

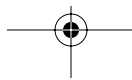
INTRODUCTION

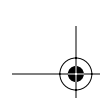


What images come to mind when I say “Jesus”? Religious icon, mystical guru, sandaled sage? Maybe he’s the figure in the stained-glass window at church, or in the painting hanging in the hallway of your grandmother’s house. Or perhaps he’s the living, breathing Son of God and Son of Man who captivates us with his teaching, embraces us with his love and disarms us with his grace.

I was twenty-three years old when Jesus and faith became real to me. My journey toward God had been a bumpy one. I attended church and youth groups growing up, but I did not connect deeply with God in any real way. Some weeks I felt close to him. But most of the time, especially in college, I only dabbled in spirituality. A church service here, a campus meeting there and an occasional meaningful conversation along the way. Like many, I knew there was something about “the God thing” that was important, but over time I withdrew from formal religious activities.

I had read about Jesus, heard sermons on his life, prayed prayers “in Jesus’ name” and even tried to convince a college roommate that Jesus was a historical figure. There was only one problem—I had never encountered Jesus up close and personal. Perhaps I had never taken time to get to know him, perhaps I was not ready to meet him, or maybe I was too intoxicated with myself to allow anyone into my life, especially Jesus. In any case, for years I was a distant observer,





peering over the fence at him like baseball fans watching their favorite teams during spring training. Unlike those fans, though, I didn't even try to get close enough for a photo or an autograph. After all, what had I done to deserve attention from such a celebrity?

Then I encountered Jesus. And he rocked my world.

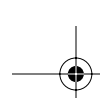
For twenty-three years I had been like Zacchaeus in the Bible, watching Jesus from the branches of a sycamore tree. And then, just like in the story, he called my name: "Bill! Bill Donahue! Come down here. I want to hang out with you today!" I leapt from the tree and began a journey in the company of Jesus and those who follow his ways.

Along the way I have discovered that you do not have just one encounter with Jesus. Each time you meet him the encounter is fresh and engaging. It adds texture and color to the relationship. You are unnerved by what he says, startled by what he does and confused by who he seems to be. On some occasions you feel you have much in common with this man from Galilee, yet moments later you are overwhelmed by his greatness and feel grateful to simply stand in the shadow of his robe.

However you view Jesus, he is certainly the most controversial figure ever to enter human history. More has been written about his life and more songs sung about him than about any other figure. Most people, especially in America, know something about Jesus—from a Sunday school teacher, a movie, a friend, a family member. But relatively few of us have ever encountered him. When we do, our image of him changes.

Have you ever seen a man speaking from a platform, stylishly dressed, articulate and professional, holding an audience in the palm of his hand? Then three days later you see that same man at a grocery store wearing a sweatsuit, chugging down a power drink after a long jog. You hardly recognize him. You first encountered him





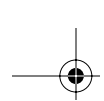
larger than life, an important and admirable figure hovering above the lives of ordinary people. Now at the checkout counter, with perspiration dripping from his forehead, he's just Bob—a regular guy like you and me.

I remember growing up watching Jimmy Stewart in movies like *It's a Wonderful Life* and thinking, *Wow, what an amazing actor!* A few years later I attended Princeton University, about forty years after Stewart himself was there. Every spring, alumni would return and parade through town and across campus. Each class wore a costume incorporating the school's colors—orange and black—and images of our tiger mascot. The older the alumni, the more conservative their costumes (though it's difficult to look distinguished wearing orange and black). The year that Jimmy Stewart returned to march with his class, the crowds were larger as the town turned out for a look at this impressive celebrity.

There he was, looking much like the rest of his classmates. A gray-haired man in his sixties, no Hollywood makeup or special lighting, wearing an orange-and-black-checkered blazer and a pair of khakis. There was something disarmingly simple and warm about him. He laughed and smiled, waved to onlookers and chatted with friends. No fanfare or pretense—he was just a normal guy. Suddenly I had a different view of Jimmy Stewart. This was a different person than I had seen on the silver screen. Oh, there was still something magical about his presence, but now he seemed like a real person, a flesh-and-blood human being. This encounter added texture and meaning to a personality I had long admired.

