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THE DAY **METALLICA** CAME TO **CHURCH**

SEARCHING FOR THE EVERYWHERE GOD IN EVERYTHING

JOHN VAN SLOTEN



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PREFACE

Over the past several years I've preached sermons on the movies *Crash*, *Lars and the Real Girl*, *Gran Torino*, *Million Dollar Baby*, *The Matrix*, *The Da Vinci Code*, *The Dark Knight*, *The X-Files*, *X-Men*, *Superman*, *Spiderman*, and *Cinderella Man*, to name a few. I've drawn on the spirituality of Van Gogh, Rembrandt, and Chagall, on the joy of drinking, the fear of public speaking, and the theology of the oil industry. I've explored the worlds of high fashion and travel, the World of Warcraft, and the World Cup. I've preached on violinist Joshua Bell, cyclist Lance Armstrong, physicist Albert Einstein, and classicists like Bach, Handel, Stravinsky, and Mendelssohn. Recent sermons have looked at photography, oceanography, biology, ecology, technology, and psychology. With the children in our church we've watched *Ratatouille*, *Finding Nemo*, *The Incredibles*, *The Ugly Duckling*, and *Pinocchio*, and we've read *Horton Hears a Who*, *Green Eggs and Ham*, and *Are You My Mother?*

We've spent our Sunday mornings discussing the human body, our senses, the imagination, and our creative capacities. We've looked at a Redwood tree and a honey bee, at tattoos and at scars. We've studied disabilities and addictions, architecture and cities, politics and business. I've preached on Texas Hold 'Em, the West Coast Trail, gourmet food, Starbucks, the Olympics, and a major league pitcher's fastball.

And, of course, we've listened to the lives and songs of many musical artists, including Coldplay, Green Day, Alicia Keys, Amy Winehouse, Eric Clapton, Bob Dylan, Ray Charles, Johnny Cash, Billie Holiday, Freddie Mercury, Lenny Kravitz, U2, Evanescence, Neil Young, Leslie Feist, Regina Spektor, and Metallica.

It's not what you think (some kind of spiritual gimmick, bait and switch, or shameless church marketing strategy).

It's not that at all.

The reason I preached on all of these topics is because I believe they belong to God. And when things belong to God, they matter and they have something to say.

This book tells the story of a world full of things and people with something to say.

It's about a God who is speaking everywhere.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are so many people on either side of the decision to write a book.

On the front end, a wonderfully patient and encouraging wife along with beautiful children who've always said it straight; a loving and supportive extended family; a church congregation filled with discerning, creative, and caring co-explorers; and many wise friends and mentors.

On the tail end, a publisher that dared to take a risk on a new author and push the boundaries, shrewd editors who always kept the bar high, and several friends and family members who spent a lot of time reading through some pretty rough early drafts.

At times people's voices have felt synonymous with God's Spirit. For that I'm very thankful.

1 THE DAY METALLICA CAME TO CHURCH

“Look out my window and see it’s gone wrong
Court is in session and I slam my gavel down
I’m judge and I’m jury and I’m executioner too. . . .”¹

—“Dirty Window,” *St. Anger*, Metallica, 2003

“But God was very angry. . . .”

—Numbers 22:22

I had an uneasy feeling when the call came that Saturday night.

“Hi . . . ahhhh . . . is this Pastor John Van Slo . . . ten of New Hope Church?” It was a woman’s voice. She sounded hesitant and a little bit uncomfortable, like she’d never made this kind of call before.

“Yeah,” I replied warily. I was in the middle of watching a hockey game, trying to relax before Sunday morning’s sermon. I didn’t much feel like doing any church business.

“What can I do for you?”

Her next line stopped me dead. Now she was all business.

“My name is Lisa from Warner Music Canada, and I represent the heavy metal group Metallica. Is it true that you’re going to be preaching on the band tomorrow morning?”

Suddenly it felt as though I was watching this conversation unfold in slow motion, as if my mind was outside my body. Represent Metallica? What? Really? Then my heart started to race. She went on, “And are you actually planning on using some of their music in your church service?”

