

STRESS IS AN EPIDEMIC

Even in the Christian World

*Stress is like an iceberg. We can see one-eighth of it above,
but what about what's below?*

—ANONYMOUS

*There is an epidemic in cities everywhere
and the epidemic is stress.*

—ANNE M. VIDOVICH, M.A.

I*'m so frustrated with being tired and stressed...*

How many times have you had that thought? Regardless of how much you resist it, it keeps swimming through your mind: “I’m stressed and tired, and I don’t know why.”

Other people appear comfortable in their lifestyles, yet you’re plagued with anxiety and exhaustion. Everyone else seems to have the missing piece to life’s puzzle...while you don’t even have the first clue on how to open the puzzle box.

Ever wondered how much money you’ve spent in attempting to eliminate stress from your life? You can’t wait for the next vacation, the next weekend away, the next relationship, the next big thing...but they all are only temporary escapes from the inevitable. Your search for meaning and relief leaves you empty-handed and several dollars short.

These spiraling frustrations continue to eat away at your energy, leaving you with a hollow feeling inside.

THE STRESS EPIDEMIC

Unfortunately, statistics show that stress has become a way of life for the majority in our society, and much of it occurs in the workplace:

- In a 2001 Gallup poll, U.S. corporations showed that sixty percent of managers felt that stress-related illness was prevalent among their employees. The resulting productivity loss amounted annually to approximately sixteen days of sick leave and \$8,000 per person.
- The World Health Organization has declared that job stress has now become a “worldwide epidemic.”
- Some estimates show that eighty percent of all visits to physicians are for stress-related disorders.
- According to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, depression—which is one result of stress—is predicted to be the leading occupational disease of the twenty-first century, responsible for more days lost than any other factor.

CHRISTIANS ARE NO DIFFERENT

It’s interesting to note that Christians, who profess to follow a supernatural and historical God-man in Jesus Christ, are not an exception to these findings. They are just as stressed and tired as the rest of the world.

Doesn’t that seem strange?

Unfortunately, it’s true. When it comes to how much stress they experience, many Christians appear to be not much different than the atheist who lives down the street. Could it be that many of us are unknowingly living out Satan’s counterfeit life purposes—purposes that look and sound just like the real thing? Could that be the reason for the statistics mentioned above?

After all, Jesus said that those who believe in Him would do the same incredible things He did—and “even greater things” (John 14:12). *Greater* things! If this is true, why have so many Christians become statistics?

Today, we in the Church are suffering from stress just like the rest of the world because of the lies we have unknowingly believed.

PURPOSE AND STRESS

Do you ever stop and try to analyze why you get stressed? Contrary to what you may have always believed, the stress you feel may have nothing at all to do with your circumstances or anything outside of you.

Two people could be experiencing the exact same situation or circumstances. One will end up anxious, and the other will experience continued and consistent excitement about life. What's the difference? The difference is their purpose!

Your purpose will always determine your stress level. —————

This book will expose the hidden connection between stress and lies, prove that counterfeit life purposes produce stress, and that God's ultimate purpose produces the promised abundant life.

*Your purpose will
always determine
your stress level.* —————

If you could live life filled—not with stress—but with purpose and power, it would be the kind of life reflected in these passages:

The lions may grow weak and hungry, but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing. (Psalm 34:10)

Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint. (Isaiah 40:30- 31)

I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. (Jesus, in John 10:10)

We are more than conquerors through him who loved us. (Romans 8:37)

Are you ready to be stronger than a lion? Do you want to “soar on wings like eagles?” How does living life “abundantly” sound to you?

You were born for those “greater things” Jesus spoke of in John 14:12. You were born to walk on water—and deep down you know it! Later on in this book, you’ll learn something that’s greater than walking on water. You’ll see that anyone who really wants to can live a supernatural life.

We’ve all wondered if there’s more to life than the way we’re living now. We’ve wondered, in the back of our minds, if there’s more to this “Christianity thing” than what we’ve seen and experienced.

I’m here to tell you there is.

You may be ready to jump in and say, “Hey, I’d like to live the way Jesus said I could!” But how in the world can I actually do greater things than Jesus Himself did? The necessary first step is to discover and unload the lies you’ve embraced.

In the Bible there are many accounts of people living this way. I’ve read other accounts of people today who have done greater things than Christ’s disciples. I personally know some of these people. When my wife, Kristy and I started walking toward this way of living, we were absolutely amazed at what we’d been missing.

I believe we all can live this way by living according to our ultimate purpose, based on what the Bible says. I used to be a statistic, living the same kind of stressful life so many others live. I desperately sought the Lord, and gradually the Holy Spirit opened my eyes and showed me the counterfeit purposes I lived by and the lies behind them.

I write this book not as an expert or life guide, but as one who has only begun to discover the powerful truths of the Bible. My life is nowhere close to perfect, even though I have personally gone from struggling with exhaustion, sickness, anxiety and irritability, to living with purpose, joy, peace, strength and good health. More than anything else in life, I desire to know God.

YOUR MOST IMPORTANT PURSUIT

Do you realize that discovering God’s purpose for your life is the single most important pursuit you’ll ever undertake? As mentioned above, your purpose will always determine your stress level. Living according to your true pur-

pose is the ticket to liberate you from the bondage of stress. Therefore I encourage you to read this book with...

- the Holy Spirit as your Teacher, knowing that your own intellect is limited. Ask Him to give you supernatural wisdom and understanding, opening the eyes of your heart and mind. “He [the Holy Spirit] will guide you into all truth” (John 16:13). Ask Him to help you hear from Him only.
- an open mind. “Instruct a wise man and he will be wiser still” (Proverbs 9:9). If you are humble and starving for God, everyone is your potential teacher in some manner. In contrast, if you think you “know it all” you won’t seek to know God better. You will only look for mistakes, inaccuracies, and things to criticize.

I also encourage you to read one chapter a day. This will help you personalize what you read and also give you time to talk about the chapter with your heavenly Father and friends. You should expect to take between twenty to thirty minutes to read each chapter.

If you’re the type of reader who likes to pick and choose chapters to read, you might have trouble understanding this book. A logical and biblical foundation has been built as it goes from chapter to chapter. Skipping a chapter may cause you to miss the building blocks needed to fully comprehend what is said.

CLARIFYING THE TERMS

Misunderstanding can sometimes get in the way of capturing the heart of a message. So, for the purpose of clarity, I would like to define the terms I will be using throughout this book:

- **Purpose**—What something is used for; the reason and intention for everything you do. Synonyms: goal, intention, point, objective.
- **Means**—A course of action by which an end or purpose can be achieved. The means to the end (or in this case, the means to fulfilling your purpose) can be accomplished through many different methods. Synonyms: ways, methods.

- **Mission**—An assignment one is sent to carry out. One's duty, job description, or responsibility to accomplish an overall purpose or objective. Synonyms: assignment, commission, duty, job description.
- **Results**—A consequence or by-product; outcome or effect. Synonyms: aftermath, fruit, repercussion.

In the next chapter, you will learn the obvious but little known connection between your purpose and stress, and how it affects your life.

SUMMARY

1. Stress has become a worldwide epidemic.
2. Christians tend to be just as stressed as the rest of the world.
3. You were designed to do “greater things,” live the abundant life, and soar on wings like eagles.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do you ever struggle with stress?
2. How have you responded to the stress in your life?
3. Have you ever wondered if there was more to the Christian life than what you've experienced?



PRAYER

Lord, please help me listen to Your Holy Spirit.

Open my heart and mind, and give me the wisdom to discover my true purpose. Release me from any unrealized bondage.

Give me a passion to focus on knowing and loving You more.

I humble myself before You and look forward to learning from Your Spirit.

Thank You, Lord.

STRESS AND PURPOSE

The History and Link between Stress and Your Purpose

*They say that there are two important days in your life: the day
you were born, and the day you find out why you were born.*

—CARL TOWNSEND

*There is no neutral ground in the universe;
every square inch, every split second, is claimed by
God and counter-claimed by Satan.*

—C. S. LEWIS

Everything has a purpose.

Imagine walking into your local hardware store and excitedly making a beeline for the tool section. They've got a new power drill you're planning to buy.

On your way to the drill aisle, you see a new high-tech gadget, like something from the future. It looks cool and complicated—lots of levers, buttons and dials. But what's it for? You stop and spend a few minutes looking at it, trying to guess. You're completely bewildered. Seeing no instruction manual, you ask a passing customer service person what this gadget is.

He hesitates for a second, and then confidently responds, "It's a plunger!"

"Are you serious? But what are all these levers and buttons for?"

He hesitates again. "Oh, it doesn't matter. It would work as a plunger."

You're confused and slightly annoyed. You dismiss him with a polite, "Thanks." But you're way too curious to just let this go. Another customer service person passes by, and you ask the same question: "Excuse me, what is this tool supposed to do?"

She responds without hesitation, “Oh, it can do whatever you want it to. It looks like one of those multi-use tools!”

You realize that you’re hearing only worthless opinions and since there doesn’t appear to be a way to discover the tool’s intended purpose, you continue on your way. That new gizmo—as cool and expensive as it may be, is not worth a penny if you don’t know what it’s meant to do.

WHAT’S IT FOR?

What did the inventor have in mind when he created that tool? What was his purpose? He obviously designed and built it with a distinct purpose that would benefit others. But if he failed to provide instructions, allowing its intended purpose to remain secret, it’s useless.

Even the simplest of tools comes with instructions for use as well as warnings against misuse. If simple tools have purposes and warnings, doesn’t it make even more sense that the really important things do too?

Like life?

Just like a tool, when your life is misused, even though your intentions are good, it will function poorly and eventually break down. And the sad thing about life is that the results of your *misuse of life* show up much later, when it can be difficult to change course. That’s why it’s critical to live according to God’s purpose and heed the warnings written in His book, the Bible.

What is your purpose in life? Why did God create you? Are there any areas where you might be unknowingly operating on the basis of lies?

All these questions lead to *the* question: *What does God really want?*

YOUR CORE MOTIVATION

Whether you realize it or not, you’re living for something on a daily basis.

Purpose is what drives you to do what you do. Purpose inspires you to jump out of bed every morning. Purpose is your energizer—the gasoline that fuels your emotional engine. Purpose is what empowers you to courageously plow through insurmountable obstacles. Purpose is what brings

color to a black and white planet. When you begin to speak and act out of purpose, something extraordinary happens. You live with ease and energy. You're centered and rested, even through the inevitable storms of life.

Without purpose, life is aimless. Empty. It's like being in a boat drifting on the ocean without a compass, or like wandering in a desert without a destination.

Without a purpose, you're not living. You merely exist. You were meant to live the abundant life, not to simply survive. Ants survive. Jesus-followers were meant to live supernaturally.

What if you could wake up each day, knowing that out of a million different purposes you could be living for, you're doing exactly what you were created to do? What if you could tighten up that purpose, certain that everything you study, work on and think about revolves around that one purpose?

Make your work to be in keeping with your purpose.

—Leonardo da Vinci

THE TRAGEDY OF MISTAKEN PURPOSES

Your purpose will always determine your stress level.

Worse than living without purpose is living out a mistaken purpose based on a lie. It results in stress, exhaustion, busyness, anger, anxiety and depression.

