

NIGHT
WITH A PERFECT
STRANGER



The Conversation That Changes Everything

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by David Gregory

CHAPTER 1

You'd think that meeting Jesus face to face, as I did six years back, would give you a leg up in the Christian life.

I'm still not sure why Jesus chose me to dine with one night at Milano's Italian restaurant in Cincinnati. Maybe God knew that my resistance to him was a mile wide and an inch deep. I was 33, outwardly successful, with a beautiful wife and two-year-old daughter. Behind the veneer, our marriage was in shambles, I doubted myself as a parent, and I wondered where in the world anyone could find the secret to life.

I received an anonymous invitation to dine with Jesus. Surely a prank by the guys at work. So I showed them. I arrived at Milano's and sat down to eat my free meal—across from a guy who claimed to be Jesus. Only thing, it actually was Jesus, patiently answering my questions, waiting for me to set aside my relentless skepticism and open my heart to the reality of a God who loved me and who died and rose to save me.

The encounter transformed my life. In the span of one evening I traversed the chasm between cynical agnosticism and faith in God. Three weeks later my wife, Mattie, had a similar encounter with Jesus on an airplane. Except Jesus didn't identify himself to her. He just let her figure it out.

Ever since those encounters we'd been followers of Jesus.

For two years afterward, life was great. How could it not be? I had met Jesus. He had explained everything. Well, not everything, but a lot of things. Life made sense. It had a purpose. I was full of joy, peace, and all that.

But I slowly lost it, whatever "it" was. My closeness to God, my excitement about Jesus, the sense of purpose and meaning he brought. I'm not sure when it started fading. I hadn't lost my

faith. Far from it. But the life that faith was supposed to produce—where was it? I thought meeting Jesus would energize me for a lifetime. But for the past four years I had been slowly coasting downhill.

The distressing thing was, I'd been doing all the "right" things to be a good Christian. After our Jesus encounters, Mattie and I decided to join a church. Wasn't that what Christians did? Naïve as we were, we chose the closest one: a nice, mid-sized suburban church. The preacher talked too long (a quarter of the people had their eyes closed and I'm pretty sure they weren't praying) and the worship band played songs that didn't exactly make me feel worshipful. Admittedly, meeting Jesus himself may have jaded me; I constantly found myself thinking things like, "Jesus wouldn't go for this song."

Fortunately, the church had plenty to offer besides Sunday services. Mattie and I joined a home group. If any place offered an authentic experience of Jesus—beyond what we had already experienced, of course—it would be a small group dedicated to that purpose. After all, that's what the twelve disciples were, a small group experiencing Jesus together.

Our first evening there, the leader invited us to tell the group a little about ourselves. I was happy to oblige.

"I became a Christian five weeks ago when I had dinner with Jesus at Milano's. Mattie sat next to Jesus three weeks later on a flight to Tucson." I turned toward her. "You two even ran into each other during a layover in Dallas, didn't you?"

"At Starbucks," Mattie chimed in. "It was the weirdest thing, this guy sitting next to me on these flights. Have . . . have any of you . . ." Her speech slowed. "Actually met Jesus . . . like that?" Apparently not. The group stared at us as if we were from another planet.

We found a new church, vowing never to mention our Jesus encounters again—not to Christians, at least.

Our second church was smaller, a bit more diverse. We joined another home group and, through our silence, felt welcomed. Unfortunately, this group seemed more intent on addressing “felt needs” than on actually experiencing Jesus. One night, after watching our second video series on parenting (following series on marriage and family finances), I remarked to Mattie, “If people were walking closely with God, wouldn’t some of these issues take care of themselves?”

I joined a men’s discipleship group, but I encountered the same problem I felt everywhere: I didn’t fit in. Men in the group were consistently sharing opinions about God that contradicted what I had personally experienced with Jesus at Milano’s. When I said things like, “I know Jesus wouldn’t see things that way,” they looked at me like I was nuts. Who was this guy, a new Christian, to presume to know what Jesus would and wouldn’t think?

