

the  
end  
of  
me



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# the end of me

Where Real Life in  
the Upside-down  
Ways of Jesus Begins

**kyle idleman**

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*transforming lives together*

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*To Dave Stone, Tony Young, and Don Gates.  
I am honored and humbled to partner with  
each of you in making known the mysteries  
of the gospel. Your service and sacrifice in  
advancing the kingdom inspire me.*

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# Introduction

I sat in my church office staring at a blank screen, preparing to write this introduction, when my assistant reminded me of a few phone calls I needed to make. I decided to knock out the phone calls before I started to type.

The first call went to voice mail, and I left a message. The next one wouldn't be so easy. I was returning a call to a man named Brian. I read in my notes that his eighteen-month-old son had died a few weeks earlier. I didn't know the details, but as a father of four, I can't imagine such loss. I said a prayer as I dialed his number. Brian answered with a monotone "Hello." Having had many conversations like this over the past twenty years, I knew there was not much I could say. So, after expressing my heartbreak for his loss, I allowed silence to settle into our conversation. After a few moments, Brian spoke four words that I was not prepared for.

*"I backed over him."*

More silence as his words sunk in.

I then told him I had not been made aware of that and asked him if he wanted to tell me what happened. He went on to explain that they didn't know their son had walked outside. In fact, they didn't even know he was capable of opening the door to go outside.

Listening, I found myself wondering how parents survive such tragedy. When he finished telling me what they had been going through, I followed up by asking a question that always feels ridiculous in moments like this: “How are you?”

Believe me, I know that doesn't seem like the right question to ask. What's he supposed to say? And yet I knew he was calling weeks after it happened for a reason. I assumed he had something in mind to share with me. After describing his horrific experience, he began to convey how he discovered Jesus in a way he never had before. His faith had gone from attending church once in a while—as tradition—to running into God's arms in complete desperation. I had a page open on my computer where I was going to be writing the introduction for this book, and without even thinking about it, I quickly typed out something he said:

*“I feel like I reached this point in my life when I had absolutely nothing left, and it turns out that for the first time in my life, Jesus has become real. Do you know what I mean? Is that unusual?”*

Yes, I know what you mean. No, it's not unusual.

When he reached the end of himself, he discovered Jesus. I prayed for Brian and his family, then hung up and wondered how many other people would say they experienced this same kind of beautiful irony. I jumped on Facebook and posted the following:

Finish this sentence: Jesus became real when ...

Within a few hours I received hundreds of responses. Some of them were general:

- I could no longer pretend that I was in control.
- I had to admit that I couldn't fix things.
- I knew I wasn't strong enough.
- I had no one else to turn to.
- I had disappointed everyone who loved me.

Most of the responses were specific:

- I was told I had three months to live because of stage IV cancer.
- I found out my husband was having an affair, and I never felt more alone in my life.
- I sat on my bed with my dad's gun in my hand but said a prayer before pulling the trigger. I don't remember the last time I had prayed.
- It became clear that I had lost control of my addiction.
- The divorce papers arrived in the mail, and I could no longer pretend I could fix things.
- Jesus reached into one of the darkest places on earth, a strip club, to show me he loved me. I realized there was no place he couldn't find me.
- My depression became too much for me to bear.
- I was forced out of my thirty-year job and had no idea what I was going to do.
- I was pregnant, my kidneys were failing, and the doctors told me to abort. I prayed for the

first time in a long time. My daughter is now twenty-three.

- I finally admitted I wasn't strong enough to save my marriage or end my addiction to porn.
- My husband was killed in a car accident.
- The ultrasound said the baby's heart stopped beating.

And then I read the one response that seemed to capture them all. In one way or another, what Brian and all my Facebook friends were expressing could be wrapped up in this single response:

Jesus became real when ... I came to the end of me.

Even though most of us can point to a significant event like the ones above, getting to "the end of me" is not just one moment in life. Reaching the end of me is a daily journey I must make because it's where Jesus shows up and my real life in him begins.

Getting to the end of me is not an easy journey, because me doesn't want to go there. Me doesn't like confrontation, and me is most interested in the promotion and success of me. Me would much prefer to read a book about advancing me, not ending me. But Jesus said in Luke 9 that whoever wants to hang on to his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will find it. He said a lot of seemingly upside-down things like that.

I've come to realize that if me gets his way, I'll miss out on the real life I'm meant to live. The life in which I love others and make a difference in the world.

