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# Climbing the Spiritual Mountain

The Questions of Jesus

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and

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foreword by

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## CLIMBING THE SPIRITUAL MOUNTAIN

### The Questions of Jesus

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# Foreword

*I like this book because . . .*

It fits human beings who are creatures beset by questions shaking and making the foundations, such as:

“What is the meaning of life, if there is one?”

“What is a human person, if not a special kind of machine?”

“What is my worth?”

“What is of real value?”

“Are we alone in the universe?”

“Are aliens inevitably hostile?”

“What is there to give thanks for, and to whom?”

*I like this book because . . .*

It recalls how Jesus engaged with individuals and groups in particular situations of need and decision by asking them questions—sometimes articulating as yet unfocused questions they were already wrestling with, sometimes opening up their imaginations to new questions which stretch horizons.

# 1

## Our Deepest Choices

“What are you seeking?”

The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, “Look, here is the Lamb of God!” The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, “What are you looking for?” They said to him, “Rabbi” (which translated means Teacher), “where are you staying?” He said to them, “Come and see.” They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o’clock in the afternoon. One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, “We have found the Messiah” (which is translated Anointed). He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, “You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas” (which is translated Peter). John 1:35–42

JOHN THE EVANGELIST BEGINS his story of Jesus in the Jordan valley with John the Baptist preaching a demanding sermon of repentance to his Jewish listeners. As he essentially calls the people to wake up, he invites individuals to come to an awareness of the fundamental beat of life with which hearts resonate and which can be so quickly lost in the round of daily choices. John the Baptist sees Jesus walking by and announces to his own disciples a stunning and unique declaration, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). Speaking to people who recognize

the images of the Passover lamb and the submissive servant “lamb led to the slaughter” of Isa 53:7, and in utter simplicity and innocent faith, John is pointing out that the sin of the world—past, present, and future—is absorbed by this Lamb. Jesus brings about reconciliation and peace between God and humankind as the gift of his person is embraced.

Embedded in John the Baptist’s introduction to Jesus is an encouragement for his own disciples to leave him and to follow Jesus. John’s humility sets the tone for the important dialogue to follow. In a world of competition, John sees beyond his own needs and ministry to the greater calling of the kingdom and takes what has been called the downward way to allow the new light of Jesus to shine forth. Andrew and an unnamed disciple (probably the Evangelist himself) respond to John’s announcement as they start to follow Jesus and gain his attention.

## WHAT IS MOST ESSENTIAL?

We can imagine the scene: Jesus is walking alone along the worn path leading away from the Jordan. The two disciples are following along behind, wondering how to broach the recommended option of changing teachers. Before they can articulate their desired plan, Jesus turns and utters a statement captured in two Greek words *ti zēteite* as presented by the Evangelist. In English, it comes across as “What are you seeking?” We know that in the poetic and highly symbolic Gospel of John nothing is a simple, casual thought. There are layers of meaning in individual observations. When Jesus asks, “What are you seeking?” he is not asking simply, “Can I help you?” or “Are you lost?” Jesus is asking something substantially deeper to these prospective followers. His question is more like “What is essential to you?” or “What are you really searching for?” “What is compelling to you?” or “What is your motive force?” These deeper questions are getting closer to the heart of the theme of John’s Gospel. We know this because the language of “seeking” (*zēteō*) used thirty-four times in John contains a distinct reference to “that which is essential.”<sup>1</sup> “Seeking” leads to “believing,” and once again, believing is never simply belief in some body of knowledge (a noun); believing is always presented as a verb leading to an active engagement with Abba. John’s sense of believing is a compelling disposition to seek after the essential reality of Abba.<sup>2</sup> The theologian and philosopher Kierkegaard

1. Stibbe, *John*, 38.

2. Schneiders, *Written*, 85–90.

describes this intense and focused seeking as “willing one thing” in his masterpiece *Purity of Heart*:

Father in heaven! What is a person without thee! What is all that he knows, vast accumulation though it be, but a chipped fragment if he does not know thee! What is all his striving, could it even encompass a world, but a half-finished work if he does not know thee: Thee the One, who art one thing and who art all! So may thou give to the intellect, wisdom to comprehend that one thing; to the heart, sincerity to receive this understanding; to the will, purity that wills only one thing.