The last straw for me was an exchange with the group leader. He was teaching about John 15, Jesus’ message on the vine and the branches.

“The key to living the Christian life is abiding in Christ,” he declared.

“And how do we do that?” I asked. Jesus must have forgotten those instructions in our time at the restaurant, because I didn’t have a clue. I was always the one asking, “What does that mean exactly?” when it came to spiritual platitudes that, I discovered, were tossed around churches like beanbags at a school carnival.

“We abide by keeping Jesus’ commandments,” he responded.

I pondered that assertion. “So you’re saying that to live the way we should, we abide, and to abide, we have to live the way we should.”

The leader smiled patronizingly. “It’s just one of the mysteries of the faith.”

It wasn’t a mystery of the faith at all; it was circular reasoning.

I left the men's group, redoubling my efforts to draw near to God on my own. After meeting Jesus, spending time with God had been easy. I knew he was right there with me, just as Jesus had been at our dinner. I could sense him speaking to me directly from the Bible.

After a time, however, that sense disappeared. God seemed distant. I got distracted by life. Paying the mortgage and attending kids' events took precedence over being alone with God.

How could I reconnect with him? Through the Bible and prayer, I figured. But the Bible didn't encourage me anymore. Instead, it screamed at me from every page: YOU AREN'T MEASURING UP! GET YOUR ACT TOGETHER! WHY AREN'T YOU A BETTER CHRISTIAN?!

And my prayers? They just bounced off the ceiling right back at me. I wasn't communicating back and forth with Someone; I was just mouthing syllables. My times with God felt hollow. I didn't feel like praising or thanking, to say nothing of confessing or supplicating.

Nor did I feel like doing any of the other things I was supposed to do as a Christian, like witnessing or going on mission trips. What was I supposed to tell people about the abundant life Jesus offered? I hadn't found it myself! I wasn't loving enough toward my wife, patient enough with my kids, or trusting enough about the future. The worst part was knowing I'd actually regressed. Not long before, I really had been laying down my life for Mattie, patient with the kids, trusting God, and telling people about Jesus. I had been excited about him. What happened?

The bottom line was, I was no longer living the kind of Christian life I wanted to, and I didn't have a clue what to do about it. I had followed all the spiritual formulas and I had gotten nowhere.

I was stuck.

Life events didn't help my frame of mind. After two miscarriages, Mattie was six months pregnant with our third child. We'd been nervous about trying again, but at six months at least we were starting to breathe easier. This pregnancy was going as planned.

I was excited about having another child, but my enthusiasm was tempered by my spiritual state. I had so wanted to pass along a vibrant, living faith to my kids. I had actually met Jesus! What an advantage my kids had spiritually! But Sara, eight, was now old enough to witness how little clue I had about what it meant to walk with God. Jacob, three, would see it himself one day. Was I bringing another child into the world only to witness his father's spiritual charade? Our church was already full of couples whose kids had failed to see the reality of Christ in their parents' lives and had walked away from the faith. I was afraid our children would soon become a similar statistic.

All of this came crashing upon me as I drove past downtown Chicago, heading south. I'd traveled this route many times. In daylight, I would look admiringly at the skyline set against the majesty of Lake Michigan. This time, it wasn't the lack of sunlight that kept me staring at the road. It was the dimness in my soul.

Where is God in the midst of all this? Why doesn't he answer my prayers for help? Am I doomed to a life of mediocre Christianity? I have everything going for me, but I feel empty on the inside. It seems like I'm just stumbling around in the darkness, without so much as a flashlight to give me direction.

My despair shouldn't have surprised me. I had just left my folks' house on Chicago's north side. Spending time with my folks—especially my dad—always made my thoughts spiral downward, even when our visit was cordial. This one wasn't.

I had only agreed to go to Chicago under considerable duress: the logic of Mattie.

