



# UPSIDE-DOWN SPIRITUALITY

THE 9 ESSENTIAL FAILURES  
OF A FAITHFUL LIFE

CHAD BIRD



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To Carson and Jeanette,  
my beloved parents

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# Introduction

## *Turning Our World Upside Down*

A couple of miles from downtown San Antonio, nestled near some of the city's oldest neighborhoods, sits a quaint little home with blue siding and white colonnades. Inside are books that number in the thousands. They stand at attention on shelves that ascend from floor to vaulted ceiling. Others rest haphazardly atop one another on the faded green carpet. There are cheap paperback romances with browning pages, thick philosophical tomes, colorful travel journals. The rooms in which children once played, couples dreamed their dreams, and families broke bread together now shelter everyone from Aristotle to Dostoevsky. The musty smell of wisdom and antiquity paints the air.

To some it's just an old used bookstore, but to me it's a temple of humanity's ever-searching mind, seeking to capture some of this world's truth, beauty, and mystery in ink on paper.

The last time I visited this store, I pulled random books off the shelves, riffled through their pages. From one of them a slip of paper fell, fluttering to the floor like a bird with a broken wing. I stooped to pick it up. In my hand was a single faded and yellowed sheet, folded in half and dated June 9, 1999. It had camped out in that book for almost twenty years. I unfolded it and scanned the words. Two short but weighty questions were scribbled on it. I read them, then read them again, more slowly. I smiled, refolded the sheet of paper, and reunited it with the book that had been its protector. Someone else would discover the note. Someone else would read it. Perhaps the same questions were bouncing around in their own heads. At one time or another, I suppose we all ask them.

Nearly two decades ago our anonymous friend asked: “Does it matter what one believes? Or is anything okay, just so long as you feel good about it?”

What I’d give to sit down with our friend and inquire if, in the last twenty years, he or she has moved any closer to answering those questions. I was twenty-nine years old when that note was penned. I read it on the eve of my forty-seventh birthday. My own journey over those years has taken a myriad of unexpected twists and turns—and more setbacks than I care to remember. At the age of twenty-nine, I had life pretty well mapped out, the body of truth dissected and labeled, and the world divided into neat little black-and-white boxes. I was a pastor and, in two years, would become a professor. I would have demolished those two questions with well-honed arguments and a barrage of biblical proof-texts—perhaps with a dash of disdain in my voice.

Today, I’d likely say, “Hey, let’s grab a beer and talk about it.”

In that conversation—as in this one you and I are just beginning—I’d attempt to gently dig beneath those ground-level questions, to probe into some other matters. We could discuss what it means to be human, to be able to ask questions like that in the first place. We could talk about what believing is, what it means for something to matter, and how reliable (or not) our feelings are when it comes to truth. And because I believe there is a God, and that God actually loves us and wants to do good things for us, I’d try to steer the conversation toward that One who is truth itself.

Perhaps by then our glasses would be empty and we’d need to order another round. But that’s okay. Drinks are on me.

Somewhere along our conversation, however, I’d endeavor to draw us down from whatever intellectual heights to which we may have soared, plant our feet on terra firma once more, and talk about truth not in the abstract but in the flesh. Touchable truth. Truth with hair and blood and fingernails. Along with crucifixion scars. Because if we never get around to talking about him—about the Truth named Jesus—then we’re just a couple of beer-drinking amateur philosophers whiling away the hours on a Friday night. But if he becomes our subject, if that sacred and scarred embodiment of truth inhabits our minds, then we will have arrived at the answer to those questions tucked away in the folds of a book twenty years ago.

The one who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life—he and he alone can tell you what really matters. And he’ll tell that if you believe in him, if you follow his call to be a disciple, it might not feel good—sometimes it’ll hurt like hell—but it’s the only path worth walking because you’ll have as your companion the God who’ll turn your life upside down in the best and craziest of ways.

## **Turning the World Upside Down**

The early followers of Jesus had many false accusations lobbed at them. The emperor Nero blamed them for the fire that swept through Rome in AD 64. The Roman writer Tacitus claimed they practiced abominations and hated the human race. Early in the second century, the imperial legate Pliny wrote to Emperor Trajan that Christians held “a perverse and extravagant superstition.” Because they refused to acknowledge the existence of Roman and Greek gods, they were labeled as atheists. Various adversaries even circulated outrageous lies that they “engaged in orgiastic sex, incest, and cannibalism.”<sup>1</sup> Today we might call it a smear campaign spread by means of fake news.

But there was one accusation hurled against Christians that was much closer to the truth: their opponents in Thessalonica claimed these Jesus followers had “turned the world upside down” (Acts 17:6). Now they were on to something. What they didn’t realize was that the God these Christians worshiped was himself the chief culprit. He took our globe in his hands, flipped it over, and gave it a mighty shake. Age-old foundations quivered and detached from the ground of human confidence. Corpses popped out of their graves like corks from bottles of champagne. Prostitutes and lepers tumbled into castles and kings sank down into the mire of the streets. God was engaged in his favorite pastime: upsetting our every expectation of how a respectable, dignified divinity should conduct himself. He was indeed turning everything upside down.

