



WHEN THE WORLD BREAKS

The Surprising Hope and
Subversive Promises in the
Teachings of Jesus

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**THE BLISSFUL EXISTENCE
OF THE GODS?**

The world is breaking.

We're still recovering from a pandemic that has taken millions of lives.

Our politics are seething with division.

Forests are burning and climate change is only beginning to show us all the harm it will do.

The racial injustice that some of us were taught to think of as a matter of history while others lived with it every day is being broadcast in real time.

A fault line has cracked open. Whether it's at the hands of human agents or in the wake of some natural event, you can feel the ground shifting beneath your feet.

The breaking may not be in the headlines, though. It might be just for you. You get a call from the doctor and the diagnosis isn't good. Or you find out your vows meant something different for you than they did for your spouse. Or maybe you feel the world breaking when your long-held beliefs about God or the Bible or faith slowly or suddenly slip through your fingers and the thing that acted as your compass is no longer there.

Whether the details are global or personal, the experience is the same: You discover that the framing reality you were living in has fractured. You experience this framing reality in the way your relationship with your parents and your job and the

color of your skin and your beliefs about God and the investment return on your 401(k) and the latest update from the war on terror all conspire to tell you that you exist and that you're a part of some coherent order in the world. To tell you that you're going to be okay. But what happens when that changes?

This isn't just a book about bad things happening. It's about what happens when the fundamental picture we had relied on—our sense of how everything holds together—falls apart. This is what we sometimes mean by the word *suffering*, and if we don't do something with our suffering, other forces will.

When the world breaks, bad religion will seize the moment. If the preachers can shame you, convincing you that a more faithful person wouldn't be suffering like this, they'll have all the power they need. They may sell you indulgences or demand your allegiance. If it isn't shame that bad religion invokes when the world breaks, it may be escapism instead. Fantasies of a future where we can leave this mess behind are especially enticing when everything falls apart.

If it's not bad religion that takes advantage of the moment, it may be addictive substances that fill the void instead. If we can just find a way to stay numb, we may not have to feel the pain of the breaking. It's a ruse, of course. Those addictions create all new kinds of pain.

When the world breaks on the level of war or economics or terrorism or a pandemic, demagogues in the political sphere will inevitably seize the opportunity to divide and conquer us.

They'll weaponize our fear and teach us to become enemies. A quick survey of world history shows that some of the most violent leaders found their way to power in moments when the populace was feeling the ground quaking beneath their feet. Everyone wants a benevolent authoritarian when they feel unsafe. When suffering is at hand, it can be exploited for the worst kinds of things.

But here's the good news:

The world has been breaking for as long as we can remember.

I know—that may not sound like good news.

But it is, because it means we've been here before. And if we've been here before, then we can turn to ancient, perennial wisdom to help us sort through these urgent problems. And if we turn to that ancient wisdom, we may discover some surprises.

There are hidden possibilities lurking in these moments. They're not revealed in some quaint moral teaching. They're not found in the "power" of optimism that turns out to be nothing more than denial wrapped in an exhausting attempt to generate positive energy from scratch. They have nothing to do with the power to hit back, to break more things in response.

These possibilities are expressed in the subversive promises Jesus spoke when he taught the eight blessings—often called the Beatitudes—recorded in the beginning of Matthew chapter 5. These strange blessings name our experiences of suffering and are built on a surprising vision of hope. This book is a

meditation on those teachings as a transformative way forward when we suffer.

To understand the strangeness of these blessings, it helps to have some background on the language of Matthew 5.

The ancient Greeks imagined that their gods experienced the best kind of life. They were up there in the clouds, or high atop Mt. Olympus, and the frail, fraught world down here, with all its chaos and violence, was far from them. The Greeks had a word for this experience: They called it *makarios*, and according to one philosopher,* it meant the blissful existence of the gods. This word *makarios* shows up in Greek texts that have been translated into English, and often in those translations, this word is rendered *blessed*.