I didn’t know how to reply. This must be some kind of joke call from someone at my church. OK, it’s not really a church in the usual sense—it meets in a community center gym where there’s bingo on Saturday nights. We

meet there because we want to get past some traditional church barriers—like imposing buildings.

A few friends knew how stressed I was about the risk of preaching a sermon on Metallica. It's such a crazy topic. For weeks I'd been doing all kinds of heresy self-checks. Doesn't Metallica play for the "other team"? Could this get me into a lot of hot water with the church? Perhaps I should have picked a safer musical genre. Or maybe just stuck to the Bible.

For a second I wondered if my prankster friend Geoff was setting me up—he'd probably gotten his wife to call.

"Who are you again?"

Now the voice was more forceful. "I represent Metallica and the band has asked if we could come to your church tomorrow with a camera crew. We'd like to tape the event."

"Are you *serious*? A *camera* crew? Is this for *real*?" The phone started to slip out of my hand as I began to sweat.

"We'd just like your permission."

"Oh no," I thought. "Metallica is going to sue us! Weren't they the band that took down Napster, the pioneer online file-sharing website, when they first started illegally distributing Metallica's tunes? And now they're coming after me!" My heart was pounding in my right temple by this point, and in an apprehensive voice I asked, "What for? Why in the world would Metallica want to get a

video of one of our church services? What are they going to do, sue us?”

She must have pulled the phone away from her ear and wondered what kind of idiot she was dealing with. “No. They don’t want to sue you. Lars [Ulrich—the band’s drummer] heard about your church service this week, and all they want is to see it for themselves. The band left town this morning, and they’re already setting up for their next concert, so they obviously can’t be there personally.”

Dazed, but a little more convinced, I told her that she had my permission. “C’mon down. Bring cameras. Bring anyone you want.”

I put the phone down and breathed hard.

For a long time.

Then I laughed to myself.

Did that just happen? Is Metallica really coming to our church? How cool is this?

Sure enough, the next day three sharp twenty-somethings—the Warner Music reps—all dressed as though they were going to grandma’s for brunch after the service, showed up at our church, camera in tow. I was wearing my standard preaching attire: khaki knee-length shorts and a T-shirt. Our community was in its typical last minute pre-service preparation mode: some were grabbing bagels and coffee at the back table, others were

sound-checking the media and queuing Metallica music videos, and the rest of us were wandering to our chairs as the house band up front opened with four screeching back-to-back, full-on, headbanging Metallica tunes (complete with dry ice and concert lighting).

Strange, perhaps, but that's what we do here.

Then I got up to talk. And something happened. I wasn't thinking about the camera, the crowd, the Warner reps, or the pressure. At that moment I suddenly felt deeply moved, profoundly and reverentially aware. After our band's lead guitarist struck his last chord, the room was vibrating. And as I stepped into the energy-saturated holy silence, I wondered if I'd be able to live up to the power and truth that this music invoked. Would I faithfully honor it and give it its due? Had I *read* it right? The moment actually felt quite strange; as though I could have just as easily been onstage at a Metallica concert, passionately voicing a few existential questions to a heavy metal congregation.

"Do you guys have any idea what's going on here?"

"Do you understand why this music is so deeply relevant to you?"

"Do you have any idea why it matters so much?"

But I wasn't at a concert; I was in church. And I wasn't some kind of rock promoter—I was a preacher. This morning was not really about Metallica; it was about God.

And I felt as though God was there in that moment, bringing truth to it.

I felt that I had a glimpse of what was going on inside the head of the average metal-loving Metallica fan and of what was playing out in a much larger context. Yes, we were all moved by the music, but there was also something bigger than the music at play; there was a Spirit behind the heavy metal spirit.

As I began to preach, it felt as though I were an actor in a play I hadn't written, about to expose the audience to the fact that there was a script, and that we were all part of a plot, and that the Playwright himself was in the room. It raised the hairs on the back of my neck.

The gym was packed that Sunday morning. I'd guess that close to two hundred folks who appeared to be non-churchgoing Metallica fans visited our church that day. Many came in response to the free promotion the service got from a local rock station. On the Friday and Saturday leading up to Sunday's service, Calgary's CJAY rock radio ran regular advertisements inviting people to come to church. No joking. CJAY, every hour or so, was announcing (and I paraphrase):

This weekend New Hope Church, right here in Calgary, is going to be preaching a message on the band Metallica. This news story has gone around

the world. So if you're not doing anything this Sunday morning, then you've got to get yourself out to church!

