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RELATIONSHIP
with
GOD

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Your Relationship with God

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DEDICATION

I enthusiastically dedicate this book to my younger son,
Michael Thomas Smalley.
Michael constantly gives me encouragement, joy, and inspiration.
Even more amazing, he gave me part of himself—
one of his kidneys—
to keep me alive and ministering,
so that we can both continue loving God and others.

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part one

REALITY CHECK





MAKING A MESS OF SUCCESS

“What is *taking* so long?” I fumed as I waited for the doctors to arrive to begin my kidney transplant operation. I was lying on a bed in a pre-op room, wearing one of those wonderful hospital gowns—you know the type. The room was fairly cold and the nurses were bustling about doing what nurses do, not paying much attention to me. I was in sort of a twilight zone, but it seemed as if I had been cooling my heels for hours—and patience had never been one of my strengths. All I knew was that I was cold, uncomfortable, and apprehensive about the transplant and that I wanted to get it over with.

What I didn’t know was that at that very moment, in the room next door, my son Michael was fighting for his life. As the doctors removed the kidney that Michael was donating to me, one of his lungs collapsed and his situation became perilous. While they were working to stabilize my son’s condition, I was grumping and grouching in the next room about the inconvenience of having to wait.

I open with this story because in a lot of ways it sums up a major crisis in my life that had encompassed my physical, emotional, and spiritual health for years. I hadn't intended to end up self-absorbed, physically sick, emotionally out of balance, and spiritually isolated, but that's what happened. I was angry, impatient, disappointed, and frustrated with a lot of things in my life—and I was under a *ton* of stress. Along the way I had stopped relying on God and began to lean heavily on my own understanding and my own resources. The results were a major spiritual and emotional burnout and some very serious physical problems.

I want to share my story with you because I've found that most people, in one way or another and at one time or another, find themselves in similar circumstances: fed up, burned out, frustrated, and out of step with God. Maybe you are going through a similar struggle in your own life right now. Perhaps you, too, have experienced the joy that comes from a relationship with Jesus Christ. Then, through the busyness of life, being pulled in every direction, you've lost your bearings and drifted away from God's best plan for you.

If the truth be told, we're all susceptible to drifting. There are so many voices in our culture that compete with God's voice for our attention. We begin to believe that we need *more* to be happy. More power. More love. More sex. More food. More travel. More things. These voices grow louder and louder, and soon we ignore the voice in our spirit that cries out, "No! We don't need more *things*; we just need more of *God*." As Jesus said, "What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?"¹

It can happen suddenly, or gradually. If our guard is down, we can easily fall prey to the whims of the world. I know firsthand what it feels like to succumb to the temptation for more things, more money, more recognition, more comfort, and more leisure. Though I achieved just about everything I could possibly want in a material

sense, I lost life's satisfaction and the enjoyment of God's blessings for a period of about ten years. I was miserable, and I wasn't sure if I could ever regain the joy I had once known.

Fortunately, that's not the end of the story, or I wouldn't be writing this book. I also want to tell you about a miraculous renewal that began during my recovery from the kidney transplant and that is still bearing fruit in my life to this day. I'm a new man, with a fresh perspective on life. In the process of this renewal, I learned some important principles that I believe will help you move toward renewal in your own life and in your relationship with God.

What follows is the story of how I lost sight of my relationship with God for a while and how I began to drift away from him—even though I knew better, even though I've been teaching about how to have successful relationships for almost my entire career. Happily, this is also the story of how I was suddenly awakened to renew my relationship with God.

If this were only my own story of wandering away from God, it might be of limited use or interest, but I have seen the same principles—both positive and negative—played out in the lives of so many of the people I have counseled over the years, people who have read my books and attended my seminars. My hope is that if you hear the inside story—and the *rest* of the story—it might inspire you to draw closer to God and to experience the same renewal, refreshment, and revitalization that I have experienced.

Looking back, I can see how easy it was for me to drift away from God. Perhaps you've drifted in a similar way. Life gets busy, and a lot of demands are placed on our time. We get focused on the details of everyday life and on becoming successful at what we do, whether it's raising a family, running a business, or working at a job. We might suffer some setbacks or get distracted, and before we know it, we've gotten out of the habit of spending regular time with

God and reading his Word. We just start doing things on our own, pursuing our own goals, and making decisions based on our own self-interest. We still go to church and give lip service to our relationship with God, but before long he starts to seem pretty distant.

I've counseled enough people over the past thirty years to know that getting off track is a common problem. Still, it's embarrassing to think about how far I actually wandered before God got my attention again. After all, I've been to seminary and served on a pastoral staff, and like a lot of other Christians, I've heard some of the best Bible teaching anyone could possibly hear. But even with all that, it didn't take much for me to become distracted from my relationship with God by all the cares and concerns of life. The success itself became a distraction. The process was so gradual that I couldn't see it for what it was—ugly, sinful, and destructive—until it was almost too late.

