

Into the Fray

HOW JESUS'S FOLLOWERS TURN
THE WORLD UPSIDE DOWN

MATT MIKALATOS



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Matt Mikalatos, *Into the Fray*
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To Krista, who gladly said,
“Take me to the riots” in Mexico City
and has gone with me
into the fray all over the world.
Here’s the book
you’ve been waiting for all these years.

God created humanity because he loves stories.

Jewish proverb

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Salutation

Dear Theo,

The hardest part of telling this story is knowing where to start. You say, “Start at the beginning.” But with a tale this huge, which beginning should I choose?

Do I start with the breath and presence of the Almighty One hovering over the face of the chaotic waters in the everlasting darkness? Do I describe the flicker of radiation that poured into a bursting flood of illumination at the first words of creation? That moment may not be *the* beginning, but it’s certainly *our* beginning. That would be an interesting place to start, listening in as the great Teacher taught creation its own existence.

I could start with the royal line, tracing back the kings and queens and ruffians and scoundrels and thieves who brought us to the moment of the Teacher’s coronation, establishing his credentials to sit upon the throne of Israel and, eventually, every nation. I could tell it like that, the hero’s tale, the history of the King. I could recount his journey from poverty to riches, from obscurity to infamy, from life to

death and life again. I could regale you with the descent from heaven and the ascent to the throne. This story could fill bookshelves.

Or I could begin by first telling you the trick of the story: here it is, the story about the good news of Joshua, Jesus, the Chosen One, the Son of God himself. You'd listen all right, thinking it was a straightforward telling, but then I would tell you ancient words from ancient mouths and show you how this story is nothing new at all, that it's a story that began before we were born and it's as if we woke up and found ourselves in the middle of it. The place we think is the beginning is really the climax, the triumphant rising action, and just when we think all is lost, we discover ourselves living in smaller stories, the denouement, the falling action, the resolution.

Many others have told the story in those ways. Like grandmothers with faded photographs, those who lived through those days turn the pages tenderly and say with deep affection, "The first time we saw him, we didn't know what to think. He pulled a dead girl from her hearse and danced with her. He spoke words that astounded the crowds, or filled them with anger, or wonder, or confusion. He spit in the eyes of the blind, and they cried in joy to wipe away the spittle, their first sight his kind brown eyes."

You've heard all those stories. You've been taught all those things. You know about God, the King, the Chosen One, the one who will save us, the Ever-Living One, the one who sits at God's right hand, the one who is both God's Son and God himself, the Teacher, our brother, our friend, Joshua, Y'shua, Yesu, Isa, Jesus.

How will I tell the story?

By telling you *their* stories, the stories of the people who walked with him, listened to him, followed him. I'm going to lay it out, orderly and in chronological order. I'm interviewing them all face-to-face, and I'm writing it out so you can read it once and for all, in one place, and know that everything you've been taught is true. You'll get the final draft in time, but here are my notes, or some of them at least.

Salutation

I've written you before to tell you stories, starting with Zack and Liz and the messenger in the darkness of the church. Do you notice how often God's work starts in darkness? I told you of God's promise that those who have walked in darkness will see a great light. I told you about Miryam, just a girl, stumbling over the dirty clothes on her floor when an angel appeared and told her she would be pregnant with God's Son. The garbage collectors and mechanics who came to see him, wrapped in a blanket and sleeping with his mother on an inflatable bed in a converted garage. The decrepit old man who burst into prayer when first he saw Jesus. The wrinkled apple of a woman who thanked God for the baby. A hundred other stories—of fishermen and IRS agents and theologians and billionaires all knocked off balance and drawn into the orbit of this uncommon man.

You know their stories because their stories are ours, just as our stories are theirs. They are the tales and happenings and accounts and reports of the good news about Jesus and about his life and death and teachings and coronation and return.

That's how I will tell the story. How about you? Where does your story of the Teacher become our story of the good news? Where will you begin?

