

The Daniel Dilemma



How to
Stand Firm & Love Well
in a Culture
of Compromise

Chris Hodges

New York Times Bestselling Author

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BOOKS

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*To my children, Sarah, Michael, David, Jonathan, and Joseph
You grew up in one of the most challenging cultures ever,
and like Daniel you stood strong in your convictions while
loving everyone around you. When you were growing up, each
morning before you left for school, I told you to “be a leader,
not a follower.” And now as adults you’re doing just that. You
didn’t let the world change you—you’re changing the world!
I am so proud of you.*

—DAD



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FOREWORD

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FOREWORD

FOREWORD



Introduction

Balancing Act—Standing Firm and Loving Well

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

—HEBREWS 13:8

It was one of the most unique gifts I'd ever received. A friend in our church had blessed me for Christmas by giving me one of the most extravagant luxuries a man can have: a handmade, custom-tailored suit. I learned these suits are called “bespoke” by the British, who are famous for their Savile Row suit-making, the height of high-end menswear. My appointment was with the best tailor in Birmingham, an older gentleman I'll call Joe. Born overseas, Joe had been tailoring in our country for decades, earning himself a national reputation for excellence.

When my wife Tammy and I arrived at my appointment—you didn't think I was going to pick out fabrics and buttons by myself, do you?—Joe greeted us at the entrance to his shop. It was a discreet, unadvertised location tucked in among dentists' offices and beauty parlors on the outskirts of downtown. The room he ushered us into smelled of starched linen and clean wool, and it was as neatly organized as the men's section at any department store. But mixed in among the fabric swatches and photos of garments on the walls, I noticed several tribal gods staring back at me.

“Welcome, Pastor and Mrs. Pastor!” said Joe, his eyes

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twinkling. “I am so happy to serve you today and will make you a beautiful suit for you to look your best!”

“It’s going to take more than a new suit to help me look my best,” I deadpanned as Joe chuckled and Tammy rolled her eyes. “But I hear you’re the best in town, so if anyone can do it, you’re the man!”

My appointment flew by as Joe measured and scribbled in his little notebook, recording more angles on my body than I knew existed. He patiently showed us flannels and tweeds, wool knits and synthetic blends of the finest fabrics from around the world. Who knew there were so many details in making a man’s suit? Growing up, I just went to JCPenney like everyone else, and my mom bought a suit that was on sale and fit. Now, in Joe’s capable hands, I looked like I was ready for *GQ*!

Finally, with our selections made, it was time to leave, and I thanked Joe sincerely for such a remarkable experience. “You are most welcome, Pastor,” he said with a solemn smile. “You are a delight, not at all what I expected.”

Curious, I said, “Why is that, Joe? What *did* you expect?”

He hesitated for a moment before saying, “I have made suits for many other pastors and people who tell me they are Christians. They see my people’s gods on the wall and say they are not real. One man in particular [he named a nationally prominent leader known for evangelism] asked me to have a meal with him so he could tell me about your Jesus. I dined with him, but when I could not give him the answer he wanted, he told me I would be sent to hell.” Joe’s voice faltered with emotion. “You, on the other hand, seem most kind. You treat me with respect and make me laugh. I thank you. You are much different than what I was expecting.”

“I’m sorry you have had such negative experiences with Christians,” I said. “That is not the heart of Jesus. I’d love for you

to meet the people I worship with so you can see it doesn't have to be that way. Would you be willing to visit my church?"

"Me? Visit your church?" he said, genuinely surprised.

"Of course," I said, placing my hand on his shoulder. "You would sit on the front row with Tammy and me, and you'd be our honored guest. We would love for you to join us."

He grinned like a teenager contemplating an invitation to his first school dance. "Thank you, Pastor," he said. "You are most kind. I would love to!"

When I returned to Joe's shop about ten days later for my final fitting, he beamed when he saw me and introduced me to his cousin, a man only a few years younger than himself. After pleasantries were exchanged, I gently revisited my invitation for Joe to visit our church some time. Unexpectedly, his cousin asked if he might be able to come as well.

"Yes, we would love to have you both." I said.

"Thank you, Pastor!" they said in unison, shaking my hand and looking like I had invited them to the Super Bowl instead of to a sermon series.

Correct but Not Helpful

As I've thought about this experience, I've wondered why Joe and his cousin responded so differently to my invitation than they did in their prior encounters with Christians, especially when all our offers were essentially the same. I respect and admire the person Joe ate dinner with as a strong man of God. Upon reflection, though, I realized his style of sharing the gospel tends to be more confrontational than mine. While I agree with this pastor's beliefs, I question his technique. In his approach to Joe, he was *correct* but he wasn't *helpful*. Joe walked away from their conversation feeling the door had been slammed in his face.

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And that's the problem. Often we mean well, but we don't love well. In every single encounter Jesus had with people, we see an unwavering attitude of love even as he calls them to leave their sin behind and follow him. My favorite example of takes place with the woman caught in adultery.

The Jewish religious leaders had dragged this poor woman from her lover's bed into the streets where they confronted Jesus, reminding him that the woman's punishment, according to the Law of Moses, was death by stoning. These Pharisees wanted to trap Christ between the old law, which was the traditional path to righteousness before God, and the new grace that he had been preaching. But Jesus's response literally left them speechless:

They kept demanding an answer, so he stood up again and said, "All right, but let the one who has never sinned throw the first stone!" Then he stooped down again and wrote in the dust.

When the accusers heard this, they slipped away one by one, beginning with the oldest, until only Jesus was left in the middle of the crowd with the woman. Then Jesus stood up again and said to the woman, "Where are your accusers? Didn't even one of them condemn you?"

"No, Lord," she said.

And Jesus said, "Neither do I. Go and sin no more." (John 8:7–11 NLT)

Don't you just love Jesus's response here? He doesn't condemn the woman like the religious legalists; instead he shows her grace. But he doesn't let her off the hook either; he tells her to "go and sin no more." Jesus avoids the extremes of either-or by displaying both love *and* righteousness.

I hold his example close as a model of how to interact with the diverse people I encounter with increasing frequency. Whether it's

someone like my friend Joe who has a different cultural background, a same-sex couple who moves into our neighborhood, or a liberal activist wanting to debate a topic on which we disagree, the challenge remains the same: how to stand firm *and* love well at the same time.

Here's what we need to remember: Truth without grace is mean. Grace without truth is meaningless. Truth and grace together are good medicine. And that's what this book is all about.

Calm in the Cultural Storm

Today, perhaps more than ever, we have the privilege of loving others and offering them God's truth that we're all sinful and in need of a Savior. This is exactly why Jesus came to live as a man—yet perfectly—and die on the cross. His sacrifice makes it possible for us to find hope in a relationship with a holy God. Once we experience his forgiveness and begin living in the freedom of God's grace, we're responsible to share this good news with everyone around us—no matter who they are or how different from us they may be.

Truth without grace is mean. Grace without truth is meaningless. Truth and grace together are good medicine.

This responsibility means we balance the truth of the standards in God's Word with the reality of his loving acceptance and life-changing grace. In other words, we are to do what Jesus did with the woman caught in adultery. Living out a balanced approach isn't easy, and it almost always stretches us beyond our comfort zones. Often, the tension between standing firm and loving well paralyzes us. We want to demonstrate the love of God to others, to serve those in need, and to share the good news of the

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gospel with those apart from God, but we don't want to embrace the immorality that often seems to cause and emerge from so many rapid cultural changes.

Consequently, we feel like we don't know our place anymore. We're frustrated or even confused, torn between what we hear in church and what we see online. We feel caught between extremes, not wanting to alienate people who need God just as much as we do, and not wanting to compromise our convictions and biblical beliefs.

We have questions with no easy answers:

- What's my role as a follower of Jesus in today's constantly shifting culture?
- How can I stand firm in my faith and still be relevant to people who seem so different from me?
- How should I respond when others say my Christian views are unloving?
- How does the Christian message apply to everyone when there are so many differences in culture, ethnicity, lifestyle, orientation, political beliefs, and spiritual practices?
- Is the entire Bible still relevant, or are some parts culturally outdated?
- Is Scripture reliable?
- Doesn't God love us all? Didn't he send his Son to die so that all may be saved?
- If I stand for truth, what will people think of me?
- How do I help my kids engage in culture without losing them to it?
- How do I handle the barrage of constant change in our world?

When culture shifts—and it always has and always will—we tend toward the extremes, in part because they seem easier and

require less of us. We may feel so angry, threatened, and frustrated that we want to withdraw from culture, attacking and condemning people who don't agree with us. Or, we may become so battle weary that we're tempted to issue a blanket acceptance that avoids any cultural conflicts.

But the good news of the gospel means we don't have to become paralyzed by extremes. We can be the calm in the midst of our cultural storm. There's another response we see demonstrated in the Bible, not only by Jesus, but also by someone in cultural circumstances shockingly similar to our own. This example reveals an ordinary person thrust into extraordinary events and the challenges that forced him to maintain a faith based on God's truth and characterized by God's grace.

This person is the prophet Daniel.

Being Right or Being Righteous

If we study the life of the prophet Daniel and the dilemma he faced, we can learn to engage our culture without compromising our faith. He faced drastic differences and diversity, and endured the immorality and corruption of a shifting culture that closely resembles our own. He not only persevered through the slippery morals and rebelliousness of his own people, but Daniel remained steadfast when thrust into one of the most decadent cultures in all of history—ancient Babylon.

Here's how it happened: After the reigns of King David and his son Solomon, Israel splintered along geographical and tribal lines. Within a few generations, the ten northern tribes of Israel abandoned their faith in the living God and started worshipping idols. Obviously, God wasn't pleased and sent warning after warning to the northern kingdom, only to have them ignored. Finally,

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their disobedience left him no choice; he allowed the Assyrians to conquer all ten tribes in the northern kingdom (see 2 Kings 17).

Judah, including the smaller tribe of Benjamin, comprised the southern kingdom, where Daniel lived. Despite watching what happened to their northern kinsmen, the remaining people of Israel also drifted away from God. Again, God issued the same kind of warnings through his prophets—Jeremiah, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah. But the nation of Judah refused to hear the messages of these men.

This time judgment arrived in the form of the Babylonians under the leadership of their emperor Nebuchadnezzar. Having already conquered Assyria and Egypt, they descended on Judah and decimated the city of Jerusalem. They not only looted the temple, but also enslaved the Jewish people. Judah crumbled, and the people of Israel became prisoners of war in an alien culture, exiled from their homeland.

Daniel was one of these exiles. He was probably around sixteen years old when he was transported along with thousands of other Jews to be slaves in Babylon. His situation was as bleak as it gets. There was no leader organizing a secret revolt, no legal recourse or government appeal to help him. Logically speaking, Daniel had no hope.

And yet because he served God he never despaired and never gave up. Daniel had no one else, yet still he trusted God to see him through. With humble confidence, Daniel glorified God through his actions and speech. His character and conduct stood out because it was both respectful and resolute. He didn't conform to the demands of Nebuchadnezzar and all the pagan customs of the Babylonians, but he didn't act self-righteous, judgmental, or defensive either. He knew the goal wasn't to be right; *it was to have influence*. He knew being right and being righteous are not the same.

For the next seventy years of his life, Daniel faced life-threatening tests—from watching friends endure a fiery furnace to spending the night in a lions’ den. But even when the foreign culture shifted around him, Daniel never wavered in his faith.

In response to Daniel’s steadfast faith and commitment to both truth and grace, God demonstrated his supernatural power and honored the one who honored him by blessing Daniel with the respect of four different Babylonian emperors. Finally, the last one, Cyrus, granted the Jewish people freedom so they could return home.

Now that’s influence!

Catalysts for Change

Daniel stood firm and loved everyone around him—just like Jesus did. Just like we’re called to do when culture shifts. I know it’s not easy to balance truth and grace in the midst of such drastic cultural change. It’s easier to disengage and try to avoid culture altogether. It’s easier to judge and condemn those who don’t agree with us. And it’s just as easy to acquiesce and accept anything and everything. But that’s not what we’re called to do or who we’re called to be. While God calls us to be his people set apart, he also commands us to go into all the world and share the good news of Jesus Christ.

The same problem that existed in biblical times continues to challenge us today: how can we remain anchored in our Christian faith when the white-water rapids of cultural change threaten to carry us away? How do we respond when culture shifts? Do we shift with it and “go with the flow”? If not, how do we interact meaningfully with a world that seems upside down to everything we believe?

From the day Daniel arrived in Babylon, he stood strong in

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his faith. His example shines across the centuries and provides us with a clear model of how to live a godly life in an evil culture. We don't have to compromise our beliefs or actively participate

How can we remain anchored in our Christian faith when the whitewater rapids of cultural change want to carry us away?

in an "anything goes" mindset. Nor do we have to sacrifice respectful relationships with others by judging and condemning them.

We can find a balance between bowing down and being a doormat and becoming

hardened into a ramrod of self-righteousness. But avoiding these extremes requires humility, compassion, and dependence on God. It won't be easy. We will only reflect who he truly is, both his holy righteousness and his gracious love, by relying on his Spirit to guide us.

Like the prophet Daniel, you and I can become catalysts for redemptive change in our time. We can be people of influence who know our goal is not to be *right* but to be *effective*. We can be people who stand out because of the way we relate to others, especially those different from us. We can be people who serve those in need with a willing spirit and gracious generosity. We can be people who reflect the loving-kindness of a good God.

We can be people who stand firm *and* love well.

Part One

CULTURE'S GREATEST
IMPACT: CONFUSED
IDENTITIES

Who Am I?



One

THE ATTEMPT TO RENAME ME

It ain't what they call you; it's what you answer to.

—W. C. FIELDS

My name is Christopher Wayne Hodges. My parents really didn't have any rhyme or reason for choosing the names Christopher or Wayne; they just liked those names and the way they sounded together. As it turns out, the name Christopher means "Christ-bearer," which seems fitting. I like the fact that my name and what I do are one and the same. Every year I have the opportunity to share the gospel of Jesus with hundreds of thousands of people. I represent Christ. I am a Christ-bearer. My name defines me accurately. It validates me. I like my name.

But it's not the name I always believed.

Growing up, I wasn't very popular. I didn't have any athletic skills, I wasn't very smart, and I was pretty shy. That led to some fairly intense bullying from those who saw me as someone they could pick on without any repercussions. I tried to avoid it, even laugh it off at times, but it didn't work. I had to do something—anything—so I decided to win friends by taking on a new persona: Mischief Maker. I'd be the one to take the dare, crack the jokes, or do the ridiculous stunt just to make the crowd laugh—and hopefully accept me.

