

GREAT NEWS FOR BELIEVERS WHO ARE INTROVERTS, SPIRITUAL
STRUGGLERS, OR JUST FEEL LIKE THEY'RE MISSING SOMETHING

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BLESSED

ARE THE

Misfits



It's Not Just You

YOU KNOW THAT FEELING WHEN GOD IS RIGHT there, *this* close, and you can just *feel* His loving arms around you, and you can literally *hear* His voice whispering in your ear, telling you how much He loves you?

I don't.

I never have.

Maybe you can relate. Maybe you can't. Or maybe, if you've gotten the impression you're too analytical, too logical, too introverted, too just plain weird, or too whatever for God, you'll let me tell you a quick story.

Once, Jesus went up on a mountainside and sat down with His odd assortment of friends and followers. They were hand-picked, and they weren't even close to being respected religious leaders.

Oh, there were plenty of popular religious big shots to choose from. Respected ones. Learned ones. Charismatic ones. Popular ones. Jesus knew all about them.

He just didn't choose them.

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That was surely a shock, because everyone thought the successful people were closer to God than others. They were recognized for their insights, their roles in public worship, and their ability to attract followers. Wouldn't Jesus want those kinds of people?

But then Jesus started talking about the way things worked in another reality, an even realer reality, called the kingdom of God, and it was in stark contrast to the way the world operates. Jesus started listing the kinds of people who should be happy that the kingdom is what it is.

And, according to Jesus, guess who should be happy:

The spiritually bankrupt.

People who are grieving.

The humble.

Those who are desperately looking for some justice in the world.

The merciful.

The genuinely pure-hearted.

People who want peace.

Those who suffer for doing the right things.

They should all be happy (or "blessed," in most translations of the Bible) because God's kingdom, the deepest reality, is the kingdom that will last. It's the one that counts.

Not this one. This one is short-lived. This kingdom, this culture, this way humans treat each other, is profoundly messed up.

But you knew that already.



When I was a freshman at the University of Illinois, my roommates were involved in campus ministries. They loved

Intervarsity and Cru (or Campus Crusade) and always talked about it. It was the thing to do.

They were older than me, and they were cool, gregarious, funny, loud, and popular. They thought I was odd, yes, but they had genuine compassion for me. They wanted me to experience their awesome campus ministries. They went to dynamic large group meetings, intimate small groups, super-fun dances, and high-impact big campus outreach events!

I wanted friends. I wanted their excitement about God too. They told me I needed to “plug in” to everything. All of it. I would need to square-dance with strangers, “share” in intimate small groups, and go up to people I didn’t know on campus and tell them about my faith.

This sounded fantastic to me! . . . Except for the square dances with strangers, the sharing in intimate small groups, and also the part about going up to people I didn’t know on campus and telling them about my faith.

When I look back, it dawns on me: of course *they* loved it. They were extroverts, all three of them. I didn’t even know what I was at the time (an introvert with Asperger’s syndrome), but when I tried doing this stuff, I’d start fantasizing scenarios—say, a sudden UFO invasion—that ended with me being vaporized on the spot.

I longed for that. *Please, Space Aliens, I know what I’m witnessing here is an awesome, powerful ministry and everybody’s having a great time. I’m just asking you to vaporize me. Thanks.*

Clearly, something was spiritually wrong with me. The campus Christians were pumped about their faith. They had emotional worship services. I sang, and felt little. They sensed

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God's overwhelming presence in prayer, so I'd join prayer groups, dutifully waiting, trying to rein in my wandering mind, asking God to help me feel His presence.

But I couldn't feel anything. Something was amiss with me spiritually, and I knew it. Prayer felt like talking into a walkie-talkie, knowing that the batteries were dead.

Maybe God gave up on me? Maybe I'd sinned too much? Maybe He wasn't there?

Worse, it occurred to me that maybe He had *never* been there. I'd done all the Christian stuff before, including, but not limited to: attending multiple DC Talk concerts, participating in Vacation Bible School programs, repeatedly being prodded to sing a song called "Arky," and engaging in hardcore Christian puppetry.*

But I didn't remember *ever* getting emotional during worship or experiencing powerful prayer.

Not once. Ever.

Growing up, I did remember sermons that scared me about hell or made me feel guilty. So there was that. But that's all I had, after a lifetime of this stuff.

I didn't abandon the idea of God. I didn't hold it against Him, because I figured it had to be my fault. Bottom line: whatever it was I was supposed to be doing, I wasn't doing it right.



