



SURVIVING THE  
**CALL,**  
THE  
ASSIGNMENT  
&  
THE  
ANOINTING



# Surviving the Call, the Assignment & the Anointing

*Passing the Four Tests of Power, Promotion, Prosperity and Pleasure*

*“If God spares my life, I will cause a boy who drives the plow to know more of the Scriptures than you do.”*

— *William Tyndale*

Scripture quotations are from the New Living Translation (NLT) unless otherwise noted. Other versions quoted include the ESV, NIV, NKJV, NASB, AMP, AMPC, MSG and The Passion Translation (TPT).

Some names in this book have been changed to protect the people involved.

Companion to *The 9 Seasons of the Kingdom of God*.

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## INTRODUCTION

# The Boy Who Pushes the Plow

*Guard your heart above all else, for it determines the course of your life.*

### **Proverbs 4:23 (NLT)**

Five hundred years ago, a scholar named William Tyndale argued with a learned churchman who believed ordinary people had no business reading the Bible for themselves. Tyndale answered him, “If God spares my life, I will cause a boy who drives the plow to know more of the Scriptures than you do.”

He kept his word. He translated the Scriptures into the language of farmers and shopkeepers, and he paid for it with his life. But the plowboy got his Bible.

I write as one of those plowboys. I am not a famous preacher, and this book is not about me. It is faceless on purpose. “He must become greater and greater, and I must become less and less” (John 3:30). What matters is not the man behind the plow but the field God is asking all of us to break up before the rain comes.

### **Why This Book**

I have spent most of my life around gifted people. I played college football as “the guy,” went through the NFL Combine, and then spent years in the NFL as a journeyman. I know what it is to be celebrated, and I know what it is to be overlooked. Both taught me something about my own heart.

Somewhere along the way, I noticed that the Church prepares people well for hardship. We know how to pray through a diagnosis, a layoff, a funeral. What we rarely prepare people for is success. We celebrate the platform, the promotion, the increase and the open door, and we forget that Scripture treats every one of them as a test.

**Adversity reveals what we need. Power reveals who we are.**

That is what this book is about. Not the trials that drive us to God, but the blessings that tempt us to leave Him. Not how to get the anointing, but how to survive it.

### **Four Tests Every Anointed Life Must Pass**

John Wimber used to warn young leaders, “Beware of the girls, the glory and the gold.” Over the years I have come to see four tests that every called and anointed life will eventually face. This book is built around them.

1. **The Power Test.** What will you do when God gives you influence, authority and results?
2. **The Promotion Test.** What will you do when people give you a title, a platform and their praise?
3. **The Prosperity Test.** What will you do when God puts money and resources in your hands?
4. **The Pleasure Test.** What will you do with desire when the opportunities multiply and the accountability thins out?

None of these tests are new. Samson, Saul, Solomon, Judas and Balaam all took them. So did many men and women in our own generation whose names you know. Some passed. Many did not. I will tell some of their stories in these pages, soberly and with honor, because history is not only what happened in the past. It is a prophetic picture of what the future can become if we refuse to learn from those who went before us.

## Rocky Got Civilized

There is a scene in *Rocky III* that I have never forgotten.

Rocky Balboa is the heavyweight champion of the world. He has defended his title ten times. He has endorsements, photo shoots, a mansion and a bronze statue. Then a hungry contender named Clubber Lang challenges him, and Rocky's old trainer, Mickey, refuses to take the fight.

Mickey finally tells him the truth. Those ten title defenses were against hand-picked opponents, good fighters but not killers. "Three years ago, you was supernatural," Mickey says. "You was hard, and you was nasty, and you had this cast-iron jaw. But then the worst thing happened to you that could happen to any fighter. You got civilized."

Look at what happened to Rocky, and you will see all four tests.

- **Power.** His past victories bred complacency. He dismissed the threat in front of him and was humiliated.
- **Promotion.** Celebrity, commercials and statues replaced the gritty discipline that made him great.
- **Prosperity.** Mansions, tailored suits and a glittering gym numbed his desperation.
- **Pleasure.** Applause became his drug, and it dulled the hunger he needed to survive.

Rocky lost the fight and lost Mickey. And then, at rock bottom, his old rival Apollo Creed dragged him to a dingy gym in Los Angeles, stripped away the luxury and taught him to be hungry again. He ran barefoot on the beach, sparred in sweat-soaked tanks and won back his title. He found the eye of the tiger through pain.

That is the story of so many of us in the Church. The worst thing that can happen to a believer is not always persecution. Sometimes it is getting civilized: comfortable, celebrated, and no longer desperate for God.

*If you think you are standing strong, be careful not to fall. The temptations in your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will not allow the temptation to be more than you can stand. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you can endure.*

### **1 Corinthians 10:12-13 (NLT)**

## **The Reason for This Season**

In *The 9 Seasons of the Kingdom of God*, I described the seasons God walks His people through: Refinement, Repentance, Revival, Reformation, Recalculate, Revolution, Release, Reward and Repeat. This book is the long look at one of them, the season of Reward. I call it Surviving the Anointing.

It is the season when God entrusts you with increase, and it is the one we misdiagnose most. We think reward is the finish line. It is not. In the fire, the question was, “Will you survive?” In the reward, the question is, “Will you steward it?”

**In the world, power is the goal. In the Kingdom, power is the test.**

## **How to Read This Book**

Read it slowly. Read it with your Bible open. Most of all, read it with other people. Each chapter ends with a short section called For the Road: three questions and one line to carry with you. They are meant to be talked about around a table, in a small group, with a mentor or with your spouse. “Those who feared the LORD spoke with each other, and the LORD listened” (Malachi 3:16).

This is not a book about the people who fell. It is a book for the people who don’t want to. I have written it with grief over the leaders we have lost and with fear and trembling over my own heart. If any of it lands hard, let it

drive you to Jesus, not away from Him. The God who tests us is the same God who trains us. He does not give us power to watch us fail. He gives us power so that we can know His love, and then He gives us more power with which to love people.

Let's pick up the plow.

PART ONE

# The Power Test

*What will you do when God gives you influence, authority  
and results?*

## CHAPTER 1

# Power Is the Test

*In the world, power is the goal. In the Kingdom of God, power is the test.*

— Peter Vescovi

There is a comedy from 2003 called *Bruce Almighty* that preaches better than some sermons I have sat through.

Bruce Nolan is a television reporter who already has the love of his life, a woman named Grace, but he can't see her for looking past her. All he can see is the anchor desk he hasn't been given. When he's passed over one more time, he melts down on live television, loses his job, and turns his anger toward heaven. God, he decides, isn't doing His job.

So God hands Bruce the job, with two rules. He can't tell anyone he is God, and he can't override anyone's free will, because love requires a choice.

What Bruce does next is the most honest part of the movie, because it is exactly what most of us would do. He uses the power on himself. He gets his job back. He humiliates his rival on the air and takes the anchor chair. When the prayers of the world flood his head, he doesn't want the weight of them, so he answers "Yes" to every request at once. Within days the city is in chaos. A million answered prayers that contradict each other are not heaven on earth. They are a riot.

Then the bottom falls out. Grace walks away heartbroken, and Bruce discovers the one thing all that power cannot touch: her heart. Power could buy him the desk. It could not keep the woman. Broken, he stands on a

highway in the rain, lifts his hands, and finally surrenders. When God asks him what he wants now, for the first time the answer isn't about him.

I love that movie because it pulls back the curtain on the human heart. Hand an ordinary man the power of God, and the first thing he builds is a stage for himself. Not because power is evil, but because the heart that receives it has not yet been made ready to carry it.

**Power does not create your character. It amplifies it.**

## **What Power Really Is**

Power is simply the ability to influence, direct, or control people and the course of events. That is not a bad thing. God is all-powerful, and He shares His power with His people. Jesus promised we would receive power when the Holy Spirit came upon us (Acts 1:8). The problem has never been power. The problem is the heart holding it.

Here is what I have come to see about power and its twin, money. Both can get you what you want from God without asking His permission. That is what makes them so dangerous. Sought for its own sake, power creates a false sense of security and self-sufficiency. It talks us out of our convictions one reasonable step at a time, until we wake up spiritually bankrupt, surrounded by everything we wanted.

God knows this about us. That is why, in His Kingdom, the order is upside down.

*Remember, dear brothers and sisters, that few of you were wise in the world's eyes or powerful or wealthy when God called you. Instead, God chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise. And he chose things that are powerless to shame those who are powerful... As a result, no one can ever boast in the presence of God.*

**1 Corinthians 1:26-29**

In the world, you climb to be seen. In the Kingdom, you kneel to be trusted.

### **The Fire James and John Wanted**

There is a moment in the Gospels that shows how quickly good men can reach for the wrong kind of power.

Jesus has set His face toward Jerusalem. He sends messengers ahead into a Samaritan village, and the village refuses to receive Him.

*When His disciples James and John saw this, they said, “Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” But He turned and rebuked them, and said, “You do not know what kind of spirit you are of; for the Son of Man did not come to destroy men’s lives, but to save them.” And they went on to another village.*

#### **Luke 9:54-56 (NKJV)**

Think about who these men were. They had walked with Jesus. They had watched Him raise the dead. They had real access to real power, and the first thing they wanted to do with it was call down fire on people who had insulted their Master.

That is the difference between the power to avenge and the presence of God to change a heart. One burns a village. The other walks on to the next village and keeps loving.

So I have to ask myself, and I’ll ask you: what do you want power for? To bless people, or to settle scores? To serve, or to be seen?

*Everyone wants to be clothed with power, but no one wants to be stripped of self.*

— Leonard Ravenhill

Rick Joyner's allegory *The Final Quest* contains a word that has stayed with me for years: "If you do not know My love, then My power will corrupt you. I do not give you love so you can know My power, but I give you power so you can know My love. The goal of your life must be love, not power."

**The power of God without the heart of God will destroy the very people you are called to love.**

Jesus gave the most sobering warning of all. On the last day, some will stand before Him with résumés full of supernatural activity: "Lord! Lord! We prophesied in your name and cast out demons in your name and performed many miracles in your name." And He will answer, "I never knew you" (Matthew 7:22-23). Miracles were not the proof. Intimacy was.

### **David's Most Dangerous Opponent**

When we tell David's story, we usually line up his enemies. His brothers, who mocked him. The Philistines. Goliath. Saul, who hunted him for years.

But I believe David's most dangerous opponent was success.

*In the spring of the year, when kings normally go out to war, David sent Joab and the Israelite army to fight the Ammonites... However, David stayed behind in Jerusalem.*

### **2 Samuel 11:1**

The shepherd boy who once ran toward a giant with a sling had become a powerful king, resting on victories God had given him and letting other men fight his battles.

Notice where David did not fall. He did not fall in the caves of Adullam. He did not fall while running from Saul. He fell on a palace rooftop, secure, celebrated, and comfortable. Adversity had taught him dependence. Success tempted him toward complacency, isolation, and entitlement.

Sometimes the greatest threat to our faith is not the battle that drives us toward God. It is the blessing that convinces us we no longer need Him.

### **Forty Years in the Palace, Forty in the Wilderness**

How did Moses understand the dangers of power so well? He had lived inside it.

*It was by faith that Moses, when he grew up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He chose to share the oppression of God's people instead of enjoying the fleeting pleasures of sin... for he was looking ahead to his great reward.*

#### **Hebrews 11:24-26**

Moses spent forty years in Pharaoh's palace, then forty years in the wilderness tending another man's sheep. God used the second forty to undo what the first forty had built into him. He was forming the character that could be trusted with power, so that Moses could one day lead a nation through its own wilderness with a humble heart.

Mark Twain told a story that helps me see it. In *The Prince and the Pauper*, a prince and a poor boy trade places. The prince is thrown into the harsh world of the common people; the pauper wakes up in a palace with no idea how to handle it. When the prince finally takes the throne, he rules with a compassion he never would have learned in comfort. Coddled power breeds blindness to other people's pain. Sudden power overwhelms anyone who was never trained to carry it.

Power is not proof of God's approval, and prosperity is not a measure of spiritual maturity. Just ask Nebuchadnezzar: "When his heart became arrogant and hardened with pride, he was deposed from his royal throne and stripped of his glory" (Daniel 5:20, NIV).

Before Israel ever crossed the Jordan, Moses warned them where the real danger would come. Not in the desert. In the blessing.

*Beware that in your plenty you do not forget the LORD your God... For when you have become full and prosperous and have built fine homes to live in... be careful! Do not become proud at that time and forget the LORD your God... He did all this so you would never say to yourself, "I have achieved this wealth with my own strength and energy." Remember the LORD your God. He is the one who gives you power to be successful.*

### **Deuteronomy 8:11-14, 17-18**

This is the oldest pattern in the human heart. Abundance breeds pride. Pride breeds idolatry. And idolatry is the root of every other wickedness. None of us escapes that pattern by trying harder. Only a heart crucified with Christ, admitting its helplessness and surrendering everything, gives grace room to work, and even then it is the beginning of a lifelong battle, not the end of one.

**The wilderness is God's severe mercy. The full stomach is the real seduction.**

### **When Uzziah Became Strong**

Uzziah was one of the great kings of Judah. He took the throne at sixteen, sought the Lord, and God made him prosper. He built, he fought, he innovated, and his fame spread far. Scripture says he was "marvelously helped" (2 Chronicles 26:15, NKJV). Then comes one of the saddest sentences in the Old Testament.

*But when he had become powerful, he also became proud, which led to his downfall. He sinned against the LORD his God by entering the sanctuary of the LORD's Temple and personally burning incense on the incense altar.*

### **2 Chronicles 26:16**

Uzziah had been given authority over a kingdom, and he decided that his authority should reach into the holy place too. Success convinced him that the boundaries God set for everyone else did not apply to him. Eighty priests confronted him. He raged at them, and leprosy broke out on his forehead while he was still holding the censer. He lived the rest of his life in isolation.

Just because you're anointed doesn't mean you're surrendered.

A character in the television series *Vikings* says something that could have been written about Uzziah: "Power is dangerous. It corrupts the best and attracts the worst. Power should only be given to those who are prepared to lower themselves to pick it up."

Now look at Uzziah's son.

*Jotham did what was pleasing in the LORD's sight. He did everything his father, Uzziah, had done, except that Jotham did not sin by entering the Temple of the LORD... King Jotham became powerful because he was careful to live in obedience to the LORD his God.*

## **2 Chronicles 27:2, 6**

Same family. Same throne. Same kind of success. The difference was not his gifting. It was his care. He honored the line his father crossed.

**It is better to look unsuccessful in the eyes of the world than to cross the boundaries God has set in pursuit of the praise of men.**

The stage showcases the gifts God has given you. Your character reveals your devotion. John Wimber understood this when he described how he chose leaders: "I don't look for great gifting as much as I look for character. I want to see how they love and serve the local church. I want to see how they give... Gifting can get worked on; character is a must."

## **If It Happens Too Fast, It Will Not Last**

*An inheritance gained hastily at the beginning will not be blessed at the end.*

### **Proverbs 20:21 (NKJV)**

We live in a day when a gifted young worshiper can go from a living room to stadiums almost overnight. A song catches fire, a video goes around the world, and suddenly a twenty-something is carrying a global platform.

I am grateful for much of the worship that has come out of these movements. It has touched a generation. But I have also watched the cost. In 2021, one of the most anointed young voices of his generation, Dante Bowe, was removed from the worship collective that had made him known, over conduct its leaders said did not reflect their values. Others from that same wave have spoken openly about being overwhelmed by sudden fame, about how a little drinking to cope became all-consuming, and about having to step away to heal.

I don't say that to throw stones. I honor what God has done through these young men and women, and I know my own heart well enough to tremble.

The platform is not the problem. Premature power is. When the stage grows faster than the soul, the soul pays the bill.

## **The God Who Tests Is the God Who Trains**

In *The 9 Seasons of the Kingdom of God*, I wrote about the season called Reward. It is the season when God entrusts us with increase: influence, income, a platform, a gift that suddenly opens doors. And it is the season most of us misdiagnose. We think the reward is the finish line. It is not. It is a different kind of test.

The question in the fire was, "Will you survive?" The question in the reward is, "Will you steward it?"

If we don't stop and honestly assess our hearts when increase comes, we will misread everything. We will mistake worldly success for divine approval. We will assume that a promotion proves our hearts are healthy. We will use new authority to settle old scores, like two disciples asking for fire.

What should have been an eleven-day journey from Horeb to the edge of the Promised Land became forty years in the wilderness (Deuteronomy 1:2). That is what happens when pride resists correction and blessing is treated as permission.

But here is the good news, and it is the hope of this whole book. The God who tests us is the same God who trains us. He does not hand us power to watch us fail. He gives us power so we can know His love, and then He gives us more power with which to love people.

The rest of these pages walk through the four tests every anointed life must pass: power, promotion, prosperity, and pleasure. Not so you can judge the people who failed them, but so you can pass them.

## **For the Road**

1. If God handed you Bruce's power for a week, what would you honestly do with it first? What does that reveal about your heart?
2. Where are you more like Uzziah, assuming your success gives you permission, and where are you more like Jotham, careful to honor God's boundaries?
3. What has God put in your hands right now that He is asking you to steward rather than simply enjoy?

**Power is not God's reward for good character. It is His test of it.**

## CHAPTER 2

# Have It Your Way

*“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”*

**Isaiah 55:8-9 (NIV)**

When I was nine years old, my dad asked me to sweep the leaves. I had my own idea about how leaves should be swept, and I told him so. He told me how he wanted it done. I argued. It wasn't long before I got a spanking.

At nine, I thought the lesson was about leaves. It wasn't. The discipline exposed something in me that had nothing to do with brooms and everything to do with defiance. I didn't want to sweep the yard. I wanted to sweep it my way.

Years later the Lord brought that memory back to me, and He used it to show me something about His Church. So many of us have adopted a “this is how I do church” mentality. We have our styles, our schedules, our preferences, and our programs, and we will argue with our Father about every one of them.

### **Burger King Christianity**

Doing church our way can keep attendance up and the offering healthy. But it quietly damages true growth, accountability, and public trust. It breeds consumerism and routine, and it keeps us from asking the only question

that matters: are we genuinely building God's Kingdom and making disciples?

Everybody says they want revival. The problem is that we want Burger King Christianity. We want it our way, not according to the path laid out in God's Word and will.

Jesus confronted the religious leaders of His day on exactly this point. "Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down" (Mark 7:13, NIV). Then He went further:

*You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight.*

#### **Luke 16:15 (NIV)**

The real challenge before the American Church is to choose devotion over convenience, and to become a community where members willingly invest themselves in service and authentic fellowship instead of shopping for the best experience.

**Success in God's Kingdom may look like failure to others, and success in the world may earn the praise of men while grieving the heart of God.**

#### **A New Cart for an Old Ark**

One of the most sobering stories in the Bible begins with a worship service.

David has become king. He wants the presence of God at the center of the nation, so he goes to bring the Ark of the Covenant up to Jerusalem. He gathers thirty thousand of Israel's best men. There is music, dancing, harps, tambourines, and cymbals. It looks like revival.

*They set the ark of God on a new cart... David and the whole house of Israel were celebrating with all their might before the LORD... When they came to the threshing floor of Nacon, Uzzah reached out and took hold of the ark of God, because the oxen stumbled. The LORD's anger burned against Uzzah because of his irreverent act; therefore God struck him down and he died there beside the ark of God.*

## **2 Samuel 6:3-7 (NIV)**

David was angry, and then he was afraid. "How can the ark of the LORD ever come to me?" he asked. He left it at the house of a man named Obed-Edom, and for three months the Lord blessed Obed-Edom and his entire household (2 Samuel 6:8-11).

What went wrong? David had zeal. Thirty thousand men had good intentions. But they tried to carry the presence of God the same way the Philistines had carried it, on an ox cart (1 Samuel 6:7-8), ignoring the instructions God had already given.

Scripture was clear. The Ark was never meant to ride on a cart. It was to be carried on the shoulders of consecrated Levites, using poles God Himself had designed (Exodus 25:12-15; Numbers 4:15; 7:9). God's presence was meant to move at the pace of holiness, not the pace of convenience. It was carried by set-apart people, not by the gifted and influential.

David figured this out. When he tried again, he told the Levites, "Because you Levites did not carry the Ark the first time, the anger of the LORD our God burst out against us. We failed to ask God how to move it properly" (1 Chronicles 15:13). By borrowing the Philistine method, Israel had replaced obedience with a worldly model.

I see something more in that ox cart, and I offer it as a picture, not a doctrine. In the ancient world the ox was a symbol of labor, strength, and wealth. To me it reflects the spirit of Mammon and selfish ambition, the

attempt to harness God's presence to drive our own progress and influence. God required His presence to be carried another way: through submission, the fear of the Lord, and costly obedience.

The Church does the same thing whenever we borrow the world's methods to carry the presence of God. Too often we prescribe instant faith instead of enduring faith. We try to speed up the pace at which God intends to move, rather than submitting to the measured, holy process by which He dwells among His people. Influence crowds out intimacy, and ambition crowds out selflessness.

And here is the uncomfortable part. When you choose God's way over the cart, not everyone will thank you. God's ways often clash with human wisdom, and when your actions line up with His thoughts instead of someone else's plans, people will sometimes be offended. Let them be. Carry the Ark on your shoulders anyway.

**God's presence moves at the pace of holiness, not the pace of convenience.**

### **The Hand or the Heart**

There is a hunger problem in the American Church, and it isn't that we're starving. It's that we're full of the wrong things.

*When your soul is full, you turn down even the sweetest honey. But when your soul is starving, every bitter thing becomes sweet.*

### **Proverbs 27:7 (TPT)**

The ancient paths of discipleship have been traded for church entertainment. It is called relevant, but it lacks real power. Attendance may grow while true discipleship withers.

The true knowledge of God does not come instantly. It comes through becoming a living sacrifice, through simple obedience, and through the

gradual renewing of the mind (Romans 12:1-2). Stay on that road, and one day you will wake up to the living presence of God within you, fueled by childlike faith and a hunger for righteousness.

Here is how I see where we are:

We want an Acts 2 Revival without an Acts 2 Reformation.

We want an Acts 2 Presence without an Acts 2 Persecution.

We want an Acts 2 Outpouring without Acts 2 Obedience.

We want Acts 2 Power without Acts 2 Pressure.

We want Acts 2 Purpose without Acts 2 Pain.

We want Acts 2 Faith without the Acts 2 Fear of the Lord.

We want Acts 2 Greatness without Acts 2 Generosity.

We want Acts 2 Rewards without Acts 2 Responsibility.

Which raises the question every one of us has to answer: are we more interested in the hand of God than the heart of God?

Francis Chan has put his finger on it: “In our impatient culture, we want to experience biblical awe without biblical devotion. At the core of our dysfunction is not necessarily style or structure but lack of devotion.”

Paul told Timothy where the hand-seeking life leads: “People who long to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many foolish and harmful desires that plunge them into ruin and destruction... And some people, craving money, have wandered from the true faith and pierced themselves with many sorrows” (1 Timothy 6:9-10). The cure he gave was not more. It was enough. “True godliness with contentment is itself great wealth” (1 Timothy 6:6).

## Be Careful What You Pray For

Elmer Towns and Douglas Porter tell of a restaurant sign they once saw that read, “Pray for Revival in America.” Their reflection on it has marked me:

*When most people pray for revival, they’re probably asking for a wonderful experience at church next Sunday at 11:00 A.M. But revival is more than a Sunday morning experience. When you pray for revival, you’re asking God for life-shaking experiences that will cost you plenty... Usually when we pray for revival, we’re thinking about the bad guys, and we’re telling God to “sic ’em.” Little do we realize those “bad guys” might be the person we see every time we look in the mirror.*

— Elmer Towns and Douglas Porter, *The Ten Greatest Revivals Ever*

When we realize revival begins with us, the people of God, we get on our knees and ask the Lord to rescue us from our own selfish ambition and turn us from the pursuit of pleasure to the pursuit of righteousness. Like the church in Laodicea, we can say, “I am rich... I don’t need a thing,” while Jesus stands outside our own door, knocking (Revelation 3:17, 20).

And sometimes the most dangerous thing in the room is not a sin we can name. It is something good we have quietly put in His place.

A sister in the Lord I’ll call Michele shared a dream with me that I have never been able to shake. In the dream, Jesus appeared to her and said He wanted to show her something important. He led her down a long hallway into a glossy conference room. Around an ornate table sat some of the world’s most prominent ministers, their faces solemn and distracted. In the center of the room, under a harsh spotlight, a woman was dancing provocatively on the table, drawing the men’s eyes and laughter.

Jesus asked Michele who the woman represented. “Oh, that’s easy,” she said. “The Jezebel spirit.”

“No,” Jesus told her. “It’s the idol called ministry.”

He showed her how these leaders were pouring their time, affection, and energy into it instead of into Him, and mistaking that offering for devotion. Ministry had captured their allegiance by promising influence, approval, and success, all while hiding how empty it was. He reminded her of the church in Ephesus, which had worked hard and endured much, but had left its first love (Revelation 2:4). Michele woke with sorrow, and with resolve to pray for leaders to return to Christ-centered devotion.

Whatever weight you give a dream, the Word behind this one is clear:

*What is more pleasing to the LORD: your burnt offerings and sacrifices or your obedience to his voice? Listen! Obedience is better than sacrifice, and submission is better than offering the fat of rams.*

### **1 Samuel 15:22**

## **When Ministry Becomes the Mistress**

Jay-Z and Justin Timberlake's song "Holy Grail" tells the same story from the inside. It's about a man in a destructive love affair with fame. Fame lifted him up, and now it uses him. It demands everything, exposes him and keeps him paranoid. He knows it's toxic and says so plainly, but he can't walk away, because the rush, the applause and the power are too intoxicating. The song even reaches back to a rock star whose fame ended in tragedy.

Ministry can become that mistress. It's meant to be the fruit of intimacy with God, not a substitute for it. But it quietly offers a platform, a following, influence and the feeling of being needed. The leader still serves God in name, but his affections have shifted. He knows he has left his first love (Revelation 2:4). He feels the drain and the prayerlessness behind the pulpit. Still, he can't break it off, because the attention feeds something the secret place no longer does.

James doesn't soften it: "You adulterers! Don't you realize that friendship with the world makes you an enemy of God?" (James 4:4).

The song's title holds the deepest irony. The Holy Grail was the sacred cup, the object of the quest. The danger for a minister is pursuing the cup instead of the One who fills it. "For my people have done two evil things: They have abandoned me—the fountain of living water. And they have dug for themselves cracked cisterns that can hold no water at all!" (Jeremiah 2:13).

The way out isn't more output. It's the confession the song never quite makes: leaving the mistress and returning to the Bridegroom.

**Ministry makes a beautiful fruit and a terrible lover.**

"I would study more. I would pray more, travel less, take less speaking engagements... I took too many of them in too many places around the world. If I had to do it over again, I'd spend more time in meditation and prayer and just telling the Lord how much I love him."

**2011 INTERVIEW *with* BILLY GRAHAM**



## **The Cycle Nobody Escapes Alone**

There is an idea commonly attributed to the Scottish historian Alexander Tytler, though historians doubt he ever wrote it, that describes how nations rise and fall. It is often called the Tytler Cycle: from bondage to spiritual faith, from faith to great courage, from courage to liberty, from liberty to abundance, from abundance to selfishness, from selfishness to complacency, from complacency to apathy, from apathy to dependence, and from dependence back into bondage.

It is not a biblical term, but it is a biblical reality. You can trace it through the whole history of Israel.

In Egypt, Israel groaned under slavery, “and their cry rose up to God” (Exodus 2:23). He raised up Moses, and faith carried them out of Egypt and through the Red Sea. Under Joshua, courageous faith took the strongholds of Canaan. Under the peaceful reign of the kings, abundance came: “The people of Judah and Israel were as numerous as the sand on the seashore. They were very contented, with plenty to eat and drink” (1 Kings 4:20).

Then the wheel kept turning. By the days of Jeroboam II, Israel’s wealth had curdled into oppression.

*They sell honorable people for silver and poor people for a pair of sandals. They trample helpless people in the dust and shove the oppressed out of the way.*

### **Amos 2:6-7**

The wealthy of that era lounged on ivory beds and feasted, untroubled by the ruin of their nation and deaf to God's prophets (Amos 6:1-6). Judah's King Ahaz trusted Assyria's power instead of God's, stripped the Temple to pay tribute, and still "continued to reject the LORD" (2 Chronicles 28:20-22). It ended in Babylon, with a king of Judah bound in bronze chains and led away (2 Chronicles 36:6).

You can even watch the cycle play out in a single life. Solomon began in humble dependence: "I am like a little child who doesn't know his way around... Give me an understanding heart" (1 Kings 3:7-9). Faith and courage built the Temple. His reign brought peace and unmatched wealth. Then abundance turned to excess. He multiplied horses, the very thing God told Israel's kings not to do (Deuteronomy 17:16), and his many wives turned his heart toward other gods (1 Kings 11:1-6). The wisest man who ever lived could not out-think this cycle.

There is a saying often attributed to Sheikh Rashid, who built modern Dubai: "My grandfather rode a camel, my father rode a camel, I drive a Mercedes, my son drives a Land Rover, and my grandson is going to drive a Land Rover, but my great-grandson is going to have to ride a camel again." His explanation, as it is usually told: "Hard times create strong men, strong men create easy times. Easy times create weak men, weak men create difficult times."

Jesus rebuked the religious leaders of His day because they could read the sky but not the season they were living in (Matthew 16:1-3). I wonder what He would say about us. Look honestly at the Church in America and ask where we are on that cycle. I don't think we are in bondage. I think we are somewhere between abundance and apathy.

## Break the Cycle

So how do we get off the wheel? I believe the only way to break the cycle is to choose servanthood at the very moment we reach abundance.

Abundance is the turning point. Everything before it is built by faith and courage. Everything after it decays through selfishness, complacency, apathy, and dependence. But if, when God blesses us, we deliberately choose humility and selflessness, we can step off the downward path. Blessing can be sustained when it is poured out in service instead of hoarded.

That is what Scripture means when it says we are being transformed “from glory to glory” (2 Corinthians 3:18, NKJV). Not rise and fall, rise and fall, but ongoing renewal and reformation.

Jesus could not have been clearer:

*You know that the rulers in this world lord it over their people, and officials flaunt their authority over those under them. But among you it will be different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must be the slave of everyone else. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many.*

### **Mark 10:42-45**

The world’s view of success is a lot more honest about itself than we are. There is a well-known story from the Lakers’ championship years. Shaquille O’Neal reminded Kobe Bryant, “There’s no I in team.” Kobe’s answer: “Yeah, but there’s an M-E in it.” Anyone who has spent time in a locker room has heard some version of that. It is the carnal worldview of success in a single line.

The Kingdom flips it. “If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake and for the sake of the Good News,

you will save it” (Mark 8:35).

And servanthood is not passive. A lack of desire is rarely our problem. Dedication is. Breaking the cycle means turning holy wants into consistent action. “Lazy people want much but get little, but those who work hard will prosper” (Proverbs 13:4).

**Choose servanthood at the top of the mountain, and you will never  
have to climb out of the valley of bondage.**

### **These Are the Days**

I do not want to leave you with only warnings, because the Lord never does.

Corey Russell has shared a prophetic dream his friend Jeremiah Johnson received. In the dream, in the middle of the rage and rebellion described in Psalm 2, he boldly declared, “These are the days we have been praying for.” Not days of ease and comfort, but days when glory breaks through, when the groan of intercession turns into the shout of harvest, and when the world’s darkness becomes the backdrop for God’s light. Seasons of abundance tend to breed complacency. Seasons of crushing produce the desperate dependence on God that births genuine revival and reformation.

The crushing is not the end of the story.

*Arise, Jerusalem! Let your light shine for all to see. For the glory of the LORD rises to shine on you. Darkness as black as night covers all the nations of the earth, but the glory of the LORD rises and appears over you.*

### **Isaiah 60:1-2**

The world will not understand this. It never has. “The natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him” (1

Corinthians 2:14, NKJV). The world will keep reaching for the ox cart and the M-E in team.

But a remnant can choose differently. We can put down the cart and pick up the poles. We can stop ordering our faith the way we want it and start receiving it the way He gives it. We can choose servanthood when the blessing comes. And when we do, the presence that once struck down Uzzah will rest on our houses the way it rested on Obed-Edom's, and bless everything we have.

### **For the Road**

1. In what areas of your walk with God, or your church life, are you most tempted to say, "I want it my way"?
2. What "ox carts" have you or your church borrowed from the world to carry the things of God? What would carrying His presence on your shoulders look like instead?
3. Where are you on the cycle right now? If you are in a season of abundance, what is one concrete act of servanthood you can choose this week?

**Revival does not come to people who want God their way. It comes to people who want God His way.**

## CHAPTER 3

# The House of Saul and the House of David

*There was a long war between the house of Saul and the house of David. And David grew stronger and stronger, while the house of Saul became weaker and weaker.*

### **2 Samuel 3:1 (ESV)**

In Chapter 1 I quoted a line from Rick Joyner's *The Final Quest*. There is another passage in that book I have never been able to shake. I don't put dreams and visions on the same shelf as Scripture. Every word like this has to be weighed against the Bible. But this one stays with me because what it says is exactly what the Bible says.

In the vision, the Lord tells him there is great danger in walking in great power. Many of His messengers have fallen to that danger. Then comes the line that stopped me cold: "If you ever start to think the power is My endorsement of you or even of your message, you will open the door to the same delusion."

The same delusion is the one that took down Lucifer. He dwelt in the very presence of God and beheld His glory, but he began to look at himself more than he looked at the Lord. He took pride in his position and his power. And the vision warns that many who have seen His glory and been trusted with His power have fallen the same way. Then this:

*It is always good for you to lose confidence in yourself. I cannot trust you with the powers of the age to come until you do. ... It is not enough for you to just lose confidence in yourself. That only leads to insecurity if you do not fill the void with confidence in Me.*

— Rick Joyner, *The Final Quest*

Read that last part again. Losing confidence in yourself is only half the cure. Emptied of self and never filled with Christ, a man does not become humble. He becomes insecure. And insecure people with power are some of the most dangerous people on earth.

That is the war this chapter is about. It is a civil war, fought inside the heart of every person God calls. On one side is purpose: the quiet, surrendered desire to do the will of God in your generation. On the other side is power: the hunger to be seen, to be large, to be proven. Both armies wear the same uniform. Both quote the same Bible. And only one of them is still standing at the end.

## **Half Obedience**

David Ravenhill once said, “A leader’s values will determine the value of that leader.”

