

Excerpts for *The First Idiot in Heaven: Secrets of the Apostle Paul (And why the meek merely inherit the Earth)*

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FROM THE BACK COVER:

While on Earth, Jesus said some difficult things. He told the rich to give away all their money, and the joyful to become mourners. If you wanted to inherit the Earth, you had to be meek. If your eye offended you, no problem—as long as you plucked it out. A friend of mine said, “Can I start following Jesus on Monday? I’d like to enjoy the weekend.”

Obviously, the words and commandments of Jesus are pure, perfect, holy—and *meant for Israelites*. Jesus Himself said, “I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matthew 15:24).

Is it possible we have been struggling along someone else’s path? What if the words in red were never meant to be *our* marching orders?

Several months after leaving Earth, the Jewish Messiah appeared as a very non-Jewish light to a self-righteous idiot en route to Damascus to kill Christians.

Up next? Not only a startling new destiny for believers (heaven instead of Earth) but a new message of pure grace for *all* humanity.

This is that story.

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INTRODUCTION:

You want to live like Jesus, you really do. You’re sincere as can be, but it’s an uphill climb. You love people and you love God, so maybe today will be the day you can finally imitate His Son. Maybe today you can finally be meek, turn the other cheek, and rejoice while getting mud thrown in your face.

Think how good it would feel to be pure—to have no sin and no guilt. Think how good it would feel to wake up calm each morning, love everyone during the day, and rest your head at night with a prayer for your enemies.

If only.

And yet it never quite works out that way. In the darkness of your bed each night, you know who you are. Jesus was Jesus, but you are you. When you curl up beneath the covers, you face the terrible truth: It has been another day of failure and frustration.

If only there were a gospel in the Bible for common, ordinary human beings. Or even mediocre people. It seems the gospel of Jesus that tells us to live like Jesus sets the bar just a little too, um, *high*.

I know all about it. I was raised Catholic. The nuns told me all I had to do was be meek and mild like Jesus (plus do everything else like Jesus) and I would go to heaven. It seemed like a tall order for someone with cartoons on his underpants. What did I know? All I wanted was to play football and eat candy.

I remember asking one of the nuns tormenting me if *she* was meek and mild; I asked her if *she* did everything like Jesus. My mistake. She fingered her rosary, made threatening gestures with a yardstick, and said of course she did everything like Jesus; she did it for a living. I wasn't so sure. None of the drawings I saw of Jesus ever showed Him holding a green yardstick.

Nonetheless, when Jesus was on Earth, He said some difficult things. He told the rich to give away all their money and follow Him (Mark 10:21). He told sophisticated people to become as children (Matthew 18:3). If confidence was your thing, you had to lose it. Were you happy? Sorry to hear that; you needed to become sorrowful instead. Here was the prescription: Give up joy for mourning—and call me in the morning.

All you have to do is obey all the commandments (Matthew 28:20). If your hand makes you stumble, simply cut it off (Matthew 5:30). If your eye wanders, it's not a problem—as long as you pluck it out (Mark 9:47). Quit whining; it's better to enter the kingdom maimed and blind than to keep making fatal mistakes. If you walk a mile with someone, tough luck—you must walk another mile (Matthew 5:41). If someone sues you for the shirt off your back, it's still not enough; you must give away your coat as well (Matthew 5:40). Throw in your shoes and socks while you're at it. Better to be safe (and naked) than sorry.

Be watching and praying—or else (Luke 21:36). If the Bridegroom arrives and your lamp has no oil, you will be cast into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping, gnashing of teeth (Matthew 25:30), and a pathetic lack of adult beverages.

Now go in peace, love and serve the Lord—and *have a good day*.

No wonder a friend of mine, after reading the four gospels, said, “I want to live like Jesus, Martin—I really do—but can I start Monday? I'd like to enjoy the weekend.”

Obviously, the words of Jesus are perfect. His commandments are pure and holy, refined seven times—and *meant for Israelites*. Jesus Himself said, “I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matthew 15:24, *New King James Version*).