“Nick, it’s your parents. They want to give us furniture as they downsize. We should take it.”

She’d walked to the kitchen table, sat across from me, and smiled that impish smile I never could resist. “We could all go—make it a four day weekend to Chicago and back.”

I rolled my eyes. “Are you crazy? Four days with my dad? I’m already down on myself enough these days. I don’t need Dad adding to that.”

“Nick, you’re just . . . struggling. We all do.”

Right. Mattie was the only person I knew who didn’t seem to struggle with her spiritual life. It all came so naturally to her.

“Besides,” she continued, “your dad’s not so judgmental anymore. He’s mellowed.”

“Being around him still makes me feel like I did as a kid. I never can measure up.”

I finally relented. I flew up on Friday and rented a U-Haul Saturday morning. Dad helped me load the furniture for my Sunday morning ride back to Cincinnati. The first 28 hours there, all went smoothly. In the 29th, Dad blurted out one of his infamous queries.

“When are you finally going to get a real, job, Nick?”

We were watching a Cubs game. He didn’t take his eyes off his HDTV.

“Dad, I have a real job. I’m a consultant.” I could feel the tension crawl up my neck.

“Uh-huh.” He reached for a tortilla chip and dipped it in some salsa. “Where’s your office?”

“My clients don’t care that I office out of the house. I go to their workplaces.”

He was silent for a few moments. Alfonso Soriano hit a double. Dad didn’t blink. “So how’s business since the recession?”

I shook my head. He wouldn’t give up. “It’s taken a while to pick back up.”

He leaned forward slowly and extracted another chip from the bowl. “I figured. Income’s down, too, I bet. Are you two making it?”

I turned to him. “Yes, Dad, we’re making it fine.” My tone was curt. I knew he could tell I was getting annoyed.

“Uh-huh.” He dipped his chip and ate it. “I’ll tell you who really is doing fine.”

Oh, brother. Here it came. Comparing me to my sister, Ellen, an EPA attorney in DC.

“Who?” I asked, as if on cue.

“Ellen.”

What a shock.

“Just got a promotion, you know.”

“No.” I stared at the game.

“And set financially. Did you know she has a guaranteed pension? By the way, how have your 401k’s done the last few years?”

I could feel the vein in my neck throbbing. “They tanked in the downturn. I already told you that.”

“Yeah, and you sold low.” He reached for the beer on the end table and took a sip. “Mattie and the kids are counting on you providing some security, Nick. Especially with another one on the way. If I were you, son—”

I rose from my chair, seething. “You aren’t me, Dad, and I’m not you. If you were me, you’d still be working at Pruitt.”

“It was a good job, son.”

“Right. And they were falsifying environmental data for client reports. That’s a federal crime.”

He turned back to the TV and watched another pitch, ignoring me while I stood in the middle of the living room. He finally reached for another chip. “It just seems to me that Mattie would be happier if you were a little more . . . stable.”

“No, Dad—you’d be happier.” I strode toward the kitchen, then turned abruptly, my voice rising. “And I am stable. I’ve only had two jobs in nine years. That’s stable.”

I reached for my keys and wallet on the kitchen counter just as my mother emerged from their bedroom. “What’s all this yelling?”

I forced my face to soften. I wasn’t mad at her. Although she never did stick up for me when Dad was putting me down. “Dad thinks what I do for a living isn’t good enough.”

“I didn’t say not good enough!” The reply came from the living room. “I said too unstable. Plus your investments—”

“That’s enough!” I shouted. I stomped down the hall to my bedroom, threw my stuff in my bag, and walked back to the kitchen.

“Bye, Mom. Thanks for the furniture.” I kissed her perfunctorily on the cheek.

“You’re leaving?”

“Yes.”

“But Nick, it’s nine o’clock. You can’t drive home at night.”

“Sure I can. Did it in college all the time.” I walked to the side door to avoid the living room. “I’ll call you next week.”

