

# Contents



*Introduction* • 11

1. Death of Zeal • 19
2. Death of Future • 39
3. Death of Plans • 57
4. Death of Expectations • 77
5. Death of Hope • 95
6. Death of Revival • 109
7. Death of Beauty • 131
8. Death of Invincibility • 151
9. Death of Image • 165

*Epilogue: Signs of Life* • 185

*Acknowledgments* • 191

*Notes* • 194

*The Author* • 199



# Introduction

The church basement was like a casino: no windows to indicate the time of day, and no easy way out. Had an hour passed, or five minutes? It was anybody's guess. A group of people from our church, many of them members of the same extended family, sat across long tables, avoiding eye contact with my husband and me. The adult daughter kept taking wild slurps of her fountain drink, seemingly to fill the painful, awkward silence. I didn't know it was possible to aggressively drink a Big Gulp, but it definitely is.

We had been in our role as co-pastors of this small, rural Missouri church for eighteen months. Aside from the one woman who consistently reminded me that I was a major disappointment for not being male, it had been a relatively smooth ride. We were learning the ins and outs of the pastoral vocation and the rhythm of parish life. As a pastor's kid, I was familiar

with that rhythm, but it's an entirely different feel when the buck stops with you (and your spouse, as the case may be). After a year and half of listening, learning, and exploring, we were hopeful. We felt ready to take ministry a bit deeper in certain areas of the church, particularly among the youth.

Thinking back to all that managed to go wrong in three months, I am still astounded. In that brief window of time, we managed to offend a vast array of people—and not just an “oh, they are annoyed with us but we'll work it out” type of offense. I'm talking “I don't think our pastors are actually Christians” level.

So I sat in that windowless basement across from this enraged, mortally offended family, with my husband next to me. We were both in a state of shock, the kind of shock that only comes from feeling deeply betrayed and—let's be honest—afraid. How did this happen? What changed? Was this the end of our pastoral vocation?

My mind was flooded with thoughts of my missteps along the way. I had no illusions of my innocence. Still, I felt a visceral need to defend and explain myself in that meeting. It was painful to listen to these people, whom I had counted as dear friends, recount to our church superior in our denomination's hierarchy all the things we had done and said that they had interpreted as malicious. Some of what they said was nonsense, silliness magnified by their own immature grasping for power. Some of it was true. As their pastor, I had said some immature things—not because I had evil in my heart or didn't love Jesus and his people, as was being suggested in this meeting, but because I thought I was in a safe place among friends and could

be honest and vulnerable. At age twenty-four, I was both young and a smidge impulsive. But I had obviously misread the situation. It was the ultimate mortification.

I sat in silence as they listed failure after failure to our denominational leader. What must he be thinking? He had trusted my husband and me with this parish, thinking we'd be a good fit. Here we were, blowing it up in a brief year-and-a-half tenure. I wanted to crawl in a hole as the litany of my failures continued, interspersed with that aggressive Big Gulp drinking.

After hearing some wild claims about our failures and character flaws, our leader spoke up, gently, as was his way. What he said next would reshape not only my understanding of ministry, but my view of God and God's action in the world.

He didn't belittle us for our immaturity (which we probably deserved), nor did he scold the family for their power games (which was a bit of a disappointment). Rather, he said, "The question we have to ask ourselves now is this: Is the resurrection enough? Is the resurrection enough to provide a way forward?"

There was a long pause. His words were met with belligerent glares from our accusers and confused stares from my husband and me. The *resurrection*? It was September. We talk about resurrection in April—March, if Easter happens to come early—but not in September. In my mind, the question did not compute. What does the resurrection of Jesus have to do with this messy church conflict? The resurrection of Jesus is about sins being forgiven, those bad choices that separate me from God, right? The resurrection is about Jesus bridging the gap between God and sinful humanity, and all those other images I was given in Sunday school. But this meeting was about

none of that. This meeting was about a heap of brokenness: relationships tattered, mistrust sprouting like a virulent weed, dishonesty and self-preservation run amok. What could the resurrection possibly have to do with *this*?

I was starting my third year in seminary and was continually thinking deeply about all things theological. I was immersed in the study of Scripture, history, and the best Christian education practices. That semester I was starting, of all things, a class specifically devoted to the study of the resurrection. I had assumed that the course would focus exclusively on the historicity of Jesus' resurrection and the biblical witness, perhaps with a brief foray into the implications of our own future resurrection, that oh-so-confusing stuff that Paul talks about in 1 Corinthians.

