

Arnie Cole + Michael Ross

Tempted, **Tested**, True



A Proven Path to Overcoming
Soul-Robbing Choices

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Arnie Cole and Michael Ross



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Dedication

From Arnie

For two great guys—Bill Bantz and Harold Berry. Thanks, Bill, for encouraging me to pursue the dream of evangelism by daily spiritual growth. And thanks, Harold, for teaching me the power of praying with a friend. You’ve both reminded me that, regardless of age, temptation leaves no one untouched.

And for one incredible woman—my wife, Char. After twenty years, you still cry when I leave for faraway places. You’re amazing!

From Michael

For Pastor Brad and Rhonda Carpenter . . . and my whole Connecting Pointe family.

For Tiffany and Christopher. I love you more and more each day.

“Keep your eyes on *Jesus*, who both began and finished this race we’re in. Study how he did it. Because he never lost sight of where he was headed—that exhilarating finish in and with God—he could put up with anything along the way: Cross, shame, whatever. And now he’s *there*, in the place of honor, right alongside God. When you find yourselves flagging in your faith, go over that story again, item by item, that long litany of hostility he plowed through. *That* will shoot adrenaline into your souls!” (Hebrews 12:2–3 THE MESSAGE).

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Starting Point

Immobilized and Neutralized

“This is goodbye,” said Jesus. . . . “I’m going home. My Father in heaven is waiting for me.”

“Don’t go just yet,” said James. “Stay awhile.”

“We can get something to eat, build a fire, have good talks,” said Nathaniel Bartholomew.

“Like old times,” said Peter.

“No more old times,” said Jesus. “There are only new times from now on. . . .”¹

Impossible! I think as I cling to a steep rock face. *How’d I ever get talked into this? I’d rather be sitting in a warm cabin . . . even just by a warm campfire—where it’s safe. NOT risking life and limb on a fifty-foot cliff. This is absolutely INSANE.*

I (Michael) am on a ten-day backpacking trip in California’s Ansel Adams Wilderness with a bunch of guy friends. We’re undergoing a “build confidence and conquer your fear” quest of sorts. Today’s challenge: Scale a slick canyon wall.

I slide my right hand across a boulder and feel a tiny crevice. I grip it with my fingertips and push with my legs.

As I inch my way up—and begin to trust the safety harness around my waist—it isn't long before I discover that this climb isn't all that crazy after all. The only truly scary part is wearing a blindfold. That's right, a bandanna covers my eyes. I can't see a thing!

"Excellent, Mike—you're doing great!" yells a voice from below. It's my friend Tom. He's my climbing partner and, literally, my eyes during this exercise.

"Listen to my voice," he calls. "I'll get you to the top. Trust me."

I stretch to reach and dig my fingers into another crevice.

"That's it!" Tom shouts. "Now push with your legs again. Only another three feet and you're there!"

I'm way out of my comfort zone. In fact, I've been living on the edge all week, pushing my body and facing challenge after challenge. The point is to take what I learn in the wilderness and apply it to my life back home—especially to my faith. I have to admit it: I've gotten way too comfortable . . . preferring my old ways, frequently if not constantly going with what I know, regularly resisting anything new. And when it comes to struggles and temptations, too often I'm finding myself immobilized and neutralized.

Now suddenly, confusion. I can't hear Tom's voice. Some of the other guys are attempting to guide me, each in a different way.

"Go to the left!" someone yells.

"No—move to your right."

"Push harder!"

Tom comes to the rescue: "*Quiet.*" After a few moments of silence, I hear his voice again. "Listen to me. Reach for a handhold above your head, push with your legs, and you'll be at the top."

His instructions are perfect. And before I can think about it again, I've reached my destination. *Victory!* I hear applause from other members of my group.

I pull off the bandanna, feeling confident, and look down.
Should have stuck with the blindfold!



Back at home within the safety of the four walls of our family room, I sit by a fire, nibble on a snack, and relive my recent mountaintop experiences. While I prefer the comforts and routine of daily living, it occurs to me that I rarely have felt more alive than when I found myself dangling from a rock face. God definitely had my attention, and my trust.

Am I too distracted, Lord? I pray. Is that why I struggle so? Am I not really hearing you?

Opening a book, I begin to read.

This One who walks like a king is named Jesus. They called Him the Nazarene or the Galilean. He called Himself the Son of man.

The common people speak of Him softly, with deep affection, such as the shepherds know, who carry their little lambs in their bosoms.

The beggars whisper His name in the streets as they pass, and the children may be heard singing about Him. His name has been breathed in prayer and whispered at night under the stars. He is known to the diseased, the human flotsam and jetsam that shuffles in and out of the towns and drifts hopelessly along the dusty highways of human misery.

