfectly.

That doesn't diminish Scripture.

It honors it.

If someone found a letter you wrote to your spouse two thousand years from now, removed three sentences, translated them into another language, and constructed an entire philosophy of marriage from them, you might reasonably object:

“That’s not what I meant.”

Context matters.

It matters when we read each other.

Why would it not matter when we read Scripture?

The Bible Contains a Conversation

There is something else we sometimes forget.

The Bible is not a single voice speaking in a single literary form from a single moment in history.

It is a library.

Story.

Poetry.

Wisdom.

Law.

Prophecy.

Lament.

Gospel.

Letters.

Apocalyptic imagery.

Different writers speak from different circumstances across generations.

And sometimes Scripture appears to contain its own internal wrestling.

One text emphasizes one dimension.

Another brings another into view.

Proverbs may describe how life generally works.

Job appears and says:

Not always.

A theology says righteous people prosper and wicked people suffer.

Then Job sits in the ashes.

Something doesn't fit.

And Scripture does not erase the tension.

It preserves it.

Maybe that's important.

Perhaps God isn't frightened by the conversation.

Maybe we are.

“You Have Heard...”

Jesus himself enters this conversation in a remarkable way.

“You have heard that it was said...”

Then:

“But I say to you...”

Those words should stop us.

Jesus was speaking to people whose beliefs had scriptural foundations.

Yet he was willing to challenge how those Scriptures had been understood and applied.

Not because Scripture was worthless.

Because interpretation matters.

He repeatedly moved beneath the rule toward the heart.

From murder to anger.

From adultery to desire.

From retaliation to enemy-love.

From external compliance toward internal transformation.

Jesus wasn't simply giving people more rules.

He was changing the lens.

The Sabbath Problem

Consider the Sabbath.

The command was biblical.

Not vaguely biblical.

Explicitly biblical.

Sabbath mattered deeply within Israel's covenant life.

Then Jesus' disciples begin picking grain.

People object.

They have Scripture on their side.

Jesus responds by telling a story about David doing something that appears to violate sacred expectations.

Then he makes an extraordinary statement:

"The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath."

Think about the interpretive move.

The command matters.

But the human being matters too.

The purpose of the command reveals how it should be understood.

Jesus seems unwilling to interpret God's instruction in a way that destroys the people the instruction was intended to serve.

That may be one of the most important interpretive principles in Scripture.

When Being Biblical Makes Us Unlike Jesus

This is where things become uncomfortable.

Is it possible to defend a biblical interpretation while behaving unlike Christ?

History says yes.

It has happened repeatedly.

People have quoted Scripture while humiliating others.

Quoted Scripture while excluding others.

Quoted Scripture while defending oppression.

Quoted Scripture while protecting institutions.

Quoted Scripture while frightening children.

Quoted Scripture while ignoring suffering.

Quoted Scripture while refusing compassion.

At some point we have to ask:

If my interpretation of Scripture consistently makes me less loving than Jesus, have I understood Scripture correctly?

That is not sentimentalism.

For the Christian, Jesus is not an optional footnote to biblical interpretation.

He is central to it.

If we believe he reveals the Father, then Jesus becomes more than someone we study.

He becomes a lens through which we understand what God is like.

“Show Us the Father”

Philip asks Jesus:

“Show us the Father.”

Jesus’ response is astonishing.

In essence:

If you’ve seen me, you’ve seen the Father.

That means something.

If our picture of God contradicts the God revealed in Jesus, we should at least become curious.

When our theology says God is one way and Jesus appears another way, perhaps the answer isn't to explain Jesus away.

Perhaps our theology needs another look.

This becomes particularly important when we encounter biblical portraits of violence, vengeance, exclusion, sacrifice, judgment and destruction.

We will explore those questions later.

But for now, perhaps we can establish a principle:

Jesus deserves the final word in our understanding of God.

Not because the rest of Scripture should be discarded.

But because, for Christians, Scripture itself leads us toward Christ.

The Word of God

We have also sometimes used language carelessly.

We call the Bible:

“The Word of God.”

And certainly Christians have historically spoken of Scripture as God's Word.

But the Gospel of John uses that title in a profound and particular way.

“The Word became flesh.”

Not paper.

Not ink.

Flesh.

A person.

Jesus.

Scripture points.

Jesus embodies.

Scripture testifies.

Jesus reveals.

Scripture tells the story.

Jesus enters it.

Perhaps confusing the witness with the One to whom it witnesses creates problems.

Jesus himself said to religious leaders that they searched the Scriptures because they believed that in them they possessed life—

yet those very Scriptures testified about him.

Imagine that.

People studying Scripture so intensely that they missed the person standing in front of them.

They knew the text.

And missed the Word.

Could we?

When Interpretation Becomes Identity

Changing a biblical interpretation can feel terrifying because our interpretations rarely exist by themselves.

They are connected to communities.

Family.

Churches.

Denominations.

Friendships.

Employment.

Reputation.

Sometimes income.

Sometimes belonging.

Questioning a doctrine can therefore feel like questioning your entire world.

That explains why evidence alone rarely changes someone's mind.

We aren't simply asking:

“Is this interpretation true?”

Somewhere beneath the surface we may also be asking:

If I change my mind, who will I lose?

Will my church still accept me?

Will my family understand?

Will my friends think I've compromised?

Will people believe I've abandoned God?

Will I still recognize myself?

Those are not small questions.

Sometimes certainty is protecting more than theology.

It is protecting belonging.

The Courage to Read Again

Perhaps spiritual maturity includes the willingness to return to familiar passages and read them again.

Not to force them to say something new.

But to allow ourselves to notice what we may have missed.

To ask:

Who wrote this?

To whom?

Why?

What was happening?

What kind of literature is this?

What assumptions am I bringing?

How does this fit within the larger biblical story?

And perhaps especially:

What does Jesus reveal that helps me understand this?

These questions do not weaken Scripture.

They take Scripture seriously enough not to reduce it to slogans.

The Humility of “Perhaps”

There is a word religious certainty doesn’t particularly enjoy:

Perhaps.

Perhaps this passage means something more than I thought.

Perhaps my tradition saw part of the picture.

Perhaps another tradition sees something I have missed.

Perhaps this question is more complicated than a single verse.

Perhaps God is larger than my theology.

Perhaps I need to listen before I speak.

Perhaps I have been wrong.

“Perhaps” does not mean truth doesn’t exist.

It means I am not truth.

That distinction might save us from a great deal of arrogance.

The Bible Clearly Says

So the next time we hear ourselves saying:

“The Bible clearly says...”

perhaps we might stop before finishing the sentence.

Not because the Bible says nothing.

It says extraordinary things.

But because we are reading it.

And readers interpret.

Perhaps we could say instead:

“This is how I currently understand this passage.”

Currently.

That single word leaves a window open.

It allows learning.

It allows conversation.

It allows correction.

It allows the Spirit to continue teaching.

It allows another human being to speak.

It even allows Scripture to surprise us.

And perhaps that is what makes a living faith living.

Not that it possesses every answer.

But that it remains capable of hearing.

Because the most dangerous Bible may not be the Bible someone rejects.

It may be the Bible someone believes they have completely mastered.

A closed Bible cannot teach us.

But neither can an open Bible read through a closed mind.

And perhaps some of us have spent years defending what the Bible “clearly says”—

only to discover that what was clearest of all

was how much more we still had to learn.

Chapter Four

When God Doesn't Look Like Jesus

There was a question I avoided for a long time.

Not because I didn't see it.

Because I didn't know what to do with it.

What do I do when God doesn't look like Jesus?

I would read Jesus saying:

Love your enemies.

Bless those who curse you.

Forgive.

Do good to those who hate you.

Be merciful.

Put away the sword.

Then I would turn a few hundred pages backward and encounter stories in which God appeared to command the destruction of entire populations.

Men.

Women.

Sometimes children.

And I was supposed to believe these portraits required no explanation.

God said it.

That settled it.

Or so I thought.

But eventually something inside me refused to stop asking:

If Jesus reveals the Father, why does the Father sometimes appear so unlike Jesus?

That question did not destroy my faith.

It forced me to examine what my faith was actually built upon.

The God We Inherited

Most of us did not begin with a blank page when thinking about God.

We inherited a picture.

From parents.

Pastors.

Sunday school teachers.

Books.

Songs.

Sermons.

Traditions.

Experiences.

Sometimes trauma.

Some inherited a God who was loving.

Others inherited a God who was angry.

Some inherited a God who watched carefully for mistakes.

Some inherited a God who required perfection.

Some inherited a God who could barely tolerate humanity until Jesus intervened.

And sometimes we spent years calling that picture:

God.

But what if part of spiritual growth involves distinguishing God from our picture of God?

Those are not necessarily identical.

Jesus Makes an Extraordinary Claim

Philip says:

“Lord, show us the Father.”

Jesus responds:

“Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.”

That statement deserves more attention than we sometimes give it.

Jesus does not say:

“I will explain the Father.”

He says, in effect:

Look at me.

Want to know what God is like?

Look here.

Watch who I touch.

Watch who I welcome.

Watch how I respond to sinners.

Watch what I do with frightened people.

Watch how I treat women.

Children.

Outcasts.

Foreigners.

Enemies.

Watch what I do when people fail.

Watch what I do when they betray me.

Watch what I do when they crucify me.

If Jesus is the revelation of the Father, then the cross becomes extraordinary.

Human beings are killing Jesus—

and Jesus is forgiving human beings.

“Father, forgive them.”

Not: “Father, destroy them.”

Forgive them.

They don't know what they're doing.

What if that is not Jesus persuading a reluctant Father to become merciful?

What if that is, the Father being revealed?

Jesus Did Not Come to Protect Us From God

Somewhere along the way, many of us inherited a strange version of the gospel.

Humanity sinned.

God became furious.

Justice demanded punishment.

God needed someone to pay.

Jesus stepped forward.

God punished Jesus instead of us.

Now God could forgive us.

We called that good news.

But I eventually found myself asking:

Did Jesus come to save us from God?

Because sometimes that is how we told the story.

Jesus became the loving member of the Trinity.

The Father became the angry one.

Jesus stood between us and God.

But Jesus does not seem to describe his mission that way.

He says that if we have seen him, we have seen the Father.

He says he and the Father are one.

He says the Father himself loves us.

Paul writes that **God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.**

God was not standing at a distance watching Jesus repair God's anger problem.

God was in Christ.

Reconciling.

Restoring.

Drawing humanity home.

That sounds different.

What If We Read Backward?

Perhaps we have sometimes interpreted Jesus through our previous picture of God.

What if we reversed it?

What if instead of forcing Jesus to fit our interpretation of everything that came before him, we allowed Jesus to illuminate everything that came before him?

That doesn't mean erasing difficult passages.

It means wrestling honestly with them.

Perhaps ancient people sometimes understood God through the assumptions of their world.

Perhaps revelation unfolds.

Perhaps Scripture records not only what people understood about God but also humanity's growing capacity to perceive God.

Perhaps some texts reveal as much about the people encountering God as they do about God.

Those possibilities can feel dangerous.

But so can refusing to ask the question.

“Kill Them All”

There are biblical passages that should disturb us.

We should not pretend otherwise.

Entire populations are placed under destruction.

Cities are wiped out.

Violence is attributed to divine command.

And sometimes our explanation has been:

“God is God. He can do whatever he wants.”

Technically, that preserves divine sovereignty.

But morally, it creates another problem.

If an earthly ruler commanded soldiers to kill children because their parents belonged to an enemy population, we would call it an atrocity.

If a religious leader claimed God told him to destroy a village, we would not praise his obedience.

We would be horrified.

Yet when we encounter similar language in an ancient text, sometimes we shut down the moral instincts that Jesus himself seems to awaken in us.

Perhaps our discomfort is not rebellion.

Perhaps our discomfort matters.

Maybe compassion isn't preventing us from understanding God.

Maybe compassion is part of how Christ is teaching us to understand God.

Abraham and Isaac

Consider Abraham taking Isaac toward the mountain.

For generations, many of us were taught to admire Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son.

Look at his faith.

Look at his obedience.

He would give God everything.

Even Isaac.

But what if another question deserves asking?

Why would Abraham think God wanted his child killed in the first place?

Abraham lived among cultures where sacrifice—including human sacrifice—was not an unimaginable religious concept.

What if the revolutionary moment in the story isn't that Abraham was willing to kill Isaac?

What if the revelation is that Isaac did not have to die?

The knife stops.

The child lives.

Perhaps God is being distinguished from the gods who demand children.

Perhaps humanity is learning something.

Maybe the voice of God was not ultimately heard in the command to kill—
but in the interruption.

Do not lay your hand on the boy.

Sometimes revelation may be found in what God stops.

Sacrifice

This raises another difficult question.

Why sacrifice at all?

Why blood?

Why would God need death before offering forgiveness?

Ancient people lived in sacrificial worlds.

Blood, animals, altars and offerings were common religious language.

Israel did not develop in a cultural vacuum.

But Scripture itself begins moving somewhere.

The prophets increasingly challenge sacrifice separated from justice and mercy.

“I desire mercy...”

“Do justice...”

“Walk humbly...”

Jesus continues that movement.

“I desire mercy, not sacrifice.”

What if God was never addicted to blood?

What if sacrifice was a language humanity understood—

and God entered that language to lead humanity beyond it?

And what if the cross is not the ultimate proof that God demands blood?

What if the cross exposes what **we** do with violence—

while revealing what **God** does with violence?

We kill.

God forgives.

We wound.

God heals.

We condemn.

God reconciles.

We create crosses.

God creates resurrection.

That sounds remarkably like Jesus.

The Cross Reveals Someone

Perhaps the cross is not primarily about changing God's mind about humanity.

Perhaps it changes humanity's mind about God.

Look at the cross.

What do we see?

A God demanding vengeance?

Or a God entering human violence and refusing to return it?

Jesus absorbs hatred without becoming hateful.

He experiences violence without becoming violent.

He encounters betrayal without abandoning love.

And resurrection becomes God's answer.

Not retaliation.

Life.

What if the cross is not God saying:

“Someone must die before I can love you.”

What if it is God saying:

“Even when you kill me, I will not stop loving you.”

That is a very different sound.

The Sound Beneath the Noise

Perhaps humanity has always been trying to hear God.

But hearing is complicated.

Fear creates noise.

Culture creates noise.

Religion creates noise.

Power creates noise.

Trauma creates noise.

Our assumptions create noise.

And sometimes we mistake the noise surrounding God for the sound of God.

But then Jesus appears.

And suddenly the sound becomes clearer.

Love your enemies.

Forgive.

Bless.

Heal.

Restore.

Welcome.

Do not be afraid.

Peace.

Come to me.

Follow me.

Father, forgive them.

Perhaps Jesus is not changing God's voice.

Perhaps Jesus is removing the distortion.

“Who Told You?”

The story begins in a garden.

Human beings hide.

They are afraid.

And God asks:

“Where are you?”

Then another remarkable question:

“Who told you that you were naked?”

Who told you?

Where did this interpretation come from?

Who told you God was disgusted with you?

Who told you God had abandoned you?

Who told you fear was God's language?

Who told you violence was God's nature?

Who told you punishment was God's deepest desire?

Who told you love needed to be earned?

Perhaps humanity has been answering that question ever since Eden.

We heard something.

Then we interpreted what we heard.

And sometimes our interpretation became our theology.

What If Jesus Is Right?

That sounds like an absurd question for Christians.

Of course, Jesus is right.

But follow it further.

What if Jesus is right about God?

Completely right.

What if enemy-love isn't merely something God expects from us?

What if enemy-love describes God?

What if forgiveness isn't something God reluctantly offers after receiving sufficient payment?

What if forgiveness flows from God's nature?

What if mercy isn't the exception to God's justice?

What if mercy reveals God's justice?

What if love isn't one attribute among many competing attributes of God?

What if John means exactly what he says:

God is love.

Then every picture of God must eventually pass through that revelation.

Including ours.

The Test

Perhaps we need a simple question when examining our theology:

Does this look like Jesus?

Our doctrine of judgment—

does it look like Jesus?

Our understanding of salvation—

does it look like Jesus?

Our treatment of enemies—

does it look like Jesus?

Our interpretation of Scripture—

does it look like Jesus?

Our church—

does it look like Jesus?

Our lives—

do they look like Jesus?

Not perfectly.

But directionally.

Because if Jesus is the exact representation of God, then becoming more Christlike should not somehow make us less Godlike.

And yet sometimes our theology asks us to believe that Jesus is kinder than his Father.

More forgiving than his Father.

More compassionate than his Father.

More willing to welcome than his Father.

Something is wrong with that picture.

Maybe We Were Dead Right

Maybe we were dead right that God needed blood.

Dead right that God couldn't look upon sinners.

Dead right that Jesus protected us from God's anger.

Dead right that divine justice ultimately meant retribution.

Dead right that certain people were beyond mercy.

Dead right that God's holiness required distance.

Dead right that fear brought people closer to God.

We had sermons.

Books.

Systems.

Songs.

And verses.

But what if we were wrong?

Not about God existing.

Not about Scripture mattering.

Not about Jesus.

What if we were wrong about the **lens**?

And what if discovering that doesn't leave us with less God?

What if it leaves us with more?

A God more beautiful than we imagined.

More merciful.

More restorative.

More Christlike.

More like—

Jesus.

Perhaps the question that once frightened me can become an invitation:

What do I do when God doesn't look like Jesus?

I look again.

At the text.

At my tradition.

At my assumptions.

At my theology.

At my lens.

And then—

I look at Jesus.

Because perhaps I wasn't wrong to believe that God had spoken.

Perhaps I was simply dead wrong about what God sounded like.

Chapter Five

Scared Straight

Some of us met hell before we really met God.

We learned about burning before belonging.

Judgment before mercy.

Punishment before Presence.

