

## Stories that Change Everything | By Any Means

*Joseph Barkley | Mark 4:1-20*

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[Aaron Brockett]

I hope you guys have had a great week. I am really excited to be able to introduce to you our guest speaker for the weekend. Joseph Barkley is the lead and founding pastor of Radius Church that meets in the greater Los Angeles area.

This is a church that he started several years ago, primarily with the mindset of reaching people who have written off the church or who have never considered faith. And God has gifted Joseph in a unique way to be able to speak into the thoughts and the hearts of that group of people.

He and his wife, Katie, have two daughters. I met them several years ago at a conference that we were at and just immediately hit it off with them. Joseph and I have stayed in touch. I've learned a ton from him. I can't wait for him to come and share with you a message from God's word. I think that you are really going to be challenged and encouraged by it.

So would you please, at all of our campuses, give a warm, Traders Point welcome to our friend, Joseph Barkley.

[Joseph Barkley]

I am thrilled to be with you today. My wife, Katie, who is here with me, and I met your pastor, Aaron, about three years ago. And he said it was at a conference. What it really was was a conference assessing whether or not people should start churches. So we went to this conference as people who felt like God was calling us to start a church.

Aaron came in as one of the seasoned leaders to evaluate and to have long conversations over two or three days with these potential church starters and to, by the end of the conference, recommend whether or not this is somebody who should go plant a church. And so, one of the things that we are grateful for is that my relationship with Aaron has kept up over the years even though we completely disobeyed his recommendation and started a church anyway.

Actually, that's not true. At the end of the assessment he was one of the first voices to say, "Yeah, God is calling you to start a church," and that meant a lot to us because we admired and respected what God had been doing through him and through Traders Point. So we actually left that assessment, that conference, more excited to see what God was going to do through us in Los Angeles than when we showed up at that thing. So we are so grateful.

I know that just a few moments ago Myron mentioned your generosity is so important because you get to be a part of something bigger than yourself and in many ways even bigger than Indianapolis. So if it's any encouragement to you I just want to give you a report from the front lines of LA where your church has been a part of guiding and resourcing a church that is reaching people that you may never meet, but it's making an enormous impact there.

Just over three years ago we started our weekly services in North Hollywood, California and there was an enormous amount of people there for the very first Sunday. There are actually more people in your band today than there were attending the very first service.

But we were there just to share the love of Jesus and the vision of life that Jesus has given us to people who, like Aaron mentioned, totally dismissed the church.

They've got the same big questions about life that you and I have, but for lots of reasons they have just ruled out the church as a place where they can find good answers and good conversations about those questions.

Maybe they've been burned. Maybe they've had a bad experience. Or maybe they just think that faith is crazy and only crazy people engage in it. But we think that that conversation should continue so we are a church for people who are convinced that church is irrelevant.

Here's another image from one of those early days. And you can count the number of people attending this special night of worship and communion on like one-and-a-half hands. That's about how many people were there.

But I'm here to report to you what God has been doing over the last few years because now, on average, we serve over 600 people across four services. Yeah, and I have no explanation for that other than God has just decided to do it and we get to be along for the ride. So thank you for being along for that ride too.

I'm asked a lot what it's like to be a church starter and a pastor in LA, really in the heart of the entertainment capital of the world because we're in North Hollywood where many of those people live and send their kids to school.

And if this is any indication of what it's like to be in a church there, last year we got to baptize a recovering adult entertainer, a Scientologist, and an executive from Netflix. That is my life—so, not too bad. Yeah.

And as you can imagine, those are remarkable stories that led people to those decisions, right? Just like your stories are remarkable stories. As Aaron got this series started last week, I agree with him that stories have the power to reach us and change our hearts in a way that no other form of communication or teaching really can. There's just something powerful about a story.

That's probably why Jesus masterfully used them so often. And one of the stories I get to take another look at today, and maybe this will be a new look for you or maybe it will be a return visit to this story for you, is one of the stories that Jesus told that I believe has changed the world. It has changed my world. It changed my life.

