

JARED BROCK AND AARON ALFORD

# BEARDED GOSPEL MEN



THE EPIC QUEST FOR  
MANLINESS & GODLINESS

CHAPTER 1

# Ignatius of Antioch

## LION FOOD (AND LOVING IT!)

BY AARON ALFORD

*Meditation: Dear friends, let us love one another,  
for love comes from God. Everyone who loves  
has been born of God and knows God.*

-1 JOHN 4:7

*Quote of the Day: I will gladly die for God  
if only you do not stand in my way.*

-IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH

The Colosseum had a good crowd that day, and the cheers of thousands rang in the ears of the man being led in chains into the arena floor. Moments later he felt himself hurled to the ground, landing in a cloud of dust inches away from the gaping, roaring maw of a hungry lion. The beast reared up, and in an instant the man felt the slash of its claws across his face.

*Now that's what I'm talkin' about!* he thought.



Ignatius of Antioch didn't set out to be devoured by lions, but he would've been mightily disappointed if his friends had prevented him from getting there. We don't know what his final thoughts were in the moments before he was devoured by bloodthirsty beasts, but we do have an extensive record of his thoughts on his way to the Colosseum.<sup>1</sup>

Born in the first century, Ignatius may have had a most unique experience with the Lord Jesus. Some writers of his day claimed that it was none other than little Ignacio who Jesus took up in His arms when He said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me" (Matt. 18:3–5).

If this was the case, the little boy who was borne up in the embrace of Jesus and giggled in His lap grew up to become someone who in return carried Jesus to the world. It may be for this reason that Ignatius was also known by another name: Theophorus, "God bearer." However he came to faith in Christ, Ignatius became one of the most important and influential leaders of the church of his time.

Whether or not it was he who Jesus took in His arms as a boy, Ignatius lived close enough to the time of Jesus' earthly ministry to have been discipled by none other than the apostle John, and one of the main themes both in John's gospel and in his letters is the unity of the church and loving one another. It's in John 17 that we hear Jesus pray "that they may be one as we are one" (v. 11), and in 1 John we read, "Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God" (4:7). John instilled in Ignatius a passion for love and unity that would become a hallmark of Ignatius's life.

Ignatius took over leadership of the church in the city of Antioch after Evodius, who himself took over from the apostle Peter. Ignatius's

leadership of the church came at a unique time for the early Christians (who first began to be called “Christians” in Antioch), as the land was ruled by the Roman emperor Trajan.

Trajan had an interesting outlook on the burgeoning movement of Christianity. While he couldn’t find any real reason to see them as a threat, neither could he tolerate the Christians’ rejection of Caesar as god. In a letter to his friend Pliny, who was governor over the region containing Antioch, Trajan’s solution to the Jesus-follower problem read more or less like this:

Dear Pliny,

I like what you’re doing with the Christians. Threaten them a bit, and if they renounce their belief about this Jesus-god, set them free. No harm, no foul! I don’t think we need to bother seeking them out, but when we do find some Christians (the kind that won’t recant), it’s probably best if we just go ahead and kill ‘em.

Your pal,

Trajan

Trajan may have had a somewhat lax attitude in regard to persecuting Christians, but it was enough to send many to their deaths, and it was under these conditions that Ignatius was arrested and tried under Trajan himself. An early document carries this account of his trial:

Trajan said, “Do you then carry within you Him that was crucified?” Ignatius replied, “Truly so; for it is written, ‘I will dwell in them, and walk in them.’” Then Trajan pronounced sentence as follows: “We command that Ignatius, who affirms that he carries about within him Him that was crucified, be bound by soldiers, and carried to the great Rome, there to be devoured by the beasts, for the gratification of the people.”<sup>2</sup>

On the way to Rome, Ignatius wrote seven letters to churches and pastors whom he met en route, or with whom he was otherwise in contact. Throughout these letters, common themes occur, and we can see the issues about which Ignatius was most passionate. As it did in the gospel and letters of his mentor, the apostle John, one theme that appears in each letter is the unity of the church. He felt it was of utmost importance for each of the local churches to live in harmony, obedience, and love with one another and their local leadership: “Wherefore, as children of light and truth, flee from division and wicked doctrines; but where the shepherd is, there do ye as sheep follow.”<sup>3</sup>

