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*Your Own Jesus*

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## FOREWORD

MY WIFE'S MOTHER WAS ALSO HER SIXTH-GRADE math teacher. Thirty or so kids had Mrs. Preston as a teacher. But Denalyn had Mrs. Preston as a mother and a teacher.

When Denalyn told me this, I asked her, “What did you call her—‘Mom’ or ‘Mrs. Preston’?”

She said, “I called her ‘Mrs. Preston,’ but with a different tone.”

Some people speak of Jesus with a different tone—a special affection, a personal tenderness. He is a teacher—but he’s also one of the family. He instructs, but also nourishes, feeds, and tucks you in at night. He isn’t just “Jesus”—he’s *your* Jesus.

Don’t you want to know your Jesus? Of course you do. That’s why you’re holding this book. That’s why I’m

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recommending it. Mark Hall doesn't have any secrets or undiscovered formulas. But he does have great insights and a wonderful way of sharing them.

Who knows? By the end of the book you may realize that Jesus is not just a teacher at the front of the class, but the One who takes you home at the end of the day.

MAX LUCADO

INTRODUCTION

WHY WE NEED  
OUR OWN JESUS



THIS MORNING, I AWOKE EXHAUSTED FROM THE weirdest dream. I was slogging through a battlefield, fighting some unidentified enemy in a war without explanation.

So I was already drained when I realized I couldn't eat breakfast because some buddies and I were starting a fast today. It seemed like such a good idea a few days ago. All of this was bouncing around in my head as I got into my new car only to remember it doesn't have AM radio. I'm trying to wean myself off talk radio because it tells me a thousand times over that the world is going to pot. *Great. Another fast on an already difficult morning.*

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Then I reached my office at Eagle's Landing First Baptist Church and encountered a secretary who wasn't wearing her customary smile. She pointed at her watch and told me I was late in placing my first phone call for a series of scheduled media interviews. That only reminded me I needed some time to work on new songs for the next album. Then there's the upcoming tour ...

If a barometer could measure the degree of being flustered, my needle would have been nearing the red side.

Yet at some point during the first interview I started thinking, *Man, God is good. Shut up and deal with this. This is awesome.* I started talking about everything God is doing with Casting Crowns and with our ministry at church, and I got pumped. Later, I ran into someone who asked, "Hey, what do you think about your record being number two in the Billboard 200?" All I could say was, "That's pretty awesome," but inside I was doing cartwheels and praising the Lord. My tense morning was a distant memory. Life was good.

Then came the email.

I learned of a problem with one of the kids in our student ministry, and my heart sank. Right about then, someone showed up for another big appointment I had forgotten about, and a crammed day lost another hour. I found myself feeling gravity again.

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So I've been up and down from the moment I awoke. All of this happened today. And it's only 11:00 a.m.

I sure am glad I have my own Jesus. If I didn't have my own personal walk with him, my life would be one giant vat of emotion, a tempest tossing me from one whim to the next. Which is why I have learned *I need my own Jesus*—my own relationship with the Lord of all creation. I can't live by what I feel but by the truth God's Word reveals.

This last line may sound familiar because it's part of the bridge in "East to West"—a song I wrote about learning to accept and live in the reality of God's forgiveness. The lyrics describe where I've been in my walk with Jesus over the past few years. No matter how many times my old life comes haunting, God calls me to rest on his truth and not on what I feel or think.

As Christians, we can't live by what we feel or go off our gut, because it is rotten (Philippians 3:19). We have to live by truth. God has been constantly reminding me lately that his Word is truth. And truth is truth. It doesn't only become truth when we start believing it. Truth just *is*—for everybody everywhere and at all times.

I try to rest in that fact and not in how I feel about it or what it means to me. Who cares what the Bible means *to me*? We need to know what it *means*. That's

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where I have to allow God to redefine my thinking. He tells us in Romans 12:2 not to be conformed to this world but to be transformed by the renewal of our minds. What always gets me about this verse is he's telling believers we still need to be transformed. It means I have a saved spirit but I still think with a lost brain, and slowly but surely my mind has to be transformed. Such transformation comes but one way—by truth. By his Word.

