

JESUS

*The God Who Knows
Your Name*

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Since 1798

PART 1

IMMANUEL

When our daughter Sara was four years old, she burst into the house carrying a water-filled baggie in which swam a wide-eyed burst of sunshine. “Look what they gave us at the birthday party!” (Gee thanks.) We dumped the pet into a fishbowl and gathered around to select a name. *Sebastian* won. He quickly became the star of the family. We actually set the bowl on the dinner table so we could watch him swim while we ate. The ultimate fish dinner.

But then we got bored. Can’t fault Sebastian. He did everything expected of a family fish. He swam in circles and surfaced on cue to gobble fish food. He never jumped out of the bowl into the sink or demanded a seat on the couch. He spent his nights nestled amid a green plant. Quiet. Novel. Contained. Like Jesus?

The Jesus of many people is small enough to be contained in an aquarium that fits on the cabinet. Package him up, and send him home with the kids. Dump him in a bowl, and watch him swim. He never causes trouble or demands attention. Everyone wants a goldfish bowl of Jesus, right? If you do, steer clear of the real Jesus Christ. He brings a wild ride. He comes at you like a fire hose—blasting, purging, cleansing. He will not swim quietly. He is more

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a force than a fixture, flushing away every last clod of doubt and death and infusing us with wonder and hope.

He changes everything. Jesus does not promise to stop your snoring, turn your kids into valedictorians, or guarantee you will have the correct lottery number. Jesus doesn't make you sexy, skinny, or clever. Jesus doesn't change what you see in the mirror. He changes how you see what you see.

He will not be silenced, packaged, or predicted. He is the pastor who chased people out of church. He is the prophet who had a soft spot for crooks and whores. He is the king who washed the grime off the feet of his betrayer. He turned a bread basket into a buffet and a dead friend into a living one. And most of all, he transformed the tomb into a womb out of which life was born. Your life.

Jesus: Five letters. Six hours. One cross. Three nails. We live because he does, hope because he works, and matter because he matters. To be saved by grace is to be saved by him—not by an idea, doctrine, creed, or church membership, but by Jesus himself, who will sweep into heaven anyone who so much as gives him the nod.

Goldfish Jesus? Not on your life.

Goldfish Jesus happens only on Christmas and Easter. The real Jesus claims every tick of the clock.

Goldfish Jesus winks at sin. The real Jesus nukes it.

Goldfish Jesus is a lucky charm crucifix on a necklace. Jesus is a tiger in your heart.

Do you know this Jesus? If your answer is no, let's talk about him. If your answer is yes, let's talk about him. Let's talk about Jesus.

Let's begin where the earthly ministry of Jesus began—in the

womb of Mary. The God of the universe, for a time, kicked against the wall of that womb. He was born in the poverty of a peasant and spent his first night in the feed trough of a cow. “The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood” (John 1:14 THE MESSAGE).

Didn’t have to, did he?

Jesus could have become a voice—a voice in the air.

Jesus could have become a message—a message in the sky.

Jesus could have become a light—a light in the night.

But he became more, so much more. He became flesh. Why? Why did he take the journey? Why did he go so far?

Might the answer include this word: *you*?

Jesus came to be near you. Any concerns you might have about his power and love were removed from the discussion the moment he became flesh and entered the world.

What a beginning. What an entrance. What a moment. Goldfish Jesus? No way.

Chapter 1

Born to You This Day

Born to a mother.

Acquainted with physical pain.

Enjoys a good party.

Rejected by friends.

Unfairly accused.

Loves stories.

Reluctantly pays taxes.

Sings.

Turned off by greedy religion.

Feels sorry for the lonely.

Unappreciated by siblings.

Stands up for the underdog.
Kept awake at night by concerns.
Known to doze off in the midst of trips.
Accused of being too rowdy.
Afraid of death.

Whom am I describing? Jesus . . . or you? Perhaps both.
Based on this list, it seems you and I have a lot in common with Jesus.

Big deal? I think so.

Jesus understands you. He understands small-town anonymity and big-city pressure. He's walked through pastures of sheep and palaces of kings. He's faced hunger, sorrow, and death and wants to face them with you. Jesus "understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same testings we do, yet he did not sin" (Heb. 4:15 NLT).