It’s interesting to note that one of the leaders to whom he wrote was none other than the former runaway slave mentioned in the book of Philemon, Onesimus. Ignatius, again encouraging unity, wrote that Onesimus, now the bishop of Ephesus, was “a man of inexpressible love, and your bishop in the flesh, whom I pray you by Jesus Christ to love, and that you would all seek to be like him. And blessed be He who has granted unto you, being worthy, to obtain such an excellent bishop.”<sup>4</sup>

Another significant theme that comes out of these letters was Ignatius’s absolute commitment to be a witness for Christ as a martyr. In fact, it became his passion. Well-meaning Christians did not, of course, wish to see him dragged off to be used as a lion’s dinner, but Ignatius counted it an honor and pleaded with them not to interfere with Trajan’s sentence:

I write to the Churches, and impress on them all, that I shall willingly die for God, unless you hinder me. . . . Allow me to become food for the wild beasts, through whose instrumentality it will be granted me to attain to God. . . . May I enjoy the wild beasts that are prepared for me; and I pray they may be found eager to rush upon me, which also I will entice to devour me speedily, and not deal with

me as with some, whom, out of fear, they have not touched. But if they be unwilling to assail me, I will compel them to do so.<sup>5</sup>

When he at last reached Rome, Ignatius the God bearer got his wish. In the account of his martyrdom, it's recorded that his final prayer before entering the Colosseum was again "that mutual love might continue among the brethren."<sup>6</sup>

In the twenty-first century West, we live in a highly individualistic culture, a culture that often seeps unseen into our faith. When a church split can happen over whether the correct lyrics to "How He Loves Us" should be "sloppy wet" or "unforeseen," it does us well to remember Ignatius and his passion for church unity. Whenever he helped local congregations to live in unity and obedience to their leaders, Ignatius was being a living answer to the prayer of Jesus, the prayer His dear friend John had written down: "that they may be one as we are one" (John 17:22).

It's doubtful many of us will be called to give witness to Christ by becoming food for beasts in the Colosseum, but we are called to give witness by means of our unity and love for one another, just as Ignatius was. Ignatius's poetic exhortation to the Ephesians, reminiscent of the apostle John's, is one we can receive just as if it were written to us:

Therefore in your concord and harmonious love, Jesus Christ is sung.  
And man by man, become a choir, that being harmonious in love, and taking up the song of God in unison, you may with one voice sing to the Father through Jesus Christ.<sup>7</sup>

