

Knowing Jesus Is Everything

Alejandro Bullón



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Preface

My conversations with hundreds of young people and the many letters that I constantly receive (some of them dramatic cries of anguished hearts) have encouraged me to write this little book. It is my goal to express in it that which brought peace and joy to my own heart.

I have come to the conclusion that young Christians do not feel happy most the time because they do not understand who Jesus is, what He has done for them, or how to have a personal relationship with Him. Many know what to do and what not to do, but find themselves incapable of living up to the rules. Their many errors leave them feeling constantly distressed. A mysterious inner drive compels them to do what they do not want. One failure follows another, followed by that mortifying whisper: “You are good for nothing—you will never make it. Why do you think you can get by being a hypocrite? It is better to give up religion altogether.”

Either such young people abandon the church or remain totally frustrated, feeling as if they are complete failures doomed to living a meaningless life. They may smile outwardly at the world, but they are crying inside. The worst of it is that they may become used to such a situation and accept it as normal. Little by little they begin to ignore God’s appeals to them and become lost forever, even while still belonging to the church.

I have written this little book for you, the youth of the church. It was composed not only with ink, but especially with love. For several years I worked with young people, talking with them beside campsite bonfires, in sports fields, at church, in the office—any time of the day. Year after year of listening to their joys, sorrows, victories, and failures prompted me to prepare these pages.

My greatest concern as I wrote was not writing style—it is you. Nor was it the beauty of the language, but to be understood by you. That is all. I am writing as I always spoke with you at camp meetings and revivals, trying to help you, because your problem was mine for several years, and I know exactly the anguish that those feel when they know what the church expects, yet cannot meet it. But above all, I have written it because one day I found Jesus as my great friend and learned that the Christian life is not only a concern with laws and regulations, but is something beautiful—it is walking each day with Jesus in a sublime love relationship.

My most profound desire is that this book may help you to hold on to the hand of this wonderful Person, who will fill your life with peace and happiness. After all, to know Jesus is all.

—Alejandro Bullón

Chapter One

Lost in the Church

Entering the room without knocking, he threw himself in the chair across from my desk. From the way he was sweating, it was clear that he was nervous.

“Pastor, I’m lost!” he said bluntly. Only three words. Nothing else would be necessary to describe the tragedy of a soul in conflict.

I knew that young man very well. We had worked together planning a number of church programs for the youth of the congregation. Now with tearful eyes he kept on repeating: “Believe me, Pastor, I am lost!”

His voice trembling, he told me his story.

“I have been a Seventh-day Adventist since birth. Everyone thinks I’m a good Christian. My parents believe that I’m a wonderful son. The church members consider me a devout Christian. They have even chosen me to be the youth leader. Many times I hear parents telling their children: ‘I wish you were like this boy.’ Everyone regards me as a model of a Christian, but that is not true. I’m miserable. I just did something horrible, and it was not the first time. The despair and anguish has become so great that I wish I could die. I’m not what other people assume I am.”

When I tried to say something, he immediately added, “I don’t want to be like that. I want to be a genuine Christian, but I can’t. I have tried many times, but I always fail.”

My heart ached as I listened.

“You are disappointed with me, aren’t you?” he asked anxiously.

Disappointed? I was almost crying. But I tried to hide my sadness, my grief, because in reality he was not alone in his predicament.

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At that moment I saw in that chair many other young people from my church—and perhaps even you.

“Pastor, I am lost!” Lost? Yes, lost in the church. Is it possible to be lost in the church? Unfortunately, yes, it is. Not only are there those who, like this young man, are doing wrong things that nobody sees. There is yet another class of lost people—those who do all that is correct, follow all the church rules, meticulously follow detailed regulations, but are equally lost.

The incident reminds me of the biblical story of the rich ruler in Mark 10. A young man like any other one in the church today, he belonged to a congregation whose leaders were very much concerned with laws and regulations. “Do not do this, don’t do that. This is sin, and that is also sin.” That ruler grew up with a wrong picture of God. He looked upon Him as sitting with a long face on His throne, dictating rules, rod in hand ready to punish the disobedient.

Since his childhood the man’s parents and church leaders had required strict observance of all rules. They were concerned with the image of the church. To update the story, if a girl would wear something unacceptable, for instance, they would take her to the disciplinary committee. Then, loving her church, she would stop wearing whatever it was, and everybody would be happy, without any concern for her feelings. The important thing was to obey the rules—to be a good church member. And thus the rich young ruler learned to observe all laws and regulations. Apparently he was well behaved, active in church programs and serving as a good role model. However, something was wrong in his innermost being. He was not happy, and felt lost in spite of all his faithful observation of the laws.

