

## **Jesus Calling: An In-Depth Review of Sarah Young's Bestseller**

By **[Sean McCausland](#)**

Over the past few decades, certain books written for a Christian audience have experienced a moment of phenomenal popularity. They include *The Bondage Breaker*, *Experiencing God*, *The Prayer of Jabez*, *The Purpose-Driven Life* and *The Shack*. Some of these titles were even found at the top of the list that matters most to many: the *New York Times*. However, while they achieved staggering sales within a year or two of being published, they eventually faded far from view. Nowadays, one will seldom hear them being discussed or even mentioned among evangelical Christians.

What is notable about *Jesus Calling*, a 365-day devotional book by Sarah Young, is that it is still riding high within the “top ten” of Christian best-seller lists *fifteen years after its initial release*. This is no small accomplishment; it has achieved what none of the aforementioned titles were able to. Furthermore, ever since Young followed up the book's success with large-print and “journaling” versions, children's and teens' editions, and three “sequel” devotionals, these have also received strong sales. Surely there is something about the contents of *Jesus Calling* that registers very strongly with millions of professing Christians all over the globe.

What follows is an attempt to evaluate the merits of *Jesus Calling* in the light of Biblical teaching, as summarized by the most significant historic creeds and confessions of Christianity.<sup>1</sup> It will begin with a brief account of how *Jesus Calling* came to fruition. Then there will be an appraisal of the book's strengths, to be followed by an assessment of its shortcomings. From this point forward the book will simply be called *JC*.

### **Brief Background on the Book's Origins**

At the time when Sarah Young began to put *JC* together, she and her husband Steve Young were stationed in Australia as PCA (Presbyterian Church in

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<sup>1</sup> These include the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Chalcedonian Creed, the Athanasian Creed, the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, the Westminster Confession, the New Hampshire Baptist Confession, the Baptist Faith and Message, and the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy. See Wayne Grudem, “Appendix 1: Historic Confessions of Faith” in *Systematic Theology* (Zondervan: 2000, pp. 1168-1207).

America) missionaries to Japanese immigrants.<sup>2</sup> According to the promotional write-up of Thomas Nelson, *JC*'s publisher, Sarah had been accustomed to writing in her own prayer journal. But then she decided that this practice was not allowing her to listen carefully enough to Jesus' words.<sup>3</sup>

As Young "embarked on a journey" of listening to Jesus, Thomas Nelson maintains, Jesus "lovingly laid on her heart" His own words, in addition to certain Scriptures.<sup>4</sup> Young then took these words and turned them into "readings"<sup>5</sup> by recording them in her prayer journal. The publisher also asserts that Jesus' words to Young were comprised of "reassurance, comfort and hope. Words that have made her increasingly aware of His presence and allowed her to enjoy His peace."<sup>6</sup> Admittedly, those who make their way through *JC* will be met with much consolation: they will find a continuous supply of warm, affectionate and caring expressions directed especially at those suffering from fear and anxiety. The constant use – from the first calendar day to the last - of the following words and phrases reinforce this observation: "My Presence", "enjoy My Presence", "relax in My Presence", "rest", "trust", "come to me", "thankfulness", "thank Me", "be still", "spend time with Me", "stay in touch with Me", "come to Me continually", "receive My peace" and "live in collaboration with Me".

Interestingly, in contrast to Thomas Nelson's claim that the pages of *JC* contain "the words and Scriptures (that) Jesus...laid on her heart"<sup>7</sup>, Young herself admits, in the book's introduction, that "*my writings are not inspired – as only Scripture is...*I have written from the perspective of Jesus speaking, to help readers feel more personally connected with Him."(emphasis added)<sup>8</sup>

I trust, then, that Young will not mind if I choose to view *JC*'s contents as Young's own thoughts. In taking this approach, I am doing little else besides heeding the instructions of the Apostles Paul and John to put all truth-claims to the test (1 Thess. 5:20-22; 1 John 4:1) and following the example of the Berean people in the Book of Acts. They were willing to evaluate the merits of no less than Paul himself by "examin(ing) the Scriptures...to see if what Paul said was true" (Acts 17:11); that is, to see whether or not his thoughts were truly given to him by God.

