



# TALKING TO YOUR TEEN

*navigating tough topics together*

# TYNDALE VOICES

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**VOLUME 7** of *Tyndale Voices* features thought-provoking content from books on talking to your teen. As you read, listen to the heart of each author and respond to the challenges offered through their words.

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# ALL-CAPS YOU

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## **YOU ARE A LIMITED EDITION!**

You are fully known, loved, and treasured by the One who made you exactly as you are.

Emma Mae Jenkins has learned the secret of living an all-caps life—a life that exudes joy and confidence in knowing and embracing the person God created her to be. And she wants to help you do the same in *ALL-CAPS YOU*.



**EMMA MAE JENKINS** is a twenty-year-old lover of Jesus and people. The color yellow, smiling, and flowers are some of her favorite things. She is the daughter of Jason and Amanda Jenkins and the older sister of her brother, Nolan Jenkins. Emma attends Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia, and majors in Women's Christian Leadership. Out of an overflow of God's love, she travels throughout the country speaking at conferences and retreats to be a messenger of God's Word. The Lord has blessed Emma with platforms of influence to glorify Him through social media and YouTube. Walking in obedience to these opportunities, she is able to invest in the lives of thousands worldwide.

# Fearfully and Wonderfully Made

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*I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;  
your works are wonderful, I know that full well.*

PSALM 139:14, NIV

## **A FATHER'S LOVE**

Right before my first day of high school, I walked into my bathroom to see a note written by my dad that was taped to the mirror. The note said,

*Emma,*

*Nothing in a makeup bag could make you any more beautiful  
than you are today. A beautiful heart makes a beautiful woman.  
Not sure how I could love you more than I do today.*

*Love,  
Daddy*

I still have this note on my mirror. When I look at it, my heart is filled with joy and honor for my dad. He not only thinks about me, but he loves me unconditionally for who I am.

My dad reflects the heart of our heavenly Father so well. God thinks about us all of the time (Psalm 139:17-18). The love of God is so real

and so strong. In His presence, I feel overwhelmed with joy. My heart is consumed with awe at the thought of Him wanting to be with me.

Zephaniah 3:17 says that “He will take great delight in you; . . . [he] will rejoice over you with singing” (NIV).

Who, me?

Yes.

In the midst of my being overwhelmed in the inexpressible and glorious joy of being His, God is rejoicing with singing at the simple thought of me.

*How have you experienced God’s unconditional love? How does it make you feel?*

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## PRICELESS WORTH

The Lord made us with respect, honor, and awe. He is enthralled by our beauty and delights in calling us His.

This becomes harder and harder to believe the more that we accept what other people say and confuse someone else's opinions with our true identity. In this world, from social media to movies, magazines to society, we hear that we are beautiful *if*—if we are this tall, this size, this skin tone. Only if we have this voice, this smile. As culture changes and shifts, standards and expectations of beauty change too. So many of us determine what we wear, how we talk, who we hang out with, based on society's ever-changing definition of beauty. In doing this, we will never be content with who we are or who we're pretending to be. As the world's standards change, we become worn out and restless by constantly trying to prove our own value.

All the while, the King of kings has already determined our priceless worth before the world even existed. God says we are fearfully and wonderfully made (Psalm 139:14). God says we are valuable (Matthew 10:29-31). God says He made us beautiful exactly as we are. Still, even though we hear His words, we aren't always quick to believe the truth fully because the world is telling us the exact opposite. If our focus is on the world, it doesn't matter how many times we hear what's true because we believe and follow whatever we are focused on. But the more time we spend with God, the more quickly and easily we begin to hear and acknowledge His voice.

*What does God say about you? How is it different from what the world says?*

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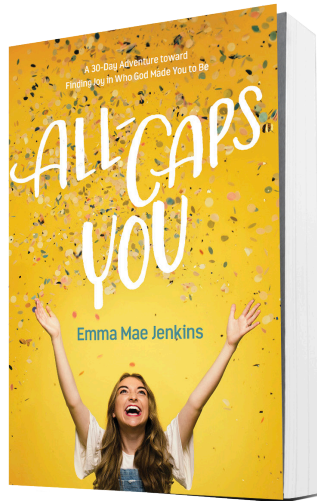
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## **GOD'S WORKMANSHIP**

What if instead of believing the lies of the devil, we choose to receive what God has said? What if we believe the truth that never changes or shifts, the truth that assures us we are priceless? Ephesians 2:10 says, “We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (ESV). God’s truth declares we are beautiful because God, the creator of beauty, made us. Our smiles can be genuine and our confidence steady because our souls know our true worth in God’s eyes.

When our souls grasp the precious truth that we are God’s wonderful workmanship, we can believe we are made with uniqueness and purpose. We can begin to have a steadfast confidence, even in the midst of the shifting standards of the world. When we see ourselves the way that God sees us, the burden of striving to be enough begins to fade. A joyfully different perspective will take its rightful place in our hearts. When we look in the mirror, the truth of who God says we are will lead us to remember that He is thinking about us and loves us unconditionally. The changing standards of culture cannot consume us when we choose to believe that we are what God says we are . . . fearfully and wonderfully made.





The heartfelt devotions, journaling prompts, and Scripture in *ALL-CAPS YOU* will strengthen your belief in the truth of God's love for you and help you celebrate the individual He created you to be as you reflect His love to the people you encounter every day.

<https://www.tyndale.com/p/all-caps-you/9781496440266>

# STREET GOD

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**HIS STREET NAME WAS DAYLIGHT.** But he was a nightmare.

On the streets of New York, darkness and violence reigned. Dimas “Daylight” Salaberrios began selling pills when he was eleven years old, and by sixteen he had served his first stint at the notorious Rikers Island prison. Dimas knew that it was never safe to turn his back, and he saw only one way to survive: by becoming a street god. He would be the richest, most powerful ruler in the hood . . . or die trying.

His dark path through the underworld of crime and drugs is one that many have traveled, yet few have emerged from it without deep scars—if they emerge at all. For Dimas, it all came down to one extreme moment, with a gun pointed at his head. He had to decide: How far would he go? Had he taken his last reckless chance to rule as a god of the streets? Only the real God could rescue him from certain death . . . but that God would send Dimas back down the darkest streets he’d ever known to do something he never could have imagined.



**DIMAS SALABERRIOS** is pastor of Infinity Bible Church, which he founded in partnership with Tim Keller and Redeemer City to City, in the South Bronx of New York City. Infinity targets at-risk youth and spearheads numerous outreach events and discipleship groups. As a worldwide missionary, church planter, and speaker, Pastor Dimas has shared the gospel on every continent except Antarctica. He is also president of Concerts of Prayer Greater New York, and he holds a master of divinity degree from Alliance Theological Seminary. He and his wife, Tiffany, live in the Bronx with their two daughters.

## CHAPTER FOUR

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I knew I was desperate when I went to sell drugs for Fat Rock. He had a horrible reputation, but I had burned too many bridges by messing up everywhere else.

Fat Rock worked for Dragon, a drug kingpin and millionaire who ran drug spots everywhere. Dragon sent me to a weed spot in South Jamaica known as the Hole. The Hole was a storefront that wasn't really a store. At the side was a wooden door. If you opened the door, you'd step into an area that looked like a living room that someone had divided with a wooden wall. A gigantic door stood in the wooden wall, secured with ten locks, several heavy chains, and a few dead bolts for good measure. Next to the door was a hole a little larger than a human eye. A customer would shove money into the hole, and out would come a bag of weed. Simple.

But it wasn't so simple for the kid working at the Hole. I found myself locked in the other side of that apartment, behind the wooden wall. The worker's area held a toilet and a tiny kitchen. The only piece of furniture was a bed with a bloodstained pillow. Clearly, someone had been shot in the head while lying on it.

When Dragon took me to the Hole for the first time, he pointed to the bloodstain and gave me a grim smile. "That's what happened to our last worker."

I swallowed hard, realizing that I'd become not only a crackhead but also a crackhead surrounded by killers.

Fat Rock explained that my job at the Hole was to sell bags of weed. "But look here," he said, dangling a full bag before me. "You'll see that these bags are fat, packed full. If you bring some empty bags with you,

maybe you can skim a little off the top and fill up some bags of your own. Make a little extra profit.”

So I picked up some little cellophane jewelry bags at a Queens bodega that carried all kinds of drug paraphernalia—crack capsules, jewelry bags, even syringes. And then I let them lock me into the Hole.

While locked inside, I thought about all those locks and chains and dead bolts, and I tried to find a way out. What if the building caught fire? A hole in the floorboards, cut for a pipe, was large enough to drop drugs into the building basement if the cops came, but no human would fit through the hole. After peering down into the trash-ridden, rat-infested darkness below, I wasn't sure anyone would want to.

The only means of escape I could see was a skylight. I'd have to perform some amazing maneuvers to even reach it, but if I slid open a window, I could probably manage.

Locked away in that small space, I found myself stone-cold sober for the first time in six months. My eyes filled with tears as I took a long look at myself and asked aloud, “How did I sink this low?”



When I was little, a crazy guy named William lived on the next block. He used to terrorize us younger kids—he'd walk up, look down on us with utter disdain, and say, “You little punk.” Then he'd hit us, hard, and make us cry.

We hated William, mostly because we feared him. Then one day when I was ten, we heard that William had gotten himself saved. We couldn't believe the rumor, so a bunch of us walked over to the next block to see for ourselves.

We found William outside his house. I summoned up my courage and walked over to greet him. “Hey William!”

He looked at me and grinned. “Yeah?”

“Are you really saved?”



His grin broadened. “That’s right. I’m saved, I’m in the Lord, and you should be too. Do you want to accept Jesus?”

William seemed happy enough, and Dawn had been happy with Jesus, so I nodded. “Sure.”

“Okay, let’s go.”

While the other kids trailed behind, William walked me to a park, where he prayed what he called a prayer of salvation. I repeated the words after him, and afterward I thanked him for helping me. Nothing had really changed for me, but again, a seed was planted.

William kept the neighborhood tongues wagging when he started wearing suits every day. Did being saved mean you had to wear a suit? He went to a strict church, and the next thing I knew, William was standing in front of the grocery store passing out tracts to anyone who’d take one. His church met in an old theater, and we’d stand outside on Sundays and listen to the people singing.

I thought I’d figured it out. Saved people wore suits, sang, and passed out tracts. If that’s what being saved meant, I didn’t want to be saved. After that, I left William alone.

When I was in fifth grade, I met my friend Roger at school. Roger seemed upset, so I asked what was wrong.

“Yo, my girlfriend broke up with me.”

“What happened, man?”

Roger released a dramatic sigh. “She got saved.”

I blinked, trying to imagine Roger’s girlfriend wearing suits and singing. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“ ’Cause when you get saved, you can’t have a boyfriend anymore.”

“Man.” I stepped back, stunned by this new revelation. “That sounds horrible.”

Not much later, I heard about an older kid called Man who lived with Blaze. When Blaze came by the house one day, he told me Man had gotten saved.

“Really?” I was with at least ten other kids who were looking for something to do. “Let’s go see him.”

So the group of us trooped over to Blaze’s house, where we found Man standing inside the gate of the fenced front yard.

“Yo, Man,” we called out. “Can you still hang with us?”

He shook his head. “No, I’m saved.”

“Wow.” We stared at him and then looked at each other. “This is weird.”

“Can you have a girlfriend?” someone asked.

He shook his head again—a bit mournfully, it seemed to me. “No, I’m saved. I’m with Jesus now.”

“So—you’re not going to play with us anymore?”

“No, dudes. You guys aren’t with Jesus, and I am.”

“Well, okay.” We looked around, and some of us kicked at the grass. “If you need anything, let us know.”

“I’m good. I’m with Jesus.”

As we walked away, one of the guys looked at me. “I knew another kid who got saved. Someone pushed him in the face, and the kid said, ‘I’m going to turn so you can push me on the other side, ’cause I’m not gonna fight you.’ The guy went to push him again, but then he just stopped.”

I stared. “Really? He just stopped?”

The guy nodded. “Yeah. He didn’t push him again.”

I fell silent, a little awed by this powerful stuff. The guy actually invited the bully to push him on the other side of his face? He didn’t fight back? I had never heard what Jesus said about turning the other cheek, but I wanted to meet that brave kid. I’d never heard about that kind of courage.