His fame has trickled down to the streets of forgotten men, has seeped into the shadowed refuges of the unremembered women. It is Jesus of Nazareth.

Any outcast could tell you of Him. There are women whose lives have been changed who could tell you of Him—but not without tears. There are silent men—walking strangely as if unaccustomed to it—who speak of Him with lights in their eyes.

It is Jesus whom they are crowding to see. They want to look on His face to see the quality of His expression that seems to promise

so much to the weary and heavy-laden; that look that seems to offer healing of mind and soul and body; forgiveness of sin; another chance—a beginning again.

His look seemed to sing of tomorrow—a new tomorrow—in which there should be no more pain, no more suffering, nor persecution, nor cruelty, nor hunger, nor neglect, nor disillusionments, nor broken promises, nor death.²



Lord, I've lived like a prodigal without even realizing it. I want that light in my eyes again. I want the new, but I'm not sure how to find it.

As I pray and read and ponder, Scripture reveals some answers. . . .

God is always at work . . . creating, perfecting, regenerating—reclaiming what is His. He knows exactly what I need and how to work out the new and destroy the old. A believer walks with the protection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Even though He calls me to bear some burdens, some hurts and some trials, He will continue to work in me, giving me a heart like His. This is my highest calling: Living in respectful fear of the One who spoke the universe into being and who holds me in the palm of His loving hand.

Disobedience can result in devastating consequences. I read about King David's life. Even though he was completely forgiven for his acts of lust, adultery, theft, and murder, God did not remove the consequences of his sin. *What can I learn from this?* Maybe that He wants me to have a serious reverence for His instructions. And that when I blow it, He wants me to take responsibility for my actions by turning to Him in repentance. He will drive out the fear of doubt and condemnation and give me the courage to follow His lead as I deal with the consequences.

He stepped down to save me and to bear the punishment for all my sins. He bought my freedom and gives back complete forgiveness. This all-powerful God is tender toward me and will never

give me more than I can bear. He will always watch over me with a steady eye. He never blinks. I *can* trust Him.

When Prodigals Come Home

When he was still a long way off, his father saw him. His heart pounding, he ran out, embraced him, and kissed him. The son started his speech: “Father, I’ve sinned against God, I’ve sinned before you; I don’t deserve to be called your son ever again.”

But the father wasn’t listening. He was calling to the servants, “Quick. Bring a clean set of clothes and dress him. Put the family ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Then get a grain-fed heifer and roast it. We’re going to feast! We’re going to have a wonderful time! My son is here—given up for dead and now alive! Given up for lost and now found!” And they began to have a wonderful time.³

Michael is a prodigal. *Each of us is.*

God’s ways are simply not our ways. Our hearts are restless and tend to wander; our selfish wills and ill-advised choices end up usurping His place, leaving us feeling lost, miserable, and defeated.

Some of us have tiptoed back to Him in fear and trembling, expecting a firm smack and a wagging finger. We’ve expected, and deserved, the “I told you you’d mess it up” speeches and the “Where in the world have you been?” questions.⁴ But Jesus throws His arms around us, assures us that no matter where we go, He’ll never lose us, reminds us of the eternal home He’s given us with Him. He washes us clean. And then He throws a party on our behalf.

All Jesus asks in return is one thing: *Believe in Him.*



By this point in our lives, we’ve figured out that the path home isn’t easy. (It never has been, never will be.) And believing is

sometimes hard too. The steps we must take so God can demolish the old and fashion the new often feel terrifying. As He goes about His work, we sometimes feel alone; often we feel judged by those inside *and* outside the church.

And all along the way, temptation nips at our heels. It never lets up.

Temptation frequently finds a way to deceive us and knock us off course. Before we know it, our faith has stopped moving. We end up paralyzed—literally immobilized, and neutralized by sin.

Just look around. Everyone struggles with something.

Mark feels trapped by lust. Alyssa gossips. Blaine overeats. Mary’s arrogant. Kelly’s mom drinks heavily. Randy has mistaken a greedy vice for a noble virtue. They’re all believers.

Yet for Christians, the truth is that meaningful change and real transformation are within reach. So why aren’t our lives different? Why don’t we experience less anxiety, less despair, less rage? Why don’t we experience more joy, more freedom, more fulfillment?

Current research by the Center for Bible Engagement indicates that more than 85 percent of American Christians describe themselves as “defeated by temptation and life-controlling problems”—everything from sexual addiction and pornography to lying, cheating, stealing, gossiping, lustfulness, greed, and jealousy. As a result, many have fallen into a toxic downward spiral:

- (1) They struggle alone.
- (2) They neglect the very things that can help them break free—prayer, Bible engagement, and true community.
- (3) They give up spiritually.

They forget this reality: God isn’t at all shocked by our weaknesses.

