

# PERSPECTIVE

JUNE 2018



Christian,  
You Have  
an Incredible

STORY

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# Christian, You Have an Incredible Story!

*“Almost everybody will listen to you when you tell your own story.” – Billy Graham*

## MY STORY

My story begins in Gatesville, a small town in central Texas. It's known as the “Spur Capital of Texas” because its museum is home to the Lloyd and Madge Mitchell collection of about 10,000 pairs of spurs, including a pair that belonged to Pancho Villa and even a pair of riding spurs used by Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. Gatesville is also home to Coryell Memorial Hospital, where I was born on a warm, sunny Monday afternoon in April of 1982.

My father's parents cried when I was born—finally a grandson to carry on the Butts family line and name (I'm the youngest of their eight grandchildren). My parents scrambled to find a name. They thought they were having another girl and had decided to name her Amy Michelle, her initials matching those of her older sister, Alison Marie. To their surprise—one they received with great joy—they had a boy instead. My Aunt Linda suggested they name me Dustin. They eventually settled on Dustin Lee and determined that no one would ever be allowed to call me Dusty, for obvious reasons.

That's how my life began. I never lived in Gatesville. Its hospital was just the closest one to our home in the tiny town of Kempner, Texas. But, interestingly, I was married there at First Baptist Church of Gatesville. Sometimes, I wonder how many other people were both born and married in a town in which they never lived. Who knows—maybe I'll die there too.

As interesting as the story of my birth is, at least to me, it's not a story I tell often. When people ask me about my story, the story I tell doesn't start in Gatesville. It starts in Lampasas, the small town in Texas where the Lord began opening my eyes to the reality of my sinfulness and my desperate need for a Savior. It's the story of my second birth, one far more interesting and compelling than the story of my first birth.

The story of my second birth begins on another warm, sunny Texas day. It was a Wednesday morning, the last day of June 1999. That Wednesday morning, I was sitting in church, but it wasn't for a church service. I was there

for a funeral. Three days earlier, Jason Leske, one of my two hundred high school classmates, had been killed in a car accident. His was the first funeral I ever attended. And as I stood before his open casket, staring at his bruised, lifeless face, I realized for the first time in my life that one day I too would lay lifeless in a casket. One day, I would die.

That reality didn't sit well with me. Honestly, it sent me into period of deep introspection and despair, though I was generally able to “fake it” around my friends. I had grown up going to church. I believed that there was a God. I knew on some level that he was holy. I knew that he hated sin and would punish sinners. I knew that hell was real. I knew that I was a sinner, and because of my sin, I deserved hell. But, at that point in my life, that was all I knew. I am certain that I heard the good news of the gospel week after week as I attended church with my family, but I'd never given it any real thought. Most Sundays, I spent more time counting the ceiling tiles in the sanctuary (approximately 240, if I remember correctly), drawing pictures, and writing poetry on the bulletin than I spent listening to the sermons.

In the midst of my despair, I began listening a little bit more on Sunday mornings. One Sunday in April, as I listened, I realized that there was a way out of hell and out of my despair—belief in Jesus Christ. The pastor gave an invitation at the end of the service and I nervously walked forward. I don't remember what I said to the pastor, but he graciously prayed with me and invited me to meet with him later that week to talk.

We met, and over strawberry milkshakes at a small table in the local Dairy Queen, he explained the gospel to me. He asked me if I believed it. I said yes. But, looking back, I realize that I didn't really believe the gospel. I wanted to escape God's judgment, and Jesus seemed like the only way out. I was self-centered and was willing to do whatever the pastor said if it meant I wouldn't spend an eternity in hell. I was baptized the next Sunday and spent the rest of that spring and summer seeking to reform my life. It was frustrating and exhausting, and sin was so appealing.

I left for college at the end of that summer. Leaving home, I also left my attempts at moral reform behind. Jesus was now a fallback. I would live life on my terms and trust that in the end God would accept me into heaven because of my “faith” in Jesus.

The first few years of college were fun, but not as fun as they should have been. My encounter with the gospel had done something to awaken my conscience. I began to see the emptiness of the lifestyle I was living and began to deeply feel the weight of my sin, often finding myself on my knees in my dorm room tearfully begging God to forgive me after an evening of partying with my friends. No matter how hard I prayed, I never felt forgiven.

God intervened in my life in a significant way at the beginning of my junior year. On an excruciatingly hot West Texas afternoon in early September, I walked into the athletics weight room to monitor our basketball players' preseason workouts and was greeted by a new face at the desk. His name was Blake White, and he was a Christian. I knew he was a Christian because he had a folder with a picture of a tube of toothpaste on it that said "Christ" instead of "Crest."

