

Chapter 1

Lonely Whales



The hunger for love is much more difficult
to remove than the hunger for bread.

Mother Teresa

Then Christ will make his home in your hearts as
you trust in him. Your roots will grow down
into God's love and keep you strong.

Ephesians 3:17



“Jim and Penie are crazy.”

Those were the words going through my mind as we made the bumpy and occasionally harrowing two-hour ride across the island of Jamaica. The road twists and turns with the landscape, scaling hills covered with banana trees, pigs, and small houses perched precariously on hillsides. Well-dressed children on their way home from school share the road with wild dogs, street vendors and motorists who seem bent on speed in spite of the obstacles in their way.

COMPLETELY **RECKLESS**

The drive was taking us to Jim and Penie's home in Whitehouse, Jamaica. Located on the south side of the beautiful island. Whitehouse is a wealthy area on what is largely an impoverished island. The word "home" may be misleading. The place they live is more of a mansion. Seriously. If you were an outsider glancing briefly at their life, you could easily think that Jim and Penie were living off of an inheritance without a care in the world. A short walk to the crystal waters of the Caribbean, their house has an industrial kitchen, countless bedrooms, a large pool, and great living spaces.

Far from being a pair of rich Americans living the good life, Jim and Penie are Completely Reckless.

Their story begins in 1996 when they traveled to Jamaica as short-term missionaries. If you think that spending time as a missionary in Jamaica is the easy way to do mission work, think again. The work is hard and the needs are overwhelming. However the people are wonderful. The experience of a tourist and a missionary in a country like Jamaica are as far apart as that of a person who visits Chicago and stays at the Drake Hotel in downtown, compared to someone who crashes in a Motel 6 on the South Side.

Jim and Penie were overwhelmed by the needs they encountered. Countless thousands of inhabitants of this island live in small homes scattered among the hills. If electricity doesn't reach a home, they may run an extension cord from the neighbors, allowing for a few light bulbs and maybe a small refrigerator. Many of the homes look like they are waiting for a strong gust of wind to knock them over. Not an unheard of occurrence on an island that is occasionally visited by hurricanes.

Family structure in Jamaica is often dysfunctional at best. The word “Dad” is a foreign term to many children who live with their mothers and siblings. If there is a man of the house, he is often referred to as the “Baby Father.” This man is usually the father of Mom’s latest baby, often not the father of any of the other children.

Because of the abundance of natural food, as Jim explained, Jamaica is a hard island on which to starve to death. However, it is a hard island on which to thrive. Food grows from trees everywhere. Even though a diet of breadfruit and pineapple will keep you alive it will not fully nourish you. Income is scarce, and because of the many mouths to feed, mothers struggle to feed their children. There are more children than there are resources. Placing a child up for adoption seems at face value to be an option, but what mother could choose among her children which to give up?

That is where Jim and Penie stepped in. It was on that trip in 1996 that their lives were changed. Their hearts were overwhelmed by the need they saw. They returned to the states and told their three young children - at that time 11, 10 and 2 years old - that they would be moving to Jamaica. Can you imagine? They left their home, their jobs, their friends, their families, to care for children they had never met.

Jim and Penie Koch are Reckless.

RECKLESS OR FOOLISH?

Reckless.

When you read that word, what comes to mind?

NASCAR?

X-Games participants?

COMPLETELY **RECKLESS**

Base Jumpers?

People who eat Taco Bell?

For us being Reckless is usually a bad thing. It results in things like body casts and insurance claims. It isn't something we usually see in ourselves, and it certainly isn't a trait that we would assign to God.

However, as I read the Bible I begin to see something about the nature of God that I can only define as Reckless. At first glance, it doesn't make sense. God is an all powerful being, who creates the very world we live in. He doesn't have to, but he does. He then creates humans and he loves us, even when we are unlovable.

It is a love that, for reasons we will explore in this book, I term Reckless. It is a love that is exemplified by God. It is a love I believe has the power to drastically change our interactions with God, with the people around us, and even with ourselves. When we begin to see ourselves as God sees us, and see the people around us as God sees them, it changes everything.