The writer goes on to describe how this willing one thing will look:

In prosperity may thou grant perseverance to will one thing; amid distractions, collectedness to will one thing; in suffering, patience to will one thing. Oh, thou that giveth both the beginning and the completion, may thou early, at the dawn of day, give to the young man the resolution to will one thing. As the day wanes, may thou give to the old man a renewed remembrance of his first resolution, that the first may be like the last, the last like the first, in possession of a life that has willed only one thing.<sup>3</sup>

In the language of the psalmist, this intentionality is referred to as “living with an undivided heart,” that is, to truly keep choosing Abba at every turn (Ps 86:11).

Jesus’ question asks each of us to consider what it is that we really want. What do we really seek? In the award-winning film *The Wrestler*, the lead character Randy the Ram (played by Mickey Rourke) has lived infatuated by the adoration and applause of the arena crowds. He has forsaken all other commitments, including care for his only daughter Stephanie. As he closes in on the end of his wrestling career he begins to question the wisdom of his choices. “Is this descending spiral of fame, money and adulation really what I want from life?” he wonders. Randy’s questions lead us to consider the desires of our own hearts and if our choices are leading us where we really want to go?

Can we be honest and really penetrate through our defenses to discern what are the deepest desires of our hearts? C. S. Lewis suggests these desires are “part of our inconsolable secret” in his haunting sermon “Weight of Glory.” We want “to be a real ingredient in the divine happiness.” We want “acceptance by God, response, acknowledgment, and welcome into

3. Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart*, 3.

the heart of things.”<sup>4</sup> But we fail to recognize these longings; instead, we mistakenly focus our energies and longings on earthly relationships and achievement. We need to consider the import of the question “What are you seeking?” at whatever stage of life and at whatever age. What do I want—whether I am twenty-five, fifty-five, or eighty? What would my life look like if these desires were satisfied? From a spiritual perspective, St. Teresa of Avila muses that our journey with Abba is like coming up to a great castle. Each of its rooms opens up into some new awareness of Abba’s pure love. St. Teresa observes that as long as we focus on our own needs or wants, we never move beyond the front porch or veranda of the castle. Such is the dulling effect of self and its relationship to spiritual awareness and ascending the spiritual mountain.<sup>5</sup>

Jesus desires to evoke in us a deeper response. Can we escape the subtle draw of the superficial? Perhaps it is the difference between settling for temporary happiness when Jesus intends to give to us true beatitude. He encourages the woman at the well, another potential follower, with the question, “Why settle for regular water when I can give water that springs up gushing to eternal life?” (John 4:14). We pause to reflect on Jesus’ first question, “What do you really seek? Do you really want to climb the mountain or not?” Jesus asks these prospective learners (the root word for “disciple” contains the meaning “to learn”) for a showing of their true colors. He asks us through them, “Do you have the ability or desire or strong determination to pursue the truth?” This question is at the heart of climbing the spiritual mountain.

## RISKY BUSINESS

The two disciples of John answer Jesus with a question of their own, also framed as two Greek words (*pou meneis* or “you-abiding”): “Where are you staying?” On a casual level, the disciples might be asking, “Can we hang out with you for a while to get to know you better? To put it bluntly, is it worth our time and effort to leave the Baptist? This is a big step, you know.” Even at this level, it is not an insignificant question. Time and effort are required to explore spiritual truths. In the Evangelist’s story this interaction between Jesus and these two disciples takes place over several days. Any relationship

4. A sermon Lewis preached in the Church of St. Mary the Virgin, Oxford in 1941. See Lewis, *Weight of Glory*, 10–11.

5. St. Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, 11.

takes time. We, in turn, need to ask ourselves, how serious are we about this mountain climbing? What kind of investment are we prepared to make? What adjustments do we need to make in our commitment to our work? Do we leave any space for eternal thoughts in our preoccupation with achievement? What about our leisure? We numb out, watching television, engaging in sports, watching a film or two—all harmless activities—but are we merely drifting? What in our daily routine gets our attention? Do we do anything to deepen the relationship we claim is our most important?