Imagine playing basketball in the NBA Finals, only to make the mistake of shooting at your opponent's goal, yet arguing with the coach and referee that you're shooting at your own goal. Is that not a monumental tragedy?

Most of us have the sense to plan more carefully than that, especially if there's a large investment at stake. But when it comes to the single most important investment we could possibly make, why do we miss the target?

The scariest thing is that many of these mistaken purposes have the appearance of being the right ones. What a sneaky little devil he is! This book exposes the counterfeit purposes authored by the great deceiver to give you awareness of his strategies and sneaky philosophies. "Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them" (Ephesians 5:11).

PURSUIT OF MY PURPOSE

When I was twenty years old, I set out to discover exactly why God had created mankind. I was searching for a foundational purpose that I could hold onto. Surprisingly, I spent the majority of my time discovering what my purpose is not. I found many Bible passages that warn of counterfeit and mistaken purposes and the destructive consequences of living according to them.

I came up with my purpose statement, though I didn't truly understand how to start living out that statement until much later. Until that point, I was unknowingly living out counterfeit purposes, resulting in a life of stress. Sadly, I've personally experienced the bondage and destructive consequences that come with a life that was never intended to be.

THE ORIGIN OF STRESS

While Adam and Eve walked in the lush Garden of Eden, getting their summer tan, they came across a smooth-talking, lying snake, who sold them the lie that they could not trust God. After falling for the lie, they realized they were naked in every way. For the very first time, they felt shame and the need to cover their nakedness.

As they attempted to hide themselves, God called out, asking where they were. Adam gave an interesting answer: "I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid" (Genesis 3:10).

Somehow this simple chain of events had caused Adam to be unreasonably afraid of God. The sad thing is, before that time, he and Eve shared a love relationship with God that was most likely deeper than any humans living on earth have had with Him since. God had done nothing to cause this fear. So why was Adam so afraid?

Let's examine the tragic scenario that occurred in the Garden of Eden:

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?"

The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’”

“You will not surely die,” the serpent said to the woman. “For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, “Where are you?”

He answered, “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.” (Genesis 3:1- 10)

1. The Original Source: Lies from the snake—“You will not surely die,” the serpent said to the women. “For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:4). Because the snake’s intention was to make God look really bad, he questioned two things about God:

First, God’s intention toward them: *Does He really mean well?*

Second, the meaning of God’s words: *Is that really what He meant?*

Ever since, Satan has been manipulating human relationships in the same way. And the above questions arise not only in relation to God, but also with each other. Ever since then, misunderstanding has been at the root of family conflicts.

I would like to remind you that even though Satan deceives many today, he and each of his crewmembers are on a short leash with God (Luke

10:18-19, Ephesians 1:18-23, Colossians 2:10). We are not to get caught up with fear towards this being. He is a defeated being.

2. *The Result: Fear in their hearts*—"I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid" (Genesis 3:10). Fear has been the shadow and echo of every lie ever since. Lies always result in fear: Will God really provide for me? Will God really protect me? Does He really approve of me?

3. *Their Strategy: To hide behind fig leaves*—"Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves." (Genesis 3:7). Since then, society's main strategy is to hide imperfections and hurts through socially acceptable means—a fabricated personality.

4. *The Long-Term Effect*—Disconnection and separation from God, others, and self.

THE RESULT OF THE LIE

One of the best strategies for winning a battle is to know your enemy's plan of attack. Since the episode in the Garden of Eden, Satan's plan has been the same:

1. *His Purpose*—Your separation from God, others and yourself (See Genesis 3:1-10).

2. *His Strategy*—Sneaky lies, creative counterfeits. "When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44).

3. *His Method*—Attacking and accusing the intentions and motives of others, twisting words to create misunderstanding. "For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down" (Revelation 12:10).

When you follow the trail of relational conflicts, lies are usually found at the root. When you misunderstand another person's words or motives, unforgiveness and bitterness often result. Lies cause separation from God, others and from self. From the separation you suffer these two results: Fear and bitterness.

1. *Fear and anxiety about God's love*—Satan wants you to question whether God really loves you enough to protect and provide for you. He

wants you to question whether God really cares and delights in you unconditionally.

2. Bitterness and anger toward others and self—Satan wants you to accuse others' intentions and project on them your own presumptions. He wants you to misunderstand other people's words and to become defensive, putting up walls against others. He wants you to condemn yourself for all of your mistakes and failures.

Satan is the father of all lies, the author of deceit. He's the mentor behind every liar, cheater and thief. Did you know that many of his lies are biblically based, with a clever and delicate twist? And they always come with a price.

Lies produce fear and bitterness.

The more you think about Satan's lies, the greater your fear becomes. Fear has many culturally acceptable faces and names: stress, anxiety, pressure, concern, worry, nervousness. In our society today, many common fears exist. These fears have a way of sneaking into many of your daily activities and your interaction with others. The five most common include:

- Fear of failure
- Fear of rejection
- Fear of pain and death
- Fear of poverty
- Fear of abandonment

Fear is the anticipation of pain. It typically starts with two words: *What if?* The trigger to fear-based thinking is imagining an undesirable event that will, in reality, most likely never occur.

Mark Twain put it this way: "I have lived a long life and had many troubles, most of which never happened." For the most part, what you fear is an illusion—a mirage. It's most often based on lies. I once heard Zig Ziglar explain fear with this acronym: False Evidence Appearing Real.

Fear will forever live imprisoned in a future that will most likely never happen. If you live in anxiety you are imprisoned by your own imagination, and because of this, you miss out on the enjoyment of the present.

Our society labels all these emotions under a single word—*Stress*.

Living with fear and bitterness always results in stress. This does not mean that all stress is a direct result of fear and bitterness. Stress most certainly can have other causes such as combat trauma, death of a loved one, rape, etc.

THERE'S HOPE: GOD'S IMPLANTED BEACON SIGNAL

Fortunately, God provided you a “beacon signal,” a method of bringing you back home to Himself when you wander away listening to lies. What a great God we serve!

When a U.S. fighter plane gets shot down while flying above enemy territory, the pilot's last resort for survival is to physically eject from the plane. Imagine the frightening trek ahead of him—to make his way through the jungles or the desert inside enemy territory, constantly wondering if his next step will be his last.

In the past, pulling that eject lever was nearly always a choice between getting blown up in the skies or dying at the hands of the enemy. That is, until 1982.

In that year, the military invented a clever way to save these fallen warriors. Personal Locator Beacons (PLB's) are techno gadgets that send out encrypted radio signals, allowing these freedom fighters to be located by a satellite system. A search and rescue team is then sent to locate them.

God hardwired you with an internal beacon signal. This divinely planted beacon signal is the desperate voice inside of you crying out to be loved and valued. You were designed in such a way that you would long for your Maker—so He could bring you back to Himself. It's an internal signal that says, “I am in urgent need of God!”

Regardless of how often you may deny your built-in hunger for love, this internal hunger is always crying out to be fed, frantically consuming any iota of love that comes your way. You might as well have a sticky note on your forehead that says, “Please love me!”

Every human being who has ever lived has experienced this unquenchable thirst buried deep inside that only God can satisfy. When your satis-

faction is not found in God, the consequences appear in your emotions. You're anxious, stressed, angry, disappointed and depressed. Physically, you suffer with exhaustion, sickness, neck and back pain, high blood pressure, insomnia, fatigue and more. Every last atom in your body is craving the approval of the Creator of the universe.

O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water. (Psalm 63:1)

My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God. (Psalm 84:2)

THE DEEPEST LONGING OF YOUR HEART

Pain was designed to alert you of danger to your physical health. Stress (fear and bitterness) is to your heart what pain is to your body, a built-in alarm system warning you that a counterfeit purpose has sneaked past your lie detector. It is your heart's way of telling you there's a threat to your life. God designed your body so you would listen to the cries of your heart.

This deep, desperate desire to be loved trumpets itself publicly in ways like these:

- You brag about what you own, who you know, what you know, what you've done and where you've been.
- You exaggerate when telling stories.
- You chase after the business/success trap.
- You buy bigger and better things you don't need, with money you don't have, to impress people who don't care.
- You look at yourself in every mirror to make sure you always look impressive.
- You passionately desire to lose weight in order to be acceptable by society's standards.

- You keep your opinions quietly to yourself for fear of being rejected.
- You find yourself talking more than listening.
- You avoid conflict at all costs, for fear of rejection or abandonment.
- You volunteer your free time at church or for other noble causes, at the expense of time with your family, because you want to feel like you're doing something significant.

As a general rule, we attempt to use our original, God-created roles as men and women to fill our need to be significant and to be loved. Men tend to look for this fulfillment in their work. They pride themselves in being competent and intelligent. They often dream about being publicly commended for a “job well done.” Women typically try to fill this need through relationships. The woman was designed to be the man’s helper, so it’s natural for her to want to be loved by a man. Women dream about being romanced by a strong and loving man.

Some of you manage this desire to be loved by stuffing it down or denying it. You masterfully train your mind to never get disappointed or hurt by others. I’m well aware of this because I’ve done it myself.

You need to realize that severe emotional and physical damage result when you stuff down your emotions and pretend that they don’t exist. If you train your mind to deny the gigantic pink elephant in the room—the relentless voice within calling for God’s love and approval—you deceive yourself into thinking you don’t need love.

WHEN YOU STUFF IT DOWN

In the 1930’s, New York Yankees’ first baseman Lou Gehrig was called the Iron Horse because he refused to take a day off from work. For over six decades he held the record for the most consecutive games played—2,130.

But medical examination revealed that every one of his fingers had been broken, some more than once. He suffered from ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis), a muscle-wasting disease, which eventually became known as Lou Gehrig’s Disease.

In later research of this disease, physician and best-selling author Dr.

Gabor Mate observed common characteristics in those who suffer from it. They're the nicest people you'll ever meet, they never ask for help, they never admit to emotional or physical pain and they never complain. Dr. Mate's findings convinced him that the emotional management style of these patients might have triggered their illness.

In his book, *When the Body Says No: Understanding the Cost of Hidden Stress*, Dr. Gabor Mate uses examples from two decades of medical practice to demonstrate how stuffing down stress helps cause this disease.

You live dangerously when you deny the existence of your heart, and believe the lie that life is all about living in your head. You can't silence this built-in beacon signal any more than you could silence an alarm system using a pillow.

*Each of you has an
urgent yearning to be
loved and approved.*

GOD'S LOVE AND APPROVAL

Since God, your divine architect, designed you with this hunger for His love and approval, you live your life either motivated by His love and approval, or in a desperate attempt to win His love and approval.

If you live *from* God's love and approval, you trust in what He tells you through His Word, and you have experienced His forgiveness, acceptance and unconditional love. You know and believe that God is happy with you because you belong to Him. You don't believe God condemns you or is angry with you any longer for all your mistakes.

If you live *for* God's love and approval, you're attempting the most unattainable feat known to mankind. You know about God's love, but either have not received it or have not really believed that He loves you unconditionally. You have stuffed down your need for love, and you look for that love in all the wrong places. Your dying words are: "I know God loves me. I just don't feel it."

Every counterfeit purpose is motivated by the need to attain God's approval. You're either extravagantly celebrating your journey back home to your perfect heavenly Dad, or you're desperately searching for Him in all the wrong places.

