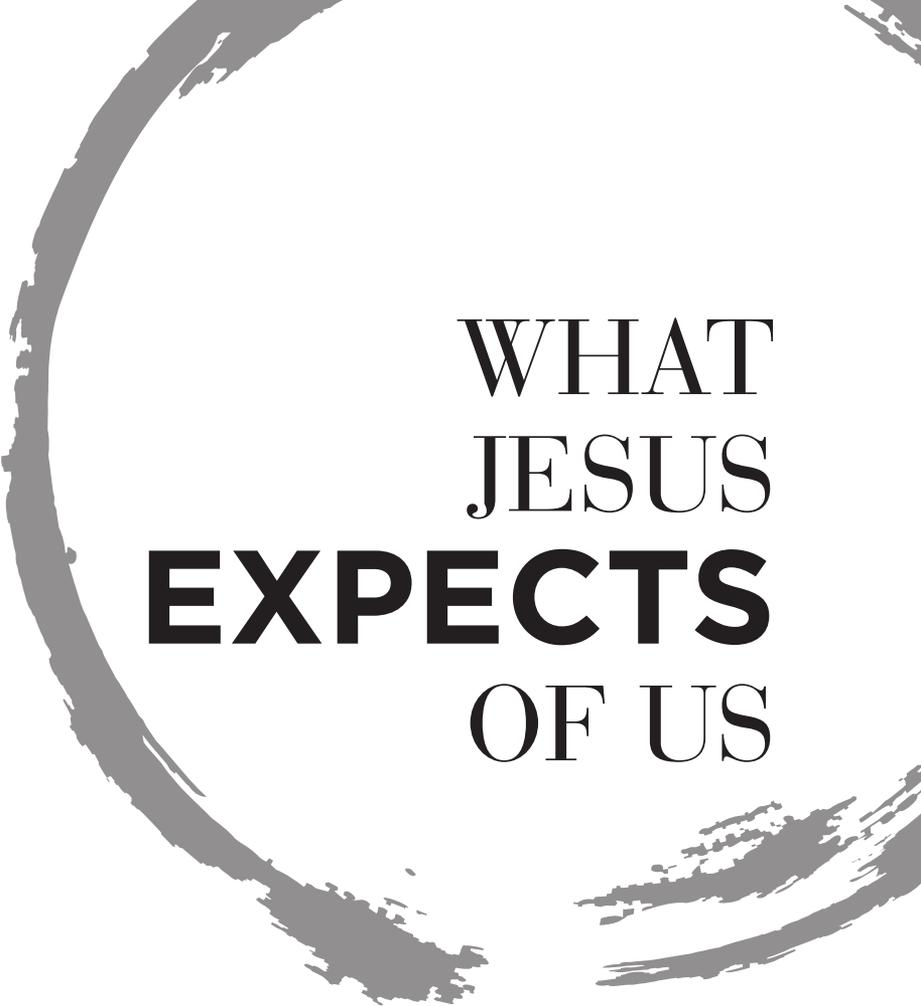




WHAT
JESUS
EXPECTS
OF US

SCOTT ENGLE



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Plano, Texas

WHAT JESUS EXPECTS OF US
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Introduction

The apostle Paul once wrote a letter to circulate among the earliest house churches in western Asia Minor, imploring them “**to lead a life worthy of the calling** to which you have been called” (Ephesians 4:1). His challenge resonates just as strongly today.

But what does it mean to lead a worthy life?

It is a question being asked less and less often. Instead, I hear mostly about all the blessings that Jesus is going to pour out on us, and he does. We want Jesus to heal our wounds, cure our sicknesses, strengthen our marriages. We want Jesus to be our therapist, our life coach. But what if we could pray not just to receive blessings, but to understand what Jesus expects of us, and for the power to hear and to act? For Jesus charged us with doing more.

Jesus said that we are to “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them . . . teaching them to obey” (Matthew 28:19-20) and to be Jesus’ “witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). A worthy life is grounded in the love of Christ, and marked by humility, gentleness, and patience as we embrace our oneness in Christ (Ephesians 4:2-5). It is a life infused by a genuine love of others and of God, a love that is not sentimental but is lived out in our service, our worship, and our building up for his kingdom. Yes, all this is what Jesus expects of us and hopes for us.