## Noteworthy Features

There are some good and admirable qualities to be found in *JC*. These qualities may account, at least in part, for the astounding success the book has enjoyed.

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<sup>2</sup> Found on Thomas Nelson Publishing website: <http://www.thomasnelson.com/jesus-calling.html>

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Young, *Jesus Calling: Enjoying Peace in His Presence* (Thomas Nelson, 2004), p. xiv.

They are noted below.

**1) It emphasizes that the heart of Christian faith is the Christian's relationship to, and reliance upon, Jesus.**

*JC* reminds us that our service to God means little, unless it is borne of a humble reliance on Him and His power. "I equip you to face whatever the day brings" (Jan. 2). "Your security rests in Me alone – not in other people, not in circumstances" (Jan. 21). "My Spirit within you is more than sufficient to handle whatever this day may bring. That is the basis for your confidence" (Apr. 5). "When the path before you looks easy and straightforward, you may be tempted to go it alone instead of relying on me. This is when you are in the greatest danger of stumbling" (Oct. 4). All of these statements echo the words of Jesus to His disciples in John 15, particularly verses 4 and 5: "Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."

**2) It acknowledges the importance of God's attributes and their practical implications for believers.**

Christian authors today often fail to remind their readers (and themselves!) just who the Biblical God is in all of His glorious qualities. In contrast, Young often throws light upon the importance of God's attributes for our daily lives. In one entry, for example, Young speaks of how God's omniscience (infinite knowledge) and His omnipotence (infinite power) can be a source of comfort to the believer: "I know exactly what this day will contain, whereas you have only vague ideas about it. I will not show you what is on the road ahead but I will thoroughly equip you for it" (Jan. 12). In another entry, we are reminded of how God's omniscience can also be unsettling: "...I can see straight through you, into the very depths of your being. There is no pretense in your relationship with me" (Jan. 14). Young also reminds readers of the assurance they can have because of God's immutability (unchangeability): "In a world of unrelenting changes, I am the One who never changes....find in Me the stability for which you have yearned" (May 26). Therefore, readers of *JC* will not be exposed to a vague, undefined Lord in its pages. Young considers God's attributes to be extremely important and relevant.

**3) It reminds us that Jesus' work on the cross is the foundation for being reconciled with God.**

Many books written for Christians today do not remind their readers of the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection. Therefore, readers of these books may easily conclude – however contrary to the intentions of the books' authors – that they can come to God on their own terms if they have conjured up enough faith

or action. But readers of JC would not be allowed to make that assumption. Young does well in speaking of Jesus' substitutionary cross-work, and His perfect human righteousness, as the only means by which one can access God's throne. For example, here is what we read in the Feb. 28 entry: "I died for your sins, that I might clothe you in My garments of salvation. This is how I see you: radiant in My robe of righteousness." Also, somewhat echoing the Apostle Paul's "how-much-more" reasoning in Romans 8:32, Apr. 10 says, "Having sacrificed my very life for you, I can be trusted with every facet of your life." And the reading for Aug. 24 states: "...My own children having nothing to fear; for I have cleansed them by My blood and clothed them in My righteousness."

