



99
THOUGHTS
ON
JESUS-CENTERED
LIVING

EVERYDAY WAYS
TO WALK WITH
THE REBEL JESUS

RICK LAWRENCE

99 Thoughts on Jesus-Centered Living
Everyday Ways to Walk With the Rebel Jesus

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DEDICATION

To Greg Stier of Dare 2 Share, who first introduced
me to the “beeline” of C.H. Spurgeon.



CONTENTS

Introduction	i
THOUGHTS 1-17: COME TO JESUS	1
<i>Practices, habits, and doables for changing the way you relate to Jesus</i>	
THOUGHTS 18-34: REMAIN IN JESUS.....	19
<i>Experiences and habits that gently lure you into a dependent relationship with Jesus</i>	
THOUGHTS 35-57: REFLECT JESUS	35
<i>Activities, projects, and surprising ways to deconstruct the false Jesus embraced in our culture and replace that façade with the real Jesus</i>	
THOUGHTS 58-71: THE HOLY REJECTIONS.....	53
<i>A series of ridiculously glorious everyday refusals</i>	
THOUGHTS 72-80: THE BEAUTIFUL DECLARATIONS.....	65
<i>A few ridiculously inspirational everyday assertions</i>	
THOUGHTS 81-99: THE ORBITAL QUESTIONS.....	73
<i>A question-a-month to chew on, over and over, in your pursuit of Jesus (plus a collection of holiday-themed questions)</i>	
Endnotes	82



INTRODUCTION

The planets in our solar system all orbit around the sun, because they have no choice but to orbit around the sun. We, on the other hand, have been given the freedom to choose our own orbits, so to speak. And even though the “planet” I call “me” will sooner or later spin out of control or disintegrate or turn into a flaming ball if I choose to leave the orbit I was created to follow—with Jesus at the center of my life—I have nevertheless chosen to do *just that* during seasons of my life. But two quotes from two great men, separated by a century, sum up the gravitational pull that has drawn me back into my close orbit of the Son, repeatedly and permanently.

In his book *Following Jesus*, the great British theologian N.T. Wright says this: “The longer you look at Jesus, the more you will want to serve him. That is, of course, if it’s the real Jesus you’re looking at.”¹ Wright is saying that it’s very possible for us to miss the “real” Jesus—the Jesus described by the Bible who is wholly unlike any man who ever lived because he is both man and God. Instead, many of us end up following a guy who *looks* a lot like Jesus but is actually more like the guy who made your sub sandwich the other day: polite, eager to serve, helpful, and comfortably anonymous. The real Jesus is magnetic, because he is far more fierce, unpredictable, and amazing than our conventionally preposterous descriptions of him.

The second quote is from Charles Haddon Spurgeon, a 19th-century English pastor who suffered from depression and a painful birth defect.

Every week, this 22-year-old phenomenon preached two services at his London church, bellowing his love for the “orbited Son” (without the benefit of a microphone) twice every Sunday to crowds of 6,000 people. At the time, he had more books in print than any other living person. He still has more books in print than any other pastor in history, including more than 2,500 of his published sermons. Historians call him the “Prince of Preachers,” and his guiding motto in life has now become my own: “In everything, make a beeline to Jesus.” Rather than explain what this little motto means, I’ll let this well-known story about Spurgeon do the talking:

Much later in Spurgeon’s ministry, a young pastor asked him to listen to him preach and give him a critique—a common request since Spurgeon was revered by other preachers. After he listened to the young man’s impassioned sermon, Spurgeon was honest—he thought it was well prepared and well delivered but it nevertheless...stunk.

“Will you tell me why you think it a poor sermon?” asked the young pastor.

“Because,” said Spurgeon, “There was no Christ in it.”

The young man said, “Well, Christ was not in the text; we are not to be preaching Christ always, we must preach what is in the text.”

The old man responded, “Don’t you know, young man, that from every town, and every village, and every little hamlet in England, wherever it may be, there is a road to London?”