The kid telling the story looked at me again. “Yo, this dude—you could tell he could fight if he wanted to. But because of God, he wouldn’t.”

I nodded, admiring the unknown kid even more. “Wow.”

“I think God stopped him.”

“Like God saved that guy.”

“Yo, when you get saved, it’s serious, man. We should all do it.”

Someone from the back of the group spoke up. “I’m going to do it before I die.”

“Huh?” I turned to look at him. “How do you do that?”

The kid shrugged. “You live normal, but right before you die, you say, ‘Jesus forgive me.’ So if you get shot or something, remember to say, ‘Jesus, please forgive me.’ Then you’ll be saved.”

That might not have been the best theology, but I always thought about that story as I went about my drug deals. That recipe for forgiveness became my backup plan. If I ever got in over my head, I might get shot and die. But if I did, the last words on my lips would be “Jesus, please forgive me.”

Lying on that bloody bed in the Hole, I thought a lot about dying. But I wasn’t ready to call on Jesus yet.

• • •

The day after I got locked in the Hole, someone from the fire department knocked on the apartment door, and I yelled out an answer. From my voice and manner they could tell they’d found a drug spot and I was a minor. The fire captain called the landlord while I eavesdropped from inside my prison.

“I’m bringing the police now,” I heard the fire captain saying, “and we are rescuing this kid.”

My heart pounded in its skinny cage of ribs. What they considered a good deed wouldn’t earn me any points with Dragon, so I scrambled onto the bed and struggled to reach the skylight. While they worked on getting into the locked inner room, I pulled myself up and ran across the roof; then I made my way down to the street. I jumped into a cab and went straight to the video store Dragon ran as a front for another of his drug operations.

Fat Rock was inside when I arrived. After recognizing me, he shot me a suspicious look. “What happened? What are you doin’ here?”

“The cops are on their way to the Hole, man.”

His eyes narrowed. “Did you grab the weed on your way out?”

“Yeah.”

“Pull it out.”

I reached into my pocket and pulled out about two thousand dollars’ worth of marijuana.

Fat Rock nodded in satisfaction. “Good work. Go chill out in the basement for a while.”

Snake, another of Dragon’s workers, followed me to the basement of the video store. When Fat Rock came down a few minutes later, Snake watched as Fat Rock began to beat me up. He beat me so badly that blood poured out of my nose and both my eyes started to swell. As blood streamed down my face, he stole about five hundred dollars’ worth of weed.

I looked at Snake, but he was as scared as I was. He didn’t say or do anything to help.

When Dragon arrived, Fat Rock told him I’d tried to rob the Hole. Without a second thought, Dragon came downstairs and began to beat me, ignoring my screams and protests. When he stopped, I thought I’d finally gotten through to him, but then he pulled a 9mm handgun from his waistband and put it to my forehead.

This was the moment I always thought I’d pray, *Jesus, forgive me*, but my brain stuttered and I couldn’t think at all.

At that instant a bell rang, signaling that a customer waited upstairs. Without a word, Dragon lowered the gun and trudged up the steps.

Bent over, trying to catch my breath, I looked at Fat Rock from beneath swollen eyelids. “Why are you doing this?”

His sinister laugh echoed amid the junk in the basement. “It’s just business, stupid.”

I was a naturally thin kid, but after losing so much weight because

of the crack, I looked like a strung-out addict. Fat Rock hadn't hesitated to treat me like one.

When Dragon yelled for Fat Rock to come upstairs, Snake and I followed, not knowing if we'd face cops, rivals, or something else.

An innocent customer, a guy who looked like a lawyer or a corporate executive, had lost three VHS tapes and had stopped by to pay the overdue charges. Dragon looked at his computer and saw that the tapes had been missing for over a year. When he added up all the rental fees, the bill came to \$1,300.

Then Dragon, a psycho dealer who couldn't seem to process situations rationally, called for Fat Rock and pulled his 9mm on the customer. In a gravelly voice, he ordered Fat Rock to take the guy to the basement.

Even though I was a crack-addicted woolah head, I understood that Dragon shouldn't be operating his video store the way he ran his drug empire. I stood near the basement door, dripping with blood and staring at a decent guy who'd come in to pay his rental bill. Why was Dragon treating him like someone who'd ratted him out?

The poor man dropped to his knees and pleaded, "Oh, no! Please don't do this!"

Holding the gun steady on the customer, Dragon glanced at Fat Rock. "Take him to the basement."

The man began to tremble. "I misplaced the tapes. All I did was misplace some videotapes!"

I shook my head, unable to believe what I was seeing. That customer could have been my sweet mother, who misplaced videotapes all the time. Whenever she found them, she returned them and paid a reasonable fine. No one had ever put her through this kind of torture.

These guys were crazy.

Dragon waved his gun in front of the customer's face. "You have one week to come up with my \$1,300 or I'm coming to your house." He

pulled out the guy's application card and held it before the man's eyes. "In case you don't believe me, I have your address right here."

Still shaking, the poor man stood. "Thank you, sir. Thank you! I'll be back with the money, and I will never lose a tape again."

I watched the man leave and wondered what would happen if Blockbuster operated the same way Dragon did. The idea was so bizarre I burst out laughing.

Dragon turned and frowned at me, not at all amused. "You're gonna work off your loss as well. Take him back to the Hole." He had made a few calls and found out it was safe to return.

Someone shoved me in the back of a Toyota Corolla. Then Freeze, Dragon's partner, drove me back to the weed spot. Freeze had a bad stutter, but he managed to warn me on our way to the apartment complex. "Y-y-you messed up, kid. We're go-go-gonna use you to send a message to all our workers."

When we pulled up to the Hole, Dragon was already waiting at the corner, his expression as dark as thunderclouds. He held a long-handled branch cutter, and for an instant I couldn't figure out why he wanted to trim bushes. Then he walked over to the car and grabbed my hand. "I'm takin' a finger."

"Man!" I screamed. "I'm only fifteen. Don't ruin my life like this!"

I'm not sure why, but the mention of my age snapped Dragon out of his rage. "Oh, shoot, you're fifteen?" He looked at Freeze. "Lock him back in the Hole."

A few minutes later, I was once again trapped in that hellhole. I cried on and off for three days, but I wasn't allowed out even for a minute. When I would sell out, Snake or someone else would come by to bring me more weed. Snake would often slap me just to make himself look tough.

Alone in that awful place, I cried out to God for help. I had sunk to the lowest point of my life—a fifteen-year-old crack addict with two black eyes and a bloodied shirt, locked away in the Hole. I wasn't sure if

God would answer, but I had no one else to turn to. No one else could see me in that miserable place.

At the end of the third day, Dragon unlocked the door and looked at me. “Your replacement is here. You can go.” He threw me a hundred-dollar bill. “Come back in a week.”

I ran to Tank’s house and told him about everything I’d been through. He felt bad for me, but what could he do? After that, I went home. My mother had been worried because, most times before, I had come home or at least called her to let her know I was alive and okay. She hugged me, and I knew she was torn between loving on me and fussing at me for causing her so much grief.

Unaware of just how deeply I was into drugs and how much danger I was in, my mother pleaded with me once again: “You’re not like those guys you hang out with. God has a plan for your life.” Part of me took notice. Could God really show me a way out? But my addiction had a far stronger pull on me than either of us realized.

As soon as Mom left for work the next day, Macho came over and we smoked woolahs. During that high, I went to my sister Emerald’s room and stole her jewelry so we could buy more drugs. Then I made the room look as if there’d been a burglary. My sister was no fool, though, and she saw right through my charade.

I was disgusted with myself. *What did I do?* That’s when I realized how low I’d fallen. Because I’d been smoking it with marijuana, I’d been rationalizing my use of crack. Once I’d stooped so low as to rob my own home, I could no longer deny that I was a hard-core crack addict. Embarrassed, I left the house, running away from the people I didn’t want to disappoint anymore.

Walking through the neighborhood, I caught up with an old classmate. He sold drugs for Jamaican Stretch, and he, too, had recently run away from home, so he let me crash in a place he was renting.

After a couple of days, the two of us decided to work together. As we headed outside to sell crack on the block, a man walked up and pointed

a machine gun at us. “Take off your coats,” he said, wrapping his hands around the gun, “and walk away.”

Standing there on the icy sidewalk, I stepped back, slipped, and fell, which only made the guy more nervous.

“Don’t move!”

Slowly, I stood up. “You can have everything, man,” we told him. “Just don’t shoot.”

We handed over our coats—with our drugs tucked inside the pockets—and the guy ran off. Now we had no money, no drugs, and no coats.

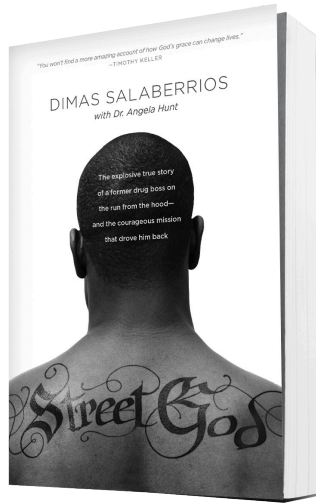
We couldn’t handle any more frustration, so we decided to call the cops. They picked us up and gave each of us a ride home.

That night I confessed almost everything to my mother. I told her about being robbed and owing money to several friends. I confessed that I couldn’t stop smoking crack and weed. I admitted I needed help.

And because my mom was a good mom, she helped me find a way out—she made arrangements for me to go live with my brother in North Carolina for a while. Coincidentally, Tank’s dad shipped him down to North Carolina as well, but to a different city.

I didn’t know where Tank was going. But at fifteen, I knew I couldn’t live like an addict anymore.





*Street God* is the compelling memoir of one man's against-all-odds journey out of a life of crime and back to the streets on a mission to change them. This incredible story of transformation reveals that we're never too far gone for God to find us—and shows how a single spark can illuminate even the darkest existence.

<https://www.tyndale.com/p/street-god/9781496402783>

# GOD FOR THE REST OF US

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**VINCE ANTONUCCI**, a pastor who reaches out to people on the Las Vegas Strip, has seen it all—and more important, he has seen God’s love in action on each and every street corner.

Vince is convinced that too many of us underestimate God and the extent of his love. *God for the Rest of Us* is Vince’s story of how he found God’s breathtaking love at work among people who are often forgotten and disdained by this world.

- Is God for the people who are forgotten and left out?
- Is he for the guy who betrayed his wife and left his kids?
- Is he for the doubters? The skeptics? The atheists?

The answers to these questions can be found in the lives of people Vince meets and ministers to.



**VINCE ANTONUCCI** pastors Verve, an innovative church that seeks to reach people who work on and live around the Las Vegas Strip. The television series *God for the Rest of Us* chronicles Vince's work there. In addition to writing books, Vince leads mission trips around the world, speaks nationwide, performs stand-up comedy in Las Vegas, and most of all, loves spending time with his wife, Jennifer, and their two kids.

# God for the Doubters

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I love it when people respond in ways I'd never expect. My favorite surprising responses seem to come from my wife. Like on our first anniversary when we went to a fancy restaurant. \* We ordered, our food came to the table, and Jen tasted it and exclaimed, "Ugh! That tastes like body odor!" Body odor? *Not* what I expected.

Just recently someone paid for us to go to another fancy restaurant. We ordered a salad. Jen took a bite and sputtered, "No! That tastes like a Navy ship!"

"What are you talking about?" I asked. "When have you ever tasted a Navy ship?"

She asked me, "Have you ever been on a Navy ship?"

"Yes."

"Then you know," she said, "that if you tasted a Navy ship, this salad is exactly what it would taste like!"

Not the reaction I expected.

The first surprising response I ever got from my wife was . . . the *first* response I ever got from my wife, long before she became my wife. During my undergraduate years of college I worked at a movie theater. I'm pretty silly. I do goofy things. At the theater, people would wait in line to buy their tickets in a little, glass-enclosed foyer that had great acoustics. So when no one was in line to buy tickets, I would go to the foyer and sing in it. I would do my best opera impersonations or sing

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\* Well, it may not have been that fancy, but when you're used to McDonald's . . .

