



Joe and Bob

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## A Pastor's Kid and a Prodigal Become Friends

### JOE

Bob was a crisp, button-down Christian. He knew a lot about the Bible and carried it to church with him every week. He was the kind of guy who could teach adult Sunday school. He had a good reputation as an eye doctor and was a pretty upstanding citizen. Then the meltdown. He had an affair with a young woman at work. He divorced his wife Rita who taught at the local Christian high school. She was diagnosed with cancer not too long after that, which made Bob an even greater pariah.

When fishermen are out for shark they do what they call “chum”—they throw bloody stuff overboard that attracts the sharks and drives them into a frenzy. Bob was a kind of Christian chum for a while. We were the sharks. What he did and how he did it pulled out all the self-righteousness in our little community. We fed on Bob for a while until we finally lost interest. Bob disappeared and when he resurfaced years later he was completely different.

I don't know if I had ever met someone so radically changed by grace. Usually you can poke someone hard enough to get

them to try to defend and justify themselves. But the Bob I had known was dead, and in his place was someone else, someone I found myself desperately wanting to know. Bob Bevington has taught me about grace. I have seen it heal his relationship with Rita and with their children. I have watched as it has flowed from him into the people God brings into his life. Bob Bevington has shown me what it looks like when grace confronts brokenness.

I remember the day he called my office to make an appointment. I looked forward to the meeting since I wondered how he would defend what he had done to Rita and why he now seemed so concerned about other people's marriages. At the time, the only real contact I had with Bob was through his new wife, Amy. Amy had called to talk about a concern she had for a couple who were separating because of an affair. She said she and Bob were praying for the couple and wanted to do anything they could to help keep them together. I found that fascinating, and not in a good way.

A few days later Bob showed up at my office, sat down across from me, and leaned forward as he is prone to do. Bob is not laid back. He is an avid Ohio State Buckeye football fan and it always seems like he is ready to jump up and yell. But as we talked about how his life had blown up, he never defended himself once. Instead he asked me how I would feel if he came to my church. He rehearsed what he had done and how he had done it. He said, "Joe, I am the worst. Everyone knows it. I will completely understand if you think we should find someplace else to go to church. I'm sure it would be simpler for you, and it would probably be better for us." I realized he was making it easy for me. I could just agree with him, and we'd be done.

I thought about it for a minute. I thought of the people who had already warned me that Bob was attending. But when I looked in his eyes I saw something I have rarely seen. I saw someone who has been forgiven much and therefore loves much. It was grace I saw that day, and I told Bob I wanted him to make our church his own. For the past few years I have been able to dive

into grace with Bob and it has utterly changed me. For that I'll be forever grateful.

## **BOB**

I was hung-over the first time I met Joe Coffey. My first wife, Rita, took me to Christ Community Chapel (CCC), a church that met in a school gymnasium.<sup>1</sup> I remember thinking it was a funny place for a church.

Joe was the assistant pastor of the church *and* the chaplain of the school. You should know this about Joe; he's a go-getter. From what I can tell he's always been that way. He's over fifty years old and still participates in Ironman competitions. He's a man's man and a very gifted communicator. Joe gave the message that Sunday but I don't remember a word he said. But that's more a reflection on my state of mind at the time than his preaching skills.

Rita and I attended for a few Sundays and then we pretty much quit going. That was fine with me. Back then I was a strong believer in "Christianity is not a religion, it's a relationship." And back then my "relationship" didn't have much room or need or respect for church.

Rita and I were blessed with two great kids, Dave and Lauren. My career as an optometrist had taken off, plus I had become an entrepreneur on the side. For the sixteen years I was married to Rita she remained faithful to me and to the Lord, while my relationship with the Lord basically just spiraled downward. By my fortieth birthday, although I had grown wealthy in the material sense, I had become spiritually bankrupt. And without even knowing it, I had lit the fuse on a 500-megaton cluster bomb that eventually went off in an explosion of adultery and divorce that would wreak immeasurable havoc in a dozen lives, and will reverberate in the lives of generations yet unborn. I will tell a lot more about that as these chapters unfold.