In the next chapter, you'll learn what God truly wants, as well as four of the most common counterfeit purposes and lies of Satan that Christians fall for when they are trying to earn God's love and approval.

SUMMARY

1. God created you with a definite purpose in mind.
2. Satan twisted God's truth and created compelling counterfeit purposes.
3. The result of the lies: stress from fear and bitterness.
4. God's beacon signal: your desperate need to be loved.
5. You either live *from* or *for* God's love and approval.
6. Counterfeit purposes are motivated by the need to attain God's approval.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. If someone evaluated your life, what one-sentence statement do you think they would give to describe your purpose?
2. Do you operate your life *from* or *for* God's love and approval?
3. Do you ever stuff down your feelings, dreams, fears and frustrations?



PRAYER

*Lord Jesus, please help me to continually humble myself.
Open the eyes of my heart so I can see what I'm really living for.*

*Show me what You really want.
Help me to break through my fears and live on purpose,
rather than by default.*

Thank You in advance for giving me a reason to live!

THE BATTLE OF PURPOSES

God's Purpose vs. Counterfeit Purposes

*Efforts and courage are not enough
without purpose and direction.*

—JOHN F. KENNEDY

*The supreme end of education is expert discernment in
all things—the power to tell the good from the bad,
the genuine from the counterfeit, and to prefer the
good and the genuine to the bad and the counterfeit.*

—UNKNOWN

Every great company writes a statement of its purpose or mission. This purpose statement is a declaration that is intended to drive every objective, goal and plan. Here are the purpose statements from two well-known companies:

Microsoft: To help people and businesses throughout the world realize their full potential.

Nike: To bring inspiration and innovation to every athlete in the world.

Each of these companies exists to fulfill its purpose statement. Employees work together to fulfill that one purpose. Imagine this hypothetical scenario: I gather all the Microsoft workers together in a gigantic auditorium and ask them, “What is Bill Gates’ purpose for this company?” They would probably shout simultaneously, “Bill wants us to help people and businesses throughout the world realize their full potential.”

Then I randomly point to Sally, one of the Microsoft workers, and ask her to describe her job. She might say, “I’m a software developer,” or “I’m a

supervisor.” Her job description or personal mission helps to accomplish the overall purpose of the company.

If you were to ask God to write a purpose statement for your life, what do you think He would write?

LIFE’S PURPOSE STATEMENT, ACCORDING TO JESUS

One of the Pharisees, who happened to be a guru when it came to the law, wanted to test Jesus with this question: “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”

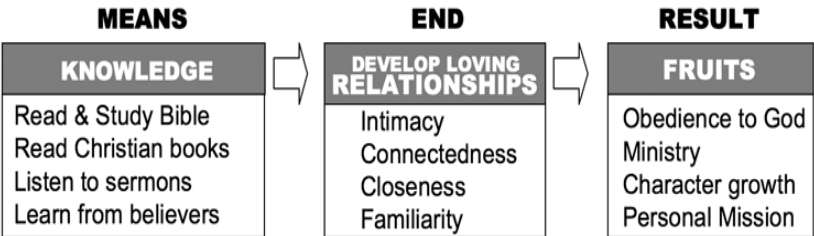
Jesus replied; “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it; ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Matthew 22:35- 40).

Jesus is simply saying you are to love God and love others like you love yourself. Don’t you just love simplicity? It just makes everything so...simple!

Love happens in the context of relationships. Relationships are never static; they are either developing or deteriorating. Therefore, based on what Jesus said, a concise summary of your purpose statement would be this:

To develop loving relationships with God, others and myself.

Your purpose is to develop loving relationships (Matthew 22:35-40; see also Romans 13:9; Galatians 5:14; James 2:8). Knowledge is a means to that end. The fruit of that end is obedience to God, ministry, character growth and discovering your personal mission.



THE SLIPPERY PATH TO PURPOSE

The slope starts to become slippery when you focus on gaining knowledge, or producing fruit, as more important than your relationship with God. These slippery paths are rooted in Satan's counterfeit purposes, motivated by the lie that you have to perform to gain God's approval.

When you live out God's purpose, you experience a variety of results.

- Worshiping and glorifying God are fruits that result from learning how loving He is.
- Becoming like Christ is the fruit of spending time with Him, just as you tend to adopt the traits of a friend you spend time with.
- Sharing with others about God's love is merely a means of bragging about Who you know.
- You follow His rules because you love Him and want to obey Him.
- Serving Him fully in ministry is an overflow of your heart that has been transformed by love.
- Wise stewardship and management of financial resources is the fruit that results from understanding His loving provision.
- You make the decision to stay pure when you see the beauty of His holiness.

FRUITFULNESS

When was the last time you saw a fruit tree grunting in an effort to produce fruit? Can you imagine such a scene? If you simply water the root of a fruit tree, it will effortlessly bear fruit. You'll never see that tree grunting or shaking. If you do, you should immediately consult a psychiatrist. Watering the root is the deepening of your relationship with God.

The Lord Jesus invites you to remain in Him:

Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear

fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. (John 15:4-5)

As a natural consequence of remaining in Him and staying close to Him, you'll bear much fruit. If you want to change the fruit you're producing, you must first change the root purpose of your life. Otherwise, producing fruit in the flesh is only a tiring way to live.

EFFORTLESS

One mid-summer day in Atlanta, I was sitting across from my friend Chris outside Starbucks. I was sharing with him from the principles God had shown me—that life is not about simply pursuing knowledge or doing good works only; rather, you should use knowledge to pursue a deep friendship with God that will result in good works.

If you want to change the fruit you're producing, you must first change the root purpose of your life.

Chris looked at me as if he'd never heard this concept before. I encouraged him to spend the first hour of his day worshipping, sharing and listening to the Lord.

A week later, Chris called, and His first words were, "Effortless, Mike. Effortless!" Suddenly, sharing the gospel, loving others and staying pure were absolutely effortless for him! He said he never knew life could be so easy!

THE LIE-DRIVEN PURPOSE: TO EARN GOD'S LOVE

Everybody has an inborn need to be approved and loved. We all have the tendency to believe the lie that we need to earn as well as maintain God's love and approval. We then begin making plans that we think will help us to achieve this unattainable goal.

We typically believe this lie as a result of how we were parented, or because of situations we've observed in our past. Let's look at four of the most

common counterfeit purposes we use to earn God's love, illustrated by four fictional individuals.

1. KEN KNOWLEDGE

Ken unknowingly believes a lie that knowledge can win him the approval of God and men. He has very strong analytical and problem-solving skills. He appears to implicitly trust his own intellect and logical thinking. He doesn't talk much about his personal friendship with God.

In reality, Ken has never learned how to deal with emotional pain. He stuffs things that are too painful to deal with. Because he refuses to admit his relational needs and desires, his disappointments reveal themselves in over-reactive tendencies. He has great difficulty allowing others to communicate their feelings. He often corrects them for being too "emotional."

Ken tries to earn God's approval by regularly pursuing new nuggets of "Aha!" information from the Bible. To him, the Bible is a textbook rather than a personal love letter. God is simply a cosmic entity to be studied and scrutinized. Ken is like a professor, devoid of any personal touch or emotion. Ken doesn't see God as a smiling dad, laughing and playing with His kids. When Ken teaches at church, his message is an academic experience void of any relational dynamics.

Ken lives in a theoretical reality and often judges others for not studying enough. He doesn't see people as those he can know, love, or enjoy. Rather, he sees them as students to be educated. From Ken's point of view, it's more important to be accurate than to be an understanding friend.

Marriage Comparison

When Ken and Kelly first got married, Ken asked her to make an instructional video explaining what would make her happy in their relationship. It was jam-packed, relaying her deepest desires and needs. Unfortunately, Ken spent most of his time watching the video, using a dictionary to define every word and dissecting every phrase.

Meanwhile Kelly waited and watched, longing for him to turn off the video and spend some personal time with her. One day, Ken came home and flopped a dozen red roses on the kitchen counter without a single word to her. He then turned and headed to the living room to study the video. Hesitant, Kelly blurted, “They’re beautiful. Except, you just don’t do that without saying anything.”

Ken responded, “Well, what do you want me to say?”

Kelly frowned. “I can’t tell you what to say. It’s supposed to come from your heart.”

Upon hearing this, Ken’s brain malfunctioned and suffered a seizure. He had no idea how to process what it meant for something to “come from your heart.”

Proper Perspective

It may be difficult for some of you to believe that there are actually people who act like Ken did towards his wife. But many people act the same way

<i>Three of the most dangerous words in the English language are:</i> I know that.	toward God. Absurd as it may seem, most Christians have followed this path at one time or another. Three of the most dangerous words in the English language are: <i>I know that</i> . This mindset becomes a lethal cancer that slowly kills relationships. For many people, knowledge has become a handicap. “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up” (1 Corinthians 8:1).
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As we discussed earlier, knowledge is a *necessary* means to the end, not an end in itself. When Jesus lived on earth, He sharply rebuked the religious people of the day for nitpicking others with their knowledge of the law, but not knowing the God Who wrote the law.

“You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.” (John 5:39-40)

As a result of Ken's inability to manage his emotional pain, he resorted to stuffing his emotions. This was partly the result of believing a message our society tends to project, that real men are not emotional. Sadly, the feelings he so vehemently denies eventually morph into fear and bitterness, manifesting themselves in defensiveness and disconnectedness.

Imagine what it would be like if you continually stuffed garbage under your living room carpet. After a few weeks, there would be a mound so huge and smelly that you couldn't have a conversation over it. In the same way, unless Ken learns how to share his stuffed emotions with God, he'll never see how his emotional mound is affecting all of his social interactions.

Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your hearts to him,
for God is our refuge. (Psalm 62:8)

Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. (1 Peter 5:7)

My Personal Experience

For a long time, I struggled with this kind of imbalance. I feel that I can describe Ken's innermost feelings because I believed the same lies he does.

When I learned how to receive God's love, my life was suddenly and profoundly changed beyond my wildest dreams. Now, rather than seeing the Bible as a mere textbook, the Bible has become a beautiful and powerful means to an end. I read, not out of attempting to gain God's approval, but out of the presumption that I'm already loved and approved of.

I found that as I got to know God in a deeper, more intimate way, I became more and more immersed in true worship. He opens the eyes of my heart and connects with me in a very personal way when we spend time together.

My marriage is the next area that has benefited by a transformed belief system. In the past, we had read countless marriage books, and although they offered help, we still had a sense that there was more. When we came to truly receive God's love and acceptance, our marriage took a gigantic leap forward.

2. PAULA PERFECTIONIST

Paula unknowingly believes the lie that unless she's perfect, neither God nor people will approve of her. Paula believes in performance-based approval. Paula is always too busy and typically lives in a frantic panic mode. Her to-do list is a mile long.

She sees God as a good Father who's disappointed with her imperfections. However much she tries, it's just never enough. From her viewpoint, the Bible is the perfect recipe for perfection. This is why, after a tiring day at work, she chooses not to read the Bible. It's too tiring to read, since she reads it through a how-to-be-perfect mindset.

Paula views people as objects to be fixed, not as people to know, enjoy and empower. She often struggles with internal anger toward others, though she never expresses this outwardly.