How I Got Off Track

When I began earnestly pursuing God's calling on my life back in the 1960s and 1970s, I never dreamed that I would eventually encounter such success. Although my career got off to a promising start, one of my first jobs, in a ministry organization, took a turn for the worse after several years and ended badly, leaving me feeling confused and discouraged. When I left that organization, Norma and I moved to Waco, Texas, where I became a family pastor in a church. In this new job and new surroundings, I felt that God was renewing my spirit and healing old wounds. It was like a breath of fresh air. I felt as if Christ once again became the center of my life. Not that everything was perfect in Waco—every situation has its challenges—but I felt renewed in my relationship with God, and he began to bless me and my work.

During those years, I remember setting aside time each day for

prayer, and praying with such focus and intensity that I believed everything I prayed for would eventually come to pass in some way. My prayers were people centered, and I prayed with big results in mind. I was energized to reach thousands of people for Christ and help thousands of marriages. At least, that was my vision and I believed that God desired to use me in that way.

After I had been in Waco for about a year, I received a phone call from my good friend Steve Scott. Steve and his wife had attended one of my weekend marriage retreats, and he had come away with a new excitement about his marriage.

“Gary,” he said, “you’ve got to write this stuff down. Have you ever thought about writing a book about marriage?”

I didn’t know if I had what it takes to write a book—the writing process and my ADD don’t always make great bedfellows—but I had been thinking about how I could expand my message to reach more people. I asked Steve if he would pray with me about it, and he agreed.

We began praying, and within six months we had a plan to write not just one book but two—one for men, and the other for women. Although I had no formal training in writing, Steve was a talented advertising writer. We worked together, and during that next year we finished the books.

In 1979, my church sent me out to be a “missionary to the world” to help couples, singles, and parents in their relationships. I taught seminars about twice a month. By the mid-1980s, Norma and I had moved to Phoenix; I had published several more books,

I was energized to reach thousands of people for Christ and help thousands of marriages because I believed that God desired to use me in that way.

which were all selling well; and the seminar ministry was really taking off. We changed the name of our organization to Today's Family and hired more staff to take our ministry nationwide.

In 1988, Steve Scott and I filmed an infomercial, hosted by Dick Clark, to sell videotapes of my seminars. We later updated these infomercials, with the help of John Tesh and Connie Sellecca, and Frank and Kathie Lee Gifford. The video series sold more than four million copies.

With the sale of all those tapes and a steady stream of book royalties coming in, you can imagine how much money we now had to handle. I know, it sounds like a great problem to have—and in many ways it was—but it created some pressure points, both in my life and in my relationships, that would later cause some serious fractures.

Money began to create some pressure points, both in my life and in my relationships, that would later cause some serious fractures.

I grew up in a very poor family and never had much money. Early in my career, when I was an assistant pastor, I was earning just enough to provide from month to month for my wife and three kids. And I was happy. I

would start my days with a morning jog, taking time to thank God for all the blessings in my life. Life was good. I felt healthy and successful, and I was excited about my relationship with God. I specifically remember telling him that I didn't need money, that all I wanted was to love people and minister to them.

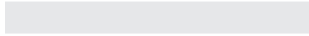
But when the money started rolling in, I found I was ill-prepared to handle it. I had never learned anything about saving, investing, giving, or anything else related to business or personal finances. I had always been the one trying to raise money for ministry; now other people were coming to me for financial help.

The amount of money that came into our ministry changed from month to month, and I didn't have a clue about how to manage it. But I wasn't worried. I believed that God was allowing our ministry to prosper and that he would guide us. I certainly wasn't worried about becoming corrupted.

I still remember sitting with my good friend Dave Cavan at his conference table and saying, "Dave, don't worry about me. My relationship with Christ is so close that money will not have the same effect on me that it might have had in the past." Well, I was wrong. Money did have a hold on me. The Bible warns us not to be naive in believing that we are above falling into temptation and sin. I was pretty naive.

Here I was, with more money than I'd ever seen and a ministry that was going off the charts in terms of growth. Even though my passion was with the ministry, not with making a lot of money, all of a sudden both the ministry and the money were begging for my attention, and God was only somewhere in the mix. I was becoming distracted from my primary relationship by the sheer volume and pace of life. Sound familiar?

As time went on, I began acquiring things—investment properties, new cars, snowmobiles, a boat. I told myself these things were all for my family's enjoyment, but being able to provide these nice things was just as much about satisfying my own ego. Just five years before, I had taught about the dangers of materialism and how rising expectations can cause stress and destroy relationships. Yet here I was, ignoring God's truth by doing the very things I had warned against.



I believed that God was allowing our ministry to prosper and that he would guide us. I certainly wasn't worried about becoming corrupted.

I now understand more clearly why money doesn't bring more happiness. The more we have, the more it controls what we do. After a while, I stopped asking God, "Is this something you want me to have?" If I saw something I wanted, I just went ahead and bought it.

I now understand more clearly why money doesn't bring more happiness. The more we have, the more it controls what we do.

