

# Dust

**“May you be covered in the dust of your rabbi!”**  
—first-century Jewish blessing

Who are you following?

Everybody is following *somebody*—or at least something.

Put another way, we’re all disciples.

The question isn’t, Am I a disciple?

It’s, *Who* or *what* am I a disciple *of*?

I know, I know; what I just said is akin to heresy in the modern world. We want *so* badly to believe that we—and we alone—plot our course, captain our ship, control our destiny. We aspire to lead, not to follow.

But, question: How is that working out for you?

Do you ever feel that nagging “thought” tug at the back of your mind: *Is the life I’m living the life I most deeply desire? Is this it?*

I was born and raised on the West Coast of America. It’s an open secret that the US in general and my home state of California in particular are built on what sociologists call “the myth of the rugged individual.” Dr. Robert Bellah called it “radical individualism” and said it’s the defining trait of America.<sup>1</sup>

And yet “no man is an island,” as the poet John Donne once said.<sup>2</sup> And no woman is either. In the words of the *New York Times* col-

umnist Tish Harrison Warren, “None of us comes to what we believe by ourselves. *The world has no free thinkers.*”<sup>3</sup>

(You see, I’m not the only cultural heretic around . . .)

Powerful forces have a vested interest in our believing the myth (and it *is* a myth) that we are following no one at all. Many of the cultural liturgies that indoctrinate us daily—“Be true to yourself,” “You do you,” “Speak your truth”—can be traced back to sources with a nefarious agenda.<sup>4</sup> If “they” (whether multinational corporations, politicians, anti-democratic government agents, marketing departments, influencers who just want more followers, etc., etc.) can make us believe that each person is a blank slate, just following the inner compass of our “authentic self” in an upward march to happiness, then they can keep us blind to all the ways we’ve been “disciplined”—formed and manipulated—by *their* desires.

Any skilled con artist knows the key to deceiving your mark is to get them to believe your scheme was *their* idea. Translation: The key to getting people to follow you is to convince them they aren’t following anyone at all.

With the rise of social media empires and their spooky digital algorithms, these powerful forces now have direct access to our flows of consciousness every time we slide our thumbs across our phones. What we are led to believe are just ads, news links, retweets, and random digital flotsam are, in reality, mass behavior modification techniques intentionally designed to influence how we think, feel, believe, shop, vote, and live. To quote the tech philosopher Jaron Lanier, “What might once have been called advertising must now be understood as continuous behavior modification on a titanic scale.”<sup>5</sup> The “world” (as it’s called in the New Testament) is *forming* us, constantly.

But what is it forming us *into*?

Because we are each becoming something. That’s the crux of the human experience: the process of becoming a person. To be human is to change. To grow. To evolve. This is by God’s design.

The question is not, Am I becoming a person?

It’s, *Who* or *what* am I becoming?

If you plot the trajectory of your life over the next five decades and envision yourself at seventy, eighty, or a hundred, what kind of person do you see on the horizon? Does the projection in your mind fill you with hope? Or dread?

For those of us who desire to follow Jesus, here is the reality we must turn and face: If we’re not being intentionally formed by Jesus himself, then it’s highly likely we are being unintentionally formed by someone or something *else*.<sup>6</sup>

So, again, Who are you following?

The deeper question here is, In whom are you *trusting*? Who (or what) do you put your faith in to show you the way to the life you desire? It’s my conviction that contrary to what we hear, living by faith isn’t a Christian thing or even a religious thing; it’s a *human* thing—we *all* live by faith.

The question isn’t, Am I going to believe?

It’s, *Who* or *what* am I going to believe *in*?

Meaning, Who or what am I going to *entrust* my life to? Do I really want to trust *myself*—or any other human, for that matter?

We creatures who seem to have gotten ourselves into the very mess we're trying to fix?

It's only human to be drawn to someone—a celebrity or guru or historical figure—and to desire to become like them. This is part of how God wired us to grow. We all have an ideal life we aspire to, and when we find a person or idea system that seems to embody what we want, we “follow” them, we put our trust in them. Or, in more Christian language, we “believe.”

