

LIVING

HOW GOD TRANSFORMS
CAPTIVES INTO CONQUERORS

FREE

E.J. KLUTTS

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Captives Into Conquerors

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Table of Contents

FOREWORD	v
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	vii
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 2: MY TESTIMONY	6
CHAPTER 3: WHY DON'T I FEEL SAVED?.....	16
CHAPTER 4: UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE BETTER.....	27
CHAPTER 5: FREEDOM, NOT LEGALISM	31
CHAPTER 6: ADDICTION	37
CHAPTER 7: THESE STRUGGLES ARE NORMAL	44
CHAPTER 8: A CHANGED HEART, CONVICTIONS, AND SURRENDER.....	47
CHAPTER 9: EXAMINING YOUR FAITH.....	58
CHAPTER 10: A HARDENED HEART	61
CHAPTER 11: DEPRESSION.....	64
CHAPTER 12: PURPOSE AND CALLING	66
CHAPTER 13: STIGMA	72
CHAPTER 14: FOR GOD'S GLORY	75
CHAPTER 15: PRAISE AND WORSHIP AS AN INTROVERT	79
CHAPTER 16: SLEEP	83
CHAPTER 17: IRRATIONAL FEAR.....	84
CHAPTER 18: WHAT IT MEANS TO PRAY	86
CHAPTER 19: COMPARISON AND CONTENTMENT	90
CHAPTER 20: PLAYING CATCH UP.....	93
CHAPTER 21: THOUGHTS ON MUSIC.....	96
CHAPTER 22: PRIORITIES.....	99

CHAPTER 23: IF I BELIEVE FOR THEM, THEN WHY NOT FOR ME?	101
CHAPTER 24: ROMANS 3:22	104
CHAPTER 25: FOR THOSE WHO ARE SEARCHING.....	106
CHAPTER 26: LIVING FREE.....	110
BIBLIOGRAPHY	116

Foreword

“Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.” (Hebrews 10:19-23, NIV)

Though my husband has prayed and poured over these pages for almost two years, I believe the Lord has been preparing this book much longer. From his birth in South Korea, his childhood growing up as an adoptee in Kentucky, moving away from home, and starting our family, the Lord has been present and working in my husband’s heart. When he felt the pull to start a blog, he did so with the sincere hope that his testimony would remind others of their identity as children of a perfect God, who loves and pursues them in spite of their imperfections. As the blog turned into a book, my husband was shocked. He never expected to write a book. But isn’t that the story of the Gospel? God is always looking for someone with whom He can accomplish the unexpected - a man with a speech impediment to lead His people out of captivity, a lowly shepherd boy to conquer a giant, a baby in a manger to bring freedom to a world held captive by sin. God is not looking for those who have it “all together”; He’s looking for those who recognize their need for Him.

Over the past 10 years, my husband and I have experienced many highs and lows together, some of which you'll read about in this book. There have been some very dark and trying seasons, and I'm sure there are more to come. But, through it all, we have learned that the stability of our lives depends on our foundation. If it's going to outlast the storms of life, our foundation can only be built on Jesus' blood and righteousness. We are sinners in need of a Savior and Jesus is faithful every time.

As you read these pages, I pray you feel the Lord's nearness. I pray God uses this book to remind you that He's not looking at you with condemnation. He knows you fully and loves you completely. He is big enough to handle your shortcomings, your doubts, and your questions. More than anything, I pray you take hold of the HOPE that is yours in Jesus, take a step closer to Him today, and begin your journey of living free. He is waiting for you.

K. Klutts

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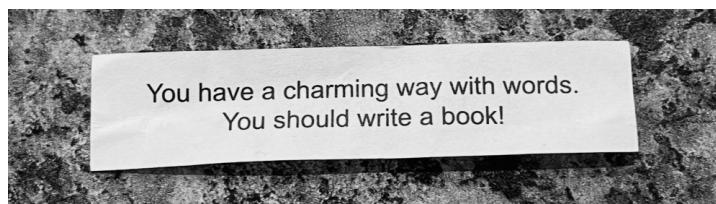
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Finally, I want to thank my kids. You've taught me what it means to have childlike faith. I love you so much, and I

pray one day you'll find encouragement from the words in this book.

Chapter 1: Introduction

“You have a charming way with words. You should write a book!”



In February 2023, I received this fortune from one of my favorite Chinese restaurants. Two and a half years earlier, I had experienced a life-changing moment with Jesus, but now I was in a dry season. I was grappling with my purpose and calling and wondering what I was supposed to be doing in my life. On the outside, everything was going great, but internally, it felt like I should be doing something more.

Enter the fortune cookie (God knows I love Chinese food, so what better way to get my attention). Upon reading the fortune, my mind immediately went to a quote from a sermon I heard a month earlier. The lead pastor was encouraging people who are currently struggling with something to use that struggle to help someone else. When I remembered that, it was a wakeup call for me. I felt God was speaking to me through that sermon, but I didn't know what to do about it. Fast forward a month later, with another nudge from God pointing me in the right direction, an idea started to form in my mind.

“You should write a book.”

While the newfound inspiration was exciting, realization started to sink in. I didn’t consider myself a sophisticated writer, and more importantly, I didn’t know anything about writing and publishing a book. I also wrestled with self-doubt. “How are you going to write a book that helps people when you’re a mess and don’t have anything figured out?” “Are you self-righteous enough to think that people are going to care what you have to say?” “Will something you write really make a difference in the world?” These are the questions that swirled in my mind over and over again. Despite this, I continued to feel the Holy Spirit’s pull toward writing a book.

I began brainstorming ideas for different book topics. Some form of devotional initially came to mind, but that didn’t seem to be the right fit. During this last five years, I had been struggling with Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), particularly repetitive thoughts, nervous ticks, and actions. It got to the point where it was affecting my quality of life. I had some pretty low moments mentally, but God used my brokenness to draw me closer to Him in a way I didn’t think was possible. If I was going to write about anything, that seemed like the topic to choose.

Then the writer’s block came. I had no clue where to begin, and really didn’t know what I was doing, but God made a path for me. I didn’t have enough material to do a full book, and I wanted to get something out into the world (a.k.a. my friend circle) right away. Social media posts didn’t seem like the right avenue, but the thought of a website/blog was planted in my mind. Enter Faith Over OCD (Faith > OCD), the website I created. Through WordPress, I was able to create a site where I could share

my testimony and create articles that placed an emphasis on how God could use anything, including OCD, for His glory and our good. It was a place where I could share thoughts on what I believe God placed on my heart at that time.

A year had passed and I was feeling pretty good with where I was. I felt like I did what God called me to do, and yet the idea didn't seem complete. It still felt like there was more to be done. As that feeling grew, I started getting nudges from God pointing me back toward writing a book. I would be listening to a random podcast and there would be a mention of writing a book. I'd be listening to an audiobook and there would be references to writing a book. At our local church one Sunday, the pastor mentioned something about writing a book, and my wife looked at me in amazement. God was making it blatantly obvious what I should be doing.

Now with a renewed focus, that brought me back to the original issue: What am I going to write about? Can I fill a whole book with material? Would anyone even care? Once again, God was there to plant a seed in my mind.

I came to the realization that most of my life has been filled with legalism. I'm sure it's part OCD, and part my wiring, but I've always had this black-and-white sense of trying to follow the rules, of what's right versus what's wrong. I don't mean that in a self-righteous way, but only to highlight how my thought patterns complicated my attempts to follow Jesus. I was constantly overanalyzing all my choices and decisions. Questions like, "If I'm really saved, should I be doing xyz?" "What if I do <insert here>, does that mean my faith isn't genuine?" "Is <said thing> technically a sin?" "If I don't go to every church event that is offered, does that make my faith less genuine?"

This way of thinking not only prevents you from living a present life, but it is also utterly exhausting. The worry, doubt, fear, and confusion are all-consuming. It keeps you distracted and unable to live the abundant life that God intends for His children. I had become a master of living my life this way. I was constantly distracted, constantly anxious, and never truly present. Thankfully, from 2020 to the present (2025), God has moved in my life in ways I didn't think were possible. He has answered so many questions I've had, helped me work through so many of my doubts, and has been so faithful through it all.

So, with all of that being said, what is this book about? To answer that question, let me start with what this book is not about. This isn't a book specifically about me or my life. That was something I knew from the start, that I didn't want to be the sole focus of this. While my testimony is in this book, and aspects of my life and experiences are shared, my primary goal is to show what God has done in my life and how He has used my experiences to help me grow. I use the word "I" in this book a lot more than "we" primarily because what I've written are things that have personally helped me navigate life better. I don't want to assume that everyone thinks the way I do, processes certain things the way I do, or has the same questions and struggles that I do. If you do though, I pray this book may offer some helpful advice to you on your journey.

I also don't want anyone to come away from reading this thinking, "Well, it must be nice for you to have it all figured out," or "What makes you think you have the right to tell me how to live my life or what I should believe?" I don't like to be told what to do or how I should live. I immediately dig my heels in when someone tells me that I should be doing something differently. I don't think anyone likes that. Trust me when I say that I'm as far from perfect

as it gets, and it's only by the grace of God that I'm here writing this.

I'm doing this because I truly believe God has placed it on my heart to do so. I'm doing this out of obedience to Him. I want this to be an act of worship to the God who has saved me. I also want to help you. God has truly helped me and revealed so much that has made my life more peaceful and joyful than it's ever been. Things are never perfect, but at the end of the day, I have an inner peace that only comes from Jesus. Through my struggles and experiences, God has shown me a better way to live. If you read these pages and it helps you in any way at all, what an honor that would be. I pray that God uses my life and this book to help you, and that God would use it for His glory.

“So Christ has truly set us free. Now make sure that you stay free, and don't get tied up again in slavery to the law.” (Galatians 5:1, NLT)

“No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.”
(Romans 8:37, NIV)

Chapter 2: My Testimony

Why is a person's testimony important? In this world, believers in Jesus live by faith, not by sight.

"For we live by believing and not by seeing." (2 Corinthians 5:7, NLT)

We believe that God is real and have experienced His presence in our lives. That belief is a gift from God. God used someone else's testimony and influence in our lives to point us towards Him. What about the people who do not believe in God?

"But how can they call on him to save them unless they believe in him? And how can they believe in him if they have never heard about him? And how can they hear about him unless someone tells them?" (Romans 10:14, NLT)

A quick Google search will show that there's an estimated 2.3 billion Christians in the world today.¹ That's an extraordinary number, and yet we have a global population of 8 billion and counting.² That is so many people who do not know Jesus. If 2.3 billion Christians shared their testimony about how God has actively worked in their lives

¹ World Population Review. "Religion by Country 2024." *World Population Review*. Accessed January 1, 2025. <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/religion-by-country>

² United Nations. "Population." *United Nations*. Accessed August 9, 2025. <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/population>.

and saved them, just think how many people that could reach.

For the skeptics out there, I get it. There are a lot of things I'm skeptical about. It's easy to be skeptical when you hear stories online from people or preachers you don't know saying things that sound exaggerated. There are things that I've read and thought, "There's no way that's true. That person is definitely making that up to fit the narrative they're trying to push."

But what about the people you do know? What about your close friends or family members that you trust wouldn't lie to you? This is where a believer's testimony is so important. I don't think it's necessarily our job to convince someone that God is real. We can't make someone believe in God who doesn't believe. However, sharing our testimony can plant seeds in an unbeliever's heart that God can make grow. I believe we can show the love of Jesus by being kind and loving our neighbors.

"They triumphed over him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death." (Revelation 12:11, NIV)

This is why I believe a person's testimony is so important. It shows how Jesus works in our lives and the lives of others, both people we know and those we don't.

With that being said, here is my testimony.

I was born in Seoul, South Korea and raised in Kentucky. Adopted at three months old, I spent the first 25 years of my life in the Bible Belt. I was raised Southern Baptist, and

I thank God for my parents and that foundation they gave me at an early age. I attended Sunday school, went to Wednesday night services, and participated in Vacation Bible School. I was always curious about God and wanted to learn more about Jesus. I remember being in elementary school, saying a prayer asking Jesus to come into my heart, and getting baptized shortly after. This isn't to go into the technicalities of when I was "officially" saved (as we'll discuss in later chapters), but as a kid, I believe I understood the Gospel the best I could at that age. I truly wanted to know Jesus.

Shortly after deciding to follow Jesus, I saw OCD tendencies creeping in. I've always had a deep sense of right and wrong, always wanting to do the "right" thing, never wanting to mess up. I didn't fully understand what Jesus did for me. I thought that once I got saved, I had to be perfect, and if I messed up, it was a reflection of insincerity on my part. At that point, once I had considered myself a Christian, any time I would mess up or do something wrong, I would immediately have to "rededicate my life to Christ." This was a constant back and forth thing. I would rededicate my life to Jesus, tell myself I wasn't going to sin anymore, and then mess up again and start the rededication all over. I thought in my mind the slate had to be clean each time I rededicated my life to Jesus, otherwise I wasn't a "real" Christian. This turned out to be a relentless cycle of guilt and shame every time I messed up, with things never being just the right way in my mind to move on. I was relying on myself, and not on Jesus. I was also suffering from OCD.

It would get worse from there. What started as a simple prayer of rededication morphed into a 20-30 second jingle that I would have to go through in my head after I did certain things that I told myself I wasn't going to do again.

And yes, all these years later, I still remember the lyrics and melody of that little tune. In my mind, it was like I couldn't move past certain mental hurdles until things were done a certain way, and that certain way was ever-changing and made no sense. There was no rhyme or reason. It was (and still is) time consuming and leaves me in a state where I'm disconnected from the present. And while certain nervous ticks have manifested over the years because of this, I'm not sure anyone would have been able to tell that something was off just by looking at me.

Fast forward to my early 30's. I'm married to an amazing woman, I recently became a father, and I have a great career. On paper, I had everything that I ever told myself I wanted. Everything I believed would make me truly happy and my life complete. However, despite all of this, I was struggling on the inside. God was no longer a priority in my life. All my time went into chasing after my own selfish ambitions (mainly in the form of entertainment) and choosing to put those things ahead of God. I wasn't attending church and was resistant to try and form any new connections with believers outside of my existing circle. I was also struggling with the long-term negative effects of a pornography addiction that started in high school. It had sunk its teeth in at an early age and never let go. This led to mental isolation and feeling like a fake and a hypocrite. I could go through the motions on the outside but feel completely isolated on the inside.

It was the addiction to pornography that really brought things to a tipping point. I loved and am still in love with my wife. The fact that I kept falling back into old habits was wearing on me. Again, the words *fake* and *phony* kept getting louder in my head. The biggest questions I kept asking were, "Why am I doing this, and why do I *keep* doing this?" I knew it wasn't good for me. I knew it wasn't

good for my soul, and yet, nothing would change. This dark pit I was in kept getting deeper.

All of this was happening at a time when I'd see friends, family, musicians, and other people of influence who were believers making a difference in the world. I could tell there was something different about them. They had a love for Jesus and an outspokenness for Him that I hadn't seen or experienced before in my own life. I'd see this and let comparison creep in. I would think, "Okay, I can see why God would want to save them. They really love Him. They are out doing things. They are making a difference. They don't have the same problems I have. I don't think I could ever be like them. I don't know if I even want to be like them." These thoughts would play on repeat in my mind. That's when I experienced God in a way that set my life on an entirely different course, one that pointed toward Him.