“Immigrant Song” by Led Zeppelin. And whoever was selling tickets at the time would just stare at me like “You are an idiot.” But there was one ticket-seller girl, Jennifer, who would smile and laugh. And I thought, “Wow, no one else responds that way to my extraordinary singing ability!”

At that time I was a new Christian, and I was trying to talk to everyone about Jesus. I felt like everyone needed to know that God is for us, and Jesus came for us. So I decided to talk to this Jen with the amazing ear for superb musical talent. But because she worked in the ticket window, facing out toward the street, and I worked *inside* the theater, we never had a good opportunity to talk. So I decided to write her a note. One day during my break I wrote a note explaining that I had just become a Christian because it turns out the Bible is true, and Jesus is real, and God loves us.

I was sharing that with a lot of people at the time, and some of the responses I was getting were negative. Jen had gone to church a little when she was growing up but had already discarded her faith, if she'd ever really had any. My expectations were low. But Jen responded in a surprising way. She told me she wanted to see if there was truth in Christianity. She didn't believe, but she was open to the possibility of faith. So we started getting together, and she asked all kinds of questions. And I began to show her the evidence for Jesus—that he really lived, actually died for our sins, and truly rose from the dead. The evidence convinced Jen that Jesus is real. And reading about Jesus convinced her that Jesus is really for her. She fell in love with him and decided to give her life to him.

Well, soon I was the one asking questions. Questions like:

*Wait, do I like this Jen girl?* I do.

*Does she like me?* I think she does.

*Do I like, like this Jen?* I think I do!

*But does she like, like me?* I think she does!

*Wait, do I love this Jen?* Uh-oh. I think I do.

*What if she doesn't love me?* Wait, is it possible she loves me? I think she loves me!

And then, *Could she be the one?* Maybe not. But what if? Wait, she is!

*Should I ask her to marry me? When should I ask her? What if she says no? But what if she says yes?*

And eventually, I did ask her, and she did say yes, and about twenty years ago we got married.

## **GOD'S RESPONSE TO DOUBT**

Maybe you have something in common with my wife. Perhaps you're someone who has discarded your faith, if you ever really had any. Maybe when I mention evidence for the Bible and for Jesus, you're skeptical. Or perhaps you do believe but also have some doubts.

And perhaps you think that because you have doubts, God's reaction to you would be negative.

You assume that God's attitude would be, "If you're going to discard your faith in me, I'm going to discard my faith in *you*. If you're done with me, I'm done with you. If you have doubts about me, I have doubts about you."

If you think that, you're going to be surprised at God's reaction to doubters. Let me share some more stories with surprising responses, because I love surprising responses.

You may have doubts about the Bible's claim that God came to earth in the person of Jesus, that Jesus exactly represents God and *is* God. At the time of Jesus, people weren't sure about that either. Some believed; others didn't.

The first person to believe was John.\* John was a cousin of Jesus and most likely grew up hearing about his cousin's miraculous birth. John was given the role of introducing Jesus to the world. He baptized Jesus. He saw a dove come down from heaven to celebrate Jesus' baptism. He

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\*The John we call John the Baptist. (Not the apostle John . . . or John Wayne . . . or John Mayer . . . or any other John.)

heard a voice boom out from heaven, “This is my Son, in whom I am well pleased.”<sup>1</sup> He witnessed Jesus’ miracles.

But then, a few years later, John started to have doubts. He wasn’t sure anymore.

By the way, the reason John began to doubt was because he’d been put in prison for speaking against immorality. He felt like, *I’m living for God. I’m in prison for it, and God’s not doing anything about it. So maybe this whole thing isn’t true.*

Maybe your doubts have been driven by circumstances. You feel like there’s no way a good God would allow this bad thing to happen in your life, so there must not be a good God.

Or perhaps your doubts are more intellectual. You had a science teacher tell you there’s no God. No one has ever answered your questions. So you’re skeptical that God exists.

It could be that your doubts are more relationally driven. You may have met some hypocritical Christians and decided, “If that’s what Christians are like, I’m not interested.”

Or maybe you had an absent or abusive father. Nearly all the famous atheists of our time had absent or abusive fathers. I don’t think that’s a coincidence. I know from my own experience that it’s easy to come to the conclusion, “If that’s what fathers are like, then I want nothing to do with this idea of a heavenly Father.”

Our doubts can be driven by many causal factors. For John, it was his circumstances. He found himself in prison, and Jesus didn’t come to his rescue.

So John sent some messengers to his cousin to ask, “Are you really the one? Are you really God come for us?”

What would you guess happened here? I might assume Jesus would say, “What kind of question is that? God gave you this special role, and you’re questioning it? How dare you? You baptized me. You saw the dove. You heard the voice. You know about the miracles. And now you doubt? That’s it!”

I would be wrong.

Because when Jesus heard John's question and doubts, his surprising response was to send the messengers back to reassure John that yes, he *was* the one, he was still doing miracles, he was still proving that he was God. And then Jesus turned to the crowd who was watching this and he said, "I tell you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John."<sup>2</sup>

John, who should have been more sure than anyone else, expressed serious doubts, and Jesus gave him the ultimate compliment. It turns out that God is for the doubter.

Here's another story.

Jesus had been doing all kinds of miracles. He'd even raised people from the dead. Thousands had witnessed his power, and everyone was talking about it.

There was a man who had a sick son, so he brought his son to Jesus. He stood in front of Jesus, looked at him, and said, "*If* you can do anything, take pity on us and help us."<sup>3</sup>

What would you guess would happen here? I might assume Jesus would have said, "*If* you can?" If? Have you not been paying attention? Do you have so little faith? Well, then, no I can't, because you don't have enough faith for me to do this miracle for you."

I would be wrong again.

Here's what actually happened next: "If you can?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for one who believes."<sup>4</sup>

Jesus kind of came back with an "if" of his own. It's like he was saying, "The 'if' isn't about me. It's about *you*. Because if you believe, anything and everything is possible."

So how did the father respond?

If I were him, I would have said, "Of course I believe! Did I say 'if'? I meant 'Since.' I meant, '*Since* you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.'"

But that's not what he said. Here's his surprising response:



“Immediately the boy’s father exclaimed, ‘I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!’”<sup>5</sup>

He was basically saying, “I do believe! But I also *don’t* believe! I have faith, but I have doubts. Help me!”

So how would Jesus react to that? Maybe with, “I’m appalled. I expect total faith. I gave you two chances!” and then stomping off in disgust?

No, Jesus’ surprising response was to speak to the man’s son and to heal him, just as the doubting father requested. It turns out that God is for the doubter.

I’ll give you one more story.

Jesus recruited some guys to be his twelve disciples, his apprentices. They became best friends. Jesus trained them. And he taught them, repeatedly, that he would die and then three days later rise from the dead.

Eventually Jesus was arrested, tortured, and killed. And three days later one of Jesus’ best friends, one of his apprentices, was alone when suddenly the rest of the group showed up and excitedly told him that it had actually happened! Jesus *had* risen! They had seen him!

And this guy’s attitude was, “Yeah, right. You expect me to believe that?” In fact, he said, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.”<sup>6</sup> Thomas was saying to his friends, “I don’t believe you. You’re lying to me. And Jesus lied to us when he said he would come back from death.”

So what would you guess happened here? I might assume Jesus would have gone to Thomas and said, “You’re no longer one of my apprentices. You’re fired, no longer one of my friends. In fact, let me delete you from the contacts on my phone.”

I would be wrong.

Because instead of firing Thomas, Jesus’ surprising response was to show up a few days later, walk right up to Thomas, and say, “Put your

finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.’ Thomas said to him, ‘My Lord and my God!’”<sup>7</sup> Jesus addressed Thomas’s doubts and led Thomas to faith.

How cool is all that?

Think about it: How would you handle it if a friend of yours, or your spouse, expressed such a lack of faith in you, such doubt about you? What if they fired questions at you about your character? Or if before you went on your business trip, your wife said, “*If* you can be faithful while you’re gone, it would be nice.” Or if you made a promise, and someone told your friend that you kept your promise, and your friend said, “Yeah, right. You expect me to believe that?”

You probably wouldn’t handle it very well, would you? I wouldn’t! We’d be angry. But God is a God of grace. And God can handle your questions. He understands your doubt. He believes in you even if you’re not sure you believe in him. And he is *for* doubters.

## **DOUBT: CURSE OR GIFT?**

I hope you’re encouraged to know that if you’re just naturally skeptical, or if things you’ve gone through have caused you to doubt, that doesn’t affect how God feels about you. God is still for you.

But you may still have a question: Why? It’s nice that God isn’t against us because of our doubts, but why does God allow us to have doubts? Why doesn’t God make himself more obvious, so believing in him is easy?

It’s because he loves you.

I believe your uncertainty is a *gift* from God.

We think we want certainty, for God to make himself obvious so we can’t doubt his existence. But maybe God’s goal isn’t for us to just acknowledge that he exists.

I’ll never forget the day my son looked at me and said without prompting, “Daddy, I love you.” He had said it back to me before, but

this time it was all on his own. Wow. That is one of the best things a parent can hear! But what if, instead, he looked up at me and said, “Daddy, I acknowledge you exist.” That . . . would not be so hot.

God could make himself obvious, and we would have to believe in him. But that wouldn’t mean we’d *love* him. And God’s goal is love.

Uncertainty may not extinguish doubt, but it actually *does* help fan the flames of love. John Ortberg puts it this way:

André Comte-Sponville notes that it is precisely the experience of uncertainty that makes possible the euphoria of what we call falling in love. We go through intense questioning, wondering, hoping, and doubting. *Does she really care?* And when that is followed by evidence that she *does* care, we have an endorphin tidal wave. It is precisely this roller-coaster ride of the agony of uncertainty and the ecstasy of relief that gives the early stages of love their emotional TNT.<sup>8</sup>

So maybe uncertainty is a gift because it gives us the possibility of that kind of relationship with God. And maybe what we really want isn’t certainty but a love relationship.

I wrote earlier about when I first met my wife and how the uncertainty led to an emotional roller coaster that ultimately led to love. Here’s some of the story of when I first met God.

I am one of the most skeptical people you could ever meet. I assume everything’s a lie and everyone’s out to get me. I was raised in an atheistic home, never taken to church, and never heard God mentioned. My mother is an atheist to this day. So I grew up with 100 percent doubt, 0 percent faith.

On Easter morning of my sophomore year of college, I saw a preacher on TV for just a minute, and he was talking about evidence for the Bible. I sneered at that. I was a pre-law major. I was into evidence, knew all about evidence, and the idea that there would be evidence for

something in the Bible made me laugh. I thought it was akin to saying, “Let me tell you about the evidence for the Little Mermaid.”

But this preacher piqued my curiosity, so I borrowed a Bible. It was the first time I had ever touched one. I opened it, wondering how easy it would be to expose it as a myth and whether anyone had tried to do that. And if not, could I get my picture on the cover of *Time* magazine as the guy who brought down Christianity?

I expected the Bible to read like a fairy tale: “Once upon a time, there lived a man named Jesus, who did nice things for people, and performed miracles, and had a blue ox named Babe, and could lasso a tornado!” I was shocked when the Bible repeatedly gave times and places. One of the first chapters I read was Luke 3, which begins,

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene—during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.<sup>9</sup>

My response was . . . surprise. That was a lot of detail for a myth! And if you give a time and place, there *could* be evidence to prove the event did or didn't happen.

So my curiosity grew, and I kept reading. I kept reading for months. Hours a day, every day, for months. I read the Bible and tried to find evidence that would invalidate it. But all the evidence actually pointed to the validity of the Bible. My curiosity was turning into confusion.

As I continued to read, the craziest thing happened. I was drawn to the central character, Jesus. He was amazing. I thought, *If this guy was real, he had to be God, because no one else could live like this. He was*

*perfect, but he didn't demand perfection from others. He taught a way of life no one else had taught, and he actually lived it. He was funny, inspiring, and compassionate.*

I realized that Jesus was so amazing that, if he was real, I would want to be around him all the time.

Then, as I continued to read about him, something dawned on me: *I think Jesus would choose to be around me.* I knew I was a total screwup. So if there was a God, I would never imagine he'd be interested in me. But this Jesus I was reading about, who was God in the flesh, hung out with really screwed-up people. He liked them.