She glanced nervously toward the living room. “Aren’t you going to say goodbye to your dad? And thank him for helping you load up?”

“I said thanks earlier.” I opened the door and stepped out, then turned back to her. “If he wants to apologize for anything, he can call me.”

I closed the door, climbed in the U-Haul, and drove away, leaving my dad behind. What I couldn't leave behind was the effect he had on me. I was forty years old, for goodness sake. Why did it matter what he thought of my life? But it did. It always did.

I felt doubly bad because of the way I had reacted. My dad knew exactly how to press my buttons and get me to overreact. And when I did, all of my Christian veneer vanished. I was the same old Nick blowing up at my dad like I always did. It was never his fault, of course. He never lost his temper. Just asked questions. Innocent questions.

Ever since I'd met Jesus, my dad believed I was just going through a religious phase. It would blow over. Or (worse, from my perspective) it wouldn't change anything about me.

Getting mad, stomping out after nine o'clock at night—I could just see my dad walking into the kitchen, getting another beer, and saying to my mother, “He must have left his religion in Cincinnati again.”

Butting heads with my dad filled me with both anger *and* guilt. Heading south, I looked in my right side mirror and saw the lights of Chicago fading behind me. Despite the beauty of the city, I felt empty every time I drove away from this place.

My next move didn't help matters. I picked up my cell phone and called Mattie to tell her I was heading home. I gave her the short version of what had happened at my folks'.

“You did what?”

“I walked out. Look, Mattie, I don't need you getting on my case, too. My dad is bad enough.”

“I am not getting on your case, Nick.” She sounded stern with me. “I just think you're going to have to apologize to your parents.”

“Me apologize? Are you kidding? My dad is the one who needs to say he's sorry. He's been treating me this way my whole life. And now you're standing up for him.”

There was silence on the other end. “Are you finished?” she finally said.

“Yes.”

“Then I’ll see you when you get home. I’ll pray that God keeps you awake. Bye.”

“Bye.”

Great. Now everyone was mad at me.

I needed a distraction. I turned on the radio and slowly scanned the AM dial, landing on a health talk show. Someone called in about low testosterone. *Maybe that’s what I need, more testosterone. I could use a boost.* I listened to the host’s response. *OK, maybe that’s not what I need.*

Someone called in about toe fungus. My mind wandered. I scanned highway signs and billboards and caught myself starting to play the alphabet game—a family favorite that Sara always seemed to win.

I wallowed in my funk through Gary, onto Interstate 65, and past Merrillville. I glanced down at the U-Haul’s fuel gauge. Almost an eighth of a tank. I didn’t feel like stopping yet. *This gas tank is huge. Rensselaer is only 20 miles. There’s a station there.* I drove on.

I knew I was in trouble when my engine started sputtering ten minutes later. I pressed on the gas pedal. *Kerplunk. Kerplunk.* I glanced at the fuel gauge. One-sixteenth of a tank. *Can’t anyone make an accurate fuel gauge anymore!*

I pumped the accelerator. Nothing. The truck slowed. I glanced in my side-view mirror. Darkness. I was stuck in the pitch black in the middle of nowhere. Somehow, it seemed fitting. When the truck slowed down to 30, I pulled over to the shoulder and coasted. I glanced at the clock. 11:27. *And only a month ago I let our AAA membership expire. Brilliant move, genius.* I glanced in my side-view mirror again. One pair of headlights. *Not many cars to wave down. Not*

that I'd want to. But there's no way I'm going to ask Mattie to drive 200 miles to bring me a gas can.

Fortunately, I had a savior: my Blackberry. Surely I could find a 24-hour tow service to run me some diesel. And charge me an arm and a leg. Between this and paying for the U-Haul, I could have bought new furniture.

The truck rolled along the shoulder and finally came to a stop. I sat and stared out past the front of the truck.

There, my headlights illuminated a man holding a fuel can.

It was Jesus.