God doesn’t stop loving us when we fail. God never gives up on any of us, not for a moment. His heart breaks when sin causes us to run *from* Him instead of *to* Him.

C. S. Lewis said it so well: “Only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is.”⁵ And no one understands temptation’s power better than Jesus. On earth, He faced the same enticements we encounter yet never once yielded to them. And as God, he broke the grip of the horrors our sin causes.

Only Jesus fully knows what temptation is and how we can overcome it. We *can* realize lasting change, through Him. He invites us to a better life—the very best life—and He extends His loving hand to guide us toward it.

Why Do We Shrink Away From Christ’s Healing Touch?

Our interviews with experts and ordinary folks alike have yielded some clues.

We Excuse Our Behavior

Temptation rarely marches into our lives with announcements of its hostile intentions. Instead, it perverts reality and cloaks itself as an excusable action, even as a commendable trait. W. Jay Wood, professor of philosophy at Wheaton College, observes:

Inordinate anger masquerades as “righteous indignation,” arrogance as “standing up for my rights,” lust as “healthy romantic ardor.” When it comes to temptation and sin, we’re all inveterate spin doctors.⁶

We Ignore the “S” Word

Saying the word *sin* in public is like saying *bomb* on a plane. It’s a loaded word that makes us uncomfortable. One person’s perception of sin may be different from another’s. And we don’t want to sound harsh or judgmental, so we avoid using the term. That’s a problem. Scot McKnight explains:

A whole generation has been nurtured on a message that has embraced a gracious view of God, but has far too often ignored the zealous holiness of that same God's love. We're in a dangerous place today. We need to confront again the message of the Bible about sin.⁷

We Misuse God's Grace

A growing number of us have become apathetic about sin, disinterested in holiness. Amy, for instance, says, "I'm not denying that I fall short, [but] I just don't see the point in dwelling on it. God forgives, and I'm free in Him." It's almost like saying, "Grace allows me to live however I please."

That bird doesn't fly. Jesus didn't sacrifice himself and defeat death so we could go on just as we are; He did it because otherwise we *would* have continued as before, and because in that state we'd have been separated from Him forever. The question isn't whether God still loves us when we sin—it's why we'd want to go on in slavery when God laid down His own life so we could be free. To paraphrase Leighton Ford, He loves us exactly as we are, and He loves us far too much to want us to stay that way.

Nobody conquers sin on their own. Through the power of God's Spirit, though, we can be freed from its grip. Because of Jesus, we *can* change soul-robbing behaviors and find relief from the entanglements and traps that so many times, for so long, have snared us and pulled us down.

It all begins when we face a truth we've tried to avoid and ignore: *Everyone* struggles with temptation, and *every* sin is deadly. There's no offense that doesn't erode us from the inside out—damaging our integrity, obscuring our identity, and weakening our relationships.

All sin impedes our intimacy with God and inhibits our ability to truly love one another.

God makes clear the solution: We have certain hope through faith.⁸

David gave us a foretaste of this truth:

Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.
Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts
no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.⁹

When we turn to Jesus and rely on Him, He deals with our struggles—moment by moment, hour by hour, day by day. He also works from the inside out, counteracting the poisonous effects of sin—healing what is hurt, restoring what is lost, strengthening what is weak.

What You'll Find in *Tempted, Tested, True*

I'm Arnie Cole, CEO of Back to the Bible. My writing partner is Michael Ross, an award-winning journalist and author of thirty-two books. Together, we've seen real and lasting change during our fifty-plus years of combined ministry experience. And as a behaviorist, I've charted successful spiritual growth programs for fellow "wounded strugglers."

My nationwide research with more than 100,000 Christians has formed the empirical foundation for this book. We'll show you proven ways to neutralize temptation—to evade its grip and to unplug its power so as to steer clear of its disastrous consequences.

Here's what we've packed into this unique resource:

Two Books in One

- (1) *A faith-building guide filled with practical solutions*
- (2) *A personal and small-group workbook*

Explore these pages on your own, referring back to them as often as you would with any practical reference guide. Better yet, read it with friends in any type of small group. All chapters can benefit both men and women. Also included is a Web-based link you can use for both personal application and group Bible study.

Real-Life Stories That Chart Lasting Change

You'll be inspired by moving testimonies:

Kelly—opens up about the struggles of caring for an alcoholic parent.

Michael—guides you through the stumbling blocks of worry and fear.

Mark—talks candidly about his addiction to pornography.

Danielle—unlocks truths about real love.

Cheryl—reveals the difference transparent community makes.

Michelle—encourages each of us to learn what God really thinks of us.

In our situation, writing together, using the personal pronoun *I* can get a little confusing, so to keep things simple, we'll indicate who is speaking. (For example, in chapter 1 it's Arnie; in chapter 2 it's Mike. In some chapters it's another contributing storyteller.) The collective *we* refers to both of us and you . . . strugglers who want to live more like Jesus every day.

