

[1 Coldplay] The song we opened with today is the first single from Coldplay’s most recent album. In the song, the singer reflects on the magic he experiences when he is around his lover. The problem is that the relationship is over. He’s broken in two, and unable to get over this lost love. The singer of the song says over and over “and i don’t want anyone else but you...i can’t get over you.” This is someone who is hurting. This is a song in the wake of a break up.

That’s sad right? But I find something very beautiful in the song. And it’s found in the closing line:

[2 lyric slide]

“And if you were to ask me
After all that we’ve been through
Still believe in magic?
Oh yes, I do
Of course I do”

This is a guy that has just gone through a breakup that broke him in two, that has destroyed him, that has made him feel like he’ll never find love again. What he thought was magic, a real authentic connection, ends up being just illusion, a relationship built on lies and full of unmet expectations. He feels tricked, and now he sees through the smoke and mirrors. Put us in this same situation and we would be tempted to give up all together, saying “there’s no such thing as love.”

[3 puppy love/illusion -> breakdown -> real love/magic] But this is how love works. The love we experience at first is really just puppy love, it’s illusion. It’s the butterflies in the stomach and all that. The real love, the real magic, only comes after the hard stuff, after all the façades fade away.

It also happens in religion. Promises are made that life is going to be easier and struggle-free. Felt-board faith. Just pray and God’ll fix it. God has a plan for you. God makes people who follow him rich and happy and successful and have perfect kids and no problems and promotions at work, etc. But you pray and they don’t get better. You give it your all and the marriage still fails. You’re demoted or fired with no warning. You brought them to church as much as you could and they still don’t believe. Or maybe you just prayed, read your Bible, tried to believe really hard and nothing... ever... happened. You begin to feel your entire relationship with God is built on lies and unmet expectations. It all starts to feel like smoke and mirrors. A cheap illusion. A childish fairy tale to keep the bogeyman away. So you give up on the God-stuff. You put it in the attic with all the other kid stuff you’ve outgrown.

But the writer of the song, even after the breakup, after the illusion fades, still believes in MAGIC. How is this possible? What I want to suggest this morning is that the fading of illusions is actually good news, because when the illusions are gone, we have the chance to discover Real Magic. That like the writer of the song, we can still believe that MAGIC exists, even in the wake of the illusion’s demise.

The problem is, we can't quite get away from the possibility that the MAGIC might be real. We see marriages that last 60 years, friendships that are more like family, religious people who, despite all the crazy circumstances they face, not only believe, but are some of the most beautiful persons we know.

[4 baby faith -> breakdown -> mature faith] So, what if FAITH is like LOVE? What if the DEEP Faith that gives us life is only possible in the wake of a sort of loss? The real FAITH, the real MAGIC, only comes after the hard stuff, after all the façades fade away.

Could we - the jaded, the heartbroken - could WE believe in magic? Like the singer, YES WE CAN!

Here's how this has played in my life...I grew up in the church. As a child, I believed the bible was dropped out of the sky, in old english, [6 Lebron] #KingJames, not that King James [7 Bible]. I believed that every hero in the bible was [8 +bible heroes] clean cut, and perfect, without ever failing. I believed that [9 +jesus] Jesus had blonde hair and blue eyes, and wore a beauty pageant sash everywhere he went. Because these are things a child learns in children's church. They were not taught explicitly, I came to these conclusions on my own. This is how I saw the bible as a child.

My last few years of highschool, the illusion began to fade. [10 replace bible with writers] I learned that the bible was not dropped out of heaven in old english but was written by real people in Hebrew and Greek.

[11 replace heroes with people] I also learned that the heroes of the bible were real humans that made real mistakes. I also learned that Jesus wasn't a contestant in the miss ancient Palestine beauty pageant, and didn't have blonde hair and blue eyes like me. [12 replace jesus with jesus] These were all things that began to chip away at the illusion.

My first day of bible college, my professor said, “Everything that you learned in sunday school is wrong.” He said this not to discredit my well-meaning teachers but to say that we're moving beyond the child answers to the adult answers about things in the bible. We're moving beyond illusion to the REAL MAGIC. It moved me and got me excited for all that I was going to learn over the next 4 years.