He seemed friendly enough. We began to talk. He was new on campus and didn't really know anyone. I wasn't, but most of my friends had either dropped out of school or graduated. As the conversation continued, I told him that I too was a Christian. He asked me if I had ever attended any of the free ministry lunches on campus. I said, "No." He then proceeded to tell me about all of the free lunch opportunities I was missing out on. Free lunch and a new friend sounded like a pretty good deal, so I agreed to go with him to lunch the next day.

Our friendship grew. I began regularly hearing the gospel at those ministry lunches and regularly talking about the Bible with Blake. And the Lord began to do a work in my heart. Slowly but surely the message of the gospel became clear. I was a sinner deserving of God's just judgment. That much I already knew. But, what I didn't know was that I didn't have to try to earn God's favor in order to be forgiven. I couldn't. No amount of moral reform, no amount of tear-filled confession could save me from God's judgment. I could not save myself. I needed Christ to save me.

I came to understand that the call of the gospel was for me to put my faith in Jesus' once-for-all sacrifice on the cross for my sin. And that faith was more than a moment of trust that I could put in my back pocket for the Day of Judgment. No it was a living, breathing, day-by-day relationship with the risen and reigning Christ marked by continual repentance and faith. To be a Christian was to be able to say with Paul, "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in

the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2:20).

I can't point to the exact moment that I repented of my sin and truly put my faith in Christ, but I can say for certain that by the end of my senior year of college I was a changed man. My desires changed. I no longer desired to live for myself and my pleasure, but for Christ and his glory. My speech changed. Corrupt and vulgar words ceased to be a part of my vocabulary. My community changed. I began attending church regularly and began building deep relationships with my Christian friends.

The Lord did an incredible work in my life and has continued that work to this day. I can look back over the years and see the ways that he has grown my faith in him and my understanding of him. As a recent college graduate on a summer mission trip, God showed me his heart for the nations. As a young teacher just out of college, the Lord taught me the importance of discipleship and opened my eyes to see that I needed to be baptized as a believer. As a member of a local church while in seminary, the Lord taught me the importance of the local church. As a husband, father, and pastor, the Lord daily reminds me of my desperate need for his wisdom and grace.

I've not arrived as a Christian. I never will. I continue to need the gospel every single day. To this day, I continue by his grace wage war against pride, fear of man, laziness, lust, selfishness, and a litany of other sins that still reside in my heart. And he continues to show himself strong when I am weak (which is all the time) and to grow and transform me more and more into the image of his Son.

That's the story of my second birth—my new life in Christ. It is not my entire story, but it is the most important part of my story because it focuses on the miraculous saving work of the Lord in my life. And, apart from the story of the gospel, it is my favorite story to tell.

## TELLING YOUR STORY

Every Christian has a similar story to tell. The details are different, but the basic story is the same: "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me; I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see." The story of every Christian is the story of salvation and transformation. And, whether we think so or not, it is a compelling story. It's compelling because it's a story about us that's really not about us at all. It is compelling because it is a story all about our great God and his miraculous

saving work in our lives. Sharing that story is one of the most natural ways to start a spiritual conversation with a non-Christian.

“Tell me a little bit about yourself.”

“What’s your story?”

These words are open doors to share about the work of God in our lives to a captive audience. Yet, many of us can get nervous when these opportunities come. I know I do. Others of us can tell a good story, but we often get sidetracked or forget important details. All of us know what it is to battle the temptation to make our stories all about us.

So, what can we do to ensure that, when the opportunity comes, we tell our story in a way that is winsome, clear, and God-honoring? I would like to suggest that one of the best ways to ensure that we are ready to tell our story when the opportunity arises is by taking some time to sit down and write it out.

Sadly, the writing out of one’s testimony has become somewhat of a lost art among Christians. Sharing one’s testimony prior to baptism was once standard practice in Baptist churches.<sup>1</sup> This meant that every Christian baptized in a Baptist church had to know how to clearly and concisely articulate the story of God’s work in his or her life. Many, if not most, wrote it out.

At Mount Vernon, we continue this tradition by asking baptismal candidates to share their testimonies prior to baptism. In order to help them prepare, we offer some basic guidance for writing a testimony. If you’ve never taken the time to write out the story of God’s work in your life, or if it’s been a while since the last time you shared your story with someone else, I would encourage you to read through these basic guidelines for writing out your testimony. Then, take some time to sit down and write out your story.