A Gentle "Nudge"

In the words of one Christ-follower we interviewed: "Mix Scripture with the encouragement of believers who gently nudge but don't judge, and you've got a powerful way of breaking free from Satan's attacks."

So think of this section in each chapter as a nudge from us. The nudges aren't based only on our opinions but are drawn from detailed, quantifiable research and interviews conducted with fellow strugglers (experts and ordinary folks alike).

This is also the book's roll-up-your-sleeves-and-dive-into-Scripture aspect, and the idea is this: *God's Word, hidden in my heart, fortifies me against temptation's power.*¹⁰

The nudges you'll find:

Nudge One: Learn to Be God-Centered

Nudge Two: Pinpoint Your Weaknesses

Nudge Three: Reconsider Holiness

Nudge Four: Change Your Brain

Nudge Five: Interrupt Your Heart

Nudge Six: "Detach" Attachments

Nudge Seven: Surrender Control

Nudge Eight: Shake the Shame

Nudge Nine: Fall in Love Again

Nudge Ten: Rethink Church

Here's how each entry is divided:

TEMPTED—Identifying Soul-Robbing Traps

First, we look inward and evaluate our struggles. Admitting our temptations and bringing them before God is the first step toward overcoming them and charting a path toward growth.

TESTED—Learning How to Break Free

Next, we highlight what works for other believers. Our conclusions about why we struggle, and what helps us to break free, are drawn from years of research.¹¹

TRUE—*Charting a Path Toward Lasting Change*

Finally, we help you customize a realistic “change plan” you can apply to your life. Grounded in God’s Word, it will challenge you to engage, reflect on, and live it out practically, day by day.

A Nationwide Research Study

My team and I (Arnie) at the Center for Bible Engagement began studying the spiritual lives of Christ-followers to answer a deceptively simple question: *Why do so many of us own Bibles yet so few of us read them?* It soon became clear that the lack of Bible engagement was *not* because we don’t see God’s Word as important, or don’t believe it, or don’t understand it. Rather, people say time and again that they want to hear from God through His Word but are simply “too busy.” This, in turn, led us to consider how temptation could be holding people back from growing spiritually.

In 2008, we launched our first major study of temptation. We discussed many findings from that initial study in our first book, *Unstuck*. Since that time, we’ve completed surveys on temptation and spiritual growth with more than 100,000 people. Our participants are a diverse group in every sense of the word—ranging in age from thirteen to over seventy, representing every state in the U.S., in addition to twenty other countries.

Through these surveys, we’ve learned that . . .

- the temptation to do or have something you know you shouldn’t is universal among humans.
- on an average day, most people encounter three to five temptations.
- men typically experience more temptations than women.
- temptations change over time. When we’re young, physically oriented temptations have the most pull; later in life, struggles with pride and judging others become more prominent.

*The world breaks everyone, and afterward,
many are strong at the broken places.*

—ERNEST HEMMINGWAY

An Opportunity to Engage the Bible

Once again, we can be radically better (truly strengthened and renewed) if we allow God to speak to us through His Word. *Bible engagement* is the key. And as we seek to live out these words that are taking root and then blooming vitally in us, God shows us how to impact the world for Him—helping others, loving the unlovely, reaching out to the needy.

Bible engagement boils down to three simple facets:

- (1) Stop simply *reading* the Bible, and start *engaging* it. It's essential that we consistently *receive, reflect on, and respond to* God's Word.
- (2) Pay close attention to frequency. We've found, repeatedly: Engaging Scripture four or more times per week makes the biggest difference.
- (3) Consider what the Bible is: our personal connection with God. It's how we hear from and have a two-way conversation with our Creator.

In order to grow, a relationship needs consistent connection. We draw closer to our loved ones as we spend time with them. It's the same way with Christ. Engaging the Bible and hearing the Lord's voice through Scripture must be experienced personally and regularly.

The Bible has a supernatural component no one can explain. For me, the more I engage the Scriptures—and respond to what God says—the more my life is molded into what He designed me to be. And even though I can learn a lot through Bible reading,

there's something on a relational plane that's even more exciting and more transformational. God's Word gets past my head, touches my heart, and revives my soul. Most of all, it renews my mind and begins to reproduce God's nature and character in my life.

(You can learn more about Bible engagement in our first book: *Unstuck: Your Life. God's Design. Real Change.* [see www.unstuck.goTandem.com].)

Tempted, Tested, True Is Online

We also introduce *goTandem*—a website that can help you and your church grow. Pop over anytime for video clips, spiritual growth assessments, and additional faith-building resources (www.tempted.goTandem.com).

