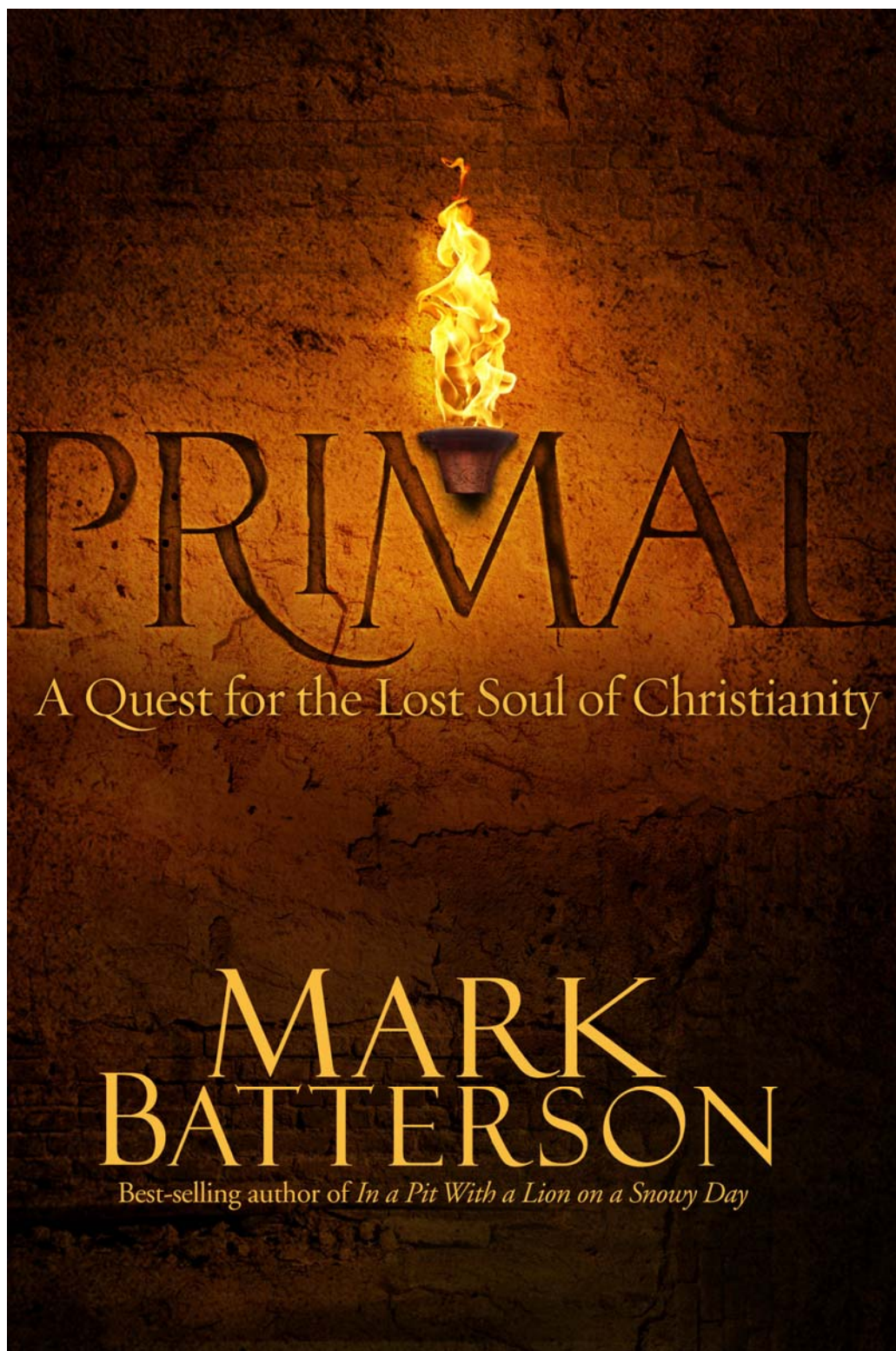


A Six Day Devotional to Accompany

Primal: A Quest for the Lost Soul of Christianity



Day 1: Two Thousand Stairs

We hopped on a double-decker bus and headed toward the heart of Rome. Lora and I had spent a year planning the trip, but nothing prepares you to stand in the very place where Caesars ruled an empire or gladiators battled to the death. As we walked the Via Sacra, we were stepping on the same two-thousand-year-old stones that conquering armies marched on. Of course, I'm guessing they weren't licking gelatos. Our three days in the Eternal City went by far too fast. And I wish we hadn't waited until our fifteenth anniversary to take the trip.

