

Things they never taught me

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Dedication

For Louis and Parp



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Out of the Fridge, Into the Fire

CHAPTER 1

“Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion?”—Jesus (Luke 11:11, 12).

“Taste and see that the Lord is good”—David (Ps. 34:8).

“None are so blind as those who will not see.”—Modern proverb.

I lived with my sister in Texas for a year, and in that time her fridge magnet collection grew by at least one: a cartoon dog-person, standing on two feet by an open refrigerator door, with the caption, “There’s nothing in here that wasn’t there when you looked 10 minutes ago.”

OK, I make a lot of trips to the fridge, but in my defense, (a) I always take small sips and slices ’cause I’m economical like that, and (b) I need the exercise. Besides, I’m rather fond of the fridge. It’s comforting and constant. Sure, it usually lacks what I’m looking for (where’s chocolate milk when you need it?), but it’s reliable. No one ever asks, “Hey, where’d you put the fridge after you used it?” It’s a pillar of the home, quiet and unassuming. As soon as you open that door, there’s the light, at your service.

One hot June afternoon at my parents’ home I polished off some strawberries—so succulent, so red—and wandered back to my work. A little later I got a

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tad thirsty. Back in the kitchen the fridge waits right where I left it. Inside the fridge the light shines (is it ever really off?), and lo, I find a bottle of clear yet fruit-flavored drink from Food Lion. Just the ticket.

Until I taste it.

It hits my teeth, my tongue, my throat—a torrent of poison. This wasn't artificially flavored, artificially sweetened water—this was bleach. I gagged, I choked, I lunged for the sink. My mother watched in shock as my stomach heaved a splattering of thick liquid redness.

“It's . . . just . . . my . . . straw . . . berries .”

Fortunately my drink wasn't straight bleach—it was one quarter Clorox, three quarters water. My mother had mixed it to mop the floor with. It just wasn't supposed to end up in the fridge. Oops. Soon enough I was fine, and the bottle bore its own scribbled skull and crossbones, far from the foodstuffs.

Growing up, I kept hearing teachers and preachers say, “Here, drink this. It's good for you. It'll wash you clean. It'll make you right with God.” Then they turned around and shut out everyone who didn't measure up to their own selective standards.

Their works-oriented potion looked like the clear water of life, but it was poison. It was bleach. While it promises purity, it burns a hole in your soul. Such religion is based on appearances, merit points, and competition with Christ—the very one who promised the woman at the well, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:13, 14).

Jesus knew those bleach peddlers all too well. One amazing thing about the

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Gospel books is that they aren't just one long John 3:16 for the lost—they also combat the self-righteously smug who confuse the issues for everybody else. With one arm Jesus embraces those who sense their need of Him, and with the other He draws a line in the sand for those who think they've already got it down pat. Matthew 23 records Jesus' devastating words of woe to those who swapped God's free gifts for their own murky brew. Jesus didn't water the message down:

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to. Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are. . . .

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean” (Matt. 23:13-28).

One July afternoon I found myself ravenously hungry—but with no fridge access. I was in Antigua, Guatemala, on a mission trip, and a cook controlled the kitchen while I worked building a school in the blazing sun. While I had plenty of water to drink, I wanted some grub. I glanced over at a large mound of dirt, dried cement caked all over the top. In my mind's eye I saw, not a mound of dirt, but a giant frosted cupcake.

People are spiritually hungry. The problem is, that when you're starving, everything starts to look like food.

Today God's Word has been bleached. A wholistic, life-giving message has been lost in a swirl of pet verses and pet peeves. What's left is an elixir of rules and regulations, dogma and do's and don'ts, with a dash of guilt and a pinch of

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paranoia. When it leaves us nauseous—still hungry, still empty, still thirsty—we either give up or find something else that offers an all-too-quick fix.

And yet there's something tantalizing about it all. An all-powerful God who drops down from the sky to become a wrinkled baby, a callused carpenter, a weeping Savior sweating blood? Intrigued, I think, *That's the kind of God I'd believe in. Not one with a pointing finger, but one with His arms outstretched; not one who came to condemn the world, but one who came to save it. One who doesn't lord over us, but walks besides us. A God who narrowed the rules, yet broadened their spirit; who brings the spark of life and liberation to everyone He touches. A Holy Spirit who patiently persuades, never forcing us. A Father God who declares us no longer servants but friends, who desires us to understand Him thoroughly rather than just follow blindly and arbitrarily.*

A deity like that ought to change everything—from fixation to faith, obsession to adoration, greed to glory, hubris to humility, agony to beauty. Such a God wouldn't bleach us bland, but would bring out our true colors. And I'm here to explore with you how He does that.

We're about to dig deep. We'll talk about such topics as:

Why are some of the worst people the most religious?

What's the real deal on prophecy and the end-times?

What makes Christianity different?

What's so important about the Sabbath?

How can we know we're saved?

How can God tolerate evil?

How come God seems so different in the New Testament than the Old?

What's the meaning of sex?

How can you tell the spiritually real from the counterfeit?

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“Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life” (Rev. 22:17).

Dig the beauty. Ditch the bleach.