

PART 3

Altering Life's Rhythms

Saying you want a new identity is one thing. Practicing a new identity in real life is an entirely different thing. The old identity has a lot of baggage.





Chapter Seven

Salt and Light

How does being who you want to be
impact those around you?

“WOULD ANYONE LIKE to see the natural color of this cave?” the Mammoth Cave National Park guide asked.

“Yes,” I heard my mom reply. I knew something was coming, but my 10-year-old brain wasn’t ready for the shock.

I heard a loud metallic clunk and everything disappeared. I saw absolute nothingness. No fade to gray, no shadowy forms of what I had seen just a moment ago. In an instant, I’d lost one of my five senses. Now down to four, I was suffocated by a blackness so thick and immediate I couldn’t even sense my mom or dad or my two sisters standing inches from me. The cave, already cold and damp, now added darkness to its qualities and swallowed me whole. For eternal seconds nothing existed, not even me.

Then came another metallic clunk. Instantly the light splashed on the walls of the cave, the blackness fled and reality got its dimensions back. I could breathe. And I knew again that I was—alive.

Now *that* was cool!
Where there is no light, there is only darkness.
Where light is present, darkness ceases.



I've only been to Vegas once. More accurately, I've been *through* Vegas once. Cheryl and I were newlyweds on a one-year offsite assignment in Southern California for my engineering job. We were on our way to Estes Park, Colorado, to meet up with her family for a hiking vacation in one of our favorite spots in the world.

We had decided to travel at night to avoid traffic and the desert summer heat. She was sleeping, and I'd been driving since we left our apartment. Vegas was at the end of our first tank of gas. At the very end.

A city of light in a
desert of darkness
can't be hidden.

This was back in the day, before Google Maps and turn-by-turn navigation on cell phones. It was getting a little scary driving through the desert after midnight, with our gas gauge hovering at E. I started going over the mileage calculations in my head, pushing aside the sleep that was curling up beside me. I tried to figure out how long it'd been since I saw the last sign, hoping I hadn't run the numbers wrong.

I wondered what it would be like to run out of gas—not a pleasant thought. Life can be unnerving when there's nothing but blackness all around, and you're traveling a lonely highway through an empty desert in a land you've never seen before.

We came over a rise, and there it was—Vegas after dark. Seeing the glow of the city was such a stark contrast to the dimensionless blackness I'd been motoring through for the last several hours. It gave me a bearing. It gave me a destination and hope. One of Jesus' comments came immediately to my mind, "A city on a hill cannot be hidden." In this case, it was a city in a valley, but the illustration was just as vivid. A city of light in a desert of darkness can't be hidden.

From a driving standpoint, Vegas saved us. In a way that road signs, maps and mileage calculations couldn't, the city aglow told us where to go and how to get there.

Come to think of it, I've actually been through Vegas twice. We went through on our return trip—this time during the afternoon rush with plenty of gas. It made for an interesting contrast, a tale of two cities. The first city offered relief and hope, a life-saving place.

This other city offered busyness and traffic hazards. It was a place we had to deal with and get through along the way to our destination. It offered us no real interest.

In fact, it offered nothing.



Light.

There's so much we don't know about it. Scientists still don't know if light is energy or particle-based, it has the qualities of both. Still, light is so practical, so functional. We use light. We've figured out how to turn it on and turn it off. We can focus it into a laser beam, or we can influence our emotions by changing the tone of a room. We heat frozen food and cook popcorn in a box that emits concentrated light beyond our visible spectrum. We peer into space to see the light and measure the universe.

Something tells me we should be careful, though, since this tech knowledge can easily give us a false sense of . . . something. Command, maybe? Just because we can manufacture light doesn't mean we can create it. We can cheapen it. We can lose the mystery, the beauty that is light.

I've seen some cool lighting effects, but none that can top a good sunset. When the sun sets on a west-facing beach, people stop whatever they're doing to watch. Whether they're eating at outdoor cafes, walking on the beach, or playing volleyball—when the last visible part of the orange ball drops below the horizon, they applaud spontaneously. Even the locals here in St. Pete, who see sunsets on a regular basis, still stop and gaze. And time and again, they even applaud.

I've seen some cool lighting effects on buildings and in rooms, but people don't usually spontaneously applaud for them.