CHAPTER 2

At the sight of him, I spent several seconds in shock. I had wanted to get back together with Jesus ever since we'd had dinner. That hope had faded with time. I never expected to see him again. In this life, I mean.

Once I got over the shock, other emotions started flooding in. Anger, for one. Why had it taken him so long to reappear? Why had he left me hanging out to dry for six years, leaving me on my own to make the Christian life work?

And guilt. My behavior at my folks' hadn't exactly been a model of Christ-likeness. More like a cauldron of resentment and unforgiveness.

But along with the guilt and anger, I felt a glimmer of hope. Perhaps now I would finally get the answers I had been looking for.

I reached for the door handle, but Jesus had already started walking toward my side of the truck. I rolled down the window. He smiled and held up the can. "Need some diesel?"

He looked the same as he had before: average height, short dark hair. Wearing jeans and a light blue denim shirt, he appeared less imposing than he had at the restaurant.

"You just happened to be standing here in the middle of nowhere with a gas can?"

"It didn't take a prophet to tell you weren't going to make it to the next station. These things don't even get ten miles a gallon, you know."

"I know."

I got out of the truck and removed the gas cap. He pulled out the spigot and poured the fuel in. After a few moments, he spun the cap closed and sealed the can. "That'll get you to a truck stop about five miles down."

"So, you're just out here helping stranded motorists?"

"I thought you might enjoy some company. Have room for one more?"

I shrugged my shoulders. My lingering anger kept me from acting too excited about his appearance. "Sure. I will in a minute."

I opened the passenger door and removed a rocking horse from the seat and two boxes from the floor. "It's all yours."

I put the items in the back of the truck and glanced at the furniture to see if anything had shifted during the ride. Everything looked OK. Not that I'd care much if something got scratched.

We got in the cab. I glanced at Jesus. "You changed out of your business suit, I see."

"Jeans seemed appropriate."

An eighteen-wheeler zoomed past us. I looked in my side mirror. The interstate was empty save for a pair of headlights far behind us. I accelerated on the shoulder and pulled onto the highway.

"This cab isn't the best place for a deep conversation. Pretty noisy." I looked over at him. "We could have met at a restaurant again."

He shook his head. "This is the right place and time."

"Have you been planning this meeting a long time, like you did the last one?"

"Let's just say I knew you'd need another one."

"And are you going to meet with Mattie again, too?"

"No, Mattie's doing fine."

By implication, that meant I wasn't. Maybe I would be if Jesus had bothered to reappear a little sooner.

We rode in silence for a few moments. I had stashed so many questions away in the intervening years, I didn't know where to start. And now that Jesus was actually sitting next to me, I could hardly remember any of them anyway. I couldn't get past the irritation I was feeling. I decided to start with that.

"So." I didn't turn toward him. "Where exactly have you been the last six years?"

"I've been where I always am."

"I thought we were getting together for more dinners."

"Who said that?"

"You did. You know—the card you gave me with the Bible verse on it? Revelation 3:20? 'If you open the door, I will come in and dine with you.'"

"Yes?"

"Well, we haven't done any more dining."

"You haven't spent any time dining with me since then?"

"You mean like, devotional times? Reading the Bible and praying?"

"That's one way."

"Sure." I finally glanced his way. Our eyes met. "But lately it seems like I'm the only one at the table."

"Maybe that's something we need to talk about."

"Maybe you should have talked to me about that at our first dinner." My words had an edge to them.

The truck stop appeared on the left. I exited, pulled up beside a diesel pump, and got out. Jesus stayed in the cab.

I felt bad about the way the conversation had started. Sure, I was mad at God. Things hadn't gone like I thought they would since meeting Jesus. But the truth was, I was glad to see him. Our first encounter was the opportunity of a lifetime. Now he was giving me another. How could I be bitter?

I finished pumping and got back in the truck. I started to turn the key, then sat back. "Look, I'm sorry for being angry. I suppose . . . I suppose you already knew I was."