We were told that God loved us—

and then immediately told what God would do to us if we failed to respond correctly to that love.

Nobody necessarily intended to traumatize us.

Many of the people teaching us were sincere.

They believed what they were saying.

They believed eternity was at stake.

And if you genuinely believe someone is standing inches from an eternal cliff, frightening them away from the edge can feel like love.

That is what makes this complicated.

People can frighten you because they love you.

And still be wrong.

Fear Works

We should acknowledge something.

Fear is effective.

Fear gets attention.

Tell someone God loves them and they may listen.

Tell someone they could burn forever and they will probably listen more carefully.

Fear fills altars.

Fear produces prayers.

Fear gets hands raised.

Fear can make children cry.

Fear can make adults repent.

Fear can generate impressive statistics for evangelistic meetings.

“How many came forward?”

“How many prayed the prayer?”

“How many got saved?”

But there is another question we rarely asked:

What happened inside them afterward?

Did they encounter Love?

Or did they learn how to survive God?

Those are not the same thing.

The Prayer

Many people can remember some version of it.

Admit you're a sinner.

Believe Jesus died for your sins.

Confess Jesus as Lord.

Ask him into your heart.

And if you sincerely prayed the prayer, you were saved.

For many people, that prayer became the beginning of something beautiful.

I would never want to diminish that.

But for others, the prayer did not end the fear.

It began a lifetime of checking.

Did I really mean it?

Was I sincere enough?

Did I repent correctly?

What if I forgot a sin?

What if I walked away?

What if I committed the unforgivable sin?

What if I die tonight?

What if Jesus returns before I get things right?

What if?

What if?

What if?

A message intended to create assurance sometimes produced lifelong anxiety.

And then we called that anxiety conviction.

“If You Died Tonight...”

There was a familiar evangelistic question:

“If you died tonight, do you know where you would spend eternity?”

It is an effective question.

Death creates urgency.

But notice where it begins.

Not with life.

Death.

Not with relationship.

Destination.

Not: Do you know the Father?

Not: Have you discovered what it means to be fully alive?

Not: Are you learning to love?

Not: Can you hear the invitation of Christ?

But: **If you die tonight...**

Fear becomes the doorway.

And perhaps some people walked through that doorway and eventually discovered Love.

But we should still ask whether fear was ever the doorway Jesus intended.

Jesus and Fear

Jesus certainly speaks warnings.

He speaks about judgment.

Consequences.

Gehenna.

Outer darkness.

Weeping.

Destruction.

We should not pretend those texts do not exist.

But we should also resist assuming that our inherited interpretation of those words is identical to what Jesus meant.

Gehenna had a history.

Judgment language had a prophetic context.

Apocalyptic language carried images familiar to ancient listeners.

The words were spoken within a world very different from ours.

Perhaps before turning every warning into a detailed map of the afterlife, we should listen again.

Because there is something else Jesus says repeatedly:

Do not be afraid.

Fear not.

Don't be anxious.

Your Father knows what you need.

You are worth more than many sparrows.

Come to me.

Rest.

Peace.

Jesus warns, yes.

But fear does not seem to be the relationship he is trying to create between humanity and God.

Perfect Love

Then John writes something almost impossible to reconcile with fear-based religion:

“Perfect love casts out fear, because fear has to do with punishment.”

Read that slowly.

Fear.

Punishment.

Love.

John connects them.

And says mature love drives fear away.

Yet sometimes our evangelism did the opposite.

We used fear of punishment to drive people toward Love.

Perhaps it worked.

But we should at least notice the irony.

We were using the very thing mature love was supposed to remove.

What Kind of Father?

Jesus repeatedly calls God Father.

That language can be difficult for people whose fathers wounded them.

But Jesus appears to use the image to communicate intimacy, care and belonging.

So imagine a human father saying:

“I love you more than you can comprehend.

I created you because I wanted you.

I want a relationship with you.

But if you don't love me back before you die, I will sustain your existence forever so you can experience conscious torment without end."

If a human parent said that, we would not describe the relationship as healthy.

We might describe it as coercive.

Love me—

or else.

Yet when we attribute the same structure to God, we sometimes call it holiness.

Perhaps God is not less loving than the best parent we can imagine.

Perhaps God is infinitely more.

Justice Matters

This does not mean evil doesn't matter.

It matters enormously.

People hurt people.

Children are abused.

Wars destroy families.

Greed crushes communities.

Power exploits vulnerability.

Human beings commit horrifying acts.

Any theology of love that simply shrugs at evil is not love.

Victims deserve justice.

Creation cries for restoration.

The question isn't whether God judges.

The question is:

What is God's judgment for?

Is judgment ultimately about retaliation?

Or restoration?

Is divine justice satisfied when suffering has been inflicted?

Or when what has been broken has finally been made right?

Those are very different understandings of justice.

The Hospital

Imagine a hospital.

A person arrives terribly ill.

The physician examines them and identifies the disease.

That diagnosis is judgment.

Something is wrong.

Truth must name it.

But the physician does not diagnose in order to condemn the patient.

The diagnosis serves healing.

What if divine judgment is more like that?

Light reveals.

Truth exposes.

Love confronts.

Not because God delights in discovering what is wrong with us—

but because what remains hidden cannot be healed.

Perhaps judgment is not Love disappearing.

Perhaps judgment is what Love does when Love refuses to leave destruction untouched.

Fire

And then there is fire.

Fire appears throughout Scripture.

We were often taught to hear one thing whenever we encountered it:

Punishment.

But fire does more than destroy.

Fire purifies.

Refines.

Reveals.

Consumes what cannot remain.

The prophet speaks of a refiner's fire.

Paul describes work being tested by fire.

Something burns.

Something survives.

Perhaps biblical fire deserves more careful attention than the pictures many of us inherited.

What if God's fire is not the opposite of God's love?

What if God's fire is love refusing to preserve what destroys us?

That would still be frightening.

Healing sometimes is.

But it is very different from torture.

Salvation From What?

We should also ask another question:

What are we saved from?

Many of us would once have answered immediately:

Hell.

But the New Testament language of salvation is richer than escaping a future destination.

Saved from sin.

Saved from death.

Saved from corruption.

Saved from bondage.

Saved into life.

Reconciliation.

Healing.

Liberation.

Restoration.

Participation in Christ.

A new creation.

Perhaps salvation is not merely God's plan for getting us somewhere after we die.

Perhaps salvation is God restoring what has been lost, fractured and distorted in us and in creation.

That begins now.

Confession

We were sometimes taught to hear Paul's words:

"Confess with your mouth..."

as though they were a formula.

Say the correct words.

Believe the correct proposition.

Complete the transaction.

Saved.

But confession is deeper than pronunciation.

To confess Jesus as Lord in the Roman world was not simply repeating a sentence.

It was allegiance.

Orientation.

A declaration that another kingdom had become central.

And belief in the heart was not merely intellectual agreement with religious information.

It was trust.

Perhaps salvation was never meant to be reduced to saying the right words before the clock runs out.

Maybe it is awakening to the reality of Christ and learning to live within that reality.

The Thief

Then there is the man dying beside Jesus.

No theology class.

No baptism.

No church membership.

No doctrinal examination.

No opportunity to repair his past.

Barely enough time to speak.

“Remember me.”

And Jesus responds with welcome.

Religion sometimes makes salvation extraordinarily complicated.

Jesus can make it sound astonishingly near.

What About Those Who Never Heard?

Fear-based systems eventually create difficult questions.

What about the child born somewhere who never hears the gospel?

What about the person whose only experience of Christianity was abuse?

What about someone taught another religion from infancy?

What about people who lived before missionaries arrived?

What about people whose cognitive abilities prevent them from understanding our theological formulas?

We developed explanations.

Age of accountability.

Special exceptions.

Invincible ignorance.

Missionary urgency.

Different levels of revelation.

Perhaps some of those ideas contain wisdom.

But notice what we were trying to do.

We were trying to rescue people from the implications of our theology.

Something inside us kept insisting:

Surely God is more merciful than this.

Perhaps that instinct deserves attention.

The Good News

The gospel literally means good news.

So perhaps we should ask:

What exactly is good about our good news?

Is the good news:

God is going to torment humanity forever, but there is a way for some of you to escape?

Or is it something larger?

God has entered human brokenness.

God has revealed himself in Christ.

Death does not have the final word.

Sin does not have the final word.

Violence does not have the final word.

Alienation does not have the final word.

Love does.

Christ is reconciling.

Healing.

Restoring.

Making all things new.

That sounds like good news.

Not merely good news for the people who figured out the formula.

Good news of great joy—

for all people.

Maybe We Were Dead Right

We were dead right that fear saved souls.

Dead right that hell needed to be emphasized.

Dead right that children needed to understand eternal punishment.

Dead right that anxiety meant conviction.

Dead right that people needed to be frightened into heaven.

Dead right that God's justice required endless suffering.

Dead right that questioning any of this meant compromising Scripture.

And perhaps some of us eventually discovered something surprising.

Fear made us religious.

But Love made us alive.

The Sound Changes

Imagine hearing the gospel without fear.

Not: **“Turn or burn.”**

But: **“Come home.”**

Not: **“God cannot tolerate you.”**

But: **“God was in Christ reconciling the world.”**

Not: **“Say this correctly before you die.”**

But: **“Follow me.”**

Not: **“God is waiting to punish you.”**

But: **“Perfect love casts out fear.”**

The invitation remains.

Transformation remains.

Repentance remains.

Justice remains.

Truth remains.

Consequences remain.

But the sound changes.

And sometimes changing the sound changes everything.

Because repentance does not have to mean crawling toward an angry God.

The word itself carries the invitation to a changed mind—

a new way of seeing.

Perhaps repentance includes discovering that some of what we believed about God was wrong.

Imagine that.

We repent—

even of our theology.

We turn.

We see differently.

And suddenly the God we spent years being afraid of begins looking remarkably like Jesus.

Maybe salvation was never about becoming frightened enough to run from hell.

Maybe it was about finally hearing Love clearly enough—

to run toward the Sound.

DEAD RIGHT

And perhaps some of us have spent a lifetime trying to get people **scared straight**—
when Jesus was inviting us
to be **loved whole**.

Chapter Six

Us and Them

Human beings seem remarkably talented at drawing circles.

Inside the circle:

Us.

Outside the circle:

Them.

Believers and unbelievers.

Saved and lost.

Orthodox and heretic.

Conservative and liberal.

Traditional and progressive.

Citizen and foreigner.

Clean and unclean.

Good people and bad people.

Our people—

and those people.

The labels change.

The circle remains.

And perhaps one of the most dangerous things about being **dead right** is what certainty eventually allows us to believe about everyone who is wrong.

Because once I am certain that I possess the truth, it becomes remarkably easy to believe something else:

You are the problem.

We Need a Them

DEAD RIGHT

Groups often discover who they are by identifying who they are not.

We belong because they don't.

We understand because they don't.

We are faithful because they have compromised.

We are enlightened because they remain ignorant.

We are righteous because they are sinful.

We are awake because they are deceived.

This happens in religion.

It happens in politics.

It happens in families.

It happens in nations.

It even happens among people who pride themselves on being inclusive.

Every tribe is tempted to create another tribe against which it can define itself.

Even people who reject fundamentalism can become fundamentalist about rejecting fundamentalists.

Even people who preach tolerance can become remarkably intolerant of those they consider intolerant.

The names change.

The mechanism survives.

Us.

Them.

The Certainty of Belonging

There is something comforting about knowing where the boundaries are.

Who is in?

Who is out?

Who can be trusted?

Who should be avoided?

What do we believe?

What do they believe?

Certainty creates belonging.

And belonging is powerful.

Human beings need community.

We need people who know us.

People who understand our language.

Our stories.

Our customs.

Our values.

There is nothing wrong with belonging.

The problem begins when belonging requires someone else's exclusion.

When our identity depends upon their inferiority.

When being chosen means someone else must be rejected.

When being right means someone else must become the enemy.

God Is On Our Side

Perhaps one of the most dangerous sentences humanity has ever spoken is:

“God is on our side.”

Armies have said it.

Nations have said it.

Political movements have said it.

Churches have said it.

Denominations have said it.

Families have said it.

Individuals have said it.

And sometimes opposing armies have marched toward one another—

both praying to the same God—

both asking for victory—

both certain God supported them.

There is something almost absurd about it.

Except people die.

Once God becomes the sponsor of our side, disagreement becomes more than disagreement.

It becomes rebellion against God.

Our enemy becomes God's enemy.

Our cause becomes God's cause.

Our violence becomes righteous.

Our prejudice becomes discernment.

Our fear becomes wisdom.

Our anger becomes holy.

And suddenly we are capable of doing terrible things with a clean conscience.

Because we are not merely fighting for ourselves.

We are defending God.

As though God needed defending.

Jesus Keeps Crossing the Lines

Then Jesus appears.

And he has an irritating habit of crossing boundaries.

He talks with the wrong people.

Touches the wrong people.

Eats with the wrong people.

Defends the wrong people.

Praises the faith of the wrong people.

Allows the wrong people to approach him.

And perhaps most offensively—

he tells stories in which the wrong people sometimes become the heroes.

The Samaritan.

Think about what that word meant to Jesus' audience.

Samaritans weren't simply neighbors from another town.

There was history.

Religious conflict.

Ethnic tension.

Mutual suspicion.

Then Jesus tells a story.

A man is wounded beside the road.

Religious people pass by.

Then comes the Samaritan.

The outsider.

The wrong one.

And he becomes the neighbor.

Jesus could have chosen anyone.

He chose **them**.

The Woman at the Well

Then there is the Samaritan woman.

Wrong ethnicity.

Wrong religious community.

Wrong gender for a public theological conversation in that culture.

A complicated relational history.

Yet Jesus speaks with her.

Not superficially.

Theologically.

They discuss worship.

History.

Messiah.

Truth.

And then something extraordinary happens.

She becomes a witness.

The person many religious systems might have dismissed becomes the person carrying the news.

Jesus does not merely tolerate outsiders.

Sometimes he allows outsiders to teach insiders something.

That can be deeply unsettling when you are dead right.

The Roman

Then a Roman centurion approaches.

A representative of the occupying power.

The empire.

The enemy.

And Jesus sees faith.

Imagine how uncomfortable that might have been.

Sometimes Jesus recognizes something beautiful in the person we have already categorized as wrong.

Perhaps categories help us organize the world.

But they can also prevent us from seeing people.

Once I know what you are, I may stop wondering who you are.

Labels

Labels are efficient.

Liberal.

Conservative.

Evangelical.

Progressive.

Catholic.

Protestant.

Muslim.

Atheist.

Gay.

Straight.

Immigrant.

Citizen.

Addict.

Felon.

Divorced.

Fundamentalist.

Woke.

Heretic.

Labels tell us something.

But never everything.

The danger comes when the label becomes the person.

Once that happens, curiosity dies.

I don't need to know your story.

I already know who you are.

Or at least I think I do.

Perhaps one of the most radical things we can do is refuse to reduce another human being to the category we have assigned them.

Jesus Saw People

There is a phrase that appears repeatedly around Jesus.

He **saw** them.

Not merely noticed.

Saw.

The crowd sees a sinner.

Jesus sees a person.

The crowd sees a prostitute.

Jesus sees a person.

The crowd sees a tax collector.

Jesus sees a person.

The crowd sees a blind man.

Jesus sees a person.

The crowd sees a leper.

Jesus sees a person.

The crowd sees an enemy.

Jesus sees a person.

Perhaps spiritual maturity is learning to see what labels hide.

What Do You See?

This may be one of the most important questions we can ask ourselves:

What do I see when I look at someone who disagrees with me?

A threat?

An idiot?

A sinner?

An enemy?

A project?

Someone who needs correcting?

Or—

a human being?

Someone carrying a story I have not heard.

Someone who has been wounded.

Someone who loves.

Someone who fears.

Someone who hopes.

Someone who has lost people.

Someone who has questions.

Someone who may have reasons for believing what they believe.

Someone who may even see something I don't.

That does not mean every belief is equally true.

It means every person remains a person even when they are wrong.

Including me.

Loving Your Enemies

Jesus says something that has become so familiar we can forget how radical it is:

Love your enemies.

Not tolerate them.

Not defeat them.

Not humiliate them.

Not prove them wrong.

Love them.

But there is something even deeper here.

To love my enemy, I first have to admit that I have one.

Someone has entered the category:

Enemy.

Jesus does not simply tell me how to treat the enemy.

Perhaps he begins dismantling the category itself.

Because it is difficult to continue seeing someone purely as an enemy once I begin genuinely loving them.

Love makes categories unstable.

It brings people close enough to become complicated.

And complicated people are harder to hate.

Proximity Changes Certainty

It is easy to have strong opinions about people we do not know.

Then you meet one.

You hear their story.

You sit at their table.

You meet their children.

You hear about their childhood.

Their wounds.

Their faith.

Their questions.

Their disappointments.

Their hopes.

And suddenly the issue has a face.

This does not automatically determine what is true.

But it changes how we search for truth.

Proximity introduces humility.

It becomes harder to talk about **those people** when one of those people has become your friend.

Maybe that's why Jesus kept eating with people.

Tables do something arguments cannot.

Who Is My Neighbor?

A religious expert once asked Jesus:

“Who is my neighbor?”

It sounds like a theological question.

But hidden inside it may be another question:

Where does my responsibility to love end?

Surely there is a boundary.

Surely I don't have to love everybody.

Surely some people fall outside the requirement.

Jesus responds with the Samaritan.

In other words:

The boundary you are looking for may not exist where you think it does.

Then Jesus turns the question around.

Not:

Which people qualify as my neighbors?

But:

What does it mean for me to become a neighbor?

That changes everything.

When Truth Becomes a Weapon

Sometimes we defend cruelty by saying:

“I'm just speaking the truth.”

But truth can be weaponized.

