

I AM

a few thoughts on faith and student life

// WHAT IS THIS BOOK?//

Great question. What you are holding in your hands is a short book containing a few thoughts on the person, words and work of the historical figure Jesus of Nazareth as well as some thoughts on what it means to be a student in this day and age.

This book is for you, whether you consider yourself a Christ follower or not. Such a monumental historical figure like Jesus Christ is worth exploring for several reasons, particularly because of the massive influence he has had on world history as well as the outrageous claims that he made. He cannot be dismissed as simply a nice guy from 2000 years ago when you actually look at what he did and what he said about himself.

The first half of this book explores eight claims made by Jesus about himself and the world, and what that means for people everywhere, including us. The second half of this book explores what it looks like to be a student, both from the Christian worldview as well from the lens of the cultural moment we find ourselves in.

Whoever you are and whatever your views might be, we hope this short book containing “a few thoughts” might help us understand the intersection of faith and student life a little better.

//WHAT'S IN THIS BOOK?//

- Part 1 - JESUS
 - Before Abraham was, I AM
 - I AM the Way, the Truth and the Life
 - I AM the Resurrection and the Life
 - I AM the Door
 - I AM the Bread of Life
 - I AM the Light of the World
 - I AM the True Vine
 - I AM the Good Shepherd
- Part 2 - US
 - I am Young
 - I am Learning New Things Fast
 - I am Surrounded by Cultural Diversity
 - I am in a Liberal Environment
 - I am a Millennial or Gen Zedder
 - I am Invited to Join God

PART ONE
JESUS

// BEFORE ABRAHAM WAS, I AM //

The Gospel of John is a narrative giving account of the life of Jesus Christ as was witnessed by his disciples. Throughout the book, Jesus makes eight “I Am” statements as he describes to us who he is, and why he changes everything. Chapter eight of John presents the Jews trying to figure out who Jesus is. They’ve seen what Jesus can do, and the wisdom that he speaks, but they want to know what authority he has to say or do these often controversial things. In no uncertain terms, Jesus lays it out for them by saying that, “before Abraham was, I Am.” To say that the Jews of this time were familiar with the phrase “I Am” is a major understatement. “I Am” is how God identified himself to Moses when calling Moses to rescue the Israelites out of Egypt. This short statement has more depth than what we might see at a first glance. It refers to his absoluteness in a number of aspects. It speaks to the fact that God has no beginning or end in time. He created time, and is not limited to it. God is therefore completely independent of anything or anyone. He existed before all creation, and did not create the universe out of a need. In fact, every piece of creation is dependent on God, since none of it (and none of us) would be here had God not created us. “I Am” also refers to the fact that God is the absolute standard of truth, beauty and goodness. Nothing compares to him in those regards, and everything apart from him will fall short in comparison to his truth, beauty and goodness.

So, after dissecting what “I Am” actually entails, we can see how wild Jesus’ statement was. Jesus was saying that he was God - he is eternal, creator, absolute in truth, beauty and goodness, and absolute in so many more aspects. It doesn’t seem strange anymore that the Jews picked up stones to kill Jesus with. Those types of claims are blasphemous, if not true. As we move through the other seven “I Am” statements of Christ in the Gospel of John, we hope that you will find no other answer than that Jesus was definitely God in the form of flesh.

// I AM THE WAY, TRUTH AND LIFE //

In John 14, Jesus tells his disciples about a home that he is preparing for them. He is not speaking about fluffing up the pillows in the guest room for them to come stay. He is referring to the sacrifice of his life that he would make so that we could remain in the presence of God forever. This sacrifice became necessary when we, as humanity, rejected God's good and loving authority, and chose our own ways over his. This is what the Bible calls sin. From that moment in the Garden of Eden, we lost our access to the presence of God, and a relationship with him. So in this chapter, Jesus is speaking of restoring that relationship between individuals and God. When the disciples ask how they can reach this gift that Jesus is preparing for them, he tells them not only that he is the way to the gift of the presence of God, but that he is also the truth and the life. In our current-day context, many people may find it offensive that Jesus calls himself the truth. Isn't truth relative to a person's beliefs? Shouldn't we be tolerant of each individual's thoughts on truth? Jesus says that that way of thinking does not belong anywhere near a person's belief in him. He says that there is one truth, and it is that Jesus Christ is needed for salvation. Following him is the way that we must walk in order to know God. There is nothing contradictory to him that can be called truth, and there is no path that we could walk that would give us life if we are against him. This would have been as offensive in Jesus' days on earth as

it might be to you today. However, Jesus did not leave space for any doubts about the magnitude of his place in our lives. He is the only unchanging, certain truth that will satisfy us and give us true, eternal life.