[13 Broken illusions] He wasn't kidding. The next four years pushed me and tested me, shattered the illusions about God and the Bible I'd held growing up. In one class, we learned something that shook many of us. The Israelites were polytheistic... that is they believed in [14 “many” “gods” graphic] “many” (poly), “gods” (theos). The reason this shocked so many of us was because the vast majority of Christians today are monotheists, [14 + “one” “god” = Yahweh graphic] one God, and we assumed that God's people have always been that way. Instead what we found out was that they believed in YHWH, sure, He was the God of their ancestors who brought them out of Egypt. But they also believed that all the gods existed. In fact, every region

in Ancient Palestine each had their own gods. So when people would move to a new area, they would just add the local gods to their collection of gods to pray to. The Israelites were no different.

You may not think that was a big deal, but for a little Sprang who grew up with felt boards in Sunday School and a beauty pageant Jesus, this rocked my world. It caused me to acknowledge that the people of God haven't always worshiped God exclusively. That YHWH was calling them away from the religions of their culture, the religions they knew. Worshiping Yahweh isn't something that just fell out of the sky.

In another class, we were looking at the Psalms. This is the songbook of the Israelites that we have in our Bible. They are songs to YHWH, about YHWH, and celebrating YHWH. (sidenote, if you are reading your Bible and you see it say the LORD, and it's written with all caps, that represents the name YHWH. that's gonna be important in a minute.) These songs were compiled over years of history. In fact, some of these songs were originally written to... other... gods.

[Scripture Slide] If you have a bible, turn with me to Psalm 29. If you grabbed one of the bibles from the back, it's on page XXXX. If you don't own a bible feel free to take that one as a gift from us.

Psalm 29 is one of those songs. It was originally written to the god Ba'al, who was worshipped by some of the tribes who neighbored Israel. We can tell that Israel took Psalm 29 and replaced "Ba'al" with "Yahweh", their God.

How can we tell that? Well, Ba'al was basically Thor - he was Canaan's thunder God. He had a big bow he used to fire lightning bolts, and split trees, and do other things that thunder gods do. So with that in mind, let's read this psalm together. I think you'll be able to see it too:

Ascribe to the Lord, you heavenly beings,
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.
Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name;
worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness.
The voice of the Lord is over the waters;
the God of glory thunders,
the Lord thunders over the mighty waters.
The voice of the Lord is powerful;
the voice of the Lord is majestic.
The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars;
the Lord breaks in pieces the cedars of Lebanon.
He makes Lebanon leap like a calf,
Sirion like a young wild ox.
The voice of the Lord strikes
with flashes of lightning.

The voice of the Lord shakes the desert;
the Lord shakes the Desert of Kadesh.
The voice of the Lord twists the oaks
and strips the forests bare.
And in his temple all cry, “Glory!”
The Lord sits enthroned over the flood;
the Lord is enthroned as King forever.
The Lord gives strength to his people;
the Lord blesses his people with peace.
Psalm 29 (NIV)

Did you catch all that? Did you see all that imagery. I can imagine that as a storm came through, the writer of this song saw God showing His power to them. His voice is “over the waters,” “strikes with flashes of lighting,” “shakes the desert of Kadesh”, and “twists the oaks, strips the forests bare.” Also notice how many times “the LORD” is mentioned right? that is an incredible amount for such a short song. All of these things lead scholars to believe that this Psalm was originally a Ba’al worship song.

That makes us nervous, right? Is the Bible just a collection of scraps from other religions? Because if it is then I don’t know if I can trust what it has to say. If it’s just copying what some other religion said, then who’s to say that what it has to say is TRUE? Those are good questions, but they’re the wrong questions. They’re questions that a 21st century American Christians would ask. They’re not questions ancient Israelites would ask.

But think about what’s going on here. The religious leaders of the day, the ones who are responsible for guiding the people toward the worship of YHWH are hearing this song being sung. A song that has beautiful imagery and incredible imagination, but all in the worship of another god. No doubt they’re hearing Israelites humming this tune under their breath when they’re walking through the market. But instead of fighting it, they hijacked it. Instead of saying, you better stop listening to those songs, they reoriented who the song was about. Instead of saying, “Those things belong outside the church. Not in here. This place is sacred.” They had the imagination and the creativity to find a way to use that song to point people to the God they had been called to worship. Is that not incredible?

Can we do that? It seems that taking these unholy things and bringing them into the holy place of God is a slippery slope. We can’t just take any ol’ song and say it’s about God, can we? They didn’t take EVERY song of Ba’al and do that...but they took some. And they were able to point people to God... for millennia.