Nothing has changed since that first-century shake-up of the world. God has never remained, like a part-time repairman, waiting on our phone call when something needs fixing. When

he invades our lives, he kick-starts a long process of deconstruction and reconstruction. C. S. Lewis pictured it this way:

Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what he is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on: you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently he starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that he is building quite a different house from the one you thought of—throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.<sup>2</sup>

When Jesus “starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably,” when his work in our lives “does not seem to make sense,” then he’s really getting somewhere. He’s pounding gaping holes in the painted drywall of our own wisdom to reveal the termite-infested 2x4s on the other side. Ripping up the carpet to point out an inch-wide crack in the foundation. What we thought would take a few months to fix and fancy up will, it turns out, require a lifetime of labor. But Christ is okay with that. He was, after all, raised in the home of a carpenter. And he’ll take his sweet time. C. S. Lewis says he “intends to come and live in it Himself,” but the truth is, he’s already moved in, put his underwear and socks in the drawers, and buckled on his tool belt. He’s here for the long haul.

The work of Jesus for us and in us does not seem to make sense because it’s not designed to. It’s non-sense. What Paul

calls “the foolishness of God” (1 Cor. 1:25). His backward wisdom will earn him a big, fat F in Professor World’s philosophy class. Jesus won’t even correctly fill in the blanks to the most elementary questions.

Question: How do you save your life?

God: By losing it.

Question: Who are the greatest?

God: The forgotten, the anonymous, the least.

Question: How do you get ahead?

God: By putting everyone else first.

Jesus doesn’t just color outside the lines. He turns the paper over and draws a brand-new image. His way of thinking (and reforming our minds), his way of acting (and redirecting our deeds), and his way of speaking (and reteaching our tongues) is so foreign to us that in virtually every situation in which he touches our lives, our first reaction will be to offer a prayer to him to reverse the very thing he’s doing.

God’s wisdom and ways seem so ungodlike not because they actually are but because they don’t fit our preconceptions of how a divinity should act and where he should be. Our hearts, by nature and by nurture, hunt for him in all the wrong places. We lock our eyes on the heavens while all the while he’s camped down at our feet. We look for him in success while he’s waiting for us in failure.

It’s bad enough that we are born with hearts that are “deceitful above all things” (Jer. 17:9). Worse yet, those same hearts are daily deceived even more. We’re duped by a cacophony of cultural voices that go on and on with pretty

little lies about God that we already want to believe because these falsehoods feed our egos. The secular spiritualists and religious self-helpers of our culture would have us believe in a God who believes in us. Half cheerleader, half life coach, this “Jesus” is all about our self-fulfillment and self-accomplishment, with personal happiness as our true salvation. Disney and Hollywood, far from simply offering entertainment, advertise a view of human nature that exalts pleasure as the highest good and being normal and average as a colossal embarrassment, and often treat religion in general—and Christianity in particular—as a ball and chain restraining us from a self-determined, carefree existence of chasing our dreams. From the moment we scroll through Facebook over coffee in the morning till we watch our favorite Netflix drama at night, we’re being exposed to a barrage of messages about human nature, what’s important in the world, and God’s place in our lives. The messages are rarely explicit. They’re embedded in the narratives, the advertisements, and the heroes and heroines of Hollywood. But their sway over people’s perceptions—*our* perceptions—cannot be overestimated. The habits of our hearts are usually formed when we’re unaware it’s happening.

If our hearts are already deceived while we’re in diapers, and if 99 percent of the cultural narratives about God are a bunch of religious malarkey, it’s no great shock that when Jesus shows up on our doorstep we usually slam the door in his face. He’s not selling what we want to buy. In fact, he’s not selling anything. He’s giving things away. Jesus has already footed the bill for us. He’s here to give us life. To hand us hope. To enrich us with wisdom. The problem is that all his life and hope and wisdom just don’t seem kosher

to us. It's not what we think we want. Nor is it even what we think God would want for us.

So Jesus has his work cut out for him. He's going to have to turn our own little worlds upside down. Good thing he actually enjoys that. God takes pleasure in revamping our hearts and recalibrating the compass of our souls. It's what he does best. His life-changing, hope-giving, wisdom-bestowing love in action.

Jesus told us to pray to our Father, "Thy will be done," for a vital reason. His will and our will are usually on opposite ends of a tug-of-war rope, with a messy mud puddle between us. He's pulling us toward the very things we think are ludicrous, beneath us, unfulfilling, and painful. We're pulling him toward what we think—and what our society tells us—will make us feel important, satisfied, proud, and happy.

Thus, God's greatest doings for us will often seem, at the time, like our undoing. And in many ways, that's precisely what they are. He's tugging us through the mud puddle. He is undoing us, unconfusing us, undeceiving us. Just as the cross must come before Easter arrives, so in Christ we must die "to the elemental spirits of the world" (Col. 2:20), its assumptions and pseudowisdom, that we might arise with new eyes illumined by the Spirit. And these new eyes that see things from a divine perspective will point our feet down paths that lead to the blessed achievement of failure.

## **Achieving Failure**

George Foreman grew up with a stomach starved for food and a heart fattened with anger. Ashamed of revealing his poverty in the cafeteria, he'd carry a brown paper lunch bag

to school. It was empty. He gave vent to his rage through his fists, first in the streets and later in the boxing ring. Opponent after opponent crumbled to the mat as six-foot-four Foreman rose through the ranks undefeated. This giant with an iron fist seemed unstoppable.

In 1974, legendary Muhammad Ali challenged Foreman to a championship match. All bets were on Foreman, who, at twenty-five, was seven years younger than Ali. Round after round, Ali took all that Foreman could dish out. Punch after punch landed but Ali remained on his feet, even taunting his opponent. Foreman gradually weakened. In the eighth round, Ali hit him with a lightning fast right hand that sent Foreman tumbling. He stumbled back to his feet at the count of nine but the judges wouldn't let the fight continue. Ali was declared the winner. And Foreman swallowed the bitter pill of defeat for the first time.