Isn't that the life you really want too? If so, I invite you to join me in looking at the upside-down paradoxical teachings of Jesus that will help you get good at reaching the end of your own me.

*Why would I want to get to the end of me?* you might ask. Because I'm guessing, like me, you want more than worldly success in this life. You want more than a few fleeting moments of happiness.

You want to ...

... love and be loved.

... make a difference in the world.

... leave well.

In the first section of this book, we will focus on four of the beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount. These specific beatitudes will help lead us, sometimes kicking and screaming, down this path to real life. I want to warn you now that so much of Jesus's teachings seem oppositional to what we have come to accept. And the life he invites us to is not just countercultural; it's counterintuitive. More often than not it flies in the face of what feels right. Each chapter will focus on a different paradoxical teaching of Christ. Jesus will show us that blessings begin and fulfillment is found in the least likely place—the end of ourselves.

In the second section of this book, we will see that when we get to the end of ourselves and finally realize we aren't strong enough, smart enough, or talented enough, then ironically we are in the best position to be used by God in significant ways.

Real life is found at the end of me. As you read this book, I am praying that Jesus will take you on a path to the end of you—and straight into your real life in him.

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# A Note to Me

Dear Me,

I've known you for as long as I can remember.

I once heard there's "a friend who sticks closer than a brother," and yes, that's us, though I doubt it's what the proverb was talking about. I've been close to a lot of people, but you and me? We have quite an attachment.

Looking back, it's fair to say I've treated you pretty well. As a matter of fact, more times than I can count, I've put you ahead of anything and everything else. Agreed?

As we were growing up, I tried to make sure you were always at the front of the line. I saw to it that you got the biggest cookie on the plate, the best parking spot, the comfiest chair in any room we entered.

In school, I noticed the little things you liked, and I went after them. You always loved attention, so I did everything in my power to see that you got it. You still like the spotlight, so I've maneuvered to keep you in its glare. Now that we have the Internet, I have more tools. I post only the pictures that show you at your very best. Anybody would think you're living the dream. Have you seen the comments people write about you? When you have struggled or had

a hard time, I've done my best to keep that our little secret. I've tried to make you happy.

Sure, it was a little easier to keep you happy when you were a cute little tyke. A simple temper tantrum got the job done. Then, as we grew older, I had to be a little more discreet. You wanted to keep winning and getting your way—all the while looking humble and unassuming. That gets tricky! Not to mention tiring.

Take marriage, for example. I promised to love and honor my wife, putting her needs ahead of my own, but you constantly insist on being first. Sometimes there's a little voice in my head in the middle of the night, saying, "*Pssst*, get up and take care of the baby, dude. Let the lady sleep." I know it's not *your* voice; you hate struggling out of bed at 3:00 a.m. You speak up and say, "Pretend you're still asleep," and, more often than not, I comply and put you before her.

Me, I know how you can get defensive, but you have had a tendency not to give me all the information. Walking through the sporting-goods store? Not your finest hour. I love to see you excited, but we should have taken a look at the budget first.

As a matter of fact, you never seem to care about dull stuff like bills and consequences and what happens tomorrow. I've said more than a few harsh words on your behalf to certain people, and you never warned me about the mess. You never told me I couldn't unsay what I've said.

I love you, Me. But I can't keep living for you. You always insisted that if I'd just keep you happy, then I'd be happy—as simple as that. But you know what? It's *not* as simple as that. It never has been.

Me, I've let you be in control and sit in the driver's seat, but it's clear you can't be trusted. You keep insisting you know the way we

should go, but it always seems to be a dead end. I've looked into some other options, and I have decided to begin a journey down a different path. It's narrow and difficult and not many choose it, but it leads to real and abundant life. However, and there is no easy way to say this, I can't take this path if I bring you along.

So, Me, this is the end of you.

*Sincerely,*  
*Me*

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*Part 1*

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# Where Blessings Begin

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## Chapter 1

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# Broken to Be Whole

It's the middle of the night and I can't fall asleep.

Next thing I know, I'm in front of a computer screen. On that screen is YouTube. And on YouTube is a video called “Evolution of Dance.”<sup>1</sup>

What, you've heard of it?

*Sure* you have. YouTube tells me this video has been viewed 286,488,088 times, and I know you're in there somewhere. Wait—

Okay, make it 286,488,089. I can't *not* watch it. But moving right along ...