It was one of those sleepless nights where my repetitive thoughts were running wild. The same cycle, the same motion, the same routine. Fine on the outside, isolated on the inside. The same worry, the same anxiety. When I finally fell asleep, I had a dream that I believe came from God. While aspects of it remain hazy, there is one part of it that I'll never forget, where it seemed like God was talking directly to me.

I vividly remember seeing a nightstand, and on it stood a picture frame. The table itself had a spotlight focused on the frame, and inside the frame there was one verse, Romans 3:22. That was it. It was as simple as that. I woke up the next morning and the first thing I did was look up that verse. I think a lot of Christians are familiar with Romans 3:23 – "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." I knew that verse, but I never paid attention to the verse that preceded it, the verse that was in my

dream. This verse addressed my fear and worries of who salvation was really for. It said, “the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction.” I was stunned after reading this, and the first thing I could think of was to just say, “Thank you, God.” I remember telling my wife, and she was in awe as well. This was God telling me, and God telling you, that salvation through Jesus Christ is available for *all* who believe.

It doesn’t matter who you are, what you’ve done, or what you’re doing. It doesn’t matter if you have been or still are skeptical of Jesus, skeptical of Christianity, or skeptical of the church. Salvation isn’t just for the vocal Christians or the ones who appear to be doing more than what you’re doing. None of us are worthy, but we are made righteous through Jesus, and Jesus alone. God changed my trajectory that night.

All of this happened in 2019. The year continued and so did the same thoughts and addictions. Despite that clear sign and my initial enthusiasm, I was still lukewarm in my pursuit of God. I kept wondering why nothing was changing in my life, but I wasn’t ready to address the obvious: I wanted to follow Jesus when it was convenient for me, but only when it was convenient. I wasn’t truly trying to seek Him.

The repetitive thoughts continued. I eventually decided to speak to a therapist about it. I can’t emphasize this enough, but at the time, this was the last thing I wanted to do. Communication is not a strong suit of mine; it’s not my default setting. I am more of a say “everything’s fine” and move on kind of person. Things just came to a point where I knew this wasn’t the way I should be living my life. The options I had were to continue down the same path without

any positive change, or to step outside my comfort zone and try to get help from someone with a new perspective.

I truly believe that God gives us agency, or the ability as human beings to make our own decisions. It can be extremely difficult, I understand, but I encourage anyone who knows they're not living life to its fullest potential to seek professional help. God has given us the ability to make decisions and has given us all the tools and resources to make a difference in our own lives, but it's up to us to act on them. All things are possible with God, and I believe that. Maybe in your circumstance things will eventually change for the better without taking any outside measures. I'm not saying that won't happen. However, that wasn't the case for me. It took speaking with a therapist to put a name to the problems I was facing. She helped me define the issue and find treatment to manage its symptoms. She taught me how to handle obsessive thoughts in a more productive manner.

That year and heading into 2020, my wife and I were in the process of seeking a new church home. We went to several churches in our area that were great, but we didn't really find the one that we knew we could call our church home. COVID happened in early 2020, and that put a pause to that search. As summer rolled by, the idea kept coming to my head to stream a service from Church of the Highlands. The first service I streamed one Sunday was the one I believe God knew I needed to hear. It was about community and not going through life isolated from other believers. Up until that point, I was very resistant to the idea of joining a small group. I just didn't think it was for me, and I still struggle with that thought to this day. However, my heart must have been softened to it at the time of hearing this message, and afterward my wife and I searched for one that

our family could join. This led us to start listening and streaming more services from Highlands.

As summer was coming to an end, we were feeling more and more like Church of the Highlands would be our church family home. I felt closer to God through worship, the messages that were being presented, and the newfound small group community. However, the addictions persisted. Mentally, I was well past the point of being exhausted. My mind felt so tired, and it didn't seem like anything was ever going to change. It felt like no matter how hard I tried, I was going to keep falling back into old habits. Little did I know, Jesus was about to change my life in a radical way.

One afternoon, I was alone at home, listening to a Highlands message via podcast. The message was delivered by Pastor Mark Pettus and aptly titled, “Trials and Temptations.” The timing of it couldn’t have been more perfect. Again, I was still wrestling with questions about why I kept making the same mistakes and why I kept having the same thoughts. So, when I saw the title of the message, I was just hoping for something, anything that I could use to apply to my own life. My thinking was misguided on a couple of different fronts. One, I was mistakenly trying to achieve something on my own that was never going to happen by my own strength. Secondly, I was hoping for a “magical solution” that I would discover through self-help and tips that would eliminate a lot of the mental struggles I kept dealing with (more on this later). With this mindset, I was destined to repeat the same mistakes over and over again.

As I was listening to the message, I realized there was a lot of good material he shared that I could use in my own life. At the same time, I felt discouraged, saying to myself, “You’re going to try all these ideas and it’s not going to

change anything. It's not going to work. Nothing is ever going to change.” Towards the end of the message, a shift began to take place.

The next thing that happened, I can only describe as a “God moment.” One of those moments where you can feel the presence of God in a way that’s hard to describe but could only be God. I’m sure that sounds crazy to a lot of people, and my prayer is that everyone would experience this in their lives. It’s something I’ll never forget.

I was sitting at the kitchen table as the message was coming to a close. Pastor Mark was describing a time in his own life when he was struggling with temptations and was repeating the same mistakes. During this time, he wrote the following in a journal entry and closed the message by reading it:

“Last I checked, sin and death have been defeated at the cross. When I ask for it, I can receive His grace and His mercy, and even better than that, I get his power, the Holy Spirit living inside of me. He who is in me is more powerful than he that is in the world. In Christ Jesus I am more than a conqueror. We are the head, not the tail. We are above, not beneath. We can do ALL things through Christ who gives us strength. Where o’ death is your victory? Where o’ death is your sting? If God is for me, who can be against me? I have the authority to trample on snakes, overcome the power of the enemy, nothing in Jesus’ name will harm me. You are more than a conqueror, and if we don’t quit, we win.”³

³ Mark Pettus, “Trials and Temptations” (sermon, Church of the Highlands, Huntsville, AL, September 2020).

As he was reading this journal entry, I was absolutely floored. All these different emotions hit me at once. I broke down in tears. In that moment, I felt the power and presence of Jesus in a way that I had never experienced before in my life. It felt so surreal, and yet I know 100% it was Him. There's not a doubt in my mind about it. That afternoon I asked Jesus to save me. It was a moment of surrender to Him and the realization that He is all I needed, forever changed with a real hope and purpose. Let me be clear, there are still daily struggles with temptations, and all my problems haven't been solved, nor all my questions answered, but my life now has a new underlying grace and foundation in Jesus. That's what makes the difference.

This is my testimony of how Jesus changed my life. For those of you who are already believers, I pray this encourages you in your own walk with Christ. For those of you who do not believe in God or believe that what Jesus offers isn't for you, my hope is that this testimony will pique your curiosity, even if it's only just a spark. I pray that you will continue reading, because it is amazing what God can do with just a little seed of faith and curiosity.

Chapter 3: Why Don't I Feel Saved?

One topic that always finds a way to creep into my mind is the doubting of my salvation. With that doubt comes the fear and anxiety that my faith isn't genuine and I'm just going through the motions out of habit versus genuine belief. It makes me question what genuine belief even means.

I would always come to verses like the ones below and start to have doubts. What I would eventually learn with these verses is that the context in which Jesus spoke these words is important to understand. I would often take the verses below out of context and interpret them to mean it's a 50-50 chance on who "gets in" to Heaven. But in the proper context, we can see Jesus was previously referring to the Pharisees who would outwardly pretend to be religious for everyone to hear and see how "good" they were when it was really all an act. Now that doesn't mean there aren't warnings in those words or things we shouldn't examine, but I don't think we should be afraid because of them. For the longest time, I took those words in with fear when I shouldn't have. God's Word says:

Not everyone who calls out to me, "Lord! Lord!" will enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Only those who actually do the will of my Father in heaven will enter. On judgment day many will say to me, 'Lord! Lord! We prophesied in your name and cast out demons in your name and performed many miracles in your name.' But I will reply, "I

never knew you. Get away from me, you who break God's laws." (Matthew 7:21-23, NLT)

And...

You can enter God's Kingdom only through the narrow gate. The highway to hell is broad, and its gate is wide for the many who choose that way. But the gateway to life is very narrow and the road is difficult, and only a few ever find it. (Matthew 7:13-14, NLT)

Whenever I think about what it will be like right before I die, I always wonder what kind of questions I'll ask. Am I going to start freaking out and questioning my salvation? Am I going to say the sinner's prayer one last time, hoping those words will save me? Or will my faith be full as I just trust in Jesus?

I can be a big procrastinator. A lot of times my mindset is, "I'll just deal with this later," or "I have plenty of time to figure this out, no need to worry about it now." But when that time comes, there's no putting things off for the future, which is why it's important to examine these things if they're on your mind.

"Examine yourselves to see if your faith is genuine. Test yourselves. Surely you know that Jesus Christ is among you; if not, you have failed the test of genuine faith." (2 Corinthians 13:5, NLT)

My constant thoughts about the end of life were anxiety inducing. The fact that my mind would keep coming back

to this worry over and over again made me realize this wasn't the way I should be living. While it is completely normal to have doubts and questions, this was becoming something else. It was becoming a lingering fear that was preventing me from being present and fully living the life that God has blessed me with. It was also preventing me from growing in faith.

It was around that time when I realized I needed to move past this once and for all, and that I wasn't going to be able to do that through my own reasoning and logic. I began praying to God about it. It's what I should have done from the beginning. I should have been praying honest prayers to God, asking Him to help me with my unbelief (Mark 9:24), to help me understand, and to help me not be afraid but have a stronger faith to trust in Him.

I would pray this continually, and God, being ever so faithful, would lead me to the right Scriptures, speak to me through the right sermons, and give me understanding that I couldn't reach on my own.

The first thing was the reminder that fear does not come from God. Fear is a tactic of the enemy that is as old as time:

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’” (Genesis 3:1, NIV)

“Did God really say you are loved and saved through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ?”

“Did God really say that He loves all of us and anyone who believes is saved?”

“Did God really say...?”

Anytime I worried that I had fake faith or that I was destined for a life without God, Scripture made it clear that wasn’t the case.

“For God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love, and self-discipline.” (2 Timothy 1:7, NLT)

I also kept coming back to the word *feeling*. Why don’t I *feel* saved? There have been many moments in my life where I felt what I believe was the presence of God. It’s something that I pray everyone would experience as it is truly amazing and hard to describe. There are also just as many moments, if not more, where I don’t “feel” God in the day-to-day. When life gets stressful, when things don’t go according to plan, during moments of frustration and anger, I don’t always have that “feeling.” During those moments, where does that leave me?

I struggled with this for a while, and a lot of that struggle stemmed from a lack of faith. Despite this, God showed up and again helped walk me through my struggle. During a message titled, “Only Believe,” Pastor Chris Hodges spoke a word that resonated with what I was struggling to understand. He said:

“God doesn’t do what He does out of our love for Him, but out of His love for us.

Faith isn't a feeling, it's a choice. Believing is not a feeling, it's a choice.”⁴

This was huge for me. It was explained in such a simple way that clicked for me. Feelings aren't reliable. Feelings can change with the shifting of the wind. I had gotten to where I relied too much on how I felt versus what I believed, and it's dangerous to let feelings and situations that arise affect my faith. The answer is written plainly in Scripture. Jesus needs to be the foundation of our lives. If we're basing our hopes on how we feel, it's inevitable that those hopes will come crashing down when life happens and things don't go according to our plans. That sort of hope doesn't stand on its own:

Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash. (Matthew 7:24-27, NIV)

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily

⁴ Chris Hodges, “Only Believe” (sermon, Church of the Highlands, Huntsville, AL, March 2024).

trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us. We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith. Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now he is seated in the place of honor beside God's throne. Think of all the hostility he endured from sinful people; then you won't become weary and give up. (Hebrews 12:1-3, NLT)

The word *choosing* can make it sound like it's what *we* have to do in order to be saved. Isn't believing an action? Isn't that something we're doing? But that's not it at all. It's what *He* already did for us (Romans 5:8, NIV) and *Him* alone (John 14:6, NIV). We're also not robots, and I believe God created us and gave us free will and the ability to make our own decisions. I had the most difficult time trying to wrap my head around these things because, in my mind, they can sound like they contradict each other. Plus, I tend to overanalyze things. Choosing to believe is an action on our part. But Scripture makes clear that it's not what we do that saves us (see the verses from Ephesians below). In these same verses, it says that God created us "so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago." Does this contradict the idea of free will?

"God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it. For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago." (Ephesians 2:8-10, NLT)

I just wanted to touch very briefly on the topic of free will, as it's easy to go down a rabbit hole with that topic. At the time when I was really examining this topic, God again used a normal Sunday sermon to help me understand.

Pastor Chris Hodges described it along the lines of him being a father and having plans for his kids one day to go to college, have a good job, get married, have kids of their own, and so on. Just because he has those plans for his kids when they're young, it doesn't mean that's exactly what they're going to do as they're living their own lives. In a similar way, if we believe in Jesus as Savior and Lord, we are children of God. As God's children, long before creation, He had good plans laid out for us to do and accomplish. He has given us free will to live out our lives, and we may choose to deviate from the plans He had laid out for us. He isn't making us do anything. Looking at it this way really gave me perspective on the subject.

As for the idea that choosing to believe and follow Jesus is an "action" on our part, or something that we're actively doing for our salvation, the Message Bible (MSG), a paraphrase of the Bible, really helped me understand this:

This is the core of our preaching. Say the welcoming word to God—"Jesus is my Master"—embracing, body and soul, God's work of doing in us what he did in raising Jesus from the dead. That's it. You're not "doing" anything; you're simply calling out to God, trusting him to do it for you. That's salvation. With your whole being you embrace God setting things right, and then you say it, right out loud: "God has set everything right between him and me!"
(Romans 10:9-10, MSG)

That's an incredible message for us all. Not a single one of us can earn, buy, or sneak our way into Heaven, and we should all take comfort in that. That sounds weird and not comforting, right? Another way to look at it is, for those who believe in Jesus as their Lord and Savior, there's nothing we can do that can take away God's love for us or our salvation through Jesus Christ. When we have doubts or are anxious about what's to come, what we need to do is this:

Believe that God's going to do what He says He's going to do. I used to question if I was "believing" hard enough, not knowing what true belief even meant. We all experience doubts in life, but I used to weigh my doubts against my faith. A lot of times, there would be more doubts than beliefs. Over time, it became very disheartening. Then I remembered I had to make the choice to believe in Jesus. That was it. Jesus is the way. I had to remember my belief isn't going to be perfect. There will be doubts and struggles, but those things don't nullify my faith. At the end of the day, I need to make the choice to believe in Jesus the best that I know how. The Bible says it clearly. I'm going to choose to believe in God's Word.

Confess. "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. One believes with the heart, resulting in righteousness, and one confesses with the mouth, resulting in salvation. For the Scripture says, Everyone who believes in

Him will not be put to shame, since there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, because the same Lord of all richly blesses all who call on him. For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”
(Romans 10:9-13, Christian Standard Bible, emphasis mine)

Know. Nothing we can do, and nothing anyone can do to us, will ever separate us from God’s love. “And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God’s love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God’s love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:38-39, NLT)

Trust that God started a work in us long ago, and that He won’t abandon us. He will finish what He started in us. “And I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns.” (Philippians 1:6, NLT)

When I have doubts or worry that I’m not doing enough, I must remember that I’m relying on myself with these thoughts, and instead need to rely on Jesus.

