

INTRODUCTION: GAGGING JESUS

Jesus of Nazareth wasn't afraid to tell it like it is. Those who claim to follow him, on the other hand, often are.

If we're not careful, we can settle for a tamed and domesticated Jesus, a gagged-and-bound Jesus, a wouldn't-say-boo-to-a-goose Jesus, a Jesus of our own making. But he isn't the real Jesus.

If you have ever suspected that Jesus wasn't crucified for acting like a respectable vicar in a pair of socks and sandals, then this book is for you. It focuses on the fifteen most outrageous aspects of Jesus' teaching – the fifteen things that you are least likely to hear preached in churches today. They are the fifteen things which make most people want to gag him. They are also the things which got him killed.

People have been trying to gag Jesus for 2,000 years. They have tried to sit him on their knee like a ventriloquist's dummy and turn him into a spokesman for their own cause. You can tell how successful they have been from the fact that the gagged-and-bound

Jesus is so popular. He never ruffles feathers because he says exactly what we want to hear.

The Communists tried to gag Jesus. They told the world he was a Communist, just like them. The Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev argued that "*Jesus was the first socialist, the first to seek a better life for mankind.*" The Cuban leader Fidel Castro insisted that "*I never saw a contradiction between the ideas that sustain me and the ideas of that symbol, of that extraordinary figure.*"¹

The enemies of Communism tried to gag Jesus too. Rather suspiciously, they told the world he was a liberal Westerner and a free-thinking capitalist, just like them. The American president John Quincy Adams declared in one of his Fourth of July speeches that "*The birthday of this nation is indissolubly linked with the birthday of the Saviour... It forms a leading event in the progress of the Gospel.*"² President Richard Nixon cursed and schemed and lied his way through five years in the White House, but that didn't stop him from invoking Jesus as an ally in his speeches and from ending them with a confident prayer that God would bless America.

When we look a little further afield, this trend becomes even more obvious. Dictators have tried to gag Jesus and to convince the world that he is just like them. Frederick the Great of Prussia argued that Jesus was "*the autocrat of the universe*", and Adolf Hitler told

1 Mikhail Gorbachev speaking in the British *Daily Telegraph* on 16th June 1992. Fidel Castro speaking in an article in *Time* magazine on 30th December 1985.

2 John Quincy Adams in a speech at Newburyport, Massachusetts, on 4th July 1837.

his adoring listeners that Jesus had led the “*fight for the world against the Jewish poison... It was for this that he had to shed his blood upon the cross.*”³

Civil rights activists have tried to gag Jesus too. Florence Nightingale hailed him as a fighter for women’s rights, arguing that “*Jesus Christ raised women above the condition of mere slaves.*” Malcolm X claimed that “*Christ wasn’t white. Christ was black. The poor, brainwashed American Negro has been made to believe that Christ was white to manoeuvre him into worshipping the white man.*”⁴

This trend continues unabated today. All around us people are trying to gag Jesus. Muslims claim that Jesus was a Muslim prophet who was simply misunderstood. Self-help gurus tell us that Jesus was the ultimate life coach. I even read an article by a gay rights activist which argued that Jesus’ decision to spend three intensive years with twelve male disciples is proof that he was gay. Jesus isn’t just the most talked about, sung about, written about and fought about person in world history. He is also the most gagged and kidnapped and hijacked person in world history. Everybody wants to put their own words into Jesus’ mouth and to make him say exactly what they want to hear. But more and more people are longing to do away with the background noise and to let the real Jesus do the talking.

3 Frederick II of Prussia writing to the French philosopher Voltaire on 19th March 1776. Adolf Hitler in a speech in Munich on 12th April 1922.

4 Florence Nightingale in her essay *Cassandra* (1860). Malcolm X in an interview for *Playboy Magazine* in May 1963.

That's why I think that you will find this short book very helpful. If it is possible to get to know the real Jesus, then we ought to. Nobody is thought about, talked about, written about, blogged about, tweeted about, sung about or ranted about as much as Jesus – and yet nobody is so little understood. Each of us needs to research the life and teachings of the greatest human being who ever lived.

In this book we will strip away the background noise by going back to the four original historical sources for the life of Jesus. Two of Jesus' twelve disciples wrote accounts of the real Jesus as they knew him: we know those books today as the gospels of Matthew and John. Another of Jesus' disciples was an uneducated fisherman named Simon Peter, who asked his more educated friend Mark to write down his account of the life of Jesus in a third gospel. Shortly afterwards, a highly educated Greek doctor from the multiracial city of Antioch turned his hand to investigative journalism and spent two years interviewing all the key eyewitnesses of Jesus' life across the length and breadth of Israel. His historical account is known to us today as the gospel of Luke.