I wondered, *Is it possible he could like me?* Then, *Well, it doesn't matter, because he's not real.*

But then I examined more evidence and thought, *I believe he is real. Could all this be true? What if it is true?*

And I read that God was offering a relationship to people. I asked, *Could I have a relationship with God? Would he want to have a relationship with me? What would that look like? What would it do to my life?*

I read more and realized, *I think he does, and I think I can actually have this.*

Then I wondered, *Should I say yes to this? Do I really believe this? Oh my goodness, I do. I believe this. I think I want to say yes. God loves me. And . . . I love God. I want God. I want to have a relationship with God forever.*

It was an endorphin tidal wave like I had never experienced before, and never will again. I loved God!

And *that's* what God is after.

If God made himself obvious—as if he were this undeniable giant that hovered in the sky above us—I would have acknowledged his existence my entire life. I would have always believed in his existence. But would I have loved him? I don't know.

Would I have had that emotional roller-coaster experience that threw me into the relationship I still have with him today? I don't

think so, because it's the experience of uncertainty that makes possible the euphoria of falling in love.

I think that uncertainty is a gift.

## **CHOOSING TO LIVE BY FAITH?**

Even when we've come to a place of greater certainty, like I'm in today, having *some* uncertainty, some doubts along the way, is a good thing. A guy named Frederick Buechner writes, "Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving." A little uncertainty can lead us to pursue more truth and find the answers we need, so our faith can grow and our beliefs can become even more grounded.

The cool thing is that there *is* truth and there *are* answers. When I began to do research, I quickly discovered that *many* people had tried to disprove the Christian faith. Intelligent people like Pulitzer Prize-winning journalists and Harvard law professors. And I read story after story, book after book, by those who had sought to tear down the Christian faith only to come to faith and turn to Christ. As I began to reach the conclusion that the Bible was true (and even today when doubts creep in), it has helped me to know that very smart people have faith.

But honestly, my skeptical nature still fought against the idea of "putting my faith" in something and choosing to "live by faith." I believed the Bible was true, and I wanted Jesus, but the faith part still bothered me. I didn't think of myself as a "faith" kind of person.

Then one day, pretty early in my journey, I realized I was wrong. I wasn't switching to faith; I had always lived by faith. I wasn't choosing faith; all of us have no choice but to live by faith.

I'll explain by telling you about my first sermon. It wasn't really a sermon, but as someone who now preaches sermons just about every week, I kind of look back on it as my first sermon.

After becoming a Christian, I started attending a campus ministry. One day every year this group would set up a stage in a courtyard

where kids ate lunch. Throughout the day, they would have some of the students from the ministry share their faith with anyone who would listen. They asked me to speak for a few minutes. I was freaked out. I was a new Christian and had never done anything like that. But I said yes, and I started working on what I'd say. When I finally had it written, I read it over enough so I could (very nervously) present it without notes.

I later learned that what I came up with was originally thought up and presented in the 1600s by a mathematician and philosopher named Blaise Pascal. It's been called Pascal's Wager, but I had never heard of it. I thought I made it up.\* Here are the basics of what I said that day in the courtyard:

Whether or not you've ever realized it, you are making a bet with your life. We are all making a bet with our lives.

You're either betting that God is real and Jesus was his Son, the Savior, or you're betting that he's not. There is no third option.

If you bet that God is real and you're *right*, then you live a life devoted to love and compassion and generosity, and when you die, you go to heaven to forever be with the God who loves you.

If you make that bet and you're *wrong*, then you live a life of love and compassion and generosity, and when you die you will rot in a grave because it turns out there is no God.

But if, instead, you make the bet that God is *not* real and you're right, then when you die you will rot in a grave, right next to the Christians who were wrong.

If you make that bet and you're *wrong*, then you lose everything. You lose out on the meaning and purpose of your

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\*I used a six-pack of cereal boxes as an illustration at the beginning of my talk—something I'm quite sure Blaise Pascal did not include in his argument. Apparently, compared to me, he was a theological lightweight.

life, and you lose the chance to be with a loving God for all eternity in heaven.

So if you bet on God and Jesus, ultimately there's really *nothing* to lose; there's only *everything* to gain.

But if you bet *against* God, ultimately there's really *nothing* to gain; there's only *everything* to *lose*.

And here's the thing—the gamble you're making isn't on whether you'll live by faith or not, because *everyone* lives by faith. You either have faith that God exists, or you have faith that he doesn't. But either way, it's faith.

I realize there may be some arguments *against* the existence of God that people who *don't* believe base their faith on.

But one thing you may not realize is that there are *definitely* arguments and all kinds of evidence *for* the existence of God, for the deity of Jesus, and for the validity of the Bible, that people who *do* believe base their faith on.

So don't think it's about whether you choose to live by faith. You *are* living by faith. Don't think that some people choose to make a gamble, placing their bet that there is a God. *We all* have to make a wager.

The difference isn't faith, or whether you'll take a gamble with your life. It's just, who are you going to bet on? Will you wager there is a God or there's not?

Just to be clear, you shouldn't place your faith in Jesus because he's a safer bet; that's not a reason to believe. But it is a reason to want to believe. It is a reason to be open to seeing if there's any truth in it. It is a reason to be open to the possibility of faith in Jesus.

I hope you start this journey of pursuing and discovering truth. And if you do, you'll find what I found. The evidence is much stronger that there is a God and that Jesus is his Son, who came for you in love.

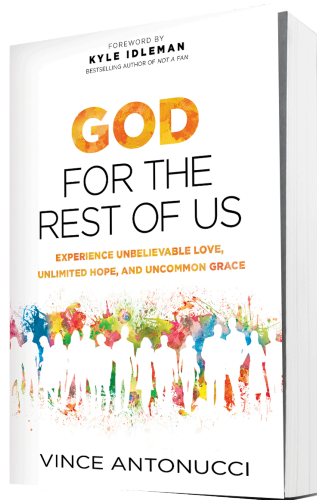


That was my first little sermon about twenty-five years ago, and I would tell you the same thing today.

Except I now understand something else. I now realize that God made a wager too. He bet on *you* when he sent his Son, when he allowed his Son to sacrifice his life on a cross, so that if you believe, you can be saved. And he did it because he is for you, he loves you, and he wants to have a relationship with you.

#### ENDNOTES

1. See Matthew 3:17.
2. Luke 7:28, NIV.
3. Mark 9:22, NIV (italics mine).
4. Mark 9:23, NIV.
5. Mark 9:24, NIV.
6. John 20:25, NIV.
7. John 20:27-28, NIV.
8. John Ortberg, *Know Doubt: The Importance of Embracing Uncertainty in Your Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 137.
9. Luke 3:1-3, NIV.



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# POPULAR

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**AT FIFTEEN**, Tindell Baldwin weighed her options—continue to follow the path and the rules set by her Christian family, or find her place in the “popular” group and have some real fun. She decided to write God a good-bye letter and set out to live the life she thought she wanted.

In her memoir, she shares provocative, raw insights into her journey through high school that led to places she never intended to go. She writes vividly and honestly to help anyone thinking of taking a similar journey themselves. Tindell shares the often untold cost of emotional pain that comes as a result of the decisions many of us make to fit in.



**TINDELL BALDWIN** has a heart for teenagers to see the ugly side of sin and the amazing redemptive power of a Savior who desperately loves them. She is author of *Popular: Boys, Booze, and Jesus* where she tells her honest account of a life without God and the lies she believed that lead her to search for fulfillment and acceptance at any cost. She volunteers as a small group leader for high school girls at her church, North Point Community Church. Her love of writing and truth is only matched by her love for her family and most days you can find her at home with her four kids and husband in Marietta, GA. For more about Tindell and her ministry visit [www.tindellbaldwin.com](http://www.tindellbaldwin.com).

## CHAPTER 6

# Desperate to Belong

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It's now six years since I was in high school. I sit at Starbucks watching a high school girl with her friends. She takes a long drag on her cigarette and drops the f-bomb a few times as she talks about her latest breakup. She complains about how hard life is and all the drama she hates so much. It feels very familiar: the cigarettes, the f-bomb, but more important, the anger. There's always something to be upset about, because, let's be honest, life really isn't fair, especially when you're sixteen. As she lights up another cigarette and talks incessantly about herself, each word drips with disdain. I want to give her a hug (while putting out the cigarette) and tell her it will get better.

When I was going through high school, the greatest anger I felt was toward my family. They were a constant reminder of the Christian life I had given up, and I partly blamed them for my heartache. I was angry that they were so happy and that they didn't understand why I wanted to be different. When we'd go on long car trips, my parents would put on Andy Stanley sermons that I refused to listen to. I put on my headphones and turned up my favorite rap CD (very hard core, I know).

There were so many reasons for my anger. I was angry that life wasn't as easy as I wanted it to be; I was angry that my family didn't understand; and I was angry that I didn't fit into their perfect mold. Still, they loved me. When I was grounded and couldn't see my friends or have a social life, they remembered what it was like to be a teenager. They'd get me out of the house, maybe take me out to dinner. On the New Year's

Eve after I'd had my heart broken, my mom brought me downstairs to hang out with all their friends. I still remember sitting with her in the dining room, her stroking my hair and laughing with her friends. She wanted me to know I wasn't alone. She wanted me to know that she still wanted me near. My parents always made me feel loved, even in the midst of punishment. I never doubted their love, but I desperately wanted them to understand why I needed my freedom.

The only thing I knew was to fight back against what felt so unfair. My mom and I had screaming matches where we both left crying and my dad had to pick up the pieces when he got home from a long day at work. When my parents went out of town, I had huge parties. My little brother would be locked upstairs, scared to come down. My oldest brother came home once to find all my friends drinking beer around the pool while I was at work.

Everyone in my family suffered. My brothers would try to talk to me, but I was as hardheaded as I was driven. I tried to make them understand that I wasn't hurting myself, but they weren't blind. I was the one who was blinded by my own need and blinded by what I thought I needed.

My friends all loved my family; my mom was even asked to coach our recreation league soccer team, the Hellions. We took smoke breaks in the middle of practice and showed up to all the games hungover. Mom loved us, though. She shook her head from the sidelines when one of my teammates got a red card for screaming and running full force at a player on the other team. My dad was equally loved; my friends would come over whenever they needed a good laugh, and most of them called him by his first name. All my friends were jealous of what looked like our normal, loving family, because a lot of them didn't have that. Most of my friends' parents were either divorced or didn't like each other. A few friends had parents who were alcoholics. They all told me how lucky I was, but I couldn't see it. I was convinced that my parents were the problem.

Honestly, I was just a brat sometimes. One year for spring break my dad went above and beyond and rented this amazing house with a pool, on a golf course, and he even let us take the rental car to get lunch and stuff. Somehow, on vacation on a tropical island, I found a way to whine and complain. Finally two of my best friends got on me; they could see how lucky I was, but somehow I couldn't. I ended up yelling at them about how they didn't understand what it was like living in a family so unlike me. This was partially true. I was living a very different life from my family, but I'd decided to change who I was. My family didn't make that decision. I expected them to change because I had, and when they didn't, I pitched a fit. When they wouldn't mold to my new beliefs, I became angry.

Because my mom was chronically ill, she had to rely on me a lot to do the things she couldn't. One afternoon she was in bed with a migraine and asked if I could pick up my little brother from church. I told her I would, even though I was drunk, but then I forgot and came home wasted with my best friend. She had to get out of bed with a severe migraine and a fever and go get my little brother. I was that selfish; it was always about my agenda and what I wanted.

There was one person I allowed in my tiny world: my sister-in-law. She met me at the height of my rebellion, and even though my brother Kristian warned her that I tended to say whatever I wanted, he didn't quite prepare her. We were all decorating the Christmas tree and drinking hot chocolate in a kind of picturesque moment, when my mom asked Kerri if she wanted to spend the night (which meant I would be sharing my room with her). I quickly responded without even thinking, "But Mom, we don't even know her!" This was the beginning of Kerri's and my relationship. She laughed it off and did stay the night.