I was stunned when I heard that announcement in the “upcoming concerts” segment of CJAY’s rock report the Friday afternoon before the service.

A friend later told me how Metallica heard about our church service. Earlier that week I had called the *Calgary Sun* to see if they were interested in doing a story on what we were preaching. They were, and they ended up writing a short article describing the event. That article was then read by a DJ at CJAY named Reaper. Reaper, while doing an interview with Metallica’s Lars Ulrich after a Thursday night concert here in Calgary, slid the *Sun* piece under the musician’s nose.

Church to Hear Heavy Message: Sermon on Metallica . . . unconventional pastor bangs home the message of anger and forgiveness. . . . [Metallica’s] a lot like the Old Testament prophets . . . [reflecting] the heart of God against the injustices and the brokenness and the hurt. . . .²

After reading the article, Lars exclaimed, “That is so cool.”

When I heard his response, I couldn’t help but smile. Since when has a Christian church received that kind of reaction from a heavy metal rocker? Over the past two decades, this band has received more than its fair share of condemnation from the Christian church. Rarely, if

ever, does anyone draw a positive faith connection to their lyrics. Who could imagine Metallica's angry cries resonating with God's?

Maybe God could.

This whole Metallica story had gotten its serendipitous start several months earlier. I had just finished preaching a sermon on U2 when a young teenage boy came up to me. Knowing that I'd previously preached on several different musical genres (Evanescence, Lenny Kravitz, Johnny Cash, Igor Stravinsky, J. S. Bach), he wondered whether I'd be open to talking about his favorite band.

"Sure," I said, without really thinking. "What kind of music are you into?"

"Heavy metal," he said.

"Oh," I responded.

We both looked at the floor for a few seconds.

"I'm really into Metallica," he said with a smile.

"Metallica!" I thought. "Never in a thousand years. I hate heavy metal, and I'm 99 percent positive there's nothing spiritually redeemable in their lyrics."

Knowing I had to deal with the boy honestly—I am a pastor after all—I told him I'd pray about it. (This is how many of us give our parishioners the brush-off: defer to

God!) Only problem was, I *did* think and pray about it that night.

The next day, a church novice, someone who couldn't possibly have known any better, called me at home. "Hey John. How are you doing? Listen, I've got two tickets for the Metallica concert this Thursday night [yeah, the band came to Calgary twice that year] and I was wondering if you and Fran would like to go? They're floor tickets so you'll have to stand, but you'll be right up on the edge of the stage."

I laughed out loud and accepted his offer, wondering if this was some kind of divine conspiracy.

Three days later, after digging up one of my old black eighties concert T-shirts, I headed off for some serious metal with my thirty-nine-year-old headbanging wife. (I brought ear plugs.) Palpable energy filled the swelling crowd as we entered the stadium. The place came alive when the opening band, Godsmack, did their set; and it exploded when Metallica took the stage. For two hours they engulfed the huge stadium in a screaming, high-decibel, musical explosion on a rotating platform no more than ten feet from where my wife Fran and I were standing. (It's OK, you can picture me yelling, "Lars! Lars!") At one point, Lars threw a drumstick to the girl on my left. I thought about tackling her for it.

The young couple on my right was equally awestruck. They knew the words to every single tune, and their devotion

was total. For two hours they wildly headbanged, risking severe neck injury. But I couldn't help thinking that they were probably more awake and alive in those two hours than I'd been for the past month. At one point a young girl looked at me standing there with my arms crossed and said, "Come on old man, loosen up!"

For the most part the concert was loud and smoky, and the words seemed largely indecipherable to my untrained ears. Eventually I got into it—it reminded me of my youthful partying days—but still, I felt a bit distracted, caught between two poles. On the one hand I wanted to just take the music in (interpret the heavy metal songs via my own personal experience), and on the other hand I wanted to watch others take it in (read Metallica through the eyes and hearts of the other concert participants). I found myself turning around often just to watch those 17,000 souls lose themselves in the experience.