He gave a slight nod.

"I'm just frustrated with my Christian life, and I can't seem to get answers. But here you are. That's timely, I guess."

The corners of his mouth turned up. "I'm glad to be here, too, Nick. In the flesh, that is."

I fired up the engine and we got back on the interstate. I felt self-conscious about the quality of the ride. Here was God the Son sitting in my U-Haul, bouncing up and down on a stiff seat. He didn't seem to mind.

Jesus looked around the cab. "Do you have anything to eat?"

I glanced at him in surprise. "You came hungry? There's an apple in a sack on the floor, plus a box of Cheez-Its."

"Thanks."

"Sorry about the crumbs on the seat."

He bent down and got the apple. We rode silently while he ate. The longer we sat, the more uncomfortable I felt. Here was the one person in all the universe who knew me inside and out. He knew the good, but what pressed down upon me was the awful reality that he also knew the bad. I could hide what I was like on the inside from everyone else, even Mattie to a certain extent. But not Jesus. And that was making me squirm.

I finally couldn't take it anymore. "OK, go ahead and say it."

He took another bite of his apple. “Say what?”

“You know. What you’re thinking.”

“Which is?”

I glanced toward him. “What a failure I’ve been. How disappointed you are in me. How I should have been living differently the last six years. Well, four at least. And tonight, how I should have reacted differently at my folks’ house.”

“What makes you believe that’s what I’m thinking?”

“Because it’s the truth, isn’t it? After all, you know everything. I can’t hide anything from you.”

He reached down and placed the apple core in the paper bag. “Nick, it sounds as if you’re the one who’s disappointed.”

He’d hit the nail on the head. “Yeah, that’s a good summary. I am disappointed. I’m disappointed in the whole Christian life. It just doesn’t work for me. The abundant life you promised—who were you kidding? Or was that meant for just some people? Because despite everything I’ve tried, I’m just not experiencing it.”

There it was, out on the table. I’d been told so many times, “Be honest with God.” Praying by myself, there never seemed much point in telling God what he already knew. With Jesus sitting next to me again, however, honesty seemed like the best route. Though I immediately felt guilty for expressing my bitterness.

“So what’s not working for you?” Jesus asked.

“You already know.”

“I want to hear it from you.”

I sighed. “OK. Everything. Spiritually, I mean. Things were easy after Mattie and I met you. We read the Bible and prayed together. We talked about you all the time. I actually had a

sense that God was meeting with us. We joined a church. We started doing family devotions with our daughter Sara. She was excited about God, even at age three. She used to dance around the house singing *Holy, Holy, Holy.*”

Jesus chuckled. “She had good taste in hymns.”

“I started serving on the outreach committee at our church. I got involved in the men’s program; I was meeting with three other guys in a discipleship group. I went through the leadership training class.”

“And then?”

“Somewhere in the midst of it all I lost contact with God. After you and I met, fellowship with God was great. But after a couple of years it started to feel burdensome, like a duty I had to fulfill. I hate to say this, but the Bible became tedious. I studied it because I was supposed to.”

I gathered my thoughts, unsure as to whether I wanted to plunge ahead. *But he already knows all this. There’s no point in not admitting it.* “I’ve gotten to the point where my prayers just seem to bounce off the ceiling. I can’t remember the last time God answered one. Not that I would have noticed, probably. I don’t like going to church. I don’t encounter God there. I’m tired of pretending to be something I’m not. I never tell anyone about you anymore. What am I supposed to say? ‘Come to Jesus! Be miserable like me!’”

He laughed. I couldn’t help a slight snicker myself. It sounded ridiculous, but that’s the way I felt.

An eighteen-wheeler had been gaining on us. It got too close for comfort, changed lanes, and passed. I shot him a dirty look. Normally I would have sworn at him, but with Jesus in the truck . . .

“If you’re tired of pretending to be something you’re not,” Jesus asked, “what exactly do you think you should be?”

“A good Christian.”

