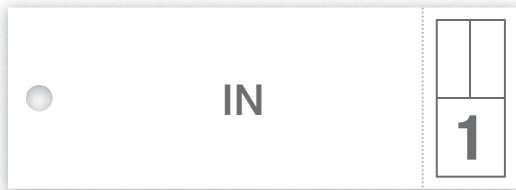


PART 1

DIGRESS

I CAME, I SAW, I BOUGHT THE T-SHIRT



My parents never took me to church.

Not once.

That might have something to do with the fact that my mother is Jewish and my father a professional gambler, but regardless, growing up I knew nothing of God, Jesus, or Christianity; as far as I know, I never even met a Christian.

I first heard about Jesus as a college sophomore in Buffalo, New York. It was Easter morning. I was waiting for my chronically late girlfriend to show up at my dorm room so we could go out for brunch. I turned on the TV. We had only three channels, and each one featured a dumb religious show. I would have turned it back off, but one of these shows looked potentially comical. An old man sat, or sunk really, into a big, red-leather chair. Questions flooded my mind: *How old is this guy? Is he going to live through this program? Had he become physically incapable of getting out of that chair? Shouldn't someone help him?*

Then Old Man spoke, “We’ve been studying the last week of Jesus Christ’s life. Today we’re going to talk about . . .” He named something, but I don’t remember

what. “Now most scholars believe,” he continued, “that this event happened on *Tuesday* of Jesus’ last week, but today I will prove to you through the evidence that it actually occurred on *Wednesday* of Jesus’ last week.”

I mulled this over for some time. Finally I decided: yes, this was the stupidest thing I had ever heard. I didn’t know a thing about Jesus, but Tuesday or Wednesday? About something that happened thousands of years ago? If it happened at all? C’mon! I turned off the TV in disgust.

My girlfriend knocked on the door.

We left for brunch.

But I could not stop thinking about Old Man. Why did he care if it happened on Tuesday or Wednesday? What did he mean by “evidence”? Did anyone help him get out of that chair?

That night I was sitting in my girlfriend’s dorm room when I noticed a Bible on the shelf. “You have a Bible?” I asked. “Can I borrow it?”

“Someone gave that to me years ago. I’ve never opened it. You can have it,” she scoffed.

That night I began reading. I had never touched a Bible. I expected it to be organized like my *TV Guide*—by day and time—because of the Tuesday or Wednesday debate that was apparently tearing up Christianity. I also assumed it would read like a tall tale: “Once upon a time there was a man named Jesus, who could walk on water. He had a blue ox named Babe and could lasso a tornado!”

I was surprised by what I found. The Bible was full of historical accounts, and then I realized there would be evidence. I knew I could prove or disprove the Bible.

As I continued to read I discovered the Bible’s outlandish claim that there was a God who loved me and sent Jesus for me. I learned that this God allegedly wanted a relationship with me and that he promised real and eternal life through Jesus.

And I encountered the followers of Jesus. I saw how the people who followed Jesus were fully alive, how they were consumed by the adventure of following Jesus. The passion and danger and excitement and joy of their new lives popped off of every page.

And I knew that I had to know: Is it true or a hoax? Did this actually happen? Is life like that really possible? Or did I just read a well-concocted fairy tale?

After months of reading and researching the Bible, I became convinced that it was true.

And I found myself drawn to Jesus. I didn't want to, but I couldn't help it. He was the coolest person I had ever come across. His character, his personality, his sense of humor, his sense of mission, his priorities, the way he was so subversive.

I still didn't know any Christians but decided I wanted to be one. Actually, that's an understatement. It wasn't just that I decided to become a Christian; it was like Jesus invaded my heart. I realized my entire life had been wrong, but God loved me anyway and was offering me a second chance. I had a grace explosion. I was *wrecked*.