Few places on earth are as historic or romantic as Rome. We thoroughly enjoyed strolling the ancient streets, people watching in the piazzas, and eating leisurely meals at sidewalk cafes. And like good tourists, we also hit all the must-see travel book destinations. We threw a penny over our shoulders into Trevi Fountain, enjoyed an unplugged concert by an electric guitarist outside the Colosseum one moonlit evening, and took a three-hour tour of St. Peter's Basilica. And all of the sites lived up to their travel book billing. But one of the unexpected highlights of our trip was an unplanned visit to a rather nondescript church off the beaten path. It wasn't referenced in our travel guides. And if it hadn't been right around the corner from our hotel, we would never have discovered it. The Church of San Clemente was named after the fourth pope, who was martyred for his faith. According to legend, anchors were tied around his ankles and he was thrown into the Black Sea.

From the outside, the church appeared weather-beaten and time-worn. But the frescoes, statues, and altars on the inside were remarkably well preserved. We quietly explored every nook and cranny of that twelfth-century church. Then we discovered that for five extra Euros we could take an underground tour. As with many of the ruins we visited in Rome, there were several layers of history in the same place. The Romans had a habit of building things on top of things. Some emperors, for example, would tear down their predecessor's palace and build their own palace right on top of it. Such was the case with the Church of San Clemente. The twelfth-century church was built over a fourth-century church. And beneath the fourth-century church

were catacombs where second-century Christians secretly worshiped God before the legalization of Christianity by Constantine in 313.

I'll never forget my descent down that flight of stairs. The air became damp and we could hear underground springs. We carefully navigated each step as we lost some of our light. And our voices echoed off the low ceiling and narrow walkway. Almost like the wardrobe in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, that flight of stairs was like a portal to a different time, a different place. It was as if those stairs took us back two thousand years in time. With each step, a layer of history was stripped away until all that was left was Christianity in all of its primal glory.

As we navigated those claustrophobic catacombs, I was overcome by the fact that I was standing in a place where my spiritual ancestors risked everything, even their lives, to worship God. And I felt a profound mixture of gratitude and conviction. I live in a First World country in the twenty-first century. And I'm grateful for the freedoms and blessings I enjoy because of when and where I live. But when you're standing in an ancient catacomb, the comforts you enjoy make you uncomfortable. The things you complain about are convicting. And some of the sacrifices you've made for the cause of Christ might not even qualify under a second-century definition.

As I tried to absorb the significance of where I was, I couldn't help but wonder if our generation has conveniently forgotten how inconvenient it can be to follow in the footsteps of Christ. I couldn't help but wonder if we have diluted the truths of Christianity and settled for superficialities. I couldn't help but wonder if we have accepted a form of Christianity that is more educated but less powerful, more civilized but less compassionate, more acceptable but less authentic than that which our spiritual ancestors practiced.

Over the last two thousand years, Christianity has evolved in lots of ways. We've come out of the catacombs and built majestic cathedrals with all the bells and steeples. Theologians have given us creeds and canons. Churches have added pews and pulpits, hymnals and organs, committees and liturgies. And the IRS has given us 501(c)(3) status. And there is nothing inherently wrong with any of those things. But none of those things is primal. And almost like

the Roman effect of building things on top of things, I wonder if the accumulated layers of Christian traditions and institutions have unintentionally obscured what lies beneath.

