

“Ramsey has written a narrative that captures the life of Jesus so vividly, at times you’ll wonder if he sat down and spoke with all the people involved in the story.”

Trillia Newbell, author of *United*

“This book throws open the curtains on Jesus and invites us to taste and see the *only* love that is better than life. This isn’t a great book just for the season of Lent but for every season of life.”

Scotty Smith, teacher in residence, West End Community Church, Nashville, Tennessee

“This book succeeds at capturing and displaying the drama of Jesus—incarnate, dead, and risen—with memorable force.”

Robert W. Yarbrough, professor of New Testament at Covenant Theological Seminary

“Ramsey’s solid biblical teaching and storytelling have deeply impacted my journey as a Christian working in Hollywood. This is a book I will give friends to help them understand what I believe.”

Korey Scott Pollard, TV producer and assistant director of *Grey’s Anatomy*, *House M.D.*, *CSI*, *Monk*, and *Nashville*

“There is a graceful simplicity to Ramsey’s prose—and to his retelling of the old familiar story—that enables him to truly move his readers with the potency of the gospel. Here is a quiet voice that can shake stone.”

N. D. Wilson, author of *Death by Living* and *Boys of Blur*

“I don’t know anyone who can make the stories—and the Story—in Scripture feel as present, as alive, and as sweeping as Russ Ramsey. His prose, his grasp of history and theology, not to mention his love of Jesus, do more than merely draw me into his book—they make me want to read the Bible.”

Andrew Peterson, singer and songwriter

“With a writer’s imagination and skill, a theologian’s backbone, and a disciple’s devotion, Ramsey weds knowledge to emotional resonance and information to immanence in this moving account of Jesus’ life.”

Dan Doriani, professor of theology at Covenant Theological Seminary

“Many of us have wondered at some point, What would it be like to live when Jesus did? With purity to biblical truth and perceptive insight into how the human heart works, Russ Ramsey answers that question. He tells the story of Jesus dwelling among us—a story filled with political intrigue, baffling miracles, relational complexities, and heart-breaking suffering—by presenting old truths in engagingly fresh ways. Read this book! And then share it with others who need to witness Jesus anew.”

Jani Ortlund, speaker at Renewal Ministries, author of *Fearlessly Feminine* and *His Loving Law, Our Lasting Legacy*

“It gives me great pleasure to endorse the life and writing of Russ Ramsey. We have been in the trenches together caring for the ‘called out ones.’ Russ gave us gospel immersion and fruits of deep care with *The Advent of the Lamb of God*. He continues this life-giving pattern of grace and service with this new, beautifully written book pointing to the Hero King Jesus.”

Charlie Peacock, co-executive director at Art House America, TV producer, and record producer for Switchfoot and the Civil Wars

“Ramsey’s ability to knit the accounts of the Gospels into a highly readable, easily accessible, and grace-saturated narrative is a blessing for all. Telling the story of Jesus in bite-sized readings that can easily accord with anticipation and celebration of the Easter season makes this book a special gift.”

Bryan Chapell, president emeritus at Covenant Theological Seminary



RETELLING THE STORY SERIES

THE PASSION
OF THE
KING OF GLORY

RUSS RAMSEY



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FOR CHRIS, MARGARET, KATE, AND JANE.

You give so much more than you take.

This book is for you.

I pray you would come to know

Jesus better through my life

than my writing.



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Preface

THE BOOKS THAT COULD BE WRITTEN



*J*ESUS' DISCIPLE JOHN WAS A WRITER. When John sat down to write, he clearly cared not only about the content he meant to convey but also about the way he put it all together. John was an artist. The story he set out to tell in his Gospel is the most ambitious story there is—how God created and redeemed humanity. Imagine sitting down to write that story. How would you start? When would you be finished?

Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, John opened his Gospel with the ambition of a man who was going to do his best to give us as much of the scope of this story as he possibly could. If you don't believe me, just look at how he begins. He takes us all the way back to the dawn of time: "In the beginning was the Word . . ." Ambitious.