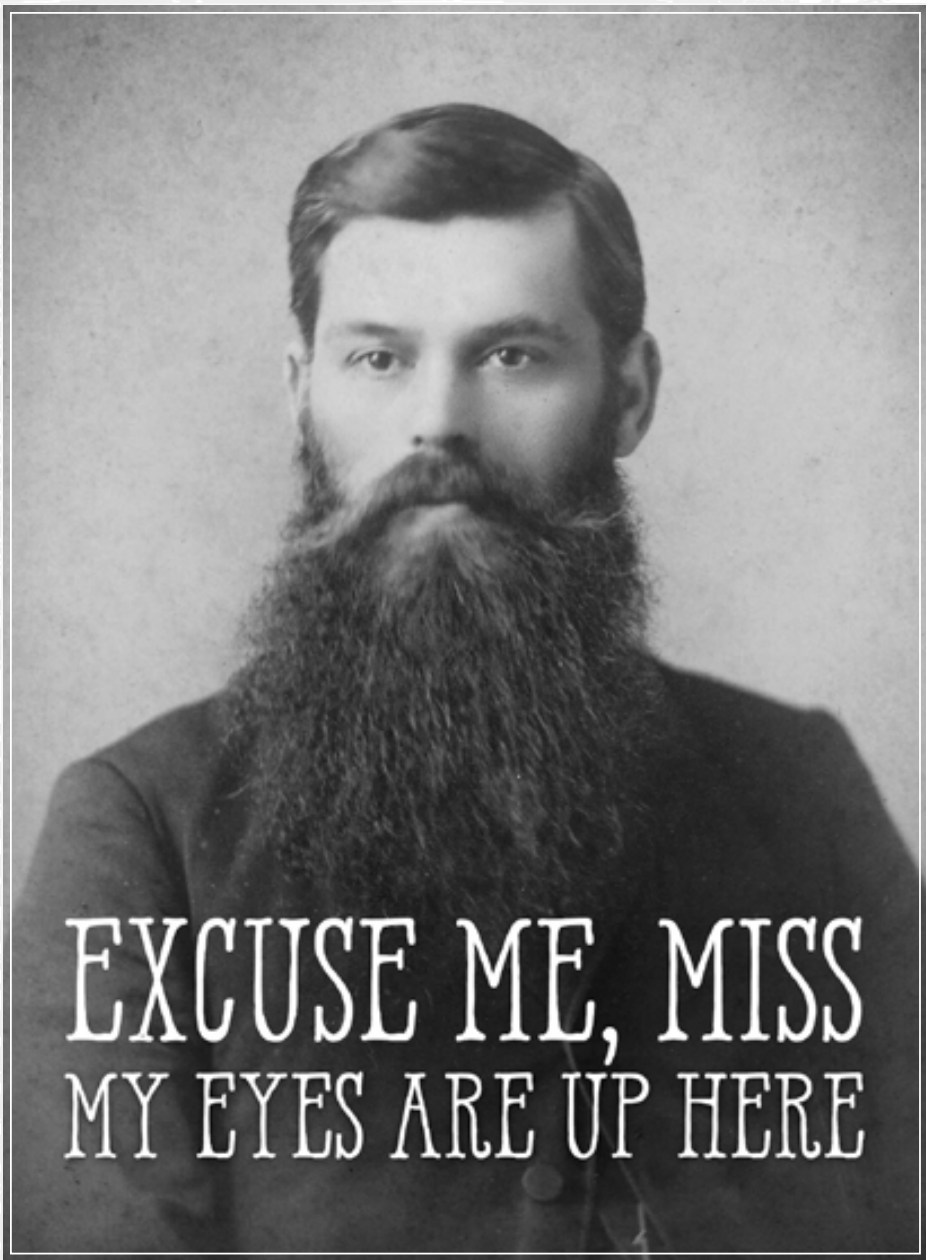
## CONTEMPLATION

1. Have you ever been tempted to leave the church you are a part of? Why?

2. How might you encourage unity in your local congregation? Do you need to forgive anyone or ask forgiveness?
3. How might you encourage unity in the church as she is represented in your city?

## PRAYER

*Holy Spirit, grant us the grace to live in humility and in unity with the entire body of Christ.*




EXCUSE ME, MISS  
MY EYES ARE UP HERE



# HOW TO GROW A GREAT BEARD IN FIVE EASY STEPS

BY AARON ALFORD

1. Reach puberty.
2. Don't shave. Admire your stubbly studliness in the mirror. (But not for long, lest you commit the sin of vanity. We suggest no more than nine seconds.)
3. It's getting itchy. Don't shave. No good thing comes without struggle.
4. It's getting really itchy. *Don't shave!* To steel yourself against the temptation to pick up a razor, we suggest sticking pictures of Mr. T, ZZ Top, Rick Rubin, and Gandalf on your bathroom mirror. Believe in your dreams! (Also, you may want to look into a high-quality beard oil product.)
5. You now have a beard! Enjoy it. Stay away from beard-endangering things like scissors, small fires, and people who say, "I liked you better without a beard." Take it with you wherever you go. Tell it your secrets. Get used to Duck Dynasty comments. Use it to defend yourself against dark forces. Slay orcs. Chop down trees by looking at them sternly. Start a tree farm in your whiskers (a nice Douglas fir should be ready by Christmas). Use it as inspiration to write that novel you've been meaning to get to. Audit the philosophy class it's already taking. Accept the inevitable advances of a virtuous woman. Flee the inevitable advances of the dissolute. (Or take a vow of celibacy; it's up to you.) Resist the temptation to use its power for evil. Let it help you improve your painting technique as it explores the possibilities found in neo-Expressionism. Endure



countless questions about how hot it gets in the summer. Use it as a haven for small animals awaiting adoption. Be patient and forgiving when your friends fall into the sin of beard envy. Use its dimensional portal (this commonly appears at the six-month mark) to explore strange new worlds and visit alternate timelines. And no matter how much it begs, never, ever feed it after midnight.