I'm not suggesting that we categorically dismiss all those evolutions as unbiblical. Most of them are simply abiblical. There isn't a precedent for them in Scripture, but they don't contradict biblical principles either. I'm certainly not demonizing postmodern forms of worship. After all, the truth must be reincarnated in every culture in every generation. And I am personally driven by the conviction that there are ways of doing church that no one has thought of yet. But two thousand years of history beg this question: When all of the superficialities are stripped away, what is the primal essence of Christianity?

The answer is what Jesus called the most important commandment. We call it the Great Commandment. It could also be called the Primal Commandment because it is of first importance.

Love the Lord your God with all of your heart and with all of your soul and with all of your mind and with all of your strength.

Day One: Talk About It

1. Have you ever had an experience (like the author's visit to San Clemente) that brought home to you the ancient heritage of our faith? If so, describe it.

2. The author says, "We have accepted a form of Christianity that is more educated but less powerful, more civilized but less compassionate, more acceptable but less authentic than that which our spiritual ancestors practiced." Do you agree or disagree, and why?

3. What promise do you see in the idea that the Great Commandment can bring us back to primal Christianity?

Day 2: The Tribe of the Transplanted

Several years ago I had the privilege of attending the National Prayer Breakfast held annually at the Washington Hilton Hotel. The breakfast is a bipartisan gathering of leaders from all branches of government and both houses of Congress as well as delegations of leaders from foreign countries. The speaker that year was Bill Frist. Prior to his tenure in the U.S. Senate, Dr. Frist performed more than 150 heart transplants as a thoracic surgeon. During his remarks, he talked in reverent tones about the moment when a heart has been grafted into a new body and all the surgical team can do is wait in hopes that it will begin to beat. At that point he stopped speaking in medical terms and starting speaking in spiritual terms. He almost seemed at a loss for words as he described that miraculous moment when a heart beats in a new body for the first time. He called it a mystery.

Heart transplants are a marvel of modern medicine, but it goes way beyond what medicine can explain or understand. The heart is more than a physical pump. It doesn't just circulate five thousand quarts of blood through sixty thousand miles of blood vessels day in and day out. The heart has a mind of its own. Studies suggest that the heart secretes its own brainlike hormones and has cellular memory. So a heart transplant isn't just physical; it's metaphysical. Heart transplant recipients don't just receive a new organ; they receive cellular memories.

In his book *A Man After His Own Heart*, Charles Siebert shares a scientific yet poetic depiction of a heart transplant he observed at New York-Presbyterian Hospital in New York City. Not long after, Siebert attended an annual banquet for transplant recipients and he was deeply moved by their profound appreciation for life. They spoke in reverent tones about the second chance at life they had been given. They humbly acknowledged their responsibility to honor the donor. And many of them talked about new desires that accompanied their new hearts.

Siebert concluded—and his research is backed up by numerous medical studies—that transplant recipients don't just receive a new heart. Along with that new heart, they receive whole new sensory responses, cravings, and habits.

Siebert called this group of heart recipients “the tribe of the transplanted.”

When you give your heart to Christ, Christ gives His heart to you. And you become a part of the tribe of the transplanted. That new heart gives you a new appreciation for life. You humbly acknowledge your responsibility to honor the donor. And the cellular memories that come with that transplanted heart give you whole sensory responses, cravings, and habits. You literally feel different. Why? Because you feel what Christ feels. And chief among those sanctified emotions is compassion. Your heart begins to break for the things that break the heart of God. You become part of this coup de compassion that started at Calvary. And that is the heart of what it means to love God with all of your heart.

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.

Day 2: Talk About It

1. Think back to your early days as a follower of Jesus Christ.

(a) How did you have a new appreciation for life?

(b) How did you begin to feel differently—feel what Christ feels?

2. What particular needy individuals or groups or places has God given you special compassion for?

Day 3: Seventy Faces

In 1801, Sir David Brewster was awarded an honorary master of arts degree from the University of Edinburgh and was ordained to preach. But his first sermon turned into his last sermon. Brewster was so nervous when he got behind the pulpit that he vowed to never do it again. In the words of a colleague, “It was a pity for the National Church of Scotland, but a good day for science.” Brewster decided to pursue his first love, the science of optics. And in 1816, his childlike passion produced an invention that has captured the imagination of children ever since. Brewster called it a kaleidoscope. Containing fragments of colored glass, the kaleidoscope reflects light in an endless variety of colors and patterns.