### **Knowing What You Believe**

Back in 1998, one of my former students called me a few months into his freshman year in college. He attended an institution of higher learning, yet he wanted answers to a kind of test he didn't expect.

“Man, I need help,” he said, his voice almost a quiver. “These professors are pounding me. The entire culture here is mocking everything I ever heard you say.”

He spent the next several minutes asking questions, though one unsettled me more than any of the others. He told the story of an assertion someone made in class that left him too befuddled to reply, which is why he had called me for help.

“Now, what do I believe about that again?” he asked.

## WHY WE NEED OUR OWN JESUS

Less than a year after leaving the cozy spiritual nest of our church group, where everyone shared the same beliefs and lingo, he was facing the white-hot furnace of a hostile universe and its ungodly worldviews. And he folded like paper in fire.

He didn't have his own Jesus.

I'm not saying he hadn't experienced salvation; he simply didn't have a meaningful connection to a living Lord through his own intimate fellowship. The walk, what little existed, wasn't personal. Reading between his worry lines, I could hear his confession: "Mark, I don't really have my own beliefs. I just have yours, and you're not here. I don't know how I'm going to get through this. Your Jesus didn't come to college with me."

At first, I wondered whether this young man needed some instruction in apologetics to inform his answers in an ungodly environment. The more he talked, and the more I thought about it, I concluded he needed something else, something deeper than quick answers from a book or enrollment in a discipleship course. He needed his own Jesus, his own nurtured, daily fellowship with the one true God. He wasn't cultivating his own faith, much less living off of it.

## Learning a Few Lessons

Recently, I've been learning some hard lessons. First, I can't forge spiritual transformation or growth. I'm not the Holy Spirit. I can teach biblical truths and try to reach people through song, but I can't make someone listen or even care—let alone change. My responsibility is to tell the truth in love as God grants the opportunity.

Second, many of us believers, even longtime members of the body of Christ, have genuine *faith* but parasitic *practices*. Sometimes our only experiences with God have trickled down secondhand from the lives of more mature believers. What we know of an authentic walk with God actually belongs to someone else—it isn't grounded in our own experience of God.

This book was generated as I asked myself—as I now ask you—some difficult questions. Is your walk with Jesus Christ characterized by personal faith, personal prayer, personal study, and personal disciplines? Or do you get by with the overflow from more mature Christians?

Do you have your own Jesus?

Perhaps reading these words makes you uncomfortable. The notion sounds almost heretical.

## WHY WE NEED OUR OWN JESUS

### *Your own Jesus.*

Yet the longer I walk with and serve Jesus in the local church, the more crucial the question seems. Every believer must have his or her own Jesus, for Jesus is the only way to salvation, peace, and contentment, both in this world and the next.

It sounds weird. It sounds like I'm insisting you find your own way, as though there are as many versions of Jesus out there as there are people. In fact, there is only one—and he is the only true way (John 14:6), and he is the same yesterday and today and forever (Hebrews 13:8). What has multiplied is the number of fragmented, faulty, *human-generated* Jesus versions.

This is precisely why you must have your own Jesus—your own personal walk with the one true Jesus.

Everything in life stems from our walk with God. We need our own, everyday, walking-around friendship with God. Just him. I'm using "your own Jesus" to convey just how much God insists on the personal.

Your pastor can pour into you. Your small group leader can pour into you. Your favorite band can pour into you. All of these folks are terrific, and they'll encourage you in your walk with Jesus—but you will have nothing more than empty religion until you develop your own friendship with the Lord. You can learn from others, but they can't live your life for you.

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You must pursue Christ for yourself. You must find your own Jesus.

*The Jesus.*

### Finding the Rhythm of God's Heartbeat

The apostle Paul writes in his letter to the Ephesians, “There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (4:4–6).

If we stop reading there, however, we miss a key component. The next verse clues us into the truth that Jesus, the “one God” to whom Paul refers, must be ours in a personal way: “But grace was given to *each one of us* according to the measure of Christ’s gift” (Ephesians 4:7, emphasis mine). The passage’s context speaks to the uniqueness of each believer as God apportions spiritual gifts for the benefit of the church. God made you unique because he wants a fellowship that is uniquely for the two of you—Jesus and you.

But how do we maintain a fellowship with God that makes us his voice, his arms and feet and hands?