## CHAPTER 2

# Good King Wenceslas

## THE MERRY CHRISTMAS BOXER

BY JARED BROCK

*Meditation: The King will reply, “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”*

—MATTHEW 25:40

*Quote of the Day: Christian men, be sure . . . ye who now will bless the poor shall yourselves find blessing.*

—JOHN MASON NEALE

In Canada we have a peculiar winter holiday called Boxing Day. Contrary to popular belief, we don't (generally) go around punching people for buying us ugly Christmas sweaters. Boxing Day is celebrated in Canada, Great Britain, and most of the Commonwealth. It's basically our version of Black Friday, minus the guns and stampedes. But we also celebrate Black Friday, so Boxing Day could more accurately be called Return-the-Stuff-You-Hate-and-Buy-the-Stuff-You-Want Day. If you ever buy a Christmas present for a Canadian or a Brit, be sure to include the receipt and store hours.

But Boxing Day wasn't always such a shallow, commercial celebration. Originally, British employers of a certain caliber gave gifts to their employees, often in the form of a box full of presents for their families. That's one theory, anyway. Boxing Day might also refer to the box that was traditionally placed at the backs of churches on Christmas Day to collect offerings for the poor. Either way, these gifts for the poor and working class were given on the day after Christmas, which also happens to be the feast day of the first Christian martyr: Saint Stephen.

And here's where Good King Wenceslas comes in.

You've probably heard the song. It was written by John Mason Neale and published in 1853, but the music originated in Finland three hundred years earlier. Like every Christmas song he ever covered, Bing Crosby sings a creditable version.

"Good King Wenceslas" is an odd Christmas carol. It mentions no nativity, no bearded wise men, no baby Jesus in a manger.

*Good King Wenceslas looked out  
On the Feast of Stephen  
When the snow lay 'round about,  
Deep and crisp and even;  
Brightly shone the moon that night,  
Though the frost was cruel,  
When a poor man came in sight,  
Gathering winter fuel.*

*"Hither, page, and stand by me,  
If thou know'st it, telling  
Yonder peasant, who is he?  
Where and what his dwelling?"  
"Sire, he lives a good league hence,  
Underneath the mountain,*

*Right against the forest fence  
By Saint Agnes' fountain."*

*"Bring me flesh, and bring me wine,  
Bring me pine-logs hither;  
Thou and I shall see him dine  
When we bear them thither."  
Page and monarch, forth they went,  
Forth they went together,  
Through the rude wind's wild lament  
And the bitter weather.*

*"Sire, the night is darker now,  
And the wind blows stronger;  
Fails my heart, I know not how,  
I can go no longer."  
"Mark my footsteps, my good page,  
Tread thou in them boldly;  
Thou shall find the winter's rage  
Freeze thy blood less coldly."*

*In his master's step he trod,  
Where the snow lay dinted,  
Heat was in the very sod  
Which the saint had printed.  
Therefore, Christian men, be sure,  
Wealth or rank possessing,  
Ye, who now will bless the poor  
Shall yourselves find blessing.*

It's inspiring, isn't it?

But here's the funny thing: Good King Wenceslas wasn't even a king.

Good Wenceslas, whose real name was Václav, was the bearded Duke of Bohemia in the year 921. Duke Václav was instrumental in bringing Christianity to the Czech Republic. He instituted the Latin rite and laid the foundation for what is now the magnificent St. Vitus Cathedral, the jewel of Prague's ancient castle complex.

