

Secondhand Jesus



It's fun to hear about a friend's vacation, to see photos, to listen to stories about amazing adventures. And to some extent, we can experience our friend's excitement and joy. But our sense will be somewhat one-dimensional. We can imagine what it would be like to travel; we can feel our friend's enthusiasm and wonder. But our thrill will never measure up to experiencing the trip firsthand, for ourselves.

It's the same with our relationship with God. It's encouraging to hear about others' walks with the Lord, to share our experiences with Him with one another. But that cannot be the basis for our relationship with God. We have to encounter God directly. We cannot rely on others to give us information about God. We must make the effort to engage Him for ourselves.

In Secondhand Jesus: Trading Rumors of God for a Firsthand Faith, author and New Life Church worship pastor Glenn Packiam challenges readers to embark on a quest to experience Christ and His power for themselves. "God wants us to know Him deeply and personally," Packiam says. "But there are no shortcuts to God. The Bible tells us that 'the way to life—to God!—is vigorous and requires total attention'" (Matt. 7:14, The Message).

Packiam shares with us his journey to engage God for himself and exchange preconceived ideas about God for the truth. "It's time to hear the magnificent, Divine Invitation," Packiam says. "It's time to take God up on His offer and embrace the mystery and majesty of knowing Him for ourselves."

The following is an excerpt from Secondhand Jesus. ([Click here to purchase this book.](#))

Life couldn't have been any better. We had been in our new house for just over a year, and it was almost time to start decorating for the holidays. Winter's frost was just blowing in over the Rocky Mountains. These were days of sipping hot chocolate and looking back over a year of steady church growth, rapidly expanding influence, and a company of close friends to enjoy it with. On top of all that, my wife, Holly, and I were expecting our second child, another girl. Life was good and there was no end in sight.

And then it was Thursday.

Everyone was distracted at work. There were meetings going on, first upstairs and then off campus, and later on campus in an impromptu staff meeting. Internet clips kept us glued to the screen as we tried desperately to decipher truth, accuracy and some reason to believe the best. But as Thursday soldiered on, doubt was sitting lower and more heavily inside me.

I remember the feeling when I got home. My heart was kicking against my chest with frantic irregularity as I ran up the stairs to our room. The sinking, tightening knot in my stomach seemed to sink with each step. I opened our bedroom door, and with breathless shock sputtered, "Babe, some of it's true."

I had just returned from an elders' meeting where I learned that the seemingly absurd accusations leveled against our beloved pastor had enough truth in them to warrant his removal from office. On Friday, we learned that he would never be allowed back. By Sunday, we were sitting in church with hot tears racing down our faces, listening to letters that told us words we never thought we would hear. Our pastor had been a prominent national figure because of his role as president of the National Association of Evangelicals. He had been featured on Barbara Walters's program and other major news shows, had been called the most influential pastor in America. It was the biggest religious debacle in my lifetime. And it happened at my church. My church.

Thursday came and everything changed; my unshakeable “good life” became a nightmare of uncertainty. Would the church implode? Would everyone leave? Would I have a job next week? Could I ever get hired in ministry again? The songs, the influence, the success, the notoriety—it all became foolishly irrelevant.

Slowly, I replayed the past. The preceding years had been heady times. Our pastor’s meteoric rise to the evangelical papacy paralleled the growing muscle of a conservative Christian movement now beginning to flex in the public square. The young men who had helped build our church, myself included, now found themselves swimming in much bigger circles of influence. We were talking to the press, traveling to Washington, D.C, and dropping more names than Old Testament genealogy.

We had become powerful by association. And it was intoxicating. We were like the eager young men in *Old School*, Tobias Wolff’s fictitious memoir of an elite prep school on the Eastern Seaboard, full of idealism and world-changing dreams: “It was a good dream and we tried to live it out, even while knowing that we were actors in a play, and that outside the theater was a world we would have to reckon with when the curtain closed and the doors were flung open.”

On *Thursday*, the theater doors flung open. The dream was over now. There was no thought of making an impact or changing the world. It was now about survival. How could we help our church stay intact?

As the days became weeks, it became clear that our church was made up of strong families who truly were connected to one another. It is a community akin to a small Midwestern town. So what if the mayor is gone? We’re all still here. I watched men and women rally together in a heroic display of Christ-like love.