It's actually contained in three of the four biographies we have of Jesus. We have Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The one that I want to look at, the retelling of it, is in Mark, chapter 4. Mark was one of Jesus' closest friends and followers and one of those eyewitness accounts that we have for us is retained and we call it Mark, that's his biography of Jesus. And in Mark, chapter 4 starting in verse 1 this is how he begins to describe a scene and re-tell the story that Jesus told this crowd.

Mark, chapter 4, verse 1: "Again Jesus began to teach by the **lake**." That's the Sea of Galilee. That's the big lake in that area. "The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a **boat** and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water's edge," which was a brilliant move.

I'm not sure if Jesus was the only one to try this but there were so many people there, and this was an age before there were microphones stuck to the face and PA systems. So he pushed out in a boat and let his voice resonate on the hillside behind the crowd that was gathered on the shore. It formed sort of a natural amphitheatre, it amplified his voice. It's a brilliant thing to do.

That gives us a sense of how many people were there. It wasn't just a conversation. This was a presentation—lots of people. Okay, So Jesus pushes out on this boat, hundreds maybe even thousands of people listening and here he begins to share this big idea with them in verse 2.

"He taught them many things by," here it is, "**parables**," stories, right? A way of reaching the heart in a way that any other form of teaching cannot do. In other words, the idea that Jesus was about to share was so significant that only a story was good enough to communicate it.

You know there is some information that you get that you don't need a story—two plus two equals four. I mean, you could tell a story around that. You know, Jermaine had two apples and Sally had two apples and Jermaine gave his apples to her and how many apples does Sally have? And you're like, "Oh, changed my life." But that doesn't need a story—two plus two equals four. Great. Check. I've got it. Moving on, right?

But if God wants you to understand that his love for you is so great, and his grace for you is so unstoppable that no matter what you have done, if you turn toward him, your Father will run up the driveway to meet you. That was the story that Aaron shared last week. And if you didn't hear it, you need to go back and listen to it on the website. He shared the story of the Prodigal Sons as people who were responding to the love of the Father.

Well, if that is how God is—I need to learn that with more of myself than just the part that is dedicated to two plus two equals four. I need to know that with my entire psychology and my

entire emotional life. That might even call me to do something with my life that I wasn't going to do before I understood that.

Have you ever heard a great story and it's propelled you to try something or to explore something that you had never thought of before? When I was a kid I saw *Rocky* and I was pretty sure that I was going to be a boxer. That didn't pan out but I tried. I saw *Hoosiers* and I was pretty sure that I was going to be a basketball player and God had other ideas with my anatomy so that didn't pan out. But I spent a lot of time trying.

I have people in my life who saw a movie and they decided to adopt a child. My life has changed because somebody shared their story with me that God had changed them—and I wanted that to be my story too. Stories have the power of changing lives.

So how come, if the idea is so important that you understand it did Jesus sometimes disguise a story behind a veil of mystery? Like this story. Here's how it goes. Starting with in verse 3—this was his parable, this was his story: "Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow."

Verse 6—I know that you are on the edge of your seats here. Stick with me. "But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain." This is a real nail-biter this story. "Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times."

And then he ends this story with a statement. Verse 9, "Then Jesus said, '**Whoever** has ears to hear, let them hear,'" which was just another way of Jesus asking the question:

Do you get it?

A farmer sows the seed and it didn't take over here but it took over here. Do you get it?

Now some people would have thought, "Great. Some farming tips. Thanks JC, I'm out." But that wasn't everybody's response. Verse 10, "When he was alone," when Jesus was alone, "the Twelve and the others," so this is more than the disciples who were interested to find out what this is all about, those "around him asked him about the **parables**."

More than just this story but maybe many of the stories he was sharing, okay? So they were curious to find out more of why the story was so important and why did Jesus feel like he needed to share it.

So in verse 11: "He told them, 'The **secret**'" and this is really important, we're going to come back to it, "The **secret** of the kingdom of God has been given to you." And what he says next is

going to sound harsh but hang with it. ““But to those on the outside everything is said in parables.”

