

The Invitation

THE
NOT-SO-SIMPLE TRUTH
ABOUT FOLLOWING
JESUS

G R E G
S I D D E R S



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Introduction

Soon after I decided to follow Jesus, I started avoiding him at all costs.

I want to tell you how it happened, because I think you might recognize your own story in mine.

I was a sophomore in college, living in a godless dormitory and dabbling in its multiple choices. But two things kept me from enjoying myself: anxiety about death and proximity to Bob, the Christian on my floor who always abstained but never judged.

One day in the dining commons, Bob walked past me with his food tray, stopped, and said, “I’d like to come by your room tonight. There’s something I want to talk to you about.”

“Uh, okay.” I could not imagine what he wanted to talk about.

It turned out to be the most important conversation of my life. He shared with me the secret of immortality. The simple truth that Jesus died for me so that I could live forever was something I had never heard in church. It spoke to my deepest

need and most paralyzing fear—and yet I stubbornly rejected it. “I pray every day,” I said to Bob, “and I don’t think God is going to send me to hell just because I don’t have Jesus as my go-between.”

Rather than argue with me, Bob said, “Well, since you pray every day, why don’t you ask God if he thinks you need Jesus?”

I didn’t see any harm in that, so after Bob left, I prayed. “God, I know I don’t need Jesus, but if you think I do, tell me.” I repeated the same prayer a couple dozen times over the next several weeks. I didn’t hear any heavenly voice, so I concluded that God agreed with me.

It was long after I stopped asking that God answered. I was lying in bed late at night when I did hear a voice—not with my ears but with my heart: “*Greg, you have been running away from me long enough. Now, turn around and follow me.*”

I cannot explain how I knew it was the voice of Jesus (any more than you could explain the times God has spoken to you), but I knew. I responded pretty much like I did when Bob invited himself to my dorm room. “Uh, okay.”

In an instant a flash flood of joy engulfed me. I knew, with the certainty that only the Spirit of God can give, that I was going to live forever.

And the exhilaration lingered. I joined an on-campus Christian group, made new friends, and bought my first Bible, one with the words of Christ in red.

And then I did something that turned my euphoria into vertigo. I read the words in red.

“Hate your father and mother.”

“Take up your cross.”

“Do good to those who hate you.”

“Sell your possessions.”

“Be slave of all.”

I discovered that this man who called me to follow him was a radical. Either that or (please, dear God) I had purchased a defective Bible. I borrowed my friends’ Bibles and compared them to mine. Sure enough, theirs said the same thing. I pointed to Jesus’s most shocking statements and asked them, “Have you read this?”

“Uh-huh,” they would yawn.

I couldn’t understand why they weren’t as appalled as I was. It was unthinkable to me to actually do what Jesus said. And yet I wanted to be a Christian (because I wanted to go to heaven). So I did the only sensible thing: I skipped the words in red. Well, not all of them, but if they got too upsetting, I simply picked up where the black ink resumed. I had wonderful devotions in the Epistles of Paul during this time.

Then one day a simple question popped into my mind: *How can I call myself a Christian if I don’t follow Christ?*

That was when I made an apprehensive reentry into the red zone. Soon afterward, I read the words of Jesus in Matthew 11:28–30: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

Maybe I should have been comforted by those words, but I wasn’t. I was confused. How could Jesus call the yoke that to me seemed so hard “easy”? How could he say that the burden I found so heavy was really “light”? At the heart of Christ’s invitation is the verb *learn*. If you were to open a Greek New Testament to Matthew 11:29, you would see the word *mathete*. It’s a verb that comes from the same root as

the noun *mathetes*, which we translate “disciple.” Jesus said that being his disciple is *easy* and *light*.

Seriously? Have you read those passages in which Jesus describes what his disciples do? There are seven of them in the Gospels—so, yes, I suppose they are light in volume and easy to memorize, but on the commitment scale, they are among the heaviest statements Jesus ever made. So where is the ease and lightness Jesus promised?

It’s in the doing of what we find daunting.

I have discovered—or, I should say, I am discovering—that the teachings of Jesus seem hard and heavy until I actually do them. That’s when I say, “Well, that wasn’t so bad. In fact, I’ve never felt better.” Once I penetrate the ominous mirage, I break through to the soul-rest I long for. Those passages that used to intimidate me have become precious to me, and I cannot imagine reverting to a mild version of Christianity with all the hard sayings of Jesus edited out. How hollow that would be.

Might you use that word—hollow—to describe your Christian experience? If so, could Christ-avoidance be the cause? Is it possible that you have been either frightened away by his most revolutionary teachings or insulated from them by tidy evangelical theology? What might happen if you were to take a fresh, unfiltered look at the discipleship sayings of Jesus? What if you read the Gospels as if the rest of the New Testament didn’t exist? Because, remember, it didn’t exist during the ministry of Jesus. What if you had to deal with Jesus on his own terms?