The question contains the answer. Fellowship. Communion with God. The personal disciplines of Bible

## WHY WE NEED OUR OWN JESUS

study, prayer, obedience, and practicing the presence of the Holy Spirit. There are no shortcuts.

Yet this book is about more than reinforcing essential spiritual disciplines. I want us to avoid something that will short-circuit our time with God. I want to help us learn to recognize and overcome the seemingly incessant opportunities for compromise, great and small, that neutralize so many believers.

Compromise is the assassin of fellowship with God. We'll learn how to spot potential compromise and, through growth in the Lord, wade through the muck and emerge resembling Jesus rather than feeling so guilty and hopeless.

All of it is designed to inspire us to find the rhythm of God's heartbeat, to obey God's bidding even in the simplest of matters, and to submit to a Lord who died for us and asks us to live for him. I can think of no more important subject for the church today, because *as go the individual walks of believers, so goes the body of Christ*.

I'm so passionate about this subject that I urge you to visit [www.castingcrowns.com](http://www.castingcrowns.com), select "Blogs," and click on "Mark Hall's Blog." Take some time in the coming days to supplement your reading of this book with a series of videos titled "Crowns' Camp." They touch on many of this book's themes.

And as we're told in John 15:5, Jesus is the vine, and

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we are the branches. He grafted us in, each branch a unique part of the growing vine. It has to be individual. It has to be real. It has to be personally cultivated. You have to be able to call Jesus your own.

CHAPTER 1

EXPLAINING  
THE WIND

*East to West*

*I can't live by what I feel  
But by the truth your Word reveals  
I'm not holding on to you  
But you're holding on to me*



THE GUN FELT AS COLD AS DECEMBER IN MY hand. I could see my friend ordering a cone in the yogurt store while I sat alone in his car with a lonely heart, my dark thoughts, and his gun.

She had dumped me. The holiday season in my hometown of Montgomery, Alabama, thickened my misery. My girlfriend enjoyed the ring my nineteen-year-old heart had given her for Christmas and celebrated by dumping me. (In her defense, she is now a wonderful Christian woman and godly mother.) To this day, I have never felt lower than I did during that holly, jolly Christmas.

I stared at my buddy in the store but really didn't

see him. I thought about the girl. And then I thought about the gun.

## Scarred Hands

I had accepted Jesus into my heart ten years earlier at Eastdale Baptist Church's Vacation Bible School (VBS). That summer, a caravan of trucks paraded through my neighborhood while kids handed out candy and balloons, yelling, "Come to Vacation Bible School! Come to Vacation Bible School!"

Since the kids looked like they'd come from a fun factory, I talked my parents into letting me go. When VBS ended, this church did something more churches need to do—they followed up. Someone came to my house and thanked my parents for taking me to VBS. Mom and Dad visited the church the following Sunday.

The death of Jeff Money, a buddy I played with when I visited my grandparents' home, further softened my parents' hearts. When he drowned in the city swimming pool, it rocked my family. My parents' eyes were opened when they saw the Money family demonstrate incredible faith in Jesus after their boy's death.

James Blakeney, Eastdale's minister of music, led my thirty-three-year-old dad to the Lord, and Dad jumped

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into faith with abandon. Attending church became the glue to our week. Dad did construction work for the church and helped people move furniture. He joined the choir, even though he'd never really sung before. He grew as a vocalist and invited his nervous son onstage with him—he's the reason I'm a singer today.

As a nine-year-old, I listened to Pastor Wayne Burns preach about my need to be forgiven of my sins. His words cut straight to my heart. I saw other people go forward to pray and get baptized. It was all laid out in front of me, and I thought on it. Then one Sunday morning, I realized, "I need this. I need Jesus in my heart." I asked Jesus to forgive me of my sins and take over my life.

At that moment, Jesus, my own Savior, removed my sins from me as far as the east is from the west (Psalm 103:12)—from one scarred hand to the other.

### The Dumbest Thought

A decade later, I still didn't grasp the truth that my sin had been erased. I just knew the same heart that had Jesus in it still hurt like never before. I had spent two years in a dating relationship building my life around a girl. I learned what happens when you build your life

around a person and then the person leaves: you don't have a life anymore.

