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Published in association with the literary agency of Wolgemuth & Associates, Inc.
I dedicate this book to the Lord Jesus Christ.
There's nobody like Jesus.
Never has been.
Never will be.
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Foreword

You can’t play Bach without expert fingering. But if you focus on the fingering and not the music, you can’t play Bach. For at least a century, biblical scholars have focused more on the fingering than the music, and so the strains of a biblical faith have sometimes been hard to hear. James Merritt’s *52 Weeks with Jesus* is a brilliant sonata in the limited line of true musicians of the Christian faith.

One of the most prominent virtuosos of the faith among twentieth-century biblical scholars was Paul Sevier Minear, a New Testament scholar who taught at Yale Divinity School. His *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, first published in 1960, portrayed ninety-six images for the church he found in the Second Testament. The book taught me what Jesus was up to in his unique style of communication. Minear was doing brain surgery, or more precisely, soul surgery—he was lifting up metaphors one should be willing to live by and are worth dying for.

This ahead-of-its-time classic book has held pride of place in my arsenal of secret weapons. I’ve given it as gifts at graduation, ordination, birthdays, promotions. Once, before it was reprinted, I swiped my card and wiped out every copy I could find in the world market.

James Merritt’s *52 Weeks with Jesus* is a worthy shelf-mate to Minear’s volume. The book presents dozens of metaphors for Jesus and backs each one up with biblical references, commentaries, meditations, and prayers. This book has now been added to my quiver of secret weapons. I plan to gift it to others often.

You will return to this book for its compelling stories and dazzling
images. But you will also find in Merritt an immensely allusive writer with wonderfully uplifting messages that come at you like a tarantella—in superb twists and unexpected turns.

Leonard Sweet
Drew University, George Fox University, Sermons.com
Introduction: The One and Only

I fell in love with Jesus in a most unlikely place: a movie theater. Most people who call themselves Christians say their magic moment came in a church service or a spiritual conversation with a friend or perhaps at a tent revival with their feet crunching on sawdust. Not me. I was smitten with Jesus in a small movie theater in rural Georgia, and I’ve never been the same.

I didn’t see many films growing up because Dad didn’t care for the cinema. A frugal man, he thought movie tickets were a waste of money, especially when you could just stay home and watch television. But Mom was unlike Dad in one major way: she liked to spend money and looked for excuses to do it.

I had just arrived home from school that Friday afternoon when Mom informed my brother and me that we were “going to the show.” I didn’t bother to ask what we were going to see. Whether the film featured cowboys or cartoons mattered little to me because I knew Mom would buy us a buttery bucket of popcorn bigger than my head. Besides, growing up in the country, “going to town” and seeing the big city of Gainesville, Georgia, was always a treat.

The Royal Theater was the only one in town, and it showed a single film, usually for two or three weeks. As we approached the building that warm August day, the marquee shouted down at us: “King of Kings.” Was this a medieval action flick with galloping horses and jousting knights? I hoped so.

After picking up the obligatory popcorn and soda, we searched for seats in a large room that could just as easily have been used as a
warehouse for antiques. We walked halfway down the aisle over threadbare carpet before sinking into three worn-out velvet seats. Then the movie began.

After the opening credits, Jesus showed up on screen, and my eyes widened. I’d heard stories about him since I was in diapers—from his stable birth to his mind-bending miracles to a whole list of sayings in a funny language. I figured he loved me “for the Bible tells me so,” but I had never seen any of these stories.

Most of the film was interesting enough. Nothing new, earth shattering, or extraordinary. But then the crucifixion scene began, and my attention level shot up like a cork on New Year’s Eve. The ring of the spikes being hammered into the hands of a man who didn’t deserve death stirred anger inside of me. Even my nine-year-old mind recognized the disconnect.