***4) It warns readers against succumbing to false beliefs and idols that can inhibit trust in Jesus.***

Another way that JC bucks the trend of numerous writings written for Christians is that it is willing to confront readers about unbiblical ideas they can easily embrace, or other things that may take the place of God in their hearts. Here are just some of several warnings that readers are to heed: "Worship me only. Whatever occupies your mind the most becomes your god. Worries, if indulged, develop into idols" (Jan. 30). "Modern man seeks his positive focus elsewhere: in sports, sensations, acquiring new possessions. Advertising capitalizes on the longing of people...I planted that longing in human souls, knowing that only I could fully satisfy it" (Feb. 12). "I am deeply grieved when My blessings become idols in their hearts" (Mar. 27). "You live among people who glorify busyness; they have made time a tyrant that controls their lives. Even those who know Me as Savior tend to march to the tempo of the world. They have bought into the illusion that more is always better: more meanings, more programs, more activity" (July 17). Young is not even afraid to bring up the ease with which we become too attached to our relationships: "If you let a loved one become an idol in your heart, you endanger that one – as well as yourself" (Aug. 23). Through all of these warnings, JC firmly emulates many admonitions given to God's people in the Bible. These include Ezekiel 14:3 ("Son of man, these men have set up idols in their hearts and put wicked stumbling blocks before their faces. Should I let them inquire of me at all?"), Colossians 2:8 ("See to it that no one takes you through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental forces of this world rather than on Christ"), and 1 John 5:21 ("Dear children, keep yourselves from idols").

***5) It accurately describes the goal of the Christian's life as being made fit by God for the life to come.***

In JC's Feb. 28 reading, Young says, "When I discipline you...it is to prepare you for face-to-face fellowship with me throughout all eternity." In the entry for April 15, we read these words: "Instead of bemoaning the loss of your comfort, accept the challenge of something new. I lead you from glory to glory, making you fit for my kingdom." Statements like these can provide us Christians with some much-

needed clarity for how we view this life. Often we embrace many faulty beliefs about who God calls us to be in this world. Two of the most common are as follows: 1) since Jesus has paid our penalty and made us His own, there is little else, if anything, we need to do or be to prepare for the world to come; or 2) Jesus' work on our behalf is essential, but only serves as a "first step" in our reconciliation with God; the ultimate determiner of our righteous status before God is our lifelong record of good works.

Young's statements cited above refute these two views. They echo the "now-but-not-yet" tension of the New Testament, which asserts that while believers are forever *declared* righteous and "set apart" in their *standing* before God, they are still in the process of being *made* righteous in their *character* by God. One good example of this tension is found in Paul's statement to Philippians: "I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me" (Phil. 3:12). Another is found in these words from the author of Hebrews: "Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness, no one will see the Lord" (Heb. 12:14). We are reminded here, especially, how believers are called to contribute to their sanctification as the Holy Spirit enables them to do so.

Two more helpful aspects of *JC* should be briefly noted. First, Young shows a good understanding of the modern technological and media-saturated world, particularly in the way that it puts a premium on speed, busyness, activity, noise, covetousness and diversions. Second, many of *JC*'s statements remind readers that this life is often filled with pain and suffering, and that God's people cannot escape this. There is hardly a page in *JC* that fails to talk about God's promise of His presence through His people's trials.

### **Noticeable Flaws**

Alas, if the positive elements mentioned above were all that could be found in *JC*, this reviewer could recommend it with few reservations. However, there are other features found in *JC* that should give readers pause before embracing it enthusiastically.

#### ***1) It encourages a view of divine guidance that seems to frown upon making plans and carrying them out.***

While *JC* might not go so far as to say that planning for our lives is abhorrent in God's eyes, the following statements (and many others like them) seem to suggest that it is inherently dangerous, if not worse: "Instead of staring into the day that is ahead of you, attempting to program it according to your will, be attentive to me and all that I have planned for you. A life lived close to me will never be dull or predictable. Expect each day to contain surprises" (Jan. 13). "You tend to make mental checklists of things you need to do in order to gain control of your life....instead of scrutinizing your checklist, focus your attention on

My Presence with you” (May 6). “Give your mind a break from planning and trying to anticipate what will happen. Pray continually, asking My Spirit to take charge of the details of this day” (June 10). Notice at least two assumptions in these statements: a) Making plans for your day means that you are trying to rule over your life, rather than entrusting God to rule it. b) Giving control of your life to God means “letting Him decide for you” what will happen to you on a certain day.

It is certainly easy for us to make idols out of our plans, and to the degree that *JC* reminds us of this danger, it is helpful. However, just because we are commanded by Jesus to give Him control of our lives does not mean that we are called to give up our freedom to make decisions and plans.