### Core Elements

Every testimony is unique. Yet, there are three elements that are common to every salvation story—your life before Christ, your salvation experience, and your life in Christ. These form the essential core of every Christian testimony. Below, I’ve provided a brief explanation of each, along with a number of questions to help guide you as you write out your story. You don’t have to answer every question. Some won’t apply. The goal is to help you

think about the Lord’s amazing grace in your life.

#### *Your Life Before Christ*

Your testimony should begin with your life before you placed your faith in Christ. You once were lost. You were a sinner in desperate need of a Savior. What was your life like? What characterized you? How did you think about God? What were your thoughts about religion and Christianity?

Don’t dwell too long on your past sin. Don’t brag about or make light of your sin struggles. Share honestly, but briefly, the parts of your past life that reveal just how much you needed a Savior.

#### *Your Salvation Experience*

After explaining your need for Christ, explain exactly how Christ entered into your life and met your need. Who or what did the Lord use to reveal your sinfulness and your need for a Savior? What are the specific events or circumstances that led to your hearing and responding to the gospel? Was there a particular passage of Scripture that the Lord used to open your eyes? A sermon? A faithful friend who shared the gospel?

Use this part of your testimony to briefly explain the good news of the gospel. Though you may use more, less, or even different words, be sure to say something to the effect of, “I realized I was a sinner in desperate need of forgiveness. I deserved nothing from God but his just judgment. But, God, in his great love, provided the forgiveness and grace that I so desperately needed through the life, death, and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ. And, in response, I repented of my sins and trusted in Christ.”

#### *Your Life in Christ*

Finally, you should explain how the gospel transformed and continues to transform your life. What were the immediate effects of your repentance and faith? What about you changed? How would someone who knew you before you were a Christian see a difference? How is the gospel continuing to transform your life?

As you share about your life in Christ, avoid the temptation to make it sound like you have it all together. Don’t be afraid to honestly share that you still have struggles. We all do. You don’t have to get into specifics. Mention some areas in which you still struggle with sin. And, be sure to share how Christ helps you in the battle.

## General Guidance

As you write out and have opportunities to share your testimony with others, there are a few helpful things to keep in mind.

### *Be Brief*

When someone asks you to tell your story, they usually aren't asking for the full-length version. They want the Cliff Notes version, not the whole novel. Aim to share your testimony in three to five minutes. For most people, five minutes of talking translates to approximately one page of typed text or about 500-600 words.

Summarizing your story in 600 words can be difficult, but laboring to be brief forces us to be clear. What are the essential aspects of your testimony? What elements add to the story? What elements detract from the main point? Start with the essentials, and then add detail as you have room.

Lord willing, your first encounter with a person won't be the only opportunity you have to share with them about Christ's work in your life. Hit the high points first. You can fill in the rest of the details over time.

### *Remember Evangelism Is More Than Telling Your Story*

Sharing your story is an excellent way to start a spiritual conversation. It may lead to evangelism, but, in isolation, simply sharing your testimony with someone is not evangelism. "Evangelism is teaching the gospel with the aim to persuade."<sup>2</sup> Telling your story and teaching the gospel are two different things.

Your story should contain the core message of the gospel—"Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" (1 Tim 1:15). For evangelism to take place, that core message must become a personal message. "I once was lost" must become "you are lost." "I desperately needed a Savior" must become "you desperately need a Savior." "I repented and believed" must become "you must repent and believe." Telling your story can be a helpful bridge to evangelism, but we must not confuse the two.

### *Share Your Story!*

Finally, pray for opportunities to share your story, and actively look for opportunities to share it. Once you have your story in written form, share it with your loved ones. Tell it to your children. Tell it to your Christian friends. And as opportunities come, tell it to anyone who is willing to listen.

As Billy Graham so aptly put it, "Almost everybody will listen to you when you tell your own story." Christian, you have an incredible story to tell! Praise God for it, write it down, and tell it to anyone who is willing to listen.

– Dustin Butts

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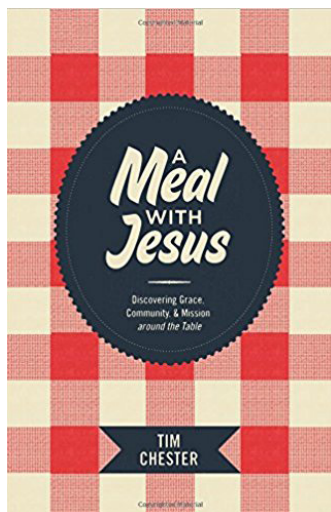
<sup>1</sup>Nathan A. Finn, "On Public Baptismal Testimonies." NathanAFinn.com. <http://www.nathanafinn.com/2012/05/31/on-public-baptismal-testimonies/> (accessed May 22, 2018).