“Yes,” said the young man.

“Ah!” said the old preacher, “and so from every text in Scripture there is a road to the metropolis of the Scriptures, that is Christ. Dear brother, when you get to a text, say, ‘Now, what is the road to Christ?’ and then preach a sermon, running along the road towards the great metropolis—Christ.”

Spurgeon lived his life “making a beeline to Christ”—it was his central, guiding commitment every time he opened his mouth to speak or teach or write. And as I have adopted “beelining” as the driving force in my life, I have discovered my own embedded purpose and identity—it feels *deeply good* to follow the orbit I was designed by God to follow. And when everything in our life is orbiting around “the real Jesus,” epic stuff happens. Because Jesus is at the center of our lives, the people around us find rescue from pain and worry and hopelessness and emptiness and loneliness and purposelessness and so many other “ness-es.” Life transcends our expected drudgeries and becomes a grand, breathless adventure.

I’ve been editor of Group Magazine, the world’s most-read resource for Christian youth pastors, for almost a quarter-century now. And our most recent research shows that the No. 1 thing on Christian teenagers’

“church wish list” is to “learn more about Jesus.” I love that. And this book is my way of throwing more wood on that fire. In these pages I hope your orbit comes so close to him that you can see him and taste him and smell him. When that happens, watch out....



THOUGHTS 1-17

COME TO JESUS

Practices, habits, and doables for changing the way
you relate to Jesus



ASSUME WHAT YOU KNOW IS WRONG

We think we know Jesus, but we're wrong. Think of a person who seems to know Jesus really well—he (or she) is probably wrong about him. In our culture we're now at a place where we're so comfortable with Jesus, so confident of who he is and what he's like, that a lot of what we think we know is actually *wrong*. At a small conference I stood up and told a well-respected church consultant that her assertion that we all pretty much know all we need to know about Jesus was wrong. She disagreed with me, and I disagreed back. Our little interchange created a stir in the group—several people excitedly stopped me at the break. One of them said, “What all people—young and old—are *really* hungry for today is Jesus.” I saw the same excited twinkle in his eye that I have when I talk about Jesus.

The first step in living a more Jesus-centered life is to assume that much of what you think you know about Jesus is wrong. It's time to wipe the whiteboard clean and start over, as if you've never heard of him. I've been assuming everything I know about Jesus is wrong for so many years now that I've slowly moved toward a life that orbits around a Jesus who is undeniably true. It has changed who I am, and it's revolutionized my impact on others. It will change you, too.

RELEASE YOUR INNER DEMOLITION EXPERT

Psychologists say that all of us hold on to “mental models” of the people we know. Because of the overwhelming amount of information our brains must organize, we tend to defend the established way we see something or someone. Even when we get new information that challenges our mental model, we hang on to what we’ve come to believe is the truth.³ We do this same thing, obviously, with Jesus. But a great example of what this looks like is Richard Jewell, a central figure in the Centennial Olympic Park bombing at the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta, Georgia.

Jewell was working as a private security guard when he discovered a pipe bomb, alerted the police, and helped to evacuate the area before it went off. In the media he was initially celebrated as a hero. But the FBI later grew suspicious of Jewell and leaked information that pointed to him as a suspect. Even though he was never charged with a crime, the “cloud of suspicion” around Jewell gave people a “mental model” of him as a terrorist bomber—most judged him as guilty, no matter what the truth was. That was true even after the real bomber—radical anti-abortion terrorist Eric Rudolph—actually *admitted* to the crime.⁴

This mental-model dynamic explains why so few of us have an accurate understanding of Jesus. Once our understanding of Jesus is established

as a “mental model,” we tend to ignore or tune out new information that doesn’t fit the model. One way we can get rid of our mental models of Jesus is to blow them up, as if we were demolition experts. Ask these three questions whenever you read anything about Jesus in the Bible:

- What did Jesus *really* say? (What was the context of his remarks—who was he speaking to, where was he speaking, and why was he speaking?)
- What did Jesus *really* do? (In the context of “normal behavior” in his culture, what impact did his actions have on those who heard him—both positive and negative?)
- How did people *really* experience Jesus? (What is the array of emotional reactions people had to Jesus, and why did they react that way?)