Sometimes, I didn't even tell Norma what I was planning to do. A classic example of this was the time I started construction on a new house without talking to Norma about it.

It was several years ago that Norma and I decided to move closer to our present ministry office in Branson, Missouri. With our kids all grown and gone (though they were all living nearby at the time), we decided we could downsize our home and save some money. We had already purchased a lot through a close friend, so we had the land; all we needed was a plan. Norma mentioned to me that she really wanted to wait until we sold the house we were living in so we would not be stretched financially.

Even though I remembered Norma giving me that advice, I began to dream about a house design I had seen in Philadelphia. The house had lots of brick and kind of an English country feel to it. I figured it wouldn't hurt to meet with the builder and at least discuss preliminary plans. When we got together, he told me he had built a similar home in California and could save us a lot of money. Without consulting Norma, I told the builder, "Let's go ahead and get started, but let's keep it a secret."

I showed Norma the plans, and she agreed to the English look, the size, and the floor plan. What she didn't know was that the house was already under construction. When I met with our banker, he told me that all he needed to finish the paperwork was

my wife's signature. I realized that I couldn't keep my surprise. I had to tell her.

I took Norma to lunch and told her I wanted to share some "good news" and some "not so good news." When she asked for the "not so good news" first, I told her I had met with the builder and that the house was already underway.

She got very silent. In Norma language that means, "You're in big trouble, pal." Taking advantage of the silence, I quickly added a little sales pitch: "But I talked with our real estate agent again, and she said we should have several offers for our home in the first three weeks of being on the market."

Norma finally signed the papers, but she let me know that she didn't appreciate my little surprise.

Three weeks later, Norma said to me, sort of in jest but sort of not, "Ah, Gary, you said we'd have several offers within the first three weeks and we haven't had one!" Once again, Norma was right.

Several months passed, and still no offers. By now it was time to move into our new home. Although moving into the new house was very exciting and fulfilling, the weight around our necks—two monthly mortgage payments—was exactly what Norma had advised us to avoid. The wisdom of her counsel was driven home to me month after month for *three years*, which was how long it took for our old house to sell.

Money also began to rule what I did with my time—and I resented it. I enjoyed speaking and writing, not sitting down for hours trying to manage all the aspects of financial planning, building, giving, being fair with my staff, and setting aside funds for future growth.

Without consulting Norma, I told the builder, "Let's go ahead and get started, but let's keep it a secret."

Our ministry was also growing. We hired more people, bought the latest and greatest equipment, and gave everyone raises and bonuses. None of these things were wrong, in and of themselves. But what was happening was that I was subtly and gradually depending less on God and relying more and more on my own wisdom and understanding. At the time it all seemed good: Not only were we taking in a lot of money, we were also giving away a lot of money to ministries and people in need.

During this time, I began to develop newer, grander expectations, expectations that included much more growth. Worldwide growth. With the financial ability to do so many different things, we were constantly asking ourselves, “What should we do next? How can we make this better? How can we reach more people?”

As the ministry grew, I think I just assumed that everyone would work well together and be happy. And like a lot of people, I expected that the material blessings would add an extra measure of happiness to my life and my work. I expected life to be more fulfilling. But instead of experiencing greater fulfillment, I felt that I was constantly overwhelmed by deadlines and frustrated that other people were not being reliable in helping me manage my money and my ministry. If they didn’t do things fast enough or well enough or just the way I wanted them done, I would come unglued. My actions and words didn’t always match that of a Spirit-led Christian. Mostly I expressed myself by complaining, griping, and judging other people. I was totally ignoring God’s truths, and I wasn’t heeding his Word.

In my heart, I knew that God had given our ministry favor and that it wasn’t by my own efforts we were being successful. But it

didn't take long for me to forget this truth. I had prayed for all the big breaks through the years, and now the doors seemed to be opening automatically. I started expecting that life would keep getting better and that more and more doors to ministry would be opened. And I expected people to keep responding to me and to the message the same way they always had.

Through the years, my ego started to swell and pride settled in my heart. I never lost the awareness that God was the one who had opened all the doors for my ministry, but as people started treating me more graciously wherever I went, I began to expect compliments and accolades. No matter where I went, whether traveling for business in the United States and Europe or on vacation in Mexico, people would come up to me and say, "I bought your video, and it changed my life! My marriage has been saved. I just wanted to thank you." After a while, the attention became almost embarrassing, and I secretly hoped that no one would recognize me or interrupt me. I grew weary of the attention.

Tragically, I was tempted to believe that I was the one who had changed all these lives. I kept telling myself I was on the right track, because how else could all these good things happen? Why else would God bless me like this? I concluded that the overwhelming prosperity must be part of God's plan and the answer to my prayers. So I forged ahead.

As the ministry grew, I think I just assumed that everyone would work well together and be happy.

I kept telling myself I was on the right track, because how else could all these good things happen? Why else would God bless me like this?

