

ENCOUNTERING JESUS

An Exploration of His Life and Works for Grad Students

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INTRODUCTION

Ah, grad school. If Charles Dickens were in grad school today, perhaps he would say about it too that “it was the best of times, it was the worst of times . . .”

Grad school offers the opportunity to spend several years learning about, developing expertise in, and deeply satisfying your curiosity about one part of the world that you are really interested in and passionate about. Along the way, you learn from and alongside some of the world’s foremost experts in that field. When you are done, you are given professional opportunities reserved for the very few—opportunities that expand our understanding of the world, shape culture, and prepare the next generation of leaders. It’s incredible what a graduate degree affords you. And for many, if not most, you get paid full-time to do this.

And yet grad school comes with many challenges and difficulties, doesn’t it? Grad school makes huge demands on your time and talents. It exposes weaknesses and limitations—perhaps for the first time—and brings

to the surface insecurities and fears that most haven’t dealt with before. For some, grad school can come at a great cost. Perhaps you will sacrifice relationships, emotional health, and financial security (the pay isn’t extraordinary), among other things.

Most significantly, you may sacrifice a relationship with God. With the demands and pull of grad school, many see God as either irrelevant or a luxury they can’t currently afford. But what if that didn’t have to be so? What if instead of seeing God as a distraction or maybe even a barrier to your success, you began to see Him as something else? What if you saw God as the one constant, underlying thread who has woven Himself all through grad school’s “best of times” and “worst of times” so that you would come to know Him personally? What if you experienced such a meaningful relationship with Him that He became the key not just to life in grad school but to life itself?

It is said of God that in Him “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 2:3). There is nothing that has been (or will be) understood or discovered about the world that doesn’t have its origin in God. For example, He’s not just the best chemist that ever lived. He created chemistry and infused it with meaning and purpose. And He wants to share that with us. That is, the “best of times” in grad school can only be fully experienced and enjoyed through a relationship with God.

It is also said of God that He fully experienced every good but also every difficult or discouraging thing that living in our world offers. He longs not just to know of or understand the challenges of your life—including those in grad school—but to meet you in the midst of them. He even desires to forgive and overcome your sin and the brokenness in your life. He says, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28). That is, you no longer have to walk through “the worst of times” in grad school alone and apart from God. He not only understands your field more than anyone else; He also understands and knows you more than anyone else.

Finally, it is said of God that He has always existed and always will. One day, grad school will come to an end. Your career (and all that your time in grad school accomplished) will come to an end. Yet long after grad

school and your career are over, God still remains. And you will find that He—the one constant, underlying thread who wove Himself all through your time in grad school—will continue to do so throughout all of your life. You will find that knowing Him personally is—or could be—the greatest, most satisfying pursuit of your life.

How is it that God—who always has been and always will be and who exists outside of the world He created and sustains—has also come so close to us? How does He so fully know each one of us (the good and the bad), as well as the delights and disappointments we experience, including those in grad school?

It’s because more than two thousand years ago, as the Bible says, He entered the world and dwelled among us for a time as Jesus Christ. According to the Bible, the only way to know God personally is through Jesus. That is, if you encounter Jesus, then you encounter God.

Whether you’re new to studying the Bible or you’ve been a Christian for a long time, this book has been designed to help you encounter Jesus while in grad school. You can either use this book while you personally study the Bible or, better yet, use it while studying the Bible and building community with others who want to grow closer to God. If you choose the latter, here are two ways you can use this book:

1. **A Five-Week Discovery Group**—As you can see, this book is divided into five sections that represent critical topics necessary for encountering Jesus. The questions for the first passage in each section are answered. This is done especially to help those who haven't studied the Bible before and those who haven't been trained on how to study the Bible. One of the purposes of this book is to teach grad students how to study the Bible, and hopefully these example passages will be helpful to you.

If you're using this book for a five-week study, we'd suggest you use the five passages that are already done. If you and the others in your group are enjoying the study at the end of the five weeks and want to continue, then you can go back and study other passages. By choosing the five-week approach, your group members can start with a low level of commitment and increase that commitment as you build community.

2. **A One- or Two-Semester Bible Study**—If you decide to use this book as a Bible study resource, we'd encourage you to go through the five sections in order. You don't necessarily have to study all the passages in each section, but we'd suggest not starting a new section until you've covered all the passages you desire to explore in the previous section.

There is one main story line in the Bible: God's redemptive plan for His children. The questions for each passage will lead your group to see how each and every Bible passage ties into that story line. There are enough passages for a Bible study group to use this book for either one or two semesters.