3

ASK THE ONLY QUESTION THAT MATTERS

“*Who do you say that I am?*” Jesus asks his disciples this question after he’s fed a huge crowd with only a few loaves and fishes. After this miraculous experience, Jesus wants to know what others, and his closest friends, really think of him. So he first asks a safer question: “*Who do the people say I am?*” And his friends answer that others are guessing that he is John the Baptist or Elijah or Jeremiah (come back from the

dead), or “*one of the prophets*” (Matthew 16:13-20). And then he looks them full-faced and asks a much riskier question: “*But who do you say that I am?*” And Peter answers by declaring that Jesus is “*the Christ, the son of the living God.*” Today, and every day after today, make this the first question you ask in the morning: “Who do I say that Jesus is today?”



DID HE OR DIDN'T HE?

Another way to deconstruct your mental model of Jesus and rebuild something more true in its place is to practice this simple habit—whenever you read something about Jesus in the Bible, ask yourself these two little questions:

1. What did Jesus do?
2. What didn't Jesus do?

Look for things Jesus embraced, advised, or did. Then think about the things he *didn't* do. For example, if you see that he healed people of sicknesses, you'll also notice that he didn't charge anyone a fee for healing them. The key is to train yourself to mentally apply the brakes whenever you read or hear anything about Jesus—to push back against “self-evident truths.” Get used to thinking about the true Jesus all the time, everywhere.

GET A LITTLE RUINED

Like a Lay's® potato chip, once you've tasted the real Jesus you won't settle for just one taste of him. You know you're getting hooked on Jesus when you do what Peter did in the aftermath of Jesus' least popular sermon (in John 6). When Jesus told the crowds they'd have to "eat his flesh and drink his blood" to be truly close to him, the adoring "followers" suddenly thought better of following him. They thought he was talking about cannibalism or something, and Jesus refused to clarify himself after they repeatedly questioned him. So they took off faster than the bulls running through the streets of Pamplona, Spain. But then Jesus turned to his best friends and asked them the humblest question in history: "*You do not want to go away also, do you?*" And Peter shoots back with the best-ever answer to Jesus' best-ever question: "*Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life. We have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God*" (John 6:66-69).

I love this scene more than any other in the Bible. Peter is saying, essentially: "I don't understand what you just said or most things you do, and this whole thing is often confusing to me, but you've ruined me for you... forever." Can you imagine what it would be like to be so ruined for Jesus that even if you wanted to reject him you couldn't? One way to get there is to practice "the art of slowing down." It's

simple, really—read the Bible (or any book about Jesus) *slowly*. Make sure you *truly understand* what’s happening, and what it would be like to *actually* be in the scene you’re reading, before you move on. Make understanding Jesus your top goal when you read the Bible, not covering a lot of verses or chapters.



JESUS IS THE DEFINITION

Jesus rescued a tax collector named Matthew from a life of betrayal and cheating, and Matthew later writes about a man Jesus met who was even more lost than he was, but didn’t know it. Here’s the first part of the story of the Rich Young Ruler in Matthew 19: *And someone came to Him and said, “Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may obtain eternal life?” And He said to him, “Why are you asking Me about what is good? There is only One who is good; but if you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.”*

Why would Jesus be so nitpicky about the man’s use of the word *good*? I think it’s because Jesus knows we use that word to describe so many things in our life that aren’t actually *good* that he feels an intrinsic need to clarify what *good* actually is. And the definition of *good* is Jesus. His goodness—expressed in such divergent ways as his preoccupation with healing people and casting out their demons, to his tenderness for the broken and forgotten, to his ferocity directed toward the religious

leaders of his day—is really the central aspect of his nature that we just don't “get.”

