

The Jesus I Never Knew

Rich Nathan

March 8-9, 2003

John: The Jesus I Never Knew Series

John 1:14-51

This weekend we are standing on the edge of a very significant time for our entire world. It is possible that in the next few weeks, America will once again be at war. It looks increasingly likely that hundreds of thousands of young men and women from this country will be ordered to invade Iraq. With this newest war and the recent arrest of the significant leader of the Al Qaida terrorist network, there has been an increasing discussion of the threat of retaliation, either by Iraq or some other entity through terrorist attacks somewhere in the United States.

A month ago, as I was thinking about the state of the world and how uncertain things were, the question occurred to me, "What if America right now is like Rome in 410 AD, right before the city of Rome was sacked by Alaric, the King of the Visigoths, and his barbarian hoard?" In other words, what would happen to people in this country if things got really bad? What would happen if some terrorists set off dirty bombs in New York, LA, or Washington, or several places at once? Perhaps you've had this same train of thought. But if destroying a couple of buildings and killing 3000 people has sent this country into an economic tailspin, creating the current political crisis, what would happen to us if an attack came against one of our major cities or if there was a coordinated attack against several cities, or our electric grids, or the reservoirs for our water supply?

It is obvious to most Americans that we are pretty vulnerable. We're an open society. We don't have police stops every few miles like they do in many other countries. We don't require people to carry identity papers everywhere.

What would happen if our economic infrastructure began following like dominoes? Corporations fail. They can't pay their loans. Banks fail. Insurance companies fail. There are massive layoffs. Or what would happen if the basic infrastructure that sustains our lives began breaking down? That electricity or gas supplies became uncertain.

The question I asked myself was how deeply do we in this church know Jesus so that we would not freak out like the rest of America? Would the group of people that make up this church share our stuff or would we fight and claw like the rest of the country just to survive? Would we fall apart emotionally and spiritually if we did suffer an attack? Or would we be able to hold it together if America or the world was on the verge of a new dark age. Is there enough true Christianity to see us through?

America, of course, is not Christianity. And Christianity is not America. The fate of Christianity does not hang in the balance with the fate of our country anymore than the fate of Christianity was determined by the fate of Rome, one of the greatest empires in the history of the world. Back in the 5th century there was actually a huge debate after Rome fell. On one side, Eusebius, the father of church history, felt that the fall of Rome meant the end of the world. In his mind, Christianity and Rome rose and fell together, and with Rome fallen, in his mind, the fate of Christianity in the world was over.

On the other side stood the great St. Augustine. He said Rome was one thing. It was the city of man. But Christianity was something altogether different; it was the city of God. And the city of God continues regardless of what happens to the city of man. I wonder how many American Christians really clearly distinguish in their minds the difference between the city of man, which is the United States, and the city of God, which is the church.

If things get really bad, I believe one of the main issues that will determine how well you or I will live, is how well we know Jesus Christ. I mean really know him. How conquered are we in a God who is not shaken by world events?

I borrowed the title from today's talk, and indeed, our entire series from a wonderful book written by Philip Yancey nearly a decade ago titled, "The Jesus I Never Knew." For my opening prayer, I'd like you to listen to a prayer prayed a number of years ago by Dr. S.M. Lockridge. It was prayed as an invocation at the opening, I believe, of a denominational assembly. Some of you, who have been in the church for some time, have heard this prayer before. Let's listen to Dr. Lockridge's prayer.

Wouldn't you like to pray just a little bit like Dr. Lockridge, especially during a time of crisis? He repeatedly asks the question, "Do you know him?" Wouldn't you like to know Jesus like this old saint knew Jesus?

In the text that we're going to study, John the Baptist offers us the starting point for our growth in the knowledge of Christ. Let's read beginning in verse 29, *The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.' I myself did not know him...."*

The starting point for sinking down deep roots in Christ, putting down an anchor that is going to stabilize us no matter what comes to this country, or whatever comes into our personal lives, is the confession of ignorance that John makes in verse 31, "I myself did not know him." What a refreshing, honest confession of spiritual shallowness.

In his book *The Jesus I Never Knew*, Phillip Yancey began with a chapter titled, "The Jesus I Thought I Knew." And in this chapter Yancey begins by talking about the Jesus that he learned about as a child in Sunday school. A Jesus who was so pleasant, so nice, so easy going, that he was like a Victorian Nanny in some old Charles Dickens novel. The Jesus whose message to boys and girls was basically, "Little boys and girls, remember to be nice to your mommies and daddies." That Jesus was like Mr. Rogers or Captain Kangaroo, only nicer.