Fifteen years have passed since that bomb went off. As I look back I am amazed that God did not give up on me. Instead, he

started sending people across my path to explain how the gospel works for scandalous sinners like me. About how grace emanates from the cross. And he gradually enabled me to see glimpses of the glorious Person of Jesus—who he is and what he did. That caused something to happen deep in my soul. Call it wonder. Call it awe. Call it gratitude. Call it a confrontation with grace.

I guess you could say I'm a prodigal come home. But believe me, the path back to the Father was not easy. In the wake of setting off that cluster bomb I found myself alienated from every Christian who had ever known me. At first I simply avoided them all. But God had other plans. Amy, my second and current wife, became a Christian and a friend invited her to a women's Bible study. At Joe's church! By then CCC had grown into a megachurch with a campus and a gym of its own, and Joe had been promoted to lead pastor. I was delighted with how Amy was benefiting from the Bible study. And the relationships she formed there were a huge blessing. Eight years later she made an announcement. She wanted us to attend Joe's church on Sundays. I said, "You've got to be kidding, my name is mud in that place."

Amy knew that was true, but she didn't see it as a problem. We had outgrown the little church we were attending—they had dismal resources for our two kids, Grace and Michael. So after six weeks of resistance and unsuccessful church shopping, I agreed to visit CCC—once.

I liked everything about the church, especially Joe's message. After the service, Amy greeted some women with small kids while I ducked a few ghosts. After all those years, my fear of facing a church community that was well informed of my history hadn't eroded very much. But during the week I prayed hard about it, and when we went back the following Sunday, Amy was excited and I could smell God in that place. I prayed some more. I decided to ask to meet with Joe. I wanted to see if he thought it would be a good idea for us to become members of Christ Community Chapel.

A week later I walked into his office and sat down for a face-to-face conversation. I reviewed the sordid litany of events, the

whole awful story, even though I was fairly certain Joe was aware of it. I said, "I don't know if you remember . . ."

Joe looked me straight in the eye. He was not smiling. "Yeah, I remember."

"So don't you think it would be easier for everyone if we found someplace else to go to church?"

Joe hesitated. He bit his lip. There was a long silence. I was on the edge of my seat.

"No," he said, "I don't think that would be necessary."

Joe offered me grace that day. It was clear—he knew the easy answer to my question was "Yes, someplace else." But instead of taking the simple route, he offered me grace. And I felt it deep within my soul. Instantly I could see that Christ Community Chapel was a safe place for returning prodigals. We started attending the membership class the next week.

A year later, on our way home from a missions trip to India, I told Joe I'd take a bullet for him—and that I'd do it with a big toothy grin on my face. I meant it. Literally. I'd still do it today. Like I said, the path back to the Father has not been easy. But my pastor and friend, Joe Coffey, has been a rock for me since that day in his office. If you knew him the way I do, you'd understand.



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## The Church

### *Of Blockheads and Magnificence*

#### **JOE**

I have been part of one church or another my whole life. There are a lot of messed up people in churches. I don't think this is a secret. In fact, organized religion is such an easy target that few secular writers even bother to take shots at the church. It is like shooting fish in a barrel. They leave it to hip Christian writers to point out how irrelevant the modern church has become.

Personally I think the church has always been a mess. Communion Sunday at the church of Corinth in the first century was evidently more like a keg party. Maybe that is why we have to use the tiny little cups now. My guess is that Corinth was still using the big cups. The ancient Thessalonian church was having trouble too. Some yahoos on the membership rolls kept quitting their jobs and running up a hill in white robes and sneakers telling everyone Jesus was coming back. It's not too different today. After the next natural disaster, one prominent Christian or another will make headlines for saying something just plain silly about why so many people died. My point is that if our faith is filled

with people who need a Savior, the church will always be filled with people who are half-cracked.