Around the same time that the Greeks were thinking about the blissful existence of the gods, the Jews were imagining a different kind of blissful existence. It was available to human beings who lived virtuously, because people who lived virtuously could depend on the protection of God as a reward. They imagined a kind of insurance policy against suffering, and the

* I got this from a book by Dallas Willard called *The Divine Conspiracy*. If you haven't read it, please stop reading my book and go read his. Seriously—it may not be a best seller, but I can't tell you how much it has influenced me and a lot of others. Willard is one of those quiet, humble elders whose work went on to shape a lot of the people who have had very public, admired careers. And also, like I said, people like me.

word for that protected status was *ashrei*. It, too, shows up in texts that have been frequently translated into English, and often this word is rendered . . . you guessed it: *blessed*.*

So when the gospel of Matthew is written in Greek telling the story of a Jewish man who spoke Aramaic, and we read there in chapter five that the first word of Jesus' teaching is *blessed*, we can gather up the ancient sentiments around this idea and feel the expansive promise of this opening word. Jesus is going to tell us about our path to the blissful existence of the gods. He's going to tell us about the kind of life that enjoys a divine insurance policy against suffering.

But there's a problem. If *blessed* describes this invincible kind of life, then the rest of what Jesus says makes no sense. With his first word, he tells the crowd that he will be describing the kind of person who has access to the blissful, suffering-free life, but then he goes on to describe people who are going through the absolute worst.

He says those who have a poverty within them are blessed.

He says those who have been shattered by loss are blessed.

He says those who have no power to attain for themselves the things they need are blessed.

He says those who ache for things to be made right within them or around them are blessed.

This doesn't sound like the blissful existence of the gods. It's clearly not a description of people who have enjoyed some

* Psalm 1, for example.

kind of divine insurance policy against suffering. He's naming the most painful human experiences. He's talking about what we feel when the world breaks, and when it breaks us, and he sounds pathologically ungrounded.

Anyone who teaches these blessings or beatitudes as a nice, logical, tidy set of instructions for good Christians isn't paying attention. Jesus is either totally naïve or he's doing something unexpected, something way deeper than a simple, straightforward prescription for pious people.

A few years ago, I found myself having to defend the idea that Jesus wasn't naïve. I was in Washington, DC, having dinner with a couple of people who are working to transform the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians toward a more just and peaceful arrangement. One of them, a new acquaintance for me that night, was a human rights lawyer who advocates for one of the factions in the conflict. The other, an old friend, asked me to share something I had been telling him earlier, about a way that I thought one of Jesus' teachings could be a resource for people working on this problem. But let me back up a bit.

My first trip to the Middle East was in 2010. I went there to learn about the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. I think I expected an academic encounter, but what I experienced was a crucible of empathy and impossibility. Our little group of five pastors from the States sat with an Israeli mother

whose son had been shot and killed by a Palestinian sniper in cold blood. Later that same day we shared a meal with a Palestinian father whose twelve-year-old daughter had been shot and killed by Israeli soldiers when they mistook his car for that of a terrorist. On another day we toured an Israeli town near the Gaza strip where every playground has a bomb shelter and the residents have fifteen seconds when the sirens sound to get underground before Hamas' rockets land. Shortly after that we were in a refugee camp watching surveillance camera footage of a playground full of Palestinian children being blanketed with Israeli Defense Force tear gas canisters as the children fled.

After a few days of these encounters, I had come to the end of myself. The end of my faith. The end of my hope. The day-to-day suffering in this conflict was more than I could bear, and I wasn't even living through it. I was just sitting next to it, sitting next to its victims as they shared their stories. I was falling into despair. I kept ruminating on this dark mantra in my mind: There's no way this gets better. There's no way...

At about that point in the trip, we visited a little church in the West Bank where a highly regarded elder named Abuna Elias Chacour is the priest. Chacour has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. He's a legend in this part of the world.

The steps that lead you up the hillside into his church are engraved with the Beatitudes, those strange blessings that Jesus taught at the beginning of his sermon in Matthew 5. I walked right over them without much notice.

As I entered the church, I noticed icons—devotional images

of saints—everywhere. There was a brown-skinned man portrayed in an icon near the back of the church, and I felt drawn to him, so I asked someone from the church who the saint was.

“Jesus,” he said.

Oh.

(I was used to Swedish Jesus with blond hair and a blue sash to match those steely blue eyes.)

Jesus was holding a book in his hands with a page open for us to read, but the text was in Arabic, so I asked what it said.

