

## From Rescued to Rescuer

JIM RAYBURN, THE FOUNDER OF YOUNG LIFE, a nationwide youth ministry, used to say, “It’s a sin to bore a kid with the gospel.” But what about adults? Is it okay to bore grownups with the gospel?

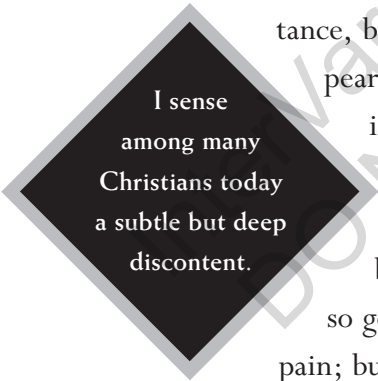
I ask the question because I sense among many Christians today a subtle but deep discontent. I don’t think they would call it boredom because that sounds too flippant, but I do sense a powerful but largely unspoken sense of disappointment in the way their Christian life is turning out. And not because of failure, either. On the contrary, they are successful dads, passionate and gifted moms, accomplished professionals, mature friends, winsome small-group leaders, respected elders, diligent students, and loving neighbors. They are good people and earnest followers of Jesus.

But at the end of the day we thought our Christian life would be more than this—somehow larger, more significant, more vivid, more glorious. But it’s not. Driving to church on Sunday

feels a bit like *Groundhog Day*, the movie where Bill Murray's character is forced to pathetically relive exactly the same day over and over again.

There is nothing wrong with the day we Christians are reliving; it's just the same, mostly harmless routine of errands and pleasant exchanges. Our distracted gaze into the distance is occasionally interrupted by a nice hello, a small chore or a really happy worship song, but then our minds slip back into the muted monotony of our perfectly fine Christian day—and we feel vaguely discontent.

It had seemed like following Christ was supposed to be a bold adventure of power and beauty and singular importance, but the reality that keeps emerging appears to be something very different. And in very deep ways, it's disappointing.



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On the other hand, it doesn't feel right to complain, either. God has been so kind to us and our life is really so good. We have our own experiences of pain; but in a world of suffering, destruction, tragedy and disastrous dysfunction—we have been spared of and privileged with so much. So what if we're a little bored. Indeed, on most days, a little gratefulness, good cheer and routine busyness seem adequate to drive away the blues.

But then, with a relentlessness and increased frequency, the ennui returns. In fact, it begins to work its way into a good part

of the larger congregation. Indeed, among many churches a familiar pattern begins to emerge. There is a thrilling experience of planting a new church, an engaging struggle through rapid growth, a creative proliferation of ministries meeting every conceivable need, an updating of facilities, excellence in worship music and programming, and a cycling through each of the latest improvements to ministry. And then, eventually, there comes a gathering discontent and a quiet, inner disappointment. Leaders look up and find themselves somehow stuck in the same routine of mediocre niceness that never seems to get near the radical drama, adventure, desperate passion and glorious power depicted in the Scriptures. Earnest, gifted, mature Christians—we feel like we are all dressed up with nowhere to go. We are left wading in the placid beach waves as the ship of adventure with Christ seems to head off to sea without us.

### **NOW WHAT?**

Indeed, there comes a time in the life of every believer and of every church where a voice inside us simply asks, *Now what?*

After we have been introduced to Jesus and have found peace with God through him. After we have been following Christ and have gradually been surrendering the compartments of our life to him. After we have asked him to redeem our past, to heal our wounds, to reconcile our marriages and safeguard our children. After we have asked him to purify our thought life, to sanctify our ambitions, to soften our hearts, to comfort us in tragedy, to

lead us in wisdom through confusion at work, at home, and in our hearts. After he has filled our minds with the Scriptures, and taught us his Word, his songs, his ways and his love for us.

After all of that, there is a voice that remains and simply asks, *Now what?*

This is, I believe, a voice of divine restlessness. This is a voice of sacred discontent. This is the voice of a holy yearning for more. This is the moment in which we can see that all the work that God has been doing in our lives and in the life of the church is not an end in itself; rather, the work he has been doing in us is a powerful means to a grander purpose beyond ourselves.