// I AM THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE //

John 11 presents another “I Am” statement of Christ – “I am the resurrection and the life.” The chapter begins with the illness and death of Jesus’ friend, Lazarus. When Jesus hears the news of his friend, he makes his way to visit the family, and, by the time that Jesus arrives, Lazarus has been dead for four days. Jesus speaks with Martha, Lazarus’ sister, and hears statements similar to what you might have heard said often by Christians when a loved one has died. She says that if Jesus had been present, her brother would still be alive. She blames her heartache on a lack of intervention on Christ’s part. She then says that she knows that her brother will rise again – essentially that she will see him again in heaven. Martha is trying to comfort herself by thinking far into the future, when the world will be restored. She does not understand what must happen first. Jesus draws her attention to himself. He says that he is the resurrection and the life. Not only would Jesus miraculously bring Lazarus back to life at that current point in time, but Martha’s brother will only rise again in the future through Christ’s own death and resurrection, where he defeats the power of death. Jesus had to endure the pain of death on the cross for life to be available to all that believe in him. This eternal life in the presence of God can only be a reality through Christ. It is never to be taken for granted – our lives were fought for through his pain, and we reap the benefits of his incredible generosity. He gave his life for

ours, and is the only one who could have earned this eternal life for us. He is our resurrection.

// I AM THE DOOR //

Chapter ten of the Gospel of John uses sheep as a metaphor for those who have accepted Christ as their Saviour. At the time that this book was written, sheep were a highly valued commodity, and shepherds were appointed to care for and protect this livestock. Sheep were kept in an enclosure made of stones, with a single opening for the sheep to come in and out of the enclosure. There was no gate for protection, but only the shepherd, who would sleep in front of the opening, monitoring what was allowed in or out of the enclosure. In verse seven, Jesus says that he is the door of the sheep. This role of the shepherd is what he is referring to. Jesus is the shepherd, monitoring what is allowed to come near his sheep, and when the sheep enter or leave the enclosure. For us, this means that we cannot receive salvation without believing that Jesus is the Son of God, and that he died to save us from our sinful nature. Jesus shows us through this metaphor that without the sacrifice of his life on the cross, we could never know God. Our sin would have made it impossible for this relationship to exist. Jesus gave us access to God. He is the only means by which we can be saved, and through whom we can know God. In order to be saved, we must believe that what the Bible says about Jesus is true and reliable, and that we can know who God is through the Bible's testimony of Christ's life on earth.

// I AM BREAD OF LIFE //

John 6 begins with the miracle of Jesus feeding five thousand people who had gathered to listen to him teach. After blessing the two fish and five loaves of bread, they were distributed to the people, and each one of them ate until they were full. This miracle awed Jesus' followers – Jesus had provided for their physical needs in a way that they would never have expected. Shortly after this, Jesus' followers seek him out again. Jesus knows their hearts. He knows that they have come to him for their physical needs to be met once more. They are seeking the benefits that Jesus can give them, rather than Jesus himself. Challenging their thinking, Jesus tells them that they are eating a bread that will only leave them hungry again, and drinking a water that will leave them thirsty. The fulfilment of these needs that they are placing above everything else will not bring them life or satisfaction. He is the Bread of Life - the ultimate satisfaction that they could ever find. Jesus introduces this idea that if they had nothing else besides faith in him, they would have everything. Following Christ means setting aside everything that we turn to for satisfaction, and seeking satisfaction in Christ. Every other "bread," be it a career, a relationship, affirmation from people, or anything else that we turn to for fulfilment, will leave us searching for more. We'll always be looking for the next promotion, more affection, or another person to validate our worth. Every other "bread" will distract us from the one person who gives

life, rather than taking it. Jesus is where we will find the only lasting satisfaction. There is no true and sustainable life apart from Jesus, and he lavishes this life on us if we would only ask.