But now, with my imagination sparked by our supervisor's brief comment, I began to wonder—to hopefully, eagerly, even *desperately* wonder—if the resurrection has something to say about life now, not just life then, in the end.



I don't have some dramatic tale to tell. I haven't had cancer. I've never lost a baby to miscarriage. I come from a loving Christian family with parents devoted to each other, to their kids, and to the church. I don't have a painful condition or secret addiction. I am married to a devoted Jesus-follower who is also devoted to me.

Instead, what I have is a rucksack of ordinary losses—small deaths along the path of my life that have wounded and grieved me. Some are the result of my own sin, some are the result of others' sin against me, and some have just, well, happened.

Among them are the death of illusions, the hopes for my future, the religious zeal I had as a young adult, the image of myself that I portrayed and protected, the death of relationships I thought secure, and the death of expectations.

My ordinary losses are probably no bigger than yours, and are maybe even smaller. My ordinary losses are just that: ordinary and plain, maybe even dull. But they are real. And their smallness does not negate their power or their importance in shaping me. Such ordinary losses in your life—and maybe some extraordinary ones—have likely wounded and shaped you.

What I needed to know that bitter, unsettling day in September about the power of the resurrection was not which theory of the atonement best encompasses the significance of the death and resurrection of Jesus. I didn't need a conversation about the historicity of the biblical account of Jesus' return to life. No. What I needed to know, and still seek to understand, is simply this: Does the resurrection have anything to say to the ordinary losses of my small life?

It's been eight years since that unpleasant basement encounter at our first parish, eight years since that seed of the promise of the resurrection for this life was planted in my heart. That seed has continued to grow, painfully putting down roots and perhaps now beginning to push shoots up through the soil of my heart. I have come to believe and know in the deepest part of my soul that the resurrection *does* have something to say to our ordinary losses, to the deaths that pock our path. The resurrection was not a mere moment in time, a flash-bang act of God to release Jesus and then us from the bonds of hell. The resurrection was a radical breaking into this world by God.

Because of the resurrection, the old is passing away and God's New Creation is taking root among us. This Spirit-empowered, resurrection-initiated New Creation is bursting to life in unexpected ways in the world, this broken world with all its hurts big and small, with all its wounds deep and superficial. And this resurrection power not only has something to *say* to the ordinary losses that lie buried in our hearts; it also bears within it a promise for healing and wholeness, both now and in eternity.

The intention of this book is not self-help. Nor is it inspiration. If you're looking for pithy encouragement, I'm sure your Pinterest feed is as chock-full of Scripture calligraphy as mine is. Knock yourself out. But that isn't cutting it for me. Nor is the "Just try harder" mantra, or its Christian companion "Just have faith," both of which land on my soul like a 1960s encyclopedia set, and have about as much value. The intention of *Signs of Life* is to engage Scripture in a meaningful way, not through elaborate word studies, original text comparisons, or mind-bending exegesis, but through story. We do not stand outside the grand story of God, like a beggar longingly looking through a window into a warm, inviting home. Our story, as disjointed and broken as it may seem, finds a place in God's story as we are invited to participate in God's redemptive work. Even our losses, or perhaps *especially* our losses, are welcomed, for they become the means by which God's resurrecting power is made manifest.

My first prayer, perhaps selfishly, is that through this journey of death and resurrection, God will transform me. I pray that God will sanctify us holy and wholly, healing some hurts that I carry in my heart and healing some hurts you carry in

yours. But I also pray that our journey through the story of God's saving action, as seen through the lens of Christ's resurrection, will transform us. I pray that this book will enliven our imaginations to see what is possible when we place those oh-so-ordinary deaths in the hands of the resurrecting God.

## One



# Death of Zeal

The brown vinyl bus seats were hot and stuck to our legs. The vinyl on my seat was also cracked, and it rubbed my legs raw. I could not have cared less, for I was on my way to teen camp.