My strategy seemed to work, for a while. I made a few kids

laugh, and I got noticed. But then I began getting into trouble on a regular basis. Basically, I was trying to live out a name that wasn't who I really was. It was the name I thought I needed so I could find acceptance and be liked.

But when I turned fifteen years old, I gave my life to Jesus and the process of healing and redeeming my name began. I discovered the calling on my life and a passion to share Christ with the world around me. Soon I had no doubt in my mind that I had been named by God—that I had a God-given identity that he knew before I was even created. But I could only be the man he created me to be if I understood and accepted my true name.

What's in a Name?

I learned the hard way that names are important. What we believe about ourselves influences every decision we make and every action we take. And that's why, when my wife, Tammy, and I started having children, we decided to be very intentional about naming our children: Sarah Beth, Michael Robert, David William, Jonathan Bryan, and Joseph Christopher.

Okay, the truth is, we just liked the name we gave our daughter, Sarah. There wasn't any deep spiritual reasoning. We're from the South and had just moved to Colorado when she was born, so we wanted something that sounded Southern. Later we discovered that Sarah means "princess," and she reflects this royal quality in every way.

When we started naming the boys, we came up with a formula: a biblical or Hebrew first name followed by a family name.

- Michael (after the archangel) Robert (after my dad)
- David (after the giant-slayer, psalmist, and king) William (after Tammy's dad)

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- Jonathan (after David's best friend) Bryan (after my grandfather Alvin Bryan)
- Joseph (after the son of Jacob in Genesis) Christopher (after me)

Curiously enough, we've noticed over the years that each of our boys embodies the traits of both the Bible character and the person in the family for whom they're named. Coincidence? Maybe. But there is something to this name thing.

Of course, we all have names. Whether or not we reflect the characteristics of our given names at birth is not the point. What matters most is the name we have written on our hearts and minds. It's what we believe about ourselves and then live out.

Maybe you were labeled "stupid" or "fat" as a kid, and despite earning a college degree or running 5Ks, you still see yourself based on those childhood labels.

Perhaps you've let sickness define you. Cancer or diabetes or MS is not only your disease, but it's also become your identity.

You might let your relationships define you. You're a husband or wife, an ex, a sister or brother, a boss, an employee.

Perhaps rejection, divorce, and betrayal have become your identity.

You may have let circumstances determine your name. Maybe the death of a loved one, tragedy, or bankruptcy have become your identity.

What's your name right now? What are the names you secretly feel are attached to you like gum on the bottom of your shoe? It's important to identify these. The names you allow to label you often title the scripts you live by. What you believe in dictates what you live out.

This explains why the number one goal of your Enemy, the Devil, is to attack your identity. He wants to give you a different

name—one that stands in direct contrast to the name God gave you when he created you.

Identity Theft

We live in a world where people have become adept at doing what is right in their own eyes, defining their identities according to their own constantly shifting ideas. From school-age children who want to change their genders to couples of the same gender planning their weddings, it's increasingly acceptable to pursue what feels right.

“Live your own truth” has become a bumper-sticker mantra for generations conditioned to believe they are entitled to reinvent themselves and live any way they choose. Reality TV portrays how anyone can be a star—models, bachelors, chefs, home buyers, politicians, and tattoo artists—as long as they remain “true to themselves.”

The names you let label you often title the scripts you live by.

I can see why this idea might be appealing, this freedom to embrace the desires our hearts harbor within them. After all, if I allowed my feelings to dictate my decisions, I probably wouldn't qualify to be a pastor. Instead, I'd be trying to make as much money as possible in order to create the most comfortable, pleasurable life possible, playing golf at every great course around the world. And while I may still struggle with those desires sometimes, I know I can't trust them to determine what's ultimately best for me. God has created me and called me for *his* purposes, not my own.

No matter how much I might wish I were a millionaire golf pro, I know that's not the life I'm called to live. The truth is, we don't have the privilege of defining ourselves, and there are limits

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to how far we can reinvent ourselves. Why? The reason is simple: we've already been defined by God, our Creator. God knows who he made each of us to be, and in the end his design is always better than what we come up with on our own.

Daniel understood this core truth. His faith in God tethered him to it throughout his time in captivity. Steeped in a culture that elevated sensual pleasure, idol worship, and moral decadence, the Babylonians focused on many things other than God. And as they sought to assimilate their new subjects, they tried to pull Daniel and his fellow captives into their lifestyle by casting shadows on their identities. Notice the very first thing that happened to Daniel and his friends once they arrived in Babylon:

Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring into the king's service some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility—young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king's palace. . . . The chief official gave them new names: to Daniel, the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego. (Dan. 1:3–4, 7)

In those days, when victors integrated enslaved captives into their own culture, it was customary to change the captives' names as a sign of ownership. The Israelites belonged to their captors now; no longer would they be known by their old names from their homeland. But these Babylonian names weren't simply different names; these new names were meant to obliterate the Israelites' identities.

They were a mockery to their Jewish heritage.
They turned truth inside out.

THE DANIEL DILEMMA

They were idolatrous names.

By comparing the original and Babylonian names of these four Hebrew young men, we get a clear picture of our enemy's strategy, the same one he uses on us today: he labels us with a new name so he can lie to us about a false identity. Let's take a closer look at how this happened with Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah.

*From Daniel: "God is my judge" to
Belteshazzar: "Lady, protect the king."*

The first thing the Babylonians did was change the gender of Daniel's name—an inherent part of each person's identity. They also shifted the focus from God to human. With this new name, Daniel's identity, at least on paper, changed from a man held accountable by an all-powerful God to that of a woman who must protect her sovereign. In their culture, this was a terrible insult. The meaning of Daniel's new name was the antithesis of his former Hebrew name.

*From Hananiah: "Yahweh has been gracious"
to Shadrach: "I am fearful of God."*

The Babylonians inverted the focus from God being good to God being bad. Instead of viewing him as gracious, kind, and loving (all implied by the name Hananiah), this new name echoed with the kind of fear you'd feel standing before a tyrant, a maniac, or a monster.

*From Mishael: "Who can compare to my
God? No one!" to Meshach: "I am despised,*

THE ATTEMPT TO RENAME ME

contemptible, and humiliated.”

Once again, the Babylonians chose a name that subverted the goodness of God in our relationship to him. It shifted the focus from our confidence in God to cowardice.

*From Azariah: “Yahweh has helped” to
Abednego: “The servant of Nebo.”*

Azariah went from being a son or heir of Yahweh, a term of endearment for the living God, to being the slave of another man.

As you can see, in every case, the Hebrew captives’ new names obliterated the true nature of God that had been represented by their names and reoriented their identities to become people who served their Babylonian masters.

Let’s review these shifts in identity:

HEBREW NAME/ MEANING	BABYLONIAN NAME/MEANING	SHIFT
Daniel: “God is my judge”	Beltshazzar: “Lady, protect the King”	Male?female Focus on God?focus on man All-powerful God?God/king who needs protecting
Hananiah: “Yahweh has been gracious”	Shadrach: “I am fearful of God”	Gracious, loving God?tyrannical God to be feared Focus on God?focus on self
Mishael: “Who can compare to my God? No one!”	Meshach: “I am despised, contemptible, and humiliated.”	Focus on God?focus on self Confidence?cowardice
Azariah: “Yahweh has helped”	Abednego: “Servant of Nebo”	Son of God?slave of man

We don’t have to ponder for long to realize our enemy’s attempt to make this kind of inside-out identity change continues

THE DANIEL DILEMMA

all these years later. Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah were subjected to new names that rejected the truth about who God was and who they were in light of that. We still see the enemy looking for opportunities to cast confusion on God's goodness and our identities today.

Consider, for example, the way society continues to redefine gender, gender relationships, and marriage, which is reminiscent of the gender change in Daniel's renaming. Things that were once inherent to who we are have now become flexible and up for debate. Our culture claims these qualities can be shaped to suit what a person wants with no regard for God's original design. But you and I know this is not true! There is purpose in how God makes us, and we must clearly know who we are in Christ to stand firm instead of acquiescing to who our culture says we should be.

Another way the Enemy tries to change our identities is by making it seem foolish to remain faithful to God. In Daniel's day, this attempt to shift perceptions about God was approached in a tribal way, often through conquest and assimilation. These days it's done through many different methods, from comedy and satire to controversy and scandal within the church. If the Devil can discredit the Bible and disgrace the church through division, dissension, and immorality, then he's succeeded.

As a result, most Christians today are intimidated by the world. We've become convinced we should keep our faith private, relegated to church one day a week. The world is so bold in expressing its multitude of beliefs, convictions, and "personal truths," while Christians are shamed into silence, so embarrassed by their faith that they become apologetic in a way that has nothing to do with sharing the gospel.

This is exactly what our Enemy wants to accomplish through a cultural identity change. He wants to distract us from focusing on our relationships with God and instead get us to focus on

pleasing others, being enslaved to their approval. It's easy to get caught up in the number of likes, Facebook friends, positive comments, and retweets we can accumulate. It feels good to have this seemingly clear proof that we have value, that our choices have value, that they are right. It's intoxicating, this twenty-four-hour access to continual validation.

I struggle with the desire to please others as much as anyone. We might have an amazing service on Sunday with record-breaking attendance and more than a hundred decisions for Christ, and yet it only takes one negative, critical e-mail about that service to ruin my day. Instead of giving God glory for all the wonderful things that happened in that service, I get hung up wondering what I could do to please that one person who didn't like our church. I have to remind myself it's not about what I'm doing; it's about what God's doing through me, through others, through the church.

Otherwise, this shift in focus, this distraction, this change in who we orient our lives around, accomplishes the exact same thing as the changing of captives' names in ancient Babylon. Our identities shift when we value those looking at the art more than the Artist.

Your New (Old) Name

When culture shifts, we need to know who we are. Scripture tells us this truth: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations" (Jer. 1:5). You are who God made you to be. You are a unique, beloved child of the Lord of the universe, your Creator, Redeemer, and Savior. You have a unique purpose for your life that no one else has had or will ever have. You are a co-heir with Jesus, adopted into the family of the King and granted

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eternal life with him in heaven after your mortal life on earth has ended (Rom. 8:17). This is your true identity.

Unless we're grounded in who God made us to be, the way we see ourselves will easily morph into an illusion—a cultural mirage. The truth of who we are will still be unshaken, but it will be covered with a veneer of lies. How does this happen? We lose

Our identities shift when we value those looking at the art more than the Artist.

sight of our God-given identity and act according to an off-kilter mental self-portrait: “For as he thinks in his heart, so *is* he” (Prov. 23:7 NKJV).

Our Enemy has become adept at convincing us to accept false labels.

First, he gets us to accept cultural definitions of who we are. When we do, others around us get to create the standards for how we measure up—or more often, how we don't.

From peer pressure to cultural standards of beauty and success, our society continually directs our focus to external qualities. Stereotypes, or labels for people largely based on their appearances, rely on the same strategy. They reduce us to the lowest common denominator until we see ourselves, and eventually others, as only a redneck, a blonde, plus-sized, or disabled. These may be our physical characteristics, some of which affect our perspectives and worldviews, but they don't define who we are. Many of us would say we know that, but if we hear people tell us often enough that we're no good because of some trait, then we may start to believe it, however subconsciously.

Another way the Enemy utilizes false labels is by convincing us to allow our past to define who we are. He calls us “liar” or “hypocrite,” “failure,” or “unclean.” This is the big one—the struggle so many of us have that drags us down and undermines our faith. We overlook the fact that God knows every moment of

our past and loves us as if he didn't. In fact, he wants to redeem our past, but too often we get in the way because we refuse to let go of our old labels.

The glorious truth is that when we let God control our lives, he gives us a new identity. We see this gift displayed in the Bible in the way God so frequently changed the names of those people who encountered his love and forgiveness in a dramatic way. Jacob went from being a coward, who deceived his father and conned his brother out of his birthright, to being Israel, the nation of God's chosen people. Abram went from being a wandering nomad with a problem telling the truth, to Abraham, an unlikely father at an old age whom God blessed for all generations. Then there were Peter (Simeon) and Paul (Saul) in the New Testament—two more examples of new identities proclaimed by new names.

Actually, these identities were not really new; they were the ones Israel, Abraham, Peter, and Paul were always supposed to have. They just hadn't fully stepped into who God had made them to be until God marked them and called them by new names. And it wasn't until they gave up trying to control their own lives that they realized the fulfillment of who they'd been born to be.

This is certainly true from my own experience. I felt insecure and uncomfortable around people as I was growing up, so I compensated by acting out and trying to be funny all the time. And it wasn't until I faced my fears and trusted God with them, wanting his approval more than anyone else's, that I felt the freedom to preach, teach, and be the leader God created me to be.

In almost every name-changing story in the Bible, after an encounter with God, a person's identity becomes more authentically revealed. They experience the freedom to stop living by cultural constraints and to start living in spiritual freedom. And the same can be true for us. God doesn't see what you are based on where you are now; he sees what you can become based on where

he wants to take you. He knows the actualities, but he sees possibilities. He recognizes what you're capable of doing and activates the greatness in you that you don't see in yourself. When you give him control of your life, he'll give you back your name!

All the Wrong Places

I recently had surgery on my shoulder to repair my rotator cuff, and it took me a few months to recover. During this time, I couldn't enjoy one of my favorite pastimes: playing golf. My need

God doesn't see what you are based on where you are now; he sees what you can become based on where he wants to take you.

for surgery and the length of my recovery also forced me to confront my age and realize my body is not the same as it used to be.

As I started thinking about aging, suddenly I saw a new gray hair every morning when I looked in the mirror. I also noticed a few wrinkles that I didn't remember

seeing before. My surgery made me slow down, and when I did, my eyes were opened. While I still thought of myself as a relatively young man, my body had started sending me some other signals.

Suddenly, I understood why some people experience this reality called a midlife crisis and do everything in their power to fight the onset of age. Maybe they have plastic surgery or begin coloring their hair. Some trade in their family sedan for a sleek new sports car. Others even go so far as to divorce their spouses and find much younger partners. All in an attempt to avoid something natural and inevitable.

It does make sense, though. When we're not connected to our God-given identities, we will plug in to other outlets to define ourselves. For some of us, it's our physical appearance and an

attempt to remain beautiful and youthful. But the truth is: we all get older and life takes its toll on us. Scripture reminds us that real beauty emanates from the inside. “The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart” (1 Sam. 16:7).

Others of us define ourselves based on performance. We might experience a sense of self-worth only when people validate us for what we do and how we do it. We try to impress others with our latest achievement, award, or accomplishment. But it’s never enough; no matter how much we achieve or how famous we become, the emptiness inside remains. “Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun” (Eccl. 2:11).