These were men who warned that people would try to gag Jesus in the future. John warned that "*The false Christ is coming, and even now many false Christs have come*".⁵ Their friend Paul warned that "*I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your*

⁵ He wrote this in about 95 AD in a letter which forms part of the Bible (1 John 2:18). The Greek word *antichristos* does not mean somebody who is against Christ so much as somebody who is a *false Christ*.

minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached... you put up with it easily enough.”⁶

Matthew was a greedy tax collector until he met the ungagged Jesus. Peter and John were simple fishermen. Luke was a typical pagan. Instead of trying to gag Jesus and to force him to say what they wanted to hear, they had the humility to listen. When they did so, they found that his teaching changed everything. They listened open-mouthed to the fifteen outrageous things which I highlight in this book from Jesus’ teachings, and they fell in love with the most controversial figure in the whole of human history.

So get ready to discover the real Jesus of Nazareth for yourself. He isn’t bound and gagged any more. He is ready to tell it like it really is to us today.

⁶ He wrote this in a letter in about 55 AD which also forms part of the Bible (2 Corinthians 11:3–4).

I

JESUS ON STRESS

Most people don't find the first of Jesus' ungagged teachings very controversial. That's because they haven't understood it. They think that Jesus' teaching about stress and worry is nothing more than fortune-cookie wisdom, nothing more than a first-century version of the Bobby McFerrin song, "Don't Worry, Be Happy". But it isn't. It is much, much more radical than that. It tells us that stress is the chief symptom of our idolatry and self-worship. When we understand what Jesus said about stress and worry, it's easy to see why it got him killed.

The gospel writers tell us that the issue of stress and worry was a recurring theme in Jesus' teaching.¹ Luke tells us what he taught in the autumn of 29 AD, only five or six months before his enemies crucified him:

¹ For example, in Matthew 6:25–34; 11:28–30 and in Luke 8:14; 10:38–42; 21:34.

Do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothes. Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them. And how much more valuable you are than birds! Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life? Since you cannot do this very little thing, why do you worry about the rest?

Consider how the wild flowers grow. They do not labour or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today, and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, how much more will he clothe you – you of little faith! And do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it. For the pagan world runs after all such things, and your Father knows that you need them. But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well. Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. (Luke 12:22–32)

I live in London. It's a crazy, stressed-out city. In fact, it's a city where people wear their busyness and stress as a badge of honour. When I catch the train to work, none of us are resting. We are part of an army of commuters who all tap away at smartphones and iPads, determined to squeeze the juice out of every single second of the day for sending emails, social networking and, above all, making money. When we get home from work we don't spend the evenings

and weekends resting. We cram our free time with so many leisure activities that most of us have to go back to work on Monday to recover.

Things may be a little different where you are, but in my city stress is killing us. Twenty per cent of British workers take time off work due to stress each year,² and over 5 million admit that they spend most of their lives “very” or “extremely” stressed.³ So when Jesus told his disciples not to worry, he wasn’t just mouthing pretty platitudes. He was challenging something at the very heart of the way we live our lives.

I want to help you understand what Jesus is telling us here about stress and worry. I want to help you grasp why God sees our overbusyness as a very serious sin, on a par with out-and-out blasphemy. The best way for me to do so is to take you on a journey through three Old Testament passages which provide the background to Jesus’ teaching.

The Bible begins with God creating the world. It took him six days, and on the seventh day he rested. Most people who read Genesis assume God rested because he was tired after finishing such a big job, but Jesus tells us that this wasn’t why he rested at all: *“My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working”* (John 5:17). He uses the Greek form of the Hebrew word *shābath*, which was used for God resting in Genesis, when he explains that *“The*

² This data comes from a 2010 survey by the UK mental health charity MIND. It found that one in five workers had taken at least one day off work due to stress during the previous year.

³ This data comes from a survey by the UK Health and Safety Executive. It found that British workers take 13.5 million days a year off work due to stress, costing the economy £3.7 billion.

Sabbath was made for humankind” (Mark 2:27). Jesus tells us that God rested for Adam’s sake, not his own, because day seven for him was day one for Adam. He had created a human being who needed to stop each day for mealtimes and for sleep,⁴ and he wanted to teach him from the outset to relax in a garden he hadn’t planted, to enjoy animals he hadn’t made and to eat fruit he hadn’t grown. In short, he wanted him to grasp that God is God and we are not. Adam never knew what stress was until he decided to have a go at being God himself and was cursed with “*painful toil*” and with survival by “*the sweat of your brow*”.⁵ Adam had rejected God’s Paradise and had chosen a life of stress and worry instead.