A fact can be spoken to heal.

Or to humiliate.

A belief can be expressed with humility.

Or used to dominate.

A Bible verse can comfort.

Or crush.

Perhaps truth is not defined merely by the accuracy of the words.

For Christians, truth has a face.

Jesus says:

“I am the truth.”

So if my truthfulness consistently makes me cruel, perhaps I have separated truth from the One who embodies it.

Truth without love can become brutality.

Love without truth can become sentimentality.

But in Christ they belong together.

The Person Across From Me

Imagine sitting across a table from someone whose beliefs you find deeply wrong.

Not mildly different.

Wrong.

Maybe they feel the same about you.

Before discussing the issue, ask:

What if this conversation is not primarily a test of whether I can prove my position?

What if it is a test of whether I can remain loving while holding it?

Can I listen?

Can I become curious?

Can I admit what I don't know?

Can I recognize truth if it comes from their mouth?

Can I disagree without dehumanizing?

Can I leave the conversation without needing to win?

Can I love someone I cannot convince?

Those may be more revealing spiritual questions than whether I had the better argument.

What Has Being Right Cost Us?

Perhaps we should perform an inventory.

How many relationships have been sacrificed on the altar of certainty?

Parents and children who no longer speak.

Brothers and sisters divided by politics.

Churches split over doctrine.

Friends separated by ideology.

Families fractured by religion.

Communities divided into camps.

And everyone believes they are standing for truth.

Maybe they are.

But perhaps another question matters too:

What has our truth produced?

Jesus said something about trees and fruit.

Look at the fruit.

Does our certainty produce love?

Joy?

Peace?

Patience?

Kindness?

Goodness?

Faithfulness?

Gentleness?

Self-control?

Or does it produce fear?

Anger?

Contempt?

Suspicion?

Arrogance?

Division?

If the fruit is consistently poisonous, perhaps we should examine the tree.

Maybe We Were Dead Right

We were dead right about who belonged.

Dead right about who didn't.

Dead right about who God approved.

Dead right about who God rejected.

Dead right about which church had the truth.

Dead right about which political side God supported.

Dead right about who was dangerous.

Dead right about who needed to change.

Dead right about them.

And perhaps we were so busy being right about them that we never noticed what our certainty was doing to us.

We became less curious.

Less compassionate.

Less gentle.

Less teachable.

Less capable of friendship.

Less like Jesus.

If being right makes me less like Christ, something has gone terribly wrong.

The Circle

Perhaps Jesus does draw a circle.

But every time we think we have discovered its boundaries, he seems to step outside them and invite someone else in.

The sinner.

The outsider.

The foreigner.

The rejected.

The doubtful.

The broken.

The enemy.

Maybe the kingdom of God is not about discovering who deserves to remain outside the circle.

Maybe it is about becoming the kind of people who keep making room.

And perhaps one day we will discover something astonishing.

The people we spent our lives calling **them**

were never as far away as we imagined.

They were frightened like us.

Hopeful like us.

Contradictory like us.

Wounded like us.

Searching like us.

Loved like us.

And sometimes—

wrong like us.

Maybe the opposite of **us and them** isn't agreement.

Maybe it is recognition.

There is no them.

There are only people.

And perhaps the moment I become absolutely certain that *they* are the problem—
is precisely the moment I should ask whether I am becoming
dead right again.

Chapter Seven

Too Much to Lose

Sometimes the hardest belief to question is not the one with the strongest evidence.

It is the one that has cost us the most.

We have years invested in it.

Relationships built around it.

Decisions made because of it.

Sermons preached about it.

Children taught it.

Books purchased.

Communities joined.

Friendships formed.

Sacrifices made.

Maybe careers built upon it.

Then one day a question appears.

Small at first.

Almost harmless.

What if I was wrong?

And suddenly we realize this isn't merely an intellectual question.

There could be casualties.

Because changing our mind now might require us to reinterpret part of our life.

And sometimes that feels like too much to lose.

The Cost of Changing Your Mind

Imagine believing something for thirty years.

You have defended it publicly.

Corrected people who disagreed with it.

Perhaps preached it.

Maybe you warned people about those who questioned it.

Then you begin seeing something differently.

What do you do?

Changing your mind privately is one thing.

Admitting publicly that you changed it is another.

Because someone will remind you:

“But you said...”

Yes.

I did.

“You taught...”

Yes.

I did.

“You told us...”

Yes.

I did.

Those can be painful sentences.

And so sometimes we keep defending yesterday—
not because yesterday is still convincing,
but because admitting we were wrong feels unbearable.

Sunk Costs of the Soul

There is an idea in economics called a sunk cost.

You have already invested so much into something that walking away feels wasteful, even when continuing may cost more.

Human beings do this with money.

Businesses.

Relationships.

Projects.

But we can also do it with beliefs.

I have believed this too long to question it now.

I have sacrificed too much.

I have taught too many people.

I have built too much around it.

I have defended it too passionately.

If I change now, what does that say about everything that came before?

So we continue.

Not always because the belief is true.

Sometimes because the investment is enormous.

Perhaps there are sunk costs of the soul.

“But I Preached This”

DEAD RIGHT

There is a particular kind of vulnerability involved when someone has spent years teaching others.

Pastors know this.

Teachers know it.

Parents know it.

Leaders know it.

You become accustomed to being the person with answers.

People trust you.

They ask:

“What do you think?”

And eventually what you think carries weight.

Then you change.

Maybe slowly.

A verse you once thought was obvious becomes complicated.

A doctrine you once defended becomes difficult to reconcile with Jesus.

A person you once categorized becomes a friend.

An experience breaks open a question your theology had neatly answered.

And somewhere inside you hear:

But I preached this.

What happens now?

Perhaps one of the most courageous things a leader can ever say is:

“I taught this sincerely. I no longer believe I understood it correctly.”

That doesn’t necessarily disqualify a teacher.

It might reveal that the teacher is still learning.

The Fear of Losing Authority

But religious systems do not always reward uncertainty.

People often want confident leaders.

Tell us what the Bible means.

Tell us what God wants.

Tell us what happens after death.

Tell us which side is right.

Tell us what to believe.

Certainty feels safe.

A leader saying “I don’t know” can make people nervous.

So leaders learn to provide answers.

Even when the questions are larger than the answers.

Eventually certainty can become part of the job description.

And admitting uncertainty feels like losing authority.

But perhaps authority built upon pretending certainty is fragile authority.

Maybe there is another kind.

The authority of honesty.

The authority of humility.

The authority of someone willing to say:

“I don’t know.”

“I am reconsidering that.”

“I may have been wrong.”

“Let’s look again.”

That kind of leader may have fewer answers.

But perhaps they create safer places for truth.

The Family System

Beliefs rarely belong only to individuals.

Families have beliefs.

Sometimes spoken.

Sometimes unspoken.

This is who we are.

This is what our family believes.

This is how people like us vote.

This is where we go to church.

This is what marriage means.

This is how men behave.

This is how women behave.

This is what success looks like.

This is what we don't talk about.

This is what good children do.

Then someone in the family changes.

Questions.

Leaves.

Believes differently.

And the family can experience that person's growth as betrayal.

Not because every change is healthy.

But because systems prefer stability.

One person changing forces everyone else to adjust.

So sometimes the message becomes:

Go back to who you were so the rest of us don't have to change.

Belonging Has a Price

Every community has boundaries.

Sometimes healthy ones.

But communities can also create an unspoken bargain:

You may belong here as long as you believe what we believe.

Question too much and belonging becomes uncertain.

For some people, changing their theology costs friendships.

Church community.

Family relationships.

Employment.

Reputation.

Even marriage.

So when we ask:

“Why can’t they see it?”

perhaps we should ask another question:

What would seeing it cost them?

People do not make decisions with intellect alone.

We are relational creatures.

Belonging matters.

Sometimes more than evidence.

The Closet of Doubt

Religious communities sometimes contain people who privately no longer believe what they publicly affirm.

They sit in pews.

Sing songs.

Recite statements.

Attend meetings.

Perhaps even teach.

But inside, questions have been accumulating.

They do not speak.

Because speaking could cost too much.

So doubt moves into a closet.

And the person learns to live divided.

Public certainty.

Private uncertainty.

That is exhausting.

Perhaps churches would become healthier if people could say:

“I’m not sure anymore.”

Without everyone panicking.

What if doubt did not immediately make someone dangerous?

What if questions were not evidence of rebellion?

What if changing your mind were allowed to be part of spiritual formation?

Jesus and Peter

Peter knew.

Peter often knew.

He was wonderfully confident.

“I will never deny you.”

Certain.

“Even if everyone else falls away...”

Not me.

Then a courtyard.

A fire.

Questions.

Fear.

Three denials.

Suddenly Peter knows something he did not know before.

Not merely something about Jesus.

Something about himself.

His certainty collapses.

But Jesus does not discard him.

After resurrection, Jesus meets him again.

Not with humiliation.

With restoration.

“Do you love me?”

Perhaps failure taught Peter something certainty never could.

Sometimes Being Wrong Saves Us

We usually think being wrong is dangerous.

Sometimes it is.

But discovering we were wrong can also save us.

From arrogance.

From cruelty.

From repetition.

From systems that no longer give life.

From inherited wounds.

From distorted pictures of ourselves.

From distorted pictures of God.

There are moments when the collapse of certainty feels like destruction—
only to become liberation.

What we thought was the end of faith becomes the beginning of a more honest one.

Grieving What We Believed

Changing your mind can involve grief.

We rarely talk about that.

You may grieve the God you once believed in.

The church you once trusted.

The leader you once admired.

The certainty you once possessed.

The community where you once belonged.

The version of yourself who felt sure.

You may even grieve years spent defending something you now regret.

That grief deserves compassion.

Because growth does not always feel like expansion.

Sometimes growth initially feels like loss.

Leaves fall before spring appears.

“What Was All That For?”

When a deeply held belief changes, another painful question can surface:

What was all that for?

The years.

The sacrifice.

The decisions.

Was it all wasted?

Not necessarily.

We are formed even through incomplete understandings.

Perhaps we do not need to despise earlier versions of ourselves.

They were walking with the light they had.

They made decisions from what they understood.

We can honor their sincerity without remaining imprisoned by their conclusions.

I do not have to hate who I was in order to become who I am becoming.

That matters.

Otherwise growth becomes another form of self-condemnation.

We Did the Best We Could

There is humility in looking backward and saying:

“I believed what I knew how to believe then.”

Not as an excuse.

As recognition.

And when our past beliefs harmed people, another sentence may be necessary:

“I’m sorry.”

No defense.

No explanation.

No theological footnote.

I believed something.

I acted from it.

It hurt you.

I’m sorry.

Perhaps repentance sometimes sounds exactly like that.

When Doctrine Has a Body Count

Some beliefs cost more than embarrassment.

They leave wounds.

Religious certainty has sometimes contributed to estranged families.

Rejected children.

Silenced women.

Protected abusers.

Racial injustice.

Fear-filled childhoods.

Broken relationships.

People terrified of God.

People who concluded they could never belong.

People who walked away from faith because the God presented to them seemed impossible to love.

At some point theology must become accountable for its fruit.

It is not enough to ask:

Is this doctrine defensible?

We should also ask:

What does this doctrine produce in actual human beings?

The Fruit Test

Jesus gives us a remarkably practical measure:

Fruit.

A tree is known by its fruit.

Perhaps our beliefs should be examined similarly.

What does this belief produce?

Love?

Joy?

Peace?

Patience?

Kindness?

Goodness?

Faithfulness?

Gentleness?

Self-control?

Or fear?

Shame?

Arrogance?

Contempt?

Control?

Exclusion?

Despair?

If a belief repeatedly produces rotten fruit, perhaps saying “but it’s biblical” is not enough.

Maybe we need to examine our interpretation.

The Courage to Lose

Sometimes truth costs something.

A reputation.

A position.

An old identity.

A comfortable community.

The admiration of people who once considered us faithful.

Perhaps there comes a moment when we have to decide:

Do I want to be seen as right, or do I want to become more truthful?

Those are not always the same thing.

Jesus said something about losing life in order to find it.

Maybe that principle reaches even here.

Sometimes the life we must lose is the identity built around always having been right.

Dead Right About Myself

There is another certainty that deserves examination.

Our certainty about ourselves.

I am this kind of person.

I could never change.

I always mess things up.

I am unlovable.

I am the strong one.

I don't need anyone.

I am the victim.

I am the failure.

I am the successful one.

I am what happened to me.

We can become dead right about our own identity.

Sometimes the most imprisoning theology is not what we believe about God.

It is what we believe about ourselves.

And perhaps Christ interrupts that certainty too.

A New Name

Scripture is filled with people receiving new identities.

Abram becomes Abraham.

Jacob becomes Israel.

Simon becomes Peter.

Saul becomes Paul.

The point is larger than names.

Encounter creates possibility.

You are not limited to yesterday's definition of yourself.

That is good news.

Because if we are capable of being wrong about God—

and wrong about others—

we may also be wrong about ourselves.

Maybe the person you declared permanently broken is still becoming.

Even if that person is you.

Too Much to Lose?

Eventually every transforming belief encounters this question:

What will this cost me?

And perhaps there is another question:

What will it cost me if I refuse to change?

What will certainty cost my relationships?

My compassion?

My curiosity?

My integrity?

My children?

My faith?

My capacity to recognize truth?

My ability to hear God?

Sometimes remaining right becomes far more expensive than admitting we were wrong.

Maybe We Were Dead Right

We were dead right because we had already invested too much.

Dead right because our friends believed it.

Dead right because our church required it.

Dead right because we preached it.

Dead right because our family expected it.

Dead right because changing would have embarrassed us.

Dead right because uncertainty frightened us.

Dead right because we didn't know who we would become without the belief.

And somewhere beneath all of that—
truth kept knocking.

Quietly.

Patiently.

Not humiliating us.

Inviting us.

Look again.

Maybe changing your mind does not mean your previous life was meaningless.

Maybe it means your life is still alive.

Still moving.

Still learning.

Still becoming.

Perhaps there are worse things than losing a belief.

We could lose our ability to change.

And maybe the most tragic form of being **dead right** is reaching the place where
we would rather preserve everything we have built—

than follow truth somewhere new.

Sometimes resurrection requires a tomb.

Sometimes transformation requires letting something die.

And sometimes the thing that needs to die

is simply our need

to have always been right.

Chapter Eight

The Closed Fist

If you question certainty long enough, another problem eventually appears.

Then how can we know anything?

If interpretations can be wrong...

If traditions can be wrong...

If churches can be wrong...

If experts can be wrong...

If I can be wrong...

then what is left?

Do we simply shrug our shoulders and say:

“Who knows?”

Is everything relative?

Is truth merely personal preference?

Is one belief as good as another?

No.

That is not where this journey leads.

Dead Right is not an argument against truth.

It is an argument for loving truth more than we love being right.

And those are very different things.

The Closed Fist

Imagine holding something tightly in your hand.

At first you are simply holding it.

Then someone tries to examine it.

Your fingers tighten.

Someone questions it.

Tighter.

Someone suggests you might be mistaken.

Tighter still.

Eventually you are no longer merely holding the thing.

You are protecting it.

And after enough time, you may not even remember why.

This is what certainty can do to belief.

Conviction says:

“This is what I believe.”

Certainty says:

“This cannot be questioned.”

Conviction can listen.

Certainty must defend.

Conviction can remain strong while becoming curious.

Certainty experiences curiosity as threat.

Conviction has roots.

Certainty builds walls.

Perhaps maturity is not learning to hold nothing.

Perhaps maturity is learning to hold what matters—
with an open hand.

An Open Hand Is Not an Empty Hand

This distinction matters.

An open hand is not empty.

It can hold something.

Treasure something.

Receive something.

Offer something.

But it can also release.

An open hand can receive more.

A closed fist cannot.

Maybe faith was never meant to be clenched.

Perhaps we can believe deeply without believing defensively.

We can say:

I believe God is love.

I believe Christ reveals God.

I believe forgiveness is stronger than vengeance.

I believe resurrection speaks a deeper word than death.

I believe every human being possesses sacred dignity.

I believe love matters.

And then still say:

“There is more for me to understand.”

Those statements do not contradict each other.

They belong together.

The Difference Between a Foundation and a Prison

We need foundations.

Human beings cannot live permanently suspended between every possible conclusion.

We make decisions.

Commit ourselves.

Love people.

Build communities.

Raise children.

Choose values.

Faith requires some form of trust.

But a foundation and a prison are not the same thing.

A foundation supports growth.

A prison prevents movement.

Healthy convictions give us somewhere to stand while continuing to see.

Unhealthy certainty tells us we are never allowed to move again.

“I Believe”

Perhaps we have underestimated the humility contained in those two words:

I believe.

Not:

I possess.

Not:

I have mastered.

Not:

I understand everything.

I believe.

Faith itself contains trust.

And trust exists precisely because we do not possess complete knowledge.

If everything were certain, faith would be unnecessary.

Perhaps faith is not certainty's religious synonym.

Maybe faith is what allows us to walk when certainty is unavailable.

Thomas

Thomas has received an unfortunate nickname.

Doubting Thomas.

As though doubt became his identity.

But Thomas asked for something understandable.

He wanted to know.

He wanted to see.

He wanted to touch.

And Jesus came to him.

Jesus did not say:

“How dare you ask?”

He offered his wounds.

Look.

Touch.

See.

There is something beautiful about that.

Jesus seems less threatened by honest doubt than religious systems sometimes are.

Maybe God is not frightened by our questions.

Perhaps truth does not need protection from investigation.

Doubt Can Be Faithful

There is a kind of doubt that simply refuses commitment.

But there is another kind.

The doubt that comes because truth matters too much to pretend.

“I don’t know if I can believe this anymore.”

That sentence can sound like faith disappearing.

Sometimes it is faith becoming honest.

