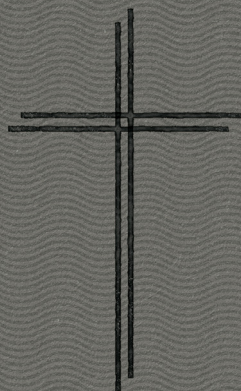


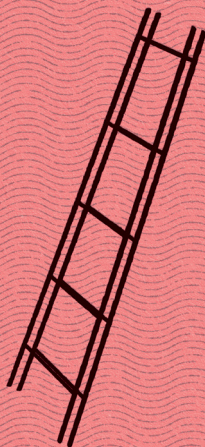
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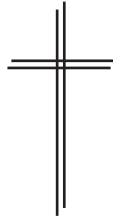
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Losing & Finding
Ourselves in the
Cross of Jesus

Josh White



Stumbling Toward Eternity



Stumbling Toward Eternity

*Losing and Finding Ourselves
in the Cross of Jesus*

Josh White



MULTNOMAH

STUMBLING TOWARD ETERNITY

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*This book is dedicated to my muse,
best friend, and wife, Darcy;
to my beautiful children, Henry and Hattie;
and to the church I have pastored and
given the last thirteen years of my life,
Door of Hope in Portland, Oregon.*

We may very well take the cross as the symbol
at once of mystery and of health. . . .

The cross, though it has at its heart a collision
and a contradiction, can extend its four arms for
ever without altering its shape. Because it has a
paradox in its centre it can grow without changing. . . .

The cross opens its arms to the four winds;
it is a signpost for free travellers.

—G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*

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A WORD TO THE READER

The amateur—the lover, the man who thinks heedlessness a sin and boredom a heresy—is just the man you need. More than that, whether you think you need him or not, he is a man who is bound, by his love, to speak. . . .

The role of the amateur: to look the world back to grace.

—Robert Farrar Capon, *The Supper of the Lamb*

Beginning is always an act of faith. The first step might be the most difficult. For me it is the fear of starting off on the wrong foot. I, like so many, suffer from what Jean Cocteau called “the agony of the act.”*

So how does one begin a book? I suppose that I ought to begin with a word, which we could also call the theme: *love*. This four-letter word is as ubiquitous as it is misused and abused. But one cannot deny that however cliché, sentimental, or common it may be, it continues to be at the forefront of all human longing and meaning. So rather than abandon the word, I would like to qualify it with another: *grace*, which at its most basic level is *love without contingency*. Now I am getting ahead of myself, but

*Jean Cocteau, *The Difficulty of Being*, trans. Elizabeth Sprigge (New York: Melville House, 2013), 7.

the book has begun.

Ever since reading *Tremendous Trifles* by G. K. Chesterton some twenty years ago, I have embraced the title of the amateur. In its most positive light, being an amateur simply means living in a state of childlike wonder. I am not suggesting a refusal to mature; there is clear difference between being *childlike* and being *childish*. After all, Jesus did say, “Let the little children come to me . . . for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.”*

The word *amateur* comes from the Latin *amator*, which means “lover.” My blessing and curse is that almost everything interests me. I tend to give myself to those interests with near obsession. I can love with a recklessness that can quickly overwhelm others, but whatever the downsides, this much is true: When I love, it is *sincere*.

Due to my love of libraries and disdain for classrooms, I might be appropriately called a lowbrow Renaissance man. I do my best to not take myself or the world too seriously, and I believe this is the best path for navigating the challenges of existence. Having said that, I am serious about Jesus, obsessed with grace, and hold tenaciously to the centrality of the cross.

Amateur also means I can be a scattered optimist. My mental glitches and complicated childhood make it extremely difficult to embrace a singular creative endeavor without feeling panicked and queasy. Being willing to dabble in nearly *everything* has led me to consider my

*Matthew 19:14.

life as simply an *unfinished event*. This leads to ideas often piling up and ultimately being forgotten. However, the ideas and interests that *do* make it out of my mind into “the real world” (as my wife calls it) are romanced with such passion that I become convinced everyone should be as enthusiastic as I am about the object of my affection. At least, until I am not. For much like Don Juan, once the romance is over, each passion is soon discarded for a new lover.

So let me just say, the quirkiness of my temperament has made bringing this book to completion more than a little challenging. I have faced an obsessiveness in choosing the right word, the right sentence, the right thought—driven by a desire to honor Jesus and represent Him and my orthodoxy well. I have agonized over the mining of my own broken history, my desire to merge grace and candor, without my mess somehow obstructing the view of His healing. All of this has led to the near destruction of my keyboard’s delete key, as things have been written, erased, and rewritten, ad nauseam. The desire to jump ship has come more than I care to admit. While dealing with the stress of writing deadlines for which (like meetings) I am *never* on time, I’ve also been leading a church in Portland, Oregon, and the combination has counterintuitively led me to complete two unreleased albums and pick up tattooing and boxing as coping mechanisms. I’ve probably given my editor an ulcer (I do love you, Paul, and I am sorry) and my wife (Darcy, you are my gypsy queen) a headache.

The American poet Emily Dickinson once wrote her editor with a question as profound as it was anxious,

Mr Higginson,
Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is
alive?
The Mind is so near itself—it cannot see,
distinctly—and I have none to ask—
Should you think it breathed—and had you the
leisure to tell me, I should feel quick grati-
tude—*

In attempting to merge literary memoir and theological reflection, I have been haunted by that same question. I, like Emily, am too close to what is written to know if the words breathe and must rely on those around me that have spoken into this book. Since memoir and theology can react like oil and water, my way forward is fourfold.

First, I center on the *cross of Christ*, just as in life.

Second, I frame the book on the *seven words* Jesus spoke from the cross.

Third, I use memoir, or *fragments*, as I call them. This was the most difficult to incorporate. I selected memories that carried life-altering significance, as a way of understanding how the gospel interacts with our past, present, and future. Memories are fragmentary by nature; they can

*Dickinson to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, April 15, 1862, in Dickinson Electronic Archives, <http://archive.emilydickinson.org/correspondence/higginson/l260.html>.

be allusive, incomplete, menacing, and paradoxical, which makes turning them over carefully in the mind and writing what one sees as painful as it can be healing.

How they connect to the themes was not something that could be forced and often was more suggestive and nuanced as is life itself. My life is not a metaphor but at times can seem metaphorical. It's not a parable though it may feel parabolic. It's not a cautionary tale, a tragedy, mystery, nightmare, romance, or adventure but like every life, there are those archetypal and universal threads that tie us together in our shared humanity.