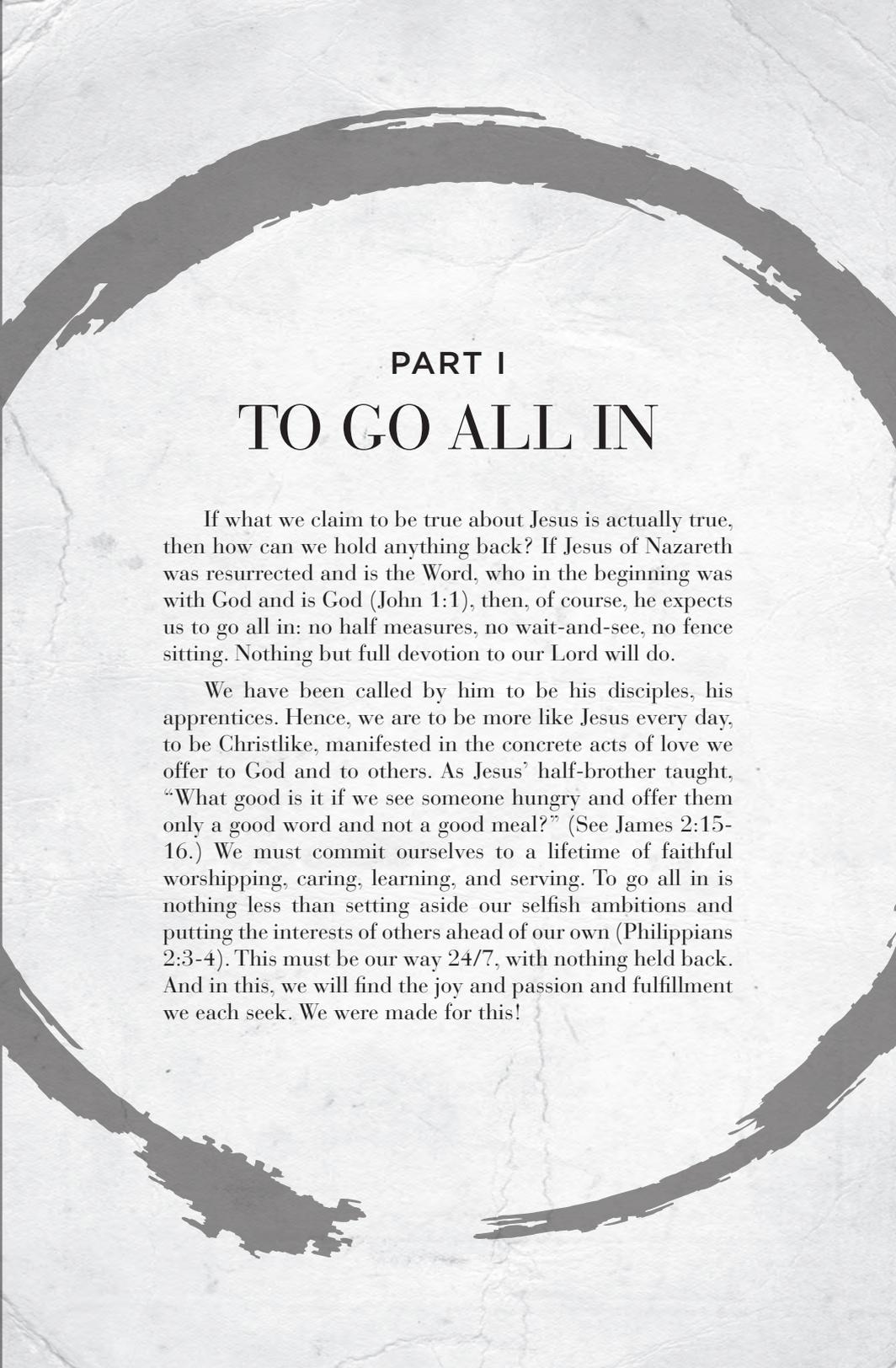
This book offers a set of Bible studies to help us answer the question, “What does Jesus expect of us?” It assumes that Jesus is more than a divine vending machine—that with faith comes responsibility. Every chapter has a single purpose in mind: to open up the pages of Scripture so that you, the reader, might “have the power to comprehend, with all the saints [i.e., believers], what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Ephesians 3:18-19).