But he didn't last long. A group of wealthy nobles plotted with Václav's younger brother and ran him through with a lance when he was only twenty-eight. He was immediately declared a holy saint and righteous king, whose power wasn't based in a crown but rather his character. He was martyred, sainted, and made the patron saint of the Czech Republic and, one assumes, their delicious *trdelník* pastries. If you ever visit Prague, you can check out his skull, which now stands, sadly, beardless.

The stories and tales of the good duke's kindness went far beyond just one Christmas gift to a poor country serf and gave rise to the medieval concept of the "righteous king." A local biographer recorded the notion in glowing terms: "Rising every night from his noble bed, with bare feet and only one chamberlain, he went around to God's churches and gave alms generously to widows, orphans, those in prison and afflicted by every difficulty, so much so that he was considered, not a prince, but the father of all the wretched."<sup>1</sup>

Now all of this is likely legend, of course, but that's really not the point, is it? This Christmas carol isn't just about a Czech royal who died 1,081 years ago.

It's about us.

If we have the ability to vote, to use our freedom of speech, and to gather together to worship, then we fall into the category of "rank possessing." If we have a house, a car, clean water, and food, we fall into the category of "wealth possessing." We are rich, and we have

the opportunity to act like kings. We can follow in the snowy footsteps of good Duke Václav and celebrate the true meaning of Boxing Day. Perhaps we can find a box of blessing for the poor and, in doing so, find ourselves truly blessed. As we walk in the footprints of faithful greats, who themselves followed in the footsteps of Jesus, we find warmth in the ground on which they trod.

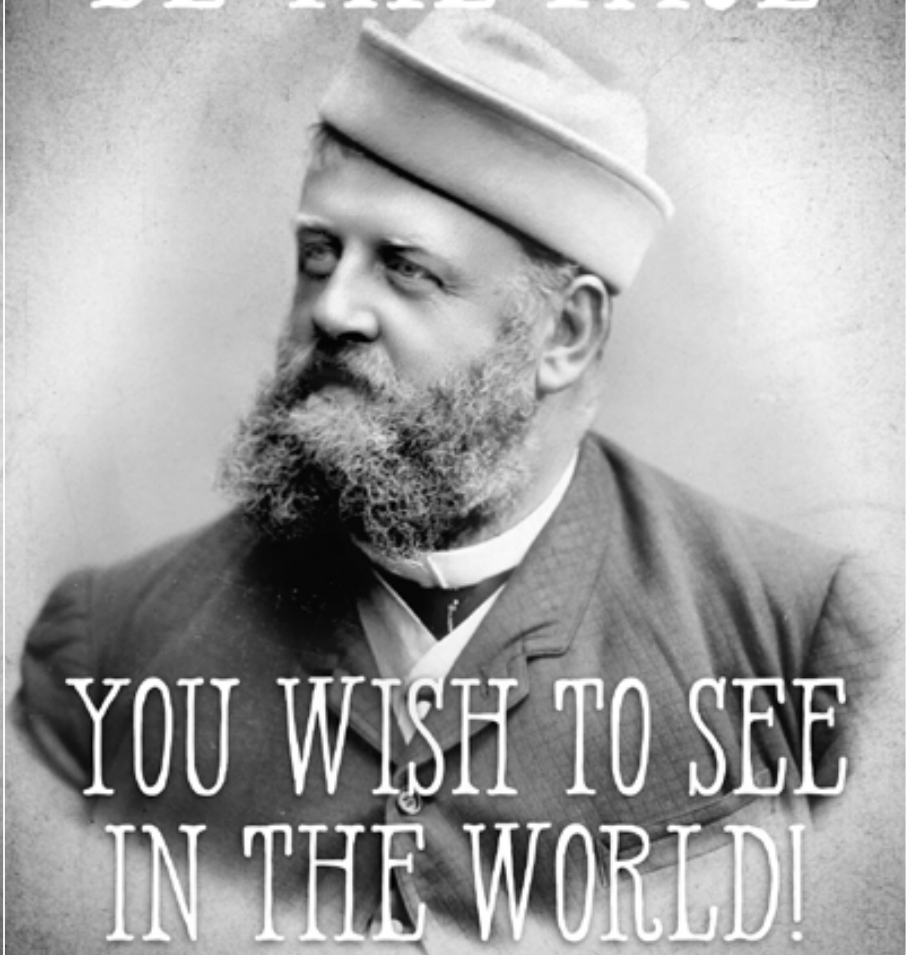
## CONTEMPLATION

1. Where do you possess rank and wealth?
2. Are you stewarding your influence and affluence well?
3. How can you “gather winter fuel” for those who face difficulty?