These fragments are not meant to explain the cross or interpret the words Jesus spoke from it. In fact, I believe it is the crucified King and His cross that interprets our stories and infuses them with the meaning we long for.

Fourth, I must also point out my use of *footnotes*. When they appear, the corresponding note will be on the bottom of the page itself. My mind loves to chase the interconnectedness of things, those threads that can open a door to meaning that was previously hidden or that may simply lead to a hallway that has no doors. They do not have to be read, but I hope you do, for often I found myself more excited about the footnote than the actual section that inspired it. (Such is the nature of the amateur.)

All that to say this: If you are reading these words, then the miraculous has happened—the book is done. I am likely breathing again. However, right now, in this moment, I am thinking about you, the reader. I am wondering who you might be and where you are in this crazy,

unsettled world of ours. Even if this is as far as you read, let me just say to you what I say to our church every week because it's true: "On your worst day, Jesus is crazy about you!"

Grace upon grace over you and yours,
Josh

PROLOGUE

FIRST FRAGMENT

the Jump

[1982]

He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

—Ecclesiastes 3:11

The apple tree next to the run-down apartment complex was huge. Some kids had salvaged a couple of dirty mattresses from the nearby dumpster and stacked them beneath the tree.

She was so cute—older than I was (probably eleven) and tall, with long dark hair. She wore an argyle sweater-vest over a plaid button-up shirt and high-waisted Jordache jeans. It was dusk. Her smile was glowing as she laughed at the boys jumping from the tree onto the mattresses. There I was in my Toughskin jeans, those stupid baby-poop brown

suede shoes from Sears Roebuck, my "HOMEWORK BLOWS MY MIND" T-shirt, and an uneven, helmet-shaped haircut imposed on me by my mother (complete with cowlick).

I watched the girl with unnoticed longing. Sam, my neighbor and only friend, was with me, so I decided to be brave. I climbed the tree to the very top. I looked down with hidden terror, made sure she was watching, and then before I could back out, I jumped.

The fall was fast, and the landing hard. Without even a bounce, my mouth connected with my knee, right where the hole in my jeans was, burying my front tooth into my kneecap. I held my leg and pulled my mouth free, groaning and wiping tears away as the blood began to flow.

But she noticed, she really *noticed*, and she even helped me up. I don't remember her name. I never saw her again. It didn't matter. For I had wrestled with God, and He had blessed me. I walked back to the apartment with a limp.

INTRODUCTION

The Good Death & the Cross of Stumbling

But we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block . . .

—1 Corinthians 1:23

For I decided to know nothing among you
except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

—1 Corinthians 2:2

The hardest thing in life is to live well. Perhaps that is why it is so hard to be honest about the difficulty of living.

The longer we live, the greater the enigma. The good news is there is nothing new under the sun. The mystery of life is still a shared mystery, and wherever the “human comedy” is told honestly, no matter how varied the experience, it carries universal truths. Our shared stories have the power to comfort us, remind us we are not alone, draw us out of ourselves, and point us to something bigger.

Take this book for example. Because of its personal na-

ture and the insecurity it produces in me when I think about it being read, this book forces me to cling to the conviction that my ordinary life, like yours, *matters*. Our stories not only speak to the human experience but are woven into a singular story as well. Whether we are aware of it or not, this story permeates everything we know with divine significance. As G. K. Chesterton, a man who lived with what can be called a “sacramental cast”* (an ability to truly see the world through the lens of grace), wrote over a hundred years ago, “I had always felt life first as a story: and if there is a story, there is a story-teller.”**

I believe in this larger story and in its Author’s ability to weave the dissonant threads of our existence into His redemptive narrative, which has allowed me to begin to confront the dragon in the road—those wounds that have cut me so deeply that for much of my life, circumnavigation felt like the only viable option. Confronting them was simply too much.

It is my desire to not simply accept the truth but to allow the Spirit of truth to drive me to Jesus, who *is* the truth, again and again. To start is to stumble and maybe even fall. But no matter how painful the wounds we experience are (as well as the wounds we cause), they must be brought into the light and brought to the cross if we want to travel the path of Jesus.

*Harry Blamires, *The Christian Mind: How Should a Christian Think?* (London: S.P.C.K., 1963), 176.

**G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1995), 66.

Why is it so hard to accept this? To believe that the gospel works not merely to remove our wounds but to transfigure them into something useful, even beautiful? Our wounds can be healed, and they can bring healing. It is true that they leave scars, but without those scars, what proof would we have of the healing?

God is calling His people back to the center, back to the *cross*. We are amid a cultural shaking that has left much of the church exposed and reeling. If we are to navigate these troubled times, we must relearn how to interpret the ideological battles raging around us through the lens of the gospel. If we remove the offense of the gospel, we lose Jesus. I am not at all suggesting we be offensive, but indifference should never be our goal. The Jesus who commanded His followers to “take up [your] cross and follow me” is being rapidly replaced with a new kind of Jesus who does not command but only suggests.*

If Jesus is stripped of His cross, His authority, and His power to forgive, heal, save, and judge, what are we left with? It’s been said, “No cross, no crown,” but in actuality it’s “No cross, no *Christ!*”

It is my pressing conviction that if we diminish the cross of Christ, we drain Christianity of its lifeblood. Without the cross as the center, we will inevitably turn to what can be called ladder theology. Ladder theology is the default setting of human existence; it is the religious impulse in all of us to prove our worth through effort, to climb our

*Matthew 16:24.

way to a heaven that has already come down to us. The heroic ascent is a fool's errand. We can no more build to the heavens than we can save ourselves, and all our attempts to do so will end in self-deception and ruin. As followers of Jesus, we cannot afford to forget what the early church fathers called the "kenosis," or self-emptying, of King Jesus. As Paul said in the letter to the Philippians,

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name.*

Our satisfaction will never be found on the ladder of human effort. Instead, it will be found in our daily surrender to the One who descended into the depths of human brokenness, emptied Himself of His glory, and identified with us at our lowest point, our sin, all without collapsing under its weight. The glory of God can no longer be defined by His impenetrable otherness or the insurmountable distance between Himself and the creation

*Philippians 2:5–9.

He sustains. His glory is discovered most fully at the foot of the cross, in His humiliation. For this is where the crucified God eradicated once and for all the impossible distance between Himself and His rebellious human creation. Our acceptance of a work that cannot be improved upon is the only way we will ascend.

The path is always down before Jesus can lift us up.

. . .

