

“Russ Ramsey is a kind of songwriter of prose. The lyrical nature of his writing makes his Bible teaching memorable, accessible, and evocative. This volume will help you to understand and explain the story of our church through the book of Acts. It will also prompt you to love Acts and Jesus all the more.”

Russell Moore, president of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, author of *Onward: Engaging the Culture Without Losing the Gospel*

“Russ Ramsey has this lovely, compelling way of helping us see and savor Christ in all of Scripture. If you want to grow in your knowledge of the Bible, to be swept up into the grand story that it tells, and to see how it gives meaning to both your story and our story, then let *The Mission of the Body of Christ* be a mentor and companion in this quest. I can’t recommend it highly enough.”

Scott Sauls, senior pastor of Christ Presbyterian Church, author of *Jesus Outside the Lines* and *Befriend*

“Russ Ramsey is a wonderful storyteller, and in *The Mission of the Body of Christ* he weaves together bits from the Old Testament and the Gospels with the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles to create a beautiful tapestry that imaginatively depicts the early days of the church. The gospel shines brightly in the pages of this book and the story of the gospel’s impact on the world is told in the most engaging and enjoyable way I have ever read.”

Ned Bustard, creative director of Square Halo Books, author of *Revealed: A Storybook Bible for Grown-Ups*

“With the voice of a storyteller and the affection of a pastor, Russ Ramsey brings the story of the early church to life in the present. With each character and scene, these pages provide a doorway for us to walk inside the narrative, inviting us to hear Paul’s journey in a fresh way as we contemplate our own questions of faith.”

Sandra McCracken, singer and songwriter, *Songs from the Valley, Psalms, Desire like Dynamite*

“Russ Ramsey’s gift for retelling the stories of Scripture is second to none. This is as evident in everyday conversation with Russ as it is in his writing. I have never met an individual who loves Scripture more than this brother, and I am thankful to God for the gift of Russ and his books to the church.”

Amanda Bible Williams, cofounder and chief content officer of She Reads Truth, He Reads Truth, and Kids Read Truth

“The best gift (among many) that Russ Ramsey offers the body of Christ is the gift of greater context. His writings have the power to lift readers from their present surroundings and set them down amid the clamoring, bustling, peopled streets of the ancient world. Ramsey’s deep biblical knowledge and disciplined imagination serve to gently illuminate oft-overlooked nuances of culture, custom, and language, thereby allowing readers to experience these old stories as if for the first time.”

Douglas McKelvey, author of *Every Moment Holy: New Liturgies for Everyday Life*

“The church isn’t always a welcoming place for single women in their forties (like me). But the New Testament church is radically hospitable—a place for witness, unity, and love. *The Mission of the Body of Christ* is a vital contribution to this conversation. Salvation, after all, is a community-creating event. As Russ writes, ‘The risen Jesus not only gave his people new life, he gave them each other.’ And I’m thankful for that.”

Bethany Jenkins, vice president of forums and content for the Veritas Forum

“For those of us church folk who are overly familiar with the Bible, it’s easy to forget (or maybe we never learned) the richness of Scripture’s narrative. For those new to faith in Jesus, the Bible can overwhelm and the story of redemption, mission, and transformation gets easily lost. Russ seeks to be a ‘faithful servant of Scripture’ and is he ever. His retelling of the Bible’s stories doesn’t distract—it amplifies. This book draws the reader into God’s transforming word and does so with the craft of an artist and a pastor’s soul. I cannot recommend *The Mission of the Body of Christ* enough.”

Barnabas Piper, author and podcaster

“Russ is a modern-day scribe, taking his cues from the words of Scripture to reimagine stories, narratives, and scenes for his readers. He doesn’t embellish or exaggerate. He tells and retells familiar narratives with a new perspective. Ordinary Christians living ordinary lives need *The Mission of the Body of Christ*, which is written to be read during ordinary time. We need to reimagine, relive, and see God’s mission for the church afresh, to be reminded there is nothing ordinary about the story in which we live. Russ does this beautifully as always.”