And so it is with Scripture. According to rabbinic tradition, every word of sacred Scripture has seventy faces and six hundred thousand meanings.ⁱ

If I had to describe Scripture in a single word, it would be *kaleidoscopic*. You can read the same verse on different occasions and it will speak to you in totally different ways. It reminds me of the adage attributed to the Greek philosopher Heraclitus: “You never step into the same river twice.” In a similar vein, you never read the same verse of Scripture the same way twice. And that is a testament to its divine Author. The Spirit who inspired the writers of Scripture thousands of years ago is the same Spirit who illuminates readers today. And His illumination of Scripture is based on His intimate and infinite knowledge of your personality, your circumstances, your dreams, your doubts, your history, and your destiny. That is why Scripture speaks to us in such kaleidoscopic ways.

The Bible was written over a span of fifteen hundred years by more than forty writers. God inspired kings and poets and prophets and shepherds. They wrote out of very different personalities in very different circumstances. Some wrote in the plush setting of a palace, while others etched their words during an island exile. Some wrote out of the agony of personal tragedy, while others wrote in the ecstasy of an epiphany. Written in three different languages on three different continents, there is no other book like the Bible. Despite the fact that it touches on

thousands of complex subjects and controversial topics, it possesses a supernatural harmony from beginning to end. And it is omnirelevant to every person on the planet.

When we open the sacred Scriptures, it is like descending that flight of stairs at the Church of San Clemente and walking into the catacombs of truth. The Bible is the place where God bares His soul. And it's no Sunday school flannelgraph. It'll make you wince and cringe and blush. But it'll also make you marvel. Nothing speaks to the soul like Scripture. It's the way God reveals His wonders in written form. And like the wonders of creation waiting to be discovered, the Bible beckons us to explore.

The quest for the lost soul of Christianity always leads us back to the Bible. But rediscovering the wonders of Scripture requires more than reading. That's where the quest begins, but that's not where it ends. Not if you want to get it into your soul. You have to meditate on it. Then you have to live it out. Meditating on it turns one-dimensional knowledge into two-dimensional understanding. Living it out turns two-dimensional understanding in three-dimensional obedience.

Day 3: Talk About It

- 1. Give an example of a way in which a Bible passage meant one thing to you at one time and another thing at another time. What made the difference?*
- 2. Have you gone through times in your life when Scripture seemed boring to you and times when it filled you with wonder? What opens you up to the wonder?*
- 3. What's your reaction to the idea that meditating on and living out Scripture can turn it into a 3-D experience in your life?*

Day 4: Don't Take Yes for an Answer

One of my inspirations is Leonardo da Vinci. Da Vinci ranks as one of most curious and creative minds in history. Born on April 15, 1452, Leonardo dreamed of things never before imagined: a flying machine, a parachute, an extendable ladder, the bicycle, an adjustable monkey wrench, hydraulic jacks, a water-powered alarm clock, and for all of you concert lovers, the world's first revolving stage. One biographer called him "the most curious man who ever lived." But my favorite description of da Vinci? "He wouldn't take yes for an answer."

I love that approach to life. If you approach every person, every challenge, every situation with humble curiosity, it transforms them into learning opportunities. The outcome is no longer seen as success or failure, good or bad, positive or negative. The only measuring stick is this: what did you learn from it? Honestly, that mindset has helped me get through some difficult challenges. When I'm going through a tough time emotionally or relationally or spiritually, I figure I'm getting an education in those areas. When it gets really tough, I think of it as graduate work. Call it a Jedi mind trick. Call it a state of denial. All I know is this: that mindset has resulted in an experimental approach to life and ministry. I'm less afraid of failing, because I know it's the best form of education. I'm less focused on getting out of situations and more focused on what I can get out of those situations. I'm less concerned with what I'm experiencing and more concerned with what I'm learning. Everyone and everything become part of my education. God redeems them and uses them to shape me into the person He wants me to become. And the learning process never ends.