Anyone familiar with the history of crucifixion as a method of execution must acknowledge that on the surface, the cross—an instrument of horrific torture and capital punishment—is a strange choice for the central emblem of the Christian faith. Widely used by the Romans as a public deterrent for revolt and crime, to be crucified was considered the cruelest and most grotesque of punishments. It was reserved solely for the lowest criminals and slaves. Paradoxically, the Romans, who prided themselves on their civility and order, refused to take ownership for the barbaric and obscene invention of crucifixion; they found its cruelty distasteful to even discuss in polite company.

It is difficult for us to understand the scandal of the cross today. As a symbol, it has become so sanitized of its original purpose that it is almost impossible for us to understand its cruelty. It was a device created by the wrath of man, meant to obliterate with brutal simplicity all semblance of its victim's humanity. The sight, sound, and

smell of this prolonged public torture—where the crucified hung naked, sometimes for days, soiled, and bloody, incapable even of stopping hungry birds from feeding on their totally exposed flesh—was meant to overwhelm the senses and strike fear in both the crowd and the crucified.

It makes sense that Paul referred to the cross as a “stumbling block.”* There is something offensive about a seemingly helpless, humiliated man dying the death of a common criminal and then being called the King of kings, the Savior of the world, a perfect man, and our holy God. Yet for Christians, the cross and its crucified God-man lie at the center of all meaningful discourse.

Why? How? Because the heartbeat of the gospel is not the wrath of God but the *love* of God. His wrath is simply His love violated. This is the God who “so loved the world, that he gave his only Son.”** In the cross, God takes the worst that humanity can produce—an instrument of total hatred and cruelty—and commandeers it. Love transforms this instrument of torment into a vehicle for God’s best, His saving grace.

There is much in the crucifixion of Jesus that is wrapped in mystery, what Scripture calls the hidden things of God.*** However, there is also much that has been revealed. Though the exact mechanics of atonement continues to be a source of much theological debate, what

*1 Corinthians 1:23.

**John 3:16.

***See Matthew 11:25.

can be known dimly has the power to illuminate our lives in such way that all things become new. For the very One who died for us also explained what He was doing while He was dying.

There were seven “words,” as they are traditionally called, recorded in the four Gospels, which were spoken by Jesus as He hung from the cross of Calvary. In each statement, Jesus—who is the *logos*, the living Word, which is “sharper than any two-edged sword”^{*}—brings a death blow to the lies that keep us from Him. Yet it is through these same words we find resurrection life. It is at the cross we discover we are inexorably loved, and it is at the cross we discover the freedom to love.

I have come up horribly short, yet God has chosen in His freedom to love me, die for me, forgive me, and save me, using the brokenness in my life to recreate me. Thus He reveals the holy mystery of His unwillingness to exist without broken people like me. How can I not thank Him for this gift? True, I do not thank Him for the abandonment, abuse, or anxiety I have experienced throughout my life. I’m not a masochist and neither is God. I see them for what they are—the outcome of sin within and without—but I do thank Him (though not nearly enough) for His ability to work through these difficulties to bring beauty out of the ashes.

Now it may seem primitive, one might even say offensive, to speak so passionately about the murder of a Jew-

^{*}Hebrews 4:12.

ish teacher who lived two thousand years ago. A man who claimed to be one with God with such consistency that anyone seriously looking into the claims of Jesus is forced into a corner where a decision is required. Either He was God then, which means He is God now, or He was a madman who, by some strange twist of fate and sleight of hand, accidentally set world history on fire. If the latter is true, He is—metaphorically speaking, of course—laughing in His grave at the lengths we will go to diminish our anxieties that life in all of its exhausting complexity and stifling brevity produces. But how can anyone gaze into the face of Jesus for any length of time and not be fixated by the miraculous merger of such gentleness and fierceness, humility and power, suffering and peace, justice and love? All I can say is, if Jesus is not the Son of God, then I must worship the ones who invented Him.

For when I come to the cross, I am silenced, the curse is revealed and reversed, and my illusions are exposed and overthrown. This is the place where our stories are brought into the light. Yes, this is the place where original sin is replaced by what is more original still: *Grace*.

This cross is the center from which we stumble toward eternity.

1.

The Cross of Judgment & Forgiveness

The First Word from the Cross

When they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. And Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

—**Luke 23:33–34**



The Wounded Hand & the Clenched Fist

Forgiveness saves. Forgiveness reconciles.
Forgiveness must permeate our politics again; forgiveness
and not moral codes; forgiveness and not Moses-zeal!
For forgiveness alone makes it possible for us to live
together. Forgiveness alone heals wounds.
Forgiveness does not make void the laws of God;
no indeed, it teaches us to keep them.

—Karl Barth, *Come, Holy Spirit: Sermons*

No words have haunted me with such paradoxical beauty like the first recorded words that fell from the lips of Jesus as He hung in agony, naked and beaten beyond recognition. Not even the crowd's derision could silence the two-edged sword that He spoke from His parched and bloody lips. This was His heart of mercy spoken over and against the blinding violence of alienated humanity.

It is here we find the God of yes with His reconciliation on display through Jesus the suffering servant. This is forgiveness not requested but personified and proclaimed. Jesus's open and pierced hands are contrasted against the

clenched fists of the hateful mob,* absorbing the vitriol and violence of human history. Jesus's glory is revealed in His humiliation. The *elective love* of God is on display. He chooses—for He alone is truly free—to love sinners in their sin. He is a forgiving God because He is love. Neither forgiveness nor wrath are a part of His essential nature; rather they are the outcome of His holy character violated. We have done much, known and unknown, that needs forgiveness. Ignorance is not innocence, but the good news that falls from the forsaken God's lips is that He is a God of mercy. In the anguish, there was also the joy set before Him, which is you. This is judgment and re-creation. This is the great exchange: Our sin blotted out through His spilled blood. This is the Judge who was judged in our place. It is the heart of the Father being revealed through the Spirit-filled Son's atoning work. He

*The clenched fist has always been a symbol of revolution, resistance, and often violence. Amid revolution, socialist parties used it commonly in the twentieth century. It was adopted by the black power, or nationalist, movement of the sixties (most notably the Black Panthers), and it reemerged with the Black Lives Matter movement of today. It is also used by White nationalist groups. I am not here to speak into the ideologies of these various movements, but I will address the shared meaning of the fist they use symbolically. Solidarity and unity are the most common words connected to the symbol of the fist today. But that is misleading at best, for we must ask, "Solidarity to what?" and "By what means?" The clenched fist was at the center of the most violent century in human history and has been primarily used as a unifying rally to revolution by those who saw themselves as oppressed. Oppressed or not, there is rage behind this symbol. In fact, in the history of the revolutions that used this emblem, most often the result was not peace but even more violent regimes. Why? Because violence begets violence. The closed fist is used to punch, not embrace, and it is an emblem of anger, not forgiveness. It is hard not to contrast it with the passive resistance movements of MLK or Gandhi, who never raised fists but fought by surrender. But nothing compares to the revolution of love worked by the pierced, open hands of King Jesus.

does not need us, but He is not content to exist without us. To be forgiven is to be embraced by the forgiving God. To be forgiven is to be freed to forgive and love.