As a mother, Paula has a tendency to correct her children for making a "mess" around the house. For her, it's more important that the house is perfect than it is to teach her children wisdom and responsibility. Her children have learned "mess prevention," rather than to be responsible.

It's often difficult to encourage Paula since she doesn't receive encouragement graciously. She seems to find ways to either deflect praise or to find something else that needs work. She does the same thing with others. When you say something good about a person, Paula is likely to say something like, "True, even though she's a little careless with her money, bless her heart."

As a result of being so hard on herself all her life, she views confrontation as more rejection. When you confront her, you're destroying her idol of perfection.

Marriage Comparison

Paula comes home exhausted from a twelve-hour workday and immediately jumps into cleaning the kitchen, doing the laundry, cooking dinner and paying the bills. Not only is she dead tired, she has been scolding herself all day because just before she had left for work, she accidentally broke one of her husband's tools

When Patrick, her husband, gets home, he notices the broken tool in the garage and casually asks Paula what happened to the tool. She snaps back, “It’s not like I meant to break it! I work so hard all day, and then I slave away doing everything here at home, so please get off my back about your tool!” She has magnified her failure to the point of self-hatred. The sad thing is that Patrick had planned to reassure her that it was no big deal. But since Paula won’t talk to him, she is now focused on punishing herself during her self-imposed pity party.

A single lie in Paula’s thinking—rejection due to imperfection—caused this tragic scenario. The inevitable result is division within their marriage.

Proper Perspective

Satan is the “accuser” (Revelation 12:10, Zechariah 3:1).

He points at you with his bony finger, focusing on all your failures. His goal is to accuse you and create copies of himself—mini-faultfinders, little accusers of the brothers. Don’t get me wrong. Corrections have their proper and necessary place in relationships. But in this instance I’m discussing priorities and focus. When your conversation is only about mistakes and failures, you may be living like Satan’s disciple, all for the sake of being “good.”

*Perfectionism is
not a legitimate
personality trait.*

Sinners could hang out with Jesus, and somehow He didn’t turn them off, even with all their imperfections. Instead, He magnetically attracted them to Himself. The only people Jesus consistently rebuked were the religious leaders of the day.

As much as you might believe otherwise, perfectionism is not a legitimate personality trait. Too many people have used the excuse that perfectionism caused this or that, when in reality it is a lethal and poisonous lie that slowly kills. Perfectionism makes you stressed, discontent, tired, critical, crabby and resistant to correction.

The Bible is explicit in what it says about this enslaving lie:

Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?... All who rely on

observing the law are under a curse.... It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.... You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ. (Galatians 3:3,10; 5:1,4)

This yoke of slavery targets the mind, playing into the way the human mind works. What would happen if someone told you, “Don’t think about pink elephants, don’t think about pink elephants!” You guessed it. You’d have large pink elephants dancing in your mind for awhile. This is a proven principle about the human mind: *What you think about expands.*

This principle applies to the practice of what I call “sin-sniffing.” When you go hunting for failure, you’ll find it in everyone, including yourself. Self-condemnation will become your shadow.

My Personal Experience

Over time, God has been healing me from the curse of perfectionism. In the past, I’ve struggled to grasp the truth that God accepts me with no strings attached. In my struggle, I had bought into the cultural lie that character growth and personal development are ends in themselves.

Whenever I met someone, I would tend to pinpoint faults and weaknesses, just the way Satan does. I meant well, guiding others toward perfection, as I promoted good behavior and discouraged bad behavior. But now that the Lord has changed my heart, I want more than anything to help others experience the beautiful intimacy available with their heavenly Dad.

God has never shown me a list of all my failures. “If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared” (Psalm 130:3-4). If He did keep a record, it would take an immense hard drive to contain all my failures, and just the knowledge that He was keeping track would break me. To my endless relief, He has shown me that He greatly delights in me, in spite of my imperfections and faults.

3. HARRY HAPPY-CHASER

To Harry, feeling happy is an eternal pursuit—an end in itself. This is Harry's way of medicating his unfulfilled longing for love. He seems to think that it is God's responsibility to make him feel good at all times. He often pursues the emotional highs that come from spiritual events—camps, seminars and mission trips. He's more excited about the great things God is doing than he is about God Himself.

As he reads the Bible, he's often looking for a feel good experience. When that doesn't happen, he blames God. He's always looking for the next big thing. The media, always pushing for the next big upcoming attraction, has popularized this type of mindset.

Harry is typically the life of the party, the one everyone calls when there's a get-together. They view him as someone who loves to laugh, someone who's fired up for the Lord and always in the center of ministry; although he also is viewed as moody.

Marriage Comparison

Harry struggles with all the work involved in being married to Henrietta. While they were dating, he had enjoyed the flirting and fun, but that seemed effortless compared to being married. Harry doesn't know it, but he swallowed the lie that it's his wife's job to make him happy. He had believed that marriage would be mostly fun and little work, that the honeymoon would never end.

Today at the office he experienced a tough situation with a disrespectful employee. Instead of facing his anger and processing his frustration, he took his anger home. After describing his rotten day to Henrietta he got upset when she responded, "Well, why didn't you say something to him?" Harry hates it when she confronts him, especially when she's right.

Proper Perspective

Emotions simply reflect the content of your thinking. When Harry's down, he usually follows an unbiblical thought process—stinking thinking. When

you dwell on the ways you've failed today, you're always going to feel bad. Emotions are the echoes of your thought processes.

Harry has never been taught to responsibly manage his thoughts. Underneath a depressed emotion is a form of fear and bitterness toward self and others. Harry believes that the benefits associated with knowing God should be his ultimate pursuit. It's all about what he can get from God to make him happy—instead of developing an intimate relationship with his heavenly Dad.

My Personal Experience

I struggled with this problem from my late teens to my mid-twenties. My wife might argue that it went all the way to my late twenties. I thoroughly enjoyed the emotional fruit that God and ministry brought me and unwittingly pursued regular emotional highs. I even measured my friendship with God based on the number of emotional peaks I experienced.

As a result of believing the pursuit of happiness lie, I regularly struggled with bouts of depression and discouragement. I spent a considerable amount of time picturing worst-case scenarios, rooted in my unwise diet of bad news via the television and newspaper.

The Lord has since taught me the power of gratitude and worship as I started the habit of worshiping Him throughout the day. When I managed my thoughts carefully, no longer entertaining the what-ifs that typically danced across my mind, I was much happier and more stable emotionally. "The Lord is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in him, and I am helped. My heart leaps for joy and I will give thanks to him in song" (Psalm 28:7).

4. MARTHA MINISTRY-MACHINE

Martha believes the lie that God's approval of her is based on how successful she is in ministry. She's secretly addicted to the praise she receives for her good works. In her eyes, to rest and relax is unproductive and a waste of time. She sees God as a workaholic and believes the lie that He's concerned about others in need, but He's not concerned about her personally.

She makes herself sick with an excessive amount of ministry, while neglecting her sleep, nutrition, family and friends. She doesn't believe in a God of rest and meditation. Life is simply too short for that.

Martha measures a person's value by how hard she or he works. Constant serving is the only way to "win" God's favor, and serving the Church is the ultimate expression of godliness. She wants people to join her in her frantic lifestyle of serving the body of Christ.

Others see her as hard working, dedicated. They love to be around her, since she radiates energy and purpose, though they're often left wanting for more.

Martha tends to view the Bible as a manual to assist in recruiting and training more busy workers. All her conversations center around ministry—her vision, successes, struggles, goals, numbers and contacts. Sadly, she rarely mentions her personal relationship with God.

Marriage Comparison

When Martha and Mark first got married, Martha committed to serve Mark at all costs. After compiling a list of his needs, she set out to do a thorough and excellent job of washing and ironing his clothes, cooking his meals, cleaning the house, mowing the lawn, fixing things around the house, etc.

Meanwhile, Mark often waited for her to take a break just so he could spend some time with her. One day he asked her to stop working so they could talk and finally catch up with each other. Abruptly she replied, "Listen, honey, I'm just way too busy taking care of you. I don't have time right now." And she rushed off to the garage.

This marriage has suffered over the years from a severe lack of intimacy. Yes, Mark is served well in many areas, and the house is clean and in good repair, but the marriage relationship is slowly dying.

Proper Perspective

Just before Jesus started His ministry, John the Baptist baptized Him. Jesus told John that He needed to be baptized to fulfill what was written. Here's the scene after Jesus was baptized:

As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” (Matthew 3:16- 17)

Jesus hadn't yet started His ministry or done His “work” so why was His Father pleased? Jesus started His ministry *from* His Father's approval—not *for* His Father's approval. For you as well, it makes God happy when you trust and believe what He has said, because true belief always results in loving acts. “The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love” (Galatians 5:6). True faith is always validated by love.

————— <i>Jesus started His ministry from His Father's approval—not for His Father's approval.</i> —————	The amazing truth is that God would rather be our <i>Dad</i> than our <i>Employer</i> . When you spend your time with God, it's important not to immediately bring up all your ministry issues. You are not your work. God wants you to get to know Him outside of work and ministry. He desires for you to know Him above all. He desires to disclose His heart and thoughts about <i>you!</i> He's much more interested in you as an individual than He is with your work for Him. Your work for Him is merely the byproduct of your intimate relationship with Him.
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He desires for you to experience Him deeply, and this will result in bearing *much* fruit in your life. As Jesus said,

“I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.” (John 15:5)

My Personal Experience

I used to be in full-time ministry as a youth leader. One of the reasons I left is that I got lost in the ministry. I had forgotten exactly why I was doing it. I had lived my life based on my knowledge, skills, gifting and talent. I had forgotten to nurture our love relationship while I served Him.

Since then, I've learned from studying the Old Testament that my friendship with Him is infinitely more important than anything I can do for Him. I'm not inferring that it has to be either-or. I'm saying that my friendship with Him is much more important. Ministry is only the overflow, the outpouring resulting from my time alone with Him.

As we know from studying Scripture, before God sent His servants into service, He often met with them in the desert. It was in the desert of isolation that these warriors drew close to God—Moses, John the Baptist, Paul, the children of Israel and Jesus Himself. It's our choice whether or not we create that desert experience daily—free from distractions, for the sake of being in His presence, and getting to know God in a personal way.

In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength. (Isaiah 30:15).

THE RESULT OF COUNTERFEIT PURPOSES: STRESS

Stress is a direct result of living by Satan's counterfeit purposes.

If you are one who often talks about a stressful day, you're probably someone who's trying to find your way home to God's loving arms through different paths, all paved with lies. To find relief from your stress you start to use "emotional anesthetics" or God replacements: TV, video games, Internet, work, sex, food, etc.

Denied something that it desperately needs, your heart will eventually give birth to addictive emotional anesthetics. Every addiction is rooted in the need to be loved. Every addiction is a form of slavery and idolatry, a replacement for your loving God.

Using emotional anesthetics to manage your emotional needs is like a child covering his face with his hands while playing peek-a-boo, believing he's invisible. It doesn't work. It's about as effective as putting a band-aid on a broken bone.

What are you supposed to do about this gnawing feeling inside, this desperate need to be accepted and approved by God? Why the gigantic

gap between knowing about the truth and actually believing it in your heart?