God has created us with the capacity to keep learning until the day we die. And that isn't something we should take for granted. The average brain is only the size of a softball and weighs approximately three pounds, yet neurologists estimate that we have the capacity to learn something new every second of every minute of every hour of every day for the next three hundred million years. Awesome, isn't it? But it's more than that. It's also an awesome responsibility. Learning isn't a luxury; it's a stewardship issue.

It's impossible to pinpoint what percentage of our minds we use, but there is untapped potential in all of us. Your imagination is capable of far more than you imagine, if I can say it that way. Yet somewhere along the way, most of us stop living out of imagination and start living out of memory. We stop creating the future and start repeating the past. And that is the day we stop living and start dying. Why? Because we stop learning.

The word *disciple* comes from a Greek root that means "learner." By definition, a disciple is someone who never stops learning. A true disciple makes the most of the 100 billion brain cells God has put on loan to him. A true disciple loves more because she knows more. A true disciple is consumed with holy curiosity that doesn't take yes for an answer. The disciple keeps seeking and asking and knocking. And the quest is never over because the questions never end.

Leonardo da Vinci carried a notebook with him wherever he went. It's estimated by some that da Vinci left fourteen thousand pages of notes to Francesco Melzi in his will. Nearly seven thousand pages still exist, and in case you care, Bill Gates purchased eighteen pages for \$30.8 million in 1994. Da Vinci's napkin scribbles ranged from botany to anatomy to philosophy to painting. And one of the things that made them remarkable is the fact that most of them were written using a technique called mirror writing. He wrote in reverse so the text could be read only when reflected in a mirror. But here is what truly inspired me. In the final days leading up to his death on May 2, 1519, Leonardo apologized to God and to man "for leaving so much undone." He had done so much, but he felt like there was so much left to do. He had learned so much, but he felt like there was so much more to learn. And he was determined to keep learning until the day he died. So even on his deathbed, Leonardo was observing and describing, in scientific detail, the nature and symptoms of his illness.

I know this sounds strange, but I want to die the same way. I don't want to die from the same illness. But I do want to learn something new the day I die. Why? Because I can. And because I believe that learning glorifies God when it's done for the right reasons. And that reason is to know more so that you can love more.

So go ahead and live as if you'll die tomorrow. But keep learning as if you'll live forever.

After all, you will.

Day 4: Talk About It

- 1. On a scale of 1 to 10, how curious are you? If your number is less than 10, how can you push it in that direction?*
- 2. What have you been learning about lately?*
- 3. How do you think God might use you more or use you differently if you cultivated your curiosity more and kept on learning?*

Day 5: Go. Set. Ready.

There is an old adage: “Ready. Set. Go.” And I know it’s predicated on the importance of preparation. But I think it’s backward. You’ll never be ready. And you’ll never be set. Sometimes you just need to go for it. We need a paradigm shift: Go. Set. Ready.

Some people spend their entire lives getting ready for what God wants them to do. But they never end up doing it because they never come to the realization that they’ll never be ready. Listen, you’ll never have enough education or enough experience. And you’ll never have enough time or enough money. And that is where so many of us get stuck, spiritually. Our failure to act on God ideas not only breeds doubt and discouragement; it’s also a form of disobedience. Not acting on a God idea is no less disobedient than breaking one of the Ten Commandments. And when we fail to act on those God ideas, we’re playing at half strength. And half strength doesn’t cut it when it comes to the Great Commandment.

The greatest moments in life are those moments when a God idea is conceived in your mind or an epiphany awakens your soul or a sympathy breakthrough breaks your heart. Something comes alive within you. And it’s absolutely energizing. But if you don’t act on it, the thing that brings you to life will cause a slow, painful death.

For nearly a decade, that’s how I felt about writing. I knew I was called to write. In fact, I feel as called to write as I do to pastor. It’s not something I want to do. It’s something I can’t *not* do. But passion turned to frustration because of the curse of perfectionism. I could never seem to finish what I started. So for several years I stopped trying altogether.

