



**Searching for God Knows What**

*Alien Philosophers, Lovesick Teens and the Gospel of Jesus*

by

Donald Miller

Can the gospel of Jesus be summed up in bullet points and formulas? Has a quick-fix culture altered the gospel of Christ, stripped it of its beauty and meaning? If you are tired of the refined version of the gospel of Jesus and are ready to understand the gospel of Christ in full, you are ready for *Searching for God Knows What*. In this book, critically acclaimed author Donald Miller explains the gospel of Jesus as you have never heard it before, and perhaps as it has not been explained in over 400 years. Rather than reducing the gospel of Jesus into a few ideas for easy consumption, Donald Miller demonstrates how the gospel of Jesus explains all of life, everything from Junior High politics to Basketball. This book is bound to entertain and stimulate as you laugh, cry and even find yourself in the human story. Donald weaves through stories of bearded women, three-legged men and even aliens to bring to light important and beautiful ideas about the origins of the human personality. As always, Donald Miller is bound to offend, but by the end of this book, you will never think of the gospel of Jesus the same. Please enjoy this sample chapter, and if you want to read more, consider picking up *Searching for God Knows What* at your local bookshop.

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## Authors Note:

Sometimes I feel as though I were born in a circus, come out of my mothers womb like a man from a cannon, pitched toward the ceiling of the tent, all the doctors and nurses clapping in delight from the grandstand, the band going great guns in trombones and drums. I unfold and find flight hundreds of feet above the center ring, the smell of popcorn, the clowns gathered below amazed at my grace, all the people chanting my name as my arms come out like wings and move swan-like toward the apex where I draw them in, collapse my torso to my legs, roll over in perfection, then slowly give to gravity, my body falling back toward earth, the ground coming up so quick I can see the center ring growing enormous beneath my weight.

And this is precisely when it occurs to me there is no net. And I wonder what is the use of a circus, and why a man should bother to be shot out of a cannon, and how fleeting is the applause of a crowd, and...who is going to rescue me?

## Chapter One:

### Fine Wine

#### The Failure of Formulas

Some time ago I attended a seminar for Christian writers. It was in a big hotel down south and hotels always make me uncomfortable because the bedding is so fluffy and the television swivels and who makes coffee in the bathroom. But I felt that I needed to be at this seminar. I was wondering how, exactly, to write a book for a Christian market, a book that people would actually read. I had written a book several years before, but it didn't sell. It was a road-trip narrative about me, a friend, and God, and how we traveled across the country in a Volkswagen van, smoking pipes and picking fights with truckers. I mean God wasn't actually a character in the book the way my friend and I were, God more or less played Himself, up in heaven, sending down puzzling wisdom and answers to prayer every hundred miles or so. But even though the story had God in it, which I believed made it prime for Christian bookstores, sales were less than holy. The book limped along for about a year and then, suddenly, died. God led the publisher to take the book out of print about the same time sales dipped into negative figures. The publisher called and asked if I wanted to buy a few thousand copies for myself at 12 cents each and I ended up buying four. I believe the rest were sold to convenience-store distributors who shelved them next to three-dollar romance novels at the back of the potato-chip isle. The only positive thing that happened in all of this was that for the next year or so I received enjoyable and sultry e-mails from women who had recently begun to consider themselves spiritual. And while I certainly enjoyed the correspondence and still keep in touch with many of these women today, the career path was not as respectable as I would have liked. I have always wanted to be a sophisticated Christian writer and not somebody who has books on the close-out isle at Plaid Pantry. That is why I signed up for this seminar, the one I was telling you about that was in the hotel with the bathroom/cafes.

I arrived the evening before, and so the morning of the seminar I woke up very early, about 6 or something, and I couldn't fall back to sleep. I opened the curtains and watched planes land at the Memphis airport for an hour or so, trying to guide them in with my mind and that sort of thing. And then I went into the bathroom and sat down and had some coffee and read the paper. After an hour I got started getting dressed and the whole time I was ironing my clothes I was wondering whether this would be the weekend I would be discovered, whether this would be the start of a long career writing adventurous, life-changing books for my fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. I sat on the edge of the bed in my suit and tie and watched television for an hour and Katie Couric was interviewing a fellow who had written a book about how Donald Rumsfeld was actually the anti-christ and I confess I practiced answering all her questions, knowing that I, too, would some day be interviewed by Katie Couric.