My birthday was a month later, and even though I was so rude to her that night at my house, Kerri sent me a present, and I instantly liked her. From then on, she became my confidant, someone I could really talk to about life. Whenever I was going through something and needed

someone to talk to, she was there. She was my go-to person, and there were so many times I called her crying. She probably got more than she bargained for when she married my brother, but she was a sister for better and worse. She slipped in Christian advice the best she could, but mostly she just listened to and loved me. She knew there weren't words powerful enough to pull me out of my pit, but she could listen. She could talk through things with me like no one else could. We'd meet at Starbucks, and I'd tell her about the latest mistakes I wanted to make. She'd listen, never interrupting, and then try to help me see the light. I often disregarded her advice, but it still stuck in the back of my head.

The journal that I filled with my stories was a birthday present from her and Kristian. I'm sure she often felt like her investment in my life was in vain, but she found out later how much it really meant to me:

*I think she was angel sent. I had another bad day where death seemed like the only option and where life hurt so bad I could barely move. I was considering my situation when a quiet voice came from my door. She's not here a lot since her home is with my brother, and on a day like today she was just what I needed, a smiling face, and an understanding ear. One that didn't judge and only cared. It's been a while since someone has genuinely cared, but for her it's all in a day's work. She puts others first, and when your life seems to be in pieces, she helps you sort it out. Although she isn't blood related, I don't need a piece of paper to tell me she is my sister through and through. Tonight seemed like the end, but I know we have many late-night talks to come.*

When I finally accepted Christ (more on that later), she was there, and we embraced, crying as sisters in Christ, finally united by something stronger than blood: eternity. All her work that seemed to fall on deaf ears for years was worth something. She never gave up on me. Thank the Lord, none of my family did.



My family did what only Christ can empower us to do: they loved me unconditionally. I never deserved my parents' love. In fact, I spat at their offer, but they still loved me. Don't get me wrong—they're human and they broke down every so often, but they always loved me, even when they didn't feel like it. What was even greater was they forgave me when I asked.

### *Then There Were My Friends. . . .*

See, friendship is the booze they feed you. They want you to get drunk on feeling like you belong.

—ALMOST FAMOUS

When I was fifteen, I desperately wanted friendships with the “cool” girls. They all seemed so confident, and I wasn't. They were comfortable around guys, and I wasn't. They were offering so much, but I had so little to give back. Somehow I wiggled my way into the group, but it always felt like something I could lose in an instant. I had to be careful that I looked the part, acted the part, and embraced the part. It was exhausting. I was always worried someone was going to realize I was a fake. Mostly, I was worried that I'd screw something up and be kicked out of the crowd. I'd seen people come and go, and I was determined to stay where I was.

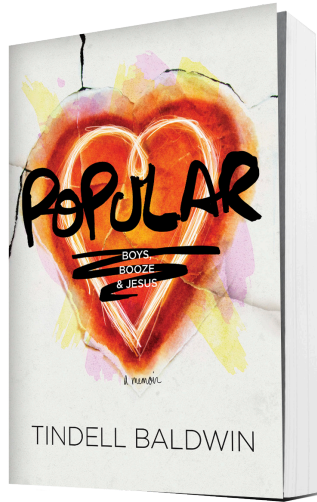
Because I was so scared of losing my spot on the social totem pole, I tried things a lot of other girls wouldn't just to impress them. I tried to say the right things so that girls didn't think I cared what they thought of me. I based all my decisions on being a part of this group. It didn't really matter in the long run, though; ten years later I'm only close with a select few—and not for any of the reasons we originally became friends.

By senior year I established a close-knit group in our popular group of twenty plus. There were four of us called the “Fun Four.” We were

known for our heavy drinking and ability to liven up any party. We did everything together. We rode to school together, had a spot in the hall where we met, and all worked at the same day care. We picked up the same habits and quit them at the same time. If one of us was in trouble, we helped her, and we always seemed to be in trouble. We were there for each other in the good times and in the bad, but we still had to be loyal to the rest of our big group. There was silent competition between everyone in the group, and I never knew who I could trust. The Fun Four formed because we weren't typical girls in many ways: we weren't prissy and didn't talk about our emotions a lot—and we were reckless. We bonded because of that. It was our place of solace in our dark world. To handle heartache, we drank; to handle loneliness, we called each other; and to handle life, we went to another party. We always knew we had each other. If only we could have saved each other.

By senior year, we developed a routine. We'd get high before school, go to almost all our classes, go to the gym, then have a cigarette on our way to work (we were clearly concerned about our health). Everywhere we went, we listened to depressing country music. We loved “depressing country,” coining the phrase because we were always listening to songs about breaking up, leaving, or being cheated on. We would plug my iPod into the car and blare “Goodbye Time” while we talked about our latest heartache.

There was always enough heartache to go around; we were always screwing up relationships or fighting with our boyfriends or falling in love with someone new. That seemed to be the trend around the high school halls—so much heartbreak we didn't know where to take it, so we listened to how other people handled it. We just wanted to know we weren't alone in our feelings; we wanted to know that other people were hurting, and country music has great sound tracks for a broken heart. Sadly, that wasn't the worst, though. The older I became, the closer real tragedy seemed to get.



In *Popular*, Tindell Baldwin shows the temporary, shallow, and painful parts of the wild side while shedding light on how she stumbled back to God and discovered grace.

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# LIFE ON THE EDGE

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## **NEED DIRECTIONS?**

As a young adult, you will face crucial questions about identity, education, marriage, career, God's will, and much more. Some of the most dramatic and permanent changes in life will occur during the "critical decade"—those ten years between ages sixteen and twenty-six.

Are you prepared to make the right choices?

You can be.



**JAMES C. DOBSON, PHD**, hosts the daily radio program *Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk*. A licensed psychologist and marriage, family, and child counselor, he is a clinical member of the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy. For 14 years Dr. Dobson was an associate clinical professor of pediatrics at the University of Southern California School of Medicine, and he served for 17 years on the attending staff of Children's Hospital Los Angeles in the Division of Child Development and Medical Genetics. He earned a PhD from the University of Southern California (1967) in the field of child development. He is the author of more than 50 books, including *The New Dare to Discipline*, *The New Strong-Willed Child*, *When God Doesn't Make Sense*, *Night Light*, *Bringing Up Boys*, and the *New York Times* bestseller *Bringing Up Girls*. Heavily involved in influencing governmental policies related to the family, Dr. Dobson was appointed by President Ronald Reagan to the National Advisory Commission to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. He has also served on the Attorney General's Advisory Board on Missing and Exploited Children, the Department of Health and Human Services' Panel on Teen Pregnancy Prevention, and the Commission on Child and Family Welfare. He was elected in 2008 to the National Radio Hall of Fame, and in 2009 received the Ronald Reagan Lifetime Achievement Award. Dr. Dobson is married to Shirley and is the father of two grown children, Danae and Ryan, and the grandfather of Lincoln and Luci Rose. He resides in Colorado.

## CHAPTER TEN

# Emotions: Friend or Foe?

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In the fall of 1969, a wild man named Charles Manson and his young followers, known as “the family,” went on a bloody rampage in the city of Los Angeles. They killed actress Sharon Tate, who was nine months pregnant, and four or five other innocent people. A few nights later, they broke into the home of Leno and Rosemary LaBianca and butchered them in cold blood. Millions of people in that area read about these murders and were paralyzed with fear. Neighbors wondered who would be next. My mother was convinced she was the prime candidate.

Sure enough, Mom and Dad were confronted by the intruder as they lay in bed one night. They heard a loud *Thump!* coming from the other side of the house.

“Did you hear that?” whispered my mother.

“Yes, be quiet,” said my father.

They lay staring at the darkened ceiling, breathing shallowly and listening for confirmation that someone was indeed there. A second *Thump* brought them to their feet. They felt their way to the bedroom door, which was closed. At this point, we see a striking difference in the way my mother and father faced a crisis. Her inclination was to hold the door shut to keep the intruder from entering their bedroom. Thus, she propped her foot at the bottom of the door and braced herself against the top. My father’s approach was to confront the attacker head-on. He

reached through the darkness and grasped the doorknob, but his pull met the resistance from my mother.

My father assumed someone was holding the door from the other side while my mother could feel the killer trying to force it open. My parents stood there in the blackness of midnight, struggling against one another and imagining themselves to be in a tug of war with a murderer. Mom then panicked. She ran to the window to scream for help. As she took in a great breath of air with which to summons the entire city of Los Angeles, she realized a light was on behind her. Turning around, she saw that my dad had gone into the other part of the house in search of their attacker. Obviously, he was able to open the door when she released it. As they discovered, there was no prowler in their house. The thumps were never identified, and Charles Manson was soon apprehended in Los Angeles and sent to prison for life.

## **EMOTIONS CAN DECEIVE**

This story illustrates the way emotions sometimes deceive us. They are inveterate liars that will often confirm our worst fears in the absence of supporting evidence. Even the young and the brave can be fooled by the shenanigans of runaway emotions.

My friend Steve Smith would agree. He won a Bronze Star for courage in Vietnam combat, but the first night his unit was on the battlefield would not be remembered for its valor. His company had never seen actual combat, and the men were very uneasy. They dug foxholes on a hill and nervously watched the sun disappear beyond the horizon. At approximately midnight, the enemy attacked with a vengeance. Guns began to blaze on one side of the mountain, and before long, all the soldiers were firing frantically and throwing hand grenades into the darkness.

The battle raged throughout the night, and the infantry appeared to be winning. At last, the long-awaited sun came up, and the body count

began. But not one single dead Vietcong lay at the perimeter of the mountain. In fact, the enemy had not even participated in the attack. Their presence had been imagined by the nervous troops. They had engaged the night in mortal combat—and won!

What causes normal, intelligent people to act in irrational ways when facing a perceived danger or threat? Why do so many of us “go to pieces” when the chips are down? This tendency to panic results from the malfunction of a system known as the fight-or-flight mechanism. That is a neurochemical process designed to prepare us for action whenever we face an immediate crisis. When we are frightened or stressed, adrenaline and other hormones are released that put our entire bodies on an alarm-reaction status. Our blood pressure is elevated, we become stronger and more alert, the pupils of our eyes dilate to gather more light, etc.

It is a very helpful mechanism when it functions properly. But when it runs amuck, an individual can behave in very strange ways. You call that “freaking out.” We call it “hysteria,” and it can grip large numbers of people simultaneously.

In 1973 a strange illness swept through a junior high school in the community of Berry, Alabama. Within a period of about three hours, more than one hundred students and teachers experienced intense itching, fainting, stomachaches, tingling fingers, and other symptoms. Seventy persons were treated in the emergency ward of a nearby hospital. Health department officials rushed to investigate the puzzling epidemic. They considered the possibility of poisons, infections, or even allergies that would explain the illness. They checked out reports of crop dusters spraying insecticides near the school and rumors of chemicals being stolen from the National Guard Armory. No stone was left unturned in their effort to identify the source of the suffering.

Soon, Dr. Frederick Wolf, Alabama state epidemiologist, announced that they had found no cause for the illness. “There was simply nothing found,” he said.



“We checked everything,” said an epidemic intelligence officer from the Alabama State Department of Health.

## **A MYSTERIOUS DISEASE... COMPLETE WITH SYMPTOMS**

So what caused the symptoms that afflicted so many people simultaneously? The researchers concluded it was hysteria, plain and simple. The students and teachers were victims of their own imaginations, which made them think they were sick when they were not. It is a very common phenomenon.<sup>1</sup>

My concern is not only about hysteria and other types of irrational fear. The problem is with our emotions themselves. They are not to be believed much of the time. I wouldn't deny the importance of feelings or the role they play in our humanness. Indeed, those who have so insulated themselves that they no longer feel are very unhealthy individuals.

In the 1993 movie *Shadowlands*, writer C. S. Lewis loved a woman who died prematurely. Her death was intensely painful to him, causing Lewis to question whether he should have permitted himself to care for her. He concluded in the last scene that we are given two choices in life. We can allow ourselves to love and care for others, which makes us vulnerable to their sickness, death, or rejection. Or we can protect ourselves by refusing to love. Lewis decided that it is better to feel and to suffer than to go through life isolated, insulated, and lonely. I agree strongly.

