

# The Bush Always Burns

Jesus in the Unannounced  
Moments of Life

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## CHAPTER ONE

# What It Feels Like to Be Lost



*What does “lostness” look like in your life?*

I know what it feels like to be lost—deep into drugs and the occult. I was using Ouija boards, studying witchcraft, and getting drunk on a regular basis. If that sounds crazy to you—if it intrigues you or seems difficult to comprehend—hang with me. The most dangerous thing we can be is lost without knowing we are lost.

Imagine for a minute you’re driving through an unfamiliar city without a map or GPS. You know your destination, but you don’t necessarily know the way to get there. You might think you know where you’re going, but there comes a point when you realize—you’re lost. You don’t recognize any of the landmarks. You don’t see any street names you know. It can be frustrating to travel long and far only to realize you’ve gone nowhere.

Now picture someone sitting in your passenger seat. Perhaps it's a friend or a spouse or a companion who's traveling with you. As you navigate, you don't say anything to your passenger. You just keep driving. Is your passenger any less lost than you are? Of course not. You're both in the exact same predicament. It's just that one of you is keenly aware that you are lost while the other is not. The truth of the matter is that we can be lost without knowing we're lost; and until we admit how lost we are, we'll never find our way.

Moses was lost for forty years without realizing how lost he was. He wandered the desert, traveling hundreds of miles. In fact, the "lost" years of Moses' life were actually quite productive. He started a family, launched a career, and made a home. He had a steady job as a shepherd, supported his wife and kids, and did the best he could to be a good man. Imagine how devastating it must have felt for Moses to realize that all the work he had accomplished during those years—all the creativity and innovation, everything he had built—was for nothing. Forty years is a long time to be lost.

Maybe the idea of being lost doesn't resonate with you. Or maybe that word sinks deep and you think, *yes—lost. I haven't wanted to say it, but that's what I am.* Either way, Moses is a prime example of how we can be lost and not realize it. We can think we're progressing quite nicely while being completely lost. And yet Moses is also a prime example to us of how—no matter where we're standing, no matter our circumstances or our landscape—the ground is always sacred. The bush is always burning.

## *Good Guy, Bad Guy*

For most of us, the mere mention of the name Judas causes an almost physical reaction. “Judas” has become a cultural term, synonymous with backstabber, double-crosser, spy, traitor, or weasel. He was one of the twelve disciples, but for the most part we don’t think of him that way. We think of him as one of the “bad guys,” one of the primary people who handed Jesus over to the Romans to be killed. Next time you think of Judas, however, consider this: He was actually a pretty good guy.

Judas walked with Jesus. He was one of Jesus’ chosen few. He learned from Jesus and was attentive to Him. Judas was a good, upstanding citizen. Jesus trusted him enough to put him in charge of managing the money for the disciples; not just a little bit of money—a lot of money. Judas didn’t wake up one day and decide to betray Jesus. For months, perhaps years, betrayal brewed inside him before he ever followed through. No one around him would necessarily have noticed his internal condition. He might not even have noticed it himself. It was a slow fade. He was the epitome of lost without knowing he was lost.

Although I’m grateful for the many exceptions to this statement, if I could pick anybody in the Bible to describe what I see when I look at the modern church, and at times even my own life, I would pick Judas. A lot of people talk about Peter as the symbol of today’s church because He denied Christ after seeing all of the Messiah’s miracles. But I think Judas is the picture of today’s church. Peter was afraid of his surroundings and cowered in fear. Judas blended in well with Jesus on the outside, but inwardly he was far away from the Lord’s heart.

The bush was burning right around him—right in front of him, in fact—but he didn't seem to notice. The ground he walked on was sacred (it was literally the same ground Jesus walked on), but that didn't change Judas's ultimate demise or faulty decision. It's amazing how we can share experiences with God, even be in His presence, and walk away untouched if our hearts are not open to Him.

Judas was close to Jesus—close enough to Jesus to dip His bread into the cup (a custom designed to put a guest of honor on display). Yet, at some point, Lucifer found a friend in Judas, who became an integral part of the plot to murder Jesus. Luke 22:3 says, “Then Satan entered Judas, called Iscariot, one of the Twelve.” That seems crazy to me. Satan *entered* Judas—a man who was at Jesus' side during His entire public ministry?