It’s only after we embrace our true identities that work becomes purposeful and meaningful—perhaps because we know we’re not defined by our performance. We do our best and can take satisfaction in giving our all regardless of the outcome. We don’t have to win a gold medal, become a millionaire, or launch a nonprofit to know our self-worth. We’re God’s beloved sons and daughters—period! There’s nothing we have to do to earn God’s love, forgiveness, or grace. He gives them freely. “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (Eph. 2:8–9).

Finally, many of us attempt to define ourselves by our possessions and monetary worth. We let money rule our lives and try to enjoy the fleeting moments of false security based on the number in our bank accounts or market portfolios. Unfortunately, money sometimes only insulates us from discovering who we really are. We might have everything money can buy but still feel

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disappointed by our lives. We learn the hard way that “life does not consist in an abundance of possessions” (Luke 12:15).

Let me just stop here and say, if you’ve ever placed your identity in your physical appearance, performance, possessions, or anything else, you are not alone. We have all found ourselves grasping at things other than God to fill the deep places of our hearts only meant for him. But if we recognize this, we can continue to work toward staying connected to the God who made us, knows us, and loves us. To become anchored by the knowledge of who God made us to be, we must see ourselves the way he sees us.

How do we do this? Perhaps the first step in this process is recognizing the biblical truth that every person is born for a specific season. “From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands” (Acts 17:26).

God chose us and has always loved us. He determined when we would be born and when we will die. “For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight” (Eph. 1:4). We can take comfort in knowing that our Father specifically chose this place in all of time and history for our lives to exist.

You can also rest in the knowledge that within your unique identity, you have a very specific purpose. Not only did God create you to live in this particular season, but he gave you just the right personality, abilities, talents, and gifts to accomplish what you’re called to do. You are not an accident. You are here on purpose for a purpose. And once you know your purpose in life, you will more clearly understand your true identity. Then nothing can stop you. Others may try to apply labels of their own, and some may even seem accurate, but when you live out of your God-given identity, these false labels can’t stick. Your awareness of being the person God made you to be permeates everything you do, every decision

you make, and every risk you take. Purpose is your identity in action. It reflects your identity and helps you to understand it more clearly.

We see this in the lives of several biblical characters. From the time Moses was a baby saved from death by his wily mother and Pharaoh's daughter, he knew God had created him for a special purpose. Even when Moses balked at being a leader because of his fears and insecurities, he couldn't deny God's presence in his life and the unique ways God guided him. Pharaoh thought he could contain the Hebrew people under Moses's leadership, but God clearly knew otherwise. Ultimately, God called Moses to be a deliverer, even as Moses's cultural circumstances tried to derail him from living out this purpose.

Purpose is your
identity in action.

Raised as an Egyptian prince, which many might consider a positive label, Moses couldn't escape his Hebrew heritage. Then, later on, living as a fugitive and a wanted criminal (obviously a bad label) Moses still couldn't hide from God, who spoke his calling to him directly through the burning bush. Even when Moses protested with excuses about his stutter and inability to speak publicly, he couldn't deny who God made him to be. He was eventually compelled to obey God and lead as the deliverer he had been fashioned to be (Ex. 2–4).

Joseph's life also demonstrated this same inescapable sense of purpose and identity, even as he lived through some terrible trials. Despite being sold into slavery by his brothers and jailed for a crime he didn't commit, Joseph didn't simply accept whatever new identities his captors pressed on him. He remained faithful and allowed God to use him and his gifts. While Joseph might have been tempted to allow his harsh circumstances to define him and his purpose, instead he kept his faith in God and remained

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obedient to be the man God created him to be. And, you'll recall, Joseph's faithfulness was rewarded as he saved the people of Egypt and Israel during the terrible famine God had revealed to him beforehand (Gen. 37–47).

How about you? Have you seen your purpose, your true identity, emerge yet? If you already know your God-given purpose, then I celebrate with you and encourage you to press on. Take comfort during challenging times and trust God to see you through them, knowing you are exactly where he wants you to be, doing what you were made to do. And if you're still searching for your divine purpose, then keep seeking what God has for you. Don't give up until he reveals to your heart your special mission in this life. Remember what's true: "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10 ESV).

Finally, to own the fullness of your identity in Christ, consider how you can help the people around you be true to their own God-given identities. I'm not talking about telling them who *you* think they should be but rather looking for opportunities when another person's pain, discomfort, or current struggle results from not knowing who God made them to be. Jesus set us free so that we can help liberate others, but often this means beginning more subtly instead of storming in like soldiers on a Black Ops mission.

Maybe it's helping your kids think through the enormous peer pressure they're under, listening carefully before sharing some of your own experiences at their age along with the timeless truth of God's Word about pleasing God rather than people. It might be having coffee with a friend who seems to be experimenting with her lifestyle, again only so you can listen to her heart and the pain she carries there. Perhaps it's grabbing lunch with a guy from your small group who has hinted at his battle to remain faithful to his wife.

THE ATTEMPT TO RENAME ME

Just remember: we all struggle to remember our true identities. Almost everyone around us is carrying some secret, some burden, some painful weight when we encounter them. We don't want to force ourselves on them and intrude, but we can make ourselves available to listen and to care. Listening and caring are fundamental building blocks we must have if we're ever going to establish a strong, respectful relationship in which to share God's truth.

The rapids of culture will always try to sweep us downstream, away from who God created us to be. And the Enemy of our souls will always look for opportunities to undermine our true identities as God's divinely designed children. All the more reason to dwell on the certainty of who God says we are and to be motivated by living out the purpose for which he made us. This lifeline of truth will keep us afloat no matter how high cultural waters may rise.

No one can name you, or rename you, no matter what.

God knows who you are.

But you need to know too.

And now you can help remind others who they really are as well.

Two

THE STRATEGY TO TAME ME

Sir, my concern is not whether God is on our side; my concern is to be on God's side, for God is always right.

—ABRAHAM LINCOLN

Have you seen this?" my friend, a fellow pastor, asked. He held out an image on his phone screen.

"No—what is it?" I said.

"Just take a look," he replied solemnly.

I was in Australia, along with many other ministry leaders, to attend the annual Hillsong Conference. Invited to speak at the Hillsong City Campus in downtown Sydney, I was waiting in the greenroom backstage before the service. When I saw the photograph on my friend's phone, I felt like I'd been punched in the gut. For a long few seconds, I was literally speechless.

It was a devastating iconic image that proudly pointed to our own choice to reject God: a nighttime photograph of the White House, home to the president of the United States of America, illuminated in rainbow-colored floodlights. The display had been assembled in celebration of the landmark US Supreme Court ruling the previous day allowing same-sex couples the legal right to marry. The picture had been taken the night before and broadcast around the world. To me, it looked like our country was thrusting

its middle finger toward heaven, declaring that we, not God, knew what was best and had the right to decide.

My heart was broken.

Buffet in Babylon

That moment, as I stared at that photograph, feeling sick inside, I knew I had to write this book. The rainbow-hued image of the White House was only the latest in a string of incidents and events that played out a theme I had been observing for many years: popular culture will always try to tame us into compromise and compliance with its fast-moving trends. Culture grinds against our values until either they crumble or we stand up and counter the cultural erosion.

If we want to live a godly life in the middle of all this friction, we must determine our core convictions according to the Bible and know how to live them—*before* we face the weight of social pressure from the people around us. It's always easier to resist the winds of change if your roots run deep in God's truth.

Daniel and his friends knew this firsthand. After their Babylonian captors changed their names, their new master Ashpenaz did something else significant: he assigned them a portion of the king's table. You might be tempted to think, *That doesn't sound so bad—what's the big deal? Maybe old Ash was just being hospitable.* But think again. Not only did the king's rich food and drink violate the dietary laws of Israel, but most of it had been offered up to idols prior to being served.

Instead of tucking in and enjoying what must have been a sumptuous meal, "Daniel resolved not to defile himself

It's always easier to resist the winds of change if your roots run deep in God's truth.

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with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way” (Dan. 1:8). To remain pure in body and spirit, Daniel politely refused the king’s sacrificial filet and cabernet. He asked instead if he and his friends could have veggies, grains, and water.

Daniel knew the kind of nourishment his soul needed as well as his body, and he knew how he was to live out his convictions. So when the opportunity to compromise came, he didn’t think twice.

When you know what’s in your core, you don’t struggle to decide.

Decide Before the Dilemma

Receiving new names and being invited to eat at the king’s table may, on the surface, have seemed like welcoming acts, but they were, in fact, the start of a full-scale assault on the young Jewish

When you know what’s in your core, you don’t struggle to decide.

men and their faith, much like the broader scheme the Devil uses in our lives to convince us to compromise our standards. Using the shifting sands of culture, the Enemy tries to erode our convictions and change our behavior. If he can lure us into the forbidden, often by appealing to our sensual appetites, then he’s derailed our relationship with God and undermined our divine purpose.

Often the Devil’s snares are open and obvious, but that doesn’t make them less tempting. For instance, every January I join with many others from our church for a month of prayer and fasting, something we call the 21 Days of Prayer. Following the hectic

holiday season, my new year's fast has become a sacred time for me to draw closer to God and seek his guidance.

And you know what? Every year, precisely during that precious time of prayer and fasting, I'm asked to speak and preach in some of the most beautiful, exotic, and amazing places in the world: tropical retreats, European conferences, Australian churches, and African missions. They're almost always worthwhile events that normally I'd love to be a part of, and they're almost always set in a place I either love or have always wanted to visit. But I refuse to give up what I know God wants me to do. Before those invitations come in, I make sure to block out the month of January for my most important appointment of the entire year.

The Enemy will use all kinds of enticements to pull you away from God's plan, to lessen your impact, to try and tame you. He'll make them seem easy and enjoyable—no big deal. Some will even seem like gifts from the Lord, blessings that look harmless to accept. But they derail you from what God actually has for you.

That's why you have to know what you stand for before that moment comes when you're offered that hit, that drink, that touch, that glimpse, that purchase, that taste. Pre-decide what you will do when those temptations come your way—and they definitely will come your way, often when you're at your weakest or when your defenses are down. Settle your core convictions and use them as anchors when everything and everyone around you wants to sweep you away.

Consider King David. He wrote, "My heart is set on keeping your decrees to the very end . . . and because I consider all your precepts right, I hate every wrong path" (Ps. 119:112, 128). He was far from perfect, but David always found his way back to God. He knew what he believed, and not even Goliath, Saul, Bathsheba, and Absalom could shake David's faith.

Ultimately, each one of us is responsible for what we hold

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true within our hearts. The question is whether it's God's truth or man's truth. Culture will try to convince you that there are no absolute truths. We'll be told "it's complicated" and that truth depends on context or a person's individual situation. What we hold true will be questioned: that the Bible is God's Word, that Jesus is the Son of God, that we must be born again. We will be questioned about our ministry values and challenged on our stand on social issues like marriage and family, money, and the sanctity of life.

Moral relativism is the religion of the day. If you doubt this, just consider that only 35 percent of Americans believe in moral absolutes anymore.¹ This figure was cited by George Barna, whose firm conducted the research, as a major factor underlying the data he released in a controversial public presentation about the moral views and behaviors of Christians. In that forum Barna noted that substantial numbers of Christians believe that activities such as abortion, gay sex, sexual fantasies, cohabitation, drunkenness, and viewing pornography are morally acceptable.

Without some firm and compelling basis for suggesting that such acts are inappropriate, people are left with philosophies such as "if it feels good, do it," "everyone else is doing it" or "as long as it doesn't hurt anyone else, it's permissible." In fact, the alarmingly fast decline of moral foundations among our young people has culminated in a one-word worldview: "whatever." The result is a mentality that esteems pluralism, relativism, tolerance, and diversity without critical reflection of the implications of particular views and actions.¹

It is absolutely possible, slowly but surely, to be led away from what God's Word says about the hot topics of today. If we want to stand for our beliefs, especially when it's not easy or politically

correct to do so, then we must have a firm grasp of the foundation of our faith and why we hold to increasingly unpopular convictions. We must, as David did, maintain an eternal point of view as our basis of reference for the cultural changes fluctuating around us.

But our goal in knowing our core convictions is not to draw a line in the sand and create an “us vs. them” mind-set. Our goal is to build bridges and serve those in need so that they might be drawn to the love of God. No one was ever won to Christ because they lost an argument. Jesus told us to share the good news of the gospel throughout all the world (Matt. 28:16–20), and he made it clear that we were to be *in* the world but not *of* the world (John 15:18–20). He said, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35).

We have the privilege of loving others and offering them God’s truth: that we’re all sinful and in need of a Savior, which is exactly why Jesus came to live as a man and die on the cross. His sacrifice makes it possible for us all to find hope in a relationship with a holy God. Amidst so many negative, destructive factors at work in our culture, we offer the good news of the gospel and have the tremendous privilege of bringing light and life to everyone around us.

The way we do this without being swallowed up by cultural forces is by anchoring ourselves to a worldview based on God’s Word. Knowing what we believe and why we believe it is foundational to our ability to be people of positive influence. Having God’s truth as our point of reference not only allows us to withstand the swirling currents of cultural change, but it also allows us to extend a lifeline of grace to others around us.

Worldview Finder

Everyone has a worldview, a way of seeing, filtering, and processing the events of their daily lives in the context of the world they live in. Basically, your worldview is the set of beliefs that you base your life on. It is the core convictions you consider when faced with decisions. It is the lens through which you view and assess the world at large.

Many factors shape your personal worldview. We all experience many of the same life events, but we see them differently. We don't see things as they are, but as *we* are—through a filter of our personal experiences, relationships, observations, and conclusions. Both good and bad, these variables are often biased, inaccurate, and subject to our emotions.

This is why we have conflict and engage in arguments with each other—because everybody uses a different filter. You have your viewpoint, and I have mine. If we take five different people, each will have his or her own unique viewpoint. These people can all attend the same event but have completely different experiences and conclusions about it.

If you've ever been involved in a car accident, you probably realized that everyone else involved saw it happen a different way.

We don't see things as they are, but as *we* are.

One driver thinks it's the other driver's fault. The other driver thinks the accident happened because there was no stop sign at the intersection. An eye-

witness thinks the collision occurred because the afternoon sun momentarily blinded one of the drivers. The officer who arrives at the scene looks at the tire marks, crumpled fender, and other evidence and reaches yet an entirely different conclusion. They're all looking at the same event from their own personal worldviews.

Our worldviews inform how we see God, how we view ourselves, and how we regard other people. They interpret our past experiences, our present circumstances, and our future expectations. Our personal worldviews affect how we see money, sex, work, and time, and even how we view good and evil.