I think it is important here in the beginning of our conversation to make a distinction between being *Reckless* and being *Foolish*. Many times the words are synonymous in our minds. We think that someone who is acting Recklessly is also acting foolishly.

For the purpose of our discussion here I would like to make an important distinction between these two concepts. For the rest of this book we will define "RECKLESS" as **acting without care for the consequence**. Someone acting Recklessly has thought through their actions, understands any potential consequences, and acts anyway. For example, a soldier who throws himself on a grenade to save his friends is Reckless. He knows the consequences of his actions. He acts anyway.

On the other hand, let's define "FOOLISH" as **acting without thought of consequence**. The foolish person doesn't stop to consider the catastrophe that may await them. A soldier in a firefight who disobeys an order to keep his head down because he wants to see what's going on is foolish.

Reckless is the couple with four kids who begin accepting foster children into their home. They know there will be consequences. They know it will be hard. But they act anyway, because the reality of children who need a home overpowers their desire for comfort.

The short sighted nature of foolishness means that harm is almost always inherent. Recently there was a news story of a man who had a two and a half year online relationship with a woman whom he had never met in person. One day she disappeared. She wouldn't return his e-mails or phone calls. He was so sure of her sincerity in the relationship that he called the police to report her missing. Imagine the sinking feeling in his stomach when he showed them her photo and saw the grins on the officers faces. Our unfortunate Romeo was informed that the picture of his love was actually an image of a woman taken from the State of Florida's website.

It was the sample drivers license photo.

The person he had been dating for two and a half years had been scamming him. They didn't do it for free either. Whoever his "girlfriend" was had talked him into sending them a total of \$200,000 over the course of their relationship. This man had sent money to accounts in the US, England, Malaysia, and Nigeria. Seriously? At what point do you start to get suspicious? I'm thinking the wire transfers to Nigeria should have been a clue....

COMPLETELY**RECKLESS**

That's foolish love.

That's love that has no thought toward the consequence.

On the other hand, Reckless love knows the consequence, accepts the consequence, and acts many times in spite of the consequence.

Another recent news story helps us understand Reckless in action. David Roth was a car salesman in Greenville South Carolina. His son, Michael, was the starting pitcher for the University of South Carolina baseball team. The team won the College World Series in 2010 but Michael's dad had missed the whole thing. After years of driving Michael to and from practices, games, tournaments, and supporting his son's dreams, David had to miss him pitching in the College World Series. David had been unable to get the time off from work to travel to Omaha where the World Series was held. He vowed never to let that happen again.

So when South Carolina returned to the Series the very next year David was faced with a choice: See his son pitch in what could be the games of his life, or keep his job. For David the decision was easy. He quit his job and was in the stands on the opening night of the series to watch his son lead the team to a 5-4 win over Texas A&M.

That's Reckless. It's acting without care for the consequences. David knew that his actions, born out of his love for his son, would mean the loss of his job. But that didn't deter him.

The person who exemplifies Reckless love may get burned. Their love may not be reciprocated. They understand this going into the relationship. It is love with eyes open rather than closed.

LOVE WITHOUT RETURN

I met Jim and Penie in 2009, when a group from our church stayed at their home in Jamaica and worked with them for a week. The story of how God has moved and used them is amazing, and can be found on their website.¹

The mansion that I mentioned earlier? It was donated to their ministry and is filled with the sounds of children. As you enter their front door and walk through a living room where kids are doing homework, playing games, and just being kids, you are confronted by a large, curved staircase. Lining the wall that wraps up to the second floor are pictures of children who have lived with Jim and Penie over the past fourteen years. There are more than 60 pictures.