So how did Judas end up betraying Jesus? I would argue it's the same way any of us end up at that place—step by step . . . little by little. We don't make big decisions to jump off the deep end. We make small decisions to ignore or resist. The bush is ablaze right beside us, but we choose not to turn and see it. The ground is sacred right beneath us, but we choose not to acknowledge it. There was no “major moment” when Judas decided to betray Jesus, just subtle moments when Judas decided to ignore the glory of Jesus and seek his own glory.

Matthew 26:20–23 reads, “When it was evening, he reclined at the table with the twelve. And as they were eating, he said, ‘Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me.’ And they were very sorrowful and began to say to him one after another, ‘Is it I, Lord?’ He answered, ‘He who has dipped his hand in the

dish with me will betray me” (ESV). The passage goes on to say, “Judas, who would betray him, answered, ‘Is it I, *Rabbi?*’” (ESV).

Don’t miss the subtlety here. In that tiny moment, we get a glimpse into the mind of Judas. Jesus was the rabbi in Judas’ life, not his Lord. The Scriptures say that every knee will bow and every tongue confess—not that Jesus is Savior, or rabbi (although He is both those things)—but that He is Lord.

From an outsider’s perspective, Judas must have looked like all the other disciples. He was sitting at the table with them, doing all the same things they did. But in his heart, he saw Jesus as a “good teacher” rather than as “Lord.”

Judas’ behavior should be a stern warning to each of us. This is what happens when you’re close to Jesus but He isn’t your Lord. When Jesus is simply a “good teacher,” when He’s the reason you have a good life—great job, kind spouse, kids in private school—but you don’t fall down at His feet and worship Him, the inevitable end is betrayal. The bush is burning, and the ground is sacred, but you’re missing it.

Also, note this: Judas didn’t betray Jesus for an incredible sum of money. He did it for thirty pieces of silver—the price of a common slave. To Judas, it wasn’t about financial gain; it was about power and prestige, about making a name for himself.

Ultimately, the end for Judas was suicide. In some ways, you might expect this to be true. Certainly, he must have felt profound guilt over murdering Jesus. But Judas’ obvious depression and

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eventual suicide make me wonder: If he was so miserable, how did he miss the joy, peace, and love to be found in Jesus? How did he go for so long without finding his way when the Way was right in front of him?

Just because you feel like you're in the middle of nowhere doesn't mean you're lost. Joseph was in solitude and darkness in Pharaoh's dungeon, but he was far from lost. An abducted victim named Daniel was taken by force to a foreign land—but it wasn't foreign to God. John the Baptist found himself living in the middle of the desert, in complete isolation, but he wasn't lost at all. Being lost doesn't necessarily look the way we think it does.

In Romans 13:11, Paul says, "Awaken from your slumber!" A person who asks a probing question is not lost.

This is one of the other confusing aspects of being lost. You might feel stuck where you are. You might feel like you're in the desert. You might wonder what you're supposed to do next. You might have some probing questions. You might feel like you've been waiting for years, or even decades, for God to fulfill His promises for you. But take heart. The fact that you feel lost is, strangely, an indicator that you're not as lost as you think you are. Turn and see. Look underneath you. The bush always burns, and the ground is always sacred.

We can be lost and not know we're lost. We can feel lost and not actually be lost. This is confusing, I know, but the point is this: When we admit we're lost, God always helps us find our way. Not always in the way we might imagine, or in the time, but the ground beneath us is always sacred. The bush is always burning.

When I was lost, I tried everything to find my way. I was frantic in my searching, desperate. In many ways, this

desperation is what led me down the paths of drugs and séances. These were destructive to my life, but I'm not sure they were any more destructive than the paths Judas walked—which must have looked like church attendance and a 401k and kids going to a great college. No matter what version of lost we live, it never ceases to be dangerous and painful.

What does being lost look like in your life? Maybe for you, it's drugs or alcohol, like it was for me. Perhaps it's simply trying to keep up appearances . . . good grades . . . career success . . . accolades and awards. Who would have thought that being a "good person" could get in the way of a life with Jesus? Either way, the answer Jesus gives is simple but not always easy. Directly underneath you—and all around you—are the divine answers you've been waiting for. The bush always burns, and the ground is always sacred.

At the end of the day, do you call Jesus "good teacher" or Lord?

## *Our Need for Jesus*

One of the most important things to note about Judas—and to learn from him—is that he didn't understand his need for Jesus. As far as Judas knew, he didn't need *anything*. He had everything under control.

