

Chapter 1

LIVING IN THE GAP

If Christianity is true in its promise of a new life, then why don't I feel more ... new?

The 1983 film *Tender Mercies* won Academy Awards for screenwriter Horton Foote and lead actor Robert Duvall. Duvall plays a once-famous but now washed-up country music singer-songwriter named Mac Sledge, who is stringing dead-end jobs together and battling the bottle. A young widow named Rosa Lee, and her little boy, Sonny, befriend Mac. Late in the movie, Mac and the boy both get baptized at the local church and are driving home in a pickup truck.

Sonny: "Well, we've done it, Mac. We're baptized."

Mac: "Yeah, we are."

Sonny: "Everybody said I was going to feel like a changed person. I guess I do feel a little different. But I don't feel a whole lot different. Do you?"

Mac: "Not yet."

Sonny: “You don’t look any different.” (Sonny sits up to look at himself in the rearview mirror.) “Do you think I look any different?”

Mac: “Not yet.”¹

NOT YET

What am I missing? This was the question I asked myself as I stood, deflated, in front of the list on the wall. It was Monday morning. My name was three slots lower than it had been the month before. Just yesterday I had heard the preacher say, “The race is over. You are accepted. Your identity is not in what you do or have done but in what Jesus does and has done. You can rest.” That sounded like such *good news*.

But here at the corporate bank where I worked, the race was far from over, and this week I was falling behind.

Each month the company would post a ranked list of everyone’s performance—how much money we had earned the company year to date. No matter what the preacher said my value was, here it was by another measure, in black and white, posted on the wall for all to see.

I was like one of those giant inflatable Gumby-men you see at the used-car lot. My heart would rise and fall depending on how many deals I had closed. When I was successful or applauded, my heart would swell. When I was criticized or failed at something, I would deflate in disappointment.

I didn’t want this list to bother me. I wanted to have peace, peace like a river. Hadn’t Jesus promised, “Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water’” (John 7:38)? I read this and wanted to take Jesus at his word. But when I looked at my life, I wondered, *Rivers? Really? Maybe a trickle here and there on my best days. But I don’t see any rivers flowing out of*

my life. Hadn't Jesus said, "I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28)? Then why was I still so restless?

I felt like that man in the gospel of Mark (8:22–26). Maybe you've read the story too. He was blind and his friends brought him to Jesus. Jesus "spit on his eyes and laid his hands on him, [and] he asked him, 'Do you see anything?'" The man said, "I see people, but they look like trees, walking." The man was no longer blind, but he could not yet see clearly. He was stuck. He was in between.

This is the only partial healing in the Gospels. What happened? Was there a power shortage? Did the one who calmed the stormy seas with a word need a second chance? Did the one who raised the dead need a do-over? Or did Jesus intend this man to serve as a sort of living parable, to say it's possible to *see*, but not yet see *clearly*?

I felt like that man. Stuck.

THE GAP

What was wrong with me? Why wasn't the gospel doing its deep work in my heart? The gap loomed large between what the gospel said was true of me (I'm forgiven, accepted, and secure) and how I saw myself. There was a chasm between what I said I believed and what I was experiencing. I felt discouraged by my lack of spiritual progress and exhausted by my efforts.

I had seen enough of Jesus to spoil my enjoyment of the world but not enough to be content with Jesus alone. And I didn't know how to move forward.

I became frustrated, then cynical. I wondered if other people were reading the same Bible and sensed the same disconnect. I felt alone. I felt like a fraud.

You may find it odd, then, that a few years later God called me to be a pastor. But this question of how to close the gap between our faith and our real lives remains one of which I'm always mindful. How can we connect the grand, high promises of God to the gritty details of our daily lives? How can we get the beautiful truths we hear on Sunday to sustain us on Wednesday afternoon at 4:00 p.m., so we don't rise and fall like inflatable Gummy-men? I'm writing this book to answer those questions, because I've learned I'm not the only one who asks them.

Melissa is in her twenties. She's tough, smart, and independent, a New Yorker transplanted to LA. She has a lot of friends because she's kind, and most of them aren't Christians because she just became one. But like so many other skeptical minds, Melissa has found herself captivated by the person of Jesus. Yet she doesn't want to become what she'd always assumed Christians were: people who claim to believe in love, forgiveness, and new life but instead live lives of fear, judgment, and smallness. She wants to experience this new life Jesus has promised, yet she doesn't feel her life changing as much or as quickly as she had hoped. And so she asks, "I *hear* what you're saying about the grace of God, but how do I get these truths from my head to drip down into my heart?"