“You really make Mr. Rumsfeld out to be a monster, Mr. Miller. This seems unfounded. How did you come to these conclusions?”

“I had him followed by a private detective, a hi-tech guy I found at Radio Shack. Everything in the book is documented, Miss Couric. Or can I call you Katie? Or can I just call you?”

When the interview was over I turned the television off and laid back on the fluffy bed and stared at the bedside clock, trying to speed time up with my mind, but time went on as usual and so I fell asleep for exactly nine minutes and then woke up and tried not to blink till about twenty minutes to eight which is when I headed downstairs. In the lobby I asked the man at the front desk which room the seminar was in. I leaned against the desk as the consigner, a twenty-something fellow with a goatee, searched for a room schedule amongst his papers. “Capturing literature for the glory of God?” The man asked suspiciously, reading the name of the seminar from a sheet of paper, looking up at me as if to ask whether or not this was the seminar I was interested in, and also, perhaps, why God was trying to “capture literature for His glory.” *That's the one*, I said to him. “Interesting name for a conference, isn't it?” He said, looking at me with a smile.

*We can't have literature running around doing anything it wants, now can we?* I told him.

“I don't suppose so.” He said, after a long and uncomfortable pause.

“And where will we be capturing said literature?” I asked. By this I was asking what room we were in. He looked at me puzzled. “What room are we in?” I clarified.

“Oh,” He said as he looked back at the sheet. “You are in conference room 210, which is just down the hall across from the restrooms.”

“Perfect.” I said, adding that if he saw people in the lobby reading pagan literature to please notify me.

“Certainly.” He said to me, confused, but kind of standing at attention all the same.

And I remember having a very good feeling that morning, walking down the big hall toward the conference room, once again believing I was on my way to becoming the next great spiritual writer, a sort of evangelical Depak Chopra crossed with Tom Clancy,

or that guy who wrote Jonathan Livingston Seagull, or Ansel Adams or whoever, just somebody famous. I had terrific ideas, I really did. I was going to write a story about a nun who takes over small third-world countries by causing their evil dictators to fall in love with her, leaving a trail of mega-churches and democracy in her wake. The book was going to be called “Sister Democracy, Show Some Leg!” And I had another story about a guy whose father, a psychology professor at a prestigious university, raised his son in a maze, rewarding him when he crawled down dark hallways and disciplining him when he crawled down lit hallways, thus teaching him to do everything in life counter-intuitively. In the story, the kid grows up to be a kind of genius with an enormous following, people literally hanging on his every word. The book was going to be called “Maze Boy, How One Man Brought Down the United States Postal Service!” And if it were a Christian novel, and I could easily turn it into a Christian novel if the money was right, I was going to call it, “Maze Boy, How One Man, With God’s Help, Brought Down the United States Postal Service!”

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I stocked up on bagels at the back of the conference room because I was the first one there. I chose a chair somewhere near the middle, and soon fellow writers began shuffling in, perhaps twenty or so over the next ten minutes. Everybody was being very quiet, looking over their notebooks, but I made small talk with a woman next to me about why we were there and where we had come from and what sort of books we liked to read. Some of the nicest people you will ever meet you will meet at a Christian writers seminar, I will tell you that right now. Very small people, though, mostly women, not the sort of folks you would imagine *taking literature captive for the glory of God*, but kind and other-centered none-the-less. The lady sitting next to me was writing a wonderful series of Christian devotions for girls who were taking ballet classes, and another lady on the other side of me was writing a series of devotions you could read while you were drinking tea. When she told me this, a lady in front of us turned around and smiled because she was working on a series of devotions you could read while you were drinking coffee. I told them their books sounded terrific, because it is true that some people like tea and some people like coffee, and for that matter, some people dance in a ballet. The ladies asked me what it was I was working on and I told them about the nun in South America and described a specific scene in which the nun actually ponders whether or not *she* has fallen in love with a dictator named Pablo Hernandez-Juarez, and I had the ladies lean in as I told them the part where the nun is standing on a balcony overlooking a Pacific sunset, painfully considering whether she should go back inside to be with Pablo or whether she should scale down the side of the dictators castle, thus escaping to move on to the next country, the next dictator, and the next story of passion and liberation. You could tell the ladies really liked my story and all three of them told me it was a terrific idea. I told them about how, in my mind, it was actually a musical, and I wistled a few bars from the love theme. And I was going to tell them about the kid who grew up in a maze and brought down the United States Postal Service but that is when the lady who was going to teach the seminar showed up.