This is the supernatural moment when the rescued enter into their divine destiny as rescuers.

This is the critical transition—when we who have been rescued by Christ come to understand that our rescue has not been simply for ourselves but for an even more exalted purpose. Indeed our own rescue is God's plan for rescuing the world that he loves.

## FOR WHAT?

For Christians the question *Now what?* finds its answer in the question *For what?*

For what purpose have we been rescued and redeemed? In order to know what is supposed to come next, we must have a clear understanding of the ultimate destination of our spiritual journey.

If we believe, for example, that our own rescue, redemption and sanctification in Christ is itself the ultimate destination, then the answer to the *Now what?* question is—well, nothing. Welcome to *Groundhog Day*.

But this doesn't seem satisfying does it?

In the same way that it seems fundamentally unsatisfying to make elaborate and exhausting preparations for a trip we never take. Or to sweat all season on the practice field but never actually get to play in the game. Or to plan a gourmet meal, gather the ingredients, select the spices, and slice and dice for a meal we never actually cook. Indeed, the idea that there is nothing beyond our personal spiritual development isn't meant to be satisfying—for our rescue is not the ultimate destination; it is the indispensable means by which God works out his plan to rescue the world.

### THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

In the Bible, Jesus is continually calling his disciples to look beyond their own meager aspirations and grasp the greatness of their calling. This is always hard for them to do, but Jesus keeps trying. In one of the New Testament's most famous passages Jesus asks the disciples to look beyond their own shrunken and mediocre ambition and embrace who God has made them to be:

You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to

everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:14-16)

“You are the light of the world.”

According to Jesus, we are it. *You* are it. The world is a dark and hurting place, and the Creator of the universe has one plan to bring light to it—and through Christ, we are that plan. Jesus is telling us that we have been rescued out of the darkness so that we can be the light of the world.

Look at the apostle Paul’s words on this theme from 2 Corinthians:

If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. (2 Corinthians 5:17-20)

Frankly, this seems like a lot to swallow. Truth be told, sometimes I’d really just rather have some light in my little world than be the light of the world. I’d settle for some more modest ambition, like being a pillar in the church or the talk of the town or maybe the ABC *World News* “Person of the Week.” But Jesus calls us to more. God calls us to make the transition from being

those who have been rescued from the world, to those through whom God is literally rescuing the world.

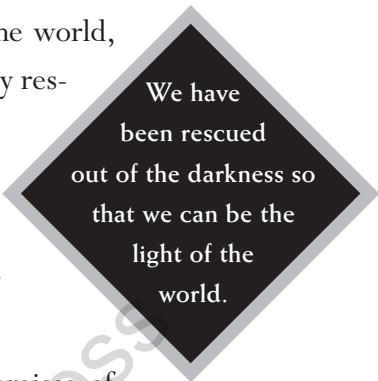
As C. S. Lewis has written in *The Weight of Glory*, it's not that we have too much ambition for ourselves; it's that we don't have nearly enough.

If we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.

Given the grand and plain calling of Scripture to a bold, glorious struggle for rescue in the world, why do so many of us tend to miss the larger calling and settle for so little?

I think there are basically three reasons.

**Ignorance.** First, many of us simply are not aware of the massive, urgent need for rescue in the world. We have been isolated so long in our suburban Christian cul-de-sac that we tend to imagine most people live like us. We know life has struggles, but we figure most go about their days like we do: keeping our kids healthy and safe, advancing in our jobs, tidying our yards, enjoy-



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ing the holidays, hanging out with friends. Indeed, many Western Christians simply have no idea what an utter, desperate disaster is taking place twenty-four hours a day around our world. They have no vivid picture of what life is like for hundreds of millions of people in our world who live in crushing, spiritual darkness, humiliation and despair. They just don't realize that there are millions of people crying out every day to be rescued from aching, urgent hunger; from degrading and hopeless poverty; from the ravages of painful disease; from torture, slavery, rape and abuse. The vast abundance and isolation on the Disneyland island of the world's affluent communities means that many Western Christians miss God's great calling to a life of heroic rescue simply because they are largely oblivious to the need. They just can't imagine that there could really be any great heroic struggle that would need their help.