Throughout this book we are going to be meeting people like Jim and Penie, people who do crazy things because of their love for their God and their love for the people around them. Some of them may seem unreachably crazy at first, like Jim and Penie. Others will be examples of people living lives of Recklessness in the midst of otherwise normal lives. They are people who embody the two greatest commandments that Jesus pointed out to us:

‘You must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’
(Matthew 22:37-38)

We love to hear stories like Jim and Penie’s. They are the good stories, the ones where real people are making a difference in the

COMPLETELY **RECKLESS**

world. They are the antithesis of what we hear when we turn on the evening news. They are people who give of themselves, often not expecting or receiving anything in return. It is love expressed with no expectation of a reciprocal.

One of my favorite sitcoms of all time is Seinfeld. There is an episode in which George decides that it is finally time to tell his girlfriend that he loves her. Jerry cautions him that if he says “I love you” and doesn’t get an “I love you” in return, it’s a problem. I would say that some of the most dramatic and meaningful expressions of love are those with no guarantee of an “I love you” in return.

That is the love that God has shown to us. That is the love that he continues to show daily. It is also the love that he calls us to participate in, to show to the people around us. It is a love that is “Reckless”.

NON-PROFIT LOVE

I am the pastor of a church, and our vision statement as a church is that “We want to become people who Love Recklessly, Live Passionately, and Serve Selflessly.” This book is birthed out of the first part of that vision. We want to become people who love Recklessly. But what does that mean?

So often in our relationships we are concerned about the reciprocal. Meaning we are in the relationship for what we can get out of the relationship. Often our relationships are structured this way intentionally. When we go into a restaurant we have a relationship with our server. But both sides of that relationship are structured for a return. You are hoping for fast, friendly service and good food. The server is hoping that if he or she is able to provide you with those things it will mean a larger tip.

This works in the restaurant setting, but it isn't a very productive structure for meaningful relationships. Many years ago my wife and I had some friends who expressed a desire to spend time with us. At the time I was working as a youth pastor and most of our friendships were with people who weren't old enough to vote. We were genuinely looking forward to some adult interaction. I remember cleaning the apartment from top to bottom. After all, it would not do to scare away our newfound friends by having grimy countertops.

The time arrived and so did our friends. I have never been good at math, but it didn't take long for me to realize that there were three people who entered our apartment that evening, rather than the two we expected. Not only that, but the third person was carrying a briefcase. He was there to discuss a "business opportunity" with us. The third person was a salesman who had come armed with enough charts and brochures for a Fortune 500 Board meeting. Our friends hadn't wanted to spend time with us because of who we were; they wanted to spend time with us for what we could do for them.

After listening for two very long hours, we finally got all three individuals to understand that we really weren't interested in the "amazing opportunity." They left, and I was left feeling used. We would never have agreed to listen to a sales pitch, which is probably why they forgot to mention it to us in the first place. We genuinely liked them as people. And, as far as I could tell, they genuinely liked us too. However, the relationship went nowhere because they were in it for a return.

But I wonder, if we were really honest with each other, how many of our relationships would we be in if we suddenly stopped

COMPLETELY **RECKLESS**

receiving any benefit from them? Or worse, if the relationship suddenly caused us harm, how quickly would we sever those ties?

I see this happen in churches. Many times people say they left a church because it wasn't "meeting their needs." While the person speaking would never express it (or think about it) this way, what they are saying is that they were in their relationship with their church body for what they could get out of that relationship, not for what they could contribute. They were visiting a spiritual restaurant and when the service didn't meet their expectations, they decided to take their business elsewhere.

This "love for profit" is the exact opposite of the love that we see our creator God showing us. Time and again in scripture we are confronted by a God who loves humanity, not because of what we have to offer him, but in spite of what we have to offer him. I think it is important that we spend some time examining the character of this God who is so generous with his love. If we understand his love for us, if we internalize it and allow it to permeate our beings, it will transform how we see ourselves and how we see and interact with the people around us.

A NEEDY GOD?

When I was a Youth Pastor I had many heartbroken adolescent females in my office crying because of a romance gone sour. From their perspective the entire world was coming to a screeching and unpleasant end. This meant that I would have to sit and listen to them cry and try to bring consolation and perspective.