People continued to treat me like a celebrity, and I began to act like one. I expected special treatment in restaurants and on airplanes, and I always traveled with an assistant to keep people from getting too close to me. How's that for a so-called relationship expert?

The Bible warns us about what can happen when we listen to too much flattery. Proverbs 29:5 says, "Whoever flatters his neighbor is spreading a net for his feet." The people who thanked me for my ministry weren't trying to set a trap for me, but I was beginning to think more highly of myself than I should have. I started believing all the hype. How blind I became!

All the attention and ego-stroking caused a disorientation in my soul. My perception of myself was out of whack, and I had a very skewed view of the worth of other people. My grandiose expectations continued to rule my life, and I became increasingly intolerant of anyone who didn't quite measure up.

One time one of my neighbors reacted to my attitude when we had a disagreement. She said, "Gary, you are nothing but a prima donna, and it's ugly." But that didn't faze me. I just figured she was jealous of my success. Such is the nature of pride. I was spoiled and self-centered, and it had happened so naturally and gradually that I hadn't even noticed. I didn't want to deal with any relational messes. I didn't want to deal with any inconveniences, and I resented anyone who tried to hold up my plans. I wanted my relationships with other people—including those with my staff and my family—to be hassle free and manageable.

Cracks in the Wall

By the mid-1990s, Norma and I had moved to Branson and had begun a new organization, the Smalley Relationship Center. My three children—Kari, Greg, and Michael—had become involved in the ministry, and all indications were that we would continue to grow

and prosper. We had already accomplished more than I had ever dreamed of, yet my personal walk with God had grown progressively colder and more distant. I felt spiritually dead inside. My motivation to continue with my ministry was gone. I was discouraged and confused. Boy, was I confused!

My relationships were suffering severely. After delivering a message at one of my seminars on how to get over anger and stress, I headed back to the hospitality room with my two sons, who were sharing the speaking responsibilities with me. Just minutes after teaching about anger, I had a disagreement with Michael and Greg about something and I lost my temper. That was the pattern in my life at that time. I let all my negative thoughts control me.

I remember Greg stepping back and saying to me, “Dad, why don’t you reread the book you wrote fifteen years ago called *Joy That Lasts*.” I felt the sting of his words, and it made me even more angry and irritated.

I wasn’t prepared to receive words of rebuke and correction from my son. But Greg had observed how people would come up to me after a seminar and tell me how much their relationships had been helped by my books or tapes, yet he knew I was not heeding my own counsel.

What my son said to me was true, though I didn’t accept it at the time. I was embarrassed by his rebuke, but he was right! I honestly had forgotten what God had taught me fifteen years earlier—that Jesus is all I need. He is the source of all my joy.

The incident with Greg and Michael made me painfully aware of my relational bankruptcy. Looking back, I realize how my son’s stern words were good medicine for me. As much as I had counseled and helped other families to get along, I was unable to work alongside

Just minutes after
teaching about anger
. . . I lost my temper.

my own sons. I was blinded by self-centeredness, unable to see the damage I was doing to the relationships around me. No wonder I felt so empty.

My whole life, it seemed, was consumed with pulsating stress. I was bothered by the traffic on my five-mile commute to work. I was

My whole life, it seemed, was consumed with pulsating stress.

irritated by the inconvenience of air travel from Branson to all my seminars. I was stressed by a steady series of publishing deadlines and the need to come up with new seminar material. I was worried about the weather as Norma and I were building our new

house. And I was caught up in the tension of working together with family members in ministry. It seemed that everything was a hassle or a distraction, and everything cost more than I had anticipated. The pressure was becoming unbearable. Ironically, the things I had expected to bring me fulfillment and enjoyment in life turned out to be the very things that created havoc.

Out of the Frying Pan . . .

After 1995, I started slowing down my direct involvement at the Smalley Relationship Center and began working out a plan to transfer control of the ministry to my children over the next several years. In 1996, my book *Making Love Last Forever* was published and sold exceptionally well.

Seeing this success, several of my friends who had built their own thriving and profitable businesses told me that if I really wanted to move up the ladder and take my publishing venture to the next level, I should consider signing up with a New York literary agent who worked with all the top publishers and could get my book proposals in front of them. This particular agent was very good at

taking individuals who had achieved fame and success in one field—people such as Dr. Phil McGraw, Maria Shriver, and Jake Steinfeld of *Body by Jake* fame—and helping them break into the publishing world. It sounded like a good idea to enlist her help.

With my next proposal, the agent took me to New York to visit three publishers. Eventually, we signed a two-book contract with Simon & Schuster. But now the pressure was really on. My books had been successful for years in the Christian market, but I felt that if I didn't hit a home run in the general market as well, I would be considered a failure.

Looking back with the perspective of five or ten years, I can see during this time the beginnings of my drift away from God. I listened to the voices of other people telling me, “You’ve got to do this,” “It only makes sense,” “It’s the next natural step,” or “If you want to be successful . . .” I can see how these voices distracted me from depending on God for every part of my life.

