



JR. Forasteros, author of *Empathy for the Devil: Finding Ourselves in the Villains of the Bible*

Available November 7, 2017

\$16, 224 pages, paperback
978-0-8308-4514-9

“JR’s ability to draw out truth with intelligence and relativity to the culture has impacted my life. No topic is too challenging for JR. to begin a conversation, asking questions which lead to further exploration of any subject, leading to a new perspective.”

— **Becky Brown**, Club New Life Coordinator, New Life Ministries

JR. Forasteros, Author of *Empathy for the Devil*

JR. Forasteros is the teaching pastor at Catalyst Community Church in Rowlett, Texas. He boasts a “killer beard” and is an active blogger and podcaster on the church and pop culture. “I learn stories. I critique stories,” JR. said. “And I’m always trying to find where God is working and join in.”

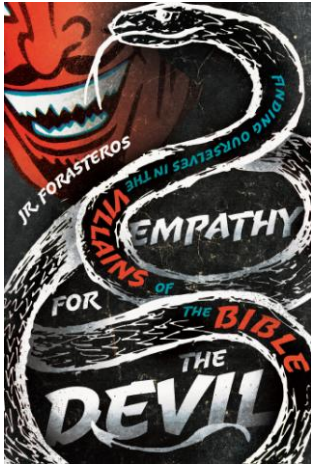
JR. has a master’s degree in religious studies, New Testament, and early Christianity from the University of Missouri–Columbia. Nevertheless, he says that he’s still making sense of Christianity. “If you’re anything like me, you’ve met Christians who are ugly, hateful people. You’ve been burned by people who claim to follow Jesus,” he said. “But I bet you’ve also met some incredibly kind, thoughtful and generous people who call themselves Christians, too. Me too. It’s a big mess, one I’m still learning to make sense of.”

JR. blogs at NorvilleRogers.com, where he reviews films and books, and is the cocreator and cohost of the *StoryMen* podcast.

Here are all the podcasts JR. cohosts:

- If you’re into geek culture history and theology, try the *StoryMen* podcast.
- If you like faith and philosophy, check out *Origami Elephants*.
- If you’re a horror movie fan, you need to listen to *Don’t Split Up!*
- If you love girl power and theology, *In All Things Charity* is for you.
- If you want to learn more about the Bible, the *Bible Bites Podcast* is Sunday School for the 21st century.

JR. lives in Dallas, Texas, with his wife, Amanda.



Empathy for the Devil: Finding Ourselves in the Villains of the Bible

Available November 7, 2017

\$16, 224 pages, paperback

978-0-8308-4514-9

“Empathy for the Devil is unlike anything you’ve ever read...The people in these pages are infamous for the worst things they ever thought and did. Plenty of us can probably relate to the fear of being remembered for our faults, what we got wrong. But beyond the darkness there is always a light to move toward. This book shows us the cost of selfish ambition and the choice we have to be protagonists in a story much larger than ourselves.”

— Clay Morgan, author of *Undead: Revived, Resuscitated & Reborn*

A Good Day to Be Bad

There’s no question we’re obsessed with villains right now. Antiheroes, reformed kingslayers, and outright bad guys rule the multiplex, the small screen, and the bookshelves. From *Gone Girl* to *Loki*, our villains insist that heroes aren’t really good, and antiheroes are worth rooting for. Broadway’s *Wicked* and Disney’s *Maleficent* invite us to revisit the old fairy tales to see if the wicked witches are as wicked as we thought. Even Superman has normalized killing, because *dark*, *edgy*, and *gritty* are the watchwords of the day.

Maybe it’s this generation of political corruption and religious sex scandals. Maybe it’s the information age, giving us access to more sides of more stories than we’ve ever had. Maybe it’s just good storytelling. But when the Joker is more interesting than the Dark Knight, it’s worth asking why. Why are we so obsessed with bad guys?

Because we want to understand. And to understand, we need to hear the other side of the story. We need to see the world from the bad guy’s point of view.

The technical term for the ability to understand another person’s position is *empathy*. Empathy is an essential human practice, particularly in a culture that is increasingly divided. Once upon a time, the person across the party line was a friend and fellow citizen with whom I disagreed. Now he is the enemy, a threat to my very livelihood; compromise with him seems impossible. Once upon a time, a person who disagreed with me theologically was still a sibling in Christ. Today we write a blog post or fire off a tweet dismissing her as a heretic who has no place in the wide stream of Christianity.

Empathy takes practice, so what better resource than the Scriptures? The Bible is filled with villains – people who have been depicted throughout history as irredeemably evil. They are the murderous brother, the evil queen, the femme fatale, the ultimate betrayer, the devil. We give these villains about as much thought as the number of verses they get – that is, not much. We don’t read them as real people but as monsters who exist only to threaten the heroes of our stories.

But the villains of the Bible were real people. They were born into sin as we all are; they were not more evil than the rest of us. I’m interested in the paths they walked. When Cain stood in that field, why did killing his brother seem like the best option he had? How could Delilah betray Samson? Why did Jezebel hate God’s prophets so much? How could Herod order the deaths of the infants? Why did Herodias want John the Baptist dead? What did Judas really hope to gain by turning Jesus over to the authorities? And how could any being who has stood in the presence of the heavenly throne want to rebel?