He said it was only later that he asked himself the question: "What government of the world would ever execute Mr. Rogers or Captain Kangaroo? There had to be more to Jesus than "Little children, be nice to your mommies and daddies."

We start this whole process of deepening our roots in Christ by confessing, "I myself did not know him." My prayer through this series is that there will be much that we will learn about Jesus Christ that will surprise us, shock us, attract us, and intrigue us. As pastor of this church, especially during this difficult time, this time of crisis, I want each one of us to know Jesus Christ better at the end of the series than we do right now. That we would be able to pray a little bit more like Dr. Lockridge.

Like Dr. Lockridge, the apostle John piles up title after title in this chapter regarding who Christ is. So John writes in verse 14 of chapter 1, *The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

Where do you find God? The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. Literally, the Word became flesh and *pitched his tent in our midst* or *tabernacled among us*. The picture John is painting is drawn from the Old Testament. In the book of Exodus we read that there was a tent, a tabernacle in the middle of the Israelite camp in the wilderness. And it was in this tent that Moses used to go to meet with God. People would stand back and they would see a cloud, a pillar, literally descend on that tent. The cloud was God's glory visibly manifested. And as Moses went into the tent they would see God's glory come down to meet with him. If a person wanted to meet with God, they'd go to the tent. John is saying that the place where we meet with God today is Jesus. His flesh, his body, is the tent that contains the glory of God. The Word became flesh and pitched his tent among us. We have seen his glory. We see the cloud come down in Christ.

How do I deepen my knowledge of God? I go to meet with God through Jesus. People say, "I find it difficult to connect with God." Perhaps you find God in nature just by walking in the woods, or by hiking through some quiet ravine. Perhaps you connect with God in music or in art by listening and observing, and taking in its beauty. Perhaps you would say about yourself, "I find God in loving, warm relationships with other people, through friendships, through holding my

child, through holding my grandchild,” or I find God through A.A. or some other 12-step program.

There is something of God in nature. There is something of God in the arts. There is something of God in loving relationships. There is something of God as people get together and are honest with each other as they are going through recovery together. But if you want the fullness of God’s presence, what the Bible calls his glory, if you want something that goes beyond a vague feeling, a fleeting sense, to something that is deeper and more substantial, you’ve got to go to Jesus.

John writes in verse 18, *No one has ever seen God, but God, the one and only, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known.*

Friend, do you do feel like God has been somewhat elusive to you? That he is like a breeze blowing by your face? You can’t quite grab a hold of him? Go to Jesus. He’s the one who makes God known. Every time you pray, whenever you think about God, whenever you wonder what God is like, whenever you struggle with doubt or fear, think of Jesus, learn about Jesus, go to Jesus.

And when you do go to Jesus, do you feel that you are going to meet in him a God who is generous or a God who is somewhat withholding? Do you expect to get help when you go to Jesus? Do you expect that God is going to help you? That he is going to open up his hand to you as you find him in Jesus? Or do you expect instead that his hand is probably going to be closed. And that you are probably not going to get anything as a result of your prayers?

Again, let’s look at what the apostle John says about Jesus. Verse 15, *John [meaning John the Baptist] testifies concerning him. He cries out, saying, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’ From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another.*

Now, verse 16 can be more literally translated, *From the fullness of his grace, we have all received grace in the place of grace, or, From the fullness of his grace, we have all received grace instead of grace, grace upon grace.* The picture that comes to my mind is that of the ocean – one wave recedes from the shore and immediately another wave comes rolling in. Wave after wave, grace upon grace. An inexhaustible supply of grace from an infinite, vast ocean of grace Christ wills to reveal to you and to me and to this world wave after wave of grace, undeserved favor, unmerited kindness, unearned blessing, wave after wave.

Friend, when you read this phrase, “From the fullness,” from the inexhaustible supply of grace we have all received, grace upon grace, when you read this phrase does it resonate inside of you? Do you say, “Yes, absolutely. Amen. That’s the Jesus I know. That’s what I expect from Jesus.”

It is common for people to say to God, "Lord, if you just give me this one thing, this healing for my child, this freedom from the addiction I am struggling with, this husband that I want, this job that I'm seeking, I will not ask you for anything ever again." John 1:16 says that you never need to ever pray like that ever again as if God gave you this big thing that you would exhaust his supply of grace. Christ is an inexhaustible source of grace. You never need to think, "Well, everything in my life is going so well. God has been so good to me. It would be wrong of me to ask him for favor at work, or favor in this class, or favor in this key relationship as I'm going to talk with someone. It would be wrong of me to ask for God's favor." Wave after wave. One wave barely recedes from the shore before another wave of grace comes to you.