This filter for processing everything around us influences every choice we make. If you've dated frequently and been engaged a half-dozen times but never made it to the altar, then you begin to think it unlikely you'll ever get married. Your past experiences lead you to some false conclusions: that you're not "cut out" for marriage, that others are unreliable and untrustworthy, that relationships can't last for more than a few months. If you allow these false beliefs to influence your attitude, then others don't want to be around your negativity or unwillingness to trust them. You end up reinforcing these lies of the Enemy and the cycle continues.

What we believe—about ourselves, about God, about others, about the way life works—makes a direct impact on our decisions each day. Our worldviews shape the objective events we encounter into subjective experiences. But here's the problem: our worldviews are profoundly influenced by the worldviews of others.

In fact, we probably have many ingredients baked into our worldviews that we never chose consciously or deliberately. We picked them up from our surroundings, our environment, our families, and the people we're around most frequently. Every time we listen to a song, we are exposed to its worldview. Every movie or TV show we watch represents a worldview. Every time we read a newspaper, magazine, novel, textbook, blog, or tweet, we see a worldview. Every conversation, every interaction, every personal encounter. They each convey a worldview.

Consequently, many threads in the tapestry of our worldviews don't belong. They're not true. Our worldviews require truth, and

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if we haven't based them on God's Word, the ultimate truth, then our worldviews rely on false and negative contributions of the world.

Consider this: in the same Barna study I mentioned earlier, 62 percent of Americans polled said they considered themselves "deeply spiritual." These same people were then asked how this "deep spirituality" affected their decision-making. Almost a third, 31 percent, said, "I make my moral choices based on what feels right and comfortable."

Our worldviews require truth, and if we haven't based them on God's Word, the ultimate truth, then our worldviews rely on the false and negative contributions of the world.

Another 18 percent of this group said, "I make moral choices based on whatever is best for me."

There's another 14 percent of Americans who said, "I make moral choices based on whatever causes the least conflict with others."

Only 16 percent reported, "I make my moral choices based on what the Bible says, what God's Word says."² This means most Christians have non-Christian worldviews! You may be a believer and be on your way to heaven yet still not have a Christian worldview because you got it from the world and not from the Word. If we don't base our decisions on the Bible, then there will be devastating consequences. We need to get our worldviews from a correct Wordview.

The biggest challenge to maintaining this will be that life won't always make sense. We struggle constantly with thoughts such as, *Why isn't my life working out like I thought it would? It's not what I intended it to be at all! Why do I feel so stressed all the time? Why is everything in my life such a mess? Why do my problems always overwhelm me?* And here's the short answer: we're using the wrong

operating system. If we accept the world's worldview, it will mess up our lives here on earth.

Not only will we struggle unnecessarily with problem after problem, but we will also miss out on rewards God has planned for us in heaven. We will get into heaven, but because we lived according to the world's standards instead of God's, we will miss out on the heavenly rewards God wants us to enjoy for eternity.

We need to get our worldviews from a correct Wordview.

If we want to maintain a worldview centered on Christ and live according to God's standards, then we must determine our core convictions. Just as a building must have load-bearing beams to support its structure, our worldview relies on beliefs determined by God's Word. Otherwise, when the culture-quakes of change occur, our worldview will collapse.

Core Convictions

Convictions require you to decide what's right ahead of time. They're not based on what feels good or seems right in the moment. They are, instead, the unmovable foundation upon which our lives are built. We don't need to be mean or judgmental when we share them with others, but we do need to be sure of them. Our beliefs, values, and moral convictions provide a starting point for what we think and feel, the decisions we make, and the actions we take. They shape every aspect of our lives.

We can see how our convictions influence our lives most clearly in our relationships. For instance, my wife, Tammy, and I have been married for more than thirty years, and I'm the only guy who has ever kissed her. You know what that makes me? The best kisser in her world!

Seriously, we decided early in our lives how we wanted our

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relationships, especially with the opposite sex, to honor God. As a result, when we married we were both virgins and could give ourselves to each other fully, knowing we got to open God's gift of intimacy together without having to compare, complain, or compete with anyone else. I've talked to many people in the church who have struggled with the aftermath of giving their sexual purity away before marriage. But the good news is, it's possible to become pure again in the eyes of God. If you've had that same struggle, know that God wants to restore you and heal you. That process can begin when you come before him, ask for forgiveness, and lift up your hurt.

Another thing Tammy and I agreed to when we got married was to take our vows as seriously as God takes them. We defined "till death do us part" as a lifetime commitment—no matter what. Consequently, we agreed to throw out two words from our dictionary: *impossible* (because it's not in God's vocabulary) and *divorce* (because it's not an option).

I won't presume to tell you exactly what your core convictions should be, since a range of different convictions can all be rooted in the Word of God, but because I'm frequently asked about my own, I would like to explore a few areas of conviction that are crucial to how one engages with the surrounding culture.

1. **WORSHIP**, or placing worth and value on who God is, tops my list. Scripture is crystal clear about God's preeminence, the way he surpasses all others:

The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him.

He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. (Col. 1:15–18)

When we worship God, we embrace his attributes. We see him as omnipresent (everywhere at once), omniscient (all-knowing), omnipotent (all-powerful), totally good, and totally loving. Worship is not about responsive readings or singing hymns. Worship is surrendering yourself to the power, majesty, and goodness of your Creator, letting God be God—even when you don’t understand what he’s doing or when you disagree. “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship” (Rom. 12:1). When we surrender ourselves to God in all things and acknowledge his headship, we don’t question him even when the culture does.

2. **GOD’S WORD**, or placing worth and value on the Bible and believing it is the infallible Word of God, comes next. “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16–17). With any situation you face, let God’s Word settle it. Don’t let society explain away what God says is true.

We must stay full of the Word of God, using it as the guiding light for our daily lives and the moral basis for our value system. We must be careful to rely solely on truth, avoiding gossip, hearsay, and the opinions of others.

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We must stay full of the Word of God, using it as the guiding light for our daily lives and the moral basis for our value system.

When asked what I think about current events or some particular issue, I often respond, “What makes you think my opinion matters? It’s what God thinks that counts.”

3. **HOLINESS** raises the standard of personal purity as we honor the lordship of Christ. God’s character, Christ’s example, and the Holy Spirit’s guidance provide our understanding of personal holiness. It’s being set apart from the world in a way that distinctly reflects who God is and what he’s about. “You know the guidelines we laid out for you from the Master Jesus. God wants you to live a pure life. Keep yourselves from sexual promiscuity. Learn to appreciate and give dignity to your body, not abusing it, as is so common among those who know nothing of God” (1 Thess. 4:2–5 MSG).

Holiness requires us to maintain a standard of salt-and-light leadership to those around us. It acknowledges God’s lordship over our lives and demonstrates our willingness to follow in the sacrificial footsteps of Jesus. It means we think through our words, actions, habits, and attitudes at all times. Holiness prevents us from conforming to cultural changes and moral relativism.

4. **FAMILY** carries worth and value as a sacred institution created by God. We are made in his image and designed for relationship. This begins with our families and extends when we marry and start a family of our own. As children, we’re instructed to honor our fathers and our mothers and to obey them; as parents, we are warned not to provoke or harm our children (Eph. 6:2–4). Families take care of one another. “If anyone does not provide for their relatives,

especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever” (1 Tim. 5:8 NIV).

One relationship that is central to the family is marriage. God considers marriage to be a lifelong sacred covenant between a man and a woman. He hates divorce, because marriage is designed to reflect the relationship between Christ and the church. According to Ephesians 5, husbands should love their wives as Christ loves the church, leading through sacrificial service, and wives must love their husbands with respect, honoring them through sacrificial devotion (vv. 22–26). Strong families grow out of strong marriages in which husbands and wives love and respect each other, serve and honor each other.

5. **LIFE** has intrinsic value in all forms, reflecting this most precious gift from God. Therefore, no person has the right to terminate human life, their own or anyone else’s. “The word of the LORD came to me, saying, ‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations’” (Jer. 1:4–5).

God knew each person even before he or she was conceived, so we must value each life as a gift from God. In light of this truth, we must face the fact that abortion is murder—there’s no nice way to say it—and taking one’s own life—including euthanasia, doctor-assisted suicide—is not our decision to make. Life is precious and only God has the right to control when we live and when we die—not human beings.

6. **HUMILITY** reflects an attitude of service, compassion, and strength. It’s the quality of placing the needs of others above your own, refusing to grandstand and draw attention to yourself. Truly humble people always reflect the

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glory of God, reminding us that he is the source of life. The opposite, of course, is pride—our human tendency to want the praise, adoration, and attention of those around us, to take all the credit and shift all the responsibility. Yet God’s view on human pride is clear: “God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble” (James 4:6).

Humility serves as the remedy for prideful self-centeredness. It reflects simplicity and sincerity, a willingness to sacrifice one’s ego. My family and I keep our lives and our ministry simple so we can do more for God. Living simply lowers costs and frees up our time so resources can go to the work of the Lord. We reach people for the glory of God, not for our own egos. Sincerity keeps us real and touchable, and it makes sure our words and thoughts match. Humility keeps our hearts tuned to God and not ourselves.

These core areas of conviction probably don’t surprise you, but if you don’t know what you believe about any of them, then I encourage you to explore God’s Word and commit to his truth. Culture will continue to be our enemy’s smokescreen for obscuring truth and confusing God’s people. But if you keep your eyes on the firm ground of God’s truth, deciding what you believe before you’re tested, then you will stand strong no matter how many bow down to the cultural pressure around you.

Who Says So?

We live in a swiftly changing world, and it can be a difficult task to stay firmly grounded as everything around us shifts. But even as cultural forces attempt to influence and corrupt our biblical worldview, we must remain vigilant and accept only the beliefs

and standards that align with our core convictions from the Word of God. This is why I was so upset by that picture of the White House with all the rainbow-colored lights and the Supreme Court ruling it was flaunting. The Bible is very clear about marriage: one man and one woman for life. This is God's intended original design. He even made the parts of a man's body and a woman's body to fit together and to have a purpose in fitting together. This was God's plan all along.

One question I hear a lot in response to this definition says, "But what about all the polygamy in the Bible? There were guys in the Bible who had multiple wives." To which I respond, "Not everything the Bible reports the Bible approves." In other words, not everything reported in the Bible is affirmed in the Bible by God. One example is the issue of slavery. Scripture includes historical accounts of people having slaves, yet it is clearly against slavery. All the way back to the very first books of the Bible. In fact, Jesus quoted Scripture and said he came to abolish and eliminate slavery—to release the oppressed and set people free (Luke 4:18). So just because we read something in the Bible about violence or some sexual deviation, it doesn't mean the Bible approves it. It's just accurately reporting the brokenness of humanity.

If you consider that we call it the *Holy Bible*, it's actually amazing. Why? Because you won't find a book that's got more violence, more incest, rape, molestation, murder, jealousy, and greed.

So why do we call it the Holy Bible then? Because this book tells the truth. If this were a human book, it might not tell all the warts and flaws of its heroes. It would just give biographies about the good things they did—their great exploits. But the Bible, when it talks about Abraham and Moses and David, tells us all their weaknesses and demonstrates that they blew it just as much as we do. They made just as many mistakes, and their families

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were just as messed up as ours are. They had as many problems and addictions as everybody else. The Bible tells the truth.

Here's what God says about marriage in his Word:

“Haven't you read,” he replied, “that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.” (Matt. 19:4–6)

From the very beginning of creation, marriage has always been one man and one woman joined for life. Who says so? Not me. God says so. While culture attempts to erode our convictions on many issues, this one remains under the rainbow-colored spotlight. It reminds us to return to our roots, our core beliefs, based on God's truth and not our own preferences. Because if we don't, we're in trouble. If we as Christians accept culture's attempts to reshape our beliefs, then our faith is built on nothing more than subjective impressions and seasonal trends. The result is not faith based on God's timeless Word but on a temporary, human-created belief system.

If we want to stand strong in a culture that consistently tells us to bow down, then we must know what we're standing on. As followers of Jesus, we're standing on eternal truth, the authority of the one and only Holy God, and the power of the gospel to change lives. “This hope is a strong and trustworthy anchor for our souls. It leads us through the curtain into God's inner sanctuary” (Heb. 6:19 NLT).

Three

THE TEST TO CLAIM ME

Every test, every trial, every heartache that's been significant, I can turn it over and see how God has turned it into good no matter what.

—CHARLES STANLEY

When my daughter, Sarah, was thirteen, she came home from school one day with something going on in her eye. It was red and irritated, and her distress was clear. Tammy took her to our pediatrician, who examined Sarah, quickly became concerned, and referred her to an ophthalmologist. By this time we were obviously worried but assumed the problem was some kind of rare infection that could be treated with maybe a strong antibiotic.

But the specialist explained that not only was Sarah's optic nerve inflamed in her sore eye, but the nerve was detaching, which would cause blindness. He said that usually he only saw this condition in patients with early onset Multiple Sclerosis and referred us to a neurologist for diagnosis and treatment.

It went unsaid that MS is presently incurable.

That it usually claims patients' lives within a few years.

Seeing Clearly

As you can imagine, we were in shock. It was like going in to your doctor for poison ivy and coming out having been told it was skin cancer. I felt discouraged and afraid but tried to remain positive and strong for Sarah's sake, and Tammy's. Yet something beyond the obvious still bothered me about it all. We were hearing a lot of words like *maybe* and *possibly* but nothing definitive, absolute, certain. While I know medicine can be as much art as science, especially when diagnosing an illness, I wondered if this situation might be a spiritual attack on our family and the church. I wondered if my faith was being tested.

Now, I'm not one to look for a demon behind every bush, but something about the entire process felt strange to me. Our church was growing like never before, and we had just moved into a new facility. We were preparing to dedicate our church and launch a community event in hopes of attracting as many neighbors and newcomers as possible. Having something so drastic happen in my family so close to our launch event seemed suspicious.

Nevertheless, I felt so defeated and depressed that I canceled all my appointments and stayed home for two days. As the weekend approached, I was forced to consider what was on the docket and whether I was still going to show up despite my internal state of chaos. I had committed to attend a prayer service at church on Saturday but didn't feel like going. I had plenty of excuses to skip it, reasons my church family would have understood, but I knew I should be there—especially to share our situation and ask others to pray. So that morning I got in my car and headed toward church.

As I pulled up to a traffic light at a busy intersection, I could tell I would be sitting there a while, and my eyes fell on my Bible on the passenger seat next to me. I casually flipped it open,

wishing desperately for some kind of message from God, even though I was doing something I usually warned others not to do. God's Word is certainly not a Magic 8-Ball, but I can't deny that the passage to which I flipped, 1 Corinthians 15, hit me like a lightning bolt:

“Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?”
 The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.
 (1 Cor. 15:55–58)

While I knew the first verses my eyes fell on were true—we shouldn't fret about our perishable bodies because there is a resurrection—I still didn't want Sarah to die. I didn't want to watch her suffer with such an incurable, debilitating disease that would likely claim her life before she reached adulthood. Then I lingered over verse 58, which encourages us to stand firm in our faith so that nothing can shake us, to give ourselves fully to the work of the Lord. My uneasy feeling persisted, but I made a choice right then. I decided to reaffirm my commitment to Jesus, to serve him no matter what—even in the unbearable event of losing my precious daughter.