My call to write traces back to a defining moment when I was nineteen years old. A preacher named Sam Farina shared a message out of an obscure Old Testament passage about an ancient warrior named Benaiah who chased a lion into a pit on a snowy day and killed it. I don’t know how. I don’t know why. But that message did more than capture my imagination. Call it an epiphany. Call it a God idea. Call it a calling. This thought was conceived in my spirit: *If I ever*

write a book, I'd love to write a book about that story. It took two decades and two manuscripts. But I took that thought captive. I held on to it. I nurtured it. I fought for it. And I worked at it. And the dream finally became reality on October 16, 2006, when *In a Pit with a Lion on a Snowy Day* hit bookstores.

That book isn't just a book. It was an act of obedience. I had to take the thought captive. Then I had to make it obedient to Christ by setting my alarm clock early in the morning. God ideas don't become reality without some blood, sweat, and tears. Oh yeah, and loss of sleep. But that's the true test of love, isn't it? If you love someone or something enough, the expenditure of energy isn't seen as a chore. It's a privilege. It's not something you have to do; it's something you get to do. Love turns work into worship. And that's how I view writing. It's worshiping God with a computer keyboard. I wish I could say that each book is easier to write than the one before, but that certainly hasn't been my experience. But the harder it is, the greater the sacrifice of praise.

We have a core value at NCC: Pray like it depends on God and work like it depends on you. Prayer is the first half of the equation. But you can't just pray about it. At some point you need to stop praying and start sweating. And then you need to keep sweating until the God idea becomes reality.

I'm absolutely convinced that the greatest predictor of success in any endeavor is persistence. It's not only how hard you try; it's also how long you try. We tend to overestimate how much we can accomplish in the short term. But we underestimate how much we can accomplish over the long haul. Why? Because energy is exponential. The harder you work and the longer you work, the more it pays off. Energy turns into synergy. And that persistence pays off.

In a study involving Japanese and American first graders, kids were given a difficult puzzle to solve while researchers measured how long they would try before giving up. On average, the American children lasted 9.47 minutes. The Japanese children lasted 13.93 minutes. That is a 40 percent difference.ⁱⁱ

Want to guess who scores higher on standardized math tests?

Success in any endeavor is a byproduct of trying harder and trying longer. There are no substitutes. There are no shortcuts. It doesn't matter whether it's athletics or academics, music or math. Study after study has shown that it takes about ten years or ten thousand hours to become great at anything.ⁱⁱⁱ No one is a natural. Or maybe I should say, everyone is a natural. But you need to work hard and work long. In the words of Malcolm Gladwell, "Ten thousand hours is the magic number of greatness."

Are there any God ideas you've given up on? Any God-ordained passions that you have stopped fighting for? Any God-sized dreams gathering the dust of disobedience?

Don't give up on them. You need to try. Then you need to try harder. And then you need to try longer.

Go. Set. Ready.

Day 5: Talk About It

- 1. Does the idea of approaching "God ideas" with a go-set-ready attitude make you more uncomfortable or more excited? Why?*
- 2. Have you had a calling from God that you haven't acted on yet? If so, what is it (if you are you willing to say)? Why haven't you acted on it yet?*
- 3. When have hard work and persistence really paid off in your life?*

Day 6: The Next Reformation

I was recently part of an international gathering of Christian leaders and thinkers that met in Wittenberg, Germany, to discuss the state of Christianity. The setting could not have been more apropos. It was there that Martin Luther sparked the Protestant Reformation by nailing his ninety-five theses to the doors of the Castle Church.

Our three-day conversation, which culminated on Reformation Day, revolved around this question: do we need another reformation? The short answer is yes. Every generation does. Every generation needs its Martin Luthers, its Wittenbergs, and its ninety-five theses. But I don't think the next reformation will look anything like the last reformation. A single person won't lead it. A single event won't define it.