Near the end of the show, as the band was wrapping up with an acoustic ballad entitled "Nothing Else Matters," I sensed a change coming over everyone. Distinctly quieter than the rest of their repertoire, this song seemed to strike a deep chord with Metallica's fans. Boyfriends put their arms around girlfriends. Many sang along with lead singer James Hetfield, and the whole place seemed to be swaying back and forth to the music.

Suddenly the atmosphere became solemn, beautiful.

As I stood there among all those people, I couldn't help but think, "This feels like church." It felt like a community in lament, like a crowd jointly voicing their despairing, disconnected, all-too-human cry to God.

So close, no matter how far
Couldn't be much more from the heart
Forever trusting who we are
And nothing else matters

Never opened myself this way
Life is ours, we live it our way
All these words I don't just say
And nothing else matters

Trust I seek and I find in you
Every day for us something new
Open mind for a different view
And nothing else matters . . .

Never cared for what they do
Never cared for what they know
But I know . . .³

At that moment God's love and compassion for all of those angry, despairing, messed-up, beautiful people welled up inside me. I *knew* I had to preach on the message of Metallica. I was sure of it.

But how? Knowing *that* you have to do something is quite different from knowing *how* to do it.

The first thing I did was go online and read the lyrics of every single Metallica song ever written.

Time after time I found myself thinking, “Hey, this sounds familiar . . . and so does this . . . and so does this!” God’s truths in the Metallica text were resonating with another set of truths I knew from the biblical story. My lifelong immersion in the Scriptures allowed me to see the God-truth in Metallica’s angry songs.

Where exactly did I find that spiritual resonance? Here are a few Metallica/biblical couplets I began to put together:

Die by my hand
I creep across the land
Killing firstborn man⁴

—Metallica, “Creeping Death,” *Ride the Lightning*

His anger flared, a wild firestorm of havoc, an advance guard of disease-carrying angels to clear the ground, preparing the way before him. He didn’t spare those people, he let the plague rage through their lives.

—God’s wrath in Psalm 78:49-50, *The Message*, 3000 B.C.

Justice is lost
Justice is raped
Justice is gone
Pulling your strings
Justice is done
Seeking no truth

Winning is all

Find it so grim, so true, so real⁵

—Metallica, “And Justice for All,” *And Justice for All*

“You wicked people! You twist justice, making it a bitter pill for the poor and oppressed. You treat the righteous like dirt.”

—God via the prophet Amos, Amos 5:7, NLT, 750 B.C.

Who are you? Where ya been? Where ya from?

Gossip burning on the tip of your tongue

You lie so much you believe yourself

Judge not lest ye be judged yourself⁶

—Metallica, “Holier Than Thou,” *Metallica*

“You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?”

—Jesus to the hypocritical Pharisees,
Matthew 23:33, TNIV, A.D. 30

In song after song, Metallica denounced injustice and hypocrisy. They exposed and derided the manipulative milieu of our consumer-driven world. Like Jesus in the temple, they angrily flipped over the tables of our ever-consuming and commodifying way of life.

I realized that Metallica was, in many cases, angry about the same things that angered the Hebrew prophets and that angered Jesus. They ruthlessly exposed wrongdoing. They lamented the mess our world was in. They exposed the meaninglessness of so much of contemporary life.

Given that the prophets were the mouthpieces of God, was Metallica too channeling God's anger?

Were they God's voice?

Curse the day I was born!

The day my mother bore me—a curse on it, I say!

And curse the man who delivered the news to my father:

“You've got a new baby—a boy baby!” (How happy it made him.)

Let that birth notice be blacked out, deleted from the records,

And the man who brought it haunted to his death with the bad news he brought.

He should have killed me before I was born, with that womb as my tomb,

My mother pregnant for the rest of her life with a baby dead in her womb.

Why, oh why, did I ever leave that womb?

Life's been nothing but trouble and tears, and what's coming is more of the same.

Are you familiar with those lyrics? No, they're not Metallica's. They come from the messed-up life of an ancient Hebrew headbanger named Jeremiah (Jer. 20:14-18, *The Message*, 600 B.C.); a prophet who despairingly shook his fist at God.