That God spent most of the first day creating light has to make it special. Think of how integral it is to a healthy life, like how light deprivation in winter contributes to Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD). Think of the way light controls our bodily rhythms by triggering the release of melatonin when it's not around so we can fall asleep and serotonin when it is so we can wake up.

I think it's good that we can use light to suit our own purposes. I think we need to keep our humility about it, though. After all, aren't we better off letting light do its natural work rather than thinking it's all about us?

I don't want to lose the mystery that surrounds light.

I don't ever want to lose the mystery.



A few years back, I attended a business conference with a client. The conference was about how to develop values-based leadership and organizations. The audience was mostly physicians and medical practice managers. One manager of a large practice asked about how to handle a certain physician. This doctor frequently referred to his Christian beliefs, lobbying hard to make faith a central issue in his role and the overall operation of the practice.

There was only one problem.

“He talks all the time about being a Christian. But the way he treats other people makes me wonder what he really believes. He's critical and judgmental. People don't want to be around him. He has a strong belief in his values, but no one else wants those values in the practice because of his behavior. How can I get him to understand that?”

Ouch.

It reminds me of Margaret Thatcher's quote on leadership, “Being a leader is like being a lady. If you have to tell people you are one, you probably aren't.” It's a favorite quote because it's so true.

I've worked with people who regularly reminded their direct staff who the leader was. I always thought this was stupid because they

were already the leader. Did they think everyone forgot? To be fair, good leadership isn't easy. If it were, there'd be a lot more good leaders around. But when someone has to remind everyone else that they're the leader, it sounds more like they're trying to convince themselves.

I've worked with others whose leadership was never in question. They just led, and everyone else just followed. They had the greatest influence, though they weren't the smartest, the loudest, or the most stubborn.

Sometimes they even had a title to go with it, but not always.

I think you could take out "leader" from Maggie's quote and replace it with "Christian," and the idea still works. There's something wrong with having to tell people that you're a Christian. It's like writing "a Christian" on a nametag in the white space right under "Hello, I am," then expecting everyone to be impressed.

But it just doesn't work that way. The people I've met that most remind me of Jesus just live, they *are* Christian. In a manner of speaking, you could say they *are* Christ. Maybe not the walking on water part, but they live like him. They don't have to *act* like him, they *are* like him.

When someone has to remind everyone else that they're the leader, it sounds more like they're trying to convince themselves.

Jesus said his followers were salt and light—an interesting pair of metaphors.

Light, as we've already seen, helps people find their way in a dark place. It exposes and reveals, removing doubt, fear and confusion. Darkness ceases to exist when light is around.

In Jesus' day, salt was considered a household staple, along with wine and oil. Since there was no refrigeration, it was used to keep food from spoiling. A pact of friendship was sealed by exchanging salt as a gift. It had medicinal value, and newborn babies were bathed and rubbed in salt.

Salt and light. Environment changers. Preservers of life. Sources of light in darkness. Lovers of enemies. The impact can easily be lost on us who flip a switch to generate light and freeze our food until we're ready to eat it.

Salt isn't like anything else. It's not another compound, like, say, sand, trying to be salty. Though it can be ruined if it gets wet, salt will always be salt.

Light isn't like anything else. It isn't another energy form trying to get to the next level. Though it can be diffused or covered up, light will always be light.

Salt and light influence their world by being what they are. They don't require anything else. They don't *act* like salt and light, they *are* salt and light.

I must admit that I've spent much of my faith journey trying to act like Jesus. I've joined religious systems that spurred me to greater Jesusness. I've worked hard in these systems—harder than many, not as hard as some—to act more like him, in the hope I would eventually be more like him.

It didn't work. It was trying to turn sand into salt. And it probably worked as well as the doctor who went out of his way to tell everyone he was a Christian rather than simply being a Christian.

I was just wearing a nametag.



When I first moved to Canada as a U.S. citizen, I knew I'd experience some cultural differences, but it was hard to pin them down. In my first year there, as I mentioned in Chapter 2, I frequently asked people what it meant to be a Canadian. My friends north of the 49th Parallel found this difficult to answer. Inevitably, they found it easier to describe things about Americans that were un-Canadian.

The greatest clarity came one time when I was in a group that didn't realize I was an American, and the subject of Americans happened to come up.