Blame Jesus. Jesus never hung out with a very good crowd. He could have if he wanted to. You realize that don't you? He actually would have fit in better with the people in my neighborhood. They are mostly decent folks. They don't appear to be particularly religious but they are really nice. They don't have big loud parties and I can't remember a single time in the last ten years when the police had to be called for anything except a rabid raccoon under someone's deck. They actually shot the varmint. It was a shocker but that is a whole other story. But Jesus hung out on the other side of the tracks with the druggies and prostitutes. He explained why when he was at a particularly raucous party at the home of a rich man named Levi. A gaggle of really good religious folk asked, "Why them?" and Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor. It is the sick. I came to heal the sick ones."<sup>57</sup> And the church has been filled with messed up people ever since.

If I went to an emergency room with a broken finger and saw someone with a gaping wound I wouldn't say, "Hey, you shouldn't be here. You are really messed up." If I had a chance I would probably say something like, "Wow, good thing you got here. You are in rough shape. I hope you make it." That is the church. People sitting around at various stages of being screwed up. Some people come with really big wounds that they'll be dealing with for the rest of their lives. It shouldn't surprise us that church people are easy targets. We didn't get in because we were particularly good. We got in because we particularly needed a savior.



I was in Florence several years ago and saw the sculpture of David by Michelangelo. In the museum, when you turn this one corner and look down the corridor, suddenly there it is in all of its brilliance, seventeen feet tall. As I walked toward it I noticed other sculptures off to the sides. One in particular is of a man

who looks like he is trying to pull himself out of the marble. His torso is partly free and his right arm reaches up to the block of marble that should have been his head. The arm is powerfully flexed but in all the years of flexing he hasn't made a lot of progress. The sculpture appears half finished. Scholars are divided about whether it is actually an unfinished work or precisely what Michelangelo intended. Many believe the great artist was giving us a glimpse of what he could see. Michelangelo claimed he could see what was inside a piece of marble. He felt his job was to free whatever was stuck by knocking off the rock that didn't belong. In this case it was a man.

Anyway, it was very moving to me partly because I feel much more like the guy trying to pull his head out of stone than I feel like David. I want to be like David and of course if I can't be like David the next best thing is for people to *think* I am like David. David stands in a magnificent pose of strength and poise. He is a man who stands with his sling (and that is about his only article of clothing) and is completely relaxed in who he is and what he can do. I, on the other hand, am much more like the poor schlep who is trying to pull his head out of a block of rock.



I was in India several years ago. Jet lag had me up early and I sat outside an orphanage with my journal and my Bible trying to listen for the voice of God through my rock-hard head. I sat for a long time before the sun began to peek over the horizon. I had already written several pages. I praised and I thanked and I repented and I tried to love this invisible God who seemed to be more elusive than most religious people will admit. Finally I put my pen down and just sat in silence.

It was a single sentence. I am not sure if it was God or just a sudden burst of truth that finally made its way in. Maybe there is not much difference. This is the truth that came to me that early morning on the other side of the world. "You are trying too



hard to love me—it is much more important for you to experience my love for you than it is for me to experience your love for me.” That was it.

There is a scene in the movie *As Good As It Gets*. Jack Nicholson is trying to express his feelings to Helen Hunt. He stumbles around and finally says, “You make me want to be a better man.” Outside that orphanage I finally had a reason to become a better man. The God of the universe looked at me with my head still stuck in so much marble and essentially said, “I love you even though you aren’t anything like David. It is my love that will be the hammer and chisel.”

In the Gospel of Mark the very first words Jesus speaks are, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”<sup>58</sup> The gospel is this good news: God demonstrates his love toward me in that while I am still a sinner Christ died for me.<sup>59</sup> Repent means to turn away from something you have been doing or believing, and do or believe something else. My biggest problem is I keep thinking God could only love someone like David so I keep trying to pull my own head out of the marble so he will love me. “Repent!!!” Jesus says, “And believe the good news. You are already loved so let the love of God set you free.”