Who do you believe in?<sup>7</sup> Who is your luminary of choice, the person whose orbit you would give anything to spend a few days living in?

Put another way, Who is your rabbi?

I am one of many people who have found Jesus of Nazareth to be the most radiant light to ever grace the human scene. I'm an avid reader, and through the gift of literature, I have peered inside the minds of some of history's greatest thinkers. All of them have laudable traits (and some not so laudable ones too). But the longer I live and learn, the more I'm convinced that Jesus has no real competition, ancient or modern. In my estimation, no other thinker, philosopher, leader, philosophy, or ideology has the coherence, sophistication, and deep inner resonance of Jesus and his Way. Much less the staggering *beauty*.

In our secular age, the air we breathe is filled with skepticism, ennui, distrust of all authority, and the bending of truth to desire and feeling. Inside this cultural atmosphere, we are *all* doubting Thomas.

But even on the days when I struggle to believe that Jesus was who he claimed to be (spoiler: more than just a rabbi), I *want*

to believe. I *want* Jesus' vision of life in the kingdom of God to be true. I resonate at a soul level with the disciple Peter's conclusion:

Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.<sup>8</sup>

I stand (or really, walk) with a vast multitude of others around the world and down through history who have come to believe: *There simply is no better way, truth, or life to be found than that of Jesus.*

Of the myriad of options, he's the one I choose to follow. I'm going to end up following someone, so I choose to follow Jesus.

The philosopher Dallas Willard used to say, “There is no problem in human life that apprenticeship to Jesus cannot solve.” Following or, as I will describe it in the pages to come, *apprenticing* Jesus, is the solution to the problem of the so-called human condition. Name your malaise: political polarization, climate change, looming global war, the mental health epidemic, addiction, Christian nationalism, widespread hypocrisy among Christian leaders, our simple inability to be kind . . .

*There is no problem in human life that apprenticeship to Jesus cannot solve.*

You may have picked up this book because you're seriously considering becoming a follower of Jesus, but you want to know what it is you're saying yes to. That's wise; Jesus urged potential followers to “count the cost” before becoming his disciples.<sup>9</sup>

Or you may already be a Christian but find in your heart a growing desire to take your faith more seriously—to become an ap-

prentice of Jesus. To add a new level of intentionality to your spiritual formation. To live on purpose, not on accident.

Or you may be a longtime follower of Jesus but feel like you've hit a plateau. You're stuck, and you ache to get unstuck, to experience a deeper level of healing. To close the gap between your life and Jesus' "life that is truly life."<sup>10</sup> In other words, you want to become a saint.

Whoever you are and whatever prompted you to read this book, welcome. I'm so happy you've come along.

I am a follower of Jesus who has spent the better part of my adult life working out discipleship to Jesus in the post-Christian West. I have come to believe that there is a Way of life laid down by Jesus himself, and that if we give ourselves to it—and ultimately to *him*—it will lead to the life we *all* most truly crave.

This book is the culmination of decades of experience, trial and error, more failures than successes, and a lot of lessons learned in the school of hard knocks. But the pages to come are no tome; they are simply an exploration and explanation of what I believe to be three of the most important words ever spoken in the long annals of human history:

Come, follow me.<sup>11</sup>

Contrary to what many assume, Jesus did not invite people to convert to Christianity. He didn't even call people to become Christians (keep reading . . .); he invited people to apprentice under him into a whole new way of living. To be transformed.

My thesis is simple: Transformation *is* possible *if* we are willing to arrange our lives around the practices, rhythms, and truths

that Jesus himself did, which will open our lives to God's power to change. Said another way, we can be transformed *if* we are willing to apprentice ourselves to Jesus.

Then—and only then—can we become the people we ache to be and live the lives we were destined for.

That said, we hear the language of "following" Jesus all the time. But what exactly does it *mean*?

It means practicing the Way.