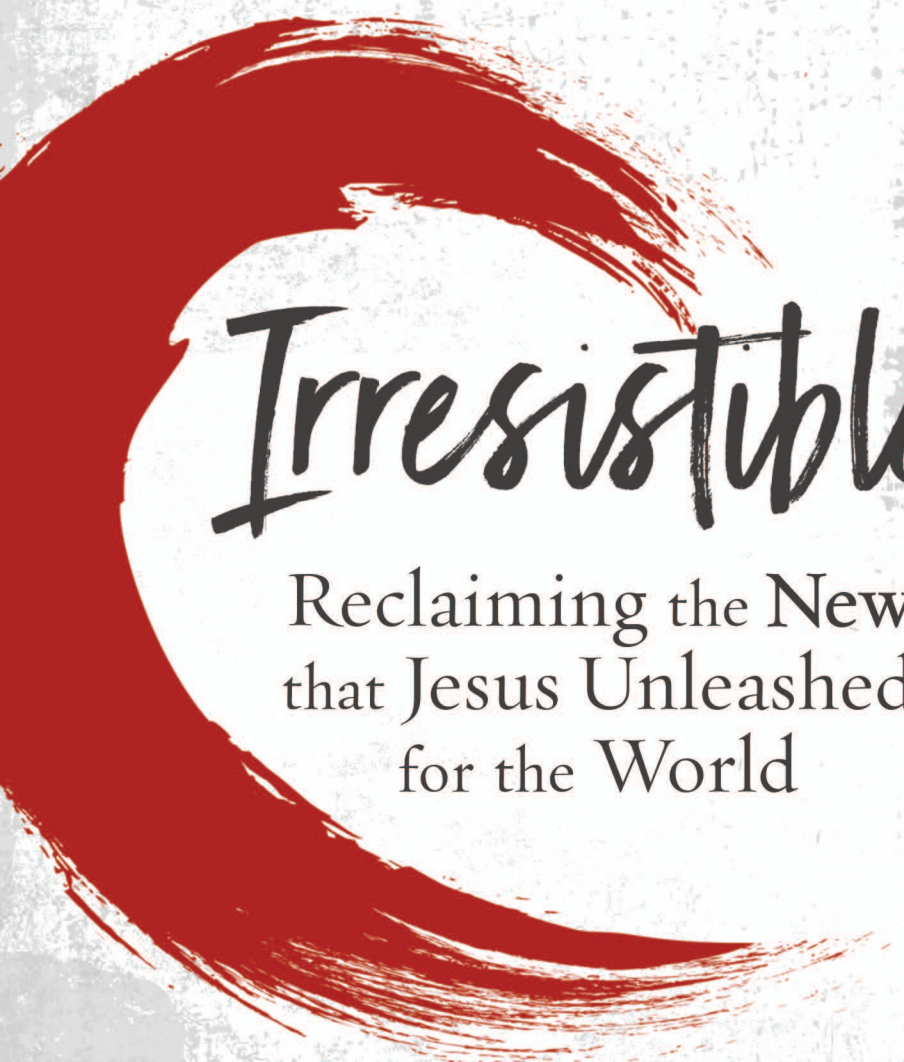


*Once upon a time there existed a
version of our faith that was ...*



Irresistible

Reclaiming the New
that Jesus Unleashed
for the World

ANDY STANLEY

For years Roma and I have endeavored to be noisy Christians. Noisy, but thoughtful. Andy has captured both ideas with a single word, “irresistible.” But as you are about to discover, he’s done more than that. In *Irresistible*, Andy reacquaints us with the original version of our faith. The version that was irresistible indeed! We love this book!

—*Mark Burnett*, television and film producer

I’ve been a Christ follower for more than thirty years and perhaps no other book I’ve ever read has caused me to wrestle with the very foundations of my faith like this one. In *Irresistible*, Andy Stanley challenges us to rediscover the gospel and reclaim the version of faith that ultimately transformed our world. This provocative book could potentially disrupt the core of your theology. And when it does, it may very well change how you read the Bible and live out your faith forever more.