SECOND FRAGMENT

You Didn't Want to Be with Me

[1975]

A dysfunctional family is any family
with more than one person in it.

—Mary Karr, *The Liars' Club*

He watched with unblinking eyes, too large for his disheveled head. He was clinging so tightly to his teddy that his hands had turned a whitish blue. He was staring, alone in his fear, out of a dirty window from the back seat of his father's run-down car at a volatile scene he did not understand. You could hear his heartbeat almost as loudly as his parents' muffled screams while he watched the scene through tears. His mother was hitting his outraged father like a wild animal.

This is my earliest memory. It's vivid but silent when I play through it in my mind, like an out-of-body experience, which makes it all the more unsettling.

When I was one, my parents had divorced. On

this visit, Dad was drunk and had put me in the back of his car. Mom later told me I kept crying, "Please don't let him take me, Mommy!" while my Father yelled, "He is my son too!" I can see the scene, but I do not hear it. What is etched upon my mind is two people fighting over me, in front of me, while I am invisible. Despite the silence of this remembered event, even today I find the emotions of it are still present and impactful.

. . .

Forty-four years later, while I was visiting my father in his run-down, filthy, cigarette-stained home in rural Alaska, he brought up that incident. Between drags of Camel Red and sips of vodka, with greasy hair stuck to his forehead and a highly flammable breathing tube in his nose, Dad spoke to me. The words came in his crackling baritone voice that never seems to have enough air: "I am still pissed at you for that, Joshua!"

"Pissed at me for what?"

"That you didn't want to be with me!"

"I was two!"

"I am still pissed!"

As with most conversations with my father these days, this dialogue came suddenly to an end. There was a stilted and abrupt quality to his speech, as it moved without warning between nostalgia, worry,

agitation, and sudden silence. I am sure this was due to a lifetime of substance abuse and years of isolation. Words were spoken and then abandoned as he retreated into an interior solitude that matched the loneliness of the Alaskan landscape around him.

How could he say that to me? The words pressed down on me with a near-otherworldly significance—not because they were true but because they were honest. He felt rejected, angry, and alone; he had pushed those feelings down and hid. Now, finally, he had confessed. He had released his grievance, and we were left with the sadness and absurdity of the words. His statement stood between us—as cold and oppressive as the permanent twilight and sub-zero weather outside. But as I sat in the discomfort of that smoke-filled space, an understanding began to slowly wash over my frustration in what I can only describe as a holy intervention. As Dad stared out the window at the snow-covered ground, fighting to breathe, I saw him in his brokenness as a child, and there I found compassion. My lips unlocked and my tongue loosened: “I am sorry, Dad.”

“It’s okay, Joshua. I’m just having a hard time at the moment, son.”

“I know, Dad. I love you.”

“I love you too, son. I’m glad you’re here. Your old man is usually tougher than this.”

“I know, Dad.”

End of conversation.

And there was peace mingled in the sadness as we sat there, quietly watching one of Dad's favorite shows, *Little House on the Prairie*. There on the screen was Pa Ingalls, pleading in a field for God to save his son. It seemed like some strange portent, and I silently pleaded the same for my dad.



Forgiveness, Where Are You?

Grace means that God does some quite definite thing,
not a thing here and a thing there, but something quite definite
in men. Grace means that God forgives men their sins.

—Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*

Forgiveness is a word dimly understood, challenging to define, and even more difficult to give or receive. It is a ghost of days gone by that holds very little bearing in the age of victimization with all its demands for justice. It's not that it is thought about with disdain, it's just not really thought about at all. To use our modern mode of quantification, it is not a word that is currently trending.

If it does make its way into our collective consciousness, it is used primarily to describe what is out of reach. In pop music, it often describes a longing to correct what is already over—in other words, “too little too late.” If the word is uttered in film or on television, it comes in the form of a frantic request that seems to guarantee its denial. The hero or antihero is about to unleash vengeance

on some sad sack who is about to expire and is pathetically crying out, “I’m sorry, forgive me.” There are those passing scenes of the shady priest in the confessional box offering absolution from a God who is portrayed as not present.*

Outside of communities of faith, the most common and innocuous use of the word *forgiveness* is found in the home (at least in my limited experience). My wife, Darcy, and I continually spoke about forgiveness as we braved those exhausting but beautiful early years of parenting. In that formative season for our two magical children, Henry and Hattie, we found ourselves frequently offering forgiveness to them or requesting it from them. They most likely never asked for this absolution, and they didn’t understand what it was they were granting. I am personally so prone to mishap that being quick to ask for forgiveness has been my only defense.** I can’t tell you how many

*The film industry’s seeming commitment to a two-dimensional presentation of a Christianity as a monolithic movement marked by sociopaths, prigs, prudes, and perverts is as maddening as it is false. But before we point the finger at Hollywood for its cheap shots, let’s at least acknowledge the nauseating sentimentality, lack of artistry, and oversimplification of complex issues found in so much of what we would call Christian entertainment.

Thank you, Phoebe Waller-Bridge, for the humanity, complexity, and pitch perfect dialogue between your character and the “Hot Priest.” I could not stop talking about the sheer perfection of your show *Fleabag* for months and may or may not have ruined its enjoyment for others—forgive me. Please, always write, direct, and star in whatever you do. You are a genius.

**I had the gift of chaos when the kids were little, and most of the time it was silly and fun, until it wasn’t, such as the time I asked Henry if he wanted to see something funny while we waited in the car for Darcy and Hattie. I honked the horn as they were walking in front of it, scaring the bejeezus out of them (they are both highly sensitive persons). My wife was so enraged that her middle finger went flying. In her gritted teeth and glare, I could see my own execution take place, while my four-year-

times, as a means of consoling after a correction or comforting after unmanaged irritation, I spoke these words: “It’s okay, Hanky. Daddy forgives you, but you can’t take Sister’s toy from her when she is playing with it.”

“Miss Hattie, I love you and I forgive you. So does Henry, but you cannot hit him when you’re frustrated. Okay? Now tell Brother you’re sorry.”

“Oh Hattie, I am so sorry. Daddy didn’t mean to scare you like that. Will you forgive me, baby?”