I look forward to hearing your story. I'll share the interviews and rough notes and stories I've collected—the stories of still more people who have crossed paths with our beloved Lord.

With affection,
Dr. Lucas



Beautiful Feet on Distant Mountains

Three days after the army left, the people of Troy wait, breathless, upon the city walls. A few soldiers remain with the women and children and old men. Everyone knows they are nothing more than an honor guard. If the enemy crests the hill coming from the west, these soldiers can do little else than fall on their swords, or wait and hope that help might come before those in the city eat each other, starve, or burn.

Alexandros was too young to go to war. He tried to slip into the ranks as they left, but he was too small to make a convincing show of pretending to be a man. His father turned him back before they passed through the city gate. He bent down, his wrinkled face already covered in dust from the feet of the Greek army, took Alexandros by the shoulders, and said, “My son, this battle is not for you.”

“But, Father, the Persian army is so large. The elders say that every man will be needed.”

His father turned his head, watching the grand army make its way through the gate. Crowds lined the road, shouting encouragement and cheering the soldiers. Many wept in the crowd, calling out their last reminders of love to those going to war. “It’s true, Alexandros. The Persians are strong as bears. Not one city has stood up to them, Son, not in the last decade.”

“All the more reason, Father. One more blade, one more shield on the line. Let me join you. Please.”

His father sighed. “You don’t know what you ask. The most likely end to that tale would be father and son together in Hades, with your mother and sisters weeping on the far shore. Unless the Persians send them to join us too, gods forbid.”

Alexandros felt his whole body wilt like a sun-scorched plant. His face burned hot with shame. “Taso is going! I can’t stay with the women and boil stew while my friends spill blood.”

The tail of the soldiers’ column had almost passed through the gate. Time was short. “Son, you have a job the same as I do. Should I fall, this family is yours and you must protect them. Watch at the western wall for our messenger. When he arrives, he’ll be racing ahead of either the bloodthirsty Persians or a triumphant Greek army. If we’ve lost—and Alexandros, make no mistake, we will fight until the last spurt of our hearts’ blood—you must take your mother and sisters and flee through the eastern gate. Run far and fast.” Alexandros opened his mouth to object, but his father only shook his head and said, “The servants will give you a sword when you return home. Use it well, my son.”

His father gripped Alexandros’s forearm and looked into his eyes, watching him for a long time. Then he hurried to join the line of men disappearing through the western gate.

That was three days ago. Alexandros can’t bear to stay in his home. His mother directs the servants in packing the valuables, which he sees as an insult to the men on the field. Does she think

so little of them? Is she so certain they will die? His elder sister speeds around the house, eyes red, helping the servants. His younger sisters barely know what is happening.

Everywhere it is the same. People packing. People weeping. Old men sitting with swords on their laps. Young men running from house to house or standing on the walls or pestering the few adult men who guard the gate.

Alexandros walks along the western wall, running his palm over the rough stones. Sweat runs down his back. The road stands clear and silent, as it has for three days, the only traveler the occasional bird pecking at the dirt. Heat waves shimmer in the distance, like curtains made of air.

But then he spies the faintest whisper of dust on the road. He leans against the stone, the rough bite of it on his belly, his hands grabbing the outside wall, pulling himself toward the road. It is a small puff of dust. Not an army, then. A man. Running this way. The messenger!

He runs along the wall and bursts down the stairs like racing water, shouting that someone is coming. Everywhere people come to life. Some race to their homes, others toward the gate. The soldiers prepare to open it, and Alexandros is there with them, pressing against the gate, begging the men to open it.

The messenger is a black speck in the distance but rapidly growing larger. He stumbles and almost falls. His legs can barely hold him. One of the soldiers says, “He is running too fast. Pushing himself to his limits. That can only be a man with an enemy at his heels.”

Soon Alexandros can see the messenger himself. He has thrown off anything that would weigh him down—no armor or sword. He runs in his toga and sandals. He is covered in dust and sweat and clotted blood, his toga stained dark as wine. “Another ill omen,” a soldier says, yanking the rope that opens the gate.