—*Tony Morgan*, founder and lead strategist at The Unstuck Group

It’s time for the church to rethink how it presents a timeless gospel to this generation. In *Irresistible*, Andy Stanley challenges us to make sure we handle the Scriptures with the kind of integrity that compels everyone to seriously consider following Jesus. Any Christian who reads this book will suddenly find themselves embracing the mission of Jesus with a new passion.

—*Reggie Joiner*, author; founder and CEO of Orange

People rarely reject Jesus as he truly is. Instead, they reject a distorted view of who they *think* he is. In his new book, *Irresistible*, pastor Andy Stanley takes you on a historic journey to rediscover the first-generation passion of what it means to faithfully follow Christ. This book will knock you off center, push you out of complacency, and reawaken an unshakable faith that cannot be ignored.

—*Craig Groeschel*, pastor of Life.Church and author of *Hope in the Dark—Believing God Is Good When Life Is Not*

Irresistible is like a once-in-a-generation shot across the bow. Andy Stanley takes a lifetime of accumulated insight and wisdom about the Christian faith, history, and why the church isn’t connecting with our current culture, and combines them together in a masterpiece work. Succinctly, powerfully, and convincingly, Andy shows us how so many Christians have

misunderstood what Christianity is and helps us recapture what Christianity originally was. I pray we have the courage to live out the ethic of the early and accurate Christian faith Andy so capably describes. The world just might come running if we do.

—*Carey Nieuwhof*, author and founding
pastor, Connexus Church

Warning: This book will set you and your ministry back—back to the first century and the approach to advancing the gospel modeled by Jesus and the apostles. Andy reminds us that the resurrection was at the center of the first-century apologetic. Then he challenges twenty-first century believers to reclaim it as the center of ours as well. I agree with Andy—this approach changed the world once. I'm convinced it could do so again. Read and apply now!

—*Frank Turek*, Christian author, public speaker, and radio host

More than any other book I've read in years, *Irresistible* has stretched my view of Scripture. I can't hear or read a passage from the Old or New Testaments without thinking about Andy's provocative insights. If you and I take this book seriously, our lives and our churches will never be the same.

—*Kara Powell*, PhD, executive director of the Fuller
Youth Institute and coauthor of *Growing Young*

This book challenged me to rethink my thoughts about the Old Testament, discuss with fellow believers what I was learning, do more connecting and less correcting of others, and be salt and light, making things better and brighter. I love how Andy loves people . . . ALL of them.

—*John Maxwell*, author of *The 360 Degree Leader*

Andy Stanley believes that the gospel of grace is an irresistible message. So why do so many resist it, reject Jesus, and rebuff the church? Perhaps the fault lies not with Jesus but with a burdensome set of rules and regulations that have been added to the simple ethic he taught in the great commandment: love God and love others (Matthew 22:36–40). Biblical in its basis, provocative in some proposals, convicting in its challenges, this book makes an important contribution to the ongoing conversation about the mission of the church, as she seeks to reach a pluralistic culture with the good news of the gospel.

—*Glenn R. Kreider*, professor of theological
studies, Dallas Theological Seminary

Irresistible

Reclaiming the New
that Jesus Unleashed
for the World

ANDY STANLEY

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Irresistible

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For Sandra

Thirty years later . . . still the finest woman I know

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That's not always comfortable.

Thank you!

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SECTION 1

Simply Resistible

INTRODUCTION

In 2007, my son Andrew, who was thirteen at the time, accompanied me on a trip to China. During our visit we were invited to tour an American-owned leather goods factory. The owner was a friend of a friend. When we arrived, he graciously insisted on serving as our guide. Before we began the tour, he introduced us to a Chinese girl in her twenties who had worked her way from the factory floor into management. He asked if we would be okay if she shadowed us during the tour.

Two hours later, we were back in his office for a quick recap. As we wrapped up, he asked, “Does anyone have any questions?” To all our surprise, raising her hand to shoulder level, our shadow spoke up. “I have a question,” she said. Turning to me, she asked, “Are you a pastor?”