I was walking toward the magnificent statue of David. The corridor was flanked on both sides by unfinished pieces of rock. Men writhing to climb out of the stone that held them fast. By the time I stood to admire the wonder and beauty of David, my appreciation for Michelangelo was very great indeed. It was the unfinished man that gave me appreciation for what Michelangelo was able to do. That is the way the church is supposed to work. The church is filled with people only Jesus could love and he wouldn’t want it any other way.

It is our cracks that might be the most important thing about us. It is cracks that let grace in. It is cracks that eventually show forth glory. Grace in and glory out. David would be easy to love. What’s not to love about perfection? But loving someone like me

is a different story. It is only when you know how terribly selfish and unlovable I am that you can begin to grasp the depth of the love of my Savior.

Before Saul became Paul he hated the church. He went from town to town dragging Christians out for beatings or prison or both. On the road to Damascus he had an encounter with the living Lord. Jesus appeared and blinded him with brilliance. Saul heard only a voice. The voice said, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” Saul must have sat there confused. It was never his intent to pick on someone so scary and so bright. Jesus indentified himself so closely with the church that to persecute the church was to persecute him. Jesus would call Saul out like a piece of throwaway marble. He was transformed by the love of the One who called him. Paul was blind and then he could see, and the thing he saw when he looked at the church was something Jesus loved dearly.

There is no one who loves the church more than Jesus. I remind myself of that every time I look out into a congregation filled with knuckleheads. And I remind myself that the biggest knucklehead of all is about to preach.

## **BOB**

You wouldn't know it from the very English surname, “Bevington,” but if it weren't for my dad's dad, I would be a full-blooded Italian. My dad's mother was born in Naples, came over young, and became thoroughly Americanized. But both of my mom's parents were serious Old-World Italians and stayed that way till their dying breath. Their real names were Pasquale and Assunta but they went by Patsy and Sue. Being Italian was a bright spot in my childhood. My grandpa played an old concertina, a small, simplified accordion. My eight cousins and I would gather around and glow whenever he played it. All my cousins were full-blooded Italians. But they overlooked my impure pedigree and called me their *paisano*. That always made me happy.

I took my mom to Italy a couple years after my dad died. It was just the two of us. We toured Tuscany as spring gave way to summer and the sun drenched the landscape. Thanks to mom's wheelchair the entire trip moved in slow motion. We lingered over the beauty of the scenery, the people, and the food. No one spoke our language, yet we felt totally at home and connected. That's probably why I had so many epiphanies there.

The first one happened in Firenze. Joe called it Florence, but we call it Firenze because we're Italian. I, too, stood in front of the magnificent statue of David. But it was his right hand that caught my attention. It is huge. And it is perfect. I tried to place my own hand into the exact same position. That's when I discovered the magic. My hand can move. David's might be perfect, but mine is alive. I've been watching the movement and marveling at it ever since.

Early the next morning I wheeled Mom out and stood next to her on the paving stones outside the three-hundred-year-old villa where we were staying. Mist hung over terraced vineyards as far as our eyes could see. That's when I truly noticed it for the first time. Air. If you stop and think about it, air is miraculous. It's invisible stuff that you breathe in for a few seconds, and then you breathe it back out, and somehow it does something in you that keeps you alive. In an act of celebration I closed my eyes and sucked in air until my lungs were bursting with delight. Then I squeezed it all out and repeated the cycle several times. When I finally opened my eyes my mom was doing the same thing. Italian air is amazing. But so is the air you're breathing right now.

The third epiphany was the best one. It was after midnight. Mom had gone to bed but I was wide-awake so I went outside. The air was the perfect temperature where you can't even feel it. I looked up and saw the most glorious sky I have ever seen. Clearer than it was in Alaska. God's fingernail of a moon kept watch over millions of stars. The 60s song "Everybody Is a Star" came to mind. It's a cool song and the title speaks volumes. It's saying that every person who lives and breathes radiates something glorious like starlight. I closed my eyes as warm thoughts

of the people we met in the nearby village filled my mind. They were stars. I smiled as I envisioned the ones who tried to speak English using only pure Italiano plus passionate hand gestures. Glorious stars. I thought about all the people living all over the world at that very moment, breathing and moving their hands.