Lore Ferguson Wilbert, writer and speaker



RETELLING THE STORY SERIES



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OF THE
BODY OF CHRIST

RUSS RAMSEY


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FOR RYAN, my brother.



I am so thankful our roots

are deep in the soil of

the church and that I got

to grow up with you.



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PREFACE



I WANT PEOPLE TO KNOW WHAT THE **BIBLE** SAYS. The details in the pages of Scripture tell a riveting story. Since the Bible was not written during a time when reams of paper and junk drawers full of pens were readily available, we can trust that Scripture was written in thrift. The details on the page are there to help us see things we might have missed otherwise.

For the first two books in this Retelling the Story series, I covered quite a range of biblical text: the entire Old Testament in twenty-five chapters for *The Advent of the Lamb of God*, and a forty-chapter synthesis of the four Gospels for *The Passion of the King of Glory*. This book, *The Mission of the Body of Christ*, presented a different challenge. It centers on a single biblical book, the Acts of the Apostles, but also draws from the narrative details peppered throughout the New Testament Epistles.

It is not always clear how the Epistles' references to people and events connect to the timeline in Acts. Before I wrote a word of this book, I created some spreadsheets in an attempt to map out the

events of the book of Acts. I wanted to get a bird's eye view of what happened, when, and to whom. I wanted to see how Paul's missionary journeys lined up with the letters he wrote. I wanted to follow the story on a map. I wanted to try to keep track of characters who stepped in and out of the story along the way. I wanted to understand the passage of time. So I charted as much of this as I could, with as much certainty as I could, based on my own study of Scripture and scholarly works.

I did not write *The Mission of the Body of Christ* to be a substitute for reading the Bible. I want this book to serve as a faithful servant of Scripture. I've included hundreds of Scripture references in this manuscript. Let me explain why. Throughout this book I paraphrase in order to maintain a unified voice. Rarely do I quote Scripture directly or at length. This applies to dialogue as well. If a character says something and there's a Scripture reference attached 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 scope 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 have tried to keep my speculative input within the natural and plausible lines of human nature.

The story told in these pages is my story. Every picture of brokenness 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 do not write as a removed researcher. I write as an eyewitness to the impact this story has had on my own life and the world I inhabit.

Thank you for reading. To give my life to the study and expression of Scripture is one of my greatest joys. As a pastor, cultivating biblical literacy is one of my most important goals. My highest hope for this book is that it will deepen your understanding of the wonder and glory of the story of the Bible.



PART 1

JERUSALEM

AD 30-33



1

A LETTER FROM AN OLD FRIEND

Philemon 1-25

THE SERVANT WHO ANSWERED THE DOOR wore a look of disbelief. The last person she expected to find when she heard the knock was Onesimus, who stood there with his traveling companion Tychicus.

Tychicus was the first to speak. “Please tell the master of the house that we come bearing letters from the apostle Paul, who is in Rome. One is for the church that meets in this house. The other is for him personally; it concerns my brother Onesimus here.”

The servant looked at the letters in Onesimus’s hands and ran off to find Philemon.

Years earlier, Onesimus had been a slave in the city of Colossae. As such he’d had a tough life. But when he ran away to Rome it got even tougher. Colossae and Rome were twelve hundred miles apart.

The only means he had to traverse that distance were boats, horses, and his own two feet.

Onesimus was Philemon's slave. Slavery was essential to Rome's social order. The entire empire was built on the backs of slaves owned by "men of nobility" who believed it was beneath them to work. Though some slaves in Rome may have had kind masters, the reality was that slaves were still property with no rights or protection. Onesimus wanted out.

When Onesimus committed to his escape, he arranged some basic preparations: money for the road and belongings to disguise the fact that he was a runaway. These he took from Philemon. He knew the minute he stepped out on his own he was in trouble. Stealing from his master was a capital crime for slaves in Rome. This wasn't an uncommon practice, however. To escape meant to risk facing the wrath of the slaveholder anyway, so many who fled also stole from their masters on their way out in the hopes of funding a clean getaway.