She was also a small woman but she knew her stuff. She had had three books published; a series of devotions you could read while eating chocolate, a book about the hidden secrets of fulfillment found in end-times prophecy, and a book about how to make “big money” painting “small houses.” Three different genres, she told us, but each one had been a success. She told us that there are, in fact, formulas for writing successful books, and that if we followed one of these formulas, then we, too, could write books that end up on sub-category, Christian or Catholic best-sellers lists, not the monthly ones, but the annual ones that also consider backlist titles and total sales including sales to ministries and radio stations as promotional give-aways. And of course I was interested, and I elbowed the lady next to me and lifted my eyebrows.

“The first formula goes like this.” Our seminar instructor began, holding a finger into the air. “You begin with a crisis. This can be a global crisis, a community crisis, whatever kind of crisis you want. This isn’t a *problem*, or a *nuisance*, mind you, this is a *crisis*. This must be something terrible that is going to happen to the world, to our country, to the church, or to the individual unless the reader does something about it. The reader must be taken to the point in which they fear the consequences of this crisis. Second, there must be a clear enemy in the crisis, some group of people or some person or some philosophy that is causing the crisis. You must show examples of how these people are causing this crisis, simply because they are the enemy of all that is good. Third, you must spell out the ramifications of the crisis should it go unchecked, and also the glory and beauty of the crisis if dealt with. You must paint a picture of a war against evil forces that are trying to cause this crisis, and you must enlist the reader into this war, painting a very clear picture of the reader as the good guy in the war against the crisis. Fourth, and finally, you must spell out a three to four step plan of dealing with said crisis.” And with this she took a breath. “Is that clear?” She asked, and as she delivered this last line, she more or less stood up straight, her petite frame putting out the confident vibe of a drill sergeant. I knew, then and there, that these were in fact the women it would take to *take literature captive for the glory of God*, that, in fact, standing before me was the archetype of my South American nun. But as excited as I was, I confess I began to wonder how I was going to work this formula into *Sister of Democracy*, *Show Some Leg!* or *Maze Boy*.

“Now there is another recipe!” She said, which gave me hope that there may be a more compatible formula for which one of my stories might wrap around. “First,” She began. “You must paint a picture of great personal misery. You must tell the reader of a time when you failed at something, when you had no control over a situation or dynamic. Second, you must talk about where you are now, and how you have control over that situation or dynamic, and how wonderful and fulfilling it is to have control. Third, you must give the reader a three to four step plan of getting from the misery and lack of control to the joy and control you currently have.”

And as wonderful as I thought this formula was, and I confess I thought it was wonderful, once again I felt that it was going to be difficult for me to wrap a story around one of these recipe’s. I thought perhaps there would be another formula, perhaps one with guns or a midnight parachute drop into a small African village, but there wasn’t. It turns

out there were only two formulas. Our instructor went on to tell us that over the next two days, for eight hours each day, we were going to walk step by step through these two magical formulas and by the end of our time we were going to have them mastered, that, essentially, we would be able to approach any topic and *hook* the reader from the very first paragraph.

I sat and listened attentively, taking copious notes, learning to *look for the misery that is hiding beneath the surface of life, the misery that many people will not feel until you tell them it is there*, and to *Identify the joy we now feel because the misery has been overcome by taking three steps*, and how *these three steps are very easy and can be taken by anybody who has fifteen dollars to spend on my book*.

When it came time for lunch, I let the room empty out except for our seminar instructor, and feeling defeated and confused because I didn't believe these formulas were necessarily compatible with my stories, I approached her and asked about how I might fit one of these formulas into a book about a nun with a machete. She looked over my shoulder into the empty room, tilted her head, then looked back into my eye and asked whether I realized this was a *non-fiction* rather than a *fiction* seminar. At the time, I confess, I didn't know the difference between *fiction* and *non-fiction*, so I slyly inquired about the delineation. "What," I began, "Do you feel is the largest difference between a work of *fiction* and a work of *non-fiction*?" And again, she looked at me confused. "Well," She said, "I suppose a non-fiction book would be *true*, and a fiction book would be *made up*."

*For example*, I said, motioning with my hand for an example.

"Well," she began, looking at the floor and smiling before looking back at me, kind of sighing as she spoke "A novel, a story like the one you are talking about, would be considered a fiction book. But a self-help book, the sort of book we are discussing at this seminar, would be considered non-fiction, because we aren't really making up stories so much as we are trying to offer advice."