Three years later, in Puerto Rico, he reentered the ring to face another fighter, Jimmy Young. If he won this match, he'd have a chance to go after Ali again and retrieve his title. The two pounded away at each other, but neither gained the upper hand. Until the ninth round. Foreman took a blow that knocked him to his knees. He managed to get up but it was all over. In the end, once more, the judges put his opponent on top. Foreman had failed again, only this time the pain was far deeper.

After the fight, in his dressing room, Foreman paced the floor, still in a daze. He thought he was going to die. He said he "could literally smell death in the room." He began to pray that God would spare his life. Suddenly, he collapsed, feeling like he was in a "deep, dark junkyard of nothing." Moments later, prostrate on a table, he said to himself, "I don't care if

this is death. I still believe there's a God." No sooner had he said that when "a gigantic hand reached in and held" him. He "jumped off the table and started screaming, 'Jesus Christ has come alive in me! . . . I got to save the world!'" Foreman said, "That experience changed me forever."<sup>3</sup>

Those two failures, and the near-death experience after the second one, were watershed moments for Foreman. He walked away from his boxing career. In time he would become a pastor and devote time and resources to helping young people. Looking back, he said it was like his whole biography had "been turned upside down." The successes he'd enjoyed early in his career he now considered the real failure because he didn't appreciate them.

Foreman's experience of failure ruined him in the best possible way. It spoiled his vision of what he considered the good life. Pre-failure, his ambition was fueled by the desire for conquest, victory, looking down at the opponent he had overcome. The goal of his life was to be extraordinary, a champion. In other words, Foreman's view of the good life was a life all about him. His desires. His dreams. His will being done. Not until he swallowed that bitter pill of defeat did he begin to taste the sweet hope of something radically new, something better. As much as it hurt, as much as it was contrary to everything Foreman wanted, failure was God's gift to him.

When God sends the gift of failure to us, we often take a magic marker and write on the package, "Return to sender!" Thanks, but no thanks. We don't want it. Obviously, the Lord mailed it to the wrong person. It's for that loser down the street who never mows his lawn and whose dogs bark all night. There's no way this is for us. I mean, it's not only what we don't want. It's also not what we've asked God for

and prayed to receive. So he shows up on our front porch to hand it to us himself. *Yes, this is for you.*

Failures, big and small, are God's ways of prying open our eyes to see what we'd never see otherwise. Had Foreman gone on undefeated, winning every fight, he'd always have had a skewed image of what life is really all about. God uses singular failures to get us off the path we're on and back on the path he himself walks—the path where he continues to turn our world upside down.

On that path we begin to learn something strange. We come to grips with just how weird Christianity is, how uncool and unmainstream it is. Because from the perspective of the world, from the view of common sense, Jesus and his followers are an embarrassing band of failures. We fail to believe that life is all about us. We fail to follow our hearts. We fail to have the kind of marriages and be the kinds of parents the world thinks we should be. We even fail to be the kind of church that is socially acceptable and religiously smart according to common human standards. On God's path we learn, often the hard way, that anytime the world stands to its feet and applauds what we're doing, there's a high likelihood we're doing it all wrong. But to fail the world—that is to achieve the upside-down spiritual life.

## **The Good Life**

If you really want to dig down to the core of what someone believes, what drives them in everything, from relationships, to careers, to where they choose to live, and often to whom they vote for, ask them, What do you consider to be the good life?

It's one of those questions that all of us answer, whether consciously or unconsciously (usually the latter). We entertain a particular vision in our minds, an orientation of our hearts, toward what we think will be good for us. What we deem a life worth living. We may or may not actually be living that life. It might be—and often is—simply a daydream. But it's still there, pushing us in certain directions, shaping our decisions, and playing a huge role in our emotional and spiritual well-being.

For many the good life is a life full of good things: a nice home, sizable savings, plenty of toys, the newest gadgets. It's characterized by acquisition and consumption, getting and enjoying those possessions that they think will ultimately make their hearts smile. For others, the good life is defined in terms of accomplishments. When I finish my degree, when I land that promotion, when I win that trophy, when I lose those pounds, when I reach retirement, then I'll finally be living the good life. For still others, it's all about how others see them or treat them. The good life happens when people finally accept me for who I am, when my parents are proud of me, when my wife looks up to me, when my husband begins to show me affection, when people don't see me as ugly or fat or disabled or poor or depressed. For them, the good life is entirely reflected in the eyes of others. *Their* estimation of *my* worth and acceptability.

And we could go on. Everyone has some set of criteria by which they define a life worth living. A good life. A blessed life.

Rarely, however, will you cross paths with someone who says the good life starts by dying. Dying would be the end of the good life, right? For believers, no. It's the only possible genesis of it. Without first undergoing death, there is no

chance of living the good life our Lord desires for us. God's good life begins with our death.

Consider how abnormal this is. In almost every situation, when we want to effect change within us, what do we do? We begin with what we already have and build on that. If I'm tipping the scale at 350 pounds and climbing a single flight of stairs leaves me red-faced, I can buy a gym membership and hire a trainer. She'll get me spinning on a treadmill, pumping iron, and insist on more salads and less chocolate cake. Over time, I can sweat off the pounds, build muscle mass, and improve my breathing. My trainer begins with my body, unhealthy as it is, and whips it into shape. Or if I lack education, I can enroll in college, camp out at the library, and attend conferences. Gradually, I'll accumulate knowledge, raise my IQ, beef up my vocabulary. I'll strengthen the mind I already have. Whether I want to cultivate positive change in my health, marriage, finances, work performance, or public speaking, I'll work with what I have. With enough time, effort, expense, and commitment, I can become the better businessperson, spouse, athlete, or student I want to be. The way forward begins with where I already am.