I’ll be honest with you. The first time I heard that, I didn’t like it. It sounded like legalism, as if a leader’s worth to God came down to a checklist. I even rewrote it in my own words to make it softer. But I have since gone back to the original, and here is the verse that sent me back:

*Saul and his men spared Agag’s life and kept the best of the sheep and goats, the cattle, the fat calves, and the lambs—everything, in fact, that appealed to them. They destroyed only what was worthless or of poor quality.*

### **1 Samuel 15:9**

God had told Saul to destroy everything (1 Samuel 15:3). Saul destroyed only what he didn't want. Scripture doesn't tell us exactly why he spared the enemy king. Maybe it was political, maybe greed, maybe the pride of parading a captive king as a trophy. But we do know what Saul did next. He went to Carmel and set up a monument "for himself" (1 Samuel 15:12). The only other man in Scripture who does something like that is Absalom, who raised a pillar to keep his own name alive (2 Samuel 18:18).

Saul's values had shifted. And when a leader's values shift, his value to the Kingdom shifts with them.

### **Half obedience is full disobedience.**

When the Lord told Samuel, "I am sorry that I ever made Saul king," Samuel "was so deeply moved when he heard this that he cried out to the LORD all night" (1 Samuel 15:11). He didn't gloat. He wept. That is how heaven feels when an anointed man trades his destiny for a trophy.

Answering the call on your life is one thing. Fulfilling your destiny in your generation is another. Saul answered the call. He was chosen, anointed and filled with the Spirit to the point that he prophesied (1 Samuel 10:10). Yet he failed to fulfill his destiny, because he was more loyal to man than devoted to God. He lost the war of surrender because he was too busy fighting the battle of success.

And it cost him more than he knew. Samuel told him, "Had you kept the command of the LORD, He would have established your kingdom over Israel forever" (1 Samuel 13:13). Instead, the throne passed to a shepherd from Bethlehem, and the promise of an everlasting kingdom came to David's line. Today the Son of David, Jesus, sits on that throne. Saul held a door in his hands that opened onto eternity, and he traded it for sheep.

Let me say something carefully here. You can be a beloved son or daughter in your legal position in Christ and still live like a prodigal in the renewing of your mind. Your adoption is secure. But your fruitfulness and your purpose in your generation can be wasted. Receiving forgiveness for your

sins does not always mean there will be no consequences for your actions. God's love for you remains constant. Your behavior may affect the level of trust He places in your hands.

## **Small in His Own Eyes**

When Samuel confronted Saul, he began with a reminder:

*Although you were once small in your own eyes, did you not become the head of the tribes of Israel? The LORD has anointed you king of Israel.*

### **1 Samuel 15:17**

There's a detail here that has haunted me. Saul was "small in his own eyes" before he became king. On the day of his coronation, he was hiding among the baggage (1 Samuel 10:22). But we never hear about Saul's wilderness season. David had the sheepfold, the cave of Adullam and the years on the run. Moses had forty years in Midian. Joseph had the pit and the prison. Even Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness before He ever preached a sermon. Saul went from looking for his father's lost donkeys to wearing a crown in a matter of days.

When people skip or rush their wilderness season, they will always find their value in their outward performance and position, instead of in their adoption and intimacy with God.

Saul being small in his own eyes looked like humility. It wasn't. It was insecurity, and those two can look almost identical from the outside. But they come from opposite places.

Humility is born from knowing that your value comes from your blood-bought adoption into God's family, not from what you can do for God. A humble person can be lifted high or set aside, and either way they're still a son.

Insecurity is a byproduct of the orphan mindset, the heart that never believes it truly belongs. It finds identity only through performance and position, measured by the value systems of this world. An insecure person hides in the baggage when he's nobody, and builds a monument to himself the moment he's somebody. Both are the same disease. That is why the wilderness matters so much. It is where God takes the orphan out of the son before He puts the crown on his head.

### **The Potter's Jar**

*But the jar he was making did not turn out as he had hoped, so he crushed it into a lump of clay again and started over. ... "As the clay is in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand."*

**Jeremiah 18:4, 6**

The jar wasn't crushed because it was ugly. It was crushed because it was ineffective. To be ineffective is to fail to produce the effect you were made for. A beautiful jar that can't hold water is still a failed jar.

So what made Saul an ineffective king? He chose power over presence. When Samuel finally pressed him, Saul confessed the root of it himself:

*Then Saul admitted to Samuel, "Yes, I have sinned. I have disobeyed your instructions and the LORD's command, for I was afraid of the people and did what they demanded."*

**1 Samuel 15:24**

*I was afraid of the people.* There it is. The man who stood head and shoulders above all Israel was ruled by the crowd.

**Whatever you fear, you will eventually serve.**

Victor Marx wrote words that read like an epitaph over a whole generation of leaders: "Anointed, called, even used by God. But they stopped obeying. They let pride in. Or lust. Or the love of position. ... Men who started

strong but didn't finish well. Not because God changed... but because they did." And then his charge: "Don't chase platforms, titles, or applause. Chase the King. ... Hell is patient. But so is Heaven. Finish well."

## **What We Worship, We Become Afraid Of**

The writer David Foster Wallace was not preaching a sermon when he said this, but he might as well have been:

*If you worship money and things, then you will never have enough.  
... Worship power and you will feel weak and afraid, and you will  
always need more power over others to keep the fear at bay.*

— David Foster Wallace

Everyone worships something, and whatever you worship will own your fears. Worship power and you will always be afraid of losing it. But if you treasure His presence above all else, then His will becomes the goal, and you are finally free.

That is why the Bible keeps calling us back to a phrase the modern church has grown uncomfortable with. "Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling" (Psalm 2:11, NKJV). Oswald Chambers said, "The remarkable thing about God is that when you fear God, you fear nothing else, whereas if you do not fear God, you fear everything else." Saul did not fear God, so he feared the people. David feared God, so he could face a giant.

Listen to how Isaiah describes the Spirit that rested on Jesus Himself:

*The Spirit of the LORD will rest on Him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and strength, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. And He will delight in the fear of the LORD.*

**Isaiah 11:2–3 (NASB)**

Jesus delights in the fear of the Lord. Do you?

There has been a silent divorce in the Church for years. We kept the love of God and quietly moved out on the fear of God. The love of God is precious beyond words, but when it is taught alone it distorts both the gospel and the image of God. The love of God births value and identity. The fear of God births obedience and character. We need both if Jesus is coming back for a bride without spot or wrinkle.

### **The House of Saul and the House of David**

Go back to the verse at the top of this chapter. There was a long war between the house of Saul and the house of David. David grew stronger and stronger. Saul's house grew weaker and weaker.

That war is still being fought, not between two families now, but inside every one of us. The house of Saul is the part of me that wants the throne for what it gives me. The house of David is the part of me that wants the Lord for who He is. And here is how David's story ends:

*For David, after he had served God's will and purpose and counsel in his own generation, fell asleep [in death].*

#### **Acts 13:36 (AMP)**

What a sentence to have over your life. When I stand before the Righteous Judge, I don't want to hear "he built a big ministry" or "he had a large following." I want to hear something like "he served My purpose in his generation, and then he came home."

The pursuit of God's presence and the pursuit of His power can look almost identical from the outside. The difference is the motive. The pursuit of power is rooted in a desire for status and performance, an attempt to earn a seat at the Father's table. The pursuit of presence is driven by hunger, obedience and surrender, because by the Spirit of adoption I have already

been seated with Christ in heavenly places (Ephesians 2:6). I am not working for a seat. I am working from one.

Is seeking power wrong? Absolutely not. The early church prayed for boldness and for signs and wonders (Acts 4:29–30). But power should be the outcome of intimacy, never the main aim. Prioritizing power over presence is like marrying for money or looks instead of love. The ring is real, but the heart is somewhere else.

*We don't seek God's power, we seek His presence. His power and everything else we need is always found in His presence.*

— John Wimber

God called David “a man after my own heart” (Acts 13:22). David was far from flawless, so what did God see? I see nine marks of the heart He is still searching for:

1. **Love** that lays down its life for its friends (John 15:13).
2. **Humility** that values others above itself (Philippians 2:3).
3. **Character**, because the Lord looks at the heart (1 Samuel 16:7).
4. **Meekness**, because God chose the weak things to shame the strong (1 Corinthians 1:27).
5. **Sacrifice**, laying down our lives for our brothers and sisters (1 John 3:16).
6. **Servanthood**, the only road to greatness in the Kingdom (Mark 10:43–45).
7. **Presence**, trusting in the name of the Lord rather than chariots and horses (Psalm 20:7).
8. **Dependence**: “Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit” (Zechariah 4:6).
9. **Commitment**, the heart “fully committed” that God’s eyes search the earth to strengthen (2 Chronicles 16:9).

Not one of these is a gift. Every one of them is a root.

**The house of Saul wants the throne. The house of David wants the King.**

## **The Supernatural Deception**

Jeremiah Johnson has written one of the clearest warnings I've read on what happens when a church falls in love with the house of Saul:

*When charismatic leaders create and cultivate atmospheres where the supernatural is valued over and emphasized above righteous and holy living, it produces followers like Simon the Sorcerer who hunger for power at the expense of intimacy. ... They will eventually tear down with their character what they built with their gifting and anointing.*

— Jeremiah Johnson

Simon the Sorcerer is a perfect picture (Acts 8:9–24). He believed. He was baptized. He followed Philip around amazed at the miracles. But when he saw the apostles lay hands on people and the Holy Spirit fall, he pulled out his wallet. He wanted the power without the cross. Peter's answer was blunt: "Your heart is not right before God."

Here is the pattern I've watched again and again. The love of power gives birth to control and insecurity, and those two unleash the orphan mindset, the heart that has to grab, prove and protect. But the love of His presence gives birth to character, and out of that character comes real power, the kind that releases the heart of the Father on the earth.

*I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward.*

### **Genesis 15:1 (NKJV)**

God did not tell Abraham, "I will give you a great reward." He said, "*I am your reward.*" In His presence is fullness of joy (Psalm 16:11). The

presence is the prize. Everything else is a byproduct.

So here is a hard question. If we want power to raise the dead but we don't want resurrection power over our sin nature, it may look like we are hungry for His presence. But we are only hungry for His power.

Johnson also put a name on what happens in a church full of orphans with platforms: "Who has the most people, services, campuses, money, largest social media following, etc. is an orphan talent show you don't want to be a contestant on! Find your identity in Christ, follow His voice, and take your eyes off of other people."

### **Forty-One Kings, Nine Righteous Men**

There's a line often attributed to Abraham Lincoln: "Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character, give him power." The British historian Lord Acton put it more darkly: "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

If you want to see the power test played out on the largest scale, read the books of Kings and Chronicles. Count the kings of God's people from Saul to the exile and you get forty-one: three over the united kingdom, nineteen over the northern kingdom of Israel, and nineteen over the southern kingdom of Judah (not counting the usurper queen Athaliah).

Of those forty-one, Scripture gives only nine the verdict "he did what was right in the sight of the LORD." That is about twenty-two percent.

Saul was rejected (1 Samuel 15:26). Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived and the builder of the Temple, let his foreign wives turn his heart to Ashtoreth and Molech, "and Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the LORD" (1 Kings 11:6). The kingdom was torn from his son. Every one of the nineteen kings of the north walked in the idolatry Jeroboam set up at Bethel and Dan (1 Kings 12:28–30). Eleven of Judah's nineteen did the same.

Here are the nine, and how each one stumbled:

1. **David** (Acts 13:22). Brought the Ark to Jerusalem and wrote the Psalms. Fell into adultery and murder, then repented with his whole heart (Psalm 51).
2. **Asa** (1 Kings 15:11). Tore down idols. Later leaned on the king of Aram instead of the Lord, and in sickness sought physicians but not God (2 Chronicles 16:7–12).
3. **Jehoshaphat** (1 Kings 22:43). Sent teachers through the land with the Law. Made an alliance with wicked Ahab (2 Chronicles 19:2).
4. **Joash** (2 Kings 12:2). Repaired the Temple. After his mentor died he turned to idols and had the prophet Zechariah stoned (2 Chronicles 24:17–22).
5. **Amaziah** (2 Kings 14:3). Obeyed God in battle against Edom, then brought home Edom's gods and bowed to them (2 Chronicles 25:14–16).
6. **Uzziah** (2 Kings 15:3). The king we met in Chapter 1, who grew powerful, then proud, and left the Temple a leper.
7. **Jotham** (2 Kings 15:34). Built and strengthened the land, but left the pagan high places standing (2 Kings 15:35).
8. **Hezekiah** (2 Kings 18:3). Smashed the idols and saw Jerusalem delivered from Assyria. Then proudly showed his treasures to the envoys of Babylon (2 Kings 20:12–18).
9. **Josiah** (2 Kings 22:2). Rediscovered the Book of the Law and led Judah's greatest reformation. Then ignored God's warning through Pharaoh Neco and died in a battle he had no business fighting (2 Chronicles 35:20–24).

Read that list again slowly. These are the *good* ones. And every one of them stumbled, several at the very height of their strength.

So what separated the nine from the thirty-two? Not perfection. What they had was the fear of the Lord, a heart that at its core submitted its authority back to God and returned to Him when confronted. Their story warns us that anointing without humility destroys destiny. Supernatural gifts demand daily surrender, or wealth and power become a trap. True authority flows from intimacy with God, not from ambition for position.

The house of Saul and the house of David are both still recruiting. Every day of obedience is a day David's house grows stronger in you.

### **For the Road**

1. Where in your life are you practicing “half obedience,” doing the part of God's instruction that costs you little and keeping the best for yourself?
2. Saul confessed, “I was afraid of the people.” Whose approval do you fear losing most right now, and what would change if you feared God more?
3. Looking at the nine marks of a heart after God's own, which root most needs tending in your life before God trusts you with more?

**Whatever you fear, you will eventually serve, so fear God and be free.**

## CHAPTER 4

# Sugar and Salt

*It's good to eat sweet things, but you can take too much. It's good to be honored, but to seek words of praise is not honor at all.*

### **Proverbs 25:27 (TPT)**

Some people avoid sugar at all costs because of what it does to the body. They read every label. They know exactly how many grams are in their coffee. They have watched a parent or a grandparent lose their eyesight, or a foot, to diabetes, and they decided it would not be them.

I respect that kind of discipline. But I wonder if we show that same caution when it comes to the praises of men.

The proverb above sets honey and honor side by side. A little sweetness is a gift from God. Too much, and the very thing that tasted so good starts to destroy you from the inside, slowly, quietly, without pain, until the damage is done. Praise works the same way. The pursuit of success is the sugar of the soul.

Jesus never called us the sugar of the earth. He called us something else:

*You are the salt of the earth. But what good is salt if it has lost its flavor? Can you make it salty again? It will be thrown out and trampled underfoot as worthless.*

### **Matthew 5:13**

Sugar makes things sweet. Salt makes things last. Sugar is about how it feels right now. Salt is about preservation, flavor and faithfulness over time.

When a believer trades the salt of obedience for the sugar of success, it doesn't happen in a day. It happens one compliment, one promotion, one standing ovation at a time.

**Sugar makes it sweet. Salt makes it last.**

## **Five Symptoms of a Sugar-Sick Soul**

Too much sugar over time can contribute to disease in the body. Too much craving for honor over time produces a sickness in the soul. Here are five symptoms to watch for, along with a simple practice for each.

### **1. A lack in personal character.**

Just as too much sugar disrupts the body's balance, too much honor creates a lack in our character and our relationships. It breeds pride and a skewed sense of self-worth. "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall" (Proverbs 16:18). "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble" (James 4:6). We watched it happen to Saul in the last chapter: his hunger for honor led him to disobey God's direct command. Pride distorts how we see ourselves, and that leads to strained relationships, poor decisions, isolation and conflict.

*Practice:* Learn to really listen. When you genuinely focus on what someone else is saying, humility and empathy grow, and the spotlight moves off of you.

### **2. Dependency on the praises of men.**

Sugar creates cravings. The more you have, the more your body wants. Honor does the same, creating a dependency on outside validation that keeps you from ever resting in who you are. Paul asked, "Am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? ... If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ" (Galatians 1:10). Jesus warned us not to practice our righteousness in front of others to be seen by them (Matthew 6:1). The Pharisees loved the praise of people, and it left them

hypocritical and blind (Matthew 23). When your identity depends on other people's opinions, your self-worth becomes as fragile as their mood.

*Practice:* Take time to reflect and journal. Ask why you do what you do, and settle your value somewhere the applause can't reach.

### **3. Damage to the heart and relationships.**

Unmanaged diabetes damages organs over time, especially the heart. An obsession with honor damages the heart too, leading to depression, broken relationships and lost integrity. "Pride ends in humiliation, while humility brings honor" (Proverbs 29:23). "Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another" (1 Peter 5:5). Nebuchadnezzar stood on his palace roof, admired the city he had built "by my mighty power ... for the glory of my majesty," and before the words were out of his mouth he was driven into the fields to eat grass like an ox. The good news is that his story ends with his sanity restored and his heart humbled before the Most High (Daniel 4). When we live for accolades, every unmet expectation becomes a wound.

*Practice:* Set goals that focus on growth and contribution rather than recognition. Learn to love the work for the Lord's sake, not the reward.

### **4. Blindness to the consequences of your actions.**

High blood sugar can damage a person's eyesight. The pursuit of honor blinds us too, so that we can't see the harm our choices are causing until the damage is obvious to everyone else. "When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with the humble is wisdom" (Proverbs 11:2). Paul tells us not to think of ourselves more highly than we ought, but with sober judgment (Romans 12:3). Samson is the tragic picture here. He chased what pleased his eyes until his eyes were gouged out (Judges 16). An overemphasis on self kills our awareness of others and leads to decisions that hurt everyone around us.

*Practice:* Build accountability. Invite a few trusted friends or mentors to speak truth into your life, and give them permission to say the hard thing.

### **5. The need for the discipline of moderation.**

Managing diabetes and managing honor both require the same thing: restraint. “Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand” (Philippians 4:5). “Godliness with contentment is great gain” (1 Timothy 6:6). Jesus is our model. Though He was God, He did not cling to His rights. He made Himself nothing, took the form of a servant, and humbled Himself to the point of death on a cross (Philippians 2:5–8). He never sought His own honor. He served and glorified the Father.

*Practice:* Practice gratitude daily. Thank God for what you have and name the contributions of others. Contentment is the cure for craving.

This whole word picture is a warning about the seductive nature of human praise and the risks that come with influence and advancement. God is not against excellence. Strive for it. But resist the lure of prideful thoughts, because they will damage the unity you value most. Don’t let self-promotion take root in your heart. Practice real humility by considering others more significant than yourself (Philippians 2:3).

## **The Eye of the Needle**

*Then Jesus said to his disciples, “I tell you the truth, it is very hard for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.”*

### **Matthew 19:23**

Why is it so hard for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God? I believe part of the answer is that it is hard for a *powerful* person to enter the Kingdom of God. Money is one of the purest forms of power this world knows. And success can open many doors where your character may fail to sustain you.

That is Peter Vescovi's line again, the one this book opened with: in the world, power is the goal; in the Kingdom of God, power is the test. Here are five places I have watched worldly success bankrupt godly character:

1. **Marriage.** Career success leads to neglecting a spouse. Work comes first, communication breaks down, and intimacy quietly dies.
2. **Parenting.** A hunger for status pushes a parent to pressure their children to excel. Instead of understanding and support, the home fills with resentment and rebellion.
3. **Stewarding money.** Wealth breeds greed and a focus on things, crowding out the generosity and faithful stewardship God calls us to.
4. **Staying too busy.** Constant busyness in pursuit of success leads to burnout and the neglect of spiritual growth and family time.
5. **Cutting off fruitful relationships.** Prioritizing power leads us to drop relationships that don't seem immediately useful, sacrificing the very community that builds character.

## Vanity of Vanities

*Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.*

### Ecclesiastes 1:2 (ESV)

Noah Webster's 1828 dictionary defines *vanity* as "emptiness; want of substance to satisfy desire," "fruitless desire or endeavor," and "trifling labor that produces no good." That is the sugar of success in a sentence. It tastes like substance, but it cannot satisfy.

Solomon, who had more power, wealth and wisdom than any king before him, put his finger on what drives so much of it:

*Then I saw yet another thing: envy fuels achievement. All the work and skills people develop come from their desire to be better than their neighbors. Even this is fleeting, like trying to embrace the wind.*

#### **Ecclesiastes 4:4**

Envy fuels achievement. That is the engine of the orphan talent show we saw in the last chapter. And Solomon of all people would know, because he won it, and he called the prize chasing the wind.

#### **The Two Refiner's Fires**

*Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tried you in the furnace of affliction.*

#### **Isaiah 48:10 (ESV)**

Most of us know about the refiner's fire of affliction. We call it "the crushing." But Proverbs describes a second furnace, and it is far more dangerous:

*Fire is the way to test the purity of silver and gold, but the character of a man is tested by giving him a measure of fame.*

#### **Proverbs 27:21 (TPT)**

Many are well aware of the crushing, but few have the wisdom to recognize the more dangerous fire of being treated like a Christian celebrity. It was not hardship in heaven, relational betrayal or lack of provision that caused Lucifer's fall. It was his beauty, his talent, his position and his rare anointing. Those gifts led him to believe he was worthy of glory that belonged to the holy God alone, and that delusion caused him to falter under the weight of his own anointing. Uzziah walked the same road: strong, then proud, then fallen.

Even the rapper Kendrick Lamar has a line on it: “Corrupt a man’s heart with a gift, that’s how you find out who you dealin’ with.” Solomon said nearly the same thing three thousand years earlier: “a bribe corrupts the heart” (Ecclesiastes 7:7). A gift in the wrong heart becomes a bribe. It buys the very soul it was meant to bless.

Power is not bad or sinful. But it becomes dangerous the moment a man’s gifting outgrows his character. That is the beginning of every downfall I have ever studied.

And the people will help you down that road if you let them. When Israel’s elders came to Samuel and said, “Give us a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have,” the Lord told him, “It is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king” (1 Samuel 8:4–7).

There is something in the fallen human heart that craves an earthly king to give us identity and value, gifts that can only come from the Father of lights (James 1:17). So, anointed leader, beware: if you do not resist the praises of men, they will crown you king.

And for the rest of us, here is a simple test. Do you honor your pastor, or celebrate a king? You’ll know by what you find yourself defending more often: the Word of God, or your pastor.

**The crushing is meant to make you. The celebrating is what can break you.**

## **The Super-Soldier Serum**

One of my favorite modern parables about surviving power comes from, of all places, a comic-book movie.

In *Captain America: The First Avenger*, Steve Rogers is a frail, sickly young man from Brooklyn during World War II, with asthma, a bad heart and a long list of other conditions. He tries to enlist again and again, under different names in different cities, and gets rejected every time. But he will

not stop trying, because he can't stand bullies, and he doesn't want to sit safe at home while other men lay down their lives. But Dr. Abraham Erskine, the scientist behind a secret super-soldier program, sees something in him and brings him into training. Steve is outmatched in every drill, and the colonel in charge wants a strong, athletic recruit for the serum instead. Then the colonel tosses a dummy grenade into the middle of the recruits. Every strong man dives for cover. The smallest man on the field throws himself on top of it to protect everyone else. That moment revealed what no fitness test could. Not his ability. His heart.

The night before the procedure, Erskine explains why he chose him. The serum doesn't just make a man stronger. It amplifies everything already inside him. Good becomes great; bad becomes worse. The first man to receive it, Johann Schmidt, was already hungry for power, and the serum magnified the monster that was already there. A strong man who has had power all his life may lose respect for it, Erskine says, but a weak man knows the value of strength, and he knows compassion. He asks Steve to promise that whatever happens, he will stay who he is: not a perfect soldier, but a good man.

That's this whole book in one scene. Power doesn't change who you are. It reveals who you are, and then it turns up the volume. Influence, wealth, authority, gifting and anointing can enlarge both our virtues and our hidden weaknesses. That is why God develops our character before He entrusts us with greater power.

*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

### **Matthew 5:3 (ESV)**

To be poor in spirit is to know how completely you depend on God. People who understand their need for Him are far less likely to mistake His power for their own. David knew it after his worst failure: "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise" (Psalm 51:17, ESV). God is not impressed by outward strength

that hides inward pride. He is drawn to the humble person who receives correction and stays aware of their need for mercy.

The world searches for the strongest, most impressive person in the room. God keeps choosing the overlooked, the underestimated and the seemingly unqualified, not so they can prove their power, but so He can show His. The danger is not power itself. The danger is receiving it without the humility, compassion and character it takes to steward it.

**Before God enlarges our platform, He develops our posture.**

Before He increases our influence, He examines our inner life. Before He trusts us with greater power, He teaches us that the power has always belonged to Him.

*Just as water reflects a person's true face, so the human heart reflects a person's true character.*

**Proverbs 27:19**

**Crushed and Wilderness-Trained**

*It was good for me to suffer, so that I might learn your statutes.*

**Psalms 119:71**

The anointing works like Erskine's serum. It is a magnifier of the heart's desire. It lifts the good in a heart to greatness, and it exposes the bad intentions of a heart and feeds further corruption. That is the very reason God so often chooses the broken.

A person who has never been crushed or wilderness-trained, who is adorned with gifts and favor and used to the privileges of influence and popularity, often becomes calloused and careless about the weight of the power they carry. But someone who has walked the path of weakness and being overlooked, who has been refined in the furnace of affliction, often has a heart that has been broken open to compassion and empathy. That kind of

soul, tempered by trials and crushing, is far better equipped to carry the power of God with humility, brokenness and a deep fear of the Lord.

Saul skipped the wilderness. Joseph didn't. He had thirteen years of pits and prisons before he had a palace. When he finally stood over the brothers who had sold him, he had the power to destroy them, and the wilderness had so shaped his heart that he used it to save them instead:

*You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good. He brought me to this position so I could save the lives of many people.*

### **Genesis 50:20**

There is a lovely picture of this in the Song of Songs: "Who is this coming up from the wilderness, leaning upon her beloved?" (Song of Songs 8:5, NKJV). The bride comes *up* out of the wilderness, and she's leaning. She went in standing on her own. She comes out leaning on Him.

### **Crushed, Then Carried**

I don't want to end this chapter in the furnace, because God doesn't leave us there. The same God who refines is the God who heals.

*The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit.*

### **Psalms 34:18**

If you have been crushed, whether by affliction, by your own sin, or by the weight of an anointing you weren't ready to carry, He is near. And weakness is not the end of your story. It may be the beginning of real strength.

*I will celebrate my weaknesses, for when I'm weak I sense more deeply the mighty power of Christ living in me. So I'm not defeated by my weakness but delighted!... For my weakness becomes a portal to God's power.*

## **2 Corinthians 12:9–10 (TPT)**

What looked like it should disqualify Paul made room for Christ's sufficiency to be put on display. His weakness became the very portal through which God's strength was revealed. Weakness surrendered to God is safer than strength governed by pride. People who have met their limits understand that every gift, every victory and every opportunity comes from Him. Seasons of weakness, testing and obscurity are often God's way of preparing our hearts for greater influence.

So embrace the crushing, be wary of the celebrating, and keep your eyes on Him. Sugar will always taste better in the moment. Salt is what lasts.

### **For the Road**

1. Which of the five symptoms of a sugar-sick soul do you recognize in yourself right now, and which practice will you begin this week?
2. If God's anointing works like Erskine's serum, magnifying what's already in you, what in your heart would you want Him to deal with before He amplifies it?
3. Which furnace are you in right now, affliction or praise? What might God be removing from you, or building into you, before He increases your influence?

**Power doesn't change who you are. It reveals who you are and turns up the volume.**

## CHAPTER 5

# Known by Fruit, Not by Gifts

*By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?*

**Matthew 7:16 (NIV)**

I once heard about a preacher who invited a little girl up onto the stage during his sermon and told her he had a gift for her. Then he started handing her twenty-dollar bills, one at a time, until she was holding two hundred dollars.

Then he asked her, “Has this money changed your character?”

She said, “No.”

He turned to the congregation and explained. The money had given her new opportunities, but it hadn’t changed who she was. A gift is freely received. Character has to be cultivated. And he warned them never to confuse the two.

That is this whole chapter in a little girl’s hands. God can put two hundred dollars, or two hundred thousand followers, or a healing gift, or a prophetic voice into your hands in a moment. None of it will change your character. It will only give your character a bigger stage.

**A gift merely needs to be opened. Fruit has to be grown.**

## What a Gift Says About the Giver

*And when God chooses someone and graciously imparts gifts to him, they are never rescinded.*

### **Romans 11:29 (TPT)**

In context, Paul is speaking about God's calling and gifts to Israel, but the principle reaches further. Both natural and supernatural gifts come from God, and He does not snatch them back the moment we stray. That is mercy. It is also why a gift can keep operating long after the heart behind it has drifted.

Here is why this matters so much. The theology you hold on this subject will decide who you trust in the Body of Christ. If you believe the anointing always equals character, you will be wide open to deception the moment someone walks in a powerful supernatural gift but lacks integrity. You'll assume that because God is moving, the man must be right. But if you understand that the anointing is first evidence of a good Heavenly Father, not proof of a submitted son or daughter, you'll be able to discern the difference between a powerful gift and a surrendered life.

*If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!*

### **Luke 11:13 (ESV)**

The gift says something about the Giver. It doesn't necessarily say anything about the one holding it. Paul says the Spirit distributes His gifts "as he chooses" (1 Corinthians 12:11, TPT). They are gifts, not grades.

Scripture is full of flawed people who spoke divine truth or carried supernatural power while their relationship with God was broken. Balaam, a pagan prophet, was compelled to bless Israel. Saul, a disobedient king, prophesied. Samson, a selfishly driven judge, carried supernatural strength.

Judas was sent out with the Twelve to heal and cast out demons, and nobody at the Last Supper suspected him. A slave girl in Philippi, possessed by a spirit, proclaimed true things about Paul. These accounts show God's sovereignty in using broken vessels. They also expose the difference between being used by God and truly knowing God.

Saul is the one that makes me tremble. When Samuel confronted him for sparing what God had told him to destroy, Saul insisted, "But I did obey the LORD" (1 Samuel 15:20). He honestly couldn't see it. How does an anointed leader end up in a sin Samuel compared to witchcraft? When he values his anointing more than the fear of the Lord. The king who had driven the mediums out of Israel ended his life disguised in the dark, consulting the medium at Endor (1 Samuel 28). Saul was anointed right up until the end.

Paul put the whole matter in two sentences:

*If I could speak all the languages of earth and of angels, but didn't love others, I would only be a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I had the gift of prophecy, and if I understood all of God's secret plans and possessed all knowledge, and if I had such faith that I could move mountains, but didn't love others, I would be nothing.*

### **1 Corinthians 13:1–2 (NLT)**

Read that slowly. You can do all of these things, tongues, prophecy, knowledge, mountain-moving faith, and not be motivated by love at all. An anointing may break yokes, but only fruit leaves a Christlike legacy.

It is hard to convince believers that anointing does not equal spiritual maturity, and I think the reason is that many of us don't really believe Romans 11:29. In the Body of Christ we get this backward. When we see someone with a spiritual gift, we assume they must have outstanding character. And when we meet someone with real integrity, we assume they

must have always been that way. We end up believing that gifts are earned and character is handed out, when it is exactly the other way around.

## **Effectiveness Versus Obedience**

When allegations against Mike Bickle came to light in late 2023, a whole movement was left asking a painful question: what do we do with everything that came through him? I will tell that story with more care in Chapter 10. For now I want to share the wisest response I read at the time, from a respected Bible teacher:

*Human nature is very complex... someone can write a beautiful song of praise to the Lord in the midst of a protracted struggle with doubt. ... But that worship song was real... We also know that people can operate in supernatural power while living in sin, like Samson... This is a chilling warning for those of us who point to the success of our ministry or the anointing of God on our lives as proof of divine favor. Careful! God knows our hearts.*

That's exactly the trap. We measure ourselves by effectiveness. God measures us by obedience. A ministry can be effective for years while the minister is disobedient behind closed doors, because the gifts and calling of God are given without repentance.

**Jesus never said you would know a man by his gifts. He said you would know a disciple by his fruit.**

Roberts Liardon spent years studying the great revivalists of the last two centuries for his *God's Generals* books, and what he found troubled him: several of these mighty men and women fell into moral and doctrinal scandal. He cried out to the Lord, studied the people of the Bible, and came away with an insight I've never forgotten. The anointing is not given for our everyday living. It's the strength of the inner man, the human spirit, that gives us the power to resist temptation and do what is right every day.

He pointed to Joseph and Samson. When Potiphar's wife grabbed Joseph, he didn't waver; he ran. Samson yielded the moment he saw what he wanted. Joseph had a strong inner man *and* the anointing. Samson had only the anointing. The anointing on a person is for public service, not private life. Many people try to live off it and never let their own spirit grow strong, and when the anointing lifts and temptation comes, they have no authority over their soul or body.

*I began to find out that the key is not how anointed you are; it is how strong you are in your inner man behind closed doors that counts.*

— Roberts Liardon

I say this with sorrow, not superiority: Liardon himself later publicly confessed a moral failure of his own. That doesn't make his insight false. It makes it more urgent. If knowing the warning were enough, he would have been the safest man alive. Knowing is not the same as abiding. Jesus never assumed that everyone who starts strong will finish. He said, "the one who endures to the end will be saved" (Matthew 24:13).

### **Successful, Anointed, but Dysfunctional**

You can fulfill an assignment, walk in supernatural gifting, and still miss your eternal purpose if intimacy, obedience, and surrender to Christ are absent.

*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**

They didn't say, "We knew You." They said, "We did things in Your name." Their whole résumé was their gifting. Spiritual activity is not the same as a surrendered relationship. "What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?" (Mark 8:36). You can build platforms, complete assignments, and move in spiritual power while slowly drifting from the One who gave them, building your own kingdom instead of His.

*Thus says the LORD: "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me, and what is the place of my rest?... But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word."*

### **Isaiah 66:1–2**

God isn't impressed with gifts, talents, and anointing the way people are. He gave them to you. What He longs for is that you steward them in wisdom and righteousness. Purpose is not found in performing for God. It is revealed in knowing Him.

### **Lonnie Frisbee**

Lonnie Frisbee was radically saved out of a hippie lifestyle of drugs, free love, and New Age spirituality, and he became one of the central figures of the Jesus Movement. God used him powerfully, first alongside Chuck Smith at Calvary Chapel and later with John Wimber in the early days of the Vineyard. Thousands came to Christ.

But Lonnie carried private struggles, including same-sex attraction and drug use, and his marriage to his wife, Connie, went through turbulent seasons. The story is told that during one of those seasons the priority was summed up as "God, ministry, then marriage," because "people are getting saved." Lonnie was eventually separated from the ministries he had helped birth. He later contracted AIDS and died of complications from the disease in 1993.

At his funeral, Chuck Smith eulogized him as a spiritual son and compared him to Samson: a man through whom God accomplished great things, yet who fell victim to his own struggles and temptations. Some felt the comparison was disrespectful. Others who knew him well felt it fit. I think it fits too, not as an insult, but as a warning that should make all of us tremble and pray for one another.