Why have we not believed these simple words? Is it too shocking to think that—while on Earth—Jesus preached a national rather than a universal message? Too tough to admit that Jesus emphasized the law of Moses (the law given to Israel), rather than grace?

Wouldn't we be honoring Jesus by believing His own declaration? Or do we think we are doing Him a favor by ignoring this plain sentence, supposing we know better than He does? Are we afraid of limiting Him? Why? While on Earth, Jesus purposely limited Himself:

“I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

Am I a lost sheep from the house of Israel? I'm Dutch and English, actually—with a little French mixed in. Does that mean Jesus was not sent to *me*? The shocking answer is: *That's exactly what it means*. While Jesus was on *Earth* (this is the key), He preached a national message to Israelites. Period. Which means the words in red are not meant for men and women (nor kids with cartoons on their underpants) of the other nations. Nor were the Ten Commandments meant for any non-Israelites.

Don't shoot the messenger. I will back myself up with Scripture every step of the way. (“Those of the nations have no law”—Romans 2:24.) Keep reading, and you will be delivered from the cycle of failure and guilt that has dogged you for months or years. There is another message (gospel) in the New Testament that *is* for you. It's infinitely easier (you get

more for doing less) and Jesus approves of it 100 percent. Why wouldn't He? Jesus invented it. But Jesus did not divulge *this* gospel until He returned to heaven and traded in His dusty robe for blinding beams of light.

The gospel that Jesus preached while on Earth has a name. It's called, "The Gospel of the Circumcision" (Galatians 2:7). This gospel is not for losers. Idiots need not apply. It *is* for sinners, yes, but the sinners better shape up quickly before Jesus returns and finds them slacking. These sinners have to repent. They have to be baptized. It helps if they cry a lot. They definitely need to "produce fruit worthy of repentance" (Matthew 3:8). All they need to do, really, is behave themselves constantly or at least try like crazy. And wiping those silly grins off their faces wouldn't hurt, either.

Why do we have such a difficult time shaping up and producing fruit worthy of repentance? Maybe better to ask: Why do we instinctively know we *can't* do these things? Why do we give up *trying* to do them? Is it because we are lazy? Ungodly? Satanic? Because we think we deserve nothing more than to be crushed beneath God's fist? Or could it be that, deep down, we think God doesn't really expect us to weep and wail, repent, and be practically perfect in every way? But if He doesn't expect all that, what do we do with all the Bible verses saying He does expect it? Could it be there are *other* Bible verses that say *different* things?

Are you bold enough to entertain a new thought? What if we, who are not Israelites, have a different gospel—in *the Bible*—than the one meant for Israel? What if this other gospel even has a different name? What if it has a different set of requirements (and a different outlook on run-of-the-mill people or hapless nincompoops) than the gospel given to Israel? And—think of this—what if this gospel promises an enormously better destiny than the one promised to Jewish believers?

Were faithful Israelites ever promised heaven? Not once. Jesus Himself said, "The meek shall inherit the *Earth*" (Matthew 5:5). Wouldn't Jesus have known what He was talking about? Israelites never dreamed of getting lifted from Terra Firma. Why would they? Jesus never spoke to them of such a thing. And neither did their prophets. Faithful Israelites were promised that they would rule and reign over the other nations of Earth. This was the promise God made to Abraham.

Back to my question. What if this different gospel I have been referring to (the easier one; the kinder and gentler one; the one that caters to those of us who are not-so-perfect) *does* take people to heaven? Wouldn't that be mind-boggling? It would mean that Sister Mary Yardstick was all wrong. Imitating the walk of Jesus would not have gotten me to heaven—as she insisted it would—but would, instead, have kept me on Earth to rule the other nations. What *would* get me to heaven would be giving up trying to be like Jesus and embracing a gospel for regular folks—assuming such a gospel actually exists.