Then one day he heard that Jesus was coming to his town.

The leaders of the church, always concerned with details and rules, were the first ones to greet Jesus: “Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife?” “Is it a sin to pray while seated?” “Is it wrong for a girl to have short hair?” “Is it wrong to have a recreational center

beside the church?” “Is it a sin to go to the beach?” The Lord Jesus did not have time to argue with them. Instead, He received a group of children, took them in His arms, and fondly caressed and kissed their innocent faces.

The scene touched the young ruler. He had never thought that Jesus was capable of relating to children in such a way. This was not what he had been taught about the Son of God. For the first time in his life he felt a desire to open his heart to someone. And when Jesus was leaving the city, he “ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. ‘Good teacher,’ he asked, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’” (Mark 10:17). In reality he was saying: “Good teacher, what must I do to be saved? I am afraid that I’m lost. I am not sure about my salvation.”

Wasn’t he a good church member? Wasn’t he obeying all the commandments? But to keep the law does not mean to be saved. Nor does being a church member in good standing guarantee salvation. It is possible to observe all the rules and yet be totally lost. Yes, lost in the midst of the church!

Jesus tried to make the young ruler understand what he had not yet learned. The man knew the words of the law—the rules—and Jesus told him: “Keep the commandments.”

“Lord,” he answered confused, “I have observed all of them from my youth.” However, he still felt an overwhelming despair, and his sense of being lost increased.

“Jesus looked at him and loved him” (verse 21). Do you want to know something? Jesus loves you, too. It does not matter if you are poor or rich, Black or White, ugly or pretty. He loves you. He understands you. The Bible declares that you are the most important thing to God right now regardless of your troubles, failures, conflicts, doubts, and uncertainties. Even with your crooked character or short temper, you are the object of all His love and compassion. Perhaps sometimes in your life you have had the feeling that nobody loves you, that your parents do not understand you, your teachers

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do not value you, and that life has denied you the opportunities that others have. Maybe you do not even like or accept yourself. But whether it might be true or not, God still loves you. He understands you. At this very moment, while you are reading this book, He is very near, ready to help you, to value you.

There centuries ago beyond the Jordan Jesus beheld the rich young ruler and loved him. He saw his inner conflicts, his battles, his anguish, his desperate situation of being lost in the church while observing all the laws and obeying all regulations.

“Son, do you know what your problem is?” Jesus asked. “You do not love Me. In your heart there is no place for Me, only for money. You are willing to observe the commandments, but you do not love Me. If you do not love Me, you are only obeying the letter of the law. Because this does not make any sense, you will continue with that terrible vacuum in your heart. Let us do something, my dear son. Go home now, take your love away from the things of this world, place Me at the center of your life, then come back and follow Me.”

The Bible says: “He went away sad, because he had great wealth” (verse 22). What a shame! He was more willing to keep commandments than to love the Lord Jesus. Why? Perhaps it is easier to look good than to surrender the heart to God.

Maybe you are thinking, *I am glad I'm not rich*. But sometimes we do not need to have riches in order to keep Jesus away from our heart. Is it possible that I love a TV artist more than I do Jesus? Is it possible that sports, friends, profession, education—things that in themselves are good—might take the place of Jesus in my heart? Could I love my church, its doctrines and name, more than the Lord Jesus?

Let me ask you: Which should be our first concern—to love Jesus or to observe rules? Sometimes we adults are more concerned that the young obey the rules than that they love Jesus. Jesus has a different interest: “My son, give Me your heart,” He declares while knocking at the door of the human heart.

Never should we forget that it is possible to obey the rules without loving Jesus, but that it is impossible to love Jesus and not obey the rules. So what should be our first interest, our main goal? If people love Jesus with all their heart, they will not do anything that hurts their Redeemer. Consequently, their lives will be ones of obedience.

Do you know why so many are not happy in the church? Lack of love for Jesus. Perhaps we are in the church because we love it, its doctrine has convinced us, and the pastor made an overwhelming altar call. Some of us are in the church because our parents want us there, or we want to please our children or spouse, or just because every human being needs a religion, but not because we love Jesus to the point that we can say: “I can’t live without You.”

“Pastor,” an elderly woman told me once, “I have been married for almost 60 years. You may ask my husband, and he will say that I have always been a perfect wife. I have done all that a good wife must do, have always acted properly, but I have never been happy. Why? I do not love my husband, Pastor.”

“But why did you marry him?”

