

NEXT DOOR SAVIOR

Chapter One

The words hang in the air like a just-rung bell. “Who do you say that I am?” Silence settles on the horseshoe of followers. Nathanael clears his throat. Andrew ducks his eyes. John chews on a fingernail. Judas splits a blade of grass. He won’t speak up. Never does. Peter will. Always does.

But he pauses first. Jesus’ question is not new to him.

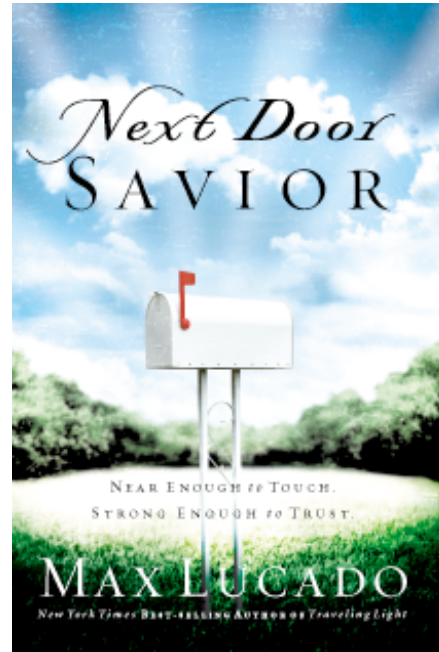
The previous thousand times, however, Peter had kept the question to himself.

That day in Nain? He’d asked it. Most people stand quietly as funeral processions pass. Mouths closed. Hands folded. Reverently silent. Not Jesus. He approached the mother of the dead boy and whispered something in her ear that made her turn and look at her son. She started to object but didn’t. Signaling to the pallbearers, she instructed, “Wait.”

Jesus walked toward the boy. Eye level with the corpse, he spoke. Not over it, as a prayer, but to it, as a command. “Yong man, I say to you, arise!” (Luke 7:14).

With the tone of a teacher telling students to sit or the authority of a mom telling kids to get out of the rain, Jesus commanded the dead boy *not to be dead*. And the boy obeyed. Cold skin warmed. Stiff limbs moved. White cheeks flushed. The men lowered the coffin, and the boy jumped up and into his mother’s arms. Jesus “gave him back to his mother” (Luke 7:15).

An hour later Jesus and the guys were eating the evening meal. He laughed at a joke and asked for seconds on bread, and the irony of it all jolted Peter. *Who are you?* He wondered so softly that no one but God could hear. *You just awakened the dead! Should you not be encased in light or encircled by angels or enthroned higher than a thousand*



Caesars? Yet, look at you--wearing clothes I would wear and laughing at jokes I tell and eating the food we all eat. Is this what death defeaters do? Just who are you?

And then there was the storm. The tie-yourself-to-the-mast-and-kiss-your-boat-good-bye storm. Ten-foot waves yanked the disciples first forward and then backward, leaving the boat ankle-deep in water. Matthew's face blanched to the shade of spaetzle. Thomas death-gripped the stern. Peter suggested that they pray the Lord's Prayer. Better still, that the Lord lead them in the Lord's Prayer. That's when he heard the Lord.

Snoring.

Jesus was asleep. Back against the bow. Head drooped forward. Chin flopping on a sternum as the hull bounced on waves. "Jesus!" Peter shouted.

The carpenter woke up, looked up. He wiped the rain from his eyes, puffed both cheeks with a sigh, and stood. He raised first his hand, then his voice, and as fast as you could say "glassy," the water became just that. Jesus smiled and sat, and Peter stared and wondered, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!" (Mark 4:41 NCV).

This time Jesus is the one posing the question: "Who do you say that I am?" (Matt. 16:15).

Perhaps Peter's reply had the tone of an anchorman on the six o'clock news. Arched eyebrow. Half smile. James Bondish baritone voice. "I believe that you are the Son of God." But I doubt it.

I'm seeing Peter kick the dirt a bit. Clear his throat. Less swagger, more swallow. Gulp. More like a first-time parachutist about to jump out of the plane. "Are you ready to jump?" he's asked. "I, uh, I, uh, I, uh, . . ."

"Who do you say that I am?"

"I, uh, I, uh. . . I believe. . . that you are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (see Matt. 16:16).