To be sure, in many of the historical biblical narratives where the Lord is not present on earth in the person of Jesus, we see Him revealing Himself to His people, and guiding them, in very direct ways. He is clearly telling them what to do and not to do in specific situations. However, such revelations are best viewed either as part of God’s unfolding revelation that ultimately culminates in Jesus (in the case of the Old Testament), or part of His special guidance which lays the foundation for His church to become disciple-makers for Jesus all over the world (in the case of the book of Acts).

Also, when we look in the New Testament – particularly in Paul’s letters - we see that the way in which the Lord guides His people begins moving in a direction that gives them leeway to decide what they think is best in areas of their lives not directly addressed by His written commands. We also notice that believers’ decisions must remain within the boundaries of God’s written commands, and that they cannot carry out what they wish unless God’s sovereign rule permits it. The Apostle Paul provides a very good example of the freedom believers have, and its limitations also. When writing to the Roman church, Paul says, “I do not want you to be unaware...that I planned many times to come to you, but have been prevented from doing so until now...” (Romans 1:13). Yet – lest we conclude that this “preventing” was God’s permanent prohibition against planning to Paul – he also says in verse 10, “I pray that now at last, by God’s will, the way may be opened for me to come to you.” So Paul had the freedom to make his own choices without feeling condemned for “planning”, but he also humbly submitted to God’s sovereign rule regarding the possibility and timing of his visit to the Romans.

Therefore, while Young may have a legitimate concern that God’s children do not get so caught up in making plans that they are serving their plans instead of Jesus Himself, she swings too far to the other end of the pendulum by suggesting that planning and making goals are inherently self-centred activities that rebel against God’s will, and that believers need to be led by God as if the special moments of His direct revelation in the Bible were normative.

**2) While JC acknowledges the value of the Bible, it considers Scripture to be only one of many means used by God to communicate with His people.**

It is good that Young does not deny the importance of the Bible as a source of God's truth to us. "Let Scripture saturate your mind and heart, and you will walk steadily along the path of Life" (Apr. 20). "If you live close to me and absorb my word, the Holy Spirit will guide and correct you as needed" (July 3). "As you walk close to Me, saturating your mind with Scripture, I will show you to spend your time and energy" (Aug. 10). However, statements like these are rare in *JC*, and the following sentence may help to explain why: "I speak to you... through sights, sounds, thoughts, impressions, Scripture. There is no limit to the variety of ways I can communicate with you" (July 25). So while the Bible is considered important, it does not seem to have any functioning authority over the other "ways" in which God seems to speak. In fact, throughout *JC* Young seems to give more attention to subjective impressions and God's "audible voice" as ways of hearing Him "speak" than the written Word. The following quotes are only a small sampling of this tendency: "If you want to stay close to me and do things my way, ask me to show you the path forward moment by moment" (Jan. 9). "My nature is to communicate, but not always in words.... Practice looking and listening for Me during quiet intervals. Gradually you will find me in more and more of your moments" (June 20). "Instead of mentally rehearsing how to do this or that, keep your mind on My Presence and on taking the next step....when you don't know what to do, wait while I open the door for you. Trust that I know what I'm doing, and be ready to follow my lead" (Nov. 4). "As you spend time in My Presence, My thoughts gradually form in your mind. My Spirit is the Director of this process. Sometimes He brings Bible verses to mind. Sometimes he enables you to hear Me "speak" directly to you. These communications strengthen you and prepare you for whatever is on your life-path" (Dec. 4).

I do not reject the idea that God can guide His people through impressions or circumstances. The problem with the statements quoted above, and several others like them, is that they do not indicate in any way which form of divine guidance is supreme - i.e., the standard by which all other forms must be evaluated. Therefore, readers of *JC* are not encouraged to apply any tests to see whether the impressions they receive come from God, oneself, or even the devil. Let us never forget that we have an unseen enemy who is very real and powerful, and who "masquerades as an angel of light" (2 Cor. 4:4). And he takes great delight in misleading those among God's people who fail to test every impression or message by the authoritative revelation that comes only from the Scriptures (Matt. 4:1-11; Acts 17:11; 2 Tim. 3:16-17).