Verse 12, ““so that, “they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise””” if they understood ““they might turn and be forgiven!””” Isn’t that what you want? Wouldn’t you want people to understand so that they can turn and be forgiven?

I don’t want us to misunderstand this. When Jesus’ audience first heard him quoting Isaiah, chapter 6, which is what that was, they understood where it was coming from. In Isaiah, chapter 6 God is saying, through the prophet Isaiah: I am heartbroken because no matter how hard I try to reach these people the last thing that they want to admit is that they need me. The last thing that they want to admit is that they don’t have it all figured out.

So we need to hear this through the voice of irony or sarcasm. It’s almost like Jesus is saying: You know there’s a little bit of mystery here and very few people are going to try and discover more, are going to try and understand it because the last thing they want to admit is that they don’t have it all figured out. Nobody wants to look stupid. Nobody wants to admit that they need anything: As hard as I try, heaven forbid that they admit that they need any help. That’s the way it’s to be understood.

But you 12 and you others, you who are hungry for a little bit more—curious for a little bit more—to you he says in the very beginning there, verse 11, “The **secret** of the kingdom has been given to you.”

Now I don’t like the word secret. It doesn’t matter if Jesus said it, that’s what it is. I don’t have to like it. I don’t like that word because to me secret implies that there is a select group who are in on this secret and some people who aren’t. There are people who are initiated and people who aren’t, right?

This is my very first time in Indianapolis, ever. I love your city so much. I’m not just saying that. I ate way too much in this city. My wife, she’s from Grand Rapids, Michigan so she’s been here before but it’s been several years. She was excited to explore the city with me. And we were told what we needed to do when we got to Indianapolis.

We had a couple of days to explore the city and we got into town and we got to the hotel and my wife, from Grand Rapids, Michigan saw a Meijer across the parking lot from where we stayed and that is the first thing that we did in Indianapolis, we went to the Meijer. And she was like, “They have everything!”

And I said, “Well, sweetheart. We can get all of these things back home.” And she was like, “Yeah, but not all in the same place.” I’m like, “You’re right. This is incredible. We had to go to Meijer. So we were there.” We spent about 12-and-a-half hours at Meijer... Not really. Not that long.

But one of the things that we were told that we had to see in Indianapolis was the Scottish Rite Cathedral. And then I found out that many people who live in Indianapolis have never done anything with the Scottish Rite Cathedral. We went for you. And I'm coming back to report how amazing this thing is.

You might have gone to a wedding there or an event. We did like the two-and-a-half hour tour of the Scottish Rite Cathedral or temple. It's the Masonic... You know exactly what I am talking about. We went and we were only going to stay for a little bit and then we found out that there was a tour and then we found out that this was a tour given by a member of the Secret Society of Masons and we were in. It became our mission to uncover as many of the secrets as we could.

So we spent two-and-a-half hours trying everything. We buttered him up. We bribed him. I've come back empty handed. I've no secrets whatsoever about this, but I was fascinated by it. And the reason that I don't have the secrets is because I wasn't initiated into the secret club.

So is Jesus saying that the secrets of the kingdom, the real secret of life—God's vision for life—is given to a select few? The insiders, not the outsiders. Well it might encourage us to find out that the real word that Jesus used, the original language that he spoke in, was a word closer to the word *mystery*.

And I love that because a secret, while that could imply that there are some people who get it and some people who don't—a secret is meant to be kept, right? A mystery is meant to be solved. A mystery is an invitation into an investigation. A mystery puts it back in your lap and in my lap and asks us an important question: Is this mystery worth solving? And the response to that makes all of the difference in the world.

We flew out here on Southwest. And I experienced what I've experienced so many times on an airplane. It's that really tragic moment at the beginning of the flight when the flight attendant has to explain emergency information.

And I don't know if some of you are flight attendants or work for airlines. Maybe you've experienced this before. I actually believe, and I don't know—you have to tell me if I'm wrong—I believe that something dies inside of a flight attendant every time he or she has to stand up in front of an airplane full of people and explain emergency information to a plane full of individuals who are doing everything they possibly can to ignore them.