Here's how to change the way you define *good* in your life. Whenever you think about Jesus or read about Jesus or talk about Jesus, remind yourself that whatever he's saying or doing is the deepest kind of good there is—no matter what it is.



7

WHEN YOU'RE BAKING A CAKE, DON'T FORGET THE FLOUR

Donald Miller, author of *Blue Like Jazz*, says he once conducted an experiment in a Bible college class he was teaching: He told his students he was going to explain the basics of the gospel message to them but would leave out one crucial truth. He challenged them to pick out the missing truth. He conducted his experiment by talking about humanity's sinfulness and examples of depravity in our culture, our need to repent because the wages of sin is death, the beauty of morality and the great hope of heaven, and all the great things we can experience once we're saved from the consequences of our sin.

But in Miller's class, not a single one of his students pointed out that “Jesus” was the missing “crucial truth.” Miller writes: “I presented a gospel to Christian Bible college students and left out Jesus. Nobody

noticed....⁵” It’s hard to fathom, but it’s possible to live out your “Christian” life and never really think about Jesus—and he’s the main ingredient in the recipe! It seems funny, but when you’ve grown used to baking cakes without the flour, it takes a proactive act of remembering to make sure you put it in the mix. Otherwise, you’ll have to settle for eating “flat-cake” the rest of your life. Here’s something simple: Every time you eat or bake or see something made with flour, remind yourself of who is the “main ingredient” in your life.



COME AS YOU ARE, NOT AS YOU SHOULD BE

Most people are sheltering either a hidden past or a harrowing present—they have pain in their lives that even their best friends don’t know about. And those hidden pains and struggles make many of us believe we’re unacceptable to God. We feel like damaged goods. We’ve been told that our goal in life is to “accept” Jesus and convince others to “accept” Jesus (a term, incidentally, that’s not even in the Bible) but it’s ironic that we so often forget that God *accepts us already*, brokenness and all.

In John 4 we’re told that Jesus broke the law, at least the law of social convention, when he sat alone with a “Samaritan-gone-wild” woman at a well. If anyone was ever “damaged goods,” it was this woman. So Jesus sends his disciples into town ostensibly to buy food, but from the context it appears that he wanted to connect with this woman alone. The

way that Jesus engaged this lonely, outcast woman is astounding. First, he initiates a relationship. Then he moves from connecting to honoring her by pursuing her and offering her hope. She wasn't a "ministry target"—his treatment of her demonstrated that he saw her as a precious daughter of his Father. As Jesus drew her into a real relationship, she sensed she could finally open up about her life. Real relationship with him starts when we come as we are, not as we should be. Have you admitted to Jesus who you really are? Or are you coming to him as the person you think you *should* be? Today is the day to change that game.



9

FIND A BIGGER “YES”

Most of us settle for what we can get in life, but Jesus is offering us the chance to say yes to something epic. My friend Greg Stier, founder of the Dare 2 Share ministry organization, once told me about the time he was standing in line at Starbucks® when he noticed a guy dressed like a goth staring at him with hate-filled eyes. Greg realized this guy had been reading the titles of the “Jesus books” he had under his arm. The guy asked, “Hey man, are you religious?” And Greg thought for a second, then responded, “I can’t stand religious people—they make me want to puke.” And the surprised goth-guy, now full of angry energy, said: “I can’t stand them either! They think they’re better than everybody else!” And then Greg shot back, “Do you know who else couldn’t stand them?” And the guy asked, “Who?” And Greg delivered the coup de grace: “Jesus!”

The guy looked shocked by Greg's answer. So Greg explained: "I'm dead serious. As a matter of fact, Jesus, the Son of God, came down from heaven to hang out with sinners like you and me, but the religious people got mad so they crucified him. But Jesus had the last laugh. Three days later he rose again from the dead, proving that he was God. Now he offers sinners like you and me eternal life if we simply trust in him." By the time Greg had finished, this kid raised his fist into the air and shouted, "Jesus is awesome!"