The messenger collapses inside the walls, and the gate falls shut. His chest heaves, and he gasps for air. He tries to speak, but his lips and mouth are cracked by the sun, and the words are unintelligible, the sounds of the barbarians. They bring him a cup of water and press it to his lips. He drinks deeply, and they help him to his feet. “The Persians,” he says, “outnumbered our men three to one. The men of this city fought bravely. You should be proud of their good service and valiant fight.”

Alexandros feels his heart drop. No. May it not be. He mentally plans his route through the city toward home. How quickly can he get his family out the eastern gate? Will it be choked with others abandoning the city? His hand twitches. Soon he will be carrying a sword on the open road.

The messenger clears his throat and throws back another cup of water. “Yes, we fought valiantly, my friends. We won! We won! We defeated the Persians!”

A monstrous cheer unlike anything Alexandros has ever heard rises up as if from the entire city. Alexandros is amazed to find his own voice roaring alongside those of the other people in the crowd. The messenger is shouting more details from the battle, but no one can hear him. The people are leaping and screaming praise and weeping and falling into one another’s arms. People shout out along the city streets, calling the news to everyone. People begin to shout out names of loved ones, and the messenger calls back their status: alive, wounded, dead, a great hero of the battle, unknown.

Alexandros shouts his father’s name over and over, waiting for the messenger to hear him. At last, the messenger turns to Alexandros, grinning, and says, “Alive! Alive and headed for home, a hero.”

Alexandros leaps to his feet and runs for home, running so fast that the wind pulls tears from his eyes. He bursts into the house and swings his sister in a circle, laughing, and falls against his mother’s chest. “We’re saved!” he shouts. She grabs his cheeks and

turns his face toward hers, and he joyously tells her the good news, shouts it to her over and over. “We’re saved, and Father is alive.”

What Is the Gospel?

We love to talk about the “gospel.” The number of books written in the last few years with the word *gospel* in the title is enormous. You can find books to help you center your marriage in the gospel, to teach you gospel-centered parenting techniques, to teach you about the importance of the gospel or the definition of the gospel or how to be a man or a woman according to the gospel. We repeat the word like a mantra. We have coalitions and committees and seminaries centered around the gospel.

But the word *gospel* never appears in the Bible. Of course, we refer to the first four books of the New Testament as “Gospels” (the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), but the word itself comes from Middle English. It has lost meaning to modern English speakers, but the original words *god spel* meant simply “good news” or “good story.”

For speakers of Middle English, this was a good, direct translation of the Greek word *euangelion*, which means “good news.” This was a secular term in Greek society, originally used in military matters. A messenger would run back from the front lines bringing (hopefully) the *evangel*, the good news about a conquering king, a success in battle, a victory over superior forces. Over time, the word started being used in family situations as well. The good news about Mom’s doctor’s appointment. The good news about a brother’s advancement at work. The good news of a granddaughter being born. The one who brought the good news, the messenger, was the *evangelist*.

I’m not sure why we’ve latched onto the word *gospel* rather than simply translating the Greek: good news. One side effect

of this choice has been that we've dressed the good news in religious clothing. Those outside the church, those who should be most interested in hearing some good news, don't realize that's what we're talking about. Imagine a conversation in which you sit down beside a stranger and say, "I want to tell you the gospel of Jesus Christ." What would they say? It would depend on the person, of course, but it's not hard to imagine them immediately dismissing us and our religious jargon. Now imagine walking up to someone and saying, "I want to tell you the good news about Jesus." Maybe they would still walk away without listening. I've tried this myself, and sometimes I get the response, "What? There's *good* news about Jesus?"

We've become so adept at telling people what they should believe and how they should act and placing that all in a brightly colored package that we call "Christianity" or "gospel" or "church" that we've missed the fact that there are people who do not realize that the news about Jesus is good. They think the gospel is about obligation, rules, responsibilities, giving things up, repenting of sins, going to services on Sunday, trying not to curse, and not eating chocolate at Lent.

