

Preview Sample



God's shadow

Daniel de Sevén

a word...

I find it very difficult to explain what's going on here. What kind of book is this, anyway? No chapters, no case to make, and a boat load of ambiguous pronouns. I even made up a word or two.

Needless to say, I had a hard time pitching this project to the few that knew about it. "What's it about?" my barber asked once. "It's about...um...life and faith and stuff," I replied. Real helpful. Sometimes I would get creative and say something like, "it's a book written not to tell the reader what to think about something but to get them to think about something." Awkward silence.

So where did this book come from? It's based on this hypothesis I have: most people don't read books with their minds but their eyes. In other words, we don't read critically enough, engaging with the author as he leads us on. I think we expect books to simply tell us what to think and are suspicious when the author is evasive or vague. We think things like: "What does the author have to hide? Why can't he just come right out and say it?" Plus, we are all caught up in this culture of busyness, moving too fast to think (after all, we abbreviate the word "you" as "u" in order to save two letters). This is why I think most people don't like poetry in this age. And while this is by no means poetry, prose

alike suffers for this uneasiness about thinking. This is, then, an effort to raise expectations and compel people to think about what they read. The fact that we have so much to do—so much to read—these days isn't an excuse not to be critical, but a powerful reason why we need to read things more carefully.

But you only hold a few pages. It's not much, but it's a sample of what the completed book will be like. I've done my best to avoid giving you the straight out answers, even when I think I know what they are. This means that I don't agree with everything I wrote (:: smile::). Like I said, the goal is for you to think about these things because I feel that our Christian faith is better off with us having wrestled with these topics. You may find things you've never thought about or even things you are violently opinionated about. Just the same, take another look. Challenge yourself so that the answers you come up with are yours and no one else's. Even if you and I disagree in the end, at least they're your answers. And that is just the beginning...

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(bleeds)

We need a Christianity that bleeds. Just look at that gold cross around her neck. Look at how it glimmers in that bright sunlight. It looks great; it matches her earrings so well. It is a triumph of fashion.

But they left it in the ground, you know. Long before we took it and wiped it off; before we sanded it down and put it in a museum. Now we wear it proudly, not as a testimony to our loyalty but to our slavery. They shrunk away from it in fear while we shrugged it off. While heaven broke over their heads we use it to lift ours up. It was to be the symbol of a new era, a new peace forged from the pieces of our brokenness. But in reality it describes neither the dead Savior nor the living one, but one that never was. No one ever died on a golden cross.

It was an instrument of death, and on it He bled love until our oceans became red, until the whole world drank up their guilt. But we have explained his love and we have filtered our water. We have encultured him and made him a brand. Instead of asking, "Do you follow Jesus?" we say, "Do you wear him? Is that your style? (If not, it's okay.)"

Someone once asked me why Christianity is such a

bloody religion. He scoffed that people who have followed Christ have had the blood of innocents on their hands. I scoffed too, knowing that those sins happened precisely because they didn't have the blood of Innocence on their hands.

I raise up those hands and wonder: "What is it I have sanctified?"

We desperately need a Christianity that bleeds.

(cyrene)

We spend \$60,000 and six weeks to tell a dozen people that Jesus is coming soon. Yet so many people feel Jesus has already come and passed them by—some poor, some homeless, some sick, some just out of luck. What does a second coming mean to those who never experienced the first one? How can they be excited that Jesus will soon return to judge the world when they missed the fact that he first came to heal the sick? Is it too late? Did they just miss him the first time? Is all the healing that can take place something they have to wait for?

I don't really blame them. We mean well, but do we mean well enough to change? We tell them what's true—and who can argue with that?—but who teaches them to pray? Who is there after the evangelist has left? Reaching people is more than telling them the right things to think. It's more than a formal introduction to Jesus. How many homeless will respond to a brochure that arrives at an address they don't have? Bibles don't keep people warm at night. Who will be there for those who struggle through broken relationships? Why must they always come to us? How many "lost" people are created in our efforts to "save" them?

6 I suppose you could blame it on the preacher if you really want. After all, it was his fiery sermon that put

that fire within you. “Get out and win souls. If you loved Jesus you would tell others.” Guilt-trip evangelism just makes more people guilty.

We don’t need this kind of Christianity. It only offers its cross to others.

Let’s go to the neighborhoods; let’s ask them if they know of our church on the corner. Ask them what they know about it. Ask them if good people are there. Ask them if lives have been changed there. Ask them if their streets are safer because of the church, if their children are happier. Ask them if the church means anything to them. Stop mailing invitations. Stop selling books. Stop asking if they want to know more about the Bible. First see if they miss your smile. First see if they know who you are.

(questions)

Hey, they wondered too. You can't tell me that my questions aren't valid. Why do you always make me feel like asking is the same as doubting? It seems to me that your answers are afraid of my questions. Why? If God loves us, doesn't he want us to know? Maybe we don't have all the answers, but why should that stop us from asking? If he didn't make us as robots but gave us free will—as you're so fond of saying—then doesn't he want us to understand why?