When John comes to the end of his story, he reveals what every writer denies at first but eventually acknowledges—he lives in a world of limits. For any story we set out to tell, we end up telling

only some of it. There is nothing for it. So as ambitious as his opening line might have been, John ends his Gospel acknowledging the reality of limits: “Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.”

I believe John’s Gospel is exactly what the Holy Spirit meant for him to write, without error and more than sufficient to reveal the one who was the Word, present at creation and solely suited to accomplish our redemption.

I also believe, though, that as John wrote, he grieved the stories he had to leave out for the sake of the narrative he meant to tell. I wonder with joyful fascination what stories ended up on his editing room floor as discarded bits of vellum and parchment. And I wonder what stories remain that he thought about cutting but then just couldn’t bear to.

My hope is that this book would serve as a faithful servant of Scripture. I’ve packed this book with hundreds of Scripture references. Let me explain how I use them. Throughout this book I paraphrase pretty freely in order to maintain a unified voice. Rarely do I quote Scripture directly or at length. This applies to character dialogue. If a character says something and there’s a Scripture reference in the endnotes, that doesn’t necessarily mean I’m quoting the original text. I’m probably not. More than likely I’m paraphrasing and distilling a larger moment in Scripture to work within the limits of this book. The references I include are there to lead you to the stories Scripture unfolds with perfect sufficiency.

While I’m on this point, I should note that I engage in some speculation in this book, imagining how certain conversations happened, how particular characters felt, and what various scenes looked like. I have tried to limit my speculations to reasonable

inferences that wouldn't redirect the Bible's narrative arc. I've avoided inventing characters or manufacturing extrabiblical encounters. I've tried to keep my speculative input within the natural and plausible lines of human nature.

For example, Scripture tells us nothing about how the nobleman from Capernaum felt as his son lay dying. But as a father of four, I imagine he must have felt some of what I experienced when one of my own children had a health scare—helplessness, worry, desperation. I've attributed some of these feelings to the nobleman on the basis that any father would certainly be enveloped in a flurry of emotions like these. When I speculate, it is in the hope that this journey through the pages of Scripture will capture your imagination in ways that will serve your lifelong study of the Bible.

Most of the editorial choices I have made about what to include (and what to leave out) are based on my desire to offer a story that would drive readers relentlessly to the empty tomb by way of the cross. Exploration of the political and religious conditions of the day is crucial for this objective. After all, God in his wisdom sent his Son into the world of Herod Antipas, Pontius Pilate, Caiaphas the high priest, the Pharisees, and the Sanhedrin—who together became the fuel God used to propel this narrative toward Golgotha. I wanted to unpack their significance, and I wanted to show God's providence in sending his Son into our world at that time. So while I have poured myself into the telling of certain stories, I have also left many beloved stories untouched. I've glossed over some better-known characters (like the woman at the well in John 4) while taking pains to expound on others who were given far fewer verses (like John the Baptist). I assure you I did this under protest. I wanted to write about all of it—every person, every conversation, every miracle, every conflict.

Oh, the books that could be written.

The Passion of the King of Glory was written in a world of limits. I set up some rules for myself as I wrote. This book would have forty chapters, one for each day of Lent if people wanted to use it as a Lenten devotional. I would try to find a voice similar to that of John, who was never overtly self-referential even though he was writing the story of own his life as a follower of Christ. As with John's Gospel, my narrative would stay in the third person, making no direct eye contact with the reader until the end.

I developed these rules while writing the first book in this series, *The Advent of the Lamb of God*, twenty-five chapters (one for each day of Advent in December so people can use it as an Advent devotional) following the epic arc of Scripture from the Garden of Eden to the manger in Bethlehem. Together, *The Advent of the Lamb of God* and *The Passion of the King of Glory* tell the story of the need for, the coming of, and the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The third volume in this series, *The Mission of the Body of Christ*, picks up the story after Jesus' resurrection and tells the remaining narrative of the New Testament, the story of the early church. It is thirty-one chapters long, ideal for reading over the course of one month.