Here, the disciples are focused and called out of their routine activities. Jesus has their attention, and they are contemplating a dramatic turn in their life direction. They are calling Jesus “Rabbi” or “Teacher” at this point in the conversation, the same name they would have been calling their old teacher, John the Baptist. They know it is a risky business to switch teachers. Who knows where it might lead? They consider their options and wonder about the cost.

However, for John the Evangelist who is reporting this story, the words “Where are you staying?” are charged with more profound meaning. They come across as “Where are you abiding?” (The Greek verb *menō* means “to abide”). The disciples are really asking Jesus, “What is the deepest desire of your heart? What are you really all about? We want to know your focus—what your heartbeat is declaring.” For Jesus, the answer is clear: “My heartbeat is about Abba, the Father. It is always about the Father.” He shares the same downward mobility as the Baptist. The great work of Jesus is to reveal and lead people to the Father. In his farewell prayer for his disciples before he heads to the cross, Jesus asserts, “I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you” (John 17:6–7). That is why he has come. There is no other reason.

This layering of John’s writing becomes richer when in the gospel Jesus turns around and says, “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them” (John 14:23). The Father and Jesus will abide with us. They will live with us. They will make their home in us at the deepest and most intimate place. The love, joy, peace, and union shared between the Father and Son will be shared with us. It is an amazing gift and promise given to the ones with courage to climb the mountain of faith. John changes the question and

directs it back to his readers: Will we abide with Jesus and Abba? Will we follow Jesus seriously and truly make him our center?

Such a work of abiding takes our deep initial question and searching into the realm of daily choices. Will I stay with Jesus? Will I be intentional in my journey with Jesus at a very practical level? In many ways, it comes down to what I let into my mind and heart. Over what will I linger? This abiding is not some moral grid of dos and don'ts; rather it is an exploration of what fosters my living relationship with Jesus. It is something like what the Apostle Paul had in mind when he said, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds" (Rom 12:2). So what films will I watch? What magazines will I purchase? What hobbies will I choose to fill up my time? These are practical questions with spiritual overtones. Decisions are made which allow helpful or unhelpful images into my mind—images that may include violence, disrespect for others, a demeaning of the human body or a disproportionate valuing of consumerism.

Take one example: In my Toronto inner city locale, violence is a devastating reality. Youth are shot and killed along the streets of our church neighborhood. Young people who have gone through our community center are now dead over drug-related violence—like Jamal who was found floating face down in the Humber River. Consequently, watching Hollywood films that glorify violence are unhelpful, disconnecting and distancing me from the pain and realities of my congregants. The apostle is encouraging us to be serious about what filters we use to interpret reality—ones that will lead us into a deeper sense of truth and that will allow us to continue the journey up the mountain.

## QUIVERING HEARTS

From the interaction generated by the two questions, Jesus extends a gracious invitation to the disciples and to us: "Come and see" (John 1:39). The invitation should make our hearts quiver with excitement. Jesus invites us to come and share the love of Abba. He invites us to become daughters and sons of the creator of the universe, indeed, the "lord of the star fields."<sup>6</sup> Again, we recognize that this statement is not a casual offer of hospitality. It is another way of inviting us to become disciples and learners of Jesus. It is a passageway from seeking to believing. When Jesus invites us to "come and see," he is inviting us to a Rubicon. We must cross over the river of

6. This phrase was made famous by the gifted songwriter Bruce Cockburn.

faith to live on the other side where active engagement with God is the norm. Karl Rahner speaks of these invitational and decisive moments as “eye to eye” encounters with God that have the import of totally shaping the direction of our lives:

This decision is basically always a decisive answer to a question that God directs to us. This decision is an answer to the question of the soliciting love of God, to the question of the unconditional faithfulness to his will . . . Therefore moments of decision are always moments of God when God’s eye looks at us, and our look meets his. They are moments from which an eternity will live.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, “come and see” are radical words inviting us to engage and be engaged by God in a truly transformational experience. This fundamental option is affirming that we are moving into the world of mystery, where heaven touches earth, a place where the ladder between heaven and earth meet and that place is named Jesus (John 1:51).