For it is by grace [God’s remarkable compassion and favor drawing you to

Christ] that you have been saved [actually delivered from judgment and given eternal life] through faith. And this [salvation] is not of yourselves [not through your own effort], but it is the [undeserved, gracious] gift of God; not as a result of [your] works [nor your attempts to keep the Law], so that no one will [be able to] boast or take credit in any way [for his salvation]. (Ephesians 2:8-9, Amplified Bible)

“Jesus said to him, ‘I am the [only] Way [to God] and the [real] Truth and the [real] Life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.’” (John 14:6, AMP)

Is it really that simple? The Bible says it is. Jesus is the way, the only way. He is the solution to the problem we as humans face. We desperately need a Savior. We need hope to survive.

While that sounds good on paper, I need practical examples of what that actually means for me to understand and grasp it. I've found that the idea of one of those office trust exercises where you close your eyes and fall back, trusting that your friend will catch you, to be the perfect illustration of what trusting in Jesus means. It's a trust exercise of faith. I have to let go and fully trust in Jesus' finished work on the cross. For me, I struggle with legalism, the idea that I'm doing the wrong thing or not doing enough. I struggle with fear and doubt. For you, it may look differently.

“When Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, ‘It is finished!’ And He bowed His head and [voluntarily] gave up His spirit.” (John 19:30, AMP)

Jesus said it is finished, so I need to embrace that. Every single day, whether I'm "feeling it" or not, I need to be embracing that faith mentality. I need to be able to confidently believe and trust that Jesus paid my price, and He made the way. I need to trust that if something happens to me, He will be there to catch me, that He won't let me fall. I need to remember that this gift of salvation has nothing to do with me and my works. It's based on Him alone and is available to all who believe.

"The Lord is my strength and my defense;
he has become my salvation." (Psalms
118:14, NIV)

Chapter 4: Understanding the Bible Better

If you've ever read parts of the Bible and come away confused about what you've read, you're not alone. Maybe you've even seen memes online that take confusing verses from the Bible and twist them in a way to discredit Christianity. These things are not uncommon.

In my faith journey so far, there have been many times when I've read something from Scripture that I've found to be confusing and hard to understand, particularly in the Old Testament. Old Testament laws can seem foreign to us today. If I'm being honest, there have been many times where I've thought to myself that God seems harsh in the Old Testament but loving in the New Testament. During those times, it's been hard for me to reconcile the difference. There have been verses I've read in the New Testament that got me thinking, "How can I ever live up to this?" (The answer is I can't.)

Let me start by saying the first thing to do is to pray honest prayers to God, asking Him to reveal His Word to you and to help you understand. Tell Him what it is that you don't understand and ask Him for wisdom. Keep doing this and keep seeking.

I wanted to briefly share some things that helped me understand Scripture in a whole new way. I am by no means a theologian, but these things have helped me see a small part of the bigger picture. One of the resources that really helped me see Scripture from a whole new perspective is Tara-Leigh Cobble's *The Bible Recap - A*

One Year Guide.⁵ This guide recaps the Bible in chronological order, chapter by chapter. She does an amazing job breaking down confusing parts of Scripture and explaining it in a way that is easy to understand. This study also helped me see God's story as a timeline throughout history. I also love how the recaps of each chapter of the Bible read like a story. It really helped me look at God's Word in a different way and to see how our own lives play a part in God's ultimate plan for creation. We are a continuation of that bigger picture. I can't recommend *The Bible Recap* enough.

There are many translations of the Bible out there and finding one that is easy for you to understand is really helpful. Each translation reads differently and eventually you'll find one that you can pick up easier. Lately, I've really been drawn to the Message (MSG). While this isn't a word-for-word translation, the Message is a paraphrase that reads like a conversation we'd have today and has helped me understand many verses in a way that older translations didn't.

It's been helpful for me to read different translations of the same verses to understand them better. An excellent resource for this is the *YouVersion Bible* app. It allows me to take a verse and see that verse in different translations. Some of my go-to Bible translations/paraphrases are:

- Amplified Bible (AMP)
- New Living Translation (NLT)
- The Message (MSG)

⁵ T. L. Cobble and S. Zimmerman, *The Bible Recap: A One-Year Guide to Reading and Understanding the Entire Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 2020).

- New International Version (NIV)
- English Standard Version (ESV)
- Christian Standard Bible (CSB)

I know that seems like a lot, but if you start by just taking a single verse and then looking up that same verse in each of the translations above, I believe you'll discover how big of a difference it makes in understanding Scripture.

Context is also extremely important. Going back to the Old Testament, a lot of those verses out of context can sound pretty wild, and it can seem as if God is angry all the time. One of the things I have to remember when it comes to Old Testament law is the time period and culture during the time it was written. If you consider the past 500 years, the culture and way of life changed with each time period. Now take that back even further, thousands and thousands of years, and no wonder it sounds completely foreign to us when we read about how people lived back then. God was revealing Himself to His people through the generations in a way that they could understand during their lifetime.

From the Old Covenant to the New Covenant through Jesus, this was all God's plan. And when it was just the right time, God sent His only Son to redeem us. As God says in His Word:

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. (Romans 5:6, NIV)

Christ arrives right on time to make this happen. He didn't, and doesn't, wait for us to get ready. He presented himself for this sacrificial death when we were far too weak

and rebellious to do anything to get ourselves ready. And even if we hadn't been so weak, we wouldn't have known what to do anyway. We can understand someone dying for a person worth dying for, and we can understand how someone good and noble could inspire us to selfless sacrifice. But God put his love on the line for us by offering his Son in sacrificial death while we were of no use whatever to him.

(Romans 5:6-8, MSG)

Let's be clear, there are things in the Bible that we will never understand on this side of Heaven. There are so many things in the Bible that I have questions about, and there's so much that goes on in this world that makes no sense to me whatsoever.

Ultimately, we have to put our trust in God. God has always been the same God. He hasn't changed, and He never will.

“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.”

(Hebrews 13:8, CSB)

Chapter 5: Freedom, Not Legalism

A lot of the themes and ideas from this book are heavily inspired by Galatians 5. I knew I wasn't living the abundant life that God intended for me and that something had to change, but I wasn't sure what it was. As I mentioned in the introduction of this book, my mind was filled with legalism and over analyzing every decision I made. "Is this the right thing to do?" "Is this sin?" I was mentally exhausted, and I always had lingering anxiety. Then I came across these passages and a lot of things finally clicked in my head:

Christ has set us *free to live a free life*. So take your stand! Never again let anyone put a harness of slavery on you. (Galatians 5:1, MSG, emphasis mine)

It is absolutely clear that God has called you to a *free life*. Just make sure that you don't use this freedom as an excuse to do whatever you want to do and destroy your freedom. Rather, use your *freedom* to serve one another in love; that's how freedom grows. For everything we know about God's Word is summed up in a single sentence: Love others as you love yourself. That's an act of true freedom. If you bite and ravage each other, watch out—in no time at all you will be annihilating each other, and where will your precious freedom be then? My counsel is this: *Live freely*, animated and motivated by God's Spirit. Then you won't feed the compulsions of selfishness. For

there is a root of sinful self-interest in us that is at odds with a free spirit, just as the free spirit is incompatible with selfishness. These two ways of life are contrary to each other, so that you cannot live at times one way and at times another way according to how you feel on any given day. Why don't you *choose to be led by the Spirit and so escape the erratic compulsions of a law-dominated existence?* (Galatians 5:13-18, MSG, emphasis mine)

I found these verses to be so encouraging and life-giving. They gave me a renewed sense of purpose and vision of how I could be living my life. A life not constrained by legalism and overthinking, but a life of freedom and peace of mind through Jesus. The only problem was, I didn't know what that meant in a practical sense. What does living free mean for me today? How can I take the questions that I have and the things that I'm struggling with and apply this concept of freedom?

I started making a list of various topics, questions, and struggles that I was experiencing. Over time, God began to show me how to tackle them to live a life of freedom through Him. The first thing I needed to take on headfirst was my struggle with legalism. God's Word makes it clear that we are free through Jesus Christ when we accept Him as Lord and Savior:

So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. And because you belong to him, the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you from the power of sin that leads to death. (Romans 8:1-2, NLT)

The Bible also makes clear that none of this is by our doing, but by what He did for us:

God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it. (Ephesians 2:8-9, NLT)

I had to ingrain this in my mind. Salvation isn't a reward to be earned. If I read my Bible and prayed every day, that wasn't going to save me. If I didn't read my Bible and pray every day, that wasn't going to doom me. If I went to church every single Sunday, that wasn't going to save me. If there were weeks that I skipped because of my laziness, that wasn't going to play a role in my salvation. This back and forth could be applied to any number of scenarios and decisions. I really struggled with this, and sometimes I still do.

I'm thankful for the "tough love" advice that I received from my local pastor when I kept going back and forth with this. He said:

There are always areas that it is difficult to be obedient in. Once again, Jesus is the standard and then made a way where that standard can be reached, but only through Him. Once again, you are asking in a way that sounds like you may think too highly of your efforts. I know that might sound harsh, but I say it with a smile.

The bottom line that I needed to realize was my actions wouldn't lead to my salvation and subsequently my freedom. It is through Jesus Christ alone I am saved and free. Once this started to sink in, my mindset was different. As the Apostle Paul writes in Romans:

For not knowing about God's righteousness [which is based on faith], and seeking to establish their own [righteousness based on works], they did not submit to God's righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law [it leads to Him and its purpose is fulfilled in Him], for [granting] righteousness to everyone who believes [in Him as Savior]. (Romans 10:3-4, AMP)

At the same time, I had to remember that just because I'm saved through Jesus, I don't have a free pass to live a life of unchecked sin. That's also addressed in Galatians 5:

For you have been called to live in freedom, my brothers and sisters. But don't use your freedom to satisfy your sinful nature. Instead, use your freedom to serve one another in love. So I say, let the Holy Spirit guide your lives. Then you won't be doing what your sinful nature craves. The sinful nature wants to do evil, which is just the opposite of what the Spirit wants. And the Spirit gives us desires that are the opposite of what the sinful nature desires. These two forces are constantly fighting each other, so you are not free to carry out your good intentions. But when you are directed by the Spirit, you are not under obligation to the law of Moses. (Galatians 5:13, 16-18, NLT)

That doesn't mean that we're not going to slip up and sin. This is covered more in depth in chapter 7 of this book, but we as humans are not and will not ever be perfect here on this earth. We are going to mess up, make mistakes, hurt others, fall back into addictions, and do things that we know we'll regret and yet we'll still do them anyway. Even though you're a Christian that doesn't mean you won't mess up and sin or make bad decisions. If that were the case, we would have no need for a Savior. But we all do make mistakes, and we're all in desperate need of a Savior, whether we realize it or not. Jesus is that Savior.

How wonderful it has been to know Jesus and experience this underlying peace and freedom in this life these past few years. Again, that doesn't mean all my struggles have gone away and the world's problems are solved (John 16:33, NLT). However, I have experienced this sense of peace and freedom that is hard to understand, and yet it's a central foundation. That same peace is available for anyone who believes in Jesus and trusts in Him. Here's what God's Word says:

That famous promise God gave Abraham—that he and his children would possess the earth—was not given because of something Abraham did or would do. It was based on God's decision to put everything together for him, which Abraham then entered when he believed. If those who get what God gives them only get it by doing everything they are told to do and filling out all the right forms properly signed, that eliminates personal trust completely and turns the promise into an ironclad contract! That's not a holy promise; that's a business deal. A

contract drawn up by a hard-nosed lawyer and with plenty of fine print only makes sure that you will never be able to collect. But if there is no contract in the first place, simply a promise—and God's promise at that—you can't break it.

This is why the fulfillment of God's promise depends entirely on trusting God and his way, and then simply embracing him and what he does. God's promise arrives as a pure gift. That's the only way everyone can be sure to get in on it, those who keep the religious traditions and those who have never heard of them. For Abraham is father of us all. He is not our racial father—that's reading the story backward. He is our faith father. (Romans 4:13-16, MSG)

And that I may be found in Him [believing and relying on Him], not having any righteousness of my own derived from [my obedience to] the Law and its rituals, but [possessing] that [genuine righteousness] which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith. (Philippians 3:9, AMP)

Chapter 6: Addiction

Back in sixth grade Sunday school class, I had a teacher I really looked up to. One of the things he warned us about was the dangers of pornography and adult content. He said that while we wouldn't understand it now, we needed to avoid that stuff, because it can have far-reaching and long-lasting negative consequences in our lives. At the time, I didn't put much thought into those words. Looking back now, I truly wish I would have taken his advice.

Those middle school years were when I started watching things I shouldn't have. What started out as inappropriate music videos on MTV and VH1 eventually morphed into photos and videos online. The one thing I will say — that I never thought I'd say — is thank God for 56k dial-up. What I considered to be an obstacle with slow internet speeds in my middle/early high school years turned out to be a huge blessing in disguise. If it wasn't for that, I would have been exposed to even more things that I shouldn't have seen at such a young age.

The kind of access that a new generation now has to inappropriate content on smartphones and social media platforms is pretty scary. It's hard for me to imagine my teenage self with that kind of access to explicit content. Add to that the things our culture pushes on us today. As an adult, now in my mid-30s, I can understand what my Sunday school teacher was talking about all those years ago.

I'm not naive to the fact that we live in a fallen world and we can't be sheltered from everything. In a lot of instances too much sheltering can lead to rebellion later on in life that comes with its own set of consequences. What I do know

though is how addictive that sort of content can become over time. While it all seemed like fun and games early on, I eventually realized I didn't want that stuff in my life anymore. At that point, I couldn't just turn around and walk away from it. I had spent 25 years of my life ingesting this content and I was hooked.

This led to the long-term consequences that my teacher referenced. I couldn't just quit. It led to a seemingly never-ending cycle of failed willpower and inevitable self-loathing. It led to me being endlessly distracted and not being present with the people around me. It led me to disappointing my wife and knowing how unfair it was to her. I can't emphasize enough how damaging pornography is to our society and to us as human beings. In today's culture, look at any of the online comments in support of pornography and you'll see words like "prude", "old fashioned", or "no fun" thrown around. I get it. When I was neck deep in my addiction, I thought it was no big deal as well. I thought it was just a bit of fun and excitement and that everyone needed to chill out. I didn't see any harm in it. But it is harmful. In fact, it goes beyond just what you watch on a screen. It can change the way you view other people in real life, and then you're stuck in a constant and never-ending battle of trying to control your thoughts and eyes. It is damaging to your relationship with God. At the beginning, you might think you can stop whenever you want, but for most people, it's not that easy to quit. You have to be on alert every single day because the temptation is too easy. To put it bluntly, it really sucks. We have a whole generation of young, middle aged, and old men and women hooked on this stuff, and we wonder why there's such an increase in sexual violence and evil in this world.

As I mentioned earlier, when I relied on my own willpower to quit, it would lead to inevitable failure. The length of

time between stopping and starting would vary, but the end result would always be the same. What I truly believe that it takes to overcome this addiction is for God to change the heart. On our own, we are bound to repeat our mistakes, but a changed heart and spirit will change the way we look at things and have a lasting impact in our lives.