But fleeing their current situation usually meant stepping into one that was worse. Since a flight like Onesimus's would have been close to impossible without help, he had to become part of the underworld of runaway slaves and criminals. He entered a society of fugitives evading arrest. Since there is no honor among thieves, this was a notoriously dangerous network to tangle with.

Along with dangers within, there were dangers without. Historically, for every society of fugitives seeking to stay underground there has been a countersociety of bounty hunters who make their living hunting them down and handing them back over for a reward. Onesimus was in trouble because runaway slaves were the bounty hunters' bread and butter—easy to find because they lacked the necessary means to purchase anonymity. This was the world

Onesimus entered when he ran—a world of fugitives, stowaways, thieves, criminals, and bounty hunters looking to get paid.

A large, diverse city like Rome was the perfect place to disappear. Many went there to do just that. With Colossae at his back, Onesimus set his face to the Eternal City. He paid smugglers for passage, made up stories to hitch rides, and changed his appearance often to blend in. He lived every one of those days looking over his shoulder. When he finally arrived in Rome, the hope of a new beginning rose inside him. Now he just had to figure out a way to make his lie his truth.

Having divided his years between being a slave and being a fugitive, Onesimus had plenty of time to ask why his life had become what it had. He would not have wished his plight on anyone. But in his heart raged a protest. He was not meant to be another man's slave. He was not meant to be known as the property of another. He was not a commodity. He was a man. He didn't choose to be born into his low position. Part of the reason he had run away was that he objected to being reduced to something so insignificant. He might die as a fugitive, but at least it would be on his own terms.

Onesimus's position softened a bit when his money ran out. Except for the company of thieves, he found himself alone in Rome—and broke. Like the prodigal son who blew through his father's inheritance, Onesimus began to shift from dreams of independence to a desperate need for help. In this underground world he was vulnerable. He needed to find safety.

He had heard there was a man in Rome named Paul, the apostle who'd led his master Philemon to faith in Jesus of Nazareth. Onesimus knew Paul was a man who specialized in helping people who were lost. He had seen firsthand the transformation of many people's lives through the church that met in Philemon's home. When

people heard Paul's gospel, something in them seemed to shake free. Peace and joy took the place of cynicism and contempt. When Onesimus learned the apostle was a prisoner under house arrest, he sought him out. Perhaps they could help each other, he thought.

Onesimus found Paul and told him parts of his story, but whatever thoughts he had about trading favors with the prisoner soon vanished when the old apostle told the runaway slave about Jesus. Paul spoke with an uncommon conviction—like he was prepared to die proclaiming the message of salvation by grace through faith in the life, death, and resurrection of the man from Nazareth.

Onesimus heard this gospel and put his faith in the same Lord his master had. It wasn't so much that Onesimus took hold of Christ. It was that Christ took hold of him. Onesimus attended to Paul like a son attended to an aging father, and Paul loved him as his own child.

Soon Onesimus began to struggle with what to do about his broken relationship with Philemon. His faith had an ethic. Though he had plenty of reasons to justify running away—reasons that, in turn, justified his thievery—he knew that because he and Philemon were both followers of Christ, they could not leave this fracture between them unaddressed.

Onesimus eventually told Paul the whole truth about what had happened and how he had come to Rome. He wanted to be reconciled to Philemon, who was now his brother in Christ, and Paul agreed that it was the right thing to do. They could not control how Philemon would react upon seeing Onesimus, so they would have to act on faith that the gospel would be stronger than one man's transgression against another—a scenario that, for Onesimus and Philemon, ran both ways.

Paul said to Onesimus, "I have been working on a letter to the church that meets in Philemon's home, your old home. I will send

you and our brother Tychicus to deliver it, along with another letter from me to him about you.”