We believe that the purpose of every grad student is to know God and to live out his or her calling both during and after grad school. Can a graduate student encounter God? Absolutely! As you'll discover in this book, the Scriptures say that He can be found and that He's actively looking for us.

God earnestly desires to make Himself known to you. He's not hiding. In fact, He promises, "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it [the door] will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened" (Matt. 7:7-8).

Besides knowing God, the Bible says our other main purpose for existing is to know and love others. That's why we want to reiterate that we hope you'll use this book to explore God while in community with others, and we hope you'll make it a priority to attend a discovery group or Bible study.

Finally, as you read the introductions to each section, you'll note that they are very personal. We

designed them that way because God is so personal, and He wants us to know Him personally. He wants us to have not only head knowledge about who He is but also heart knowledge—to actually fall in love with Him. Chad will share stories from his spiritual journey that will hopefully not only engage with you intellectually but also engage with your heart.

Later, in the appendix, I (Ashley) will share my story and how it relates to encountering Jesus in grad

school. Chad and I both obtained graduate degrees, he in engineering and I in chemistry, and we both understand the challenges you face as a grad student. Hopefully our stories will be a huge encouragement to you as you explore God.

It's almost time to begin section 1, but before you do that, we encourage you to read over this next bit of instruction, "How to Study Each Passage."

HOW TO STUDY EACH PASSAGE

As we shared in the introduction, the purpose of this book is to help you encounter Jesus while in grad school, whether you're new to studying the Bible or have studied it before. All of Scripture tells one story about Jesus and our need for Him. Every passage in some way draws our attention to our sinfulness and Christ's solution to our sinfulness.

Good theology is based on the beliefs that God exists, is personal, can be known, and has revealed Himself to mankind. The Bible claims to be the authoritative Word of God. It's divided into sixty-six books, which include different genres: narrative, the law, poetry, prophesy, and epistles (letters). Some books are divided into chapters, while others are so short that they consist of only one chapter. These chapters, in turn, are divided into individual verses so that we can easily find specific passages in the Bible. There is also one major division in the Bible: the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament was written before Christ was born,

while the New Testament was written after the death of Christ during the first century AD. Since the Bible is ultimately a book about Jesus, it's the source material for learning about Him. If we want to know Jesus, we must study the Bible. When we look closely, Jesus (or at least our need for Jesus) can be found in every passage in the Bible.

Before you can find Christ in a passage, you need to do the work to understand it thoroughly in its original historical context by carefully looking at the grammar, syntax, and context. With a robust understanding, you'll be better able to discern how Christ is legitimately present in a passage and avoid inserting Him falsely.

Included in this guidebook are the texts of the passages that we recommend you study. They are printed with wide margins and generous spacing so you can mark them up. By the time you are done, your passages should be huge messes of crisscrossed lines; lists of verbs,

commands, and promises; and circled highlights. Maybe you'll make a list of things that confuse you or diagram a few sentences like you did in grammar school. If you slow down and pick the passage apart, you'll be surprised by what you'll see.

Below are some of the connecting words and relationships to look for when you study the passage. Not everything you notice will be significant, but by observing the flow of the text and making note of connections, relationships, repetitions, and so on, you will be able to get the passage to open itself up to you. Initially, don't worry about drawing conclusions; rather, just learn to look and see what the text says. As you do, pray for the Spirit to lead you; what is important will begin to emerge.

CONNECTORS

Contrast: but, even though, much more, nevertheless, yet, although, than, otherwise

Comparison: too, also, and, as, just as, so also, likewise, like

Reason: because, for this purpose, for this reason, for, since

Result: so then, therefore, as a result, thus, then, that, so that, in order that

Time: now, until, when, before, after, while, since

Correlatives: so . . . so also, for . . . as, so . . . as

Condition: if, if . . . then

RELATIONSHIPS

How does this passage relate to what comes before it (and after it)?

Are there things that are alike or different?

Are there things that are repeated?

Is there a progression?

Once you've dissected a passage, you are ready to ask questions of the text that will help you encounter Jesus in each passage. There are two genres of Scripture that will be explored in this book: narrative and parables. In each of these two genres, the path to encountering Jesus is slightly different. There are also several other genres in the Bible, such as the law, poetry, prophecy, and epistles, which are not covered in this book. After you finish this study, we'd encourage you to use Faculty Commons's grad student/faculty version of the book *One Story: How All of Scripture Points Us to Christ* by Tim Henderson and Tom Sperlich to learn how to study other genres.

If you're using this book as part of a discovery group or Bible study, we'd encourage you to study just one passage per week. After each passage, there are two pages of questions separated into four columns. We'd encourage you to fill in one column per day, allowing yourself to

reflect on the text throughout the week. If you do this, your week will look something like this:

Day One: Profile the Passage

Synthesize the observations you made while marking up the text, and record them in response to the questions in the first column.