Unfortunately, many times I would see them fall all over themselves trying to win back the affection of the "man" who

had broken their heart. By “man” in these instances I mean the thirteen year old with a face so full of pimples and braces that you thought he might be a pizza with a zipper.

It isn't just teenage girls who behave this way. As adults we have all seen people dive into unhealthy and unwise relationships because they feel a need for completeness that they believe can be filled by the next man or woman who comes along. The result is often a string of broken hearts, fatherless children, and a deeper feeling of emptiness than existed before.

I have made the following statement several times in front of different audiences and it always brings a few chuckles as well as a few gasps: God is either a teenage girl hoping to receive love, or he is a complete creator desiring to share love.

Again and again through scripture we see God return to people who have treated him badly. He creates a man and a woman who soon disobey him. At that point if I were God I would have been tempted to “reboot the system.” Obviously the humans he created were flawed, let's try this again, shall we? God didn't do that. He was forced to remove Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, but not before he provided them with clothes to protect the bodies that they now recognized as being naked.

Years later God chose to reveal himself to a man named Abram, making a lavish promise to him and his descendants. It is a promise to bless them and to “multiply your descendants beyond number, like the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore.” (Genesis 22:17) Like all of God's promises, it is a promise that God keeps. Abram's descendants become the nation of Israel.

The books of Judges, I and II Kings, and I and II Chronicles in particular portray the occasional nature of the faithfulness of

COMPLETELY **RECKLESS**

these Israelite people that God had blessed. The creator God chose them from all people to be his people. God provided them with a land to live in, and asked for their faithfulness to him in return.

And time and again they walked away from him.

If God were living by our normal relational standards he would have returned the favor and walked away from the Israelites. But God didn't. He punished them from time to time, as any loving parent punishes a child that he or she loves. But the purpose of the punishment is always redemptive, to bring them back to right relationship with him. God continued to call them his people.

In the New Testament we see a rag tag group of twelve men chosen by Jesus to change the world. They weren't the sharpest knives in the drawer. They forgot and misinterpreted things Jesus said. They ran away from him in his hour of need, and denied that they had ever met him. And yet God used them.

So here's my question, and it's one that I think we need to solidify in our minds before we can continue our discussion: Is God needy?

Was God so lonely that he created Adam and Eve for company? Was his desire for human interaction so compelling that he kept coming back to the Israelites in spite of the fact that they regularly spit in his face? Was Jesus that desperate for followers that he grabbed the first twelve who agreed to follow him?

If we take away what we know of the character of God and look simply at the actions of God, they don't make sense. We could easily build a picture of a needy God who is infatuated and unhealthily obsessed over unfaithful humanity.

THE COMPLETE GOD

There is a baleen whale that has been swimming alone in the expanse of the Pacific ocean for the past twenty years. Baleen whales don't usually swim in large groups, but they do associate with other whales for protection and reproduction. Not this whale. She has wandered for twenty years in isolation. Scientists have nicknamed her 52 Hertz. I know, it's a lame nickname. But they are scientists, so we'll cut them a break for being incredibly smart in other areas.

Scientists at Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute monitor whale calls and follow migratory patterns using hydrophones on the ocean floor. Using these underwater microphones they can distinguish individual whales based on the sounds they make. Most baleen whales make noises that fall between 15 and 20 hertz on the sound spectrum. Unfortunately for 52 Hertz, her vocal cords produce a sound at 52 hertz, hence the nickname.

The problem is that other baleen whales can't hear sound at that frequency. So for the past twenty years, 52 Hertz has been wandering the ocean alone, calling to other whales who simply can't hear her. Her migratory patterns don't match those of other whales and in the deep blue waters of the Pacific a chance encounter without the help of sound to locate one another is never going to happen.²

And so 52 Hertz swims, alone. She will most likely continue to swim alone until the day she dies, having lived an existence void of outside contact.