While I was fishing for another inspirational video, I experienced YouTube whiplash.<sup>†</sup> One minute Dude is twisting the night away, and the next I'm somehow watching a documentary about a poor community in Paraguay.

Yeah, quite a transition. At first, this new video is about what you'd expect to see—images of abject poverty. The community is literally located in a landfill, where more than 1,500 tons of trash are

† Youtube whiplash: A phenomenon that occurs when you inadvertently find yourself switching violently from one video genre to another.

dumped every day. Broken and discarded junk piled up everywhere, and that's home for these people.

More than one hundred residents scratch out a living by digging through the trash, looking for something that can be recycled and sold. I've seen it myself, firsthand, when I've visited developing-world countries. What YouTube can't give you is the *smell*. It's there in all these dumps: the smell of hopelessness.

It all seems broken beyond repair. But keep watching.

I soon learn that this community in Paraguay is known for something other than a landfill. Something you'd never guess, unless you've seen the video. This community is known for having—are you ready for this?—an amazing orchestra.

No, not your average big city philharmonic with Stradivarius violins and grand pianos played by the cast of the Grey Poupon commercial. No, it's a children's orchestra in which all the players live in the slums, right there at the landfill.

Favio Chavez, a young professional musician, happened to come for a visit. He was horrified by the living conditions he saw and that no one did anything about it. So he announced he was opening a small music school.

Before long he was surrounded by eager and willing candidates. They were ready to learn, but they had no instruments. However, Chavez had some ideas about that too. He'd met a trash picker, Nicolas Gomez, who could find almost anything in a mound of garbage. "I want you to look for a special kind of trash," Chavez told him. "Bring me anything we could recycle into an instrument."

But how?

Well, they made a cello from an oil can and old cooking tools, a flute from tiny cans, a drum set with old X-rays as the skins, a violin from a beat-up aluminum salad bowl and strings tuned with forks.

You or I, if we had visited, would have just seen and smelled and felt the sadness. Chavez *heard*—and he heard not what was, but what *could* be. He heard music emerging from squalor. The music of hope.

It's now known as the Landfill Harmonic, just to show that you can be in the dumps and still have a sense of humor. Here's an orchestra made of kids from a junkyard playing instruments built of refuse.<sup>2</sup> You can fire up the computer and watch it right now, if you'll promise to stay away from that YouTube video about the talking cats.

You and me, we live in a throwaway culture. We'd never have thought of bringing beauty from recycling—not when Amazon.com, with shiny, brand-spanking-new stuff, is a click away. You break it? You trash it. You replace it.

Yet I go back to read the Gospels, and now there's a sound track. The music of the Landfill Harmonic seems to play on every page. I can hear it because I know the full story, and I see the connections. Jesus left the throne room of heaven for the landfill slum of earth. He gave up perfection for brokenness and pain. And he said, "Strike up the band." He heard weeping and wailing and turned it into laughter.

They called him a fool, a misguided fanatic. There was hopelessness all around him, but even if I gave you one hundred guesses, you'd never be able to come up with the full picture of what Jesus

can do when he digs into that ugly hill and comes up with throw-away, busted fragments of life.

## Sermon on the Mountainside

Jesus's best-known lesson is called the Sermon on the Mount—the mount being the location where he begins to teach his disciples about a new way of life.

He is in the midst of bringing God's kingdom to earth's landfill, and such things make people uncomfortable. Like the ideas of Chavez, this stuff runs counter to the ways people think. It says up is down and trash is treasure. He begins to introduce us to the great kingdom paradox: at the end of me I find real life in him.

Matthew 5:1 tells us that Jesus sees the crowds, climbs a mountain, and sits down to teach. If you're like me, you tend to skip over that scene-setting stuff to get to the red-letter words in your Bible—the actual sayings of Jesus. But let's look a little deeper.

We find that if Jesus climbed a mountain, this is probably happening just above the Sea of Galilee. There were revolutionaries in those times, and a lot of them laid low in those mountains, avoiding arrest.

So this makes sense. Jesus is another revolutionary who has come up the mountainside. He is saying, "Down with the kingdom of this world and up with the kingdom of God." And the new kingdom has new rules, many of which are just the reverse of the old ways. Some New Testament scholars call this Jesus manifesto the "Great Reversal" for obvious reasons. Even today it all seems counterintuitive.