I had no idea where this was going. I had not introduced myself as a pastor. I wasn’t even sure if it was okay that I was a pastor. We were in China. For all I knew, she was a government plant assigned to follow us around all afternoon.

“Yes,” I said. “I’m a pastor.”

What she said next, in her beautiful broken English, caused the hair to stand up on the back of my neck.

“How good is good enough? I recognize your voice.”

I was stunned. *How Good Is Good Enough?* is the title of a little book I had recently published. The manuscript was based on a message I had preached years earlier. She continued.

“Two years ago, someone gave me a CD of your sermon, ‘How Good Is Good Enough?’ I listened to it over and over. Then I asked Jesus to save me and live inside me. Before, I was empty. Now, I am full.”

If you think I made this up, I don’t blame you.

I have witnesses.

She went on. “I wanted to go to church, but there are no churches in my city. I began attending a Bible study in an apartment close to where I live. Sometimes I ride the bus to church, but it is two hours and I’m always late. The bus ticket is expensive and I don’t know anyone at the church.”

I was both honored and humbled. But she wasn’t finished. Looking to her boss, she said, “Can I ask the pastor another question?”

He nodded.

“Pastor,” she said, “why doesn’t everyone in America go to church?”

I still haven’t recovered from her question.

I had no idea how to respond. I still don’t.

How do you explain thousands of empty churches to a young lady who would ride two hours to attend a church in another town? A young lady who would be there every time the door was opened, if there was a door to open? The Bible study she attended was part of a network of *underground churches*, what the Chinese government refers to as unregistered churches. Her participation put her at risk. Owning a Bible put her at risk. Talking about attending church in front of her boss put her at risk.

Imagine her shock if she were to discover that not only do most American Christians not read the Bible, in most churches there is a closetful of Bibles that have been *left behind*.

I don’t remember how I responded. I said something entirely forgettable. But I haven’t forgotten her question. It’s bothered me ever since. Her question is one of the reasons I’ve written this book.

So, why doesn't everybody in America go to church?

Why is the church so *resistible*?

Jesus wasn't.

Once upon a time, his church wasn't either.

Chapter 1

THE NEW STANDARD AMERICAN VERSION

Much of what makes American Christianity so resistible to those outside the faith are things we should have been resisting all along. While many of us have been working hard to make church more interesting, it turns out that fewer people are actually interested. And while most people outside the church continue to have a favorable view of Jesus, they don't necessarily have a favorable view of his body, the *church*.

That's a problem.

It would be like me saying, *I like you; I just don't want to be around your body.*

The decline of Christianity in America, the popularity of the New Atheists, and the meteoric rise of the *nones* underscore something that's been true for generations but didn't matter much until now. Modern, mainstream Christianity is fatally flawed. These flaws make it fragile and indefensible in the public square. The populist version of cultural Christianity we see today is anchored to two assumptions that create a straw-man version of our faith. Sadly, this straw man passes for actual faith in many evangelical churches.

This version of Christianity is simplistic and easily discredited. For decades, college professors with biases against religion have found Christian freshmen easy targets. I've talked to, listened to, and read interviews, blogs, and books by dozens of folks who've left the Christian faith. I've yet to hear a story from anyone who abandoned Christianity based on

anything directly related to Christianity—at least the original version, anyway.

I recently read a blog by a former worship leader who left the faith after she read a book “proving” contradictions in the Bible. Apparently, she grew up believing the foundation of our faith is a non-contradicting book.

It’s not.

A renowned New Testament scholar recently acknowledged he lost his faith and embraced atheism because of suffering in the world. But the foundation of our faith is not a world without suffering. Pain and suffering don’t disprove the existence of God. It only disproves the existence of a god who doesn’t allow pain and suffering.

Whose god is that?

Not ours.

Ours promised it.

People leave the faith because they had a bad church experience.

Me too.

So what?

Quantum physics doesn’t undermine the claims of Jesus. Neither does natural selection. Unverifiable Old Testament miracles don’t cause our house to come tumbling down.