In that yogurt store parking lot, I thought about ending it all. I didn't think I had much of a life to end. I'd considered suicide before, but when my buddy showed off his pistol, something happened inside of me. When he left me alone in his car, death became a real possibility. I didn't understand it then, but spiritual warfare had descended.

Satan hissed at me. *Do it. Do it.* He clenched his teeth and urged me on. *Get it over with.*

I sat there holding the gun, listening to that still wrong voice. My fingers curled around the cold metal grip.

And then I had the dumbest thought.

The dumbest thought that opened my heart to understanding forgiveness. The dumbest thought that propelled me into ministry, marriage to the girl of my dreams, and a music career.

The dumbest thought that saved my life.

## The White Monster

Growing up, I loved horror movies. I begged my parents to let me stay up and watch scary movies into the

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wee hours. At the time, Hollywood offered movies like *Alien* and *Friday the 13th*, but my parents didn't let me know those even existed. To me, a horror movie meant a black-and-white Frankenstein flick or Bela Lugosi playing Dracula.

During commercial breaks in those late-night monster fests, Dad would dispatch me on suddenly urgent errands. He would concoct a strange need, something intended to test me—and amuse him.

“Son,” he'd begin seriously, his face illuminated by the flickering television set in our darkened family room, “go to the storage shed in the backyard and get me a screwdriver.”

I arched one eyebrow. “What? It's midnight!”

Dad just looked at me, so out I trudged to the toolshed behind our home. The southern Alabama night enfolded our yard like a vampire's cloak, and my feet felt cold in the dew-soaked grass. I tried not to let my imagination run wild, but I was secretly glad that at least I'd have a screwdriver for a weapon on the trip back to the house.

As I fumbled around with twitchy fingers to find the screwdriver, the hairs on the back of my neck began to stand at attention. Did I mention our shed didn't have a light?

On my way back to the house, my dogs went bal-

listic. I *knew* they weren't barking at me. One second, my loving little wiener dogs were nipping at my feet, and the next they went Cujo on some unseen danger. I almost needed fresh pajamas.

Just before I panicked, my dad appeared at the back door and flipped on the porch light. There, just a few yards ahead of me, I caught a glimpse of a menacing white creature with a long tail as it hissed at my little dachshunds. My parents hadn't let me see *Halloween*, but somehow I could hear the theme music playing.

To fathom my confusion in the ensuing seconds, you have to understand I had never laid eyes on a live possum. I had seen dead possums decaying along the highway, but breezing past roadkill at fifty-five miles per hour doesn't do the little boogers justice.

They're stone-cold killers, man.

When you don't understand something new, your brain compensates—otherwise, it would just explode on the spot and ooze out your ears. For instance, if you'd never seen a horse before, you might say, "That's the biggest dog I've ever seen."

At that terrible midnight moment in the backyard, I knew I was looking at the world's biggest rat. Enormously big. It-might-eat-me-in-one-bite big.

The possum was albino. He had white fur and pink-rimmed bluish eyes that reflected the porch light. His

## EXPLAINING THE WIND

lips were so pink they looked almost red. I tried to stay calm, but then I saw its teeth. They were enormous. They looked like rows of white needles. I can still see the beast in my mind, crouched, back arched, teeth ready to rend. Every late-night scary movie I'd ever seen was condensed into a single hellish furball.

What happened next came close to scarring me for life. Dad hustled over, grabbed a shovel from the shed, and ... bong! He knocked the possum cold and proceeded to chop it to bits right in front of me. Then he calmly put the shovel back in the shed, walked past me without a word, and went inside to watch the rest of the movie.

I didn't need horror movies—Dr. Frankenstein lived just down the hall.

My chest heaved as I scurried back to the living room. I folded my hands in my lap and stared at the television. The monsters on the screen seemed like kid's play compared to what I had just witnessed.

Dad peeked over at me and smiled. He explained that he had just killed a possum—something that was more of a pest than a threat. His calming words went in one ear and out the other. My rapid-fire heartbeat convinced me that I had just seen a monster, no matter what Dad told me.

## Flawed Logic

It took a while to process the possum sighting, but years later, I realized I had had a typical reaction. My brain operated like anyone else's when confronted by something new and shocking: logic kicked in.