If you’re up for it, I’d like to take you back in time, back before the cross mopped up our messes, before the resurrection released the superhuman power of the Spirit, be-

fore the apostles helped clarify what Jesus left fuzzy. How I thank God for the cross, the resurrection, and the apostles, but something precious is lost when we reverse the order of things. It's like reading the last chapter first. When we encounter the teachings of Jesus chronologically, in the order they were given, the transformation is deeper. At least that has been true in my life.

So let's go back to the beginning—back to Jesus unplugged. Let's zoom in on those passages that include phrases like "Follow me" and "my disciples." As you consider the implications of being a disciple of Jesus, you'll invariably wrestle with the same questions I have wrestled with: *Did Jesus really mean that? Could I really do that? What are my other options?* But, as you take the risk of bearing his yoke, you'll discover that quality of life that everybody seeks but only disciples find.

Let me give you the invitation in the form of a visual image that was given to me fifteen years after I first heard Jesus say to me, "Follow me." I had just finished watching a three-hour dramatization of the Gospel of Matthew called *The Visual Bible*. It was on videotape (I know, I am dating myself), and when the screen faded to black, I thought it was over. But it wasn't. Right before the credits, there is a thirty-second, silent, slow-motion shot of Jesus walking along the Sea of Galilee. It begins with a close-up of his sandaled feet, and then it gradually widens to show him walking away from the camera. Suddenly, Jesus stops, looks toward the camera, and, with a slight smile and a beckoning gesture, invites the viewer to follow him. He turns away and continues to walk, then stops again, turns around, and, with a broad smile on his face, waves his arm as if to say, "Come on!" Then the picture freezes for several seconds.

Can you see it? I replayed the videotape so many times I wore it out. (No worries, I replaced it with a DVD.) I'll never forget the scene. Especially the smile. It's as if Jesus couldn't conceal the joy he felt in knowing what was in store for those who follow him. If I had still been a new Christian, sweating my way through the Gospels for the first time, I might have interpreted his grin as sadistic, but after fifteen years of following him, that smile brought tears to my eyes—tears of joy, gratitude, and affection toward this man, this God, whom I once feared but now loved with all my heart.

You want to follow Jesus, don't you? It's why you picked up this book. It's why you're still reading. And it's why, by the time we finish this turbulent, exhilarating journey together, you will be more certain than ever that it is in running to Jesus, not from him, that we find the life we were created to live.

A Word about the Study Guide

The study guide in the back of this book has both "Before" and "After" sections for each chapter. If you want to study the Scriptures on your own before you read my thoughts on them, the "Before" sections will help you to do that. If you would like to reflect on or discuss with others the practical implications of each chapter's content, use the "After" sections.

1

Letting Go

WHAT'S KEEPING YOU
FROM FOLLOWING JESUS?

Follow me.”

It's not a command you can obey sitting down. That's easy to miss when you read it in the Bible because—well, because generally when you read it you're sitting down. But when Jesus spoke these words to the first disciples, he was always standing—and rarely standing still. In order to follow, you had to get up and go.

Philip was the first one Jesus summoned. John 1:43 says that Jesus found Philip, which implies that he went looking for him. He did not pick Philip randomly; he singled him out. Imagine it. A man you hardly know approaches you and speaks all of two words: “Follow me.” What do you do? Most

people would go, all right, but in the opposite direction. But for some reason, Philip followed.

Simon and Andrew were next. Jesus was walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee. He saw the two fishermen casting a net into the lake. “Come, follow me,” he said to them, “and I will make you fishers of men” (Matt. 4:19). How long did it take them to decide? Not long. “At once they left their nets and followed him” (Matt. 4:20).

They got as far as the next boat. There were James and John. Jesus beckoned them, and “immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him” (Matt. 4:22).

A short time later, as Jesus was walking along, he saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his collection booth. “Follow me,” Jesus said to him, and that was all it took. “Levi got up, left everything and followed him” (Luke 5:28).

In each case, the response was immediate, unconditional, and ambulatory. They got up and went. Why would anyone in their right mind leave everything behind to follow this man, not knowing where he was going?

Why Follow Jesus?

The easy answer is that Jesus was God, and God doesn’t take no for an answer. But that’s not it, because some people did say no to Jesus. His authority was not irresistible.

No, there was more to it than who Jesus was. There was also what he offered. And what was that? A better future. That’s why people follow Jesus—because they believe that whatever he has in store for them is better than what they leave behind.