Many people think they know Jesus. Some admire him; some turn away at the mere mention of his name. But few have truly taken the time to sit in his company and bask in his presence. When they do, everything changes. Suddenly they are riveted by his words and over-





whelmed by his actions. Whether they embrace him or reject him, all are affected by him.

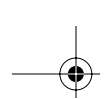
This book is not a history of Jesus or a theological treatise on his roles as Prophet, Priest and King. It is not even an explanation of his various titles—Master, Lord, Savior, Creator. So much has been written in these areas that I doubt whether I could add anything of substance.

My purpose is to reveal Jesus as we encounter him in the stories of the Bible—on walks, at dinner, in the marketplace, on a hillside. I never cease to be amazed at these encounters, these moments in the company of Jesus and in the company of those who follow him. But I would like to take us further—beyond the text. It is one thing to study Jesus and pray to him and worship him. It is another to simply be with him in the context of his life and work. And that is where I'd like to take us—into the company of Jesus where we can engage him in the moment. We will meet him as teacher and friend, as lover and forgiver. We will encounter him as leader and conqueror, as healer and revealer.

As I spend time in the company of Jesus I find myself confronted with his words and inspired by his actions. I think you will also. And these encounters will create a longing to know Jesus better, to move beyond first impressions toward deeper relationship and understanding. The material in this book is a starting point on the journey to an endless stream of conversations and moments with the Son of God.

Each time I cross paths with Jesus in my life or across the pages of the Gospels or at work in others, I am called to respond. I feel compelled to answer the question, "What shall I do with Jesus?" Religious elites and political leaders of his day would have answered that question one way. Eager followers could have answered yet another. And the marginalized members of society—the weak, powerless and bro-





ken—still another. But the real question for each of us today is, “What will *we* do with Jesus?”

The question is as viable for the committed Christ-follower as it is for the spiritual seeker or the unimpressionable cynic. How do I respond to this unique person in history? Much of our response depends on where and how our path crosses his.

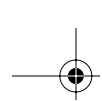
To help you along the journey and to maximize your interactions with this unique person, the book is structured to encourage daily readings. It is designed to promote deeper engagement and reflection. At the end of each section there will be an opportunity to process what you have just read. Three prompts will guide you here: “Personal Response,” “Dialogue with God” and “Further Bible Reading.”

In the “Personal Response” portion you will find a few provocative questions to chew on. This section is ideal for personal reflection and journal writing. I find it important to ask myself some hard or probing questions about what I am learning in my relationship with God, particularly with Jesus. This will start you down that path.

Next you will find a brief paragraph called “Dialogue with God.” These prayers reflect some of what I feel (or have felt) in my relationship with Jesus based on how I have encountered him. They are designed to be personal—prayers you might find yourself praying. I do not intend to pray in your place or assume your thoughts. But I believe these words reflect the ideas and emotions we all experience as we encounter Jesus. Some will sound like the thoughts of a skeptic and others will reflect a deeper faith; all are expressions of real anger, joy, sadness, hope and sometimes plain confusion. For some of you, these prayers will be a starting point for further dialogue with God. Others among you may find them difficult or new. Take a risk and try praying them yourself, or put them into your own words.

Below the “Dialogue with God” prayer you’ll see a suggestion for





further Bible reading. If the verses used in a particular section create a hunger to know more about Jesus and his ways, then this reading will help. Most are Gospel passages from the life of Christ; a few come from other places in the Bible.

For those of you in small groups, another way to experience God while reading this book is to use the companion Jesus 101 study guides. Each kind of encounter with Jesus (as provocative teacher, sacred friend and so on) is expanded on in a study guide designed for a more engaging small group format. You can read a section of the book and then delve more deeply into the study guide. The eight study guides parallel the eight chapters of this book, and each guide is divided into six sessions of small group material. The guides can be used separately or in conjunction with *In the Company of Jesus*, whatever best serves your group.

So, what comes to mind when I say “Jesus”? Your answer to that question at the end of this book will be much different than it is now. At least that is my hope. Join me in a journey through these pages, a chronicle of small but often profound encounters with the God-Man, the most amazing, disarming and sometimes controversial person ever to breathe our air or walk our roads.

Come. Let's spend some time in the company of Jesus.