<sup>2</sup>J. Mack Stiles, *Evangelism: How the Whole Church Speaks of Jesus* (Crossway, 2014), 26.

## A Meal with Jesus

Written by Tim Chester

Bookstall Price: \$13



With an inviting gingham tablecloth, and an interesting title like, *A Meal with Jesus*, I was curious about Tim Chester's book from the start. His aim is clearly to challenge, encourage and equip Christians with a stronger theology of "grace, community and mission" around meals. Chester explains that one important way the Bible says *the Son of Man came* (think "not to be served, but to serve" or "to seek and save the lost") was eating and drinking (Luke 7:34). Yes! He came with a clear purpose - to lay down his life to save the lost. Yet, his strategy often looked like... food! The book revisits many passages,

especially in Luke, looking afresh at how these ordinary meals were ministry, whether Jesus was the host or the guest. Our Savior welcomed even those who no one else would, by inviting them to a meal, by eating with them.

Food connects people, thus creating amazing opportunities for both fellowship and gospel ministry! I was really helped by some of his ideas and examples about how ordinary people can use mealtimes. There is a helpful section on overcoming the many excuses our hearts can give for not showing hospitality.

Chester covers a lot of ground, hitting on a wide variety of topics related to meals and food that may be of interest or help to. One section, about food in general, focuses on how sin marring all relationships, even our relationship with food. That made me think!

For several reasons, I recommend this book. You'll see afresh the compassionate heart of Christ and the ways he saves ordinary sinners and uses ordinary meals. You'll long for heaven and desire more earnestly to see your friends and neighbors take a seat not only at your table, but at the marriage supper of the Lamb. You'll be more grateful for what meals represent as we receive God's kindness again and again. And, you'll be so thankful! Through the cross, Christ has created a community. Just this past Monday, we had some Mount Vernon friends kindly invite our family over to their home for a simple outdoor meal of barbecue sandwiches. Their goal was that, together, we could welcome and get to know some of their neighbors around a meal. As we talked and ate, I couldn't help but smile as I reflected on this book. The way Christ cheerfully, generously and intentionally shared ordinary meals with sinners, welcoming them, was on display. How beautiful!

– RECOMMENDED BY JAMIE BUTTS

### Excerpts From the Book

## 1

"Involvement with people, especially the marginalized, begins with a profound grasp of God's grace. Often our instincts are to keep our distance. But the Son of God ate with them. He's not embarrassed by them. He lets them kiss his feet. He's the friend of riffraff, traitors, the unrespectable, drunks, druggies, prostitutes, the mentally ill, the broken and the needy - people whose lives are a mess. Ultimately Jesus gave his life for them."

– Meals as Enacted Community, p.40

## 2

"It's not that meals save people. People are saved through the gospel message. But meals will create natural opportunities to share the message in a context that resonates powerfully with what you're saying. Hospitality has always been integral to the story of God's people."

– Meals as Enacted Mission, p.89

## 3

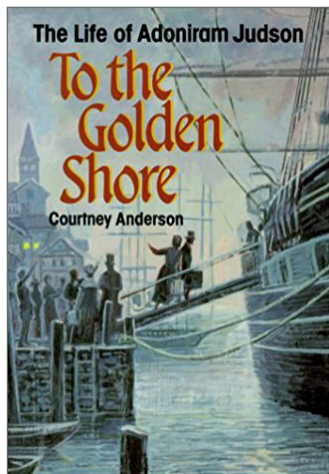
"We need to begin our interaction with people with a question much more often than we do. Only as we enter into their stories, their hopes, and their disappointments will our message connect and have meaning. We mustn't fear others' pain or hide our own, for Christ is with us..."

– Meals as Enacted Promise, p.127

## To The Golden Shore

Written by Courtney Anderson

Bookstall Price: \$15



I got over 100 emails and texts today alone. In fact, I got one from my daughter just before I opened my iPad to start writing this review. Jaynic was asking us to pray for her upcoming mission trip. In a matter of 30 seconds, I had responded to her prayer request. If Adoniram Judson had a prayer request, it may have taken two years for him to get a response. In our world of immediate gratification, we can't even comprehend such a delay. But that was the reality for those living far from home in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. After reading *To The Golden Shore*, Adoniram Judson is a new hero of mine and

if you read it, you will understand why.

Judson was the first missionary to be sent out from America's shores. While in college, and after his conversion, he read a book on the "mysterious empire of Burma." He became consumed with the idea of an American going to a foreign land (previously, all missionaries had been European). Convinced the Lord was calling him, he made plans to do just that.