In the next chapter, you will learn what God's ultimate purpose is for your life, and what exactly fills this constant longing you have inside.

SUMMARY

1. Your life purpose is to develop loving relationships with God, others and yourself.
2. Every counterfeit purpose is motivated by a desire for God's love and approval.
3. Counterfeit purposes produce stress.
4. There's a big difference between "knowing about" and "believing in your heart."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. If you asked your closest friends and family, which of the counterfeit purposes would they say you struggle with?
2. Would they say you're a critical and judgmental person?
3. Do you struggle with just knowing and not truly believing?
4. Do you struggle with stress and anxiety?



PRAYER

Lord, open my eyes by the power of Your Holy Spirit, and show me if I'm living like a Pharisee in any way. I don't want to live like that, for You know how much I want to know and love You. Forgive me for living without believing. I want to love You with all my heart, soul, mind and strength. It's the least I can do in light of all You've done for me. May Your Word and the power of Your Spirit guide me to that end. Thank You, Lord!

WHAT GOD REALLY WANTS

Living Your Purpose Statement

*Our greatest joy and our greatest pain
come in our relationships with others.*

—STEPHEN R. COVEY

Life is relationships; the rest is just details.

—GARY SMALLEY

Life's Purpose Statement: To develop loving relationships with God, others and yourself.

Jesus boiled everything down to “Love God and love people,” teaching us that love is at the heart of all the law and the prophets. In other words, love is at the core of life.

I think I would have had one big problem with Jesus’ response if I had been there. I learned long ago that, like everyone else, my natural tendency is to be less than loving. How would I ever live up to this simple but seemingly impossible challenge to love an invisible God, and to love unlovable people, let alone love myself?

Well, thank God He addresses this difficult question in His instruction book, the Bible.

Here’s the life-changing concept, the verse that not only blew the lid right off my old mindset, but also absolutely revolutionized my life: “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

INDEBTED TO OUR DAD

The fact that Jesus received the death sentence on my behalf answers my issue with this.

The word *indebted* means “owing gratitude or recognition to another for help or favors.” Most of us respond naturally to generosity with a sense of indebtedness. The greater the gift or sacrifice, the more we feel we owe something in return. I call this the *Indebtedness Principle*.

You might respond to receiving a valuable gift by saying, “Oh, I can’t believe you would do that! How can I ever thank you?” We see this response in Scripture: “How can I repay the LORD for all his goodness to me?” (Psalm 116:12).

Anyone who ever teaches that God’s love and grace is a license to sin is someone who has never experienced grace.

Anyone who ever teaches that God’s love and grace is a license to sin is someone who has never experienced grace. The *Indebtedness Principle*, rooted in God’s unconditional love, is one of the most powerful forces in the universe. This force is so far reaching and widespread that renowned sociologist Alvin Gouldner reported that there is no human society that does not subscribe to this principle.

YOUR DIVINE ATTORNEY

Imagine driving down the street, as you head to a very important job interview.

You’re eating a sandwich snugly tucked in its wrapper. Though you try to be careful, you accidentally drop your sandwich and stain your pristine white shirt. You yell profanities. Distracted and fuming over the stain, you suddenly feel a thump—you’ve hit something! You immediately slam on the brakes and notice a woman screaming at you. Your car has hit her three-year-old son.

Fast forward to nine months later. You’ve been sentenced to eight years

in prison for manslaughter. It's the end of life as you know it. Will you be beaten up, raped, or even killed in prison? What will your friends and family think of you? What kind of job could you get after release? Anguish and grief wash over you like a tidal wave.

Without any warning, your personal attorney, Jesse Christus, who's also been a trusted advisor and a surprisingly good friend through this nightmarish ordeal, requests a private consultation with the judge. Forty-five minutes later, he comes out with a forced smile. "I have great news," he says. "You won't have to serve time in prison. The judge is allowing me to serve your sentence in your place."

You look at him in complete disbelief, wondering if he's lost his mind or if this could be some kind of cruel joke. He reassures you with a letter from the judge, confirming the best news you've ever heard. You tearfully hug him and thank him.

Eight years later, when Jesse is finally released from prison, will you cancel all other plans in order to welcome him back to society? Of course you will! And if Jesse asked to stay at your home for a while, you would be thrilled to have the opportunity to "pay back" this man, if only in a small way, because of the sacrifice he made for you.

You would love him in return because he first loved you.

God initiated the first step toward you by making Himself vulnerable. He did this to show you that He loved you first—undeservingly and sacrificially.

ORPHANS IN NEED OF A PERFECT DAD

Jesus came so we could be reconciled to our heavenly Dad, as Scripture makes clear:

For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to Him through the death of His Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through His life! (Romans 5:10)

All this is from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation. (2 Corinthians 5:18)

After an argument with a friend that makes you decide never to speak again with him, the relationship is broken. Reconciliation is necessary to restore the friendship you once had. To reconcile means to reestablish, settle, or restore a close relationship between people.

Jesus didn't come to condemn the world, but came to seek and to save the lost (John 3:17; 12:47; Luke 19:10). We all start out lost, whether we realize it or not. He became the "go-between," bridging the gap between God and us, to fulfill our desperate need and longing for the perfect Dad we've always wished for.

Every child has a God-given need to be raised and nurtured by a loving father. Without this father role, the child is destined for a troubled life. Consider these findings from the National Center for Fathering:

- 36.3 percent of children live without their biological father.
- The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services states that fatherless children are at a dramatically greater risk of drug and alcohol abuse.
- Children who live apart from their fathers are 4.3 times more likely to smoke cigarettes as teenagers than children growing up with their fathers in the home.
- Three out of four teenage suicides occur in households where a parent has been absent.

These alarming statistics confirm the epidemic of "fatherlessness" in our nation today. Numerous studies have shown that an absentee father drastically affects a child's mental, physical and emotional development, as well as his financial future, sexual behavior and drug and alcohol use. It's unfortunate, but many people hold grudges, even after their fathers have died, for things that happened in their childhood.

In a perfect world, our earthly fathers would be a living example of our heavenly Father's love. We would readily want to run into our heavenly

Dad's arms. Sadly, only a small number of us have had first-hand experience with a earthly father who reflects the qualities of our heavenly Father.

Consequently, God uses the imperfection of our earthly fathers to guide our deep longing into the presence of the only perfect Father, God.

LONGING FOR DAD

Deep down we all yearn for a father who will take an interest in us.

We all silently desire that our father would get to know what we think and feel. We yearn to regularly hear that we're loved—that our dads are proud of us. We want them to know us intimately, to understand us, and even greatly delight in us. We want a father who believes in us and will exuberantly cheer us on, giving us strength that will sustain us later in life. We want our fathers to reassure us that the future ahead is very bright for us.

You weren't an accident. You weren't mass-produced. You aren't an assembly-line product. You were deliberately planned, specifically gifted, and lovingly positioned on the Earth by the Master Craftsman.—Max Lucado

It's important for every father to encourage his son—to tell him he was born to be a mighty warrior; that he is more than a conqueror; that he has the necessary tools to win any battle that comes along; that he can do the impossible because of his unshakeable faith and courage.

Every daughter wants to be daddy's girl. She longs to hear him say that she's his most precious princess—that she's the most beautiful girl in the world. She needs to hear that he'll protect her from all the evil villains in the world.

We all need to believe we'll succeed in whatever challenge that comes along—to know that failure is not the end of the world, to know that our dad will not abandon us or hate us for failing.

Our desperate longing to be loved can only be fulfilled from a loving Dad. This deep longing is what John Eldredge's book, *Wild At Heart*, calls the "father wound" that is found in so many men and boys in our society today.

SEARCHING FOR DAD

There's a story of a father and son in Spain who became estranged, and the son ran away.

After months of searching for his son in vain, the father put a classified ad in a Madrid newspaper that said this: "Dear Paco, meet me in front of this newspaper office at noon on Saturday. All is forgiven. I love you. Your Father." At noon on the following Saturday, 800 Pacos were in front of the newspaper office.

Well, there's good news. Your Dad in heaven knows the longing of your heart! The great God of the universe was the One who created and placed within you this very longing—your internal signal beacon—designed to bring you home to your ultimate Dad. He creatively designed it so all the other God replacements you use to fill the Father-love void within, will fail miserably.

The Creator chose to become like His creatures, and He paid the penalty for our crimes so that as our heavenly Father, He could adopt those who truly trust Him.

But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir. (Galatians 4:4-7)

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:26)

During His time on earth, Jesus started a controversial trend when He addressed God as "Abba." This was no different than our calling Him "Daddy" today. But in the first century Jewish culture, calling God "Dad" was considered absolutely unthinkable and irreverent. It expressed a level of intimacy unfamiliar and abhorrent to them.

The apostle Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, repeats this same term—“Abba, Father” (Galatians 4:6). In this context, he says once you belong to Him, you are allowed to call God by the same name Jesus did—Daddy. I love it. What a privilege! God is so much more than a divine ruler. He’s the supreme head of a very large family, and He desires to invite spiritual orphans to become a part of His family.

Your heavenly Dad has always been with you. He watched over you even before you were born, and He personally custom designed you with all your unique gifts, talents, and personality traits. He was beside you when your earthly father decided to work, read the newspaper, watch TV, or surf the Internet rather than spend time with you. He was there to cheer you on at your recital, your game, your graduation, even when your earthly father couldn’t make it. He was with you every time the tears fell, and you sobbed in your bedroom or on that lonely walk. God’s heart broke as He watched your heart break.

Your earthly dad may have abandoned you, but your heavenly Dad will never do so.

Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you. (Hebrews 13:5)

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. (Isaiah 43:2)

Even as you read this book, your heavenly Dad is watching you with delight, excited that you’re finally able to receive the amazing love He’s loved you with since the beginning of time. He’s very, very different than your earthly dad. He’s deeply interested in you, and more than anything else, He wants an intimate relationship with you. You are a highly valued member of His family.

Without faith, it’s impossible to make Him happy (Hebrews 11:6). Think about this: He didn’t say it’s impossible to make Him happy without perfection or complete knowledge. Your Father in heaven knows you believe in Him. He’s extremely happy with you. Since happy people smile, you can

be certain He looks down from heaven and smiles at you! He never raises His voice at you or frowns at you. He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, and “abounding in love” (Psalm 103:8, Exodus 34:6, Nehemiah 9:17, Joel 2:13, Jonah 4:2).

MY CHILDREN

Kristy and I have a precious four-year-old daughter. I am head-over-heels in love with her. She’s so much fun. Often she’ll come to me during the day and rub my back, giving me the sweetest smile in the world.

We also have a handsome two-year-old son, who I am absolutely crazy about. He is the most captivating little man-child I could wish for. We call him our little preacher because he talks a mile a minute.

It’s amazingly fulfilling to have a little princess to cuddle with and a son to play and wrestle with. My children only have one problem with me. I exasperate them with my kisses. They always squirm and squeal for me to stop way before I’m done kissing them.

Every night, I hold them in my arms, look into their eyes, and gently say to each of them, “You are my child, and I love you. I am very happy with you.” I remind them that I believe in them and that they will do the impossible because of their faith in God. I remind them that I am extremely proud of who they are.