After Greg told me this story, he followed it with this profound truth: "People need a much bigger 'Yes!' to overwhelm all the little 'No's' floating around in their brains." Jesus certainly offered his disciples a "bigger yes." Ever wonder why grown men in the middle of long-practiced careers would literally drop everything and risk their livelihood to start following an obscure "prophet"? The answer, I think, is in "I will make you fishers of men." He gave them a bigger "Yes!" Ask him for your bigger "Yes!" and he will give it to you.



10

OH COME LET ME ADORE HIM

The celebrated Christian writer Henri Nouwen served for years as pastor of Daybreak, a Christian community near Toronto for developmentally disabled people that was planted by the L'Arche movement. Nouwen had great respect for the co-founder of the L'Arche community in the United

States, Father George Strohmeier. He tells this story about discovering the “secret ingredient” in Father Strohmeier’s life:

George has always come to know Jesus with a depth, a richness that few priests have experienced. When he pronounces the name of Jesus you know that he speaks from a deep, intimate encounter.... I know for sure that there is a long and hard journey ahead of me. It is the journey of leaving everything behind for Jesus’ sake. I now know that there is a way of living, praying, being with people, caring, eating, drinking, sleeping, reading, and writing in which Jesus is truly the center. I know this way exists and that I have not fully found it yet.

How do I find it? George gave me the answer: “Be faithful in your adoration.” He *did not* say “prayer,” or “meditation,” or “contemplation.” He kept using the word “adoration,” worship. This word makes it clear that all my attention must be on Jesus, not on myself. To adore is to be drawn away from my own preoccupations into the presence of Jesus. It means letting go of what I want, desire, or have planned, and fully trusting Jesus and his love.⁶

It’s not possible to “adore” someone you know very little about, Adoration is the fruit of paying attention to something truly beautiful, and we don’t pay very close attention to most of the truly beautiful things in our life. Learn something new about Jesus every day, no matter

how small or insignificant the “new” seems to you, and you will find yourself adoring him very soon.

11

HIT EVERY POTHOLE

It seems strange, but if you want to get closer to Jesus and learn more about what makes him tick, look for the things he said and did that are hard to understand—I call them “Jesus potholes.” For example, why did Jesus treat the Canaanite woman who was asking him for help in Matthew 15 so harshly? Or why, in John 7, did Jesus tell his brothers he wasn’t going to attend a feast in Judea and then later go anyway? The key to “pothole-ing” is to ask yourself a simple question every time you come across something about Jesus that’s hard to understand: “What’s my best guess as to why Jesus said or did this?” Then don’t give up until you answer your question. Think of yourself as a miner drilling deep into the earth because you’re looking for gold. You really want that gold, so don’t give up easily.



12

REMEMBERING TO REMEMBER

Throughout history the people of God, including you and me, have had a super-hard time remembering to remember God. I mean, we're following him, growing closer to him, and living our lives with him as our orbital center—and then we aren't. We forget all about who he really is and what he really does. Sure, I saw him come through for me yesterday, but I'm acting like he's my enemy today. You could say remembering to remember God is the primary spiritual discipline of our lives, because we're so typically bad at remembering to remember.



13

LEAVING KINDERGARTEN

There are two paths to growing in our relationship with Jesus—both are legitimate paths, but one of them goes “deeper into the woods,” so to speak. The first path is to learn to trust in Jesus because of what he's done in the past—to remember the ways he's come through for you and others. On this path, our relationship with him is based on his track record and on our expectation that he'll continue to get a pretty good “grade.” I think this is a kindergarten approach to a relationship—nothing wrong with it, but it's a little baby-ish. Going “deeper into the

woods” means learning to trust Jesus not because of his track record, but because of what you’ve learned about who he is by “tasting and seeing” that he is good (Psalm 34:8). Many, many before us have walked this path, including Job and Abraham and David in the Old Testament, all the disciples in the New Testament, and billions more since then. Think of the person in your life who’s impacted your life with Christ most profoundly. That person has likely gone “deep into the woods.” Be that person for someone else.