Bill is in his sixties and has been around church since he was a boy. He's a business executive, hardworking, competitive, and driven. His face always looks tired. He's heard all the sermons and knows all the verses and can sing all the old hymns by heart. After one Sunday service I asked Bill how he felt about the sermon. His response was memorable: "Cynical as hell," he replied, and smiled that tired smile. He's been hearing for years how abundant and full life in Christ is

supposed to be, but he knows how dry and empty he feels inside, and he's felt this way for so long.

Thom is young, single, and talented. He got an agent his first year in LA and thought things were going to take off. But he's getting fewer and fewer callbacks these days, and his confidence is flagging. Thom's not a Christian. He doesn't see how believing in someone who lived two thousand years ago could make much of a difference in his life today. It's not that Thom is hostile. He's just indifferent.

I'm writing this book for Lucy. She has made resolution after resolution and kept many of them. She's tried new jobs, a new haircut, a new city. But she's tired of herself and the way she does things. All she wants to do is change, but she doesn't know how to make that happen.

But it's not just Melissa, Bill, Thom, Lucy, and me who have felt that gap. John Newton was a pastor in Olney, England, in the eighteenth century, and he wrote what is probably the most famous hymn of all time, "Amazing Grace." Its theme of redemption is one Newton knew quite well. As a young man, he was a sailor, and even among this rough bunch he had earned renown, in one captain's words, as the most profane man he had ever met. After deserting the Royal Navy, Newton got into the slave trade. During a violent storm at sea in 1748, Newton cried out to God, and not for the first time found religion. But this time something real had happened in his heart, and Newton's life began to change. He stopped drinking and gambling, and began to pray and read the Bible. Yet he continued in the slave trade for several more years.²

His song can make it sound like the work of God's amazing grace in our hearts is deep and immediate:

I once was lost, but now am found
Was blind, but now I see.

But in Newton's own life, it was a long journey between "now I see" and seeing clearly. As a pastor and in his letters, he openly shared his struggles with sin and temptation—his own deep acquaintance with the gap—which is why his letters of spiritual comfort are still treasured today as masterpieces of devotional literature. It wasn't until 1788, forty years after God's grace found a wretch like him, that Newton would write, "I hope it will always be a subject of humiliating reflection to me, that I was, once, an active instrument, in a business at which my heart now shudders."³ There were forty years between his conversion and his conviction regarding the slave trade, forty years for the gospel to do its deep work in his heart. The grace was amazing that first day, but it took years to take root and blossom. And this for the man whose name is synonymous with amazing grace. Forty years—that's quite a gap.

It's been said, "The longest journey a man will ever make is the journey from his head to his heart." This book is about that journey and the unparalleled power of our union with Christ to help us along the way.

MIND THE GAP

Today, I'm a pastor of a church in Los Angeles, full of people who come from many different walks of life and from all over our city. They have questions similar to the ones I was asking in that banking office not so many years ago: How do I connect God to my daily life?

A skeptical friend once asked me, "If the gospel is supernatural, as you say, then why doesn't it seem to make more of a difference in

the lives of so many who claim to believe it?” That’s a great question and not just for skeptics. Because the gap between what Christians claim is true about themselves and what we often see when we look in the mirror—that gap is real. Melissa knows it, and John Newton knew it. And I’m writing this book because I’ll tell you a secret. In my job I’ve learned there are a lot of people out there who feel alone and afraid, who feel like a fraud.

Do you feel the gap? Having the courage to recognize it and admit it is the first step in this gap being closed. You must mind the gap.

But it’s certainly possible to ignore, or not be bothered by, the gap. I’ll never forget the first sermon I ever preached. As I stood at the door afterward, greeting people on their way out, one older man patted me on the shoulder as if I were a young Cub Scout and said, “Well, that was a *nice* sermon. Now, back to the real world.”

If, like that man, you never try to connect the truths of God to your everyday life; if you construct a wall to divide the sacred “nice sermons” from the secular “real world”; if you keep Jesus and his authority safely tucked away in heaven where he can’t threaten your way of doing things, then this gap won’t concern you. It won’t even occur to you that it should.