1

From the Garden to the Desert . . . and On to the Cross

Our Age-Old Battle With a Deadly Menace

“Religion is for people who are afraid they’ll go to hell. Spirituality is for people who have been there.”¹

God speaks. Darkness hides. A soup of nothingness suddenly bursts with light and color and warmth.

God creates—water, air, sky, earth. And living beings!

Creatures spring forth in every size and shape, splashing through the seas and thundering across the plains. Chirping. Flapping. Swarming. Bleating. Gnawing. Clawing. Digging.

It is good.²

God gives. His essence. His heart. Himself.

As He reaches into the ground, dust pours through His fingers. But then He begins to form it, molding sand and mud into something familiar. A foot. An arm. A face. His greatest masterpiece.

Let us make human beings in our image,
make them reflecting our nature
So they can be responsible
for the fish in the sea, the birds in the air, the cattle,
And, yes, Earth itself,
and every animal that moves on the face of Earth.³

God animates. Lungs inflate. Hearts beat. Eyes open wide—gazing back into His.

Humans: spirit, flesh, reason, emotion, passion, creativity, intellect. The finest reflection of God that He could dream up. His image. His family. Adam and Eve.

God blesses. And the first man and woman rule over the world.

Prosper! Reproduce! Fill Earth! Take charge!
Be responsible for fish in the sea and birds in the air,
for every living thing that moves on the face of Earth.⁴

God rests. The world is complete. His work is finished.

It is good, so very good.⁵



In the beginning, life was flawless.

Adam and Eve lived in a garden paradise “to work it and take care of it.”⁶ It was their vocation, their life’s purpose. God spoke intimately with His children there and even walked among them “in the cool of the day.”⁷

Imagine it: Two perfect humans enjoying pristine perfection with their Maker. No fear or shame came between them and God. No

pain, no suffering, no hatred, no regrets. Perfect harmony. Adam was one note, Eve the other, and God the third—woven together in an intimate melody none of us has ever come close to recapturing.⁸

Way different from today, right?

I (Arnie) see brokenness all around me. In my own town—a relatively affluent Nebraska community—children and homeless families go hungry. Some huddle near busy intersections, clutching tattered signs: “Need Food.” “Unemployed Vet.” “Help My Kids.” Teens who look like streetwalkers and gang-bangers file into our schools.

I flip on the news and am assaulted by a barrage of nonstop misery: Rising gas prices, crashing markets; earthquakes along the Pacific Rim, tornadoes in the Midwest. “Terrorists mastermind another bombing . . .” “Scandal on Capitol Hill . . .” “A deadly shooting *inside* a mega-church . . .”

Man’s inhumanity to man. Fractured families. Broken hearts. Lying. Cheating. Stealing. Rage. Envy. Gossip. Greed. Pride.
Sin.

Everywhere. All around us and *in* us—you, me . . . our children. No one is immune. Yet on most days we manage to stay pretty numb to it all. “We ignore our failures and downplay our moral meltdowns,” writes Steven James. “We fill our lives with frantic distractions so we can avoid noticing the splinter of guilt embedded so deeply in our souls.”⁹

The question is, why do we have a splinter in our souls?

Genesis 3 tells us *what* happened in the garden: *The serpent shows up, a lie about God is whispered, a soul-robbing choice is made, forbidden fruit is tasted, and . . . BAM! Humans are tossed into the thorns of a fallen world.*

Adam and Eve were made in the image of God. An image represents someone or something; on Earth, they represented the Lord. They had every advantage: a perfect home, a perfect purpose, a perfect relationship.

So *why* did they end up immobilized by temptation and neutralized by sin? *Why* did a perfect beginning degenerate into the chaos we experience now?

Two reasons.

We're Free to Choose

God didn't create us to be automatons. Instead, the One who uttered neutrons into existence gave His greatest masterpieces the freedom to dream, to use their imaginations, and to think on their own. They were free to work with their hands and to create. They were free to make their own decisions and to govern the world on His behalf. But in doing so, the Lord exposed himself to the pain of jilted love.¹⁰ Adam and Eve could choose to *love* God and to become even clearer reflections of Him . . . or they could choose to turn their backs on Him and *reject* Him altogether.

God could have existed for all of eternity without pain, but instead He risked anguish in order to have someone outside himself to love; someone who might freely love Him back.¹¹ And this is the genius of His creation.