It was finally my time. Having been a youth pastor's kid for many years—always lingering on the edges of wild youth group games, playing the part of everyone's cool little sister but never actually being a *part* of things—I was more than ready. I sat toward the front of the bus with the other newly christened seventh graders, some more nervous than others. My dad was now the lead pastor, but he had a CDL license and thus was driving us to camp. I looked up into the long, rectangular rearview mirror and caught his smiling eyes—celebrating the important milestone but discreetly allowing me to shine.

The next nine hours were bliss: stopping at Stuckey's rest stop to buy snacks and that Somewhere over the Rainbow magnet I had needed all my life, singing absurd songs until annoyed adults pleaded for a break, playing MASH over and over again on sweaty, crinkled notebook paper, working up the courage to casually throw in names of boys in the youth group, hoping no one would take notice and call out my crush. The thrill of being a part of the group was intoxicating. I drank deeply.

A few hours into the trip, the damp Kansas summer air turned brisk as the bus began the trek up the mountain to our denominational campground in Colorado. I felt a shiver of excitement as the campground came into view: Golden Bell.

The week would be full of firsts: first time rappelling off a cliff, first late-night game of capture the flag, first youth group crush (the boy I'd marry nine years later . . . but that is a different story). I experienced my first emotionally charged teen worship service and took my first tentative sermon notes, carefully penned in the fresh journal that was a gift from my mother. It was my first mountaintop spiritual high, dizzying in its power. So many firsts! It was a rich taste test of what was to come over the next six years in that youth group.

Two summers later, in July 1999, I found myself on yet another bus, this time in Toronto, Canada. No more hot, sticky vinyl. We drove from our hotel to the convention center in style, in charter buses with lush cloth seats and air conditioning blasting us with an icy breeze. For the past year, I had plunged my hands into countless soapy buckets at car washes, babysat kids I did not like, participated in dinner theaters, even cleaned toilets—all to raise enough money to attend an

international gathering of Nazarene teenagers that takes place every four years.

Every night, dynamic speakers took to the stage, preaching fiery messages of salvation and full consecration to God. And every night, hundreds of teenagers poured into the aisles and knelt at altars, responding to the movement of the Spirit and the highly charged emotional atmosphere. I had not yet made my way forward. I had long since decided to follow Jesus and had even experienced what we in our tradition call a moment of “entire sanctification,” that second work of grace in which the Spirit empowers you to give your entire self to Jesus—at least as thoroughly and sincerely as you can when you are eleven. Now I was waiting to see if the Lord had a new word for me.

On the fourth night it came. Overcome by the Spirit and the passion of the moment, I sat down heavily during a worship song sung by the nine thousand voices. I was brought low by the weighty presence of God. The voice was not audible, or even terribly specific, but it was clear nonetheless: *I am calling you to ministry.*

The fires of zeal were ignited.

Several weeks later, on a muggy Sunday night in August, I stood nervously behind a pulpit for the first time, testifying to my local congregation about God’s call in my life. No going back now. I basked in the celebration, the affirmation, the approval. The flames of zeal were fully ablaze, fanned by the encouragement and pride of my church family.



In the first century, the Roman Empire was at peak strength and influence. The power and influence of Rome's culture, religion, and philosophy dominated the Western world. In each place it conquered, the empire established colonies, insisting that citizens participate not only in the political practices of Rome but in the religious practices as well. These included emperor veneration, which quickly evolved into worship. Local religious practices in the colonies began blending into Roman ones, blurring the lines between them.

Unlike their pagan neighbors, who seemed unruffled by the syncretism between their traditional religious practices and those instituted by Rome, the Jewish community resisted. They insisted on the unique lordship of the God of their ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

In this cultural and religious melting pot, a boy was born to a devout Jewish family in Tarsus, and they named him Saul. Saul's family was not just any Jewish family, but a family of Pharisees. For anyone who has stepped foot in a church and heard at least a sermon or two, the word *Pharisee* conjures up a host of connotations: hypocrites, legalists, violent accusers of Jesus. And as the Gospels make clear, many Pharisees were all these things. But at the heart of Pharisaism was a deep love for God and a longing for purity of the people of God through enflashed faithfulness. By keeping the Torah and guiding the people of Israel to do the same, often through zealous and occasionally violent means, Pharisees hoped to hasten the coming of the kingdom of God.