*I see*, I said, kind of looking at the ceiling.

*I get it*, I said, looking back at the floor.

*Indeed*, I said, looking back at my instructor.

"Doest that help?" She asked, smiling and putting her hand on my arm. *It does*. I said. *It helps a great deal. I like to get peoples perspective on fiction and non-fiction. I find the various opinions intriguing*.

"I am sure you do." She said to me after a long and uncomfortable pause.

I ate lunch at the Denny's across the street from the hotel, feeling the entire trip to Memphis had been a mistake. And then I remembered a little song, something about making lemons from a lemon tree, and I realized that what I needed to do was write a non-fiction book, something that helped people who were miserable become happy. Only

mine would be a Christian self-help book, and I would start each reading with scripture, then break down the formula the scripture spoke of. I was going to call it, *Devotions you can Read While Eating Ice Cream, Soy Ice Cream And So On!*

There is no question I was the best student at this seminar. Women under one-hundred pounds lose energy in the late afternoons because they do not eat enough and they miss their families. I returned home and began pouring over the Bible, looking for formulas I could use for my book of daily devotions. And I have to tell you this was much more difficult than you might think. The formulas, in fact, are hidden. It seems when God had the Bible put together, He hid a lot of the ancient wisdom so basically you have to read into things and even kind of make things up to get a formula out of it. And the formulas that are obvious are terrible. For instance, a guy named Steven was miserable (or at least I assumed he was miserable) and then he became a Christian, and then he was stoned to death. This formula, of course, was not good enough to make the cut. And for that matter neither was the one about Paul, who was a murderer before he became a Christian and then was blinded while traveling, met Jesus in a burst of light, and then spent various painful years moving from city to city, prison to prison, routinely being beaten and bit by snakes. No formula there. I moved on to Peter, who was rescued from a successful fishing business only to be crucified, some historical accounts claim, along with his wife. And of course that wouldn't work. So I decided to ignore the actual characters of scripture and just go with the teachings of Jesus. And that is when things really became difficult. Apparently Jesus had not heard of the wonderful tool of acronym. He mostly told stories, some of which were outlandish. Step one: Eat my flesh. Step two: Drink my blood. Do you know what having to read something like that would do to a guy trying to process dairy products?

And of course I got frustrated. And it really got me thinking that, perhaps, formula books, by that I mean books that take you through a series of steps, may not be all that compatible with the Bible. I looked on my shelf at all the self-help books I happened to own, the ones about losing weight, the ones about making girls like you, the ones about getting rich, the ones about starting your own pirate radio station, and I realized none of them actually helped me all that much. I mean all the promises of fulfillment really didn't work. My life was fairly normal before I read them, meaning I had good days and bad days, and then my life was fairly normal after I read them too, meaning I still had good days and bad days. It made me wonder, honestly, if such a complex existence as the one you and I are living within can really be broken down into a few steps. I mean it seems like if there were a formula to fix life, Jesus would have told us what it was.

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A few weeks later I learned an invaluable lesson from a wealthy and successful businessman here in Portland who owns a chain of coffee shops. A few of us were sitting in one of his shops one morning, and another friend asked if we had seen the *World*

*Series of Poker* on television the night before. None of us had, but that mention led to a conversation about gambling. My friend who owns the coffee shops told us, in a tone of kindness and truth, that nobody he knows who is successful gambles; rather, they work hard, they accept the facts of reality, they enjoy life as it is. “But the facts of reality stink,” I told him. “Reality is like a fine wine,” he said to me. “It will not appeal to children.” And I am grateful my friend stung me in this way, because this truth helped me understand and appreciate life itself, as it is, without the hope snake oil offers. I didn’t read formula books after that because *reality is like fine wine*. I am quite snobby about it, if you want to know the truth.

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That said, I do believe people change, and I do believe life can get better. I mean I have changed, slowly, over time, the way a tree grows by a river. I have a very intelligent and conservative friend who teaches at a local Bible college, and he believes the only thing that truly changes a person is God’s truth, that is, His Word and His working in our lives through the Holy Spirit. This made a lot of sense to me, because the times in my life when I have been most happy haven’t been the times when I’ve had the most money or the most freedom or the most anything, but rather when I’ve been in love or in community or right with people. My friend at the Bible college believes the qualities that improve a person’s life are relational, relational to God and to the folks around us. This made a lot of sense too because when Jesus was walking around on Earth He taught His disciples truths through experience, first telling them stories, then walking with them,

then causing stuff to happen like a storm on the sea, then reiterating the idea he had taught them the day before. And even then it took Him years before the disciples understood, and even then the Holy Spirit had to come and wrap things up. So it made me realize that either God didn't know about the formulas, or the formulas weren't true.