Let’s say you undertake to read through the entire Bible in a year. What good will it do you if you don’t connect some dots, grasp the larger story of

Introduction

God's redemptive work, and generally comprehend what you are reading? These studies will help. Not only can you reflect on what Jesus expects of us all, you will begin to understand the biblical story and our shared faith in ways you may not have before. My suggestion is to read a chapter daily and then put the book away for a while. Come back later and read them again. This is how we learn . . . at least it is how I've learned and how I've heard God's Word as I never had before. Indeed, faith does seek understanding.

Scott L. Engle,
Plano, Texas



PART I

TO GO ALL IN

If what we claim to be true about Jesus is actually true, then how can we hold anything back? If Jesus of Nazareth was resurrected and is the Word, who in the beginning was with God and is God (John 1:1), then, of course, he expects us to go all in: no half measures, no wait-and-see, no fence sitting. Nothing but full devotion to our Lord will do.

We have been called by him to be his disciples, his apprentices. Hence, we are to be more like Jesus every day, to be Christlike, manifested in the concrete acts of love we offer to God and to others. As Jesus' half-brother taught, "What good is it if we see someone hungry and offer them only a good word and not a good meal?" (See James 2:15-16.) We must commit ourselves to a lifetime of faithful worshipping, caring, learning, and serving. To go all in is nothing less than setting aside our selfish ambitions and putting the interests of others ahead of our own (Philippians 2:3-4). This must be our way 24/7, with nothing held back. And in this, we will find the joy and passion and fulfillment we each seek. We were made for this!



Chapter 1

Lukewarm about God?

Jeremiah 29:10–14

For thus says the LORD: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the LORD, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the LORD, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

Revelation 3:14–22

And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the origin of God's creation: "I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth. For you say, 'I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.' You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. Therefore, I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich; and white robes to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen; and salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see. I reprove and discipline those whom I love. Be earnest, therefore, and repent. Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me. To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches."

Hot, Cold, or Lukewarm?

How would you characterize your own relationship with God?

This passage from Revelation hits my heart hard each time I read it. You see, I know that I spent much of my adult life as a Laodicean Christian.

I went to church much of the time, sang in the choir, and taught Sunday School now and then, but I was lukewarm. I would have told someone that I believed in Jesus and would have been able to spout some smart-sounding theology, but I was rather indifferent to the whole thing. I could take care of my own needs quite well, or so I thought. Sadly, I did not realize all this at the time. It is only by looking back from my new life in Christ that I can see my tepid faith for what it was.

When I read that Jesus wants to spit these wealthy, lukewarm Laodiceans out of his mouth, I take a big gulp and thank God that he grabbed me rather than tossed me.

Which Is It?

It is no surprise to us that Jesus would prefer the Laodiceans be on fire and totally committed, trusting God in all things, and working to build his kingdom. Surely the creator of all things, the God of love, ought to be the focus of such passion and desire.

But why would Jesus prefer the Laodiceans be cold? That seems odd. Why would Jesus prefer people not know him at all, or even hate him, to simple indifference? In the gospel of John, we see repeatedly that with Jesus there is no fence straddling—no room for indifference. One believes or one does not believe. One path leads to the light, the other remains in the darkness. One way leads to life, the other to death. And it is Jesus who is “the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6).

In John’s gospel and this message to the Laodiceans, the concept of “lukewarm Christian” is an oxymoron. It makes no sense. How could someone have genuinely been born from above (John 3), have given their life over to Jesus Christ, and yet be indifferent about the whole thing? At least Jesus knows where he stands with a person who is either hot or cold.

Many who come to church are like I once was—present but apathetic, not allowing God into any part of my life beyond Sunday morning. A little worship here and there suits some just fine. But Jesus stands at the door, knocking, waiting for us to open it, not just peek through the crack.

God Never Gives Up—Neither Should We

I do not know whether you would call the Jews exiled to Babylonia hot, cold, or lukewarm. Shattered and lost would probably be more accurate. They had been relocated over a thousand miles from Jerusalem with no prospects of returning. They believed that they were being punished for their abandonment of God. In essence, they were headed to prison to serve out a life sentence in bondage.

Yet, this letter from the prophet Jeremiah bears a message from God that even though the generation sent into exile will not return, their children will come back to Jerusalem. This passage is grounded upon a faithful God who never gives up on promises made. And God promises the people a “future with hope” (Jeremiah 29:11).