I imagine young Saul sitting at the feet of his father as he debated the Torah and its interpretations with other Jews. He

would have participated in the sacred celebrations and feasts like Passover, asking the traditional questions assigned to children: Why on this night do we only eat unleavened bread? Why on this night do we eat only bitter herbs? Over and over, Saul would hear the story of God's great rescue, the deliverance of God's people, Israel, from slavery in Egypt.

As he grew, Saul joined his peers at the local synagogue, repeating the Torah until it was not just tucked into his mind but rooted deeply in his heart. By the time he was ten, Saul would have had the Torah memorized verbatim. This seems like a remarkable feat to us, although at the time, that much was quite ordinary. But Saul's own testimony in the New Testament makes clear that he was in no way ordinary, but rather went beyond his peers in his studies of the Torah and "advanced in Judaism beyond many. . . people of the same age" (Galatians 1:14). When other young men left formal schooling, Saul continued by studying under a famous rabbi, Gamaliel, in Jerusalem.

It is impossible to know all that swirled in young Saul's heart, but it's not hard to guess. Saul was a Hebrew of Hebrews, a devoted Jew, a Pharisee, committed in mind, body, and soul to following the Torah. His imagination was shaped by the stories not only of God's deliverance but also of the heroes of his people who kept Israel pure. He knew stories of people like Phinehas, who, being so full of zeal for God, acted violently against those who defied God's command. He knew of Elijah, who zealously fought against the prophets of Baal, killing hundreds (see Numbers 25 and 1 Kings 18).

Saul longed for God's kingdom to come in its fullness and for Israel to be restored. Perhaps he could join the ranks of his

zealous ancestors, fighting for purity and righteousness in the name of God, with violence if necessary.<sup>1</sup> The zeal of Saul smoldered like hot coals, hungry for fuel.



The heat of my own youthful, zealous fire intensified, burning hot white. I immersed myself in church life and Christian disciplines. Almost every night of the week was filled by church-related activities: Bible quizzing, accountability groups, a Bible study, youth group, door-to-door visitation of teenage guests to the church the Sunday prior, parties after high school football games. And in a way, it was wonderful. As on that first bus ride to church camp, I felt a deep connection to my youth group friends, a bond built on our common faith in Jesus and, for several of us, a call to vocational Christian service. I felt seen and loved by the congregation who affirmed my call. My heart was aglow with the fires of zeal as I sought to grow in faith and participate in ministry.

But something was slowly and almost imperceptibly shifting. The fire of zeal, which had been a source of heat, comfort, and camaraderie, was increasing in heat. My zeal was sending sparks outside the boundary of its kindled purpose.

My environment provided ideal conditions for just such a toxic blaze. The posture of American evangelicalism toward culture in the late 1990s and early 2000s was a strange contradiction. We who were evangelical Christians approached the world with a blend of separation and evangelism, specifically through mimicry. As a teenager, I got the clear impression that I was not to be in close relationship with “the world”—that’s

church-speak for anyone outside the faith. At the same time, I was supposed to be reaching out to that very world. Keep your distance *and* reach out? That's a complex message for teenagers to follow.

One youth lesson in particular drove the point home. I sat on a cold metal folding chair in the church gym, where portable partitions created a temporary room in which the teens could worship together midweek. I don't remember the specifics of the lesson being taught, only the object lesson used to make it clear. Our youth pastor called Max, a strong, athletic sophomore, up to the front.

"All right, Max, climb up onto this folding chair. Okay, now you be the Christian in this scenario, okay? Mandy, now you come on up."

Mandy, a small, timid freshman, approached the makeshift stage. She was all of ninety pounds soaking wet, and not the least bit aggressive—unlike me, who was known for throwing elbows and accidentally giving some black eyes during youth group icebreakers.

"Okay, Mandy. You're the world, okay? Max, you try to pull Mandy up to you, to the Christian life. Mandy, don't make it easy."

The rest of us leaned forward, ready to watch the spectacle. Mandy went limp, allowing her body to flop around as Max tried to strong-arm her up to his level. He was clearly struggling. But Max had something to prove to his watching peers. With one final *umph*, he yanked Mandy up to the chair.

Now they both stood, uncomfortably close, on the metal folding chair.

“All right!” our youth pastor said. “Hop down now, Mandy. Now it’s your turn. Your goal, as the world, is to pull Max the Christian down.”

Passive, quiet Mandy grinned unexpectedly. She grabbed Max’s hand and swung, Tarzan-style, from the chair to the floor. Max was caught off guard and crashed to the ground. We cheered at her unanticipated victory.