Sitting in that darkened theater, my mom unaware, I opened a conversation with God in my heart. Why are these Roman soldiers crucifying Jesus? He hasn’t done anything wrong. He gave sight to blind people, helped paralyzed people walk again, fed hungry bellies, stood up for the underdog, loved the unlovable, and didn’t commit any crimes. Why are they crucifying him?

A response pierced the darkness and penetrated my heart: “They are not crucifying him. You are!” Breath was sucked out of my lungs and my stomach turned. What was I to make of such an accusation? I rode to my own defense. Me? I wasn’t there when they crucified Jesus.

The scene progressed, and I assumed the conversation had ended. I declared myself winner by TKO. But then the voice returned again: “Remember, he died for your sins.” The voice was right. The Roman soldiers and spikes weren’t the only ones that nailed Jesus to the cross. My sins affixed him there. In some way, I had scourged him, brutalized him, defaced him, humiliated him, spat on him, mocked him, and condemned him. He died for me, because of me, and instead of me.

And that is the moment I realized it:

There’s nobody like Jesus.

I prayed: Jesus, I believe you died for my sins. I believe you came back
from the dead. There is no one else like you. Please forgive me and save me. Amen.

I sat still for a moment, not sure if I had done anything at all. I didn’t feel different. A choir of angels didn’t serenade me, no bright lights shone down on my seat, and a deep bass voice didn’t shout, “I am God. Welcome into my family.” Still, I knew that the boy who was going to walk out of the Royal Theater was not the one who had walked in. I elbowed my mom, and before she could shush me, I whispered, “Momma, I think I just got saved. I just asked Jesus into my heart.”

Looking back on this moment, I now realize that I had begun a love affair with a carpenter that day. I fell head over heels for a manger-laid infant. I became obsessed with a water-walking, storm-calming, miracle-working Nazarene. And you know what? I’ve never gotten over it.

There’s nobody like Jesus. And that’s why you’re holding this book in your hands. Because whether you are a historian, scientist, philosopher, or just an average Joe or Jane, you have to agree that Jesus Christ is one of the most influential humans to ever walk the earth. The secular Encyclopedia Britannica devotes more than twenty-one thousand words to Jesus. Major works of art, music, and literature throughout human history have been devoted to telling his story. Even time is divided by his life (BC denotes “before Christ” and AD means “in the year of our Lord”). Though he died in his young thirties, today more than two billion people claim to follow his teachings.

Yale historian Jaroslav Pelikan once wrote, “Regardless of what anyone may personally think or believe about him, Jesus of Nazareth has been the dominant figure in the history of Western Culture for almost twenty centuries.”

Yet Jesus’s prominence is both a positive and a negative influence among those who follow him. We’ve heard and seen renderings of him so much of our lives that we think we know him better than we actually do. The life and teachings of Jesus are so rich and deep that those who’ve devoted their lives to studying the New Testament constantly discover new elements of who he is as they plumb the depths of the biblical record.

As Tim Stafford writes, Jesus has become “deceptively familiar. People think they know all about him, so they never look at him. When they
finally do, they are surprised at what they find. Jesus may seem to be a stranger, even though they have grown up in his company.”

A few years ago, I began wondering what difference it would make in someone’s life if they devoted just one year—a mere fifty-two weeks—to meeting, knowing, and falling in love with Jesus. I decided to test it out. I dived into the Gospels every week for a year. I read books on Jesus. I listened to other messages about Jesus. Every sermon I preached for a year was taken from a Gospel account of Jesus.

As that year progressed, I noticed I was being changed. My passion for Jesus grew, my love for him was stoked, and my eyes were open to new facets of his wonder and beauty and majesty. And all those who had joined me in the endeavor were experiencing the same. That’s when I decided to pen this book, because I believe spending one year with Jesus can transform your life. I believe it can help you be a better parent, a more loving spouse, a finer friend, and a more generous, loving, compassionate person.