We take the same approach with the Bible, and especially with forgiveness. We hold forgiveness up to the light, inspect it from every conceivable angle, shake it, thump it, and bring it to our ear to see if it's ever going to say something back to us. Then we decide it's too good to be true. We let our logic elbow faith out of the way.

After all, God-sized forgiveness doesn't compute. It just makes sense that God will give up on us sooner or later.

Understanding and truly accepting God's forgiveness is the incubator to a meaningful walk with Jesus. As we escape the dregs of compromise to walk in purity and obedience, we are free to grow on God's timetable if we ignore the lies of the unholy world. And only by avoiding faulty human logic can we give our lives over to the seeming risk of a God who is actually unable to be anything but faithful.

Everything we will ever be or ever have in our walks with our own Jesus hinges on this simple truth. It is a truth comprised of one word and yet all of eternity.

## EXPLAINING THE WIND

### F-A-I-T-H.

You'll have to take God at his word before your outlook and your walk breathe life. The New Testament Greek for the word *believe* is *pisteuo*—as in John 3:16: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever *pisteuos* in him should not perish but have eternal life.” The word *pisteuo* means “trust” and carries with it the connotation of placing all of your weight on something.

When you sat down to read this book, you *pisteued* probably either in a chair or a bed. You trusted in it to bear your weight, hold you up, and not drop you.

Do you have *pisteuo* faith, the kind in which you place all of your weight on Jesus for now and eternity? It is the only faith able to open the doors of heaven and unlock your eternal destiny. But it requires leaning on Jesus and carrying on a daily fellowship with him that can't help but uplift him and change you. It has to be personal. God insists on it.

I say this with confidence because we can't mature in Christ until we understand we are positioned *in* Christ. Read the letter to the Ephesians and notice how many times it asserts that our position is in Christ. This truth deepens our understanding of Romans 8:1: “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are *in* Christ Jesus” (emphasis added).

We can either believe what our Father tells us and grow or listen to the Lie and die. The Lie comes from Satan, who burdens us with guilt and shame. But let's start fresh. Let's ditch the Lie and believe the assurances of our loving Father.

The Bible says we are forgiven. It says we are saints. It says we are children of God, citizens of heaven, members of God's family, and chosen members of a royal priesthood. It says we are salt and light, we are people who dwell in a city set on a hill. It says we are co-heirs with Christ, ready to inherit the eternal life reserved for the saints. We cannot be separated from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus.

As believers, sometimes we feel such basic truths are below us. Shouldn't we be discoursing on God's sovereignty or immutability or debating predestination and our millennial views? Forgiveness and trust are for beginners—they're for the VBS kids handing out candy from the back of a truck.

Yet when your world is crashing around you, what are you really wrestling with? In tough times you ask, "Can I really trust God with this situation? Am I being punished for all the bad stuff I've done? Is God really going to forgive me? Is my sin really gone?"

Logic says one thing, but God says another.

## Inexplicable Favor

God's forgiveness is without precedence. When I forgive someone, what that person did to me seems always to hover in the back of my mind. I can't help but make decisions based on my memory of what happened. How can God, whose memory is perfect, be any different? We assume there's no way God can forgive without condition and without end.

But that's human logic. If we're uncertain about what God says in his Word, we'll think, "I'm not really sure what God's love is, but this is what my dad's love is like, so that must be what God's love is like." Or, "Since forgiveness looks like this at work or at school, this must be how God forgives."

Sometimes that logic is fine—you can live the rest of your life thinking that possums are rats—but mistaken notions about forgiveness can shatter lives.

We live as if we believe that God follows human logic. Three strikes, and you're out. You get written up so many times, and you're fired. You get so many reprimands, and you're suspended. You get too many speeding tickets, and you lose your license. You break these vows, and your spouse leaves you.

You commit this sin too many times, and God is going to leave you too. It just makes sense.

This logic originates with our false belief that we did something to make God love us in the first place. We think we're so lovable that God can't help but love us. But really the opposite is true. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. God cared for us before we were even born!

When we understand that our relationship with God is something he starts, maintains, and completes (Philippians 1:6), we can begin to accept the truth that God's forgiveness is forever. As Psalm 103:11–12 assure us,

For as high as the heavens are above the  
earth,  
so great is his steadfast love toward those  
who fear him;  
as far as the east is from the west,  
so far does he remove our transgressions  
from us.