Karen C. Hinckley, of Yale University, explains it this way in *The Story of Stories: The Bible in Narrative Form*:

He [God] had previously made creatures who were pure spirit: They could reason, make choices, and perceive qualities in God like His majesty. "Holy, holy, holy!" they cried as they worshiped Him unceasingly for His greatness and perfection. But His love was beyond their capacity to grasp. A being needed feelings—even passion—to understand what it would mean to offer oneself to another vulnerably and to share—well, to share love. God was a passionate, self-giving Being, and His angels were utterly unable to appreciate this side of Him. On the other side, animals had

feelings but could not reason and make moral choices; their love lacked consciousness and maturity. Man was God's ingenious hybrid—spirit and soul, reason and passion, the finest reflection of Himself that God could produce.¹²

God put Adam and Eve in charge of the garden to practice their godlike qualities of creativity and authority. So they could practice their ability to make moral choices, he gave them one restriction: Don't eat from "the Tree-of-Knowledge-of-Good-and-Evil."¹³

But then an invader from outside the physical universe, a spirit who camouflaged himself as a snake, tempted Eve: "God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."¹⁴ In other words, *He doesn't really love you. He wants to keep you ignorant, under His thumb, abiding by an endless list of unreasonable rules. You're more an amusing pet than a person. Rebellion is your only choice.*

Adam and Eve had no idea that the imposter had been the highest of God's angelic servants until he himself rebelled. According to tradition, his name had been Lucifer ("lightbearer") but became Satan ("the adversary") and Abaddon ("the destroyer"). He decided he didn't want to spend eternity worshiping his Creator; he considered that to be beneath him. So he declared his independence and set up a rival kingdom.¹⁵

The wily serpent knew how to sway the minds of the world's first couple. *Does God really know what's best for you? Could you be happier looking out for yourselves instead of always listening to Him?*

The scent and color of the forbidden fruit enticed their senses, and suddenly everything they knew about the Lord—His desire for them, His loving care, His wisdom and gentleness—all was forgotten. At that moment, truth was traded for lies. As they gave in to temptation and were dragged into revolt, a deadly menace

was freed. This lethal foe now would taunt and toy with humans until the end of time.

We Ache for Control

Deep in our heart of hearts, we all want to call the shots for ourselves.

I'm going to live my life my way—carve out my place in this world, find my meaning, and get what satisfies me. Sometimes we even mouth the lies Satan whispered in the garden: I'm just not ready to fully trust God. I mean, how can I be sure He really cares about me and my problems? If He does, then where is He? Why can't I hear Him? Maybe I really would be happier doing things my way.

Yet our preoccupation with *me*—and not with God—is exactly what went wrong in the garden. Adam and Eve rejected God's one single command, and all of human history changed. They bought the lie from Satan: They became convinced that being in charge of their own soul was best.

The problem with this strategy is that we humans tend to make bad choices. Part of the reason is that we don't see the entire picture, the complete story. But another reason is that, quite simply, we're selfish. Since the fall, self-centeredness—not God-centeredness—has become our defining characteristic.

“Governing the cosmos on God's behalf was and is not enough for humanity,” says Scot McKnight. “Humans ache to rule the cosmos. They want to be God. The ache to be God and act as if we are God is what sin is all about.”¹⁶

Even though there is plenty of evidence down through the ages that humankind's view of good and evil is flawed, we still want to be in control. Isn't this how most of us live our lives? Its appeal is to our baser instincts.

Nonetheless, try as we might, yearn as we do, we are *not* the master of our fate or the captain of our soul. Like it or not, sin leads us down only deadly paths, and all kinds of them:

- *We allow our will to usurp the power of God.*
- *We redefine sin and morality: “There is a way that appears to be right, but in the end it leads to death.”¹⁷*
- *We base our significance (and the status of others) on fleeting markers like strength, beauty, intelligence, achievements, wealth.*
- *We seek happiness anywhere but the Source: alcohol and other drugs, obsessions with our own pleasures and pastimes (sports and gambling or getaways and shopping), houses, pets, possessions.*
- *We seek love anywhere but the Source: We rely on our relationships with other people, we give in to lust, we misuse sensuality and sex.*
- *We seek meaning anywhere but the Source: careers, religious practices, power.*



Think about a typical day. Much of it gets spent trying to make life work *without* God in the center. Yet we still expect Him to cooperate—relating to us on *our* terms, revolving around *our* plans, solving problems so we can live how *we* want to live. And while we may think our lives are humming along just fine, we’ve been deceived. Gradually, choice by choice, a chasm between us and God is growing wider and deeper.

Humming along fine? Disconnecting from the Source is disastrous.

Simply put, separation from the Lord is *the* root cause of everything that has gone wrong (and will go wrong) in our lives. It’s

the cause of that splinter so deeply embedded in our souls, which brings us back to the question *Why?*

Why is it so easy to listen to the whisperings of a snake and so hard to hear the voice of the Lamb? Why are we drawn so naturally to illusion and so slow to pursue the truth? I think it's because ever since Adam and Eve's fatal choice, the jargon of temptation has been our natural tongue and the dialect of love has been a foreign language.¹⁸

And So We Wander Through the Desert . . .