Summer came and I decided to flee Buffalo and visit my father in Florida. He had just gotten out of prison (for embezzling money from Ted Williams, the famous baseball player, but that's another story). I told my dad that I had decided to become a Christian, though I had never met one. He was a little taken aback. After collecting his thoughts, he told me about a pastor who had visited him in jail, and wondered would I like to meet him. That night the pastor and I met and the next day I was baptized.

Before the water had evaporated from my skin, the pastor asked me, "So, where will you go to church when you get back home?"

I gave him my best Gary Coleman "What'chu talkin' 'bout, Willis?" look and said, "I haven't really thought about going to church. I don't think church is for me."

He claimed that church was for everyone and gave me the name and number of a minister friend in Buffalo. “He’s a good guy. Give him a call.”



Back in Buffalo I stared at my phone. The idea of going to church weirded me out. I was so nervous my fingers trembled as I dialed. I had to start and stop about four times. Finally there was a ring, and a kind female voice answered on the other end. I asked to speak to the pastor, and she informed me that he wasn’t there.

“Oh,” I said, disappointed.

“What’s the matter?” she asked.

“Well, I’m supposed to come to church this Sunday.”

“He will be here on Sunday,” she answered. “Why don’t you come and you can meet him then?”

“But how will I get in?”

“How will you get *in*?” She sounded confused.

“Yes, how will I get in?” I asked again.

“Do you mean how will you get *here*? I can give you directions.”

“No,” I responded, “how will I get in?”

“How will you get *in*?” she echoed.

I was starting to get angry. “Yes, how will I get in? I don’t have an invitation. I haven’t signed up, or—or anything.”

Silence.

Finally she replied, “Well, you just walk in. Just show up and walk in.”

This didn’t make sense to me. Just show up and walk in? You couldn’t just show up at a college and expect to participate in a class. A boy can’t just show up at Cub Scouts without taking a three-finger pledge. Just show up and walk in?

I took a deep breath and resolved to speak slowly and gently. “So, what you’re trying to tell me . . . is that I can drive to your church on Sunday . . . get out of my car . . . walk up to the door . . . and just . . . walk in.”

“Yes, that is what I told you,” she said. “Just show up and walk in.”

“But . . . that’s the strangest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“And you,” she responded, “are the strangest person I’ve ever talked to.”



I was nervous. Going to church was a little like what happens in the movie *Antwone Fisher* where Antwone goes as an adult to meet his family for the first time. Except I’m not black, don’t know Denzel Washington, and I’m not in the military. Okay, it was almost nothing like that movie. But I was nervous.

That Sunday I went to church for the first time.

And while I was nervous, I was also excited. I couldn’t wait to meet Christians. Growing up, I had a vague negative stereotype of them formed mostly from watching Ned Flanders on *The Simpsons*. But now I knew the truth. After reading the New Testament, I knew what they would really be like. People with fire in their souls. People determined to change the world for Jesus. People filled with awe at what God is doing in their lives. People who can’t stop being amazed by grace. People with joy oozing out of them. People who will follow Jesus wherever he goes. After months of reading the New Testament, I knew this is what Christians would be like. I couldn’t wait to see in person, in the flesh, these lives that had become so familiar to me through the pages of the Bible.

I showed up that first Sunday . . .

took a deep breath . . .

and walked in . . .



EMILY

2

Walking through the front door of that church building was like passing through a portal to a different world. So much was unfamiliar. For the first time I heard about “propitiation,” “puppet ministry,” and “potluck suppers.” I stood for “fellowship,” knelt for prayer, and sat on a hard wooden bench (which they called a “pew”). I saw more polyester in one morning than I had my entire life. I experienced church snack time, which consisted of little pieces of cracker and small plastic shot glasses of grape juice. A man explained that we would be singing hymns 11, 52, 17, and 63. I almost yelled out, “Bingo!”