With this metaphor in mind let's contemplate God's existence before the creation of man. God is eternal, meaning that

COMPLETELY **RECKLESS**

he has no beginning and no end. It is a hard concept for us to get our minds around. Paul refers to him as “the eternal King, the unseen one who never dies.” (I Timothy 1:17) The writer of Hebrews tells us that it was by the “power of the eternal Spirit” that Jesus offers himself on the cross. (9:14) Moses wrote a song in which he says:

Before the mountains were born
before you gave birth to the earth and the world,
from beginning to end, you are God (Psalm 90:2)

God was, before there was.

Period.

It would be easy for us to assume that God wandered around the vacant cosmos like 52 Hertz, a lonely and isolated being in need of friends. Sure there would be things to do: Visit far-off galaxies, maybe play a galactic game of billiards using a comet for the cue ball. But after a few thousand millennia life would get boring, right?

Being God, this would have been an easy problem to solve. Why not create friends? Like the lonely three-year-old playing with his or her stuffed animals, when no actual friends are present, friends can be created. However, the creative power of God infinitely surpasses the three-year-old who names a teddy bear. When God creates, the results are living, conscious beings.

Was it a cosmic case of the lonelies that prodded the eternal being to invest his time into non-eternal, finite, and flawed humans?

I don't think so.

God does not need us because God is not only eternal, he is complete. At his very core God is what we refer to as triune. God is three beings in one. It is at the same time a truth and a mystery about the nature of God. He is one being with three distinct persons. These three live in deep relationship with each other. We refer to them as God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

The early Christians used a big word to describe the relational nature of the Trinity: *perichoresis*. Don't worry about how it's pronounced. What is important is what it means. The term literally means "to dance around." The word picture is of a dance with multiple partners weaving and spinning and interacting with each other. God at the core of his being is relational, but is also complete in that established and eternal relationship. The Father, Son and Spirit dance together in perfect harmony. Scot McKnight helps us understand this interaction in his book *A Community Called Atonement*:

The Father and the Son and the Spirit retain genuine separable identities while at the same time they are so related to one another that one can't be known without the other. Relationality, in other words, is inherent to who God is.³

There is a completeness of relationship that exists within the trinity which supersedes and eliminates the need for outside relationship - at least, outside relationship for the purpose of completion.

COMPLETELY **RECKLESS**

Doug Sherman explores this idea in his book *More than Ordinary*. “God doesn’t need anything. He certainly didn’t have a gap in His life; He was not lonely or needy. He was eternally content in community with His Son and the Spirit.”⁴ Francis Chan puts it this way: “His being is utterly complete and perfect, apart from humanity. He doesn’t need me and you. Yet he wants us, chooses us, even considers us His inheritance (Eph 1:18). The greatest knowledge we can ever have is knowing God treasures us.”⁵

The completeness of God’s nature is important for us to not only realize, but also to internalize. God’s desire for relationship with each of us is not born out of need, but out of love.

BE COMPLETE

There is a verse of scripture that I misunderstood for years. Located in Matthew chapter five, it is this: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Growing up, I had always pictured perfection as exclusion of everything bad. Sin was a black stain on a white canvas and perfection was allowing God to remove that stain and restore the perfectly white canvas. That was perfection. It was life without; life that was without hate, lust, jealousy, anger, drinking, smoking, swearing, and dancing. Perfection was about getting rid of things that God didn’t like, or at least things that the pastor didn’t like. Apparently doing without those things would make me like God.

And then I began studying this verse. I realized that I don’t think I had ever heard it preached within the context in which Jesus preached it. This passage is a small portion of the most famous sermon ever delivered, the Sermon on the Mount. Our verse comes at the end of chapter five. Jesus has just spent time

laying out directions that almost all have to do with how we interact with the people around us. They are instructions on how to live that are relational at their core. Let's look at a few of them:

You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. (v. 21-22a)

If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. (v. 39)

Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you. (v. 42)

And then we come to our passage.

You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (v. 43-48)

COMPLETELY **RECKLESS**

The perfection that Jesus is referring to in this instance seems to be more than a legal keeping of a law. It is relational. The Greek word that is translated “perfect” here is the word *teleios*. The word has the connotation of completeness. This verse could just as easily be translated “Be complete, therefore, as your heavenly Father is complete.”