Nor will this gap concern you if you believe that the gospel means you have a ticket to heaven when you die and that grace means you don’t need to strive to obey Christ while you live. If you believe “It is finished” means there’s nothing then left for you to do; if you consider Jesus’s call to discipleship to be optional, reserved for the cloistered few or supercommitted, then you won’t be bothered by the gap either.

And sadly, many Christians have lived with this gap for so long that they no longer mind it. Ernest Hemingway ended his novel *The*

Sun Also Rises with the line “Isn’t it pretty to think so?”⁴ And isn’t that how many of us feel, in the quiet of our hearts, about these grand, high promises in the Bible: “Rivers of living water” or “Whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again” (John 7:37–38; 4:14)? *Wouldn’t it be pretty to think so? Now, back to the real world.*

OUR ONLY HEALTH IS THE DISEASE

I’ll admit this has been an odd way to begin a book about the best news you’ll ever hear. It’s discomfoting. But feeling the discomfort of this gap is actually a sign that you want to take Jesus at his word, a sign that you want to be healed. “Our only health is the disease,” wrote T. S. Eliot in one of his poems, “to be restored, our sickness must grow worse.”⁵

While there are several responses on offer today concerning what to do with this gap (and many of them are good and helpful), there is one, it seems, that very few people are talking about.

It’s all over the Bible and was prominent for the first seventeen hundred years of Christian thought. But on the whole, we’ve lost our grasp of it. It might be the most important aspect of the Christian life you’ve never heard of. And nothing is more needed today than a fresh appreciation of this very old reality. This book makes no claim to be original; it seeks only to excavate a treasure that has been buried for far too long. We need to rediscover our union with Christ.

UNION WITH CHRIST

The seeds of this book were planted almost twenty years ago. Reading the old theologians, I kept stumbling across the idea of *union with Christ*. The term sounded vaguely familiar. But the way these writers

talked about it made me realize I must not really know what it meant. For example:

First, we must understand that as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value to us. Therefore ... he had to become ours and to dwell within us.⁶

I was much more accustomed to thinking of Christ as a savior *outside* of me than as one who dwells *within* and has united his life to mine. Yes, I had heard the popular refrain “Jesus in your heart,” but my primary understanding of the gospel was that Jesus had accomplished something *for* me, once, long ago. However, these writers spoke of Christ uniting himself to me, here and now. I didn’t see myself as one in whom the Son of God now dwells. I didn’t go through my day mindful of the indwelling presence of Christ. And I certainly didn’t see this as the heart of the gospel. All that Christ has done for us remains “useless and of no value to us,” unless we are united to him? That’s some strong language!

Over and over again, I found writers from across the centuries who defined salvation and the Christian life in terms of being united to Christ. For example:

- “That indwelling of Christ in our hearts ... that mystical union [is] accorded by us the highest degree of importance.”⁷

- “By virtue of the believer’s union with Christ, he doth really possess all things.”⁸
- “Being in Christ, and united to him, is the fundamental constitution of a Christian.”⁹
- “Union with Christ is right at the center of the Christian doctrine of salvation.”¹⁰
- “There are no benefits of the gospel apart from union with Christ.”¹¹
- “Union with Christ is the fountainhead from which flows the Christian’s every spiritual blessing.”¹²
- “Union with Christ is theological shorthand for the gospel itself.”¹³

I hope you’ll forgive my heaping up these quotes like endorsements on a movie poster. But listing them out helps us see the central importance union with Christ has consistently been given throughout history. Some of these voices are contemporary writers. And indeed, in academic circles, union with Christ has become a hot topic. But the one place union with Christ is not prominent today is the one place it most needs to be—the local church.

Union with Christ is not some dusty relic of history or ivory tower pursuit. It takes us to the very heart of the gospel. It’s what makes the gospel good news.

How much should we make of our union with Christ? Writer J. I. Packer says that it is not possible to make too much of it and the communion with God it allows:

Communion between God and man is the end to which both creation and redemption are the means; it is the goal to which both theology and preaching must ever point; it is the essence of true religion; it is, indeed, the definition of Christianity.¹⁴

Is this the definition of Christianity to you? Is this what you think of when you think of being saved? That “to be saved means to be united to the Savior”?¹⁵

The greatest treasure of the gospel, greater than any other benefit the gospel brings, is the gift of God himself. Is it any wonder, then, that twentieth-century writer John Murray concluded, “Nothing is more central or more basic than union with Christ ... it is the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation.”¹⁶

NOTHING IS MORE CENTRAL OR MORE BASIC?