“When I was a young girl,” she explained, “we did not choose a husband. Our parents did it. One day my father said: ‘My daughter, two months from today you will marry the son of one of my best friends.’ They prepared my hope chest. The party was ready, and two days before the wedding I met my fiancé. I did not like him. I never could love him, but I got married, because I had to obey. I have been a perfect wife, but never a happy one.”

How can we be happy together with someone we do not love? Perhaps we might compare baptism to a marriage ceremony with Christ. Many Christians perhaps could say: “Lord, I am in the church, baptized five, or 10, or 15 years ago. All this time, somehow I have done whatever the church requires. But I have never been happy.” Why? Because it is impossible to be happy in the company of someone that we do not love. When living together with someone that we do love is not an easy thing, imagine what it would be

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like without any love at all. We can never be happy in the church just because we have belonged to it since birth, or because of social, religious, or family pressure. None of these reasons will make any sense unless you have love for Jesus. Otherwise the Christian life will become “hell,” a terrible burden to endure. To practice something just because we are baptized, or to obey a few rules just to please someone, is the worst thing that can happen. Always we will find ourselves thinking of some way to get out of it, of forsaking everything. If we think that nobody will see it, we will do something wrong.

All the church rules, all that we have to give up, all that we have to learn, will have meaning only when Christ’s love motivates our heart. Our first prayer should not be “Lord, help me to keep Your commandments” but “Lord, help me to love You—with my whole heart.”

The rich young ruler went away with a sad heart and never returned. He was willing to be a church member, but not to surrender his heart to the Master.

Chapter Two

The Indian Guide

I guess it was about 3:00 or 4:00 in the afternoon, but in the deep jungle it seemed like twilight. Suddenly black clouds covered the sky and thunder echoed in the immensity of the Amazon forest like the cries of frightened giants. Every few minutes lightning flashed, breaking through the dark sky. I was scared. In fact, I had been frightened since the moment that I noticed that I had lost the trail.

I was a missionary among the Campa Indians, who live along the banks of the Perené River in the Amazon region of my native country. That morning in 1972 I had left my home hoping to visit a village a two-hour walk through the forest. I could not recall the exact moment I lost the trail. But when I tried to find it again, all my efforts only increased my confusion. The minutes and hours slipped away, and then thick clouds announced the approaching storm.

Heavy rain and darkness arrived at the same moment. I sat on the ground under a tree, pleading with God to help me find the trail. I do not know for how long I was there, but when the rain decreased I started walking again through the mud and dark. I was totally wet, tired, hungry, and at that moment almost in despair. “You can’t stop—you have to go on,” I repeated to myself. “You will find the village—you can’t stop.”

However, something seemed to argue in my mind that it was useless to continue on, that it would be better to stay there and wait for dawn. Stay there? Soaked from head to toe? Alone? What if some wild animal would come? It was the first time that this had happened to me. I did not know the jungle, having come from the city just a few months earlier. Terror soon overwhelmed me, and I started run-

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ning insanely, as if someone were after me. The rain blurred my vision, even though I wasn't I able to see very much in such darkness. It was then that I fell down a 15- to 18-foot embankment. Mud covered me from head to foot. There was no sign of any trail. Only darkness and the dreadful pounding of rain on the leaves and ground.

Although I did not want to accept the fact, I was completely lost. When I tried to get out of that hole by grabbing a small tree, it pulled out by the roots, and I slid back into the mud. As I grabbed another one, excruciating pain forced me to release it, and again I splashed back into the mud, my hand full of thorns. Everything I tried was useless. My feet would slip, and back to the bottom of the hole I would go. I felt at the point of tears. Was it because of fear of some wild animal? exhaustion? hunger? I wish it had been only those reasons. But it was not so.

Looking back, I saw that my Christian life had been like that night. All the time trying to get up, to follow all the rules and commandments, yet always finding myself trapped in the same place. I was lost in the church—observing, to a certain extent, all the rules, but still lost. And the worst part of it was that I had been a minister for two years.

Like a movie, my whole life began to unreel before my eyes as I huddled in that jungle hole. My mother had been converted when I was 4 years old. I cannot recall her missing a single meeting. Saturdays, Sundays, and Wednesdays—she was always there with all of us children. Above the rostrum of the little room in which the group of eight people gathered to worship was a very special place for a picture of the Ten Commandments. We all had to know them by memory and keep them faithfully. Since my childhood I had learned all the church rules. No smoking. no drinking, no dancing, no movies—no, no.

“O Lord,” I asked myself many times, “how is it possible to live this way?” In my adolescent years I felt a terrible conflict. I knew all that I should do and all that I shouldn't, but, unable to live up to the