Take Levi, for example. Tax collecting was a dirty business, and even though it paid well, it left Levi feeling empty

and unredeemable. But then he heard of this man, Jesus, who was going around forgiving sins, as if he were God, and healing, because he actually was God. *If only he could forgive someone as far gone as me*, Levi thought. *I'd give anything to get a second chance.* But the reverie was fleeting, because he knew the chances were remote.

And then, suddenly, there he was. Jesus. Looking at Levi, of all people, and saying, "I want you." It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to start fresh, with a clean slate. It was the pearl of great price, worth more than all the money in the world. Uprooting was the easiest thing Levi ever did, because what he left behind was rubbish; it was dung compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing the man who forgives sins. It's easy for people to follow Jesus when they are eager to shed their past.

But what if you're happy with where life has taken you? What if you have a clear conscience and a comfortable life-style? Jesus calls people like that to follow him too. What's the draw for somebody whose roots are deep in enviable soil?

That was Simon's story. Matthew and Mark cut to the chase: Jesus called him, and he came. But Luke and John fill in the blanks. They explain why Simon was willing to drop his nets and start walking. It wasn't because of wanderlust. He had the companionship of a wife and family, the security of a stable job, and the luxury of a home. He was living the Israeli dream. He thought, "It doesn't get any better than this."

Then Jesus showed up and said, "Oh yes it does."

It didn't start on the day Jesus called Simon, but sometime earlier. Perhaps it was at the end of a typical workday, when Simon was unwinding at home, that his brother Andrew

burst through the door and announced, “We have found the Messiah!” Andrew had always been the more spiritual of the two, so Simon gave him an I’m-glad-it-works-for-you nod. But Andrew pestered him until he agreed to go and meet Jesus.

When Simon arrived at the place where Jesus was staying, John 1:42 says that “Jesus looked at him,” but that’s a mild translation. Literally, he *gazed* at Simon. Tell me that wouldn’t give you the willies.

And then Jesus spoke. “You are Simon son of John.” Weird. How did he know his name? Then he did something even more odd. He renamed him. “You will be called Rocky.” *Cephas*, which is Aramaic for *Petros*, which is Greek for *Rock*.

Now, if you know anything about Simon, you know that he was not a rock-like guy. Stable, consistent, level-headed, dependable? No. If Jesus had chosen a name that described the kind of man Simon was at that time, he would have said, “You will be called Flakey.” But instead he named him prophetically, foretelling what kind of man Simon would become under his influence. Those first words out of Jesus’s mouth touched a nerve in Simon’s soul. Jesus said to Simon, essentially, “Follow me, and I will transform you into the kind of person you never dreamed you would be.”

Would that mess with your head? A stranger who others say is anointed by God stares at you, calls you by name, and says, “I know who you are and who you have the potential to be. And I intend to help you become the best possible version of yourself.”

It rattled Simon, but not enough to inspire instant allegiance. He returned home—back to the familiar, safe rut of his routine. But those disturbing, alluring words of Jesus echoed in his mind and aroused a yearning deep inside, at

that subterranean level that so many of us leave unexplored. It was foreign territory for Simon, so he didn't go there. He tried to forget that man, that gaze, that voice, those words.

Jesus the Unavoidable

But Jesus can be persistent. Matthew 4:13 says, "Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum." What a coincidence. That just happened to be Simon's neighborhood.

We don't know how long Jesus was in Capernaum before Simon agreed with Andrew that Jesus was the Messiah, but eventually he came around. Yet Simon exercised his faith from a safe distance, as an observer rather than as a participant. He was a back-row disciple.

That all changed on the day Jesus decided to preach on the beach, near the fishermen who had docked their boats on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. When the crowd grew so large that Jesus was literally backed into the water, he climbed into one of the boats. Guess which one? "The one belonging to Simon," Luke 5:3 tells us. Like a heat-seeking missile, Jesus was closing in on his target.

He asked—who else?—Simon to get in and skipper the boat. After it was a little offshore, Jesus sat down and taught the people. I doubt Simon was listening. He was probably thinking, *Why is this man stalking me?*

When Jesus finished teaching, Simon quickly started rowing, eager to get ashore before Jesus could do anything that might humiliate him in front of his friends. But it was no use. Jesus said to him (why do I imagine a smile on his face?), "Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch" (Luke 5:4).

Awkward. The preacher tells the fisherman to go fishing, in the heat of the day, when—as any fisherman worth his salt knows—the fish are too deep for the nets to catch. The best fishing was always done at night, and Simon was quick to inform the Son of God of that fact. “Master, we’ve worked hard all night and haven’t caught anything.” And then there was a pause, just long enough for Simon’s brain to catch up with his mouth. *Who am I to argue with Jesus?* he thought. *I’m a fisherman, that’s who. He may know how to preach—oh yeah, and heal people—but I know how to fish. Still, he’s the Master. But this doesn’t make any sense.* Back and forth his mind raced. Finally, reluctantly, he surrendered. “But because you say so, I will let down the nets.”