We need Jesus. We need to truly believe that we are forgiven by His finished work on the Cross, and we need to pray daily that God would change our heart through His Holy Spirit. That's the only way. One of the things I try to do every day is to pray this prayer from Psalms. These verses encompass what I need to overcome these addictions. I pray for a pure heart. I pray that the Holy Spirit will sustain me:

Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. (Psalms 51:10-12, NIV)

If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble and sin, cut it off and throw it away from you [that is, remove yourself from the source of temptation]; it is better for you to enter life crippled or lame, than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into everlasting fire. If your eye causes you to stumble and sin, pluck it out and throw it away from you [that is, remove yourself from the source of temptation]; it is better for you to enter life with only one eye, than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fiery hell. (Matthew 18:8-9, AMP)

Even though long-lasting change requires God's help, we also have to take personal responsibility for our decisions. God has given us free will and we have the power to choose. One of the things I try to do is eliminate easy triggers that would lead to temptation. I'm not perfect at doing this, but it is something I try to do as much as I can.

For instance, when it comes to TV shows and movies, if the MPAA ratings indicate that the show or movie contains nudity or explicit sexual content, I'll try to avoid it and move on to something else. Before I watch something, I'll typically check websites that have already screened the show or movie to see what parental advisory warnings there are and use this information to make my viewing decision. Websites like Plugged In, Common Sense Media, and IMDb are really good resources for this.

Social media, and in particular Instagram, was another app I had to delete from my phone. While photography is a big hobby of mine, with Instagram, it was too easy to search for things that I shouldn't have been looking at. I'd also just be scrolling through my main feed and see sponsored posts of influencers and ads that would trigger further unnecessary temptations. The same thing would happen with Facebook. The way their algorithms seem to work, every other post popping up on my news feed would be an ad I didn't need to see. The way sex appeal has been pushed to market and sell things obviously isn't new, but the ads and posts that would come up were things I didn't need in front of my face every time I opened the apps. Again, unnecessary temptations.

When it came to technology, having access to a personal laptop was something I did not need to have either. Everything I need to do on a laptop, I can now do from my

phone. Plus, the laptop itself was just another gateway that would lead to temptation. Turning it into a “family” laptop where only my wife knew the password greatly helped and eliminated another potential avenue of slipping up.

Maybe the most important takeaway from this comes from Scripture itself, and that is to confess these sins to another believer and have them pray for you:

“Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.” (James 5:16, NIV)

It’s important to remember that we are forgiven through Jesus alone. This verse, however, puts an emphasis on the word “healed.” Having someone close to you who will pray for you and provide a level of accountability is very powerful and motivating. It’s just so important not to keep things bottled up and in the darkness. Sin thrives in the dark. We have to confess these sins and bring them to the light.

“Then there are those who avoid light at all costs, who scorn the light-filled path. When the sun goes down, the murderer gets up—kills the poor and robs the defenseless. Sexual predators can’t wait for nightfall, thinking, ‘No one can see us now.’ Burglars do their work at night, but keep well out of sight through the day. They want nothing to do with light. Deep darkness is morning for that bunch; they make the terrors of darkness their companions in crime.” (Job 24:13-17, MSG)

“For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. It is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. But everything exposed by the light becomes visible—and everything that is illuminated becomes a light. This is why it is said: ‘Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.’” (Ephesians 5:8-14, NIV)

When I read books in the past about overcoming addictions, I was particularly irritated with the ones that seemed to indicate that if you do “x, y, and z,” you’ll overcome the addiction and not have to worry about it anymore. The implication being that if this doesn’t work for me, and I still keep slipping, then I’m doing something wrong. This is far from the truth.

I believe that I’m saved through Jesus. My sins are forgiven by His blood. We also live in a fallen world and we’re not going to be perfect. I feel like right now I’m in a better place with this addiction than I have ever been, and yet one of the long-term consequences of this is that those temptations always linger in the back of my mind. I have to be careful not to run right into them.

I also want to recommend a book by Joe Rigney titled, *More Than a Battle*,⁶ for anyone dealing with these

⁶ Joe Rigney, *More Than a Battle* (Brentwood, TN: B&H Books, 2021).

struggles. This book has been an excellent resource for me and has greatly helped my understanding of the problem at hand.

I'll close with this verse:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us. We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith. Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now he is seated in the place of honor beside God's throne. (Hebrews 12:1-2, NLT)

Chapter 7: These Struggles Are Normal

As a Christian, I often struggled with this question: If I believe in Jesus and He dwells inside me, but I also still struggle with sin and addiction, don't those two things contradict each other? Logically, it just didn't make sense to me.

That question would just be the starting point. From there, the OCD would kick in.

“You don't see anyone else struggling with these questions.”

“Do you really believe this to be true?”

“Your faith is weak.”

“How does any of this make sense?”

“You keep messing up, while you see transformation in other people's lives. Do you really know Jesus the way they do?”

These questions would constantly nag at me. But the answers and comfort I was looking for came from Scripture. Sometimes it's comforting to know that we are all in it together and that everyone has things they're dealing with. My struggles may be different than yours, but neither of us needs to struggle in silence. No one is perfect and no one has it figured out, which is why we all need a Savior. I found these passages from Romans 7 to be of great comfort to me as I wrestled with these questions:

But I need something more! For if I know the law but still can't keep it, and if the power of sin within me keeps sabotaging my best intentions, I obviously need help! I realize that I don't have what it takes. I can will it, but I can't do it. I decide to do good, but I don't really do it; I decide not to do bad, but then I do it anyway. My decisions, such as they are, don't result in actions. Something has gone wrong deep within me and gets the better of me every time.

It happens so regularly that it's predictable. The moment I decide to do good, sin is there to trip me up. I truly delight in God's commands, but it's pretty obvious that not all of me joins in that delight. Parts of me covertly rebel, and just when I least expect it, they take charge.

I've tried everything and nothing helps. I'm at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me? Isn't that the real question?

The answer, thank God, is that Jesus Christ can and does. He acted to set things right in this life of contradictions where I want to serve God with all my heart and mind, but am pulled by the influence of sin to do something totally different. (Romans 7:17-25, MSG)

That verse essentially described what I was going through – the back-and-forth tug-of-war in my mind. It also poked a

hole in my thought about never seeing anyone else struggle with sin. These verses, and the entire book of Romans, were written by the Apostle Paul. Through God, Paul wrote thirteen out of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament. Reading that Paul had these same struggles and same thoughts brought comfort to my mind. We are all struggling with something. Just because we're followers of Jesus and our souls are saved, the earthly struggles we face don't simply disappear. The good news is that we don't have to bear them alone. Jesus is with us and He paid our debt in full. Jesus was tempted just like us and yet He overcame. He made a way for us through Him. None of us are worthy, yet we are so loved. It's such good news for all of us. We have freedom through Jesus. And this freedom is a free gift from the Father. None of us have ever earned or deserved it, and more and more I find such comfort in that. This doesn't mean we have a free pass for deliberate sin, but through Jesus we have His grace and mercy when we fall short.

Chapter 8: A Changed Heart, Convictions, and Surrender

“But if you’re not sure, if you notice that you are acting in ways inconsistent with what you believe—some days trying to impose your opinions on others, other days just trying to please them—then you know that you’re out of line. If the way you live isn’t consistent with what you believe, then it’s wrong.” (Romans 14:23, MSG)

I mentioned in the previous chapter about legalism that my way of thinking tends to be very black and white. I don’t operate well in the gray area. Over the years as I’ve grown in my walk with Christ, I’ve started paying more attention to my actions and the things that I enjoy as hobbies, whether it’s movies, TV shows, video games, books, or music. I attribute this to a new and changed heart the moment Jesus saved me.

“I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.” (Ezekiel 36:26-27, NIV)

I can testify about the verse above in my own life. I can look back at some of the shows I used to watch, or some of the music that I used to listen to, and it makes me cringe. Thinking about a lot of the lyrics that my favorite bands

used in their songs makes me wonder why I ever had those songs on repeat. Looking back on the way I used to think in my college years and early adult life, I can see the difference and I thank God for it.

With that said, I still enjoy watching movies and TV shows, I still enjoy playing video games, and I still love listening to music. I'd consider all those things hobbies of mine. Now that I'm a new creation in Christ and I can see how He is changing my heart, my mind starts to shift back to that legalistic mindset of what is right and what is wrong; what is sin and what isn't sin; what I should be doing and not be doing as a believer. I have a – let's say talent – for overanalyzing everything.

As I was searching for answers about right and wrong, God led me to Romans chapter 14. I recommend reading the whole chapter, if you can. In it are examples of debates between who's right and who's wrong when it comes to eating certain foods (kosher versus non-kosher) and what day is considered a Sabbath or holy day over others.

“One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. But whoever has doubts is condemned if they eat, because their eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin.”
(Romans 14:5-6, 23, NIV)

I believe a modern version of the debate about eating kosher or non-kosher, or which days are holier than others, could be substituted for any number of the debates we have within Christian circles today. For instance:

Some Christians like going to the movies.
Others think it's wrong.

Some Christians like to play video games.
Others think it's wrong.

Some Christians don't think trick-or-treating at Halloween is bad. Others do.

Some Christians think it's okay to be fans of Harry Potter. Others don't.

Some Christians think it's okay to listen to secular music. Others don't.

This list can go on and on. I wanted to get another perspective on this, so I sought advice from a pastor friend of mine, because it got to the point where it was a stumbling block for me. We discussed that "gray area." What my friend helped me see is that there isn't a specific commandment in the Bible that says it's not okay to watch Netflix or movies, or it's not okay to play video games, for instance. What he said was, as believers, when we're in those situations, the Holy Spirit convicts us so that we would know the right thing to do.

Now, you may read that and immediately think it gives you license to do what you want to do. As long as it doesn't feel wrong, it must not be bad, right? I thought that too at first. But that's the way the world thinks. If we're being honest with ourselves, we know that, as humans, we have a

baseline sense of what is right and wrong. And, as believers of Jesus and through God's Word, we know we are held to a higher standard. Eventually, I started to see and experience what my friend described. I would start watching a movie and, as it went on, I'd get a sense of uncomfortableness that told me I should turn it off. Or I would start listening to an album by a band I liked and, as soon as some of the lyrics came on, I'd realize I didn't want to listen to it. I started to recognize those nudges and convictions from the Holy Spirit. My prayer is that when I feel those convictions, I would listen to them and not just continue doing what I know I shouldn't do, because that is sin.

There are also those things that are clearly sinful or precursors to sin. As I mentioned previously, when it comes to what I watch, if it has nudity in it, that is a huge red flag for me because it leads to sinful thoughts.

In my search for guidance on this topic, God led me to the book, *The Things of Earth: Treasuring God by Enjoying His Gifts* by Joe Rigney.⁷ This book was extremely enlightening for me, and I'm so thankful that God put it in my path. One of the things he discusses is how to navigate the topic of evil in our culture and hobbies today. I highly recommend it to anyone who is having difficulty navigating this as a believer.

I would be remiss if I didn't include the advice from Paul in Philippians 4:

“Summing it all up, friends, I'd say you'll do best by filling your minds and meditating

⁷ Joe Rigney, *The Things of Earth: Treasuring God by Enjoying His Gifts* (Crossway, 2014).

on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious—the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse. Put into practice what you learned from me, what you heard and saw and realized. Do that, and God, who makes everything work together, will work you into his most excellent harmonies.”

(Philippians 4:8-9, MSG)

I wanted to close this chapter on the topic of surrender. I realized that a lot of my searching and questioning stemmed from being afraid of what I was going to have to “give up” now that I was saved. There were several verses that would immediately come to mind for me, and if I’m being honest, I would find them to be pretty intimidating. The first one was when a rich man approached Jesus to ask Him what *he* would have to do to get into Heaven:

Another day, a man stopped Jesus and asked, “Teacher, what good thing *must I do* to get eternal life?” Jesus said, “Why do you question me about what’s good? God is the One who is good. If you want to enter the life of God, just do what he tells you.” The man asked, “What in particular?” Jesus said, “Don’t murder, don’t commit adultery, don’t steal, don’t lie, honor your father and mother, and love your neighbor as you do yourself.” The young man said, “I’ve done all that. What’s left?” “If you want to give it all you’ve got,” Jesus replied, “go sell your possessions; give everything to the poor. All your wealth will then be in heaven. Then come follow me.”

That was the last thing the young man expected to hear. And so, crestfallen, he walked away. *He was holding on tight to a lot of things, and he couldn't bear to let go.* As he watched him go, Jesus told his disciples, “Do you have any idea how difficult it is for the rich to enter God’s kingdom? Let me tell you, it’s easier to gallop a camel through a needle’s eye than for the rich to enter God’s kingdom.” The disciples were staggered. “Then who has any chance at all?” Jesus looked hard at them and said, “No chance at all if you think *you can pull it off yourself. Every chance in the world if you trust God to do it.*”

(Matthew 19:16-26, MSG, emphasis mine)

The other verses were when Jesus was speaking with His disciples about following Him:

“Then he said to them all: ‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must *deny themselves* and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it. *What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self?*’” (Luke 9:23-25, NIV, emphasis mine)

There’s a lot to unpack here. First, one of the main takeaways from this passage about Jesus and the rich man is that the rich man asked what it was that *he* had to do to obtain salvation. I think that’s a common question for a lot of people. However, the attitude of the rich man in these verses seems to be that of cockiness or arrogance. To the

list that Jesus presents him with (don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't steal, don't lie, honor your father and mother, and love your neighbor as you do yourself), the rich man appears to shrug all those things off as easy, and asks what else is left for him to do. Jesus, knowing the condition of his heart, then tells him to sell everything he has, give the money to the poor, and follow Him. After the man heard this, he walked away.

He was holding on tight to a lot of things, and he couldn't bear to let go. These words right here are ones that would stick with me for the longest time. Words that I would purposely avoid because of how much I could relate to them. Words that appeared to be a standard that I could not live up to. Combine these words with Luke 9:23 about denying oneself daily and I was left with a sense of dread and the lingering thought that I couldn't do this.

I love playing video games. I love watching movies and television shows. I love good storytelling. As I mentioned earlier, I would consider all these things as hobbies of mine. This may sound ridiculous to some, but I started asking myself, "If it came down to it, could I give all these things up? Could I live the rest of my life without playing video games or watching movies? What would I do in my spare time if that was the case?" As silly as it sounds, I struggled with these questions and I was having a hard time being honest with myself. I kept going back to the rich man. *He was holding on tight to a lot of things, and he couldn't bear to let go.* He gained the whole world while he was alive on this earth but, in the end, he lost his soul.

Several months after the moment where Jesus saved me, I started wondering what it really means to say Jesus is Lord of my life. I realized I hadn't given up control yet (and yes, I still struggle with that today). I was still trying to hold on

to what I thought made me, well, me. I was putting myself first and was making everything about me. I was afraid to learn what “denying yourself” would mean. Did that mean I was destined to live a life of boredom and simplicity all in a vain effort to save my soul (legalism)?

We’ll discuss the answer to that question shortly. One thing I wanted to point out though is that through God’s grace, He helped me see where my “treasure” truly was. I was so focused on what I’d have to give up in order to follow Jesus that I had become the rich man in that story. I was holding on tight to a lot of things, and I was afraid I couldn’t let those things go. I was putting those things above God and making them idols. That revelation was eye opening for me, and I’m so grateful God helped me see my own selfishness.

That night, I got on my knees and prayed to God. I repented of my selfishness and my desire to be god of my own life. I repented for putting my love for “things and stuff” over God. I repented for the fact that video games, movies, and television shows had become my idols. I admitted that I had cared more about those things than following Jesus. Through the Spirit, I prayed a prayer of surrender to God. While I don’t remember the exact words, it was along the lines of, “God, whatever you call me to give up, I’ll surrender it to you. If you call me to give up video games, I’ll surrender them to you. If you call me to give up movies and shows, I’ll surrender them to you. My life is yours, and I surrender it to you. Help me to do this. Help me to listen to your convictions. Jesus, you are my Lord. My Savior. Thank you for saving me.”