But Jesus doesn't want to talk about *tangible* rules or laws. He isn't into current events either. Nothing about the Romans here. All that is on the *surface* of life, and Jesus wants to go a little deeper to what's inside us—what makes the surface the way it is. The kingdom of God begins as an inside job.

Jesus launches his sermon with a list of very striking paradoxes. For our purposes we will look at four of these statements that sound ridiculous at first blush but start to make sense once you think a little deeper and compare your personal experience.

For example, his first statement promises the ultimate reward to the least likely people:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (v. 3)

First four words: “Blessed are the poor.” You might be thinking, *Yes! I win, because I'm completely broke.*

Then you stop to think about it. Maybe Jesus misspoke—surely it should be “Blessed are the rich.” Because if you say to a rich person, “Hey, you have a beautiful mansion here,” what does he say? “Yes, I know. I'm *so* rich.” Nope. I bet he says, “Thank you. I'm so blessed.”

And yes, I see the words *in spirit*, and I realize Jesus isn't talking about money for the most part. But the point remains. We think of a blessed life as one that ends up with plenty of money, not plenty of poverty. Add on the fact that Jesus uses a word for *poor* here that translates to “*destitute*” or “*bankrupt*.”

*Blessed are those who are bankrupt in spirit.*

Really the word we use is *broke*.

*Blessed are you when you're so broke you have nothing to offer.*

If you think much about it, this is a shocking statement. Jesus is saying that God's kingdom begins in you when you come to the end of yourself and realize you have nothing to offer. It's precisely the opposite of every assumption we tend to make in this world.

Flat broke. Busted. How does that guy act? Not as if he's got the world on a string, all the answers neatly compiled. His spirits are in the gutter. And Jesus praises that here. That guy down in the dumps—he wins.

Yet the conventional wisdom of pretty much everywhere tells us to radiate self-confidence, self-sufficiency. In short, rich in spirit and in everything else to boot. Top of the heap, and not a garbage heap either.

Jesus says the kingdom begins with taking inventory and coming up with zero. We have nothing to offer, and that means we're making progress.

That's real revolutionary talk.

## Sinful Simon

There's no review blurb from Jesus on the back of this book saying, *I'm okay; you're okay*. Jesus says nobody's okay. We're all broken. But what does that look like?

Luke 7 invites us to a dinner at the home of a religious leader named Simon, who is hosting the visiting rabbi, Jesus. Is Simon a Jesus enthusiast? Apparently not; his turn came up on the “host the rabbi” sign-up sheet, that's all. How do we know this? Luke makes it pretty clear.

You see, there was a protocol for this kind of evening. It was all spelled out in the rules. You'd greet the guest with a kiss of the hand, a sign of welcome. But Simon dispenses with this formality.

Also, foot washing was a daily reality in a dusty culture that revered cleanliness. The roads weren't exactly paved, so you washed your feet when you visited a friend. At this kind of dinner, the host was expected to help wash the visitor's feet.

Simon blew off this one too. At the very least, he could have offered a bowl of water and let Jesus have at it. But he didn't do that either.

Next on the checklist was anointing the guest's head with oil. This was an especially hospitable gesture, and very fine oil should be used, not the discount stuff from the drugstore. But, you guessed it, no anointment for Jesus.

Don't get me wrong. We don't stand much on ceremony at our place either. I don't have many books of dining etiquette on my shelf. I can't even keep my knives and forks straight when setting the table. My wife has it all down, but when she shows me for the 373rd time, I look at her lovingly and say, "Whatever."

Simon isn't saying that. He isn't trying and getting it wrong. He isn't trying at all, and he knows it; everybody in the room knows it. Remember, Simon is a religious leader, and right out in front of all the dignitaries, he's ignoring the religious rules. Which gives us a clue as to his opinion of the teachings of Jesus.

Simon is showing us how things tend to work. Because of his wealth, he is comfortable. Because of his power, he is respected, or at least feared. Because he's at the top of the heap, he's arrogant. This is a scenario everyone recognizes.

During the meal, a woman crashes the party. She has no invitation—she just walks in. Suddenly things are uncomfortable in a whole new way. Luke 7:37 identifies this woman as someone who “lived a sinful life.” That’s a polite way of saying she’s a prostitute—and yes, she’s checking in at a religious leader’s home.

Simon surely is thinking, *What’s up with this?* At the top of the heap, propriety is an important value. Nothing, in his mind, is more important than predictability and order. He’s a professional religious rule follower.