We don't want to look them in the eye; we don't want to act like they exist. I know that some of us have heard this information before but why do we do that? I don't understand why we do it. And airlines, because they care, they are trying everything they can to get us to pay attention to this information—that, by the way, is meant to save your life, right?

So sometimes they throw in a little bit of comedy or they have these cool videos. I remember the first time I saw this attempt was several years ago on a Delta flight and they showed this video of what I call the safety vixen—some of you might remember the safety vixen—and they were going through the emergency information and the safety vixen, she just looks you right in the eye through the TV screen and she says, “Smoking is not allowed.”

That’s what she says, “Smoking is not...” It’s not as effective because I’m bald with a beard and I’m not as good to look at but still imagine her saying, “Smoking is not allowed.” That’s the only thing I remember from that video.

So had the engines stopped and the plane was falling out of the sky—the masks are going drop out of the ceiling and my two daughters would be like, “Daddy, what do we do?” I’d be like, “Just don’t smoke. Whatever you do, don’t smoke.” That’s the only thing that I remember but it worked, it worked, right?

So I have a suggestion for airlines because this information is so important. I think maybe they should use parables. Give it a shot. I don’t know if we’ve got any airline executives in the room. I don’t know, just a suggestion. If you use it and you make money, you can find be at [josephb@radius.la](mailto:josephb@radius.la).

If you use this idea here’s how I think it could go. The flight attendant stands up in front of the airplane full of people and says, “In the unlikely event that the engines cut out or fail and we start dropping out of the sky, your personal safety will be like a hummingbird that flies through the air and grabs upon a leaf and makes a nest for her young. Whoever has ears, let them hear.”

It’s a mystery, right? And then you get to decide if that is a mystery worth solving. Is my life worth finding out more? “How is my personal safety like a hummingbird? I don’t get it. I don’t get it.”

“Well, now we will reveal the secrets of Delta to you.”

I think that there were some ideas that were so important that God wanted to place a little bit of volition into your lap. You have to want this because that’s a good head start into the significance of the size, the life-changing quality of this information.

I don’t know if there is any more life or death information that is more regularly ignored than the airplane emergency information that we get. And I think, in some ways, this stuff that Jesus was trying to share with us is so crucial, so big that you have to want it or you’re not going to get all of it. So here to these 12 and to these others, they come looking for more and because they did they got it.

Verse 13: “Jesus said to them, ‘Don’t you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?’” And they were like: I think we just established that we have no idea

what you are talking about. “How then will you understand any parable?” The implied answer to that—I suppose we have to keep coming back to you. Yep.

So verse 14, here’s what it means. He didn’t always explain it but in this case he did and I’m thankful for it: “The farmer sows the **word**.” Dense idea for them. To us the term *word* might simply mean like was this a magical incantation, or do we mean... They weren’t carrying around one of these [Bible] when he said it. To them to sum it all up the concept of *word* actually was synonymous with God himself.

When John wrote his biography of Jesus he said Jesus was the *Word* he was God. That’s how John understood Jesus, right? So here this was a story about the influence of God in your life—the impact of God in your life. God wants to grow you. And as he goes on to explain, your ability to grow in your faith or even discover faith for the first time really is resting, largely, on your response to God trying to reach you.

So if right now you don’t feel like you’re growing or you’re facing a confusing moment or you’re feeling challenged in your faith or you feel like you’re just kind of like checking out of your faith, it’s not because God isn’t trying to lead you, God isn’t trying to love you, God isn’t trying to comfort you, God isn’t trying to speak to you—it may be because you’re not very receptive to it right now. And it could be for any number of these reasons that Jesus explains.

Verse 15: “Some people,” if God is trying to reach them or speak to them, “...are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. **As soon as they hear it**, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them.”

These are people that God is trying to speak to as to: Do you get it? Do you understand it? These are people who would say, “In all honesty, I don’t want it. I don’t want it.” And maybe for good reason, do you think? Because you’re exhausted. You think it’s nuts. Maybe somebody who said that they were speaking for Jesus has treated you poorly. “I just don’t want anything to do with it.”