BOOK EXCERPT

"We underestimate the power of looking to our greatest enemies. We forget that they are like us more than they are unlike us and that if we can learn to see ourselves in their eyes, to bridge the gap between 'us' and 'them,' tremendous healing and peace can be found. Never has there been a time in history where this message is more needed, and JR. tackles the subject with creativity, wisdom, and grace. You don't want to miss this book."

— Allison Fallon, author of *Packing Light*

These villains deserve more than a cursory reading. Certainly history has done violence to their legacies far beyond what they may deserve. But we owe it to ourselves to practice some empathy for these devils.

So this book is an experiment in empathy. Each section begins with a fictionalized reimagining of biblical villain-making moments. The villains are the protagonists. The stories are not meant to be strictly historical — though I did the best I could. For several of these characters, the Bible is the only source we have, and some are no more than a footnote in history. We will explore these stories as acts of creative empathy. The goal is to cultivate some understanding of these individuals and to ask how anyone could do what they did.

After we revisit each villain's defining moment, we'll investigate the biblical text in more detail, tracing themes in the stories throughout the rest of Scripture. We'll also reflect on where these themes emerge in our own spirituality and how we might pursue a more faithful walk with God.

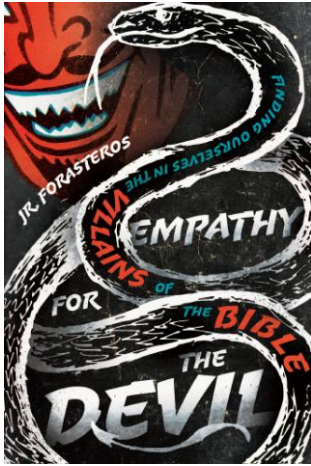
The goal of this project is to understand, not to exonerate. Empathy does not insist we condone the beliefs or behaviors of other people, but only that we see the world from their perspective.

Yet we don't want to do this. We want to assume that wicked monarchs and murdering brothers and betraying disciples and Nazi soldiers are fundamentally different from us. We want to declare with confidence, "I would never do that!"

And for the most part, we're right. The vast majority of us won't participate in genocide and won't murder even one person. But that doesn't mean the same seed of evil doesn't live in our hearts. Ultimate, this is why we want to understand the villains. We want to see how we might be walking the path they've already trod. Why? Because now is the time to turn away, while sin is still just a seed.

Bad guys fascinate us because we have a sneaking suspicion they're not that different from us. Perhaps, if we can learn some empathy, we might discover we're walking their path — just a few steps behind. We might be able to repent before sin blooms and we become villains in our own right.

— Taken from the introduction



Empathy for the Devil: Finding Ourselves in the Villains of the Bible

Available November 7, 2017
\$16, 224 pages, paperback
978-0-8308-4514-9

In this fictionalized narrative, JR. Forasteros reintroduces us to some of the most villainous characters of Scripture. He shows us what we can learn from their negative examples, with figures such as Cain, Jezebel, King Herod, and even Satan serving as cautionary tales of sin and temptation. Forasteros vividly tells their stories to help us understand their motivations, and his astute biblical and cultural exposition points out what we often miss about their lives.

Our World Lacks Empathy

What is *Empathy for the Devil* about?

JR. Forasteros: Everyone acts according to their own self-interest. People we regard as enemies and villains are heroes in their own minds. By practicing empathy – understanding without necessarily condoning others’ actions – we can discover the sinful actions and habits in our own lives to which we were blind before.

By beginning with narrative, I bypass a lot of the rational objections we have to the overly-familiar biblical villains. After the narrative creates some empathy, we can investigate why we resonate with these villains and what their sins can teach us about our own.

How do we begin to rediscover empathy by looking at the villains of the Bible?

JR.: We have a distinct lack of empathy in our world today. We give ourselves the benefit of the doubt while we assume the worst in those we consider enemies. In my years of teaching and preaching Scripture, I’ve found that when I treat the infamous villains of the Bible as human beings not too different from us, we can learn to see the planks in our own eyes before we go looking for the specks in our neighbors’.

Who did you have in mind as you wrote *Empathy for the Devil*?

JR.: Those raised in the church who may or may not now identify as Christian. They are at least passingly familiar with many biblical stories and characters. They consider themselves spiritual but struggle to find how those stories and characters make a difference in their day-to-day lives. They may be disillusioned with the institutional church. They like Jesus, but aren’t necessarily convinced he is God or the only way to a relationship with God. Faith has to make a difference before it can be compelling to them.

What do you hope readers learn from your book?

JR.: I hope readers learn the following:

- We are more like those we perceive as enemies than we are different.
- Facing our own sin is painful but necessary.
- Some sin is so deeply embedded that the only way we can identify it is to see ourselves in someone we might regard as an enemy.
- Big, obvious sins don’t begin as big, obvious sins. They begin as seeds, small and difficult to identify. But this is when it is easier and less painful to face and deal with them.