Like Metallica, Jeremiah cried out, “Why? Why such a messed-up world, God? Why was I born into this?” Both Jeremiah and Metallica passionately lamented the fact that things were not the way they were supposed to be.

I continued to study Metallica’s lyrics, intrigued by all the biblical parallels, but I had more than just the Bible in mind. Having grown up in the Reformed church tradition meant I also had sixteenth-century theologian John Calvin whispering in my ear. (Doesn’t everybody take their heavy metal this way?) In my mind, it was Calvin who first gave me permission to explore the truth found in so-called secular culture. It was his worldview that led me to read the band’s lyrics with an ear for God’s voice.

“All truth is inspired by the Holy Spirit,” Calvin once wrote. All truth—where it really is truth—comes from God, according to John Calvin. Which makes sense when you think about it; where else could truth come from? Who else could be its source? And when Calvin used the word *all*, I think he really meant *all*. All truth—including biblical truth, mathematically formulaic truth, aesthetically beautiful truth, athletically inspired truth, naturally scenic truth, psychologically wise truth, biologically evolving truth, and even righteously-indignant-high-decible-passionately-screaming-for-justice truth. Here I began to find a theological basis for preaching heavy metal.

Calvin again: “Wherever we cast our gaze” we can spot signs of God’s glory, disclosed in “the whole workmanship of the universe.”⁷

Wherever. For me, that word was obviously big enough to include a band like Metallica.

In an even more compelling passage, Calvin links this openness to truth with the pervasive influence of God’s Holy Spirit:

Whenever we come upon these matters [truth] in secular writers, let that admirable light of truth shining in them teach us that the mind of man, though fallen and perverted from its wholeness, is nevertheless clothed and ornamented with God’s excellent gifts. If we regard the Spirit of God as the sole fountain of truth, we shall neither reject the truth itself, nor despise wherever it shall appear, unless we wish to dishonor the Spirit of God. For by holding the gifts of the Spirit in slight esteem, we contemn [show contempt toward] and reproach the Spirit himself.⁸

I took the phrase “secular writers,” and replaced it with the phrase “heavy metal music” and then reread the paragraph. And then I felt the heat. Who wants to dishonor the Spirit of God? Or show contempt toward the Spirit himself? By not claiming truth as God’s—“wherever it shall appear”—we disrespect God, demean

him. We make God into something less than God—a God made in our own image who is way too small.

With this biblical and theological background, I found myself thinking, “Hey, I’m not just *allowed* to look for divine truth in this world, I’m *obliged* to!”

With more than enough material for a good sermon introduction, I then focused my research on the individual lives of the band members. It was here that I encountered some of the personal injustice each had faced. They were angry for good reason, and somehow, by understanding their pain, I found the right heart for more fully understanding their songs.

Lead guitarist Kirk Hammett had an alcoholic, abusive father who regularly beat the living daylight out of him. On his sixteenth birthday Kirk watched his father beat up his mother. As a young boy, lead singer James Hetfield heard his mom say that his dad wouldn’t ever be coming back from that business trip. Hetfield also collided with the “Christian” church (sect) that his mom belonged to. After she was diagnosed with cancer, the church told her that in order to be healed she didn’t need to seek medical help. She just needed to have enough faith and believe. She ended up dying of cancer.

It’s no wonder Hetfield was so angry at the church and at God. No wonder he wrote songs like “The God That Failed” and “Fade to Black.” And it’s no wonder so much of the band’s music speaks of depression, darkness, and

despair. These guys knew brokenness firsthand. Reading their personal stories, a deep sense of empathy started growing inside me. By entering into their world, I could understand why they'd be so compelled to vent their anger. It didn't excuse all of their behaviors, but it did help me understand their music on a deeper, more empathic level.

When I read about that spiritually abusive church being complicit in Hetfield's mother's death, I found myself filled with anger. People of faith often draw these lines between the creator God and the world he made, as though the God of the Bible were not also the God of all good science and medicine. This split thinking is also applied to the spheres of secular psychology, business, and entertainment. It leads to the conclusion that there can't be anything good about anyone or anything that's not Christian: Because Metallica isn't a Christian band . . . Because he's not a faith-based counselor . . . Because she's not a Bible-believing businessperson . . . there can't be anything good about them.