Fast-forward several centuries and we discover in Genesis 6:11 that people continued to make this same choice. It describes their sin as *hāmās*, a Hebrew word which is usually translated *violence* (as in the name of the Palestinian terrorist organization) but which essentially refers to *busy self-assertiveness*. Jesus describes the overbusyness of that generation when he tells us that “*People were eating, drinking, marrying and being given in marriage up to the day Noah entered the ark*” (Luke 17:27). God saved Noah because he was totally different in his outlook. He emerged from the ark after the Flood with the mother of all to-do lists: He was in charge of the rebuilding of civilization. Yet

⁴ Psalm 121 encourages us to treat our need for sleep as a nightly reminder that God is God and we are not.

⁵ Genesis 3:17–19. We discover in Genesis 3:5 that the essence of Adam’s sin was trying to be like God.

the first item which he placed at the top of his to-do list in Genesis 8 was to kneel down and worship God, resting on his knees before his Creator.

Fast-forward a few more centuries and we find that Moses constantly reminded the Israelites that God is God and we are not. When they panicked at the Red Sea, he assured them that “*The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still*” (Exodus 14:14). He gave them God’s command at Mount Sinai to take one day in seven as a day of rest because “*This will be a sign between me and you for the generations to come, so you may know that I am the Lord*” (Exodus 31:13). He warned them that if they failed to rest then they would suffer from burnout and exhaustion (Leviticus 26:2–35), and when he caught an Israelite working on the Sabbath he didn’t let him off with a simple caution. When we get offended that he ordered the Sabbath-breaker’s execution in Numbers 15, we simply show we haven’t understood Jesus’ teaching about stress and worry. We haven’t grasped that “*I’m worried*” is just another way of saying “*I’m not convinced that God will do his job without me*”, or that “*I’m feeling stressed*” is just another way of saying “*I’m trying to do God’s job for him and it’s not working out for me.*” Jesus warns that stress and worry aren’t minor vices or personality flaws. They are the symptoms of our self-worship.⁶

In Luke 12, Jesus lists some of the biggest things we worry about – things like money and food and clothes and our health – and then tells us that “*the pagan world*

⁶ The Hebrew Law reserved the death penalty for very few things: mainly for murder, idolatry and blasphemy. The Sabbath-breaker was executed for acting as though he was his own little god.

runs after all such things". People who don't know God get very stressed about these things because they live their lives as little gods and therefore feel the burden of providing for themselves. God hands them over to their stress and worry in order that every bird and flower will preach a sermon to them about God's provision. In cities like mine, where people can't stop checking their emails for an evening, let alone one day in seven, God uses stress and worry to warn us to stop blaspheming and to start sabbathing. The fourth-century writer Hilary of Poitiers described stress and worry as *"a blasphemous anxiety to do God's work for him"*.⁷ He understood the message of Psalm 46:10: *"Be still, and know that I am God."*

Many of the people who heard Jesus saying this were furious. Since money was the currency of their attempts to play at God, they persuaded one of Jesus' twelve disciples to betray him for a handful of silver coins. While he waited for them to come and arrest him in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus sweated drops of blood from his brow in fulfilment of the curse which had fallen on Adam for attempting to be like God (Luke 22:44). He was crucified wearing a crown of thorns on his forehead because thorns and brambles were the symbol of Adam's painful labour in Genesis 3. While the merchants of Jerusalem were busy with their trading, while the priests of Jerusalem were busy with their religion, and while the homeowners of Jerusalem were busy with their shopping and cleaning

⁷ Hilary of Poitiers writing in about 360 AD in his treatise *On the Trinity* (4.6).

and cooking, Jesus died on a wooden cross for their sin and cried out, *"It is finished!"* (John 19:30). He has paid the penalty for our blasphemous anxiety to do God's work for him. We don't have to earn our forgiveness. We simply have to rest in what the Lord has achieved for us.

You can tell whether you are following the real Jesus or a Jesus of your own making by the way that you respond to this as the first of Jesus' fifteen offensive teachings. Will you get upset and resist him or will you surrender to him? Will you confess your overbusyness and your blasphemous anxiety to do God's work for him? If you will, then Jesus promises that your painful toil is over: *"The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent"* (John 6:29).

Once forgiven, will you adopt a new lifestyle which plays by a different set of rules in the midst of a stressed-out and burned-out culture? Will you trust God to be God and simply be content to be his creature? Will you let him carry the weight of your life and trust him like a little child? If you will, then Jesus promises to deliver you from stress and worry:

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. (Matthew 11:28–30)