Day Two: Expose the Problem

Review the passage again, but this time look deeper to discover and record the problems of sinfulness that the human and divine authors are addressing.

Day Three: Explore the Solution

This day is often the most fun, as it is when we begin to understand how the passage anticipates or points to Christ's solution to our sinfulness. Look for connections between how God intervenes in this passage and how He ultimately has intervened through Christ.

Day Four: Reflect and Respond

Consider how this passage matters in your life and how the Spirit may be calling you to respond.

Day Five: Meet with Your Discovery Group or Bible Study

We hope that as a grad student, you will experience the Gospel deeply and that it will transform and shape your life, your relationships, and your calling as a scholar. We also hope that you will connect with others around you who are also exploring God. Others can help you embrace your need for the Gospel and the ways that Christ fully meets that need. You need others to pray with you and for you. You need others to help you fully experience and encounter Jesus and point others to Him as well.

SECTION ONE

Why Jesus?

Introduction and Discussion: Why All Religions Aren't the Same

A number of years ago, I (Chad) traveled with a group of American college students on a spring break trip to Central Asia. During a social gathering, we met with a group of Christian Middle Eastern college students and took turns sharing how we came to know Jesus.

Most of the Americans' stories were similar in that a family member or friend introduced them to Jesus during childhood or while they were in college. When the Asian students shared their stories, I noticed a distinct difference. No family member or friend had ever talked to them about Jesus. Every single one of them had seen and met Jesus in a dream or in a vision! One student, whom I'll call "Annie," shared:

I had never heard the name Jesus or even knew He existed. My family is a strong Muslim family, and we never heard anything about other religions in school. Everyone I knew was simply born a Muslim. Then one night I had this dream. There was a man with outstretched hands, and He said to me, "Come to me, Annie. I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Come to me." I do not know how I knew His name, but somehow when I woke up the next morning, I knew this man's name was Jesus. Several months passed by, and over time I forgot about the dream.

Then last year during the harvest season, I left college to go home and help my family with the harvest. I was out in the field with my friends, and suddenly two bad men appeared and started chasing my friends and me. After a few minutes, I tripped on something and fell to the ground. The two men started kicking me and hitting me, and then one of them got on top of me to rape me.

As the man started to rip my clothes off, I closed my eyes and began to cry out to Jesus. I began praying to Him, asking Him to help me and vowing to follow Him if He saved me. A moment later, I opened my eyes, and the men had disappeared. That day I became a believer of Jesus. I have been following Him ever since, and I was so excited a few months ago to meet a few more Christians. I thought I was the only one in my country.

Annie's story illustrates that there's something very special about Jesus. Once Annie had encountered Jesus in her dream, she somehow knew He could be counted on in a time of need. To Annie, Jesus wasn't just another prophet or a good man. He wasn't just the figurehead of one of the major religions. Jesus had power and authority that only God could have, and yet at the same time, He exhibited the love and compassion she could rely on at a time when she needed Him the most!

As I've worked in full-time campus ministry these past fifteen years, I've found that many students believe that all religions are the same. It's a very common misconception among grad students and undergrad students alike. Before beginning a personal relationship with Jesus, I wondered if all religions were the same as well.

Why do people believe all religions point to the same God? The popularity of relative inclusivism is the most common reason. Relative inclusivism is the assertion

that no human being has ever gained absolute truth but that all human beings have partially obtained absolute truth.

Let me explain. An example can be found in the famous poem by John Godfrey Saxe, "The Blind Men and the Elephant." In this poem, Saxe shares the story of six blind men describing an elephant. One touched the elephant's trunk and said the elephant was like a snake. Another touched the tusk and said the elephant was like a spear, and another grabbed the elephant's leg and said the elephant was like a tree. Each man had a different interpretation of the elephant because he was blind and was only touching part of the elephant.

The problem with the poem is that although it appears to be inclusivism on the surface, it's actually covert exclusivism. The poet is telling us that each blind man's interpretation was equally valid, but what he really means is that no one's interpretation is valid but his. He (the author) is the only one who isn't blind and can see the whole elephant. In the same way, people may say all religions are equally valid, but they really mean that no one's belief is valid except theirs.

As I've searched for the difference between Christianity and other religions, I've discovered that the ultimate answer lies in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. If what He says about Himself in John 6 is true (that He is the only way to God through His death for our sins and His Resurrection on the cross), then the Christian faith

is the only true faith. If He's not who He says He is, then the Christian faith is a sham.