Maybe some of those things are the good news, or at least part of it. But the core message is something different. Sometimes we share the good news in a strange way, focusing on things that are not central to it. It's like Alexandros running home and shouting to his family, "I hope you made your beds and cleaned the kitchen and are making something good for dinner because Father is coming home." The good news is buried in there somewhere along with the list of all the things that need to be done.

So what is the good news, exactly? If someone ran for two days from the battle lines and collapsed at the city gate, what would their first few sentences be after gulping down a cup of cool water?

For many followers of Jesus, the go-to Bible passage on this question is 1 Corinthians 15:1–5.

Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve.

And on it goes, telling us about all the people who saw Jesus after his resurrection.

When many of us share the good news with someone, it boils down to these points:

Jesus died for our sins.

He was buried.

He rose again.

He appeared to others (another way of saying, “This story is true”).

Because of this we can be saved.

“Jesus died for our sins and rose again on the third day so that we might experience God’s salvation.”

Is this the gospel?

Well, yes. Certainly Paul (who wrote 1 Corinthians) thinks it’s a fine definition and refers to it explicitly as the good news that he preached to the Corinthians. It’s a story about what Jesus has done for us and how we can experience personal salvation as a result.

So that settles that.

The Gospel Test

Every once in a while, I'll attend a church service, or go to a Christian movie, or read a Christian book, and afterward, when I ask other believers for their thoughts, I'll hear comments like this: "It is a good book, I guess, but it doesn't really present the gospel." I even heard someone say once that a particular book of the Bible isn't that great because it doesn't clearly present the gospel. It's as if there are two criteria we use to critique a talk, a movie, or a book that purports to be Christian.

First: Is it good? Did I like it?

Second: Does it present the gospel clearly?

And if it was a wonderful, amazing talk or movie or book that doesn't "present the gospel clearly," then it has failed the test. The gospel test. It's of limited worth at best. Or, at least, that's how we talk sometimes.

Here are three (true) statements found in Scripture. There's no question that they're good and worthwhile statements that reveal something about God. The question is whether they are the "gospel." So ask yourself this: If someone shared the content listed below with someone who didn't know Jesus and then told you, "I shared the gospel," would you agree or disagree?

1. Jesus is the Messiah.
2. Jesus is descended from King David.
3. The Sermon on the Mount is the good news.

Clearly, none of these statements on its own passes the 1 Corinthians "gospel test." *Maybe* number one does, if you do a really good job explaining what *Messiah* means. I think it's safe to say that if our definition of the gospel is "Jesus died for our sins and rose again so that we can be saved," none of these three statements can be described as the gospel. They are not sufficient.

Good. I'm glad that's settled.

Except that Acts 5:42 says that every day, whether in the temple or in their homes, the followers of Jesus never stopped teaching and sharing the good news that "Jesus is the Messiah." They never stopped sharing the good news. The gospel. What gospel did they share? The gospel defined as "Jesus is the Messiah."¹

At first you might think that's not a big deal. If we parse out what "Messiah" means, we might come up with something similar to the 1 Corinthians definition. Jesus is the Chosen One of God sent to bring hope and healing and restoration to the human race. How did he accomplish that? By dying in our place and rising from the dead. So because he is the Messiah, we can find personal salvation and be connected to God. I guess if we say it that way, "Jesus is the Messiah" might pass the 1 Corinthians gospel test. Maybe it's shorthand for the more detailed version of what we believe the gospel to be.

How about "Jesus is descended from King David"? No way. Not even close. It's not mentioned in 1 Corinthians 15, and while it's an interesting piece of trivia about Jesus's royal bloodline, it's not the gospel. Except that 2 Timothy 2:8–9 says, "Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel, for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God's word is not chained."