Philemon was a leader in the church in Colossae. When he saw Onesimus standing in his doorway, Philemon had to wrestle internally with what the law permitted and what his faith required. What would he do with the anger he felt in his heart toward Onesimus? With his sense of betrayal? With the fact that Onesimus was now a Christian? Their shared faith changed not only who they were but who they were to each other.

Philemon's life had been transformed by the work of Jesus. Who he'd been before he met Christ was not who he was now. He had become a man with a reputation for love and faith. He poured himself out for the benefit of others, and people's lives were changed by Christ as a result.

Philemon took the personal letter from his runaway and began to read.

“My brother,” Paul said in his letter to Philemon, “the same grace you so effectively apply to others has taken hold of Onesimus. As sure as you are a changed man, so is he. Christ has overcome his past just as he overcame yours. Now all that matters between the two of you is what happens next. If Jesus has changed both of you, then I ask you: Who are you to each other? Perhaps this is the reason you and Onesimus were parted for a season—so that you might have him back, no longer as a slave but as a brother.”

All three of these men had been transformed by Jesus. Being present for Onesimus's and Philemon's conversions, Paul held a deep affection for them both. He wasn't just contending for Onesimus in this letter; he was pastoring his friend Philemon. God was

moving all three of them deeper and deeper into his unfolding purpose for their lives—a purpose to redeem the lost while bringing glory to his Son, who was their peace.

As Philemon read the letter, he remembered Paul's gift for persuasion.

“Look,” Paul's letter continued. “I could command you to do what I am about to ask, but I don't want to. I want to give you room to respond with your heart. I want you to think, to love, and to live under the banner of the truth that Christ changes us. Your runaway slave has become like my son. And I his imprisoned father. Onesimus gave himself in service to me. For that I am grateful. He has been very useful and I have regarded his service as though it came from you. Your servant Onesimus has become my heart. If there is anything he owes you, name the price. I will repay it. And I will not ask you to repay what you owe me, which is your life. If you consider me your partner in the faith, receive Onesimus as you would receive me.”

Philemon smiled at this bit of rhetorical flourish. Paul was saying, in essence, “I gave you the hope of eternal life—and now I have taken Onesimus's debt. How much do I owe you?”

Money aside, Philemon had to do more than forgive a debt. Paul hadn't just sent him the letter about Onesimus—he had sent Onesimus to deliver it. Paul wanted Philemon to receive Onesimus back as a brother. Onesimus wanted this too. The proof was in the fact that, just as his escape had led him twelve hundred miles away, so now his desire to be reconciled brought him twelve hundred miles home.

Paul would have been glad to keep Onesimus, but there was, in fact, a particular opportunity they owed Philemon—the chance for him to receive his slave back as a brother. To forgive Onesimus was to take him as an equal, which not only forgave what was in the past but renewed the purpose for their future together.

Paul appealed to these two participants in the system of slavery to see each other's inherent dignity as a brother in Christ. This was deeply abolitionistic. The gospel of Jesus undermined any hint of any right one person could claim over another as his or her own personal property. Instead it set the example that their lives should be offered up for the sake of each other.

Because of Christ, Philemon and Onesimus were now brothers. This truth lay at the heart of Christianity. There was no longer slave or free, Jew or Gentile, male or female. All were one in Christ Jesus. This was the impact of their new faith, and it was revolutionary.

The faith that took hold of Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus continues to this day, making families out of strangers and friends out of enemies. Though the plan for the church of Jesus Christ dates back to the days before Eden—that mysterious era before time began—its visible formation came together when a man from Nazareth was crucified, died, and was buried and on the third day rose again.



2

ASCENSION

Acts 1:1-26

JESUS OF NAZARETH'S DEATH did not bring an end to his ministry. Rather, his crucifixion at the hands of Pilate and the chief priests fanned into flames a movement that would reach around the world and down through time. The reason? Jesus' death did not end with a corpse on a slab. It ended with resurrection—a real, bodily resurrection and a truly empty tomb.