So why does a prostitute show up at a dinner for the pious?

She must be feeling some blend of shame, humiliation, doubt—your choice of negative emotions.

But something brought her here. Has she heard about Jesus? Stood on the periphery of the crowd, listening to words about a kingdom too good to be true? Is she the very type of person who could use a Great Reversal?

## Beautifully Broken

With daggers being stared at her from every direction, all this woman sees is Jesus. Or maybe we should put it this way: all she sees is Jesus seeing *her*.

As their eyes lock, there is no judgment, no looking at her as a mound of garbage that needs removal. She is broken and she knows it, but he sees something else.

She is *beautifully* broken.

Picture the scene. Jesus is reclining at the table. For some reason, chairs were not the thing. People hunkered down on the floor and

leaned on an elbow that was propped up by a cushion. Their feet would reach away from the table.

As the woman approaches Jesus, she comes first to his feet—feet left filthy by Simon. At that moment, the room is silent. What could possibly happen next in this scenario between teacher and tramp?

She looks around hesitantly, knowing how most of the eyes will read: disgust, rejection, even outrage. Actually, many of them look down, awkward as people are in these situations. Or maybe some of these men fear she could call them by name, from past transactions.

Then she meets the gaze of Jesus, full and bold. He smiles; I'm sure of that. Her visit is treated as a delightful surprise. Treasure, not trash. He doesn't simply accept her—she seems to have made his day.

Because of this, she is undone.

She has come to the end of herself.

Tears begin to flow from her eyes, first just one or two and then a cascade. At this point all she can do is be real, because the love of Jesus is real. She falls to the floor and begins kissing his feet—dirt and sweat and all. The tears become the cleansing water Simon should have supplied.

The funny thing about tears is that when they fill our eyes, that's when we see most clearly. She knows that Jesus's feet haven't been washed. It's crystal clear what she must now do. But she can't exactly call to the host for a towel, can she? So she lets down her hair. In those days women always wore their hair up in public. If a woman let down her hair for a man who wasn't her husband, it

was considered grounds for divorce—an act of indecency. So we can imagine the audible gasp that fills the room as she reaches to unfasten her hair.

Simon could have—should have—provided water from the well and the finest towel available. This woman, whose name we don't even know, provides water from her eyes and a towel from her hair. A dirty woman has become a living embodiment of cleansing.

That may sound nice, but it wouldn't have looked it. Not in those times. People in that room would be thinking, *I can't un-see this. It's a disgrace, a scandal!*

Then she brings out the perfume.

Women of the time often wore a small flask around their necks, filled with a bit of fragrance. For a prostitute, it would be an important part of daily business, a drop at a time, a man at a time.

Where one drop would have sufficed for the feet of a rabbi, she empties the flask. She will not need this ointment anymore. She offers all that she has because he has changed all that she is. She cannot stop kissing those feet, now clean in a way that turns the ritual inside out.

Just as his teaching does with every ordinary action. Just as he does now in addressing a supposedly righteous man and a supposedly wicked woman. His words turn every preconception inside out.

For Simon, Jesus has a rebuke.

For the woman, he has a blessing—and a word of redemption: “Your sins are forgiven” (v. 48).

With those words, Jesus has enacted the beatitude “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” He has blessed the poorest spirit imaginable and rebuked the gaudiest, richest, most arrogant.

## Trick Question

Which person in the story do you want to be most like?

In the past when I've taught this story, I've asked the question, "Who are you most like?" but I think the real question we should struggle with is not who *are* you most like, but who do you *want* to be most like?

If you had to choose, would you be more like the well-respected religious leader who seems to have his stuff together, the guy everyone looks up to? The guy who lives in a beautiful home and has VIPs over for dinner?

Or would you rather be the broken prostitute who embarrasses herself but deeply experiences the love and grace of Jesus? The reason it's a trick question is because most of us want both, especially those of us who've been Christians for a while. Said another way, *we want to be made whole without having to be broken.*

We'd like to be Simon at the end of the story, saying, "Oh, okay—I get it. Good lesson, Jesus! I'll go on about my life, enjoying my wealth and status in a wiser way now."

Here's the only problem with that strategy: *we are all broken.*

It's true. Some of us just do a better job of hiding it than others. In Luke 7, it's painfully obvious that the woman is broken—she's lying on the floor weeping at a party she has crashed.