What gives us the right to engage God's world this way? How can we treat the elements of God's good creation so callously? God made it all. It's all his. What makes us think we can judge it as harshly as we do? Who says *we* get to draw the lines? No wonder many outside the faith view Christians as naïve and judgmental.

My newly found compassion for the members of the band helped me view them more fairly. And by reading more

deeply into their stories I discovered that God was still very much at work in their lives, nudging them, subtly leading them in a healthier direction.

I not only discovered the band members' past hurts, but also their struggle to find new ways to deal with them. James Hetfield, for example, speaks honestly about his battle with anger. He is beginning to recognize that no number of raging songs will make the pain dissipate. Nor would there be enough alcohol to drown it or drugs to deaden it or denial to make it disappear. Hetfield came to a point where he realized that the solution lay beyond these false remedies.

In one particularly revealing interview, Hetfield offers a penetrating look into his own soul. "From the beginning I think people identified with us. Especially angry young men. Learning to embrace that was a big deal, and I've been kind of running away from my life's mission—identifying with people's brokenness and singing about it and bringing it into a stadium and on record—and not knowing it. And I've really tried to put on this shroud of this tough guy who can take it all. And at the end of the day I'm broken inside."⁹

At their second Calgary concert, Hetfield reaffirmed his life's mission. Halfway through their set, standing on one of the upper stages, he said, "How many of you have brought some anger here with you tonight?" The crowd

went wild. And then he said, “So have I . . . and I’m leaving it right here tonight.” The crowd went wild.

That’s how James Hetfield proclaimed his life’s mission to 17,000 angry Calgarians.

Years earlier Hetfield (along with Hammett and Ulrich) prophetically wrote a revealing and largely autobiographical song entitled “The Unforgiven.” In it he despairingly explores what a life of “unforgiveness” results in: darkness, anger, and ultimate imprisonment.

This bitter man he is
throughout his life the same
he’s battled constantly
This fight he cannot win
A tired man they see no longer cares
The old man then prepares
to die regretfully
That old man here is me¹⁰

In an interview, Hetfield commented on what this song meant to him.

Yeah, [it was] a showdown with myself. “The Unforgiven” is really blaming other people. I’ll never forgive you for what you’ve done. But at the end of the day it’s up to me to forgive, so I can move on and live the life I need to live.¹¹

The moment I read that quote I knew I had my sermon conclusion.

A heavy metal star preaching the gospel of forgiveness. I could work with that.

And so I preached God's message through Metallica that Sunday morning, and as a result something changed in our church. Something changed in me.

The story of a church preaching Metallica hit the wire and went around the world. I had interviews with rock stations from all over North America, a five-minute talk on Irish National Radio—even *Rollingstone.com* carried the story. People could not believe a church would love Metallica in this way.

As I explained my rationale for inviting Metallica to church, all the reporters and DJs I spoke to were genuinely intrigued. I was intrigued. It felt like I was onto something new, on the edge of a new way of living my faith, a new way of doing church. The experience was so alive and so real for our church community it made me wonder . . . If God is this active in the lives of a few heavy metal rockers, where else is he moving? If recognizing God's presence in this one unconventional place has this much power in terms of catching the world's ear, then what would it mean to recognize God in *all* the places his Spirit is at work?

READER DISCUSSION GUIDE

1. What do you think is the author's main point? (Back up your answer with quotes and passages from the book.) In your opinion, does the author succeed in communicating this point to the reader?
2. What's the significance of the Metallica story, and why do you think the author begins there?
3. In chapter 2 the author relates some life-changing events from his personal life. How did you react to these events? How did they fit with the book's overall message?

4. The author uses many examples, everything from popular culture, to art, to sports, to fashion. Which example(s) spoke most effectively to you?

5. Beyond the two introductory chapters, did one chapter particularly stick in your mind? Why?

6. If you're reading this book in a group, share with the others a particular section or passage that especially moved or motivated you.

7. How will your life and faith be different after reading this book?