God is complete in and of himself. It is God’s completeness that allows him to love an imperfect humanity. It is precisely because God doesn’t need us that his love is so amazing.

In his Gospel, when Luke recounts this message he writes that Jesus said “You must be compassionate, just as your Father is compassionate.” Compassion. Completion. Perfection. They are intertwined. “To follow Jesus in His ministry of compassion precisely defines the biblical meaning of being perfect as the heavenly Father is perfect.”⁶

COMPLETELY PERFECT

The current trend to focus on love to the exclusion of scriptural direction is incredibly damaging. That’s not where I’m headed. I am talking about a holiness on the far side of completeness. It is an embodiment of being “complete as God is complete.” I believe it is this completeness that frees us to love God and others the way that we are designed to.

I did not grow up in a Christian home. But our family did go to church. We went because good people went to church. It was like giving money during the Jerry Lewis telethon or donating our used clothes to Goodwill. We were good people because every Sunday morning Dad and Mom dressed us up (something I despised) and drove us downtown where we sat in uncomfortable wooden pews and listened to the pastor in the long black robe.

Once I entered Junior High, I honestly dreaded Sunday mornings. I was now old enough to sit in the pews with my parents. Before this I had been too young and had been in “children’s church”. Children’s church was fun. Children’s church had games, graham crackers and juice. And yes, before you ask, there was a flannelgraph. Then I hit 6th grade. We all knew what happened in 6th grade. You “graduated” to big church. I didn’t want to go to big church. All that was there for me in “big church” was to doodle on the back of the pew cards and play the “In the bathroom game” with the hymnal.⁷

One of my best friends growing up was Jon. Jon and his family lived in a yellow Cape Cod across the street and a few houses down from me. Jon and I would play for hours in the woods down the hill from our house. We turned a huge dirt pile into a pirate ship one day, a battle ship the next, and a castle the third. It was a 7 year old’s Shangri la.

I remember thinking that Jon and his family were crazy because they went to church not just on Sundays, but Wednesday nights too. And sometimes twice on Sundays! What kind of sick sadist would spend more time in church than they had to?

Then a Youth Pastor came to our church who began talking about a personal relationship with Christ. This God that I had heard so much about wanted to have a relationship with me?

It was within a one year period of time that our family accepted Christ. For me it was at a Carman concert in nearby Battle Creek. (If you are unfamiliar with Carman, picture a Latin Donny Osmond with bushier eyebrows.) I don’t remember anything of what he said that night, but I remember wanting to start a relationship with this God that I had heard so much about.

COMPLETELY **RECKLESS**

Soon after this my family switched churches. We started attending a large church close to where we lived. It was there that I learned more about what it meant to have a personal relationship with Christ. The Pastors during the time I was there, Sam and Keith, demonstrated with their words and their lives what it meant to be a follower of Christ.

I was also introduced to a new concept as well. That of being scared of God. It wasn't something that was taught on purpose, but was more a by-product. This God that loved me and wanted a relationship with me could also get mad at me.

There is much debate in the church world about whether you can lose your salvation. In other words, once you have accepted Christ, can you decide that you no longer want to follow Him? Many believe, myself included, that a person can choose to walk away from God.

My understanding of this morphed into belief that any decision to do something that God wouldn't like could cause a rift between him and me that would send me to hell. I lived in fear of sinning and then dying.

It wasn't until I was in college and later on that I began to have a more healthy understanding of God's love and grace. I do still believe in living a holy life, and I do believe that a person can determine in their heart to reject a God they once loved. But I don't believe that a loving God will condemn a thirteen year old to eternal damnation because he slipped into a moment of lust after seeing cleavage on TV.

My point is this: Holiness was about removing things from my life. It was never about bringing wholeness to my life. Being complete as God is complete means more than avoiding

the things that God doesn't like. It means allowing his Spirit to transform us. It means a transformation of our self-perception that revolutionizes our world-perception. But now I'm getting ahead of myself.