If what Jesus says in John 6 is true, He's also the most powerful, beautiful, and compelling person to get to know and explore. As Annie discovered in the story shared earlier, He's someone we can count on in times of need. He can and will provide for us. He's compassionate and understands what we're going through at all times.

When we encounter Jesus, we encounter a person who loves us so much that He gave up His life so that we can have eternal life.

In this section, Let's explore four key passages in the gospels (the first four books of the New Testament) that point out why Jesus is so significant and what makes Him so different from other religious prophets and leaders.

Sample Passage and Passages to Study Yourself

JOHN 1:1-18

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. ⁴ In him was life, and the life was the light of men. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him.

John the Baptist, not the disciple and author of this gospel.

⁸ He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.

⁹ The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. ¹² But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

Life and light are obviously significant metaphors to describe Jesus.

According to this verse, those who believe in Jesus become adopted children of God.

Repetitive and obviously important!

Passage claims Jesus is God.

¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. ¹⁵ (John bore witness about him, and cried out, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.’”) ¹⁶ For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known.

Here John makes the connection that the Word is Jesus. Why did he use the phrase “the Word?”

What are some key observations?

Jesus is described as being the Word. Verses 14–18 clarify that this passage is about Jesus.

The passage claims that the Word was God and is God.

John also claims that Jesus created everything and that He is the life and is light.

Is there anything unusual, confusing, or surprising?

It seems unusual that Jesus is described as being the Word. What does that mean?

Verse 12 is surprising when it implies that only those who believe in Jesus are given the right to become children of God.

What's the main plot, argument, or idea?

To know God, it takes Jesus. Jesus is the ultimate revelation of who God is. That's what John meant when he said Jesus is the Word.

In this passage:

What character flaws or difficulties are presented?

Although God created the world, the world did not know Him. We lived our lives independently from God, and our fellowship with God was broken.

Without the Word, the true light, we live in a world of spiritual darkness.

In the human condition:

What are the deeper issues of humanity that the tension in this story brings to the surface?

Although we were created by Jesus and are intended to find our purpose in Him, because of the spiritual darkness in the world, we all tend to find our purpose in things besides God. As grad students, we try to find our purpose in our studies or careers.

On top of that, sometimes we revel in the dark. We pursue things that only temporarily satisfy, like greed or lust, or even good things, like success in school.

In this passage:

How does God begin to address the tension?

You reveal yourself through your words, and so does God. You could learn a lot about someone by reading a biography, but the only way you could know him or her personally is by meeting that person and hearing the words that he or she shares with you. It's the same way with God. You can know a lot about Him by reading the Bible or hearing what others say about Him, but the only way you can know God personally is through Jesus—His Word.

In Christ:

How does this narrative point to Christ's ultimate resolution?

To know God, it takes Jesus. Jesus is the ultimate revelation of who God is. That's what John meant when he said that Jesus was the Word. By knowing Jesus, the only true light, we can overcome the darkness in this world and find complete joy. While things of this world temporarily satisfy, Jesus satisfies eternally.

How do I identify with the characters' struggles with sin and suffering?

I almost constantly seek joy in other places besides Christ: pursuing success in my career, being consumed by what others think of me, and being dependent on myself instead of trusting and relying on God for provision, contentment, and satisfaction.

In the last month, how have I embraced or resisted Christ's resolution?

It's difficult for me to embrace the fact that Jesus can fully satisfy me. Instead of pursuing Him like I should, I'm constantly distracted by things of this world. This week, I will be more diligent to actively pursue growing closer to Christ so that He can satisfy me.

What question could I ask or what story could I share to start a back-and-forth conversation with a colleague (non-Christian or Christian) about my brokenness and the hope of Christ brought to the surface in this passage? Recently I've been thinking that life is about more than just work and studies, that I have a purpose. Have you had those same thoughts, and if so, what do you think?

JOHN 3:16-21

¹⁶“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only

Son of God. ¹⁹And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.

²⁰For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. ²¹But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.”

What are some key observations?

In this passage:

What character flaws or difficulties are presented?

Is there anything unusual, confusing, or surprising?

In the human condition:

What are the deeper issues of humanity that the tension in this story brings to the surface?

What's the main plot, argument, or idea?

In this passage:

How does God begin to address the tension?

How do I identify with the characters' struggles with sin and suffering?

In the last month, how have I embraced or resisted Christ's resolution?

In Christ:

How does this narrative point to Christ's ultimate resolution?

What question could I ask or what story could I share to start a back-and-forth conversation with a colleague (non-Christian or Christian) about my brokenness and the hope of Christ brought to the surface in this passage?