But it’s now seventeen years later. I’ve gotten married (not to my chronically late girlfriend). I have two kids. I’ve gained a few pounds. And I’ve gone from having never walked into a church to having seventeen years worth of Sundays in church buildings. And with all that experience (not to mention the few extra pounds) under my belt, I can tell you that there is something very familiar about most of the Christians I’ve met. Unfortunately, it’s not that they remind me of the people who populate the pages of Scripture. Instead, they remind me of a little girl named Emily.

Little Emily looks cute in her souvenir shirt that proclaims, “My parents went to Florida and all I got was this lousy T-shirt.” But there’s something sad about it too. She missed the journey. She didn’t get to take part in the adventure. While others broke out of their dull routine, Emily missed the excitement of doing something different. She didn’t get to play in the waves or hug Mickey. She didn’t get to experience the joy. Even the horrifying incident when the tire blew out and Stan, the self-proclaimed “Good Samaritan Redneck,” rescued the family in his *Sanford and Son* pickup truck has quickly become a fond memory for everybody. Everyone except Emily. She missed the journey.

As I’ve gone to church and met Christians and lived as one myself, I’ve realized something.

We are Emily.

When I read about the lives of the first Christians in the pages of the New Testament I see people who actually went “on vacation to Florida,” who truly experienced the ups and downs of the trip. But when I look around at Christians today, I see people who just wear a T-shirt for an adventure they’ve missed out on. We’re missing the journey. We’re stuck in the same dull routine. We’re missing out on the joy and fear and laughter and doubt and mystery and confusion of following Jesus, of taking great risks for God, of praying dangerous prayers, even of being spiritually attacked.

We wander around with lifeless shark eyes.

The more honest among us find ourselves asking questions like: Is this all there is? Is this really what Jesus meant when he said, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full”?¹ Is this the life Jesus died for me to have? Didn’t Jesus pay too high a price to buy me *this* life? Am I just supposed to be miserable until I get to heaven?

I think the word that best describes how many feel about their Christian lives is not *abundant*, *joyful*, or *purpose-driven*, but *disappointing*.

And when I met Christians for the first time as a sophomore in college, I was disappointed. I was disappointed at *their* disappointment. And I swore I would never be like that.

But I have to be honest.

Over the years I have, at times, descended into the world of the “T-shirt wearers.” I have found myself going through the motions. I’ve lost my purpose and passion for so long at times, I had to put them on the back of a milk carton. In honest moments I’ve asked those same despairing questions. I’ve been disappointed.

And I’ve wondered if maybe God is the problem. I mean, he does want everyone to say yes to his offer. And if someone is trying to sell me a new car, vacuum cleaner, or cell phone, I don’t expect them to be completely honest. They’ll exaggerate the benefits, ignore the problems. It may still be a great car, vacuum, or phone, but I’m not getting the whole truth, and I know it.

Maybe God is like that.

The benefits he claims to give to those who say yes to him include abundant life, pure joy in the face of trials, peace that surpasses understanding, power to heal the sick with our prayers, assurance that we will never be tempted in a way we can’t handle, fearlessness, and the promise that we will do greater things than Jesus did.

How many Christians would say these things are a good description of their lives? More personally, does it describe yours?

So maybe God is the problem. Perhaps he’s just a master salesman. After all, he’s good at everything else.

But I don’t think so.

Actually, I think *we’re* the problem.

And I think there's a solution.
I think we need to go on vacation.



Last fall my family decided to go to Disney World. From the moment we decided to go, things changed around our house. A sense of anticipation started brewing. We breathed hope. I'd return from a bad day at work and tell my wife, "My life sucks." She'd smile and say, "Yes, honey, but we're going on vacation!" As our trip neared, the excitement boiled. I picked up a book on Disney to prepare. This book had scientific equations and mathematical algorithms to help avoid lines and go on the most rides in one day. I spent hours planning in detail each of our days at Disney. I determined the order of the rides we would go on, where we would eat, when my kids would go to the bathroom. Nothing was left to chance. It was a lot of work, but it was fun because it helped me look forward to our vacation.