While Mandy had surprised us with her vigor, there was little surprise in this object lesson. This was a message we knew: Avoid the world. It will pull you down.

The holes in this metaphor are glaring to me now: the implied hierarchy between the saved and unsaved, the complete reliance on one’s own strength to live faithfully in the face of temptation, the apparently impenetrable boundary between “the saved” and “the lost.” But as a teenager whose heart was ablaze with zeal and whose brain was still stretching beyond the concrete into abstract and critical thinking, I thought it made total sense. Avoid the world. Have nothing to do with it. It will only corrupt you, dragging you down to rebellion and sin.

Paradoxically, this was also the world that we, the zealous youth, were supposed to evangelize. Avoid that broken, sinful, evil world so intent on bringing you down—but make sure you invite them to our next youth event.

So I did, throwing myself into the contradiction: Stay separate, invite. Keep away, attract. The youth council helped plan elaborate parties with outrageous themes designed to draw crowds. We laid out parodies of popular games, television shows, and songs like weird bait, designed to lure the masses. I

persisted, because this was faithfulness. This was how we would win the world, how we would “take the country back” for God. This was what the zealous do: avoid corruption and encourage other people to join the enclave.

Yet such a contradiction comes at a price. I found myself both the enforcer of legalisms and the enforced. At one of our annual fall retreats, our youth group was dismissed from breakfast and instructed to have personal quiet time with Jesus before the morning service. I diligently read my Bible and scribbled away in my journal, confessing my shortcomings. All the while I managed to keep an eye on those around me. My peers were scattered about, sprawled on picnic tables and sitting under trees, backs against rough bark. Who would be the first to get up and go about other business? Who was the most devout and would linger in prayer the longest?

At lunch later that day, an equally zealous friend whispered to me disdainfully, “Did you see how long Mitch spent on his quiet time? Like five minutes. That’s pitiful.” I nodded in agreement. Pitiful.

The judgment masquerading as accountability—as iron sharpening iron—eventually flipped in my direction. When I was a sophomore, I gave up Bible quizzing to join the cheerleading squad. I had gone as far as I wanted to go with quizzing and was ready to try something new. A friend from my youth group approached me at school. “You’ve changed,” Mark said, shaking his head in condescending disappointment.

“What are you talking about?” I asked, genuinely confused.

“You used to be so serious about God. But cheerleading instead of Bible quizzing? Wow. Just wow.”

In the moment, I brushed off his comment as absurd, but the impression lingered. Was he right?

Some of my youth group peers gave up, exhausted by the relentless pressure of zeal and the demand for proof of emotional spiritual encounters. They were worn out by the insistence on very specific behaviors to keep one's good standing with God and the group, as well as by the requirement of near-total separation from any unbelieving friends. Some attended less frequently, avoiding retreats and camps, while others left entirely. They left not only the youth group but also the faith. Disillusioned and disgusted, they lacked tools to think critically or to see a more congruent path to faithfulness.

But I'm no quitter. I pushed harder. I helped plan more elaborate events. I went on every mission trip offered to prepare for my future vocation, sighing in judgey frustration at those who didn't participate to the same degree. I felt the weight of maintaining the image I had created of a teen "on fire" for God. I felt the pressure to stoke the flames, to press down the incongruities. I ignored the casualties, including my own soul, as the fires of zeal grew out of control.



By the time Saul comes of age, his zeal is a raging inferno. Stephen, a leader in the early church, stands before the Jewish leaders. He is calling them to account for their hard-heartedness and their refusal to acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God, and the locus of God's saving action in the world over and above the temple or Torah (see Acts 7–8.)

As Stephen's speech goes on, recounting the oft-told story of God's people, he comes not to the promise of a gloriously restored temple filled with God's presence but to a declaration that God's promises had all been fulfilled in the person of Jesus. As he listens, Saul feels his heart throb in his chest, pumping with righteous indignation. What began as annoyance at a foolish man caught up in a foolish movement grows into a boiling rage. Saul realizes what Stephen is implying: temple and Torah are pointing beyond themselves to Jesus. Jesus' followers are claiming that he is the Messiah, the anointed one of God.