Flash forward to 1700s England. At this point in Church worship, they don’t sing songs all together the way we do today. The worship leader would sing a line and the congregation would repeat it back. It made more a very long worship gathering.

Then came along 2 brothers that changed the game. John and Charles Wesley were pioneers for the new worship that was unfolding in their day. They wrote nearly 9000 hymns between them that are still sung in churches all over the world to this day, we even sang one this morning. If you’ve ever thought some of the songs we sing were long, how about a song that has 16 verses?!?! These guys brought about a new way of singing in the church. Singing together!

Now, the problem with introducing new songs has always been how can people sing along if they don’t know how it goes? That’s why the whole sing and repeat method was used. So how did they make it work? This was revolutionary at the time, but as we’ve seen already, they had precedence to do so. They crafted deep theological concepts into beautifully poetry, and put them to the tunes of the day, melodies that the people would recognize. They took songs from the world around them and gave them new purpose. No doubt they were hearing their people humming these tunes under their breath when they’re walking through the market. And instead of fighting it, they thought why can’t we use that to teach them about God?

Now they didn’t take every song but they took some. And they were able to point people to God... for centuries.

If you haven’t picked up on it yet, this is why we do a cover song every week at Catalyst. We recognize that culture outside the Church can still say true things about God. So we find those pieces of art, highlight and celebrate them as evidence God is already working ahead of us in the world around us.

We obviously can’t do every song that’s on the radio in church, but we do some. And then when we hear those songs in the grocery store, or car, or on youtube, it now points us to God.

So why all this discussion about Ba’al worship songs and singing radio songs in church? Because the Psalms aren’t the only thing about the bible that gets tricky. Because when you start to actually read the bible and figure out how to reconcile what the Bible says with what we get from other sources, it gets tricky. Because many of us are under the illusion that the Bible is a science book, or history book, when in actuality it was never meant to be that. It’s never claimed to be that. The Bible is a witness to God. The whole purpose of the Bible is to point us to God.

The Bible, this collection of books, and stories, and poems and letters, and songs, didn’t fall from heaven to be imposed upon humanity. It grew from within humanity and God’s interaction with real humans. It emerged from real people in real places. And as their understanding of God changed, so did the stories they told. And they weren’t concerned with being scientifically accurate. And while they did their best to be as accurate as possible, just a cursory read of the gospels, the stories of Jesus, will reveal that they didn’t always have the facts straight.

But that’s not the point is it? To get all the facts straight? So it can stand the test of time with new scientific discoveries, and more historically accurate sources? No. The point of the bible is

to point us to God. That's it. The whole thing, from Genesis to Revelation is meant to show us this God who loves us. Who desires to have a REAL connection with us. And the Bible? It tells that story beautifully.

It paints a picture of the God, who created all things (no matter how long it took), and when that creation chose to turn its back on Him, He never turned His back on them. Time and time again, He continues to reach out, to call out to His creation. And when prophets and kings didn't work, He came to earth himself, to show us what it really meant to have LIFE. And when we killed him for what He said, He rose again to show us that not even death can hold back this NEW LIFE. The Bible tells of a God who will do anything to be with His creation and when all is said and done that's what He'll get. Now that's a story that is inexplicable and indescribable with analytical, literal words. It takes poetry and Bon Jovi ballads. It's MAGIC.

The Bible is a great example of how religious illusion can be broken. A lot of us have struggled with faith because the more seriously we take the Bible, the more challenging it becomes. We were told it was simple, and it's anything but.

But ask anyone who has a deep faith and they'll tell you it's not because faith is simple. It's deep, rich, complex. There's something inexplicable at the heart of faith, a person who doesn't fit into a book, no matter how good it is. A person who is beyond compare, whose love is deeper and wider and longer than a human mind can explain or understand.

A person who offers us life, who heals and restores and calls us forward. A person who can only be described as magical.

When we find the deep magic of faith, the Bible becomes something more to us than an instruction manual or a history book. It becomes a love letter between God and humanity, a treasure trove that makes our faith rich beyond measure.