Wouldn't that be something God would do? Bless the socks off average, ordinary people? Doesn't it align with everything we know about His penchant to stun loser-types (fishermen, prostitutes, taxcollectors) with draughts of favor? So God gives reformed sinners (obedient Israelites) what He promised them—namely, Earth—but then later announces a *different* gospel that seats unworthy people (those who haven't a prayer of being like His Son) at His right hand in the highest regions of heaven.

Would this be a gospel you'd like to learn about?

What if—after all these years of struggling and failing to be like the meek and mild Jesus—you have been laboring upon someone else's path? Reading someone else's mail? Straining to pay someone else's bill? What if you have been sweating up someone else's Mount Sinai, while misguidedly condemning yourself for not only losing your way, but repeatedly falling? And what if ceasing all these struggles will actually land you a *better* destiny than the one you'd have had if you'd done everything right?

The entire Bible is *for* us, but what if not all of it is *to* us? While on Earth, Jesus Christ directed His words to the descendants of Abraham. Several hundred years later, someone got the brilliant idea of taking everything Jesus said and printing it in red ink. Red is the color of “do this or else,” so we who are not descendants of Abraham assume these words are *our* marching orders.

What if they aren’t? What if Jesus Christ did have a special message for all humanity, but He saved *that* message until He had traded in His earthly sandals for more glorious heavenly footwear?

Several months after Jesus Christ left this Earth from the Mount of Olives, He appeared as a beam of light brighter than the sun to a hate-crazed sinner (read: idiot) en route to Damascus to kill Christians. The glorified Christ gave this man (the apostle Paul, then known as the Pharisee Saul) a message so different than the one the humbled Christ gave Israel (it was grace instead of law; rest instead of works; joy instead of dread, heaven instead of Earth), that even the Jews who believed in Jesus as their Messiah—when they got wind of this new gospel—wanted the messenger dead.

Today, these two messages—or gospels—are so completely opposed that people wonder: *How can such a strict, hardcore Messiah who barely talked to Gentiles when He was on Earth, suddenly be telling all kinds of people: “I love you no matter what you do; you are completely perfect in spite of your behavior or nationality. And you know what? Leave Earth to Israel; I am taking you to heaven”?* And why are both messages side-by-side in the same Bible?

Not even I, Martin Zender—The World’s Most Outspoken Bible Scholar—have the audacity to pit the words of Jesus Christ (printed in religious red) against the words of the apostle Paul (printed in standard, boring black). I don’t have to. These words are not at odds; they are purposely distinct. Besides, the words of the apostle Paul *are* the words of Jesus Christ—albeit the glorified Christ Who revealed things to Paul which God kept hidden while His Son walked among Israelites.

Peaches and pears go together fine in a salad, but we mix the fruit from disparate spiritual trees at our own peril.

Does the thought of plucking out your eyes make you queasy? Are you too tired to go the extra mile? Loathe to climb one more mountain? In short, are you frustrated at not being able to live like the sandal-wearing Messiah?

Rejoice! Not even Jesus expects you to live like Jesus. He, Himself, brought a new, non-Jewish message to the most hateful, self-righteous jerk ever to walk the planet. If God’s grace can save such a loser, then what are you worried about?

These are Paul’s secrets.

I commend to you this new—yet very old—adventure.

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## FROM CHAPTER 2: WHO IS THIS IDIOT?

Let us now consider works. Everyone in the Bible demanded works—except Paul. Concerning salvation, *he* said: “If it’s works, then it’s no longer grace. And if it’s grace, then it’s no longer works” (Romans 11:6). Those were plain words that even I—ex-Catholic confused person—could understand. But were they too radical to believe? They clashed with everything else in the Bible. Reading Paul was like wandering through a fun house where every mirror somehow made you look better than you were:

Warning: Objects in mirror are more righteous than they appear.

The rest of the Bible—with what appeared to be an endless list of do’s and don’ts—set me up for failure. Only Paul, it seemed, cut me slack. How did this radical messenger of grace make it into Scripture? God inspired Paul, did He not? Or did Paul finagle his way into Holy Writ? How was I supposed to make Paul fit with the other Bible writers? Or was it possible that Paul was God’s radical, and he wasn’t *meant* to fit?