I fell in love with Jesus sitting in a movie theater nearly a lifetime ago. My prayer is that you will do the same over the next fifty-two weeks.
How to Read This Book

You may have guessed that this book is designed to be consumed over the course of a year. If you choose, you can digest the book more quickly, but the yearlong span is intended to provide time for reflection and to let the material sink in. When you pour rich maple syrup over a stack of pancakes, it takes a few moments for the amber liquid to soak deep down into the flapjack. Similarly, exploring the depths of Jesus Christ is often best done over time.

The book is divided into sections, and each section focuses on a different aspect of who Jesus is. Within each section are chapters—there are fifty-two total, one for every week of the year—and each chapter is divided into five short segments. You can read one segment per day beginning Monday or you can read them all in one sitting and then revisit them throughout the week.

At the beginning of each chapter you’ll find Scripture passages to be read and explored every day. At the end you’ll discover a prayer and a question for consideration. Journaling as you go may be helpful.

If for some reason you miss a week—you accidentally leave the book on your nightstand and leave for a family vacation or experience an unexpected death of a loved one—don’t worry. You can pick back up the following week. My hope is not to add one more obligation to your already packed life, but rather to provide you with a resource that has the power to radically transform it!
Birthdays are not unusual—unless the baby happens to be God. We begin our journey with Jesus at a logical place: his lineage and birth. More than a sweet, syrupy Christmas story, Christ’s beginning reveals why he should be important to us and why we are important to him.
The Reason You Are Who You Are

What do you do when God falls silent?

That’s the question Jewish people were asking during the four hundred years before Jesus’s birth.

For centuries God spoke to his people, but when the last prophet, Malachi, wrote his final words and put down his pen, God stopped talking. For nearly half a millennium, they heard neither godly grunt nor heavenly hiccup. Only silence.

When God finally began talking again, the first thing he had someone jot down was a family tree. You may be tempted to skip the genealogy at the front of your New Testament—Who wants to comb through the names of strangers giving birth to strangers?—but you dare not.

Why?

Because this family tree is yours!

Imagine if a distant relative told you they had located a family tree that traced your lineage more than two thousand years. You wouldn’t wait for a coffee break to read it. No, you’d snatch that sucker up and study it, even if you had to use a vacation day at work.

The genealogies in the Bible are worth our time because they tell stories of how God has moved in the life of your ancestors for millennia and the reason you are who you are. And more to the point of this journey, they tell us a lot about our elder brother, Jesus.
God Oversees the Future

Three names stand out in the rich tapestry of Jesus’s genealogy: Abraham, Judah, and David. God promised from the beginning that the Messiah would come through a particular bloodline:

- the family of Abraham (Genesis 22:15-18)
- the tribe of Judah (Genesis 49:8-10)
- the house of David (2 Samuel 7:8-17)

Jesus could claim to be the Messiah, but he would soon be dismissed unless he came from the line of King David. All of those “begats” in the Old Testament exist for a reason. God made a promise all the way back to the Garden of Eden that a Messiah would come: from a woman (he would be human like us), via the family of Abraham (he would be part of God’s people), through the tribe of Judah and the family of David (he would be both Messiah and King).

Through thirty-nine books of the Old Testament and over four thousand years of history, God was overseeing the future. He was busy keeping his promise, filling out the family tree of Jesus that would result in the birth of the Jewish Messiah and the King: Jesus Christ.

His Tree, My Tree

Every year at Christmastime, the world looks back two thousand years to the birth of a baby. But for more than four thousand years, people living on the other side of that birth looked forward to the same event. The birth of Jesus Christ was no accident. It was not the result of chance but of choice.

“So what?” you ask.

Long before we were born, God was overseeing our future as well. We didn’t choose our ancestors; God did. God designates our identity, as he did with Jesus, so that we might fit into his plan for the world. In other words, you can know just by your birth and unique identity that God has a special plan for your life.