So when Saul's companions roar in anger—when they grab Stephen and drag him outside the city, collecting stones along the way and then laying their cloaks at Saul's feet as they prepare to stone Stephen for his blasphemy—Saul does nothing. He does nothing but stand still in silent approval of their righteous, zealous violence.

It is time—Saul's time—to enter the story of his people, to participate in the purification of God's people who had clearly gone astray. Goaded by the flames of zeal and the approval of his fellow Pharisees, Saul sets out to ravage the church. He bursts into homes where Jesus' followers are gathered. He drags men and women to jail.

The flames of Saul's zeal grow, damaging everyone in his path. Motivated as he is by a sense of righteous calling to cleanse Israel from its unfaithfulness in following after this Jesus, Saul makes his way to Damascus with the blessing of the high priest to capture any followers of the Way and bring them to Jerusalem for trial. The heat of his zeal rises up from the pages of Scripture. His passion for his people and for his God almost sings our fingertips.

But what Saul does not see, cannot see for the smoke in his eyes, is how his zeal is working against the purposes of God. But that's what zeal, unchecked, does. It blinds us to what God is doing as it consumes our attention and energies. Fanned into an inferno, zeal devours, damages, and ultimately destroys everything it touches.



As adolescence wore on, I found the zealotry of my teenage years to be unsustainable. I was running out of fuel to burn and coming into an awareness of the damage that unchecked zeal had wrought among us. However, my zeal was not extinguished in a dramatic fashion by some specific crisis of faith or catastrophe in the church. It was much more mundane than that. I simply burned out.

By my senior year of high school, I felt a deep fatigue in my bones. After six years of planning, attending, and inviting friends to attractional youth events, I was tired. In my heart, I wondered, What exactly are we inviting them to? The culture of the youth group had devolved into mean-spiritedness, and even I felt on edge, wondering how I would be belittled or shamed by the older boys on any particular day. Some days it would be teasing about my appearance; other days, arbitrary rudeness and mockery for no discernable reason. I walked on eggshells to avoid inciting their cruelty. Why would I want to bring anyone else into that milieu?

I still participated in retreats and camps and mission trips. Some inflamed emotion once again, like a brief splash of gasoline onto a fire, but there was no staying power. I longed for

something I could not name. It is not fair to place the fault at the feet of my youth pastors or youth leaders. It was the water in which we were all swimming. A few prophetic voices were beginning to identify and give language to the incongruity in American youth ministry. But it would be years before those voices trickled down to youth groups like mine. Disillusioned, burned-out young people like me were left with indistinct impressions that something was amiss. But we had no guidance to discern the source of the vague feelings of unease, and certainly no alternative way forward in faithfulness.

I could no longer deny the incongruities: the painful disconnect between isolationism and evangelism, the distance between the claim of Christian community and the mistreatment I so regularly experienced there. I questioned the realities I had once accepted so freely: that to be saved meant ascribing to specific, nonnegotiable beliefs. These included such things as believing in a six-day creation account, adhering to a very specific moral code including but not limited to total abstinence from alcohol, and voting Republican. This code also meant working tirelessly to mimic pagan culture's events, technology, and aesthetics so as to attract unbelievers to the church.

Even as the questions flooded in faster than answers were keeping up, I showed up to college and enrolled as a ministry major. But this churning in my spirit, combined with an inability to put to words the disorientation I was experiencing, expressed itself in cynicism, in a critical spirit toward any church event. I called out the brokenness I saw in the system, but I had nothing to offer in terms of a more faithful way. Only despair, contempt, and exhaustion. Cynical ministry students

are always such a joy to have around. I am certain I was no exception.

I did not doubt God's existence or even my call to ministry. But two things I knew: The zeal of my youth was dead. And I was afraid. Because without zeal, what was left?



The death of Saul's zeal makes for a much better story than mine. As he trots off to Damascus, ready to violently rip people from their homes and lead them to their deaths, Saul has the most unlikely of encounters on the road. He is thrown to the ground by a sudden "light from heaven" that flashes around him (Acts 9:3).

N. T. Wright, in his biography of Saul, says it well. Saul, with a "head full of scripture, heart full of zeal," looks into the light, in full anticipation of beholding the glory of the Lord beheld by Moses.<sup>2</sup> Instead, he looks up to see the nail-scarred feet of Jesus. As his eyes slowly move upward, he sees the wounded hands, the brown, bearded face, the eyes full of compassion and also pain.

"Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

In a flash, like a bucket of water on a campfire, Saul's zeal for persecuting followers of Jesus is extinguished. His devotion to God is sincere, but it has been pointed in the wrong direction. Again, Wright: "[Saul] had a zeal for God, but had not understood what the One God was up to."<sup>3</sup>

God was not working to restore Israel as a great earthly kingdom to rule the nations. Nor was God seeking out individuals to enforce the purity codes of Moses. God's vision was greater

than Saul could have imagined: setting the entirety of creation right, not through acts of might and power but by coming in the flesh. Jesus had come not to rule but to give himself as a sacrifice for many and to be resurrected to New Creation life. Saul had mistaken the signposts—those things intended to point to God’s restorative intention, things like temple and Torah—as the destination. God was wooing all creation to wholeness.



I, too, had missed the signposts of what God was doing. The toxic culture of my youth group, the paradoxical posture toward secular society, the legalism enforced through social pressure, the mimicry of the world’s methods to achieve our ends: all of it missed the mark.

But—and this is key—we missed the mark not because we did not love the Lord, or because we were not seeking faithfulness, or because we did not long for God’s salvation to reach the ends of the earth. Quite the opposite. With zealous, uninformed passion and self-righteousness, we bought into the narrative that the role of the church was to call out the sin of the world and keep our own noses clean. I bought the story that Christians are to avoid being sullied by the world by ministering via a ten-foot pole until the world acts right, and to keep everyone inside the church walking a tight, uniform morality line. These were the signs of faithfulness, the indicators of God’s approval and our inclusion in the faith family.

I mistook the signs for the destination. In my zeal, I lost sight of God’s healing, saving, restorative purposes for all creation. Or perhaps I didn’t know what to look for in the first

place, blinded as I was by the smoke of unbridled and uninformed zeal. My devotion to God was sincere, but it pointed in the wrong direction. Like Saul, with my head full of Scripture and my heart full of zeal, I did not see what God was and is doing in Jesus.

For Saul, being rightly reoriented began when he was plunged into the waters of baptism by none other than a former enemy, Ananias—a leader among the Christians whom Saul had come to persecute. Still dripping from the baptismal waters, Saul goes to Arabia for three years. Some scholars claim that this is in fact Saul's first missionary trip, that he immediately jumped into preaching the gospel of Jesus the Christ. But I am captivated by an alternative explanation of that brief allusion to what was clearly a formative time.

Arabia is a place loaded with Israelite history. It is the home to Mount Sinai, where Moses encountered God, where Israel received the Torah, where the covenant was established between God and God's people. But as N. T. Wright highlights, it was also the mount to which Elijah fled after his dramatic encounter with the prophets of Baal on top of Mount Carmel, which resulted in the deaths of 450 pagan priests at Elijah's command. After that, Elijah fled, disillusioned by the state of things and declaring to God, "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts" (1 Kings 19:10).

I feel Elijah's anger, his angst. "I have been very zealous for the Lord!" So what gives? I thought this was the way, God: violent zeal against your enemies for the sake of *your* kingdom! Yet here I am, afraid and in despair, with no dramatic revival to add to my prophet credentials.

Wright imagines Saul asking the very same questions of the Lord, sitting on the same mountain, generations later: I have been zealous for you, Lord! A Hebrew of Hebrews, a persecutor of the disobedient, a violent enforcer of the law. What gives?<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps it was during those years of prayer and study on the mountain that Saul received a new commission: to proclaim Jesus as King to the nations. The vicious enforcer, the violent zealot, is transformed to a suffering servant. He is shaped by the witness of the Crucified One, King Jesus.

I sat in my undergraduate classes, full of guilt over the death of my zeal. I was cynical not out of meanness but because it served as a protective shield for my heart, wounded from the confusing brokenness I had experienced. In my heart, I asked the same questions those passionate, zealous servants of God had asked before me. I have been zealous for you, God; I have been “all in,” “on fire.” So what gives? Why the disillusionment and exhaustion? Why no roaring revival after those years of serving you in the youth group? I was only nineteen years old. It was a little early in the game to burn out, wasn't it?