Feeling bolstered by my encounter with God at the stoplight and by Saturday's prayer meeting, on Sunday I talked to one of our members whose father was a well-known neurologist. When I called and explained our situation to him, he graciously agreed to see us the next day. On Monday we drove down to Montgomery, and he examined Sarah and performed an MRI. He saw no signs of MS—everything looked fine! While we breathed a sigh of

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relief, it was only a partial victory because Sarah still couldn't see out of her left eye. The neurologist encouraged us to wait a few days and see if the eye healed on its own, and we agreed.

Later that week we hosted our first big public event at the church and had an amazing turnout. More than twenty-two hundred people attended, and more than six hundred made decisions to accept Jesus! We were so grateful to the Lord for his goodness, and we gave him thanks for how it all came together. And you know what? The next morning, Sarah's vision improved! While her eye remained sore for a few more days, she had no more problems with her vision after that. Today she's totally healthy and happy and the mother of a new baby, our first grandchild.

Tried and Tested

The timing of Sarah's ailment and subsequent recovery could have been coincidental, but in this case hindsight is twenty-twenty. The entire happening clearly tested our faith right before a strategic, crucial event for God's kingdom. The Enemy used my fears and frustration over my daughter's medical situation to try and distract me from a soul-winning kingdom event. Yet God allowed it to mature my faith and to increase my trust and joy in him.

You see, the problems we face in this life are not circumstantial or random—they are opportunities to grow stronger in our faith. God allows these tests to prove our mettle and mature us for future purposes. Understanding the nature of these tests (whether they last only a few weeks or an entire lifetime) and how to respond to them can make all the difference in the world.

Knowing our identity is critical.

Settling our core convictions is too.

But, unfailingly, at some point, we will all be tested.

As we explored in chapter 2, determining our core convictions

is essential to a strong, stand-up faith. But convictions alone won't insulate us from the trials that put them to the test. If a chain is only as strong as its weakest link, then the strength of our faith relies on the stability of what we believe when under attack. It requires courage to look the Enemy in the eye and stand our ground, so we need to know with confidence what our faith is built on. Convictions are all about the choices we make before we're challenged. Faith is our ability to act on our convictions when tested.

Daniel knew what it meant for his faith to be tested—repeatedly. In fact, he even asked his Babylonian captors to put him to the test. Here's how it happened:

Daniel then said to the guard whom the chief official had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, "Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food, and treat your servants in accordance with what you see." So he agreed to this and tested them for ten days. (Dan.

1:11–14)

Daniel asked Ashpenaz to test him and his Hebrew friends for ten days. Why ten? Throughout Scripture, the number ten represents

the testing of faithfulness: obeying the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20), giving a tenth to Lord (Deut. 14:22, Mal. 3:10), praying for ten days in the Upper Room after Jesus ascended (Acts 13), enduring ten days of persecution in Smyrna (Rev. 2:10). Daniel knew that his faith would be put to the test, and he embraced the

Convictions are all about the choices we make before we're challenged. Faith is our ability to act on our convictions when tested.

challenge. Rather than trying to avoid the discomfort of being tested, Daniel saw this conflict with culture as an opportunity.

When culture shifts, our faith will always be tested. The Enemy uses tests to wear us down in his attempt to derail our faith. He wants to place obstacles in our way and challenge our convictions. Paul encountered this and wrote, “For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, did, again and again—but Satan blocked our way” (1 Thess. 2:18). The Greek word used here for *blocked* literally means “cut a ditch” or “made a detour.” When we’re walking in the purposes God has for us, we go directly against the will and the plans of the enemy. So, naturally, the enemy wants to block our paths and convince us to give up, to take a permanent detour. Ultimately, he wants us to serve him. Whenever our faith is tested, we must choose whom we will serve.

Turn the Other Cheek

One of the clearest challenges to my faith happened when I was a student at Louisiana State University. Let me say first that the college experience, by its very nature, is one big test if you’re trying to follow Jesus. Suddenly, as a young adult, you have all this juicy freedom you’ve never had before. You can stay out all night and sleep all day, skip classes you don’t like, eat what you want when

Whenever our faith is tested, we must choose whom we will serve.

you want, go to endless parties, drink, smoke—even dance. So just being on a huge university campus like LSU challenged my faith as a young man.

But one incident still stands out to me. I had gotten a job at the LSU Law School, working in the maintenance department to make money for my living expenses. Most of the crew members were good old boys, proud rednecks who liked to

smoke, drink, cuss, and make jokes about quiet Christian boys like me. I was so fervent about my faith that I decided to bring my Bible to work and read it at lunch and during breaks. The other guys just laughed and talked trash about me.

One day one of their buddies from the campus police force dropped by. He happened to be from the Middle East, a big burly guy named Mohammad. Mohammad stopped in and saw me reading my Bible over in a corner. He joined in the jokes with the other guys at first, but then he came over and said, "You don't really believe the stuff in that book, do you?"

I looked up at him and said, "Yes, I do. I believe it's God's Word. I really do."

"No, you don't," Mohammad scoffed. "Not when push comes to shove, you don't."

"I'm afraid you're wrong," I said. "I really do believe every word in this Bible. I'm a follower of Jesus, and this helps me live my life."

"Really?" he taunted. "You'd still believe it was true no matter what happened to you?"

"Yes, absolutely," I said.

Smack! In that instant Mohammad backhanded me so hard I flew off my stool and landed on the floor. My jaw felt like it had run into a brick wall.

"Hey! What was that for?" I said, getting up.

Mohammad picked up my Bible and pointed his finger at me. "If you believe everything this book says, then you must turn the other cheek."

I just looked at him, and time seemed to stand still.

Part of me wanted to get out of there. I mean, getting smacked around wasn't exactly in my job description. I didn't get paid nearly enough for this kind of abuse.

Part of me wanted to laugh and tell Mohammad to just back

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off. He clearly enjoyed being a bully, and there was probably no way I could win here.

But the rest of me knew this was a test, an opportunity to stand up for Jesus in the face of adversity. So I looked Mohammad in the eye and slowly turned my face to present my other cheek to him. “Go ahead,” I said.

“No, you don’t mean it.”

“Yes. Go ahead. Here’s my other cheek.”

Crack! Another set of knuckles to my face as I saw stars and stumbled backward. I stood up and picked up my Bible, which he had dropped. I sat down on my stool and started reading it, trying to ignore the blistering ache of my poor head.

Mohammad stared at me and then took off his cap. His entire demeanor had changed. Somehow I had won his respect.

“You’re the first real Christian I have ever met,” he said. “Tell me what you believe and why you believe it.”

That encounter became the beginning of a friendship that lasted through the rest of my time at LSU. Mohammed would come by during his breaks or after shifts and ask me to tell him about my faith, about Jesus, about what it meant to be a Christian willing to turn the other cheek.

I tell you this story not because I’m such a strong believer who faced such terrible persecution. This little incident is nothing compared to the persecution so many Christians around the world face from their families, their communities, their leaders, and their governments. I still think about Mohammad and pray for him. And I still remember what my head felt like for the rest of that week. But there has never been a moment in my life that forced me to choose whether or not to follow my faith the way that one did. Jesus said we cannot serve two masters. “Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God” (James 4:4).

When culture shifts, you will be tested.
But never give in to the pressure.
Because it will make you stronger.

Ten Times Better

God will always use the tests in our lives to make our faith stronger and to reveal his glory to those around us. Just look at what happened next with Daniel and his friends:

At the end of the ten days they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food. So the guard took away their choice food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables instead. To these four young men God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds. At the end of the time set by the king to bring them into his service, the chief official presented them to Nebuchadnezzar. The king talked with them, and he found none equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah; so they entered the king's service. (Dan. 1:15–19)

They passed the test with flying colors. God rewarded them with knowledge and understanding. The king found them incomparable and asked them to join his inner circle. Being tested those ten days resulted in their situation being ten times better. We're always better after the testing.

And life is full of tests. Everything great is learned and earned through pain. The very act of childbirth, of coming into this world, brings great pain for both mother and child. My wife tells me there's no other pain to compare to the anguish of pushing a bowling ball-sized little person through your body. It's probably

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no picnic for the baby either, being pushed and pulled from the warmth and safety of the womb into a cold, loud room where someone slaps you until you scream your head off. Fortunately, we don't remember that part.

But we do remember the hard work, painful sacrifices, and countless hours poured into the birth of a career, a new business, or a ministry. When we follow God's guidance and we're living according to his purpose for our lives, we will be tested. We will be tempted to give up. To take the easy way out. To run away from the trouble. But those tests become stepping-stones to growing stronger and stronger, to becoming all that God wants us to be.

Everything
great is learned
and earned
through pain.

How gracious he will be when you cry for help! As soon as he hears, he will answer you. Although the Lord gives you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, your teachers will be hidden no more; with your own eyes you will see them. Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, "This is the way; walk in it." (Isa. 30:19–21)

The way we handle adversity and affliction is key to a successful Christian life. We are all going to walk through difficult times—they're inevitable. It's how we respond that determines our faith and our rate of growth. We must learn to understand and accept tests as part of the process of maturation. It's how we grow. We're told,

In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in

praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. (1 Peter 1:6–7)

Nearly every moment of life is a test. If we're serious about growing in our faith, we will likely experience greater testing than other people who are not following God. The Bible calls it the "refiner's fire" (Mal. 3:2). This refers to the process that blacksmiths and other metal workers use to improve the quality of their work. They heat up the metal to reveal its impurities, which they then remove to make the metal purer and fitter for its purpose.

God tests us to refine us—not to punish us.

Pop Quiz

You remember how your schoolteachers would surprise you with a pop quiz, an unscheduled and usually unexpected test? Those tests weren't necessarily fun, but they were good indicators of what and how we were learning the material. Daily life is full of those same kinds of pop quizzes. Every day we face opportunities to exercise and grow in our faith. Spiritual testing is basically God's pop quiz, a challenging situation or unexpected circumstance that reveals our potential, growth, and maturity.

God tests us to refine us—not to punish us.

Many of us interpret resistance the wrong way. We can often view tests as nothing more than an attack of the devil—but that's not the case. The enemy may try to attack us while we're in the middle of a test, hoping we'll be weaker and more vulnerable; but the kind of tests we're talking about here are chances to grow, be promoted, and graduate to the next level. They're not obstacles to be despised but instead are opportunities for advancement. In fact, they may mean you're closer than ever to doing exactly what

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God has called you to do. Paul wrote, “I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me” (Acts 20:23).

After facing numerous tests and trials in his life and ministry—everything from shipwrecks to jail cells, not to mention murderous crowds—Paul knew the value of these situations. He said, “Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope” (Rom. 5:3–4). Later, he also encouraged us to “be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer” (Rom. 12:12).

And Paul wasn’t the only one with this counterintuitive message. James, the half-brother of Jesus, explained, “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything” (James 1:2–4). We can only grow in our faith if we’re tested—it’s that simple. It might not be what we want to hear, but it’s true.

Long before Paul and James, David also saw the value of tests and welcomed them: “Test me, LORD, and try me, examine my heart and my mind” (Ps. 26:2). Like Daniel, David asked to be tested: “Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Ps. 139:23–24). How often do you pray and ask God to test you? More frequently it’s the other way around for many of us—we want God to spare us from trouble and remove all obstacles from our paths. But when we ask for that, we’re essentially praying that we won’t grow.

Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived, reminded us, “The crucible for silver and the furnace for gold, but the LORD tests the heart” (Prov. 17:3). If we want to grow, we can’t back away from

places where we see our faith clashing with the culture around us. Instead, we can view that friction as an opportunity for our faith to be tested.

Embrace that conflict with the courage of the Lord.

The Heart of the Matter

It's no surprise that courage often fuels our ability to endure tests and overcome obstacles. Courage is the condition of your heart that allows you to believe you'll succeed without knowing *how* you'll succeed. But where does courage come from? The origins of the word itself reveal the way courage is forged in the depths of our souls. The English word *courage* evolved from *cour*, the Middle English word meaning the heart, the seat of one's deepest feelings. This usage evolved from Old French, *corage*, and originally from the Latin word for heart, *cor*.

Notice the way *core* and *courage* both come from this word for the heart. This makes sense because our hearts are the battleground between our trials and our convictions. They square off in a showdown to determine what remains and stays true in our hearts. When culture challenges our convictions, we must exercise courage—a deep-seated strength of heart—and resist the temptation to conform or compromise. Courage fuels our ability to carry out our convictions.

Where does our courage to stand strong in the face of cultural change come from? The same place where Daniel's, Abraham's, and Paul's came from: the presence of God and the Word of God. It's the same place David found courage when faced with losing all that he loved—his wives, his children, his crown, and the respect of all who followed him.

David and his men reached Ziklag on the third day. Now the

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Amalekites had raided the Negev and Ziklag. They had attacked Ziklag and burned it, and had taken captive the women and everyone else in it, both young and old. They killed none of them, but carried them off as they went on their way. When David and his men came to Ziklag, they found it destroyed by fire and their wives and sons and daughters taken captive. So David and his men wept aloud until they had no strength left to weep. David's two wives had been captured—Ahinoam of Jezreel and Abigail, the widow of Nabal of Carmel. David was greatly distressed because the men were talking of stoning him; each one was bitter in spirit because of his sons and daughters. But David found strength in the LORD his God. (1 Sam. 30:1–6)

David, the king and military leader of the nation of Israel, wept aloud with his men until they had no strength to weep. Apparently, many of his men allowed bitterness to set in and began to talk of stoning David for allowing such terrible events to transpire. But notice David's response: he found strength in the Lord his God. I love how the King James Version renders verse 6, saying David “encouraged himself” in the Lord.

Sounds great, right? How cool that David, at his lowest point, was able to encourage himself in the Lord. But how do we do that? It's no coincidence that David's poetic lyrics in the Psalms often serve to ignite courage in our hearts. “Hear my cry, O God; Attend to my prayer,” he begged. “From the end of the earth I will cry to You, when my heart is overwhelmed; lead me to the rock that is higher than I” (Ps. 61:1–2 NKJV).