I give my life to the study and expression of Scripture, and it is one of my greatest joys to be able to say that. The story told in these pages is my story. Every picture of brokenness in these pages is in some measure the story of my own brokenness. Every need that rises to the surface is in some way a need I share. Every tendency toward rebellion, every cry of desperation, every prayer for forgiveness, and every hope of redemption rings true in me. I write not as a removed researcher but as an eyewitness to the impact this story has had on my own life and the world I inhabit. This is the story of how God loved and rescued me. I pray the same would be true for you.



PART 1

OBSCURITY



1

LIFE FOR THE DYING

John 4:43-54

NO FATHER SHOULD HAVE TO WATCH his own son die.

The road from Capernaum to Cana ran uphill the entire way, pulling at the already burdened nobleman's steps. He concluded there was only one option that might save his dying son, and that solitary hope had him moving away from the boy as quickly as he could go. It was all he knew to do.

If he hurried, he could cover the twelve miles between Galilee's shores westward to Cana before evening. Though his culture considered it unbecoming of a grown man to run, time was against him. Regardless of what anyone thought, he needed to keep moving, and in this moment neither his wealth, nor his age, nor his position mattered. He was desperate.

From humble beginnings, the nobleman had risen to a position of midlevel importance in Galilee as a servant of Herod Antipas, son

of Herod the Great. It was Herod Antipas's world. The nobleman was only living in it. Back before Herod the Great died, he had divided oversight of his part of the Roman Empire between three of his sons: Philip, who oversaw the northeastern lands of the Golan Heights; Archelaus, who became king over Judea, Idumea, and Samaria; and Antipas, who assumed the lesser title of tetrarch over the regions of Galilee and Perea.

Though Archelaus was older and presumed to have the greatest leadership potential of the three brothers, Antipas was driven to command respect. Knowing it would not simply be given, he was determined to earn it. The Galilee he inherited had become politically unstable, a haven for dissidents and outlaws. To Antipas, this was as much an opportunity as it was a problem. He wouldn't just rule Galilee. He would transform it.

Following in his father's footsteps, Antipas did the only thing he knew would gain notice: he built. Early on he rebuilt the war-ravaged Sepphoris into his capital city, which became home to over fifty thousand people. Not too long after that he moved his capital to the glimmering shores of the Sea of Galilee, establishing the great city of Tiberius, with its stadium, hot-springs bathhouse, temple, and royal palace. Under Antipas's leadership the entire region was reborn.

This was the nobleman's Galilee. Though his title was modest, it conveyed that he was a man of influence and affluence—a royal by right of his service to his king. But even if he could call upon all the resources of Rome—all its wealth, its intellectual potency, its political power—the one thing he wanted most, Rome could not provide.

He wanted his son to live.

His mission carried a sad irony. The same Rome that had given him his esteemed position in the world had also been responsible for the deaths of many sons whom fathers just like him would have

given anything to save. Only a few decades earlier, Antipas's father ordered the execution of all Israelite boys under the age of two in the hope of killing the one many whispered would be Israel's promised, coming Deliverer—the one they called the King of glory.

Though Herod had no way to know if he had succeeded, his cruelty heaped sorrow upon countless mothers, fathers, brothers, and sisters across the land. How many prayers went up in those days for the sons Rome took? How many fathers searched for a reason to hope and found none?

The world was a hard and broken place. The allure of wealth and power, which always seemed to cost men far more than it gave, didn't matter to the nobleman anymore. Now he was just a father throwing up prayers to whomever occupied the heavens above as he made his way to the little village of Cana, hoping to find the only man on earth he imagined could help—Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus had made a name for himself at a wedding in Cana not too long before the nobleman's son took ill. Jesus was there with his family when, to the host's great embarrassment, the wine ran out. Knowing her son, Jesus' mother asked him if there was anything he might be able to do to rescue the feast. Jesus gathered the servants and told them to fill the ceremonial washing jars with water. Somehow, though no one could explain it, the water became wine—good wine.