Samson “judged Israel in the days of the Philistines twenty years” (Judges 15:20), selfishness, lust, and arrogance and all, without losing his ministry or his anointing. In our own day, Mike Bickle and Robert Morris each had more than twenty years of deeply influential ministry before hidden sin came to light, stories we will face in Chapter 10. If you assume you are in good standing with God because the anointing is still flowing, the speck in your eye can grow into a mountain-sized blind spot. Your spiritual gifts reflect God’s goodness and mercy, not your own.

## **A Calling or a Career**

*Now great crowds accompanied him, and he turned and said to them... “Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it?”*

### **Luke 14:25–28 (ESV)**

Notice when Jesus said this. Great crowds were following Him. The moment the ministry looked most successful, He turned around and tried to thin the crowd. He wasn’t building an audience. He was building disciples.

A calling costs you everything. A career pays you for your time. The danger in our generation is that ministry has become a career path, with a ladder to climb, a salary to grow and a brand to build. And when ministry becomes a career, it can quietly become an idol. James warns, “Not many of you

should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly” (James 3:1, NIV).

## **When Ministry Becomes an Idol**

Here are twelve dangers that come with power and position in ministry. None of us is immune to them, and I include myself.

1. **Spiritual elitism.** A position can produce pride and self-importance. “Pride goes before destruction” (Proverbs 16:18).
2. **Burnout and overcommitment.** Jesus Himself told His disciples, “Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest” (Mark 6:31).
3. **Financial temptation.** “The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil” (1 Timothy 6:10).
4. **Hypocrisy.** A public persona that doesn’t match the private one. Jesus called it being a whitewashed tomb (Matthew 23:27–28).
5. **Doctrinal compromise.** Softening truth to please people or grow the ministry (Galatians 1:10).
6. **Neglect of personal spiritual growth.** Pouring into everyone else and running empty. “No branch can bear fruit by itself” (John 15:4).
7. **Family strain.** “If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God’s church?” (1 Timothy 3:5).
8. **Discouragement and criticism.** Constant criticism wears down morale, yet testing produces perseverance (James 1:2–4).
9. **Loss of focus on God.** The busyness of the work crowds out the Lord of the work (Matthew 6:33).
10. **Financial dependence on messages that move the heart of man instead of the heart of God.** Adjusting the message so donors aren’t offended, telling itching ears what they want to hear (2 Timothy 4:3–4).

11. **Dependence on a ministry that may be compromised.** When your livelihood is tied to a ministry that has drifted, your own integrity is at risk (2 Peter 2:1–2).
12. **Division when a theological community has errors.** Be like the Bereans, who examined the Scriptures every day (Acts 17:11).

*Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.*

### **1 John 3:18 (ESV)**

#### **Builders, Not Talkers**

When the arrogant king of Aram sent word that he was about to crush Israel, the king of Israel sent back a reply that has become a proverb:

*A warrior putting on his sword for battle should not boast like a warrior who has already won.*

### **1 Kings 20:11**

We live in a generation that loves to talk about what it's going to build. Be careful not to confuse the price of ignorance with the cost of discipleship. Some of the pain we call "persecution" or "the cost of the call" is really just the bill for not counting the cost before we started.

Jeremiah Johnson says it with fire:

*Pioneers are builders more than they are talkers... They are focused on producing fruit rather than false fire. ... Pioneer? What have they built? What's the address? ... Pioneering is about working, building, and sacrificing for His legacy!*

— Jeremiah Johnson

Jesus told a story about two builders, one who built on the rock and one who built on sand (Matthew 7:24–27). From the street, both houses looked

the same until the storm came. Many people talk about doing something significant. Very few cultivate the character and discipline to stay submitted to the True Vine and actually see it happen. “For many are called, but few are chosen” (Matthew 22:14). Be among the few.

### **Someone to Mock, or Someone to Mature?**

Fruit cuts both ways. It is how we discern our leaders, and it is also how we treat them when they fall short.

During the 2025 NFL Draft, quarterback Shedeur Sanders sat waiting for a phone call that kept not coming. He had been talked about as a first-round talent. The first round came and went. On the second day, his phone finally rang. A voice claiming to be a team executive told him he was about to be drafted, and then added that he’d have to wait a little longer. It was a prank. The caller turned out to be the son of an NFL assistant coach who had gotten hold of Sanders’ private number, and the league later fined both the coach and his team. Sanders kept waiting until the fifth round, when he was finally selected with the 144th pick.

I’m not using that story to rule on anyone’s heart. I’m using it because it shows how easily a culture can stop seeing a person. Professional athletes get reduced to statistics and draft grades, cheered, mocked, and traded. We forget that every one of them bears the image of God (Genesis 1:27).

The Church does the same thing to its leaders. Sometimes we idolize them, and sometimes we tear them apart, and both are ways of forgetting they are human. Idolization puts a weight on their souls no human was built to carry. Toxic scrutiny strips them of dignity.

But compassion cannot become an excuse to abandon biblical accountability. Leaders are to shepherd “not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock” (1 Peter 5:2–3). So how do we hold both? The same way a good

coach does. A great coach critiques a player for the sake of his growth, not his humiliation. He tells the truth because he believes in the man.

**A critical spirit sees someone to mock. Biblical correction sees someone to mature.**

### **Not Perfection, but Correction**

When I talk about surviving the anointing, I am not talking about perfection. “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). I am talking about correction, confession, and accountability.

Here is a line I want you to remember: if we cover our sins, God will reveal them. If we confess our sins, God will cover them. “Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy” (Proverbs 28:13).

*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*

### **1 John 1:9**

Think about what happens when you sell a house. The law requires a seller’s disclosure. You have to tell the buyer about the cracked foundation, the leak in the basement, the old water damage behind the drywall. A seller who hides those things isn’t just dishonest. He is setting up a future disaster, and when the truth comes out, and it always does, the deal falls apart and trust is gone.

In the Kingdom, confession is our seller’s disclosure. Being open about our sins and weaknesses with God and with trusted people builds trust and keeps our spiritual house healthy. Hidden flaws only get worse in the dark. Vulnerability is not weakness. It is the doorway to healing.

“Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required” (Luke 12:48). The anointing is much. A gift can be handed to you in a moment,

like twenty-dollar bills pressed into a little girl's hands. Fruit is grown slowly, in the light, by people who keep coming back to the Vine. Let's be the kind of people who can carry what God gives, not because we never stumble, but because we never stop coming into the light.

### **For the Road**

1. If your gifts were taken away tomorrow, what fruit of character would remain to show that you belong to Jesus?
2. Is your ministry, work or calling becoming a career or an idol? Which of the twelve dangers do you feel pulling at you most?
3. Is there anything in your life that needs a "seller's disclosure" to God and to a trusted brother or sister?

**The gift reveals the generosity of the Father; the fruit reveals the faithfulness of the son.**

## CHAPTER 6

# The Roots You Cannot See

*For the eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him.*

### 2 Chronicles 16:9

One morning I walked out the front door and stopped cold. The big tree in front of our house had split right down the middle. Half of it was lying across the yard.

I remember the Lord speaking to my heart as clearly as I've ever heard Him: *Pay attention. Learn from this.*

When I talked with our landscaper, he told me the tree had been diseased and dying on the inside for a long time. You would have had to look very closely to see it, he said, because from the outside the leaves were green and the canopy looked full and healthy. In the end, it was the weight of its own branches and leaves that tore it in two.

I have thought about that tree more times than I can count. It looked successful right up until the day it fell. And I have watched the same thing happen to men and women of God.

### Anointing and Authority

That tree pictures one of the most important distinctions in this book, and I want to make it as clear as I can.

Picture a tree. The **anointing** is the branches and the leaves, the part everyone can see. It is the visible reach of a life: the preaching, the

healings, the worship, the influence. The **authority** is the depth and girth of the roots, the part no one sees. It is the hidden life with God that holds everything up.

A tree can grow a canopy faster than its roots can support. When that happens, it isn't the storm that brings it down. It's the weight of its own success.

Your authority is the overflow of your private relationship with God. Your anointing can be activated by, and even motivated by, a public display of God's power. Power births anointing, but God's character births authority.

Even Jesus grew in both directions:

*And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man.*

### **Luke 2:52**

Notice the two kinds of favor. They are not the same, and they don't come from the same place. Here is how I have come to understand them.

*Spiritual Gift + Stewarding the Gift = Anointing*

*Intimacy with God + Obedience = Authority*

Anointing produces influence. Authority comes from, and leads back into, intimacy. Stewarding your gift will give you favor with man. Intimacy and obedience will give you favor with God. Anointing moves the hearts of men, but authority moves the heart of God. Anointing will impress the Church. Authority will impress heaven. John Paul Jackson summed it up in one line: "The anointing is a gift. Authority is a relationship."

You can have a great deal of favor with man and very little with God. That is one of the most frightening realities in the Kingdom. The people Jesus described on judgment day, the ones who prophesied and cast out demons and worked miracles in His name, were not frauds in the way we usually think (Matthew 7:22–23). The prophecies happened. The demons left. They

had anointing. What they did not have was relationship. Their works were, in the truest sense, unauthorized. They used the power without living under the authority of the One it belonged to.

As one teacher, Liza Coughlin, put it: “Just because someone has the anointing doesn’t mean they will walk in obedience to the Lord.”

The anointing is a supernatural gift. Authority is based on a healthy relationship with God that produces divine character.

**You can be entertained by someone’s anointing. You will be transformed by someone’s authority.**

Anointing is not a bad thing. I want to say that clearly. We need it, and I pray for more of it. It just becomes extremely dangerous when a person is not living under the authority of God. And God is not searching the earth for the most gifted. He is searching for the most surrendered. There is an old saying, author unknown: “If you seek God’s hand, you will miss His face. If you seek His face, you will get His hand also.”

### **Three Lessons from a Fallen Tree**

That tree in my yard taught me three things.

First,

**it looked good on the outside while it was dying on the inside.**

This is why it is so hard for successful leaders to ask for help. When the leaves are green and the crowds are growing, who would believe you are sick? Who would you even tell?

Second,

**it could have been saved.**

If someone had seen the disease spreading, an arborist could have pruned the branches and treated the tree. We need the same thing. We need trusted

prophetic voices in our lives who can diagnose our real spiritual condition, people who love us enough to look past the leaves.

Third,

**to survive, it would have needed to be stripped bare for a season.**

The cure would have looked like loss. For a time, there would have been no shade and no beauty. For us, that often means dying to the need to look successful in the eyes of man.

### **What Keeps a General Standing**

When you study the men and women who carried great anointing over the last century, the kind Roberts Liardon profiled in *God's Generals*, a pattern emerges. The ones who survived had deep roots, and their roots had a few things in common.

The first is

**faith and dependency on God.**

Smith Wigglesworth, the plumber turned apostle of faith, was known above all for his prayer life and his constant devotion to the Word. His ministry was anchored in God's power, not in personal charisma. He did not trust his gift. He trusted the Giver.

The second is

**humility and integrity.**

John G. Lake is remembered for his ethical seriousness and his refusal to turn the miracles into merchandise. When the power of God is moving, the temptation to monetize it is real. Those who resisted kept their testimony clean.

The third is

**teachability.**

Kathryn Kuhlman was willing to adapt her methods across decades of ministry, carrying the same message into new forms as the world changed around her. A teachable leader can be corrected, redirected, and refreshed. An unteachable one hardens.

The ones who fell have a pattern too.

Some fell through

**pride and independence.**

William Branham was one of the most remarkable healing evangelists of the twentieth century, yet after his early success he drifted into serious doctrinal error and isolation, and he would not receive correction. A gift that answers to no one eventually goes off the rails.

Some fell through

**moral compromise.**

Aimee Semple McPherson reached multitudes through radio and healing campaigns and founded a denomination, but her legacy was clouded by the controversy surrounding her 1926 disappearance and by a turbulent marriage history that eroded public trust.

Some fell through

**money.**

In the healing revival era and since, exploitative fundraising and lavish lifestyles have damaged the credibility of more than one ministry that started in genuine fire.

None of this is new. Dependence, humility, teachability: these are what sustain an anointing. Pride, compromise, and greed are what break it.

**The anointing is a supernatural responsibility to steward, not a supernatural reward to flex.**

## **The Call, the Assignment, and the Anointing**

So let's be clear about what God actually gives us.

### **The Call**

is what God invites you into: the divine invitation and purpose placed on your life before people ever recognize it. Of David it was said, "when David had served God's purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep" (Acts 13:36).

### **The Assignment**

is what God entrusts you to steward: the specific mission, responsibility, or burden heaven gives you to carry in a particular season. "Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it" (1 Corinthians 12:27).

### **The Anointing**

is what God empowers supernaturally: the grace and spiritual empowerment that enables you to do what you could never do in your own strength. "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you" (Acts 1:8).

God calls. He assigns. He anoints. You obey.

Many people desire all three, but few realize that divine character is what sustains them. The call may open the door. The assignment may place weight on your shoulders. The anointing may empower you beyond your natural ability. But without character, what God gives you can eventually destroy you.

## **Why Revival Tarries**

People often ask why revival tarries in America. We pray, we fast, we hold conferences, and still the nation does not turn. I believe at least two reasons go back to that tree.

**First, we don't know the difference between the leaves of testimony  
and the fruit of substance.**

We get excited about leaves: big services, viral clips, gifted platforms. But Jesus walked up to a fig tree covered in leaves, found nothing on it but leaves, and cursed it (Mark 11:13–14). Leaves advertise fruit. They are not fruit.

**Second, we don't understand that the gifts and callings of God are  
irrevocable.**

*For God's gifts and His call are irrevocable [He never withdraws them when once they are given, and He does not change His mind about those to whom He gives His grace or to whom He sends His call].*

**Romans 11:29 (AMP)**

Because God does not take His gifts back, a gift can keep operating long after the heart behind it has drifted. If we don't understand that, we will assume that anyone who still flows in power must still be walking with God. That assumption has wrecked a lot of sheep.

**Star Search and the Quest for a Few Weak Men**

Some of you remember *Star Search*, the old television talent show. Contestants sang, danced, and told jokes, and judges hunted for the next big name. The world is still running that show. It searches for the strong, the beautiful, the talented, and the impressive.

Heaven runs a different search. “The eyes of the LORD search the whole earth” (2 Chronicles 16:9), but He is not looking for stars. He is looking for hearts fully committed to Him. And very often He finds them in weak places. Paul reminded the Corinthians that few of them were wise or powerful or wealthy when God called them, so that “no one can ever boast in the presence of God” (1 Corinthians 1:26–29).

Why would God do it that way? Because the anointing was never meant to be the property of a few stars. “But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth” (1 John 2:20). And because the gifts are irrevocable, He gives them to people He knows will need a lifetime of leaning on Him to carry them.

So what is the anointing? It is God’s supernatural empowerment through His Spirit, enabling people to fulfill divine purposes beyond human ability. It can persist despite human flaws because it is tethered to God’s redemptive purposes, not to personal worthiness. Obedience and humility grow and sustain it; disobedience diminishes its effect. In the New Covenant every believer is anointed for service and discernment, but stewarding it requires aligning with God’s holiness rather than self-interest. The anointing reflects God’s sovereignty, not His approval of anyone’s character. His power works through willing vessels, not perfect ones.

## **The Anointing Trap**

Let me give you a parable.

A young pastor, call him Mark, joins a church because he is amazed by the senior pastor’s powerful preaching and the miracles that follow his ministry. Mark assumes that a man with gifts like that must be close to God. But over time, hidden pride and greed come to the surface. The senior pastor uses Bible verses to justify his luxury: “God blesses His chosen!” He manipulates people with “prophecies” that conveniently serve his own interests, much like Balaam. When his theft and secret sins are finally exposed, the church collapses.

Heartbroken, Mark realizes he had confused anointing with holiness. Samson had supernatural strength but no self-control. Judas was sent out with the Twelve to heal the sick and still betrayed Jesus.

True authority flows from surrender to God, not from anointing alone. Supernatural power without maturity corrupts, and spiritual gifts released

before character is formed waste divine potential.

## **A Safe Place for the Wrong Things**

We have entered a dangerous age in the Body of Christ, an age with very little discernment, where many cannot tell the difference between those who operate in anointing and those who walk in authority. And I have to say something that grieves me:

**Church culture has become a safe place for selfish ambition and a dangerous place for ambassadors of truth.**

God said something very similar through Jeremiah:

*Do you really think you can steal, murder, commit adultery, lie, and burn incense to Baal and all those other new gods of yours, and then come here and stand before me in my Temple and chant, “We are safe!”—only to go right back to all those evils again? Don’t you yourselves admit that this Temple, which bears my name, has become a den of thieves? Surely I see all the evil going on there.*

### **Jeremiah 7:9–11 (NLT)**

Put plainly, God was asking, “Has the house that bears My name become a safe place for criminals? I have seen it with My own eyes.” And of the leaders He said, “they commit adultery and walk in lies; they strengthen the hands of evildoers, so that no one turns from his evil” (Jeremiah 23:14).

## **Where Are the Sons of Issachar?**

When David was being established as king, a remarkable group came to stand with him:

*From the tribe of Issachar, there were 200 leaders of the tribe with their relatives. All these men understood the signs of the times and knew the best course for Israel to take.*

### **1 Chronicles 12:32 (NLT)**

We need the sons of Issachar again: men and women who can read the hour, assess what is really happening, and know what God’s people should do. Paul once rebuked a church that couldn’t settle its own matters: “Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you? no, not one that shall be able to judge between his brethren?” (1 Corinthians 6:5, KJV). That question still hangs over the American Church.

### **Unauthorized Spiritual Physicians**

Not long ago I read a news report about a cosmetic surgery clinic. A former nurse alleged that the physician of record frequently left the operating room during surgeries he was listed as performing. If that allegation is true, patients were being operated on by people who were not the doctor they trusted, under the authority of a name on a chart.

Would you feel compelled to warn people about a doctor like that? Of course you would. There is a clear moral obligation to warn people about a harmful physician.

So why don’t we feel the same urgency about harmful shepherds in the Body of Christ? Too often what we call “honor” is actually neglect. Misplaced loyalty, fear of conflict, and church cultures that put institutional honor over truth, and the ministry over the gospel, let unhealthy spiritual leaders go unchecked. Many are anointed. The question is whether they are authorized.

Scripture does not let us hide behind silence. “Faithful are the wounds of a friend” (Proverbs 27:6). Paul warned the Ephesian elders that “fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock” (Acts 20:29), and he

told Timothy to rebuke leaders who persist in sin “in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear” (1 Timothy 5:20). Jesus condemned religious leaders who looked beautiful on the outside and were full of corruption within (Matthew 23:27–28). John tells us to “test the spirits” (1 John 4:1), and through Ezekiel God rebuked shepherds who fed themselves instead of the flock (Ezekiel 34:2–4). True honor aligns with God’s standards. It is never silence in the face of sin.

*Beware of false prophets who come disguised as harmless sheep but are really vicious wolves. You can identify them by their fruit, that is, by the way they act... A good tree produces good fruit, and a bad tree produces bad fruit... Yes, just as you can identify a tree by its fruit, so you can identify people by their actions.*

*Matthew 7:15–20 (NLT)*

Notice again: a tree, and fruit, not leaves.

A false prophet is someone who claims divine authority but practices deception, opposing God’s truth by distorting His message, performing misleading signs, or leading people into spiritual rebellion, often for personal gain or idolatry. Their teaching ultimately contradicts Scripture and leads people away from God (Revelation 16:13–14).

And here is the part that should sober every one of us. In Deuteronomy, God says a false prophet’s sign might actually come to pass:

*If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or wonder that he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, “Let us go after other gods,” which you have not known, “and let us serve them,” you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams. For the LORD your God is testing you, to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.*

*Deuteronomy 13:1–3*

Power is not proof. A sign that works is not the same as a heart that obeys. Deuteronomy 13 tests whether we will remain faithful to God when a sign points elsewhere.

In Matthew 7:21–23, people appeal to prophecy, deliverance, and miracles, yet Jesus exposes their lawlessness and declares that He never knew them. Spiritual activity cannot replace knowing Christ and doing the Father’s will.

Judas adds another sobering warning. He was among the Twelve to whom Jesus gave authority over unclean spirits and disease (Matthew 10:1–4). Scripture does not individually record his miracles, so we should not claim more than it tells us. Yet when Jesus announced that one of them would betray Him, the disciples did not immediately recognize Judas as the betrayer (John 13:21–25). It is reasonable to consider that his outward participation in their ministry gave them little reason to suspect what was happening within him. That is an inference, not an explicit statement about his miracles. What Scripture makes clear is that Judas’s place among the commissioned Twelve did not establish the faithfulness of his heart. Entrusted authority and proximity to Jesus were no substitute for personal surrender.

Balaam spoke words God gave him (Numbers 23:5, 16), yet helped lead Israel into idolatry and sexual immorality (Numbers 31:16; Revelation 2:14). True words in his mouth did not make his counsel trustworthy.

Samson’s power operated amid compromise, but eventually the Lord left him (Judges 16:20). Solomon’s wisdom did not prevent his heart from turning toward other gods (1 Kings 11:1–10). Gifts did not remove their responsibility to obey.

Romans 11:29 concerns God’s irrevocable gifts and calling, primarily His faithfulness concerning Israel. It is a supporting connection, not a blanket promise that anointing always continues regardless of conduct. These other passages establish the warning directly: the operation of a gift must never be mistaken for God’s approval of the life carrying it.

So look past the leaves, in the leaders you follow and in the mirror. Hidden intimacy and daily obedience nourish the roots. **We must stop using what God does through us to avoid examining what is happening within us.**

### **For the Road**

1. If your life were a tree, which is growing faster right now: your canopy (what people see) or your roots (your hidden life with God)?
2. Who are the “arborists” in your life, trusted voices with permission to tell you what they see beneath the leaves?
3. In the leaders you follow, have you been more impressed by their anointing or transformed by their authority?

*The anointing is the branches everyone sees. Authority is the roots only God sees.*

## CHAPTER 7

# The Strongest Weak Man in the Bible

*Popularity has slain more prophets of God than persecution ever did.*

— Vance Havner

Picture a man who can rip a lion apart with his bare hands, and who cannot say no to a pretty face.

That is Samson, the strongest man in the Bible and one of the weakest. He could carry the gates of a city up a hill on his shoulders, but he could not carry the weight of his own vow.

Samson is not a cartoon strongman. He is a mirror held up to anyone who has ever been gifted, used, applauded, and tempted to believe the applause meant God was pleased. He was handed more power than almost anyone in the Old Testament, and he failed the test again and again. Yet his story does not end in failure. It ends with a blind man's prayer, and with God answering it.

Before we walk through his life, I want to name what I see in it, because I see it everywhere in the Church today.

### **The Samson Syndrome**

There is a pandemic in the Church that I call the Samson Syndrome: valuing favor with man over favor with God.

**When you value the favor of man more than favor with God, you  
are in danger of not surviving the anointing.**

In his book *The Samson Syndrome*, Mark Atteberry observes that from Samson to Bill Clinton, men of power and influence have always drawn people to themselves, and that power is often more attractive to others than looks, talent, or even character. Power is magnetic. It draws temptations a humble man would never even meet.

There is also an unhealthy zeal in the Body of Christ that covets a public platform more than a private relationship with Christ. You can tell which one you have chosen by what you protect. Choosing power over presence is exposed when you are more concerned with guarding your influence with people than with guarding your intimacy with God.

When a Christian leader falls, we usually blame a lack of discipline, bad theology, or the wrong denomination. Few of us consider that the leader may have been given, or may have grabbed, more power and influence than God ever intended for him. That mirrors the very beginning of sin, when the pursuit of a glory meant for God alone corrupted what God had made. Every time we take credit for what only God could do, we repeat that ancient temptation. And God does not share His glory with another (Isaiah 42:8).

### **Samson the Judge and Deliverer**

Samson was not a fraud. He was a judge in Israel, raised up during forty years of Philistine oppression, announced by the Angel of the Lord and set apart as a Nazirite from his mother's womb. The Spirit of the Lord really did come upon him. The results were real.

Look at the record in Judges 14 through 16. He tore apart a young lion with his bare hands. He struck down thirty Philistines in Ashkelon. He caught three hundred foxes, tied torches between their tails, and burned the Philistines' grain, vineyards, and olive groves. When the Spirit rushed on him, new ropes melted off his arms like burned flax, and he killed a thousand men with the fresh jawbone of a donkey. When he was dying of

thirst, God split open a hollow place and water poured out. He tore the gate of Gaza loose, posts, bar and all, and carried it to the top of a hill. And through all of it, “he judged Israel twenty years” (Judges 15:20).

Any ministry today would put that résumé on a banner. But read the same chapters again and you see another story running underneath the first: impulsive desire, broken vows, a man who never seems to pray until he is desperate, and a heart that drifts while his hands keep winning.

How can both stories be true at once? Because, as we have already seen, “the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (Romans 11:29, NKJV). God does not snatch back His gifts the moment we sin. That is mercy, and it gives us room to repent. But it also means a gift can keep operating while a life is falling apart, and the people around a gifted leader can mistake his power for God’s approval. So can the leader.

Samson had anointing without consistent surrender. He had strength without self-control. He had public victory while he was privately drifting. He kept playing with compromise until the very thing that empowered him was gone, and he did not even notice it had left.

God can use a person mightily while still confronting the deeper issue of character in that person’s life. If we assume we are in good standing with God because the anointing is still flowing, the speck in our eye can grow into a mountain-sized blind spot.

**Your gift is not proof of your character. It is proof of God’s goodness.**

So let’s walk through Samson’s life as a series of tests. I see nine contrasts in his story, nine places where the favor of man and the favor of God pull in opposite directions. We will take the first five in this chapter and the last four in the next.

## Contrast One: Reward vs. Responsibility

*And behold, a young lion came toward him roaring. Then the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon him, and although he had nothing in his hand, he tore the lion in pieces.... After some days he returned... and behold, there was a swarm of bees in the body of the lion, and honey. He scraped it out into his hands and went on, eating as he went.*

### Judges 14:5-9

Watch what Samson does with the sweetness. The lion was a victory God gave him, and the honey was a reward that came out of it. But the honey sat inside a dead body, and a Nazirite was forbidden to go near a corpse (Numbers 6:6-7). Samson wanted the sweetness of the win without the responsibility of the vow. Then he handed some of the honey to his parents without telling them where it came from, and made them unknowing partners in his compromise.

That is what happens when we value the favor of man more than the favor of God. We want all the rewards of the anointing and none of the responsibilities that come with it.

**Your platform shows people the depth of your anointing. The way you steward their hearts shows them the depth of your character.**

Scripture does not lower the bar for the gifted. It raises it. “We who teach are held to a higher standard of judgment” (James 3:1). “Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required” (Luke 12:48).

If you lay Samson’s life next to the Law he was raised under, the report card is sobering. I count at least eight places where he crossed a line God had clearly drawn:

1. **Intermarriage.** He demanded a Philistine wife, against the plain command of Deuteronomy 7:3-4 (Judges 14:1-3).

2. **Contact with the dead.** He ate honey from a carcass and later fought with the jawbone of a dead donkey, both forbidden to a Nazirite (Numbers 6:6-7).
3. **The wedding feast.** He hosted a seven-day Philistine drinking feast, the kind that would almost certainly have put wine in front of a man vowed to touch nothing from the vine (Judges 14:10; Numbers 6:3-4).
4. **Thirty men for a bet.** God was moving against Israel's oppressors, but Samson's own heart was settling a gambling debt "in hot anger" with other men's lives and clothing (Judges 14:19).
5. **Personal vengeance.** He burned the Philistines' harvest to get even, when the Law said, "You shall not take vengeance" (Judges 15:4-5; Leviticus 19:18).
6. **Sexual immorality.** He slept with a prostitute in Gaza and then gave himself to Delilah, outside the covenant of marriage (Judges 16:1-4).
7. **Lying.** He deceived Delilah three times about the source of his strength (Judges 16:6-15).
8. **The razor.** He handed over the secret of his vow and let his head be shaved, the one line that marked him as God's (Judges 16:17-19; Numbers 6:5).

And he was still winning battles through most of that list.

Scripture calls us to honor godly leaders, but Samson shows why blind allegiance is dangerous. Divine appointment is not moral infallibility. Never confuse God calling a man with that man answering the call. And never let a leader's failure become your permission to repeat it.

The Church often gets this backward. When a shepherd's sin is waved away as "a common struggle we all have," we contradict the Bible's call for heightened accountability for those who lead. Paul told Timothy that elders who persist in sin should be rebuked "in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear" (1 Timothy 5:20). That is not cruelty. It is protection for

the flock. Grace was given to empower transformation, not to excuse its absence.

Being consecrated has to matter more to us than the pursuit of happiness or staying in control of our own lives. Jesus did not offer us a platform. He offered us a cross, and said that those who let go of their lives for His sake are the ones who find true life (Matthew 10:38-39).

Some of the young women who used to babysit our kids now have children of their own, and more than one has told us they badly misjudged how ready they were. Babysitting is helping another family for a few hours. Parenting is yours, all day and all night. One is nine-to-five. The other is twenty-four-seven.

Ministry is the same. It grieves me to say it, but a pimp will work twenty-four-seven for money while too many of us want a nine-to-five in ministry. Jesus warned about the hired hand who “sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees” (John 10:12). We have ten thousand guardians, as Paul said, but not many fathers (1 Corinthians 4:15). Lord, raise up fathers in the faith, not employees who run when the wolves show up.

## **Contrast Two: God’s Process vs. God’s Pleasure**

*But Samson told his father, “Get her for me! She looks good to me.” His father and mother didn’t realize the LORD was at work in this, creating an opportunity to work against the Philistines, who ruled over Israel at that time.*

### **Judges 14:3-4**

God was at work in this. That does not mean God was pleased with it. Samson’s vow and his role as judge should have shaped every decision he made, including whom he married. Instead, the only reason he gave was, “She looks good to me.” God, in His sovereignty, wove even that into His

plan to deliver Israel. Samson's selfishness did not stop God's purpose. But it never became God's pleasure.

People who value the favor of man more than the favor of God confuse God using their process with God being pleased with their progress.

Paul anticipated the confusion: "Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means!" (Romans 6:1-2). The Bible is full of people who were useful to God without being pleasing to Him. Saul, the Pharisees, and Balaam all had influence, and all mistook it for God's endorsement. There is a difference between being used by God and being known by God. Favor with God requires holiness, not just utility.

**God is sovereign even over our disobedience, but that does not make our disobedience His will.**

God sees the end from the beginning and can weave even our worst choices into His purpose. That is His mercy, not His approval. Yet again and again, men and women of God have lived in compromise and pointed to the success of their ministry as proof that God approved of their private conduct.

Here is something I have watched happen over and over. When leaders are caught, they reach for the failures of the saints of old. "David fell too." Yes, he did. But David's story was not written to give us permission. It was written to show us repentance.

The real thread through the Bible's heroes is not that they never failed, but that their failure met God's mercy through repentance. Abraham lied about Sarah and still became the father of faith. Moses killed an Egyptian and was sent back to lead the Exodus. David committed adultery and murder, repented, and became a forefather of Christ. Peter denied Jesus three times, wept bitterly, and preached at Pentecost. Paul persecuted the Church and became the apostle to the Gentiles.

God's redemptive power can turn human failure into divine destiny. But you cannot borrow a saint's sin without also borrowing his repentance.

### **Contrast Three: Objective Obedience vs. Subjective Success**

After losing his wager, "the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon him, and he went down to Ashkelon and struck down thirty men... In hot anger he went back to his father's house" (Judges 14:19). From the outside, Ashkelon looked like a win. Underneath it was a man in a rage, fixing a problem his own pride had created.

People who value the favor of man more than the favor of God have a hard time choosing obedience when obedience makes them look unsuccessful. Samuel spoke the timeless word to Saul, another anointed man who chose the look of success over the substance of obedience:

*Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams.*

### **1 Samuel 15:22**

Obedience is objective; it is measured against what God said. Success is subjective; it is measured against what people see. When selfish ambition drives a church, a ministry, a business, or a career, we start offering God sacrifices He never asked for in place of the obedience He did ask for, because a sacrifice can be seen and applauded. Worship leader Rita Springer said it in a way I cannot shake:

*If you can build the biggest church in America off the foundation of a lie, then what does that say about our model for church, and how much does your success empower the narrative that God is complicit with my deception?*

— Rita Springer

We will look later in this book at the falls that make her words so painful, including Robert Morris's 2024 resignation. For now, notice the pattern that often follows a fall. Accountability gets reframed as persecution, and the fallen leader is cast as a suffering Job instead of a David who needs to repent. Scripture becomes a shield for unrepentant sin. Success built that way is not God's authorization. It is a house built on sand.

The same test showed up in a Roman governor's headquarters. "Don't you realize that I have the power to release you or crucify you?" Pilate demanded. Jesus answered, "You would have no power over me at all unless it were given to you from above" (John 19:10-11). Pilate knew the right thing to do; even his wife sent word that Jesus was a righteous man (Matthew 27:19). But releasing Him would have looked weak, and blinded by the fear of man, Pilate chose position over Presence.

Jesus faced the opposite pressure from His own family. "How do you expect to be successful and famous if you do all these things in secret?" His brothers asked. "Go to Jerusalem... and show the world who you are!" (John 7:3-4). That is the voice of subjective success: go where the crowds are, get seen, grow your platform. Jesus could have expanded His influence by taking that advice. Instead He did only "what he sees the Father doing" (John 5:19).

The Father often tests us by hiding us in seasons of obscurity. Those seasons reveal whether we truly love Him or only love the good gifts He gives. There is no better way to pass that test than to choose private surrender over public success.

#### **Contrast Four: Competition vs. Conviction**

*Samson replied, "If you hadn't plowed with my heifer, you wouldn't have solved my riddle!"*

**Judges 14:18**

Samson lost a riddle contest, and his response was not repentance but rivalry.

People who value the favor of man more than the favor of God cannot tell the difference between bowing to the spirit of competition and surrendering to the Spirit of conviction.

Both feel like wind. At Pentecost the Spirit came “like a mighty rushing wind” (Acts 2:2). But Paul also warned about believers “carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning” (Ephesians 4:14). One fills a surrendered room. The other blows an unsundered heart wherever it can win.

Compare Samson with David. When David faced Goliath, he stepped forward as God’s representative: “Who is this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should defy the armies of the living God?” (1 Samuel 17:26). David’s anger was jealousy for God’s name. Samson’s anger was usually about Samson: his riddle, his honor, his eyes. Same enemy, very different heart.

I played football long enough to know what competition can do to a man. It can make you better. It can also make you need to beat somebody in order to feel like somebody. That is the orphan mindset, and it is deadly in a church.

**When the orphan spirit rules a leader, he will always believe that to be somebody, he has to beat everybody.**

Solomon saw it long ago: “Envy fuels achievement... Even this is fleeting, like trying to embrace the wind” (Ecclesiastes 4:4). Paul warned that a ministry run on conceit produces “envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions” (1 Timothy 6:4). When the spirit of competition takes over church culture, the Body of Christ starts to look more like rival gangs protecting turf than a loving family carrying revival. A son who knows he is loved does not need to beat his brothers. He can celebrate them.