Things really began to come to a head in 2000 with the publication of my first book with Simon & Schuster, *Secrets to Lasting Love*. To begin with, it wasn't the book I wanted to write. In fact, I had signed the contract based on another idea, but when I started to write that book, the publisher didn't like the direction it was taking and steered me toward the “secrets to lasting love” idea.

This felt like old news to me. My most recent book prior to that was *Making Love Last Forever*, and I felt as if I had already said everything I had to say on that particular subject. As I tried to write, I struggled internally and said to myself, “Smalley, you're not saying anything new, you're just saying it in a different way.” But the publisher wouldn't budge.

I can see during this
time the beginnings
of my drift away
from God.

My name had already slowed down in the marketplace because the infomercial I used to do had been off the air for a couple of years. When *Secrets to Lasting Love* didn't sell as well as expected, the situation went from bad to worse. I felt that my agent should be doing more to help me promote the book, but she said, "You told me you were going to have an infomercial, but you can't seem to work it out." And then Simon & Schuster said, "We're not sure we want to do the second book." It was a nightmare.

In the end, the contract was canceled and I walked away from a lot of money, but I was so happy to get away from that situation that I didn't care how much it cost me.

In the wake of all this, I started to think that whatever I was going to accomplish in life I had already done. I didn't have any new

I started to think that whatever I was going to accomplish in life I had already done.

material to write about, and I didn't have any really big dreams. I decided that God must be done with me, or at least I was done with ministry. It was like I plateaued. I just *ended*.

I sat in ministry meetings where everyone was discussing my retirement—or even more discouraging, discussing what would happen when I died! I began to believe I was done. I lost my vision for what God had called me to do. I lost my hunger for God's Word because I had lost sight of who I was. I went to church, but usually I would end up critiquing the sermon.

During this season of my life, I'm sure I prayed, but I don't remember any kind of routine. I'm sure I read my Bible, but I wasn't doing any kind of regular study. I wasn't reminding myself daily from God's Word of why I was here, what I was doing, and what my purpose in life was. I lost my ability to hope and dream. I drifted away from God and went my own way. I spent money, took trips,

and got caught up in materialism again. God didn't seem to be giving me a new vision for what was next, so it seemed logical for me to scale back my involvement in the ministry, hand over the reins to my children, and help them get going.

If you've ever worked in a family business, you know where this story is headed.

An Unsuccessful Succession

All three of my children have very strong personalities. Before they joined the Smalley Relationship Center, they had already developed their own vision and their own ministries. So when we brought everyone together under one roof, they all had their own ideas of how we should operate and what we should do. Almost immediately, I realized I had made a big mistake in trying to have everyone work together. Trying to pull together four ministries in one and have all of us agree on a common direction was a recipe for conflict, misunderstanding, and confusion. We had a lot of very stressful family meetings trying to come to a win-win-win-win solution (remember, it was three kids and Dad) about the direction of the ministry.

After some of those family meetings, I was more stressed out than ever. We were usually a harmonious family who really enjoyed each other most of the time, but now we found ourselves at loggerheads. Despite our good intentions for serving people through our ministry and building a family enterprise, we were at each other's throats.

"I don't like your proposal."

"Oh yeah? Well, I don't like *your* proposal, and I don't like *you* all that much, either!"

I don't think anyone ever actually said that, but it seemed that was the tone of many of our meetings. On more than one occasion, I found myself thinking, *What have I gotten myself into?*

And then, as part of the generational succession plan, other members of the family became owners and voting members of the organization. All of a sudden, my children’s spouses—wonderful

On more than one occasion, I found myself thinking, *What have I gotten myself into?*

people with whom I’d had great relationships, but mostly at family holiday gatherings—were standing up in meetings to voice their opinions about what we should do. I would sit there thinking, *This is like an out-of-body experience that I don’t want to be a part of. What happened to my ministry?*

As if all that wasn’t stressful enough, my elder son, Greg, who had succeeded me as president of the ministry, decided he wanted more professional efficiency in our day-to-day operations as the counseling ministry grew. So he re-assigned the office manager and put her in charge of making travel arrangements for our speakers. Well, the office manager just happened to be my wife, Norma, who had run the daily operations of the ministry for twenty years.

Greg handled the reassignment in a very loving and respectful way, but it still hurt, and Norma was very discouraged. She would glare at me and say, “You did this, Gary. You put him there. This was *your* idea.”

If you’ve heard the saying, “If the momma ain’t happy, ain’t nobody happy,” you have an idea of what things were like. I thought, *How did I make such a mess of everything, and what am I going to do about it?*

In his role as president, Greg talked to me about my contribution to the content of our seminars. He said, “Dad, you’ve got to come up with some new stuff when you speak at the big simulcast we’re putting on in six months.” But I didn’t have anything new to

say. All I had was a load of hurt from all the things that were happening with my family, and I was struggling with that. While we were teaching others how to have effective relationships, our own relationships were being tested to the core.