I am not recommending, therefore, that we build walls to protect ourselves from pain. But we must understand that emotions are unreliable and at times, tyrannical. They should never be permitted to dominate us. That principle was generally understood in our culture for hundreds of years. During the revolutionary days of the late sixties, however, a major shift in attitude occurred, especially among the young.

One of the popular notions of the day was, “If it feels good, do it.” That phrase says it all. It means that a person’s flighty impulses should be allowed to overrule every other consideration—including the needs of children, principles of right and wrong, a person’s long-term goals, lurking dangers, and common sense. “Don’t think—just follow your heart” was the prevailing attitude.

That is damnable advice. It has ruined many gullible people. Behavior has consequences, and stupid behavior often has terrible consequences. If you follow blindly the dictates of emotion instead of controlling them with your will and intellect, you are casting yourself adrift in the path of life’s storms.

I once wrote a book whose title asked this question: *Emotions: Can You Trust Them?* It took me two hundred pages to say, “No!” Emotions are biased—whimsical—unreliable. They lie as often as they tell the truth. They are manipulated by hormones—especially in the teen years—and they wobble from early morning, when we are rested, to the evening, when we are tired.

One of the evidences of emotional maturity is the ability (and the willingness) to overrule ephemeral feelings and govern our behavior with reason. This might lead you to tough it out when you feel like escaping—and guard your tongue when you feel like shouting—and to save your money when you feel like spending it—and to remain faithful when you feel like flirting—and to put the welfare of others above your own. These are mature acts that can’t occur when feelings are in charge.

## **WE MUST TAKE CHARGE OF OUR EMOTIONS**

The Scriptures instruct us to subjugate our emotions and make them dance to our tune. Well, they say approximately that. We read in 2 Corinthians 10:5, “We take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (NIV). That’s pretty clear, isn’t it? Consider Galatians 5:22-23, “But when the Holy Spirit controls our lives he will produce

this kind of fruit in us: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (TLB). These are called “the fruits of the Spirit,” and they begin with the attribute listed last—the exercise of self-control.

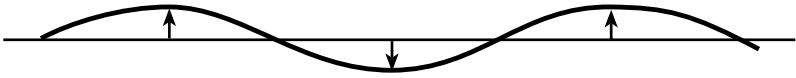
We also need to understand how emotions influence us and the principles by which they work. First, it is helpful to know that they are cyclical in nature. There is a certain rhythm to our mental apparatus. Haven’t you noticed from your own experience that highs are followed by lows and lows by highs? The reason is that there is a regular fluctuation, almost like a mathematical sine curve (illustrated below), that takes us systematically from a peak of enthusiasm to a mild depression. In women, that pattern generally follows the phases of the menstrual cycle. In men, it is more environmental in origin. But it exists for both genders.



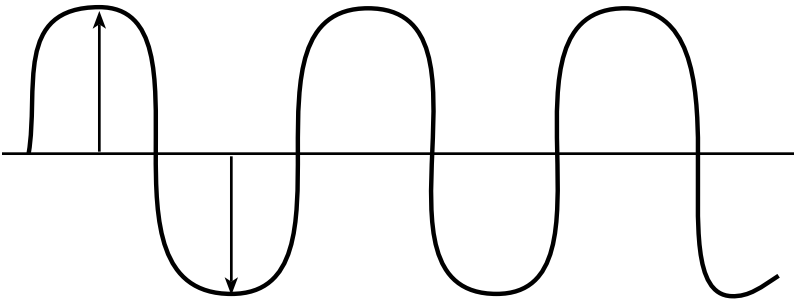
Not only are emotions cyclical, but each person has his or her own characteristic “wobble.” In other words, individual personalities do not extend much further up than they do down. If we draw a line through the curve symbolizing the emotional center (neither high nor low), the distance from there to the peak for a particular person is usually the same as the distance from there to the valley.

I’ll explain what I mean by looking at temperaments representing the two extremes. Type 1 people, as illustrated below, don’t get very excited about anything. These Steady Freddies and Stable Mabels don’t cheer very loudly at football games, and their laughter is never boisterous. Good news is received about as calmly as bad.

On the other hand, they never get very depressed, either. They are rather dull people, but at least they are consistently dull! You can count on them to be the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. If a husband comes home and announces he's taking his wife to Hawaii or Paris for a holiday, this Type 1 lady will probably smile and say, "Fine." And the new Porsche in the driveway won't thrill her either. That's just the way she is made. Her emotional pattern looks like this:



By contrast, Type 2 people (depicted below) are the world's true "swingers." Their emotions bounce from the rafters down to the basement and back up the wall again.



We all know at least one Type 2 individual who gets extremely happy every now and then. He arises in the morning and giggles at the very thought of the sunrise. He waves at the birds and grins at the flowers and whistles "Zippity-Doo-Dah" throughout the day. Beware of this guy! I guarantee you he is going to crash and burn in a few days.

When that come-down occurs, despair will settle on his head. Nothing will go right, life won't be worth living, he will have no friends,

and woe will fill the entire earth. He's so sentimental he'll weep at supermarket openings. He is truly an emotional yo-yo. And for reasons I've never been able to explain, this Type 2 extremist will probably marry a Type 1 bore, and the two of them will irritate each other for the rest of their lives.

My wife and I attended a symphony in Berlin during our first trip to Europe. Sitting in front of us was a young man who was probably studying music at a local university. He went into some kind of strange ecstasy during the first half of the performance, swaying to the orchestration with his eyes closed and standing to cheer after every number. Following the last performance before the intermission, he went almost out of his mind with delight. You would have thought he'd just won the Publishers Clearinghouse Sweepstakes. He yelled, "Bravo! Bravo!" and waved to the conductor.

But wouldn't you know, the second half of the performance made him sick. He slumped in his chair, booed the orchestra, and muttered his displeasure throughout the remaining hour of the concert. He finally sprang to his feet and pushed toward the aisle, stepping on toes, knees, and Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, stalking from the auditorium in a huff.

Though I've never seen this young man either before or after the performance, it is obvious that he was a Type 2 personality. His capacity to experience a "high" in the first half was matched by an equal and opposite "low" a few minutes later.

Frankly, I enjoyed his antics more than I did the music, but I wouldn't want him as a brother-in-law. You can bet *everything* is a big deal to him.

## **WHAT GOES UP MUST COME DOWN**

Now let's address another aspect of our cyclical emotions. It is important to understand that anything that takes you up will also bring you

down, and vice versa. For example, mild depression is likely to appear following a busy holiday, the birth of a baby, a job promotion, or even after a restful vacation. The cause for it is physical in nature. Elation and excitement are driven by adrenaline, which results in a greater consumption of energy. After a few days in that hyper-state, there has to be a come-down. If you understand that mechanism, you can brace yourself for the low end of the cycle.

That is what happened to Shirley and me when we bought a new house some years ago. We had waited for years to find a home we could afford, and we became very excited when escrow closed and it was finally ours. The elation lasted for several days, during which I thought about this cyclical principle. I remember telling Shirley we could not remain elated much longer. We needed to prepare ourselves for the lower end of the curve.

Sure enough, we both became mildly depressed in a couple of days. It wasn't a severe reaction, just a case of what some people call "the blahs." The house didn't seem so wonderful, and we worried about the price we had paid for it. We lived there for nineteen years and grew to love the place, but we thought we had made a mistake during our brief moment in the pits.

Your own occasional depression will be more tolerable if you understand it as a relatively predictable occurrence. Highs *must* be followed by lows. It is governed by a physical law; you can depend on it. But in the healthy individual, lows eventually give way to highs, too. It cuts both ways.

There is another characteristic of these mood swings that should be especially useful to those who are married or plan to get married. Since romantic love is an emotion, it conforms to the same cyclical pattern I have described. You already know that the excitement of a new love affair is like nothing else in human experience. A couple in that relationship enters into a kind of ecstasy that is almost indescribable. *This is it! The search is over!* They've found the perfect human being. They want

to be together twenty-four hours a day—to take walks in the rain and sit by the fire and kiss and munch and cuddle. Hooray for love!

What too few couples know, unfortunately, is that this exhilarating feeling NEVER lasts very long. As with other temporary moods and feelings, it is destined from the beginning to swing down from that high and hit the skids. It is absolutely inevitable! Thus, if you identify genuine love with that feeling, you're going to be very confused when it passes. This is the tender trap that leads many young people to make a disastrous mistake. The romantic excitement between them feels like something they can live on forever. Then...it goes away, sometimes on the honeymoon or maybe a few months later.

I'm not implying that such a couple is no longer in love. I am saying that the romantic feeling they shared is not love. It sometimes precedes the real thing. Genuine love is much deeper and more stable. It is based on a commitment of the will, a determination to make it work, and the bonding I described earlier. With these elements in place, a relationship can be as steady and predictable as the sunrise. Meanwhile, the feeling will continue to come and go throughout their married life together.

I was trying to explain this up-and-down characteristic to a group of one hundred young married couples to whom I was speaking. During the discussion that followed, someone asked one guy why he and his wife married so young. He replied, "Cause I didn't know about that wiggly line until it was too late." For the rest of you, there is no excuse. You now understand that feelings will not carry a relationship very far. Feelings are important, to be sure, but they must be supported by the will and a lifetime commitment.

## **SO WHERE ARE ALL THOSE MOUNTAINTOPS?**

This point is so important that I must emphasize it. If you expect to live for months or years on a romantic mountaintop, you can forget it. You won't stay there. My concern is for the many naive young couples who

“fall in love” and lock themselves into marriage early in the relationship before the natural swing of their emotions has even had its first dip. They then awaken one morning without that neat feeling and conclude that love has died. In reality, it was never there in the first place. They were fooled by an emotional high before it came sliding downward. This is the bottom line: When love is defined as a feeling, the relationship can be no more stable than a frame of mind.

Remember that the greatest passage about love ever written, recorded in 1 Corinthians 13, does not even mention feelings. It tells us

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.  
(1 Corinthians 13:4-8, NIV)

That sets the record straight.

There is a related matter that I feel we must touch, at least, before concluding. Our spiritual lives also conform to the characteristics I have described. Many people who repent of their sins and become followers of Jesus Christ subsequently experience the kind of “honeymoon” that is typical for romantic lovers.

They feel an incredible sense of cleanness and harmony with God. It is not unusual for such new converts to read the Bible many times each day and to think about little else. Those individuals are in danger of spiritual confusion at that moment, because once again, their feelings will be temporary. Emotions cannot remain supercharged, even for the noblest reasons.

As with romantic love, our relationship with the Lord goes through distinct emotional stages. First there is the courtship, when we are getting to know Him and beginning to understand His holy Word. Then



there is the honeymoon period, which is nothing short of exhilarating. Finally, there is the steady, deep, but less-emotional experience of married life. This third stage is marked by a quiet commitment and growing maturity as the years unfold.

New believers who don't understand how emotions change in time may become disillusioned and conclude that their faith is meaningless. It is a tragic mistake. Their relationship with the Lord must be based on Scripture and its claims, rather than linking it to ephemeral feelings that blow hot and cold. You can be as close to the Lord when you feel nothing as when you're in the grip of spiritual passion.

I've addressed this topic in greater detail in my book *Emotions: Can You Trust Them?* It is relevant here because of the need for self-awareness when we are young. Socrates gave that advice to each of his students 2,500 years ago when he instructed them to "Know thyself." That has been the goal of this brief discussion.

We began with a story about my mother. We'll end with another. She attended a small-town high school in Oklahoma during the 1930s that had produced a series of terrible football teams. They usually lost the big games and were invariably clobbered by their archrivals from a nearby community. Understandably, the students and their parents began to get depressed and dispirited by the drubbing their troops were given every Friday night. It must have been awful.

Finally, a local automobile dealer decided to take matters into his own hands. He asked to speak to the team in the locker room after yet another devastating defeat. What followed was one of the most dramatic football speeches of all times. This businessman proceeded to offer a brand-new Ford to every boy on the team and to each coach if they would simply defeat their bitter rivals in the next game.

The team went crazy with anticipation. They howled and cheered and slapped each other on their padded shoulders. For seven days, the boys ate, drank, and breathed football. At night they dreamed about touchdowns and rumble seats. The entire school caught the spirit of

ecstasy, and a holiday fever pervaded the campus. Each player could visualize himself behind the wheel of a sleek roadster with eight or ten gorgeous girls hanging all over his body.