You would say Job was awesome Christian. He never did anything wrong, and when God allowed the devil to torment him didn't he say: "I cry out to you, but you do not answer me....You have become cruel to me; with the strength of your hand you oppose me." Job said God had become cruel to him. I'm not saying he was right or he was wrong; the fact remains that someone who was a lot closer to God than me dared to question him.

The prophet Jeremiah also had questions. Early on in his journey he told God: "You're always just when I bring my case before you, Lord. But let me talk with you about your justice. Why do the ways of wicked people prosper? Why are they happy who deal so deceitfully with others?" And just to drive the point home, Jeremiah adds: "You have planted them, yes, because of you

they've taken root."

Or let's talk about Solomon, who some have said is the wisest man to ever live. Do you know what he learned about life? "What happens to the sons of God happens also to the animals. One thing affects them both: as one dies, so does the other. There's no difference between the two. It's all pointlessly absurd."

I'm in good company.

Why are we so afraid of questions? Are we afraid that everything will unravel? What does that say about how we view God?

(unconditional)

I enjoy being in the arms of another; someone who loves me for what they can get out of me, because I know I can give. For when I give, they give back—that's security.

But you say you love me unconditionally. I don't want you to love me unconditionally, because everything we do should be reasonable. To love without reason is reckless and scary. I have no control over it; it's so strange. When I hang up on you or walk out in the middle of your moment, it doesn't faze you. It's like you can love me without me. Nothing I do affects you. I don't like being this powerless. I like conditions. Conditions mean I can do something to make you love me more.

Still, you say you can't love me more than you do. How is that possible? What did I do to deserve it? Why are you so unrelenting? It makes me nervous. I feel like I'm missing some great truth about life that makes you the way you are. Or maybe you're just crazy. Maybe I'm crazy, because even though I don't understand you, even though I keep going to people whose love I can influence and adjust, I keep coming home to you. This constant, unconditional love you have is what repulses me...and what makes me repent.

(smile)

I saw him smile. He couldn't have been more than 10. Life smiled back. He ran up and asked the lady for a piece of chocolate. She offered him one, but he frowned. I heard him tell her that he had a sister too and that he wondered if it'd be okay to give her one too. But the lady didn't have another, so he took none. The lady was absolutely enchanted by such a noble young boy. He wasn't going to eat if his sister didn't get something also. He was raised well, we'd say, and he had lots to smile about.

But I've seen other little boys who didn't smile. They were being kidnapped (but told they were being "set free"), given guns ("to save people"), and trained as soldiers ("freedom fighters") to destroy the government ("liberate the nation"). They weren't raised by men, but monsters.

Or maybe it's not so complicated. Maybe they were simply guilty of being born in an impoverished city or to a broken, dysfunctional family. Maybe everyone on their street did drugs and hurting each other was a common means of resolution. What other options were there? How can you blame them if they didn't grow up to be our ideal citizens? What chance did they even have? Sure, they always had a choice, but what were

their options? What did they have to smile about?

So I realized that it's a short fall from a smile to a frown. Some kids never have the opportunities I did. So I wonder who I would be if an army invaded my city, or there was a food shortage, or some plague ruined this glass house of order I take for granted.

Who would I be in a different world? What would I be like when if I were really tested? If the flame of divine scrutiny were really put to me, how much would be dross and how much would be gold? If I had to literally fight to feed my family and friends, would I lose my lofty ideals about non-violence and loving ones neighbor? How can I really blame those people who are put to the fire every day, while I sit apathetically on my sofa basking in the warm glow their hardships create? Don't I realize that they are the logs I put into the fire? Is it clear to everyone but me that we will tolerate genocide in Africa so long as it doesn't interrupt us watching movies about genocide? How much money do we spend watching a movie about a tragedy we could have prevented?

Why have I been cursed with this blessedness when I use it to further my own ignorance?

Am I really who I seem when I sit so far from the fire?

(Empty)

The cross and the coming were never too far apart. Jesus taught us to pray, “thy kingdom come.” We’re supposed to want it, to expect it, to pray for him to come even while we praise him for the present. We are to look for Christ to come as the first followers were told to look for an empty tomb.

The power of the cross was not simply in Jesus dying under a brooding sky, but in the empty tomb as well. For the resurrection was power. It showed us that nothing could hold God back from us. Death, our strongest foe, has shattered our human ties and poisoned God’s creation. It has never let us go or shown us mercy. Rather, death stalks us, hunts us down. But the life and love of Jesus Christ has prevailed. It was easy for the man Jesus to die—everybody dies—but for him to return from the grave gives us hope that we can return from our fallen places. Jesus has proved that he is strong enough to overcome whatever prevents us from returning home with him. And not only is he strong enough, but he showed us that he’s willing as well.

The resurrection was a promise as well. It showed us our future and what God planned to do for us. It was a foretaste of the Second Coming, a trailer to the main event. So why do we treat the resurrection like it’s only

in the past? Isn't it in our future as well? Doesn't it as much to do with the Second Coming as with the cross?