The next time your world seems to be spinning out of control and you wonder if someone has their hand on the throttle of the train, just
read the first verse of the first chapter of the first book of the New Testament. You’ll be reminded that Jesus’s tree is your tree and that God is in control.

**God Overcomes the Past**

As Jesus’s genealogy unfolds, we discover that because Jeconiah (also known as Coniah) was a wicked king, Jeremiah pronounced a curse on him and his dynasty (Jeremiah 22:24-30). The curse did not mean that Jeconiah would be childless, but rather that his descendants would not inherit the throne of David. But Joseph, the husband of Mary, was a direct descendant of Jeconiah (Matthew 1:12-16). Uh-oh.

As Mary’s labor pains begin and our Messiah prepares to take his first breath, we notice a problem in Jesus’s past. But—as with us—the past is no barrier for God.

In Matthew’s Gospel, the genealogy is paternal going back through Jesus’s earthly father, Joseph. In Luke’s Gospel, the genealogy is maternal tracing through Jesus’s mother, Mary. Jesus’s mother was a direct descendant of David, not through the kingly line of Solomon—where the curse of Jeconiah fell—but through another son of David named Nathan (2 Samuel 5:14). One branch of the line of David cuts off at Jeconiah, but another branch descends through Nathan, bypassing this curse.

Legally, Jesus is the son of David through Joseph. Biologically, he is the son of David through Mary.

God can overcome whatever troubles are behind you to achieve the purpose he has set before you.

**You’re in the Picture**

God could have just left Jesus on somebody’s doorstep, but instead he did it through the mosaic of ordinary humans. Why did God use all these people in Jesus’s family tree?

It has been noted that as few as five points of identification can single out any individual from the billions of other people on this planet: name, street address, city, state, and nation of residence. If someone anywhere in the world were to write those indicators down, they could locate you.

Just as Jesus Christ had certain markers that identified him as the
Messiah, you and I were born with certain signs chosen by God so that we could fit into his plan. God wants our lives to be a masterpiece of his goodness and grace: “For we are God’s masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things planned for us long ago” (Ephesians 2:10 NLT).

Jesus was just like us—born with a past and a history—and we have been made to become like him. God wants you to be a masterpiece of his grace by living for his glory and expressing his goodness to others.

**This Week’s Prayer:** Lord, thank you for including me in the rich lineage, which has made me a member of your family. Equip me to share your goodness so that more can be called your children.

**This Week’s Question:** What are the benefits of being included in the mosaic of this particular family tree?
No-Names and Black Sheep

Most of the people in Matthew’s and Luke’s genealogies of Jesus are no-names. God promised he would provide a Messiah through Abraham’s bloodline, and he did. But when you open up the cedar chest of Jesus’s lineage, it is full of dirty laundry. Rather than a roll call of the rich and the famous, parts read like a police lineup.

One thing that would have grabbed the attention of any first-century Jew was the inclusion of women in the list. This was extremely rare since ancients traced lineage through males. And yet Jesus’s genealogy in the Gospels includes five females. This sets the tone for justice and equality between the genders that is reinforced throughout Christ’s ministry.

But even stranger is the type of women the writers decided to include. If these women had been Rockefellers, Hiltons, or other social royalty, one might expect them to be ancestors of the Son of God. But the women included in the New Testament genealogies are downright scandalous.

Tamar, Rahab, and Bathsheba were the black sheep in the line of Abraham and David. They committed three of the most serious kinds of sexual sins that any ancient could commit: incest, fornication, and adultery. Yet God, in his grace, included them in the family tree of Jesus Christ and used them to produce the world’s Savior. God seems to be
saying that no one is beyond his grace—a message that Jesus reiterates repeatedly.

**God Can Take Us Where We Are**

Tamar, the first woman mentioned in the family tree, would have brought a gasp from anyone knowing her history. Her story is one of the most perverse, lurid, sinful events in Scripture.