Do you know Jesus like that? Is this the Christ that you know? We read in verse 17, *For the law is given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.* Do you know God well enough to let him tell you the truth even when it hurts? Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. Christ has in his person this wonderful balance of grace and truth. Kindness and firmness. Mercy and boundaries. Christ is not just Mr. Rogers, or a kindly old nanny who says, "Now, children, just run along and play. Have fun." Christ is not an enabler, an accommodator, or some co-dependent marshmallow. Christ is not a nun waiting to whack you on your knuckles for some minor infraction. Christ is full of grace and truth.

How difficult it is to stay on that tightrope. No one in the history of the world has been able to stay on, or walk on that tightrope other than Jesus Christ. We all fall one way or the other. We are either too hard or we are too soft. We either enable, or accommodate addiction, selfishness and self-indulgence, or we set such firm boundaries that people don't experience mercy when they are in our presence.

Grace and truth. You know, the Lord is always going to tell you the truth, even if the truth hurts. The Lord is never going to lie to you or me. The Lord will challenge our agendas. God challenges our dreams, regarding how our lives should look. Our dreams mostly involve having jobs of prominence, comfortable moments here on earth. God is much more interested in getting us ready for heaven than in making us comfortable here on earth. The Lord will clip our wings. The Lord will limit our ambitions. The Lord will say "no" to our appetites. The Lord will confront our behaviors. The Lord will pinch our flesh. And do you know what is one of the most common ways that Christ will speak the truth to you, truth that stings, truth that hurts, truth that has a bite to it? Do you know one of the most common ways that you are going to hear Christ speaking the truth to you?

I hear the truth most often and my chain is most often jerked in an uncomfortable way through other people who know Christ. My wife, Marlene, is used more

often in my life as an agent of the truth of Christ than anyone else on earth. She'll say to me, "Richie, you are wonderful to everyone else on earth. You are so welcoming and warm and giving. But when you come home, you just shut down. You don't communicate. You don't verbalize love enough." And when she says those kinds of things to me, as she often does, everything in me wants to scream, "Yes, I do!" Sometimes I actually do say, "Yes, I do." I want to defend, I want to deflect, I want to point out her weaknesses. But inside, I have this uncomfortable feeling that God is talking to me through my wife.

Friend, if you are anything like me, God is going to use human beings to bring you his truth. It could be that he'll use a family member or a friend or a small group leader, or a co-worker. God can confront you through someone who doesn't even know God. He's big enough to speak to us through anyone. And you will know that this is happening to you when you are upset by what is being said, when what is being said stings, when you have a desire to deflect and defend. But inside there is a ring of truth that you don't want to acknowledge. When you are all alone what is being said corresponds with your deepest intuitions regarding yourself. The book of Proverbs tells us dozens of times that God reveals his wisdom to us through correction by others.

Is there some truth that you haven't wanted to hear? Is someone telling you about your insensitivity? Is someone talking to you about your ambition, or your work habits? Your addictions? The way you relate? Or some belief that you are holding about yourself that is not true? Is there some truth that you haven't wanted to hear?

Friend, if you want to know Jesus better, then welcome his coming to you through the truth and correction that others bring even if the truth hurts.

Jesus is not only the tabernacle, the tent where we meet with God; Jesus is not only the inexhaustible source of grace upon grace; Jesus is not only the one who tells us the truth, but John the Baptist calls him the Lamb of God. Look with me at verse 29: *The next day* [actually John 1 could be outlined as a week in the life of Jesus. John gives us these time sequences and it all amounts to a week in the life of Christ.] *John [John the Baptist] saw Jesus coming towards him and he said, "Look the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."* And then, in verse 35, *The next day* [now we are on day 3], *John was there again with two of his disciples. When he saw Jesus passing by he said, "Look the Lamb of God."*

Why does John the Baptist call Jesus the Lamb of God? What do you think? It is not because Jesus is gentle, soft and cuddly like a lamb, or that children like to run after Jesus like they run after the lambs in the petting zoo. John the Baptist is saying that Jesus is the sacrificial Lamb that many Old Testament scriptures pointed to. Jesus is the God-provided Lamb of Genesis 22 that was killed by Abraham in place of his son Isaac as a sacrifice to God. Jesus is the Passover Lamb whose blood protected Jewish families in Egypt from God's wrath. Jesus

is the Lamb of the daily temple sacrifices offered morning and evening for people's sins mentioned in the book of Leviticus. Jesus is the Lamb led to the slaughter that Isaiah 53 talks about, the Lamb that took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows.