“Buddy, I am so sorry. I got frustrated, and that’s not okay. I love you so much! Will you forgive me?”

I can’t think of a single time when young Henry or Hattie ever said, “Daddy, forgive me.” At most, I received the slowly spoken, “Sorry,” which was usually prompted by, “What do we say?”* The point is this: My kids never felt the need to ask for something they instinctively knew I would give them. My requests for forgiveness from them have never been because their love for me was at stake. I ask for their forgiveness for the same reason I ask God for a forgiveness that is already mine: To humble my naturally proud, excuse-making self.

We can teach our children what is right and wrong, we

old collapsed into an inconsolable puddle of tears. Sorry, ladies, I feel bad that it still makes me smile.

*I can only speak from my own parenting experience. Due to the mess of my childhood—though my mom loved us fiercely—I am well aware that what I am saying is not the experience of every child. It is heartbreaking and unbearable to think of children being neglected and abused. If you are like me, our healing is found at the cross. There the acceptance of forgiveness and the willingness to truly forgive forge the ability to tell a different story.

can help them understand sin and lovingly discipline them, but if grace rules the home, forgiveness becomes the air they breathe. Forgiveness, like air, cannot be explained to a child, only experienced. We, the parents, absorb the unfiltered emotions and unpredictable behavior: The food on the floor, the diaper artwork, the bald spot on the dog, the permanent marker on the face, the tantrums, the fork in the outlet, the hitting, biting, and scratching. They literally can be little beasts. I know there were times my wife and I—especially Darcy, who carried the bulk of this load—were exhausted, overwhelmed, and even longed for a momentary respite provided by Mimi and Papa, but nothing could separate Henry and Hattie from our love, then or now. Forgiveness was the fact, not the focus of conversation in our home. For us, the “yes” of love was simultaneously the corrective “no” to the wrongs that could never threaten it, as well as the covering that left guilt, shame, and fear suffocated and forgotten.

I am not attempting to say we don’t need to ask for forgiveness from God. We should. I am saying that unless we become like little children, our requests will remain unreal. Why? Because it is childlike faith—the belief that we are loved without condition that causes us to confess. As I said at the beginning, this is a book about love. Love defined by grace, and grace is love without contingencies. The forgiveness of Jesus is not mere pardon; it is His acceptance of us as His beloved, in spite of us. It can be as difficult to receive as it is to define, but there is not a

person who has truly experienced it that didn't know it when it came. Why? Because we don't just experience forgiveness, we experience the God who forgives.



The Judge & the Judged

Just as we can never go behind God's saving and revealing acts in Jesus Christ and in the mission of his Spirit, so we can never think or speak of him truly apart from his revealing and saving acts or behind the back of Jesus Christ, for there is no other God.

—Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*

Understanding the words “Father, forgive them”^{*} requires that we ask, What kind of statement is this? Is it a plea, a request, or a proclamation? And, what has God revealed Himself to be like? First and foremost, God is revealed in Scripture as one. But as the revelation of Scripture unfolds, the one God reveals Himself to be a community within Himself, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We worship and serve a triune God. The moment we forget that, our entire faith can unravel like a snag in a sweater. We may not be able to explain the Trinity, but God's triune

^{*}Luke 23:34.

nature is what makes sense of everything else.*

We must not separate the mind of the eternal Son from that of the Father and the Spirit. It is tempting to apply to Jesus the relationship we see between God and Moses, who asked the Lord to show the rebellious Israelites mercy. In that account, we are told that “the LORD relented.”** God moved from severity to mercy based upon Moses’s mediation. Jesus is indeed our mediator. He is the final mediation, and God does get angry. He hates sin because it violates His character and robs Him of what He loves: You! The problem with comparing this to the cross is that it divides the triune God into competing persons. The gentle Son is not pleading with an angry Father. He is presenting the heart of a Father who loves us despite ourselves. This is fundamentally the most transformative truth for me. My Christian life did not begin to open up until I truly believed in the depth of my being that on my worst day, Jesus is crazy about me. It’s not just Jesus but the triune God who loves and who is love. As

*Let’s consider something else that can’t be understood but is itself the foundation to understanding other things that would be hidden: quantum mechanics. A subfield of physics that describes the behavior of atoms, quantum mechanics continues to this day to baffle scientists with its hazy probabilities and violations of time and space. It flies in the face of reality itself. Yet we know it to be real because it is the entire basis for the computer and semiconductor, to name just a couple examples. So too, the doctrine of the Trinity brings harmony and clarity to God’s self-disclosure, His redemptive history, and what it means to be made in the image of God. At the same time, the fact that God is three in one in inseparable unity is a mystery hidden within God Himself. Attempts to dispose of this impenetrable doctrine—and many have tried—unravel the heart of the Christian faith and create endless heretical problems and contradictions, which the Trinity in all its apparent contradictions actually solves.

**Exodus 32:14.

Jesus said to His disciples in the upper room, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father."*

We cannot pit persons of the triune God against each other without doing damage to the Godhead itself. Jesus is the man who mediates and the God who forgives, the Judge and the Judged in our place. He is communicating the Father's heart because He and the Father are one. As it is declared in the letter of Hebrews,

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being.**

God has nothing to say to us except what He has said and continues to say through Christ, who is the Word become flesh. Jesus is the final Word and the eternal solution to God's pursuit of humanity in our brokenness and sin. He is consistent with what we see from Genesis to Revelation: God is a God who continually intervenes into humanity's brokenness. The forgiveness that is proclaimed in the Scriptures corresponds to the work of the cross. The good news is that God, in His freedom, chooses to love

*John 14:9.

**Hebrews 1:1–3, NIV.

sinner in their sin. This is grace. This is God with us and for us. Jesus is not wrestling with the Father's reluctance but proclaiming His heart to forgive. There is no God behind the back of Jesus.

Scripture is graphic in its depiction of God's forgiveness. His forgiveness is more than simply pardon. It is removal: "As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us."*

This is not a self-induced amnesia. Rather, God has chosen to put our sin aside as if it never happened. The vivid language of that Scripture emphasizes the completeness of God's forgiveness. When He forgives, our sins are dealt with thoroughly. God sees them no more. He sees us in His Son, the sinless one. The forgiving God, in His freedom, has chosen to love us and cleanse us through His love. He is holy love. His goal is not pardon but acceptance of the sinner, and our God is a consuming fire.

*Psalm 103:12, NIV.