He summoned his crew as the crowd on the beach snickered. Out they rowed, and down went the nets. Simon’s face was red with embarrassment and anger.

But not for long. Suddenly the nets were full. As the men struggled to haul them in, they began to tear under the weight. A second boat was summoned. Both boats were loaded so full of fish that they began to sink.

Simon was undone. Luke says that he fell at Jesus’s knees. Why not at his feet? Because they were knee-deep in fish. That was as low as Simon could go. Facedown on top of the flopping pile, Simon cried, “Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!” What was his sin? Unbelief: “For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken” (Luke 5:8–9).

But if there was anything Simon should have known by then, it was Jesus had no intention of going away—at least, not without inviting him to come along. Jesus said to Simon, “Don’t be afraid. From now on you will catch people” (Luke

5:10 NIrV). Don't just read the text; observe the subtext. How many people? As many as those two boats full of fish! "Simon," Jesus was saying, "it's my plan, not only to change your character, but also to use you to change the destiny of countless others."

That was the offer Simon couldn't refuse. Personal transformation was one thing, but being used by Jesus to help people live forever—how do you say no to that?

A Personal Invitation

Would you say yes if Jesus pursued you with as much determination as he pursued Simon Peter? I have news for you: He is. It's no accident that you are reading these words right now. And soon we'll come to passages where Jesus will offer you the same future he offered Simon—a future of personal transformation and eternal impact.

But if that's the future you want, there's one thing you're going to have to do right at the outset. You're going to have to get up and go. And that means leaving something behind, doesn't it? It may be your family, your home, or your career. It may be a bank account or a prized possession. It may be your reputation, your pride, or your safety. It may be a lifelong dream. Whatever it is, if you want a better future, you're going to have to do what Simon and Andrew and James and John did. "They pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed [Jesus]" (Luke 5:11).

Seven years ago, I was in the same Bible study group as a high school math teacher named Heather. Teaching is a great way to serve Jesus, but he had something else in mind for Heather. Over time we learned that she felt a strong calling

to be a missionary—specifically, a Bible translator. Do you know where Bible translators live? In remote tribes. Heather was up for that, but she wanted to do one thing first: marry a man who wanted to go with her. She had dreamed of being a wife and mom long before she dreamed of being a missionary. Common sense told her to wait, but Jesus was telling her to get up and go.

She cried every night for months. She purposely laid on her back in bed, facing the ceiling, so that God could look down from heaven and see the agony she was going through. Finally, excruciatingly, she left her dream behind and followed Jesus. She quit her job, joined a mission organization, and moved from the West Coast to the Deep South to take linguistics classes in preparation for deployment.

On the first day of orientation, Heather met David, who had come from the East Coast. He too had surrendered his desire to marry before becoming a missionary. A month later they were dating. A year and a half after that, they were married. And now they are living in the Middle East, working with others to translate the Bible into multiple dialects, so that people who have never before read the book that contains the secret of eternal life can do so in their native language. And, by the way, David and Heather have three children, with a fourth on the way.

“I tell you the truth,” Jesus said in Luke 18:29–30, “no one who has left home or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age and, in the age to come, eternal life.” Jesus does not invite us to follow him so that he can ruin our lives. He does it to give us more than we could ask or imagine.

Who doesn't want that? The rub is, we want to follow Jesus without leaving anything behind—let alone everything.

Traveling Light

“I will follow you wherever you go,” a man announced to Jesus in Luke 9:57.

Really? “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head” (Luke 9:58). “Are you willing to be homeless? Rootless? Mobile?” Apparently not. We never hear of that man again.

Jesus said to another man exactly what he had said to Simon Peter: “Follow me” (Luke 9:59).

The man was willing to go, just not right away. “Lord, first let me go and bury my father” (Luke 9:59). His dad probably wasn't dead yet, but just as soon as he did die, as soon as the man's family obligations were fulfilled and his inheritance banked, he would jump to his feet and go. “Jesus, you can be the Lord of everything but my timetable.”

Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” Nowhere in the Gospels does Jesus wait for anybody. It's now or never.

Still another said, “I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say good-bye to my family” (Luke 9:61). “Let me go home and weep with them over the sacrifices I will make. Let me go and reminisce about the good old days, and grieve the fact that I have to leave those I love to follow you.”

Jesus replied, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:62). “If you're going to regret following me, just stay home.”

Tragically, most do. It's not that we don't want to follow Jesus, it's just that we want to do it sitting down. We ask him to stay. He tells us to go. And whether the rest of your life turns out to be ordinary or extraordinary may just boil down to this one question: Which do you want more—what Jesus offers, or what you have to leave behind to get it?