Now granted, neither one has contributed very much to the family so far. They have yet to make dinner, mow the lawn, make money, or repair anything around the house. So far they’re just normal kids, being their precious, unique selves. Nevertheless, I enjoy them enormously and I am absolutely crazy about them, because they are my children. How much more does our God, who is exceedingly more loving than I am, enjoy and delight in those who are *His* children.

If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him! (Jesus, in Matthew 7:11)

As much as you adore your children, your Dad in heaven is even crazier about you! He wants to be up-close and personal with you—to pierce the dimensional gap so He can hug and hold you, and tell you how much He loves you. And the amazing fact is that He did do this!

He wants you to know that all your mistakes and failures in the past, present and future were deleted, erased from His memory when you received His forgiveness. All God's anger and irritation was unloaded on His only Son two thousand years ago.

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:21)

Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him. (John 3:36)

Some people use fear to motivate others to obey. Although it's very important to fear and respect God, those are not the reasons that you love Him. Once you belong to Him, you no longer need to be motivated by the dread of His anger. He now delights in you. You're now family!

For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave *again to fear*, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." (Romans 8:15)

As amazing as it sounds, God believes in you and is proud of you. He can't wait to look into your eyes and tell you how much you mean to Him. It's His fervent desire to share with you what's on His heart (See Psalm 25:14). He has never stopped looking at you and delighting in you since the day of your birth (See Psalm 139).

Consider these incredible truths about yourself. You are not an accident. You are unique and original in every way. You were created for a specific and personal mission that no one but you can fulfill. He wants to shower you with His heart's delight.

He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all—how will he not also, along with Him, graciously give us all things? (Romans 8:32)

“...*how will he not also...*” How could you think your heavenly Father desires less than the best for you when He ransomed His child to restore you to Himself? After such a sacrifice, will He now withhold from you? I’m not saying that you will never have pain, disappointments, or tragedy. I’m merely sharing one part of my Father’s heart that’s rarely talked about.

MY FATHER’S LOVE

When I encountered the Lord Jesus on November 23, 1986, He became my Hero and my Savior, saving me from a miserable life of emptiness and rebellion.

Then He became the friend I never had, and I would share with Him all the tragic drama we create as teenagers. Later I was introduced to the Person of the Holy Spirit, who became my power source and my counselor. But I have to admit, God the Father remained a mystery to me, a forbidding form hidden behind a curtain—a faceless and distant ruler.

It was years ago when I sought to discover the identity of the faceless person behind that mysterious curtain. But in my search I often felt I was flailing in the dark, grasping at smoke. Have you ever felt that way? One day I’d feel really good about being loved by God; the next day I felt distant from Him, like He wasn’t around or wasn’t truly interested in me.

Then I discovered the Father’s Love Letter, a letter written by Barry Adams. I also watched Barry’s video, *The Journey Home to Love*. It took my relationship with God to an entirely new level. After watching the video, I ran to my closet and wept like a baby for thirty minutes. I was absolutely broken, deeply moved by the depth of His love. I could hardly believe how much God has wanted to be my Dad.

Below is the letter written by Barry Adams, based on what God said in the Bible:

My child,

You may not know me, but I know everything about you.

Psalms 139:1

I know when you sit down and when you rise up. *Psalms 139:2*

I am familiar with all your ways. *Psalms 139:3*

Even the very hairs on your head are numbered.

Matthew 10:29-31

For you were made in my image. *Genesis 1:27*

In me you live and move and have your being. *Acts 17:28*

For you are my offspring. *Acts 17:28*

I knew you even before you were conceived. *Jeremiah 1:4-5*

I chose you when I planned creation. *Ephesians 1:11-12*

You were not a mistake, for all your days are written in my book. *Psalms 139:15-16*

I determined the exact time of your birth and where you would live. *Acts 17:26*

You are fearfully and wonderfully made. *Psalms 139:14*

I knit you together in your mother's womb. *Psalms 139:13*

And brought you forth on the day you were born.

Psalms 71:6

I have been misrepresented by those who don't know me.

John 8:41-44

I am not distant and angry, but am the complete expression of love. *1 John 4:16*

And it is my desire to lavish my love on you. *1 John 3:1*

Simply because you are my child and I am your Father.

1 John 3:1

I offer you more than your earthly father ever could.

Matthew 7:11

For I am the perfect father. *Matthew 5:48*

Every good gift that you receive comes from my hand.

James 1:17

For I am your provider and I meet all your needs.

Matthew 6:31-33

My plan for your future has always been filled with hope.

Jeremiah 29:11

Because I love you with an everlasting love. *Jeremiah 31:3*

My thoughts toward you are countless as the sand on the seashore. *Psalms 139:17-18*

And I rejoice over you with singing. *Zephaniah 3:17*

I will never stop doing good to you. *Jeremiah 32:40*

For you are my treasured possession. *Exodus 19:5*

I desire to establish you with all my heart and all my soul.

Jeremiah 32:41

And I want to show you great and marvelous things.

Jeremiah 33:3

If you seek me with all your heart, you will find me.

Deuteronomy 4:29

Delight in me and I will give you the desires of your heart.

Psalms 37:4

For it is I who gave you those desires. *Philippians 2:13*

I am able to do more for you than you could possibly imagine.

Ephesians 3:20

For I am your greatest encourager. *2 Thessalonians 2:16-17*

I am also the Father who comforts you in all your troubles.

2 Corinthians 1:3-4

When you are brokenhearted, I am close to you.

Psalms 34:18

As a shepherd carries a lamb, I have carried you close to my heart. *Isaiah 40:11*

One day I will wipe away every tear from your eyes.

Revelation 21:3-4

And I'll take away all the pain you have suffered on this earth. *Revelation 21:3-4*

I am your Father, and I love you even as I love my son, Jesus.

John 17:23

For in Jesus, my love for you is revealed. *John 17:26*

He is the exact representation of my being. *Hebrews 1:3*

He came to demonstrate that I am for you, not against you.

Romans 8:31

And to tell you that I am not counting your sins.

2 Corinthians 5:18-19

Jesus died so that you and I could be reconciled.

2 Corinthians 5:18-19

His death was the ultimate expression of my love for you.

1 John 4:10

I gave up everything I loved that I might gain your love.

Romans 8:31-32

If you receive the gift of my son Jesus, you receive me.

1 John 2:23

And nothing will ever separate you from my love again.

Romans 8:38-39

Come home and I'll throw the biggest party heaven has ever seen. *Luke 15:7*

I have always been Father, and will always be Father.

Ephesians 3:14-15

My question is...Will you be my child? *John 1:12-13*

I am waiting for you. *Luke 15:11-32*

Love,

Your Dad, Almighty God¹

Once I grabbed hold of my Dad's incredible love, it only increased my appreciation for my earthly father. At that moment, old un-met needs suddenly faded into insignificance, and I could fully release my dad from my expectations of perfection.

1. Father's Love Letter, Barry Adams

IS HE YOUR DAD?

How do you know if you've truly received the Father's love? Is there a biblical test to know whether you have truly experienced this, or is it merely information in your head?

These passages tell you how you can know:

The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.
(Galatians 5:6)

We know that we have passed out of death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death... Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love... If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen... If anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him. (1 John 3:14; 4:7, 4:8; 4:20; 2:5)

According to these verses, there are only two possible outcomes:

1. You will love others, if you've experienced and believed God's love for you.
2. You will not love others, if you haven't experienced or received God's love.

This, in a nutshell, is the *Indebtedness Principle* at work. Of course, most people find themselves somewhere in between these two extremes. Nevertheless, these are two logical conclusions that the book of 1 John trumpets without apology. Just pause for a few minutes and consider these questions:

Do you struggle to be patient and forgiving toward others?

Do you have trouble listening and taking an interest in other people's lives?

Is it hard for you to serve, give and truly encourage others?

If you answered yes to these questions, there's a strong probability you haven't received God's love. If you had, you would love other people. Remember, the solution in this case is not to try harder, but to dig deeper.

You live out what you believe about God.

Those who always correct others believe God is always rebuking and correcting them; but those who believe God hears, understands, encourages and empowers them will be busy doing those same things for others. In order to love, you must learn to receive God's love first.

Those people who became personally involved with Jesus were never the same again. They shared the gospel, not because they had to do it out of guilt, but because they were compelled to *after* receiving His great love.

When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus... Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John replied, "Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard." (Acts 4:13, 18-20)

On Judgment Day, many will be surprised that they never truly knew God.

Imagine a man walking up to a woman and telling her he knows her name, phone number, address and social security number. Then imagine him smiling and proposing marriage. Obviously, most women would respond by saying, "I don't know where you got this information, but I wouldn't even dream of marrying someone I didn't know."

Imagine the man replying, "I can't believe you won't marry me! I know so much about you. Do you know I mowed your lawn and went grocery shopping for you yesterday? I even wrote a song for you! How can you not want to marry me? I've done so much for you."

She most likely would respond with, “I don’t know you. Leave me alone!”

How horrible it will be for those who think they’re Christians, only to be devastated when Jesus drops this bomb on them on Judgment Day. At that moment, they’ll regret simply following rules and studying facts about Him, but never really pursuing Him in a personal way. They tried to live the “Christian life,” based on what they knew about God, but they never had a personal relationship with Him.

Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of heaven... Many will say to me that day, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?” Then I will tell them plainly, “I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!”
(Matthew 7:21-23)

This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with His powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction...
(2 Thessalonians 1:7-9)

Love, courage and faith are not simply a list of character qualities you “work on” and check off one at a time. They result from an intimate encounter with Christ. In truth, the twelve disciples were really very ordinary men who were radically transformed by the greatest and most loving Hero the world has ever seen.

Many people fall into the exhausting trap of just trying harder to love others.

In the next chapter, you’ll learn how you can not only know the Father’s love in your head, but also experience it in your heart. You’ll also learn how to finally break the false and crippling association between your earthly dad and your Heavenly Dad.

SUMMARY

1. Jesus summarized your purpose statement: to love God and to love others as yourself.
2. You love God and others because He first loved you (the *Indebtedness Principle*).
3. God adopted you so He could be the Dad you've always wished for.
4. Your earthly dad's imperfections cause you to look for the perfect Dad—God.
5. The biblical test of whether or not you know God is your love for others.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do you have difficulty receiving praise or gifts?
2. How do you see God the Father? Do you see Him as your Dad?
3. When you think of God, what is His facial expression as He looks at you?



PRAYER

*Lord, help me to increasingly grasp the depth of Your love.
Teach me to see and receive Your love throughout the day.
I desire to love You more, so please continually pour out love into
my heart for You. Help me to understand the fact that You are
the perfect Dad I've always wanted. Thank You, Lord!*

OVERCOMING STRESS

Understanding and Mastering Your Mind and Heart

*Thoughts lead on to purposes; purposes go forth in action;
actions form habits; habits decide character;
and character fixes our destiny.*

—TYRON EDWARDS

*Creating a joint venture between head and heart
puts a power pack behind your goals.*

—DOC CHILDS

Have you ever wondered why so many of us give up on New Year's resolutions?

When you try to change your behavior rather than your belief system, the result is only a temporary change at best. Attempting to change habits using your will power alone is like putting a Band-Aid on a broken bone. Most dieting doesn't work for this same reason.