And then there's God's mode of operation. When Jesus gets his hands on us, he throws everything into reverse. He doesn't begin where we already are. He doesn't work with what we've got. He doesn't size us up, diagnose our strengths and weaknesses, and implement a program of self-improvement. In fact, what we deem our strengths are, in his estimation, often graver problems than our weaknesses because they breed confidence in ourselves.

Instead, Christ always goes for the nuclear option: he kills us. Or, to put it more precisely, he kills us by pulling us up

onto the cross with him. We co-die with Jesus. Co-bleed with him. Are co-buried and then co-resurrected with him. God is not in the business of making us better; he's on a mission to make us dead. Dead on the cross with Jesus to everything that defines us as frail, flawed, prideful humans. Dead with Jesus to our misplaced aspirations, our selfish dreams, our egocentric universe. Co-crucifixion with Jesus is the genesis of the good life. Because before we can truly live, we must first truly die to the un-life, the non-life, we once had apart from him.

The good life is thus a Good Friday kind of life. On that day God himself turned the world upside down by transforming what looked like failure into the victory of salvation for all. While everyone gawked and jeered at that bloody, naked, executed criminal, labeling him a total loser, God knew what he was doing. He chose to exhibit his wisdom under the guise of foolishness. He was reigning over a kingdom that unaided human eyes saw—and will always see—as a colossal flop.

And into this foolish failure of a kingdom he carries us within his body, even as he himself resides within our bodies. “It is no longer I who live,” the Christian says, “but Christ who lives in me” (Gal. 2:20), for I have already journeyed from death to resurrection in him. It is no longer I who work and play, but Christ who works and plays in me. It is no longer I who love and believe, but Christ who loves and believes in me. It is no longer I who am a husband and father, wife and mother, police officer or teacher, pastor or pilot, but Christ who is all these in me. Our union with Christ by virtue of our co-death and co-resurrection with him now defines us. It is who we are. It is how our Father sees us. And it is how the Spirit enables us to see ourselves.

If we are so inextricably united with such a misunderstood savior, then we'll be misunderstood disciples. Many, if not most, will think our confession of the good life makes no sense. In fact, though they might never say it to our face, they'll think our life choices are quite stupid, backward, and even insulting. And I don't mean merely the talking heads who champion secular ideologies but coworkers, neighbors, and those who share our last names. Early in his ministry, Jesus's own family thought he had gone off the deep end. They tried to grab him and force him to come home since he was evidently "out of his mind" (Mark 3:21). The religious bigwigs upped the ante by accusing Jesus of housing a demon in his head. "He is possessed by Beelzebul," they claimed (v. 22).

To follow Jesus, in other words, is often a lonely way. It is never the path chosen by the majority. But Christ never claimed it was. "Enter by the narrow gate," he said. "For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few" (Matt. 7:13–14).

But through the narrow gate and in that hard way we find Life. Life with a capital *L*. We find the one who is "the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). Or, rather, he finds us. He searches us out, lifts us up, and carries us into his Father's kingdom. Indeed, so narrow is the gate leading to life that there's only room for one person to squeeze through—Jesus. The only way we get in is astraddle his shoulders. As the shepherd carried the lost lamb home on his shoulders, rejoicing the whole way, so Jesus smiles and laughs his way back to the Father with us slung around his neck. He brings

us home. He rescues us from the carnivals of triviality in which we're wasting our time on dead-end dreams. He frees us from the maze of monetary acquisition that impoverishes our souls. He liberates us from the slavery to emotionalism, radical individualism, and various versions of the egocentric American dream. And he reveals a better way, the only good way. A way that actually accords with being human—with being a son or daughter of God, a brother and sister to all other people, an earthly creature who also bears the image and likeness of the Creator. In Jesus our worlds are turned upside down. But we find, to our utter amazement, that upside down in him is actually right side up. What we thought was death before is actually life, and what we thought was life was death. What we deemed undesirable failures before are successes, and what we deemed successes are, in reality, failures.

Failures of a faithful life—that's what we'll be talking about in the chapters to follow. What this world's common-sense wisdom reckons as failures, anyway. The failure to be extraordinary, the failure to live independent lives, the failure to go big or go home, the failure to think love sustains our marriages, even the failure to have a personal relationship with Jesus. George Foreman said that his whole biography had "been turned upside down." So it will be with us. If not our whole biography, then at least a few chapters of it. For there are areas in all our lives—personally, in our families and marriages, as well as in our churches—where we've become so habituated to the empty platitudes of our culture that we don't even realize our hearts have gone astray.

The early Christians were accused of turning the world upside down. The greatest compliment we can receive is the

accusation that we are doing the same. When that happens, we'll know the truth: that the Spirit is rebuilding us through his Word to be, think, believe, and act as free people, liberated by the death and resurrection of Jesus into the good life of those beloved by God.