* I still dabble in Christian puppetry when no one is looking, but that's not the point. You don't need to be reading this footnote. Go back to the text. Thanks.

Then I met a guy named Kurt who was excited about his faith. He told me I needed to experience something different, that I needed the Holy Spirit to show up and *truly* take over my heart. Obviously that freaked me out, but I was willing to visit his group out of lonely desperation.

Maybe God would fix me, and I'd experience the presence of God everyone else was apparently feeling.

We went into a basement in a campus church, and we sat in metal folding chairs, and they shared and emoted about God for an hour. They eventually turned to me and asked me if I was “open to the Spirit,” and I told them I sure was, at least I thought I was, or sure wanted to be, or something like that, I don't know, or . . .

They got up and gathered around me and started praying out loud, all of them, all at once, fervently.

They burst out “praying in tongues”—praying in languages I didn't recognize—and I closed my eyes and asked God to please, please help me.

Please don't give up on me.

Please let me have whatever it is everybody else has.

Please. Something.

But nothing was apparently happening. That frustrated some of the rapid-praying people around me. It was chaotic, but they took turns praying out loud near my ear, saying things (in English) like, “God, break through this young man's wall of resistance. Open him up to You,” and “Break the chains that are binding this young man to his own intellect and . . .”

“Humble Brant, Lord!”

Yes, humble me. Please, God.

“Help him not to depend on his own understanding! Release Satan's power over him! Do it now!”

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Yes. All of that.

“Break through right now!”

Please. I don't want to be this way anymore. Break through, God.

“Let Brant get out of his own mind and turn to You!”

Yes, Lord. Get me out of my mind, like these people.

“Open Brant's heart, God! Do it! Open his heart and mind to You!”

Was I supposed to just start talking in another language? If so, I wanted that. *Kick-start my other-language-speaking, Father. Please.*

Any language but English, Father. I already speak English, so that won't mean as much, and—

“DO IT!”

Nothing.

“OPEN HIS HEART!”

Nothing at all.

After a long time the prayer ended. I had completely failed. I was still “in my own head.”

I was eighteen years old, a church-raised repetitive sinner, well aware of my laziness and selfishness and lust and sarcasm. And I couldn't feel God at all.

I wanted God, honestly I did.

Did God, presuming He exists, still want me?



It hurts to remember this. Not so much because it's embarrassing (it is) but because I know this sort of thing has happened to so many people who are reading along. If it wasn't the

basement/prayer scenario, it was something like it: a time when we were left wondering if, when it comes to God, we belong on the Island of Misfit Toys, if we belong at all.

God, I don't feel You. I don't get it. I don't understand church people. I'm not having the same experience everyone else seems to be having. I have doubts. I don't think like the others do.

People talk about being "saved from sin," but I'm still sinning. I try and try, but I don't fit. I don't know if I ever have.

Honestly, I often wonder if You're around, but here I am, talking to You. I feel alone.

Please have mercy on me.

If you can relate to that, I'm not alone.

Neither are you.



I was raised in churches as a preacher's kid, and I've long worked in "Christian entertainment." I've seen enough hypocrisy and cartoonish, show-biz religion to give Bill Maher fuel for fifty more *Religulous* documentaries. (A documentary I haven't watched, by the way. No need. I feel like I've already lived it.)

If you were setting out to make someone a harsh skeptic of Christianity, you might want to give him a background like mine. I'll share some very personal things along the way to explain. But this isn't a memoir. It's about how people like me can still believe Jesus is the best news in the history of the world.

As a radio host, I enjoyed regularly talking on-air with the head of the American Humanist Association, Paul Kurtz. He was also in charge of the Center for Skeptical Inquiry and was known for being a "leading American skeptic."

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Laughing, he once told me, “You know what? I think you really *are* more skeptical than I am.” I felt strangely proud of this. I out-skepticed the Leading Skeptic Guy.

It turns out, I’m so skeptical, I’m skeptical of skeptics. I’m skeptical of myself. And that’s led me back to—of all things, of all people—Jesus.

I hope when you’re done with this book, you’ll see God still loves people like you and me, people who sometimes genuinely don’t understand what people are doing or feeling or thinking when it comes to religious stuff.

We have reason to be very relieved.

Happy, even. *Blessed*.

You see, Jesus went up on a mountainside, and He sat down with His odd assortment of followers, and He told them what the kingdom of God was really like, and it didn’t look at all like what they expected.

It was way better.

It included *them*.