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To be honest, though, I don't know how much I like the idea of my spirituality being relational. I suppose I believe this is true, but the formulas seem much better than God because the formulas offer control; and God, well, He is like a person, and people, as we all know, are complicated. The trouble with people is they do not always do what you tell them to do. Try it with your kids or your spouse or strangers at the grocery store, and you will see what I mean. The formulas propose that if you do this and this and this, God will respond. When I was a kid I wanted a dolphin for the same reason.

I remember watching that television show *I Dream of Jeannie* when I was a kid, and I wondered at how great it would be to have a Jeannie of my own, complete with the sexy outfit, who could blink a grilled-cheese sandwich out of thin air, all the while cleaning my room and doing my homework. And I realize, of course, that is very silly and there is no such thing as a genie that lives in a lamp, but it makes me wonder if secretly we don't wish God were a genie who could deliver a few wishes here and there. And that makes me wonder if what we really want from the formulas are the wishes, not God. It makes me wonder if what we really want is control, not a relationship.

Some would say formulas are how we interact with God, that going through motions and jumping through hoops are how a person acts out his spirituality. This method of interaction, however, seems odd to me because if I want to hang out with my friend Tuck, I don't stomp my foot three times, turn around and say his name over and over like a mantra, lighting candles and getting myself in a certain mood. I just call him. In this way, formulas presuppose God is more a computer or a circus monkey than an intelligent Being. I realize that sounds harsh, but it is true.

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I was watching *Booknotes* on CSPAN the other day and got caught up in an interview with a literary critic from the *New York Times*. The interviewer asked the critic why he thought the Harry Potter series was selling so many copies. "Wish fulfillment," the critic answered. He said the lead character in the book could wave a wand and make things happen, and this is one of the primary fantasies of the human heart. And I think this is true. I call it "Clawing for Eden." But the Bible says Eden is gone, and as much as we want to believe we can fix our lives in about as many steps as it takes to make a peanut-butter sandwich, I don't believe we can.

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So if the difference between Christian faith and all other forms of spirituality is that Christian faith offers a relational dynamic with God, why are we cloaking this relational dynamic in formulas? Are we jealous of the Mormons? And are the formulas getting us anywhere? I mean, are modern forms of Christian spirituality producing better Christians than days long ago, when people didn't use formulas and understood, intrinsically, that God is a Being with a personality and a will of His own? Martin Luther didn't believe in formulas, and neither did John Calvin. Were they missing something, or are we?

After the writers seminar, and after my friend told me reality was like fine wine, I started reading the Bible very differently. I stopped looking for the formulas and tried to understand what God was trying to say. When I did that, I realized the gospel of Jesus, I mean the essence of God's message to mankind wasn't a bunch of hoops we need to jump through to get saved, and it wasn't a series of ideas we must agree with either, rather, it was an invitation, an invitation to know God.

I know there are people who have actually gone from misery to happiness, but they didn't do it by walking through three steps; they did it because they had a certain set of parents and heard a certain song and knew somebody who had a certain experience and saw some movie then read some book then had something happen to them like a car wreck or a trip to Seattle, and then they called on God and a week later read something in a magazine or met a girl in Wichita, and when all this had happened they had an epiphany, and somebody may have helped them fulfill what this epiphany made them feel, and several years later they rationalized this mystic experience with three steps, then they told the three steps to us in a book. And I'm not saying they weren't trying to be helpful; I bring this up only because life is complex, and the idea you can break it down, or fix it in a few steps is rather silly. The truth is there are a million steps, and we don't even know what the steps are and, worse, at any given moment we may not be willing or even able to take them and still worse they are different for you and me and they are always changing. I have come to believe the sooner we find this truth beautiful, the sooner we will fall in love with God on His terms, who keeps shaking things up, keeps changing the path, keeps rocking the boat to test our faith in Him, teaching us not to rely on easy answers, bullet points, magic mantras or genies in lamps, but rather in His guidance, His existence, His mercy and His love.

Personally, I was miserable before I understood these ideas, but now I am so happy I laugh all the time, even in my sleep.

Sorry, I couldn't resist. On to chapter two!