## PRAYER

*Father of the rich and poor alike, make us saints in helping those who have less than we have.*

BE THE FACE



YOU WISH TO SEE  
IN THE WORLD!



# ON BEING A BIBLE DONKEY

BY AARON ALFORD

Being yourself can be frustrating, especially if you're me. I try my best to live with integrity, purpose, and humility, but much of the time I fail. I'm stubborn and stupid, and sometimes it seems like I'll never get my act together. In short, I feel like a Bible Donkey.

Growing up in churches that mostly used the King James Version of Scripture, my church friends and I took particular delight in the sections of the KJV Bible that referred to donkeys. Giggling gleefully, we would call one another "Bible Donkeys." We were the epitome of Christian maturity. I'm sure you, dear reader, were never so juvenile.

The Bible mentions donkeys on at least eighty-seven occasions. God told Moses, "If thou see the ass of him that hateth thee lying under his burden . . . thou shalt surely help with him" (Ex. 23:5 KJV). Then, of course, there is the most famous Bible Donkey of the Old Testament, Balaam's Bible Donkey. God famously used Balaam's donkey, an ass who could not speak—a dumb ass—to prophesy a warning to Balaam and save his life. (He's been using Bible Donkeys to speak ever since.)

I don't want to remain a Bible Donkey, but I'm coming to terms with the reality that, like Balaam's donkey and every other donkey before and since, I can be stubborn, stupid, and insensitive. Perhaps you can relate. But don't worry; such traits don't exclude us from God's kingdom. Balaam's donkey wasn't the only donkey God used for His glory. There's a story in the gospel of Mark about a colt (the foal of an ass):

[Jesus said,] "Go to the village ahead of you, and just as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden.

Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ say, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here shortly.’”

They went and found a colt outside in the street, tied at a doorway. As they untied it, some people standing there asked, “What are you doing, untying that colt?” They answered as Jesus had told them to, and the people let them go. When they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks over it, he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread branches they had cut in the fields. Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted,