News of this miracle spread quickly. But the miracle itself wasn't what set the nobleman off on his quest to find Jesus. It was how people said he did it: quietly. Had he been a charlatan out to make his living by tricking people, Jesus would have made the miracle primarily about himself and maybe even charged people to see it. Instead, the story went, he sought to deflect attention from himself.

Jesus had been away from the region for some time now. But reports steadily made their way back to Capernaum that Jesus was performing other signs and wonders in and around Jerusalem. It was hard to know which of the stories were true and which were inflated composites of third-party anecdotes. Taken on their own, some seemed more credible than others. But taken together, they presented Jesus as a man who loved the hurting, healed the sick, and welcomed the destitute. This stirred in the nobleman the courage to hope since he himself was hurting, his son was sick, and the entire world around him was a fractured mess.

The nobleman thought that if anyone could save his son, it would be Jesus. As soon as the village came into view he began asking everyone he met if they knew where he could find the man from Nazareth. It didn't take long. When he finally saw Jesus, he realized that the course of his life seldom put him in the position where he now found himself. He was in need. There was nothing he could offer Jesus in exchange for what he was about to ask from him. All he had were his words and a little bit of hope.

The nobleman spoke to Jesus with concise humility: "Sir, my son is dying. Will you help us?"

Jesus looked at the man and then at the people gathered around whose interests were now suddenly piqued. He said, "Unless you all see me perform signs and wonders, you refuse to believe in me. Is this what you want from me? A sign?"

The nobleman hadn't expected Jesus' rebuke. He wasn't asking for a show. Still, Jesus raised the crucial question: What did he want, really? Did he want Jesus to do a trick for him? No doubt many of those gathered hoped for just that. They had heard about the water becoming wine, and they wished they had been there to see it. They would love an encore.

But who did the nobleman think Jesus was? Did Jesus need to come to his son's bedside, put his hands on the boy's head, or speak a blessing? What did he want from him?

The nobleman said, "I want my son to live. That's what I want. I want him to live. I want him not to die. But I can't stop the death that is coming. So please, help me. Come to Capernaum. Please. Save him."

Seeing the sincerity of his hurt, Jesus said, "Yes. Go on home. Your son will live."

Jesus' words alone would have to suffice because his answer made it apparent that he would not be making the trip to the boy's home in Capernaum. There would be no bedside visit, no incantation, no trick. Just these few words. The nobleman would have to accept that Jesus' word was as good as his presence.

So he departed robed in the logic that if Jesus actually possessed the supernatural ability to heal his son, then surely he could bring that healing with nothing but a word.

As the nobleman hurried back, one of his servants met him on the road. Breathless, the servant said, "He's getting better. He's getting better!"

The nobleman's eyes lit up. "What? When?"

The servant said, "Yesterday, about an hour past noon." It was the same moment when Jesus had promised that the boy would live.

For all his nobility and the wealth that came with it, the most valuable title the nobleman held in that moment was "father." His son was alive and recovering, and Jesus of Nazareth had saved him. There was no question in the father's mind about that. When he got home, he told his entire household the story of how he had asked Jesus for this miracle and the way in which it was granted. They all marveled at this Nazarene who had given them such a precious gift. He had given life to the dying.



2

WILD WITH THE HOPE

Matthew 4:1-11

THE DETAILS SURROUNDING JESUS' BIRTH became part of the lore of his community. He was born in Bethlehem but raised in Nazareth, west of the Sea of Galilee, and some said he'd been conceived while his mother was still a virgin, that his birth was a miracle from God, heralded by angels themselves. Others assumed that the timing of his arrival—so soon after his parents' wedding—meant that if he wasn't an illegitimate son, then at the very least temptation had gotten the best of his parents before they'd wed. Still, it was hard to deny that there was something unusual about Joseph and Mary's son. Even from a young age, his wisdom, understanding, and learning mystified the religious leaders when they heard him speak. His own community regarded him as a man who had found favor with God. As his parents watched Jesus mature, they couldn't help but see his Nazareth

years as a time of preparation for a calling they knew would inevitably lead him away from them.