"Loudmouths," one guy called them, ... uh, called *us*.

Another man piped in, "Yeah, they act like they own the place."

"Well," said a third, "That's because they know what's best for everyone else," which elicited a hearty laugh from the group.

Though they were unsure about what a Canadian identity was, they were quick to identify what it was not, American. This seemed backward to me because Canadians have so many great qualities in their national ethos. Canadians are generous, likable people. They're diverse, inclusive and hospitable (except on the hockey rink).

If I were Canadian, I'd define myself by qualities like these.

But then, that's easy for me to say, being an American.

Being on an identity journey prompted me to observe Christians. It was sort of like watching people in the mall or the airport. I had to step out of myself a bit, back away from long-held presumptions and preconceptions, open my eyes ... and watch. I saw how people talked about their practices and their interests, their struggles and their joys. I listened to what they did and how they acted.

It was—it is—a little weird.

I see people who call themselves Christians approaching their identity like my Canadian friends by defining themselves by what they aren't. Just listen.

"It's time for Evangelicals to take a more aggressive stance in the political arena."

"The church needs to fight back against the cancel culture."

"*The Shack* is not a Christian book." (This book's dated, but you get my point—every couple of years, some new book creates controversy for Christians).

"Christians should boycott that store because they sell XYZ products!"

"It's not right that Hollywood pushes the LGBTQ agenda?"

"Requiring me to wear a mask violates my freedom of religion."

As you listen, ask yourself why politics and boycotts and issues and controversies are so intoxicating. Why is it so energizing to join in a cause? Is it a coincidence that joining causes is easier than loving others unconditionally—like, say, our enemies? Can we not see that holding *others* accountable is so much easier than holding *ourselves* accountable?

The amount of energy spent highlighting what Christians don't want to be makes me wonder if their primary goal in life is to avoid being un-Christian. It's like advancing Christian interests by attacking things that aren't Christian.

Does salt become salt by trying not to be unsalty?

Would light become more like light by striving not to be dark?

What if we spent our time and energy focusing on what we are—or perhaps better said, what we will be? Wouldn't it be easy to see who we are not? From whatever desert they're traveling through, no matter

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how dark or dry or hopeless their circumstances are, people could see that our lives are different. They'd ask us where we get our hope, peace and assurance.

Think of the impact that would result if everyone who claims to follow Christ lived this way. What a statement it would make if "Christian" was universally understood to mean "someone who transforms their world through unconditional love." How convincing and influential it would be for Jesus' followers to have one single agenda. Being salt and light—and for this to be the rule, not the exception.

I think it would be cool if people could see *that* identity in Christians. I think living from *that* identity would validate any social or political message we might have. I think more people would see it—especially those who were looking.



We think of love as if it were something we turn on, like a light switch. We think of it as an activity, or maybe a skill or even an emotional expression. When we think of loving others more, we try to work harder at it, looking for a brighter bulb. We think of something we do or should do.

But that's not how I see love in Cheryl.

When it comes to her spiritual awakening, Cheryl's story is pretty vanilla. There's no great turnaround, nothing that God rescued her from. She's never been drunk or high (although it's pretty memorable watching her come out of anesthesia post-surgery). God has never

spoken to her from a burning bush. As best she can remember, she's just always followed God.

I've never once felt unloved by her. And I've never seen anyone spend time with her and walk away feeling unappreciated. This isn't something she chooses to do. She doesn't put on love like a shirt or a face of makeup. She doesn't increase the dosage of her love supplement.

She just *is* love.

She'll hate reading this, of course, which is just like her. She'll say she's put her foot in her mouth before. She's offended some people and disappointed others. But those who know her know those are exceptions. And even if they weren't, quantifying them misses the point. Loving others isn't about having the fewest goof-ups or offenses. She's not perfect. But spend time with her, and you'll have the uncanny sense you've been loved—however imperfectly—and you are richer for it.

It's not what you see on the outside that makes her who she is. It's who she is that makes what you see on the outside. Love is an integral part of her identity.

Maybe the best way to measure her love is to watch the effect she has on other people. You can debate the number of her loving characteristics or the quality of her actions, you can't debate the way she makes you feel.

The way she lights up your cave.