If we’re honest, there is nothing I can say, no environment we could create that would make you budge. I don’t want it. It’s ricocheting off of your soul no matter what God is trying to say to you this morning. That may be one response. Maybe that’s you. Only you would know if I’m talking about you.

But there are some other responses to it as God is trying to speak to us and grow us and lead us. Verse 16: “Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word,” they hear the voice of God in their lives, “and **at once receive it with joy**.” It’s a blast.

Verse 17: “But since they have no root, they last only a **short time**. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away.”

And if, right now, your experience of the voice of God has been nothing but excitement and ecstasy, then God may be drawing you into a deeper, stronger faith so that your faith isn't always driven by your feelings.

I know. I've been there before when faith stopped feeling good—I was tempted to go to other things that felt good when faith started to feel tough. So God may be calling you into a territory you've not been in before and that's scary. God may be calling you to bring something out of hiding with somebody and that is terrifying. God may be calling you to deepen your understanding of who he is because you've got some doubts and that's worth exploring further.

The question is: What will you do with it when it doesn't feel good? You might be getting pressure from your workplace or on campus or even in your family because you've started to express your faith and that's gotten some pushback. What will you do in those moments of pain? Unfortunately, many people, because it stops feeling good, people who believe that God is only in the goose-bumps they run to something else.

You know, I've gone to those restaurants where you get the soft drink—you can get your own soft drinks by yourself and you go to the lemonade option and oftentimes you'll see in the fine print: This contains zero percent fruit juice. It tastes like lemonade but it's all ade and no lemon. Like, how do you do that? How do you make it taste so much like a lemon?

I can just imagine that they are in the lab and they are like, "How are we going to get this to taste like lemonade? And there's this little intern in the back and he's like, "Maybe we should try lemons." It's like, "Shut up, Steve. You've no idea. We have been told we cannot use lemons—anything in the world except for lemons to make lemonade." And we drink it. We drink lots of it.

There are some people where their faith really has not been a surrender of their whole lives to Jesus. They've not picked up any cross. They've not sacrificed a thing. They have just continued to follow the goose-bumps and they received the flavor of faith but not the strength of it. And that's a life that is just a sitting duck when the pain and the persecution and the challenges hit, rather than grow stronger they go running.

So maybe it's an encouragement if that's where you find yourself today—that faith has stopped feeling good and you want to run to something else and find the goose-bumps somewhere else. I want to encourage you that Jesus is a Savior he is not an escape.

And if what you've done is to try to escape the pain of your life and to run to the bliss of some of these environments and experiences—if that's what your faith has really amounted to, then Jesus is probably calling you right now to stick around through the pain and invite him into the pain, invite him into that tomb where the resurrection really needs to happen.

Invite him into the challenge of your marriage or into your addiction or into that moment of bringing something out into the light. Invite him into there so that you can experience the

strength and the goodness of his salvation right in the middle of your pain, because he doesn't want you to escape it he wants you to grow stronger than your circumstances. Amen. Alright?

Now there's another kind of receptivity to it. Verse 18: "Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; but the **worries** of this life, the deceitfulness of **wealth** and the **desires** for other things," like just anything else, "the desire for other things come in and choke the word, making it **unfruitful**."

These are people like I've been so often in my life, who are succeeding at achieving or succeeding at maintaining. And maybe you have, at a moment time, given your life to Jesus and he's started to pull you out in the steps of faith, into growing your faith, but you've now settled into just sort of maintaining a stable life because that's the safest that it's ever felt. Like, "I've amassed a certain amount of money in my bank account." Or, "I finally am able to rub shoulders with the right people." Or, "I finally look the way that I want to look."

"I've finally gotten the track record or the traction in my career that I need to get and I don't want anything to disrupt the delicate balance that I've achieved."

And you know, from the outside looking in you look full and leafy but if we were to look really closely you ain't fruitful. You ain't fruitful because now your worry has caused you to try and just maintain and contain the things that you have achieved in this life—where you're really finding your strength and security.