I'm convinced the secret to finding encouragement relies on our response—not our reaction. When something hard happens, it's tempting to react—to express our anger, fear, confusion, and frustration with no filter. We may lash out at others, blame ourselves, experience extreme anxiety, or sink into depression. But we

have to do more than simply express our feelings; we must direct them to God and surrender ourselves to time alone in worship. In that time, we each must ask ourselves, “Am I responding or reacting?”

God can handle our scariest, most volatile emotions—just read through Psalms if you have any doubt—and he wants us to trust him with what’s at stake. David, like Daniel, Paul, and others, was courageous because he understood the power of worship. I’ve learned this lesson personally as well. At times in my life, just after I received difficult news, I’ve retreated to my office and prayed, crying out to God and worshiping him. This practice has been my lifeline, providing the daily dose of courage I needed.

So many of our trials are skewed by our perspective. For us, our problems seem overwhelming and all-encompassing while God seems small and distant. But for God, the all-powerful and all-present Lord of all creation, our problems must seem quite small. However, when we meet him in quiet time alone together, then our perspective reaches a point of balance. We still may not be able to see beyond our problems or imagine how we’ll get through them, but we know we’re going to keep our eyes on Jesus each step forward.

The more time you spend with Jesus, the less time you’re going to spend being intimidated by the opinions of others or worrying about your problems. Worshiping God has become the first thing I do whenever I’m faced with a loss, crisis, or major setback. This didn’t always come naturally to me, but now I recognize how it has saved me so many times as I seek to stand strong in my faith. Worship is your

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lifeblood. It will produce courage to fuel your faith when you're being tested.

And you will be tested, my friend. The critical question is simply how you will respond: fearfully, allowing the Enemy a chance to derail your faith, or with courage to step forward and trust God with the outcome.

Culture wants to claim you—but you don't have to let it.
You have all you need to pass any test you face.
You have the courage of the Lord.

Part Two

CULTURE'S GREATEST TEST: WHOM WILL I WORSHIP?

Will I Worship God or Cultural Idols?



Four

WHEN THEY SAY I MUST

A person will worship something, have no doubt about that. We may think our tribute is paid in secret in the dark recesses of our hearts, but it will out. That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our lives, and our character. Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming.

—RALPH WALDO EMERSON

The scene around me took my breath away. Thousands and thousands of people surrounded me, and I witnessed every act of worship mentioned in the Psalms: shouting, singing, uplifted hands, laughter, clapping, chanting, dancing, and joyful expressions of every variety. The volume of so many vibrant voices escalated into a crescendo of exaltation. Men, women, teens, and children from various socio-economic, cultural, and educational backgrounds united together to celebrate the immediate object of their devotion.

The University of Alabama football team.

And this wasn't even a game against another college team! That day I was one of more than ninety thousand people watching the spring practice game of the Crimson Tide, a scrimmage between the crimson team and the white team. If you've ever been to a large-scale sporting event, I bet you can imagine what I was

seeing. The scene before me was simply amazing. With all the preaching I do, everyday experiences quickly turn into sermon illustrations and learning opportunities. And that moment at the game was no different.

Worship Team

Something you should know about me is that I love sports, especially college football, and I root for my beloved Louisiana State University (LSU) Tigers year round—Geaux Tigers! And keep in mind, my favorite team isn't very popular here in Birmingham, where I'm caught right in the crossfire between Auburn and Alabama, both former national champs and always contenders. I learned early in life that Southeastern Conference (SEC) football is its own denomination within the broader religion that is college sports. It's fun, and I absolutely love it as much as any of those other rabid fans around me did that day at the spring scrimmage in Tuscaloosa.

But that day, I started thinking about how it's normal for us to hoop and holler, scream and shout, paint our faces and high-five total strangers at a football game (or even in our living rooms *watching* a football game) but we feel uncomfortable if someone raises their hands or sings out "Amen!" in a worship service. (I have a dream that one day the praise on Sunday at my church, Church of the Highlands, will be greater than the praise that happens in the football stadiums on Saturday.) God doesn't mind that we enjoy watching and playing sports. He minds if we don't put him first. We should really consider whether we're willing to give praise to a team of athletes who don't even know us but stay silent before the God who created us. It all comes down to worship.

When I focus on worship, I'm not talking about singing praise songs in a church service, participating in a responsive reading, or

praying with your small group. Those are all expressions of worship, but worship itself refers to what's going on inside your heart. Worship centers on the answer to a series of questions we all face: What matters most to me? Whom do I care about most? Who or what gets my devoted allegiance and loyalty? What's my top priority? Where does all my time, energy, and money go?

When we answer these questions honestly, we get a pretty accurate picture of where we stand with God. He created us in his own image as spiritual beings. We are made to worship, and if we're not worshipping our Creator, then we're trying to put something else in his rightful place. This is what we call *idolatry*: bowing down and offering our hearts to false gods.

Idolatry, worshipping anything or anyone instead of God, comes in many forms—not just in pagan statues and exotic shrines to false gods in the form of objects or animals. Our culture bombards us every day with alluring idols of power, money, sex, and fame, each one asking us to bow before it. If we're not anchored in Christ, if we haven't drawn our line in the sand that we refuse to cross, then our hearts can easily become seduced by cultural gods and then cave to temptation. Our Enemy can take us out of the race and rob us of the purpose, peace, and joy that God created us to experience.

But it doesn't have to be this way. When others compel us to bow before their idols, we can refuse to cross that line. Again, this isn't us vs. them. But we do need to recognize that our hearts are pursuing different things. That way we can stand strong—no matter how much heat we face.

Just like Daniel.

We are made to worship. But if we're not worshipping our Creator, then we're trying to put something else in his rightful place.

Golden Oldies

As if they hadn't been through enough already, after the triumph of their test and being given a place in the king's inner circle, Daniel and his friends faced Babylonian pressure to bow down at point-blank range. There was no way for them to avoid this cultural confrontation. It was a spiritual tug-of-war: they could hold their ground or they could give up.

King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, sixty cubits high and six cubits wide, and set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon. He then summoned the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials to come to the dedication of the image he had set up. So the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials assembled for the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up, and they stood before it. Then the herald loudly proclaimed, "Nations and peoples of every language, this is what you are commanded to do: As soon as you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes and all kinds of music, you must fall down and worship the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace." (Dan. 3:1–6)

This story packs a big wallop with a lot of spiritual lessons. We'll look at several, but let's start with one that tends to get overlooked: the king's idolatry relied on both image and sound. Old King Nebuchadnezzar not only erected a giant statue, but he ordered a band to play the royal soundtrack for his Golden Oldie. He wanted his subjects to experience the full audiovisual treatment as they bowed before his ego-inspired idol.

We shouldn't be surprised. Satan has always used sounds and images in his deceptions and temptations. Why? Because he knows that appealing to both these key senses has a greater effect than just focusing on either one alone. Wanting to be worshipped himself, our enemy never forgets that people are designed for worship. He knows that human beings are drawn to sounds, especially to the cadence, rhythm, and harmony of music.

Music has incredible power to influence our moods and penetrate our thinking. Why do almost all movies have a soundtrack? To intensify the feeling we're supposed

Wanting to be worshipped himself, our enemy never forgets people are designed for worship.

to experience while watching the film. Scary movies wouldn't be half as frightening without all those orchestra strings playing so ominously whenever someone looks in the closet or walks through the woods. And think about the lyrics to songs—how often do they get stuck in our heads? You can turn on the radio and have “Build Me Up, Buttercup” running through your mind for weeks!

When I got saved in 1978, I was fifteen. In the time between the free-love seventies and the anything-goes eighties, popular music held great power, just as it does now. In fact, one of the big messages preached in most youth groups at that time focused on the dangers of rock-and-roll. Most pop music, especially disco, contained innuendos of a sexual nature, if they weren't outright explicit. Heavy metal was becoming more mainstream with an emphasis on sex, violence, suicide, and death. Backward masking, or hidden, destructive subliminal messages, was revealed to be part of many such albums.

I knew personally the power of music and the kind of impact it had on people. My father was an accomplished organist and was frequently invited to play at many churches around the country.

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One of my earliest memories was seeing Dad using both hands—and both feet—as he commanded a massive pipe organ and played a beautiful hymn. I must have inherited his love of music because I began taking piano lessons when I was five. I loved playing and learned quickly—so much that by age fifteen I was teaching a dozen students of my own. Classical pieces, old hymns, contemporary worship songs—I knew how they often set my heart free to worship God and feel his presence.

Steeped in such a rich background and love for music, I was naturally curious about how to regard popular music, especially rock. I wanted to honor God and not listen to anything that would cause me to struggle or give the Devil a foothold into my mind and heart. So, together with some other kids, I went to hear speakers from a traveling ministry, the Peters Brothers, present the truth about rock music. At the end of the service, many teens and young adults accepted Jesus, while others brought their old albums to burn. They wanted to renounce their former lifestyles and the dark messages they had listened to for so long. They had broken free and wanted to encourage others to do the same. Their message was extreme, and even though they received a lot of publicity that mocked their efforts, they weren't afraid to take a stand.

I was deeply moved by their message. They made a big impact on me and my listening habits. I quit listening to secular music shortly after.

Maybe this is too extreme for you, and you're thinking, *Come on, Chris—it's just some innocent fun. Yes, there's bad stuff in the mix, but all rock music isn't bad.* You may be right, but taking this stand has really helped me practice what I believe, and it has helped me to create a barrier between my ears and popular culture. Why don't you try only listening to worship music this week and see what it does for your heart?

Like the Babylonians, I know there's something unique about

the power of music. And I believe Satan uses it to get his message across in a way that seems harmless, like background noise. He's good at deception. Don't forget that he masquerades as an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14), a throwback to his days as Lucifer before he rebelled against God and was expelled from heaven. Back then he was in charge of worship, and I have to think this included music. I believe worship in heaven still does.

He's with the Band

Let's look at our Enemy's background to gain a clearer understanding about worship from the way he sees it. To understand anything in Scripture, we must go back to its origin. In this case, let's turn to the three angels named in the Bible as ruling angels or "archangels." Each one represents a component of worship.

The first, Michael, shows up in response to Daniel's prayer (Dan. 10:13, 12:1) (more about this in a moment). Gabriel is another ruling angel and always brings a message, a Word from God. He appeared to Mary and announced the news about her selection as the mother of Jesus (Luke 1:26–56). Finally, there's Lucifer, the angel in charge of worship (Ezek. 28, Isa. 14). Every full encounter with God includes these same three components: prayer, the Word, and worship.

I believe these three archangels each ruled over a third of heaven as delegated by God. We know that when Lucifer fell, a third of the heavenly host of angels went with him (Rev. 12). His fall offers us insight into the attitude of humble surrender that must be present in a true worshiper's heart. Consider this passage from the prophet Isaiah:

How you have fallen from heaven, morning star, son of the dawn!
You have been cast down to the earth, you who once laid low the

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nations! You said in your heart, “I will ascend to the heavens; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of Mount Zaphon. I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.” (Isa. 14:12–14)

This passage was addressed to a man, the King of Babylon, but the message was intended for the spirit behind the man. This is similar to Jesus telling Peter, “Get behind me, Satan!” after Peter questioned why Jesus had to suffer and die (Matt. 16:23). Christ was speaking to Peter but sending a clear message to rebuke the Enemy.

In this passage from Isaiah, we see the way Lucifer (Satan) wanted to redirect worship away from God and toward himself. Isaiah points to five “I will” statements, all of them using words like *ascend* and *raise*, *exalted* and *highest*. Lucifer wanted to take God’s place as the deity, the Most High, worthy of worship from all creation. This seems to be his greatest desire—to be exalted and lifted up in worship. He even wanted Jesus to bow down and worship him (Matt. 4:9)!

It’s also interesting to note that Lucifer was described as having “stringed instruments”:

“Your pomp is brought down to Sheol, and the sound of your stringed instruments” (Isa. 14:11 NKJV). Another rendering of this same verse indicates that these may have been harps: “All your pomp has been brought down to the grave, along with the noise of your harps” (NIV).

In another passage, this one from the prophet Ezekiel, we find a message addressed to the King of Tyre but once again talking about Lucifer.

You were the seal of perfection, Full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. You were in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone

was your covering: the sardius, topaz, and diamond, beryl, onyx, and jasper, sapphire, turquoise, and emerald with gold. The workmanship of your timbrels and pipes was prepared for you on the day you were created. (Ezek. 28:12–13 NKJV)

Describing him as “perfect in beauty” and referring to his presence in Eden makes it clear this passage is not about the King of Tyre but about Lucifer, who was decked out like royalty, adorned with “every precious stone,” and was given timbrels (small instruments like tambourines) and pipes (basically woodwind instruments). It makes sense that the angel in charge of worship in heaven included music as part of his domain and used it actively in his attempt to ascend to God’s throne. In fact, when you list all the instruments mentioned in conjunction with Lucifer in Scripture, virtually all instrument families are represented: strings, percussion, and wind.

In case there’s any doubt, the continuation of this same passage reinforces Lucifer’s relationship with music. As the “guardian cherub” (v. 14), Lucifer was anointed to lead with music. Through his “widespread trade” (v. 16), he tried to exchange his role as worship leader with that of being the center of attention, the focus of worship. Once he was cast out of heaven to earth (v. 17), he lost his job as worship leader but still retained his knowledge of the power of music and how to pervert it for his purposes.

You were anointed as a guardian cherub, for so I ordained you. You were on the holy mount of God; you walked among the fiery stones. You were blameless in your ways from the day you were created till wickedness was found in you. Through your widespread trade you were filled with violence, and you sinned. So I drove you in disgrace from the mount of God, and I expelled you, guardian cherub, from among the fiery stones. Your heart became

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proud on account of your beauty, and you corrupted your wisdom because of your splendor. So I threw you to the earth; I made a spectacle of you before kings. (Ezek. 28:14–17)

As much as I love music, I know the Enemy still likes to use it strategically to penetrate our minds and hearts with his ungodly message. Look the way music has been intertwined with alcoholism, drug addiction, sexual promiscuity, self-destruction, and suicide in recent generations. Songs like the Rolling Stones “Sympathy for the Devil” in the late sixties, Foreigner’s “Feels Like the First Time” in the seventies, and Ozzy Osbourne’s “Suicide Solution” in the early eighties weren’t exactly offering messages of hope.

If Lucifer is no longer in charge of worship in God’s kingdom, then who is his replacement? We are! Christians are the Devil’s replacement in this role of worship leader—yet another reason why he hates you and me so much. He lost his job to us.

God created us with the same three types of musical sound—strings (vocal cords), percussion (clapping), and wind (singing)—so we can be living instruments of worship. Throughout the psalms, we’re instructed to praise him with our voices, our clapping, and our very breath. This reinforces once again that the greatest test of our lives will be who and what we worship. The Enemy wants us to worship anything other than God—to walk in his footsteps of unholy worship, whether it’s bowing before him and what he portrays as worthy of praise, or giving in to cultural pressure and bowing before something else that seems like it should be elevated—like gold.