We might think that God would simply reach out and accomplish all this. God shouldn’t need help. “I know the plans I have for you” (v. 11). Yet, these very plans will be shaped and affected by the people. When they call upon God and pray to him . . . then God will hear them (v. 12). The people will find God, and God will find them, but they are to seek God with their heart (v. 13).

There is a deep mystery here that speaks to the profound love that God has for us. You and I, weak and confused though we may be, influence the plans and the actions of God. It is true that our faith is a gift from God so that no one can boast about it (Ephesians 2:8-9), and yet we are to search for God. We are to pray. We are to open the door. As scholar Anthony Saldarini puts it in his commentary on Jeremiah:

None of that may be quite logical, but it is that peculiar biblical claim about human freedom and divine initiative, or, if you will, divine freedom and human will. . . . God’s will and freedom do not run rampant over human words and deeds—good or bad—nor does human intentionality so control what happens that God is unable to affect the divine purposes. What “happens” occurs within that tension. So we count on God to be God and we pray to God in order to bring that about.¹

Pray and Search

At one point in my life, I was lost. So lost that I did something I think I had never done before. I got on my knees and prayed. I prayed that God would pull me close, would give me direction and purpose. In short, rescue me.

And God did rescue me. Over a period of a few months, God began to move me out of my lukewarm state and brought my wife into my life. By the grace of God, I abandoned my indifference toward God and embraced the life-fulfilling passion that comes from an ever-growing relationship with our Lord.

1. Anthony Saldarini, “Jeremiah” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: General Articles & Introduction, Commentary, & Reflections for Each Book of the Bible Including the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books in Twelve Volumes, vol. 6* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2001), p. 796.

People sometimes come to me to talk about that time in my life, for they themselves are lukewarm and lost. My advice to them is always the same: pray and do. Pray and then do the things you would do if you felt the passion you want to feel. Attend worship each week. Join a Sunday School or a Bible study. Find a place to serve on a regular basis. There is infinite variety in how this plays out in our lives, but the basics have always been the same—pray and do.

For a Deeper Understanding

Jeremiah's Letter

As the unrelenting pressure of the Babylonian empire fell on the Jews in Jerusalem nearly 600 years before Jesus, Nebuchadnezzar began sending them into exile. A large wave left for Babylonia in 597 BC, ten years before the final destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. This passage from the book of Jeremiah is part of a letter Jeremiah wrote while still in Jerusalem to those Jews in exile.

The message from God that Jeremiah delivers in the letter is grounded in future hope, though not the immediate moment. The Jews have been exiled to a distant land. They are instructed to go ahead and build homes and raise their families. They are even to pray that Babylon prospers, for then they will prosper as well. It will be decades before God brings them home.

However, the message also carries a warning. The people are not to trust lying “prophets and diviners” amongst them. Their visions and dreams are not to be trusted. We aren’t told the specifics, but there were false prophets in Israel and there are false prophets among those exiled in Babylon. Based on the conflicts between Jeremiah and some of the false prophets, it seems most likely that the deceivers were promising a quick end to the exile.

The Seven Churches of Revelation

Revelation is a biblical book that people either seem to be fascinated by or seem to simply avoid in confusion. Some read it as if it is a movie script and wait for it to play out. Others see no message in Revelation relevant to our contemporary lives. However, in truth, Revelation is writing of extraordinary power and profound meaning for us all. It is “God-breathed” just as much as the other 65 books of the Bible. Indeed, some of the most moving and best-known scenes in all of Scripture are found in Revelation. After the opening vision of Christ in the first chapter, John’s vision turns to seven

Lukewarm about God?

letters from Christ to actual churches in western Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey), one of which is the letter to the church at Laodicea.

Each of the seven Christian communities (Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea) gets a different message from Jesus. A good exercise is to read each letter and ask yourself which would be addressed to your church. The specifics of the letters are not always easy to understand, but the thrust of each is clear. The Christians in Smyrna are encouraged in their suffering and poverty. They are rich in what matters. The Philadelphians are encouraged in their patient endurance. Jesus' words to these churches, when laid against the warnings given to the wealthy Laodiceans, remind us that for 2,000 years the way of Christ has been marked by suffering, not prosperity.

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