But what about Simon? This is a guy who has spent the first twelve years of his life memorizing the first twelve books of the Bible. By fifteen, he has memorized the entire Old Testament. Let that sink in for a moment. It means he can recite nearly three hundred prophecies about the coming Messiah. And at the moment he's looking across the table at him.

Yet Simon treats the Messiah as an unwanted dinner guest. Simon is broken too. He is *really* broken, which is defined as not knowing you're broken. The broken woman in the story knows goodness and perfection when she sees it; the broken man doesn't, and he doesn't even know that he doesn't.

Here's one to think about: the less you see your own brokenness, the more broken you are. Another one for the upside-down and inside-out file.

Don't misunderstand this chapter. I'm not here to break you. I'm not even asking you to break yourself. *You are already broken.* The Bible tells us in no uncertain terms, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). The real question is whether we can own up to it.

It's not a question of being broken; it's a question of brokenness.

## We Are "Those People"

Sociologist Brené Brown's TED talk on vulnerability has accumulated more than fifteen million hits. A significant factor in its popularity is the plain truth that, as much as we fight it, we long for the freedom to admit we're broken. We don't realize our need to do it. It's true for every one of us, and it's most true for those who least realize it.

Brown helps us see we're not alone. Here's what she says:

We are "those people." The truth is ... we are the others. Most of us are one paycheck, one divorce, one drug-addicted kid, one mental health diagnosis,

one serious illness, one sexual assault, one drinking binge, one night of unprotected sex, or one affair away from being “those people”—the ones we don’t trust, the ones we pity, the ones we don’t let our children play with, the ones bad things happen to, the ones we don’t want living next door.<sup>3</sup>

*We are those people.*

We are the people who ignore the hurts of others, as long as someone takes care of us.

We are the people who yell at one another in the car on the way to church, then climb out with sunny smiles to demonstrate it’s all good.

We are the people who think God is somehow more impressed with us because we make up our own rules and follow them.

We are the people who have gone into deep debt to keep up appearances.

We are the people who look down on others who are different.

We are the people who take the easy way out and log on to the porn site.

We are the people who work fifty-plus hours a week, trying to prove our worth.

We are the people with holes punched in our walls and doors unhinged from slamming.

We are the people who spend hours a day on social media, trying to convince people that our lives are better than theirs.

Most of us have some conception, in our heart of hearts, that a lot of the pieces never seem to be mended. But we will go to great

lengths to avoid the full, honest embrace of our condition. There are just too many voices in our ears telling us not to sweat the small stuff, and it's all small stuff. Ask any of your Facebook friends, and they'll have you convinced in just a few quick words that you're not broken at all. Several hundred social media friends can't be wrong, can they?

There are too many voices telling us to keep up appearances, because if we don't, our life will fall apart.

There are too many voices telling us to entertain ourselves, and if we don't think the bad thoughts, the bad stuff will somehow trickle away.

That's why the people of our times have become masters of illusion, experts at covering pain, abusers of medication, slaves of financial debt, followers of fads, and partakers of loneliness. Because we won't realize that the only solution for being broken is ... brokenness.

By brokenness, I mean the acknowledgment of it, the full and unflinching acceptance that we are bankrupt, poor in spirit, and have nothing to offer. In our culture, that's a hard sell. Few people will pay hundreds of dollars to attend a seminar helping them experience brokenness. They may not do it even if you pay them the hundreds of dollars.

Brokenness is not trending on Twitter. It's not written on anyone's résumé, and it's no business strategy at all. It is, however, the one hope Jesus holds out for us, the inside-out, upside-down way that is somehow the only path that ultimately is right side up.

Embrace the paradox: brokenness is the way to wholeness.

## Real Life Begins

So the bad news is that I'm not okay and neither are you. We're both badly broken. Not "gently used," like the clothing requested by Goodwill. We're ripped, torn, and ragged. Citizens of the global junk heap.

The good news is that God makes the broken whole. He takes the overlooked, the undervalued, the left out, the written off, the damaged and destroyed, and then he does what only he can do.

God loves to make the broken beautiful.

In his book *Lord, Break Me*, William MacDonald points out that in the physical world, broken things lose their value. They are thrown away—glassware, dishes, furniture. Flaws are fatal. But in the spiritual world, just the reverse is true. Broken things are precious. Broken people reveal the beauty and power of God. Flaws are *openings*.