**3) It seems to promote a formulaic, "cut-and-dried" approach to having fellowship with God that seems to take little, if any, notice of the profound faith trials and spiritual lapses experienced by many believers.**

For a book that does not shy away from the reality of troubles or trials in the lives of Christians, *JC* is surprisingly formulaic, simplistic and even superficial when it comes to suggesting ways for coping with such circumstances. For example, Young seems to suggest that by simply trusting Jesus in the midst of trials, believers don't really have to feel the full weight of the suffering that a trial presents, if indeed they should even feel it at all. Here are several examples of this assumption:

When you trust me in the midst of trouble, peace flourishes and weeds die away. (Apr. 2)

Many problems vanish instantly in the Light of my Love, because you realize you are never alone. (Apr. 9)

The more you give yourself to Me and my ways, the more I fill you with inexpressible, heavenly Joy. (May 4)

It is through awareness of my presence that Peace displaces negative feelings. (May 19)

When you turn from your problems to my presence, your load is immediately lighter. (May 25)

Anxious thoughts meander about and crisscross in your brain, but trusting me brings you directly into My presence. As you thus affirm your faith, shackles of worry fall off instantly. (July 25)

Your mind is like a seesaw. As your trust in Me goes up, fear and worry automatically go down. (Aug. 10)

If My children could only recognize my presence, they would never feel lonely again. (Aug. 24)

These statements' claims that suffering from trials can be overcome, at least largely, by "simple faith" or "simple awareness of God's presence" cannot be reconciled with the teachings on the subject from the Scriptures. To be sure, God's Word does have encouraging words for sufferers. For example, Jesus says to His disciples, "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). Also, in the letter of 2 Corinthians, the Apostle Paul reminds us that God promises comfort when we suffer (2 Cor. 1:3-4) and grace to sustain us even if our troubles are not removed (2 Cor. 12:6-10).

So the Lord promises to uphold us with His grace and comfort *while we suffer*, but we are not promised that any of our fears or worries will "automatically go down" as our "trust...goes up." Neither are we promised that we will "never feel



lonely again”, at least in this life. One of the reasons why we are to “set our hope fully on the grace that will be brought...at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 1:13) is because “if only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied” (1 Cor. 15:19).

Yet, there are other statements found in JC that even more troublesome. They suggest that believers’ speaking of certain words have some kind of special power to bring them back to the LORD if they have backslidden:

When you are weary and everything seems to be going wrong, you can still utter these four words: “I trust you Jesus.” By doing so, you release matters into my control, and you fall back into the security of my everlasting arms. (Mar. 30)  
When you feel far from me, whisper my name. This simple act, done in childlike faith, opens your heart to my Presence. (Apr. 8)

When you feel distant from me, whisper my name in loving trust. This simple prayer can restore your awareness of My presence. (July 12)

Simply bring your thoughts gently back to Me every time they wander. The quickest way to redirect your mind to me is to whisper my Name. (Aug. 25)

As soon as you realize you have wandered from your trust-path, look to Me and whisper, “I trust you, Jesus.” This affirmation will help you get back on track. You need to voice your trust in Me frequently. This simple act of faith will keep you walking along straight paths with Me. (Sept. 9)

When you find yourself in the thick of battle, call upon my name, “Jesus, help me!” At this instant, the battle becomes Mine; your role is simply to trust me as I fight for you. (Dec. 3)

If thoughts like these do not encourage incantation (i.e., the practice of chanting particular words in the belief that they have a magical ability to actualize what one wants), they seem to come rather close to doing so. By contrast, the Scriptures do not encourage such shortcuts or easy tricks of any kind. Rather, they call for something far more demanding from the wayward Christ-follower: repentance. And repentance is not a matter of simply saying words. First, it requires a serious reflection on the state of one’s heart. This practice is called for throughout the Bible, particularly in the sayings of Haggai the prophet: “Give careful thought to your ways” (Hag. 1:5,7). Second, it calls for careful listening of God’s words: “Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). Third, it includes admitting and abandoning any and every sin exposed by God’s words: “Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper; but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy” (Prov. 28:13, see also 1 John 1:9). Finally, it involves showing the genuineness of one’s confession by walking in a different direction: “Produce fruit in keeping with repentance” (Matt. 3:8; Luke 3:8). The fact that the Lord Jesus

Himself continually calls His church to repentance reinforces the truth that He desires more from His people than just words (Rev. 2:5, 16, 21, 22; 3:3, 19, 20).