So Paul's good news includes not only that Jesus is the Messiah but also that he is David's great-great-great-lots-of-greats grandson. So I guess that's part of the gospel too. We better go back and rewrite some of our gospel tracts to say, "We forgot to add that Jesus is descended from David."

OK, but what about the third example, that the Sermon on the Mount is the good news? The sermon never mentions Jesus being the Messiah. (In fact, in other places Jesus rebuked demons who tried to share that particular bit of the gospel.) It never mentions

that Jesus would die or rise again from the dead, and it never mentions our personal salvation as such. Can it be the gospel?

Let's look for a moment at the Gospel of Matthew. It starts with a genealogy (essentially, that Jesus is descended from King David). In chapter 2, Jesus is properly respected as a king. In chapter 3, John the Baptist says that Jesus is the Messiah sent by God, and in chapter 4, Jesus is tempted by the evil one. And then in Matthew 4:23, it says this: "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, *proclaiming the good news of the kingdom*, and healing every disease and sickness." What was the good news (gospel) that Jesus was preaching?

Matthew spends three chapters writing out the answer to that question. In Matthew 5–7, Jesus gives us a gospel presentation, and if you read it through that lens, I think you'll find it incredibly fascinating. It's the good news about the coming kingdom, where the poor own the kingdom and the mourning are comforted and the pure in heart see God. This is the good news, and it doesn't match 1 Corinthians 15 at all.

Why didn't Jesus teach the same gospel?

The Gospel of the Kingdom and the Gospel of Jesus

Jesus often taught the good news of the coming kingdom, when God's reign on earth will spread and his will will be done "on earth as in heaven." Much of this good news has to do with the transformation of culture, the re-creation of the world, the justice that will come, the broken things that will be made whole. The bringing about of that kingdom is a key piece of the good news of Jesus, and he is, of course, the King of that kingdom. The good news of the kingdom and the good news of Jesus go together. Acts 8:12 talks about Philip sharing the "good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ."

The good news about Jesus is partly that Jesus is God, that he died for our sins, that he rose again, and that because of those things we can experience salvation. These are undoubtedly parts of the gospel.

But the transformation of all creation is part of the gospel too. The coming government that Christ will rule is part of the gospel. Scripture occasionally talks about the good news purely in the sense of the plan of salvation for human beings. But the vast majority of the time, the good news is directly related to some revelation of God's character. The good news is less "you can be saved" and more "there is a God who loves you enough to save you." Humanity's salvation results from God's character.

Also, there's a reason that the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are called the Gospels. Every word of those books is part of the good news of Jesus. Matthew starts with the genealogies, and that's the gospel. Mark starts with a prophecy from Isaiah and refers to it as the good news—that there will be one preparing the way for the Messiah. Luke starts with the story of an old priest who sees an angel and is told his son will prepare the way for the Lord. John starts with a philosophical discussion of Jesus as the Word who is God and dwells with God and made all things.

All of this is the gospel. The story of Jesus is the good news—the good news about God; the good news about the kingdom (it's here and it's coming); the good news about Jesus being the Messiah, descended from David, descended from Adam, Son of God, and his death, burial, and resurrection; the good news about our salvation; and the good news about the re-creation of the world.

"God is light; in him there is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5). That is the gospel.

Jesus came to baptize with fire. That is the gospel.

Jesus speaking to an outcast woman at a well. Jesus caring for his mother from the cross. Jesus telling God that he does not want

to die if there is another way. Jesus letting the little children come to him. All these stories are the gospel too.

The good news is larger than a handful of theological statements. The “full gospel” can’t be presented in fifteen minutes or in a sermon or in a series of sermons. Every new understanding we gain about the person and character of Jesus is the good news, and he is an infinite being. The work of eternity will be learning the extent of the beautiful good news of Jesus.

Yes, the first words of a messenger at the city gate may well be, “Jesus, the Christ, died on a cross and rose from the dead for our salvation.” But there are more words to come after that, many more, an eternal stream of living water that flows from the throne of God and fills the whole earth.