One morning during devotions, I opened my Bible to Leviticus. *Should I read this book?* I asked myself. *Does anything in here actually apply to my life?*

Surprisingly—yes.

Even though you and I—along with everyone else—yearn for the garden, our sin has left us in a hostile wasteland. Cleansing the earth with a flood was a shocking way to get our attention: Humankind's inner corruption must be destroyed; holiness must be lived.¹⁹ Yet the Ten Commandments God laid down²⁰ were (and are) continually broken, and His once freshly scrubbed creation again became stained, polluted by the same flaws that had earned Lucifer a place in hell: *rage, envy, gluttony, sloth, pride, lust, greed.*

Leviticus shows us that the Lord isn't giving up on humankind.

God enthroned himself right in their midst—confined behind four layers of curtains and a screened courtyard. Without the barriers, His holy presence would have disintegrated anyone who came near Him. Sin and holiness are like gasoline and fire—they simply cannot come in contact with each other.

He longed to wander among His children as He had in Eden, to look into their eyes, face-to-face again. He wanted them to be holy with Him—set apart from the world order that the Serpent's

influence had perverted. So once more He had to use shocking methods to teach some shocking truths.

Seemingly endless blood sacrifices had to be brought to the Lord every day. To many contemporary ears, this sounds like senseless waste and cruelty, but God required it because the people had to learn: *Evil costs dearly.*

Whenever someone offered an animal, he laid his hands on it to identify himself with it. As he watched it butchered and burned, he knew that God was accepting its death in his place.²¹

Imagine being a priest. You'd spend your day slaughtering bulls and goats and lambs, removing hides, separating organs and fat, cutting meat into pieces. You'd be wringing doves' necks and tearing off doves' wings, and you'd be constantly sprinkling blood around on altars and toes and earlobes.

Imagine the stench—all that blood, the flies, the mess. And imagine, most of all, that it never stops. As a priest finishes with one bull, some guy comes up with another and says, “Can you please handle El Toro here? I didn't even realize I was sinning, but I just messed up.”²²

Imagine the misery. The people would keep on sinning, and the priests would keep on slicing up warm flesh.

Why this ongoing massacre? What did a human's personal life have to do with a blameless animal? *Everything.* People could not be released from sin's guilt without payment for sin's cost—remember, holiness and unholiness, or purity and impurity, cannot coexist. The only way they could be absolved was by the sacrifice of someone or something innocent of the offense.

As many lessons as the sacrificial system taught, it was not a deterrent to sin—the Old Testament is plain as day on this. The people went on sinning, and the priests went on butchering.²³

Humans have a way of making routine that which should be startling. God's holiness demands that a price be paid for treason;

that price is death, separation from Him. But He knows that, having fallen, His people are incapable of living perfectly. For a time, for payment in blood, He accepted an animal to substitute for the human.²⁴

Yet just for a time. That system was not God's ultimate plan, and it would remain in place only until the time was right for *God himself* to become the once-for-all sacrifice for sin.

The Way of the Cross

The hour had come. God the Son was about to be slain before the eyes of the world, but first the soldiers decided to have some "fun" with Him.²⁵

Jesus was shredded with a whip that had multiple leather strips, each armed at the end with sharp metal or bone. Then, after His captors had woven a crown from a bush (each thorn about an inch long and sharp as a needle), one jammed it down onto His head. Another hung a purple robe on His mutilated body, and the crowd jeered Him.

Some spat on Jesus. The soldiers made a game of punching Him in the face again and again and again as they demanded that He "prophesy" by telling them who, in turn, had struck Him.

Once Jesus was led to "The place of the skull,"²⁶ those who gathered at the cross beheld hate at its worst and love at its best. People so hated that they killed God's Son; God so loved that He gave people life.²⁷

Iron spikes were driven completely through each of His hands and feet. He was stripped naked and raised high into the air for all to see and scorn as He hung for hours in the Middle Eastern sun. Jesus eventually became so exhausted that no matter how hard He tried, He could not hold His body up by His pierced feet. He began to hang from His torn hands, His weight gradually pulling apart His arms and shoulders.

He struggled to keep shifting back to His feet, but exhaustion gradually overtook Him until, finally, His arms bore all His weight. Thus His body began to cave in on itself as He couldn't gasp enough air into His lungs.

There, in the blistering heat—battered beyond comprehension and nearly beyond recognition, with spikes through His limbs and His bones being pulled from their sockets—Jesus slowly suffocated to death. What had been foretold hundreds of years earlier came to pass:

He was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
and by his wounds we are healed.
We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to our own way;
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.²⁸

Onlookers witnessed even more than the fulfillment of prophecy. Nature itself began to writhe and cry out at what we were doing to our Maker.