I think back to when we met on our blind date. Cheryl, in her boots, led me around the dance floor. That day I rejected what I saw on the outside. She was nice, but frankly, I wanted to leave. My eyes were opened, though, a week later. The dancing blind date was actually a precursor to a weekend double date to attend an Arkansas-Texas A&M football game. We spent three hours trapped in conversation on the drive from Dallas to College Station. She wasn't looking for anything from me. I was important. I was heard. I was relevant. I was respected and valued. All this from a woman who had no romantic interest in me at the time. I began to see who she was on the inside, and it was so captivating I couldn't take my eyes off her. By the end of the weekend, I knew she was the woman I wanted to marry.

I'm reminded of a line from the movie *Gladiator* and Maximus' thoughts on Rome. "Rome is the light," he says. "I've seen much of

the rest of the world. It is brutal, and cruel, and dark.” For me, love is like Maximus’ Rome: Love is the light. Darkness may be the natural color of our cave, but when love appears, the darkness of this world flees. Evil, hatred, pride, fear, hopelessness, trouble, envy, greed, suspicion ... none can remain. In the face of light, darkness has no identity. It has no relevance, no reality.

In the presence of light, darkness ceases.



When I was in seminary, my school hosted a conference and “asked” the students to help out. When I went (late) to sign up, there were only two open slots—one for childcare (a one-hour commitment)

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and one for serving dinner (two hours minimum). At the time, we’d just had Brennan, so watching someone else’s kids was not high on my list of things to do. But childcare would give me one more hour to study—and to sleep. So, I ventured into the fray. Heck, how bad could it be?

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I’m goin’ in—lock and load, baby.

When I arrived at the childcare room, there was a toddler who’d tripped and, unfortunately, broken his fall with his upper lip. It now stuck out like a purple grape. It hurt *me* just to look at it, so I can’t imagine how much it hurt *him*. He was absolutely inconsolable. All the other volunteers (who happened to be female) had tried to calm him down, but he had gone off the emotional edge.

I’d never seen him before, but he must have sensed something in me that took away the stranger danger. I looked him in the eye, gave him his blanket, held him close and started talking to him, man to man-cub. Immediately, he quit crying and laid his head on my shoulder. Every minute or so, he would jerk in a deep breath, a leftover reflex from his crying rage.

After five minutes, he suddenly pulled away from my chest, sat up and looked at me straight through, getting a good read.

“Are you for real?” his eyes asked. “Can I trust you?”

We held eyes for a moment, long enough to reassure his young instincts before he laid his head back down. I held him that way for the rest of the hour.

There was a connection between us, and though this may sound like I’m reaching, a manly connection. It wasn’t my pity that he felt. It wasn’t a consolation technique or a certified childcare skill he recognized. It was something else. I was there, present. I just knew he needed what I had to give. I understood his loss of hope and need for respect amid his pain. I didn’t know how I knew it, I just knew. And so did he.

When his mom came to pick him up, he was relieved but didn’t immediately clamor for her. And I didn’t want to let him go. After a long moment, he knew it was time and simply leaned toward her, replacing my shoulder with hers. Though my hour wasn’t up, I left immediately with an eerie confidence that God had steered me to this encounter, and that my job there was done. I felt as gratified as I could ever remember for having helped another human being.

It left a profound impact on me and opened a new understanding of Jesus’ priority of love. “This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples,” he said, “When they see the love you have for each other.” It seems that even a child—or maybe *particularly* a child—knows love when he sees it. It’s that love radar we all have, the one that works on an intuitive level we can neither justify nor deny.

Love is inexplicable and unreasonable. And unmistakable. It cuts through the crap of this world the way a laser cuts through steel. Nothing can resist it.

And it’s something so genuine that we can’t just turn it on, you know? It can’t be faked or manufactured. There’s no such thing as imitation love, synthetic light or artificial salt. Love that’s this deep is the visible expression of who we are.

Curiously, though we can’t turn it on, we *can* turn it off.

We can’t deny it, but we *can* hide it.

Resist it.

Withhold it.



How would we be perceived if love were our most definable, common characteristic?

I wonder.

David Kinnaman's book *unChristian* is a research-based reveal of how people view those who say they are "Christian." The findings are not complimentary. 84 percent of young non-Christians say they know a Christian personally, yet only 15 percent say their lifestyles are noticeably different in a good way. Kinnaman sums up by saying that the negative reaction isn't about what Christians believe, it's about how they behave, the "swagger" and the sense of self-importance they project.