The person may not be walking away from truth.

They may be refusing to continue calling something true merely because they were told they must.

Perhaps some doubt is not rebellion against faith.

Perhaps it is faith refusing dishonesty.

Questions Are Not Enemies

Think about how much human progress began with a question.

What if the earth isn't the center?

What if this illness has another cause?

What if this accepted treatment is harmful?

What if this person is not inferior?

What if this law is unjust?

What if this interpretation is wrong?

Questions open doors certainty keeps closed.

Yet many of us were raised in environments where certain questions felt dangerous.

Don't ask that.

Don't read that.

Don't listen to them.

Don't question leadership.

Don't question doctrine.

Don't question the Bible.

Don't question God.

But perhaps questioning our understanding of God is not the same as questioning God.

Sometimes it may be precisely how we move closer.

The Fear Beneath Certainty

Why do questions frighten us?

Sometimes because we fear where they might lead.

If this one thing changes, what else changes?

If Genesis isn't what I thought, what happens to Scripture?

If hell isn't what I thought, what happens to evangelism?

If atonement isn't what I thought, what happens to the cross?

If this verse doesn't mean what I thought, what happens to everything built upon it?

We imagine a row of dominoes.

Touch one—

everything falls.

So we protect the first domino.

But perhaps a faith that can be destroyed by an honest question was already more fragile than we realized.

Maybe God is not standing behind our theology whispering:

“Please don't examine this too closely.”

The House

Jesus tells a story about houses.

One built on sand.

One built on rock.

Storms reveal foundations.

Perhaps questions can function like storms.

They expose what our beliefs are resting upon.

Some things survive.

Others collapse.

We usually view collapse as failure.

But what if the thing collapsing needed to collapse?

Would we rather spend our lives living in a fragile house simply because we are afraid of discovering the foundation is sand?

Sometimes demolition is mercy.

Deconstruction

There is a word that has become common in religious conversations:

Deconstruction.

DEAD RIGHT

For some, it describes careful examination of inherited beliefs.

For others, it sounds like abandoning faith entirely.

But perhaps construction imagery can help.

Anyone who has renovated an old house understands that not everything needs to be destroyed.

Some things are beautiful.

Some foundations are strong.

Some beams remain solid.

Other things are rotten.

Unsafe.

Poorly constructed.

Added later.

Covering something original.

A wise renovation does not burn the house down because a wall needs repair.

Nor does it preserve rotten wood because it has always been there.

It examines.

Keeps.

Repairs.

Removes.

Restores.

Maybe spiritual growth can work like that.

Keep What Is Good

Paul gives remarkably simple advice:

Test everything. Hold fast to what is good.

Notice both movements.

Test.

And hold.

Not:

Believe everything.

Not:

Reject everything.

Test everything.

Hold what is good.

That sounds remarkably like an open hand.

Examination and conviction together.

Curiosity and commitment.

Humility and faith.

Certainty and Control

Sometimes certainty is really about control.

Mystery makes us uncomfortable.

If I know exactly how God works, I feel safer.

If I understand precisely who is saved, I feel safer.

If I know why suffering happens, I feel safer.

If I can explain tragedy, I feel safer.

If I can create a theological system where every question has an answer, I feel safer.

But perhaps God was never intended to become manageable.

Mystery does not mean God is unknowable.

It means God is inexhaustible.

There will always be more.

More depth.

More beauty.

More questions.

More discovery.

Perhaps eternity itself would become terribly boring if God could be completely explained in a systematic theology textbook.

Knowing a Person

Think about someone you love deeply.

You know them.

But do you completely know them?

After decades together, can they still surprise you?

Can you discover something new about them?

Can they change?

Deep relationship does not eliminate mystery.

It makes mystery intimate.

Perhaps knowing God is something like that.

Not solving an equation.

Not mastering a doctrine.

Relationship.

We know—

and continue knowing.

We see—

and continue seeing.

We hear—

and continue listening.

The Need to Win

Closed-fist certainty reveals itself most clearly in disagreement.

When someone challenges us, what happens inside?

Do we become curious?

Or begin preparing our response while they are still speaking?

Are we listening to understand?

Or listening for weakness?

Do we want truth to emerge?

Or do we want to win?

There is an enormous difference.

If truth is my goal, I can afford to discover that you are right about something.

If winning is my goal, your being right becomes dangerous.

Perhaps one of the greatest freedoms is reaching the place where another person's insight no longer threatens us.

"I hadn't thought of that."

What beautiful words.

Teachability

Maybe the opposite of being dead right is not uncertainty.

Maybe it is teachability.

Teachability says:

There are things I know.

There are things I think I know.

There are things I don't know.

And there are probably things I don't know that I don't know.

That final category should keep us humble.

Every generation has blind spots.

Every culture.

Every denomination.

Every family.

Every person.

Including us.

Conviction Without Contempt

Can we believe something strongly without despising people who disagree?

That may be one of the great challenges of our time.

Can I say:

“I believe this is true.”

without adding:

“Therefore you must be stupid, immoral, deceived or evil if you disagree”?

Can conviction exist without contempt?

Jesus seems to suggest it can.

He could speak with remarkable clarity.

And remarkable compassion.

Perhaps strength and gentleness were never opposites.

The Open Table

Maybe instead of imagining truth as a fortress we must defend, we could imagine a table.

Come.

Sit.

Bring your questions.

Bring your experience.

Bring your tradition.

Bring your doubts.

Bring your Bible.

Bring your wounds.

Bring what you think you know.

We will listen.

We will examine.

We will disagree.

We will learn.

And no one needs to be destroyed for the conversation to continue.

Perhaps truth is strong enough for a table.

Maybe We Were Dead Right

We were dead right that questions were dangerous.

Dead right that doubt was weakness.

Dead right that changing our minds meant compromise.

Dead right that certainty demonstrated faith.

Dead right that leaders needed answers for everything.

Dead right that people who disagreed threatened truth.

Dead right that defending God required closed fists.

But perhaps God never asked us to defend truth by becoming unteachable.

Maybe truth doesn't need our fear.

Maybe truth invites our attention.

Our honesty.

Our curiosity.

Our humility.

Open Your Hand

So perhaps the invitation is simple.

Look at what you believe.

Hold it.

Value it.

Examine it.

Live from it.

But every once in a while—

look at your hand.

Is it still open?

Can someone ask a question?

Can new understanding enter?

Can an old interpretation leave?

Can God surprise you?

Can you say:

“I don’t know”?

Can you say:

“I was wrong”?

Can you say:

“Tell me more”?

Can you say:

“I still believe this, but I understand why you see it differently”?

Can you change without believing you have betrayed yourself?

Then perhaps your convictions are alive.

Because living things breathe.

Living things move.

Living things grow.

Dead things become rigid.

And maybe that is the deepest warning hidden inside the title of this book.

The goal was never to become **dead right**.

The goal was to become alive—

alive to truth,

alive to one another,
alive to mystery,
alive to correction,
alive to Love,
and alive enough
to keep our hands open.

Chapter Nine

When the Church Couldn't Be Wrong

I love the church.

That needs to be said before anything else.

The church gave many of us language for things we could not yet name.

Faith.

Community.

Prayer.

Worship.

Service.

Hope.

It introduced us to Scripture.

It told us about Jesus.

It stood beside us at weddings and hospital beds.

It buried people we loved.

It fed families.

Built hospitals.

Started schools.

Sent missionaries.

Cared for strangers.

Sat beside the dying.

The church has been capable of extraordinary beauty.

And—

the church has been wrong.

Sometimes terribly wrong.

Those two statements can exist together.

Perhaps maturity requires allowing them to.

The Church Is Made of People

We sometimes speak about the church as though it descended from heaven completely formed.

But churches are made of people.

And people bring themselves with them.

Culture.

Fear.

Ambition.

Tradition.

Politics.

Prejudice.

Trauma.

Wisdom.

Compassion.

Ego.

Generosity.

Control.

Love.

The church can therefore become a place where human beings display extraordinary goodness.

And extraordinary blindness.

Calling something sacred does not automatically remove everything human from it.

Sometimes it makes the human parts harder to question.

“Touch Not the Lord’s Anointed”

There are phrases religious systems learn to use when threatened.

Don’t question leadership.

Don’t cause division.

Don’t gossip.

Don’t rebel.

Don’t touch the Lord’s anointed.

Sometimes those warnings are appropriate.

Communities cannot survive constant suspicion and accusation.

Leaders deserve fairness.

Rumors can destroy people.

But those same ideas can become shields.

Questions become rebellion.

Accountability becomes dishonor.

Transparency becomes disloyalty.

And eventually protecting the leader becomes confused with protecting God.

That is dangerous.

Any system where leaders cannot be questioned is a system where abuse can hide.

Loyalty

Loyalty can be beautiful.
Standing beside people through difficulty matters.
But loyalty becomes unhealthy when it requires blindness.
Sometimes people know something is wrong.
But this is our church.
Our pastor.
Our denomination.
Our ministry.
Our family.
So we protect the institution.
Maybe quietly.
Maybe sincerely.
We tell ourselves:
Think about all the good being done.
Think about the people who could be hurt if this becomes public.
Think about the reputation of Christ.
And sometimes in trying to protect the reputation of Christ—
we behave nothing like Christ.

The Reputation of God

God has survived a remarkable amount of bad publicity.
Perhaps God does not need us to hide truth in order to protect God's reputation.
If something happened, truth matters.
If someone was harmed, they matter.
If leadership failed, accountability matters.
If an institution acted wrongly, repentance matters.
Maybe the reputation of the church is not protected by pretending it never fails.

Maybe it is protected by demonstrating what repentance actually looks like when it does.

“We Have Always Done It This Way”

Every institution develops traditions.

Traditions can carry wisdom.

They preserve memory.

They connect generations.

They create continuity.

But eventually tradition can forget why it exists.

Someone asks:

Why do we do this?

And the answer becomes:

Because we’ve always done it this way.

That sentence should make us curious.

Maybe there was once a good reason.

Maybe the reason still exists.

Or maybe the practice outlived its purpose.

Jesus encountered something similar.

Human traditions had become so intertwined with faithfulness that questioning the tradition sounded like questioning God.

Jesus distinguished between them.

That distinction remains necessary.

When Method Becomes Sacred

Churches often begin with a movement.

Something alive happens.

People encounter God.

Community forms.

A method develops to support the movement.

Then something subtle occurs.

The method becomes sacred.

What once served life must now be preserved even when life has moved somewhere else.

Music styles.

Buildings.

Programs.

Leadership structures.

Service formats.

Language.

Dress.

Schedules.

Titles.

Methods become identity.

And anyone suggesting change appears unfaithful.

Perhaps institutions are always tempted to preserve the container after forgetting what the container was meant to carry.

Buildings

We sometimes call buildings churches.

“I’m going to church.”

But the earliest followers of Jesus did not understand church primarily as property.

Church was people.

Community.

Body.

Presence.

DEAD RIGHT

Yet buildings can gradually become sacred in ways people are not.

We spend enormous resources maintaining property while people nearby struggle.

We fight over carpet.

Pews.

Stages.

Rooms.

Names on walls.

Who owns what.

Who controls what.

There is nothing wrong with buildings.

They can serve beautiful purposes.

But perhaps whenever preserving a building becomes more important than serving people, we should ask which one we actually believe is sacred.

Success

The church can also become dead right about success.

Bigger is better.

More people.

More campuses.

More money.

More programs.

More influence.

More followers.

More visibility.

And perhaps sometimes those things reflect genuine fruit.

But Jesus had an interesting relationship with numbers.

Sometimes crowds followed him.

Sometimes he said something difficult and they left.
He did not appear to chase them.
Perhaps faithfulness and popularity are not synonyms.
A large church can be healthy.
A small church can be healthy.
A large church can be unhealthy.
A small church can be unhealthy.
Numbers tell us something.
They do not tell us everything.

The Celebrity

Religious culture can create celebrities.
Charismatic leaders.
Powerful speakers.
Visionaries.
People who seem unusually gifted.
There is nothing inherently wrong with appreciating someone's gift.
But admiration can become immunity.
The more important someone becomes to an institution, the harder it becomes to hold them accountable.
Too much depends upon them.
Attendance.
Giving.
Reputation.
Identity.
So warning signs are ignored.
People make excuses.

Victims are questioned.

And the gifted person becomes too valuable to confront.

But perhaps any gift that requires other people to be sacrificed in order to preserve it has ceased serving the body.

“For the Sake of the Ministry”

Those words have justified strange things.

Neglecting families.

Ignoring exhaustion.

Crossing boundaries.

Accepting unhealthy behavior.

Silencing concerns.

Sacrificing relationships.

Because ministry matters.

The calling matters.

The mission matters.

But what if the people closest to us become casualties of our calling?

Can something truly be God’s work if doing it requires us to repeatedly become less loving?

Perhaps God is not asking us to destroy people in order to serve people.

Pastors Are People

Pastors can also become victims of unhealthy certainty.

They are expected to know.

To lead.

To counsel.

To preach.

To pray.

To comfort.

To be available.

To remain spiritually strong.

To carry everyone's crisis.

And sometimes the church forgets that the pastor is a person.

A person who gets tired.

Questions.

Grieves.

Struggles.

Needs friendship.

Needs boundaries.

Needs rest.

Needs permission not to know.

Perhaps religious systems can dehumanize leaders while appearing to honor them.

Putting someone on a pedestal is another way of removing their humanity.

The Calling

There is another phrase that deserves examination:

“God called me.”

Perhaps God did.

But those words carry enormous power.

If God called me, who can question what I am doing?

If God told me, discussion becomes difficult.

Sometimes calling becomes a shield against accountability.

Perhaps genuine calling should make us more accountable, not less.

If something is truly sacred, it should welcome examination.

When Leaving Means Betraying God

DEAD RIGHT

Some people remain in unhealthy churches because leaving feels like abandoning God.

They were taught that this community was God's chosen place.

That questioning leadership meant questioning divine authority.

That leaving meant rebellion.

So they remain.

Sometimes for years.

And when they finally leave, they experience guilt.

Fear.

Grief.

Disorientation.

Who am I without this church?

Where is God now?

Perhaps one of the most healing discoveries a person can make is:

God did not live only in the building you left.

Presence is not property.

The Church and Jesus

Maybe the simplest question is the one we have already been asking:

Does this look like Jesus?

Our leadership—

does it look like Jesus?

Our use of money—

does it look like Jesus?

Our treatment of outsiders—

does it look like Jesus?

Our response to failure—

does it look like Jesus?

Our treatment of women—

does it look like Jesus?

Our treatment of children—

does it look like Jesus?

Our political alliances—

do they look like Jesus?

Our response to the wounded—

does it look like Jesus?

Our ambitions—

do they look like Jesus?

Our certainty—

does it look like Jesus?

That question may be more revealing than the name above the door.

The Church Does Not Need to Be Perfect

Perhaps part of our problem is that we confuse holiness with perfection.

The church does not need to pretend it has never been wrong.

Imagine how powerful it could be to say:

We got this wrong.

We hurt people.

We failed to listen.

We protected the wrong thing.

We misunderstood.

We are sorry.

We are changing.

That would not make the church weak.

It might make the church believable.

Repentance Is for Institutions Too

We often preach repentance to individuals.

Maybe institutions need it too.

Churches can repent.

Denominations can repent.

Ministries can repent.

Organizations can say:

We were wrong.

Not:

Mistakes were made.

Not:

We're sorry you were offended.

Not:

We regret that you misunderstood our intentions.

But:

We were wrong.

We harmed people.

We are listening.

We will repair what we can.

Imagine if repentance became something churches demonstrated instead of merely preached.

The Empty Chair

Perhaps every leadership table should contain an imaginary empty chair.

It belongs to the person affected by our decisions who is not in the room.

The grieving person.

The abused person.

The poor person.

The child.

The outsider.

The person questioning faith.

The exhausted caregiver.

The person who stopped attending.

The person our theology discusses but whose voice we have never heard.

Before making decisions, perhaps we should ask:

What would they say if they were sitting here?

Maybe Presence begins by noticing who is missing.

Fruit Again

Jesus keeps bringing us back to fruit.

We can have correct doctrine.

Beautiful worship.

Strong preaching.

Successful programs.

Growing attendance.

And still produce wounded people.

Eventually we must ask:

What grows here?

Are people becoming freer?

More compassionate?

More truthful?

More loving?

More courageous?

More able to forgive?

More able to think?

More able to question?

More able to sit with suffering?

More like Christ?

That may tell us more about a church than its statement of faith.

Maybe We Were Dead Right

We were dead right that our denomination had the truth.

Dead right that our leader could not be questioned.

Dead right that loyalty meant silence.

Dead right that bigger meant blessed.

Dead right that tradition meant faithfulness.

Dead right that protecting the institution protected God.

Dead right that leaving the church meant leaving God.

Dead right that admitting failure would weaken our witness.

And perhaps we were wrong.

Maybe the church becomes strongest precisely where it no longer needs to pretend.

Maybe holiness is not the absence of failure.

Maybe holiness includes what we do after failure is revealed.

Truth.

Confession.

Repentance.

Repair.

Grace.

The Church I Still Believe In

I still believe in the church.

Perhaps differently than I once did.
I believe in communities where questions are safe.
Where leaders remain human.
Where wounded people are believed and protected.
Where Scripture is explored rather than weaponized.
Where children do not learn to fear God.
Where disagreement does not end relationship.
Where nobody has to pretend.
Where tables keep expanding.
Where the lonely find community.
Where the grieving are not rushed.
Where caregivers are cared for.
Where outsiders become friends.
Where truth can be spoken without fear.
Where repentance is practiced.
Where love is not merely preached—
but experienced.
Maybe that church will not always look impressive.
Maybe it will sometimes look like a handful of people sitting around a table.
Someone crying.
Someone listening.
Someone asking a question nobody can answer.
Someone saying:
“I was wrong.”
Someone else saying:
“You’re still welcome.”