THE SECRET KEY

Imagine being handed a large, foot-long key. It's shiny and golden.

Can you feel how heavy and smooth it is? You close your hand around the key and squeeze it. You feel the excitement as you are led to a secret door. You are consumed with anticipation, wondering what you might possibly discover behind that door.

As you slip the key into the lock and carefully turn it, the door creaks open and light streams into a place long hidden. What precious treasures

have been concealed here? In the shadows you can make out the outline of a treasure chest full of truths—truths that will help you overcome stress and empower you to live the promised abundant life.

Though you may not have realized it, you’ve had access to this key all your life. You also discover that everyone else has had access to the same key, though few seem to put it to use.

*The only thing you have
the ability to control
is your mind.*

This key is God’s gift to you. This gift is *the choice to control your mind*.

World-famous author and public speaker, Dale Carnegie, was once asked what he thought was the greatest thing he’d ever learned. He said,

By far the most important lesson I have ever learned is the importance of what we think. If I knew what you think, I would know what you are. Our thoughts make us what we are. Our mental attitude is the x-factor that determines our faith. Emerson said a man is what he thinks about all day long. How could he possibly be anything else? I know now with a conviction beyond all doubt that the biggest problem you and I have to deal with is choosing the right thought. If we can do that we will be on the high road to solving all of our problems. The great philosopher who ruled the Roman Empire, Marcus Aurelius, summed it up in eight words, “Our life is what our thoughts make it.”

If you desire to truly grasp the depth of God’s love and the fact that He delights in you, you need to understand how your mind works in relation to your heart, your spirit and your belief system.

Many would list the keys to successful Christian living as follows: the Holy Spirit, Bible study, prayer and church involvement. I wholeheartedly agree. But you must first understand and manage all of these keys within your mind. When you understand that the only thing you have the ability to control is your mind, you can then be responsible to implement every other biblical “key” to your life.

WHAT IS THE “HEART?”

Have you ever wondered what the Bible means when it talks about the heart?

We all know it's not referring to the blood-pumping organ inside the chest. When we speak about the heart, we often are referring to our desires, feelings, memories, fears and opinions.

So what is the “heart”—that part of us that carries all these things?

The term “heart” represents what today has become generally known to experts as the subconscious mind. The conscious mind makes up ten percent of the total mind, and the subconscious the remaining ninety percent. The subconscious is the storehouse for all our desires, feelings, memories, fears and opinions. Unlike the conscious mind, it never sleeps.

Acting as a hard drive that stores information fed to it by the conscious mind, the subconscious lacks the capacity to reason or make choices. Its exclusive job is to obey what the conscious mind commands. The conscious mind is the captain of this mental ship.

Interestingly, if there's ever an argument between the conscious and the subconscious mind, guess who wins the argument? No question—the subconscious mind rules the day! This is evidenced by the fact that, as studies show, almost all buying decisions are emotionally based. In essence, when we speak of our “mind and heart,” we're referring to the two different sections of the mind, each having its own distinct role.

Following are Scripture verses that refer to our heart. It's interesting to read them now that we know what the heart is:

But the LORD said to Samuel, “Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.” (1 Samuel 16:7)

Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. (Deuteronomy 6:5)

HOW YOUR HEART WORKS

All of your experiences are recorded in your heart.

Your ability to manage your heart, as opposed to choosing to deny your feelings, determines how well you will process your memories and whether you will interpret your past from the standpoint of faith or the standpoint of a victim. Every picture from the past—pleasant or traumatic—is stored in the heart.

In the Old Testament, a man by the name of Joseph was violently assaulted by his own brothers, abandoned, left for dead in a pit and unjustly imprisoned for thirteen years. How would you have interpreted your memories had this been your story?

Joseph could have chosen the role of a victim. He could have become bitter, self-preserving or fearful. Instead, he desperately ran to and trusted in the One who was in charge of all things. He chose to interpret his past through the lens of faith in the One who intended good toward him. He was able to tell his brothers, “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives” (Genesis 50:20). *Intended* is a word clarifying God’s motive of love behind this event.

Repetitious truth thinking and reinterpreting your past through the lens of faith and forgiveness is how you are to finally break the false and crippling association between your earthly dad and your Heavenly Dad.

For the most part, when I find myself in situations that bring fear into my life, I realize that the fear is only revealing past experiences I never dealt with. Thank God that He makes all things new! Now, when these situations reveal the pain I experienced in the past, I say to my Lord: “Thank You that I am no longer that person who was afraid or angry with that (situation or person). Today, I choose to forgive and act courageously! I know that your loving and powerful hand is behind everything that has happened in my life.”

When you wallow in fear and bitterness, your heart begins to create false associations with both the past and the present. Here are some examples:

- A dog viciously attacked Harold when he was very young. Ever since, he hasn't wanted anything to do with dogs, including little yappers.
- Katie had a big brother who was continually finding fault with her while she was growing up. As an adult, she became closed-minded when faced with any conflicts. Now, she projects the anger she felt toward her brother onto anyone in authority over her.
- Jerry grew up with a controlling mom who had the tendency to micromanage his life. When he married, he began to overreact to his wife's suggestions. Jerry's bitterness toward his mom caused him to be overly sensitive and defensive with his wife.
- Sheri's dad was non-communicative. When at home, he spent most of his time watching television and reading the newspaper. Because he failed to initiate a relationship with Sheri, she now rejects God because she believes He, too, is a distant and uncaring Father.

Every overreaction simply reflects the hurt that is buried in your heart.

<i>Every overreaction simply reflects the hurt that is buried in your heart.</i>	Stuffed down fear and bitterness will inevitably surface. In reality, circumstances don't break you, they just reveal who you really are inside. Conflicts always trigger unresolved fear and bitterness from the past. The issue at hand is rarely the real issue. All of your fears, bitterness and strongly held beliefs take up residence in your heart.
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For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. (Jesus, in Matthew 15:19)

BELIEF ABOUT BELIEFS

A belief is a thought you accept as true, whether or not it really is. A thought begins in the conscious mind, but as time allows the thought to marinate, it ends up in the heart. Your belief system resides in the heart, not in the conscious mind. It is the result of the repetition of thoughts you have

chosen. The repetition of a thought, supported by certain experiences and observations you've made (reasonable or not), produces a belief.

By the age of thirteen or fourteen, your mental programming regarding marriage, finances and relationships have been set in your subconscious mind. As adults, your life is the evidence, or the printouts, so to speak, of the mental programming you've received up to that point.

Dr. Stephen Kraus, a scientist from Harvard University, discovered after interviewing numerous extremely successful people that the one key to success is belief. "Belief," he says, "is a powerful predictor of success." He understands that our belief always determines our actions.

So what exactly happens with your mind and brain when it comes to forming beliefs?

THE MIND-BRAIN CONNECTION

From a purely spiritual viewpoint, growing a loving relationship with the beautiful God of the universe is best done by:

1. Reading the Bible and talking with Him
2. Dependence on and assistance from the Holy Spirit
3. Being underneath the covering of a local church

From a purely scientific and human viewpoint, what happens to you when we get involved in the activities listed above? All three originate and are processed within your spirit, conscious mind and heart.

Through the years, I have observed that many Christians go to seminars and camps. As one who has also participated in these kinds of events, one of the questions that continually runs through my mind is: "Why are the results of these events short lived? What's the key to long term and permanent change?" Based on my studies of the Bible, supported by scientific evidence, the key to long-term change is repetition of truthful thinking that produces truthful beliefs within the context of a relationship with your heavenly Dad.

Truthful beliefs will always produce the promised abundant life. Lies always produce stress.

Allow me to illustrate how the brain is affected by the mind's repetitious thinking of truth.

My four-year-old daughter loves to learn. Let's examine what happens in her brain during the learning process.

The brain is made up of billions of nerve cells called neurons. Every time my daughter learns something new, a baby neuron or nerve cell is born. This process is known as neurogenesis. When she learns more about a subject, tiny branches called dendrites grow and spread out from the neurons and connect and communicate with other neurons through synapses. The more frequently she hears about what she's learned, the more her dendrites grow. The more her dendrites spread inside her brain, the more her brain-power increases.

Now that you've seen how your brain develops as you process new information and the resulting emotions, let me illustrate how your mind changes from believing a lie to believing truth.

Dr. Martell grew up thinking the earth was flat. That thought was contained in a neuron inside his brain. Since he has believed this most of his life, the dendrites on this neuron were quite vast with their branches intricately spread throughout his brain.

Now let's say you went to Dr. Martell and told him the earth was round. You provided pictures, detailed videos and testimonies from renowned scientists. Because this is so contrary to his deeply held personal convictions, he will probably experience some intense emotional shock. Since the evidence was too conclusive to ignore, he makes the decision to believe this newfound discovery once he gets past his initial surprise. As a result of believing this new truth, a baby neuron starts to grow inside his brain, and with continued thinking, an aggressive web of dendrites will gradually spread. Every week for the next year, Martell reads articles on the subject, educating himself more and more. This constant reminder helps develop the widespread growth of his dendrites, imbedding his belief deeply. It's unlikely that Martell could ever be convinced by anyone that the earth is flat. That old flat-earth neuron has withered long ago, and has been replaced by the new.

Dendrites follow the use-it-or-lose-it rule. Think a thought once and your dendrite won't last. Think it over and over again for a long period of time, and the neural network in your brain grows like a spider's web. This is how belief systems develop in your brain. Dendrites have a half-life of fourteen days. When you don't repeat a thinking process within fourteen days after first learning a new idea, half of the dendrites wither. Fourteen days later, they die by half again. This is why there are so many books available that claim you can break or form a habit in thirty days.

Now, you're probably asking, "How does this have anything to do with God?"

God is the One who designed your brain and He knows that if you don't implement daily habits of remembering, truth dendrites begin to shrivel and die. Did you know that in Deuteronomy alone, the word *remember* is mentioned seventeen times? The same admonition to remember is repeated over and over throughout the Bible:

Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. (Deuteronomy 8:2)

But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your forefathers, as it is today. (Deuteronomy 8:18)

Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them slip from your heart as long as you live. (Deuteronomy 4:9)

We are what we repeatedly do.—Aristotle

When you are not daily remembering God, your mind will unavoidably accept lies from the overwhelming voice of the world. Beginning in the

next chapter, you'll learn in more detail the 7 habits that you will be implementing to *remember* your God and dramatically grow your truth dendrites.

MIND MISMANAGEMENT PRODUCES STRESS

Your conscious mind is the gatekeeper of your heart.

It's the manager, programmer and bodyguard of your heart. The conscious mind makes the choice to correct the lie your heart believes with the truth of God's Word. This explains why the Bible says it's so critical that you protect your heart: "Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life" (Proverbs 4:23).

When you choose not to take responsibility for your thoughts, stress happens.

During his work at Stanford Medical School, renowned cellular biologist Dr. Bruce Lipton concluded that stress is caused by false beliefs. In other words, lies cause stress. As mentioned earlier, lies cause fear and bitterness, which eventually causes stress.

Stress activates your body's emergency alarm system, producing a very toxic and dangerous hormone called cortisol. Your bodies were designed to tolerate up to twenty-five grams of cortisol per day. The problem is that the "what if" thinking pushes the cortisol levels way over that limit:

- What if my husband dies on his way home from work?
- What if my boss fires me?
- What if I can't make my car payment next week?
- What if I fail my next test?