The Christian life can be distilled down to our daily struggle over what and how to worship. Open yourself up to what God might be trying to say to you about this. What is the Holy Spirit whispering to your heart?

The Firing Line

If you should doubt the truth that worship is our most basic struggle, just consider that the whole Bible begins and ends with a battle over worship. From tempting Eve and Adam in Genesis to dominating the world in Revelation, Satan has always wanted to turn people's worship—preferably to himself, but anything other than God will do. His sole purpose is to force good people to bow to cultural idols that are not worthy.

We see the beginnings of forced worship in our culture today with the moral war already raging here in America. It wasn't enough that abortion was legal-

The Christian life can be distilled down to our daily struggle over what and how to worship.

ized; now we're being forced to offer it and pay for it via support systems in our workplaces. There are numerous battles of belief, and you may find yourself in the midst of one right now. From redefining the institution of marriage to determining who uses which public restrooms, our culture is repeatedly forcing us to comply with standards that directly violate our Christian faith.

Rather than continue to list these various battles, I'd rather cut to the chase and consider how we should respond to any such confrontation. After considering the blatant coercion Daniel faced, let's see how he and his Hebrew friends stood their ground rather than bow before the king's idol.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to the king, "King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from Your Majesty's hand. But even if he does not, we want you to know,

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Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.” (Dan. 3:16–18)

Talk about staying cool while facing the firing line! Notice they didn’t lead a rebellion, plan a boycott, condemn the king for building his idol, or argue about why they shouldn’t have to bow down. In fact, they told the king they didn’t need to defend their decision in this matter! They simply said, “We will not bow.” They made it clear they trusted the Lord to rescue them—and here’s the key to their stand: even if he didn’t, they still would not regret their decision. In the end, they were cast into the furnace, yet none of them received the slightest scorch mark. God protected them and honored their fireproof faith.

Where did they get this kind of resolve? As we’ve seen, they definitely had the right foundation. They knew who they were despite the Babylonians’ attempt to mock their identities. They had settled what they believed before they were taken captive. And they embraced the opportunity to strengthen their faith by courageously enduring the trials set before them. These three pillars—believe, embrace, and endure—support the kind of character needed to take a stand in a way that isn’t defensive or combative.

You Are What You Worship

Sometimes, though, the idols in our lives aren’t as clear as a large golden statue, or even today’s cultural lifting up of self over God’s original intents. But the truth is, we all worship something whether we’re deliberate about it or not. We all bow to something. Every day, all day long, and everywhere we go, we worship. It’s what we do, and it’s who we are. Worship is our response to what

we value most. Often, whether unconsciously or consciously, we allow culture to determine what it is that we value most.

How do you know where and what you worship? Just follow the trail of your time, affection, energy, money, and loyalty. They will lead you to the truth about what you worship.

We all need to think through and identify what we're really worshipping. Everybody has an altar. We may not have it set up in our homes like a pagan shrine, but what we value most in life will always have the place of greatest prominence.

Worship is our response to what we value most.

We are the only part of creation that does this—that offers our worship up. Why? Because we are created in God's image, created to bring pleasure and glory to the One who made us. But not all of us choose to worship God—and if you're not worshipping him, I promise you, you're still worshipping something. It's like breathing; it's how you're made.

But you'll never be satisfied, empowered for your purpose, or fulfilled in life as long as you worship anything other than God. So many have clearly exchanged the Creator for something he created as the center of their lives. This is exactly what the Devil wants—to have us derailed and in the ditches, away from God and away from who he created us to be.

Christians do it as well as nonbelievers, arousing the jealousy of our God as we bend to the innumerable things the world convinces us are the most important. When we attach ourselves to anything other than God for ultimate meaning in our lives, it's idolatry. It can be something we're addicted to—prescription

You'll never be satisfied, empowered for your purpose, or fulfilled in life as long as you worship anything other than God.

pills, illegal drugs, alcohol, porn, sex, shopping, or gambling. It can be something that's a positive by itself, such as our family or work or even church. But if we elevate it to the most important thing in our lives above God, it's still idolatry.

Unholy Trinity

I'm convinced idolatry runs rampant in our culture today. Simply consider what most people spend their money on—and perhaps more important, what they aspire to: more money, bigger houses, more possessions, fitter bodies, more power. Although the Bible is quite clear on the subject of idolatry, some people dismiss it as no longer being applicable, because “that's the Old Testament.” But that's simply not true; the New Testament could not be clearer: “Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry” (1 Cor. 10:14).

Throughout the Bible three false gods are mentioned repeatedly. There's the spirit of mammon, the god of possessions and greed. His worshipers' motto could have been “never enough.” The same mind-set manifests itself today in the way many people pursue riches, assuming this will make them happy. Mammon always tries to squeeze into our hearts in place of God (Matt. 6:4). It's okay to have money—as long as money doesn't have you.

The next is Baal, a god of power and the root of all pride (Judg. 2:11 and 10:10; 1 Kings 18:18; Jer. 2:23; Hos. 2:17). He's all about self-achievement and self-sufficiency. Remember those crazy fun-house mirrors (or now the apps) that make you look like a circus strongman? Baal basically reflects this kind of image back at his worshippers, saying, “You don't need God! You're strong enough to control it all yourself.”

We see this same attitude today in the way we assume we can control our lives if we stay busy. It's the driving force behind workaholism and our out-of-control schedules. We drive too fast

because we feel like we're perpetually late and must catch up any way we can. We eat in our cars while returning calls and scanning e-mails and texts. At work we're thinking we need to be at home, and at home we're thinking we need to be at work. So many of us spend minutes a day with our children and spouse, even less time with God, and work nine or ten hour days, which illustrates the spirit of Baal is alive and well in the twenty-first century!

Finally, there's Asherah, the goddess of pleasure—specifically sensual pleasures of the flesh (1 Kings 14:23; 2 Kings 17:10; Jer. 7:16–18). Sometimes called Ashtoreth as well, this goddess intensifies lustful appetites and worships through sexual acts. This idol has been around for centuries, including Venus for the ancient Romans and Diana for the Greeks, and focuses on fertility. Worshippers live by the credo “if it feels good, do it!”

I think you'll agree that this god of sensual pleasure, lust, and sexual fulfillment has many modern worshippers. I don't need to cite the latest statistics about rape, human trafficking, and pornography to make a case. Not to mention the no-holds-barred mind-set regarding homosexuality and pretty much all forms of sexual expression. And we're not just talking about men here. Even suburban soccer moms worship Asherah, accounting for most of the 125 million copies of *Fifty Shades of Grey* sold worldwide (through June 2015).¹

These false gods—power, money, and sex—have been warring against our relationship with the Living God from the beginning. They popped up in the garden of Eden: “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” (Gen. 3:6, emphasis mine). Here we have mammon's greed (“good for food”), Asherah's appeal to pleasure (“pleasing to the eye”),

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and Baal's emphasis on self-empowerment ("desirable for gaining wisdom").

We also see these same three counterfeit gods used when the Devil tempted Jesus right after his forty-day fast in the desert:

The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, *tell these stones to become bread.*" . . . Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "*throw yourself down.*" . . . Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. "*All this I will give you,*" he said, "if you will bow down and worship me." (Matt. 4:3, 5-6, 8-9, emphasis mine)

Appealing to Jesus's hunger after his fast, the devil attempts an appetite-fueled temptation to "turn stones into bread" (Asherah), followed by the encouragement to show off his power and "throw yourself down" (Baal), and finally the promise of "all this I will give

you" (Mammon). By appealing to human appetites and senses, our pride, and our greed, these false gods remain powerful tools of our Enemy. It is likely these same three will confront you in some form of temptation today.

These false gods power, money, and sex have been warring against our relationship with the Living God from the beginning.

Nebuchadnezzar featured them as well in the temptations

he offered in Daniel 3. The king's statue was dramatic in appearance, made of gold and ninety feet tall. It represented the power of the king and his pride. And it was accompanied by sensual music to complete the worship trifecta. As has been the case from the

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beginning of creation, the battle will always be over our hearts and what we worship.

We face this battle right now, today, over who gets our worship. Like Daniel and his friends, we are pressured to bow down on a daily basis. We must take a stand and be willing to say, “I am not going to bow to Hollywood’s images. I will not support my government’s demands to compromise my faith. I will not yield to my fleshly desires to make myself and my pleasure the center of my life.”

Today we will worship the Living God, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Today we see our line in the sand.

And we will not cross it.

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If we ever forget that we are one nation under
God, then we will be a nation gone under.

—RONALD REAGAN

It's cancer."

I stared at my phone screen and reread my sister Karol's text over and over again. She had accompanied Dad to his doctor's appointment earlier and had promised to let me know how it went. I had just pulled into the church parking lot and was about to return to my office when I saw her text. Gasping as if I'd been tackled by a lineman, I doubled over against the hood of my car. The fear that had been lurking in the back of my mind now fully surfaced and was becoming reality. My father had cancer.

It wasn't just that I loved my dad; he was my hero, my friend, my mentor in the Christian faith. He had been the best man at my wedding, and as Church of the Highlands began to grow, my dad had moved from Baton Rouge to Birmingham to help us. He was deeply intertwined in every aspect of my life, and I couldn't imagine any of it without him.

Walking into church on autopilot, I went up to my office and shut the door. I slumped into the chair behind my desk and began wrestling with feelings I couldn't even name. As a pastor and a student of God's Word for decades, I had all the biblical answers

and pastoral training for situations like this. I knew God's truth. I believed God's truth. None of that changed. But suddenly I didn't know what to do. Just as Daniel had been a captive of the Babylonians, I felt as though I was suddenly being held hostage by heavy emotions I couldn't process.

So, feeling desperate for God, I did the only thing I knew to do: I turned on some praise and worship music. That probably sounds strange. Worship and grief don't usually go hand in hand. But I'd learned to practice worshipping God no matter what circumstances I faced, and that day wouldn't be any different. God promises us peace that surpasses all understanding in Philippians 4:7. But don't miss the instruction attached to this blessing. Philippians 4:4 is the key that unlocks this peace: "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" Worship didn't erase my grief in the moment, but it definitely turned up an overriding peace. A peace I couldn't have found any other way.

I let the goodness of who God was soothe me. I felt his power strengthen me. I sensed his presence as he comforted me. And though I knew I would grieve over Dad's cancer again and again, I also took comfort in the reality that I could survive this news.

My dad's death would not be the death of the best parts of me. His influence would forever live on through me. The hallmark of his last days wouldn't be grief but rather the fullness of life. During this season, while my father battled for his life, God gave me a verse to focus on: "The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom" (2 Tim. 4:18). As I reflected upon the meaning of this verse, I thought, *Well, which is it? Will God rescue my dad from this evil attack? Or will Dad go safely into heaven?*

Eventually, I realized the answer was "yes"—and both happened. After his initial treatment and chemo successfully eradicated the disease from his body, the cancer returned the following

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year, and my beloved father passed away a few months later. I grieved then, and I still miss him now. But it brings me great joy knowing where Dad is right now and that I'll get to see him again someday. With God, we're always in a win-win situation. No matter what's at risk or what we lose—even the most precious people in our lives—God's goodness will sustain us.

But the pivotal moment in the whole journey of Dad's illness was that day in my office—the day I worshipped God and refused to bow to fear, pain, and despair. All of hell wants us to bow to anything other than God. It may be the most important decision we'll make in the cultural shift: who we will and will not worship. If I had chosen not to worship at the time, the world would have understood. After all, death and sickness are universally known to take people out for at least a little while. Choosing to worship in the midst of all this—that might have been last course of action

Through worship, we move from viewing our problems as big and God as small to the exact opposite: because we remember how big our God is.

most would think of or recommend. But then, doesn't stepping out in faith usually run counter to the logic of this world?

Getting the news of Dad's diagnosis that day was like my lions' den moment, because my mind told me that God had abandoned me—cancer felt more powerful than God. But rather than give in to the

despair of looming circumstances, I chose to worship no matter what and never bow to the pressures of life. And you can do that too. Worship changes everything. Through worship, we move from viewing our problems as big and God as small to the exact opposite: because we remember how big our God is.

Worship restores our perspective.

Warning Signs

Personal crises and painful circumstances aren't the only obstacles that we must battle with prayer and praise. Anytime we face a crossroads moment and cultural calamity sends us reeling, we must hold to our core convictions and never take our eyes off Jesus, even if—and perhaps especially when—the world pressures us to do just that.

Values that traditionally have been held high are under attack from all sides today. The institution of marriage has been redefined. Our schools cater to contrarian special interests instead of biblical truth. Our leaders condone and approve of taking the lives of our unborn children. Cracks continue to spread across the moral foundation of our nation, shattering biblical beliefs—not to mention commonsense values—once considered so important. Many people believe one major blow occurred in 1962 when the Supreme Court ruled that prayer had to be taken out of public schools.

If you're under fifty years old, you probably can't even imagine our country including prayer in its classrooms. But in fact, before this ruling most school days began with the Pledge of Allegiance followed by a prayer like this: "Almighty God, we acknowledge our dependence on Thee and we beg Thy blessing over us, our parents, our teachers, and our nation." Eventually, though, enough people were offended by this that the highest court in our land decreed that prayer must go.

This may not seem to be such a big deal, especially considering what we've grown accustomed to these days, but there are always unforeseen consequences when we bend to public opinion and remove God and the perspective that comes from regularly communing with him. It's not a slippery slope—it's one domino

toppling the next until all Christian values have been leveled. Consider all that's happened since prayer was removed.

Teenage pregnancy rates went up 500 percent after 1962. The number of unmarried mothers also rose dramatically. The divorce rate is now so high that many young children don't even understand what a family looks like. Violent crimes have risen steadily since the early sixties, and our prison system is now bursting at the seams.¹

Another way to look at it is to consider the decline in educational performance. After 1962, SAT scores declined steadily each year for almost two decades before reaching a plateau, one that has now started to decline again. We once had the best school system in the world, but now we're ranked about fifteenth among industrialized countries—this despite spending more money on our school system than any other nation in the world.²

It's an astonishing shift, to say the least. I'm not proposing that we put prayer back in schools. Today such a move would require every other belief system to do the same. I simply want to point out how quickly moral compromises can erode our society. We've gone from a decree that prayer has no place in public schools to rulings like the one in New Mexico recently (August 2013), which declared that sexual freedom trumps religious freedom. In this case the State Supreme Court ruled that a Christian photographer cannot decline to take pictures of a same-sex couple's commitment ceremony, despite the fact that doing so would violate his faith convictions.³

We've come a long way, and our downward slide continues. Things were far from perfect in past decades, but there was a safety net of shared moral values beneath us. There was the freedom to worship God that our ancestors fought so passionately to achieve. Today, however, I'm afraid that safety net, that freedom, has been ripped to shreds and woven into a snare set by our Enemy.