Bread being broken.

Stories being shared.

Silence being honored.

Presence being offered.

And somewhere among them—

Christ.

Perhaps the church was never meant to be the place where everyone was **dead right**.

Perhaps it was meant to be the place where people could become alive together.

Learning.

Changing.

Forgiving.

Growing.

Listening.

Loving.

And discovering that God was never threatened by our questions.

Only waiting for us to stop defending everything long enough
to hear again.

Chapter Ten

Winning the Argument, Losing the Person

There is a strange kind of victory that feels remarkably like loss.

You proved your point.

Your facts were correct.

Your memory was accurate.

Your argument was stronger.

They finally stopped talking.

You won.

And somehow—

you lost.

Maybe they walked away.

Maybe they shut down.

Maybe something changed in their eyes.

Maybe they simply learned that telling you what they really think isn't worth the cost.

You were right.

Perhaps completely right.

And still something died.

That may be the most literal meaning of being **dead right**.

“But I Was Right”

I have said those words.

Perhaps you have too.

“But I was right.”

Maybe you were.

But sometimes that's not the most important question.

What did being right produce?

Did it create understanding?

Did it bring healing?

Did it move the relationship forward?

Did it make honesty safer?

Or did it merely establish who won?

There are moments when accuracy matters enormously.

Truth matters.

Accountability matters.

But relationships reveal something uncomfortable:

It is possible to be right about the facts and wrong in the way we hold them.

The Courtroom

Some relationships gradually become courtrooms.

Evidence is collected.

Past statements are remembered.

Contradictions are noted.

Witnesses could practically be called.

“You said...”

“No, what I said was...”

“That’s not what happened.”

“Yes it is.”

“Remember last Tuesday?”

Soon nobody is trying to understand.

Both people are prosecuting.

And every conversation requires a verdict.

Who was right?

Who was wrong?

Who started it?

Who owes whom an apology?

But marriages cannot survive forever as courtrooms.

Neither can friendships.

Families.

Churches.

Eventually someone has to leave the witness stand and come back to the table.

Memory Is Not a Recording

We are often remarkably confident about our memories.

I know what happened.

I know what you said.

I know what you meant.

But human memory is not a video recording.

We remember through emotion.

Experience.

Expectation.

Pain.

Fear.

Meaning.

Two people can experience the same event and remember it differently without either deliberately lying.

That possibility alone should soften some arguments.

Maybe the goal isn't always determining whose memory wins.

Maybe sometimes the question is:

“What was that experience like for you?”

That question can open doors facts alone cannot.

Intent and Impact

One of the most common relational collisions happens between intent and impact.

“I didn't mean to hurt you.”

Perhaps you didn't.

But they were hurt.

We sometimes use our intention to invalidate someone else's experience.

Because I didn't intend harm, you shouldn't feel harmed.

But both things can be true.

I did not intend to hurt you.

And—

I hurt you.

Maturity allows both truths to remain in the room.

Perhaps one of the most healing responses is:

“That wasn't my intention, but I can see that it hurt you. Tell me what happened for you.”

No defense.

No courtroom.

Curiosity.

Explanation Is Not Always an Apology

We are remarkably talented at explaining ourselves.

“I'm sorry, but...”

Usually whatever comes after *but* becomes the real message.

I'm sorry, but you misunderstood.

I'm sorry, but you were doing the same thing.

I'm sorry, but I was under a lot of pressure.

I'm sorry, but that's not what I meant.

Those explanations may even be true.

But sometimes the wounded person doesn't need our explanation first.

They need recognition.

“I see what I did.”

“I understand why that hurt.”

“I'm sorry.”

Period.

There is enormous power in a period.

The Need to Be Understood

Sometimes we keep arguing because we desperately want to be understood.

If you could just understand why I did it...

If you understood what I meant...

If you understood what I was going through...

Then maybe you wouldn't be angry.

That desire is deeply human.

We all want to be understood.

But relationships become difficult when both people demand to be understood before either is willing to understand.

Someone has to go first.

Maybe love sometimes says:

"Before I explain myself, help me understand you."

Listen to Understand

We often listen autobiographically.

Someone speaks and immediately we search our own experience.

"That happened to me too."

Or we prepare advice.

"You should..."

Or correction.

"That's not what happened."

Or defense.

"That's unfair."

But listening can become something different.

Tell me more.

What did that feel like?

What did you need from me?

What did you hear when I said that?

What am I missing?

Those questions require something certainty hates.

Suspension.

For a moment, I suspend my need to explain my reality long enough to enter yours.

That is not agreement.

It is presence.

The Last Word

Some people need the last word.

Sometimes I have been one of them.

One more clarification.

One more correction.

One final point.

One final text.

One final paragraph.

We tell ourselves:

I just need them to understand.

But perhaps there are moments when the most loving final word is no word.

Silence.

Not punitive silence.

Not withdrawal.

Not the silent treatment.

The silence that says:

I don't need to win this.

That kind of silence requires strength.

Parents and Children

Certainty becomes especially powerful in parenting.

Parents possess authority.

Experience.

Resources.

And usually genuine love.

We want to protect our children.

Guide them.

Keep them from mistakes we made.

So we tell them what is right.

Sometimes we are right.

But children eventually become adults.

And adult children need something different from parents than young children do.

They need room.

Room to choose.

Room to question.

Room to fail.

Room to believe differently.

Room to become someone we did not design.

Perhaps one of the hardest transitions in parenting is moving from:

“I know what's best for you”

to:

“I trust you to live your life.”

When Children Leave

Some families fracture over certainty.

Religion.

Politics.

Marriage.

Identity.

Lifestyle.

Old wounds.

Parents say:

“I cannot compromise what I believe.”

Children say:

“I cannot keep being around you if being around you means constantly being judged.”

Both may be hurting.

Both may feel misunderstood.

Both may believe the other needs to change first.

Years pass.

Birthdays.

Holidays.

Grandchildren.

Illness.

Life keeps moving.

And everyone remains right.

Sometimes painfully right.

Sometimes **dead right**.

Perhaps there are moments when the most important question is no longer:

“**Who is right?**”

but:

“Is there still a bridge?”

The Bridge

A bridge does not require two shores to become identical.

That is why bridges exist.

Difference remains.

Distance remains.

But something connects them.

Maybe relationships do not always require agreement.

Maybe they require enough love to build a bridge across disagreement.

“I still believe what I believe.”

“And I still love you.”

Those sentences can coexist.

Marriage

Marriage exposes certainty quickly.

Two people enter a relationship carrying two histories.

Two families.

Two sets of expectations.

Two communication styles.

Two understandings of money.

Sex.

Conflict.

Affection.

Responsibility.

Religion.

Holidays.

Parenting.

Privacy.

Closeness.

Then we discover something astonishing.

The other person does not experience reality exactly as we do.

At first this can seem unreasonable.

How can you not see this?

It's obvious.

No.

It is obvious **to me**.

That distinction can save relationships.

“You Always” and “You Never”

Certainty loves absolute language.

You always.

You never.

Every time.

Nothing I do matters.

You don't care.

You only think about yourself.

These sentences rarely describe reality accurately.

They describe emotional reality.

Something hurts.

But absolute language creates absolute defense.

“I don't always do that!”

Now the argument becomes about the word *always* rather than the pain underneath it.

Maybe we could learn to listen beneath inaccurate language for accurate pain.

That is a different kind of hearing.

The Story Beneath the Argument

Couples rarely fight only about what they appear to be fighting about.

The dishes may not be about dishes.

Money may not be about money.

The text message may not be about the text message.

Underneath may be another question:

Do I matter to you?

Can I trust you?

Do you see me?

Am I safe with you?

Will you leave?

Do you respect me?

Am I enough?

Arguments have content.

But they also have stories.

Sometimes we become so dead right about the content that we never hear the story.

Friendship

Friendships need room too.

A friend is not someone required to agree with everything we believe.

A good friend may be the person safe enough to tell us:

“I think you’re wrong.”

And we remain friends.

What a gift.

Perhaps real friendship does not require constant agreement.

It requires enough security that disagreement does not threaten belonging.

You can challenge me—
and still sit at my table.

The Courage to Say “You Were Right”

There are few sentences more liberating than:

“You were right.”

No qualification.

No explanation.

No attempt to reclaim half the victory.

You saw something I didn't.

You understood something before I did.

You were right.

Those words do not diminish us.

They enlarge us.

Because when truth matters more than ego, another person's correctness becomes a gift rather than a threat.

The Courage to Say “I Was Wrong”

And then the companion sentence:

“I was wrong.”

Perhaps followed by:

“I hurt you.”

“I didn't listen.”

“I assumed.”

“I judged.”

“I was defensive.”

“I should have believed you.”

“I thought I understood, but I didn't.”

“I am sorry.”

Relationships can survive remarkable amounts of imperfection.

What they struggle to survive is imperfection that can never admit itself.

Apology Without Demand

A genuine apology does not control the response.

We sometimes apologize expecting immediate restoration.

I said I’m sorry.

Why are you still upset?

But an apology is not a transaction.

It does not purchase forgiveness.

It acknowledges responsibility.

The other person may need time.

They may need distance.

They may never restore the relationship to what it was.

Repentance cannot demand an outcome.

It can only become truthful.

Forgiveness Does Not Mean Pretending

Forgiveness also deserves clarity.

Forgiveness is not saying:

It didn’t matter.

It wasn’t wrong.

Come back and do it again.

Trust is automatically restored.

Boundaries are unnecessary.

Sometimes love forgives and still says:

“You cannot continue treating me this way.”

That is not hatred.

That may be wisdom.

Being relational does not require becoming unsafe.

What If Reconciliation Isn't Possible?

Not every relationship can be restored.

That needs to be said.

Sometimes the other person is gone.

Sometimes they refuse.

Sometimes contact is unsafe.

Sometimes too much damage has occurred.

Sometimes reconciliation requires two people and only one is willing.

But even then, perhaps something can change within us.

We can release the courtroom.

Stop rehearsing the trial.

Stop needing the universe to declare us right every morning.

Not because what happened was acceptable.

But because carrying the case forever keeps us imprisoned in it.

What Do You Want More?

In difficult relationships, perhaps this question is worth asking:

What do I want more—connection or victory?

Sometimes truth requires confrontation.

Sometimes boundaries require separation.

Sometimes justice requires standing firm.

But many of our ordinary conflicts do not require a winner.

They require understanding.

Maybe I can surrender the argument without surrendering myself.

Maybe I can listen without agreeing.

Maybe I can apologize without becoming worthless.

Maybe I can allow you to remember differently.

Maybe I can love you without controlling your conclusions.

Jesus at the Table

Jesus spent remarkable amounts of time at tables.

With people who misunderstood him.

People whose theology differed.

People who would betray him.

People who would deny him.

People others considered unacceptable.

He seemed to believe something could happen around a table that could not happen from a distance.

People become human again.

Maybe that's what we need.

Less courtroom.

More table.

Less prosecution.

More curiosity.

Less:

"Let me tell you why you're wrong."

More:

"Tell me what this has been like for you."

Maybe We Were Dead Right

We were dead right about what happened.

Dead right about what they said.

Dead right about what the Bible said.

Dead right about how they should have responded.

Dead right about what our children should believe.

Dead right about what our spouse should understand.

Dead right about why our friend was mistaken.

Dead right about whose fault it was.

And perhaps one day we looked around—

and nobody was left in the room.

We won.

Congratulations.

The Question

Maybe before the next argument we could ask ourselves:

Is this something that actually requires a verdict?

Does someone need to win?

Can I remain curious?

What am I defending?

What is the person beneath these words trying to tell me?

What would love sound like right now?

Can I be wrong?

And perhaps the hardest:

Even if I am right, is being right the most important thing I can offer this person?

Sometimes it will be.

Truth matters.

But sometimes the greater gift will be listening.

Presence.

Gentleness.

An apology.

An open chair.

A second conversation.

A bridge.

A table.

Because at the end of our lives, I doubt many of us will wish we had won more arguments.

We may wish we had listened longer.

Apologized sooner.

Held fewer grudges.

Asked better questions.

Made the phone call.

Crossed the room.

Rebuilt the bridge.

Said:

“I love you”

while there was still time.

Perhaps the saddest epitaph would be:

HE WAS RIGHT.

And underneath:

But he lost everyone proving it.

Maybe wisdom is learning there are things more important than winning.

And sometimes the only way to save the relationship

is to allow our need to be right

to die first.

Chapter Eleven

Who Told You That You Were You?

There is a question in Genesis that has fascinated me for years.

After the humans eat from the tree, something changes.

They hide.

They cover themselves.

They become afraid.

God comes looking.

“Where are you?”

The man answers that he heard the sound of God in the garden and became afraid because he was naked.

Then comes the question:

“Who told you that you were naked?”

Who told you?

I wonder if we have moved past those words too quickly.

God does not begin by confirming Adam’s new interpretation of himself.

He questions its source.

Who told you?

Where did you get this idea?

Whose voice are you listening to?

What happened to the way you saw yourself?

Perhaps that remains one of the most important questions we can ask.

Who told you who you are?

The Voices

Long before we develop a mature understanding of ourselves, voices begin speaking.

Parents.

Teachers.

Siblings.

Coaches.

Pastors.

Friends.

Bullies.

Culture.

Religion.

Success.

Failure.

Trauma.

Rejection.

Someone says:

You're difficult.

You're lazy.

You're too sensitive.

You're not smart enough.

You're selfish.

You're strange.

You're a disappointment.

You're a sinner.

You're bad.

You're not attractive.

You're too much.

You're not enough.

Sometimes those words are spoken once.

Sometimes repeatedly.

Eventually something strange happens.

The external voice becomes internal.

Nobody needs to say it anymore.

We say it to ourselves.

When a Description Becomes an Identity

There is an enormous difference between:

“I failed.”

and

“I am a failure.”

Between:

“I made a bad decision.”

and

“I am bad.”

Between:

“I was rejected.”

and

“I am unwanted.”

Between:

“My marriage ended.”

and

“I am incapable of love.”

Between:

“I was wounded.”

and

“I am broken.”

An event becomes a description.

The description becomes a story.

The story becomes an identity.

And eventually we become dead right about ourselves.

Evidence

Once we believe something about ourselves, we begin collecting evidence.

See?

There it is again.

I knew nobody would stay.

I knew I would fail.

I knew I wasn't enough.

I knew people couldn't be trusted.

I knew God was disappointed in me.

Every experience gets interpreted through the existing story.

Evidence that contradicts the story can be dismissed.

Someone loves us.

They don't really know me.

Someone compliments us.

They're just being nice.

Someone stays.

Eventually they'll leave.

Grace arrives and we explain it away.

Sometimes we become so committed to our wounds that healing feels unbelievable.

The Lens Again

This is the lens.

A cataract does not change what is actually there.

It changes what we are able to see clearly.

Perhaps wounds can become cataracts of identity.

Rejection becomes a lens.

Abandonment becomes a lens.

Religious shame becomes a lens.

Failure becomes a lens.

And then we look at ourselves through it.

Eventually we stop saying:

“This happened to me.”

and begin saying:

“This is me.”

Maybe healing is not becoming someone entirely different.

Maybe healing is recovering the ability to see who was there before the lens became clouded.

Naked and Unashamed

Before fear enters the garden, there is a remarkable description:

Naked.

And unashamed.

Nothing hidden.

Nothing performed.

Nothing defended.

Nothing covered.

They simply exist.

Seen.

Known.

And apparently safe.

Then something changes.

The first great fracture may not merely be rule-breaking.

It may be distorted perception.

Suddenly they see themselves differently.

They see one another differently.

And they hear God differently.

The same garden.

The same humans.

The same God.

A different lens.

And now the sound that once accompanied Presence is interpreted through fear.

“I Was Afraid”

That sentence matters.

“I heard you...

and I was afraid.”

Perhaps fear changed the sound.

Have you ever received a text message from someone while already angry with them?

The words may be neutral.

But you hear tone.

Or walked into a room convinced people were talking about you?

Every glance means something.

The sound has not necessarily changed.

The interpretation has.

What if humanity has sometimes done that with God?

We heard God through fear.

Then created theology from what fear told us God sounded like.

Shame

Guilt says:

“I did something wrong.”

Shame says:

“Something is wrong with me.”

That distinction matters.

Healthy guilt can move us toward responsibility.

I hurt someone.

I need to repair it.

I lied.

I need to tell the truth.

I failed.

I need to learn.

But shame does something else.

Hide.

Cover.

Run.

Don't let anyone see you.

Sound familiar?

The garden story understands shame remarkably well.

Religion and Shame

Unfortunately, religion has sometimes become exceptionally good at reinforcing shame.

You are sinful.

Unworthy.

Depraved.

Dirty.

Nothing good exists in you.

Your heart cannot be trusted.

God cannot tolerate sin.

God had to turn away.

Jesus suffered because of you.

Perhaps some of those statements emerged from sincere attempts to take sin seriously.

But what did people hear?

Sometimes they heard:

There is something fundamentally disgusting about me.

Then we wondered why people struggled to believe they were loved.

We spent years telling them they were unworthy—

then became frustrated because they had difficulty receiving grace.

Jesus and Shame

Watch Jesus with people carrying shame.

The woman caught in adultery.

The woman at the well.

Zacchaeus.

Peter after denial.

The leper.

The bleeding woman.

People whose bodies, histories or choices placed them outside respectable circles.

Jesus does not pretend everything is healthy.
But neither does he reduce people to what happened to them.
He sees something beneath the label.
Perhaps grace does not deny truth.
Grace tells a deeper truth.
You did this.
But this is not all you are.
This happened to you.
But this is not all you are.
You failed.
But failure is not your name.