I sat in class, dialoguing with my peers about the importance of appealing methods of ministry. It was an ironic moment as I defended the practice I knew in my heart was amiss. “But it's important that we offer something appealing to attract people to church!” I loudly argued—too loudly, trying to convince myself. “I mean, we have to compete with culture for their attention and participation, right?”

My professor sighed gently. “People, you will never out-MTV MTV,” he said. “Do you get that? We have to get out of that game. When we mimic culture in an attempt to lure

people to faith, we have failed before we have begun. We have lost sight of who we are and what we are to be about.”

I gasped. How did he know? How did he know that was my deepest fear about ministry—the demand to compete with culture on culture’s terms? Here he was, saying it out loud for the world to hear. What was this madness?

“Our call as the church, and as church leaders, is not to run the hottest show in town, the flashiest, most alluring performance,” he said. “Our call isn’t to serve as the morality police, spewing condemnation rapid-fire. Our call is to a King and a kingdom.”

There have been one thousand moments—one thousand kindnesses enacted and gentle truths spoken—that have brought about transformation in my life. This moment, the MTV moment, gave me permission finally to surrender my zeal and its rotten fruit.

Listening to my professor’s words, I felt a lightness, a freedom that had eluded me for so long. Freedom, and yet a new fire—fueled not by my own self-importance or energy but by finally knowing what I thought I had always known: God is King. And the King is on a mission to redeem the world, to bring the kingdom in its fullness, and to make all things new. My future role as a shepherd would be to allow my heart to be molded into the shape of a cross, mimicking the King who came not to dominate or assert authority through violence but to serve and to give his life to free us from sin and death. As I am shaped, I join the Spirit in the work of reshaping the hearts of the people with whom I have been entrusted, to reflect the King and his kingdom.

Human zeal is toxic, deadly, like wildfire out of control. It is pride, it is self-righteousness, and it is fear masquerading as courage. It cannot save, redeem, or restore. Instead, as Isaiah 9:7 says, “The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.” The Lord will establish the kingdom of God, built upon righteousness and justice forevermore.

I have been captured by this vision of the King and his restorative kingdom, the same vision that reoriented Saul. But for such a new vision to take root, space had to be made. As painful as it was, that old zeal had to go. It had to burn itself out so that something more faithful might emerge in its place: Jesus-shaped service to the church and to the world, both of which are so beloved by God.



It has been many years since I first said yes to that call to vocational Christian service, and many years, even, since the fires of zeal burned themselves out. That season of deconstruction was painful, and I have no illusions that I will somehow avoid further deconstruction as I mature in faith. Yet I am deeply grateful for those zealous fires, for the way they broke me open so that a more faithful, cross-shaped path might emerge.

I pastor in Idaho now, a place where fires occasionally rage out of control. A couple of years ago during a camping trip, we stumbled across a section of forest that had been entirely decimated by fire. The image of charred stumps and ash heaps is burned into my mind’s eye. Every tree gone or burned beyond redemption—or so it would seem.

But Idaho is home to a unique type of pine tree, the lodgepole pine. The lodgepole produces unusually hard cones that are sealed entirely by a strong resin. The cones cling to the tree, often for years, doing nothing to propagate their species. Quite the hangers-on they are. They linger, tucked in the branches, avoiding contact with the soil and thus preventing new plants from taking root. The resin ensures that no invader compromises the cone.

And so a lodgepole pinecone sits, sealed in safety—until fire comes. When fires roar through the forest, claiming every tree as victim to the flames, the lodgepole cones fall to the ground, no longer upheld by twigs or shielded by needles. In that moment when death seems assured, when all hope is abandoned for the tree and species at large, something remarkable happens. The resin, that stubborn, sticky seal, melts in the heat of the inferno, allowing the seeds to emerge and be carried hither and yon by the wind. Without the fire—without the death brought on the blazing wings of destruction—new life could not emerge. In fact, the survival and propagation of the lodgepole pine and forest fires are so inextricably connected that the National Forest Foundation calls lodgepole pinecones “heat dependent.”<sup>5</sup>

When the fire burns out and all seems lost, a promise is hidden away in the fertile soil of destruction. Two, maybe three years after a fire ravages a forest, what is the first sapling you will see, waving its spindly, courageous branches in the wind? A lodgepole pine, born from a stubborn, resin-coated cone awakened by fire. From death and destruction comes new life once again. You might even call it a resurrection.