## **Contrast Five: The Lust of Man vs. the Love of God**

*Samson went to Gaza, and there he saw a prostitute, and he went in to her.*

### **Judges 16:1**

Read that again slowly. An anointed man of God, a judge of Israel, walked into enemy territory and went to a prostitute.

People who value the favor of man more than the favor of God come into agreement with a lie: that a man or a woman can offer them something better than what God can.

Esau traded his birthright for a bowl of stew, and afterward “he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears” (Hebrews 12:16-17). Samson traded a calling for a night. Lack of self-control and sexual sin usually travel together; both have forgotten the value of delayed gratification.

I want to name something many of us carry quietly. Call it carnal imagination: the willful fixation on sexual fantasy with someone outside the covenant of marriage. It feels private and harmless. It is neither. The unguarded imagination is where real-world compromise gets rehearsed. At root, it is a refusal to trust that God is enough to meet our deepest needs.

There is a story I love about a man who came to his pastor, tormented. “I can’t stop looking at pornography,” he confessed. “Women are just so beautiful.”

The pastor was quiet for a moment and then asked him gently, “Have you ever truly gazed at the beauty of God?”

The man had no answer. The pastor went on. The world offers cheap imitations of intimacy, he said. The desire you feel is a whisper from God, who wants to give you true pleasure. Pornography promises fulfillment and drains your soul, leaving shame and emptiness behind. But God’s beauty is

boundless and fully satisfying. When you fix your eyes on His holiness, His love, His majesty, earthly cravings start to lose their grip.

The man did not walk out of that office free. But he walked out with a new question burning in his heart: *What if I have really been starving for the presence of God?*

That is the question under every addiction. The bride in the Song of Songs had found the answer: “He alone is my beloved... outstanding among ten thousand!” (Song of Songs 5:10).

*Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit?*

### **1 Corinthians 6:18-19**

Now look at a young man who passed the test Samson failed. Joseph was a slave, far from home, with every reason to feel owed something, when Potiphar’s wife demanded that he sleep with her.

*But Joseph refused.... “How could I do such a wicked thing? It would be a great sin against God.”*

### **Genesis 39:8-9**

Joseph understood that saying yes would be a sin “against God,” the true source of his strength and authority. Carnal desire produces spiritual impotence. Giving in would have severed his intimacy with God, just as Samson’s compromises did to him. His refusal was more than a moral victory. It was the defense of his most essential relationship.

Samson had the stronger arms. Joseph had the stronger heart.

## **For the Road**

1. Where in your life are you enjoying the “honey” of a reward while quietly ignoring the responsibility that came with it?
2. Have you ever pointed to God’s use of your gifts as evidence that He approves of an area of compromise? What would repentance look like there?
3. In what relationship or arena do you feel the need to beat somebody in order to feel like somebody?

**Being useful to God is not the same as being known by God.**

## CHAPTER 8

# When the Hair Grows Back

*But the hair of his head began to grow again after it had been shaved.*

### **Judges 16:22**

There is a moment in the Samson story that has always undone me. It comes right after the worst sentence in the account, “He did not know that the LORD had left him.” Samson is blind, shackled in bronze, grinding grain like an animal in a Philistine prison. And then, almost in passing, the writer adds one quiet line: his hair began to grow again.

No one in the prison noticed. The Philistines were too busy celebrating. But Heaven was counting every strand.

In the last chapter we walked through the first five tests of Samson’s life. In this chapter we finish the nine, and then we turn to the cure. The point of studying Samson is not to sneer at him. It is to survive what he did not survive, and to discover that even for a man who failed that badly, God was not finished.

### **Contrast Six: God’s Patience vs. God’s Approval**

*After this he loved a woman in the Valley of Sorek, whose name was Delilah. And the lords of the Philistines came up to her and said to her, “Seduce him, and see where his great strength lies, and by what means we may overpower him.”*

### **Judges 16:4-5**

By the time Samson met Delilah, he had broken nearly every part of his vow except one, and nothing bad had happened. He still won. He still walked away from every trap. I believe that is exactly what convinced him that consecration was optional. He mistook God's mercy toward his carnal pursuits for God's endorsement of them.

People who value the favor of man more than the favor of God confuse God's patience with God's approval.

*The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.*

## **2 Peter 3:9**

God's patience has a purpose, and the purpose is repentance. When we treat His patience as permission, we are spending mercy that was meant to bring us home. Zephaniah described people who had made exactly that mistake. God said He would search Jerusalem with lanterns "to punish those who sit complacent in their sins. They think the LORD will do nothing to them, either good or bad" (Zephaniah 1:12).

"The LORD will do nothing." That is the creed of the complacent heart.

D. Brian Shafer's novel *Exile of Lucifer* imagines the very first creature who made this mistake. In the story, Lucifer knows God sees his intention to rebel, and he cannot understand why God lets him keep going. He assures the other angels that when the decisive moment comes, "the Most High would do nothing." Yet the question badgers him: "How long shall the Lord allow me to progress? If He is truly Lord why does He not have me exposed and be done with it?"

That is fiction, but it captures something true. God does not create robots. You cannot truly trust God if you were programmed to. Love requires freedom, and freedom means God gives us room to obey or disobey Him.

The room He gives us is not a sign that He has stopped seeing. It is a sign that He is still waiting.

**God loves us too much to let us get away with our sin.**

### **Contrast Seven: The Praises of Men vs. the Praises of God**

*And she said to him, “How can you say, ‘I love you,’ when your heart is not with me?...” And when she pressed him hard with her words day after day, and urged him, his soul was vexed to death. And he told her all his heart.... Then the lords of the Philistines came up to her and brought the money in their hands.*

#### **Judges 16:15-18**

Delilah never overpowered Samson. She wore him down. “How can you say you love me?” Day after day she pressed on the one place he had never surrendered to God: his need to be wanted. And for the approval of a woman who was being paid to destroy him, Samson told her all his heart.

People who value the favor of man more than the favor of God fear losing favor with people more than they fear losing intimacy with God.

**If we do not learn to crucify our flesh privately, our flesh will eventually crucify us publicly.**

So here is the question each of us has to answer. Am I more interested in what I can get away with and still be saved? Or am I more concerned with pleasing the heart of God and living for eternity?

David once lived that question badly. From his rooftop he saw Bathsheba bathing, sent for her, slept with her, and she conceived. To cover it up, he called her husband Uriah home from the siege. But Uriah had too much integrity to go home to his wife while the ark and the army were camped in tents (2 Samuel 11:11). So David arranged for Uriah to die in battle, married Bathsheba, and assumed the disaster had been averted.

Everyone in the palace was managed. Every person who could have exposed him was handled. David had protected his standing with men. But he forgot to take God into account. The chapter ends with one line:

*But the thing that David had done displeased the LORD.*

## **2 Samuel 11:27**

That is the only review that matters.

### **Contrast Eight: Selfish Ambition vs. Driven by Eternity**

“Get her for me,” Samson told his father, “for she pleases me well” (Judges 14:3). From the first time we meet him as a grown man, Samson is looking for what pleases him. That one line follows him all the way to the Valley of Sorek.

People who value the favor of man more than the favor of God are often looking for an opportunity instead of living for eternity. And here is a hard truth about manipulation: it only works when someone believes a person can offer what only God can truly provide. Delilah had leverage over Samson only because he believed she had something he needed more than God.

*For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there.*

## **James 3:16 (NKJV)**

There is another 3:16 I want to set beside that one. John the Baptist, the most popular preacher of his day, with crowds flooding into the wilderness, pointed away from himself:

*I indeed baptize you with water; but One mightier than I is coming, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.*

### **Luke 3:16 (NKJV)**

I believe there is a “3:16 civil war” going on inside the walls of the Church today, another front in the long war between the house of Saul and the house of David. On one side is James 3:16: self-seeking, self-preserving, always looking for the next opportunity. On the other side is Luke 3:16: people who have embraced the cross and are driven by eternity, living not for themselves but for the glory of the One who is mightier.

When we crave the approval, affection, and rewards of people more than obedience to God, compromise becomes easier than conviction. That is Samson’s whole story. Small compromises for personal desire became spiritual blindness, first in his heart and then in his eyes. Temporary pleasure became more valuable than eternal purpose.

### **Contrast Nine: Human Effort vs. Divine Empowerment**

*And she said, “The Philistines are upon you, Samson!” And he awoke from his sleep and said, “I will go out as at other times and shake myself free.” But he did not know that the LORD had left him. And the Philistines seized him and gouged out his eyes and brought him down to Gaza and bound him with bronze shackles. And he ground at the mill in the prison.*

### **Judges 16:20-21**

“I will go out as at other times.” Those may be the most dangerous words in the story.

He did not know. That is the part that frightens me. Samson had grown so used to the power showing up that he never noticed the Presence had left.

People who value the favor of man more than the favor of God believe the lie that their own effort is the source of their anointing, rather than the Person and work of the Holy Spirit working through them.

Go back through the record. Not one time did Samson ever set himself free. Every time the ropes snapped, Scripture says the Spirit of the Lord rushed upon him first (Judges 14:6, 19; 15:14). His strength was never the product of his discipline, his zeal, or his training. It was the gift of a gracious God. But he had operated under the anointing so consistently, for so long, that he forgot where it came from. Trust in God had been quietly replaced by self-confidence. So when the Spirit lifted, Samson did not feel the difference until it was too late.

Someone will ask whether this can happen to a believer today. Under the old covenant, God's Spirit came upon certain people for a time and for specific tasks. Under the new covenant, the Spirit dwells within every believer, and rivers of living water flow from our inner being (John 7:38). But when we habitually ignore sin and sear our conscience, the soul goes to war with the Spirit of God within us. The flow is quenched, like a faucet turned off that was meant to release living water. Repentance, surrender, and the renewing of the mind open it back up.

This was God's word to Zerubbabel, and it is His word to us:

*Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit, says the LORD of hosts.*

**Zechariah 4:6 (NKJV)**

Frank Bartleman, who walked through the Azusa Street Revival in the early 1900s, understood this better than most:

*After God filled me, His Spirit rested mightily upon me one morning and He said to me: “If you were only small enough, I could do anything with you.” ... When a man gets to the place where he really loves obscurity, where he does not care to preach, and where he would rather sit in the backseat than on the platform, then God can lift him up and use him, and not very much before.*

— Frank Bartleman

Nebuchadnezzar learned the opposite lesson the hard way. Standing on his palace roof, he said, “By my own mighty power, I have built this beautiful city.” While the words were still in his mouth, a voice from heaven took the kingdom from him and sent him to eat grass like a cow “until you learn that the Most High rules over the kingdoms of the world” (Daniel 4:30-32).

“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13). Not by myself. Through Him. The moment the strength becomes mine, it is already on its way out the door.

### **The Prescription: A Living Sacrifice**

So how do we survive the anointing? After nine diagnoses, here is the cure, and it is not complicated. It is just costly.

*Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.*

#### **Romans 12:1 (NIV)**

The answer to selfish ambition and carnal lust is not more willpower. It is an altar. A living sacrifice is someone who has already died to the need to be seen, celebrated, and satisfied by anyone other than God.

People who value the favor of God more than the favor of man are willing to lay down their lives and break the cycle. They live for a generation they

may never see, so that the Lamb can receive the reward of His suffering. They are willing to march toward a Promised Land they may never personally enjoy.

That is exactly where Samson finally arrived. Blind, humbled, and mocked in the temple of Dagon, he prayed what may have been the first truly surrendered prayer of his life: “O Lord GOD, please remember me and please strengthen me only this once” (Judges 16:28). Then he put his hands on the pillars.

*And Samson said, “Let me die with the Philistines.” Then he bowed with all his strength, and the house fell upon the lords and upon all the people who were in it. So the dead whom he killed at his death were more than those whom he had killed during his life.*

### **Judges 16:30**

Notice the word: he *bowed*. The man who never bowed in his strength finally bowed in his weakness, and it became his greatest victory.

That is why the cure always runs through repentance. David, after Bathsheba, after Uriah, after Nathan’s finger in his face, did not reach for an excuse. He reached for an altar: “Create in me a pure heart, O God... Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me.... My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise” (Psalm 51:10-11, 17).

Søren Kierkegaard put it this way: “The tyrant dies and his rule is over; the martyr dies and his rule begins.” Samson spent twenty years ruling like a strongman. His real reign began when he died to himself.

### **He Must Increase**

Losing confidence in ourselves is only half the cure. The other half is putting that confidence in Christ. Self-hatred is not humility. Humility is

moving your trust off yourself and onto Him. Paul learned it through a thorn he begged God to remove:

*But he answered me, “My grace is always more than enough for you, and my power finds its full expression through your weakness.” So I will celebrate my weaknesses, for when I’m weak I sense more deeply the mighty power of Christ living in me.*

## **2 Corinthians 12:9 (TPT)**

Of everything God created, it seems only angels and people are tempted to believe that the talent and beauty He gave them were meant to bring glory to themselves. A sunset never takes a bow. But we do.

### **The Spirit was sent to testify of Jesus, not to promote us.**

Jesus said the Helper would come and “bear witness about me” (John 15:26). When Christ is lifted up, He draws all people to Himself (John 12:32). Our job is not to be lifted up next to Him. It is John the Baptist’s job: “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30). Surviving the anointing comes down to this: knowing Jesus and making Him known matters more than being known and being celebrated.

There is an obscure man in Proverbs named Agur who asked God for neither poverty nor riches, only the measure he could carry without forgetting Him (Proverbs 30:8-9). We will come back to his prayer later in this book. For now, I believe it applies to anointing and influence as much as to money.

History is not just a record of what happened. It is a prophetic picture of what the future can become if we refuse to learn from those who went before us. True honor does not pretend our heroes were flawless. It learns from their lives. Many men and women we still celebrate carried a mixture of anointing and compromise, influence and iniquity. That mixture is not normal Christianity. It is what happens when selfish ambition, fame, and entitlement are allowed to grow unchecked beside a real gift.

God is still searching. “The eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to give strong support to those whose heart is blameless toward him” (2 Chronicles 16:9). Let’s be part of that remnant.

**To the Church without mixture, God will send His Spirit without measure.**

If you are not sure how to pray after reading this, you can pray this with me:

*Lord, give me the measure of Your anointing and influence that I can steward with my character. Don’t give me more platform than I have roots. Help me remember that it is You alone who leads me and empowers me. In my own strength I can do nothing. Amen.*

## **Samson and the Church**

I want to close Part One with a picture. This is not doctrine, and I do not want anyone to build a theology on it. It is an illustration, the way a parable illustrates. But when I look at Samson, I see a prophetic picture of the Church in our generation: walking in the power of the Holy Spirit, His gifts, without walking in the fruit of the Holy Spirit, His character.

Samson was set apart from birth, filled with supernatural power, and called to deliver God’s people. So is the Church.

And I see Delilah as a picture of the Jezebel spirit, the seducing, controlling spirit Jesus warned the church at Thyatira about (Revelation 2:20). She did not defeat Samson in battle. She lulled him to sleep on her knees. In the same way, I believe much of the Church has been lulled to sleep by a gospel with no cross and no denial of self. It is the same offer Satan made to Jesus in the wilderness: all the kingdoms of the world and their glory, without the cross (Matthew 4:8-9). Jesus refused it. Too often, we have taken it.

Delilah figured out that Samson's power came from his vow, his covenant with God, marked by the hair that was never to be cut. In the same way, the Church's power comes from our blood covenant with Jesus, who is our covering. And notice this: Delilah could not take Samson's hair by force. He had to hand over the secret. The enemy cannot cut the Church off from her covering without her consent. We have to give it away.

Scripture says Samson wore his hair in seven locks (Judges 16:13, 19). I cannot read that without thinking of the sevenfold Spirit of God before the throne (Revelation 1:4; Isaiah 11:2). When the locks were gone, so was the strength, and Samson did not even notice. A Church can keep the building, the music, the crowd, and the calendar long after the Presence has quietly lifted.

But here is the mercy. In the prison, the hair began to grow again. God did not leave Samson bald forever. I believe He is doing the same with His Church right now, restoring intimacy with the Holy Spirit to a humbled people who have been grinding in the mill of their own striving.

And finally, Samson learned that the key to life is not loving your life but laying it down (Revelation 12:11). He put his hands on two pillars and pushed. To me those pillars are a picture of death to self, the baptism of repentance. When Samson bowed, the house of the enemy came down. He killed more Philistines in his death than in his life.

The Church will lead more people to the cross by picking up our cross than we ever did by chasing our personal dreams. Our greatest harvest will not come from our strength. It will come from our surrender.

That is where Part One ends, and where the Power Test is passed. Not with a stronger Samson, but with a bowed one. Not with a bigger platform, but with an altar. The hair is growing back. The question is whether, this time, we will remember where the strength comes from.

## **For the Road**

1. Is there an area of compromise where God's patience with you has started to feel like His approval?
2. When have you said, in effect, "I will go out as at other times," relying on past anointing instead of present dependence on the Holy Spirit?
3. What would it look like for you to "bow" this week, to lay down a personal dream so that more people are drawn to the cross?

**Samson's greatest victory came when he finally bowed.**

PART TWO

# The Promotion Test

*What will you do when people give you a title, a platform  
and their praise?*

## CHAPTER 9

# Addicted to Titles

*For what is exalted and highly thought of among men is detestable and an abomination in the sight of God.*

### **Luke 16:15 (AMP)**

If you have ever seen the old comedy *The Naked Gun*, you probably remember the scene. Lieutenant Frank Drebin stands in front of a crowd with his hands raised, calm as a crossing guard. Behind him, everything is blowing up. Fireworks are screaming into the sky, buildings are going up in flames, people are running for their lives. And Frank, straight-faced, waves the crowd along: “Nothing to see here. Please disperse.”

We laugh because it is absurd. Nobody could look at that much fire and call it nothing.

And yet that is exactly what many church institutions have done when moral failure has broken out in leadership. The house is on fire behind the pulpit, and someone steps up to the microphone with a calm voice and a press statement: nothing to see here. Keep coming. Keep giving. Keep worshiping. The lights are still on and the band still sounds great.

But God has never been impressed by the lights.

*For the LORD does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.*

### **1 Samuel 16:7 (NKJV)**

That is where the second test begins. In Part One we looked at the Power Test, what happens to a man or woman when God's power starts to flow through them. Now we turn to the test that usually follows close behind. When the power shows up, the platform shows up. The title shows up. The invitations, the microphones, the following, the reputation. This is the Promotion Test, and it has quietly taken out as many anointed people as any open sin ever did.

## **Reformation, Not Deconstruction**

Before we go any further, I need to draw a line, because some people will read a section of this book like the one you are starting and assume I am inviting them to tear down the faith. I am not.

There is a word in the air right now: *deconstruction*. And there is an older, better word the Church has needed in every generation: *reformation*. They can sound alike. They are not the same.

### **Deconstruction challenges the Word of God. Reformation questions the traditions of men.**

You can hear deconstruction in sentences like these: "If the Bible was written by people, why can't we question everything in it?" "How can we say the Bible is perfect when some parts clash or feel outdated?" Notice where the knife is pointed. It is pointed at Scripture itself. The final authority becomes my feelings, my experience, my sense of what seems fair.

Reformation sounds different. "Traditions are made by people. Why keep doing things that don't reflect Biblical truth?" "If Jesus flipped tables in the temple, maybe we should flip the traditions that hurt people instead of transforming them." Here the knife is pointed at us, at our habits, our systems, our sacred cows. The Word stays on the throne, and everything we have built gets measured against it.

Jesus never once questioned the Scriptures. He quoted them. But He was the greatest Reformer who ever walked into a religious building:

*And He said to them, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer,’ but you are making it a robbers’ den.”*

### **Matthew 21:13**

“It is written.” He used the Word to judge the tradition, never the tradition to judge the Word. That is the posture of this whole part of the book. I am not asking you to doubt God. I am asking you to let His Word examine the culture we have built around His name.

Some of you may wonder why I would spend a whole part of a book on the failures of gifted people. It is not because I enjoy it. It grieves me. But I have watched what happens when we refuse to talk about it, and I have come to believe the silence does more damage than the truth. And I am not writing as someone standing above the people we will talk about in the pages ahead. I am writing as someone who knows he could fall.

Many have been wounded by leaders who carried genuine gifts but lacked God’s compassion and integrity, and they need to know that what happened to them was real, and that it was not God. Others will be hurt in the future, and if they don’t understand how a person can be anointed and still be unsafe, they will end up blaming God for what a man did. The rest of us need to learn that big crowds and real miracles are not God’s signature on someone’s private life. And every one of us who carries any gift at all needs the warning for ourselves. We still quote Solomon’s “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge” (Proverbs 1:7) even though we grieve his idolatry. Eat the chicken and throw away the bone. Learn from the mistakes of spiritual fathers and mothers through the lens of honor and humility, and you may not have to make those mistakes yourself.

*Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.*

### **1 Corinthians 10:12-13 (ESV)**

People like to say God will never give you more than you can handle. I don't think that is quite true. God often gives us challenges only He can handle. What He gives us is the grace to trust Him to carry us through. There is always a way of escape. But you have to want it more than you want the thing that is tempting you.

### **“I Was Not There”**

There is a story that has stayed with me for a long time, about a man named Addisu.

He stood in a packed megachurch arena with his hands raised while the band thundered. The crowd roared the chorus: “Break every chain!” He laughed. He danced. He wept. Later that night, at home, he sat in the warm afterglow of another “successful” service.

Then a still, small voice cut through his thoughts.

*I was not there.*

He froze. The lights, the fog machines, the polished worship team, the short, tidy sermon. All of it had stirred the crowd. None of it had stirred God. The words of the prophet Amos came down on him like a judge's gavel:

*I hate all your show and pretense—the hypocrisy of your religious festivals and solemn assemblies... Away with your noisy hymns of praise! I will not listen to the music of your harps. Instead, I want to see a mighty flood of justice, an endless river of righteous living.*

**Amos 5:21, 23-24 (NLT)**

That same night he wandered into a small, dim chapel and stood there alone. “Lord,” he cried, “You aren’t moved by lights or stages. You are moved by a broken spirit and a contrite heart.” And in that silence the Holy Spirit met him. No smoke machine. No sermon built for social media clips. Just a broken man and broken prayers, poured out on the floor like water.

I am not against lights or excellent music. I spent years in stadiums. I know what production can do to a crowd. But that is exactly the point. Production can move a crowd. Only the Spirit of God can move a heart.

**Entertainment church moves the crowd. Holy Spirit church cuts the soul and moves Heaven.**

Russell Johnson put it well: “If we care much about the fate of the world, we must care most about the integrity of the Church.” The world is not waiting on a better show from us. It has better shows than we can ever put on. It is waiting on a people whose private lives match their public worship.

**A Paradise That Killed Them**

In 1968, a researcher named John Calhoun, working with funding from the National Institute of Mental Health, built what some have called a “mouse utopia.” He named it Universe 25.

It was a large, escape-proof enclosure, roughly a hundred inches square, and it was a paradise for a mouse. Perfect climate. Endless food and water. Hundreds of little apartments stacked along tunnels. No predators, no disease, no scarcity. Every need met.

He started with four pairs of mice. The population doubled about every two months, and by around day 315 there were more than six hundred. It looked like a success story. Then everything began to unravel. Some young males formed violent gangs. Older males withdrew and became apathetic. Mothers neglected and even abandoned their young. Calhoun called it a “behavioral sink.”

And then a strange group appeared that he called “the beautiful ones.” These mice groomed themselves constantly. They ate and slept and kept clean, but they would not fight, would not mate, would not engage with anyone. Perfect on the outside. Empty on the inside.

The colony topped out at around 2,200 mice, in a paradise built to hold 3,840. Then the births stopped altogether, and the colony died out.

Calhoun’s warning was that abundance without meaningful roles leads to collapse. Later work in his lab explored how creative challenges and purposeful roles could restore health.

I don’t hold up a mouse experiment as Scripture, and I won’t pretend we are mice. But as a parable it is chilling. Abundance without purpose can destroy us faster than scarcity or the hardest seasons ever could. Look at those beautiful ones long enough and you may start to recognize them in the mirror. Polished. Comfortable. Well fed. Never engaging the battle, never bearing fruit. That is what promotion without purpose produces.

*O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?... Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?*

### **Galatians 3:1, 3 (ESV)**

Most of us did not start in the flesh. We started on our knees, hungry and desperate, with nothing but God. Then God was faithful. He blessed us. He opened doors. And somewhere in the comfort of the blessing, we quietly switched sources. That switch rarely makes a sound. Samson rose to shake himself free “as at other times,” and did not know that the Lord had left him

(Judges 16:20). He was so used to the power that he never noticed the Presence had gone. Nothing to see here.

**The Promotion Test is rarely failed in one dramatic moment. It is failed slowly, comfortably, in a paradise where every need is met and the hunger quietly dies.**

### **The Title in Front of the Name**

Pick up almost any Christian conference brochure and look at the speaker list. Apostle. Prophetess. Bishop. Doctor. Senior Pastor. Overseer. Sometimes there are three titles in front of a single name, and you have to read the whole line before you find out who the person actually is.

I want to be careful here, because titles are not evil. Scripture uses them. Paul called himself an apostle. There is nothing wrong with recognizing the function God has given someone.

But in the Christian community there is often an obsession with power and position, and it shows up in how much weight we put on the title in front of the name. When we define spiritual authority by titles, we drift toward idolatry and selfish ambition without ever noticing we left the road.

In the Bible, titles communicate *function*, not *identity*. True spiritual authority comes from the Lord, not from a title or a list of accolades. When a person becomes married to their title, their identity and their value start to fuse with their position. Before long they believe their performance defines who they are. That copies the culture around us instead of setting a Biblical standard.

I know this one from the inside, and I will tell you more of my own story before this part of the book is over.

**When you get your identity from your calling instead of the Father's love, you will live preoccupied with performance instead of resting in His security and peace.**

## **Kingdom and Righteousness**

There is a verse most of us memorized as children:

*But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*

### **Matthew 6:33**

Slow it down, because Jesus said two things, not one. A kingdom is a government: rule, dominion, the administration of a king. When we seek God's kingdom, we are seeking His reign and His power breaking into the earth. Righteousness is behavior that is morally right, marked by justice, virtue, and uprightness. When we seek His righteousness, we are seeking His character. His heart.

Why did Jesus put them together? I believe He knew how easily we would chase one and neglect the other. Many seek His power. Few seek His heart.

Power is the ability to influence, control, or direct people and the course of events, and if we are honest, that is part of what draws many people into ministry. We want to move people. We want to see things change when we speak. Jesus moved people too. But notice why:

*When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.*

### **Matthew 7:28-29**

The teachers of the law mostly repeated what earlier rabbis had said. Jesus' teaching flowed straight out of His relationship with His Father. "I only do what I see My Father doing." That is why He carried authority. It wasn't His title. Nobody had ordained Him. It was His intimacy.

## **Half a Home**

R.T. Kendall has said something that describes the American Church with painful accuracy: “There has been a silent divorce in the Church, speaking generally, between the Word and the Spirit. When there is a divorce, sometimes the children stay with the mother, sometimes with the father.”

Those on the Word side often become suspicious of the Spirit. Those on the Spirit side often become careless with the Word. And the children, the people in our pews, grow up in half a home.

In the 1960s the broadcaster Paul Harvey read a short piece on the radio called “If I Were the Devil.” It has proved strangely prophetic: “To the young, I would whisper that ‘The Bible is a myth.’ I would convince them that man created God instead of the other way around. I would confide that what’s bad is good, and what’s good is ‘square.’”

If I could add a line to his warning, it would be this. If I were the devil, I would convince half the Church that the gifts of the Spirit are outdated, so that believers would stop expecting to hear their Shepherd’s voice (John 10:27). And I would convince the other half that the gifts are all that matter, so they would chase power and forget character. Either way, I would win.

But our Father is not stingy with His Spirit. “How much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him” (Luke 11:13, NLT). The answer to the misuse of the Spirit has never been the absence of the Spirit. It is the right relationship with Him.

## **The Greatest Man With No Miracles**

Let me ask you a question I like to ask in Bible studies. Who did Jesus say was the greatest man born under the Old Covenant?

*Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist.*

**Matthew 11:11 (ESV)**

How many recorded miracles did John the Baptist perform? Zero. Not one healing. Not one storm calmed. Not one dead man raised. John 10:41 says it outright: “John did no sign.”

So what made him the greatest? Listen to what the angel told his father before he was born:

*For he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb.*

### **Luke 1:15 (ESV)**

“Great before the Lord.” Not great before the crowds, although the crowds did come. John was entrusted with intimacy with the Holy Spirit from the womb, and he was found faithful with it. That is what Heaven calls great.

### **Man values power. The Kingdom of God values presence.**

Go back to the verse at the top of this chapter. What is highly esteemed among men is detestable in the sight of God. I suspect the reverse is often true as well: what God esteems, men often despise. A man in camel’s hair eating locusts in the desert, with no stage and no miracles, was the greatest of them all.

That is why so many of us would rather build a franchise than a family. A franchise impresses people. It scales. It can be measured, branded, and multiplied. A family is slow, messy, and mostly invisible. But only one of them looks like the Kingdom.

### **“I Am a Voice”**

If you want to know how a man so anointed could stay free of the hunger for titles, listen to how John answered when the religious leaders sent a delegation to pin one on him:

*They asked John, “Who are you?” He came right out and said, “I am not the Messiah.” “Well then, who are you?” they asked. “Are you Elijah?” “No,” he replied. “Are you the Prophet we are expecting?” “No.” ... John replied in the words of the prophet Isaiah: “I am a voice shouting in the wilderness, ‘Clear the way for the LORD’s coming!’”*

### **John 1:19-23 (NLT)**

No. No. No. Every title they offered him, he refused. I’m not the Messiah. I’m not Elijah. I’m not the Prophet. I’m a voice. That’s all.

And later, when his followers were troubled that the crowds were leaving him for Jesus, he said, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30, NKJV).

Contrast that with a prayer I once heard from a well-known pulpit: “Jesus, make me famous so I can make You famous.” It sounds noble. It sounds like a strategy for the Kingdom. But it is exactly backward from John. Jesus becomes known when I become less.

So keep three pictures in front of you as we walk through this test together. Frank Drebin, waving the crowd past the fire. Addisu, alone in a dim chapel, hearing “I was not there.” And a man in the wilderness refusing every title they handed him. A bigger room, a better title, a more comfortable life: none of them are sins. Many are gifts from God. But every one of them can become a place to hide. The question is not whether God can promote you. He can. The question is whether you can carry it without losing Him.

### **For the Road**

1. If every title were taken away from you tomorrow, what would you believe about your worth? What does that reveal?

2. In what area have you begun in the Spirit but drifted into trying to finish in your own strength?
3. Are you more drawn to God's kingdom (His power) or His righteousness (His heart)? What does your prayer life suggest?

**Titles describe what you do. Only the Father can tell you who you are.**

## When the Gifted Fall

*For God's gifts and his call can never be withdrawn.*

### **Romans 11:29 (NLT)**

A few years ago a movie came out called *Brightburn*. It took the Superman story and asked a dark question: what if the boy from another world, raised by a kind farm couple, discovered his powers and chose evil instead of good? In the film, a boy named Brandon Breyer realizes he has extraordinary abilities, turns his back on everything his parents taught him, and begins to terrorize his hometown, including the very parents who raised him.

It is a disturbing film. But it raises a question many hurting believers have asked me in one form or another. Would God ever let someone keep their anointing if they were using it for evil or selfish gain?

The uncomfortable answer of Scripture is yes. He might.

The gifts and calling of God are without repentance. God does not hand out gifts on probation. That is part of His goodness and faithfulness. But it also means a gift can keep operating long after the heart that carries it has drifted far from Him. This chapter is where we have to look at that squarely. I will tell each story once, as soberly and briefly as I can, and with honor. I am not interested in gossip. I am interested in what these stories can teach the rest of us so we don't repeat them.

## Not for Long

Anyone who has been around professional football has heard the old joke that NFL stands for “Not For Long.” Careers are short. The body breaks down. A younger, faster man is always coming for your spot.

By one widely used estimate, there are around 1.1 million high school football players in the United States. Only about six or seven percent of them will play in college, and only about one percent of college players will be drafted. I know those odds from the inside. I was one of the few who made it. But here is the question nobody asks the kid with the dream: *So what if you make it?*

ESPN’s documentary *Broke* tells the stories of men who reached the very top of professional sports and then lost everything through reckless spending, a lost sense of identity, and no accountability. Years earlier, a book called *God’s Generals* told a strikingly similar story in the spiritual realm, tracing how the great healing evangelists and revivalists of the last century rose, what God did through them, and why so many of them failed to survive the anointing through pride, greed, or isolation.

Its author, Roberts Liardon, knew those stories better than almost anyone alive. In 2004, after allegations of an inappropriate relationship with a male staff member, he acknowledged a moral failure and stepped down from leading the church he pastored. I don’t tell that to shame him. I tell it because it should put the fear of God in every one of us. Here was a man who had written the warnings with his own hand, and knowing why the generals fell was not enough to keep him standing.

**Knowing why others fell will not keep you from falling. Only abiding will.**

So when we ask God for the anointing, do we know what we are signing up for? Will we be “Not for Long,” burning bright for a season and then collapsing under the weight of what we were given? Or will we be “Nice for Life,” steady to the end because we never took our eyes off Jesus?

## The First to Fall

Who created Satan? The honest answer is that God created Lucifer. A vivid way to put it is that Satan was “born” the day Lucifer did not survive his anointing. Ezekiel’s lament over the king of Tyre has long been read by many in the Church as reaching past that earthly king to the fall of the devil himself:

*I ordained and anointed you as the mighty angelic guardian. You had access to the holy mountain of God and walked among the stones of fire. You were blameless in all you did from the day you were created until the day evil was found in you... Your heart was filled with pride because of all your beauty.*

### **Ezekiel 28:14-15, 17 (NLT)**

Anointed. Close to the fire of God. Blameless. Until. Isaiah records the heart behind it: “I will ascend to heaven... I will climb to the highest heavens and be like the Most High” (Isaiah 14:13-14, NLT). Count the “I”s.

I believe Lucifer fell in love with God’s power more than he loved God’s presence. And here is the sobering part. Did he lose his power when he fell? No. He is still powerful. He just isn’t holy.

The pursuit of presence and the pursuit of power can look almost identical from the outside. Same meetings, same worship, same prayer lines. The difference is motive. The pursuit of power is driven by a need to perform in order to gain an identity. The pursuit of presence is driven by a desire to obey in order to grow in intimacy with God. Power should be a benefit of intimacy, never the motivation for it. Pursuing power before presence is like getting married for sex instead of for relationship. What was meant to be the fruit of covenant becomes the reason for it, and the covenant can’t hold the weight.