Peter

Peter denied Jesus.
Three times.
Imagine the shame.
He had been so certain.
“Even if everyone else...”
Not me.
Then he failed spectacularly.
If Peter had written his own identity afterward, perhaps it would have been:
Coward.
Traitor.
Failure.
But resurrection interrupts his conclusion.
Jesus meets Peter again.
And Jesus does not call him Denier.

He asks:

“Do you love me?”

Perhaps Jesus knew Peter better than Peter’s worst moment knew him.

That possibility gives me hope.

Your Worst Moment Is a Terrible Name

Most of us have moments we wish we could rewrite.

Things said.

Things done.

Things left undone.

Relationships lost.

Choices made.

Maybe consequences remain.

Responsibility matters.

But your worst moment makes a terrible name.

Imagine if everyone in Scripture were permanently named by their failure.

Moses the Murderer.

David the Adulterer.

Peter the Denier.

Thomas the Doubter.

Paul the Persecutor.

We sometimes do exactly this to ourselves.

And to one another.

We freeze people at the worst frame of their story.

God seems strangely interested in what happens next.

The Person I Used to Be

Growth creates another difficulty.

Sometimes people around us need us to remain who we were.

They know that version.

They understand how to relate to it.

Then we change.

Become healthier.

Set boundaries.

Question old beliefs.

Stop playing an assigned family role.

Speak when we used to remain silent.

Rest when we used to overfunction.

And someone says:

“You’ve changed.”

Sometimes that’s an accusation.

Perhaps occasionally the appropriate response is:

“I hope so.”

Identity and Role

We can also become dead right about our roles.

I am the pastor.

The caregiver.

The strong one.

The provider.

The fixer.

The peacemaker.

The responsible one.

The successful one.

The spiritual one.

Roles can be meaningful.

But eventually we may confuse what we do with who we are.

Then what happens when the role disappears?

Retirement.

Divorce.

Children leave.

The ministry ends.

The job changes.

Someone dies.

The person we cared for no longer needs us.

Who am I now?

Perhaps any identity that disappears when a role ends was never large enough to contain us.

More Than What You Produce

Our culture often asks:

What do you do?

We answer with occupation.

But perhaps the deeper question is:

Who are you when you are not producing?

When you are not helping?

When nobody needs you?

When you are not succeeding?

When you cannot perform?

When you are simply present?

Can you still believe your life has value?

That can be a surprisingly difficult question.

The Tree of Knowledge

Perhaps there is another layer to the garden story.

The tree is associated with the knowledge of good and evil.

Evaluation.

Categorization.

Good.

Bad.

Right.

Wrong.

Worthy.

Unworthy.

Us.

Them.

And immediately after eating, human beings begin evaluating themselves.

Naked.

Problem.

Cover it.

Hide.

What if one of humanity's deepest wounds is the compulsion to constantly evaluate our worth?

Am I good enough?

Successful enough?

Spiritual enough?

Attractive enough?

Productive enough?

Right enough?

Perhaps the Tree of Life offers another way of being.

Life received rather than worth achieved.

Presence before performance.

Belonging before evaluation.

Before You Did Anything

Think about a newborn child.

Before achievement.

Before theology.

Before morality.

Before career.

Before reputation.

Before success.

Before failure.

The child simply exists.

And someone holds them.

Looks at them.

Loves them.

The child has produced nothing.

Yet possesses immeasurable value.

When did we decide human worth needed to be earned?

The Voice at the Water

Jesus comes to baptism.

Before the public ministry unfolds.

Before the healings.

Before feeding crowds.

Before the cross.

Before resurrection.

A voice:

“This is my beloved Son.”

Beloved before performance.

Identity before achievement.

What if we have reversed that?

Perform—

then perhaps become beloved.

Behave—

then perhaps belong.

Believe correctly—

then perhaps be accepted.

What if the sound has always moved the other direction?

Beloved.

Therefore live from belovedness.

Who Told You?

So perhaps we return to the garden.

Who told you?

Who told you that you were worthless?

Who told you your failure was your identity?

Who told you God was ashamed of you?

Who told you you had to earn love?

Who told you your usefulness determined your worth?

Who told you your divorce defined you?

Who told you your addiction was your name?

Who told you your past had the authority to determine your future?

Who told you you were too old to begin again?

Who told you you had missed your chance?

Who told you?

And perhaps the most important question:

Was the voice telling the truth?

Maybe We Were Dead Right

We were dead right that we weren't enough.

Dead right that nobody could truly love us.

Dead right that our failure defined us.

Dead right that God was disappointed.

Dead right that we had to prove our worth.

Dead right that our usefulness was our value.

Dead right that our past determined our future.

We had evidence.

Memories.

Scars.

Voices.

Experiences.

And maybe—

we were dead wrong.

A Different Sound

What if beneath all those voices there is another Sound?

Beloved.

Come out of hiding.

You are seen.

You are known.

You are still here.

There is more.

Follow me.

Perhaps salvation includes learning to recognize that Sound again.

The Sound before shame.

Before hiding.

Before fear.

Before all the voices told us who we had to become.

Maybe healing is not manufacturing a better self.

Maybe healing is remembering the self that fear taught us to forget.

And perhaps the question echoing through the garden is still echoing through every human life:

Who told you that you were you?

Maybe it is time to examine the source.

Because some of the things we have been most certain about—

even the things we believed about ourselves—

may turn out to be fiction wearing the clothing of fact.

And perhaps one of the greatest discoveries of our lives will be realizing:

I was dead right about who I thought I was.

Until Love told me otherwise.

Chapter Twelve

Everything Happens for a Reason

There are sentences we say because silence frightens us.

“Everything happens for a reason.”

“God needed another angel.”

“It was God’s will.”

“God never gives you more than you can handle.”

“There must be a purpose.”

“All things work together for good.”

Most of these words are not spoken cruelly.

Quite the opposite.

We say them because someone is hurting and we desperately want to help.

A child dies.

A spouse receives a diagnosis.

A marriage collapses.

A pregnancy ends.

A job disappears.

A family receives devastating news.

Someone looks at us with tears in their eyes and asks:

“Why?”

And we feel obligated to answer.

Perhaps sometimes the most truthful answer is:

“I don’t know.”

The Need for Why

Human beings search for meaning.

When something terrible happens, the mind immediately begins trying to organize it.

Why did this happen?

What caused it?

Could I have prevented it?

Was it punishment?

Was it God’s plan?

Did I miss something?

What am I supposed to learn?

Why them?

Why me?

Why now?

A reason feels like something to hold.

Randomness is frightening.

Mystery is frightening.

So explanations arrive.

Sometimes quickly.

Too quickly.

The Funeral

Imagine standing beside parents whose child has died.

There are no words large enough for that moment.

Yet people try.

“God has a plan.”

“God needed him more than you did.”

“He’s in a better place.”

“At least you had him for the years you did.”

“Everything happens for a reason.”

Perhaps every sentence contains an attempt at comfort.

But grief hears differently.

God needed my child?

God planned this?

God chose this?

God could have prevented it but decided it served some larger purpose?

What kind of God am I being asked to trust?

Sometimes our attempt to defend God makes God almost impossible to love.

Jesus Wept

Jesus arrives at Lazarus' tomb.

He knows resurrection is coming.

If anyone has theological perspective, Jesus does.

He could explain death.

He could preach.

He could tell Martha and Mary that everything was about to work together for good.

Instead—

Jesus wept.

Two words.

Perhaps one of the most profound theological statements in Scripture.

God with us does not stand outside grief explaining it.

God enters it.

Presence before explanation.

Tears before answers.

Maybe sometimes that is what love looks like.

Presence Does Not Need an Answer

There is a difference between fixing and accompanying.

Fixing says:

How can I make this stop?

Accompanying says:

I will stay with you while it hurts.

That is harder.

Because presence requires us to tolerate our helplessness.

We cannot resurrect the child.

Restore the marriage.

Reverse the diagnosis.

Undo the accident.

Bring the person back.

So we reach for words.

But sometimes words are how we escape the discomfort of simply being there.

Perhaps silence is not failure.

Sometimes silence is respect.

Job's Friends

The book of Job understands this beautifully.

Job suffers catastrophic loss.

His friends arrive.

And initially they do something extraordinary.

They sit with him.

Seven days.

No explanation.

No sermon.

No correction.

Just presence.

Perhaps that was the wisest thing they did.

Then they began talking.

And everything became more complicated.

They needed Job's suffering to make sense.

Surely there must be a reason.

Surely something caused this.

Surely the moral order still works predictably.

Good things happen to good people.

Bad things happen to bad people.

Therefore if something terrible happened to Job—

Job must have done something.

Their theology required an explanation.

Job's experience refused to cooperate.

When Theology Protects the System

Sometimes explanations of suffering are less about helping the person who suffers and more about protecting our worldview.

If terrible things can happen without a neat explanation, the world feels unsafe.

If faithful people can suffer terribly, our formulas stop working.

If prayer does not always produce the outcome we want, certainty collapses.

So we explain.

Maybe they lacked faith.

Maybe there was hidden sin.

Maybe God was teaching them something.

Maybe God closed the door.

Maybe God took the person.

Maybe it was all part of the plan.

Anything to preserve the system.

But perhaps a theology that requires blaming wounded people in order to remain intact deserves examination.

“God Never Gives You More Than You Can Handle”

This sentence has comforted some people.

But it is not actually what the familiar biblical passage says.

Paul speaks about temptation and God's faithfulness in providing a way through it.

That is not the same as saying no human being will ever experience more pain than they can bear.

Life gives people more than they can handle all the time.

That is why people collapse.

That is why we need one another.

That is why communities matter.

Sometimes the truth is not:

"God won't give you more than you can handle."

Perhaps it is:

"You were never meant to handle everything alone."

That sounds different.

Did God Do This?

This may be the question underneath many grief conversations.

Did God do this?

Did God cause the cancer?

The accident?

The miscarriage?

The suicide?

The hurricane?

The murder?

The dementia?

The child's death?

If God is sovereign, people reason, everything that happens must therefore be something God specifically chose to happen.

But sovereignty and causation are not necessarily identical.

A king may remain king without personally causing every event in the kingdom.

Perhaps a world containing genuine freedom, natural processes, mortality and consequence can contain events God does not desire.

Jesus teaches us to pray:

“Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

That prayer itself suggests God’s will is not automatically expressed in everything happening on earth.

Otherwise, why pray it?

Jesus and Suffering

When Jesus encounters suffering, notice what he does.

He heals.

Restores.

Feeds.

Touches.

Delivers.

Comforts.

Weeps.

He does not encounter blindness and say:

“The Father gave you this for character development.”

He moves toward restoration.

When his disciples encounter a man born blind, they immediately ask for a theological explanation.

Who sinned?

This man?

His parents?

They want causation.

Jesus refuses their categories.

The disciples want an explanation.

Jesus sees a person.

We still face that choice.

The Problem With “God Needed Them”

God does not need our loved ones more than we do.

God is not lonely.

God does not require another flower for heaven’s garden.

God does not need another angel.

And human beings do not become angels when they die.

These phrases may sound comforting because they attempt to place death inside a beautiful story.

But sometimes they place responsibility for death directly onto God.

God took your mother.

God took your husband.

God took your child.

Perhaps we should be careful.

Jesus described death as an enemy.

Paul called death the last enemy.

If death is an enemy, perhaps we should hesitate before making God its author.

“All Things Work Together for Good”

This beautiful passage has sometimes been turned into something it does not need to mean.

It does not require us to call everything good.

Cancer is not good.

Abuse is not good.

Betrayal is not good.

Death is not good simply because something meaningful may eventually emerge from grief.

There is a profound difference between saying:

“God caused this for good.”

and:

“God can bring good even from this.”

One requires tragedy.

The other redeems it.

Maybe God is not the author of every wound.

Maybe God is the One who refuses to let wounds have the final word.

Meaning After Loss

People sometimes discover extraordinary meaning after tragedy.

They start foundations.

Help others.

Change careers.

Repair relationships.

Become more compassionate.

Discover depths they did not know they possessed.

That is beautiful.

But the meaning that emerges afterward does not necessarily explain why the tragedy happened.

A mother may help thousands of grieving parents because her child died.

That does not mean her child needed to die so those parents could be helped.

Love can create meaning from devastation without calling devastation necessary.

That distinction matters.

Grief Does Not Need to Be Redeemed Quickly

We are uncomfortable with unfinished stories.

We want the lesson.

The testimony.

The redemption.

“How has God used this?”

Sometimes the answer is:

“I don’t know yet.”

Sometimes:

“I don’t care right now.”

Grief deserves room before it is turned into inspiration.

A wound does not need to become a ministry immediately.

Pain does not owe anyone a lesson.

Sometimes grief simply needs to be grief.

The Stages

We have even become dead right about how people grieve.

Denial.

Anger.

Bargaining.

Depression.

Acceptance.

Those categories have helped many people understand experiences around loss and dying.

But they have often been misunderstood as a predictable staircase.

Stage one.

Then two.

Then three.

Eventually acceptance.

Real grief rarely behaves so politely.

It circles.

Returns.

Surprises.

A smell.

A song.

A birthday.

An empty chair.

A Tuesday afternoon.

Years later.

Grief is not necessarily a problem to complete.

It is often love learning how to carry absence.

“Closure”

We speak about closure.

Perhaps sometimes closure exists.

But when someone deeply loved dies, what exactly are we closing?

The relationship changes.

It does not become meaningless.

We continue carrying people.

Their voice.

Their humor.

Their influence.

Their stories.

Their love.

Perhaps healing is not closing the door.

Maybe healing is learning how to walk through life carrying the relationship differently.

Don't Explain My Pain

There is something sacred about another person's suffering.

We should enter carefully.

Take off our shoes.

This is holy ground.

Do not rush in with explanations.

Do not tell them how to feel.

Do not compare losses.

Do not tell them they should be grateful.

Do not give God credit for something they are struggling to survive.

Sit.

Listen.

Cry.

Say their person's name.

Bring food.

Remember the anniversary.

Stay after everyone else returns to normal.

Presence.

Perhaps that is enough.

The God Who Stays

Maybe the deepest promise of faith was never:

Nothing terrible will happen.

Terrible things happen.

Nor:

You will understand why everything happens.

We won't.

Perhaps the promise is something quieter:

You will not be alone.

Though I walk through the valley—
through it.

Not around.

Not above.

Through.

Presence in the valley.

Presence beside the hospital bed.

Presence at the funeral home.

Presence in the empty house.

Presence during the first Christmas.

Presence when everyone else stops calling.

Emmanuel.

God with us.

Maybe that is enough theology for some days.

Mystery

“I don't know” can feel spiritually inadequate.

But perhaps mystery is not faith's enemy.

There are questions for which I no longer feel compelled to manufacture answers.

Why this child?

I don't know.

Why didn't healing come?

I don't know.

Why did this happen now?

I don't know.

Where was God in every moment?

I don't completely know.

But I can still say:

I believe Love was there.

Not causing every wound.

But present within it.

Weeping.

Holding.

Calling.

Restoring.

Somehow working toward life.

Maybe We Were Dead Right

We were dead right that everything happened for a reason.

Dead right that God took them.

Dead right that suffering was part of God's plan.

Dead right that tragedy was sent to teach lessons.

Dead right that grief followed stages.

Dead right that people needed closure.

Dead right that every question required an answer.

Dead right that defending God's sovereignty mattered more than sitting with someone's pain.

And perhaps—

we were wrong.

Maybe some things happen because bodies are mortal.

Because people have freedom.

Because nature can be violent.

Because choices have consequences.

Because accidents happen.

Because we live in a world still groaning.

And maybe God's glory is not that God secretly orchestrated every tragedy.

Maybe God's glory is that nothing—

not suffering,

not grief,

not violence,

not failure,

not even death—

can finally prevent Love from finding us there.

Something Better Than an Answer

So when someone asks:

“Why?”

perhaps we don't need to panic.

We can say:

“I don't know.”

Then stay.

Maybe hold their hand.

Maybe cry.

Maybe say:

“I miss them too.”

Maybe say nothing.

There will be time for theology.

Maybe.

But in the immediate presence of suffering, people rarely need us to explain God.

They need someone willing to embody Presence.

And perhaps that is where God has been all along.

Not hiding inside the explanation.

But sitting beside us in the mystery.

Weeping.

Waiting.

Loving.

Remaining.

Maybe we were **dead right** about why suffering happened.

But perhaps the grieving person never needed us to be right.

Perhaps they simply needed us

to be there.

Chapter Thirteen

Jesus Was Dead Right

There is another meaning hidden inside the title of this book.

I didn't fully see it at first.

We have spent these pages talking about all the ways human beings have been **dead right**—

certain of things that turned out to be wrong.

Certain about God.

Certain about Scripture.

Certain about other people.

Certain about ourselves.

Certain about suffering.

Certain enough to argue.

Exclude.

Condemn.

Divide.

Sometimes even kill.

But then there is Jesus.

And suddenly the phrase means something entirely different.

Jesus was **dead right**.

Literally.

He lived what he believed all the way to death.

And then—

he rose again because of it.

The Difference

Human certainty has often been willing to kill in order to prove itself right.

Jesus was willing to die rather than stop loving.

That may be one of the clearest distinctions between the kingdom of God and the kingdoms we create.

We say:

“If you threaten what I believe, I will destroy you.”

Jesus says:

“You can destroy me, and I will still love you.”

We protect truth with violence.

Jesus embodies truth through surrender.

We defeat enemies.

Jesus forgives them.

We demand vindication.

Jesus entrusts himself to the Father.

We create crosses.

God creates resurrection.

Perhaps Jesus was not merely right about certain ideas.

He was right about **Love**.

Love Your Enemies

“Love your enemies.”

Those words sound beautiful until someone becomes your enemy.

Then they sound impossible.

It is easy to love enemy-love as a theological concept.