# PART 1

# OURSELVES





# 1

## The Good News That God Doesn't Believe in You

*The Failure to Believe in Ourselves*

**S**tuck to the dashboard of my Freightliner truck is a small, rectangular calendar, no bigger than 3x4 inches. The top part advertises a fertilizer company that is one of my customers, a regular stop on my delivery route. Beneath the company's name, logo, and address are the dozen sheets of paper that document my progress from January to December. One of my daily rituals, before I kill the diesel engine and clock out, is to take my pen and X out the day just completed. Then, at the close of each month, I rip off that sheet, crumple it up, and toss it in the trash. Time marches on.

At the beginning of the year, that little calendar is in pristine shape. The top part candy-apple red, the twelve sheets

of paper cotton white, their edges razor straight. But by the time “Joy to the World” dances through the speakers, that calendar looks utterly joyless. Used up. Worn out. Smudges of dirt and grease from my fingers mar the colors. One corner is peeled up where the sticky back came unglued. The edges of December’s page are torn and bent and haggard.

The year is not kind to the calendar. As all too often it is not kind to us.

Remember that January? The one that, like a seed swaddled in fertile soil, appeared full of potential, primed for growth and fruitfulness? It would be a good year, maybe even a great year, you thought. Your kids were healthy. Your marriage solid. Your job secure. Then, one by one, the ensuing months not only mocked your optimism but tested and—at times—seemed to erode your faith.

Last year was like that for my sister, Rayna. In January, she scanned the months ahead and smiled to herself. She and her husband, Scott, were both healthy. They had one beautiful little granddaughter from their son, and had just found out, around the Christmas tree, that their oldest daughter would bless them with another grandchild in early October. Like that pristine calendar, the year looked bright and shiny, packed with potential.

Then a gloomy May dragged itself onto her doorstep. While redoing her bathroom, Rayna missed a step down from the ladder, fell, and almost blacked out from the pain. She would spend the summer healing from a broken leg. Scott, a farmer and rancher, would be sick for weeks in the fall, barely able to leave the house to care for his cattle and crops.

But these monthly trials were child’s play compared to August. Their daughter went into labor early and little Reming-

ton Faith (“Remi”) entered all our lives—a full eight weeks before her due date. Due to heart issues and serious breathing difficulties, Remi would spend the rest of that year in the NICU, on a ventilator.

While that year held many blessings, including the birth of this granddaughter, the journey from January to December also left the family worn out, their faith tested, and—like my dashboard calendar—feeling more haggard than healthy.

That was my sister’s year. But I bet you have your own. The Year of Great Expectations that became the Year of Cancer, the Year of Divorce, the Year of Bankruptcy, the Year of Funerals. Or maybe it was no single dramatic event. Just an exhaustingly long series of little things that all added up to a year that left you feeling washed up, struggling to hope, and craving a fresh start.

Fresh starts are what January 1 is all about, especially after a year stained with disappointments. ’Tis the season of New Year’s resolutions. The floodgates of social media will spill forth with inspirational memes: “What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us.”<sup>1</sup> Or, “Believe in yourself and the rest will fall into place. Have faith in your own abilities, work hard, and there is nothing you cannot accomplish.”<sup>2</sup> They all strike a similar chord: within you is limitless potential, if you only believe it, tap into it, make it your own. This year can be the best of years if you’ll believe the best about yourself, that you possess the wherewithal to make it happen.

But, if these New Year sentiments still taste a little bland, like they need a dash of religion sprinkled on top, you can also see quotes along the lines of, “God never gives you more than you can handle. You’ve got this.” Or, “No mountain

is too high, no ocean is too vast, no dream is too grand, if you'll trust that God has trust in you." Oftentimes these words from the movie *Elmer Gantry* will be quoted to prop up the downtrodden and urge them to drink deeply of the potential bottled up in January 1: "You may not believe in God, but God believes in you."

On the cusp of a new year, especially after twelve months of setbacks and face-plants, these positive proverbs of human potential and divine reinforcement can raise our flagging spirits and buoy our sinking hopes. They can be the secret to success as we take our next steps forward into an uncertain future.

Or they can be the most disastrous advice we've ever received.

To know which, we need to ask ourselves some fundamental questions, beginning with a very simple one: Is it possible that your bad year is, from God's perspective, the year in which he did his best work in you? Is what we label bad often what God calls good?

We begin to find the answer to those questions in the rise and fall of a famous Babylonian king.

### **The King Enthroned in Dirt**

Nebuchadnezzar was living the Babylonian dream. He had become the man, the myth, the legend. Everything a guy might desire in his wildest imagination was already his in spades: unlimited power, immeasurable wealth, prestige, honor, accolades, women, you name it. If he so desired, he could have breakfast in bed, hunt big game that afternoon, wine and dine his friends that evening, and sate his sexual

appetite between the sheets of the harem that night. He possessed what many men would kill for. To say that he was enjoying the good life is the understatement of the century. Nebuchadnezzar was a rock star, business mogul, international celebrity, and playboy—all rolled into one.

And he was doomed.

One night Nebuchadnezzar had a dream that everything he treasured would one day be trashed. He would be driven away from other people to live like an animal—chewing on grass, drenched by dew, having the mind of a beast (Dan. 4:1–26). Daniel, who interpreted the dream, warned him to repent, to show mercy to the poor, to do righteousness (v. 27). But the king was deaf to his plea.

At first, it seemed this strange dream had been just a passing nightmare, not a prophetic warning. After all, for the next twelve months nothing changed. His life was still smooth sailing. He was living the plush lifestyle of the rich and famous.

Then one day, while strolling atop his royal palace, he scanned his grandiose metropolis and let his ego do the talking: “Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?” (v. 30 NIV). No sooner did the words leave the king’s mouth when that nightmarish dream finally did come true.