Kinnaman's research summarizes the three most common perceptions of present-day Christianity—anti-homosexual, judgmental and hypocritical. These "big three" are followed by being old-fashioned, too involved in politics, out of touch with reality, insensitive to others, boring, not accepting of other faiths, and confusing.

And this was (as I write this) a decade ago.

Like many, I watched the reports of the Capitol riots at the end of the Trump administration with a spectrum of feelings, from disbelief on one end to disgust on the other. Even more surreal was the involvement of some who claimed their actions were faith motivated.⁴⁶ And after the riots, I continued to hear rumblings of protest from some segments of those who identify as Christians that the time has come for more aggressive action against government oppression and restriction of religious freedoms.

How do swagger, mob tactics, self-importance and civil unrest reflect the character, pattern and purpose of Jesus' life? Is Jesus' love somehow insufficient so that we're compelled to enforce it by leveraging social influence and seizing the political high ground?

If so, how do we reconcile this with the fact that Christianity is currently growing fastest in regions where you can be imprisoned or executed for practicing faith in Jesus? And how does that follow Jesus' example of rejecting political influence and power in favor of the much more significant act of loving society's rebels and cast-offs?

Faith or religious beliefs can—and I think should—be a part of the social discourse and political conversation. But this calls for using wisdom and avoiding attempts to protect self-interest or control power. Jesus is calling us to be peace-giving beggars, mourners and meekers, not just for *our* benefit but for the benefit of others. If that's true, we do ourselves a disservice to look at the topic of identity myopically, with ourselves as the sole beneficiary.

Faith, while wholly and personally ours, isn't about us. It's about the object of our faith.

Jesus told his followers that they were light. Not that they'd be *like* light, but that they *were* light. Light, along with salt, doesn't need additional motivation to be what it is. It doesn't need to adapt or develop in order to chase away the darkness. It doesn't need a catalyst or an intervention. It doesn't need a reminder. It doesn't need a majority. It doesn't need government sponsorship—or, for that matter, legal freedom.

All it needs is a dark place to shine in.

Now *that's* cool!

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DISAMBIGUATION

CHAPTER 7

THE BIG IDEA:

Love is who we were meant to be—and there are no shortcuts or artificial substitutes.

DARKNESS CEASES TO EXIST IN THE PRESENCE OF LIGHT.

Light is an element of creation, electromagnetic radiation in the spectrum the human eye can detect. Darkness is ... nothing, it's the absence of light.⁴⁷

A "CITY OF LIGHT" CAN'T BE HIDDEN.

If it's truly light, it shines bright. The darker the night, the brighter it shines. It calls to people mired in darkness, who, without light, stumble, trip and fall because they're lost.⁴⁸

TRUE LIGHT IS UNIQUE AND MYSTERIOUS AND SHOULDN'T BE TAMPERED WITH.

If God and Jesus are truly "light"—and his followers, by extension, are ambassadors of light—they must be careful to represent the light in its true form. They would do well to retain the sense of awe and mystery and not look for shortcuts or settle for substitute, sub-standard versions of light.⁴⁹

WE CAN'T BE EFFECTIVE SALT/LIGHT AMBASSADORS BY RE-LABELING WHO WE ARE NOW.

If you tell people you're following Jesus and it's not apparent in your life, something's probably off. Being salt and light is not about wearing a nametag.⁵⁰

WE CAN'T BE AMBASSADORS OF SALT/LIGHT BY BEING LESS OF WHOM WE DON'T WANT TO BE.

Light's brightness doesn't come from trying to be less dark. Trying to represent God by being less of what he's not doesn't make any sense. If we want to represent God and all that he is, we must be like him.⁵¹

LOVE ON THE INSIDE MAKES US SALT AND LIGHT ON THE OUTSIDE.

Unconditional love is the visible evidence of God living in us. It's the fruit, the natural byproduct of someone who has surrendered their life to him and is living out his teachings. Our love for others points to God.⁵²

HOW WOULD CHRISTIANITY BE PERCEIVED IF LOVE WERE ITS MOST VISIBLE, DEFINABLE CHARACTERISTIC?

God only knows. We should consider why Jesus' New Commandment was to love one another as he has loved us.⁵³