// I AM THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD //

Remember the days of playing endless games of hide and seek with your friends? Your prime hiding spot might have been at the back of a cupboard, behind a curtain, or under a piece of furniture. What did all the best hiding places have in common? Darkness. Your hiding away was much less noticeable in the darker spots of the house. Now that we are older, darkness is still associated with hiding away things that we do not want others to see. When we are ashamed of something, we keep that sin in darkness, away from the sight of man, and the sight of God. We find this sense of security in the hope that our shame won't be found out. But, as we have learnt from childhood until now, we are always found out eventually. In John 8, Jesus says that he is the light of the world. He tells us that following him means stepping into the light. This can sound scary – everything that we have worked to keep under cover and in darkness will be revealed in the light. However, through Christ's forgiveness, we are given freedom from everything that we had to hide away. He brings our guilt into the light so that he can abolish it, and make us new and pure. Living a life with Christ at the centre means that we are able to live lives that don't need to be hidden. He forgives us when we fall into sin again, and he draws us towards good things that are not shameful, so that we do not have any need to hide parts of our lives from God, or from the people around us. Jesus

stating that he is the light of the world means that he is the only one able to free us from our states of darkness.

// I AM THE TRUE VINE //

In John 15, Jesus uses the imagery of a vine and its branches to explain our relationship with him. Without a vine, branches would really just be dried up twigs on the ground. They would have no chance of growth or producing fruit, but would progressively wither away. Branches need to be attached to a vine in order for them to have life, grow, and be fruitful. Jesus says that he is the one that provides our nourishment for growth. Without being closely connected to Christ, we will not grow in our faith, or be able to produce the traits that reflect God's character. These things are only accomplished as we seek out a deeper relationship with Christ, and he transforms us through that relationship. Jesus also says that the Father is the vinedresser. For a plant to flourish to its full potential, someone must tend to the plant, ensuring that it has everything that it needs for growth, and removing any part of the plant that would inhibit this growth. This is what the Father does. He loves us enough to challenge us and cause us to produce good fruit. This fruit might look like an increase in love and care for those around us, or other feeling drawn towards actions that further the kingdom of God. If there is sin in our life that is inhibiting us from reflecting God's nature, he cuts that sin away and frees us from it. Knowing that God is taking care of our lives in this way shows us that this vine is the safest, most beautiful place to abide. We are challenged to increase

our faith and glorify God, and protected from dangers that might distract us from him.

// I AM THE GOOD SHEPHERD //

Jesus explains an aspect of his identity as our good shepherd through drawing a comparison between himself and a hired worker. A hired worker is not affected by the wellbeing of the sheep. He is paid the same wages every day, regardless of the number of sheep that he is protecting. However, someone who owns the sheep will care deeply if one of them is injured. The sheep belong to him. He knows everything that there is to know about each sheep individually, because he was there when they were born or added to the flock, and he has watched them grow. In fact, he has been a major influencer on their growth, ensuring that they have the nutrition and protection that they need for their development. When Jesus says that he knows his own sheep, and they know him, he means that he knows those who belong to him in the deepest sense possible. In him, we have this belonging, and he cares for us more than anything or anyone else in this world could claim to. He proved his love to us in the ultimate act of laying down his life for us. His love for us motivated him to give up everything that he had, so that we might be able to live in his presence forever.

PART TWO
US

// I AM YOUNG //

Unless you are an extreme outlier, and that is awesome if you are, you are young - students typically are. The Bible isn't silent on what it means to be young. It speaks into the traps and pitfalls as well as the strengths and advantages of being young.

Perhaps the best thing we can start off by saying is that God is with the young as much as he is with anyone. He uses and blesses people from the womb to the tomb. Young people have a particular energy and vigor that tapers off the older people get. Young people are brilliant at running hard and fast with tasks, dreams, missions and, in many ways and for many reasons, can probably push themselves further and harder than those who are older. Physically, they generally require less rest and are full of strength and passion.

What might young people expect for those around them? In our day and age we find ourselves in an interesting position in history. Historically, young people can and should expect people to look down on them in many ways. God actually encourages young people to not let this hinder them and to set an example to all people, not of proving ourselves and doing what we think is right, but rather an example of godliness. On the other hand however, we find ourselves in a culture that worships youth. Many young people feel the pressure to "make it" before they turn thirty, which is a new western

phenomenon and not a universal norm. There is an expectation then to succeed, as well as to prove ourselves and chart our own courses despite what the previous generation may think or advise.

This thought leads us into some of the pitfalls of youth that God warns about. Whether we like to hear it or not, young people are inexperienced in a number of areas. We have not had the possibility of many life experiences, nor have we experienced simply living through decades, seeing the ebbs and flows of culture, and getting to practically test whether the knowledge that we have acquired is it true and helpful, or not. We could call this wisdom, or at least, a part of what it means to have wisdom, which is something that older people naturally have. Does this mean young people cannot have any wisdom? Not at all. Many are very wise. Does this mean all older people are wise? Not a chance. Many are very foolish despite the knowledge they have.