In the aftermath, Nebuchadnezzar’s “good life” was revealed for what it really was—vanity of vanities, a sand castle washed away by the rising tides of divine judgment.

This ruler entered the worst years of his life, which turned out to be the best years of his life. “Best” not because they were full of smiles or suffering-free or prosperous. They were terrible. It’s a weird scene, but picture the king growing hair

long like eagle feathers and fingernails like the claws of a bird, crawling on all fours as he chewed on grass like a cow its cud (v. 33). The man was utterly undone. He lost everything. A debased, despicable, frightening caricature of a human being. No biblical figure plummeted more deeply into an animalistic, subhuman existence than did this once smug, narcissistic king.

And yet it was here, in the low of lows, that he was finally reconciled to the High of Highs. At the close of his suffering, he raised his eyes toward heaven and his sanity was restored. He praised the Most High, honoring and glorifying him who lives forever (v. 34). Eventually his nobles sought him out, and he was raised from the dirt back to the throne. The closing verse of his narrative is telling: “Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything he does is right and all his ways are just. And those who walk in pride he is able to humble” (v. 37 NIV).

“Those who walk in pride he is able to humble.” Before his worst year, the king would not, *could* not, have uttered this best confession. To put it in New Testament terms, God crucified Nebuchadnezzar. He put this proud man to death in order that he might give Nebuchadnezzar new and true life. The king lost himself in order that he might find, in his emptiness, the God who alone could fill that void within him. This complete failure of a man discovered, wrapped within that failure, the kind of heavenly success that only Christ can give.

This story illustrates, in graphic detail, that what we label as bad the Lord often knows is good for us. This is how the Lord of the cross works. We look at life through glory-eyes but he looks at our lives through cross-eyes. Where we see

death, he sees life. Where we see loss, he sees gain. He does indeed turn everything upside down.

And what he did for Nebuchadnezzar in a big way, he also does for us in smaller ways. We might not be swaggering atop our palaces, chests puffed out as we relish our world-renowned accomplishments, but we all lug about our pride, our trophies, our self-sufficiency, our addiction to control, our insatiable egos. And they all have a divine bull's-eye on them. Because the Father loves us, he disciplines us and humbles us (Heb. 12:6). In that God-given humility, and only there, do we become more aware of the fact that sometimes the worst years of our lives are those years when God is doing some of his best work within us.

### **The Nebuchadnezzar Syndrome**

Our lifelong struggle is what we might call the Nebuchadnezzar Syndrome. Like the king, we are natural-born believers. It's just that we always gravitate toward believing the wrong thing. We perform quite well at putting our faith in everything but God. And there's a vast smorgasbord of options. Life is like a cafeteria. Grab your tray and amble along, spooning a little power onto your plate, using tongs to lift some wealth, slicing off a big piece of control. Wash it all down with a sugar-soaked, super-sized glass of self-esteem. Our palates are all unique, and the god options are virtually limitless, so each of us winds up with a tray heaped full of diverse divinities that we think will assuage our spiritual appetite.

What we discover, as the king did long ago, is that what looks appetizing, what tastes sweet, what goes down smooth, is usually poison masquerading as a meal.

Christ runs a very different kind of kitchen. And even though the courses he serves and the drinks he pours are manifold, all of them are nothing but various ways he puts himself inside us and us inside himself.

The Breastplate of St. Patrick sums up the menu in the kitchen of Jesus:

Christ with me,  
 Christ before me,  
 Christ behind me,  
 Christ in me,  
 Christ beneath me,  
 Christ above me,  
 Christ on my right,  
 Christ on my left,  
 Christ when I lie down,  
 Christ when I sit down,  
 Christ when I arise,  
 Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me,  
 Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,  
 Christ in every eye that sees me,  
 Christ in every ear that hears me.<sup>3</sup>

Ireland's patron saint is poetically extending what Paul wrote to the Philippians: "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (1:21). In an old hymn we give triple emphasis to this truth: "Jesus, Jesus, only Jesus, can my heartfelt longing still."<sup>4</sup>

Christ alone. Jesus, Jesus, only Jesus. He is the sole meal of the Father. The bread that comes down from heaven to give life to the world (John 6:51). The exclusive food and drink who nourishes us as nothing and no one else can, for he is the flesh-and-blood embodiment of the Father's love.

The Nebuchadnezzar Syndrome is like a spiritual eating disorder. It channels our appetites in a multitude of directions but never toward Christ. It seduces us into believing that our peace, our fulfillment, our purpose are found in a life where we get what we want. Where all our dreams come true. Where we believe in ourselves. And where even God believes in us. In other words, this syndrome bids us pursue a life in which everything revolves around us. Our desires become the touchstone of what is good or bad.

### **There Is a Way That Seems Right**

“There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death” (Prov. 16:25). Wise old Solomon wrote these words. And if there’s anyone who would know the truth of them, he’s the man.

In one of his other books, Ecclesiastes, Solomon documents his own quest for the good life. He sought for it in wisdom, in cramming his brain full of facts and discoveries and wonders. “He spoke of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of the wall. He spoke also of beasts, and of birds, and of reptiles, and of fish” (1 Kings 4:33). He “was wiser than all other men” (v. 31). Yet he concluded that “in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow” (Eccles. 1:18).

He also sought the good life in pleasure, in laughter, in wine, in architecture, in gardening, in lovers, in the acquisition of servants and animals and precious objects (2:1–9). “Whatever my eyes desired,” he wrote, “I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure” (v. 10).