After that moment, a heavy burden lifted off my shoulders. I had to have that moment of revelation to realize what my idols had been and be willing to listen to the Holy Spirit. If

God tells me to give up those things, however that looks, I need to surrender them to Him. It all starts with being honest with God and yourself and praying to Him about it. The peace that came from knowing that Jesus is Lord and being honest about what I was afraid of really helped me, and it can help you too.

Now back to the question, was I now destined to live a life of boredom and simplicity? The answer to that is no. God created each one of us with unique personalities, desires, and aspirations. God created the world we live in. God created all the good things in it for our pleasure and enjoyment, to ultimately point us towards Him and His love for us. He is a Father who delights in giving His children good gifts (Matthew 7:11, James 1:17).

“For everything God has created is *good*, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with gratitude...” (1 Timothy 4:4, AMP, emphasis mine)

“As for the rich in this present world, instruct them not to be conceited and arrogant, nor to set their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on *God, who richly and ceaselessly provides us with everything for our enjoyment*. Instruct them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous, willing to share [with others]. In this way storing up for themselves the enduring riches of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life.” (1 Timothy 6:17-19, AMP, emphasis mine)

“O taste and see that the Lord [our God] is good; How blessed [fortunate, prosperous, and favored by God] is the man who takes refuge in Him.” (Psalms 34:8, AMP)

Our God is so good, and I am so grateful that He takes delight in His creation. I love the parallels that God shows us from the physical to the spiritual. As an earthly dad, when I give gifts to my children, I delight in their joy and their smiling faces. I want them to enjoy those gifts. The same is true of our Heavenly Father.

“If you then, evil (sinful by nature) as you are, know how to give good and advantageous gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven [perfect as He is] give what is good and advantageous to those who keep on asking Him.” (Matthew 7:11, AMP)

“The Lord your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing.” (Zephaniah 3:17, NIV)

However, we still live in a fallen world. We, as sinners, easily twist these gifts and good things and use them for our own selfish desires. It's all too easy to turn the good things God gives us into idols that we desire more than God Himself. I find that I have to be extra cautious when it comes to this.

“because [by choice] they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator,

who is blessed forever! Amen.” (Romans 1:25, AMP)

What a powerful reminder and great perspective. There can't be anything in my life that I'm not willing to part with for Jesus' sake. That's a hard but necessary truth. I pray that the Lord will help me overcome my own selfishness and pride when it comes to these things. I'm actively praying right now that God would show me and give me clear signs when my head gets stuck in legalism, fear, and doubt.

I wanted to wrap up this chapter by going back to the story of the rich man. After he had walked away, the disciples were wondering who could possibly have any chance to enter Heaven.

Jesus looked hard at them and said, “No chance at all if you think *you* can pull it off *yourself*. *Every chance in the world if you trust God to do it.*” (Matthew 9:26, MSG, emphasis mine)

Ultimately, it's not about willpower or striving. It's not a checklist of all these things you have to do in order to be worthy. That's an impossible task. We are not worthy, but Jesus is. Jesus is the way (John 14:6). By His Holy Spirit, He will sustain us and carry us to completion until the day of Jesus Christ (Philippians 1:6).

Chapter 9: Examining Your Faith

“Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?” (2 Corinthians 13:5, NIV)

This is one of those verses that would trigger legalism in me. “Examine yourself.” “Test yourself.” “Fail the test.” Those are the words I would focus on. The misguided thought I had was that if I wasn’t able to do all the things I thought a real Christian should do, what was “enough” to ensure I wasn’t failing the test?

I’d see verses like Ephesians 2:8-9 where it clearly states that our works or attempts to keep the law do not save us:

For it is by grace [God’s remarkable compassion and favor drawing you to Christ] that you have been saved [actually delivered from judgment and given eternal life] through faith. And this [salvation] is not of yourselves [not through your own effort], but it is the [undeserved, gracious] gift of God; not as a result of [your] works [nor your attempts to keep the Law], so that no one will [be able to] boast or take credit in any way [for his salvation]. (Ephesians 2:8-9, AMP)

Then I would read verses like James 2:17, where we are told good works prove faith is real:

So you see, faith by itself isn't enough.
Unless it produces good deeds, it is dead and
useless. (James 2:17, NLT)

These verses seemed like a contradiction and were hard for me to wrap my head around. What I didn't understand was that it wasn't the works in themselves that would save me. That wasn't it at all. Jesus alone is Who saves us. Period. What those verses tell us is that good works are a natural result of faith in Jesus, not the other way around.

James goes even further by saying:

"You say you have faith, for you believe that there is one God. Good for you! Even the demons believe this, and they tremble in terror. How foolish! Can't you see that faith without good deeds is useless?" (James 2:19-20, NLT)

Again, that's not to say Christians aren't going to mess up and do foolish things. That's just part of being human. But if we claim to believe in Jesus and our lives don't reflect that belief, we need to examine our hearts. I used to think examining one's faith was a sign of unbelief, but in fact it is the opposite.

I sought guidance from my local pastor and what he said really helped me understand those verses better. He said:

The works follow faith. They do not contradict; they are two sides of the same coin. Always examine your faith. I examine mine every day. The enemy would love for you to be confused so that you don't "obey"

and simply start loving and serving people. The more you stay stuck in questions, the less you are activated to see the Faith and works combination coming alive through Jesus.

I saw that being stuck in this back and forth was preventing me from loving and serving the people around me, which is our God-given calling and purpose. I could be stuck constantly worrying about my own salvation and fail to show love to those who need it most.

I love how God always shows up during my questioning. As I was thinking about writing this chapter, one of my friends told me I should listen to a message from a recent Men's Night at his church. The keynote speaker was Rick Burgess. He said something that really resonated with me. He said, "Do you see the evidence of Jesus in your life? He's not so insignificant that you could somehow be right with Him and not see it."

Hearing that was a huge reminder that it's not about me and what I do. It's all about Jesus. I can see how Jesus has changed my life and my thoughts. I am a work in progress, but He hasn't given up on me and He won't give up on you.

Chapter 10: A Hardened Heart

“Your ancestors refused to listen to this message. They stubbornly turned away and *put their fingers in their ears to keep from hearing*. They made their hearts as hard as stone, so they could not hear the instructions or the messages that the Lord of Heaven’s Armies had sent them by his Spirit through the earlier prophets. That is why the Lord of Heaven’s Armies was so angry with them.”
(Zechariah 7:11-12, NLT, emphasis mine)

“Their minds are full of darkness; they wander far from the life God gives because they have closed their minds and hardened their hearts against him. They have no sense of shame. They live for lustful pleasure and eagerly practice every kind of impurity.”
(Ephesians 4:18-19, NLT)

I mentioned early on in the introduction that one of the things I struggle with is pride. When I think someone is telling me what I’m doing wrong or how I should be living my life, my walls immediately go up. The older I’ve gotten, the more I’ve noticed this. I had a tendency in my 20s to avoid going to church services. While this was partially due to laziness, I didn’t want anyone to question me or tell me to change my lifestyle. I didn’t want to hear anything that questioned what I was doing and how I was living.

“Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their own hearts to [sexual] impurity, so

that their bodies would be dishonored among them [abandoning them to the degrading power of sin], because [by choice] they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.” (Romans 1:24-25, AMP)

While I wasn't living a wild and crazy life during this time, I was still drifting further and further from God. My priorities were all over the place and I was resistant to positive change. In the throes of pornography addiction, I wanted to do what I wanted to do. I didn't care about the long-term ramifications that it had on my soul and thoughts. I was focused on following athletes, musicians, celebrities, politicians, and the things of this earth rather than the Creator Himself. I thank God that He didn't give me over to that hardened heart. There's a song by Benjamin Williams Hastings titled, “If It Wasn't for Jesus,” and the lyrics really sum up those years for me.

If I didn't know Jesus, there's no telling where I'd be right now. I was looking for comfort and fulfillment in all the wrong places. I thought I knew what freedom was because I could do whatever I wanted, but I really had chains of addiction and loneliness strapped to me. It was all about me.

I still struggle with a hardened heart at times. My wife will calmly make suggestions to me about certain things and my defenses will immediately go up, which leads to hurting her. I'll still be hesitant going into church sermons because I don't want to add anything else to the list of changes I need to make in my life. When I hear stories of miracles and things that seem impossible happening today, there's

often a cynical side of me that doubts the validity of what I'm being told.

That type of mindset is skewed though, and now that I'm more conscious of it, I need to continue to pray for a soft heart. It's so easy in our current culture to become jaded and closed off about things. You can't look at comments online, watch the news, or drive through rush hour traffic without tensions rising. The verse below is excellent guidance on navigating these times, and I pray that it will guide you like it has for me when I'm struggling.

“So, as God's own chosen people, who are holy [set apart, sanctified for His purpose] and well-beloved [by God Himself], put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience [which has the power to endure whatever injustice or unpleasantness comes, with good temper]”
(Colossians 3:12, AMP)

Chapter 11: Depression

“Why am I discouraged? Why is my heart so sad? I will put my hope in God! I will praise him again— my Savior and my God!”
(Psalms 42:11, NLT)

Depression is such a terrible thing. It sucks the life out of you and the people you love. It can be debilitating. It can destroy lives. Growing up, I had some lingering OCD tendencies that affected my daily life, but not any major depressive episodes. As an adult, that changed.

Over time, the OCD symptoms got worse. The constant repetitive thoughts, overanalyzing every situation, inventorying everything I did, and nervous ticks drastically started to increase. There would also be days where I felt sad. Days where I felt like breaking down. Days where I had no motivation to do anything and only wanted to lie down in a dark room and sleep until the feelings passed. In a lot of those instances, there wasn’t anything I recall that would trigger those feelings. It just got to a point where I knew this wasn’t the way I should be living my life.

I understand the sensitivity of this subject, so I don’t want to make broad claims about what someone should do who is struggling with depression. When you’re in the thick of it, you don’t want to hear platitudes of how things will eventually get better. What I do want to say is this:

Jesus loves you and is with you in the darkest moments, even when you don’t feel Him.

Please seek professional help. For me, therapy and long-term medications really have made a difference in my

quality of life. Life is too short to try and manage things on your own. The years will fly by and God has more for you in life, so please don't give up. Reach out to someone. If you try something and it doesn't work, keep trying. Solutions that work for some people may not work for others, but you shouldn't stop if the first thing you try doesn't show you immediate results.

I'll say it again, God has more for you in life. Please believe it.

“The Lord hears his people when they call to him for help. He rescues them from all their troubles. The Lord is close to the brokenhearted; he rescues those whose spirits are crushed.” (Psalms 34:17-18, NLT)

““For I know the plans I have for you,’ says the Lord. ‘They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope. In those days when you pray, I will listen. If you look for me wholeheartedly, you will find me.”” (Jeremiah 29:11-13, NLT)

Chapter 12: Purpose and Calling

“And He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their lands and territories.”
(Acts 17:26, AMP)

“For the Spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life.” (Job 33:4, NLT)

As I'll discuss in a later chapter, the Lord has often used music to speak into my life. There's a song called “A Life Worth Dying” by Josiah Queen that I found to be both inspiring and challenging. Listening to this song really made me stop and think about things, both in life and death. At some point in our journey, all of us ponder the meaning of life. God has placed it in our hearts to long for something more than what the world can give us.

“He has made everything beautiful and appropriate in its time. He has also planted eternity [a sense of divine purpose] in the human heart [a mysterious longing which nothing under the sun can satisfy, except God]—yet man cannot find out [comprehend, grasp] what God has done [His overall plan] from the beginning to the end.” (Ecclesiastes 3:11, AMP)

As much as I enjoy video games and storytelling, at the end of my life, when I finally meet Jesus, I don't want the only

thing that I have to show for my time spent on this earth to be my 107,199 Xbox Gamerscore, how many prestige levels I've reached in *Call of Duty*, or how many movies and shows I've watched. Instead, I want to hear the words, "well done." Again, it's not our deeds that get us to that point. It's only through trusting in Jesus. I do want to know that I walked in obedience and faithfully did the things I was called to do, however big or small they may be. Not only will obedience and faithfulness lead to helping others, but I'll also be a much more joyful and content person in the process. I recently saw a meme online that said, "You may not change the whole world, but you may change somebody's world." That's a powerful way to think about it.

"The master was full of praise. 'Well done, my good and faithful servant. You have been faithful in handling this small amount, so now I will give you many more responsibilities. Let's celebrate together!'"
(Matthew 25:21, NLT)

When I considered those who appeared to be making the greatest impact for Christ in this world, I often thought of missionaries overseas in dangerous areas, charismatic speakers up on a stage, and the worship leaders and artists who sang praises and touched people's lives with music. That left me wondering what I was supposed to be doing in my own life. What was my purpose? What was my calling? My life was going well, praise God, but why was I still lacking an internal sense of purpose?

In the midst of my questions, God spoke to me through a sermon at church titled, "Blessed are the Poor in Spirit." Pastor Chris Hodges explained:

Without Jesus, I'm living my life experiencing temporary joys. The game was fun, but now it's not so much fun. I enjoyed that meal, and I don't enjoy it anymore. Anhedonia is a symptom of depression. It's when the things that used to bring you pleasure don't bring them anymore. You've lost your joy. But you don't have to live that way. Praise be to the One, the God of our Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, in His great mercy He has given us new birth into a living Hope, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, AND (not just salvation), an inheritance that can never perish or spoil. An inheritance and purpose to impact the lives of others. I maintain the happiest people on the planet are ones who are impacting other people's lives for eternity. And without it, you're poor. And every other joy you chase, the vacations, food, football, fun, will last for a minute and fade away. But because of Jesus I can have a joy of living a life that glorifies God and impacts others. You'll never be happy until you're doing something with your life that impacts the life of another. The happiest people in the world are the ones that say, "Jesus, I need you."⁸

That really hit home for me and gave me a starting point for my search. At the time, I had a job that I enjoyed, but it wasn't something directly in ministry. I'm a fairly introverted person and tend to like roles where I stay

⁸ Chris Hodges, "Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit," (sermon, Church of the Highlands, Huntsville, AL, September 2021).

“behind the scenes” versus being front and center in the spotlight. I also don’t tend to be someone who can walk up to strangers and start conversations with people. How could God use me to share the Gospel and how could I help others?

A lot of times as humans, we tend to have a “go big or go home” mindset. We want our goals and outcomes to be grand and successful. We measure success based on social media likes, comments, and views, how big of an audience we’re able to reach, or how much money we raise. While those measurements aren’t necessarily bad, they tend to lead to disappointment when things don’t go according to plan or our vision isn’t realized. That disappointment can lead to discouragement and a fear of trying again when opportunities present themselves.

What God showed me during this time was that I didn’t always have to think so big when it comes to serving Him. It’s going to be the small, consistent things that make a difference in people’s lives. For me, this looks like trying to be the best husband and father I can be. This is something that always needs improvement and something I can do daily. To be present with my family and do my best to point them towards Jesus. That’s probably the most important role that I’ve been given and one that I need to work on the most. But my purpose also extends beyond the walls of my home. In Acts 17:26, God tells us He specifically created each one of us with unique gifts. He has placed us in a specific point in time and at a specific location. Each of us has been given a specific sphere of influence. There are people we can reach that others may not be able to reach. God has placed us where we are for a reason.