The other writers exhorted me to change myself; I considered them reformers. Paul, on the other hand, had given up on me. To Paul, I was beyond reforming. Usually when someone says, “You’re hopeless, kid,” it’s bad news. But when Paul said it—it spelled relief. I could never be acceptable to God—at least not by following all the rules. So Christ accomplished things I could never have accomplished for myself. I could never make myself righteous, so Christ did it for me. All Christ now wanted from me was thanks and a sigh of relief.

That, I could do.

My quirks never alarmed Paul. I pictured myself approaching him like I used to approach the priests once a month in those shadowy confessionals. I would tell Paul my sins. But unlike the priest, Paul would yawn and say:

Well, duh, Zender. That’s the old humanity; what would you expect it to do? I’m surprised you’re as good as you are. You’re probably worse than you’re telling me. In any case, it doesn’t matter. Now you are to think of yourself as having died with Christ (Romans 6:8). News flash: The old humanity has been crucified, Zender (Romans 6:6). God isn’t looking at the old humanity anymore; He’s looking at Christ. Now, God looks at *you* the same way. You are a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). Time to re-adjust your head.

Died with Christ? The old humanity crucified? A new creation? This was not reformation—this was something else entirely ...

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### FROM CHAPTER 3: IN THE BEGINNING

Paul’s thirteen letters are a radical departure from the rest of Scripture, and I am including Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John in that group. The only place in the Bible where you will find details concerning God’s remedy for restoring the heavens is in the thirteen letters of Paul. The only place in Scripture where you will find law tossed out the window is in the thirteen letters of Paul. The only books in the entire Bible dealing with the special salvation of Gentiles (non-Israelites), who sin as a vocation and have never even heard of Moses—are the thirteen letters of Paul.

Here, and here alone—in the thirteen letters of Paul—are found the deepest depths of grace ever to be shed abroad from God’s heart. I know how shocking this must sound. It means that in the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John (including the red letters spoken by the earthly Christ), you will *not* find the deepest depths of grace ever to be shed abroad from God’s heart. Those books are deliberately incapable of unfolding these depths. They are only meant to confirm, for Israel, a promise God gave their chief patriarch and forefather, Abraham.

At the end of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, grace was still God’s greatest secret. There is some grace in these four accounts for the sons and daughters of Israel, but not the kind of grace Paul brought to the nations. The name Paul gives this grace tells us a lot about it ...

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## FROM CHAPTER 6: DAMASCUS ROAD

Since Genesis 1:1, God had ignored the heavens. Not a single heavenly magistrate dared question Him concerning this. “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the Earth,” they often repeated amongst themselves, “as for the Earth, it came to be a chaos and vacant.” The tacit implication was that God had unattended business. The Son had sacrificed Himself and died for the sins of Israel, becoming the perfect sacrifice for that disobedient nation in accord with the Abrahamic promises, which, they knew, concerned the restitution of Earth. Yet, were not the heavens in worse straits?

For it is not ours to wrestle with blood and flesh, but with the sovereignties, with the authorities, with the world-mights of this darkness, *with the spiritual forces of wickedness among the celestials.*

—Ephesians 6:12, CLNT

There was another consideration—or so one would think. It’s tempting for us moderns—sitting here with the gift of hindsight—to imagine in that distant day a celestial questioning of the scope of Christ’s death. At first glance, it would seem that Christ’s blood (spilled on the cross) did not reach beyond Palestine. Would not such an astounding death as Calvary’s overspill the boundaries of Judea? This question never arose. Why would it? The eventual fulfilling of the Abrahamic covenant seemed sufficient blessing for dogs (Gentiles). What more could the other nations want?