Judson left Boston with his wife in 1812 for the mission field as a Congregationalist. Two months after arriving in India, Judson determined that he must become a Baptist. After reading and studying the Word of God, he understood from Scripture's plain teaching that believers should be baptized, and he had to take a stand; even when his only avenue of support—the Congregationalists—broke ties. In God's providence, it was not long before Baptists began supporting Judson and his work.

Judson faced many trials while in India: the loss of children and wives and resistance to the gospel. He translated the Bible into Burmese and created a Burmese dictionary. Ultimately, thousands were converted as a result of his ministry.

On June 27, 1819, the first Burman convert was baptized. His name was Maung Nau and following his conversion, Nau wrote (in Burmese), "...taking refuge in the merits of the Lord Jesus Christ...shall dwell with yourselves, a band of brothers, in the happiness of heaven..."

As Judson was dying he told his wife, "I feel so strong in Christ. He has not led me so tenderly this far, to forsake me at the very gate of heaven...I leave myself entirely in the hands of God, to be disposed of according to his holy will." What an inspiring read!

— RECOMMENDED BY LARRY CHANDLER

### Excerpts From the Book

## 1

"All at once his imagination was kindled. An amazing, a brilliant, a dazzling prospect appeared to him. Why should not he be a foreign missionary to one of these remote parts of the world as yet unreached by the gospel? He could be the first Congregational foreign missionary—the first American, the very first!"  
— *Embassy to Ava— The Decision*(1809), p.53

## 2

"Thus, ...we are confirmed Baptists, not because we wanted to be, but because truth compelled us to be... we feel we are alone in the world, with no real friend but each other, no one on whom we can depend but God."  
— *Exile* (1812), p.146

## 3

"No one in the mission doubted that Maung Nau had experienced the grace of God, and it was agreed that he should be baptized the following Sunday, after which he would be received into church fellowship...in the eyes of the other church members the seventh was the most important. For the seventh would be the first Burman ever to become a Baptist."  
— *The First Convert* (1818-1819), p.224



for Where Your  
**TREASURE**  
 is  
 THERE YOUR  
**HEART**  
 will be also

“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

– Matthew 6:19-21

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Jesus spoke these words during his famous Sermon on the Mount where he instructed his disciples about life in the kingdom of heaven (Mt. 5:2). The principle stated at the end should illicit a probing question – Where is my treasure? What do I value more than anything? What consumes my thoughts? In what am I willing to invest my energy and time? These questions help identify our treasure. When we have identified it then we will know to what our hearts are tethered.

More often than not, our hearts are tethered to our “stuff”: our finances, possessions, home, and many of the material things we own and enjoy. Jesus calls them “treasures on earth.” By nature, they are things that do not last. They decay, break, become obsolete, or are stolen. They are things of this world.

How often are our hearts so easily tied to things made of plastic, glass, aluminum, and graphite? That in and of itself is a sad illustration of the condition of the human heart. Think about the tween that gets their first smartphone. They think there are few experiences as joyous as peeling off the plastic and seeing that white light for the first time!

They will be consumed by a 5.5-inch pixelated screen. They guard it, accessorize it, and track its constant whereabouts. Siblings may see it but only under very strict conditions and supervision. And if it is lost or damaged (Heaven forbid!), they will ask their parents to reorient all of life until it is recovered or replaced.

How is it that one small gadget can have such an effect on the human heart? Lest we be quick to judge, as adults we’re no different than the tween with their first smartphone. We each have some other “treasure on earth” that captivates our hearts.

Yet, as citizens of the heaven we can lay up treasures that will never need replacing and will always be satisfying. As we pursue all that we are and have and are to be in Christ, we are laying up treasures in heaven. As we love and treasure him and his law, our hearts are tethered to him more and more. All of the material possessions and wealth we have are a gift from the Lord. They are to be spent and enjoyed as God intends. But we should hold loosely to them so we can hold tightly to Christ.

One day, as we pass from life on earth to life in eternity, our faith will give way to sight. There we will behold the glory of Christ and the treasures of heaven. On that day, we will understand better than we ever have just how fading the treasures of earth really are. May God, even now, give us a vision, through his Word, to see and treasure Christ above all else.

– BRAD THAYER

# NEW MEMBERS

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Trevor & Erin Coen



Carlos Estrada



Luis Hernandez



Dustin & Amy Renn  
(Margaret, Wesley,  
& Nolan)



Joel Rivero



Allan & Lucy Topham



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