Despite relative inexperience in many areas of life due to our age, we as young people tend to not believe that we actually are inexperienced. God continues to warn young people in particular to pursue humility as well as respect for older people and voices in their lives. We, as young people, are very good at following our hearts and passions, and God speaks to this as well, warning us to flee from reacting impulsively. All of this can cause what we know as the generational gap, where generations

are alienated from each other. This is something to watch out for and fight against by using our energy and passion constructively and faithfully, as well as by recognizing that we don't know it all and we do need older, wiser people who have seen and understood more than we know.

// I AM LEARNING NEW THINGS FAST //

Knowledge, like money, sex or power, is inherently a wonderful gift from God that is meant to be used and acquired to display God's glory and goodness to the world. They are to be used and enjoyed for human flourishing. Much like money and sex though, when God and his good intentions are removed from the equation, knowledge can become distorted and dangerous. The Bible actually speaks of two different types of knowledge. There is dangerous knowledge and good knowledge.

Dangerous knowledge is knowledge that is learned through an experience of evil. It separates from God. It is ultimately foolish - although it is called wisdom by the world around us, it causes the breakdown of human flourishing. It removes what the ancient Hebrews called *Shalom* - the perfect wholeness of peace and harmony experience by all of creation. Gaining any knowledge, even good knowledge, brings about the risk of becoming proud and arrogant. Once again, this can lead us to ruin as our own apparent greatness blinds us to reason and advice.

Good knowledge is broad and contains everything that we can learn from the world that will help us to flourish and, in turn, cause society to follow. This includes learning from the past, learning from our mistakes, as well as learning how others think and why. Learning all

these things helps us navigate life and helps us live the life God has designed us to live. Every subject also provides us with a knowledge of God. History shows us how God has sustained and controlled all of human history. Politicians, kings and queens rise and fall at his hand. Psychology helps us understand the human mind and our behaviour. As we study it, we learn about the God in whose image every human has been made. Mathematics shows us a God of order and logic, who has set up this world according to his wisdom. We can choose to flow with his wisdom for blessing, or fight against it for harm.

Education, particularly tertiary education, can lead to an accumulation of knowledge, but not necessarily wisdom. Wisdom is gained from putting knowledge into practice and living it out. Students at universities are often on the cutting edge of new ideas, much like the philosophers who sat on Mars Hill in Athens waiting to hear new concepts, and constantly being given large amounts of new information. Because of this, students run the risk of latching onto ideas quickly without testing if they are in fact good, true, and helpful to society over the long haul, and if they create harmony in our experience of God. Wisdom must be gained from the Bible and from those who have walked the road of life with him, ahead of us. Wisdom can also be gained by having a humble heart that fears God above all else. There is much more that can be said about the pursuit of wisdom, but these are the starting points.

// I AM SURROUNDED BY CULTURAL DIVERSITY //

Most universities are extremely diverse. This does not mean that every national subculture or global culture is represented equally and proportionally, but many are represented in some shape or form. Often we can find a microcosm of the country as a whole, apart from perhaps the wide range of ages, although if you included staff and faculty members this would change. In South Africa we have male, female, from poor, middle and upper class backgrounds, representing almost every race and language in our country, as well as foreigners from all over Africa and the rest of the world. Universities and university towns often have similar attributes to urban centers when it comes to the diversity of people. It is a cultural and religious melting pot. In this environment we will find all sorts of world views, spiritual beliefs, cultural practices and expectations and cultural expressions through the arts. In a way, it is a glimpse of the world that God interacts with every single day. Environments like these will test what you truly believe and you will be forced to take ownership of your own world view. No longer can you just go with what everyone around you believes in your culture, because you will find multiple views, multiple gods, multiple ideas of right and wrong. This is not a bad thing. In fact, it is good thing to figure out what you believe to be true and hold onto it in the midst of constant challenge. Lastly, the kingdom of God is going to one day include people of every tribe and tongue, and although everyone in that

Kingdom will have bowed their knee to King Jesus, it will still be a wonderfully diverse group of different people, albeit with a common goal. University is a great place to start getting to know people that are not like you.

// I AM IN A LIBERAL ENVIRONMENT //

Although full of multiple perspectives, it may be said that universities in particular have a liberal bent. In some ways, it is only because of this liberal bent that so many diverse beliefs and perspectives can inhabit the same space, albeit with complexity and challenges. Liberalism is a political and moral philosophy based on liberty and equality. Liberals espouse a wide array of views depending on their understanding of these principles, but they generally support civil rights, democracy, secularism, gender equality, racial equality, internationalism, freedom of speech, freedom of the press and freedom of religion. Liberalism became a distinct movement in the Age of Enlightenment, when it became popular among Western philosophers and economists.