We often look at our salvation as if it's something that's behind us now. You and I, we are not saved. Look at where we are. Did not the apostle say, "do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption"? In one sense we are saved, in that we are "sealed" or marked by God to be saved. In that way we have our ticket, but we are not riding yet. It would be pointless if salvation only meant changing social circles and trying to be a better person. There's more to it than that. That's just the beginning. We are not yet home, and it would be a grave mistake to settle down here as if this is the life we were saved for. This isn't what we were meant for, the empty tomb teaches us that. It happened to remind us that just because Jesus is gone it doesn't mean it's over now.

While sin is a tragic detour from God's original plan, it has enabled us to experience him in a way we never would have been able to otherwise. At Easter many Christians sing the words: "O felix culpa quae talem et tantum meruit habere redemptorem" or "O happy fault that merited such and so great a Redeemer." It seems wrong on some level to be thankful for this situation. But it's okay. We're not happy that things ended up this way, but because they did we got to see how far God would go to save us. It's God's way to bring good things out of the bad. That doesn't change the fact that it's still bad, but unexpected blessings often bloom in these situations. That's what God does.

The cross. The tomb. The coming. It's all one smooth brush stroke. It's all part of the process of redeeming people. It's been in God's mind the whole time. The last feast that the Hebrew people were called to celebrate was the Festival of Tabernacles. On that day the people were asked to live in tents or some kind of temporary structure to remind them of how God had led them to a new home in the Promised Land. They were also told to cut palm branches and wave them in the air and rejoice in God that they were in a new land. Can you imagine what that must have looked like? Can you imagine what it must have sounded like? An entire nation gathered together celebrating the fact that God had led them home!

An entire nation...

An entire church...

(when angels attack)

God waited until he was alone before he attacked.

The anxiety encroached with each step Jacob took towards Edom. Four hundred armed men were on their way and the best Jacob could do was divide up his family into two groups. That way, if the soldiers attacked one group at least part of Jacob's family would survive. A grizzly optimism at best.

Turn around. I'm sure that alternative presented itself over and over. Why go towards Edom at all? It's not like they were coming for you, Jacob. You came to them, unarmed and with everything you owned. But God had told Jacob to go back to Edom. For him, there was no going back.

Jacob was trapped between God and 400armed men. Yet he pressed on with everything he owned and everyone he loved.

That's what it means to fear God more than men.

"So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak."

Jacob had been praying to God, looking for some as-

surance that this would end well. He reminded God of the promises he made and even thanked God for everything he had done for him. But God didn't answer.

Still he prayed. Night swallowed up everything that was familiar and comforting to him on the other side of the river. He was totally alone.

But not quite alone. God appeared, disguised, and fought with Jacob. All night they pushed and punched and rolled around until the sun began to peek over the river. It was an even match, God and Jacob. But God fights dirty. "Let me go," God told him. But Jacob just held on all the harder. The tables were turned. God couldn't escape. So he touched Jacob's hip with a finger and bolts of pain shot through his body, but Jacob was a desperate man and still held on. That's when Jacob realized who he was fighting with.

"I'm not letting you go until you bless me," Jacob told God. Just a few hours earlier he had been thanking God for all the blessings he didn't deserve. Now he was fighting God for more.

You probably have a lot of time to think when you're wrestling with someone all night. Neither of them said anything to each other, and the frustrations of Jacob's life naturally bubbled to the surface. Twenty years ago, he had lied to his father, stolen from his brother, and schemed with his mother. He ran away from home a fugitive and was taken in—and taken advantage of—by the only family member around. But God was with

him for some reason, and blessed him. It just wasn't enough. He was returning home now to the scene of the crime. He wasn't just facing his brother Esau again, he was facing his past. God can dole out sheep and servants all right, but he had to know for sure that God had forgiven him. Maybe Jacob hadn't forgiven himself, either. But he needed some kind of assurance and he was determined to get it. For only a man armed with guilty desperation can prevail against God.

Sometimes I wish God could come to wrestle with me too. Sometimes I wait for him by the river that flows through my back yard. Sometimes I want more than inaudible words. Sometimes I want to pin him to the ground and look in his eyes and see my desperation reflected there.

I wrestle with things too. I have doubts about my past. I would fight God for peace. To hold him down is just another way of holding on.

Sometimes it's hard to hold on to God.

Sometimes it just seems like he wants nothing more than to get away and escape back to where he came from.

Sometimes he makes holding on hurt.

Sometimes you have to hold on for a long time.

But daybreak comes.

(Two Worlds)

We raise our cubicle walls high against the Montana sky. These emaciated boundaries form the confines of our world. We can touch it, feel it, experience it....It protects us from the vast, untamed expanse around us. It protects us from what we don't and can't know.

But how absurd we look in this modern Babel, with these manufactured walls (which are so natural to us) saving us from these wise rocks, peaceful fields, and laughing sky. Here we are, claiming to master this borrowed space. But we never look at it from the outside.



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