It wasn't long before the shock of scandal gave way to the discomfort of introspection. This was ultimately not about a fallen pastor; it was about fallen nature, a nature we all have lurking within us. It became less about the worst being true about him, and more about the worst being true about us. We began to allow the Lord to turn His spotlight, one more piercing than the light of any cameras, on our own hearts. Secret sins, recurring temptations, hidden pride all looked sinister in His light. There was no such thing as a little white anything. Every weakness was now a dangerous monster with the potential of ruining our lives. Couples began to have difficult conversations with each other, friends became more vulnerable than they had ever been. Honest was the new normal. That sounds so strange to say.

But far beyond discussions and confessions, one question, one I never thought I would have trouble answering, relentlessly worked its way to my core. It surfaced from the pages of Henri Nouwen's book, *In the Name of Jesus*. Nouwen had been an influential theology professor at Harvard, living at what most would have considered the apex of his career. But something was wrong.

"After twenty years in the academic world as a teacher of pastoral psychology, pastoral theology, and Christian spirituality, I began to experience a deep inner threat. As I entered into my fifties ... I came face to face with the simple question, 'Did becoming older bring me closer to Jesus?' After twenty-five years of priesthood, I found myself praying poorly, living somewhat isolated from other people, and very much preoccupied with burning issues."

But Nouwen's inner wrestling was largely unnoticed by those around him, which made it more difficult for him to accurately gauge the condition of his heart.

"Everyone was saying that I was doing really well, but

something inside was telling me that my success was putting my own soul in danger. I began to ask myself whether my lack of contemplative prayer, my loneliness, and my constantly changing involvement in what seemed most urgent were signs that the Spirit was gradually being suppressed. ... I was living in a very dark place and ... the term 'burnout' was a convenient psychological translation for spiritual death."

Haunted by the emptiness of his own spiritual walk, Nouwen started on a journey that eventually led to his resignation from Harvard. He took a position as a chaplain at Le Arche, a care facility for the handicapped. There he learned what it meant to live out a life of love and servanthood, to live as Christ among the broken, to truly "lead in the name of Jesus." I had read his profound and honest reflections years before, but as I reread them in the wake of the scandal, I found myself convicted. Nouwen's question dealt with something deeper than sin; it was about the essence of the Christian life, the thing we must have above all else.

I remember sitting with a few friends in my living room on New Year's Eve, reflecting on how insane 2006 had been. We decided to have a little dessert and ponder the year that was now in its closing hours. Each couple took turns reviewing highs and lows of the year. For the most part, it had been a good year. Bigger and better opportunities, unexpected financial success, the births of healthy children, and the accelerated elimination of debt were some of the items on the good list. But we had also experienced *Thursday*, and "bigger and better" now seemed as days long ago, *auld lang syne*. The events of that day in November now overshadowed everything the next year might hold. Everything was good now, but how long would it continue? Would the things that had gone awry last year create repercussions that would undermine all the things we had held so dearly? For some, the fear of losing the jobs they loved was becoming a distinct possibility. The reality of how suddenly a curve in the road can appear was sobering us.

And then I raised the question: Did we—did I—know Christ more as a result of the passing of another year? Were we any closer to God? It was not the sort of question to answer out loud. I wrestled with it in silence. It was a question of my own relationship with Christ.

I have been a Christian since I was a young boy. I spent my high school years sitting in on the Old Testament history classes my mom taught at our church's Bible college, listening to sermon tapes, and praying and planning with my dad as he and my mom planted a church. My youth was defined by long quiet times, meaningful journal entries and leadership roles in our youth group. I was a theology major in college and had been in full-time, vocational ministry for six years. Yet in the wake of *Thursday*, none of this mattered. Did I truly know God ... *today*? Was my knowledge of Him active and alive, or stale and sentimental?

There was no easy or succinct way to answer that question. But as I allowed it to burrow its way in my heart, I began to see something. I had long lived subconsciously believing that God was a sort of cosmic agent, working to get me bigger contracts and better deals while saving me from scammers and opportunists. God was my Jerry Maguire, my ambassador of quan, and my prayers were spiritually cloaked versions of asking Him to "show me the money." Not necessarily literal money—just comfort, success, good friends, an enjoyably smooth road, an unmitigated path to the peak of my game.

If you had suggested that theology to me, I would have condemned it, criticized it, and denied three times that I even knew of it. It wasn't until *Thursday* came and went that I saw what was lurking inside. I had slowly bought the suburban rumors of God. My house was an evidence of His blessing. Our growing church was an indication of God's pleasure. Things were going to get better and better while I kept my life on cruise control. Never mind that I had struggled—mostly unsuccessfully—to have consistent time alone with God. Forget

that I had hardly spent time worshipping God offstage.