It is much harder when someone betrays you.

Lies about you.

Rejects you.

Humiliates you.

Hurts someone you love.

Threatens everything important to you.

Then enemy-love stops being inspirational.

It becomes cruciform.

Jesus did not merely teach:

Love your enemies.

He demonstrated what the words meant.

The people killing him became the people he forgave.

“Father, forgive them.”

That may be one of the most extraordinary sentences ever spoken.

Because Jesus wasn't forgiving people who had apologized.

They were still crucifying him.

He Could Have Been Right Differently

Imagine all the ways Jesus could have demonstrated that he was right.

Power.

Force.

Retaliation.

Judgment.

He could have humiliated his opponents.

Destroyed his enemies.

Called down heaven.

Proven everything.

Instead, he washes feet.

Including Judas's.

Think about that.

Jesus knows betrayal is coming.

And still kneels.

Still washes.

Still serves.

Sometimes we refuse to be kind to someone because they disagreed with us on Facebook.

Jesus washed the feet of the man preparing to betray him.

Perhaps we still have something to learn about being right.

Peter Had a Sword

When they come for Jesus, Peter does what human beings have always done.

He reaches for a weapon.

Protect the innocent.

Defend the truth.

Save Jesus.

It makes sense.

Peter knows which side is right.

And in that moment, perhaps Peter is as **dead right** as any of us have ever been.

Jesus is innocent.

The arrest is unjust.

The authorities are wrong.

Peter has every reason to defend him.

Then Jesus says:

Put the sword away.

That should disturb us.

Because if there were ever a moment when righteous violence could be justified—
surely defending Jesus would qualify.

But Jesus refuses to build his kingdom with the weapon.

Then he heals the person wounded by his own defender.

What a picture.

A disciple wounds someone while trying to protect Jesus.

And Jesus repairs the wound his follower created.

How many times has that happened since?

Christians defending Jesus—

and Jesus healing the people Christians wounded while defending him.

Perhaps the kingdom never needed our sword.

Truth Did Not Need to Kill

Jesus says:

“I am the way, the truth, and the life.”

Truth has a body.
And look at what Truth does when threatened.
Truth does not panic.
Truth does not manipulate.
Truth does not need to destroy its opponents.
Truth remains truthful.
Even when misunderstood.
Even when mocked.
Even when abandoned.
Even when crucified.
Perhaps truth is stronger than we imagined.
Maybe truth doesn't need our fear.

Pilate's Question

Pilate asks:
"What is truth?"
And the irony is almost unbearable.
Truth is standing in front of him.
Not an argument.
Not a doctrine.
Not a proposition.
A person.
We have spent centuries debating truth.
Defending truth.
Dividing over truth.
Sometimes killing over truth.
And perhaps Jesus keeps quietly standing before us saying:

Look at me.

If your truth makes you cruel—

look at me.

If your truth requires an enemy—

look at me.

If your truth needs fear—

look at me.

If your truth gives you permission to dehumanize—

look at me.

If your truth makes you incapable of mercy—

look at me.

Maybe we have been defending truth while ignoring Truth.

The Cross

The cross is where human certainty reaches its terrifying conclusion.

Religious certainty.

Political certainty.

Imperial certainty.

Crowd certainty.

Everyone knows what needs to happen.

Get rid of him.

The religious authorities have reasons.

Rome has reasons.

The crowd has reasons.

Even the disciples have their assumptions about what Messiah should be.

Everyone is certain.

And Love gets crucified between their certainties.

Perhaps that still happens.

Whenever preserving our system becomes more important than recognizing the person in front of us—

Love can end up on the cross again.

“Crucify Him”

We like imagining ourselves standing with Jesus.

But perhaps the more uncomfortable question is:

Where would I actually have been?

Would I have recognized him?

Or would Jesus have threatened too many things I considered sacred?

He questioned traditions.

Challenged religious authorities.

Reinterpreted Scripture.

Associated with unacceptable people.

Violated expectations.

Refused political categories.

Disturbed religious certainty.

Maybe I would have called him dangerous.

Maybe I would have had Bible verses.

Maybe I would have been dead right.

And completely wrong.

The Silence of Jesus

Something remarkable happens during the trial.

Jesus sometimes refuses to defend himself.

That fascinates me.

Most of us want to correct the record.

If someone misunderstands us, we explain.
If someone accuses us, we defend.
If someone posts something inaccurate, we respond.
If someone questions our motives, we want our side heard.
Jesus sometimes remains silent.
Perhaps he did not need everyone to believe he was right.
He knew who he was.
There is tremendous freedom in that.
When identity is secure, vindication becomes less urgent.

Resurrection Is Vindication

But resurrection comes.
The stone moves.
The tomb empties.
Life appears where death believed it had won.
And suddenly something becomes clear.
Jesus did not lose.
Love did not lose.
Mercy did not lose.
Forgiveness did not lose.
Enemy-love did not lose.
The cross looked like defeat.
Resurrection reveals something else.
Jesus was right.
Right about the Father.
Right about Love.
Right about forgiveness.

Right about mercy.

Right about the kingdom.

Right that death would not have the final word.

He was dead right.

And resurrection became the Father's **Yes** to everything Jesus revealed.

What God Vindicated

Perhaps resurrection is not simply God's approval of Jesus' theological accuracy.

It is God's vindication of the **way of Jesus**.

The way of self-giving love.

The way of forgiveness.

The way of mercy.

The way of peace.

The way of laying down the sword.

The way of touching outsiders.

The way of welcoming sinners.

The way of confronting oppressive power without becoming oppressive.

The way of losing life and somehow finding it.

God raises **that** life.

Maybe resurrection tells us something about what ultimately survives.

Love.

We Were Afraid Love Wouldn't Be Enough

Perhaps that is why we added so much.

Control.

Fear.

Power.

Rules.

Boundaries.

Threats.

Institutions.

Certainty.

We were afraid Love wasn't enough.

Surely people need something stronger.

Surely enemies must be defeated.

Surely sinners must be frightened.

Surely outsiders must be controlled.

Surely God needs defending.

Surely truth needs protection.

Jesus seems to place an extraordinary amount of confidence in Love.

Even when Love gets him killed.

And resurrection says:

He was right.

The Seed

Jesus uses the image of a seed.

Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone.

But if it dies—

life emerges.

That is the strange mathematics of the kingdom.

Lose—

and find.

Give—

and receive.

Serve—

and become great.

Die—

and live.

The world says preservation is victory.

Jesus says sometimes what we cling to must die before something greater can live.

Maybe that includes our certainty.

What Needs to Die?

Perhaps after everything we have explored, the question becomes personal.

What needs to die in me?

My need to win?

My need to be admired?

My need to have every answer?

My need to defend yesterday?

My resentment?

My fear?

My tribal identity?

My picture of God?

My certainty about someone else?

My certainty about myself?

What if resurrection is waiting on the other side of something I am desperately trying to keep alive?

Not Every Death Is Resurrection

We should be careful.

Jesus' self-giving does not mean remaining in abusive situations.

It does not mean surrendering boundaries.

It does not mean allowing others to harm us.

It does not mean victims should quietly endure violence.

The cross should never be used to keep people on crosses someone else built for them.

Jesus freely gives himself.

That distinction matters.

Self-giving love is not the same as coerced suffering.

Resurrection does not sanctify abuse.

Losing the False Self

Perhaps the death Jesus invites is deeper.

The death of the self that must constantly prove itself.

The self built from comparison.

The self that needs enemies.

The self that survives through control.

The self terrified of being wrong.

The self that cannot apologize.

The self that cannot change.

The self that would rather lose a relationship than lose an argument.

Maybe that self can die.

And perhaps something freer can rise.

Resurrection Faith

What if resurrection is not merely something we believe happened to Jesus?

What if resurrection becomes a pattern for how we live?

Beliefs can die.

And something truer can rise.

Relationships can die in one form.

And sometimes something healthier can emerge.

Old identities can die.

And a more authentic self can appear.

Fear can die.

Love can rise.

Certainty can die.

Wonder can rise.

Religion can die.

Presence can rise.

Maybe resurrection is happening more often than we recognize.

Dead Right

So perhaps we need to redeem the title.

There are two ways to be dead right.

One kind of being dead right kills everything around it in order to remain correct.

It destroys relationships.

Silences questions.

Creates enemies.

Protects systems.

Defends itself.

That kind of certainty produces death.

But Jesus shows another way.

He does not kill to prove himself right.

He loves until death.

He forgives until death.

He remains faithful to the character of the Father until death.

He refuses to become what hates him.

He refuses to let violence teach him violence.

He refuses to let hatred determine who he becomes.

And that makes him—

dead right.

Then Comes Morning

Friday says:

Love lost.

Saturday says:

Nothing is happening.

The tomb is closed.

The dream is over.

Certainty has won.

Rome won.

Religion won.

Violence won.

Death won.

Then comes morning.

And perhaps resurrection is God's eternal answer to every system that believes death has the final word.

No.

Life.

No.

Love.

No.

Again.

The stone moves.

The Sound returns.

And the one who refused to stop loving walks out of the tomb.

Maybe This Is What Being Right Looks Like

Perhaps being right was never primarily about possessing correct information.

Perhaps the deepest rightness is alignment.

Being aligned with Love.

Aligned with mercy.

Aligned with truth.

Aligned with life.

Aligned with the character of God revealed in Christ.

We will still get things wrong.

Our theology will remain incomplete.

Our interpretations will continue developing.

Our knowledge will remain partial.

But perhaps there is something we can orient ourselves toward.

Love.

Paul seems to understand this.

We know in part.

We prophesy in part.

Our knowledge is partial.

But love—

remains.

The Question Changes

At the beginning of this book we asked:

What am I dead right about that I may actually be dead wrong about?

Perhaps now another question emerges:

What is worth being dead right about?

Jesus gives us an answer.

Love God.

Love your neighbor.

Love one another.

Love your enemy.

Forgive.

Serve.

Heal.

Welcome.

Give.

Become merciful.

Make peace.

Follow me.

Maybe we will not understand everything.

Maybe we were never supposed to.

But perhaps we can become increasingly certain about the direction.

Toward Love.

Toward Life.

Toward Presence.

Toward Christ.

And if following that way costs us some old certainties—

let them die.

If it costs us the need to win—

let it die.

If it costs us the God we created in our own fearful image—

let that God die too.

Because resurrection waits beyond many necessary deaths.

Jesus was **dead right**.

But he didn't stay dead.

And perhaps neither should we.

Chapter Fourteen

What Is Worth Being Right About?

After questioning certainty for this many pages, perhaps it is time to risk being certain about something.

Not everything.

Something.

Because eventually life requires commitment.

We cannot spend forever saying:

Maybe.

Perhaps.

I'm not sure.

There are moments when we have to stand somewhere.

Live from something.

Build our lives around something.

So after everything we have questioned, what remains?

What is worth being right about?

Perhaps the answer is surprisingly simple.

Love.

Is That Too Simple?

Maybe.

“Love” can become sentimental.

A greeting card.

A song lyric.

A pleasant feeling.

But that is not the kind of love Jesus reveals.

The love of Jesus has weight.

It confronts.

Forgives.

Protects.

Welcomes.

Serves.

Challenges.

Touches wounds.

Crosses boundaries.

Tells truth.

Lays down power.

Resists oppression.

Washes feet.

Carries crosses.

Forgives enemies.

And gets back up.

That is not sentimental love.

That is resurrection love.

God Is Love

John does not merely say:

God loves.

He says:

God is love.

That is an extraordinary statement.

Love is not simply something God occasionally does.

Love describes God's being.

Which means every theological claim we make about God should somehow be accountable to that revelation.

Not our shallow definition of love.

Christ-shaped love.

Self-giving love.

Holy love.

Truthful love.

Restorative love.

Enemy-loving love.

The love revealed in Jesus.

The Center

Perhaps one of our problems has been giving every belief equal weight.

We build enormous theological systems where hundreds of doctrines become equally essential.

Get one wrong and the entire structure feels threatened.

But Jesus appears capable of identifying a center.

Someone asks:

What is greatest?

Jesus answers:

Love God.

Love your neighbor.

Then he says something remarkable.

Everything hangs here.

The Law.

The Prophets.

Hang.

Perhaps Jesus is giving us more than two commandments.

Perhaps he is giving us an interpretive center.

Everything hangs on Love.

What Hangs Here?

Imagine a hook on a wall.

Jesus says:

Hang everything here.

Your theology.

Your interpretation of Scripture.

Your ethics.

Your understanding of holiness.

Your understanding of justice.

Your relationships.

Your politics.

Your church.

Your leadership.

Your parenting.

Your marriage.

Your treatment of strangers.

Your treatment of enemies.

Hang it here.

Love God.

Love neighbor.

If something refuses to hang there, perhaps we should examine it.

Love Is Not Agreement

This needs saying again.

Love does not require agreement.

If it did, enemy-love would be impossible.

Jesus does not say:

Agree with your enemies.

He says:

Love them.

That means disagreement and love can occupy the same room.

Perhaps we need to relearn that.

We can disagree without contempt.

Correct without humiliating.

Confront without dehumanizing.

Set boundaries without hatred.

Walk away without vengeance.

Love is not the absence of truth.

It is the way truth becomes safe enough to hear.

Love Can Say No

Sometimes our fear of sentimentality is justified.

Love does not always say yes.

Love can say:

No.

Stop.

This is harmful.

You cannot treat me this way.

You cannot treat them this way.

This needs to change.

Justice can be love saying no to what destroys people.

Boundaries can be love refusing to cooperate with harm.

Accountability can be love telling the truth.

Perhaps the question is not whether something feels pleasant.

The question is:

Does it seek the genuine good of the person and the community?

Love and Justice

We have sometimes positioned love and justice against each other.

God is loving—

but God is also just.

As though justice is the moment God stops being Love.

But what if divine justice is what Love does when something has gone terribly wrong?

Love confronts oppression because people matter.

Love exposes abuse because victims matter.

Love challenges lies because truth matters.

Love seeks restoration because brokenness matters.

Justice without love becomes vengeance.

Love without justice becomes sentimentality.

But perhaps in God they were never separated.

Mercy

Then there is mercy.

Religious certainty sometimes treats mercy suspiciously.

Too much grace.

Too much forgiveness.

Too welcoming.

Someone might take advantage.

Jesus encountered this criticism.

He ate with sinners.

Wrong people.

Questionable people.

People whose lives had not been properly cleaned up before dinner.

Religious observers objected.

Jesus responded:

“Go and learn what this means: I desire mercy, not sacrifice.”

Go and learn.

Perhaps we are still learning.

The Fruit Test

Maybe when we do not know whether something is right, we can examine its fruit.

What does this belief produce?

Does it make me more loving?

More joyful?

More peaceful?

More patient?

Kinder?

More faithful?

Gentler?

More self-controlled?

Or does it consistently produce:

Fear?

Contempt?

Arrogance?

Suspicion?

Shame?

Violence?

Exclusion?

Despair?

A tree is known by its fruit.

Perhaps theology is too.

Truth Matters

None of this means truth is irrelevant.

Quite the opposite.

Love requires truth.

If someone is being abused, love does not say:

Let's avoid judgment.

Love tells the truth.

If I have hurt someone, love does not say:

My intentions were good.

Love takes responsibility.

If an institution is corrupt, love does not protect appearances.

Love exposes what needs light.

Truth matters.

But perhaps truth becomes dangerous when disconnected from love.

Truth can become ammunition.

Jesus makes truth relational again.

“I am the truth.”

Truth has a face.

People Before Positions

Perhaps one of the disciplines worth practicing is learning to see a person before seeing a position.

Before:

Conservative.

Liberal.

Christian.

Muslim.

Atheist.

Gay.

Straight.

Immigrant.

Citizen.

Addict.

Pastor.

Prisoner.

Republican.

Democrat.

Progressive.

Fundamentalist.

There is a person.

A story.

A childhood.

A wound.

A hope.

Someone they love.

Someone they miss.

Something they fear.

Something they are trying to understand.

A label may tell us something.

It never tells us everything.

Love remains curious.

Sacred Dignity

What if we became dead right about this:

Every human being possesses sacred dignity.

Not because everyone behaves well.

Not because every belief is true.

Not because every choice is healthy.

But because humanity is not disposable.

The person in front of me is not an issue.

Not a category.

Not a project.

Not an enemy to destroy.

A person.

Perhaps sacred dignity is one of the places conviction should become immovable.

The Least of These

Jesus does something remarkable when talking about human beings who are hungry, thirsty, strangers, poorly clothed, sick or imprisoned.

He identifies himself with them.

You did it to me.

Think about what that does to theology.

We can spend hours debating where God is.

Jesus says:

Look there.

Among vulnerable people.

Perhaps one way to test what we believe about God is to examine what our belief causes us to do with people who possess the least power.

The Stranger

Scripture repeatedly returns to the stranger.

The foreigner.

The widow.

The orphan.

People vulnerable because they lack social power.

Why?

Perhaps because our treatment of people who cannot benefit us reveals something about who we are.

It is easy to love people who increase our status.

Love becomes clearer when there is nothing to gain.

Children

Jesus places children near the center.

That should challenge any theology that frightens them unnecessarily.

Any church culture that silences them.

Any family system that treats them as property.

Any religious structure that protects adults at their expense.

If our theology requires sacrificing the emotional or physical safety of children in order to preserve itself—

our theology should lose.

The child should not.

The Wounded

The same is true of wounded people.

The grieving.

The abused.

The traumatized.

The lonely.

The dying.

Sometimes they do not need answers.

They need Presence.

Maybe we can become dead right about that.

People should not have to perform their pain correctly to deserve compassion.

Grief does not need permission.

Tears do not require theological explanation.

Sometimes the holiest thing we can offer is simply:

I am here.

Presence

Maybe this is where everything keeps returning.

Presence.

Not fixing.