By the way, if something in the previous paragraphs made you wince, I can’t tell you how happy I am you’re reading this book. Keep reading and you’ll be introduced to a better, more robust, version of *your* faith.

In all my years of ministry, I’ve only had one conversation with an unbeliever—a Jewish friend—who had an objection to Christianity based on anything to do with the claims of Jesus. “Andy,” he said, “I just don’t believe someone can pay for someone else’s sins. I believe each of us is responsible for our own sins.” I smiled and said, “Well, congratulations, you’re standing on the threshold. That *is* the issue.”

THE WAY FORWARD

The way forward is not complicated, though some will find it controversial. It's not original with me. It's hidden in plain sight in the Gospels and the epistles of Paul. We know it *works* because it already worked. Once upon a time, members of a Jewish cult called *The Way*, against all odds, captured the attention and, ultimately, the dedication of the pagan world, both inside and outside the Roman Empire. So perhaps we need to hit pause on much of what we're doing today—which isn't working all that well anyway—and take notes from the men and women credited with turning the world upside down.

What did first-century Christians know that we don't?

What made their faith so compelling, resilient, and, in the end, irresistible?

How did a religious cult birthed in the armpit of the empire, whose leader had been rejected by his own people and crucified as a wannabe king by Rome, survive in the face of overwhelming resistance? How is it that this same upstart religion would eventually be embraced by the very empire that sought to extinguish it?

I'm not the first to ask these questions. Scholars and historians have pondered these mysteries for generations. For the most part, they've all arrived at the same conclusion. British author Karen Armstrong, no friend to evangelical Christianity, sums it up this way:

Yet against all odds, by the third century, Christianity had become a force to be reckoned with. We still do not really understand how this came about.¹

Historically speaking, she is correct. It's virtually impossible to explain. Anthropologists, historians, and even skeptics with agendas have reached the same conclusion. Namely, something *happened* in the first century that resulted in Christianity spreading like an airborne disease. There was something about the faith of these first- and second-century believers that made it attractive, compelling, and seemingly irresistible.

The role of scholars and historians, like medical doctors diagnosing a disease, is to look for natural causes. We seek rational explanations as to why things happened the way they did. So when it comes to the seemingly unexplainable meteoric rise of the church, I'm convinced we should accept the explanation offered by those closest to the actual events. The testimonies of Peter, Luke, James, Paul, and others provide ample explanation for why the Jesus movement not only survived the first century but eventually overcame the very political and religious machines intent on destroying it.

Sandwiched between the Jewish temple and the Roman Empire, the Jesus movement should have been buried right alongside its founder. But it wasn't. At this very moment, Christians from all over the world are visiting the ruins of the Roman Forum, while fifteen hundred miles away, tourists are snapping pictures of the temple mount. Rome is adorned with crosses. Jerusalem is filled with Christian tourists.

Rome and Jerusalem are connected at the hip by the church. Two thousand years ago, the cross symbolized the power of empire. Today it symbolizes the power of God.

How did that happen?

What can we learn?

And, most importantly, could it happen again?

I believe so.

NEW, NOT IMPROVED

Jesus stepped into history to introduce something new.

He didn't come to Jerusalem offering a new version of an old thing or an update to an existing thing. He didn't come to make something better. Jesus was sent by the Father to introduce something *entirely new*. People gathered by the thousands to listen. To see. To experience. Read the Gospel of Mark and circle the word *crowd*. There's a crowd in practically every chapter.

But it wasn't just his *new* message that made Jesus irresistible. It was Jesus himself. People who were nothing *like* him *liked* him. And Jesus *liked* people who were nothing *like* him. Jesus invited unbelieving, misbehaving, troublemaking men and women to follow him and to embrace something *new*—and they accepted his invitation.

As followers of Jesus, we should be known as people who like people who are nothing like us. When we invite unbelieving, misbehaving troublemakers to join us, they should be intrigued—if not inclined—to accept our invitation.

“Pastor Stanley, why doesn't everybody in America go to church?”