Jacob’s son Judah chose Tamar, a Canaanite girl, to be the wife of his firstborn son, Er. The marriage started rocky and never made it to smooth soil. She was pagan, and he was wicked. Er was so evil that the Bible says God finally killed him.

Here, the story grows complicated. After Er died, the law required that a childless widow should be given to one of her husband’s brothers so that she could have children to carry on the family name. One of Er’s brothers refused and the other was too young.

Frustrated with being childless, Tamar concocted an evil scheme. She disguised herself as a prostitute, veiled her face, and waited for her father-in-law, Judah, by the side of the road. Judah—willing to sleep with a prostitute—falls for her deception. Out of this relationship, twin sons were conceived. Perez, who was born first, became an ancestor of Jesus Christ.

God weaves this cord into the tapestry of Jesus’s family tree to make a point: No one is beyond grace. God can take you where you are and fit you into his plan and his purpose.

**God Can Change What We Are**

Rahab was a prostitute by trade. She was what one Bible scholar called “the Madame of Jericho.” Outside of Matthew’s genealogy, every time Rahab is mentioned in Scripture, she is referred to as “Rahab the prostitute.” She was also a Canaanite—a mortal enemy of Israel who worshiped a false god. (The Canaanites were to Israel what al-Qaeda is to the United States.) Yet, God also decides to include her in the family tree.

After forty years of wandering in the wilderness, the Israelites prepared to enter the Promised Land. Joshua had sent spies to scout out
the city of Jericho. When they came upon Rahab, they asked her to hide them. She tucked them away in her home.

When the enemy came looking for them, Rahab lied to protect them. Knowing the Israelites would destroy the city, she bargained with the spies to save her family. They agreed not to take her life or her family’s if she would hang a scarlet thread from the window of her house, so her family could be identified and spared.

Rahab not only risked her life to protect God’s people, she abandoned the gods of the Canaanites for the true God. This professional prostitute ended up becoming the great-great-grandmother of David and ancestor of Jesus. Mark up another point for grace.

**God Can Use Who We Are**

When David gazed across the city from his rooftop, he noticed the beautiful Bathsheba bathing. Enamored, he sent his servants to fetch her. Their secret one-night stand wouldn’t remain secret for long, because Bathsheba became pregnant and her husband was away at war. As a result, David ended up devising a scheme to kill her husband so he could marry her.

Bathsheba didn’t have a choice when the king called for her—she had to go. But because of the culture, she was an object of shame as an adulteress. To add to the tangled mess, she married her husband’s murderer. This is a story that is as complicated and despicable as any in the Bible (or Hollywood, for that matter!).

Yet somewhere, someway, somehow God chose to use Bathsheba. Even though the first baby died, Bathsheba conceived again and bore a son named Solomon, who became the next link in the divine chain of God’s Son, Jesus.

God can take your complicated messes and use them for good.

**An Unlikely Mosaic**

You would have expected the family tree of Jesus to be a Hall of Fame—filled with heroes and sages. But some parts of it feel a bit like a Hall of Shame instead. Jesus’s family line was populated with Gentiles, fornicators, adulteresses, prostitutes, liars, wicked kings, and other rascals.
It’s actually fitting that God would use this group of misfits to give us a Savior. Because the Savior, Jesus, would be a misfit himself. No, he didn’t sin. But he would shatter preconceptions again and again. Jesus refused to fit the mold people had fashioned for the Messiah, shocking the masses at every turn. At the end of a long line of misfits, we encounter a “misfit Messiah.”

Through Jesus’s family tree, God puts his grace on display. God is reminding us that he can do for us what we cannot do for ourselves: pick up broken pieces and put them together, take broken lives and make them whole, gather broken hopes and make them reality. That is the message of Jesus’s family tree.

**This Week’s Prayer:** Lord, I thank you that no one is beyond your supernatural grace and that you choose to work through imperfect human vessels. Use me to your glory.

**This Week’s Question:** What are the broken places in your life that God has chosen to work through?