All those fictitious fear-based thoughts cause stress and release cortisol into your bloodstream. Cortisol slowly destroys the white blood cells and other necessary cancer-fighting cells in your immune system. Cortisol interferes with the body's natural ability to heal itself. Stress is to your body what termites are to a house. It slowly but surely eats you to death.

The immune system is like a chain made up of links. Illness and disease are waiting to rain down on your immune system and will find the weakest link to attack the path of least resistance. Designed to protect you from

illness, the immune system struggles under the destructive effects of stress, as proven by hundreds of research studies.

Most people who choose to live a life of fear and bitterness, destroy their immune system and become ill. What's sad is some have mistakenly blamed the cause of their illness on heredity, the environment, demonic influence, old age or bad luck. Though there are definitely exceptions, and it's clear that not everyone who's ill lives a stressed life, it is inevitable that those who do suffer with stress suffer physically.

I strongly encourage an open-minded approach to this subject and a willingness to research the connection of stress (whether as a cause or aggravation) to almost every illness—depression, cancer, asthma, allergies, heart disease, lupus, arthritis, insomnia, obesity, etc.

The tendency to avoid problems and the emotional suffering inherent in them is the primary basis of all human mental illness.—M. Scott Peck

Stress, society's code word for fear and bitterness, is the primary killer today. According to the Center for Disease Control, eighty three percent of all deaths of adults between twenty-one and sixty-five are related to lifestyle and stress. It has in many cases become so much a way of life that it isn't clearly recognized, or it is simply denied.

It is imperative to become reconciled to God, others and yourself, rather than simply medicating your hidden and silent misery with a deathly array of emotional anesthetics.

The sorrows of those will increase who run after other gods.
(Psalm 16:4)

EMOTIONAL ANESTHETICS FOR THE HEART

As mentioned earlier, our society offers an abundance of emotional anesthetics to aid in the attempt to relieve stress, instead of finding our rest in the God of rest Himself.

A most popular and dangerous God-replacement (idol) today is television. The interesting thing about TV is that your subconscious mind is not able to determine what is real or true and what isn't. It views everything it sees as reality and truth, which explains why you become emotionally affected while watching a show or a movie.

Multiple studies have proven that watching TV is mostly a subconscious experience, which is literally identical to being hypnotized. The viewer could go from a normal state of mind to a hypnotized mental state within thirty seconds when watching television. The mind is left vulnerable to be brainwashed by whatever message it hears and sees. What does the Bible say about this?

Do not bring a detestable thing into your house or you, like it, will be set apart for destruction... I will set before my eyes no vile thing. (Deuteronomy 7:26, Psalm 101:3)

Have you ever wondered why watching TV is so addictive? While you're watching TV, your brain releases a chemical called dopamine. Dopamine is the "feel good" hormone released by the pituitary gland into your bloodstream, the same hormone released through these other activities:

- listening to your favorite music
- using drugs: alcohol, cocaine and tobacco
- eating/drinking
- sexual orgasm
- accomplishing a task from your to-do list
- playing video games
- watching movies

Interestingly, all the above activities have a tendency to become addictive. And every addiction is rooted in the need to be loved. Addiction is a form of slavery when you choose a counterfeit and deceptive promise of feeding your hunger to be loved. It's the pursuit of temporary pleasure (dopamine rush) to silence the cries of your heart to be loved. Phillip Yancey has said, "what the Old Testament calls idolatry, enlightened Westerners call 'addiction.'"

My people have committed two sins: they have turned from Me, the living water, and dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water. (Jeremiah 2:13)

How many times have you watched TV, only to be left empty and wanting more after you turn it off? There's always an emotional dip that occurs after you've left the fantasy world you wished you lived in. It's the alternative escape from your painful, present condition.

—————
*Every addiction is
rooted in the need
to be loved.*
—————

There's nothing inherently evil in these activities mentioned above. The motive and reason for taking part in these activities is what makes it idolatry. Addiction is a condition of the heart.

Satan's goal for you is a cluttered mind. If you live without the power of solitude and the reflective thinking that results, you turn into mental zombies.

I remember when I used to anxiously look forward to a vacation to escape my stress. Since then, I've learned that even if I spent a month in Hawaii, my problems would still find me. They reside inside of me. A vacation, then, needs to happen within me, in the rest and peace that originate in a trusting relationship with my heavenly Dad

You have filled my heart with greater joy than when their grain and new wine abound... The LORD is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in him, and I am helped. My heart leaps for joy and I will give thanks to him in song... I will go to the altar of God, to God, my joy and my delight... Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love, that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days. (Psalms 4:7; 28:7; 43:4; 90:14)

RESTING IN GOD

Stress is the result of trying to control something that's uncontrollable. You try to control a situation or a relational outcome because you fear the

outcome will be the opposite of what you want. More often than not, you have this fear because you've believed a lie.

This is the reason the Bible says to repent, which literally means *to change your thinking*. Because God is your rest, you don't have to believe lies that stress you out. He wants you to receive the enormity of His love toward you. He is your rest. You don't ever have to find "relaxation" in a thousand different sources to relieve your stress.

Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint. (Isaiah 40:28-31)

To "hope in the Lord" (Isaiah 40:31) is a mind-heart decision and a choice. The result is that you'll have unexpected and supernatural strength!

I have personally experienced this amazing unexpected strength. In the past, I had chronic fatigue syndrome and hypoglycemia. I needed food at least every three hours to keep my blood-sugar levels up. As I've gotten to know my Lord on a deeper level, I've experienced energy beyond what I ever thought was possible. In addition, I got to a point where I was able to fast!

I have read countless scientific studies citing cases involving people who were healed from every known disease out there. If you are struggling with an illness or an addiction, you have hope! Please believe that God is more powerful and loving than you could possibly ever imagine.

Years before my own personal breakthrough, a friend of mine, Sean, told me his story. He was healed from a ten-year struggle with Multiple Chemical Sensitivity (MCS). I remembered thinking at the time, *Good for you, but not for me*. I was too closed-hearted to even consider the possibility that the mind-body connection applied to my life.

Awhile later, things in my life started to change, for the worse. After having experienced many years of considerable stability and financial success, we faced a two-year period of upheaval. I had four different jobs, moved five times, lost a close loved one and lost all of the equity from our real estate properties. We also lost thousands of dollars in a real estate venture and became buried in debt. In addition, we had the responsibility of caring for our two young children.

This was the stressful context that set the stage for the birth of this book.

It was during this difficult time that Kristy and I had asked the question, “Isn’t there more to Christianity than this?” There was no doubt that God had placed this deep hunger we were experiencing in our hearts. This was the beginning of an aggressive quest through biblical, medical and scientific research.

Our lives haven’t been the same since.

The interesting thing is, the joy and peace we began to experience had nothing to do with the distressing situation we were in! In fact, our difficult circumstances gave us the perfect context to get closer to our God. We experienced many miracles during this time—the kinds of things that we used to think happened only to “other” people.

We’ve begun the exciting journey to the promised abundant life. Abundant life is not a life-promise for comfort, even though I have no problem with comfort. Abundant life is strength in the midst of trials; wisdom in the midst of confusion; peace in the midst of turmoil; joy in the midst of tragedy; and most of all intimacy with my God in the midst of difficulties.

REPROGRAMMING YOUR MIND’S HARD DRIVE

Did you know the Bible repeats seventy-five times the command to reprogram your mind?

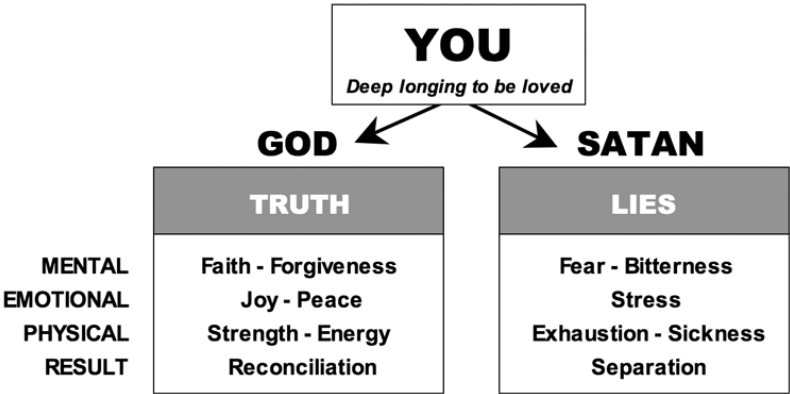
The word *repentance* is used in the Bible to convey the original meaning of changing one’s mind. The Bible teaches that the first step to following Jesus is to change your thinking. Change your mind from what? From

lies you have unsuspectingly believed. Deuteronomy is adamant about the consequences that will occur if you don't.

However, if you do not obey the LORD your God and do not carefully follow all his commands and decrees I am giving you today all these curses will come upon you and overtake you... The LORD will send on you curses, confusion and rebuke in everything you put your hand to... The LORD will plague you with diseases until he has destroyed you...The LORD will afflict you with madness, blindness and confusion of mind. (Deuteronomy 28:15,20-21,28)

In other words:

- 1. If you love Him, you will obey Him.
- 2. When you don't obey, it's because you don't love Him.
- 3. The reason you don't love Him is that you believe the lie that He doesn't love you.
- 4. These lies cause fear and bitterness.
- 5. Fear and bitterness cause emotional distress also known as stress.
- 6. Stress destroys your immune system.
- 7. When your immune system breaks down, it can't fight illness and disease effectively.



The best and only way to reprogram your mind is not by simply eliminating all the lies you believe, but to replace them. This is the power of the *Replacement Principle*. The smartest way to take a bone out of a dog's mouth is not by grabbing it and playing tug-of-war. It's by dropping a fat and juicy porterhouse steak in front of him.

Don't eliminate, replace.

Feed your faith, and your fear will starve to death. Fear knocked at the door. Faith answered. No one was there. Fear and faith cannot keep house together; when one enters, the other departs.—Vern McLellan

The truth that reprograms your mind occurs in the *context* of your relationship with God. The more you spend time with Him, the more your thinking will gradually transform.

Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. (Romans 12:2)

Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. (Deuteronomy 11:18-19)

In the remainder of this book you will be applying all that you learned in the last five chapters. You will be discovering the seven habits to overcome stress and live the promised abundant life. This is where you'll really see the changes begin in your life!

SUMMARY

1. Your thoughts control how you live your life.
2. Your "heart" is your subconscious mind.

3. Beliefs are thoughts deemed to be true.
4. Repetition grows dendrites in your brain.
5. Stress in your mind affects your body.
6. “Emotional anesthetics” are society’s response to stress.
7. Throughout the Bible, God tells you to change your thinking.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How have you seen stress affect your body?
2. How have you seen repetitious thoughts play out in your life?
3. Do you use “emotional anesthetics” in your life? What are they?



PRAYER

*Thank You so much, Lord, that You've given me the gift
of the choice to control my thinking. I humble myself before You.
Help me take action instead of merely gathering information.
Open my eyes to any lies I have believed without realizing it.
Help me deepen my relationship with You and with others.*