Lucifer was not the last. Saul, anointed as Israel’s first king, died by his own sword. Eli would not restrain his sons and died the day judgment fell

on his house. Solomon, gifted with extraordinary wisdom, let his wives turn his heart to idols, and his divided heart set the stage for a divided kingdom. Demas deserted Paul “because he loved this present world” (2 Timothy 4:10). Two more deserve a longer look, because they were convincing to the very end.

There is a saying often attributed to Abraham Lincoln: “Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man’s character, give him power.” Bill Johnson has said, “The anointing of God opens doors... many that you are not called to walk through.” Every one of these men walked through a door the anointing opened and the heart was not ready for.

### **Judas and Balaam**

Judas followed Jesus, was chosen as one of the Twelve, and was sent out with the others to preach, heal the sick, and cast out demons (Matthew 10:1-8). When Jesus finally announced that one of them would betray Him, nobody pointed at Judas:

*“Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me.” The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he spoke.*

### **John 13:21-22 (ESV)**

Uncertain. Three years of walking together, and no one suspected the treasurer. Only in hindsight does John tell us that Judas “was a thief and in charge of the money case” (John 12:6, TPT). The love of money and the love of God’s presence can look so similar from the outside that his betrayal came as a complete shock. That should make us slower to assume that gifting proves anything about a heart.

Balaam is stranger still. He spoke only the words God gave him. King Balak of Moab offered him a fortune to curse Israel, and three times Balaam opened his mouth and blessed them instead (Numbers 22–24). If that were all Scripture told us, we would call him faithful. But when he

could not curse Israel with his mouth, he showed their enemy how to make them curse themselves through compromise (Revelation 2:14). Peter calls men like him “prophets who love profit” (2 Peter 2:15).

Bill Hamon described him this way: “Though he was committed to speaking nothing but pure words from the Lord, yet he was self-determined and lusted enough for power and possession to persist in hoping that God would allow him to prophesy something that Balak would reward.” His message, his ministry, and his outward morality all seemed in order. His motive, his maturity, his methods, and his money were not.

God is far more concerned with the integrity of His servants than with the accuracy of their gifts. Spiritual gifting is not the same as spiritual maturity.

*Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God.*

#### **1 John 4:1 (ESV)**

### **The Question on the Plane**

Most of the time, when a gifted person drifts, God removes His *presence* long before He removes the *power*. That is what makes it so dangerous. The meetings keep going well. The prophetic words keep landing. And the man assumes that because the power is still there, God must be pleased.

A seasoned prophetic minister named Rob Jones boarded yet another flight, this time to a conference in Ukraine full of hungry believers. As the plane climbed, he sensed the Lord say, “I want you to get off the road.” At first he wondered if it was the enemy trying to silence him. Then came the question that pierced him: “*Do you have the character to sustain the move of God on your life?*”

Luke tells us that Jesus gave the Twelve “power and authority” (Luke 9:1, NIV). They are not the same thing, and Rob realized he had mistaken the

first for the second. He had taken a working gift as God's endorsement for a busier schedule. But a working gift is not a finished man.

As he tells it, the Lord then showed him three prominent leaders who had received the same warning and had not heeded it: Paul Cain, Todd Bentley, and Ted Haggard. The public record of all three is sobering.

Paul Cain was a respected prophetic minister with roots in the healing revivals of the mid-twentieth century, later associated with the Kansas City Prophets. Many who sat under his ministry tell of details revealed with startling accuracy. In 2004 he publicly confessed to long struggles with alcoholism and homosexual practice and stepped away from ministry. Jack Deere, once one of his closest friends and defenders, later wrote:

*Paul Cain couldn't state the gospel, even when I wrote it for him. For these reasons, I'm fearful about where Paul is spending eternity. But I am sure about two things. He had the greatest prophetic gift I've ever seen. He was the most abusive person I've known.*

— Jack Deere

The greatest gift and the most abusive person, in the same man. Looking back on that era in 2025, theologian Sam Storms, who knew Cain personally, affirmed that genuine supernatural activity was present early on, but described how unrepentant sin and a lack of accountability, in a culture that excused “men of God” from ordinary spiritual disciplines, eventually corrupted the ministry. In his view, the prophetic flow largely dried up after the exposure.

Todd Bentley drew worldwide attention leading the Lakeland outpouring in 2008, with many claims of miraculous healing. That same year he stepped down after it became known he had been in an inappropriate relationship with a staff member, and his marriage ended in divorce. Ted Haggard was the pastor of a large church and president of the National Association of Evangelicals. In 2006 he resigned after a scandal involving drug use and a

relationship with a male escort, and he entered a long season of counseling and restoration.

Rob Jones made that trip his last. For a couple of years he stepped off stages and into obscurity, praying, fasting, letting God dismantle his hunger for applause, and helping raise his granddaughter. He was eventually able to meet one of those three men and share what he had seen, and that leader confirmed it was exactly what had happened to him.

God was gracious enough to warn them before the fall. He is gracious enough to warn us too. Your gift may open doors, but only character keeps you in the room. As Pastor JC Groves said, “No matter who you are. No matter how long you’ve been in ministry... you are one decision away from stupid. One decision away from ruining it all.”

## **The Names We Know**

The falls have not stopped. R.T. Kendall wrote of Ravi Zacharias, “I never knew anyone like him... A true genius, a mind that comes along once in a century... Never in my lifetime have I seen such a catastrophe afflicting the Christian church.” After Zacharias died, an investigation commissioned by his own ministry confirmed a long pattern of sexual misconduct and abuse of power. Carl Lentz was fired in 2020 for infidelity. Marcus Lamb, co-founder of a global Christian television network, publicly admitted in 2010 to an affair years earlier. Mike Bickle and Robert Morris each had more than twenty years of deeply influential ministry before their hidden sins came to light, Bickle’s through the 2024 investigations into his conduct, Morris’s through his 2024 resignation and his 2025 guilty plea.

And it is not only our era. Martin Luther recovered the gospel and wrote harshly against the Jewish people. John Calvin played a part in the execution of Michael Servetus. Jonathan Edwards preached in the First Great Awakening and owned enslaved people. Profound influence and serious blind spots can live in the same heart.

In the spring of 2023 I had a dream I share humbly, as something I've prayed over, not as a pronouncement. I met Mike Bickle at a church conference, and he said to me, "There's only one rule here: all eyes on Him." I told him how my wife and I had built our own house with a prayer room attached, and I began to weep until I could barely whisper, "The gift of tears..." He said something important next, but I couldn't hear it. Months later the allegations against him became public. I don't claim to understand everything the dream meant, but I sensed the Father's kindness in it, and I believe its message was that one rule. A mantle can be real and a man can still lose his way when he takes his eyes off the Lord.

People sometimes assume a fall must come from bad theology or the wrong denomination. Speaking very generally, Reformed circles tend to struggle with legalism and charismatic circles with lawlessness, but leaders fall in every camp. Few stop to consider that the leader may have developed an appetite for more power and influence than God ever meant him to carry. And giving influence to someone struggling with sexual immorality is like making an alcoholic the bartender. It will never end well, for him or for the people he serves.

The documented failures of men like Mike Bickle and Robert Morris do not invalidate charismatic theology, any more than Ravi Zacharias's fall invalidated Christian apologetics. Truth doesn't rise or fall with the character of the man who taught it. After every one of these stories, thousands of hurting people ask, "How was I deceived?" Before we answer, pray. Pray for the people they hurt, for their families, for them. And pray for yourself, because nothing in their story is foreign to your flesh or mine.

## **The Battle Behind the Numbers**

You may have seen the dire statistics about pastors passed around in ministry circles. Many trace back to informal surveys from decades ago, and I won't build a warning on a shaky number. But one widely cited survey of 1,050 Reformed and evangelical pastors found that every single

one knew a colleague who had left the ministry because of burnout, conflict, or moral failure. Every one. The wound is real, and the battle is not mainly a human one (Ephesians 6:12). Three dangers rise to the top again and again.

The first is

### **sexual immorality**

, and very often it is not first about sex. It is about pain. A leader carrying more than his soul can hold reaches for something to numb it. He self-medicates in the flesh what he was meant to bring to the Father. Scripture does not tell us to manage this temptation. It tells us to flee (1 Corinthians 6:18).

The second is

### **burnout**

. Jethro watched Moses judging the people from morning until evening and told him, “The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone” (Exodus 18:18). Many leaders are tending fires God never lit. We assume that because the work is holy, the pace must be too. But the anointing is not a substitute for rest, and even Jesus “often withdrew to lonely places and prayed” (Luke 5:16). If your yoke is crushing you, it may be worth asking whose yoke you are wearing, because His is easy and His burden is light (Matthew 11:30).

The third is

### **division**

, and the word hides a picture: di-vision, two visions. When two visions compete in one house, the house splits. Division thrives where selfish ambition and control reign. Unity grows where servanthood and humility come first.

## **When Affection Overrides Obedience**

*The Leadership Test Inside Your Own House*

Scripture: 1 Samuel 2:22–29; 3:13

Some of the hardest tests of leadership come through the people we love.

It is easier to recognize compromise in a stranger than to confront it in a son, a close friend, or someone who helped build the ministry. Shared history gives disobedience a familiar face. We remember their sacrifices. We understand their struggles. We fear what correction might cost the relationship.

Eli knew that tension. He could identify his sons' wrongdoing and speak against it, but his words did not become the restraint his responsibility required.

His failure exposes a dangerous separation: a leader can say the right thing while permitting the wrong thing to continue.

The call does not exempt us from that test. It places responsibility in our hands. We are accountable for how we use the authority entrusted to us, including the moments when using it may cost us someone's approval.

Another question makes the test even harder: Am I benefiting from what I refuse to confront?

Perhaps the person brings money, influence, loyalty, or relief from a heavy workload. When their usefulness begins determining our response to their conduct, our judgment becomes compromised.

Faithful leadership requires courage governed by humility. We establish clear expectations, address wrongdoing truthfully, and follow through with proportionate consequences. We remain open to

correction ourselves. Where trust has been broken, repentance and restored responsibility may require different timelines.

Love seeks a person's restoration while also protecting those affected by their behavior.

Eli's story asks every leader a searching question:

Have I made obedience negotiable because the person testing it is someone I cannot bear to disappoint?

Surviving the assignment includes learning to disappoint people without abandoning love—and to love people without abandoning obedience.

## **Blessed or the Best?**

So why would God give His anointing to flawed, broken people at all? The film *Amadeus* has helped me wrestle with that question, not by answering it but by showing what happens in a heart that can't accept the answer.

As a boy, Antonio Salieri vowed to God that if He would grant him fame, he would remain faithful all his life. He became the court composer. He had everything he had asked for. Then he met Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, crude, immature, and giggling, and discovered a genius far beyond his own. He could not understand why God would pour such brilliance into a vulgar young man and not into him, the one who had kept his vow. He grew bitter, renounced his faith, and resolved to destroy Mozart as revenge against God.

God often tests our hearts by blessing other people with the gifts we wanted. Salieri wanted to be the best. Mozart was blessed. And because Salieri couldn't tell the difference between being blessed and being righteous, he hated both God and the gifted.

Some of us are Salieri, bitter that God would use "him" or "her." Some of us have been wounded by a Mozart, a gifted person whose character was a wreck. Either way the answer is the same: man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart. A gift only has to be opened. Fruit has to be cultivated.

## **Kissing the Rock**

Jesus is called "a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense" (Romans 9:33). Some who read this chapter have been deeply hurt, not just by a leader but, if they are honest, by God. Why did He let that man keep preaching? Why did the healings keep happening while my marriage, my family, my church was being destroyed?

I can't answer every one of those questions. But I can ask you one.

**Can you kiss the Rock that has offended you?**

Can you lean in toward the God who allowed something you don't understand, and trust that He is still good, still just, and still near the brokenhearted? He has not stopped calling, and He has not stopped warning. Character, cultivated in the secret place and guarded by the fear of the Lord, can carry more weight than you ever imagined. That is how you survive the anointing. Not by being more gifted, but by being more surrendered.

The gifts and calling of God are irrevocable. So is His love for you.

### **For the Road**

1. Has a gifted leader ever wounded you? Have you placed any of that pain on God instead of on the person responsible?
2. Where might God be asking you the question He asked Rob Jones: do you have the character to sustain the move of God on your life?
3. Which of the three dangers, immorality, burnout, or division, are you most exposed to right now, and what boundary would guard you?

**God will often remove His presence long before He removes His power. Don't mistake the one for the other.**

## CHAPTER 11

# The Oil You Cannot Borrow

*“Were not our hearts burning within us while He was speaking to us on the road, while He was explaining the Scriptures to us?”*

**Luke 24:32 (NASB)**

When I played pro football, there was a moment before every home game that never got old. You stand in the dark of the tunnel, packed in shoulder to shoulder with your teammates, and you can hear the stadium on the other side. Then the signal comes, and you run out into the light and the noise of tens of thousands of people.

One game day, as I ran out of that tunnel, I saw something in the spirit. I saw an angel spreading its wings over me, shielding me.

I asked the Lord what it was.

He told me, *“They are shielding your heart from the praises of men.”*

I have thought about that moment for years. Of all the things I might have needed protection from on a football field, God thought my heart needed protection from the applause.

This chapter is about what shields us. It is about two kinds of anointing, and why only one of them can keep us safe from the other. Many of us talk about “the anointing” as if it were one thing. Scripture gives us a richer picture than that, and understanding the difference may save your ministry, your marriage, and your soul.

## **The Four Rivers**

Jesus said something unusual about the Spirit:

*“Anyone who believes in me may come and drink! For the Scriptures declare, ‘Rivers of living water will flow from his heart.’”*

### **John 7:38 (NLT)**

Rivers. Not river. One Source, many streams. At the very end of the Bible we see that Source, a river flowing from the throne of God (Revelation 22:1). At the very beginning we find another picture.

*A river flowed from the land of Eden, watering the garden and then dividing into four branches.*

### **Genesis 2:10 (NLT)**

The Pishon, the Gihon, the Tigris, and the Euphrates. I am not saying Genesis 2 was written to teach this, but I see in those four rivers flowing from one source a helpful picture of four streams of anointing that flow from the one Spirit of God.

The first is the

### **Anointing Gift**

: the gifts and talents God wove into your spiritual DNA. They are given by grace, and they differ from person to person: prophecy, serving, teaching, encouraging, giving, leading, showing kindness (Romans 12:6-8). Because these gifts are part of how God made you, they are without repentance (Romans 11:29). That is a mercy, and it is also a warning. John Paul Jackson used to teach on the difference between a psychic gift and a prophetic gift, and it is a sobering reminder that a capacity God placed in a person can be yielded to the wrong source.

The second is the

### **Global Anointing**

: influence and favor. It is the kind of grace God described when He told Jeremiah He had appointed him “over nations and kingdoms, to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant” (Jeremiah 1:10).

The third is the

### **Power Anointing**

: the effectiveness of the gift. It is the anointing that breaks yokes. This is where results show up. But remember the people in Matthew 7 who brought Jesus a résumé of miracles. Results are not the same as fruit.

Think of it like cooking. “I can cook” is the gift. “I’m great at cooking” is the power, the effectiveness that makes people taste the difference. “I’m a chef,” with the name on the door and people who travel to eat your food, is the influence. All three are real. None of them tells you anything about whether the chef loves the people he is feeding.

These streams are worth stewarding. Paul told Timothy not to neglect the gift he had received when the elders laid hands on him, but to throw himself into it so that everyone would see his progress (1 Timothy 4:14-15). And one thing I have learned is that honor and humility unlock the anointing that men and women of God carry. I watched it happen in a pro football locker room, when a teammate named Jake stood up to lead worship and preach to the team. The anointing on a man flows most freely toward those who honor what God has put on him.

The fourth river is the

### **Abiding Anointing**

: the oil of intimacy and righteousness. Think of Mary of Bethany at the feet of Jesus. This is the knowledge of the heart of God.

For the rest of this chapter I want to focus on the two that matter most for surviving the anointing: the Power Anointing and the Abiding Anointing.

## **Upon You and Within You**

The anointing that rests *upon* you is different from the anointing that lives *within* you.

### **The Power Anointing**

comes upon a person. “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you,” Jesus promised (Acts 1:8). Its purpose is outward: miracles, healing, prophecy, evangelism, the supernatural works of ministry. It rests upon believers for specific tasks, the way Jesus announced at Nazareth that “the Spirit of the Lord is upon me” (Luke 4:18). It can ebb and flow with God’s assignment, as it did with Samson (Judges 16:20).

And here is something we rarely say out loud. The Power Anointing is stirred by the hunger in the room. In His own hometown, Jesus “did only a few miracles there because of their unbelief” (Matthew 13:58). Notice how often He pointed to the faith of the person receiving: “Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace” (Mark 5:34). “As you have believed, so let it be done for you” (Matthew 8:13).

That is why the Power Anointing can flow strongly through someone who is far from God in private. It responds to the hunger and faith of the people in the room, not only to the holiness of the minister. Outward anointing does not guarantee inward intimacy.

### **The Abiding Anointing**

lives within. It is the indwelling Holy Spirit (John 20:22). Its purpose is inward: intimacy with God, transformation, discernment. It is not seasonal. It is constant, and it grows stronger through relationship, prayer, and obedience. “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you” (James 4:8).

*But the anointing which you have received from Him abides in you, and you do not need that anyone teach you; but as the same anointing teaches you concerning all things, and is true, and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you will abide in Him.*

### **1 John 2:27 (NKJV)**

Jesus described the same reality in the language of a vine: “As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me” (John 15:4, NASB). The Abiding Anointing is the root of lasting fruit. Without it, the Power Anointing becomes hollow. That was Jesus’ warning to the church at Ephesus, which had great works but had left its first love (Revelation 2:4-5).

So here is the summary. The Power Anointing is stirred by the hunger of the people in the room. The Abiding Anointing is stirred by the hunger within you.

**The first births results. The second births relationship.**

### **When the Ministry Becomes a Burden**

In a televised interview, Benny Hinn spoke openly about the season when his marriage fell apart and he went through a divorce. He described his personal life as being in shambles, and he said his ministry became a burden instead of a blessing. One of the questions he wrestled with was this: how could God still use him so powerfully when his life was in such a state?

Whatever you think of his ministry, that question is an honest one, and this chapter is the answer. The Power Anointing kept flowing. But compromise had eroded the abiding connection, and the ministry that once felt like a joy turned into a weight. Outward success can mask inward collapse. Intimacy is not optional.

Years ago the Lord showed me a picture I have never forgotten. I saw a candle without a flame, and a fireplace with no fire in it. And He said to me, *“This is who you are without My presence upon you. Don’t forget what is of you and what is of Me. Where you begin and where I begin.”*

A candle without a flame is still a candle. It still looks like one. It can sit on a shelf for years, and nobody will know the difference until the lights go out.

## **The Burning**

Go back to the road to Emmaus. Two disciples walked for miles with the risen Jesus without recognizing Him. Only when He sat down at their table and broke the bread were their eyes opened, and in that moment He disappeared. Then they turned to each other and said the words at the top of this chapter: weren’t our hearts burning within us?

What was that burning?

I believe it was spiritual hunger, the evidence of the Abiding Anointing. The prophet Jeremiah felt it too. He was mocked and worn out and ready to quit, but he couldn’t:

*But if I say, “I will not remember Him  
Or speak anymore in His name,”  
Then in my heart it becomes like a burning fire  
Shut up in my bones;  
And I am weary of holding it in,  
And I cannot endure it.*

**Jeremiah 20:9 (NASB)**

## **Spiritual Hunger**

When a baby is born, do you have to teach it to be hungry?

Of course not. Hunger is the first sign of life. A newborn who won't eat is a newborn in danger. In the same way, spiritual hunger is one of the clearest signs that a person has been born again. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied" (Matthew 5:6, ESV).

But spiritual hunger works in the opposite way from natural hunger. When you are physically hungry and you eat, your hunger goes away. When you are spiritually hungry, the more you eat, the hungrier you get.

And when you are physically hungry, the longer you wait to eat, the hungrier you become. When you are spiritually hungry, the longer you wait to feed, the more your heart goes numb and forgets it ever needed the presence of God.

**Spiritual starvation doesn't feel like starving. It feels like being fine.**

Webster's old dictionary defines *hunger* as the pain or uneasiness that comes from long abstinence from food, and as the desire for something with great eagerness. Real hunger creates urgency, desperation, and a total lack of concern about looking foolish. Hungry people don't care how it looks. Michael Jordan once said that whatever you have a love for, "if you have to walk you would go get it. If you have to beg someone you'll go get it."

## **Faith and Hunger**

Faith and hunger are not the same thing, and we need both.

### **Faith**

is assurance in the unseen, confidence in God's truth even without physical evidence (Hebrews 11:1). It is a gift (Ephesians 2:8-9). It is Abraham believing God's promise of a son against impossible odds (Romans 4:18-21), and the centurion trusting Jesus to heal from a distance (Matthew 8:5-13).

### **Spiritual hunger**

is a craving for God's presence, a restless desire for deeper intimacy with Him that shows up in prayer, repentance, and the pursuit of holiness. "My soul thirsts for You," David wrote (Psalm 63:1). It is the Samaritan woman asking for living water to fill an emptiness nothing else could fill (John 4:13-15).

Faith without hunger leads to complacency, the lukewarm church that says, "I am rich... and have need of nothing" (Revelation 3:17). Hunger without faith leads to frustration, or to idolatry. When Israel grew restless waiting at the foot of Sinai, their hunger without faith built a golden calf (Exodus 32:1-6).

The psalmist had both:

*For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness.*

### **Psalm 84:10 (ESV)**

Here is what makes this so tricky. Spiritual hunger for God's presence and carnal hunger for selfish ambition can both look like zeal for the Father's house. One wants God glorified. The other wants to be praised. The true condition of the heart is revealed by one question: do you fear losing intimacy with God more than you fear losing influence with people?

### **The Oil You Cannot Borrow**

Jesus told a story about ten bridesmaids waiting for a bridegroom. When the cry went up at midnight, the foolish ones turned to the wise and said, "Please give us some of your oil because our lamps are going out." The answer came back, "Go to a shop and buy some for yourselves" (Matthew 25:8-9).

That has always sounded a little selfish to people. Why wouldn't they share? Because this oil can't be shared.

**The Power Anointing can be imparted. The Abiding Anointing can only be cultivated.**

You can receive power when someone lays hands on you. But the oil of intimacy cannot be transferred through prayer or teaching, because it is produced by spiritual hunger and a well-stewarded relationship with God. Nobody can abide for you. Not your pastor, not your spouse, not the anointed man whose meetings you drive hours to attend.

The orphan mindset can't reliably tell the difference between these two sources: the external power that came upon men like Samson and Saul, and the inward rivers of living water Jesus promised would flow from within. Learning to discern both motive and source protects us from deception, and from following people who honor God with their lips while their hearts are far from Him (Isaiah 29:13).

Jesus never hid the cost of buying this oil. "If you truly want to follow me, you should at once completely disown your own life," He said. "For what use is it to gain all the wealth and power of this world, with everything it could offer you, at the cost of your own life?" (Mark 8:34, 36, TPT).

And when we have lost our way, the door back is still open. David prayed his way through it after his own catastrophic fall:

*Create in me a clean heart, O God.*

*Renew a loyal spirit within me.*

*Do not banish me from your presence,  
and don't take your Holy Spirit from me.*

*Restore to me the joy of your salvation,  
and make me willing to obey you.*

**Psalms 51:10-12 (NLT)**

Notice what David begged for. Not his kingdom. Not his reputation. *Don't take Your presence from me.* The Spirit within us is our teacher and our

guard (John 14:26). He will remind us who we are and whose we are.

## **When Hunger Turns**

The Power Anointing becomes dangerous when our hearts get discouraged and burdened. In seasons of pain and rejection, we are tempted to self-medicate with self-will and selfish ambition. We reach for the platform the way some people reach for a bottle.

Esau did it with a bowl of stew. “I’m starving!” he said. “What good is a birthright if I’m dead?” (Genesis 25:32). His physical hunger was so loud he sold something eternal for something that was gone by dinnertime.

Beware the day your fleshly hunger for power and recognition outweighs your spiritual hunger for intimacy.

That brings me back to the tunnel, and the angel’s wings.

I have come to believe that the Abiding Anointing is the only thing that can shield your heart from the effects of the Power Anointing resting on you. When God uses you, the praises of men will hit your soul, and you will be tempted to take credit for something God did. There is a reason for that pull. When a man or woman is submitted to God, something of the reflected glory that was lost in the Garden is restored. People are drawn to it, because they are seeing the glory of God shining off a human face. But it is reflected glory. The moment we think it is ours, we are in trouble.

## **“The Guy” and the Journeyman**

So how do we survive the anointing? We have already heard John the Baptist’s answer: “He must increase, but I must decrease.” Let me tell you how God has been teaching me that answer.

I spent five years in college football as “the guy.”

Then I spent twelve years in the NFL as a journeyman.

For a long time I believed I needed to achieve success in the eyes of the world to be a valuable vessel for God's glory. I thought if I could just be "the guy" again, then God could really use me. I don't believe that anymore. I've come to understand that God simply requires my obedience and my humility to work through me and shine for His glory.

If you want to make God famous on the earth, put obedience and humility ahead of fame and riches, and you will fulfill your destiny.

God loves us so much that He will sometimes bruise our reputation, our resources, and our relationships to restore our intimacy with Him. I've lived that. It didn't feel like love at the time. It does now.

*Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word... It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees.*

**Psalm 119:67, 71 (NIV)**

## **Your Goliath Is a Gift**

Here is something I have seen again and again. Whenever God gives you a great promise, He places a great problem in front of it.

When we misdiagnose our struggles, we misunderstand His method of preparing us for our assignment. Our problems become our tutors. Your giants often mark out the realm of authority you are called to carry in God's Kingdom.

Many believers miss this, but Goliath was one of the greatest blessings in David's life. Without Goliath, David would have stayed a shepherd. The giant was the doorway to the throne.

So stop running from your giants. Face them in the strength of the Lord. It is in that holy collision that your destiny is unlocked.

## The Danger of Mixture

I want to close Part Two with a word of wisdom from Derek Prince, the great Bible teacher who spent decades teaching the Church on the Holy Spirit and on deliverance. He warned often about the danger of *mixture*, and his teaching helps explain much of what we have seen in these chapters. What follows is my summary of it.

Prince taught that a person is spirit, soul, and body. When someone is born again, the spirit is made new, sealed, and indwelt by the Holy Spirit. It belongs entirely to God, and demons cannot possess what God owns. But the soul, meaning the mind, will, and emotions, may still hold strongholds, and the body can still wrestle with sickness, addiction, or compulsion. That is why he rejected the idea that a Christian can be “possessed,” which implies ownership, and preferred the Biblical idea of being *demonized*: influenced, oppressed, or harassed. A believer may be affected. A believer is never owned.

It also means salvation is not the same as deliverance. Salvation secures eternal life, but it does not automatically remove every influence that came in through trauma, sin, or generational exposure. Deliverance removes what doesn’t belong. Sanctification renews what God already owns. And freedom is kept through ongoing surrender, a renewed mind, and obedience. “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty” (2 Corinthians 3:17), but that liberty has to be walked out.

Prince pointed to King Saul as the sobering example. Saul was chosen by God, empowered by the Spirit, and given real authority. Yet when he rejected God’s word, the Spirit of the Lord departed from him, and a distressing spirit troubled him (1 Samuel 16:14). And notice: Saul did not lose his throne right away. He kept the position long after he lost the covering. Position and past anointing do not protect us from the consequences of present disobedience.

The same principle applies painfully to William Branham, a man who moved in remarkable healing power in the mid-twentieth century, yet later taught serious doctrinal errors. Gifting can operate while the soul, or the doctrine, remains unsundered. Power does not prove truth. Only Scripture proves truth.

**Never confuse manifestation with maturity.**

That is the danger of mixture. The spirit can be anointed while the soul still desperately needs renewal. You can be used by God in power and still be wrong in doctrine and unsafe in leadership.

And that is why we cannot judge by the gift. Not in others, and not in ourselves. The Promotion Test is not passed when the crowd grows, the title arrives, or the miracles come. It is passed in the hidden place, where the oil is bought one hour at a time, where the angel's wings cover a heart that still knows the difference between where it begins and where God begins.

He must increase. I must decrease. That is how a voice in the wilderness survives the anointing.

**For the Road**

1. Is the anointing on your life mostly "upon" you or "within" you right now? What evidence would you point to?
2. When did you last feel your heart burn in God's presence? What has been feeding your hunger, and what has been dulling it?
3. What "Goliath" are you running from that might actually be the doorway to your assignment?

**The Power Anointing can be imparted. The Abiding Anointing can only be cultivated.**

PART THREE

# The Prosperity Test

*What will you do when God puts money and resources in  
your hands?*

## CHAPTER 12

# Silver and Gold Have I Plenty

*For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?*

### **Mark 8:36**

The story is told that Thomas Aquinas once stood in Rome in the presence of Pope Innocent IV while a large sum of money was counted out on the table in front of them. The pope looked at the pile and smiled.

“You see,” he said, “the Church is no longer in that age in which she said, ‘Silver and gold have I none.’”

“True, holy father,” Aquinas answered. “But neither can she now say to the lame, ‘Rise up and walk.’”

I have carried that exchange around with me for years, because I think it is the most honest diagnosis of the American Church I have ever heard, and it was spoken roughly eight hundred years before any of us were born.

Peter and John had no money in their pockets at the Beautiful Gate, and a man who had never walked went leaping into the temple (Acts 3:6-8). We have reversed the arrangement. We have the silver and the gold. The lame are still sitting at the gate.

A Church that has grown in worldly influence and worldly success but cannot walk in the power and authority of the Kingdom may impress a crowd. It may build a following. But it poses no threat to the kingdom of darkness, and it holds very little value for the Kingdom of God.

So we have to redefine what success in ministry means. It cannot be measured by attendance and net worth. The real questions are harder. Are we making disciples, or are we entertaining lukewarm consumers? Are we bringing people under the conviction of the Holy Spirit, or are we soothing the conscience of passive believers until they are convinced that drive-through Christianity is discipleship?

Francis Chan once said that our greatest fear should not be failure, but succeeding at things in life that don't really matter. Paul said the same thing with fire in it.

*Anyone who builds on that foundation may use a variety of materials—gold, silver, jewels, wood, hay, or straw. But on the judgment day, fire will reveal what kind of work each builder has done. The fire will show if a person's work has any value. If the work survives, that builder will receive a reward. But if the work is burned up, the builder will suffer great loss... Stop deceiving yourselves. If you think you are wise by this world's standards, you need to become a fool to be truly wise.*

### **1 Corinthians 3:12-15, 18 (NLT)**

With this chapter we open Part Three, the prosperity test. In my earlier book I called the Reward season the place where we must learn to survive the anointing. Nowhere is that harder than when the anointing starts to pay. Money is power you can hold in your hand, and the Kingdom tests what we do with it.

### **The American Dream and the Cost of Discipleship**

I want to ask a question that may make some of us uncomfortable. Are the American Dream and biblical Christianity at odds with each other?

I believe that in many places they are. When I lay the American Dream next to the temptations in the wilderness, it looks far more like Satan's offer to

Jesus than like Jesus' call to His disciples. The enemy offered the kingdoms of the world, comfort for the flesh, and a public display that would make everyone admire Him (Matthew 4:1-10). Jesus offered His followers a cross. His invitation calls us to surrender self-interest, to love sacrificially, and to live for eternity. A life spent chasing temporary wealth and independence runs straight against the values of His Kingdom: humility, servanthood, and an eternal purpose.

Jesus warned the religious leaders of His day, "Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition" (Mark 7:13). Our tradition is not the washing of cups. Ours is a nice house, a nice car, a nice job, a nice family, and a nice retirement. Then, as the last chapter before we stand before the Creator of the universe to give an account, we spend our final years collecting seashells. I can picture it. "Here it is, Lord. My seashell collection. And I've got a pretty good golf swing. And look at my boat."

David Platt put it plainly: "We desperately need to explore how much of our understanding of the gospel is American and how much is biblical. While the goal of the American dream is to make much of us, the goal of the gospel is to make much of God."

John Piper spent much of his ministry pleading with a generation, "Don't waste your life." And a saying often attributed to Charles Spurgeon cuts closer still: Christians are not so much in danger when they are persecuted as when they are admired.

Jesus told the Pharisees, who loved their money, "What is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God" (Luke 16:15). That should stop us. What we celebrate in our conferences and on our platforms, God may look at very differently. Solomon wrote that silver is tested in a crucible and gold in a furnace, but a man is tested by the praise he receives (Proverbs 27:21).

**Applause is a furnace. So is a paycheck.**

## **The Calling and the Commission**

David's life shows the tension between being anointed and walking in Kingdom authority better than any life in the Old Testament. Samuel poured oil on his head when he was a boy in a field, and the Spirit of the Lord came powerfully on him from that day on (1 Samuel 16:13). He was called. But he was not yet commissioned.

What came next was not a coronation. It was years in the wilderness. He fled Saul. He led a band of outcasts, men who were in distress, in debt, and discontented (1 Samuel 22:2). He endured betrayal. The process tested him at every turn. Would he cling to God's promise, or would he use his own strength to seize by force what God meant to give him through surrender?

Twice he had Saul in his hands. Twice he refused to touch him. "The LORD forbid that I should do this thing to my lord, the LORD's anointed" (1 Samuel 24:6). David honored his persecutor. He confronted Saul's behavior, but he would not remove Saul from his position. That was God's business.

Many people today are more like Saul than David. They chase recognition and position to validate their identity and their calling, but they lack the integrity to steward God's authority. David's journey is a warning and a promise at the same time. The anointing ignites destiny, but only character sustains it. Without the crucible of God's process, even a true calling can corrode into self-destruction.

Here is something I wish someone had told me at twenty-two:

**The favor of God opens many doors. Most of them you are not called to walk through.**

Gordon Lindsay, who watched the healing revival of the mid-twentieth century from the inside, gave a sober verdict: "Few ministers can stand the test of prosperity, popularity, and power, and survive."

In prayer I have sensed the Lord say something to me that I now say to anyone with a gift: *Don't fall in love with My power, My position, or My provision. Fall in love with My presence.*

## **Loving the Praise of Men**

There is a quieter version of the prosperity test. It doesn't look like a scandal. It looks like silence.

*Many people did believe in him, however, including some of the Jewish leaders. But they wouldn't admit it for fear that the Pharisees would expel them from the synagogue. For they loved human praise more than the praise of God.*

### **John 12:42-43 (NLT)**

If I were to put that verse in modern words, it might sound like this:

*Many people privately agreed with Jesus about \_\_\_\_\_, even some influential church leaders. But they kept their convictions hidden, afraid of backlash from their peers or of being shut out of the right Christian circles. They cared more about fitting in with the culture and keeping its approval than about living openly for God's glory.*

Fill in the blank. Marriage. Gender. The Church. Purity. Money.