Despite my objections to the formulaic statements from JC quoted above, I do not mean to suggest that the Lord would never work in such a way as to provide immediate relief from our trials, or to give instant deliverance from idols or besetting sins. He certainly does at times. However, should we expect these kinds of divine activities to be the norm?

Not if we believe the testimony of Scripture, or, for that matter, our experience. The Lord wants to accomplish certain things in us through our sufferings and battles with sin, not least of which are the production of proven character, and hope for the new life to come<sup>9</sup> (Rom. 5:3-4; Heb. 12:7-11). So the kinds of “instant deliverance” and “instant-return-to-the-path” moments that JC encourages us to obtain do not generally reflect God’s dealings with us in this life.

#### ***4) It provides an unbalanced and lopsided picture of the Christian life.***

While it would be unrealistic to expect a 365-day devotional to adequately cover the vast terrain of doctrinal and ethical areas that believers ought to be familiar with (at least to some degree) when they follow Jesus, there are several Biblical subjects that are given scant, if any, attention in JC. This is at least partly because of the enormous over-emphasis that the book gives to the individual’s one-on-one communion with Jesus. As noted above, in the “brief background” section of this review, the pervasiveness of this theme is indicated by the constant repetition of phrases such as “My Presence”, “relax”, “rest”, “trust”, “come to me”, “thankfulness”, “be still”, “spend time with Me”, etc.

So here are just some of many important topics that are missing as a result: making God known to others through witnessing, evangelism and discipleship; knowing how to read God’s word properly; praying in ways that glorify God; seeking God’s will for every area of life; giving to and serving people in need; living a life of constant repentance; fighting against besetting sins and putting them to death; cultivating a life of joy; fearing God over people; learning to give sacrificially and generously; learning to love enemies and other people in your midst; growing in holiness and righteousness; growing in discernment of right and wrong; submitting to government and other authorities; learning to be a

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<sup>9</sup> At the same time, it must be said that we can never know (at least in this life) why God has chosen particularly grievous trials for some of His children, and not others. This is a matter over which believers ought to show the utmost sensitivity to their Christian brothers and sisters, and put their hands over their mouths as a matter of course. Actually, when viewed especially in light of this sobering reality, the “just believe/just say...” statements made by Young seem positively cruel rather than helpful. Why? They can encourage additional guilt, discouragement or despair in suffering believers whenever they realize that the LORD is not delivering them (at least right away) from their sufferings or besetting sins as a result of their simple choices to believe, or whispers of His name.

faithful spouse and parent; honouring one's own parents; observing the Lord's supper; and being a light to the world.

Two more areas deserve special mention, because their absence in *JC* is particularly astonishing. The first one is the importance of growing obedience as a mark of a true disciple. A constant refrain of Jesus to His disciples - particularly in the Apostle John's writings - is "if you love me, keep my commands" (John 14:15, 21; 15:10, 14; 1 John 2:3-4, 7; 3:22-24; 5:2-4; 2 John 1:6). Yet there is little, if anything, in *JC* to remind us of this charge. It is entirely conceivable that some readers of *JC* who are professing Christians could go through life blissfully unaware of their responsibility to do what the Lord instructs them to in all areas of life, especially if Young's devotional is the only Christian book they ever read.