Not controlling.

Not explaining.

Being there.

Jesus is called Emmanuel.

God with us.

Perhaps that is one of the deepest revelations of God.

Not merely God above us.

God with us.

At tables.

At graves.

In storms.

Among crowds.

Beside outcasts.

Inside suffering.

On crosses.

Walking roads after resurrection.

Presence.

What if being Christlike is largely learning how to be present?

We Know in Part

Paul gives us words that could serve as a manifesto for this entire book:

We know in part.

There it is.

Not:

We know nothing.

We know.

But—

in part.

That is conviction with humility.

Knowledge without arrogance.

Faith without pretending omniscience.

Then Paul moves toward something greater.

Faith.

Hope.

Love.

And the greatest?

Love.

Maybe Paul understood *Dead Right* long before we did.

What Remains?

Imagine losing some of your certainty.

Your eschatology changes.

Your interpretation of Genesis changes.

Your understanding of atonement changes.

Your denomination changes.

Your politics change.

Your understanding of Scripture develops.

Your picture of God grows.

What remains?

Can you still love?

Can you still forgive?

Can you still serve?

Can you still sit beside someone who is suffering?

Can you still feed someone hungry?

Can you still welcome a stranger?

Can you still recognize Christ in someone you once called an enemy?

If so, perhaps faith has not disappeared.

Perhaps it has found its center.

The Creed Beneath the Creeds

What if beneath all our statements of faith there were a simpler confession?

God is Love.

Jesus reveals God.

Every person bears sacred dignity.

Truth matters.

Mercy matters.

Justice matters.

Forgiveness matters.

Presence matters.

Love your neighbor.

Love your enemy.

Care for the vulnerable.

Remain teachable.

And when you discover you were wrong—
change.

Perhaps that would not answer every theological question.

It was never intended to.

It might simply tell us which direction to walk.

A Compass Instead of a Map

Maybe faith is sometimes more like a compass than a map.

A map tells us exactly where everything is.

A compass tells us direction.

We have often wanted maps.

Detailed maps.

Who is saved?

Who is lost?

What happens after death?

When does everything end?

What does every verse mean?

Where does everyone belong?

Jesus sometimes seems more interested in giving us a direction.

Follow me.

Toward whom?

The wounded.

The excluded.

The enemy.

The Father.

Toward what?

Mercy.

Justice.

Forgiveness.

Life.

Love.

Perhaps we do not need every road labeled if we know which direction is home.

What I Am Willing to Be Wrong About

There are many things I am increasingly willing to discover I was wrong about.

Interpretations.

Traditions.

Theological systems.

Assumptions.

Predictions.

Opinions.

Maybe even some things I currently hold very strongly.

I hope I remain teachable enough to change.
But there are some things I want to risk becoming increasingly certain about.
That mercy is better than cruelty.
That reconciliation is better than alienation.
That healing is better than wounding.
That peace is better than violence.
That humility is better than arrogance.
That people matter more than systems.
That children should be safe.
That grieving people deserve Presence rather than explanations.
That enemies remain human.
That forgiveness can break cycles vengeance never can.
That Love is stronger than fear.
That life is stronger than death.
And that Jesus shows us what God is like.
If I am going to be dead right about something—
let it be that.

Not Certainty—Orientation

Perhaps that is the distinction.
I do not need certainty about everything.
I need orientation.
I need to know which way I am facing.
Toward fear?
Or Love?
Toward control?
Or freedom?

Toward exclusion?

Or welcome?

Toward vengeance?

Or restoration?

Toward ego?

Or humility?

Toward death?

Or life?

The questions may remain complicated.

But perhaps the direction can become increasingly clear.

When You Don't Know What to Do

There will be moments when we do not know.

What does this passage mean?

What should I believe?

Which theological position is correct?

What happens after death?

Why did this happen?

What is God doing?

Maybe we will not always have an answer.

So perhaps we can ask another question:

What would Love do next?

Not abstract love.

Not permissiveness.

Not avoidance.

Christ-shaped Love.

What would Love say?

What would Love refuse?

What would Love protect?

What would Love forgive?

What would Love confront?

What would Love restore?

Who would Love notice?

Perhaps that question will not solve everything.

But it may keep us facing the right direction.

Dead Right Again

Maybe one day we will discover that some of what we believe today is wrong.

I expect we will.

Perhaps future generations will shake their heads at us.

Maybe they should.

We are human.

We see through lenses.

We know in part.

But I hope they can say something else about us.

They kept learning.

They apologized.

They changed.

They listened.

They protected the vulnerable.

They made room at the table.

They chose mercy.

They remained curious.

They loved.

And whenever they discovered they were wrong—
they moved.

Perhaps that is enough.

Because maybe the goal was never to become right about everything.

Maybe the goal was to become the kind of people who can be corrected without becoming destroyed.

People whose identity does not depend upon winning.

People who can say:

“I was wrong.”

And still know:

“I am loved.”

People who can release an old certainty without losing themselves.

People who know the difference between having convictions—
and being possessed by them.

So what is worth being right about?

Perhaps the answer has been standing before us all along.

Not an argument.

Not a system.

Not a doctrine.

A person.

Jesus.

The one who loved enemies.

Touched outsiders.

Protected the vulnerable.

Forgave sinners.

Challenged power.

Washed feet.

Wept at graves.

Laid down the sword.

Carried the cross.

Forgave his killers.

Entered death.

And rose again.

If I must choose a direction—

I choose that one.

And if I am going to risk being dead right about anything—

let me be dead right

about Love.

Chapter Fifteen

Alive Again

Maybe this book was never really about being wrong.

Maybe it was about becoming alive.

Alive enough to question.

Alive enough to listen.

Alive enough to change.

Alive enough to apologize.

Alive enough to discover that something we defended for years no longer deserves defending.

Alive enough to let an old belief die without believing we have died with it.

Alive enough to encounter God again.

Because perhaps the opposite of being **dead right** is not being wrong.

It is being alive.

We Began With Certainty

We began with a disturbing question:

How many times have we been dead right—only to discover we were dead wrong?

History answered.

Many.

Religion answered.

Many.

The church answered.

Many.

Our relationships answered.

Many.

Our own lives answered.

More than we probably remember.

We have been certain about God.

Scripture.

Other people.

Ourselves.

Suffering.

Salvation.

Justice.

Hell.

Church.

Family.

Enemies.

And sometimes time revealed what humility might have allowed us to discover sooner.

We were wrong.

But perhaps those words no longer need to frighten us.

I Was Wrong

Say them.

I was wrong.

Notice that you survived.

Again.

I was wrong.

You are still here.

Those words do not erase your intelligence.

They do not erase your sincerity.

They do not erase everything you have ever believed.

They do not mean you cannot be trusted.

They mean you are human.

And perhaps something more.

They mean you are teachable.

The Freedom of Being Wrong

There is extraordinary freedom in no longer needing to defend every previous version of yourself.

I believed that then.

I see it differently now.

I taught that then.

I would teach it differently now.

I thought I understood.

Now I realize there was more to see.

There is no shame in that.

Perhaps the greater tragedy would be reaching the end of life having never changed at all.

What kind of living thing never changes?

Growth Leaves Evidence

Look at a tree.

The rings tell a story.

Seasons.

Drought.

Rain.

Injury.

Recovery.

Growth.

The tree does not apologize because this year's ring is different from the one before it.

Difference is evidence that it lived.

Maybe our changing understanding can be viewed similarly.

These are the rings of a human life.

What I believed at twenty.

What I understood at forty.

What suffering taught me.

What love taught me.

What failure taught me.

What grief taught me.

What people different from me taught me.

What Jesus continues teaching me.

Growth leaves evidence.

Return to the Garden

Perhaps we should end where humanity's story begins.

A garden.

A sound.

A question.

“Where are you?”

Maybe we once heard accusation in those words.

Where are you?

What have you done?

Come out and face the consequences.

But perhaps we can hear something else now.

Where are you?

I miss you.

Why are you hiding?

Come out.

The Presence is looking for the person fear sent into hiding.

Who Told You?

Then the second question:

“Who told you?”

Maybe that question has been underneath this entire book.

Who told you God was like that?

Who told you those people were your enemies?

Who told you questions were dangerous?

Who told you doubt meant failure?

Who told you the Bible could only be understood one way?

Who told you God needed violence?

Who told you fear was the gospel?
Who told you your suffering was God's plan?
Who told you your worst moment was your identity?
Who told you changing your mind meant abandoning faith?
Who told you being right was more important than loving?
Who told you?
Maybe some voices deserve to be questioned.
Even familiar ones.
Even respected ones.
Even our own.

The Sound

Before the hiding, there was a Sound.
Presence moving through the garden.
Humanity heard.
Then fear changed the interpretation.
Perhaps that has been our story ever since.
God speaks.
Human beings hear through lenses.
Culture.
Trauma.
Religion.
Tradition.
Fear.
Desire.
Power.
Then Jesus comes.

And the Sound becomes flesh.

Touch the leper.

Welcome the child.

Eat with the outsider.

Forgive the sinner.

Challenge the powerful.

Love the enemy.

Put away the sword.

Do not be afraid.

Father, forgive them.

Peace.

Come.

Follow me.

Maybe this is what God has sounded like all along.

Run Toward the Sound

Fear taught us to hide from God.

Jesus invites us to come near.

Religion sometimes taught us to run from punishment.

Jesus says:

Follow me.

Perhaps spiritual maturity is learning which sound to run toward.

Not every loud voice is God.

Not every religious voice is God.

Not every fearful voice is God.

Not every voice quoting Scripture has understood Scripture.

Listen for the Sound.

The one that sounds like Jesus.

Run toward that.

The Cataract

Maybe our problem was never simply that we lacked information.

Sometimes the lens was cloudy.

A cataract does not change what is being viewed.

It changes the clarity with which we see.

Perhaps grace performs cataract surgery on the soul.

Slowly.

Sometimes painfully.

Removing distorted ways of seeing.

God didn't become more loving.

We began seeing Love more clearly.

People didn't suddenly acquire dignity.

We began recognizing the dignity that was already there.

Jesus didn't change.

Our lens did.

New Eyes

Imagine opening your eyes after years of distorted vision.

The light may initially feel overwhelming.

Things look different.

Colors appear that you had forgotten existed.

Edges become clearer.

Faces look different.

Maybe awakening can feel like that.

At first disorienting.

Then beautiful.

Perhaps repentance itself can be understood this way.

A changed mind.

A changed lens.

A willingness to see again.

The Open Hand

We talked earlier about the closed fist.

Maybe we should look at our hands one final time.

Open them.

What are you holding?

Your theology?

Your reputation?

Your past?

Your certainty?

Your disappointment?

Your identity?

Your need to be vindicated?

Your resentment?

Your picture of God?

You do not have to throw everything away.

Just open your hand.

Let truth remain because it is true—

not because you are afraid to examine it.

Let what needs to stay, stay.

Let what needs to leave, leave.

And leave room for something new.

You Are Allowed to Grow

Perhaps someone needs permission.

You are allowed to grow.

You are allowed to reconsider.

You are allowed to ask questions.

You are allowed to read the passage again.

You are allowed to admit you do not know.

You are allowed to discover that your parents were wrong about something.

Your pastor.

Your denomination.

Your professor.

Your political party.

Your favorite author.

Your friend.

This book.

Me.

And—

you.

You are allowed to discover that you were wrong.

Don't Replace One Certainty With Another

There is one final danger.

We can leave one rigid system and immediately build another.

We can become certain that uncertain people are better than certain people.

Proud of our humility.

Dogmatic about being non-dogmatic.

Judgmental toward judgmental people.

We can become **dead right about not being dead right**.

Human beings are remarkably creative.

So remain watchful.

The goal is not to join the correct new tribe.

The goal is to remain alive.

Keep the Chair Empty

Leave an empty chair at your table.

For someone who disagrees.

For someone whose story challenges your assumptions.

For someone who sees something you don't.

For the stranger.

For the wounded.

For the person you once called *them*.

Maybe even for the person you used to be.

Let them sit.

Listen.

You do not have to surrender truth to make room for another human being.

Perhaps making room is part of truth.

Make the Phone Call

There is something else.

If being right has cost you someone—

and a bridge can safely be rebuilt—

perhaps build it.

Make the call.

Send the message.

Cross the room.

Say:

“I have been thinking.”

Say:

“I didn’t listen well.”

Say:

“I was wrong.”

Say:

“I still see some things differently, but I don’t want our disagreement to become our entire relationship.”

Say:

“I miss you.”

Say:

“I love you.”

Do it while there is time.

There are arguments not worth carrying to a grave.

Apologize Without Disappearing

You can admit you were wrong without hating yourself.

That matters.

Humility is not humiliation.

Repentance is not self-destruction.

You can say:

I did harm.

I regret it.

I want to repair what I can.

And still believe you are worthy of love.

Maybe grace gives us enough safety to tell the truth about ourselves.

We no longer need innocence.

We have mercy.

Listen to People You Were Taught to Fear

Sit with someone outside your circle.

Not to convert them.

Not to debate them.

Not to study them.

Know them.

Ask about their life.

Their family.

Their hopes.

Their wounds.

Their faith.

Their questions.

Perhaps you will still disagree.

But maybe *them* will become a name.

A face.

A friend.

And sometimes proximity performs its own kind of resurrection.

Read Scripture Again

Read it again.

Not defensively.

Curiously.

Notice the questions.

The tensions.

The development.

The humanity.

The beauty.

The violence.

The poetry.

The mystery.

The contradictions we sometimes rush to harmonize.

The voices.

And through all of it—

look for Christ.

Let Jesus remain the lens.

When you are uncertain what God looks like—

look there.

When God Looks Frightening

Look at Jesus.

When theology makes God appear less merciful than Jesus—

look again.

When religion makes God appear less forgiving than Jesus—

look again.

When our interpretation requires us to become less loving than Jesus—

look again.

Perhaps the answer will not always be simple.

But the direction remains.

Toward Christ.

Toward Love.

Friday

There will be Fridays.

Things die.

Beliefs.

Relationships.

Dreams.

Certainties.

Versions of ourselves.

Sometimes we will stand before something we thought would last forever and watch it disappear.

Friday hurts.

Do not rush past it.

Saturday

Then comes Saturday.

The strange space between death and resurrection.

Nothing makes sense.

The old certainty is gone.

The new understanding has not arrived.

We hate Saturday.

We want answers.

But perhaps Saturday is sacred too.

It teaches us to wait without certainty.

To exist between.

To trust when the tomb is still closed.

Maybe some of us are living there now.

Sunday

Then sometimes—

Sunday.

Not always the answer we expected.

Not restoration to exactly what existed before.

Resurrection is not resuscitation.

Jesus rises—

but he carries wounds.

That matters.

Resurrection does not pretend Friday never happened.

It transforms what Friday means.

Maybe that is how our lives heal too.

We do not become people who were never wounded.

We become people whose wounds no longer have the authority to name us.

Jesus Was Dead Right

And now the title returns one final time.

Jesus was **dead right**.

He loved all the way down.

Into betrayal.

Into abandonment.

Into violence.

Into death.

And Love rose.

Perhaps resurrection is God's great vindication:

This is the way.

Not domination.

Not fear.

Not vengeance.

Not exclusion.

Not certainty defended by violence.

Love.

And Love gets the final word.

What If I Am Wrong?

I hope I never stop asking that question.

What if I am wrong?

About this verse?

This person?

This belief?

This memory?

This assumption?

This fear?

This book?

Ask it without terror.

Because being wrong is not the end.

Sometimes discovering we were wrong is exactly where resurrection begins.

What If Love Is Right?

But perhaps another question should accompany it.

What if Love is right?

What if mercy really triumphs?

What if forgiveness really is stronger than vengeance?

What if enemies really can become neighbors?

What if people really are more than their worst moments?

What if God really is as beautiful as Jesus?

What if death really does not have the final word?

What if Love wins—

not by destroying everything opposed to it,
but by refusing to stop loving until everything broken has been made new?
What if?

I think that is a question worth living.

No Final Answer

So I will not end this book by telling you I finally have everything figured out.

I don't.

I know less with certainty than I once did.

But perhaps I trust more deeply.

I am less interested in defending God.

More interested in recognizing God.

Less interested in winning arguments.

More interested in hearing people.

Less interested in deciding who is outside.

More interested in making room at the table.

Less frightened of saying:

I don't know.

And increasingly willing to say:

I was wrong.

Maybe that is not the loss of faith.

Maybe it is faith becoming alive.

Still Listening

So here we are.

Back in the garden.

The evening air moves.

The leaves stir.

A Sound comes through the trees.

Once, perhaps, we heard it and hid.

Maybe now we can hear differently.

No hiding.

No covering.

No clenched fists.

No need to defend ourselves.

Just Presence.

And a question:

“Where are you?”

Here.

I am here.

Still learning.

Still changing.

Still healing.

Still questioning.

Still believing.

Still loving.

Still listening.

I may be wrong again.

Probably will be.

But I no longer need to be afraid of that.

Because truth is not threatened by my questions.

God is not threatened by my growth.

And Love is not waiting for me to understand everything before drawing near.

So I open my hands.

I listen for the Sound.

And when I hear the voice that sounds like Jesus—

mercy,

truth,

forgiveness,

justice,

welcome,

peace,

Presence,

Love—

I will run toward it.

Not because I am certain about everything.

But because I am becoming certain about the direction.

Away from fear.

Away from hiding.

Away from the graveyard of certainty.

Toward Life.

Toward Love.

Toward Christ.

Maybe I spent too much of my life trying to be right.

Now—

I want to be alive.

And perhaps that is the final invitation of *Dead Right*:

Do not be so afraid of being wrong that you become incapable of resurrection.

Let what is false die.

Let truth rise.

Keep your hands open.

Keep your heart soft.

Keep listening.

And above all—

stay alive.