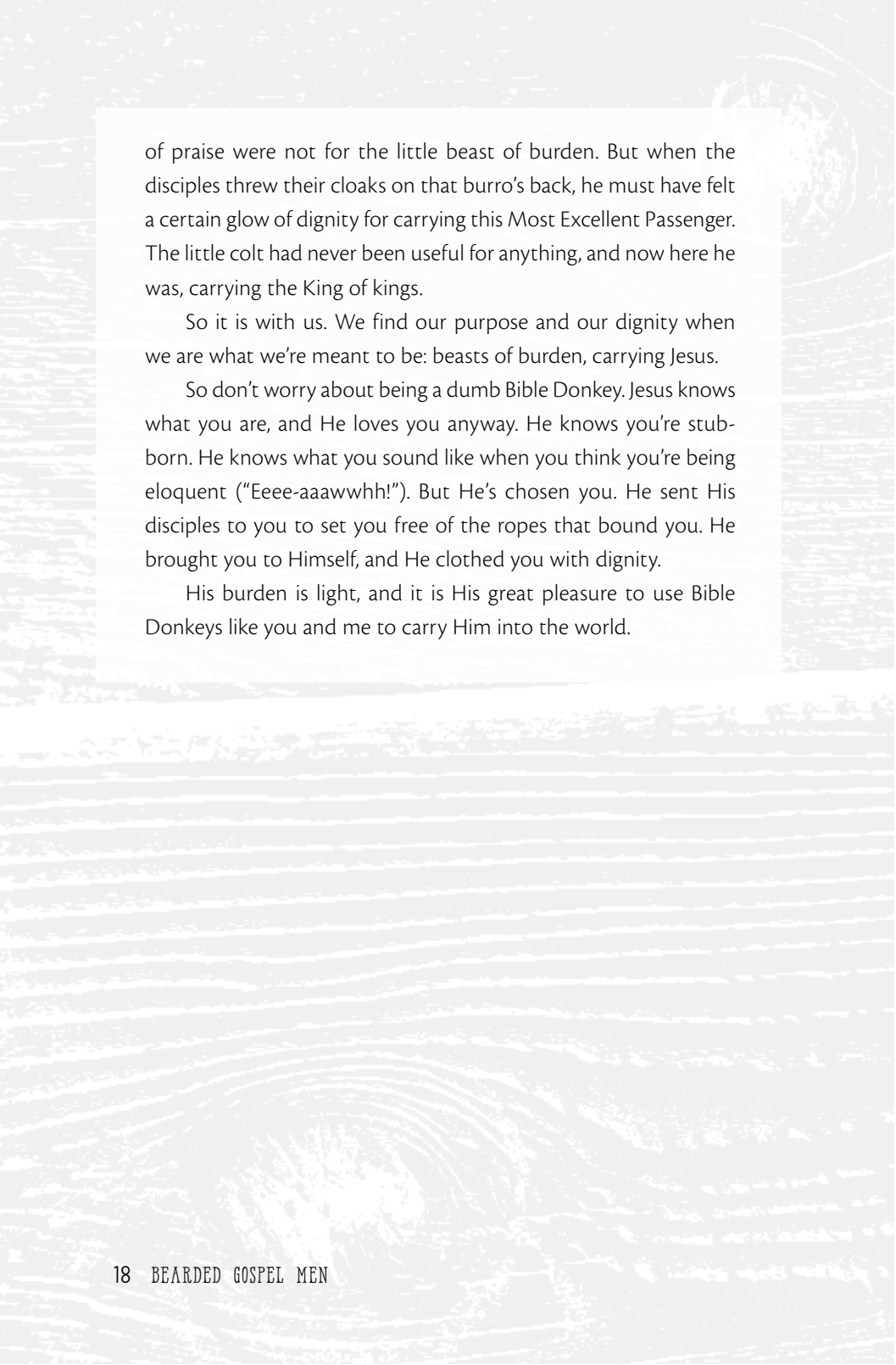
“Hosanna!”

“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” (11:2–9)

Mark is usually the most succinct of the gospel storytellers, charging through his account in just sixteen chapters. But here Mark spent a significant amount of time on a seemingly small incident. He didn’t say, “So the disciples obeyed Jesus and fetched a mule.” No, Mark took his time with this story. It’s almost as if the little jackass is the star of the show.

So let’s look at this colt. He was young, and he was tied with a rope. He was not in a stall—he was alone in the open street, possibly neglected and uncared for. In fact, he’d never been sat upon, and donkeys are pretty much good for one of two things: carrying people or carrying stuff. This one had been used for neither. Then a couple of disciples showed up, freed him of his bonds, and brought him to the Lord. It’s then that the poor, neglected donkey found his purpose: carrying Jesus.

If there’s a lesson to be learned from these Bible Donkeys, it’s this: It is a noble thing to be used by God, but it doesn’t require nobility on our part. When that colt went riding into the city carrying Jesus, no one was looking at the donkey. The shouts



of praise were not for the little beast of burden. But when the disciples threw their cloaks on that burro's back, he must have felt a certain glow of dignity for carrying this Most Excellent Passenger. The little colt had never been useful for anything, and now here he was, carrying the King of kings.

So it is with us. We find our purpose and our dignity when we are what we're meant to be: beasts of burden, carrying Jesus.

So don't worry about being a dumb Bible Donkey. Jesus knows what you are, and He loves you anyway. He knows you're stubborn. He knows what you sound like when you think you're being eloquent ("Eeee-aaawwhh!"). But He's chosen you. He sent His disciples to you to set you free of the ropes that bound you. He brought you to Himself, and He clothed you with dignity.

His burden is light, and it is His great pleasure to use Bible Donkeys like you and me to carry Him into the world.

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