“‘I am the way, the truth, and the life.’”

Oh.

That’s something Jesus says in the gospel of John, in the New Testament. These are words that the Christians I grew up with cared about a lot, so I had heard them many times. But whenever I heard Christians talking about them, they didn’t really mean anything for the world I lived in every day. I had been taught that they were about another time when some of us would get to leave this broken world behind.

But I had been ruminating on that dark mantra—there’s no way this gets better—and my despair was growing, so I was desperate and open and for the first time in my life I heard those words in a whole new way. What I heard from that brown-skinned icon was: “There is a way that things get better, and that’s what I’ve been trying to show you.”

I went back to my hotel room that night and opened my Bible. This was the same Bible that I had used for years for personal reading and prayer, for study and preaching. Most

of its pages were marked up from all that work. But the page in Matthew 5 with those blessings was pristine. Untouched. Those verses hadn't really mattered to me until then.

I felt myself pulled toward these strange blessings, as if there were something urgent and true in them that had nothing to do with the trite preaching I had heard about them in the past. In fact, I suspected that the strangeness of what Jesus was saying was a clue to its meaning. And the more I learned from the people who are doing the bravest, most beautiful work in the most broken places to put things back together, the more convinced I became that Jesus was onto something.

So a few years later when I found myself in DC having dinner with those two people talking about conflict, my friend asked me to share something from the reflecting I had been doing. When you're a pastor and someone asks you to talk about Jesus, even if you're not sure it's the right timing, it's pretty hard to say no. But before I could respond, the human rights lawyer cut me off.

"No offense," she said, "but Jesus has nothing to do with this. We're talking about a deeply entrenched conflict in which people are oppressed by a very complicated status quo involving politics and militaries and ethnic and religious biases and foreign interests who are using the land and people in question as a proxy for their own geopolitical power games..." And the more she described the context, and how it had nothing to do with Jesus, the more I was reminded of how similar it was to the context in which Jesus lived. The Jewish people in the first

century had suffered exile and occupation for centuries. Their homeland was constantly being claimed by different empires that wanted it to serve their trade routes. Their religion was seen as suspect by the cults of their day. If Jesus had been naïve or simplistic, dropping cheap platitudes from a privileged place, his message wouldn't have found any traction with people who lived every day with a world that was breaking. The things he said and did were disruptive to the disorder that he and his people inhabited, and if they hadn't been, I don't think we would have even heard of him today.

So I want to turn to those blessings that Jesus speaks, because they point us to the promise and possibility hidden within every breaking moment. I don't believe they're moral lessons about how to be the kind of person God wants to bless. I don't think they're descriptions of what a good Christian should be like. In fact, I don't think they're specifically for Christians at all. I think they're for humans. I have come to understand them as paradoxes we cannot solve but that we can dance with, and that if we trust them, we'll discover a way forward when the world breaks. And we are desperate for a way forward.

The last decade of my life has brought me face-to-face with too many breaking points. The journey has taken me around the world, to sit with Israelis and Palestinians and hear their stories of hurt and hatred and creativity and peacemaking;

to the Beqaa Valley of Lebanon to enter the tents of Syrian refugees and sip tea with them while they tell me of the barrel bombs dropped on their homes, striking terror in their children and forcing them to flee; to Northern Ireland, where so much healing is still needed in response to the sectarian violence of The Troubles while Brexit threatens to disrupt the current peace; to Sri Lanka and Kenya to work with young leaders from around the world who have seen more terror and violence in their neighborhoods than I've seen in my life, but who somehow live with more bravery than I've ever known.

I pastor a church in the heart of a city where the fault lines of racial and economic inequality that are shaping our national discourse are local matters. I've sat in mental health facilities with members of our church as they heal from their suicide attempts. Like most pastors, I've walked with our people through unexpected loss in every form.

I've watched someone I love nearly destroyed by addiction, a front row seat in a cruel theater, seeing them teeter on a precipice that I was powerless to rescue them from.

I've walked through the collapse of my own mental health when memories of childhood trauma surfaced, triggering a five-year depression that culminated in a ten-day psych ward stay of my own.

It's through these experiences—from the global and political to the private and personal—that I've begun to recognize the terrain of reality that Jesus describes in the Beatitudes. There are reliable patterns that emerge in suffering.