The more my wife and I searched our own souls, the more we realized we had become passive, complacent, at times even indifferent about our own knowledge of God. We had been lulled to sleep by our own apparent success, numbed into coasting by our spiritual Midas touch.

What began in the days after *Thursday* was a journey, a road of uncovering and discovering, of stripping away what thoughts of God we now knew were rumors and finding again the face of Christ.

These were not rumors that came from one man, one pastor. In fact, it's hard to say that any of them did. Any search for the headwaters would be misguided anyway. Because that's not the point. It's not *where* the rumors came from; it's *why* they came at all.

Here's what I've learned: Rumors grow in the absence of revelation. Every time we keep God at arm's length, declining an active, living knowledge of Him, we become vulnerable to rumors. Lulled by false comfort and half-truths about God, we—in Keith Green's famous words—*fall asleep in the light*.

What the Heck Is Going On?

Until life comes to a screeching halt.

There are moments when time stands still. Our old vision of the world, like a scrim on a giant set, rolls up out of sight, leaving us with a jagged, stark picture of reality, its edges sharp, rough and bare. Everything looks different, feels different. Things that once peppered our lives with meaning are now completely irrelevant and vain. Things we had ignored and overlooked are now incredibly clear, almost stunning in the forefront. The football team whose games you would never miss now seems horridly trivial. The powerful boss you were trying to impress, you now scorn and dismiss. The child you

once wished would just go to sleep, you now run to hold in your arms.

A death of a loved one, the finality of divorce, the weight of debt crushing into bankruptcy—these are the moments that shake us, that wake us up and make us numb all at the same time. My moment is not that tragic in light of others. I think of a friend whose wife is facing a medically incurable disease. Or another friend whose wife decided married life was overrated and the party scene was where she belonged. I know a father who can't escape the grief of losing a child years ago. Sorrow covers him like a cape and time offers no oxygen. There is no way to compare tragic moments. The game of my-moment-is-worse-than-your-moment, while possible, is seldom profitable. Pain is acutely real to those who are breaking under its weight.

These are the “what the heck?” moments. The moments where everything stops except you, as you slowly look around. Examining. Reflecting. Puzzled. Bewildered. The silence is broken by a bellow from deep inside: “What the heck is going on?” Or some less sanitized version of the same. How could this be? And what's more, how could this be while God is with me?

The psalmists understood this feeling well. Fully two-thirds of Psalms are laments, an old-fashioned term for a “what the heck?” moment prayer. Imagine these words being prayed at church:

“Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?” (Ps. 10:1)

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, and am not silent” (Ps. 22:1-2).

“My tears have been my food day and night, while men say to me all day long, ‘Where is your God?’” (Ps. 42:3)

These were covenant people, people to whom God had made an unbreakable promise, a promise to bless them, protect them, and make their days go well. So why on earth were they being pursued by enemies, losing their belongings and getting depressed—all while watching the wicked flourish? It didn't make sense. It wasn't lining up with the covenant—or at least their understanding of it. And so they took their complaint up with God.

What's interesting is that for the most part, we don't find out how God specifically responded. There are "Psalms of Thanksgiving," where the psalmist restates his lament in the past tense—recounting how he was in trouble—and then gives thanks to God for delivering him. But the "lament psalms" grossly outnumber the "thanksgiving psalms." We don't know if all became well on earth all the time. But we are told two crucial things: the consistent character of God—good, just, faithful, loving—and the characteristic response of the psalmists—the choice, the vow, to praise. In one of the psalms quoted earlier, the words of lament are followed by these words of praise: "Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One; you are the praise of Israel" (Ps. 22:3).

Maybe in some ways, the Bible is written the way the Oracle in *The Matrix* prophesies: It only tells us what we need to know. It does not tell us all there is to know, only what we need for life and godliness. Here is the lesson of the psalmists: All of our experiences and emotions can become a springboard to find God and see Him for ourselves. God is present on every scene, waiting, wanting us to seek Him, believe in Him, and worship Him with every ounce of our existence.

Our discussion here is not first about suffering. The question of whether God causes it, allows it, or has nothing to do with it, has been voiced since the days in the garden. Our discussion here is simply that these moments—whether they come from our free will, the devil's evil schemes, or God's strange

providence—present us with an opportunity. Regardless of your theology, these two things are common to mankind: We all experience a measure of suffering, and every experience can be redeemed.