When I opened my eyes a really bright star got my attention. I honed in on it and discovered it was actually two stars that had come into alignment. That's why it was so bright. It occurred to me that people can do that, too. Maybe you and I will meet someday and the star that is you and the star that is me will line up. If we do, the glory we give off can be beyond addition. Like one plus one equals three.

But the epiphany didn't end there. I suddenly remembered a line from the song that posed the question, "Ever catch a fallen star?" That is probably *the* question when it comes to relationships. In this world, everybody is a star, but a fallen one. We are all self-eclipsed by our own sin. So bringing our fallen stars into alignment is tricky business. I think that's why people continually look for something to align themselves *with*. Something outside themselves. Something to have in common. It might be a hobby. A political cause. An irritating co-worker. It can be anything. Even a beverage. If we find alignment with just the right something, another star might join us and together we might be able to bask in a little glory for a while.



Large groups of people sometimes attempt to align themselves with something big. When this works it can be quite exhilarating. Like on January 3, 2003, when Ohio State played Miami in the Fiesta Bowl for the National Championship. Buckeye fans started swarming nine hours before the kick-off. As I walked down the street it was as if I had seventy thousand best friends—all because I was wearing scarlet and gray clothes, a Woody hat, and several necklaces made of buckeyes. Total strangers of all ages were high-fiving me. Some offered me brats and beers. I exchanged

email addresses with several of them as if we'd be friends forever and do business deals and go on fishing trips together. But in reality those new relationships were false alignments. The stars in the Pleiades look close, but they are actually light-years apart.

Of course, Ohio State won the game in double overtime as time stood still for the Buckeye Nation. But on my way back to the car a guy with a scarlet and gray face puked on my shoes. That took a little of the shine off for me. The Arizona desert air didn't smell quite as fragrant after that. There are glory-muting blockheads in every crowd.

I think it's safe to say that genuine and lasting alignments between individuals are rare. And the odds get worse the more people you add to the mix. Christians are no exception. Joe did a good job of pointing that out. But there's another side to the story.



When Jesus is the “big thing” people attempt to align themselves with, real glory can happen. Like sitting around a campfire discussing the gospel with close friends at Walden Pond until the wee hours. Or in an upper room on a missionary campus in India singing praise songs with our team. Or in a circle of prayer after Bible study on a Sunday night. And especially in our regular Sunday morning worship services at Christ Community Chapel. Somehow alignment happens in spite of the presence of a blockhead like me. And in the process, many—maybe not all—but many, are drenched in glory. How can that be?

The first clue is that the fallen stars are not the only stars present. Jesus is there, too. In the very last chapter of the Bible, Jesus says, “I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.”<sup>60</sup> Fully God and fully man, Jesus is the only human star that has not fallen, and he promised, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”<sup>61</sup> His presence makes the most ordinary place brilliant and special beyond imagination. Nothing in Firenze or Rome or the universe can compare.

Another clue is that all or some of the people in those alignments *love* Jesus. Peter summed it up in a single verse that is among my favorites. It's 1 Peter 1:8, which says, "Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory." So when people who love Jesus get together and rejoice like this, since each of them is already filled, the glory simply spills over onto those around them. You've probably seen this. It happens regularly in lots of churches. If you come to our church and worship with Rob Thomas or Marshall Brandon or Tom Randall you'll see what I mean.

A third clue comes from a verse that might contain the seven most mysterious words in the entire Bible. "Christ in you, the hope of glory."<sup>62</sup> Christ is the most glorious being in the Universe. His glory is immeasurable. So if the infinitely glorious Christ is *in* a person, what can that mean? And what can it mean when two or more persons with Christ in them come into alignment?

Every true believer in Christ has experienced brokenness over his or her sin. So when they see sin in another person, it looks familiar—it looks like their own. That's when empathy and deep understanding become possible.

Every true believer has experienced the grace of being forgiven on behalf of Christ's sacrifice. So when they are offended by another, they know where to take it—to the cross. To the unique place where genuine forgiveness and lasting reconciliation can be found. And when this happens, it's glorious. Like Rita and Amy worshipping side-by-side in our church on a Sunday morning.