If Peter was hesitant, you can hardly fault him. How many times do you call a callous-handed nail bender from a one-camel town the Son of God?

There was something wrong with the picture.

We used to look at such scenes in elementary school. To keep us occupied, the teacher would pass out drawings with the question at the bottom “What’s wrong with this picture?” Remember them? We’d look closely for something that didn’t fit?

A farmyard scene with a piano near the water trough. A classroom with a pirate seated on the back row. An astronaut on the moon with a pay phone in the background. We’d ponder the picture and point to the piano or pirate or pay phone and say, “This doesn’t fit.” Something is out of place. Something is absurd. Pianos don’t belong in farmyards. Pirates don’t sit in classrooms. Pay phones aren’t found on the moon, And God doesn’t chum with the common folk or snooze in fishing boats.

But according to the Bible he did. “For in Christ there is all of God in a human body” (Col. 2:9 TLB). Jesus was not a godlike man, nor a manlike God. He was God-man.

Midwifed by a carpenter.

Bathed by a peasant girl.

The maker of the world with a bellybutton.

The author of the Torah being taught the Torah.

Heaven’s human. And because he was, we are left with scratch-your-head, double-blink, what’s wrong-with-this-picture? Moments like these:

Bordeaux instead of H²O.

A cripple sponsoring the town dance.

A sack lunch satisfying five thousand tummies.

And, most of all, a grave: guarded by soldiers, sealed by a rock, yet vacated by a three-days-dead man.

What do we do with such moments?

What do we do with such a *person*? We applaud men for doing good things. We enshrine God for doing great things. But when a man does God things?

One thing is certain, we can’t ignore him.

Why would we want to? If these moments are factual, if the claim of Christ is actual, then he was, at once, man and God.

There he was, the single most significant person who ever lived. Forget MVP; he is the entire league. The head of the parade? Hardly. No one else shares the street. Who comes close? Humanity's best and brightest fade like dime-store rubies next to him.

Dismiss him? We can't.

Resist him? Equally difficult. Don't we need a God-man Savior? A just-God Jesus could make us but not understand us. A just-man Jesus could love us but never save us. But a God-man Jesus? Near enough to touch. Strong enough to trust. A next door Savior.

A Savior found by millions to be irresistible. Nothing compares to "the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (Phil. 3:8 RSV). The reward of Christianity is Christ.

Do you journey to the Grand Canyon for the souvenir T-shirt or the snow globe with the snowflakes that fall when you shake it? No. The reward of the Grand Canyon is the Grand Canyon. The wide-eyed realization that you are part of something ancient, splendid, powerful, and greater than you.

The cache of Christianity is Christ. Not money in the bank or a car in the garage or a healthy body or a better self-image. Secondary and tertiary fruits perhaps. But the Fort Knox of faith is Christ. Fellowship with him. Walking with him. Pondering him. Exploring him. The heart-stopping realization that in him you are part of something ancient, endless, unstoppable, and unfathomable. And that he, who can dig the Grand Canyon with his pinkie, thinks you're worth his death on Roman timber. Christ is the reward of Christianity. Why else would Paul make him his supreme desire? "I want to know Christ" (Phil 3:10 NCV).

Do you desire the same? My idea is simple. Let's look at some places he went and some people he touched. Join me on a quest for his "God-manness." You may be amazed.

More important, you may be changed. "We all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit" (2Cor. 3:18 RSV).

As we behold him. We become like him.

I experienced this principle firsthand when an opera singer visited our church. We didn't know his voice was trained. You couldn't have known by his corduroy coat and loafers. No tuxedo, cummerbund, or silk tie. His appearance raised no eyebrow, but his voice certainly did. I should know. He was in the pew behind mine.

His vibrato made dentures rattle and rafters shake. He tried to contain himself. But how can a tuba hide in a room of piccolos?

For a moment I was startled. But within a verse, I was inspired. Emboldened by his volume, I lifted mine. Did I sing better? Not even I could hear me. My warbles were lost in his talent. But did I try harder? No doubt. His power brought out the best in me.

Could your world use a little music? If so, invite heaven's baritone to cut loose. He may look as common as the guy next door, but just wait till you see what he can do. Who knows? A few songs with him might change the way you sing.

Forever.