There were new financial pressures as well. Within the new ministry structure, we began to expand again, paying big-name speakers to be part of our simulcasts and adding counselors to our staff, which grew from thirteen to forty-three. These professional counselors were paid professional-level salaries, which meant a major increase in our overhead. To balance our cash flow during this expansion, we established a line of credit with the bank, but when our revenues didn't keep pace with what we were borrowing, the bank got nervous. Even though by now I was only one of several owners, the bank made it very clear that if the company got in financial trouble, they weren't going to go after my children. They were going to go after me, because they knew what kind of assets I had.

I often reflect on this ten-year period of my life and wonder how I survived. Thankfully, God provided the wake-up call I needed. He knew I needed a crisis to shake me out of my preoccupation with myself.

While we were teaching others how to have effective relationships, our own relationships were being tested to the core.

YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

1. Does a close relationship with God come naturally to you? What can you do to draw closer to God?
2. What priorities in your life do you feel you have placed above God?

YOUR RELATIONSHIP *with* GOD

3. On a scale from 1–10 (10 being the highest), rate your level of stress.
How is your stress level affecting your relationship with God?

KEY VERSES: Read Matthew 19:16-26

Prayerfully consider what earthly things might be coming between you and the Lord. Consider how you identify with the Rich Young Man.

MAKING IT PERSONAL

List some aspects of your life that you need to surrender fully to God. What areas of your life are a struggle for you to turn over to him?

MEDITATIONS ON COLOSSIANS 3

Before my revival, I had become too distracted to experience the full impact of God's Word in my life. I had set up too many idols around my heart—my expectations, my goals, my book sales, the success of my ministry, my comfortable lifestyle, my fancy vacations—idols that had to be removed in order for me to fully reconnect with God. I am so thankful that God empowered me to remove those idols from my life and saved me from my distractions.

I can't overemphasize the importance of removing all the distractions from your life—anything that is competing for your attention and keeping you from hearing God through his Word. If you're so distracted that you can't even find time to read the Bible and pray on a daily basis, then that is where you must begin. I know that sounds pretty basic, but that is where so many Christians start to go off track—when they neglect the basics. It's what happened to me, and I've seen it happen with countless others, as well.

God's Word is such an important element of our relationship and communication with God—and it is freely available to us if we will just take the time. God's Word can change our hearts each and every day of our lives. No other book can correct, teach, rebuke, bless, inspire, encourage, and sustain us. God's Word really is alive. But like any living relationship, Scripture can't work if we don't do our part. Meditating on it and applying it to our daily circumstances take deliberate intention, discipline, and action. Thankfully, God gives us the power to do this through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Imagine that God is sitting across the table from you as you read your Bible. He's there, you know, even though you can't see him. Take a minute to read a passage of Scripture while visualizing

God's presence with you. He wants to speak to you through his Word. He wants you to tell him all about your day, and he has advice to give you about how to go about the plans you've made. Read Scripture *with* him, and listen to what he says. Tell him your thoughts about what you are reading, and allow his wisdom to penetrate your heart.

Colossians 3:1-17 has deeply affected me since the renewal of my relationship with God. As an example of how much can be found in even a small portion of God's Word, I want to take time to unpack the verses for you. This passage means a lot to me personally and has greatly affected my relationship with God. It's like a summary of the New Testament for me. I have decided to meditate on Colossians 3 every day of my life from now on. Each day I approach it differently. I review the verses in my mind, reflecting on what it means to live out these godly principles. I want to be a walking letter that communicates the truth of Colossians 3 to everyone who knows me. Let me share with you what God has revealed to me as he has brought these words to life, and let me invite you to meditate on these verses for the next ten days.

DAY 1: “Set your hearts on things above.”

“Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.”

COLOSSIANS 3:1

What this verse has impressed on my heart is that Christ has lifted me up, *away* from something. He has raised me up from something low. I envision him lifting me above the things of this world. He has removed me beyond the gravitational pull of worldly things. He has separated me from addiction to the things of this world. He has lifted me away from my negative emotions. He has lifted me up, away from the expectations of this world, away from the affections of this world.

After my three near-death experiences, the fact that my physical body will one day occupy a grave became very real to me. The truth is, no one knows when his or her time will come. But now I can read this verse with a new hope that death cannot keep me from the love of God. He has lifted me up, out of my sin, out of my spiritual grave. As you read this verse, picture your own grave or tombstone and think about how low, how deep, death can take you. Then imagine Christ lifting you out of your grave by the power of his love and grace, lifting you up to a place of honor beside him. There is no better place to be.

“Since you have been raised to new life with Christ, set your sights on the realities of heaven, where Christ sits in the place of honor at God’s right hand.”¹ Meditating on the “realities of heaven,” the reality of my “new life with Christ,” makes me want to set my heart on the things that are above, the things that are valuable to Christ, the things that are a priority to him, and the things that are important to his kingdom. What is important to Christ is now also important to me.

I also like how the 1937 Charles Williams translation of Colossians 3:1 emphasizes that we are to “keep on seeking the things above.” It’s a lifelong, continual process.