Although there are various strands, scholars have identified the following major common facets of liberal thought: believing in equality and individual liberty, supporting private property and individual rights, supporting the idea of limited constitutional government, and recognising the importance of related values such as pluralism, toleration, autonomy, bodily integrity and consent.

Practically, what we experience then is an environment of tolerance and inclusion, at least in theory. There is a strong sense of postmodernism where there is no such

thing as absolute truth - relativism is supreme in these parts. It has to be, if the individual right to freedom, self identity and autonomy is the highest value. Expect people to take offence easily and take criticism personally because self is the highest value. No one is able to tell someone else that they are wrong necessarily, because everyone simply has their perspective which is equally as valuable and true as the next persons. Because of the high view of self autonomy, we should also expect a general suspicion around authority and those in power, often in the realm of organized religion.

Couple all this with the strong traditional backgrounds of many students that are not western in their origin and we really do find ourselves in a fascinating, yet challenging environment, whoever we might be.

// I AM A MILLENNIAL / GEN ZEDDER //

Millennials are often categorized as the generation of people born between 1980 and the mid-90s. Generation Z then, is roughly the generation born from around the mid-90s to the end of roughly the first decade of this century. The majority of students fall into at least one of these two generational categories with Gen Z set to become increasingly predominant over the coming decade.

Millennials are the first generation brought up immersed in digital technology. It is completely a part of their life, particularly engaging with their friends and the world at large through social media. They have a very positive attitude toward technology. Millennials are on track to become the most educated generation in western history and in the next thirty years will dominate the globe as 39% of the voting population. They are quite conscious of the world in which they live and are concerned about the environment and social causes like no generation before them. Being global citizens they value diversity and tolerance and are outraged by social injustice. Any church planter should see clear bridges here with our beliefs as God's people when it comes to social justice. They are highly compassionate people. Millennials are more typically liberal - they are more likely to support same-sex marriage and the legalization of marijuana. They are hyper aware of any discrimination including race, gender, sexual orientation

etc... They are progressive and looking for new ideas and policies to move nations forward. They are practical and results oriented, as well as team oriented. Although they are liberal, they are typically secular and non-religious. They are averse to anything too organized ie religion is not cool, spirituality is. They are weary about authority and leadership. They are also after “reality” and are suspicious of things that are too slick or feel fake. They are nomadic and do not like to settle down too long - whether that is in a relationship or in the workplace. They like things instantly rather than playing a long game of investment - this can lead to impatience. They value entertainment and spending money on pleasurable pursuits. Lastly, they are adventurous and keen to take risks and travel!

Although we are only starting to understand and think about Generation Z, a few things can be said. In the West, both the September 11 terrorist attacks in the US and the economic recession of 2008 have hugely impacted this generation, although not many of them have memories of the 9/11 events, and certainly not of a world before them. The relative global optimism of the 90s is not something they are familiar with as they have grown up in a world where the US has been active in the “war against terror”. The financial stress faced by their parents in 2008 has also impacted their outlook on life. Whereas millennials began to discover technology and the internet at an early age or in their teenage years, members of Gen Z have been born into that world. They

have never known a world without cell phones and social media came into their lives at a very young age, whereas most millenials encountered Facebook in their teens and twenties. They have been born into a customizable world, one where you don't need to wait until a certain time, on a certain weekday to watch the next episode of your show or plan a trip to the store to see what new books or games were available. They know a world dominated by on-demand service where many things are available to you when you want it, where you want it.

For better or for worse, these are some of the characteristics and mindsets we can expect from ourselves and those around us as we continue to grow up in this rapidly changing world.

// I AM INVITED TO JOIN GOD //

Where does all this information leave us? Well, firstly you need to decide if this is true or not. The claims made about students, particularly the more cultural and context dependent statements, don't claim to be infallible truth, but the claims of Jesus do. He claimed them to be true. He claimed himself to be truth. The choice before you is this - will you believe that he is who he says he is, has done what he says he has done and will do for you what he says he will? Jesus is inviting you into the adventure of recreating the world into what it was meant to be. God is on a cosmic mission to renew the universe and he is inviting you to join him in it. How do you get in on this invitation? Simple, by believing Jesus - believing who he is, and what he has done to forgive you of your sins, restore your relationship to God and set you on a new trajectory for a new life. He now invites you to follow him as the Lord and ruler of the cosmos and to follow his rulership that is growing all over the globe. Will you join him?