If it's true that nothing is more central or basic than union with Christ, and this book aims to show that it is, then it is fair to ask this: Why is union with Christ neither central nor basic to so many of us? Why, rather, is union with Christ, if it's talked about at all, reduced to some vague or optional aspect of Christian living, perhaps something reserved for theologians, as opposed to being seen as the central truth of salvation *for everyone*? Why, when asked, “What is the gospel?” would union with Christ not spring to our minds or come to our lips?

My initial interest began with this riddle: Whatever happened to union with Christ? How did something so central become so marginalized?

But my primary interest is not to solve a riddle or right a historical wrong, but rather to help us connect God to our daily lives. Union with Christ is the good news we need to hear today. It is good news for Melissa and Bill, Thom and Lucy, me and you. If you too have felt this gap and wondered how it can be closed, union with Christ might be what you are missing.

Our neglect of union with Christ explains the gaps between our faith and our lives. When the *work* of Christ *for* us becomes abstracted from the *person* of Christ *within* us, is it any wonder there is a chasm between our heads and our hearts or between our beliefs and our experiences? Is it surprising that we feel frustrated and cynical or tossed to and fro?

Union with Christ tells you that you don't have to be stuck, or resigned to "wouldn't it be pretty to think so?" Jesus's promises about rivers of living water—these are not hollow words. For he is that living water, and if you belong to him, he has joined his life to yours.

Union with Christ needs to become again what it once was, "of highest importance."¹⁷ Because just as our neglect of this reality has had real and harmful consequences, so its recovery will have real and lasting benefits. If you have ever asked of the Christian life, "Isn't there more to it than this?" the answer is yes—union with Christ is the "more to it."

THE GREATEST, MOST HONORABLE, AND GLORIOUS OF GRACES

John Owen may not be widely known today, but he is considered one of the greatest theologians ever to have written in the English

language. His collected works, still in print, run to twenty-four volumes, and he wrote more and thought as deeply about communion with God as anyone ever has.

“How few of [us],” Owen wrote, “are experimentally acquainted with this privilege of holding immediate communion with the Father in love.”¹⁸ We may pray to *Our Father*, Owen is saying in seventeenth-century language, but so few of us actually experience loving communion with him.

Owen is onto something here. When he writes “how few of us,” he’s lamenting the gap and acknowledging how very real it is for so many of us. He’s also saying we shouldn’t feel this way. It’s a problem. We’ve addressed this gap in a variety of ways in this chapter, but perhaps they all boil down to what Owen so eloquently describes here: we find it so difficult to enjoy God.

John Owen was also a pastor, and when he wrote “how few of us,” he was including himself. Elsewhere he wrote, “I myself preached Christ some years, when I had but very little, if any, experimental acquaintance with access to God through Christ; until the Lord was pleased to visit me with sore affliction.”¹⁹

Owen was confessing that he, great theologian that he was, had been telling others about the riches of knowing Christ while he himself was not experiencing them. And this, he said, went on for “some years.” Until by a strange remedy, the way of affliction, he was brought to the end of himself and into the light and solace of God’s care and presence.

I’m writing this book for you because I know John Owen was right when he acknowledged, despite what we may say, how few of us are truly walking in the confidence that God, our Father, looks after us and is pleased with us.

I'm also writing this book because I believe Owen was right when he wrote elsewhere, "Union with Christ is the greatest, most honourable, and glorious of all graces that we are made partakers of."²⁰ For Owen, union with Christ is the missing link that connects the grace Christ offers with our experience of God's love.²¹ Union with Christ is the thread that holds it all together.

The man in the gospel of Mark who saw men as trees walking didn't remain stuck in that dreaded in between. But it took the *presence* of Christ to heal him. "Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he opened his eyes, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly" (Mark 8:25).

It might seem like healing is far away. "Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal," Paul wrote, acknowledging the gap in his own life, "but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me" (Phil. 3:12 NIV). Union with Christ enables you, like Paul, to face the gap with ruthless honesty, but also with unfettered hope, optimism, and energy. I want you to know that union with Christ is really possible. For you. You can press on, "further up and further in,"²² to what is already yours in Christ.

Apart from him you can do nothing (John 15:5). But united to him, you can drink the sweet waters of the far country, even as you wander in a dry and thirsty land. For Christ will "make it a place of springs" (Ps. 84:6), even rivers of living water.