THIRD FRAGMENT

The Mole

[1979]

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

—Romans 3:23

It was a hot summer day. The air was stagnant as the old man, who sold night crawlers for a living, sat in his lawn chair with a shotgun across his lap, waiting for the mole to surface. We were picking blackberries beneath the shadow of the bridge when we heard the shot from behind us. We licked our purple-stained fingers, dropped our buckets, and ran toward that lonely, windblown man. He stood triumphantly over the mound that he had been angrily watching from his manicured lawn. To his surprise, and maybe embarrassment, the poor, blind subterranean dweller had surfaced, from the confusion and vibration of the blast, unscathed. Miraculously, the spread of pellets had missed it.

The old man called us kids closer and let us hold

and pet the docile alien creature. It had brown velvetlike fur, a seemingly eyeless face, a pink nose, and strange two-thumbed, oversized paws that turned outward, allowing it to move through the dirt like a swimmer performing the breaststroke.

The shift from the dark earth to the open air utterly transformed its behavior. For in our hands, its softness both in touch and temperament made it impossible for us to grasp that beneath the ground it was a monster, a destroyer of earth that terrorized the man's precious earthworms with its poisonous saliva and awful clown paws, which could grasp its victim with such precision so as to squeeze the dirt out of its insides without killing it, carrying the prey back to its lair for later consumption.

The old man could not allow this because the earthworms were his livelihood and the yard their home, which is why when we were done playing with our temporary pet, he took it behind his house and shot it in the head.

. . .

It's not just the violence of the story that haunts me. It's not even the paradoxical nature of the mole—although both are poignant. It is how the whole narrative is haunted by the groan of creation itself. Even as a child I sensed that creation was a gift that had somehow gone wrong. That day held beauty, joy,

play, and wonder, yet here was something else there—something ominous that cast a shadow over us as fully as the cantilever bridge shadowed the yard. The allure of death is one of the unsettling pieces. As children, we had heard the gun before, so we knew what it did. We had never seen anything move after it had been on the receiving end of that old man's shotgun. We were thrilled to see the mole alive, but we were also ready to witness, and even participate in, its death. Then there is the old man, frail and close to death, but willing to waste his days, withdrawn, violently protecting what he felt was his livelihood, when in actuality it did not provide enough to take care of his most basic needs but nonetheless was his identity. He didn't have time for life; he was too busy protecting it from unseen threats. There is also the duality of the mole itself. In the ground it was hidden in darkness, violent and elusive, but the light of its new environment instantly transformed its very nature. Yet, if given a choice, it would return to the dark.

I, like you, am a part of this grand narrative. In the light of the crucified King, I have come to recognize the invisible thread that weaves it together. I am innocence lost, and yet I am still full of childlike wonder. I am the aging man who wastes life to avoid death's coming, and yet I am also wisdom growing. I am the mole, both monster and new creation, hidden and exposed, dangerous and gentle. My exis-

tence is always a potential gift or threat to others. I am both of the earth and the air. I am heaven and hell. I am a mixture. But unlike the mole that died once, I must die that good death daily.



The Sinfulness of Sin & the Law of Mixture

GOD sticks his head out of heaven. He looks around.
He's looking for someone not stupid—one man,
even, God-expectant, just one God-ready woman.
He comes up empty. A string of zeros.

—Psalm 14:2–3, MSG

Our denial of sin has done nothing to curb its cosmic fecundity. It has merely created an inability to explain why we hurt and where we can find healing. It has led to the current culture of victimization. Understanding sin and mixture in our own lives is what will set us free from being the victim or blaming the victimizer. Everyone will be both in their lives, and Jesus died for both. Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, does not just disturb our victim narrative today but utterly dismantles it with three words when He says to His disciples, “If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things

to those who ask him!”*

As Jesus was speaking to His followers about prayer, He made this rather offensive statement without explanation. His reference to them as evil, but capable of good, is as troubling as it is profound. It is a word that sheds light on the purpose of His entire message and why He came. It is also the crux to understanding this book. The coexistence of evil alongside good is a baffling idea for us since we tend to define *evil* as something we are not. It is a word we reserve for the worst that humanity produces. We are so gifted at deflection. Jesus, however, does not separate humanity into various groups based on effort. Nor does He suggest His disciples are as bad as they could be. No, for Jesus there seems to be only two groups:

1. Evil people who say yes to His yes, accepting His sacrifice on their behalf.
2. Evil people who say no to His yes, rejecting His sacrifice on their behalf, which I would argue is the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit.

It is easy to see how damaging the Sermon on the Mount could be if we do not understand its purpose. We can no more live what He demands than He can sin. We are damned without the cross, for we can't be perfect. It's the whole reason He came. His words are meant to bring

*Matthew 7:11.

us to the end of ourselves. Like the alcoholics or drug addicts who have bottomed out and recognize they can't do it without help, the Christian life flows from the same principle. It is our daily surrender to the sinless Christ by His Spirit within us that brings the change. Yet we hammer people with the sermon's impossible demands, attempting to externalize it when the root problem is that of the heart.

As one example, and I could give many, one may practice nonviolence, but Jesus said anger at another person is murder. For me, there isn't a day that goes by where I haven't killed someone—even people I love.* You might be asking, "What about righteous indignation?" Yes, but our mixture means that righteousness in our anger cannot be sustained. We cannot hold our anger the way that God does, which is why Scripture warns us: "Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold."**

There is a fundamental brokenness that lies beneath the surface of everything. Unfortunately, when we refuse to recognize the implications of sin—not only in the world but also in our lives as believers—the outcome is an inevitable movement away from the cross and back to the ladder. Ladder and law are interchangeable. Ladder theology is the false belief that, if I achieve A, B, and C,

*Portland, as of late, has unfortunately turned my imagination into something more akin to the scenes of ultraviolence from *Clockwork Orange* than the still waters and green pastures of Scripture.

**Ephesians 4:26–27, NIV.

then I will be accepted and satisfied and then I will prove my worth. All people engage in it, but it is most disturbing in the church. Why? Because it manifests in our attempts to present to the world an ideal that we ourselves can't live. We would never say this, but it's what we communicate when we view behavior and traditions as the defining factors of our faith. The ladder is defined by the false promise of arriving by climbing. The cross is defined by the promise of knowing by dying.

Ladder theology leads to what I like to call selective sanctification. And it's not just a Christian problem. It is a universal phenomenon—I was guilty of it before I was saved and still find myself wanting to do it today. Selective sanctification reduces life to a list of personal convictions to create a sense that we are okay in the world. It is driven by our dueling desires to belong and to hide. The heartbreaking reality is that when this goes unchecked among believers it leads to lovelessness and pride in the pulpit, judgment and exhaustion in the pew, scandal and damage in the church, and ineffectiveness in the world.