By our standards today, we might say he had a good job, a savings account, was trusted by his companions, and had a 401k and two great kids who never got into trouble. He had a good education, a beautiful wife who respected him, and a happy



marriage. But despite having all the blessings of God, Judas didn't really *know* God. He hadn't experienced Him.

His reputation ran wide, but his character wasn't deep. His leadership abilities were flawless, but he forgot how to serve. He networked well but was inwardly alone. He enjoyed life on the stage in front of the masses who followed after Jesus but, unfortunately, he traded the altar for that stage. His prayers were prayer-less, and his hefty offering was shallow.

Judas was lost, but he didn't know it. He was in an environment rife with the movement of God, yet he remained oblivious. When we come to God desiring something specific—a great marriage, a new car, a job, entrance to a specific college—we might get what we want, but we run the risk of leaving satisfied, feeling like now we have all we need. When we come to God looking simply for God Himself, we begin to realize all we could ever want is found in Him—not the things He offers. “Seek first his Kingdom and his righteousness,” says Matthew, “and all these things will be given to you as well” (6:33).

Jesus teaches this lesson in a profound and unmistakable way in the Gospels, when He drives the money changers out of the temple. Interestingly enough, Matthew, Mark, and Luke record Jesus driving money changers out of the temple at the *end* of His three-year ministry. But in John's account, He does it at the beginning. The details of the two accounts are different enough that we can see these events were actually two separate occurrences. In other words, Jesus sandwiched His public ministry with two displays of His intolerance for the abuse of truth. Leave it to Jesus to both come in and go out with a bang.

The disciples saw everything that took place. Jesus used a homemade whip of ropes and loosed the animals. Clanging coins echoed as they hit the ground. Money boxes cracked as He turned over tables, His voice thundered, “Take these things away; do not make my Father’s house a house of trade” (John 2:16, ESV). Stunned onlookers would have recognized this as a reference to Psalm 69:9, “Zeal for your house has consumed me and the reproaches of those who reproach you have fallen on me” (ESV).

Like Judas, the money changers in the temple were standing on sacred ground, yet they couldn’t have been more oblivious. The power and presence of God—the person of Jesus—was right in their midst, yet they missed it. They ignored the glory of God for the purpose of their personal gain.

Not long ago, I was with a friend in Jerusalem, and we got to spend some time with a history buff. We spent most of our time at historical sites. He took us beneath the streets in Jerusalem, where we walked through the unearthed ruins of a former priest who took up residence in first-century Jerusalem. We walked around the foundations of a first-century house and while we did, our friend gave us the history—one fraught with greed, posturing, positioning, and networking.

He explained how there was power, affluence, and influence to be found in the “system” of the priesthood, which meant some were motivated to keep the system functioning properly no matter what. Power and influence can be an intoxicating force. As our guide talked, I couldn’t help but think how dangerous it is to have influence, power, or resources supported by a system—even if the system is religious or based on an appearance of good.

In some ways, it's unavoidable, but my prayer is that we never worship the system over the God who ultimately called us to it.

At one point, our friend explained that the Sadducees (a sect of leaders in the priestly caste) purchased the system from the Romans. This meant the temple tax had to be paid with a Tyre coin, made of pure silver, and the priests controlled the prices of the tax. It also meant the sacrificial system was more of an economic engine than it was an opportunity for people to have an encounter with the divine. In fact, many people couldn't afford to

give sacrifices at all. Some priests starved to death because greedy/crooked priests wouldn't share revenues.

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Standing below ground in Jerusalem, hearing this, I felt the tears rise behind my eyelids. How in the world could they—could we—forget God who was the reason for it all? How could we become so lost without knowing it? And if it's possible to be so

lost without realizing it, is it possible I'm this lost? Is it possible you are? It's a sobering thought to consider we're all just one step away from depravity—clothed in power, wealth, and influence.

No wonder Jesus was so angry. Yes, there were some who came to buy sacrifices with pure hearts. But even those pure intentions were muddied by the injustice and corrupt hearts of the leaders. Almost everybody there was lost. Very few realized the ground they walked on was sacred. None of them was in tune with the realities of heaven unfolding around them.

In the few words Jesus said to the crowd, He distinguished between “my Father’s house” and a marketplace. “My Father’s house” alludes to a place or encounter where being with, treasuring, and honoring God in service and holiness is priority; a place where it’s precious simply to be with God (Psalm 84:10). Yet the focus on God had been replaced in this setting by a system—a system that was leading (some intentionally and others unintentionally) to destruction and despair.