When the Bible becomes part of a deep faith, we don't take away from what the Bible is saying. We don't just pick and choose what we like and don't like based on personal feelings or bias. We allow ALL of Scripture to speak to us. We also make sure that we are not making the Bible say more than what it is saying. If we try to make the Bible something it's not, it's going to fail us. The Bible is not a science book, a history book, an answer book.

“Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.” Matthew 7:24-27 (NIV)

The Bible is a witness to God. The whole purpose of the Bible is to point us to God. And if we start there, then the questions that we ask about it should not lead us away from God but toward

Him. It helps us realize how authentic and real these words are. They came from real people in real situations. The warts that we find along the way are not taking away from its authority, it's actually giving it more. It means it CAN be trusted. It didn't get crafted in a vacuum, outside from human experience, but grew up from within humanity's experience with God, who guided and inspired every word.

So what do we do with this? Should I just stop reading my Bible? Absolutely not! This is exactly the Bible we are supposed to have, and it is still the best way to meet this God that it's pointing to. We just need to stop living in the illusion that the Bible is something it's not, and embrace the REAL MAGIC of what the Bible is.

In order to do this, we need to change the way that we are reading the Bible. Many of us have grown up reading the bible to get INFORMATION so we can know what it SAYS. And while reading scripture does lead to new information, that's not its main purpose. We must learn to read the bible for TRANSFORMATION, so we can know what it's CALLING US TO DO. One of the ways we've found to do this is using a practice called Lectio Divina, it literally means “divine reading.” We outline this in the Guide to Spiritual Practices which you can find in the lobby. I've already picked your scripture for you so you don't have to worry about where to start, John 1:1-18. This is a passage that Scripture talks about Jesus as the Word of God. Lectio basically asks you to read the passage 3 different times, and focusing on different things each time. Ultimately, Lectio gives you the space to hear from God. You're not just reading tons of scripture and checking off a list. You're reading this scripture specifically to meet with this God that it's pointing to.

For those of you that this really intrigues you and you're interested in finding out more about scripture and it's history and how it came to us, I would encourage you to check out the Bible Bites Podcast. This is basically Sunday School for the 21st century. It's JR and I, and a friend of ours, Tom, discussing scripture in a very candid way. We don't sugar coat it. We tell it how it is. Episode 1 we talked about the very thing we talked about today, “How did these writings come to us?” How did we get them? Each episode is only 20 min so you can listen on your commute to work, or during nap time, or before you go to sleep. Whenever works best. This is a very practical way for us to break through the illusion to find the REAL MAGIC on the other side.

Our prayer is that after all is said and done, after all the questions and digging and wrestling, that if someone asked you if you still believe, even in light of all that's happened, and all you've learned, that you would be able to say along with me, Yes I do. Of course I do.

My journey since those college classes has been one where I've learned more and more about the scripture and how it points to God. Because of those classes I have not been afraid of breaking the illusions. I know for some of you this may be the first time this has ever been proposed to you so it's a little scary. My prayer for us all is that we would not be scared of it. Seeing the Bible for what it is, not what we want it to be, is liberating and allows us to have conversations that we couldn't have otherwise. It allows us to find the real MAGIC of God, on

the other side of illusion. The magic of God that is beyond analytical, literal words on a page. The magic of God that grows from within our lives not a faith that is a reciting of answers we learned in children's' church.

No matter where you are in your walk with God - pre- belief, disillusioned, loss of faith, hanging on by a thread, or feeling good and walking talk - we are all asked to take the next right step. Bring along your doubts, questions, frustrations, failings, into the conversation. Don't be afraid. Questions and doubts are the catalyst to move us from illusion to magic, from children's church answer faith toward a deeper mature faith. If you are a little further in the journey, be someone that's known among your friends and co-workers who's not afraid of the tough questions, be someone they can talk to about their doubts. Recognize that if they have questions, it means God is the one at work to bring them to that place, you could help them take their next right step.

Catalyst, if we were to all join together and seek this deeper faith, this MAGIC, this could be a place where gracious conversations can happen. A place where we don't ask people to check your brain at the door, but embrace those who are seeking God, even while they have questions. We could be a place where science and history and philosophy are not viewed as suspect, but are welcomed into the conversation because we know that God is working in them just like He's working in Ba'al songs, British hymns, and Coldplay tunes. We could be a place where the MAGIC happens for all people.

Do you believe that could happen? It's gonna take all of us being open to the new thing that God wants to do. The deeper MAGIC that God wants to reveal to us.