Then and Now

Similarities between what Daniel experienced while captive in Babylon and what Christians face today are unmistakable. At least four parallels seem to be mirror images of one another. Let's briefly consider each one:

1. *We live in a society hostile to faith in God.* Daniel faced a pagan culture with no interest in, respect for, or fear of the Living God. The Babylonians tried to force Daniel and his fellow Jews to relinquish their faith and embrace the cultural customs of their captors. While Christians in our country face cultural peer pressure, we must remember our brothers and sisters in other countries who on a daily basis face severe and dramatic persecution for their faith. As we're instructed in Scripture (1 Peter 5:9), stand firm and pray for those who are suffering and being martyred right now.
2. *We face commands from those in authority to do something that violates the essence of our faith.* The Babylonian kings ordered Daniel and their other Hebrew prisoners to worship pagan idols or face death. They consistently worked to eliminate Daniel's faith in God and replace it with cultural conformity based on political pressure and deadly enforcement. Now consider the Supreme Court battle Hobby Lobby fought in response to the Health Care Reform Act, which forced them to subscribe to a healthcare plan that would provide the morning-after pill for their employees. The court ruled in Hobby Lobby's favor in the end and they won the case, but other legal battles like it still loom on the horizon.
3. *We face serious consequences for noncompliance.* Daniel

and other Jews remained imprisoned and faced trial after trial as the Babylonians attempted to assimilate them. The Hebrew captives likely faced physical punishment and torture as well as several life-threatening encounters with furnaces and lions. Our consequences may not be as immediate or seem as dangerous, but they are nonetheless punitive. Currently, one of our time's biggest moral debates is about how churches should respond to homosexual marriage. If we don't perform ceremonies for homosexual couples, will the government take away our tax-exempt status? But then, who says we have to conduct state marriages? We answer to God—not the mayor, governor, or president. Will our ministries serving those who are in need be crippled by the consequences of standing firm on what the Bible says about marriage?

4. *We endure cultural and societal punishment for maintaining our beliefs.* Considering the life of Daniel, we realize just how extraordinary he was—not only to survive his Babylonian captors' trials and tortures but to influence them with his steadfast faith. Daniel never allowed his fear, anxiety, or concerns to impede his faith or inhibit his obedience to God. Today, we must look to his example for the strength and courage to do the same, because we will face serious consequences when we stand firm in whom and how we worship. Some have lost their jobs, their elected offices, their businesses, and their reputations. Some have sat in courtrooms and jail cells, refusing to compromise their bedrock faith in God and his ways.

These similarities reflect the advancement of what I call the anti-Christ spirit of our age: the persecution of Christianity, the Bible, churches, and Christian values by means of coercion,

authoritative control, and cultural consequences of condemnation. The Bible warns us,

The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with how Satan works. He will use all sorts of displays of power through signs and wonders that serve the lie, and all the ways that wickedness deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness. (2 Thess. 2:9–12)

These four parallels between Daniel's Babylon and the world around us are no coincidence. There's more going on than what we can see on the surface of events. The spirit of the Antichrist that was at work in Daniel's day continues today in his mission of overthrowing God and destroying God's followers. Typically, it's a two-pronged attack. First, the Enemy tries to get people to exalt humans above God. Second, he attempts to stop the worship of God. We see both strategies pervading our culture.

Perhaps the easiest way to get us to elevate humanity above God is to make life all about us. The Devil executes his plan by working nonstop to replace God's truth with two big lies: (1) "If it feels good, do it!" and (2) "Live your own truth—do what is right for you." Our spiritual Enemy has all kinds of cultural weapons at his disposal to promote this kind of a mind-set that places our own desires over all else: business, sports, entertainment, money, power, fame, pleasure, sex. They're all enticements that can shift the focus from God to us if we elevate them to become our top priorities.

He knows that if he can get us entirely dependent on something earthly, then we'll be miserable and will only want more and

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more of it to escape our pain. The paradoxical cycle of addition is a deathtrap for so many people. But what's worse is when this paves the way for the suppression of people of faith who have not chosen to participate. And we see the early signs this already, of our religious freedom being limited by cultural whims.

Issues such as legalized abortion—not only allowing it but forcing taxpayers to pay for it—and homosexual marriage have ripped the moral fabric of our nation. We now face forced compliance with acts that go against our faith. And we must be prepared to trust God and face the consequences—whatever those may be. Culture loves to drive a wedge between our convictions and our worship. If the world can force us to abandon God's truth, then it can push us toward worshipping its idols and not our Holy God.

Worship is respecting who God is and how he sees things. It's acknowledging that he is God and we are his creation. The clarions

Culture loves to drive a wedge between our convictions and our worship.

of culture want to force us to abandon our form of worship because they find it offensive. Because our ongoing, faithful obedience to God and his Word threatens those who want to undermine God's existence and his role in our lives. And so our

culture consistently and continually tries to erode the truth about God and place his power in human hands.

But our religious freedom is foundational to our country's existence—this is why the Pilgrims left their homes behind, sailed perilous waters, and started over in the dangerous wilderness they discovered after landing at Plymouth Rock. These early pioneers of the faith knew what we must now remember. Likewise, as Peter and the apostles explained to the Jewish religious leaders trying to arrest them for preaching the gospel of Christ, “We must obey God rather than human beings!” (Acts 5:29).

An Uncompromising Position

There can be no doubt: biblical values are slipping away. With that erosion, so, too, our religious freedoms begin to shrink. As culture shifts, new limitations emerge in an attempt to determine what we can and cannot do. The world now does not want us to worship God the way we choose. Basically, our situation is no different than the conflict Daniel faced in Babylon.

After facing cultural challenges and surviving a fiery test of faith, Daniel had to endure his greatest culture clash yet. After Nebuchadnezzar, Babylon was ruled by a new leader, Darius. Although Daniel continued to maintain a place of influence in the royal court, many officials remained jealous that this Hebrew outsider held power within their midst. So they plotted to kill Daniel and get rid of him once and for all:

Finally these men said, “We will never find any basis for charges against this man Daniel unless it has something to do with the law of his God.” So the administrators and the satraps went as a group to the king and said: “May King Darius live forever! The royal administrators, prefects, satraps, advisers and governors have all agreed that the king should issue an edict and enforce the decree that anyone who prays to any god or man during the next thirty days, except to you, Your Majesty, shall be thrown into the lions’ den. Now, Your Majesty, issue the decree and put it in writing so that it cannot be altered—in accordance with the laws of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be repealed.” So King Darius put the decree in writing. (Dan. 6:5–9)

Having failed at forcing Daniel to worship something other than God, the Babylonians now wanted to prevent him from worshipping his God at all. They devised a clever plan to force

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Daniel's hand—from a position of prayer and worship to the Living God to one of full submission to their king. But notice, once again, how Daniel responds:

Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before. Then these men went as a group and found Daniel praying and asking God for help. So they went to the king and spoke to him about his royal decree: "Did you not publish a decree that during the next thirty days anyone who prays to any god or man except to you, Your Majesty, would be thrown into the lions' den?" The king answered, "The decree stands—in accordance with the laws of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be repealed." (Dan. 6:10–12)

What did Daniel do in the face of this royal decree? He prayed! He worshipped God and prayed three times a day—"just as he had done before." Daniel didn't panic, he didn't force a confrontation, and he didn't argue about the unfairness of the decree. He

simply did what he had always done—prayed and worshiped the Lord he loved and served.

Are we willing to make the same commitment? Will we resolve that no matter what happens or who tries to influence us that we will not bow before any other God? That we

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will continue to worship only God? Do we have the kind of courage Daniel had?

The Fruit of Courage

Daniel consistently refused to give in to the demands of his captors and their culture. He would not bow down to their idols or participate in their unhealthy hedonism. And when they told him he could not pray to anyone but the king, he didn't even blink. He went home and prayed three times as usual. His example continues to be a witness to the world; the way we handle cultural pressure always is. As we touched on in chapter 3, to walk in Daniel's footsteps, we must have courage. But more than courage, we must demonstrate the fruit of courage—action.

Courage was certainly something we saw in the lives of Jesus's disciples, especially after he had returned to heaven and sent them the Holy Spirit. It's even mentioned in a number of scenes: "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" (Acts 4:13, emphasis mine). The public officials threatened to kill the disciples because of their beliefs and teaching, yet they stood fearlessly in the face of this threat.

This kind of courage got the attention of the people, who then noticed that the disciples were not men of intellect with considerable religious training. They were just ordinary fishermen. But they had spent time with Jesus, which had left an indelible mark on them, fueling limitless reserves of courage for all they would face.

We see the fruit of the disciples' courage later in the same chapter (Acts 4) when they attend a prayer meeting: "After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they

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were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God *boldly*” (v. 31, emphasis mine).

This boldness is what I want for you—and for all of us who follow Jesus and want to stand strong in our bow-down culture: The boldness to stand courageously in the face of an ever-shifting culture. To speak up even when what you believe isn’t popular. It may not feel good—but the rewards are eternal. We’re told, “Do not lose your courage, because it brings with it a great reward” (Heb. 10:35 GNB). And, as we’ve seen with the disciples, the key to courage always comes back to spending time with Jesus. The more time we spend with Jesus, the more courage we will have.

This kind of courage is not reserved for pillars of the faith like Daniel, David, Paul, and the other disciples. It’s available to you and me. If you look at strong people of faith, I believe you will find in them tried and tested, fireproof, lion-proof faith. These people have as many problems as anyone else, but they also have something else: the promises of God and his Word, and the courage to act on them.

The key to courage always comes back to spending time with Jesus.

When I pray each day, I always read God’s Word first. Then I ask the Lord to illuminate a verse or idea from what I’ve just read. And then I listen. In fact, a long time ago I learned to always keep pen and paper close by when I pray. Some of the best, most creative ideas have come to me when I pray and listen to God as he speaks to my heart through Scripture.

This kind of personal word from the Lord is a promise deep down inside us. Without it, we’ll be tempted to panic and cave under the pressure when the going gets tough. Despite the storm swirling around us, a word from God gives us the assurance to stand tall and to speak boldly. This is one of the main reasons I encourage you to spend time every day reading God’s Word and

reflecting on it in prayer. And whether you understand it or not, whether you like it or not, accept its authority.

Even when I don't like it, God's Word tells me the truth. Sometimes it makes me miserable as it confronts areas of my heart and life that need to change. But if I submit myself to God's truth, it sets me free. Surrendering to God's truth strengthens our convictions and fuels our courage, providing confidence in the face of the storm:

These words I speak to you are not incidental additions to your life, homeowner improvements to your standard of living. They are foundational words, words to build a life on. If you work these words into your life, you are like a smart carpenter who built his house on solid rock. (Matt. 7:24 MSG)

If we build our lives on popular opinion or our feelings, then we will always feel unstable and insecure, fearful that everything could change at any moment. Without the certainty of God's character and his Word, life has no stable foundation. But when we rely on him, we will enjoy the peace of mind and fullness of heart that comes from knowing that God's got this. He's the same yesterday, today, and forever. He loves us, and nothing can change that.

Speak Up

Daniel wasn't the first to risk everything and trust God with the outcome. Abraham was asked to sacrifice his precious son, Isaac, the miracle child he and Sarah had been promised and had waited for and finally conceived in their old age. Why would God give them this amazing gift only to ask them to give it back? Only God

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knew. But Abraham wasn't asked to understand God's logic or motive; Abraham was simply asked to obey.

By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death. (Heb. 11:17–19)

Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead. He trusted the Lord to do the seemingly impossible because Abraham had already seen God do it before. Abraham didn't refuse despite how unimaginable the sacrifice. You see, courage doesn't try to figure out all the answers and refuse to act until it understands. Courage comes from the heart. Like love, courage requires a commitment of unbreakable trust. Courage is doing what you are afraid to do, and not allowing fear to rule your decisions. Simply put, cour-

age looks up, stands up, and speaks up.

Courage looks up, stands up, and speaks up.

As Christians, many of us have a hard time speaking up for Jesus in public. Again, this

struggle is nothing new: the apostle John tells us that even when Jesus walked among them, "No one had the courage to speak favorably about Jesus in public" (John 7:13 NLT). But the need to speak up in the name of Christ has never been greater.

I'm sure many of us have thought, *I don't know what to say that won't hurt people. I don't know how to reach them. My Christian views will seem so unloving—others won't understand. If I stand for truth, what will people think of me?*

But this is a risk we have to take. If we keep our hearts purely

focused through continual prayer and praise and season our words with God's grace, then we don't have to worry about what others may think. God's truth has the power to set people free—this should fuel our desire to connect with others, not a smug attempt to prove we're right.

We know some people won't want to hear what we have to say. Others may not like what we say, but they will respect us for speaking up and see our motive is not to be right but to be loving. This can be challenging, because, as I said in chapter 2, it's easy to slip into an "us versus them" attitude in which grace evaporates. But this can be averted by daily coming into God's presence and aligning our perspectives with his. Then we will be strengthened both in the love with which we approach people and in our boldness and courage to engage rather than shy away from the conversation.

God's truth has the power to set people free—this should fuel our desire to connect with others, not a smug attempt to prove we're right.

We all need to be encouraged in this. Even the great apostle Paul needed encouragement in this area: "One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: 'Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent'" (Acts 18:9).

"Wait a minute, Chris," you might be saying. "What's the big deal? I don't need to speak up as long as I'm right with God in my heart." And I would answer you by directing you to what Jesus said: "Stand up for me against world opinion and I'll stand up for you before my Father in heaven" (Matt. 10:32 MSG).

And if we don't? The next verse explains the consequences: "But everyone who denies me here on earth, I will also deny before my Father in heaven" (v. 33 NLT).

Do you realize how important it is that you not be a coward

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about your faith? Jesus said essentially, “Hey, if you deny me here on earth, I will deny you before my Father in heaven. If you’re ashamed of me, I’ll be ashamed of you.” Sound harsh? Not if you’re seriously committed to what you believe.

Consider how vocal everyone else in the world is about their beliefs. As social media continues to give almost everyone access to a channel for expressing their opinions, people make it clear they’re loud and proud of their viewpoints, but those with God’s truth fear being misunderstood or hated. Christians remain timid, even reluctant, to speak up for fear of a lions’ den looming ahead. But when these moments come up, think about Daniel, on his knees, praying as usual, despite the royal decree. Take courage, my friend, and stand strong in God’s truth.

Refuse to give up your ground.

Do what God wants, not what people want.