THE RESISTERS

In the Gospels, we discover two groups that considered Jesus a threat—the self-righteous and those whose political and financial fortunes were secured by the fragile peace between temple and empire.

For the most part, Jesus' critics did not target his character. No one accused him of being immoral, dishonest, or cruel. They were threatened most by his teaching and his popularity. Religious leaders around Jerusalem were jealous of the favor he found with the populace. When you read the transcripts from his trials, you can't help but agree with Pilate when he announced to Jesus' accusers: “I find no *basis* for a charge against this man.”²

He found none because there was none.

Pilate knew why temple leaders were insistent that Jesus be crucified. It had nothing to do with their law or their exclusivist religion. They wanted to be rid of Jesus purely out of “self-interest.”³

The tipping point for those opposed to Jesus was not a *scandal*. It was a *miracle*. An extraordinary act of compassion. Jesus raised a well-known citizen from the dead. When news of this particular miracle circulated, the chief priests and Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. That may not mean much to us, but it was unusual in first-century Judea.

These groups disagreed on just about everything. But in Jesus they found common ground. A common threat. A common enemy.

After multiple attempts, neither group had succeeded in diminishing Jesus' influence with the crowds. So in a moment of desperation, they joined forces. All they needed was a . . . how did Pilate put it? A *basis* for a charge. The apostle John knew or later met someone in attendance. At one point, someone's emotions got control of their mouth and they blurted out what everyone in the room was thinking:

What are we accomplishing? Here is this man performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation.⁴

Forty years later, that's exactly what happened.

More on that in a bit.

In the end, religious leaders were able to manufacture a *basis* for a charge. Jesus was found guilty of bad theology and terroristic threats against the temple. Pilate joined the charade to keep the people who kept the people happy, happy. This was never about justice. No crime had been committed. When we step back from the chaos and the rapid-fire string of events leading to his crucifixion, it's abundantly clear Jesus was arrested and crucified because he was *too popular*. He was crucified for drawing too large of a crowd. People who were nothing like him liked him. And he liked them back. He was hard to resist. Impossible to dismiss. Why? He offered something new. Something brand-new.

But new brands rarely sit well with those whose fortunes are tied to the old ones. Those who profit most from the status quo are least inclined to let it go.

The plot twist was that Jesus' crucifixion was more beginning than end. His death initiated the *new* he had spoken of throughout his public ministry—the *new* predicted by Old Testament prophets and foreshadowed in Genesis. What Jesus' enemies did not know—could

not have known—was that while ending Jesus’ life brought about an end, it was not the end they had envisioned. His death and resurrection initiated a chain of events that would eventually bring an end to ancient Judaism, as well as the Roman Empire in its current form, the empire directly responsible for his death.

THE JESUS MOVEMENT

It was after the resurrection that Jesus’ reengaged followers began to understand he had not come to simply add an additional chapter to the story of Israel. Jesus had not come to introduce a new version of Judaism. His movement was not regional. The Jesus movement was an all-skate. It was for all nations. His followers claimed he was the final sacrifice for sin, eliminating the need for the Jewish temple. But not just the Jewish temple. Twenty years or so after the resurrection, the apostle Paul would stare down the idol-worshipping civic leaders in Athens and declare their temples were unnecessary as well.⁵ In that same speech, Paul labeled idol worship ignorant. Like a parent, waiting for a child to outgrow her childish ways, God had overlooked idol worship for a season.⁶ But now it was time for the world to grow up and acknowledge the living, portable, for-all-nations God.

Needless to say, the Jesus movement was immediately at odds with both Jewish and non-Jewish culture. Understandably so. Jesus claimed to be the *fulfillment* of Judaism and a *replacement* for paganism.

Jesus was new wine. Judaism and paganism were old wineskins. The *new* Jesus offered was a departure from the traditions of both. Jesus, along with his early followers, argued that Judaism and paganism both pointed to a day when God would unleash something *new* in the world, for the world. Those with eyes to see would recognize it. Those with ears to hear would listen and follow.

Specifically, Jesus came to establish a new covenant, a new command, and a new movement. His new *movement* would be international. The new *covenant* would fulfill and replace the behavioral, sacrifice-based systems reflected in just about every religion of the ancient world.