Finally the day arrived. We loaded up the car and raced away from home. Pulling out of the driveway felt like a prison break from my worries and stress. At home and work so much competes for my attention and so many problems weigh me down. But as we drove away my blood pressure went from boil to simmer, my heart rate from Metallica to Michael Bolton. The five-hundred-pound gorilla I'd been giving a piggyback ride kindly climbed off my shoulders. And I realized that, at least for the next week, I'd be able to relax.

Not only that, I would have fun. Part of the reason I love vacations is because they can be a journey out of routine and into adventure. I like having some standardization in my schedule, but oftentimes my entire life feels like a monotonous, never-ending routine. But as our neighborhood disappeared in the rearview mirror,

I knew I was also leaving my routine behind, and we were driving into an adventure. Even though I had done my normal manic, control-freak planning, there was still some uncertainty about our trip. I wasn't sure exactly how things would go down, what we might experience, or who we'd encounter. It was going to be a blast.

I *love* vacation.

Now don't get me wrong, I'm not saying that vacations are nonstop thrills or that they're perfect. Parts of every vacation are *boring*. The drive to Disney took twelve hours—twelve hours, with two small children. In case you're keeping score, that's three meals, four snacks, eight bathroom stops, and forty-seven *thousand* "Are we there yet?" The trip was pretty boring. But that was okay. This was boredom with a purpose. Because we were going somewhere, we had a destination, and we knew it would be exciting.

Vacations can also be just plain *bad* at times. One day on that perfectly designed Disney trip, we arrived at the park early, according to plan. We were first in line and waiting for the grand opening. Finally they opened the gates and everyone went running in, with us in the lead. The entire crowd was rushing for the same ride, knowing that later it would have the longest lines. They longed for what only I would achieve. We would be first on that ride, and then first on the next most popular ride, and then first on the next most popular ride. Our plan was working perfectly. There was no stopping us now! After about a hundred yards I looked back to gloat, but I noticed that the thousands of people following me were no longer following me. They had all turned right, but we were still going straight. I saw a Disney employee and asked, "What's going on? Isn't *this* how you get to the big ride?" "No," he said, pointing to the throng of people, "*that's* how you get to the big ride." My whole plan . . . ruined.

We went on another vacation years earlier that was full of problems. I was speaking at a conference in Chicago in late April, and we decided to fly out a couple of days early to make it into a vacation. We were stoked . . . until the day we left.

I woke up with the flu *and* pink eye. Freakin' pink eye! How do you even get pink eye? I was miserable the entire flight. We brought my son, who was just a baby then, and he was miserable on the plane. This meant *everyone* was miserable on the plane. When we arrived and picked up our rental car, it was the longest automobile I'd ever seen. We drove off in the Pimpmobile, embarrassed but accepting our fate. Pimpin' ain't easy, but someone's got to do it.

The next day we drove to downtown Chicago and took our son to the aquarium where we discovered babies are not interested in fish. We left the aquarium and went to a supposedly great restaurant, but we didn't like our food. After dinner we went to a Bulls game where my son decided he didn't want to sit on my lap. He kept escaping and crawling under the legs of total strangers, so we left in the second quarter.

The next morning my son was sick. He had the flu . . . and pink eye. Freakin' pink eye! We decided that sickness would not stop us, so we drove to legendary Wrigley Field for a Cubs game. It was 34 degrees and the wind chill made it feel like we were stuck in the middle of a Popsicle. We left in the second inning. On the drive back to our hotel it felt like something was stuck in my tooth, so I scratched at it, and my tooth chipped. Well, it didn't *chip* as much as it *chunked*. There was more tooth in my hand than in my mouth. And now every time I spoke, the jagged spear that once was my tooth cut the inside of my mouth. That night we went to an Italian restaurant a friend told us about. As I pulled into a parking place, I misjudged the length of the Pimpmobile and clipped the