When I read this verse, I visualize myself alongside Jesus, lifted high away from the pull of this world, where I am free from my sin. Jesus is God’s right-hand man, with all the power and authority to be my mediator. I picture Jesus with a scepter in his hand, crushing his enemies under his feet. I, too, am privileged to fight for God’s truth, and through his power I can overcome the enemy’s schemes and say no to my lower nature. As I seek the things that are important to Christ, I have joined in his divine fellowship with God, which transcends this world. I picture myself seated with Christ at the right hand of my heavenly Father.

APPENDIX

NAMES AND ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

Advocate (1 John 2:1, NKJV)
Almighty (Revelation 1:8; Matthew 28:18)
Alpha and Omega (Revelation 1:8; 22:13, NKJV)
Atoning Sacrifice for Our Sins (1 John 2:2)
Author and Perfecter of our Faith (Hebrews 12:2)
Author of Life (Acts 3:15)
Author of Salvation (Hebrews 2:10)
Beginning and End (Revelation 22:13)
Blessed and Only Ruler (1 Timothy 6:15)
Bread of Life (John 6:35, 48)
Capstone (Acts 4:11; 1 Peter 2:7)
Chief Cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20)
Chief Shepherd (1 Peter 5:4)
Christ (1 John 2:22)
Creator (John 1:3)
Deliverer (Romans 11:26)
Eternal Life (1 John 1:2; 5:20)
Everlasting Father (Isaiah 9:6)
Gate (John 10:9)
Faithful and True (Revelation 19:11)
Faithful and True Witness (Revelation 3:14)
Faithful Witness (Revelation 1:5)
First and Last (Revelation 1:17; 2:8; 22:13)
Firstborn from the Dead (Revelation 1:5)
God (John 1:1; 20:28; Romans 9:5; Hebrews 1:8; 2 Peter 1:1; 1 John 5:20)
Good Shepherd (John 10:11, 14)
Great High Priest (Hebrews 4:14)
Great Shepherd (Hebrews 13:20)
Head of the Church (Ephesians 1:22; 4:15; 5:23)
Heir of All Things (Hebrews 1:2)
High Priest (Hebrews 2:17)
Holy and True (Revelation 3:7)
Holy One (Acts 3:14)
Hope (1 Timothy 1:1)
Hope of Glory (Colossians 1:27)
Horn of Salvation (Luke 1:69)

YOUR RELATIONSHIP *with* GOD

I AM (John 8:58)
Image of God (2 Corinthians 4:4)
King Eternal (1 Timothy 1:17)
King of Israel (John 1:49)
King of Kings (1 Timothy 6:15; Revelation 19:16)
King of the Ages (Revelation 15:3)
King of the Jews (Matthew 27:11)
Lamb (Revelation 13:8)
Lamb of God (John 1:29)
Lamb without Blemish (1 Peter 1:19)
Last Adam (1 Corinthians 15:45)
Life (John 14:6; Colossians 3:4)
Light of the World (John 8:12)
Lion of the Tribe of Judah (Revelation 5:5)
Living One (Revelation 1:18)
Living Stone (1 Peter 2:4)
Lord (2 Peter 2:20)
Lord of All (Acts 10:36)
Lord of Glory (1 Corinthians 2:8)
Lord of Lords (Revelation 19:16)
LORD [YHWH] our Righteousness (Jeremiah 23:6)
Man from Heaven (1 Corinthians 15:48)
Mediator of the New Covenant (Hebrews 9:15)
Mighty God (Isaiah 9:6)
Morning Star (Revelation 22:16)
Offspring of David (Revelation 22:16)
Only Begotten Son of God (John 1:18, NKJV; 1 John 4:9, NKJV)
Our Great God and Savior (Titus 2:13)
Our Holiness (1 Corinthians 1:30)
Our Husband (2 Corinthians 11:2)
Our Protection (2 Thessalonians 3:3)
Our Redemption (1 Corinthians 1:30)
Our Righteousness (1 Corinthians 1:30)
Our Sacrificed Passover Lamb (1 Corinthians 5:7)
Power of God (1 Corinthians 1:24)
Precious Cornerstone (1 Peter 2:6)
Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6)
Prophet (Acts 3:22)
Resurrection and Life (John 11:25)
Righteous Branch (Jeremiah 23:5)
Righteous One (Acts 7:52; 1 John 2:1)
Rock (1 Corinthians 10:4)
Root of David (Revelation 5:5; 22:16)
Ruler of God's Creation (Revelation 3:14)

Ruler of the Kings of the Earth (Revelation 1:5)
Savior (Ephesians 5:23; Titus 1:4; 3:6; 2 Peter 2:20)
Son of David (Luke 18:39)
Son of God (John 1:49; Hebrews 4:14)
Son of Man (Matthew 8:20)
Son of the Most High God (Luke 1:32)
Source of Eternal Salvation for All Who Obey Him (Hebrews 5:9)
The One Mediator (1 Timothy 2:5)
The Stone That the Builders Rejected (Acts 4:11)
True Bread (John 6:32)
True Light (John 1:9)
True Vine (John 15:1)
Truth (John 1:14; 14:6)
Way (John 14:6)
Wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:24)
Wonderful Counselor (Isaiah 9:6)
Word of God (Revelation 19:13)
Word of Life (1 John 1:1)

NOTES

CHAPTER 1

1. Mark 8:36

CHAPTER 2

1. 1 Peter 2:2

CHAPTER 3

1. Philippians 4:19
2. Luke 22:42
3. Luke 22:44
4. Gerald G. May, *Addiction and Grace* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988).

