

# *Did Jesus Really Call?*

## Review of *Jesus Calling*

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1

As far back as you can recall, you've started or ended the day with a time of personal meditation on God's Word and prayer. Only this time, you try something different. You want to hear Jesus speak to you personally. So you take out pen and paper and record the results. As she tells us in her introduction, this is what happened when Sarah Young sought a deeper sense of the presence of Jesus. The result is the daily devotional, *Jesus Calling: Enjoying Peace in His Presence* (Thomas Nelson, 2004). The book has taken off since it was first published. It now includes a variety of supplements and has even been turned into a NKJV study Bible.



The author states up front that, unlike Scripture, the words she reports from Jesus are not inerrant. Nevertheless, she presents them as first-person speech from Jesus himself. "I knew that God communicated with me through the Bible," she says, "but I yearned for more." "Increasingly, I wanted to hear what God had to say to me personally on a given day." That "more" was "the Presence of Jesus," something beyond the ordinary means of grace. "So I was ready to begin a new spiritual quest," beginning with Andrew Murray's *The Secret of the Abiding Presence*. After reading *God Calling*, she relates, "I began to wonder if I, too, could receive messages during my times of communing with God."

Preparing for an interview today on the topic, I read through *Jesus Calling*. A few reflections: first touching on the method and then on the message.

### THE METHOD

In Romans 10, Paul ties the method of salvation to the message: Just as God has saved us in Christ, apart from our works, he has chosen a method of delivering this gift that puts us on the receiving end. We don't have to ascend into heaven or descend to the depths to find Christ, according to Scripture. "But what does it say? 'The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart,' that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming" (v 8). "So faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of Christ" (v 17).

Jesus Christ, who rose from the dead, is the Word Incarnate; his speech is the very word of God. Proving his claims by his resurrection from the dead, he also commissioned his

# Did Jesus Really Call?

apostles as his ambassadors. Their speech in his name is his speech. Furthermore, when that word is proclaimed and read today, it is the very Word of God. Preaching involves teaching and exhortation, but it is more than that; it is Christ himself commanding, absolving, justifying, renewing, sanctifying, and assuring us. Christ could not be closer to you than he is by his Word and Spirit.

Neither Christ nor the Spirit speaks today apart from his Word. It is through the public ministry of preaching and the sacraments that the Holy Spirit unites us to Christ with all of his benefits. When we meditate on Scripture privately or in our family devotions, it is an extension of that public ministry. The preached Word calls us “out of ourselves,” as the Westminster Shorter Catechism puts it, binding us to Christ and therefore to his body. It is not simply a private affair in the garden, alone, whose joy “none other has ever known,” as the Keswick-inspired hymn has it (“In the Garden”). It was this point that separated the churches of the Reformation not only from Rome but from the Anabaptists.

Yet evangelicalism is a river into which various streams converge. The Reformers discovered in Scripture an inseparable connection between the public and the private, the external and the internal, the formal and the informal. However, radical Protestantism has frequently set the latter over the former. Sure, the external Word matters, but it’s the word that Jesus or the Spirit speaks directly to each of us every day that matters more. “Something more” is the essence of what the Reformers called “enthusiasm.”

In terms of method, then, *Jesus Calling* is a “something more” book. At the very least, I believe that it encourages believers to see God’s Word as hum-drum and to ascend into the heavens or descend to the depths to discover a word that will make Jesus more present in our daily lives. According to the Reformation stream of evangelicalism, God speaks to us in his Word (the arrow pointing down from God to us) and we speak to him in prayer (the arrow directed up to God). However, *Jesus Calling* confuses the direction of these arrows, blurring the distinction between God’s speech and our response.

## THE MESSAGE

In terms of content, the message is reducible to one point: Trust me more in daily dependence and you’ll enjoy my presence.

There are some good points. Jesus, according to the author, doesn’t promise a problem-free life; trials are opportunities for growth spurts. He’s in charge and works everything together for our good. Don’t seek Jesus merely to confirm your own plans for the day, but be transformed by his purposes. And above all, fix your eyes on Jesus.