The final area that is not given any substantial attention in *JC* is the necessity for us to meet with, and love, the body of Christ. There is not one sentence in Young's work where the Jesus-follower is encouraged to meet with other believers, worship with them, serve them, rejoice with them, pray with them, learn God's word with them, grieve with them, observe the Lord's supper with them, or forgive them. What's worse, *JC* seems to view other people as little more than a nuisance: "When you are with other people, you often lose sight of my Presence... (People) become your primary focus" (May 2). The only "means of grace" that *JC* seems to recognize is a believer's own personal one-on-one communion with God. As such, *JC* promotes, however unintentionally, a "lone ranger" kind of Christianity that is not healthy. It is certainly at odds with New Testament teaching, where the Lord is always found when two or more of His people are gathered together (Matt. 18:20) and where there are at least twenty-five "one another" exhortations, most of which are found in the Apostle Paul's letters (e.g., Rom. 12:10; 1 Cor. 1:10; Eph. 4:32).

***5) It contains thoughts that are either too vague or too errant to be attributed to Jesus.***

Hopefully, by this point, it is becoming evident that while Thomas Nelson claims *JC*'s contents to be the very words of Jesus, its actual substance is a muddled mixture of solid, biblical truths and perplexing statements that reflect Young's somewhat biblically informed, yet very imbalanced, perspective. One category of these statements has already been discussed above: the "just-do-A-and-God-will-do-B" sayings. Two other kinds of problematic statements are explained below.

First, *JC* contains an abundance of statements that are unhelpfully ambiguous. What are we to make of the following sayings?

A person who is open to My Presence is exceedingly precious to Me. (Apr. 4)

Through collaborating with me in all things, you allow My life to merge with yours. This is the secret not only of joyful living but also of victorious living. (Apr. 13)

When you feel some lack, it is because you are not connecting with me at a deep level. (May 21)

Let My light soak into your mind and heart, until you are aglow with My very being. This is the most effective way to receive my peace. (May 31)

Let my love seep into the inner recesses of your being. Let my brilliant Love-Light search out and destroy hidden fears. (July 28)

Spend time basking in the light of my presence. (Sept. 23)

Breathe slowly and deeply. Relax in My Holy Presence while My face shines on you. (Oct. 13)

Let me gold-tinged Love wash over you and soak into the depths of your being. (Oct. 23)

When my presence is your deepest delight, you know almost instinctively what will please me. A quick glance at me is all you need to make the right choice. (Nov. 6)

Emotional and physical healing are enhanced by your soaking in the Light of My Presence. (Dec. 13)

If people inquiring about Christianity begin their study by reading *JC*, they might be forgiven for being rather flummoxed by the language contained in the sayings above – unless, after hearing it, they surmise that the Christian faith is some kind of spiritual equivalent to sun-tanning on a beach, soaking in a hot tub, or standing in a hot shower! In any case, these statements cannot be attributed the One who, in the Bible, speaks most often in very stark, unmistakable terms about what it means to know Him and follow Him as Lord. While there are certainly comforting words of Jesus in the New Testament such as “come to me”, “trust in me” and “remain in me” (Matt. 11:28; John 14:1; 15:4 ff), there are also constant refrains of “follow me”, “take up your cross”, “obey my commandments” and “repent” (Matt. 10:38; Luke 9:23; John 15:14; Rev. 3:19, to cite just a few).

If vague statements aren't enough to persuade readers that the contents of *JC* are problematic, then outright errors made by Young, while trying express biblical truths, just might be. While there are several such errors to be found in *JC*, it is best to focus only on two at this point. The first emerges from Young's flawed reasoning that because the Lord will not ever leave or condemn His people (true so far, as Heb. 13:5 and Rom. 8:1 attest), He will never be displeased with them:

“I love you regardless of how well you are performing....I love you with an everlasting love that flows out of eternity without limits or conditions....your accomplishment as a Christian has no bearing on my love for you.” (Apr. 19) We also find this saying: “You don’t have to perform in order to receive My love. I have boundless, unconditional Love for you. How it grieves me to see My children working for love: trying harder and harder, yet never feeling good enough to be loved.” (Sept. 15) Young captures a kernel of truth here; God does not cease to be our Father, nor Jesus our brother, just because we have failed to live as we have been called to do. Our relationship with God is not based on, or maintained by, our works. Rather, it is founded upon Christ’s death, resurrection and provision of His imputed righteousness to us, as Young rightly states in other places of JC.