His new *command* would serve as the governing behavioral ethic for members of his new movement.

The *new* Jesus introduced stood in stark contrast to the values and tempo of both empire and temple. The empire assumed *might made right*. And while Rome claimed the right to make the rules, those who maintained the temple were committed to protecting their rules at all costs. While the Roman Empire and the Jewish temple were worlds apart, imbedded within each were values and assumptions that knit them together, creating a formidable obstacle to first-century Christianity. That the church survived both is a testament to the power of the gospel and the courage of first- and second-century Christians.

The first-century church withstood the pressure to adopt and integrate the familiar streams of empire and temple into their new faith. This is a testament to how incompatible they understood the two to be. The *new* Jesus introduced stood in stark, blatant, and unambiguous contrast to the values and assumptions of both empire and temple. Those closest to Jesus understood this contrast. The gospel accounts underscore and illustrate the differences. The apostle Paul leveled his harshest criticisms at those who attempted to integrate empire and temple thinking into the *new* Jesus introduced.

For almost three hundred years, the church fended off pressure to integrate and incorporate the old ways. But with the conversion of Constantine the Great and the signing of the Edict of Milan, the church transitioned quickly from persecuted minority to empowered majority. Almost immediately, resistance to the old ways was replaced by adoption, integration, and incorporation.

REFORM

Fast-forward to the sixteenth century and reformers would dedicate, and on occasion forfeit, their lives to free the church of the values, culture, and tone of empire and temple. For many, the birth of Protestantism signaled a revival of the *new* Jesus introduced. But the struggle would not end there. The temptation to pour the new wine Jesus offers into the

old wineskins of temple and empire is with us today. Every generation needs imperfect reformers—men and women who, like the apostle Paul, become apoplectic when they see a trace of the old ways creeping into the *new* Jesus introduced. I'm convinced it's the mixing, blending, and integration of the old with the new that makes the modern church so resistible. It's the mixing, blending, and integration of the old with the new that make our faith indefensible in this misinformation age. Jesus warned us two thousand years ago against pouring new wine into old wineskins. In the end, both the wine and the wineskins are ruined.⁷ The result is a mess.

“Pastor Stanley, why doesn't everybody in America go to church?”

To understand the uniqueness of Jesus' message, movement, and ethic, we must first understand the *old* with which these were contrasted. To punctuate this contrast, it's necessary for us to journey back through a stretch of familiar biblical history.

Chapter 2

GOING GLOBAL

Ancient Israel was a means to an end.

That's not a slight.

Being a *means* to an end is what gives things meaning. Purpose. If you refuse to become a means to an end, your life will never have meaning. That's the meaning of *meaning*. Live for yourself and you'll only have yourself to show for yourself. Become a means to an end and your life takes on . . . meaning. Funerals teach us this. Funerals remind us that the value of a life is always measured by how much of it was given away.

Back to Israel.

God created the nation of Israel as a means to a divine end. He created the nation for a global purpose. God's global plan for the nation was first announced long before there was a nation. Around 2067 BC, God promised ninety-nine-year-old Abraham a son who would become a nation that would bless the world.

The entire world.

Here's the original wording:

I will make you into a *great nation*,
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.

God promised Abraham he would make his “name great.” That’s Bible speak for “I’ll make you famous.”¹ I’m guessing this isn’t the first time you’ve heard of Abraham.

So there you go.

Promise kept.

But here’s the real news:

and *all* peoples on earth will be blessed *through* you.²

We can’t imagine how ridiculous that sounded to a man with *no* people standing in the middle of *nowhere*. But that promise initiated a chain of events that would roll out over the course of about two thousand years. In addition to the unimaginable scope of this promise, there was something historically peculiar about it as well.

God promised to “bless” the world through Abraham’s descendants.

That didn’t make any sense.

Ancient people didn’t *bless* one another.