“And how would you define that?”

“Someone who actually does what the Bible—what you—tell us to do. Someone who isn’t impatient with his wife and kids, who isn’t resentful every time he has to do something inconvenient, who actually cares about people rather than avoiding being around them, who shows God to people in a positive way, and leads people to Je—to you.” I glanced in my mirror again.

“Who doesn’t swear at drivers on the road.”

“You didn’t swear at that semi driver.”

“Yeah, but I would have if you weren’t here!” I exclaimed, exasperated. I rolled down my window to get a little fresh air. The road noise was too great to have a conversation. I rolled the window back up.

“What bothers you the most,” he asked, “that you aren’t behaving like a Christian should behave, or that you aren’t as close to God as you were, or even closer?”

“Both,” I admitted. “When you boil it down, those are the two main things. I’m tired of being a hypocrite. And I’m tired of feeling so distant from God. I just don’t know how to get close to him—to you—any more. I do love God. I mean, I guess I do. The whole thing just seems so burdensome.”

He shook his head. “That’s the second time you’ve used that word.”

“I can’t even listen to Christian music anymore. This abundant life and unending joy they’re singing about—I don’t know anyone who experiences that. Well, Mattie, maybe. I wish I could go back listening to my old secular CDs.”

“Who’s stopping you?”

“I trashed them all. I went to a Christian conference that convinced me everything from Metallica to REM to Simon and Garfunkel’s greatest hits was satanic. So—wanting to obey God, and be holy for him—I got rid of all my non-Christian music. The great CD purge of 2006.”

“That’s too bad. Simon and Garfunkel had some good stuff. You could download them, you know.”

I looked over at him. How weird was this, Jesus talking about downloading music? Not something he ever discussed on the hills of Galilee.

A pair of headlights passed us going the opposite direction. I looked in the rear view mirror. No other traffic was in sight. We were completely alone.

“I suppose what really annoys me is Mattie.” I took a deep breath. This was going to sound petty. “I resent where Mattie is spiritually.”

“Which is where?”

“Far ahead of me.”

“Why do you say that?”

“The way she relates to God. He’s so real to her. She’s always seeing deeper things in the Bible. The way she acts toward the kids—she’s so much better with them than I am. And I hate to admit it, but she’s a better wife than I am a husband. That bit about laying down my life for her like you laid down your life for the church— that’s a total joke. I try to be loving, but then I revert to my old selfishness. I mean, she has her faults, too . . .”

There wasn’t any point in listing Mattie’s shortcomings. I didn’t think that would go over real big with Jesus.

“We met you within weeks of each other, and now it seems like she’s light years ahead of me. And I don’t know how to catch up.”

“I wasn’t aware it was a race.”

“You know what I mean. Maybe I just haven’t been committed enough. But to be honest, I’m tired of it all. What’s the point of having another quiet time, or listening to another sermon, or attending another home group meeting? It’s not going to change anything.” I looked over at him. “I’m sorry. I tend to get pretty discouraged when I’m out of fellowship with God.”

“Out of fellowship?” He looked surprised. “How did that happen?”

“Well, you know. I wasn’t exactly the most loving son around my parents tonight. Then I snapped at Mattie on the phone. And my bad attitude . . . I just haven’t taken the time to confess any of it and get back into fellowship.”

Jesus glanced out his window. “Stop the truck.”

We went under an overpass. I looked at him. “What? What is it?”

“Stop the truck! Pull over. Now!”

I pulled the truck onto the shoulder and slowed down. “Why? What’s wrong?”

“I have to get out.”

“What for?” I was starting to feel alarmed.

The truck came to a stop. Jesus unbuckled his seatbelt and reached for the door handle. “I can’t be in here with you.” He got out and closed the door.

I unbuckled myself, leaned across the seat, and rolled down the window. “Why not?” I was thoroughly baffled by his behavior.

He took a step back from the truck. “Because we’re out of fellowship.”