“In his grace, God has given us different gifts for doing certain things well. So if God has given you the ability to prophesy, speak out with as much faith as God has given you. If your gift is serving others, serve them well. If you are a teacher, teach well. If your gift is to encourage others, be encouraging. If it is giving, give generously. If God has given you leadership ability, take the responsibility seriously. And if you have a gift for showing kindness to others, do it gladly. Don’t just pretend to love others. Really love them. Hate what is wrong. Hold tightly to what is good.” (Romans 12:6-9, NLT)

“For we are His workmanship [His own master work, a work of art], created in Christ Jesus [reborn from above—spiritually transformed, renewed, ready to be used] for good works, which God prepared [for us] beforehand [taking paths which He set], so that we would walk in them [living the good life which He prearranged and made ready for us].” (Ephesians 2:10, AMP)

Knowing each of us has been given unique talents, ask God to show you what talents He has given you. Ask Him to give you opportunities to serve others and the courage to follow through when those opportunities are revealed. Keep praying until you have more clarity; He will answer. Going back to my example, since I’m not very good at open communication or public speaking, the Lord led me to writing opportunities as a way to serve and help others. Our church gives us the opportunity to respond to prayer requests and write letters to people in correctional facilities.

When I found out about this, it was the perfect fit for me. The writing from that led to creating a blog and eventually to writing this book.

I want to go back to the point about “going big” when it comes to serving. To be clear, there’s nothing wrong with that. It’s an awesome thing to have big ideas for serving and making an impact. I just have to remember that nothing’s wasted and there isn’t a limit on what God can do. If something doesn’t turn out the way I wanted it to or doesn’t get the reception I wanted, that doesn’t mean it was all for nothing. Our job is to be obedient to God and God’s job is everything else. When we step out in faith, we’re being obedient to God’s calling for us.

I also wanted to point out that while it’s good to use what you’re good at to serve God and find ways to help others, that doesn’t mean you should be afraid to branch out and step outside of your comfort zone. Just typing that out makes me nervous, but it’s true. Ultimately, it is God who will see us through until the end (Philippians 1:6).

“But Moses pleaded with the Lord, ‘O Lord, I’m not very good with words. I never have been, and I’m not now, even though you have spoken to me. I get tongue-tied, and my words get tangled.’ Then the Lord asked Moses, ‘Who makes a person’s mouth? Who decides whether people speak or do not speak, hear or do not hear, see or do not see? Is it not I, the Lord? Now go! I will be with you as you speak, and I will instruct you in what to say.’” (Exodus 4:10-12, NLT)

Chapter 13: Stigma

Recently, I was streaming a popular show when something stood out to me that was playing out on screen. It was the portrayal of the crazy, old neighbors who quipped that the solution to the problem at hand was that more people needed to know Jesus. The interaction obviously wasn't meant to be taken seriously, as the intention was to show how "out-of-touch" Christians are and mock their belief in Jesus.

This is nothing new. It's a tale as old as time and one of the enemy's tactics of deception. He does his best to discredit the Gospel and make it sound like believers in Jesus are the crazy ones. I've sadly lost count of the number of times in movies, TV shows, and books where the name of Jesus is misused. It's only gotten worse in the streaming era where there don't seem to be any boundaries.

I have experienced the enemy trying to discredit faith. In one instance, my wife and I were talking about how God was going to work through a situation that was happening. One of my immediate thoughts while we were talking was, "If someone heard me talking right now, they'd think I'm delusional and sound absolutely crazy." This wasn't the only time thoughts like that had come up, but it was the first time I really had to stop and think about why I was thinking like that.

In another instance, I was stopped at a red light in front of a church. It was just a normal weekday morning and a pastor was standing out front in the nearly empty parking lot. A man was walking across the street from a gas station parking lot and was using the church parking lot to avoid the busy street. I only caught the first moments of the

exchange before the light turned green, but the pastor greeted the man and asked him, “Can I talk to you about my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ?” The man walked up to the pastor and they started talking.

As I was driving ahead, I thought about the words “my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” Those are words that I’ve said countless times in my life. The scene I had just witnessed between the pastor and the passerby was incredible. From a non-believer’s point of view, I could see why it seemed crazy. A man goes out of his way to approach a complete stranger and inquire about his relationship with Jesus? That is a bold move. It made me question whether I could be this bold for Jesus, even when it seems crazy to others.

While my faith had been rekindled, I realized I had lived the past decade of my life not openly talking about Jesus, even to the people closest to me. I would pray, but my prayers were self-centered. I had spent ten years doing whatever I wanted and living for myself while God took the backseat. When I did finally start to speak about Jesus out loud, it sounded foreign to me. I’m also not a naturally outspoken person, which made speaking out about my faith far outside my comfort zone.

What I’ve found so far is that practice and repetition make speaking about our faith more natural. The more you do something, the easier it becomes. I’m still, and always will be, a work-in-progress on this side of Heaven, but I pray that, as life continues, it will become more natural for me, and any believer, to openly talk about God without fear of sounding foolish. Jesus is my Lord and Savior, and how eternally grateful I am for a faithful God who loves me even when I doubt and am skeptical.

“Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Philippians 2:9-11, NIV)

“For I am not ashamed of this Good News about Christ. It is the power of God at work, saving everyone who believes—the Jew first and also the Gentile.” (Romans 1:16, NLT)

Chapter 14: For God's Glory

“So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.” (1 Corinthians 10:31, NIV)

I always found the words “for God’s glory” to be confusing. I’d hear pastors say it a lot in sermons. I’d hear athletes say they’re competing to bring glory to God. I’d hear musicians who are performing and worshiping say they’re doing it to give God glory. It would get more confusing when I’d hear the words glory, praise, and worship all being lumped together in the same context.

In Exodus, Moses asks God to show him His glory. God’s response to Moses is so simple and yet so powerful. God’s glory is all His goodness. How awesome is that? The goodness of God is the glory of God. It’s so powerful because as God’s glory was passing by, God said that Moses could not see His face otherwise he [Moses] would die due to His presence:

Then Moses said, “Please, show me Your glory!” And God said, “I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim the Name of the Lord before you; for I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion [lovingkindness] on whom I will show compassion.” But He said, “You cannot see My face, for no man shall see Me and live!” Then the Lord said, “Behold, there is a place

beside Me, and you shall stand there on the rock; and while My glory is passing by, I will put you in a cleft of the rock and protectively cover you with My hand until I have passed by. Then I will take away My hand and you shall see My back; but My face shall not be seen.” (Exodus 33:18-23, AMP)

The New Testament goes even further and reveals that at the proper time, Jesus was revealed to us (Galatians 4:4). While Moses could not see God’s face back then, when the time was right and Jesus came to earth, we could see His glory and His face, because Jesus is God:

And the Word [Christ] became flesh, and lived among us; and we [actually] saw His glory, glory as belongs to the [One and] only begotten Son of the Father, [the Son who is truly unique, the only One of His kind, who is] full of grace and truth [absolutely free of deception]. (John 1:14, AMP)

After God led me to those verses, I was slowly able to understand, as much as my brain could comprehend, what the glory of God meant. However, I was still left with the question, what does giving God glory really mean?

As I was doing research on this to try and learn more, I found an article on the *Desiring God* website written by Peter Krol that summed it up perfectly. He writes the following:

Giving him glory includes offering him praise, but it also means much more. We glorify him by arranging our lives around

him and his priorities. We glorify him when he captures our attention and receives our time and resources. We glorify him when we drop everything to spend time with him. We glorify him when we care more about what he wants than about what we want. Even better, we glorify him when we want the same things he wants. That's why he's glorified in us when we're satisfied in him.⁹

That was about as practical as it gets. I was grateful God led me to that explanation.

If I'm being honest, there are times I struggle with the idea that God is first and I am second. He is greater than I. Humans have been struggling with this from the beginning. We are biologically wired for survival, so it makes sense that we would struggle with putting ourselves last. Add to that our sin struggles and a "me first" society, and it becomes easy to put ourselves on a throne rather than God. When my selfish and cynical side starts to nudge its way in, I have to stop and remember that God is God. That He was always there and always will be. That He created the universe and the concept of time. That He is outside of space and time because He created it. That I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for Him creating me. That He doesn't need me, and yet He wants me (and you) and loves us so much that He would send His only Son Jesus to die for us so that we could be reconciled to Him. That He wants to be in a relationship with us as His children through Jesus. That He is so powerful that my mind can't comprehend His goodness and wonder. That's what I need to remember.

⁹ Peter Krol, "God Is Like Dessert," *Desiring God* (blog), April 22, 2015, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/god-is-like-dessert>.

“Know and fully recognize with gratitude that the Lord Himself is God; It is He who has made us, not we ourselves [and we are His]. We are His people and the sheep of His pasture.” (Psalms 100:3, AMP)

“For from Him [all things originate] and through Him [all things live and exist] and to Him are all things [directed]. To Him be glory and honor forever! Amen.” (Romans 11:36, AMP)

Chapter 15: Praise and Worship as an Introvert

“O come, let us sing joyfully to the Lord; Let us shout joyfully to the rock of our salvation. Let us come before His presence with a song of thanksgiving; Let us shout joyfully to Him with songs.” (Psalms 95:1-2, AMP)

As I mentioned in an earlier chapter, I’m very much a “stay behind the scenes” type of person who likes to avoid being in the spotlight. I’m also more soft-spoken. I don’t enjoy big crowds, tend to go with the flow more than I make waves, and am more introverted than not. All these characteristics tend to make praise and worship in any public environment uncomfortable.

Growing up in a Southern Baptist church, I would often mouth the words during hymns, or just people-watch and focus on the people on stage. The worship part of the service was never something I looked forward to and my ideal situation would be to show up just as the message started. Sometimes that still holds true. The church we are currently going to is more contemporary, and I love seeing people with their hands lifted high worshiping God. It’s an amazing sight to see and hear people worshiping God in unison. However, the idea of joining in by singing and lifting my hands makes me extremely anxious.

The idea of drawing attention to myself is something I wish didn’t bother me, but it does. Ultimately, I know that the fear is a lie from the enemy, but that doesn’t make it easier.

The reality is that no one is going to judge me if I sing or open my hands. We are all there for a single purpose. It's not about us, but about God.

A moment that left a real impression on me was when we brought our kids to one of the adult worship services. At the start of the service, the lights started to dim and the music started. This was the first time they had experienced something like this, and I could tell they were awestruck by the experience. The moment that I was most struck by was when they looked up at their mom, whose hands were lifted up as she was singing, and they both began to do the same. It was an extremely touching moment for me to witness. To see children uninhibited by what people think, freely singing to God with their hands lifted high was truly incredible.

So where does that leave me? Even though there are times when I'd prefer to arrive at church just before the message, I still love worship music, and I love to worship God. When I'm by myself and have AirPods in, or I'm listening to music in my car or on our Alexa, I love to sing or hum songs of praise. I can feel God's presence during that individual worship time, and it lifts my spirit. All of that begs the question, "Why can't I do that in public?"

I'm thankful the Lord knows my heart, and I'm grateful that right now when I am at church during worship, I can close my eyes and sing the words in my head. I'm thankful that I can pray during times of worship to draw closer to God, and I'm grateful for that whole atmosphere when I'm in that moment. I'm grateful that I see other men who appear like me, so I know I'm not the only one who experiences this.

“O Lord, you have examined my heart and know everything about me.” (Psalms 139:1, NLT)

“But the Lord said to Samuel, ‘Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the Lord sees not as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.’” (1 Samuel 16:7, AMP)

The same thing happens when I’m in a group of fellow believers and I listen to them talk about their love for God. I can hear it in their voices and can see on their faces that they truly love God. Their enthusiasm is so encouraging and uplifting. I’ll nod along and agree with what they’re saying and may have things that I want to add to the conversation, but I just feel uncomfortable. I will look at them and think, “Why can’t I show that much outward enthusiasm for God? Is there something wrong with me or my faith? Is my faith not genuine like theirs?” And the cycle begins again.

I have to remind myself that God made me who I am. If the world had nothing but extroverts and strong personalities in it, it would likely be an insufferable place. Jokes aside, He created my personality and my temperament. He created you as you are, and He created me as I am.

“Oh yes, you shaped me first inside, then out; you formed me in my mother’s womb. I thank you, High God—you’re breathtaking! Body and soul, I am marvelously made! I worship in adoration—what a creation! You know me inside and out, you know every bone in my body; You know exactly how I

was made, bit by bit, how I was sculpted from nothing into something. Like an open book, you watched me grow from conception to birth; all the stages of my life were spread out before you, The days of my life all prepared before I'd even lived one day.” (Psalms 139:13-16, MSG)

With that said, there's always room for growth. There's always room to step outside your comfort zone. Personally, I do pray that one day I'll have the courage to worship freely in the moment with a sincere heart, and not have to worry about what other people “may” be thinking. I wouldn't want it to be for show or to prove to myself that I could, but to genuinely worship God. I pray that for myself and for others like me. At some point, we'll all get there. The process of sanctification will one day be complete, thanks to Jesus. Through Him, we'll get there.

“Let all that I am praise the Lord; with my whole heart, I will praise His holy name. Let all that I am praise the Lord; may I never forget the good things He does for me. He forgives all my sins and heals all my diseases. He redeems me from death and crowns me with love and tender mercies. He fills my life with good things. My youth is renewed like the eagle's!” (Psalms 103:1-5, NLT)

Chapter 16: Sleep

In my early notes for this chapter, I wrote the words “GET MORE SLEEP.” The irony of this is that it’s past midnight as I’m writing this chapter. I’ve always been a night owl. I feel most productive the later it gets, even when I’m tired. I strongly dislike waking up early in the morning. This can lead to problems.

The more tired I am, the more my guard is down. And the more my guard is down, the more likely I am to make poor decisions. I’m saying this because right before I started writing this, the temptation was strong to give into the lies of the enemy. I thank God that He gave me the will to use this as an opportunity to write instead of listening to the enemy’s lies.

What I’ve been trying to work on personally is knowing when I need to rest. Realistically, I’m not going to go to sleep at 9 o’clock every night, but when I sense that my body is getting worn down and the enemy’s lies and temptations are swirling around in my head at night, I’d be doing myself a favor by going to sleep. Scripture says it best, being well rested will result in the strength to stand tall and steady, ready to tackle the temptations the devil throws our way:

“I stretch myself out. I sleep. Then I’m up again—rested, tall and steady, fearless before the enemy mobs coming at me from all sides.” (Psalms 3:5-6, MSG)

Chapter 17: Irrational Fear

“Do not fear [anything], for I am with you; do not be afraid, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, be assured I will help you; I will certainly take hold of you with My righteous right hand [a hand of justice, of power, of victory, of salvation].” (Isaiah 41:10, AMP)

Another struggle that I have where OCD tends to exacerbate the problem involves irrational fear. There was a time at the height of my mental struggles when my mind was constantly playing tricks on me, trying to get me to believe things that weren’t happening, things that I knew were not true and didn’t happen. It got to the point where I could almost convince myself that the lies were real. One example of this was when I was looking for a space to park in a parking lot. If I hit a bump in the road, I’d worry that I hit someone and would have to drive around the parking lot multiple times just to “verify” that no one was there. It sounds absurd typing it out right now, but at the time, those things would feel very real. Over time, they would become overwhelming.

I had to learn that this sort of irrational fear has no place in our lives. It is a lie straight from the enemy, designed to distract and confuse. It’s a tactic that tries to prevent us from fulfilling our calling in life and from being present with the ones we love. If we spend all our time living in fear of what could happen, we’ll never be at peace and never truly live.