*Despair.* For some other Western Christians, however, lack of information doesn't seem to be the problem. It's not that they don't know enough; rather, they know too much. They know that our world is a rolling disaster of human suffering. They see the images on the news and the Internet. They hear stories and statistics on the radio and among their friends. Their problem is they have no idea what they could actually do about it.

Here the problem is not obliviousness but the paralysis of despair. Sure, maybe God wants to use me for a few doable errands of kindness in my neighborhood, but what could God possibly do with me to rescue a world from the massive hell of human suffer-

ing that lies beyond? Accordingly, when we read that Jesus calls us “the light of the world,” we picture ourselves more as a nice nightlight that will comfort the kids and keep us from stubbing our toe on the way to the bathroom than as a brilliant light saber that is heroically contending with the great evil of the world and driving out deep swathes of darkness. As a result, in a world crying out for rescue, we miss our larger calling from God and set for ourselves “appropriate” and more modest goals for serving his kingdom. We may even retreat backward into obliviousness because, after all, who can keep staring at horrible things you can’t do anything about? Moreover, there is always great work that needs doing right here in our own cul-de-sac, right?

Consequently, while a world (and God) waits, groaning, for the people of God to bring hope, love, service and divine rescue, so many Western Christians miss their anointed work of truly glorious rescue because they are oblivious to the dramatic, urgent need, or they are paralyzed by hopeless despair.

**Fear.** But again I don’t think this fully explains why so many of us miss the very calling for which we most deeply yearn, and why we find ourselves trapped, instead, in a cul-de-sac we don’t want to be in. I sense there is a third obstacle that is deeper and more fundamental, and that simply is the problem of fear.

The world of disastrous human suffering is scary, and for very understandable reasons we are afraid. We actually know *a lot* about human suffering and need. We probably don’t know enough, but who doesn’t know that massive numbers of people

in our world are desperately hurting? And truth be told, we actually *know* we probably could make a difference. We can't make a difference everywhere about everything. But we know there are people who really do make a significant and heroic difference in our world, and there is probably no reason why, in theory, we could not do so as well. So when we peel it down to the honest core of the issue, what many of us find is fear. We're scared—scared of lots of different things. In fact, we are scared of many things *already*—and we aren't even trying to rescue the world.

If we answer God's call to be the light of the world in the midst of great darkness and sign up to be the means by which Jesus is seeking to rescue the world—honestly, that simply feels intimidating. It sounds uncomfortable, scary, frustrating, exhausting and probably dangerous—and worst of all, it's unknown and out of our control. This is not why we went to college, bought a nice house in a good neighborhood, put seat belts on our kids and locked our doors at night. I did these things to *stay out* of the darkness, not to move toward it.

### THE DILEMMA

So there it is. The heart of the dilemma. It seems we cannot rid ourselves of this primal, unquenchable yearning to make our lives matter. By divine hardwiring, we desperately want our lives to count—really, significantly count—for God's rescuing work in the world. And nothing else fills up the void. (We've tried.) On the other hand, we're really uncomfortable about where such

an adventure might lead. While nodding affirmations in Jesus' direction as he beckons, we cannot get our feet to actually move. We desperately, deeply want something—but our heart faints in the attempt to get it.

Indeed, how do I actually live with bravery, love and significance? And how do I lead others in that path? We have all had moments and glimpses of our own courage. We've all been brave when we needed to be. The question is, how can we live more like that? In fact, how can we live like that so consistently that it becomes who we actually are?

What are we to do? I believe Jesus is eager to show us the way. In fact, I think Jesus is offering this generation a very fresh and powerful pathway to courage. And that surprising pathway is what we will look at next.