Jesus was around thirty years old when he left Nazareth to begin his public ministry. The first thing he did was journey to Bethany beyond the Jordan to find his cousin John.

John was a preacher who lived in the wilderness proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Dressed in a camel hair coat like the prophet Elijah, he looked like the child of a feral, violent land, but he spoke as one privy to the mysteries of God. People from all over were drawn to hear him.

His message was simple and pointed: “Hope is here. The Lord is with us.” Many in Israel responded to John’s message by coming to confess their darkest secrets—to begin again a conversation with the Maker who promised to never forsake them.

It had been a long time since the people of Israel had reason to think God was near, let alone active. Their recent history was a sad tale of sifting through the rubble of exile. Yes, they had come home. But like Job, though they were able to reconstruct much of what fell to the Babylonians and Assyrians who had carried them off, what they rebuilt could not replace all they had lost. Neither could it take away their grief. They were poor in spirit—mourners, meek and hungry for righteousness. Estranged from comfort and unsure of their inheritance, they wanted to see God, and if not God himself then at least traces of his presence with them.

Generations earlier, when their ancestors followed Joshua across the river where John now stood, they passed from being slaves in the wilderness to a mighty kingdom built on the promises of their God. But now, every Roman sword that clinked against the armor moving through their streets and alleys reminded them that they had again returned to the wilderness of oppression. So when John

emerged from the wild, proclaiming the nearness of God, many regarded him more as a guide than a stranger. They came to John, and he led one person after another down into this river that ran through their history as a people—one bank marking who they had been and the other who they would become. And in those waters, between those banks, he baptized them.

John grew up with the stories of how God had opened his own mother's barren womb to bring him into this world. He knew he was born to proclaim the salvation of the Lord. He also knew that the Lord had given his mother's cousin Mary a son of her own—only Mary's miracle wasn't that she overcame barrenness to conceive. It was that she conceived while she was yet a virgin.

Back when Mary was pledged to marry Joseph, the angel of the Lord appeared to tell her that the Lord was giving her a boy and he would be called the Son of the Most High God. God was going to give this child David's throne where he would reign forever over the house of Jacob, and his kingdom would never end. Mary would carry in her womb the King of glory, the Savior of the world.

John's mother, Elizabeth, used to tell him about the time Mary, whom she sometimes referred to as "the mother of my Lord," came to visit and how when she entered their house, John leapt inside Elizabeth's belly. It was as though he couldn't wait to begin proclaiming the Lord's salvation, she told him.

John knew this was his path. He would never be wealthy. He would hold no position of power. He was the courier of the news that God was giving his forgetful creation the Savior he had promised so long ago. John's purpose was to run wild with the hope that the Messiah had come.

Jesus found his cousin baptizing at the river. When John saw him, he stopped and stared.

Jesus said, “Baptize me, John.”

John resisted. “Me baptize you? You should be the one baptizing me.”

But Jesus said, “John, this needs to happen. We’re at the beginning of something new, something greater than you can see. Let me stand in the waters of forgiveness with you. This is part of how we fulfill the reason we’re here.”

Though John didn’t know when, he knew the day would come when the Savior of the world would step from the shadows of his preparation into the public eye. Seeing Jesus wade down into the water toward him, John suspected that day had now come. So he baptized the one whose trail he had come to blaze.

What happened when Jesus came up out of the water was unlike anything anyone had ever seen. A brightness grew and shadows shrank until light flooded the valley and a voice from the sky spoke: “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”

Fear and awe gripped those gathered as they then saw the Spirit of God descend like a dove and come to rest on Jesus. Any questions John might have had about Jesus’ true identity dissipated. Those gathered witnessed an unprecedented display of divine convergence: the Father sent his Spirit to glorify his Son. The people searched for some way to understand what this meant.