We read here about the Lamb of God, that Christ is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. That phrase "takes away" literally means removes, carries off. Perhaps the background for this phrase is found in a fascinating ritual found in the Old Testament book of Leviticus. In Leviticus 16 we read of a ritual in which the Jewish High Priest would lay both of his hands on a goat and symbolically transfer the entire nation's sins on to the head of that goat. Then the goat would be chased out into the wilderness, symbolically carrying the sins of the nation off with him. The goat was called the "scapegoat." The goat took all of the blame, and all of the punishment that the people deserved on its own head and carried it away. When Christ died on the cross, he fulfilled this Old Testament picture of the scapegoat. Through faith, when a person comes to Christ, we can place our sins upon his crucified body and Christ carries our sins away from the place of judgment.

So let me ask you a question. What do you believe God does with your sins? Do you really feel that God in Christ has separated you from your sins? Let me make this more personal. Consider those sins that you feel most guilty about. For me, I feel most guilty about those things that I've done in which I've hurt someone else, especially people that I love. I want you to think for a moment about those sins you've committed that you feel most guilty about. Have you confessed them to Christ? If you haven't, you are forfeiting peace and forgiveness and a clean conscience, which Christ freely offers you. 1 John 1:9 read, *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*

If you have confessed your sins, do you feel forgiven? Do you feel like your sin has been taken away from God's sight? That it has been carried away from the place of judgment? Do you feel like your conscience is clean? Do you know Christ as your Lamb of God, your scapegoat, who carries your sin far away from you?

And the last title that I want to consider today, there are a number of others in this text, but the last one I want to consider is very simply, Rabbi. We read in verse 37, *When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus. Turning around Jesus saw them following and he asked, "What do you want?" They said, "Rabbi, (which means Teacher), where are you staying?" "Come," he replied, "and you will see."*

Rabbi, Teacher – do you know in the evangelical wing of the Christian church, of which this church is a part, there has been an unfortunate reaction to what more liberal churches teach about Jesus. Historically in more liberal churches, and I

don't mean politically liberal, rather theologically liberal, there was a tendency to call Jesus a great prophet, a wonderful teacher, but deny him all of the titles that we read in the Bible. That Jesus is God come in the flesh. That Jesus is the Lamb of God who comes to take our sins away. In reaction to the liberals, the more evangelical wing of the church was so insistent upon asserting that Jesus is God come in the flesh, and he is the Lamb of God who came to take the sins of the world away, that we almost avoid calling him our Teacher, our Rabbi.

But this is a tragic omission in the church because it is the ministry of Jesus to teach us, to instruct us. What does it mean to call Jesus "teacher?" As Dallas Willard stated so well in his book *The Divine Conspiracy*, he asked the question, "Do you think that Jesus is really smart?" Do you know Jesus well enough to say, "I believe that Jesus is the smartest person who ever lived? And I believe that Jesus' proposed way of life is better than anything I could ever come up with or that anyone else could have ever come up with?"

For example, do you believe that Jesus was really smart when he said, "You have heard it said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, but I tell you do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.'" Do you believe that Christ was smart when he taught us to not seek personal vengeance, or is that the dumbest thing you've ever heard?

Or regarding your sexuality, do you believe Christ was smart when he said, "I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart? If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell."

Would you say, friend, that Christ really is your teacher about life? That you believe he is the smartest person on earth? And that when you have a problem, your first thought is, "I'm going to go to Christ." "I need to hear what my teacher, Jesus, says about this." I'll be honest with you. I want Christ to be my teacher. But there are things that Jesus said, including the ones I just read, that I still shake my head at and say, "Is that really the best way to live? Do you really know what you are talking about, Jesus?"

How can you and I get to know Jesus better? Looking at the followers of Christ in this text, I'd like to finish with three simple, but I believe profound, principles. The first is that as I look at John and the Baptist, I would say, no matter how gifted you are, or how much you have been used, stay humble before God.

In verse 19 we read, *Now this was John's testimony when the Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Christ." They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" He answered, "no." Finally, they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who*

sent us. What do you say about yourself?” John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, “I am the voice of one crying in the desert, ‘Make straight the way for the Lord.’ Now some Pharisees who had been sent questioned him, “Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?” “I baptize with water,” John replied, “but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.”

John is saying that it doesn't matter who he is, it matters who Christ is. Here's a man who Jesus said is the greatest man in the history of the world, John the Baptist. And John the Baptist said, “I'm nothing in comparison to Christ. I'm not even worthy of being a slave and untying this man's sandals.”