Your local church might very well be the best place for you on the planet. If it's a place where Jesus is. If it's a place where some of the people love Jesus, and have Jesus in them. If it's a place where broken people with authentic faith experience confrontations with grace. A place like that can become irresistible to any fallen star.



The wonderful thing about Jesus Christ is that there are so many things about him you can be sure of. One of these is that he loves the church. He loves the church so much he gave himself up for her. That's Ephesians 5:25. There's significance in the fact that the Bible refers to the church as *her*. Try to fathom the meaning of the astonishing words Paul writes a few verses later: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' This mystery is profound, and *I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.*"

That can only mean one thing: Christ loves the church so much he intends to *marry* her! He desires to hold her close and, in some spiritual way that applies only to God, become one with her. That is an unimaginable level of alignment. But it will happen. And it will be glorious. John saw an astonishing vision announcing it. He later gave this report:

Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out, "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready. . . ."63

Then an angel told John to write something encouraging: "Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb." John smiled. But the angel wanted to make sure John knew the source, "These are the true words of God."

Jesus loves the church so much, it is inevitable—he *will* have her as his Bride. His excitement for her cannot be contained. And he wants us to know it. He wants us all, together as one body, to long for him as much as he longs for us. Christ loves the church with passion and resolve. He is able, and he is eager, to transform us into something irresistibly beautiful. As unbelievable as this may sound, the church will be his crowning glory and bring him great pleasure, far more than anything else he has made. And, knowing where this is all headed, he loves the church with a perfect and infinite love right now, at this very moment.

I hope you take a few moments to let that sink in before we go on.



How much does Jesus love the church? Enough to pay an unimaginable price to bring her into complete alignment with himself. His hands tell the story. They are wonderful hands. Hands that fashioned the Universe. "All things were created through him and for him."<sup>64</sup> Hands that took on flesh and became tiny baby hands. Hands that became tough as he practiced a carpenter's trade. Hands that healed lepers and gave sight to the blind. Hands that popped open the ears of the deaf and blessed little children. Perfect hands whose movements were always innocent and sinless. Hands that were nailed to a cross with nine-inch iron spikes. Bloody hands that ceased moving so that ours could move forever. That's how much he loves the church. His hands bear scars at this very moment as he sits at the right hand of the Majesty on High, pleading our case and praying for us and waiting eagerly for the big day. The day he takes our hand in his and makes us his Bride forever.

There's another thing that tells the story of his love. Air. In the beginning, through Jesus, God spoke air into existence. Then he formed man out of the dust and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. But Jesus did not count his equality with God a thing to be grasped; he emptied himself and took on flesh and lungs and the need for air to stay alive.<sup>65</sup> Then he breathed out so many wonderful words. Words that thousands of years later still bring hope and meaning. One day he arched his back and breathed his last, screaming at the top of his lungs, "It is finished."<sup>66</sup> He suffocated to death so that we could live and breathe forever. That's how much he loves his Bride. When the awestruck centurion saw the way Jesus took his last breath he whispered, "Truly this man was the Son of God!" He was right. On the morning of the third day Jesus came out of the tomb, breathing. And later that night he breathed on his fallen-star, blockhead disciples and they



received the Holy Spirit.<sup>67</sup> The world has never been the same, because at that moment the church was born.

So when you walk out of your church feeling indignant, and justified at being disappointed or critical, remember—you, too, are a fallen star and a blockhead, just like every other person in that place. When you feel like keeping Jesus but quitting the church, remember who she is—the precious Bride of Christ. Can you really love him without loving her? Isn't being a member of her this world's highest privilege? Don't miss out on the privilege just because she's still imperfect.

Jesus won't have it any other way. I *must* love the church. I must "1 Corinthians thirteen" her, the chapter that says "Love is patient and kind . . . love does not insist on its own way . . . love is not irritable or resentful . . . Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

God, help me keep this fallen star in alignment with her. Because Jesus loves her.