Jesus, who “knew what was in man” (John 2:25, ESV), saw beyond the religious system and directly into the hearts of the money changers. Hearts where a love for position, power, and religion were prevalent and sincere love for God was absent. People wanted what God could give them, but they didn’t want God Himself. Many of them looked for God but didn’t find Him. Others weren’t even looking anymore.

Can you relate?

Albert Einstein once said, “Perfection of means, and confusion of goals seem to characterize our age.”<sup>1</sup> I think this means that many of us are lost and we don’t know it. We’re following the rules. We’re good, upstanding citizens, like Judas. We get good grades and do our homework and go on to have great careers and decent marriages and pay our bills. But we have lost our way—even though the Way is right in front of us. We have everything we need, so we don’t understand our need for Jesus.

Revelation 3:17—the passage that describes what it means to be a lukewarm Christian—reads, “You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.”

Wow! In other words, the most wretched thing you can possibly do, the thing that will cause God to spit you out of His mouth, is to forget you need Him. You think you're rich, but you're pitiful and naked—incredibly sobering.

In Mark 7:9, Jesus says to the scribes and Pharisees, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition!” (ESV) They had allowed the “system” they established as a roadmap to God to *replace* God Himself. I don't know about you, but for me, this sounds painfully familiar. Can you see ways in our culture—or in our lives—where we've allowed the system we built as a way to God to replace the Way?

The scene in the temple that day wasn't an isolated instance of questionable worship. It was the outward manifestation of greed, cloaked with religion: “This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me” (Matt. 15:8–9, ESV). The pattern, unfortunately, has repeated itself throughout history. God is perpetually in our midst, yet we don't see or acknowledge Him.

Do you know how desperately you need Jesus? I can honestly say I do, but that understanding hasn't been easily won. Not many would wish for my testimony. Like I've said, I've been to some really dark places in my life—places where no one should choose to venture. I've been lost. Sometimes we have to admit we're lost before we can be found.

## *Dark Places*

The truth is, if we slow down long enough to remember, we've all been to some dark places. Sometimes we find ourselves in

dark places not because of our choices but the choices of others. Sometimes we're the driver. Other times, we're the passenger. Sometimes we can see how lost we are. Other times we don't realize it until we've missed our destination by a long ways. In the end, we have no one to blame for where we end up. We can't control everything that happens to us, but we can control how we respond.

The choices of others filled my childhood with fear and sadness. I learned at a young age about broken trust and broken promises. As a child, the night terrors were so bad I spent days in doctors' offices as they tried to discover what was wrong. No one was ever able to point to the exact problem. Spiritual problems can't be solved with an earthly consciousness.

I saw the ravages of sin in my childhood. I saw what anger can do to someone and how bitterness rots to the very core. I learned from those closest to me how to converse with the spiritual realm. I remember talking with demons and watching candles float off of tables and chairs scoot across the basement floor. No wonder the night terrors were so bad.

My access to alcohol was far from whimsical, and experimentation with hallucination fed my curiosity for the world beyond. By the time I entered middle school, I had most everybody around me fooled. Because I was a good student, in the accelerated classes, in programs such as "talented and gifted" and "conflict managers," and was a decent athlete, no one fully understood my darkness. I was popular and dressed nicely, but inwardly I was dead. I was lost and nobody knew it. Darkness doesn't always look so dark, especially when it's cleaned up and made to look nice.

It reminds me of what Jesus said in Matthew 23:27, “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything

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unclean.” Speaking of dark places, Jesus compares the Pharisees—some of the most religiously and culturally upstanding people of His day—to tombs, where they kept dead bodies.

The significance of this is huge. Tombs or sepulchers were above-the-ground edifices to house bones/cadavers. A committed teacher of the law or common Hebrew would have fled from these “unclean” tombs. The tombs were whitewashed for

at least two reasons. First, the paint alerted someone that the tomb was nearby—so they could avoid contact. Second, it was a beautification and preservation technique. A whitewashed tomb looked more beautiful than just a regular one.

This was me—a whitewashed tomb—all cleaned up on the outside and extremely good at covering up the death beneath the surface.

I’ve been to dark places, which is why I’m certain where I would be without Jesus. No matter the circumstances of my life, I know—completely and deeply—how desperately I need Him. I pray regularly that the grace of God will be present in my life so I never forget where I’ve been. Are you keenly aware of the dark

places in your heart? We all have them. We're all lost. Are you willing to see and admit how lost you truly are? This is the first step toward your personal discovery of the bushes burning in your life.