That last one may be the quietest of all. It is very hard to preach what Jesus taught about money when your own security depends on the people listening. The leaders in John 12 were not losing a salary, but they were afraid of losing a seat. The fear is the same.

## **Kingdom Over Legacy**

Even the faithful can build the wrong thing with the right gift. I see a sobering picture of this in Joseph.

Joseph is one of the heroes of Genesis. God gave him the interpretation of Pharaoh's dreams and the wisdom to prepare for seven years of famine. His policies saved lives, his own family's among them. But read Genesis 47 carefully. As the famine dragged on, the Egyptians traded their money for grain, then their livestock, then their land, and finally themselves. "We are willing to become Pharaoh's servants," they said (Genesis 47:25). Joseph's system concentrated all the land and power in Pharaoh's hands and left the people dependent on the throne.

It worked. It was practical. But I wonder whether it lacked prophetic vision. A few generations later "a new king came to power in Egypt who knew nothing about Joseph" (Exodus 1:8), and the same centralized machinery that once fed Israel was used to enslave her. I don't say this to condemn Joseph, whom Scripture honors. I offer it as a picture of what happens when God-given wisdom is untethered from Kingdom priorities. It can build structures that value immediate success over what is best for the people of God.

Unhealthy ambition is marked by personal legacy and short-term gain. Godly excellence is rooted in humility, integrity, and stewardship that thinks in generations. One builds systems that look successful but end in bondage. The other lifts up communities and guards their freedom. True excellence needs prophetic discernment, so that what we build today still serves God's heart for our grandchildren.

### **Solomon: Richer and Wiser, and Still Turned Away**

If any life proves that the prosperity test is real, it is Solomon's.

Solomon did not go looking for wealth. When God invited him to ask for anything, he asked for an understanding heart to govern God's people. God was so pleased that He added what Solomon had not asked for: riches and honor beyond any king of his day (1 Kings 3:9-13). The idea of Solomon stewarding great wealth did not start with Solomon. It started with God.

“So King Solomon became richer and wiser than any other king on earth” (1 Kings 10:23, NLT).

And Solomon did great things with it. He built the temple. He gave us Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. But the record of his staggering wealth is followed by this:

*Now King Solomon loved many foreign women... And in fact, they did turn his heart away from the LORD. In Solomon's old age, they turned his heart to worship other gods instead of being completely faithful to the LORD his God, as his father, David, had been... In this way, Solomon did what was evil in the LORD's sight; he refused to follow the LORD completely.*

### **1 Kings 11:1-6 (NLT)**

He broke the clear command of Deuteronomy 7:3-4. He built shrines for Chemosh and Molech so his wives could burn incense to their gods. The God who had appeared to him twice said He would tear the kingdom away, and after Solomon died, the kingdom split and never came back together (1 Kings 11:7-13).

One of the biggest lies in our church culture is that wealth is proof that God is pleased with our obedience and stewardship. Apply that to Solomon. He was one of the wealthiest men who ever lived. His wealth was God's idea. And Scripture's verdict on the end of his life is that he did evil in the sight of the Lord. The extraordinary riches he received after asking only for wisdom became the very gift that shipwrecked his devotion.

It is folly to think your gift reflects your own goodness. It reflects a good Father who gives good gifts for the benefit and growth of His people. Solomon drifted from intimacy with the One who gave him everything, and so he failed to obey and failed to steward. He did not survive his anointing.

Let your life be an example of what to do, not what not to do.

## **The Idol of Professionalized Ministry**

I believe God is dismantling the idol of professionalized ministry in our generation.

I want to be careful here. It is not sin to earn your bread through gospel labor. Paul said plainly, “Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain” (1 Corinthians 9:9). The worker deserves his wages. The problem comes when a salary shackles our tongue to the approval of men. When the fear of losing our income silences justice and blunts the edge of God’s Word, we have traded eternal souls for earthly comfort.

As the return of Christ draws nearer, I believe the cost of discipleship will rise. If we are used to looking the other way now, staying silent while the voiceless suffer and rebellion goes unchecked because we are afraid of losing provision, do we really think we will have the strength to stand when following Jesus costs us our lives?

It is worth noticing that when Revelation describes the final system of rebellion, its mark is economic. No one can buy or sell without it (Revelation 13:16-17). I believe that is because all rebellion ends up being about worship: whom will you trust, and whom will you serve? Let the Church be marked not by clinging to financial security but by holy zeal, preaching Christ crucified even unto death.

## **Laodicea: Rich, and Lukewarm**

The last letter Jesus dictated to the churches of Asia was to a wealthy church. I believe it reads like a letter to us.

*I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked... Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock.*

**Revelation 3:15-17, 19-20 (ESV)**

Laodicea was a rich city, but it had no good water supply of its own. Its water was piped in from springs some distance away. Nearby Hierapolis was known for its hot springs, which people valued for healing. Colossae was known for cold, fresh water that quenched thirst. By the time water reached Laodicea it was neither. It was lukewarm, good for nothing, the kind of water that makes you want to spit.

I see a spiritual picture in that. When we are relationally distant from God and have no direct access to the living water of the Holy Spirit, we end up living on secondhand revelation piped in from somewhere else. By the time it reaches us it has lost its heat and its refreshment. We can no longer bring healing to a generation that is thirsty for the living God.

Notice what Jesus does not do. He does not walk away. He knocks. “Those whom I love, I reprove.” Even His rebuke of Laodicea is an invitation to dinner.

We have been taught that “church business” is something to tolerate. But that is exactly what made Jesus flip tables. “My house will be called a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of thieves” (Matthew 21:13). When someone turns the deepest kind of intimacy into a financial transaction, we do not call it a preference. We call it prostitution. The house of the Father was built for intimacy with Him. You cannot run it like a business without provoking the anger of a holy God.

## A Word to Compromised Shepherds

*What sorrow awaits you shepherds who feed yourselves instead of your flocks. Shouldn't shepherds feed their sheep? You drink the milk, wear the wool, and butcher the best animals, but you let your flocks starve... I will rescue my flock from their mouths; the sheep will no longer be their prey.*

### **Ezekiel 34:2-3, 10 (NLT)**

I believe 2020 was a kind of pre-test for the Body of Christ, a practice exam for harder days that the prophets called “a time of trouble for Jacob” (Jeremiah 30:7). What it revealed troubled me. The real epidemic was not only a virus. It was a church model that was quickly deemed “non-essential” in a moment of crisis. And in too many places it exposed a lack of courage and accountability among shepherds who fed themselves while the sheep were crushed.

Thomas Paine wrote, “A body of men holding themselves accountable to nobody ought not to be trusted by anybody.” Peter Vescovi says it more briefly: “Beware of those who crave authority but shun accountability.”

That brings me to something many believers have never been told.

In the United States, most churches are organized as 501(c)(3) organizations. The church pays no federal income tax, and gifts to it are tax-deductible for the giver. In exchange, it cannot endorse political candidates, must limit its lobbying, and must keep its activities religious, educational, or charitable.

Most tax-exempt organizations, from food banks to hospitals to universities, must also file an annual IRS Form 990. It is a public document. It reports the organization's revenue, expenses, and assets. It shows how it is governed, including its board and what it pays its top leaders. The purpose is transparency, so that donors, the public, and

regulators can see that tax-exempt money is being used the way it was given.

Churches are not required to file it.

There are historical reasons for that exemption, and many churches handle money with great integrity. But it does mean that, unlike almost every other nonprofit, a church can keep its finances entirely private. Donors are left to rely on whatever accountability the church chooses to offer. When I looked, I found that many of the largest churches in my own region publish no Form 990 at all.

I am not saying every church that does not file is hiding something. I am saying that when a church prioritizes a business model of salaries, revenue streams, and asset growth over spiritual integrity, and also opts out of the one tool designed to keep nonprofits honest, it is walking very close to the thing Jesus condemned. It risks turning the family of God into an institution, and the house of prayer into a den of thieves.

If you are a leader, I don't write this to shame you. I write it as a son of the Church who loves her. Choose transparency before you are forced into it.

**Light is a friend to the faithful.**

## **For the Road**

1. If you laid your life next to the American Dream and next to Jesus' call to carry a cross, which one would it more closely resemble?
2. Fill in the blank from John 12:42-43. What conviction are you keeping quiet to protect your place or your provision?
3. If your finances, or your church's finances, were laid open on the table tomorrow, would you be at peace?

**We can have the silver and the gold and still leave the lame at the gate.**

## CHAPTER 13

# Bigger Barns or an Ark

*“But God said to him, ‘You fool! You will die this very night. Then who will get everything you worked for?’ Yes, a person is a fool to store up earthly wealth but not have a rich relationship with God.”*

**Luke 12:20-21 (NLT)**

Years ago, in a moment of prayer, God asked me a question I did not expect. *How do you see money?*

Instantly a picture flashed in front of me. It was a Band-Aid, flimsy and temporary, the kind of thing you put over a wound. But as I looked at it, it changed. It became a loaded gun: cold, heavy, with power coiled inside it.

Then I heard Him say, *When you stop seeing money as a Band-Aid and start seeing it as a gun, you will stop hurting yourself, your family, and others. Only then will you understand its true danger.*

I have wrestled with that picture for years. I’ll come back to it. But I want you to hold it in your mind as you read this chapter, because most of us have been treating a loaded weapon like a bandage.

### **“This Doesn’t Apply to Me. I’m Not Wealthy.”**

Whenever I teach on this, someone thinks it. I used to think it too.

But by any global measure, if you have food in your fridge, clothes on your back, a roof over your head, and a bed to sleep in, you are better off than most of the people on this planet. Global wealth estimates have long suggested that an ordinary American salary places a person among the top

few percent of earners in the world. If you own a smartphone and can read these words, you have access to information that billions of people do not.

We are, by the standards of history, the rich man in the parable. Jesus' warnings about wealth are addressed to us.

I grew up in the pain of poverty and around a lack of stewardship. Later in life people told me how to keep wealth once you earn it. But nobody warned me about the dangers that come with having it: independence, pride, and the “my will be done” mentality that so often rides along with money. The message was always to fear losing money. Nobody told me to fear what constant wealth could do to my ego, my independence, and my trust in the God of Scripture.

**The problem in America isn't a lack of prosperity. The problem is greed, envy, discontentment, and a lack of stewardship.**

Peter Vescovi, in *The Great Money Reform*, puts it this way: “Without stewardship, what was meant to bless you may end up destroying you.” He also observes, “It is rare for people to prepare themselves to steward the thing they are asking for.” Most of us are praying for more. Very few of us are preparing to carry it.

Here is a sentence I have come to believe with my whole heart: Men use God for provision, but God uses provision to get men to His Son.

## **Pockets Filled With Holes**

Some time ago I shared with those I teach what I sensed the Lord was saying for that year. It was a word about a second chance, and it came from the little book of Haggai.

The exiles had come home from Babylon to rebuild the temple. They laid the foundation, then stopped and got busy with their own lives.

*“Why are you living in luxurious houses while my house lies in ruins? This is what the LORD of Heaven’s Armies says: Look at what’s happening to you! You have planted much but harvest little. You eat but are not satisfied. You drink but are still thirsty. You put on clothes but cannot keep warm. Your wages disappear as though you were putting them in pockets filled with holes!”*

### **Haggai 1:4-6 (NLT)**

Pockets filled with holes. I don’t know a better description of the American household. We earn more than any generation before us and are still not satisfied. That is not a problem of income. It is a problem of priority. God told them plainly why their harvests blew away: “Because my house lies in ruins... while all of you are busy building your own fine houses” (Haggai 1:9).

But Haggai is a book of second chances. The people listened. They feared the Lord. And God sent one more message: “I am with you” (Haggai 1:13). Within weeks they were building again.

### **Bigger Barns**

Jesus told a story about this.

*“A rich man had a fertile farm that produced fine crops. He said to himself, ‘What should I do? I don’t have room for all my crops.’ Then he said, ‘I know! I’ll tear down my barns and build bigger ones. Then I’ll have room enough to store all my wheat and other goods. And I’ll sit back and say to myself, “My friend, you have enough stored away for years to come. Now take it easy! Eat, drink, and be merry!”’”*

### **Luke 12:16-19 (NLT)**

Notice how the man talks only to himself. *I* will tear down. *My* barns. *My* friend. There is no God and no neighbor in the conversation. And God’s

answer is the verse at the top of this chapter.

The rich man did not have a money problem. He had a relationship problem. He was rich in barns and poor toward God.

There is a saying I have leaned on in hard seasons: “Sometimes God will destroy our plans when He sees that our plans are going to destroy us.” The rich man’s plans were never interrupted until it was too late. Some of us should thank God for the interruptions.

### **Noah’s Recalculation: A Parable**

In my earlier book I wrote about a season called Recalculate. You know the voice in your car’s navigation when you miss a turn: “Recalculating.” It doesn’t scold you. It plots the best route from where you are and turns you around. I believe much of what we call delay in revival is God recalculating His people. Let me show you what I mean with a story.

I want to be clear before I begin. What follows is *not* what Scripture says happened. The Bible tells us Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation, who walked with God and did everything God commanded him (Genesis 6:9, 22). This is an imagined retelling, a parable, meant to hold up a mirror to us. Picture a different Noah.

At first this Noah gave himself to the task with his whole heart. He gathered timber, followed God’s detailed instructions, and began to raise the great vessel. Every swing of his hammer was an act of obedience.

But as the years passed, he grew distracted. The bustle of the city’s commerce, the lure of wealth, and the admiration of others began to catch his eye. He started to dream about securing his legacy by worldly means, a great enterprise that would rival any business in the region. Slowly, the ark slid to the back of his priorities.

God saw his heart drifting, and He knew these new ambitions would ruin him. So, in love, God disrupted Noah’s plans. Materials for his new

ventures were lost or spoiled. Workers were called away. Sudden storms set everything back. Each setback was a gentle but firm nudge turning Noah's face back to the mission he had been given.

Confused and frustrated, Noah finally went to prayer, and there he remembered what he had forgotten: *Sometimes God will destroy our plans when He sees that our plans are going to destroy us.* He laid down his ambitions and picked up his hammer again. When the rain came, he and his family were safe inside the ark's walls, and he stepped out on the other side grateful for a God who loved him enough to redirect him.

That is the parable. Here is the point. When our ambitions start to lead us away, God may step in, not to punish us but to protect us and bring us back to the work that matters.

Jesus said the last days would look like the days of Noah: "people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away" (Matthew 24:38-39, NIV). Eating, drinking, marrying. None of those are sins. The danger was that ordinary life had swallowed eternity, and no one looked up.

## **Two Masters**

*No one can serve two masters. For you will hate one and love the other; you will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.*

### **Matthew 6:24**

Dr. Mark Chironna describes Mammon as a real spiritual rival, "a power that teaches scarcity, control, and self-protection." But, as he says, recognizing its influence "is not despair but clarity: once seen, it can be resisted."

Jesus did not warn that the main problem of the last days would be a lack of ambition. He warned about the opposite: an abundance of selfish ambition, greed, and the hunger for power.

That does not mean wealth is evil. Noah couldn't launch a GoFundMe to pay for the ark. Building it cost something. So the question is not how much money is "too much." The question is whether we are building bigger barns to flex our ego, or an Ark of His Presence to rescue God's family from the flood of lawlessness that hardens hearts toward a holy God.

Whether we see it or not, every one of us is building one of two things: an Ark of His Presence, or a Tower of Self-Recognition. One is rooted in "Your will be done." The other is rooted in "my will be done." One makes disciples. The other breeds love of self. Jesus said the wise man builds on the rock of hearing and doing His words, and when the floods rise that house stands. The foolish man builds on sand, "and great was the fall of it" (Matthew 7:24-27).

**Hoarded, money builds towers. Surrendered, it builds arks.**

### **Why Prosperity Is So Dangerous**

C.S. Lewis gave one of the clearest answers I know in *The Screwtape Letters*. In that book a senior demon, Screwtape, writes letters coaching his nephew Wormwood on how to ruin a human "patient." At one point the patient begins to prosper. His reputation grows. His social circle widens. His work becomes absorbing and satisfying. Screwtape is delighted.

Suffering, he explains, might drive a man to God. Prosperity lulls him into comfort, quiet pride, and self-sufficiency until his dependence on God fades into apathy. And because it never sets off an alarm, it works better than open sin.

*Prosperity knits a man to the World. He feels that he is “finding his place in it,” while really it is finding its place in him. His increasing reputation, his widening circle of acquaintances, his sense of importance, the growing pressure of absorbing and agreeable work, build up in him a sense of being really at home in earth.*

**C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters***

I have seen Screwtape’s letter play out in my own world. Many people know the story of Johnny Manziel, told in a Netflix documentary about his years as “Johnny Football.” He won the Heisman Trophy as a freshman and became a household name almost overnight. Read Lewis’s words again with his story in mind. An increasing reputation: national stardom. A widening circle of acquaintances: celebrities and parties. A growing sense of importance that began to outweigh the discipline that got him there. I don’t write that to throw stones. I played this game too, and I know how fast the world finds its place in a young man.

When we focus more on getting money than on how God prepares and trains us through money, we end up asking how to make as much as possible. The real question is whether God can trust us with His provision.

**The Band-Aid and the Gun**

Let me go back to the vision.

The gun’s warning stayed with me. When money is not respected, it becomes a weapon, hoarded, idolized, or used to exploit and manipulate people. But the Band-Aid’s lie is subtler. It says money can heal what is broken in us. It cannot. Wealth cannot heal the orphan mindset. Only the renewing of the mind by God’s Word and the counsel of the Holy Spirit brings that kind of restoration.

So now I hold on to this. Money is neither savior nor healer. It was never really a Band-Aid. It is more like a gun: a tool that destroys in the wrong

hands, and in the right hands brings security and protection. Everything depends on how we see it and whether we surrender it.

It is easy to fool the crowd about money. It is moderately easy to fool ourselves. It is harder to fool our family, nearly impossible to fool our spouse, and utterly impossible to fool God. “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:21).

The film *Paycheck* works as a modern parable here. An engineer whose memory is wiped after each secret job expects a payout of around ninety million dollars, only to learn he signed it all away for an envelope of ordinary items: a key, a ticket, a watch. Each one turns out to be exactly what he needs at the right moment to destroy the machine he built, a machine that would lead the world to ruin. I see in those humble clues something like manna: ordinary things made holy in the hands of a God who knows the end from the beginning. Had he clung to the money, he would have ignored the clues. As Peter Vescovi puts it, this is the call to walk “with the Provider rather than prioritizing worldly provision.”

### **The Shrewd Manager**

Jesus told one of His strangest parables right after the parable of the prodigal son. A rich man’s manager is caught wasting his master’s possessions and told he is finished. So before he is removed, he calls in his master’s debtors one by one and cuts their bills, so that people will receive him into their homes.

*The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.*

**Luke 16:8-9 (ESV)**

Why would the master commend a dishonest man? Not for his dishonesty, but for his clarity. The manager reversed his means and his ends. He stopped using people to get money and started using money to win people.

So ask yourself: am I using people to save money, or using money to redeem people?

In Genesis 6:14, *The Message* renders God's command to Noah this way: "Build yourself a ship from teakwood. Make rooms in it." And Jesus told His disciples, "My Father's house has many rooms" (John 14:2). God has always been building a house with room for His family.

**In this season, what ship are you building?**

## **Four Paradigms on Money**

I see four ways people relate to money, and each has a face in Scripture.

### **1. Ownership: The Prodigal Son Mentality**

*The younger son told his father, "I want my share of your estate now before you die."*

**Luke 15:12 (NLT)**

- **Focus:** Self-centered comfort. "My inheritance, my pleasure, my comfort."
- **Heart posture:** The rebellious orphan. Prioritizes temporary gain over relationship with the Father and over Kingdom purpose.

### **2. Hardship: The Martha Mentality**

*"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one."*

**Luke 10:41-42 (NIV)**

- **Focus:** Works-driven sacrifice. “My legacy, my human effort, my recognition.”
- **Heart posture:** The religious orphan. Equates suffering with holiness and righteousness, and risks burning out.

### 3. Stewardship: The Rich Young Ruler Mentality

*“All these I have kept,” the young man said. “What do I still lack?”*

**Matthew 19:20 (NIV)**

- **Focus:** Earthly responsibility without eternal surrender. “My security, my control.”
- **Strengths:** Responsible, ethical, and disciplined with resources.
- **Weaknesses:** Attached to wealth as a measure of security. Struggles to surrender control to God, because the natural mind cannot receive the things of God (1 Corinthians 2:14).
- **Heart posture:** Partial obedience. Honors God with a ritual mentality but puts earthly safety ahead of radical obedience.

Stewardship is a “halfway” paradigm. It avoids the selfishness of Ownership and the legalism of Hardship, but it still falls short of Discipleship. Like the young ruler, many of us honor God with our morality and our money management, but we struggle to release our wealth, or the identity we have built around it, for His Kingdom. Stewardship may secure financial stability. But if it stops there, it breeds safety and control. True discipleship, as Jesus taught it, requires total surrender.

### 4. Discipleship: The Matthew 28:19 Mentality

*Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.*

**Matthew 28:19-20 (NIV)**

- **Focus:** Living for eternity. “His mission, His Kingdom, His will be done.”
- **Heart posture:** The surrendered ambassador. “We are Christ’s ambassadors” (2 Corinthians 5:20). Lives to invest every resource, time, wealth, and gifts, into God’s Kingdom and the discipling of others. Counts everything as loss “because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ” (Philippians 3:8).

Discipleship is marked by radical obedience. It treats time, talents, resources, and money as tools for living with eternity in view. It values obedience over outcomes, and it trusts God with the results instead of leaning on human effort. We see it in the church of Acts 2, a family devoted to the apostles’ teaching, to prayer, and to such radical generosity that needs were met both physically and relationally, and the Lord added to their number daily (Acts 2:42-47).

This is the goal. Not ownership, not hardship, and not even stewardship. Discipleship.

## Two Appetites

I believe there is a civil war in the Church right now, like the long war between the house of Saul and the house of David (2 Samuel 3:1), and it is fought between two heart postures: carnal greed and spiritual hunger.

Greed is an excessive, selfish desire for wealth, power, or resources, often at the expense of others or of what is right. It is rooted in fear and in the desire to lord over people. It compromises integrity and leaves the soul empty. Spiritual hunger craves intimacy, connection, and purpose with the living God. It takes the same raw desire and turns it from vanity and envy into a fire for justice, love, and communion with Him.

The two are related. They are both appetites. “Just as Death and Destruction are never satisfied, so human desire is never satisfied” (Proverbs 27:20, NLT).

### **Untethered desire births carnal greed.**

God made us hungry. The question is what we feed. Saul's house grew weaker and David's grew stronger. The same is true in us. The appetite you feed is the one that wins.

That is why it matters how you define the Kingdom you are seeking first (Matthew 6:33). If you believe seeking the Kingdom means pursuing success, promotion, and influence, you will end up serving Mammon while calling it God. But if you define the Kingdom as pursuing a relationship with Him, obeying His will, and knowing His heart above all else, the reward will be your own transformation.

Aquinas was right about the Church that had silver and gold and could no longer say "walk." But the opposite is also possible. A people can hold money with open hands, build arks instead of barns, and once again say to a lame generation, "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk."

### **For the Road**

1. Have you been treating money like a Band-Aid for something only God can heal? What would it look like to respect it like a gun?
2. Which of the four paradigms best describes how you handle money right now: Ownership, Hardship, Stewardship, or Discipleship?
3. Look at your calendar and your bank statement from the last month. Are they building a bigger barn or an Ark of His Presence?

**Men use God for provision, but God uses provision to get men to His Son.**

## The Training Room Called Provision

*When you walk with the Provider, you won't be deceived by the provision.*

— Peter Vescovi, *The Great Money Reform*

The first thing I remember about my college weight room is the sound. Iron plates clanging against iron bars, echoing under the banners of old bowl-game glories. I was a scrawny freshman lineman, and I would stand there and stare at the veterans. Linemen and linebackers built like bodybuilders, throwing around barbells that seemed to defy gravity.

But the man who owned that room was Cheyenne, a senior captain.

One afternoon I watched him bench 500 pounds. The bar bent as he lowered it to his chest, and then he exploded it upward. The whole team roared. I just stood there, amazed, aching to be strong enough for those heavy racks.

That is when I heard the Lord whisper through the clatter: *If only My children craved spiritual strength like this when it comes to discipleship. This is like My Refiner's fire.*

My strength coach caught me staring. “You think this is just about building muscles?” he said, nodding toward Cheyenne. “Pain can make you bitter, or it can make you better. These racks don’t care about your comfort or your excuses. Iron doesn’t negotiate.” He slapped the bench. “In here, you don’t need the weights to cooperate. You need them to resist you. No resistance, no growth.” Then he jabbed a finger at the motto painted on the wall: *You*

*can't live soft and play hard.* “Those weights aren’t for show. They build strength and character. You wanna be great? Let the pain do its work.”

I didn’t know it then, but I was standing in a parable. God’s economy works the same way. When He allows financial weight into our lives, a drained savings account, a call to give sacrificially, a long wilderness season of waiting, He is not withholding His favor. He is testing our resolve in the Refiner’s fire and burning away our self-reliance. The world says, “Avoid the heavy racks. Chase comfort.” But heaven’s Coach says, “Prove faithful here, and I will entrust you with more.”

Cheyenne’s strength was not built overnight. Neither is faith. It is not forged in safety and comfort.

So the question is not whether the heavy weights will come. They will. The question is whether we will surrender to the Father’s training so we can be strengthened, or abort His process to stay comfortable.

## **A Reason for Your Season**

In *The 9 Seasons of the Kingdom of God*, I wrote that every season has a reason. Nowhere is that more true, or more misunderstood, than in the area of money.

Picture Moses standing on the plains of Moab. In front of him is a generation that has eaten manna every morning of their lives. On the other side of the Jordan is a land they have only heard about. Before they cross, Moses reminds them who they are:

*The LORD did not set his heart on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other nations, for you were the smallest of all nations! Rather, it was simply that the LORD loves you...*

### **Deuteronomy 7:7–8**

Israel was not chosen because they were impressive. They were chosen because they were loved. That is where every conversation about provision has to start. Then Moses explains what the last forty years were really about:

*Remember how the LORD your God led you through the wilderness for these forty years, humbling you and testing you to prove your character, and to find out whether or not you would obey his commands. Yes, he humbled you by letting you go hungry and then feeding you with manna, a food previously unknown to you and your ancestors. He did it to teach you that people do not live by bread alone; rather, we live by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.*

### **Deuteronomy 8:2–3**

The wilderness was a training room. For forty years their clothes didn't wear out and their feet didn't swell (Deuteronomy 8:4). God was disciplining them the way a good parent disciplines a child, for their own good (8:5). And as we saw at the very beginning of this book, Moses warned that the most dangerous moment would not be the wilderness. It would be the land of milk and honey, the fine houses and multiplied silver and gold, when they would be tempted to say, "I have achieved this wealth with my own strength and energy" (8:10–18).

Hunger was the test in the wilderness. Plenty would be the test in the Promised Land. Both were tests of the same thing: would they remember who their Provider was?

This is where so many of us miss it. When we focus more on obtaining money than on how God trains us with money, we end up pursuing how to make money instead of asking whether God can trust us with His provision. We spend our lives trying to get out of the training room instead of letting the training room do its work.

## **God cares more about your spiritual health than your net worth.**

When we forget that, we miss the reason for our season.

### **The Lies of Mammon and the Commandments of God**

Jesus named money as a rival master (Matthew 6:24). Mammon does not usually announce itself. It sounds like ordinary, responsible questions. But listen closely and you'll hear the difference between the traditions of men, which are self-centered and fear-based, and the commandments of God, which are Christ-centered and faith-driven.

Here are eight questions Mammon asks, and the question God asks in its place.

1. **Mammon asks:** "Am I tithing enough so God will bless me?" That treats God like a debt collector and turns faith into a transaction. **God asks:** "Am I stewarding what I have been entrusted with to glorify Him?" It is required of stewards that they be found faithful (1 Corinthians 4:2), and what we steward is His, not ours.
2. **Mammon asks:** "If I work harder, will God make me wealthier and fulfill my dreams?" That is wealth as earned entitlement, the seed of the prosperity gospel. **God asks:** "Are my work and my dreams submitted to His Kingdom purpose?" Seek first the Kingdom (Matthew 6:33), and let eternity shape your ambition.
3. **Mammon asks:** "Do I have enough to do what I want in retirement?" That is trust in wealth over divine provision, self-sufficiency dressed up as wisdom. **God asks:** "Do I have enough to do what God wants me to do in retirement?" Our aim in every season is to please Him (2 Corinthians 5:9).
4. **Mammon asks:** "Will people notice if I give more?" That is giving for applause. **God asks:** "Am I giving secretly and joyfully, as worship?" Don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing (Matthew 6:3–4).

5. **Mammon asks:** “How much debt can I handle to keep up with my lifestyle?” That puts image over wisdom and normalizes bondage. **God asks:** “Am I pursuing financial freedom so I can serve God and others?” The borrower is servant to the lender (Proverbs 22:7), and debt is a barrier to mission.
6. **Mammon asks:** “Why can’t I have what others have?” That is envy, measuring my worth by possessions. **God asks:** “Am I cultivating gratitude for His daily provision?” Give thanks in all circumstances (1 Thessalonians 5:18). Contentment is a form of worship.
7. **Mammon asks:** “Is it okay to indulge in luxury while others struggle?” That is comfort over compassion. **God asks:** “Am I using my excess to bless others and care for the vulnerable?” Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord (Proverbs 19:17).
8. **Mammon says:** “Others have more than I do because they must love God more than me.” That treats wealth as the measure of God’s favor and judges hearts by bank accounts. **God asks:** “Is my security rooted in His promises, not my balance?” He has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you” (Hebrews 13:5). His presence is the inheritance, not the possessions.

Notice that Mammon’s questions all circle back to me: my blessing, my dreams, my comfort, my image. God’s questions all circle back to Him and to the people He loves. That is the whole difference between a consumer and a steward.

## **The Rack Cheyenne Once Owned**

Let me finish the weight room story.

By my senior year, I finally stepped up to the rack Cheyenne used to own. He had long since graduated. The room went quiet as I gripped the bar. Five hundred and five pounds, a number that once seemed impossible to me. The

iron resisted. My muscles strained. And I remembered the whisper: *This is like divine training.*

When I looked it out, the room erupted.

Cheyenne wasn't there to see it, but I like to think he would have been proud. Because by then I understood something. The training, the resistance, the crushing weight were never the enemy. They were the fire that forged my character.

*He will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver; He will purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver.*

### **Malachi 3:3 (NKJV)**

The Refiner sits. He is not in a hurry, and He is not absent. He is watching the metal, waiting until He can see His own reflection in it.

So hear me, especially if you are in a hard place financially right now.

Just because you are in a financial Egypt does not mean you have been unfaithful.

Just because you are in a financial wilderness does not mean you have failed the test.

And just because you are in a financial Promised Land does not mean you have stewarded God's provision well.

Your bank balance is not a report card. The key is to ask God to search your heart and show you whether you are in step with His plan.

### **Three Financial Seasons**

Israel's story gives us three financial seasons. Most of us will walk through all three, sometimes more than once. Each has its own blessing, its own temptation and its own reason.

## **1. The Egypt Season: complete financial dependence on someone else.**

In Egypt, Israel lived entirely on someone else's system. At first it was a gift. Joseph's family was given the best of the land of Goshen by Pharaoh's provision (Genesis 47:4–6). Generations later the same system became slavery, with bitter, crushing labor (Exodus 1:11–14). And yet, once they were free, they still longed for Egypt's "security" (Exodus 16:3).

A modern Egypt might look like a recent graduate working a low-paying job, living on loans, feeling trapped by debt and unable to pursue their calling.

The *blessing* of Egypt is that God provides through others, even through unjust systems. The *temptation* is resentment, envy, or compromising your values to gain security. The *reason* for the season is humility. Egypt shows us how badly we need divine deliverance.

*Reflection: Can I recognize God's faithfulness even in a system of dependence?*

## **2. The Wilderness Season: complete financial dependence on God.**

In the wilderness, every human guarantee is stripped away. "I will rain down bread from heaven for you," God said (Exodus 16:4). Manna came one day at a time, and it couldn't be stored up. God was teaching them to depend on Him daily.

A modern wilderness might look like a single mother working two jobs to cover rent and groceries, unable to save a dime, making it through on unexpected help, like a gift card slipped to her by a coworker.

The *blessing* of the wilderness is intimacy with God through daily surrender. The *temptation* is grumbling, fear and doubting His goodness. The *reason* is to purify our faith and teach us gratitude for His sufficiency.

*Reflection: Am I seeking God's presence more than His provision?*

### **3. The Promised Land Season: financial independence, with an invitation to keep depending on God.**

In the land, there is abundance. Prosperity is tied to meditating on and obeying God's Word (Joshua 1:8–9). But Moses' warning still stands: remember that it is the Lord who gives you power to produce wealth (Deuteronomy 8:17–18).

A Promised Land season might look like a business owner who funds scholarships for underprivileged kids and personally mentors them in the faith.

The *blessing* is having resources to bless others and glorify God. The *temptation* is pride, greed and forgetting God's role in your success. The *reason* is to practice faithful stewardship and reflect God's own generosity.

*Reflection: How am I using my abundance to advance His Kingdom?*

Notice that only one of these seasons is “financially independent,” and even that one comes with an invitation to stay dependent. In the Kingdom, independence from God is never the goal. The question in every season is the same: Who is my Provider?

### **Contentment: The Wealth Nobody Can Steal**

When Abram refused the spoils of war from the king of Sodom, God came to him in a vision and said, “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward” (Genesis 15:1, NIV). Not “I will give you a great reward.” *I am your reward.* That is the secret of contentment. Paul put it this way:

*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**

Paul learned to be content in plenty and in hunger (Philippians 4:11–12). Godly contentment grows out of surrender to the sufficiency of Christ. It is rooted in trusting God’s provision and His sovereignty, because He has promised never to leave us.

Greed and lust are the opposite. They are insatiable. “Death and Destruction are never satisfied, and neither are human eyes” (Proverbs 27:20, NIV). Paul calls greed idolatry (Colossians 3:5). Greed and lust reject God’s boundaries and keep demanding more, whether it’s power, pleasure or possessions, until desire conceives sin and sin gives birth to death (James 1:14–15).

Contentment starves greed and lust by exposing their core lie: that fulfillment can be found outside of God. Only Christ can set the heart free from those tyrants (John 8:36) and fill it instead with the peace that passes understanding (Philippians 4:7).

**A content heart is a heart the enemy can’t buy.**

## **More Money, More Problems**

I spent a long career in pro football, and I can tell you the stories are real. In 2009, *Sports Illustrated* famously reported that 78 percent of NFL players were bankrupt or under financial stress within two years of leaving the game. People still argue about that number, but few who have been in a locker room doubt the pattern. The same goes for lottery winners. You have probably heard that most of them go broke within a few years. That claim is hard to verify, but the stories of ruined winners are everywhere. And as we’ll see in the next chapter, the research on inherited wealth tells a similar story.