As I was struggling in this area, God provided guidance. It came through Scripture.

“Give your entire attention to what God is doing right now, and don’t get worked up about what may or may not happen tomorrow. God will help you deal with whatever hard things come up when the time comes.” (Matthew 6:34, MSG).

My life would be so much less stressful if I would take those words to heart. Reading that really helped change my mindset and attitude on fear. I don’t want to be oblivious and pretend it doesn’t exist, but this way of looking at it has helped me not to dwell on fear for too long. I don’t want it to consume my mind. It again comes down to control and surrender. I want to be in control of the unknown, and when different variables start to pop up, I lose the illusion of control I thought I had. I have to remember and take comfort in the fact that God is in control, and nothing is going to surprise Him. If you’re a believer, His Holy Spirit lives in you and will guide you forward. Trust in Him. If you are still on the fence, I want you to know that God will meet you where you are in your journey. No matter where you are, know that you can always seek Him and He will be found.

“For God did not give us a spirit of timidity or cowardice or fear, but [He has given us a spirit] of power and of love and of sound judgment and personal discipline [abilities that result in a calm, well-balanced mind and self-control].” (2 Timothy 1:7, AMP)

Chapter 18: What It Means to Pray

“I cry out to the Lord; I plead for the Lord’s mercy. I pour out my complaints before him and tell him all my troubles.” (Psalms 142:1-2, NLT)

I am a routine-oriented person. It’s very easy for me to pray out of repetition, where I’m praying to check off a box for the day instead of praying with actual sincerity. An easy example of this can be my prayers before a meal. A lot of times I’m led by my stomach and will quickly run through a prayer so I can get to my food. This is a fruitless prayer. What I need to remember when I’m praying like this is that it’s such a blessing to have food to eat. I need to make a habit of practicing gratitude and praying to God with sincerity, truly thanking Him for these blessings.

That’s just one example out of many where I’m “saying the right thing” without having the right heart posture. The verses in Psalm 142 remind and encourage me that my prayers shouldn’t be insincere or out of repetition.

I admit that when it comes to prayer, when my eyes are closed and I’m trying to focus, it’s hard for me to picture God. When I can’t picture who I’m talking to, it’s easy for me to get distracted and disinterested. When I find myself in this situation, I try to picture what Jesus looks like. I try to imagine what it would be like to be sitting across the table from Jesus and to see His face. I imagine myself having an actual conversation with the Lord, because that’s what prayer is.

“Philip said to Him, ‘Lord, show us the Father and then we will be satisfied.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Have I been with you for so long a time, and you do not know Me yet, Philip, nor recognize clearly who I am? Anyone who has seen Me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father?’” (John 14:8-9, AMP)

When I do this, it greatly helps me stay focused on my words and helps my mind not to wander. It's a good reminder for me that I'm talking to God and that I can talk to Him like it's an actual conversation, not just empty words. I love the advice from Jesus Himself when it comes to prayer:

Here's what I want you to do: Find a quiet, secluded place so you won't be tempted to role-play before God. Just be there as simply and honestly as you can manage. The focus will shift from you to God, and you will begin to sense his grace. The world is full of so-called prayer warriors who are prayer-ignorant. They're full of formulas and programs and advice, peddling techniques for getting what you want from God. Don't fall for that nonsense. This is your Father you are dealing with, and he knows better than you what you need. With a God like this loving you, you can pray very simply. Like this: Our Father in heaven, Reveal who you are. Set the world right; Do what's best—as above, so below. Keep us alive with three square meals. Keep us forgiven with you and forgiving others. Keep us safe

from ourselves and the Devil. You're in charge! You can do anything you want! You're ablaze in beauty! Yes. Yes. Yes.
(Matthew 6:6-13, MSG)

A lot of times, I just don't know what to say or how to say it. When terrible things are happening around the world, or when tragedy strikes, I know I should be praying, but the words aren't coming out or making sense like I want them to. Thank God that when I don't know what to say, His Spirit does:

Meanwhile, the moment we get tired in the waiting, God's Spirit is right alongside helping us along. If we don't know how or what to pray, it doesn't matter. He does our praying in and for us, making prayer out of our wordless sighs, our aching groans. He knows us far better than we know ourselves, knows our pregnant condition, and keeps us present before God. That's why we can be so sure that every detail in our lives of love for God is worked into something good.
(Romans 8:26-28, MSG)

I also believe it's important to pray together with fellow believers and to pray out loud. It's one thing that I don't do enough, mainly because I don't feel comfortable doing so. But there's something powerful about praying in the name of Jesus. The more you pray with others, the more comfortable you'll become. The more comfortable you become with prayer, the more you'll speak the name of Jesus out to a world that desperately needs Him.

I pray that whether you've prayed all your life, or never prayed at all, you would just talk to Jesus and tell Him

everything that's on your mind. Everything that's worrying you. Everything that you're afraid of. Anything that you're questioning. Anything that doesn't make sense (and trust me, the things that are going on in this world don't make any sense). He hears you. He, being fully God and fully man, He having walked among us and lived this life – He understands. Try to picture His face like He's in the room with you, and just talk to Him.

“Set me free from my prison, that I may praise your name. Then the righteous will gather about me because of your goodness to me.” (Psalms 142:7, NIV)

My mind can be my prison. Thoughts can be poisonous. Repetition, fear, anxiety, depression, you name it. Pray that God will set your mind free, and when it happens, know that it was something only He could do. Praise His name.

Chapter 19: Comparison and Contentment

“Make a careful exploration of who you are and the work you have been given, and then sink yourself into that. Don’t be impressed with yourself. Don’t compare yourself with others. Each of you must take responsibility for doing the creative best you can with your own life.” (Galatians 6:4-5, MSG)

Comparison is a trap, and it’s easier to fall into now than ever before. This isn’t meant to be a social media bashing chapter, however, there’s no denying the effect social media has had on our minds. From our friends and family to influencers, celebrities, musicians, athletes, ads, etc., there’s a constant stream of content and information shaping the way we think. For me, this inevitably leads to comparison and wanting instead of being content with who God made me to be and thankful for the blessings in my life.

I can have the best intentions to be thankful and present, but as the day goes on and I keep scrolling, thoughts of dissatisfaction inevitably creep in. I think it’s the natural side effect of social media, at least for me. I’ll see someone posting pictures of a trip, and I think, “I wish I was visiting that place.” I’ll see someone post a picture of a new house or car, and naturally think, “I wish I could be buying a bigger home or nicer car.” I’ll see hundreds of ads showing me all the things I should be buying or the glamorous lives of celebrities and influencers, and it’s hard not to let envy or greed creep in.

I took a yearlong break from social media, and recently decided to sign back on. One of the first things I noticed after being off for a year was how foreign it felt posting pictures of a family trip or a fun thing we did that day. It just felt like bragging and got me asking myself why I was posting at all. I also noticed how easy it was to get too comfortable with the scrolling and posting. The more comfortable I got with it, the more I could see how it was negatively affecting my thinking.

I realize this may not be the case for everyone. We all struggle with different things, and social media may not affect others the same way it affects me if I'm on it too much. I completely get that. I know there are positive things it can bring to people's lives. Photography is a big hobby of mine and I like using it as an outlet for that. I also know I need to be careful not to let it become just another distraction in a world full of distractions. I cannot let it prevent me from being thankful, content, and present with those I care about most.

When I stopped spending countless hours picking up my phone and scrolling social media, God helped me realize I have a life to live right now with people I love who need my attention. When I stopped browsing Zillow to see what houses were available, God reminded me how blessed I am to have a nice home to live in. When I stopped checking out the latest cars that were coming out and wishing for an upgrade, God taught me to be thankful for reliable transportation. It's not wrong to have dreams and aspirations for the future. Personally, it's more about accepting that if I'm not in the position to buy a house or car, or go on a big vacation, I probably shouldn't spend every day tempting myself with those things. The only thing that produces is a spirit of discontentment. I'm a very

slow and stubborn learner, but God is showing me that joy and peace don't come from always wanting more. True joy and peace come from being content with who God created me to be and the blessings He has given me.

At the time of this writing, I'm fully off social media, and it has made such a difference in my life. I don't want to tell people what to do, but let me just say this. If you're feeling anxious, depressed, angry, confused, cynical, or lonely, try taking a six month break from social media and see if it makes a difference in your life. There's so much vitriol online that sometimes it's good to step away and take a break from it all. It's all too easy to become jaded in the world today.

“Yet true godliness with contentment is itself great wealth. After all, we brought nothing with us when we came into the world, and we can't take anything with us when we leave it. So if we have enough food and clothing, let us be content.” (1 Timothy 6:6-8, NLT)

Chapter 20: Playing Catch Up

An OCD symptom I've dealt with for the longest time is constantly inventorying and checking off items on endless lists. This happens most with the stuff I want to get caught up on in my free time. The constant listing in my mind of each show, movie, or game that I've watched or played, along with the listing of the ones that I want to watch or play in the future gets extremely tiring. It also takes me away from being present with those around me.

While medication has played a big role in helping me deal with OCD symptoms, God has also taught me a lot about managing how I spend my free time. As far back as I can remember, I've always wanted to stay caught up with the latest shows, movies, books, podcasts, and games. If I started a show, I had to watch each and every episode until the very end of the series. If I started a movie, even if I knew it was going to be awful and wasn't enjoying it, I had to finish it. I had to make sure I was up-to-date on all the latest trends, which was an impossible task.

It got to the point where I wasn't even enjoying half the stuff I was watching or playing. I was just trying to complete one thing and move on to the next so I could check something off my list. There's no telling how much time I wasted on things I didn't even like. All of that begged the question, "If I'm not even enjoying these things and it's becoming a chore just to get caught up, what am I even doing? Why am I wasting my time?"

While I don't believe in Greek mythology, the tale of Sisyphus pushing the boulder uphill only for it to roll back down before he gets to the top is a good illustration for what I was doing. I was constantly adding things to a never-ending list and feeling overwhelmed when I wasn't checking those things off. It sounds ridiculous, but it had become a compulsion for me.

It was through this tiring process that God helped me realize I shouldn't be living like this. It wasn't sustainable or healthy, and it was taking me away from more important things. The realization that I didn't have to do everything, watch everything, or listen to everything was incredibly freeing. There's always going to be another show, another movie, another game, another album, another sporting event, or another audiobook to keep track of. It's impossible to think I'd ever get to the point where I'm "caught up" with everything I think I want to do. One thing that has helped me is reading the cliff notes of a long series or something I don't have time for to see how it ends. This has helped me to realize I'm not missing out. Instead, I'm able to invest more time in the things that really matter.

It's just not feasible to make time for everything, and there are some things we shouldn't be doing. FOMO (fear of missing out) is a real thing, but I have to remember that being a Christian means not going along with all the trends of the world. These things shouldn't have control over my life. Once I realized I didn't have to have a constant list of things to get caught up on, a weight was lifted from my shoulders. I am free through Jesus, and it's okay to say no to things that are exhausting or not fruitful. Ultimately, we are on this earth for a short period of time, a vapor (James 4:15). I'm glad God showed me I don't have to invest my time in things that don't produce good fruit. Saying no to

the wrong things gives us the ability to say yes to the things God wants for us.

Chapter 21: Thoughts On Music

Music has always played a huge role in my life. I love discovering new bands and going to live shows. One of the things I love most is when you find that one song that you can connect with and listen to on repeat, especially when the buildup of the bridge hits and leads into that final chorus. There's nothing like it. Music can help convey thoughts and emotions in a way that few things can. Music can also help draw you closer to God.

If you've never given contemporary Christian music (CCM) or worship music a chance and think the genre is boring, I get it. During my high school years, throughout college, and in my 20's, I was kind of a music snob. I was (and still am) big on pop/punk rock, metalcore, post-hardcore, alternative rock, and various pop and rap acts. I didn't give CCM a chance because, for one, I was far from God, and two, I thought songs that were only about God would be generic and boring.

That all changed in the fall of 2020 when Jesus changed my life. As God drew me closer, worship music began to take on a whole new meaning for me. It was a way to draw closer to God. My day could be full of stress, anxiety, and worry, but when I put in earbuds and turned on worship music, it shifted my entire mood. When our family has Alexa playing worship music in the background, the atmosphere in the house changes. It's a powerful act of praise.

I recently read an article on Billboard that inspired this chapter of the book. The headline read, “Inside Contemporary Christian’s Heavenly Rise to Among the Fastest-Growing Genres In the U.S.” I was surprised and encouraged. Seeing this article published in 2024 showed me God is still moving in our culture. To see more and more people listening to CCM/worship music and imagine how God is using music to draw people closer to Him is incredible.

With that said, I wanted to share a small playlist of songs that have drawn me closer to God and helped me in life. There were hundreds to choose from, but these 12 stood out to me. While a couple of the bands from this list aren’t from the CCM genre, their music has encouraged me and lifted my spirits during hard times. For family and friends, believers and non-believers who happen to be reading this, I hope at some point you’ll be willing to listen to these. If you happen to be struggling with your faith, stressed out, or simply bored, I encourage you to give it a try. Put on some headphones or turn up the speakers, press play, and close your eyes. I pray these songs will help draw you closer to God:

1. “Get Me Right” by Dashboard Confessional
2. “Dead Man” by Wolves At The Gate (or the acoustic version featuring Michael McGough for the non-metal fans)
3. “King of Hearts” by Brandon Lake
4. “You Will Be Saved” by Elevation Rhythm
5. “If it Wasn’t for Jesus” by Benjamin William Hastings
6. “My Story” by Genavieve Linkowski

7. “Downstairs” by Twenty One Pilots
8. “Help My Unbelief” by Chris Tomlin
9. “Bye Fear” by Elle Limebear
10. “Calvary’s Enough” by Brooke Ligertwood
11. “Still You” by Benjamin William Hastings
12. “Oldies Station” by Twenty One Pilots

Chapter 22: Priorities

“But first and most importantly seek [aim at, strive after] His kingdom and His righteousness [His way of doing and being right—the attitude and character of God], and all these things will be given to you also.” (Matthew 6:33, AMP)

The older I’ve gotten, especially now that I have kids, I’ve discovered how much I enjoy that one to two hours of downtime at the end of the day before I go to sleep.

Whether it’s playing a game, watching a show or movie, or just relaxing, I’ve found that decompression time to be invaluable in guarding me from burnout during a long week. However, when I begin to prioritize that time over God, it becomes all too easy to let that chunk of free time become an idol for me.

The issue dawned on me when I was playing a game one night and, as it was getting late, I realized I hadn’t taken the time that day to do a daily Bible reading. Honestly, I had no intention of reading my Bible that night and was planning on going to sleep when I finished playing. That was a big red flag moment for me and helped me see how my priorities needed to shift when it came to my time. If I was prioritizing my own downtime over taking the time to do a five-to-ten-minute Bible reading before the end of the day, I needed a heart check on what was truly important to me.

As I mentioned earlier, I believe it’s important to not get burned out on living life and carrying on in your roles and responsibilities. I believe that having a hobby or something you enjoy is essential in preventing that. Personally, it’s very easy for me to prioritize my hobbies over spending

time with God. That incident was a reminder for me that my relationship with God should be the most important priority, even though there are many, many times when I don't treat it as such. I'm so grateful God is always faithful to me even when I am not faithful to Him.