His conclusion? “All was vanity and a striving after wind” (v. 11). King Solomon, like his Babylonian counterpart, possessed everything a person might desire, including an IQ that was out of this world, yet in the end he realized he was a fool. No better than an imbecile sprinting after the breeze on a hot summer day.

“There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death” (Prov. 16:25). The Hebrew word for “way” is *derek*, which refers not only to a path or road but a way of life. A vision of what constitutes human happiness and fulfillment. More than a lifestyle, it’s a mind-style, a heart-style, a way of being human in this world. Solomon realized the *derek* he was on, racing after intelligence, pleasure, and wealth as the goals of life, led to only one place—a deep, yawning pit of destruction. It may seem right, it may feel good, but the euphoria is temporary. Ocean water may, at the moment, quench the thirst of a man floating at sea, but in a few hours he’ll be dead. So it is with many *dereks* that people travel in this life.

What *derek*, which way, are you on? How do you envision what it means to be human in this world? You may not be Solomon, but you’ve probably conducted your own experiments. Some search for the good life in the intellectual rigors of the academic world. Others seek it in a string of sexual hookups. Others pore over every self-help book they can find. Some look for it by immersing themselves in work, in the collection of expensive toys, in sculpting their bodies at the gym, in boasting the biggest bank account among their friends. We’re all looking for that “one thing” that will make us feel worthy, important, like our lives are not a waste.

Here's a little secret, though: all these ways—the innumerable bad ones and the singular good one—lead to death. The only question is whether this death will be the end of our life or the genesis of true, abundant life.

“I have come that they may have life,” Jesus said, “and have it to the full” (John 10:10 NIV). This life Jesus speaks of, this overflowing life, always has its origin in emptiness. The emptiness our friend Nebuchadnezzar experienced when he toppled from the throne to the dirt. The emptiness that Solomon discovered when all his wine and women and brain-power turned out to be a dead-end street. And it's the emptiness to which Christ leads all of us when we realize that *we* are the problem—not the solution—to our lives.

This unwelcome truth cannot be stressed enough. The ultimate problem is not that we lack self-esteem but that we are engrossed in ourselves. The problem is not that we don't believe in ourselves, or believe that God believes in us, but that we've set ourselves up as the object of faith. We arrive in this world with the assumption that we are the center of it. Good comes to be defined by what pleases us, satisfies us, entertains us, makes us feel better about who we are. We aren't born with clean slates, as it were, with the whiteboard of our hearts just waiting for words to be written upon it. The words are already there. Rather, a word is already there, scribbled over and over—the word *me*, *me*, *me*, repeated a thousand times. The solution to life, the way we achieve true joy and contentment, cannot be found within ourselves because we are the problem.

What we need is failure. Failure to believe in ourselves. Failure to believe that God believes in us. A Nebuchadnezzar kind of failure, in which our eyes are unglued from our navel

and directed outward to the only one who can transform this death of self into a resurrection into life.

### **God's New Year's Resolution for Us**

Rather than asking what our New Year's resolution might be, let's ask what God's resolution for us is—what his good and gracious will is for our lives. It turns out to be the same on January 1 as on March 1 and July 1, all the way to December 31. God's resolution is simply this: *to get us out of ourselves and into his Son.*

Rather than encouraging us to believe in ourselves, the Spirit gives us faith to trust in the Lord who remains faithful, even “if we are faithless . . . for he cannot deny himself” (2 Tim. 2:13). Rather than telling us to look within and tap into our potential, he's hard at work “fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith” (Heb. 12:2 NIV).

In his novel *The Hammer of God*, Bo Giertz tells the story of Fridfeldt, a young pastor in Sweden who is passionate about obedience, holy living, producing spiritual fruits, being that person who always has his religious ducks in a row.<sup>5</sup> On the surface, anyway, Fridfeldt seems to be the poster boy of discipleship. But his weakness is precisely that seeming strength.

Every hour of every day, this man's resolution is focused in a singular direction: on himself. Yes, it's a focus on doing holy stuff, but that is all smoke and mirrors. Fridfeldt, intensely religious though he may be, is really no different than a secularist. His eyes are on his works, his heart, his activity, his achievements. He is the center of his religious world. His “Jesus” is not so much a savior of sinners as a cheerleader of doers.

One Sunday, the Spirit finally begins to have his way with this young pastor. It's Transfiguration, the day when the church celebrates Jesus's revelation of glory to Peter, James, and John atop the mountain (Matt. 17:1–8). Fridfeldt grabs a little book of sermons and steps into the pulpit to read one of them. One verse from the Bible story catches his eye as he scans the page. It's near the end of the Gospel account, after Moses and Elijah disappear, after the Father speaks, after the cloud that enveloped Jesus vanishes. Speaking of the disciples, it says, "And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only" (v. 8).

Looking out over the congregation, Fridfeldt begins to read the sermon aloud. As he does, he realizes, with a growing astonishment, that no one needs to hear this sermon more than he does. The old pastor who had authored this little collection of homilies had been reposing in the parish cemetery for the last half-century, but on this momentous day, he stood in the pulpit, as it were, alongside Fridfeldt, proclaiming a message about "Jesus only."

