

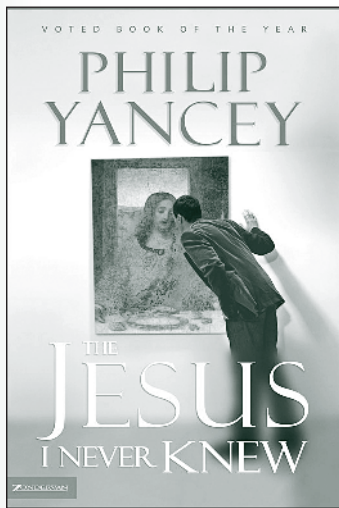
Rediscovering Jesus

A Review of Philip Yancey's *The Jesus I Never Knew*

by Dennis Stauffer

Editor's note: Dennis Stauffer wrote this review for his *Life of Christ* class at Rosedale Bible College this fall. The class was taught by Eric Kouns.

Modern-day Palestine looks very little like the country in which Jesus lived and taught. A mosque dominates the skyline of Jerusalem, shrines and monuments have sprung up in many biblical places, even Jesus' hometown is an archeological ruin. But what was this land like when Jesus walked the earth? What if one could



walk with Jesus through the streets of Jerusalem, meet a Roman soldier, listen as Jesus taught in a synagogue, or visit his hometown? In his book *The Jesus I Never Knew*, Philip Yancey seeks to follow Jesus' footprints throughout first-century Palestine. Yancey examines the birth, life, teachings, death, and resurrec-

tion of Jesus in light of what Jesus' words and actions must have meant to the people around him. Yancey also demonstrates how the resulting insights apply to modern Christians.

The book focuses on three aspects of Jesus and his ministry: who Jesus was, why he came, and what he left behind. Yancey begins with the representation of Jesus that he ascribed to throughout much of his childhood and youth. To him, God was generally remote and uncaring. Jesus was little more than a teacher who told people to

be nice to each other. However, he soon began to realize that Jesus was far more: he was God in the flesh.

Yancey begins his examination of Jesus with Jesus' birth, followed by his childhood and temptation. Through the incarnation, the God of the universe became a helpless baby. In Jesus, God humbled himself, became approachable to mankind, entered the world as one of the least of its citizens, and courageously made himself utterly vulnerable. Jesus grew up as a normal Jewish boy in first-century Palestine. His Jewish upbringing had a significant effect on both himself and on those who walked, talked, and lived with Him. The temptation of Jesus by Satan revealed what kind of Messiah Jesus would be. Jesus would not be an earthly king, a social reformer, or an insurrectionist. He came to resolve humanity's deepest need by reconciling humans to their Creator. The temptation was just the beginning of Satan's attacks against Jesus. Throughout his ministry, Jesus never backed away from these attacks. Jesus also had the ability to show unparalleled love and compassion. He preferred to live, associate with, and use the most unlikely people.

Yancey's investigation moves on to the issue of why Jesus came to earth. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus blessed the poor, the meek, the humble, the pure in heart, and the merciful. By embodying these very characteristics, Jesus showed what kind of qualities God truly values. Jesus proclaimed the revolutionary message of salvation. His words caused the religious establishment to hate him, attracted fishermen and tax collectors, and caused even his closest followers to desert him. Jesus' life and teachings were saturated with grace. He loved those who were despised, healed the sick, and forgave sinners. Jesus performed many signs and miracles that led those who believed to a deeper faith while causing those who did not to hate him. In his death, Jesus revealed his ultimate purpose in coming to earth. He overcame sin and death by becoming sin

and dying for the world. The Lord of the universe was utterly humiliated. However, only a few days later, Jesus came back to life and brought with him hope for all mankind.

Since Jesus was the living Word, much of what the church is and should be is shaped by this one man. By ascending to heaven, Jesus passed on the responsibility of advancing the kingdom to his followers. Throughout history, the church has thrived under persecution, hardship, and many of the other conditions that characterized Jesus' own life. Jesus' kingdom is a simultaneously unstoppable and nearly invisible force that transforms humans in the most authentic way. The only sinless friend of sinners challenges His followers to walk in His steps and to love the unlovable.

The Jesus I Never Knew is essentially a chronicle of one man's journey as he seeks to discover a little more of Jesus' true nature. Yancey's writing holds much value for Christians today simply because his quest is one that nearly all Christians embark on at some point in their spiritual walk. The main strengths of the book lie in its general sense of objectivity, its unique insights gained from research and personal experience, and in the issues it does not seek to completely explain. However, the portrait of Jesus is created from the perspective of one man. Thus, the chief weaknesses of the work are its somewhat disjointed organization and the degree to which the writing is shaped by the author's personal opinion and outlook.

Yancey's combination of journalistic skill and personal honesty produce a picture of Jesus that is quite unique and revealing. In many instances, the author succeeds in removing the screen of hundreds of years of church doctrine to portray Jesus as he would have actually looked to his Jewish and Gentile contemporaries. Jesus' Messianic claims had an impact on His audience that cannot be fully understood by twenty-first century Gentiles. Yancey masterfully highlights aspects of Jesus' life, such as His "Jewishness," that can only be effectively revealed through careful research. It is difficult to imagine Jesus as a Jewish boy studying the Torah and going to the synagogue every Sabbath with his parents. The author



Philip Yancey PHOTO CREDIT: RYAN RODRICK BEILER/SOJOURNERS

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draws extensively on his personal experiences with the "outcasts" of society to shed light on features of Jesus' ministry and teachings. The Beatitudes came alive to Yancey as he began to realize that it is often the poor, the meek, and those who mourn who possess the qualities that God desires. Several issues, such as Jesus' divine and human nature, are largely left as mysteries. Yancey does not seek to fully explain Jesus' dual nature, but leaves the reader with a sense of awe at the fact that the God of the universe became a human being. The book does not seek to explain Jesus but to make Him come alive in a whole new way.

The portrait of Jesus in the book is inevitably skewed by the author's personal interpretation. The narrative jumps from the first century to the twenty-first, from the life of Jesus to the life of the author, from events in historic Palestine to events in modern-day Russia or America in an almost haphazard manner. While some of the examples have value, others merely interrupt the flow of the book or take the focus off the subject matter. Many of Yancey's insights, while mostly true, are strictly opinions. Even the best attempts to examine the impact of events such as the resurrection or ascension are to a large degree speculative.

The Jesus I Never Knew transports the reader back to first-century Palestine. Through colorful language and modern-day examples, Yancey brings to life a Jesus as seen by those who lived, worked, and walked with Him. Jesus transformed the course of history, leaving behind a church that will endure forever. Yet Jesus accomplished this not as a powerful king, but as an ordinary Jew in a small nation under foreign rule. Yancey sheds a wholly new light on what it must have been like to walk with, listen to, and follow this man, the ruler of the universe. **BB**



Dennis Stauffer is from Apple Creek, Ohio and will be attending Rosedale again this spring. He attends Wooster Church of the Nazarene in Wooster, Ohio.