CHAPTER 4

1. 2 Corinthians 10:5
2. Ephesians 5:15-16
3. John 10:10
4. Ephesians 3:16-21
5. James 4:6-8
6. James 1:19-20
7. Ephesians 4:29
8. Proverbs 4:23
9. Proverbs 3:5-6
10. See Galatians 5:22-23.
11. Galatians 5:25
12. Colossians 3:3
13. See Daniel 7:14.
14. 2 Timothy 1:7, NKJV
15. See John 8:32.
16. Colossians 3:2
17. Job 31:1
18. See Proverbs 4:23, NASB.

CHAPTER 5

1. See Philippians 1:6.
2. Mark 12:30-31
3. See Matthew 22:36-40.
4. The 5 *M*'s are adapted from my book *Joy That Lasts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, revised edition, 2000). A more complete discussion of the 5 *M*'s can be found there.

YOUR RELATIONSHIP *with* GOD

5. See Ephesians 2:10.
6. 1 Thessalonians 5:18
7. James 1:2-4
8. See Matthew 5:45, NKJV.
9. See Job 1:6-12.
10. Job 42:1-3

CHAPTER 6

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2. Luke 21:17, 19
3. Philippians 4:19
4. Hebrews 5:8-9
5. James 1:4
6. 1 Thessalonians 5:18

CHAPTER 7

1. See Matthew 6:25-34; 10:29-31; Luke 12:6-7, 27-31.
2. James 1:5
3. James 3:17
4. Don Colbert, *Deadly Emotions: Understand the Mind-Body-Spirit Connection That Can Heal or Destroy You* (Nashville: Nelson, 2003), 140-142.
5. *Ibid.*, 141-142.
6. Linda Song, Gary Schwartz, and Linda Russek, "Heart-Focused Attention and Heart-Brain Synchronization: Energetic and Physiological Mechanisms," in *Alternative Therapies in Health and Medicine*, 1998, volume 4, number 5, 44-62.
7. Proverbs 4:23
8. Philippians 4:13, NKJV
9. See Proverbs 3:5-6.
10. James 1:19

CHAPTER 8

1. Luke 22:42
2. Emilie Griffin, *Clinging: The Experience of Prayer* (New York: McCracken, 1994), 13.
3. James 4:8
4. Romans 12:2
5. William Law, *The Spirit of Prayer* (1749), part 1, chapter 2, prayer 1.2-23; see online at www.spiritofprayer.com/wlaw02.php for the text of this book.
6. Romans 5:1-2, NRSV
7. Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Life*, American edition (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale, 1977), 143.
8. Calvin Miller, *Into the Depths of God* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 2000).

9. Galatians 2:20, NKJV
10. 1 Peter 1:6-7
11. 1 Timothy 4:7-8
12. Philippians 3:12

MEDITATIONS ON COLOSSIANS 3

1. Colossians 3:1, NLT
2. See Galatians 5:22-23.
3. See Philippians 4:19.
4. Revelation 19:11, 16
5. Colossians 3:5, 8, TLB
6. See Matthew 19:26; Philippians 4:13.
7. See 1 Peter 1:14-15.
8. See Galatians 5:16.
9. 1 John 2:15, NKJV
10. Matthew 7:1-2
11. See Romans 13:8.
12. See Romans 13:9-10.
13. See 1 Corinthians 13:13.
14. See Proverbs 3:34; James 4:6.

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Dr. Gary Smalley, the cofounder and chairman of the board of Smalley Relationship Center, is America's relationship doctor. He is the author or coauthor of more than forty books, including the best-selling, award-winning books *Marriage for a Lifetime*, *Secrets to Lasting Love*, and *The Blessing*. Releases within the past several years include the best-selling *The DNA of Relationships*, *Men's Relational Toolbox*, *Food and Love*, *Bound by Honor*, and the Redemption fiction series, coauthored with Karen Kingsbury.

In addition to earning a master's degree from Bethel Theological Seminary, Gary has received two honorary doctorates, one from Biola University, and one from Southwest Baptist University, for his work with couples.

In his thirty years of ministry, Gary has appeared on national television programs such as *Oprah*, *Larry King Live*, and *Today*, as well as numerous national radio programs. Gary has produced films and videos that have sold millions of copies. Gary and his wife, Norma, have been married for forty-two years and live in Branson, Missouri. They have three adult children and eight grandchildren.