Finally, the big night arrived and the team assembled in the locker room. Excitement was at an unprecedented high. The coach offered several last-minute instructions, and the boys hurried out to face the enemy. They assembled on the sidelines, put their hands together, and shouted a simultaneous “Rah!” Then they ran onto the field—and were demolished, thirty-eight to zero.

All their exuberance didn’t translate into a single point on the scoreboard. Seven days of hoorah and whoop-de-do simply couldn’t compensate for the players’ lack of discipline, conditioning, practice, study, coaching, drill, experience, and character. Such is the nature of emotion. It has a definite place in human affairs. But it must always be ruled by the higher mental faculties of will and intellect. When left to stand alone, feelings usually reveal themselves to be unreliable and even a bit foolish.

So enjoy the exhilaration when it comes. Take the ride to the heights when you get the opportunity. But don’t get hooked on the thrill of the moment. Take charge of your emotions. And when it comes time to do the right thing, don’t let your feelings lead you to compromise. That is the way to live a happier, more successful life and one that is more pleasing to God.

## **QUESTIONS FROM THE EDGE**

1. Sometimes I feel like the world is stacked against me. I’m not sure why, except I just think I don’t have a chance to really be somebody. Whenever something goes wrong for me, I say to myself, *What did you expect? It always happens that way.* Do other people feel like I do?

Yes, many people have that attitude. They, like you, see themselves as “victims” who are destined to come out on the short end of things. It is a common reaction, especially among people with a disability and among those who don’t like the way they look, by those who were abused as children, etc.

But the problem has become even broader in recent years. Our society is telling us that we’re all victims of some sort of abuse. Hispanics, African-Americans, Asians, Jews, Native Americans, women, children, and now even white males are supposed to feel discriminated against. Yes, discrimination and racism are still serious problems in this culture, but it doesn’t help to make us all feel like we’re being “had” in one way or another. The net effect of that mind-set is to fracture us into competing special interest groups, instead of binding us together in unity. I call it “the curse of universal victimization.”

Let me speak very candidly to those of you who believe the world is out to get you. What you’re feeling is a form of self-hatred, which is very destructive. It is also demoralizing. Whenever you begin to conclude, “I can’t win,” and “What’s the use?” you’ve set yourself up for failure. Your pessimism becomes a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. It doesn’t have to be that way.

Let me tell you a story about my friend David Hernandez. His parents were illegal immigrants from Mexico who were trying to start a new life in this country. Unfortunately, they couldn’t find work for months, and the children were hungry for weeks at a time. Finally, the family was hired as migrant farmworkers helping to harvest the potato crop in the state of California. They lived under trees and used a big oil drum as a stove. They owned nothing and had very little chance of escaping the suffocating grip of poverty.

Despite their depressing circumstances, the Hernandez family had a certain dignity and strength about them. They were Christians, and they taught their children that God loved them and had a plan for their lives. Their little boy, David, internalized that message of hope. He

never thought of himself as a victim even though he had every reason to feel cheated. His family was at the bottom of the social ladder without even a house to live in, but his worth as an individual was rooted in his faith.

David began attending public schools, and he proved to be an outstanding student. As he grew older, he was given a scholarship to attend a private school where he continued to excel academically. To make a long story short, he went on to graduate from college near the top of his class and was granted admission to Loma Linda University School of Medicine. He earned his medical degree and went into a surgical residency in obstetrics and gynecology. Dr. David Hernandez then became a professor at both Loma Linda University and the University of Southern California schools of medicine.

Who would have thought that the little Mexican boy in the potato fields would become a highly respected physician and medical educator? It would never have happened if David had seen himself as a helpless victim—a loser whom life had shortchanged. Because he refused to adopt a defeatist attitude, he overcame the obstacles in his path.

But life was to deal David Hernandez yet another challenge. He called one day to tell me that he had been diagnosed with a terrible liver disease. He was still in his thirties at the time. A few years later, David died from this rare disorder called sclerosing cholangitis.

I went to see him in the hospital a few days before the end. Though very sick, David did not whine or ask, “Why me?” Even in that difficult hour when he knew death was imminent, he never indulged in self-pity. He knew intuitively that a person is only a victim if he accepts himself as one.

I strongly advise you to follow Dr. David Hernandez’s model—to resist the temptation to see yourself as a victim. Fight it with all your might. It is one of Satan’s most powerful weapons against you, and it is a lie. God made you with His own hands, and He makes no junk. He

will help you overcome the circumstances that present themselves as obstacles lying in your path.

2. My former girlfriend and I thought we were madly in love because we were crazy about each other from the moment we met. We were together every day and all our friends thought we would get married. But the relationship cooled off very quickly and now we can hardly stand each other. I don't even like to be around her. What do you think happened to us?

Not knowing either of you, it is difficult to say for sure. But I can tell you that the way your relationship began had something to do with the way it ended. As I've indicated, a love affair is usually doomed when it begins with great intensity. It almost always burns itself out in time. In a manner of speaking, you and your girlfriend ran your race together as though it were a one-hundred-yard dash. It should have been approached like a marathon. That's why you exhausted yourselves before your journey together ever got started.

If a love relationship is to go the distance, there needs to be comfortable pacing that keeps the two parties from consuming each other. That will give the bond a chance to form—and allow the “glue to dry.” Remember?

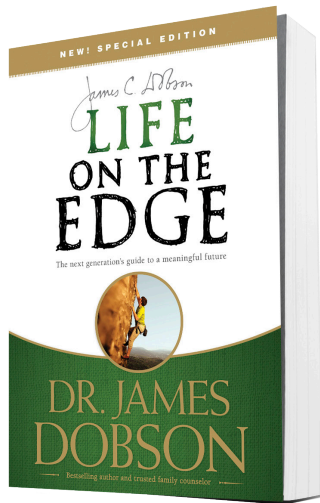
3. Is there a time of day when it's best to handle threatening or unpleasant topics?

There certainly is, and it is important to consider. Most of us cope with frustration much better in the morning than we do later in the day. It stands to reason that stressful topics are more difficult to handle when we are tired than when we are fresh. That's why I recommend that husbands and wives, and single individuals as well,

not talk about unpleasant topics at night. Most of our concerns will wait until morning when they will be less likely to upset us and create interpersonal crises.

#### **ENDNOTES**

1. "Alabama Incident Is Classic Case of Hysteria," *Medical Tribune*, September 19, 1973, 1, 7.



Like a trusted friend who understands, Dr. James Dobson candidly addresses the issues that today's young adults face. In his warm, conversational style, he reveals principles to help you make the right choices and get the direction you need in order to look forward to a bright and successful future.

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# MAKING THE BEST OF A BAD DECISION

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**WE ALL MAKE LIFE DECISIONS** we come to regret, but here's the good news: You can clear your conscience, make things right with God and others, and get to a place of grace and new beginnings.

In *Making the Best of a Bad Decision*, pastor and bestselling author Erwin Lutzer shows that no matter how many wrong paths you have taken, there is still a right one just up ahead. Whether you worry you've married the wrong person, struggle with poor financial choices, wish you'd chosen a different profession, or have made a choice that's hurt someone you love, you'll be amazed at how God can use that bad decision to still bring good to you and others. His grace is bigger than our foolishness; his forgiveness is bigger than the mistakes and messes we've made.





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# How to Make Wise Decisions

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## Wisdom for next time

One day while vacationing with my family at Lake of the Ozarks, I was lying on my back, floating on an inflated raft, enjoying the warmth of the Missouri sun. After a few moments I opened my eyes, only to discover that my mini-raft had drifted from the dock and had turned in an unexpected direction. It took me a few minutes to reorient myself to the landmarks and to realize how far I had drifted from the spot where I had set out.

That's the way our lives often go: We come to our senses and find ourselves far away from where we started, and we wonder how we got there. How did we get ourselves into the mess we're in? Sometimes we're tempted to float through life, just hoping that our raft will end up in a good place. Thanks to the law of unintended consequences, we often find ourselves in a spot that is very different from what we had envisioned. No one plans to get divorced; no one plans to go bankrupt; no one plans to work at a meaningless job. No one plans to drift through life without a clear purpose.

Why do so many people make bad decisions? Often it is because they've bought into a prevailing lie in our culture: namely, that we

should all just “follow our hearts.” The Bible, however, tells us that our hearts are very deceitful. We don’t intuitively know the path we should take, so we drift along from one heart impulse to another. We need a better basis than our fickle feelings to guide us to a worthy goal.

But how can we make better decisions as we move forward? Yes, we know that God is there for us even in our mistakes; but think of how much better it would be to avoid those mistakes in the first place. The fact that you are reading this book is proof that God isn’t finished with you yet. You still have important decisions to make, and your future can be so much better than your past. Thankfully, we can always choose to give God the broken pieces of our lives and allow him to set us on the right path again.

In this chapter, I will share some tried-and-true principles that can help us make wise decisions. Whenever I’ve applied these principles, I have made good choices; when I have ignored them, I’ve regretted the path I’ve chosen. It is amazing the extent to which God will work to keep us from foolish decisions if we sincerely want to do what is right and good. But we also have to gladly submit to his will and purpose.

We don’t know the future, but God does. Because only he can see around corners, wisdom dictates that we should enlist his help before we embark on a new venture. God gives us a promise that he guarantees to keep: If we sincerely want to follow his will, he will give us wisdom when we encounter a fork in the road. If we ask in faith, God has guaranteed that he will answer (see James 1:5-8). But God will not allow us to play games with him; he will not give us wisdom if we ask for it with minds already made up. To ask for wisdom means that we clear the decks and sign a blank check expecting God to fill in all the details.

We usually don’t stumble into wise decisions. I pray that the principles in this chapter will help you stay on track, so that you can look back without regret, but with satisfaction, knowing that you served God to the best of your ability.

Before I share what we should do, let's take a moment to learn what we should *not* do.

### *Some Don'ts*

1. *Don't be duped by the path of least resistance.* The easiest path is often not the right path; the easiest path frequently leads to regret and ruin. To be more specific, when we follow our natural inclinations, we have a tendency to veer off course very quickly. Jonah, you will remember, discovered he had enough money to board a ship going west when God had told him to go east. He thought it would be much easier to take a cruise on the Mediterranean than to preach to evil people whom he hated. If you remember the rest of the story, he was wrong—preaching to the Ninevites would have been easier than being swallowed by a fish. God used the storm and the fish to give Jonah a second chance, and to help him realize that the path of least resistance is often a journey to the bottom of the sea.

Easy decisions often result in the most painful consequences. Often people get married because breaking the relationship is perceived as too painful. “I knew I shouldn't have married him,” a distressed young woman said to me, “but I didn't have the strength to say no after all we'd been through.” Breaking the engagement seemed much harder than planning a wedding; saying no after years of courtship seemed an impossible burden and would have resulted in embarrassing questions and personal pain. Instead of doing what she knew she should, she betrayed her best instincts and went through with the wedding. She proved the proverb correct: “Marry in haste, repent at leisure.” She learned that easy choices often end with hard realities; often the best path is the one that is most difficult.

The word *easy* and the word *right* seldom go together. When we go with the flow, unwilling to swim against the tide, we'll soon discover that we have to settle for a decision that was easy to make but is difficult

to live with. The path of least resistance makes crooked rivers and regretful Christians.

2. *Don't sacrifice the permanent on the altar of the immediate.* Amy was a young woman who didn't particularly like school, so when she was offered a position selling clothes at a local store after high school, she said yes. Having her own job spelled independence and extravagance. But ten years later, when she was married and tired of the monotony of her job, she had neither the money nor the time to go to college. She didn't know it at the time, but by doing what seemed convenient, she lost sight of the long-range point of view. When making a decision, think beyond today to the rest of your life.

3. *Don't rush into decisions, especially in matters of great importance.* Sometimes we feel great urgency to make a decision; perhaps we want something so badly that we are willing to hurry the process. When the Bible encourages us to “wait on the Lord,” it means that we should wait for the Lord to give us the guidance we seek. Of course, we should not use this as an excuse to do nothing, convincing ourselves that we are “just waiting for God” when there is much we could be doing to make our lives more productive.