Ancient tribes conquered, plundered, and enslaved one another. Let’s face it; modern nations don’t *bless* one another. We spy, negotiate, and impose sanctions. Again, we can’t begin to imagine how ridiculous this sounded to Abraham.

Moving on.

Abraham eventually had some *people* who eventually migrated to Egypt, where they eventually multiplied themselves to nation status, which made their host nation terribly uncomfortable. Instead of kicking ’em out, Pharaoh put ’em to work.

As slaves.

So much for all those promises. It’s difficult to *bless* all the nations of the earth when you’re making bricks for a king who considers himself master of the universe. But unlike Egypt’s gods, Abraham’s God was

mobile. So when Abraham's God was good and ready, he showed up. He tapped Moses as his representative and sent him to Pharaoh with that unforgettable line.

Let's all say it together.

"Let my people go!"

After a bit of arm-twisting, Pharaoh did just that.

The reason I feel the freedom to summarize four hundred-plus years of Israel's history in four-plus sentences is our familiarity with the story line. But while many modern readers (and moviegoers) know the story, it's next to impossible for us not to miss its significance. In the most extraordinary, drawn-out, spectacle-filled, worthy-of Hollywood's-attention manner imaginable, Israel's God demonstrated his *mobility* and *authority*. Clearly, his authority was not constrained by geography. The earth was his jurisdiction. His message to Pharaoh was unequivocal:

You've got something that belongs to me and I'm not leaving here without it!

One by one, Israel's invisible God king humiliated Egypt's pantheon of gods. In the end, he worked it out for his people to plunder what was arguably the wealthiest nation on the planet. All this without holding anyone at the point of a sword. By the time Israel put Egypt in the rear-view mirror, Egypt's economy was decimated. Clearly, Israel's one God was mightier than all Egypt's gods combined. And all that without home field advantage. Israel's God was the visiting team. He was mobile. Mobile gods were not a thing in the BCs.

Fast-forward four months and we find the people of Israel camping at the foot of Mount Sinai watching Moses descend with God's instructions for the nation. We call it the *Ten Commandments*. But before it was over, it was more like the *600 Commandments*. Those famous first ten functioned a bit like a table of contents—the CliffNotes version. If you grew up in church, you may remember how this most ancient of ancient constitutions began:

I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.³

Translated: That was me who did that.

He continued,

You shall have no other gods before me.⁴

To which they thought, *Correct! We shall not. We saw what you're capable of.*⁵ And then the statement that set Israel apart from everybody else in the neighborhood:

You shall not make for yourself an image in the *form* of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them.⁶

When Moses finished reading the summary points of all God required of the nation, they responded with a hearty:

Everything the LORD has said we will do.⁷

But of course they didn't.

And we shouldn't be surprised.

They were at camp.

Does anybody keep their camp commitments?

I didn't. You probably didn't either. If you didn't grow up going to church camp . . . perhaps it's for the best.

The movies and bedtime versions of this narrative don't accurately reflect how Moses made several trips up and down Mount Sinai. Each time Moses returned with even more detailed instructions for the nation. One of these mountain-climbing excursions lasted forty days. While he was gone, the natives grew restless. You may remember this part from Sunday school:

When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, "Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him."⁸

Seriously?

God is still dictating the fine print and his people are already abandoning the first and most important commandment. How could that be?

Aaron answered them, "Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me." So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, "These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt."⁹

What? Those cows we just watched you make out of our plundered Egyptian gold were what delivered us from Egypt?

This is where most of us get confused. Why would recently freed slaves abandon the God who had recently freed them? How could they adopt something they saw created before their very eyes as an object of worship? It's confusing for us because we grew up believing in an invisible, everywhere-at-the-same-time God. But this was new territory for the people of Israel. Not having an object to worship was as confusing to them as their insistence on having one is to us. They *needed* something tangible. Visible. Stationary. That episode didn't end well. In the end it meant Moses had to make another trip up Mount Sinai to fetch yet another set of tablets.