Of course, there is another voice we hear in our minds whispering softly, “Do not make such a declaration. Postpone it for another day.” The Scripture bluntly calls such a voice “the Deceiver” (Rev 12:9). This is the voice that has kept us at the base of the mountain for all these years. This is the voice preventing us from making the ascent. This is the voice, in St. Teresa’s analogy, that glues us to the front porch, the voice of our immediate need. This is the voice that truly dislikes adventure and has the smell of death. Jesus invites us to “come and see” but he will never force us; rather he offers us the grace to overcome the Deceiver’s nattering—if we will listen and take our deepest desires seriously.

Our reflection on the story ends with two observations of the immediate effect on these early disciples. First, we note Andrew running off in excitement to tell his brother Simon the good news. We later learn in John’s Gospel that Andrew is regularly doing this sort of thing—finding people and bringing them to Jesus. He brings the young lad with the bread and fishes to Jesus, precipitating the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand (John 6:8); later he introduces some Greeks who have wanted to meet with the Savior of the world (John 12:22). We can never underestimate the power of simple friendship and personal interest in achieving momentous spiritual change. In his excitement about Jesus, Andrew has naturally emerged as the first evangelist in the scriptures.

7. Rahner, *Need and Blessing*, 92.

Who do we bring to Jesus? Who do we mentor? Who has mentored us? Who, like Andrew, walks with us through the changes of life? Camilla Gibb in her novel *Sweetness In the Belly* comments on the weakness of the word “friend” in English. It is a prosaic word—uncommitted, perhaps even casual, and a far cry from the Harari word for “friend” of the Ethiopian people, meaning something like “my liver”—intense and essential. “My liver” highlights the importance of friends, and Andrew, in his recognition of the treasure he has found and his accompanying need to share is a worthy model for us to emulate. He is the friend we long to have and wish to be on our ascent up the spiritual mountain.

We also note the language that Andrew employs. He no longer calls Jesus “Master,” but “the Messiah.” Jesus is not simply a teacher among other teachers; he is now the long awaited Messiah, the Anointed One of God (John 1:41). Indeed, Andrew has passed through a tunnel from the realm of seeking, into the land of believing. He engages Jesus as his center and thus becomes once again a model for us as we consider climbing our own spiritual mountain. If Andrew, a regular fisherman working the shores of the Sea of Tiberius can move ahead on spiritual terms, then there is potential for real movement and real growth for all of us.

Second, Andrew brings his older brother Simon to Jesus. When Jesus sees Simon he tells this fledgling disciple that he will receive a new name—*Cephas*, or Peter, which means “rock” (John 1:42). Jesus sees Simon with insight; he sees into Simon, penetrating his façade and outer self. Jesus observes the potential in this lovely man. He is not only a worker of the Sea of Galilee but a person who will become absolutely pivotal in the history of the church and humankind. Jesus always sees our potential. He never desires diminishment for us but wants to lead us into spacious places of abundance and fecundity. Jesus has a dream for us as well. Just as he renamed Simon, so he wants to give us a new name, as we are told in the closing words of Scripture: “I will give a white stone, and on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it” (Rev 2:17).

What is Jesus’ dream for you? How can Abba’s dream for you connect with the deepest desires of your life? He does not play games like the capricious Greek gods. Instead, he seeks only our good. If we begin to climb the mountain, we are starting in the direction of receiving that new name, a name that declares that we are the beloved—like Andrew, Peter, and the unnamed “beloved disciple.” Preparation for ascent starts with a serious question and leads us to a serious ending, a new name that gives us

a passageway to heights, to mountaintops, and a new dynamic to pursue the summit.

## **FURTHER REFLECTION**

1. What does it mean for you to climb the spiritual mountain? How do you picture your ascent?
2. Imagine Jesus turning to you and asking, “What do you really want in life?” What is your response?
3. What keeps you from really going after your deepest desires?
4. How might you take some small steps in following Jesus in an intentional way?