This is why we must not downplay the seriousness of our sin nature (*singular*) from which the endless variations of our sins (*plural*) play out. The Lord's words remind us that we are often ignorant of the darkness within. I can wake up a zealot, by the afternoon be a hedonist, and end my day like a practical atheist. We need the Spirit's illumination to look at the sin in ourselves and the mixture it creates. For at its most elemental level, sin is . . .

1. *A universal rebellion* against God's rule and a continual rejection of His grace: "I am my own!" "My will be done!"
2. *Sickness and slavery.* What is clear in Scripture (and is played out in crushing real time throughout human history) is that sin is invasive, and it infiltrates every arena of human existence. Sin has distorted what it means to be made in the image of God. The image is still present, but it has been deeply marred, leaving humanity bound, broken, blind, and in need of divine intervention. It doesn't mean that everything we do is bad, but it does mean—even for those who have been regenerated—that everything we do is mixture. There is much that needs to be forgiven, and ignorance is not innocence. At its core, sin is us playing God, and nothing enslaves like the tyranny of the illusory or, as I prefer to call it, the shadow self.

As Jesus Himself said, "Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."*

But what does that freedom look like if sin is always a problem? To answer that we must consider the law of mixture.

*John 8:34–36, NIV.

. . .

The law of mixture is a truth that is as ubiquitous as it is ignored and denied. The difficulty of *being* lies in the inescapable fact that no matter where we live, how young or old we are, who we love or who we've lost, what we have or don't have, how wise or unaware we are, and even what we believe or don't believe, until we *shuffle off this mortal coil*, life at its best is mixture.

It's amazing how the world ignores this truth. But it is especially confounding when Christians do so since it describes the inescapability of our sin nature and its impact on every arena of existence. *Mixture*. It is everywhere. It is in us. This is a hard and sobering truth, capable of creating bitterness, anger, and despair if it is not anchored in the gospel of Jesus. When the Spirit first confronted me with this truth, I was brought to my knees and met with grace. It has been my key to understanding the impossibility of life without losing hope, and it has helped me, though far from perfectly, to enter into my suffering and the suffering of others, such as my father. Most importantly, it has been a continual reminder that the goal of the Christian life is not arriving but *knowing*.

Of course, I am not the first to describe this law. I think of the apostle Paul, who wrote, "So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me."*

Wherever I am, I find mixture with me. It is within me,

*Romans 7:21, NIV.

beside me, behind me, and before me. Its inflexible nature is written into the fabric of creation—this is why all of creation groans—and it cannot be escaped without escaping life itself. Wrestling with this truth is not for the faint of heart, and there is as much danger in overanalysis as there is in avoidance of this reality.

Our frustration and madness flow out of life's apparent incompleteness. One could say we are frustrated with the frustration held within the gift of existence itself. The dark side of mixture (death, failure, loss, suffering), like an unwanted companion, is always there to remind us just how fragmented we are. This universal longing to be both more and the same is insatiable. This is the paradox of existence—we want to be “ourselves” but never seem to be satisfied with the self we currently are. Our mixture does not dissipate as Christians; in fact, it is amplified by Christ's very presence. This is why the apostle Paul, at the end of his life wrote to the young pastor Timothy, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.”* Notice, he said “I am” a sinner, not “I was.” Why? Because intimacy with Jesus means living in the light, and we can't come into the light without being continually exposed. One of the great and painful lessons I am still learning is that the victory I have in Christ is not the conquering of my mixture. It is the victorious Christ, working in and through my mixture because, in His loving freedom, He chooses to do so. The question I must ask

*1 Timothy 1:15.

daily is, Am I willing to actually surrender this glitchy vehicle called me to its rightful owner?

Sin is forgiven but that doesn't mean forgiven sins aren't treacherous due to our mixture. There is a perpetual conflict of the new nature—*Christ in me*—at play within a sinful setting. For no matter how much I sense the Spirit of Christ at work, or no matter how effectively and boldly the gospel is proclaimed, there is simultaneously a plethora of other voices in the back of my head—calling me a fraud, singing my praise, pointing out my shortcomings, and inflating my strengths. This is why the cross must remain our center, for without it we will always try to downplay or ignore the mixture that is always at play. As theologian Gerhard Forde warned, “Superficial optimism breeds ultimate despair.”*

But if we are forgiven, why do we still struggle? Maybe it's because we treat forgiveness as an end in itself rather than the outcome of the end, the once-and-for-all work of the cross. The Spirit must grieve over our distrust in the forgiveness that is already ours. His atonement is a finished event that has secured the forgiveness of humanity, but we must say yes to His yes over us if we want to experience this reality. His forgiveness cannot be separated from Himself. The challenge before us is the fact that the default setting of the human heart is to push back against anything that threatens our autonomy. Forgiveness of sins

*Gerhard O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1997), 16.

is not the purpose of the cross, for God has always been a forgiving God. The purpose of the cross is reconciliation, by which the gulf between God and man has been permanently removed through Christ's victory over sin, death, and the dominion of darkness. The gift is not simply forgiveness; it is the forgiving God Himself who chooses to love us in our sin but is not content to leave us there. Absolution is total on the side of God, and it is rejected only from our side because of our unbelief.

So here, Jesus declares the very heart of God over humanity in its most darkened state: "Father, forgive." It is a word of love that comes to the unlovable. It is a love that meets us in our lowest point, our sin. For the gospel to be what it is, it must be grounded in who God is in the essence of His person and revealed to us through Jesus, who was and is fully clothed in His own gospel. His forgiveness is an immovable reality grounded in His death and resurrection. His love and absolution can at times feel utterly elusive, but that doesn't make them any less real.



The Heart of the Heart

As the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

—Colossians 3:13

As beautiful as forgiveness and reconciliation are, when it comes to God's call upon the forgiven to forgive others, it can feel impossible. Our identities often become wrapped up in the wrongs we have (or believe we have) endured. The natural inclination to sin means that bitterness and blame shifting are the repeated behaviors of our modern age—collectively and individually. As Jacques Ellul prophetically wrote in 1948 with such precision,

Christians cannot consider themselves pure in comparison with others or declare themselves unaffected by the world's sin. A major fact of our civilization is that sin is becoming more and more collective, and each individual person is constrained to participate in it.*

*Jacques Ellul, *Presence in the Modern World* (Eugene, Ore: Wipf and Stock, 2016),

Our capacity for judgment toward others along with our simultaneous justification of ourselves is deeply troubling. It reduces us to nothing more than the effects of another's cause. We become what has been done to us. So busy nursing our wounds, we become blind to ways that we participate in the wounding, or propagate the wounding, or wound others from our woundedness. We cannot recognize how fundamentally broken we are without divine intervention; it really doesn't matter how much light there is if we are blind. We need new sight, but when we receive it, we are often horrified by what we find. It's much easier to suppress and exchange the truth for a lie than to come into the light. It's easier to create our scapegoats. It's easier to play the victim.