So began Israel's formal relationship with the invisible, mobile God of Abraham. Freed from their Egyptian taskmasters and equipped with rules to live by, they prepared to break camp and begin their journey north to the promised land. But before they put Sinai in the rear-view

mirror, Moses commissioned the construction of a portable tent called the tabernacle to house and transport the sacred law tablets. When the construction of this tent was complete and the stone tablets were resting safely in the wooden box constructed for that purpose, something extraordinary happened. Moses describes it this way:

Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the *glory* of the LORD *filled* the tabernacle. Moses could not enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the *glory* of the LORD *filled* the tabernacle.¹⁰

God took up residence.

Nobody carried a portable statue-god into the tabernacle and set it on a pedestal, as was the custom in pagan nations. When Israel's God was satisfied that everything was as it should be, he chose to inhabit the tabernacle. He filled it with his glory. His presence. On his terms.

But even with the presence of God in their midst, Israel was still in no position to "bless" all the nations of the earth.

Just ask Pharaoh.

Nobody in Egypt was feeling "blessed" at that particular moment.

ONE LAST THING

In addition to Moses' multiple trips up and down Mount Sinai, there's something else we modern Bible readers miss as well. The content, wording, and arrangement of God's instructions to Israel are in the form of a legal contract. Scholars refer to this template as a *suzerainty treaty* or a *bilateral suzerainty treaty*. This form of agreement was used by non-equal parties when defining the terms and conditions of their relationship. In a suzerainty treaty, the greater power, the suzerain, dictates terms to the lesser power, the vassal.

Think curfew.

The point being, the Ten+ Commandments were more than commandments. They were just one part of a comprehensive legal contract or covenant between God (the Suzerain) and the nation. Here's some original wording:

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Write down these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a *covenant* with you and with Israel."¹¹

The events at Mount Sinai signaled the inauguration of a covenant relationship between God and the nation of Israel. As we will discover, this covenant would define and govern God's relationship with the nation of Israel for the next thousand-plus years. The primary terms and conditions are found in Exodus 19–24. They are repeated, expanded, and in some cases clarified in Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. But the following three verses pretty much summarize the deal points:

You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my *covenant*, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.¹²

This was a classic, *I will as long as you do* suzerain treaty. *Keep my commands and I'll keep you safe*. The agreement was bilateral and conditional. If the nation of Israel didn't uphold their end of the deal, God was under no obligation to uphold his.

Got it?

Let's keep moving.

FAST-FORWARD

Israel eventually arrived safely in the promised land. Once they arrived, however, they didn't do much in the way of blessing the inhabiting nations. Instead, they conquered and on occasion plundered their way to

dominance in the region.¹³ After several generations operating as a loosely organized theocracy ruled by judges, the elders of the nation decided it was time for something new. It was time for Israel to grow up and start acting like “all the other nations.”¹⁴ That would require a king. A visible king.¹⁵

KINGS AND THINGS

It was never God’s intention for Israel to have a king *other than himself*. But all the cool kids had kings. So the elders and leaders of the nation confronted the prophet Samuel and insisted he appoint a king. Samuel checked with God and received this response in return:

Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have *rejected*, but *they have rejected me* as their king.

Ouch!

As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, *forsaking me* and serving other gods, so they are doing to you. Now listen to them; but warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will claim as his rights.¹⁶

Samuel returned to the elders and did as God had instructed. He did his best to scare the king out of ’em, but to no avail.

But the people refused to listen to Samuel. “No!” they said. “We want a king over us.”¹⁷

What they said next set the stage for what happened next.

Then we will be *like all the other nations*, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles.¹⁸

The problem, of course, was God did not intend for Israel to be *like all the other nations*. God intended for Israel to stand out from *all the*

other nations because he was planning to do something through Israel on behalf of *all the other nations*.

They were a means to a global end.

In the end, they caved to peer pressure and got what they asked for. A king. Several actually. For decades they had more than one at a time. As predicted, most of Israel's kings were disasters. The nation paid for this decision in treasure and blood. In this way they did become *like all the other nations*. In spite of this, God kept his promise to Abraham. He did not abandon his global purposes for the nation. All the nations on the earth would indeed be blessed through a nation that insisted on being like all the other nations of the earth.