Often, the ways we react to a breaking world end up breaking us or breaking the world further. We return violence with violence, against ourselves or others. We let fear bring out the worst in us, and we give our world over to leaders who manipulate that fear for the sake of their power. We stop trusting others because someone wasn't trustworthy once. We hold on to the negative energy that the breaking created, and then are surprised to discover that it begins to break us. We become instruments of violence precisely by trying to protect ourselves from it.

Or, as one cultural anthropologist put it: "Men cause evil by wanting heroically to triumph over it."*

But it doesn't have to be that way.

In the paradoxes of Matthew 5, Jesus begins by helping us abide our powerlessness. He knows that healing is usually located in the places we most want to avoid. He knows that we can actually embrace our emptiness and face our pain. As we do so, we relinquish the kind of counterfeit power that we grasp for when we suffer, leaving open the possibility that we could get our hands on the real thing.

And then, in the final Beatitude, Jesus blesses those who are persecuted because of righteousness or justice. I don't think he's talking about American Christians whose egos are stinging from being told "Happy holidays" instead of "Merry Christmas." This is a blessing for heroes. A blessing for people

* Earnest Becker, *Escape from Evil*.

so powerful, so potent, that evil has marshaled its limited resources to target them.

It's as if he assumes that the same sad, powerless victims he's speaking to at the beginning could become such a threat to the disorder that evil will have to come after them.

As if in suffering, we can cooperate with a mystery that will lead us into real power.

As if we can become the kind of people who put things back together.

This is how I've come to understand hope. It arrives when we realize that nothing taken from us can defeat us. When we discover that the pain we've been running from was never going to destroy us. When we become acquainted with the healing mysteries that are laid bare in our most difficult experiences. When we discover that God is growing us up into our shared calling as healers.



Before we jump in, a few things you may want to bear in mind:

First: If the word God doesn't work for you or Jesus is uninteresting to you, that's okay. I understand. This book is going to talk about God, and it's built around some of Jesus' central teachings, but for thousands of years people from all sorts of different perspectives have found some common ground in these teachings, regardless of what they believe or don't believe. I think you will, too. I'm not writing this to get you to join the

club. I just want to share something that I think we could all stand to hear.

Second: A lot of books about suffering try to explain it. They address questions like: Why are we suffering? And how could God allow this? This isn't one of those books. While brilliant people have worked out some thoughtful responses to questions like those, in my experience, most people trying to answer such questions for others end up saying stupid, harmful things. And when you're in the middle of it, I'm not sure that a metaphysical diagram of cause and effect is really what you need.

Third: Because we're talking about the subversion and surprises in these blessings, don't expect them to fit into the categories we've created to make sense of the world. They're designed to subvert them, which means this may not be a quick read. Give yourself permission to put this book down and think or meditate or pray (or throw it against a wall) as often as you feel the need.

Fourth: The only thing in this book that I'm an expert on is my own experience. In everything else I'm an amateur. A student. I'm a student of this text in Matthew 5, and I'm not pretending to have the authoritative reading on what those words mean. I can only describe what they've done in me. I'm not an expert on trauma, but I love to learn from people who are. I'm not a mental health professional, but I believe mental health is something we all need to work on together. I'm not an expert on conflict transformation or peace studies, but when I

spend time with the experts, I always come away feeling like I've gotten a little closer to some of the most important truths we can know. That's why this book doesn't focus primarily on systemic change or the work of public justice, although it will include references to that work. I'd rather you turn to qualified practitioners for those lessons. This book focuses on the personal journey that helps us enter and sustain that work.

And speaking of professionals, the last thing to tell you before we begin is this: I believe in professional help and serious engagement with the best methods we have for healing today, whether the healing is personal or societal. I believe in therapists and twelve-step groups and learning from real practitioners of peace. I believe in taking your meds and showing up at treatment centers. Naming the spiritual realities in our suffering isn't some way of dismissing the physical and neurological and emotional and political and pharmacological realities. It's just that I think we should try to wrap our arms around the mysteries that are lurking in the midst of all of those other important things.

So with those disclaimers aside, let's see if we can get at those mysteries...

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of *When the World Breaks**

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