In *The Problem of Pain* C.S. Lewis wrote, “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”

Crumbs of Rumor

Too often, we walk through life with our hands fixed firmly over our eyes and ears, ignoring and avoiding the living presence of Christ with us—maybe from fear or guilt or simple apathy. But every once in awhile, our hands are pried off our face, our eyes are almost forcibly opened, our ears are unplugged. We catch a glimpse for ourselves, a glimpse that will be our undoing. And our salvation. In that moment, we are ruined and redeemed by that little glimpse.

Job had that experience.

He never auditioned for the role, never signed up for the part. God chose him. He chose him, we are often told, to prove a point to the devil. But I’m beginning to wonder if God chose him to show Himself to Job, to save Job from the stiff, straight lines he had drawn around God. Think about it. The story doesn’t end with the devil returning to heaven and saying, “OK, God, you win. You were right. Job didn’t curse you. He does indeed serve you for nothing.” If that were the central tension in the story, there is a glaring lack of resolution.

A series of ridiculously unfortunate events befalls Job in a very short span of time. What takes place in the lengthy remainder of the book is a dialogue between Job, three of his friends, and a presumptuously precocious young man named Elihu. After sitting silently for seven days, the three

friends can't bear to hold in their wisdom. One by one they present their cases to Job, trying to explain why he is suffering and what he should do about it. They generally agree that things have gone so poorly for Job because of some hidden sin in his life. They plead with him to go before God, repent, rid himself of his sins, and make peace with the Almighty. Job refuses. He insists on his innocence and laments to God with words that are uncomfortably honest.

Then Elihu speaks. He dismisses the elders' wisdom, preferring his own fresh insight. He is less willing to condemn Job for sin, but not as reluctant to rebuke him for pride. He hints at God's sovereignty and our inability to fully understand His ways. But he, too, echoes the familiar refrain that obedience will lead to a prosperous, pleasant life, and that disobedience will lead to tragedy and sorrow.

As arrogant and simpleminded as Job's friends may seem to us, as hard as it is to imagine ourselves saying something like that to a friend who has just lost everything, remember that they are simply articulating the prevailing wisdom of the day. It was their misguided understanding of the covenant that gave them this simple premise: Obey God, and all will be well; disobey, and you will suffer.

That formulaic and faulty view of the covenant may be the reason the book of Job is included in Hebrew Wisdom Literature. It may be that the purpose for the book of Job is to counter an overly black-and-white view of life. Perhaps God understood that humans would take the rich, profoundly unique covenant that He had made with His people and reduce it to simplistic, pithy phrases. Maybe God knows our propensity to redact the living words of relationship into rumors that spread like fire--and that sooner or later, we will get burned.

What if the book of Job is not all about some intergalactic dispute between God and the devil? What if it's really about

revelation and relationship with mortals?

At the end of the story, after Job asks God over and over with the nagging persistence of a 2-year-old why he has suffered, God responds. Not with answers, but with questions—questions that bring Job to his knees. Finally Job cries: “I admit I once lived by rumors of you; now I have it all firsthand—from my own eyes and ears! I’m sorry—forgive me. I’ll never do that again, I promise! I’ll never again live on crusts of hearsay, crumbs of rumor” (Job 42:5-6, *The Message*).

This is the climax of the book of Job. It’s the way this incredibly moving story of suffering resolves. The mention of God restoring to Job more than what he lost is sort of an afterthought, a footnote to the story. It comes after Job finds firsthand knowledge of God. The story of Job is first and foremost a salvation story: God saved Job from small, narrow, rumor-laden views of Himself. And then Job lived holy-ever-after. It’s what happens when rumors give way to revelation.

I have come to the uncomfortable realization that I have believed rumors about God that have kept me from Him, kept me from really knowing Him. I suspect I am not alone. This book is about some of the more popular rumors, and the path to finding the truth. What you read here is not intended to be the basis for your view of God. Instead, this book is an attempt to jog your mind, stir your heart, provoke your questions, and whet your appetite for the quest, for the journey that only you can take. The journey that Job took. A journey that is not necessarily one of suffering, but one that by design means eye-opening, paradigm-shattering discovery. So yes, in some sense it hurts. It’s a journey that begins with your fist to the sky and can end with your knees on the earth. A journey that begins with questions and ends with speechless worship.

Mine began on a Thursday.

Glenn Packiam is an associate worship pastor at New Life Church and the director of the New Life School of Worship in Colorado Springs, Colo. He was one of the founding worship leaders and songwriters for the Desperation Band and is the author of Butterfly in Brazil and Secondhand Jesus, from which this article was adapted. Copyright 2009 David C Cook. Secondhand Jesus by Glenn Packiam. Used with permission. May not be further reproduced. All rights reserved.