I know two men who left their employer to start their own company, intending to compete with their previous employer. Nothing wrong with that, of course. But in this case, the motive was pure greed—just the desire to make more money, and also to spite their demanding, ungrateful employer. They did not bother to consult God about their decision. They already knew they had the ability to build a strong company; they had the desire to do it, and they could see no reason why their ideas would fail. But apparently God was not impressed with their wisdom; as the Bible says, pride goes before a fall (Proverbs 16:18). Their business collapsed and they wished they had stayed with the vocation they once had.

When we impulsively rush into a decision, especially if we have wrong motives, we can't expect to receive God's blessing. Yes, if we

repent and pray, God will help us right where we are. But how much better to consider a long-range perspective. Life, someone has said, is a marathon, not a hundred-yard dash.

Here is a principle I've had to learn: We must give God time to say no to the decision we are about to make. I have found that God has numerous ways of opening doors or closing them. He really wants to guide us in the right way.

4. *Don't be a fool!* A fool, as defined in the book of Proverbs, is a person who will not listen to wise counsel. He or she does not learn from mistakes and is never open to guidance. A fool is abundantly satisfied with his own wisdom. Here is a warning: "Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle or they will not come to you" (Psalm 32:9, NIV).

Some people prefer to go shopping for counsel; if they don't like what they hear from one person, they will go to another until someone confirms what they have already made up their mind to do. If you are looking for wisdom, be prepared to hear advice with which you may not agree.

Many stories can be told of lives squandered by people who were determined to do their own thing, disregarding the wisdom of the Bible and the wise counsel of their family and friends.

## **MAKING WISE CHOICES IN AN AGE OF CONFUSION**

As I've already said, wise decisions are those we make with the end in mind. We must determine who we want to be at the end of our lives if we are to make smart decisions here and now. I had a professor in seminary who told us that we should frequently ask ourselves, "What should I do today that twenty years from now I would wish I had done?" In other words, we must look beyond the immediate to what will help us further down the road. The following principles will help us stay on the right track.

### *Check Your Motives*

Take the time to make sure that the motivation for your decision is what God wants rather than simply what you want. Or to put it differently, the first question we should ask is not, What will make me happy? but rather, What does God want me to do? Another question is even more basic: Am I *willing* to do what God wants me to do? I think the single most important reason that we make bad decisions is because of our stubborn refusal to submit to God. Either because of fear of what he will expect of us or because we think he will restrict us, we fool ourselves into believing that we are capable of running our own lives on our own terms.

We all have a mental image of the life we want: a happy marriage, a beautiful house, recognition for our accomplishments, a few of life's luxuries, and an early retirement. All of that must be surrendered to God. The risk, I suppose, is that our ambitions might be canceled if we honestly submit to whatever God asks. We can't say, "God, please give me a preview of what you have in mind for my life so that I can choose whether I like it or not."

We're all grateful that Jesus, in Gethsemane, did not put his own personal happiness above doing God's will. "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done" (Luke 22:42, *ESV*). Of course, most of our decisions are neither that clear-cut nor that excruciating, but the point still stands: We must take the time to ask ourselves some hard questions about what God might want. He really does give his best to those who leave the choice with him.

### *Balance Your Priorities*

When faced with an important decision, weigh your priorities. Take a sheet of paper and write down the pros and the cons, paying careful attention to what this decision will mean to you, your family, and your

own fulfillment. The job that pays the most isn't necessarily the one that is best for you. Many a person has sacrificed what is most important for something of lesser importance. So you have to ask some hard questions: What will this decision mean for my emotional and spiritual health? What impact will it have on my family? Will I be expected to compromise my personal convictions? Am I doing this just to bolster my personal status, or is there a more noble, eternal reason why I'm making this particular choice?

Whenever you can, trade success for significance. Dwight L. Moody, the founder of the church I serve, had the ambition to become the most successful salesman in the area; but he changed his mind when he heard a group of Sunday school girls pray for their dying teacher. He said that money would never tempt him again. He saw the larger picture, and that motivated him to increase his work among the poor children of Chicago—a decision that led to his becoming one of the most famous evangelists in the world. Of course, I'm not suggesting that we can all do what Moody did, but we can choose significance over success as it is most often defined.

Knowledge is important when making a decision, but the facts must be combined with wisdom. Wisdom is the ability to see beyond the pros and cons to other factors that might not be obvious just by weighing the information itself. Wisdom, as I have emphasized, comes to us from God and from the lips of wise people who cross our paths.

### *Surrender until You Have Personal Peace*

Here is another bit of wise counsel we all can apply: "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful" (Colossians 3:15, ESV). The word *rule* means that peace is like an umpire that should control our hearts, giving us a thumbs-up or a thumbs-down on what we are doing or about to do. In all things, we should be convinced that what we are doing is right



and good, and in harmony with what God wants. The peace of God sits in judgment on our lifestyles and our decisions. Sometimes we experience what might be called a “check in our spirit”; that is, a hunch that we are about to embark on a wrong path. We should listen to this prompting of the Holy Spirit, especially if we have a suspicion that something isn’t right. Christians are indwelt with the Holy Spirit, who can be grieved because of our sin and missteps; the Spirit also brings peace when we obey.

We can’t foresee all the consequences of our decisions, but God can. And that is why it is so important not only to consult God, but also to be quiet enough in our inner being so that we can hear the still, small voice of the Spirit if we are about to make a mistake. We’ve all had the experience of sensing that there is a cloud over a decision we were about to make. When that happens, I’ve learned to back off and ask, What am I missing in this decision? Women often have a more highly developed sense of intuition than men. Often they have a hunch that something is amiss, and husbands would do well to listen to what their wives have to say.

There is, of course, a danger in having inner peace alone as our guide. People have made the most bizarre decisions saying that they “had a peace about it.” We can talk ourselves into a false peace; we can rationalize what we want to do, and eventually our emotions will follow the path our minds have insisted on. That’s why all the principles of this chapter have to be taken together as part of the decision-making process.

### *Expect God to Guide You in Various Ways*

God does not have a “one size fits all” policy when it comes to leading us. Rest assured that he is not playing games with us, laying out options and then standing back and saying, in effect, “I dare you to choose the right path!” He is willing to guide in different ways, but he expects our

willingness to listen and obey as part of the process. The old cliché is nonetheless true: “God gives his best to those who leave the decision with him.”

Sometimes circumstances dictate what our next steps should be; at other times, people give us guidance by sharing their wisdom or putting us in touch with others who become a part of our decision. Often there is a confluence of events that gives us the strong suspicion that God is putting a scenario together for us that will introduce us to new possibilities. The key is to look for God’s hand of guidance in all things.

I’ve also discovered that God often guides me when I’m not even aware of it; I just walk through a door that seems reasonable to me, and that door opens to yet another door. Only in retrospect am I able to see how important those ordinary decisions were.

Many people have been led astray by seeking a “sign” from the Lord. Like the coed who prayed, “Lord, if he calls before 10 p.m., I’ll assume I’m supposed to date him.” That’s simply deciding in advance a desired course of action. Others have been greatly misled because they interpreted circumstances in a way that gave them license to do what they wanted to do. Jonah probably said to himself, “Without my even scheduling it, there’s a boat that just happens to be going to Tarshish. I just happen to have enough money to pay the fare, and I just happen to be so content with my decision that I can fall asleep during a storm.” And yet, we know that Jonah was actually running from God.

We’re back to the bottom line: Knowing God’s will is all about knowing God himself, with faith that he will lead us. Continually making the basic commitment that we are willing to do God’s will must always be in the forefront of our minds.

### *Realize That Our Decisions Are Seldom Free from Doubt*

Even after we have sought God’s wisdom; even after we have gathered the facts as best we can; even after we have prayed that God would

lead us according to his will, bringing us peace, there can still be a residue of doubt about the decisions we have made. Sometimes we can't distinguish doubt from fear or fear from excitement. The good news, I've discovered, is that whatever doubts I've had usually evaporate after I've crossed the line and the decision has been made.

We should be encouraged to know that even the great apostle Paul felt uncertainty at times about his decisions. He was criticized by the church in Corinth for changing his mind about coming to visit them. He wanted to visit, but didn't. So he asked them, "Was I vacillating when I wanted to do this? Do I make my plans according to the flesh, ready to say 'Yes, yes' and 'No, no' at the same time?" (2 Corinthians 1:17, *ESV*). He made plans that failed, plans with good intentions that did not materialize.

Honest doubts are part of our earthy sojourn.

## **GOD'S SOVEREIGN CONTROL**

Here is a promise every Christian can claim, either before or after a decision has been made: "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28, *NIV*). This awesome promise doesn't enable us to see *why* God does what he does, nor is it a quick cure for sorrow; but it is a promise we cling to because we know that God is working for our good.

Be encouraged by the *comprehensiveness* of God's purposes. "All things" means everything works together for good. Life is haphazard, with no neat categories, but God makes them fit together. He finds a place for everything. What does he use to work for our good? He uses his Word and his people, but he also uses our foolish decisions, financial reversals, and people who work against us—"all" means *all*.

Don't misunderstand. We can't excuse our sinful decisions as fodder for God's good works; but God is greater than our mistakes and wrong

choices. Paul says that all things “work together.” The word in Greek is *synergism*, which derives from two words—*syn*, meaning “together,” and *ergo*, meaning “to work.” God works and he works things together. God sees around corners and knows the outcome in ways that you and I cannot possibly fathom; and he works everything together for our ultimate good.

When I was a boy on the farm, I loved to take things apart. My eldest brother was able to take apart a tractor motor, repair it, put it back together, and make it run again. The best I could do was take apart a clock because I was intrigued by all the little wheels. Some were going in the same direction as the hands of the clock, and others were going counterclockwise. Some were going fast and some slow. Because some of the wheels were spinning in opposite directions, it seemed as if some of the parts were working against themselves. But when I looked at the face and realized it kept time accurately, I had to admit that all the parts were working together for good.

Mark my words: When you have a bad day, it may be a very good day from God’s standpoint. God is working to bring about your ultimate good. Only he can do that. When he synergizes events, they fall together for good. I don’t know how God takes sodium and chloride, both of which are poisonous, and puts them together to create salt, without which we could not possibly live. I don’t know how God takes sin and disappointment and brings them together and makes something good out of them, but I’m convinced that he does. If you love him and are called, you’re in the circle of those who benefit from this special work of God.

The promise of Romans 8:28 teaches that God, by his power and grace, weaves, overrides, and makes events converge in such a way that there are no permanent tragedies for believers in Christ. Conversely, for non-Christians, there are no permanent triumphs. If you don’t love God, you are *not* called according to his purpose and this promise

doesn't apply to you. You may exist for God's good, but you will never exist for your own ultimate good apart from God.

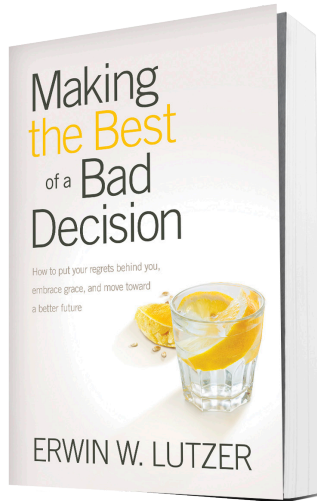
Follow these words and I guarantee you will make wise decisions:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. (Romans 12:1-2, NIV)

God guides us when we surrender our rights to him and are willing to do whatever task he gives us. Meanwhile, he is greater than our bad decisions, greater than our sins, and greater than our regrets. If we love him, he is there to guide us, even if we should choose the wrong road.

## A Prayer

*Father, I know that the greatest obstacle to my ability to make wise decisions is my unwillingness to give myself—my future and my desires, my life—over to your care. At this moment, I make Romans 12:1-2 my personal prayer. I surrender myself to you—both my past and my future—for your control and keeping. Help me, going forward, to make decisions that bring honor to your name. I give up my desire to be the captain of my own ship, and I place you at the helm, believing you will guide me wherever you want me to go.*



Join Pastor Lutzer on a journey of expectation and hope. In *Making the Best of a Bad Decision*, you'll learn practical ways to make the best of even your worst decisions and move forward into a better future.

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