A few years back I asked my dad if he believed in hell, and I was totally surprised by his response but not his logic. With his usual slightly agitated, raspy nonchalance, he said, "Yeah, I believe in hell."

"Why?"

"Because I know so many people that should go there!"

"What about you?"

He looked at me incredulously and replied, "Joshua, I am a good person!"

We need to point to someone else to explain the scars we bear, the glitches in our psyches, the dysfunction in our relationships, and the challenges that continually creep into our day-to-day lives. We long to place our-

selves on the right side of our individual histories. Our culture has taught us to romance the trauma because we love the drama.

This is at the heart of the opaque proclamation, “I am this way because . . .” It is the primordial word from the garden: “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.”*

Deflection is an affront to the very foundation of the gospel because it refuses to give grace to others while abusing it for ourselves. Forgiveness cuts at the bitter core of victimhood, for it is the reminder that Jesus died for the victim and victimizer; we all will find ourselves in both roles—often at the same time. As René Girard stated with such urgency, “The time has come for us to forgive one another. If we wait any longer there will not be time enough.”**

. . .

I have often fruitlessly demanded my father’s acknowledgment that he abandoned me. But every time I have withheld my love and my forgiveness, I have discovered I cannot wound him without wounding myself. I cannot erase him without erasing myself. It has always been a fool’s errand. Every time I have brought up Dad’s absence,

*Genesis 3:12.

**René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 212.

his response has been, "I am not going to apologize for how I raised you!"

"You didn't raise me."

"Joshua, when you call, I want to feel better, not worse."

"I'm sorry, Dad, but you cannot tell me you have no regrets!"

"Joshua, I love you, but I am not going to talk about this."

End of conversation.

My father's words, "You didn't want to be with me," that were spoken over me in that claustrophobic house of sadness, led me to write this book. I am committed to looking for the pinpoints of grace in every story and not letting myself play the victim, but I also know how damaging it can be when we refuse to say, "What happened was not okay." When we get hung up on an event that haunts us, we need to let the Spirit of truth show us what might be hurting us—or worse, what is hurting others through us now. It's not simply insight I am after but the ability to truly forgive. Actually what I really want is healing, which includes both forgiveness and insight. It is not an exaggeration to say that every time I have wanted to abandon what feels like the impossible work of reconciliation with my father, I find myself confronted with words of Jesus on the cross and the divine mystery of His saving work. It might seem ludicrous to apologize to my dad for something that happened when I was two. For some it might seem like a willful refusal to hold him accountable for his abandonment of us boys and his absolute unwill-

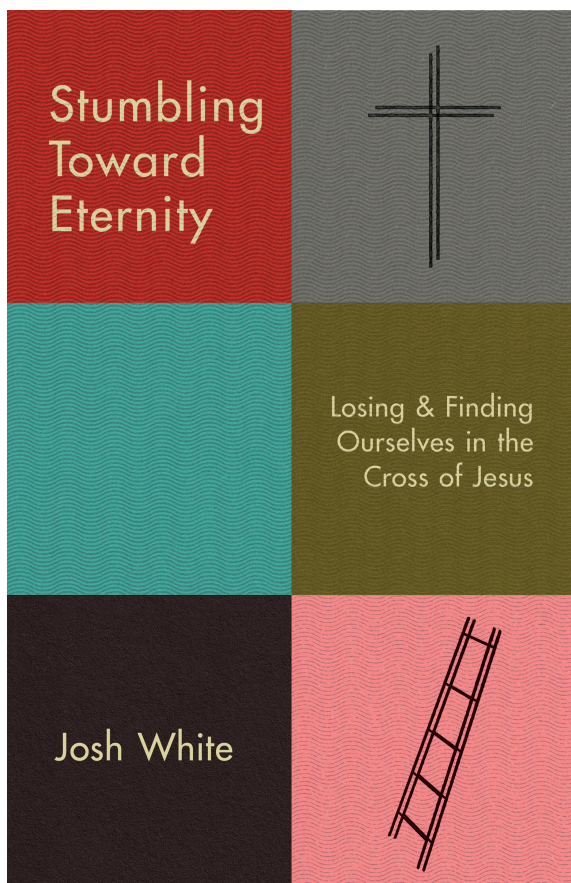
ingness to contribute to our upbringing, which left my mother with the emotional and financial burden. With Dad, there has never even been an openness to apologize. It would be dishonest to say that is not a hard pill to swallow, but the admonition of Scripture to honor our mother and father comes with no contingency.

Even more inescapable is the conviction of the Spirit that I cannot speak of my own absolution while refusing the same to those who have hurt me. *The forgiven must forgive*, as Jesus warned. Why? Because forgiveness removes barriers to love. I have never found it hard to forgive. Or so I thought, until I realized that my forgiveness for my father was in the abstract and amounted to nothing more than that evil sin of *acedia*, or indifference. I'm not one who holds on to things—that is, I am not easily offended, and I am grateful for that temperament. However, I must always ask, Have I really forgiven the person who has sinned against me? Or is it just a cover for the dark possibility that the person simply holds no significance in my life? Some people want to make the perpetrator pay. That is vengeance, which might be the lesser evil, for at least there is feeling rather than the cold belief in a false forgiveness, achieved by refusing to acknowledge that the person exists at all. This was the troubling revelation that broke through the hardness of my heart.*

*It's hard to admit that when I was a young adult, before meeting Jesus, as a way of protecting myself from people I perceived as threats, I lived by the unspoken maxim, "You can't hurt me if I refuse your existence." What a horrific way to live, but even more troubling is that same maxim's ability to survive under the guise of a false for-

There must be a *relational proximity* to the forgiven if the forgiveness is to be meaningful. It is not my mental release of wrongs, which someone may or may not be aware of, that is needed but my love. A love that flows freely from one who has been forgiven much to the forgiven other. We need not concern ourselves with the other's response. We are not responsible for that, but as painful as a refusal to reconcile is, we must hold on to hope with a readiness to receive the offended.

We must let the forgiving Christ be responsible for us. It is His prerogative to forgive and to love through us. This is the only tangible evidence that the barriers are removed. This is the reason I stand firmly in the conviction that the loveless Christian is an illusion.



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