Three days after Jesus was buried, he rose from the grave and appeared to his disciples. Over the course of the next forty days, the resurrected Jesus, with his nail-pierced hands and spear-split side, spent time in the company of his friends—teaching them, encouraging them, and preparing them for a mission to take the story of his resurrection to the furthest reaches of the globe.

On one of those occasions, as Jesus was eating with his friends, he told them to wait for the gift the Father had promised—the Holy

Spirit Jesus had told them about. The Holy Spirit would come and comfort them and lead them forward. They were to remain in Jerusalem until this happened.

It could not have been easy for the disciples to sit with their risen Lord. For as much joy and hope as Jesus' resurrection brought them, they had been present at his death. They had witnessed the brutal execution of this man they loved, followed, and gave their lives to serving. They saw his beaten and bloody form hang from the cross as he breathed his last. After he died, they were hollowed out with grief.

Along with their grief was the guilt. The trauma of the crucifixion had revealed weaknesses in each one of them. They watched their loyalty to Jesus collapse under the weight of the chief priests' resolve to put an end to what he had started. Not one of them had shown the strength they believed they possessed when Jesus was taken into custody. Each one denied knowing him in his greatest hour of need.

On top of the grief and the guilt was the fact that the world as they knew it had changed. When the resurrected Jesus appeared to his disciples, it was to remind them of their call to be his witnesses in the world. But after the resurrection, they hardly knew what that world was anymore.

They were fragile and unsettled, but they could not escape the reality that Jesus had in fact risen. And they knew they were somehow tied up in it. How could they not be? In a world where everyone dies, one man's resurrection becomes instantly relevant to all. His resurrection was part of their story.

The disciples used that time to ask questions of Jesus. They wanted to understand what would happen next. Would he deal with the religious leaders who opposed him? Would he overthrow Rome? Would he restore the kingdom of Israel to her former glory? And if so, when? Would they be part of it?

Jesus told them the Father was establishing his kingdom, but the particulars of this business were not theirs to know. Such knowledge belonged to God alone. What he could tell them, however, was that the Holy Spirit would come on each one of them in a matter of days, and when he did, they would be filled with power.

In that power, they would be his witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. This Great Commission, the disciples came to understand, was very much about the kingdom of God. Their mission, though they struggled to grasp it, was in some way the work of building the kingdom of God. The Holy Spirit and the kingdom of God—the two main subjects Jesus discussed after his resurrection—were inseparably linked, meaning the disciples' call to bear witness to Christ carried eternal significance.

Forty days after the resurrection the disciples were on the Mount of Olives and Jesus was with them. He told them they would be his witnesses, and after he said this, he began to rise up into the sky right before their eyes. Up he went, until a cloud hid him from their sight. The disciples stood in silence as they watched him go. In that moment the world became an even greater mystery than the one the resurrection demanded they embrace.

Jesus did not need to visibly ascend. What the disciples witnessed was not for Jesus' benefit but for theirs. He did it so they would know he was actually gone. They would not see him the next day. He would not attend to them in the same way he had these past forty days. They were not to wait for him. Now they were to wait for the Holy Spirit.

As the disciples stood, looking up and watching their friend vanish, two angelic beings dressed in white appeared. The luminous apparitions said, "Men of Galilee, why are you standing here looking into the sky? This same Jesus who has now been taken up

will come again. He will descend in the same way you saw him ascend into heaven. He is coming back.”

But as far as the disciples were concerned, the time for standing around and looking up to heaven had passed. They needed to let Jesus go and step into the mission he had given them. What was happening in the sky was not their chief concern. What was happening on earth was.

The disciples responded by obeying Jesus’ command to wait. They left the Mount of Olives and went back into Jerusalem and gathered many of Jesus’ followers together in the upper room where they were staying.