However, it is simply untrue to assert, as Young seems to do, that the Lord does not have conditions for His children if they hope to receive some (if not many) of His blessings. There are numerous passages of Scripture that refute this assumption, but only a few need mentioning. To believers who have gotten too friendly with the world’s mindset, James says, “Come near to God and He will come near to you.” (James 4:8) By saying this, James assumes that there is a sense in which God has distanced Himself from these particular believers because they have sought the world’s approval rather than God’s. Also, when the Apostle John says, “Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask, because we keep his commands and do what pleases him.” (1 John 3:21). Note how confidence in God to “receive...anything we ask” is contingent upon our obedience. Finally, when Jude says, “Keep yourselves in God’s love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you eternal life”, he’s suggesting that it is possible for believers to stray from God’s will in such a way that their *fellowship* with Him is adversely affected, even if their *relationship* with Him does not change.

A second error Young makes in understanding Scriptural truth is her belief that because God has made us in such a way that we can voluntarily respond to Him, He must necessarily remain in a state of passivity and inertness until such time as we seek His guidance and leading. “I risked all by granting you freedom to think for yourself....I made you in My image, precariously close to deity.” (Apr. 21) “Though I yearn to help, I will not violate your freedom. I stand silently in the background of your mind, waiting for you to remember that I am with you.” (May 25) “I restrain my yearning to fix you, waiting instead for you to come to Me for help. Imagine the divine restraint this requires, for I have all power in heaven and on earth.” (June 8) These statements seem to suggest that we can somehow act independently of God, and that God’s fulfillment of His plan for us depends entirely on our positive response.

It is difficult to know how to respond to these statements without moving into the typically contentious subject area of God’s sovereignty and human responsibility. For the sake of keeping focused on the purpose of this review, it is best not to

spend much time here. Two comments will have to suffice.

First, to say that God “risks” anything is to assume that, somehow, He might not have the power or authority to carry out all that He wishes, and that somehow there are things that lie outside of His control. Is this what we find in the Word of God? “He does as He pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: ‘What have you done?’” (Daniel 4:35). “I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say, ‘My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.’” (Isa. 46:10) “He is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else.” (Acts 17:25) God is further described by the Apostle Paul as “Him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of His will.” (Eph. 1:11) I leave it to readers to judge for themselves whether “risk” is an appropriate or even reverent word to be used for God.

Second, I invite readers to ponder this statement of Paul’s from his letter to the church at Philippi: “Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and act in order to fulfill His good purpose.” (Phil. 2:12-13). Is this God a Being who impotently lies still until times come when we call on Him to act? Can we possibly act in any way independently of God? The answer to both questions is obvious. Far from there having to be a “divine restraint” imposed by God on Himself in order for us to seek Him, it is only His power that possibly enables us to seek Him or bring any glory to Him. Remember these words of Jesus to His disciples: “Apart from me, you can do nothing” (John 15:5). And Paul reveals the source of Christian faith to the Ephesian church: “This is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God” (Eph. 2:8).

## **Conclusion**

All in all, it is difficult to gauge the merits of *Jesus Calling*. It has too many good and sound statements to dismiss out of hand. Unfortunately, it also has too many troubling statements to recommend without qualification, if, indeed, it should be recommended at all.

Hard as it is to say, *Jesus Calling* is ultimately unworthy of endorsement. Admittedly, it is hard to imagine that a review like this will put even a dent in *JC*’s long-time and continuous success. Even so, I humbly plead with fans of *JC*, Young herself, and the rest of us who are followers of Christ to study and meditate upon the contents of the Bible more thoroughly, with eagerness and humility. The more we do this, the more we will discover that the Holy Spirit is pleased to illuminate the written words of Jesus upon our hearts and everyday lives. Then we will find it unnecessary and even counterproductive to seek words that we imagine to be “directly from our Lord”. We will be reminded that He

speaks so powerfully through the Scriptures that we have “everything we need for a godly life” (2 Pet. 1:3, cf. 2 Tim. 3:16-17).

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