It is not only the famous and the lucky. Recent consumer surveys have found that around half of Americans earning six figures say they live paycheck to paycheck, and so does a surprising share of those earning a quarter of a million dollars a year or more.

More money doesn't fix a money problem. It magnifies it. Here are some of the most common reasons:

- **Lifestyle inflation.** Spending rises as fast as income. Bigger house, nicer car, more travel, and no more savings than before.
- **Poor stewardship.** No budget, and no working knowledge of investing, taxes or insurance.
- **No long-term plan.** No emergency fund, no retirement plan, no estate plan.
- **High fixed costs and debt.** Mortgages, car payments, private tuition, credit cards.
- **Social pressure.** Supporting extended family and friends, or making high-profile gifts to keep up appearances.
- **Bad advice.** Dishonest or unqualified advisors, high-fee products, bad investments.
- **Short, volatile careers.** Athletes and entertainers often have brief seasons of very high income.
- **Our own biases.** Overconfidence, wanting it all now, gambling on the next big thing, and keeping up with our peers.
- **Life events.** Divorce, medical bills, lawsuits and market crashes can drain wealth fast.

Look at that list again. Almost every one of those is a character issue before it is a math issue. Money only reveals what is already in the heart.

### **The Power Test in Marriage**

After the rich young man walked away from Him, Jesus looked around at His disciples and said:

*How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!*

**Mark 10:23 (NIV)**

I believe you could also read it this way: *How difficult it is for a powerful person to enter the Kingdom of God*. Money is a form of power. And power creates opportunity, but opportunity demands discipline and character. Without them, power becomes a seed of self-destruction rather than growth.

Nowhere is that clearer than in marriage.

On one side, financial stability really does help a marriage. When a couple has steady income that covers their needs, little debt and some savings for emergencies, there is simply less pressure in the house. Research has long shown that couples under financial strain face a higher risk of divorce, and that frequent arguments about money are one of the strongest predictors that a marriage will end.

But the answer is not “more.” Sudden wealth and fame bring their own pressures: isolation, temptation, lost shared purpose, and fights over the moral question of how to spend what you have. One power dynamic that has been studied is income. Economists at the University of Chicago found that when a wife out-earns her husband, couples on average report less satisfaction in their marriage and are more likely to divorce. You will also hear that divorce rates for celebrities and professional athletes are far higher than average. Those exact numbers are hard to pin down, but anyone who has lived in that world has watched a lot of marriages buckle under the weight of money, travel, attention and long seasons apart.

The point is not that money destroys marriages. It is that money and power test them. If a marriage is built on Christ, provision becomes a tool for shared mission. If it is built on self, more money just gives selfishness a bigger budget.

Remember Agur, the obscure wise man who prayed for the right measure? His prayer belongs in every household budget:

*Give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, “Who is the LORD?” Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God.*

**Proverbs 30:8–9 (NIV)**

He was not afraid of having too little. He was afraid of having too much and forgetting. That is the prayer of a man who understood the training room.

**For the Road**

1. Which of the three financial seasons are you in right now, and what do you think the “reason for your season” might be?
2. Look back at the eight questions. Which of Mammon’s questions shows up most often in your own thinking?
3. When was a time that financial resistance made you stronger instead of bitter?

**The weight isn’t the enemy; it’s the training.**

## CHAPTER 15

# The Other Gospel

*The crucible for silver and the furnace for gold, but a man is tested by the praise he receives.*

### **Proverbs 27:21 (NIV)**

The younger son couldn't wait any longer.

*The younger son came to his father and said, "Father, don't you think it's time to give me the share of your estate that belongs to me?"*

### **Luke 15:12 (TPT)**

We usually focus on what the prodigal did with his inheritance. But look at what he believed before he ever left. He looked at what his father was holding back and called it unfair. He misread protection as punishment. He thought the father was withholding his blessing, when the father was preparing him for his purpose.

What you misdiagnose, you will mistreat. Are we doing the same thing with our Father?

Let me ask the parents a question. Do all your kids get the same liberties? Of course not. Your sixteen-year-old gets the car keys and your eight-year-old doesn't. That has nothing to do with love.

I love all my children equally. But I do not trust all my children equally. Trust is earned by showing maturity, discipline and personal responsibility.

As my kids earn trust, they gain access to more of my resources and more of my responsibilities.

God works the same way. His eyes search the whole earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to Him (2 Chronicles 16:9). His gifts and calling are without repentance (Romans 11:29). He doesn't take them back. But how much He *entrusts* to you depends on how you steward what He has already put in your hands.

### **Each According to His Ability**

Jesus told a story about exactly this. A man going on a journey entrusted his property to his servants: "To one he gave five talents of money, to another two talents, and to another one talent, each according to his ability" (Matthew 25:15, NIV). Two of them put the money to work and doubled it. The third dug a hole and buried it.

Notice: the servants did not receive equal amounts. And they were not rewarded for having the most. The two-talent servant heard the same "Well done" as the five-talent servant (25:21, 23). What they were judged on was faithfulness with what they had.

Now imagine the parable rewritten through a humanistic, socialist lens. Call it the parable of the storehouse:

*"Again, it will be like a community leader who called together all the workers and entrusted the community's resources to them. To each, they gave an equal portion of grain, according to their need. Then the leader departed..."*

You can already feel where that story goes. If everyone gets the same portion and the same outcome no matter what they do with it, then the servant who buried his grain is treated exactly like the one who planted his. Faithfulness stops mattering. Fruitfulness stops mattering. And without

anyone intending it, the story trains people to watch each other's portions instead of tending their own.

I'm not making a political speech. I'm pointing out that the Kingdom of God runs on stewardship, not on equal outcomes.

**Envy and greed ask, "What's in my neighbor's hand?" Stewardship and generosity ask, "What's in my hand?"**

Here is the strange thing. The prosperity gospel makes the very same mistake from the other direction. It confuses *equality of stewardship* with *equality of outcome*. Equality of stewardship means all of us manage what God has given according to our abilities, aiming to give our best rather than to be the best. Equality of outcome says wealth and health are guaranteed to everyone, regardless of ability or divine purpose. Net worth does not measure authority or impact in God's Kingdom. Keep your eyes on Jesus, and stop comparing your blessings to someone else's.

### **A Gospel You Don't Need to Be Born Again to Want**

Prosperity theology is the belief, found among some charismatic Christians, that financial blessing and physical health are always God's will for believers, and that faith, positive speech and donations to religious causes will increase a person's material wealth. Material success is treated as the sign of God's favor.

Paul had strong words for any message that adds to the gospel of Christ:

*But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed!... For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God?*

**Galatians 1:8, 10 (NASB)**

Before we point fingers, though, let me be honest. We like to criticize the people who believe the prosperity gospel. But all of us believe it to some

extent. That is why we get offended when we follow God and things don't go our way.

The proverb at the top of this chapter says a man is tested by the praise he receives. Isaiah adds the other half: "I have tested you in the furnace of affliction" (Isaiah 48:10, NIV). Here's the problem with the prosperity gospel. It treats the praise that comes with success as the reward, and the pain of your process as proof that you are under spiritual punishment. But Scripture says prosperity and pain are both *tests* of your character. Neither one is evidence that you lack it.

Samuel Sey said it plainly: "Christ didn't come to earth to rescue you from poverty and diseases... He came to earth to rescue you from your sin nature, your orphan mindset and hell."

God does care about poverty, disease and injustice, and one day He will make every wrong thing right. But even the martyrs under heaven's altar are still crying out, "How long, Sovereign Lord?" (Revelation 6:10, NIV). If people in heaven are still waiting on the Lamb to make wrong things right, then a gospel that promises you everything now is not the gospel. The prosperity message makes us put our trust in what God is *doing* for us, instead of what He has already *done* in giving His Son as a ransom for our sins.

So why do so many of us fall for it?

Part of it is fear. Many of us were taught to tithe because if we didn't, we'd be cursed. But when giving is driven by fear of punishment, obedience shrinks into a transaction. The New Testament calls for cheerful, free-hearted giving that flows out of gratitude, not anxiety about curses. So examine your motives. Are you giving to avoid a curse, or to reflect the heart of a good and generous Father?

Part of it is our flesh. The prosperity gospel offers a formula: do these things, say these words, give this amount, and you'll get these rewards. It

invites us to seek Jesus for material provision instead of pursuing Him for who He is.

**The love of prosperity, power and pleasure will make you sit down at tables Jesus would have flipped over.**

John Piper has pressed this point hard. The prosperity gospel, he argues, is no gospel at all, because it offers people what they already want as natural human beings. You don't have to be born again to crave wealth, so you don't need to be converted to be "saved" by it. "The natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him" (1 Corinthians 2:14, NKJV). Call people to Christ by offering them what they naturally desire instead of the "foolishness" of the cross, and you can grow massive churches and export your message to the nations as "gospel." But it is another gospel.

Words hold objective definitions, yet we often assign them subjective meanings, and *prosperity* is one we have bent out of shape. That is why Jesus taught theology through parables. I don't learn your definition of a word by how you explain it. I learn it by how you live it.

## **Two Gospels Side by Side**

**The prosperity gospel: success is the goal.**

It teaches that God wants every believer wealthy and healthy, and that faith, positive confession and tithing will unlock financial and physical blessing. It promises guaranteed outcomes. You can see it in the culture it produces: private jets presented as proof of anointing, and church events priced for the few who can afford them.

**The stewardship gospel: purpose is the goal.**

It calls believers to wisdom, diligence and care with whatever they have, whether little or much. It doesn't guarantee wealth. It does promise that

faithfulness leads to divine purpose and spiritual growth, whatever your financial status.

There's also a difference between building wealth on the generous giving of others and building wealth through hard work and enterprise. The first often promises financial blessing in exchange for offerings, a promise that can exploit the faith of people who are believing God for a breakthrough. The second builds through diligence, excellence and personal responsibility, and creates goods and services that serve people.

Financial independence doesn't mean being rich or buying whatever we want. It means being free from financial pressure so we can make decisions based on God's will instead of money. The goal is alignment with God, not a particular balance.

Jake Hamilton put it this way: "If He gives you the world but denies you Himself, He hates you. But if He gives you Himself but denies you the world, He loves you infinitely."

*For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?*

#### **Mark 8:36**

You can have worldly success and still not have a successful relationship with Christ.

### **When the Wicked Prosper**

The prosperity gospel has no answer for one of the oldest questions in Scripture. In Malachi's day, God's people watched the wicked get rich and decided, "What's the use of serving God?... From now on we will call the arrogant blessed" (Malachi 3:14–15). Asaph nearly lost his faith over the same thing:

*Here's my story: I came so close to missing the way. I was stumbling over what I saw with the wicked. For when I saw the boasters with such wealth and prosperity, I became jealous over their smug security.*

### **Psalm 73:2–3 (TPT)**

Jesus warned that in the last days many would turn away and the love of many would grow cold (Matthew 24:10–12). I believe one of the great end-time narratives of offense will be birthed out of the favor and prosperity of the wicked. People who were promised that obedience equals wealth will watch the ungodly prosper and walk away.

Here's what I've come to believe instead. God, in His sovereignty, releases the perfect mixture of prosperity and pain, persecution and blessing, crushing and favor. He even permits evil for a season, and He weaves all of it together to bring the most love, the most worship, the most redemption and the most souls into His Kingdom for the glory of His name.

### **John the Baptist in Prison**

No story exposes the prosperity gospel like John's.

He lived consecrated from the womb. He drank no wine (Luke 1:15). He lived in the desert, ate locusts and wild honey, and prepared the way for the Messiah. He saw the Spirit descend and called Jesus the Lamb of God (John 1:29). And what was his earthly reward? A cell in Herod's dungeon, and then the executioner's sword (Matthew 14:1–12).

From that cell, the man who had been so sure sent his disciples with a question:

*“Are you really the one prophesied would come, or should we still wait for another?” Jesus answered them, “Give John this report: ‘The blind see again, the crippled walk, lepers are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised back to life, and the poor and broken now hear of the hope of salvation!’ And tell John that the blessing of heaven comes upon those who never lose their faith in me—no matter what happens!”*

### **Matthew 11:3–6 (TPT)**

John seems to have expected the Messiah to bring judgment immediately, and it hadn’t come. His own disciples needed encouragement too. So Jesus sent back the evidence, and then a gentle word that the New King James renders, “Blessed is he who is not offended because of Me.”

The greatest prophet born of a woman was nearly shipwrecked by the idea that faithfulness should be rewarded with deliverance in this life. That is the seed of the prosperity gospel, and it was in John’s prison cell.

Favor is not always fair, and pruning is not punishment. Our responsibilities and challenges are based on our own callings and assignments, not on what our neighbor can handle. We don’t all carry the same burdens, because we aren’t all meant to wear the same crown.

We all want the Joseph ending: from the pit to the palace. Nobody wants John’s ending. But the “happily ever after” God promises is in eternity, not in the final chapter of this life.

### **Peace in My Day**

Now look at a king who got the Joseph ending and squandered it.

Hezekiah had just been healed. God had added fifteen years to his life, and envoys came from Babylon with letters and gifts. Hezekiah was so flattered that he showed them everything: every storehouse, every treasury, the silver, the gold, the armory (Isaiah 39:2). Then Isaiah showed up with a

word: everything in the palace would be carried off to Babylon, and some of Hezekiah's own sons would be taken away to serve as eunuchs in a foreign court.

*Then Hezekiah said to Isaiah, "This message you have given me from the LORD is good." For the king was thinking, "At least there will be peace and security during my lifetime."*

### **Isaiah 39:8**

Read that again. Hezekiah heard that his own sons would be carried away, and his response was relief. *At least it won't happen on my watch.* That is a man who has lost prophetic vision, and "where there is no vision... the people perish" (Proverbs 29:18, AMPC).

I am afraid we are raising a Hezekiah generation. Surveys in recent years suggest that most younger adults would rather spend their money on experiences now than save for the future. I understand why; many of them watched their parents lose jobs and homes. But here's the principle underneath it: where the vision for family isn't valued, preparing for the future has no value. Paul saw it coming: "People will be lovers of self, lovers of money" (2 Timothy 3:2).

They learned it from somewhere. Peter Vescovi says it with compassion: "Although with good intentions we mistakenly prepare our kids to pursue provision instead of the Provider." We taught our kids how to get a good job. Did we teach them how to know the God who gives the power to produce wealth?

Compare Hezekiah with Thomas Paine in the darkest days of the American Revolution: "If there must be trouble, let it be in my day, that my child may have peace." Hezekiah said, "Peace in my day, whatever happens to my children." A true father says, "Trouble in my day, so my children can have peace." That is the heart of our Father, who took the trouble on Himself at the cross so His children could have peace.

## The Wealth That Was Laid Up

Few promises get preached more in American churches than the “great wealth transfer.”

*Good people leave an inheritance to their grandchildren, but the sinner’s wealth passes to the godly.*

### Proverbs 13:22

I believe it. But I also believe this may be the most prophesied and the most missed word in the Church. Proverbs 13:22 is first a verse about stewardship, the wineskin, more than about wealth, the wine. The Amplified Bible says the inheritance a good man leaves is “moral stability and goodness.”

And I’ve come to see in this verse a picture of something greater than money. I believe the true “wealth of the wicked” is the sons and daughters of the wicked, children who will be embraced by spiritual fathers and mothers through the spirit of adoption. “God sets the lonely in families” (Psalm 68:6, NIV). That promise isn’t automatic. Someone has to open their home and their life.

Will church culture still celebrate receiving the wealth of the wicked when it realizes that the wealth is not material riches but the priceless children of a fatherless generation? The sons and daughters are the wealth. The money is just the resources to help take care of them.

And remember what happened the last time there was a great wealth transfer. When Israel left Egypt, they plundered the Egyptians (Exodus 12:35–36). In the wilderness they melted that gold into a calf and turned a revival into an orgy (Exodus 32). Most of the Israelites who received the greatest transfer of wealth in their history never saw the Promised Land. Not because wealth is evil, but because wealth is dangerous when you don’t have the character to steward that level of power.

**Stewardship uses money to save people. Greed uses people to save money.**

Then there is the question of what survives you. Solomon died one of the richest men who ever lived. One generation later, his son Rehoboam rejected wise counsel and lost ten of the twelve tribes (1 Kings 12). He inherited the wealth but not the wisdom behind it. Within five years Shishak of Egypt carried off the treasures of the temple and the palace, including Solomon's gold shields, and Rehoboam replaced them with bronze (1 Kings 14:25–27). A couple of generations later, King Asa stripped what silver and gold remained to buy a foreign king's help (1 Kings 15:18).

Gold to bronze to empty. The money vanished. The wisdom never transferred.

History repeats the pattern. One widely cited study by the Williams Group, which followed more than 3,000 wealthy families, found that around 70 percent of family fortunes are lost by the second generation and about 90 percent by the third. The main reason wasn't taxes or bad investments. It was a breakdown of trust and communication in the family, and a failure to pass on values and purpose to the heirs.

I knew a man who died at seventy-eight. He left a fortune of about eleven million dollars, and he also left a stack of spiral notebooks: twenty-three years of handwritten journals titled *What the Lord Showed Me*. After the funeral, his nineteen-year-old granddaughter found them. She started reading one entry a night. Within six months she was leading a prayer group of forty college students. Within two years she had planted a house of prayer that now runs around the clock. The money is still sitting in a trust, barely touched. The revelation, written down, became rocket fuel.

“Write the vision and make it plain on tablets, that he may run who reads it” (Habakkuk 2:2, NKJV). The inheritance that survives is never measured in dollars. It's measured in pages the next generation can run with.

## Surrender over Success

Hebrews 11 is often called the Hall of Faith. Most of us love the first half of this passage:

*By faith these people overthrew kingdoms, ruled with justice, and received what God had promised them. They shut the mouths of lions, quenched the flames of fire, and escaped death by the edge of the sword... But others were tortured, refusing to turn from God in order to be set free. They placed their hope in a better life after the resurrection... All these people earned a good reputation because of their faith, yet none of them received all that God had promised.*

### Hebrews 11:33–35, 39

“But others.” That’s the hinge. Some were delivered from death. Others were delivered *through* death. Both were commended for the same faith.

God didn’t ask us to follow a formula. He asked us to have faith in His character. A formula gives you control over the outcome. Faith trusts in the goodness of God regardless of the outcome. We have to decide in advance that God is good.

John the Baptist was delivered by death into eternity. Lazarus was delivered from death by resurrection power (John 11). Both were loved. Both were faithful. “For who can know the LORD’s thoughts?” (Romans 11:34). The Bible doesn’t promise us understanding. It promises a peace that surpasses understanding. If we choose to trust the Potter as He shapes us, we can rest in His process instead of depending only on His power to pull us out of the fiery trial.

Sometimes we are delivered from the fire. Sometimes we are delivered by the fire. We don’t get to choose the outcome, but we do get to choose what we put our trust in. Three young men in Babylon understood that:

*If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God whom we serve is able to save us. He will rescue us from your power, Your Majesty. But even if he doesn't, we want to make it clear to you, Your Majesty, that we will never serve your gods or worship the gold statue you have set up.*

### **Daniel 3:17–18**

*But even if He doesn't.* That is the sound of someone who has passed the prosperity test. They weren't serving God for the outcome. They were serving God because He is God.

The power to prosper was never the prize. It was the test. And the only way to pass it is to lay the outcome down. Are you willing to go all in, not knowing what the outcome will be?

### **For the Road**

1. Where have you been offended at God because following Him didn't turn out the way you expected?
2. If you died today, what would your children and grandchildren inherit from you besides money? Is any of it written down?
3. Can you honestly say "even if He doesn't" about the thing you're believing God for right now?

**Prosperity and pain are both tests of character, not proof of it.**

PART FOUR

# The Pleasure Test

*What will you do with desire when the opportunities  
multiply?*

## Temples, Not Trophies

*Sheol (the place of the dead) and Abaddon (the place of destruction) are never satisfied; so the eyes of man are never satisfied.*

### **Proverbs 27:20 (AMP)**

A game ball from my first NFL game once ended up floating in a swimming pool.

A friend of mine spotted it bobbing in the water and looked at me like I had lost my mind. “Why is that in there? Why isn’t it in a glass case?”

I shrugged. “I don’t care. It’s just a ball.”

Maybe I took it too far. But I never kept much of that stuff. Old jerseys, bowl rings, trophies. They were never my thing. I had learned early that a piece of metal on a shelf can’t love you back, and it can’t tell you who you are.

What I did not learn early enough was that there was a trophy God actually cared about, and I was throwing it around far more carelessly than any game ball.

We have walked together through the tests of power, of promotion, and of prosperity. Now we come to the last one, and for many of us the most dangerous: the test of pleasure. It is the test of love and lust. It has toppled kings, silenced prophets, and emptied pulpits. It has also quietly wrecked ordinary marriages and ordinary young men and women who never stood on a stage in their lives.

I want to walk through it the way a father talks to his sons and daughters. With truth, because the stakes are too high for anything less. And with grace, because I have needed every ounce of it myself.

## **Temples, Not Trophies**

*Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. Don't you realize that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and was given to you by God? You do not belong to yourself, for God bought you with a high price. So you must honor God with your body.*

### **1 Corinthians 6:18-20**

I didn't care about trophies. What I didn't take seriously enough was my own body, the very temple and resting place of the Holy Spirit. For years I desecrated God's temple because, if I am honest, I believed the created was more valuable than the Creator.

Jesus said that anyone who even looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart (Matthew 5:28). I lusted, and I dishonored women, because I did not understand what Jesus and Paul were declaring about sexual sin. I thought of it as a private matter between me and my appetites. I did not see that I was mishandling something holy.

I understand now. You do not belong to yourself. God bought you with a high price.

So I want to spend the rest of my days treating as sacred what is actually sacred. Not rings and game balls. Not buildings made by human hands. The bodies of people created in the image of God, meant to be the dwelling place of His Spirit and part of the Bride of Christ. That includes my own body, and it includes every person I will ever be tempted to treat as an object.

**A trophy can float in the pool. A temple cannot.**

### **When the Dream Goes Empty**

Before humanity fell, Adam was given work: “The LORD God placed the man in the Garden of Eden to tend and watch over it” (Genesis 2:15). Labor came before the curse, so work itself is not the curse. We were never called to find our identity in our labor. We were called to find pleasure and thankfulness in expressing our love to God through it, working “as though you were working for the Lord rather than for people” (Colossians 3:23).

Hold onto that, because it matters for everything that follows. When work is love offered to God, we are satisfied. When work becomes the place we go to get our identity, we will never have enough. And a soul that is never satisfied will eventually go looking for another kind of pleasure to fill the hole.

Every athlete of my generation knows “Eye of the Tiger.” There is a line in it that has always stuck with me: “So many times, it happens too fast, you trade your passion for glory.”

I watched it happen to teammates. I felt the pull of it myself. It is the same emptiness Johnny Manziel described after getting everything he ever wanted, and the same one Solomon described three thousand years earlier: “Meaningless! Meaningless!... What do people gain from all their labors at which they toil under the sun?” (Ecclesiastes 1:2-3).

Here is the danger. When the dream doesn’t deliver what it promised, the emptiness doesn’t simply sit there. It looks for something to medicate it.

**When our dreams fail to satisfy our expectations, we will  
compromise our character to satisfy our carnal pleasure.**

That is why Paul, who loved athletic metaphors as much as any football player, said, “I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified” (1 Corinthians 9:27).

Notice who Paul worried about being disqualified. Not the pagan. The preacher.

And it rarely happens all at once. What starts as a small private allowance in a season of peace becomes a public collapse in a season of pressure.

**What you tolerate in private in days of peace will be exposed publicly in days of pressure.**

## **Salt and Sugar in the Heart**

Earlier in this book we set the sugar of success beside the salt of obedience. The same two bowls sit side by side when it comes to desire. Love and lust can look a lot alike, just as salt and sugar do. You may not be able to tell which is which until you taste.

That is why Scripture invites us to “taste and see that the Lord is good” (Psalm 34:8). If you have been raised on counterfeit sweetness, real love can seem bland at first. But one will always leave you bitter, and the other will leave a sweetness that lasts.

You cannot discern the difference by feelings alone. Jen Wilkin has observed, “It is not coincidental that a lack of discernment and a neglected Bible are so often found in company.” The person who does not know the Word will not know the difference between love and lust, because they will be tasting with their emotions instead of testing with the truth.

Noah Webster’s 1828 dictionary defines lust as “longing desire; eagerness to possess or enjoy.” Notice that word *possess*. Love wants to give. Lust wants to have.

Here is the biggest lie of the spirit of lust. It tells us that a person crafted in the image of God, a person who belongs to God, can be used by us for gratification outside the boundaries of love as Scripture defines it. Underneath that lie is an even deeper one: that someone made in God’s

image can give us greater joy, greater satisfaction, and greater pleasure than the presence of God Himself.

**Lust is our futile attempt to get from the created what can only truly come from the Creator.**

## **The Lie in the Garden**

That lie is as old as the Garden.

*Now the serpent was craftier 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’?”... When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it.*

### **Genesis 3:1, 6**

Look closely at what the devil did. God had said, “You may *freely* eat of every tree of the garden” except one (Genesis 2:16). The serpent flipped the emphasis. He took a sentence about abundance and turned it into a sentence about restriction.

He knows something about us. When we focus on what we lack instead of what God has given, our attention shifts toward what we can’t have and away from what we do have. Adam and Eve had everything except the one thing that would destroy their relationship with God, and the devil got them staring at that one thing.

So let me ask you plainly: what is the one thing the enemy has you focused on right now that is hindering your intimacy with God?

**What gets your attention will shift your intentions.**

The same threefold lie from Eden shows up in every temptation toward sexual sin. John names it: the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life (1 John 2:16). Eve saw that the fruit was “good for food” (it

will meet my need), “pleasing to the eye” (it will feel good), and “desirable for gaining wisdom” (it will give me more than God’s plan will). At the root of all three is distrust of God’s goodness.

The Garden teaches three truths every generation has to relearn:

1. **Beauty does not equal ownership.** The lust of the eyes says, “If it is beautiful, I should have it.” But “charm is deceptive, and beauty does not last” (Proverbs 31:30), and beauty never gives you the right to possess someone.
2. **Desire does not equal permission.** The lust of the flesh says, “If I want it, it must be meant for me.” James says desire, when it is allowed to conceive, gives birth to sin (James 1:14-15).
3. **Sexual encounters outside God’s design cannot define your worth.** The pride of life goes looking for validation outside of God’s truth. But you were bought with a price. Your worth was settled at the cross.

## **River or Pie**

There are two ways to look at God’s blessing.

When you take a slice of pie, there is less left for everyone else. That is the orphan mindset. It lives in scarcity. It assumes that if I don’t grab it now, I’ll never get it.

When you dip a cup into a river, there is just as much left for the next person. That is the Spirit of Adoption. It lives in gratitude, because sons and daughters know the Father’s supply never runs dry.

Adam and Eve had to walk past their abundance to reach the one thing God was trying to protect them from. Long before that, the devil did the same thing. He ignored the privileges God had entrusted to him and fixated on what he did not have: “Your heart became proud on account of your beauty” (Ezekiel 28:17). And when Adam and Eve reached for the one

thing they didn't have, they lost the most precious thing they did: their relationship with God.

If the devil could sell the lie of lack in a perfect world, to two people who had never sinned, what makes us think he won't try it on us, in a broken world, with weak flesh?

Here is the good news. Lust cannot easily take root in a heart that is full. When we are living out of the abundance of intimacy with God, when His Holy Spirit is flowing within us, the counterfeit loses its leverage.

*The Lord is my best friend and my shepherd. I always have more than enough.*

### **Psalm 23:1 (TPT)**

#### **Call It by Its Name**

Words have objective definitions, but all of us carry subjective definitions shaped by our experiences. And what you mislabel, you will mistreat.

If you call a tiger a cat, you will end up raising a predator, not a pet. If you call lust "love," you will feed what is trying to devour you. If you call sexual sin "just being human," you will never take it to the cross.

So let me name it as plainly as I can. Sexual immorality is when the desire to defile integrity, holiness, and purity excites you rather than repulses or offends you.

That doesn't happen overnight. Deception, self-gratification, and pornography slowly condition a person to dishonor their own temple, and often the bodies and dignity of others as well. Over time, what is forbidden and destructive becomes the very thing the flesh craves. Purity starts to feel foreign. Defilement starts to feel normal. That is why we cannot trust a road just because it feels right: "There is a path before each person that seems right, but it ends in death" (Proverbs 14:12).

## The Woman in the Red Dress

There is a scene in *The Matrix* that most people remember even if they have forgotten the rest of the movie.

Morpheus is walking Neo through a training program, a crowded simulated street full of people in dark suits. Morpheus is teaching, warning. Then a woman in a bright red dress walks past. Neo turns his head and follows her with his eyes, and in that moment he stops listening. When he looks again, the woman is gone. In her place stands an Agent, pointing a gun at his head.

“Were you listening to me, Neo,” Morpheus asks, “or were you looking at the woman in the red dress?”

She was never real. She was designed in a vivid shade of red for one purpose: distraction. She was bait.

In the world of espionage there is a name for that tactic. It is called a honey trap. A target with information, access, or influence is drawn into a false romantic or sexual relationship so the trapper can gain leverage over him. Sometimes the goal is information. Sometimes it is blackmail. Always, the goal is control.

The enemy of your soul did not invent that strategy in a spy novel. He has been running it since the Garden.

*For the lips of a forbidden woman drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil, but in the end she is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two-edged sword. Her feet go down to death.*

### Proverbs 5:3-5

Let me be careful here. Proverbs is a father talking to a son, so the picture is of a seductive woman. But this is ultimately describing a spirit, not a gender. Men and women both can be the honey, and both can be the target. The honey on the lips is false flattery and false affirmation. And who is

most vulnerable to flattery? The person who feels rejected. People who feel unseen are hungry, sometimes desperate, for validation.

Solomon's counsel is not to argue with it. It is to run: "Don't even go near the door of her house" (Proverbs 5:8, TPT). Otherwise the road ends with strength wasted and an old man groaning, "If only I had listened" (Proverbs 5:9-13).

I once came across a line that has stayed with me: *Comfort is a drug. Give a weak man consistent sex, good food, and cheap entertainment, and he will throw his ambitions and purpose right out the window.* That is not only true of men, and it is not only true of the weak. Any of us, when we stop guarding our hearts, can trade a calling for comfort.

### **The Enemy's Favorite Weapon**

If I could name the number one weapon the devil uses against prophetic voices and anointed people, it would be sexual sin. It corrupts spiritual authority. It fractures intimacy with God. It undermines public witness. And it invites a shame that keeps people hiding instead of healing.

Scripture shows the pattern. We have already stood with David on his rooftop. Notice one more detail: the king *sent* for Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11:4). When the most powerful man in the nation summons you, you do not have much of a choice. His adultery led to the murder of a faithful soldier and to chaos in his own house for generations. Samson, captivated by Delilah, lost his strength, his sight, and his freedom. And Joseph, pursued day after day by Potiphar's wife, did not try to reason with temptation. He ran, leaving his cloak in her hand (Genesis 39:12).

Why does this weapon work so well? James tells us.

*Each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.*

**James 1:14-15**

The enemy does not have to create the desire. He only has to wait for a season when the promises of God feel far away. That is when we start to believe one of his oldest lies: that the lust of the flesh can medicate our pain. When our burning desire for God is quenched by a burning desire for immoral pleasure, it gives birth to a false idol named Compromise.

There is nothing new under the sun (Ecclesiastes 1:9). In 1988 Jimmy Swaggart stood before his congregation and confessed his sin after his involvement with a prostitute was exposed, and a global ministry was shattered. The documented falls we walked through in Chapter 10, from Ted Haggard to Ravi Zacharias to Mike Bickle, carry the same sexual thread. I do not name these men to gossip or to gloat. Every one of them preached to multitudes. Every one of them knew the verses. And every one of them proves that being anointed does not make you immune.

**The anointing is not a force field. It is a responsibility.**

The world has its own version of the story. In late 2025 Netflix released *Sean Combs: The Reckoning*, a documentary series about one of the most powerful men in the music industry and years of accusations of coercion and violence. Some of it is public record: a hotel security video of him attacking a former girlfriend, for which he apologized, and a 2025 federal conviction on prostitution-related charges, even as the jury acquitted him of the most serious counts. I'm not his judge. But the story it tells is of power without accountability, until violating boundaries became a source of control and thrill. When identity is not anchored in God's unchanging love, sexual conquest becomes a dark counterfeit for intimacy.

What grieves me is that the same pattern shows up in ministry. When a leader elevates the praise of people over the praise of God, authority comes untethered from accountability, and that disorder very often shows up as sexual abuse. The sacred gift of “one flesh” is turned into a weapon that wounds victims, destroys the perpetrator, and leaves a generation confused about the reality that His love is better than wine.

*Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure,  
for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.*

### **Hebrews 13:4**

#### **Untethered Sympathy**

Ravi Zacharias often said something like this: “In the economy of God, we are meant to love people and use things. In the human economy, we have ended up loving things and using people.” It is a true statement. It is also, now, a heartbreaking one.

How can a person preach the truth and live the opposite? John Piper offered one of the most helpful answers I have heard. Reflecting on how Zacharias had manipulated people, he warned that sympathy must be “tethered to the truth so that it is given lavishly when the truth calls for it and is withheld when the truth clashes with it.” Zacharias, Piper said, “portrayed himself as an embattled, burdened, wounded warrior in the righteous cause of the gospel,” and turned his position of power into a form of neediness that demanded untethered sympathy.

Untethered sympathy is empathy detached from the truth of God’s Word. It lets us lower our theology to match our pain. It starts with “I’m hurting,” moves to “I deserve this,” and ends with “God’s commands don’t apply to me right now.” It is a humanistic gospel that gives people permission to climb off the altar the moment life becomes painful, all in the name of “You deserve to be happy.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer called the church's version of it cheap grace: "the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance... grace without discipleship, grace without the cross." Cheap grace does not set people free. It sets predators free and leaves the wounded alone.

We are called to empathize with people's pain and with their process. Deeply. But only to the degree that our empathy stays tethered to the truth.

**Love without empathy is offensive. But love without truth is a lie.**

Sometimes real love will cost you the relationship. When you love people, you want what is best for them, and many times what is best for them is not you. The leader who demands sympathy to feed his own needs is not loving the flock. He is feeding on it.

## **Be Killing Sin**

So what do we do with all this? Not panic. And not pride.

Sexual sin is such a potent weapon because it targets the place where human weakness meets spiritual authority. The answer is not to stop believing in the anointing. The answer is to build our lives around the things that protect it.