“The faithful love of the Lord never ends!
His mercies never cease. Great is His
faithfulness; His mercies begin afresh each
morning.” (Lamentations 3:22-23, NLT)

Chapter 23: If I Believe For Them, Then Why Not For Me?

“‘You don’t have enough faith,’ Jesus told them. ‘I tell you the truth, if you had faith even as small as a mustard seed, you could say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it would move. Nothing would be impossible.’” (Matthew 17:20, NLT)

I heard this scripture from a sermon recently and it really resonated with me. When I have read people’s testimonies of how they got saved or when I have seen people in church services give their lives to Jesus, I don’t question their salvation or doubt their authenticity. Instead, I see it as their lives being changed forever and their eternity secured through Jesus.

As an earthly father now, I can’t wait for the day when my kids (however old they may be) give their lives to Jesus and ask Him to save them. When that day happens for them, I’m not going to worry about their salvation or any legalism behind it because I know God loves them and Jesus has paid their price. When I think back on being a child and asking Jesus into my heart, I question the genuineness of my faith and whether I was actually saved because my understanding then wasn’t as strong as it is now. Why is it that I believe these things for everyone else, but have doubts when it comes to me?

As I discussed in chapters three and nine, it is perfectly normal to have doubts and to question and examine your faith. I believe those things can demonstrate whether a person's faith is genuine because it shows that they care to stop and think about it rather than taking their faith in Jesus for granted. On the other hand, if that questioning becomes the focal point of your thoughts, and it begins to lead to worry and paranoia about your salvation, that's a sign you've taken it a step too far. Fear doesn't come from God and the enemy can use this constant worry to distract you from living a present life and fulfilling the plans God has for you.

“For God did not give us a spirit of timidity or cowardice or fear, but [He has given us a spirit] of power and of love and of sound judgment and personal discipline [abilities that result in a calm, well-balanced mind and self-control].” (2 Timothy 1:7, AMP)

We can be our own worst critics. When this starts to happen to me and I start to doubt that the good things I believe for others can't happen for me, I have to stop and remind myself that it's not about me. It's about what Jesus already did. He started the good work in us and He will carry it to completion. Nothing can separate us from His love for us. We just have to trust in Him.

“I am convinced and confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will [continue to] perfect and complete it until the day of Christ Jesus [the time of His return]. [Rom 14:10]” (Philippians 1:6, AMP)

“For I am convinced [and continue to be convinced—beyond any doubt] that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present and threatening, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the [unlimited] love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

(Romans 8:38-39, AMP)

Chapter 24: Romans 3:22

“We are made right with God by placing our faith in Jesus Christ. And this is true for everyone who believes, no matter who we are.” (Romans 3:22, NLT)

I wanted to circle back on what God did in my life through this verse. I talked in detail about it in chapter two, but it bears mentioning again because that whole experience was amazing. The fact that I was going through a season of questioning why God would want to save me and doubting that the Gospel was meant for people like me, only to see Romans 3:22 in a dream. The whole thing still blows my mind when I think about it. For everyone who believes. What an amazing gift!

It's also amazing how easy it is for me to forget about the impact of this moment, to forget about what God has done in my life and move past instances in my life when God has shown up in incredible ways. Life moves at such a breakneck speed, and I'm often distracted, moving on to the next thing, stressed, or anxious. It's easy to minimize these experiences over time.

When I have a “that was definitely God moment,” it's always incredible, and I always have a renewed focus on Him for a brief burst of time. How quickly that starts to fade when I get distracted by other things. I let the moment lose its luster and drift back to my routine. Things inevitably start to go downhill in my faith and I start to feel distant from God again, all because I take for granted how amazing God is.

The fact that I live here in the United States is such a blessing. We are so fortunate, and it's easy to take things for granted. One of our pastors recently said in a sermon that he doesn't want to ever let the fact that Jesus has saved him become mundane. And I wholeheartedly agree. I don't ever want to take for granted that I am saved through Jesus alone. I don't ever want that to be something I gloss over in life.

I always need to remember what God has done in my life and be thankful for Jesus every single day, to dwell on Him. When there are days that I'm "not feeling it," I need to pray that God would soften my heart and remind me of all the good things He has done. I need to pray that God would restore the joy I had the moment I was first saved and pray that He will carry me forward in that peace and joy.

"Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me."
(Psalms 51:12, NIV)

Chapter 25: For Those Who Are Searching

While the majority of this book was written with believers in mind, I wanted to include a chapter for my friends, family, and anyone else reading this who has not accepted Jesus as their Lord and Savior. This chapter is for those who are living life but deep down know that something is missing, for those who are searching for something more in life, for those who feel a sense of unease about what happens after life on this earth, or for those who don't believe that there is life after death.

I don't want to turn this chapter into a Christian apologetics section. There are plenty of good books out there that can go into detail as to why people believe the Bible is real. As in the previous chapters of this book, I am writing based on my personal experience.

For anyone who is skeptical about Jesus and Christianity, I get it. There have been many times when I have asked myself if I really believe that Jesus is God. There have been many times when I have questioned if God is really out there, or if He is just an idea that we cling to in order to try and make some sense of this world. Let me just say that if He does not exist, our outlook is bleak. If it is true that there is nothing after we live this life, if it's as if we never existed at all, what's the point? Sure, we can come up with reasons while we're here (family, friends, enjoyment, acquiring wealth), but if it all inevitably ends, is there really any reason for living at all? Or if we all end up in the same place, is there no justice for the atrocities that are committed while we're on this earth?

I've tried to live for myself, to do whatever I wanted to do, to find freedom in "things" that the world told me were good. When I made that my sole purpose in life, I was absolutely miserable. What initially seemed cool and freeing led to a lack of purpose and self-loathing. The things I thought would make me happy eventually lost their luster, and I would move to the next thing to try and curb the craving of my soul. All of it led to an endless cycle of disappointment.

Now, as depressing as that sounds, that is not all there is to this life. There is more. He is more. In my lowest moments in life, I truly believe I have experienced God's presence through Jesus' saving grace. He changed my life, and if you open your heart to the possibility that He is real, He can change your life too. Scripture leaves this invitation open to anyone.

The Spirit and the bride say, "Come." Let anyone who hears this say, "Come." Let anyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who desires drink freely from the water of life.
(Revelation 22:17, NLT)

There may be some of you who truly do want to believe that Jesus is real but are still skeptical. Perhaps the world just looks too bleak, and you question how God could let certain things happen. At the same time, you don't want to close the door on Him because you still want to hold on to hope. Pray to God out loud and ask Him to help you in your unbelief. I have said this prayer many, many times, and He has helped me overcome the skepticism that I used to have.

"What do you mean, "If I can"?" Jesus asked. 'Anything is possible if a person

believes.’ The father instantly cried out, ‘I do believe, but help me overcome my unbelief!’” (Mark 9:23-24, NLT)

Maybe you’ve been hurt by the church in the past, or by people who say they are Christians. Maybe you see people who say they are Christians, but they’re messing up and doing things you wouldn’t expect a believer in Jesus to do. Sadly, church-hurt is very common and can keep people from wanting to believe. We as Christians can be terrible representatives of Jesus and the Gospel, but that’s also why we all desperately need Him. He made a way where there was no way. We are saved through Him and Him alone, not by our works or lack thereof.

Maybe you don’t think you have anything to offer, that too much has happened in life, or that you’re too far gone. Perhaps you’re like me and question why God would want to save you when you haven’t done anything to deserve it.

“But God put his love on the line for us by offering his Son in sacrificial death while we were of no use whatever to him.” (Romans 5:8, MSG)

Maybe all of that sounds good for other people who appear to have their lives together, but you’re nowhere close to that. Maybe you think God’s promise is only for certain people and not for you.

Romans 3:22. “*For everyone who believes.*” That verse changed the trajectory of my life, and it can change yours as well. God created and loves each and every one of us. His promise is for everyone who believes. Not just certain people. Not only for people who appear to have it together.

His promise is for everyone. He is patient with us and wants all of us to come to Him.

“Don’t overlook the obvious here, friends. With God, one day is as good as a thousand years, a thousand years as a day. God isn’t late with his promise as some measure of lateness. He is restraining himself on account of you, holding back the End because he doesn’t want anyone lost. He’s giving everyone space and time to change.”
(2 Peter 3:8-9, MSG)

If you made it this far and are still reading, I pray God will draw you close and touch your heart. I pray you’ll be open to seeking Him. I pray you’ll be open to the possibility that He is real and seek out other resources and churches to learn more. I pray you will call on His name to save you and choose to follow Him.

I’ll close with this wonderful promise from God:

If you openly declare that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is by believing in your heart that you are made right with God, and it is by openly declaring your faith that you are saved. As the Scriptures tell us, “Anyone who trusts in him will never be disgraced.” (Romans 10:9-11, NLT)

Chapter 26: Living Free

As I'm writing the final chapter of this book, it's hard to believe how far along it has come. I really believe God has had His hand on this project every step of the way. When the seed of an idea for this book was first planted in my heart, I had no idea how I would fill a whole book. It seemed like an impossible task. The more I got into it, the more the chapter outlines began to flow. As I was writing, I'd always come across the right set of scriptures, the right quotes from books, the right message topics from sermons, and the right ideas to fill the pages. God is faithful, and I truly believe He helped me see this through to the end.

One of the things I've been most impressed by is how God has answered my own questions and doubts while I was writing. There were topics I was unsure of and questions that I had that I couldn't figure out. In just the right moment, those answers were revealed. Writing this book has helped me so much, and every chapter of this book I plan to take to heart. I pray this book will help you if you have struggles and questions like I do. I pray that if you do not believe and happen to come across this book and read it, that God would use it to draw you closer to Him, and that it would inspire you to seek Him fully. Lastly, I pray that one day when I'm not here, if my children or their children are going through similar struggles and need guidance, this book would be a blessing to them.

For most of my life I was captive to my own mind, and I still struggle with aspects of that today. Whether it's worry, stress, anxiety, depression, guilt, legalism, or fear, I will ruminate on those thoughts day and night to the point of exhaustion. This isn't the way we're meant to live. If you

are a follower of Jesus, you have been given the right to become a child of the living God and an heir of His Kingdom.

“But to all who believed Him and accepted Him, He gave the right to become children of God.” (John 1:12, NLT)

Through Jesus Christ we no longer have to be held captive by our own minds. We are now more than conquerors through Him who paved the way for us.

“No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:37-39, NIV)

Living free doesn’t mean living perfect. Living free also doesn’t mean living a reckless life of perpetual sin. We are free from living a life of legalism because Jesus paid our price. This life is precious and I no longer want to live it being consumed by doubt and fear in every decision I make. It’s exhausting and unnecessary.

“It is absolutely clear that God has called you to a *free life*. Just make sure that you don’t use this freedom as an excuse to do whatever you want to do and destroy your freedom. Rather, use your *freedom* to serve one another in love; that’s how freedom grows. For everything we know about God’s

Word is summed up in a single sentence: Love others as you love yourself. That's an act of true freedom. If you bite and ravage each other, watch out—in no time at all you will be annihilating each other, and where will your precious freedom be then? My counsel is this: *Live freely*, animated and motivated by God's Spirit. Then you won't feed the compulsions of selfishness. For there is a root of sinful self-interest in us that is at odds with a free spirit, just as the free spirit is incompatible with selfishness. These two ways of life are contrary to each other, so that you cannot live at times one way and at times another way according to how you feel on any given day. Why don't you choose to be led by the Spirit and so escape the erratic compulsions of a law-dominated existence?" (Galatians 5:13-18, MSG)

As followers of Jesus, we are not promised a perfect life here on Earth. There are going to be difficulties, tragedies, sorrow, and strife. Jesus Himself said so.

"I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world."

(John 16:33, NLT)

This doesn't mean life isn't good and we shouldn't enjoy the life we have been blessed with. God sent His Son to Earth so we could experience abundant life rooted in Christ.

“The thief’s purpose is to steal and kill and destroy. My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life.” (John 10:10, NLT)

“As for the rich in this present world, instruct them not to be conceited and arrogant, nor to set their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on *God, who richly and ceaselessly provides us with everything for our enjoyment*. Instruct them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous, willing to share [with others]. In this way storing up for themselves the enduring riches of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life.” (1 Timothy 6:17-19, AMP, emphasis mine)

Ultimately, the conclusion I believe God has led me to is that living free means to completely trust in Jesus, to mentally and physically let go of anything that’s holding you back, and trust that Jesus will catch you every time you fall. Life is still a journey, and life is still hard. Slip ups are going to happen, we’re still going to sin, and every second of every day we’re going to need God’s grace and mercy. Sanctification is a continual process. Don’t get discouraged. Keep moving forward and don’t be afraid of growth and change. Living free means to let go of the weight we were never meant to carry — that sinking feeling we have to live perfectly to earn God’s grace. We can’t live up to that standard of perfection and holiness on our own. It’s only through Jesus.

The enemy can’t steal your salvation (John 10:27-30, NLT), but spiritual warfare certainly exists. He will do all he can to get you to doubt, fear, and question everything

you believe. Thoughts will pop in my head saying, “You haven’t done enough,” or “There are better people than you who love God more than you do and are going to Heaven, unlike you.” I’ll think, “I’m a fake and everything that I’m doing is in vain.” When these moments come, instead of lingering in doubt and fear, I have to turn the tables on the devil and say, “You know what, you’re right. Nothing that I have ever done or ever can do will get me into Heaven or save me. But Jesus did.” End of argument.

As I discussed earlier, I struggle with guilt when I find myself enjoying hobbies. I’ll hear sermons or read comments online that, while not intended to make people feel guilty, make me feel like I’m not doing enough in my relationship with Jesus. I think we can all agree that we should strive for growth in our faith and not become stagnant in the roles God has given us, because the work isn’t done until Jesus returns. I also think we shouldn’t feel guilty for living this life that we’ve been given. We’re not robots walking this earth without free will, but humans created in the image of God with unique interests, personalities, hopes, and dreams. Sometimes I find it difficult to keep these facts in mind, but that’s why I pray for discernment to know the difference between conviction from the Holy Spirit and condemnation from the enemy. I also have to be self-aware when my hobbies start to become my idols.

I have to remember Jesus said not to worry about tomorrow and that He would give us strength to deal with whatever the future may bring. I have to rely on the promise that He is faithful and His mercies to us are renewed each morning. There are things on this earth that we’ll never understand while we’re here, but we have to trust in Jesus. Through Him, we can truly live free.

“Give your entire attention to what God is doing right now, and don’t get worked up about what may or may not happen tomorrow. God will help you deal with whatever hard things come up when the time comes.” (Matthew 6:34, MSG)

“Those who know your name trust in you, for you, O Lord, do not abandon those who search for you.” (Psalms 9:10, NLT)

“Then they asked Him, ‘What are we to do, so that we may habitually be doing the works of God?’ Jesus answered, ‘This is the work of God: that you believe [adhere to, trust in, rely on, and have faith] in the One whom He has sent.’” (John 6:28-29, AMP)

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Do you feel mentally stuck and physically exhausted? Are you burdened by doubts, unsure that God exists or that He really cares about you? In *Living Free*, you'll learn how to access the power that is yours through Christ and conquer the lies that have been holding you captive. This book is more than a testimony; it's a testament to the boundless love of a faithful God who wants to meet you exactly where you are.

*Born in South Korea, E. J. Klutts grew up in Kentucky. A blogger turned author, his aim is to share stories of God's faithfulness. Outside of writing, E.J. finds his greatest purpose in being a Christ follower, husband, and father. *Living Free* is his first book.*