The danger of not knowing our personal darkness is huge. We run the risk of finding comfort in our spiritual pedigree—upbringing, obedience, or church attendance—rather than in Jesus. Beware of the belief that you're exactly where you perceive yourself to be. Jesus addresses this with one of the most provocative verses in all of the New Testament: "See to it, then, that the light within you is not darkness" (Luke 11:35). It's a travesty to walk around in darkness and discover that we had only *imagined* our path was illuminated. Darkness knows no bounds. We're all born separated from God.

If we want to get to the place where we truly grasp how much we need Jesus, we have to be willing to admit the darkness in our own hearts. We have to be willing to abandon the "system" we think will get us to Jesus—the rules, religion, and outward appearances of goodness. We have to know that we're lost and know that Jesus is the Way—the *only* way—home.

### *Where Is Jesus in All of This?*

Is it really possible to lose sight of Jesus even though He's part of our daily religious rhythm? The answer is yes. The Old Testament and the New Testament testify to this. Ezekiel 10 tells how the glory of the Lord departed from the temple, and for approximately one hundred years, the Israelites continued to gather and go about their routine. First Samuel records the life of



King Saul who, when the Spirit departed from him, continued to hold a place of earthly leadership—though in heaven his position was forfeited.

Luke 2 tells how Jesus' parents went to the temple for the dedication of their twelve-year-old son, as was the custom. After leaving the temple to sojourn home, Joseph and Mary discovered they didn't know where Jesus was. Aside from the obvious parental panic of losing a child, have you ever thought how ironic it was that Jesus was lost, of all places, during a religious ceremony and in a religious community?

Even though it appears Jesus is with us in our religious practices, we would do well to avoid the assumption that we are actually with Him. It's entirely possible to lose Him in the midst of trying to find Him or at least our version of Him. In the midst of custom and culture, sometimes we miss Him. The bush is always burning, and the ground is always sacred—but that doesn't mean you recognize it. You can stand among a group of people who call themselves Christians and still wonder *where is Jesus in all of this?*

Far beyond the witchcraft I was involved with or the drug abuse that trapped me for years, the darkest place I've traveled may very well have been those days when I thought I was close to Jesus but then discovered my heart was hard. Take a minute and look into your own heart. Is there any trace of darkness there? Do you know what it feels like to be lost?

Many have asked Jesus to be the Savior of their souls. Many have committed their lives to Him so He could be their leader. Many, across the world, have come forward in response to ask Jesus to take away their pain. And yes, Jesus does take away

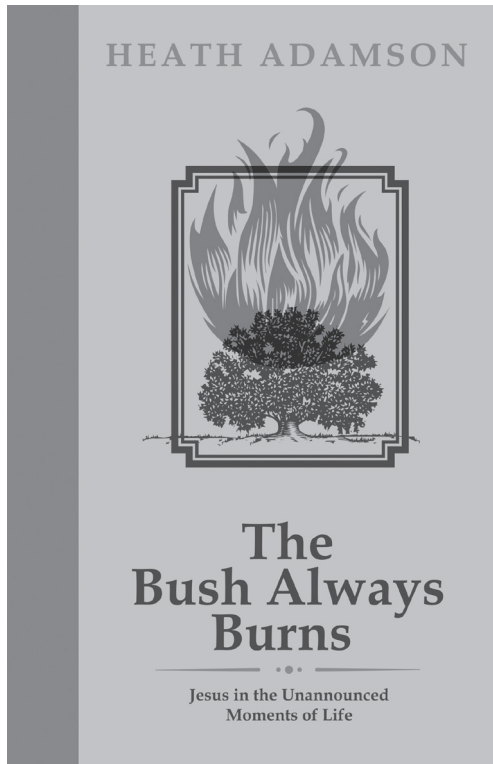
our pain. He does long to be our Savior. He is the epitome of leadership, which is actually servanthood. But in the end He is so much more than that; He is Lord.

Are you lost? Perhaps being lost isn't such a bad thing. Feeling lost may help us realize we've been walking with Jesus but haven't really seen Him. We've been Christians our entire lives, but we're still searching for something. Maybe being lost wakes us up to the fact that bushes are burning, all around us. Maybe, if you feel lost, a good place to start would be this: Every knee will bow and declare not that Jesus is a rabbi, leader, guru, friend or homeboy, but Lord. Who will you say He is?

*For More Information*

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