During my junior year of high school, Mr. Short taught my church small group. I liked him because he was different. He wasn't the polished, tie-wearing, churchy, old-school guy I had come to expect. He was

## EXPLAINING THE WIND

raw in his approach, more direct. He would hit us with statements and make us think. His class was the Baptist version of *Dead Poets Society*. Mr. Short wouldn't allow us to give Sunday school answers but tried to cut through our little churchy shells. He refused to let us fake it. He wanted us to know why we believed what we believed.

One day, Mr. Short explained God's forgiveness by using Psalm 103 in a way I will always remember: "There is a reason God used the east and west to describe how far he cast your sin from you," he said. "If you go north, you can only go north so far until you're finally going south. And you can only go south so far until you're going north. But if you start traveling east, it keeps going east forever, and west just keeps going west. If you think about it, you're never going to go so far west that you're going east. That's how far he cast our sin from us."

### It Is Finished

God says he drops our sins into his sea of forgetfulness (Isaiah 43:25; Micah 7:19). Sometimes we believers struggle on that sea, riding its swells and billows to the point of sickness as we base our worth and identity

on worldly pursuits and opinions. No one else forgets our sin. A sea of forgetfulness doesn't make sense when everyone else is ready to throw us into a mud puddle of remembrance. The world continually reminds us of our failure and rubs our noses in it.

The most liberating truth in all of Scripture is that *we are liberated*. God is not a God bound by human logic. God is not like our spouse or coworker. God is not like our teacher, friend, or significant other. When God says he forgives us, he is speaking the truth because *he* is truth (1 Thessalonians 2:13; Titus 1:2). When God says he forgives, he isn't talking about a sappy, sentimental moment in which we talked him into being good to us. He is referring to a sovereign decree of his will to extend grace to an undeserving person.

He did this by killing his Son.

This is a blunt statement, but it's true. John 3:16 states that God *gave* his Son. At the same time, Jesus, who is God, laid down his life (John 10:17–18). Why? So he could offer us the truth of 2 Corinthians 5:21: “For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (NKJV).

Jesus became sin for us. Gnaw on that one. That's how serious God is about forgiveness.

With no equivocation, God says, “I am choosing not

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to count your sin against you anymore—not because you’re a good person or because you’re doing more good than bad—but because my Son paid the debt for your sin. *Tetelestai*—it is finished (John 19:30). Transaction complete. All you have to do is believe me and give me your whole life, and I’ll place your sin upon my Son and credit his righteousness to you.

“I’m doing every bit of this. You’re doing nothing. Even the faith you demonstrate will be my gift to you. Now live as though your sin is gone—because it is. As far as the east is from the west.”

### Every Crevice

Every human being since Adam and Eve has sinned. Each of us is a sinner, enslaved to the sinful nature within us. This is why Jesus told Nicodemus he must be “born again” (John 3:3). Our lone hope is to be made new through spiritual rebirth in Jesus, and the only way to produce fruit afterward is to live as though we believe God did what he said he did.

We will never understand these truths fully—that’s why faith is required. Even Nicodemus, steeped in the laws and traditions of Israel, struggled with the notion. Jesus smiled at him on a breezy Jerusalem night and

said, “Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit” (John 3:7–8).

It’s OK not to see the wind; it’s enough to know that God makes it blow.

The next time you find yourself saying, “Well, surely God will do this,” or, “There’s no way God would do that,” ask yourself if Scripture backs you up or if you’re creating theology based on human logic. God’s character is revealed to us only after the Holy Spirit quickens us through his living Word. He speaks truth into every crevice of our lives and holds us accountable (Hebrews 4:13).

With unyielding and unflinching love, God insists we change our lives and draw ever closer. God invites us past the personal to the intimate. God invites us to be Christlike.

We’ll never be able to explain how our sins are removed from us as far as the east is from the west. But each day we *are* able to accept God’s forgiveness in faith. Accepting God’s forgiveness means appreciating it and living in a way that shows we appreciate it. It means being willing to forgive ourselves (John 4; 8:1–12) and to forgive others (Matthew 6:14–15).