If Jesus understands our weaknesses, then so does God. Jesus was God in human form. He was God with us. That is why Jesus is called Immanuel.

Immanuel appears in the same Hebrew form as it did two thousand years ago. *Immanu* means "with us." *El* refers to *Elohim*, or God. So Immanuel is not an "above-us God" or a "somewhere-in-the-neighborhood God." He came as the "with-us God." God with us. Not "God with the rich" or "God with the religious." But God with *us*. All of us. Russians, Germans, Buddhists, Mormons, truck drivers and taxi drivers, librarians. God with *us*.

Don't we love the word *with*? "Will you go *with* me?" we ask. "To the store, to the hospital, through my life?" God says he will.

“I am *with* you always,” Jesus said before he ascended to heaven, “to the very end of the age” (Matt. 28:20). Search for restrictions on the promise; you’ll find none. You won’t find “I’ll be with you if you behave . . . when you believe. I’ll be with you on Sundays in worship . . . at mass.” No, none of that. There’s no withholding tax on God’s “with” promise. He is *with* us.

God is with us.

Prophets weren’t enough. Apostles wouldn’t do. Angels won’t suffice. God sent more than miracles and messages. He sent himself; he sent his Son. “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14 NKJV).

For thousands of years God gave us his voice. Prior to Bethlehem he gave us his messengers, his teachers, his words. But in the manger God gave us himself. Extraordinary, don’t you think?

I imagine even Gabriel scratched his head at the idea of “God with us.” Gabriel wasn’t one to question his God-given missions. Sending fire and dividing seas were all in an eternity’s work for this angel. When God sent, Gabriel went.

And when word got out that God was to become a human, Gabriel was no doubt enthused. He could envision the moment:

The Messiah in a blazing chariot.

The King descending on a fiery cloud.

An explosion of light from which the Messiah would emerge.

That’s surely what he expected. What he never expected, however, was what he got: a slip of paper with a Nazarene address. “God will become a baby,” it read. “Tell the mother to name the child *Jesus*. And tell her not to be afraid.”

Gabriel was never one to question, but this time he had to

wonder. *God will become a baby?* Gabriel had seen babies before. He had been platoon leader on the bulrush operation. He remembered what little Moses looked like.

That's okay for humans, he thought to himself. But for God? The heavens can't contain him. How could a body? Besides, have you seen what comes out of those babies? Hardly befitting the Creator of the universe. Babies must be carried and fed, bounced and bathed. Some mother burping God on her shoulder? Why, that was beyond what even an angel could imagine.

And what of this name? What was it—Jesus? Such a common name. There's a Jesus in every cul-de-sac. Come on, even the name Gabriel has more punch to it than Jesus. Call the baby Eminence or Majesty or Heaven-sent. Anything but Jesus.

So Gabriel scratched his head. *What happened to the good ol' days?* Global floods. Flaming swords. That's the action he liked.

But Gabriel had his orders. Take the message to Mary. *Must be a special girl*, he assumed as he traveled. But Gabriel was in for another shock. One peek told him Mary was no queen. The mother-to-be of God was not regal. She was a Jewish peasant who'd barely outgrown her acne and had a crush on a guy named Joe.

And speaking of Joe, what does this fellow know? Might as well be a weaver in Spain or a cobbler in Greece. He's a carpenter. Look at him over there—sawdust in his beard and a nail apron around his waist. You're telling me that God is going to have dinner every night with him? You're telling me that the source of wisdom is going to call this guy "Dad"? You're telling me that a common laborer is going to be charged with providing food to God?

What if he gets laid off?

What if he gets cranky?

What if he decides to run off with a pretty young girl from down the street? Then where will we be?

It was all Gabriel could do to keep from turning back. “This is a peculiar idea you have, God,” he must have muttered to himself, but he followed through. He wasn’t about to rebel against his boss, who also happened to control the universe.

He visited Mary and told her:

Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name JESUS. (Luke 1:30–31 NKJV)

The story of Jesus begins with the story of a great descent. The Son of God became the child of Mary. He became one of us so we might become one with Him. He entered our world in the high hope that we will enter his.