14

BEELINING YOUR LIFE

As I mentioned in the introduction to this little book, a “beelined” life is a life that orbits around Jesus in every way possible. For example, who doesn’t want to do well on a test at school or work toward a promotion at their job? But what would it look like to do these things because you’re pursuing a closer relationship with Jesus? When we “give what we have to give” in every area of our life, we honor the way Jesus has wired us and the unique role he’s created us to fill. The “because” of our life is, really, everything. Once you find out a person’s because, you know most everything you need to know about him or her. So, do you know your because? Make it Jesus, and you’ll be living a beelined life.



15

COME WITH A BLANK SLATE

Try this experiment on a day when you have a little more time than usual to read. Choose one of the four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John) and quickly read through it looking only for patterns in what Jesus said and did. You're not reading, necessarily, to understand everything he said and did—you're reading to experiment with a kind of hypothesis. You're testing something to see what you can learn from the test. As you quickly read, make a simple list of the things you observe as you're paying attention to what Jesus said and did. When you're finished, spend a little time answering this question: "If this is basically what Jesus said and did, how does my list challenge my previous perceptions of him?" Here's one from my list: "Jesus spent more time praying than speaking. Why?"



16

ACT LIKE JESUS MEANT WHAT HE SAID

In his excellent book *Jesus Mean and Wild*, Mark Galli describes a startling encounter with an unmasked Jesus. Galli was pastor of a California church when a group of Laotian refugees asked if they could become members. Galli offered to lead them through a study of

the Gospel of Mark as a foundational exercise before they made their commitment. The Laotians had little knowledge of Scripture or of Jesus. When Galli got to the passage where Jesus calms the storm, he asked the refugees to talk about the “storms” in their lives—their problems, worries, and struggles. The people looked confused and puzzled. Galli filled the awkward silence by asking, “So what are your storms?” Finally, one of the Laotian men asked, “Do you mean that Jesus actually calmed the wind and sea in the middle of a storm?”

Galli thought the man was merely expressing his skepticism, and since he wasn't intending to spend the group's remaining time wrestling with the plausibility of Jesus' miracles, he said: “Yes, but we should not get hung up on the details of the miracle. We should remember that Jesus can calm the storms in our lives.” After another uncomfortable stretch of silence, another man spoke up: “Well, if Jesus calmed the wind and the waves, he must be a very powerful man!” The Laotians buzzed with excitement about this while Galli looked on as a virtual outsider. While these newbie Christian refugees entered into something like worship, Galli realized he'd so taken Jesus for granted that he'd missed him altogether.⁷

Have you and I made the same mistake as Galli? Have we so taken Jesus for granted in our lives that we've essentially stopped relating with him as if he really did the things he did? Instead of making Jesus' words and actions into safer metaphors, how about we do something radical and simply accept what he said and did at face value, like we would do with any good friend?

STOP AT EVERY QUESTION

Jesus used great questions to teach his followers how to think critically and biblically. My friend Bob Krulish, the director of pastoral staff at my church in Denver, once scoured all four Gospels to extract every single question Jesus asked—and ended up with an astonishing 287 questions! And what explosive questions Jesus asked—so potent with little thought-bombs:

- *“If a man receives circumcision on the Sabbath that the Law of Moses may not be broken, are you angry with Me because I made an entire man well on the Sabbath?” (John 7:23).*
- *“Simon, son of John, do you truly love Me more than these?” (John 21:15).*
- *“Which is easier to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up, take your mat and walk?’” (Mark 2:9).*

When you read or hear about a question that Jesus asked, treat it like a stop sign. Stop, pay attention, look both ways, and decide how that question helps you understand Jesus better—what he likes and dislikes, promotes and discourages.