After all, the reign of fabled blessing—the coming Millennium—would forever end the Gentiles’ days of begging scraps from Israel’s table. Wouldn’t it? Well, not exactly. Upon reconsideration, it was begrudgingly conceded, among the angels (celestials), that even in the promised earthly kingdom the nations would still be considered second-class citizens. Their blessing would exceed their present distress, yes, but not without some song and dance for the sake of their superiors. Zechariah had prophesied concerning that time:

This is what the Lord of Armies says: In those days ten people from every language found among the nations will take hold of the clothes of a Jew. They will say, “Let us go with you because we have heard that God is with you.”

—Zechariah 8:23, NASB

*But at least the scraps will be bigger. Right?*

God smiled at this celestial bantering, biding His time.

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## FROM CHAPTER 10: A RACEWIDE GOSPEL

The cross of Christ reached far deeper into humanity’s need than merely giving one sad nation a new heart. Each year, the Passover lamb was not tortured; its throat was slit—that was it. Not so Christ on the cross. Jesus Christ’s six hours of torture touched an aspect of humanity’s condition that the mercifully killed Passover lamb could not reach. The Passover lamb leaves Israel intact—the cross wipes out everything and everyone in its path. The cross of Christ says:

The whole race is finished. Watch the depth of suffering; see the six hours on the Roman stake. We’re pulling humanity out by the roots here; that’s how deep this goes. Forget Abraham and David; we’re going back to Adam now. It’s that bad. When this Man rises from the grave, a new creation will have come into the lives of those believing it. Eventually, all shall come to believe it. (As Paul makes clear in 1 Timothy 4:10—“We rely on the living God, Who is the Savior of *all* humans, *especially* of those who believe.”)

Peter never taught this; he was not a new creation. The new creation eliminates fleshly distinctions, and Peter has to be an Israelite in the kingdom—he has to be. Jesus told him he would sit on one of twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Matthew 19:28).

Yet what does Paul say? “For whoever are baptized into Christ, put on Christ, in Whom there is not Jew nor yet Greek” (Galatians 3:27).

Peter never taught this; he couldn't. He has to be a Jew in the kingdom. Peter was not, and is not, in the body of Christ.

Paul alone discusses how one man, Adam, affects all humanity. Not coincidentally, Paul alone boasts in the cross. Only Christ on the cross—not the Lamb sacrificed for Israel—undoes the condemnation of Adam.

No other writer discusses Adam. They speak of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, Daniel. Paul alone traces our entire spiritual history to the inaugural human. Only through Paul's message does the entire race become new. The Hebrew Scriptures demanded a new birth for Israel. Paul's teachings are to the new birth what a well is to a tea saucer.

Now I know why Paul always seemed like Mr. Absolute to me. Why I always sensed he went deeper. Because he did go deeper. I failed to see specifically then that Paul was the only writer returning us to Adam, relating Adam's failure to the manner of Christ's death, and removing the old humanity by the roots.

When I was a kid, one of my chores was to pull dandelions. My dad always said: “Get ‘em by the root.”

The gospel of the Circumcision does not get humanity by the root. Rather, it remakes humanity. It takes the raw material of the present creation and fashions it anew. This is what being “born again” means. “Born again” puts God's spirit into Israelite flesh, so that Israel can at last enact God's commandments. Being born again merely spruces up the old humanity; it reforms it. No wonder the other writers always struck me as reformers; they *were* reformers. Modern so-called men of God always wanted me born again. I never embraced that. I needed more. My root was wrong. Fix me today, and I am back in a month to re-confess my sins, as the Catholic church did to me. They never extracted my sin by the root. Their fix was a Band-Aid; ten “Our Fathers” and ten “Hail Marys,” and I was back next month—back on the wheel like a gerbil. The root never left me. (Protestant churches aren't much different. Protestants say you must confess your sins each day or you'll be “out of fellowship” with God, and then poor, helpless God can't bless you.)