And God has been calling you to serve and you're like, "I just don't know if I have the time. Or, God is calling you to give into the mission of Jesus and you're like, "It's going to reduce my margin. I can't."

God is calling you to share your faith and you're like, "Oh, that's really going to ruin my reputation. I can't do that." God's calling you to bring something to the light. And you're like, "Oh, I don't know. Everybody likes me right now. They wouldn't like me or love me if they really found out what was going on beneath the surface."

These are people who are just more worried about how in the world they are doing than what God is doing in the world. And if God is pulling you out of your comfort zone—oh, I hate that so much—but if he's pulling you out of your comfort zone and he's asking you: Do you get it? Do you get it? This is the kind of life that's like: I've got this.

Maybe some of you are there right now. I've got this. And the encouragement to you, and certainly to me when I fall into that trap, is that the antidote to your fear is not safety. The antidote to your fear is courage and faith—to finally follow God into the surprising places of life and see what kind of fruit he can bear through your life weigh out the fear that ends in the branches.

Now, thankfully, thankfully God has so much more for us and this is the last kind of receptivity. God is speaking: Here is how you can become the kind of life that God can grow and God can use.

Verse 20: “Others, like seed sown on good soil, **hear** the word, **accept** it, and **produce** a crop,” and even though they can’t guarantee this, “—some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown.”

Inevitably your life will bear more fruit. Inevitably God is going to produce results through your life if you’re the kind of person who, as God is speaking into your life, as God is leading you into another step of your faith and asking you: Do you get it? This is the kind of life that says, “Yeah, and I want more.”

Yeah, and I want more—like a healthy tree going back to the nutrients and absorbing and, “Yes, I want more. Just like the 12. Just like the others who didn’t understand completely what Jesus was trying to get across to them, I want more. I want more. I want more.”

I love that God presents mystery because I get to be a part of the discovery. I love that God has asked me and invited me into this adventure and into this investigation because the more that I step into that the more I learn to trust him.

See, when I was much younger in my faith I only trusted God when I felt like he was fully explaining himself. And now I’m getting to trust God because of whom he is. And there is no place that he is going to lead me where I should not follow.

I think that the reason that God presents so much of this life as a mystery to us is because it keeps us hungry and coming back to him over and over and over again. Because God’s goal in your life is not that you would know more, it’s that you would know him more.

So if he has to keep just a little bit of mystery so that you take one more step and one more step and keep hungering after his presence to answer those questions and to reduce the confusion and to fight that fear—then what you’re going to find over time is not only will your faith become stronger but you will have an intimacy with Jesus that you never had before.

He wants you to know him. He wants you to trust him.

I think that I want to close with a question. I believe that Jesus would ask this right after he would ask the question: Do you get it? And I think that question is simply this:

Will you share it?

One of the amazing things about stories is that we can identify with different characters or different features of the story. I think this is a story that first and foremost is calling us to

evaluate if we really want God to speak into our lives and grow us. That's the first thing. What kind of soil are you?

But I also think that it's a story that can call us to join God in the farming of his voice into the world, into the planting of his presence into this world.

Matthew, when he recalls this story planted it right before the crucifixion of Jesus and that might be when it happened, when Jesus shared it. In other words, Jesus might be trying to teach us: this is how the mission is going to keep growing long after my execution. And the mission is not going to grow precisely. It's going to grow lavishly. I want you to be farmers, you and me to be farmers who plant the invitation of God and plant the vision of Jesus and plant the hope that we have found in him into the world around us.

This is not farming in 2018. I was talking to someone in the last service who met an agronomist. I'd never heard this term before this morning, but someone who studies soil so that they know exactly what kind of crops they can grow in the soil—that's brilliant. It's like we don't want any seed to go to waste so we want to know precisely the perfect condition by which we should plant this.

That's not what Jesus is talking about. He was talking about good, old-fashioned ancient Palestinian farming, which is just like scattering seeds into the wind and results may vary. The cool thing is that all of the different soils that Jesus described, guess what? All of them can bear fruit.