More than 120 people were gathered in all. There were the eleven disciples: Simon Peter, James and John (the sons of Zebedee), Peter’s brother Andrew, Philip, Thomas, Bartholomew, Matthew the tax collector, Simon the zealot, Alphaeus’s son James, and James’s son Judas. With them were the women who had discovered the empty tomb, Jesus’ mother, Mary, Jesus’ brothers, and many more whose lives had been changed by Jesus.

For ten days they waited, but it was not a passive waiting. They used the time. They joined together to pray. They prepared for the work that lay ahead. This was an act of obedience to their slain and risen Lord. In their waiting they trusted him, even though their understanding of what lay ahead was less than clear.

Jesus never told them how long they would have to wait for the Holy Spirit to come—just that he would arrive in a little while. After all that had transpired in Jerusalem in recent weeks, remaining there was as much an act of courage as it was an act of faith. This was the city where Jesus had been arrested, beaten, crucified, and buried. This was the place where Judas had betrayed Jesus for a pocket full of silver and where Peter had denied knowing Jesus for

fear of a child's accusation. This was the city that seemed bent on erasing any trace of the movement Jesus started.

There were more appealing places to wait and families many of them could have gone home to. Each had the option to return to their homes in places like Galilee, Nazareth, and Cana. They could have gone back to their old jobs—fishing, collecting taxes, carpentry, prostitution. They could have even gone back to their old religions—Judaism or Roman paganism. But those who gathered in the upper room didn't. They chose to obey Christ, and they waited. And they used their time.

Each person gathered in that upper room over the course of those days had been changed in some way through their relationship with Jesus. The cast of characters would have included people like Mary Magdalene, who had once been possessed by demons, and Nicodemus, the Pharisee who helped cover the cost of Jesus' burial. Perhaps the synagogue ruler from Capernaum, Jairus, was there with his daughter Talitha, whom Jesus had raised from the dead, and perhaps they were huddled together in friendship with Lazarus, whom Jesus had also raised from the dead. Former lepers, newly sighted blind people, and once-paralyzed beggars would have been milling about in the crowd too.

As it has always been with the people of God, their desire to obey Christ was strengthened by the bond of their fellowship with one another. God had made them to need one another—to be known, loved, and supported. This was the power and influence of Jesus in each of their lives. He had loved and served them in such a way that they had come to need one another. The usual dividing lines of the day—wealth, nationality, reputation—were already beginning to blur. These were people who had come to accept that they were all weak and that Jesus had been strong for them. They were all poor

and Jesus had been generous with them. They were all outsiders and Jesus had given them a place with him. These truths drew them toward one another.

As they waited, they also spent time in devotion to God. They gathered regularly to pray. For what? Certainly for the Holy Spirit to come. But they also asked the Lord to prepare them for the calling he had given them—to bear witness to the true, global, eternal gospel of their resurrected Lord. As they thought about and prayed for the world Jesus meant to change, they considered the changes already begun in them. Many in this group were completely different people than they had been before they met Jesus.

They prayed and they read Scripture. Knowing that the Holy Spirit was coming, they searched the Scriptures to learn what they, as the firstfruits of the budding church on earth, ought to be doing in preparation for the Holy Spirit's coming. In this way, as people have done down through time and around the globe, the disciples spent their time in two-way conversation with God—talking to him through prayer and listening to him through Scripture.

As they prepared for the Holy Spirit's coming, the disciples set out to restore their brotherhood by replacing Judas Iscariot, who had betrayed Jesus and then taken his own life. Scripture told them to do this. Judas' replacement needed to be someone who had been with the disciples for the duration of Jesus's ministry, from John's baptism through to Jesus' ascension. He needed to be someone who had been a witness not only to Jesus' life but also to his death and resurrection. Two men fit these requirements—Justus and Matthias. The eleven disciples left the business of choosing in the hands of God by casting lots to determine who would replace Judas.

The lot fell to Matthias, and he joined their number. And not a moment too soon, because in a matter of only a few days, their band of 120 disciples would grow to a number no one could have imagined. The death of Jesus did not bring his ministry to an end. It fanned it into flames.