Thus also, Israel. With Israel, flesh is still recognized. In Israel, Jew and Greek remain. As I said, these must remain, because there are twelve thrones in the kingdom, representing the twelve tribes of Israel. What about Paul's throne? There are not thirteen thrones. I wondered about this. Poor Paul. He was the most awesome, energetic apostle of them all. Where was his throne? Now I know: Paul does not have a throne on Earth; his future is not tied to Earth. Only Paul announced the truth: “There is neither Jew nor Greek.” This was beyond radical. Peter never did quite understand. *Not be a Jew? How could it be?* Yet Paul, in the book of Philippians, despises his nationality and throws it away. Either this is dangerous and stupid—or else it sits at the core of the most liberating message ever to visit humanity ...

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Paul pronounced a curse on the message that mixed law and grace, the very message that reigns today in the modern Christian church. This mixed message confuses and disturbs, breeding fear, false guilt, and shame. Many people hearing this mixed message wonder if they are really saved. Those hoping for truth in the realm of Christianity see some light in the writings of Paul, but then they read James and despair comes. Something in Romans thrills them, such as: “There is no more condemnation in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1), but then here comes Peter. Or here comes James. Or Jude. Or Hebrews. Or here come even the red letters of Christ.

What these folks fail to realize (no one has ever told them) is that the red letters of Christ, while inspired, are not the final words of Christ.

“If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe *if I tell you heavenly things?*” (John 3:12).

What follows when people mix the two gospels, then, is the guilt and condemnation of religion; it’s a pseudo-grace in Israelite garb that attempts to couple “total grace” with a do-this-or-else mentality. How few people read the address on Scriptural envelopes; how few distinguish between what is theirs and what belongs to Israel.

They open other peoples’ mail and try to pay other peoples’ bills.

On the one hand, the Christian religion will *say* you are a new creation in Christ, and all your sins are justified. On the other hand (the hand they slap you with), they will say you’d better confess your sins and at least attempt to reform yourself before Christ returns and finds you slacking. Otherwise, *how do you know if you’re even saved?*

Identifying the source of this confusion will grant you a peace and security in Christ that you’ve probably never known ...

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#### FROM CHAPTER 14: EMBRACE THE NEW MESSAGE

Many times, I have been in the presence of those who hear Paul’s message but don’t understand him. They even say, “I don’t get Paul.” I speak to these folks of: “our identification with Christ,” being “complete in Christ,” being “crucified with Christ,” “transcendent grace,” of God “reconciling the heavens and the Earth to Himself,” of “the conciliation of the world,” of the God Who is “operating all in accord with the counsel of His own will,” of, “one died for the sake of all, consequently all died,” of the “new creation,” and of, “as in Adam all are dying, thus also in Christ shall all be vivified.” What do I get in return? Blank stares. Furrowed brows. Sighs of exasperation.

Yet another person will approach and speak to these same folks of: “Israel,” “law,” “Ten Commandments,” “Hebrews,” “Jesus,” “sin,” “worthy,” “temple,” “lamb of God,” “priesthood,” “Matthew,” “Mark,” “Luke,” “John,” “James,” “Peter,” “Passover,” “baptism,” “Jesus the Nazarene,” “Overcomer,” “Revelation,” and “144,000.”

And they just about lose their minds with happiness.

The people hearing *these* things become transformed. A light goes on inside them. They love all things Israel. They love the idea of being worthy of salvation. They love the idea of working. They love the idea of law. They love the idea of priesthood and ceremony and a people set above all other people. They love the brown-haired, bearded, sandaled Jesus. They love Jerusalem; many of them want to visit the Holy Land, or be baptized in the Jordan River. The rite of baptism fascinates them; they can’t wait to get wet. They love ceremony. They love candles and angels and burning incense.

Again, try bringing Paul to them, and it’s like speaking Japanese to a Frenchman. Truly, they don’t get Paul. Paul is “too hard.” Paul is “too intellectual.”

Thing is, they can’t make grace jive with law. If truly given the choice between law and grace, they will choose law every time. Why in the world would anyone do that? Religious humans love the idea of outperforming other humans. Law allows this. The Israelite message makes room for fleshly distinction and accomplishment.

I finally understand who these people are, and why they don't get it ...

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