From noon to three, the whole earth was dark. Around midafternoon Jesus groaned out of the depths, crying loudly, "*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?*" which means, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"

Some bystanders who heard him said, "He's calling for Elijah." One of them ran and got a sponge soaked in sour wine and lifted it on a stick so he could drink. The others joked, "Don't be in such a hurry. Let's see if Elijah comes and saves him."

But Jesus, again crying out loudly, breathed his last.

At that moment, the Temple curtain was ripped in two, top to bottom. There was an earthquake, and rocks were split in pieces.

What's more, tombs were opened up, and many bodies of believers asleep in their graves were raised. (After Jesus' resurrection, they left the tombs, entered the holy city, and appeared to many.)

The captain of the guard and those with him, when they saw the earthquake and everything else that was happening, were scared to death. They said, "This has to be the Son of God!"²⁹

That was true. And so was destroyed the curtain that set apart the holy from the profane, the barrier between the created and the Creator. Jesus' payment for our sins now made it possible for anyone to be made pure enough to stand in God's presence.

The Maker of the world had paid for the world's defiant disobedience. The sacrifice, the substitution for our punishment, was complete. All who have believed were—*are*—freed from the power of the deadliest menace.

Satan had lost. No matter how many battles would be waged from then to the end, the *war* with sin was *over*.

Now it was simply up to each individual to step forward and claim the victory that already had been entirely, eternally achieved.

Now it's time to fight back.

Jesus said,

*This is war, and there is no neutral ground. If you're not on my side, you're the enemy; if you're not helping, you're making things worse.*³⁰

My Story, *Your* Story . . .

There's an ongoing tug-of-war in every heart.

As much as we long to be in control, we also yearn to get home—to our true home, with Jesus; to the everlasting garden where we'll walk with Him "in the cool of the day"³¹ and "be like him, for we

shall see him as he is.”³² There’ll be no fear, no shame, no pain, no suffering, no hatred, and no regrets. There’ll be perfect harmony: God and us—woven together in flawlessly intimate melody.

It’s up to us to choose Him.

It’s up to us to release control and to surrender that ache to Him.

As God’s human creations, we’re free to follow a life-path that will lead us into His eternal kingdom (which promises to be unimaginably more wondrous than Eden) . . . *or* we can determine to remain in the thorns. Remember: On this battlefield, there isn’t a no-man’s land.

*We can choose God’s life and see manifested
in us the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy,
peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness,
faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.*

OR

*We can choose our own way and yield to the
acts of the sinful nature, allowing ourselves to
degenerate with the cravings of the flesh: sexual
immorality, impurity and debauchery, idolatry
and witchcraft, hatred, discord, jealousy, fits
of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions,
envy, drunkenness, orgies, and the like.*³³

During my dark moments, when I find myself entangled with temptation and dragged away by sin, I’ve caught myself asking if I’ll ever “get there.”

I’ve made some dumb choices during my six decades on planet Earth. (And not just “long ago,” either.) I’ve allowed that ache in my own soul to push God’s authority and power right out of my

life. Thankfully, though, the ache that knocks me off course from time to time also ends up dropping me to my knees in humble repentance.

I've made some good choices too.

I committed my life to Jesus Christ fourteen years ago, and every day since I've given that same heart to my beautiful wife, Char. I raised four one-of-a-kind kids. I dedicated myself to supporting and building up the church. (Researching and writing this book also falls into the "good" category!)

Regardless, the spiritual tug-of-war doesn't let up, and the apostle Paul's anguish frequently becomes mine:

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. . . . I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.³⁴

If you're feeling alone in your win-lose battle with temptation, listen clearly: Do not allow yourself to fall victim to the enemy's "isolate and destroy" strategy. He wants you to feel as if you're the exception—a hopeless spiritual loser. The truth is you're not alone. *Every* human soul is a battleground: "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me."³⁵ And there, in *each* of us, a war between good and evil is fought every second of every day.

Through Christ, we all can be spiritual winners as well.

Here are a few things for us to get through our heads:

We are the prodigal son.

We are Adam and Eve.

We are not alone.

God lavished upon the first humans everything they needed—every advantage to succeed. He gave them the tools to withstand temptation and to stay outside sin’s grip.

He’s still doing this today. The Bible proves it, and research confirms it.



Now, let’s roll up our sleeves and get practical! Whether you’re male or female, young or old, rich or poor, we’ve shown you two universal truths:

1. We all struggle with temptation and sin.
2. Jesus Christ can free us from bondage to soul-robbing choices.

In the following section (and the similar section in each subsequent chapter), let us nudge you toward real change, toward true transformation! We’ve laid out a proven path to help you engage the Bible and hear God’s personal message to you, to learn approaches to spiritual growth that are helping other believers (based on current research findings), and to chart a realistic plan for navigating any temptation trap you’ll encounter.