"The law constrains a man to look chiefly at himself," Fridfeldt reads. Indeed, it does. Like a mirror, it constantly throws our flawed perfection back at us. And not only the "big-L" Laws like the Ten Commandments but the "little-l" laws as well.<sup>6</sup> "Little-l" laws are "the demands we feel every day from our culture, those around us, or ourselves."<sup>7</sup> Like the laws that command, "Thou shalt be skinny," "Thou shalt be successful," "Thou shalt believe in thyself," or "Thou shalt always come in first place." The high and holy day of "little-l" laws is New Year's day, when we resolve to fix ourselves, improve ourselves, make ourselves right. All these laws push us in only one direction: back to ourselves, inside ourselves, not to Christ.

As Fridfeldt continues to preach, the words of this old sermon begin to awaken in him an upside-down understanding of discipleship. In the mess of his life, he has lost sight of Jesus. He has been running “the endless way of the law.” A steep pathway “bordered by naked trees whose supple branches hung down like whips.” The way of the law, the pathway of obedience and perfection and self-centered spirituality “lies endlessly before you, bringing continually severer demands and constantly growing indebtedness.” But “suddenly Christ stood there in the middle of the road. Now his old thoughts gave way to something new and wonderful: Jesus only, righteousness for each and every one who believed. The pathway had an end!”<sup>8</sup> That end is Christ, who is “the end of the law” (Rom. 10:4).

“Jesus only,” the sermon accentuated over and over, like “hammer blows aimed with unerring precision against the head of a nail.”<sup>9</sup> Jesus only is The End of the endless road of self-improvement, self-salvation, self-belief—the me-me-me trinity of the ego’s religion. Jesus only is our conversion. Jesus only is our justification. Jesus only is our sanctification.

Like the disciples atop the mountain on the day of our Lord’s transfiguration, we lift up our eyes to see no one save Jesus. No hope save Jesus. No peace save Jesus. We become monomaniacs about Christ. He’s the only one who rescues us from a vain life of pursuing false gods. The only one who meets us in our death to fill us with abundant life.

If we are our problem, then Jesus and Jesus alone is our solution.

What the Spirit revealed to Fridfeldt that day in the pulpit, he reveals to each of us as we stand at our desks, in our kitchens, in our classrooms: life is not about us. It’s not about

how strong or weak we are, how smart or dumb we are, how flabby or fit we are. It's not about believing in ourselves or God believing in us. Life is all about losing our flawed and egocentric identities in a co-death with Christ and being raised to newness of life in his resurrection.

One of the best gifts we can receive is the failure to put trust in ourselves. One of the most important truths to learn is that God doesn't believe in us. He is the one who is trustworthy. He doesn't believe in us; he does something profoundly better: he loves us. Our Father doesn't peer within us, pinpoint some hidden quality worthy of his affection and trust, and then act on that discovery.

Before we were born, before we were either bad or good, dependable or undependable, lovable or unlovable—from all eternity our Father loved us. He didn't go on a hunt to find people deserving of his grace. Quite the contrary!

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Rom. 5:6–8 NIV)

Grab hold of these words: “When we were still powerless . . . while we were still sinners.” Robert F. Capon reminds us that “if the Gospel is about anything, it is about the God who meets us where we are, not where we ought to be—‘while we were still sinners.’”<sup>10</sup> The gospel is “not some self-improvement scheme devised by a God who holds back on us till he sees the improvements. Above all, Jesus wants to

make sure we understand that he doesn't care a fig about our precious results. It doesn't even make a difference to him if we're solid brass bastards, because 'while we were still sinners, Christ died for the ungodly.'"<sup>11</sup>

Jesus knows good and well that there's nothing inside us worth believing in. In fact, everything inside us looks absolutely untrustworthy. If anything, when the Lord peers into our hearts, he should hightail it for the hills, getting as far away from us as he can. But he's not that kind of God. He loves before he looks. And even after he looks, he still loves. Because his love has nothing to do with us. It is not sparked by our goodness or sustained by our obedience. God is love. It's who he is and what he does. While we were still powerless, he was powerful to save. While we were still sinners, he was still the sinless, gracious, saving God he's always been.

Our life as husbands and wives, moms and dads, teachers and truck drivers is a Jesus-only life. Whether we have a smiles-and-laughter year or a dumpster-fire year; whether we are at the top of our game or hunkering down in the shadows of defeat; whether we completed an Iron Man or were so depressed we just binge-watched Netflix, every day of that year is lived in Christ alone. When the Father sees us, he sees his Son. Period. Full stop. He doesn't see a glowing success or an embarrassing failure, he sees Jesus. "You have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3). And there's no safer hiding place in the world than there.

In Jesus only do we become the people we were created to be. The Father's children. His holy family. There is the good life, for we become part of the body of the good and gracious Savior. Every "thou shalt" ends in him. He is the end of little-l laws and big-L laws. When we are in Jesus, no law

can accuse us any more than it can accuse Christ. Here is the freedom found in being loved—unconditionally, unceasingly, by the God whose grace covers every single flaw we have.

In Jesus only we fail to believe in the pseudo-god who believes in us. Instead, we believe in the God who is crazy over us. Who can't lavish enough love upon us. Who is head-over-heels for his children. Gone is all this ego-talk of self-this and self-that. Here to stay is the Jesus-talk of forgiveness, mercy, new creation, and abundant life.

The good news for all of us who, like Nebuchadnezzar, lose ourselves and find God in failure is that God will never lose us. Never fail us. Instead, he'll keep right on rejoicing over us, laughing in love over the children who mean more to him than anything else in heaven and earth.



Blessed are those who fail to believe in themselves, who fail to believe that God believes in them, for they shall find in Jesus-only everything their heart desires.