Some might take a little bit more patience and cultivation—a little bit more hard work, a little bit more love. But even the rocky soil, even the soil along the path over time can be broken and softened and watered and can receive the seed that would grow a life and change the world.

So it's not up to us—I want you to hear this—it's not up to us to use this story as permission to evaluate whether or not you are the perfect condition for me sharing Jesus. I am not allowed to write anybody off from the grace and the invitation of Jesus Christ.

Some of you parents—I was talking to a mom after the first service this morning and she was crying saying, "I have been trying to break through to my son, my adult son, for so many years and he has not budged." And my encouragement to her is I don't when and I don't know how but I wouldn't rule that out.

I have seen the end of some of those stories. I have seen where the last person you would expect finally surrenders his life to real hope and real life in Jesus—I've seen that soil breakthrough in ways that shocked me, people who I probably would have written off. I mean, that was my life.

That was my friend Chris' life. Chris grew up on the streets of LA and like so many of the people around him he was invited to join a gang and he did at a very young age. And he had this grandmother who he would tell you about now who was just praying, "Jesus, I want him to have a different life than this." But it wasn't panning out.

For decades Chris was embroiled in gang activity—in and out of prison, in and out of violence, in and out of addictions. And there were people in his life who wanted him to have a different life and prayed desperately and loved him and cared for him and always kept their doors open for him. Chris didn't want to have anything to do with them.

Chris is the guy who most of us would look at and say, "There's no possibility of this guy getting another chance. There's no possibility this guy will ever following Jesus."

At one point in his life he was homeless on the street with a pregnant girlfriend. And there was another friend of ours, from another church, and he met Chris while he was down there just serving among the homeless population in downtown LA. He met Chris and something drew him to Chris, the last guy that any of us would think would be impacted by this.

Chris didn't respond at first. He resisted, as you would expect he would. And then this friend kept serving him and he kept visiting him and he kept coming back sharing his story with Chris. And then, over time, the hard soil of Chris' life, the tough exterior was broken apart revealing what is underneath all of us, which is a soft heart in desperate need to be known and loved—a heart in desperate need of hope.

Once Chris' hard exterior was cracked through much prayer and much patience and much service and much love, like you provide every single week in this church, Chris opened up his life to Jesus. And guess what? Chris started a church just up the street from us and the first people he got to baptize were the guys who used to be in his gang.

And I love our church and I'm supposed to come up here and brag about how great Radius is—it's pretty amazing, but I've got to be honest with you. Chris is getting to reach people I could never reach, just as I'm positioned to reach people he never could. Chris gets to be a part of the story that I don't get to be a part of but it's just because he opened up his life to what God can do. One step at a time—one branch at a time—one leaf at a time his life started to bear fruit, fruit that will last forever. Why would you want to miss out on that?

Let me pray for you.

God, thank you that you are so patient with me. And God I just confess the times that I, for lots of reasons, have just dismissed your word cause it's been confusing or it's been scary and too much of a mystery and I can't be bothered with that. I'd rather just figure it out on my own. I'd rather just keep it safe and stable and contained—no surprises. I don't want any surprises in my faith.

Jesus, I confess that at times—I think I’m probably confessing on behalf of somebody else here—I confess the times when I’ve felt like, “Yeah, I’ve already done my piece. I’ve already invested enough and now I just get to enjoy a normal life, a safe life, a peaceful life. But as long as I have air in my lungs you are calling me to the adventure of your kingdom. There are still people to reach. There are still people to serve. There are still people to invite. There is still life to be changed, beginning with my own.

So drive, Lord, your presence, your voice, deep within my psychology and my soul. I want to know you more deeply and if it takes a little bit of mystery for me to come looking for more, then give me mystery.

God, I also pray that through our steps of courage and our lavish planting of the voice and the vision and the life of Jesus into this world, that, God, you would use all of us to reach people who nobody else could reach and to not discriminate, God.

I don’t want to end this life as a neatly manicured, profile and presentation of a life well lived, God. I want to end this life and take my last breath leaving the most Jesus behind me as I possibly can. And I pray this in your name because we want what only you can do. In Jesus name we pray: Amen.