That means accountability, with real people who are allowed to ask real questions. It means repentance that is honest and ongoing, the kind David prayed: "Create in me a clean heart, O God" (Psalm 51:10). It means putting on the full armor of God so we can stand against the devil's schemes (Ephesians 6:11). And it means holy humility: "If you think you are standing strong, be careful not to fall" (1 Corinthians 10:12).

Most of all, it means remembering that sin is never conquered by our own strength. It is conquered by surrender to a Savior who has already conquered it.

Sexual sin produces spiritual impotency. It robs us of the very intimacy and authority we were anointed to carry. So we have to ask honestly: are the

carnal pleasures of sexual immorality worth forfeiting the superior pleasure of knowing God?

There is another path. It runs back toward the Garden, back to the One who walked with us in the cool of the day. In the chapters ahead we will name the counterfeits, and then we will find our way home to the only Love that is truly better than wine. Until then, the Puritan John Owen gave counsel three centuries ago that has never gone out of date:

*Be killing sin, or it will be killing you.*

— *John Owen*

## **For the Road**

1. Where has your work, your dream, or your platform become the place you go for identity instead of the place you offer love to God?
2. Who or what is your “woman in the red dress,” the distraction that shows up when you are supposed to be listening to the Lord, and what abundance have you been walking past to get to it?
3. Who in your life has permission to ask you hard questions about your purity, and when did you last give them an honest answer?

**Lust says, “I lack.” Love says, “The Lord is my shepherd, and I have more than enough.”**

## Pleasure Without Responsibility

*You say, “I am allowed to do anything,” but not everything is good for you. And even though “I am allowed to do anything,” I must not become a slave to anything... But you can’t say that our bodies were made for sexual immorality. They were made for the Lord, and the Lord cares about our bodies.*

### **1 Corinthians 6:12-13 (NLT)**

Jacob arrived in a strange land with nothing but the clothes on his back. His uncle Laban put him to work, and after a month Laban asked him what he wanted for wages.

*Now Laban had two daughters. The name of the older was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah’s eyes were weak, but Rachel was beautiful in form and appearance. Jacob loved Rachel. And he said, “I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel.”... So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her.*

### **Genesis 29:16-20**

Seven years, and they felt like a few days.

That is one of the most beautiful sentences in the Bible. Anyone who has trained for a season knows how long seven years is. But Jacob’s years flew by, because love was carrying him.

Here is the difference between love and lust. Love is the fruit of knowing the heart before you touch the body. Lust is the fruit of knowing the body

before you know the heart.

**Lust is impatient. Love knows how to wait.**

That principle has a spiritual side, too. God wants us to know His heart for His Body, His character and His love for His people, before He lets us touch His Body by ministering to His Bride. Many of the failures we have looked at in this book began right there. Gifted people were handed access to God's people before their own hearts had been formed by God's heart. They touched the Body without knowing the heart, and the people of God got hurt.

This chapter is about what happens when we want the pleasure and refuse the responsibility.

**Ishmael Always Mocks Isaac**

The enemy cannot create. He can only counterfeit. Every perversion is a cheap version of a blessing God has already promised us. In our impatience we grow tired of waiting for His timing, and we seize with our own hands what He meant to give.

You can see it in Abraham's story. God promised him a son. The years went by, Abraham and Sarah grew impatient, and Ishmael was born through Hagar. Later the son of promise, Isaac, finally arrived.

*But Sarah saw Ishmael, the son of Abraham and her Egyptian servant Hagar, making fun of her son, Isaac.*

**Genesis 21:9 (NLT)**

The Ishmaels we produce in our impatience will always mock the promise God is still bringing. Paul uses this very story to describe the war between the flesh and the Spirit (Galatians 4:28-29).

Solomon shows how every counterfeit works. The lips of the adulterous woman drip honey, "but in the end she is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a

two-edged sword” (Proverbs 5:4). First the sweetness, then the bill. We almost always underestimate what follows when we give in. Samson did. Captivated by Delilah, he ended up blind, grinding grain in an enemy prison (Judges 16:21).

Notice also that “her ways wander, and she does not know it” (Proverbs 5:6). That is the most dangerous part. There is a blindness that comes with this sin, sometimes ignorance, sometimes a deliberate refusal to look. Pharaoh saw sign after sign and still hardened his heart. Ignorance can feel like bliss in the beginning, but eventually the consequences of avoiding reality catch up. “My people are destroyed from lack of knowledge” (Hosea 4:6).

There is an old saying worth memorizing: *Sin will take you farther than you want to go, keep you longer than you want to stay, and cost you more than you want to pay.*

*Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.*

### **Galatians 6:7-8**

Every temptation toward sexual sin is selling one of four counterfeits:

1. **Counterfeit love.** A false intimacy that mimics real love but is fleeting and self-serving, without commitment or selflessness.
2. **Counterfeit fulfillment.** A shallow, temporary satisfaction that leaves you emptier than before.
3. **Counterfeit freedom.** A promise of liberation from restrictions that ends in bondage and regret.
4. **Counterfeit happiness.** A promise of joy through indulgence that delivers guilt and sorrow.

The real thing is worth the wait, and God promises strength to those who wait for it:

*They who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.*

#### **Isaiah 40:31**

### **A Bowl of Stew**

How did Jacob learn to value waiting? Part of the answer is a story from years earlier, involving his brother and a pot of soup. Esau came in from the field exhausted and traded his birthright for a bowl of red stew. “Look, I’m dying of starvation!” he said. “What good is my birthright to me now?” (Genesis 25:32, NLT).

Jacob was far from perfect. He was a schemer, and he would reap what he sowed in Laban’s house. But in that moment he valued the promise more than the meal. Esau valued the meal more than the promise. Rick Joyner wrote that Esau “proved to be more concerned about the immediate gratification of his appetite than about his eternal inheritance,” and that we should be shocked to discover “just how prevalent this same nature is within most of us today.” The writer of Hebrews ties Esau’s choice directly to sexual sin:

*See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son. Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. He could bring about no change of mind, though he sought the blessing with tears.*

#### **Hebrews 12:16-17**

Do you hear the lie of sexual sin in Esau’s words? *I’m dying here. What good is my purity to me right now?*

That lie only works in the moment. It needs you to forget the future. So here is a tool I have learned to use. Sometimes, to make a wise decision, you have to borrow pain from the future and bring it into the present. Picture the tears Esau would cry. Picture the face of your spouse, your kids, the people you lead. When you do, you realize it is never worth making a permanent decision based on a temporary feeling.

**Vision is what keeps the stew in perspective.**

## **The Sin of Onan**

*But Onan was not willing to have a child who would not be his own heir. So whenever he had intercourse with his brother's wife, he spilled his seed on the ground. This prevented her from having a child who would belong to his brother.*

### **Genesis 38:9 (NLT)**

Onan wanted the pleasure without the responsibility. In his eyes, his personal liberty outweighed what God wanted for his life and for his brother's widow.

There is a name for that posture: entitlement. Entitlement is deciding, consciously or not, that what you want matters more than what God wants. It bypasses any effort to honor another person's body as a temple of the living God. Anthony Hulsebus, in *Rejection Exposed*, puts his finger on the root: "You can be selfish without lusting but you cannot lust without being selfish."

After the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* in 2022, I asked the Lord about it. Wasn't this an act of national repentance? I'm thankful for every life that will be protected. But as I prayed, I sensed Him answer in a way I did not expect: *The sin of Onan is in the land.*

We want the pleasure of our sin without its consequences. And here is the hard part for those of us in the Church. We have spoken passionately

against abortion, and we should. Every life is made in the image of God. But we have often been strangely quiet about the sexual immorality that so often leads there. We address the fruit and not the root, and I believe one reason is that the hands of the American Church are not clean when it comes to sexual purity.

Let me say this with as much tenderness as I can. If you have had an abortion, or you pressured someone into one, or you paid for one, this is not a word of condemnation for you. Jesus' blood is enough for that too, and there are churches and ministries full of men and women who have found deep healing there. This is a word to the Church as a whole. We cannot keep asking for revival without responsibility. We have to deal with the root.

## **Two Lies of the Sexual Revolution**

The Sexual Revolution, roughly the 1960s through the 1980s, challenged the traditional codes of sexual behavior in America. It brought wider acceptance of sex outside of marriage, the pill, the mainstreaming of pornography, and legalized abortion.

I want to be fair. Many who embraced it were reacting against real hypocrisy, against a religious culture that often had rules without love. Their longing for love and freedom was real. But the answer it offered was built on two lies:

- 1. Sex is for pleasure.**
- 2. Desire equals identity.**

Those lies are strongholds, and the weapons of our warfare are “made powerful by God for tearing down strongholds” as we “take every thought captive to make it obey Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:4-5, NET). Here is the truth that tears them down:

1. **Sex is for marriage.** It is a covenant gift. “A man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24).
2. **Biblical identity redirects fleshly desire.** My desires do not define me. My Father does. And as I come to know who He says I am, He reorders what I want.

Sex unhinged from covenant lives for the moment of pleasure rather than the movement of family. When you elevate the experience over the endurance, the relationship becomes disposable, and every season that does not measure up becomes a reason to leave. God never designed sex to be the measure of a marriage. He designed it to be the seal of one.

## **Is All Sin Equal?**

Every episode of *Law & Order: SVU* opens with the same words: “In the criminal justice system, sexually based offenses are considered especially heinous.”

Sometimes I wonder if Hollywood remembers something about sexual sin that the Church has forgotten.

People ask me all the time, “Isn’t all sin equal?” Here is my answer. All sin is equal in that any sin separates us from a holy God and requires the blood of Jesus. But not all sin carries the same consequences on earth, and not all sin does the same damage to other people.

That distinction matters more than you might think.

In the news reporting that followed the scandal at one large ministry, a former staff member described a conversation with a senior leader. According to his account, the leader asked him to help disciple a man who had been accused of sexually assaulting a woman. The woman had called the police, but the leader had persuaded her not to press charges, and the

ministry had increased the accused man's financial support to give him "stability and some encouragement."

When the staff member objected, he said the leader asked him, "Have you ever had an impure thought?"

He answered, "Are you telling me that you equate an impure thought and rape as the same thing?"

The reply, as he recounted it: "Sin is sin." Not long afterward, he said, he and his wife were pushed out of the ministry.

I want to slow down here, because this is where bad theology does real harm to real people.

Jesus did say that looking at someone with lust is adultery of the heart (Matthew 5:28). He did not say it to make adultery, or assault, seem small. He said it to show how serious the inner life is. The enemy loves to twist that teaching. He whispers to the struggling believer, "You already sinned in your thoughts, so you might as well act on it." And he whispers to the church leader, "We're all sinners, so this assault is no different from anyone's bad thought."

Both are lies.

When a man or woman takes someone's body with no regard for that person's heart, will, or consent, it is not a "relationship that went too fast." It is violence. When we treat all sexual sin as identical, we end up treating a predator as a spiritual patient instead of what Jesus called a wolf in sheep's clothing (Matthew 7:15). And the victim gets wounded a second time, this time by the very people who should have protected her.

So let me say it as clearly as I know how. If you have been sexually assaulted or abused, it was not your fault. You did not cause it. You are not the one who needs to repent of it. The entire responsibility belongs to the one who did it, never to the one it was done to. What was done to you was a

crime and a sin against you, and God's heart burns with justice on your behalf.

A church's first duty in that moment is to protect the vulnerable, to report crimes to the proper authorities, and to care for the wounded. Not to manage the reputation of the ministry. Not to "restore" the abuser quietly.

**Sin is sin before God. But a scratch is not a gunshot wound, and a wolf is not a patient.**

### **Watch the Seed Before It Grows**

James shows us how sin grows:

*When a person is carried away with desire, lured by lust, and when desire becomes the focus and takes control, it gives birth to sin.  
When sin becomes fully grown, it produces death.*

#### **James 1:14-15**

The old saying traces the same road: watch your thoughts before they become words, your words before they become actions, your actions before they become habits, and your habits before they become your character and your destiny.

When Jesus said to tear out the eye or cut off the hand that causes you to sin (Matthew 5:29-30), He was not calling for self-mutilation. He was calling for radical, decisive action. If what you see is leading you into sexual sin, change what you see. If what you touch is leading you into sexual sin, change who you allow yourself to touch.

So let me ask some honest questions. Do you tolerate sexual immorality in the movies you watch? In your household? In the way you dress? In your dating relationships? At your workplace? In what you allow your kids to consume?

What if we had been taught from our youth that we are temples of the living God?

*You don't belong to yourself any longer, for the gift of God, the Holy Spirit, lives inside your sanctuary. You were God's expensive purchase, paid for with tears of blood, so by all means, then, use your body to bring glory to God!*

### **1 Corinthians 6:19-20 (TPT)**

#### **The Quiet Epidemic**

In 2016, evangelist Josh McDowell told CBN News, “I would personally say that from all my knowledge now, pornography is probably the greatest threat to the cause of Christ in the history of the world.”

That is a strong statement from a man who has spent his life defending the faith, and I think he is right to be alarmed. Pornography is available to every child with a phone, for free, in private. Pastors and counselors keep telling us what it does. It breaks trust in marriage. It keeps you from real intimacy. It wounds the self-image of both spouses. It takes without giving. It trains desire in the wrong direction, and it is linked with infidelity, depression, and anxiety.

Most married men and women would refuse any medicine, no matter what it promised, if it would rob them of their ability to be intimate with their spouse. Yet sexual immorality has that very effect on our intimacy with God. Undisciplined lust always leads to a famine of His presence.

Rick Joyner described where the road leads in *There Were Two Trees in the Garden*: “The more ‘free’ one becomes in his pursuit of satisfaction, the less satisfaction he experiences... These only increase the appetite while providing less and less fulfillment.” Peter said it first: “by what a man is overcome, by this he is enslaved” (2 Peter 2:19).

**The religious spirit will make you more worried about being cursed for missing church than about being defiled by pornography.**

## **Malachi 2 Before Malachi 3**

We love to preach Malachi 3. “Will a man rob God?” (Malachi 3:8). We are quick to warn about the curse of withholding the tithe.

But how often do we preach Malachi 2?

*You cry out, “Why doesn’t the LORD accept my worship?” I’ll tell you why! Because the LORD witnessed the vows you and your wife made when you were young. But you have been unfaithful to her, though she remained your faithful partner, the wife of your marriage vows. Didn’t the LORD make you one with your wife? In body and spirit you are his... So guard your heart; remain loyal to the wife of your youth.*

### **Malachi 2:14-15 (NLT)**

The very next verse says that God hates divorce (Malachi 2:16). He hates it because He loves the people it tears apart.

If you have walked through a divorce, especially one you did not choose, please hear me. This is not a word of condemnation for you. Many of you were abandoned, betrayed, or abused, and God’s heart is for you. This is a word to the Church about our priorities. Malachi’s people were faithful with their offerings and unfaithful in their marriages, and God would not accept their worship.

I wonder where the church in America would be if Malachi 2 had been preached as often as Malachi 3.

The religious mindset holds a strange paradox. It believes tithing guarantees God’s blessing even in the middle of sexual immorality, while failing to tithe brings a curse even on a person living a pure life. That is the

Pharisee's prayer all over again: "I thank you, God, that I am not like other people... adulterers... I fast twice a week, and I give you a tenth of my income" (Luke 18:11-12, NLT).

Tithing and fasting may reveal your spiritual discipline. Sexual purity reveals the fruit of your character and your true hunger for God.

### **Joseph's Secret**

What kept Joseph pure when his master's wife said, "Sleep with me"?

*He wouldn't do it. He said to his master's wife, "Look, with me here, my master doesn't give a second thought to anything that goes on here; he's put me in charge of everything he owns... The only thing he hasn't turned over to me is you. You're his wife, after all! How could I violate his trust and sin against God?"*

### **Genesis 39:8-9 (MSG)**

Joseph saw the one thing he had not been given, and he chose to stay grateful for everything he had been given. His heart toward God, his humility, and his fear of the Lord kept him. He was like Jacob in the fields of Laban: a man who could wait, because he valued what God had promised more than what was offered in the moment.

So the call of this chapter is not just "try harder." It is "come home."

*"Yet even now," declares the LORD, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments." Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.*

### **Joel 2:12-13**

## **For the Road**

1. Where have you wanted pleasure without responsibility, in your relationships, your habits, or your expectations of God?
2. Where are you being tempted to trade a birthright for a bowl of stew?  
What future pain could you “borrow” today to help you choose wisely?
3. Of the questions about what you tolerate (movies, home, dress, dating, work, kids), which one did the Holy Spirit put His finger on?

**Lust can't wait. Love can wait seven years and call it a few days.**

## Your Love Is Better Than Wine

*One thing I ask of the LORD, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple.*

### **Psalm 27:4**

There is a story told about a young man named Jake.

He slumped in a creaky chair across from his pastor, hands trembling. “I can’t stop looking at porn, Pastor. Every time I swear I’m done, I relapse. Women are just so... beautiful.”

His pastor leaned forward. “Jake, have you ever truly looked at God? Not just as holy or powerful. As beautiful. More radiant than anyone in creation?”

The question knocked the breath out of him.

Jake thought he had seen God: as a kid reciting Bible verses, as a teenager singing hymns, as an adult gritting his teeth through sermons. But beautiful? No. God had always been a distant judge, a list of rules, a cosmic fire extinguisher for guilt. Beautiful was the curve of a woman’s smile. The flicker of skin on a screen.

That night, after deleting his browser history yet again, he opened his dusty Bible, and Psalm 27:4 undid him. *To gaze on the beauty of the Lord.* David wrote that. David, a man who had tasted forbidden beauty. *What kind of beauty*, Jake wondered, *could eclipse Bathsheba?*

The next morning he went back to his pastor. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen Him as beautiful. Not really.”

“Then let’s start there,” the pastor said, and handed him a journal. “Write down every Scripture that speaks of God’s beauty. His glory. His splendor. His radiance. Study them the way you’ve studied other things.”

Weeks passed. Jake devoured verses about the “light of your face” (Psalm 4:6) and the “river of your delights” (Psalm 36:8). Slowly his cravings began to starve. One night he read Psalm 45:2, “You’re the most beautiful of all men; grace flows from Your lips,” and he froze. This was about Jesus. The God who became flesh, not to shame him, but to out-beautify every counterfeit.

For years Jake had worshiped creation and been blind to the Creator’s glory. Now, looking at the cross, he saw it. God wasn’t just better than porn. He was breathtaking. And whenever the cravings came clawing back, Jake would whisper, “Show me Your beauty again,” and open the Word.

## **Is Freedom Really Possible?**

People ask me, sometimes with tears in their eyes, “Is it possible to ever walk in purity? Or will I struggle with sexual immorality my whole life?”

My answer is yes. It is possible.

I do not say that as someone who never struggled. For years I desecrated the temple of God in my own body. But I have found that freedom is real, and I believe God has shown me four ways to walk out of sexual immorality and into His presence.

## **First: Behold the Beauty of God**

The first key is the one Jake found. We will never be free of lust simply by hating it. We have to be captured by something more beautiful.

Here is the lie we believe: that a human being can give us something better than God can give us. So we have to see Him as He is.

*My lover is dark and dazzling, better than ten thousand others!*

### **Song of Songs 5:10 (NLT)**

The bride in the Song of Songs opens with this cry: “Your love is better than wine” (Song of Songs 1:2). That is the confession of a heart that has tasted the real thing. When you have truly tasted His love, the counterfeit wine loses its pull. Salt stops tasting like sugar.

This is why the enemy fights so hard to keep you from His presence. He knows that a heart satisfied in God is nearly impossible to seduce.

**You don’t overcome lust by staring at it. You overcome it by beholding Him.**

### **Second: Make a Covenant with Your Eyes**

The second key is a decision. Job made it thousands of years ago:

*I made a covenant with my eyes not to look with lust at a young woman... Doesn’t he see everything I do and every step I take?... For lust is a shameful sin... It is a fire that burns all the way to hell. It would wipe out everything I own.*

### **Job 31:1-12 (NLT)**

Job made that covenant without the indwelling Holy Spirit that every believer has today. If Job could do it, what is our excuse?

A covenant with your eyes is not a vague hope that you’ll do better. It is a settled decision made ahead of time, before temptation walks by. It means deciding what you will and won’t watch, where your phone will and won’t be at night, and what you’ll do with your eyes the moment temptation appears. Joseph didn’t negotiate. He ran.

And the covenant is kept the way every covenant is kept: by staying close to the One you made it with.

*How can a young man stay pure? Only by living in the word of God and walking in its truth... I consider your prophecies to be my greatest treasure, and I memorize them and write them on my heart to keep me from committing sin's treason against you.*

### **Psalm 119:9-11 (TPT)**

Meditating on God's Word does more than fill our minds with good information. Compulsive sexual behavior trains the brain's reward system the way other addictions do: the rush teaches the brain to crave more, ordinary pleasures start to feel dull, and shame and isolation follow. But the same God who made our brains made them able to change. We are "transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Romans 12:2). The Word rewires desire. It writes the truth so deeply on the heart that when temptation speaks, Scripture answers first.

### **Third: Repent of the Pride Beneath the Lust**

The third key goes to the root. Paul diagnoses the source of sexual brokenness in Romans 1:

*For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened... Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator.*

### **Romans 1:21-25**

Notice the order. Before there is any sexual sin in the passage, there is a refusal to honor God and a refusal to give thanks. Pride and ingratitude come first. Sexual brokenness follows. We tend to think the core issue in

the Church is sexual immorality, but sexual immorality is the fruit. The root is pride. Pride convinces you that someone else's body can be used for your pleasure.

That is why behavior management alone can never set us free. We have to deal with the throne of our hearts.

We were created to gaze. We were made to behold and to be moved by beauty. We see it in people, in art, in nature, in excellence, because beauty is not an accident. It is a reflection, a lesser glory pointing back to the One who is Beauty Himself. Many have been shipwrecked by stopping at the created thing and never letting it lead them back to the Creator.

When the beauty of creation becomes ultimate in our hearts, we begin to worship what was meant to be a witness. We cling to the gift and neglect the Giver. We ask what is temporary and fragile to satisfy a longing only the glory of God can fill. That is how we dishonor the holy. Not always by rejecting God outright, but by treating Him as less than what He made.

### **Creation becomes a window, not a throne.**

If you want to pray with me, pray this: *Lord, open my eyes to see You for who You truly are. Show me that You are the beauty behind all beauty, the glory above all glory. I turn from my pride. I give You thanks. Take the throne of my heart again.*

### **Love Is Love?**

Romans 1 brings us to a question every believer has to face honestly. Our culture's slogan is "Love is love." It sounds kind. But if love is whatever we feel, then the word has lost its meaning. Walter Martin put it well: "If truth were all-inclusive, nothing would be false." By definition, truth excludes.

I want to answer this question with conviction and with compassion, because there are real people on the other side of it.

I'll call one of them Nelson. He was a quiet man, the kind whose calm face hides a storm, and the storm was over his sexual identity. As we talked, I sensed the Lord whisper, "Speak to his God-given identity, not merely to his same-sex attraction." So I did. Nelson bore the image of God, and Christ had proven his worth by dying for him. His struggle had not erased that image or put him beyond redemption.

Then Nelson said, "I'm a gay Christian who has been rejected by the Church."

I felt the Spirit shift my assignment: "Now address the behavior." I told him I wasn't there to condemn him, and that his struggle did not have the authority to define him. Then I said something I had been sensing for a while. "Prophetic people often see others through God's redemptive lens. They notice people's potential, their pain, their beauty. But that perception can get distorted through abuse, promiscuity, emotional wounds, or misplaced intimacy. What if some of what you've perceived as attraction is a distorted echo of your gift? What if it's a burden for someone that got mistaken for romantic chemistry?"

He froze. "God spoke the same thing to me last week," he said quietly. "Pray for me."

I don't offer that as a formula for every person's story. Only the Holy Spirit knows the whole of any heart. But I have seen the pattern enough to say it plainly: do not mistake carrying a burden for someone with romantic chemistry. A genuine spiritual burden always leads people closer to Christ, never into emotional dependency or sexual compromise.

As for the question itself, Preston Sprinkle's *People to Be Loved* is one of the most careful and honest treatments I know. He takes the strongest arguments on every side seriously. Drawing on his work and my own study, here is why I am convinced Scripture still teaches that sex belongs only in the marriage of a man and a woman. The Bible speaks often about marriage and only ever affirms marriage between a man and a woman. Jesus, asked

only about divorce, went back to creation anyway: “At the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female’... and the two will become one flesh” (Matthew 19:4-5). His silence on same-sex relations is not approval. He never named human trafficking either, and He held a stricter sexual ethic than His contemporaries, not a looser one. Paul’s argument in Romans 1 is rooted in creation, not in culture. And for two thousand years the Church has read it this way. Tradition can be wrong, but it would take an earth-shattering case to overturn it, and that case has not been made.

But those of us who hold the line must hold our own hearts to the same standard. Paul writes Romans 1 and then turns immediately on the self-righteous reader: “Do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?” (Romans 2:4, NASB).

The man struggling with same-sex attraction and the man struggling with pornography stand at the foot of the same cross. Neither of us is defined by our desires. Both of us are invited to be defined by our Father.

#### **Fourth: Let Him Make All Things New**

The fourth key is not something we do. It is something He does.

*And the one sitting on the throne said, “Look, I am making everything new!”*

#### **Revelation 21:5 (NLT)**

Maybe you’ve read these chapters with a heavy heart. Maybe you have a past you’re ashamed of, or you are in the middle of a struggle right now. Or maybe your story is one where purity was not given away but taken from you, and you have carried shame that was never yours to carry.

Hear the promise of God: “I will restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten” (Joel 2:25).

*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.*

## **2 Corinthians 5:17-18**

He does not just forgive. He makes new. And then He hands the healed the ministry of reconciliation, so that the place of your deepest shame can become the place from which you bring hope to others.

### **The Consummation Tent**

I want to close with a story. It is told as the story of a Jewish bride, and I cannot vouch for the details as history. I share it as a parable. But I have never heard a picture of the gospel that moved me more.

In ancient Israel, the consummation of a marriage was a sacred, covenant act. The law of Moses speaks of the “evidence of virginity,” a cloth a bride’s parents could keep as proof of her purity (Deuteronomy 22:13-17). According to the tradition behind this story, after the wedding the couple would enter a tent, and afterward the groom would hang the white sheet outside as a sign that a blood covenant had been made.

The story tells of a young woman who had given away her purity years before. She was ashamed and had never told her fiancé. On her wedding day she felt the full weight of her guilt. She knew what would happen in the tent. She knew there would be no blood on the sheet.

When they entered the tent, she could not bear it any longer. She fell at her husband’s feet, confessed everything, and begged him to forgive her.

To her astonishment, he already knew.

Instead of condemning her, he picked up a sharp stone and cut his own forearm. He let his blood fall onto the white sheet. Then he walked outside

and hung it up for everyone to see.

His blood was her new testimony.

Do you see Him?

That is exactly what Jesus did for us. We came to the wedding with no proof of purity, nothing to offer but our shame. And our Bridegroom already knew. Instead of exposing us, He shed His own blood so that we could be forgiven, cleansed, and presented as a spotless Bride. The cross is the sheet hung outside the tent for the whole world to see: *It is finished. She is Mine. Her past has been covered by My blood.*

*He gave up his life for her to make her holy and clean, washed by the cleansing of God's word. He did this to present her to himself as a glorious church without a spot or wrinkle or any other blemish.*

#### **Ephesians 5:25-27 (NLT)**

If you are a survivor of abuse, hear this as well. If your purity was taken from you rather than given, there is no sin of yours to confess in that. But there is still a Bridegroom who knows every detail of your story, whose blood covers your shame, and who calls you clean, chosen, and beloved. The shame belongs to the one who sinned against you. The sheet with His blood on it belongs to you.

And this story calls those of us who have been forgiven to do the same for one another: to be honest in our marriages and quick to extend the grace we ourselves received. A Church that has been covered by the Bridegroom's blood should be the safest place on earth for a sinner to come clean.

### **The Bridegroom Is Coming**

We began this book with a warning. In the world, power is the goal. In the Kingdom, power is the test. We have walked through the tests of power, promotion, prosperity, and pleasure. We have looked at those who passed

and those who fell, and we have been honest about our own hearts along the way.

But every test in this book points toward one day.

The Bridegroom is coming. He is not coming for a Bride who earned her place. He is coming for a Bride He purchased with His own blood. But she is a Bride who has prepared herself. She has kept her lamp burning. She has made a covenant with her eyes. She has learned to wait. She has tasted His love and found it better than wine.

God once told Ezekiel a painful parable about a very different kind of bride. Two sisters, Oholah and Oholibah, pictures of Samaria and Jerusalem, were married to the Lord, yet kept running after other lovers. “For when she left Egypt, she did not leave her spirit of prostitution behind,” God said. And the younger sister, though she saw what happened to the older, “followed right in her footsteps” (Ezekiel 23:8, 11, NLT). They had left Egypt, but they had not let Egypt leave them.

I see in those two sisters a picture, not a prophecy, of the two forces that have shaped so much of the West and now the Church: a Romanticism that builds love on feelings and encounters instead of faithfulness and endurance, and the Sexual Revolution that told us sex is for pleasure and desire is identity. Each has twisted covenant love in its own way. And each has taught the Church to chase peak experiences, the next exciting event and the next charismatic speaker, instead of loving faithfully in the unglamorous seasons.

Kris Vallotton gives couples a piece of counsel that fits the Church just as well: “A great marriage is never an accident; it’s a covenantal choice you will make with each other for the rest of your life.” If you fell in love, he says, make sure to choose love, “because that which begins with an accident can only be maintained by choice.” The Church does not need more romance. It needs more covenant. A Bride who chooses Him in the unglamorous seasons is a Bride who will be ready.

*Let us be glad and rejoice, and let us give honor to him. For the time has come for the wedding feast of the Lamb, and his bride has prepared herself. She has been given the finest of pure white linen to wear. For the fine linen represents the good deeds of God's holy people.*

### **Revelation 19:7-8 (NLT)**

That is the reward this whole book has been reaching for. Not a title, not a platform, not a fortune, not a moment of pleasure. Him. The joy of standing before Him, washed and whole, hearing Him call us His own.

So keep your temple holy. Keep your eyes on His beauty. Keep your heart in covenant. And if you have stumbled, run to Him, not from Him. His blood is already on the sheet.

*The Spirit and the bride say, "Come!"*

### **Revelation 22:17**

## **For the Road**

1. Have you ever truly seen God as beautiful, not just holy or powerful? What would it look like to "study His beauty" this week the way Jake did?
2. Which of the four keys (beholding His beauty, a covenant with your eyes, repenting of pride, letting Him make you new) do you most need to take hold of right now?
3. Is there a secret you have been carrying into the tent? Who is the safe, godly person you could bring it to, as you bring it first to the Bridegroom who already knows?

**The Bridegroom already knows, and His blood is already on the sheet. Come home.**

## EPILOGUE

# Keep Your Lamp Burning

*At midnight they were roused by the shout, “Look, the bridegroom is coming! Come out and meet him!”*

### **Matthew 25:6 (NLT)**

Jesus told a story about ten bridesmaids waiting for a wedding.

All ten were invited. All ten had lamps. All ten were waiting for the same bridegroom, and all ten fell asleep when he took longer than expected. From the outside, you could not tell them apart.

Then the shout came at midnight. Ten women woke up and reached for their lamps, and five of them discovered that their flames were going out.

“Please give us some of your oil,” they begged the others.

And the wise ones gave an answer that sounds almost unkind until you understand it: “We don’t have enough for all of us. Go to a shop and buy some for yourselves” (Matthew 25:8-9).

While they were gone, the bridegroom came. The door was shut.

### **The Oil No One Can Lend You**

Every test in this book comes down to that moment.

The foolish bridesmaids were not pagans. They were invited. They had lamps. They looked ready. What they lacked was the one thing that can’t be borrowed at midnight: oil, the private, cultivated, day-by-day intimacy with God that no one else can hand you.

You can borrow a title. You can borrow a platform. You can borrow someone's anointing for a season, sitting under a gifted ministry and feeling the heat of their fire. You can even borrow a reputation. But you cannot borrow oil. Oil is bought in the secret place, one ordinary morning at a time, long before the shout.

**The anointing can be shared in a room. The oil can only be cultivated in a heart.**

That is why the four tests are so dangerous. Power, promotion, prosperity and pleasure all have the same effect: they make the lamp look bright while the oil runs low. Samson's lamp looked bright right up until the morning he said, "I will go out as before," and did not know the Lord had left him. The church at Laodicea said, "I am rich, I have everything I want." Their lamps were polished. Their oil was gone.

## **What Midnight Reveals**

Midnight is the moment when what was hidden becomes visible. Every season of increase is a kind of midnight. So is every crushing.

- In the **power test**, midnight reveals whether you know His love or only His power.
- In the **promotion test**, it reveals whether your identity is in your title or in the Father.
- In the **prosperity test**, it reveals whether you trust the Provider or the provision.
- In the **pleasure test**, it reveals whether your heart is kept for the Bridegroom or given away to lesser lovers.

The wise were not the ones who never slept. All ten slept. The wise were the ones who prepared before they slept. They did the unglamorous work of filling their flasks when no one was watching and nothing seemed urgent.

## **How to Keep Your Lamp Burning**

If you have read this far, I don't want you to close this book with a vague resolve to "do better." I want you to go fill your flask. Here is how I have learned to keep my lamp burning.

### **Stay hungry.**

Spiritual hunger works the opposite way from physical hunger. The more you feast on His presence, the hungrier you become. The longer you go without, the more your heart forgets it was ever hungry. Don't wait until you feel like it.

### **Stay in the Word.**

The lamp in Scripture is also the Word: "Your word is a lamp to guide my feet and a light for my path" (Psalm 119:105). Let it read you before you read anyone else.

### **Stay accountable.**

Give a few people permission to ask you about money, power and purity, and to tell you the truth. Add accountability as fast as you add influence.

### **Stay small.**

Remember the cup Jesus chose: the servant's towel, not the throne. Choose servanthood at the top of the mountain.

### **Stay in covenant.**

Love is a choice you keep making in the unglamorous seasons. The Bridegroom is not looking for a Bride who had one great encounter. He is looking for one who kept her lamp burning.

And if your lamp is flickering right now, hear the good news: it is not midnight yet. The shop is still open. The Bridegroom is still saying, "Come." Repentance is not the end of your story. It is how oil gets bought.

## **The Shout Is Coming**

One day the shout will ring out over the whole earth: “Look, the bridegroom is coming!” Every title will fall silent. Every platform will be emptied. Every bank account will be closed. Every pleasure that promised to satisfy will be exposed as the cheap substitute it always was.

And the only thing that will matter is whether we know Him, and whether He knows us.

The boy behind the plow doesn’t get to choose when the rain comes. He only gets to choose whether the ground is ready when it does.

So break up your fallow ground. Fill your flask. Pass the tests, not to be seen, but to be found faithful.

### **Keep your lamp burning.**

*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)**