# Did Jesus Really Call?

Yet I kept asking, “What purposes”? “Who is Jesus and why should I fix my eyes on him?” In short, the gospel is taken for granted. When exhortations to trust are separated from a clear proclamation of who Christ is, what he has done, and why he is therefore trustworthy, trust simply becomes a work—something that I need to gin up within myself.

The substance of the book is drawn from the wells of the Keswick or “higher life/victorious life” movement that B. B. Warfield critiqued so thoroughly at the turn of the twentieth century in his massive study, *Perfectionism*. Based on the Wesleyan notion of two acts of faith—one for justification and another for sanctification, the Keswick teaching calls believers to enter into the “higher life.” While they are saved, many believers fail to experience the presence of Jesus in their daily lives. By “surrendering all,” letting go of their attachment to the things of this world, and striving to enter into this realm of ultimate peace, believers can attain a perpetual state of victory. As Warfield pointed out, the movement exhibited a deep inner contradiction in its message. On the one hand, you aren’t supposed to do anything, but simply rest in Jesus. Leave off striving! On the other hand, there are many things that you have to strive to do in order to enter into the higher life. Warfield traced the lineage back to Germany mysticism.

Andrew Murray (1828-1917) was a classic spiritual writer in this stream and his book, *The Secret of the Abiding Presence*, has been a staple of Keswick piety. Murray’s emphases are replete throughout *Jesus Calling*. The only difference is that they are placed on the lips of Jesus himself.

Compared with the Psalms, for example, *Jesus Calling* is remarkably shallow. I do not say that with a snarky tone, but with all seriousness. The Psalms first place before us the mighty acts of God and then call us to respond in confession, trust, and thankfulness. But in *Jesus Calling* I’m repeatedly exhorted to look to Christ, rest in Christ, trust in Christ, to be thankful and long for a deeper sense of his presence, with little that might provoke any of this. Which means that I’m directed not actually to Christ but to my own inner struggle to be more trustful, restful, and thankful.

Consequently, trust becomes a work. Nothing depends on us, but everything depends on us. Strive to stop striving. Then, “Save your best striving for seeking my face” (71). “Thankfulness opens the door to My Presence...I have empowered you to open or close that door” (215). You can achieve the victorious life through living in deep dependence on Me” (6). “Every time you affirm your trust in me, you put a coin into my treasury. Thus you build up equity in preparation for days of trouble. I keep safely in My heart all trust invested in Me, with interest compounded continuously. The more you trust Me,

# Did Jesus Really Call?

the more I empower you to do so...*Store up for yourself treasure in heaven*, through placing your trust in Me. This practice will keep you in My Peace.”

The first mention of Christ even dying for our sins appears on February 28 (page 61). The next reference (to wearing Christ’s robe) is August 9 (p. 232). Even the December readings focus on a general presence of Jesus in our hearts and daily lives, without anchoring it in Jesus’s person and work in history.



As in Keswick spirituality more generally, trust becomes an inner virtue that grows by its exercise. “The more you choose to trust Me, the easier it becomes,” Jesus allegedly says. “Thought patterns of trust become etched into your brain.” This has more in common with Aristotle than with the Apostles. The latter taught that faith comes—and is strengthened—by hearing God’s Word proclaimed.

Reading *Jesus Calling*, I was reminded of the confusing message of my Christian youth. Longing for “something more,” I pored over my mother’s bookshelf: Thomas a Kempis’ *Imitation of Christ*, D. L. Moody, Bill Bright, and Andrew Murray. Only with the discovery of the Reformers and various Puritan writers was I offered a liberating alternative that drew me out of myself to cling to Christ. While looking to this Reformation stream for a cluster of doctrines, many in the history of pietism have looked for “something more” elsewhere. Luther and Calvin may be great guides on understanding salvation, but we find our spirituality in medieval and modern alternatives. Yet Reformation piety directs us to the Word, always to the Word, where Christ speaks to us every time it is preached and his sacraments are administered in his name. When we come to this Word, in public and in private, we never need something more.

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