You know, one thing that I've loved about Vineyard throughout our history is that as a church movement, leaders have refused to pile up titles for themselves. People used to come to John Wimber, the founder of the Vineyard, and say to him, “Well, what should we call you? Are you a prophet? Are you an apostle?” In so many church movements, there is this piling up of titles for an individual. I've received letters literally signed “Apostle So-and-So,” “Prophet So-and-So.” People want to be recognized as a prophet, apostle, or evangelist.

I love John Wimber's response. He said, “You want to know who I am? I'm just a fat man trying to get to heaven.” And then he would drink another diet coke. That's how you get to know God. Don't be too enamored by yourself. No matter how gifted you are, no matter how much has happened through you, stay humble before God.

Here's the second principle. No matter how much you think you know, stay hot after God. Look at verse 35, *The next day John was there again with two of his disciples. When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, “Look, the Lamb of God.” When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus. Turning around Jesus saw them following and asked, “What do you want?” They said, “Rabbi, (which means Teacher) where are you staying?” “Come,” he replied, “and you will see.” So they went and saw where he was staying and spent the day with him.*

Here were two disciples with the greatest man in the history of the world, this great prophet, John the Baptist, but they left him to follow Jesus. No matter how much you know, whatever your present experience is, however long you've been in this thing called Christianity, stay hot after God. That's how you increase in the knowledge of God. They spent the day with Jesus. I wonder how many of you would say, “I know Christ has invited me to follow him, but I've allowed such a great distance to arise in my relationship with Christ, that I feel like I've lost his presence. Why not draw near to him again? Tomorrow morning, instead of reading the paper, why not read the Bible first? Take a walk and reconnect with Christ.

And the last principle is, no matter how threatened you are, stay honest with God. We read in verse 43, *The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said, "Follow me." Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida. Philip found Nathanael and told him, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets are wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" Nathanael asked. "Come and see," said Philip. When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, "Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false."* And then Christ revealed more of who he was to Nathanael.

Nathanael's reaction to hearing Philip say that he had found the Messiah and that the Messiah was born in Nazareth was to say to Philip, "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" It is so easy for us to play church with each other, to be completely plastic, to never confess doubt, to pretend you believe more than you do, to pretend you know more than you do, to try to look more spiritual than you are. You are around all of these religious people. They all seem to be a step ahead. They are all so very sure.

Do you know the one person who really gets to know Christ? It is the person who is honest. He's the one who says, "I'm not sure I believe this. I'm really concerned about the present crisis. I don't feel like I will stay standing if things get rough. I don't really understand how this verse applies to my experience in my world." Jesus loves openhearted honesty. The people who really get to see and know more of Jesus are the refreshingly honest people. They are the ones who say, "Lord, I don't completely get it. I don't understand why you do such and such. But I really do want to know you better." No matter how threatened you are, be honest with God.

You know, you may be going through a personal crisis right now – a marital or relational problem, a family crisis, a problem with one of your kids, a health crisis, a problem with a parent. Perhaps your difficulty is emotional depression, anxiety, or it's financial. On the other hand, there are many of you who are doing well. But there is nothing more important for you and for me than that we would get to know Jesus better. Let's pray.

Call: There are some of you today who would say, "I don't feel like I know Jesus at all. But I want to begin this journey of getting to know Jesus. I want to get on the road. It feels, Rich, like the journey may be a thousand miles long. But I at least want to get on the road to Christ."

Evangelistic Call.

Prayer: This morning I'm going to ask each one of you who believe yourselves to be followers of Christ, to respond to this talk by asking yourself the question, "What particular aspect of Christ do I really need to know better at this moment in my life? Do I need to begin by just meeting God in Jesus Christ? Do I need to

know Jesus as the one who is generous, grace upon grace? Do I need to know him as the one who is trying to tell you the truth through other people? Do I need to know him right now as the Lamb of God, who takes away your sins? Do I need to know him as Teacher?"

The Jesus I Never Knew

Rich Nathan

March 8-9, 2003

John: The Jesus I Never Knew Series

John 1:14-51

I. The Revelation of Christ

- A. Where do you begin your search for spiritual knowledge? (Jn. 1:29-31)
- B. Where do you find God? (Jn. 1:14)
- C. What do you expect to get from God when you pray? (Jn. 1:16)
- D. Do you let God tell you the truth even when it hurts? (Jn. 1:17)
- E. What do you believe God has done with your sins? (Jn. 1:29,35)
- F. Do you think Jesus is really smart? (Jn. 1:35-39)

II. The Response of His Followers

- A. No matter how gifted you are, stay humble before God. (Jn. 1:19-28)
- B. No matter how much you know, stay hot after God. (Jn. 1:35-39)
- C. No matter how much you are threatened, stay honest with God. (Jn. 1:43-47)