Jeremiah the prophet was sent by the Lord to a potter's house to await further instructions. When he got there, he saw the potter toiling away at his wheel, the water and clay mixing and whirling as a jar emerged. But the potter's fingers failed him at some delicate point, and he found himself holding a flawed jar, something no one would buy. As the prophet watched, the man pushed the clay back together and began molding it again, "as seemed best to him" (Jer. 18:4).

Then Jeremiah received further instructions from the Lord. "Can I not do with you, Israel, as this potter does? ... Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, Israel" (v. 6).

It's such a beautiful image of God sitting at the wheel, looking down at a flawed piece of pottery, and refusing to toss it. The potter made another jar "as seemed best to him." All the same clay and the

same cracks, but all made new. There *is* no junk heap. The art is in endless possibilities of one piece of clay.

My prayer is, *God, take my broken pieces and remold them into what seems best to you.*

The question is whether or not we are willing to let the cracks show. For some of us, nothing could be more unthinkable. We want to airbrush any mistakes or flaws or scars.

But God looks at our brokenness much more like something called Kintsugi. This is a ceramic restoration process developed in Japan in the fifteen hundreds. Broken ceramic pieces are sealed together, but instead of hiding the cracks, the cracks are boldly highlighted and traced over with gold.

Normally anything that was broken and refurbished sells at a discount, but not Kintsugi pottery. Most often, the ceramic piece actually turns out to be more beautiful and more valuable than before it was broken. In fact, many collectors have been accused of deliberately breaking prized ceramics so they could be made whole with gold. That sounds a lot like the economy in the kingdom of heaven. The broken are the most valuable.

This is the redeeming power of God through Jesus Christ. When we finally come to the end of ourselves and give God the broken pieces, he can make us whole. Isaiah 53:5 helps us see our brokenness from the perspective of the cross:

But he was wounded for the wrong we did; he was crushed for the evil we did. The punishment, which made us well, was given to him, and we are healed because of his wounds. (NCV)

The word *wounded* in this verse actually refers to bruises—black-and-blue marks created by broken blood vessels. And the word *healed* comes from a root meaning “mended, repaired, thoroughly made whole.” Isaiah is saying that we are made whole because he was broken.

And it’s only after we have been made whole that we are ready to fulfill our purpose and be used by God. That’s the inside-out way of Jesus—in you, then through you.

Cue the orchestra.

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## Chapter 2

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# Mourn to Be Happy

Toward the top of my list of least favorite things is waking up in the middle of an awesome dream.<sup>†</sup>

Don't you hate that? There you are having this incredible dream with no connection at all to real life. Just good stuff for its own sake. Right at the best part, you wake up. Wait! No! You were in the middle of something!

It's especially annoying when the dream is clearly about escaping a load of stress. The dream is so good that what wakes you up is you telling yourself in the dream not to wake up.

When I was getting myself ready to write this chapter, I slept with a pen and paper beside my bed. The idea was that if I woke up from an awesome dream with no connection to real life, I could quickly write it down and remember it. I thought that was a killer idea, but the best I got was a dream of eating a bowl of sugary cereal.

<sup>†</sup> Other least favorite things: unimportant emails marked urgent with a little red flag; grown men wearing socks with Crocs; how the barista at Starbucks looks confused when you say “large” instead of “venti”; people who don't turn right at a red light; Sudoku; people who make lists of things they don't like; irony.

Really? You know you're getting old and pathetic when your best dream is eating a bowl of Frosted Flakes instead of Fiber One.

But it seems a law of life that if you're in the middle of an awesome dream, something will wake you up.

## Dream Intruders

They say life is but a dream, but if so, there are too many abrupt wake-ups in it. I bet you've had more than a few. I mean those times when life was on cruise control, but then something happened and you were suddenly in for a rough ride. The end of me often comes when my dreams come to an end.

Maybe for you it was pretty early on, when your mom or dad sat you down and introduced you to the word *divorce*.

Maybe it was a message from the person you thought was "the one," telling you it just wasn't going to work out.

Perhaps it was a phone call telling you there had been an accident and you needed to come to the hospital.

Maybe it was a text you were never supposed to read that uncovered the affair.

Maybe your boss told you the position you'd held for a number of years was being eliminated.

You were living the dream, and then life was shaking you awake. So intrusive. To come awake is to lose something—money, health, work, innocence, some special someone.

If you're going to live, you're going to lose. You will come to the end of yourself. You might as well wake up to the fact.