The last reformation was a reformation of creeds. The next reformation will be a reformation of deeds. The last reformation was symbolized by one central figure. The next reformation will be led by millions of reformers living compassionately, creatively, and courageously for the cause of Christ. It will be marked by broken hearts and sanctified imaginations. And the driving force will be the love of God. A love that is full of compassion, wonder, curiosity, and energy.

The last reformation dates back to the early sixteenth century. Pope Leo X was raising funds to build St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, and the primary means of fundraising were indulgences. One of those fundraisers, an itinerant preacher named Johann Tetzel, coined this catchy jingle: "As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory springs." In essence, salvation was for sale. And people were led to believe that each coin put into the coffer paid down time spent in purgatory.

By the year 1509, a depository of more than five thousand holy relics had been accumulated by Frederick the Wise, who wanted to make Wittenberg the Rome of Germany. The purported relics included a thorn from the crown of Christ, a twig from the burning bush, a piece of gold from the

gift of the wise men, and a piece of bread from the Last Supper. The collection also included thousands of holy bones from dead saints. Each relic was given a chronological value. Viewing the bone of a dead saint, for example, was worth a reduction of four thousand years spent in purgatory. One of the silver coins paid to Judas? Fourteen hundred years. Add it all up, and the total value of the collection of holy relics was 1,902,202 years and 270 days.^{iv} Once a year, on All Saints' Day, all of those relics were put on display in Wittenberg, Germany. And it was the day before All Saints Day, October 31, 1517, when one man challenged the status quo and changed the course of history.

No one knows where a reformation will begin or who will lead it. It often happens in unlikely places and is led by unlikely people. And a monk named Martin Luther was as unlikely a candidate as anybody.

Luther was a devout monk. Like the other monks in his order, he was awakened by the cloister bell at two o'clock in the morning and began the first of seven prayer cycles. His confessions lasted up to six hours. And he would often fast for three days on end without so much as a crumb of bread. Luther said of himself, "I was a good monk, and I kept the rule of my order so strictly that I may say that if ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery it was I."^v

Then, in the fall of 1516, Martin Luther was teaching through the book of Romans at the University of Wittenberg when he came to this Scripture: "The just shall live by faith." Luther experienced a theological tipping point. He said, "This passage of Paul became to me the gate of heaven."^{vi} And the rediscovery of a simple truth—*sola fide*, or by faith alone—became the rallying cry of the Protestant Reformation.

Now let me make an all-important observation. If you miss this, you miss the soul of this book. Reformations are *not* born out of new discoveries. Those are often called cults. Reformations are born out of rediscovering something ancient, something primal. They are born out of primal truths rediscovered, reimagined, and radically reapplied to our lives.

So what does our generation need to rediscover? What primal truth needs to be reimagined?
What is our reformation?

Simply put, we've got to be great at the Great Commandment. Anything less isn't good enough. Or I should say, great enough. We must not succeed at the wrong thing. We must not invest our earthly lives in things that have no heavenly value. We must not be great at things that do not matter. We have to be great at what matters most. And what matters most is loving God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

When you descend the flight of stairs into the soul of Christianity, and everything is stripped away but its primal essence, what you're left with is the Great Commandment. Just as the medieval church rediscovered justification by faith, so our generation must rediscover the Great Commandment. The rallying cry of the last reformation was *sola fide*. The rallying cry of the next reformation is *amo Dei*.

Translation: love God.

Day 6: Talk About It

- 1. Do you think the church needs a new reformation? Why or why not?*
- 2. Why do you think a renewed love for God could be the spark that sets off a new reformation?*
- 3. What will it take to get each one of us—and the church as a whole—back to a primal focus on the Great Commandment, loving God most of all?*

Footnotes

ⁱ Lawrence Kushner, *Eyes Remade for Wonder* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 1998), 50.

ⁱⁱ Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers: The Story of Success* (New York: Little, Brown, 2008), 249.

ⁱⁱⁱ Check out *Talent Is Overrated* by Geoff Colvin and *Outliers* by Malcolm Gladwell.

^{iv} Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Meridian, 1995), 53.

^v *Ibid.*, 34.

^{vi} *Ibid.*, 50.