But Jesus understood. He had come to this river as someone unknown to the world. In those waters God himself set Jesus apart in a divine affirmation of a purpose greater than anyone could imagine. When Jesus stepped out of that river, he knew he was entering into a life of opposition and sorrow. As the old cleric Simeon told Jesus’ mother years before, Jesus would reveal the hearts of all mankind. The light that flooded the Jordan Valley would go with him wherever he went, shining in every dark corner of every dark heart, exposing every dark secret in a world that had

grown quite fond of its shadows. So it would come as no surprise that he would be opposed. Still, the level of hostility coming his way would be greater than anyone could imagine. And it would change the world.



The first opposition Jesus faced when he left John at the river wasn't political or social. It was spiritual, and it was dangerous. The Spirit that descended on him in his baptism drove him out into the wilderness, where he was tested for forty days. The desert had long been a place of struggle and testing for the people of God, as it had also been a place where God often met them. Out among the snakes and wild beasts, this was the sort of solitude that revealed a man's true resolve.

The tempter, sometimes a subtle serpent, sometimes a roaring lion, came to Jesus in the wilderness not as a predator but as a negotiator. He knew Jesus' power well and had no inclination whatsoever to test it. Rather, he came to see if he might strike a deal. There was something Jesus had come to do—something no one else could accomplish. Jesus knew what it would cost him. He had come to offer himself up as an atoning sacrifice for the sins of the people of God—to live the life of perfect righteousness they had all failed to live before God and to die in their place as their sinless sacrifice.

The tempter also knew Jesus' objective, and more than anything he wanted to prevent it. Maybe he could persuade Jesus that there was a way to achieve the better parts of his mission without having to endure the worst. Knowing that Jesus' frame was weakened by hunger, the tempter began to test him by playing to his basest appetites. "Why are you hungry? If you are the Son of God and if you have command of the physical realm, why not eat? Why deny

yourself? You should turn one of these stones to bread. You can, you know.”

But knowing that his entire life would require continual self-denial on behalf of a people who were governed by their appetites, Jesus said, “I don’t live on bread alone. My food is to do the will of my Father who sent me.” The tempter considered Jesus’ response and then took him to the pinnacle of the temple and said, “You know that if you threw yourself down from here, God would send his angels to catch you. Nothing can hurt you.”

The point of this test wasn’t for Jesus to imagine the exhilaration of leaping off the pinnacle only to see the angels swoop in to catch him. The tempter was baiting Jesus to speculate about how unnecessary the pain of death really needed to be, if he would only entertain the possibility. Weary as he was, perhaps Jesus would consider, if only for a moment, the appeal of self-preservation.

But this wasn’t a game to Jesus. He told the tempter, “It is written, ‘You shall not put God to the test.’”

The tempter came back a third time, taking Jesus to a high place where he could see the kingdoms of the world in all their splendor. He said to Jesus, “Bow down and worship me, and all these kingdoms will be yours. They are mine to give, and I will give them to you.”

This offer of dominion over the kingdoms of the world was the first time Jesus and the tempter were actually talking about the true nature of Jesus’ mission. He had come to establish a new kingdom. This didn’t need to be a fight, the tempter suggested. All Jesus needed to do was bow down and worship him, and he would just hand the world over.

Jesus said, “Leave me, Satan. You know what I know—we are to worship the Lord God alone.”

The authority Satan offered Jesus wasn't his to give. Jesus had come to establish his dominion over every corner of the world, and through a fierce revolution he would take it all as creation's rightful King. Jesus wasn't there to make a deal with the devil. He had come to defeat him. Forever.

The tempter knew he was getting nowhere. But he also believed there was still time. He and Jesus would tangle again. Maybe next time Jesus' resolve would be weaker. Holding on to that flicker of hope, the tempter departed.