

BILL TELL

lay it down

LIVING IN THE FREEDOM

OF THE GOSPEL



“What a great gift Bill has given to us in this book! Pick it up. Read it slowly. What could be more important than to mine the depths of the grace of God—especially in a world where we continually fall back into a desperate and hopeless attempt to do what Christ has already done? Bill not only does a masterful job of mining these depths, but he also doesn’t shy away from the myriad of ‘Yeah, but’ questions we all ask when faced with the radical reality of what Christ has done for us: a new life, no condemnation, adoption as a child of the King. Wow! What can we add? Nothing. Cease striving. Lay it down. Great book!”

DEL TACKETT

Architect and host of *The Truth Project*

“Bill Tell has written a tremendously encouraging book for anyone caught in the bindings of performance-based religion. His insights may challenge long-held assumptions about what God wants from you and will lead you to a life of deep joy.”

AMY SIMPSON

Author, *Anxious: Choosing Faith in a World of Worry*

“When we meet Jesus, up close and personal, we accept the unconditional grace of being accepted into God’s family. But for many of us, after that, we go to work trying to please God by what we do. Unfortunately, we are wired by our Christian culture to try to work our way into God’s presence as believers. Travel with Bill Tell as he unlocks the

secret of living a close, vibrant relationship with our closest friend, Jesus. This is a life-changing message that you'll want to share with your small group or Bible study. As people grasp the truth of God's unconditional acceptance of them in Jesus, you'll see them change the same way I saw Jesus transforming Bill's life."

LAUREN LIBBY

International president/CEO, TWR International

"The question 'What does God think of me?' can frighten us and even make us feel enslaved and defeated. *Lay It Down* not only engenders freedom and rest from our performing; it encourages obedience and holiness based on what God thinks of us. Pick up *Lay It Down*, and find rest for your weary, busy soul."

ROD MAYS

Executive pastor, Mitchell Road Presbyterian Church, Greenville, South Carolina

"In this refreshing book, Bill Tell identifies the lies that many in the church believe, lies that keep them in bondage, lies that keep them in sin, and lies that keep them from enjoying God's extravagant love. Not only does he expose the lies, Bill points us to the truth. Through his extensive knowledge of Scripture as well as his own experience, Bill shows us the way to true freedom and joyful obedience."

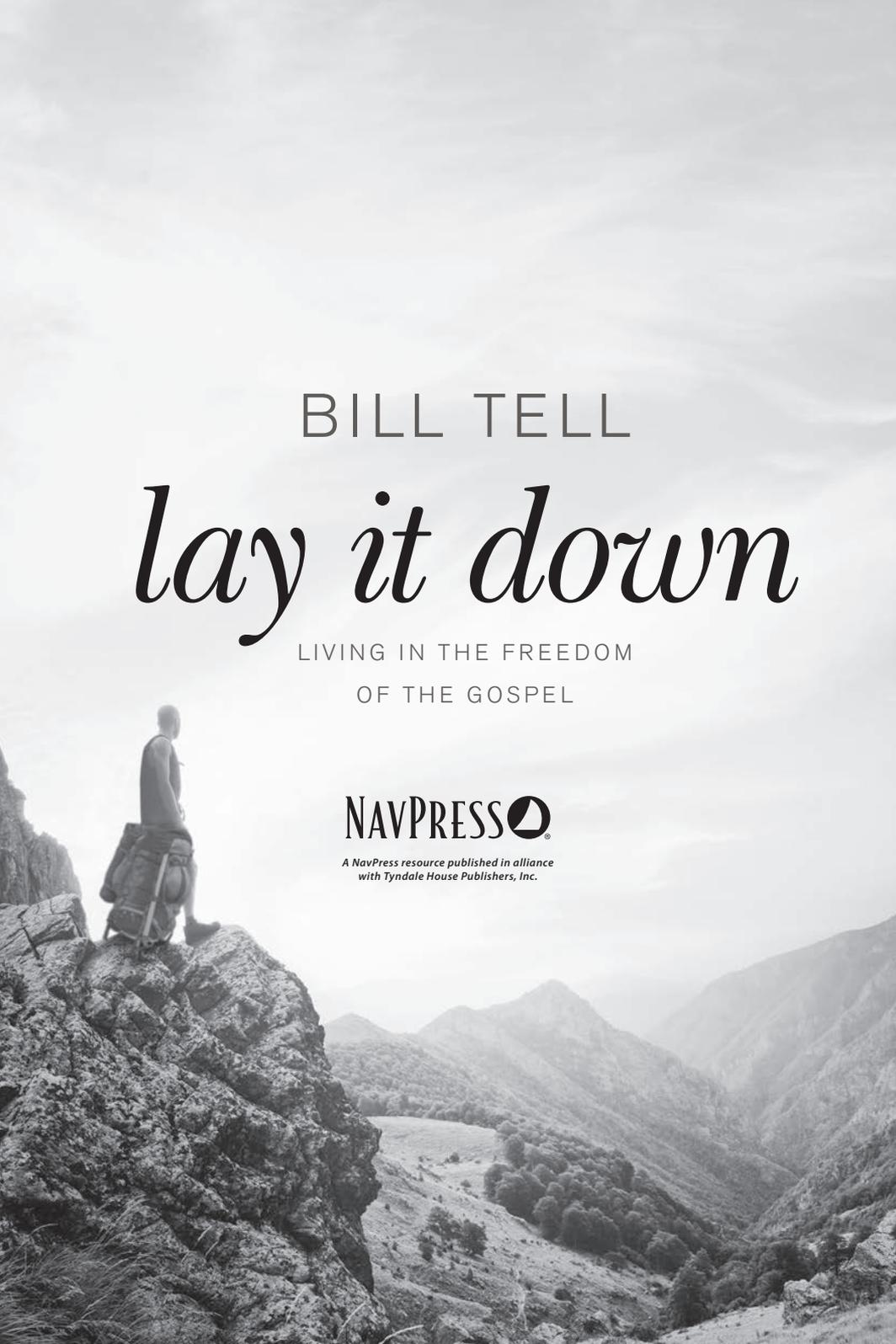
MARK BATES

Senior pastor, Village Seven Presbyterian Church, Colorado Springs, Colorado

“Writing from his own experience and his thorough knowledge of Scripture, Bill Tell shows us how to move from performance-based living into the glorious freedom the gospel is meant to bring. This book will benefit all believers regardless of their stage of maturity in the Christian life.”

JERRY BRIDGES

Author, *The Pursuit of Holiness*



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Lay It Down: Living in the Freedom of the Gospel

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Foreword

AS OUR TEAM travels various continents, we are repeatedly riveted by two realities. Everyone on this earth carries an enormous thirst for lasting, personal freedom. And most simply don't know where to look for the water.

In *Lay It Down*, you have come to the headwaters of freedom. Not the freedom of religious condolence or psychological coping. Not even the self-awarded liberty promised by many in the church, but the freedom of the original gospel. It is the freedom Jesus promised for your personal journey, your family, your community, and your friendships *today*.

While “original,” these truths of grace offering such freedom are not at all “common.” They have been buried under the rubble of much misunderstanding, misrepresentation,

and confusion. So you may be astonished to learn in *Lay It Down* that you are exceedingly freer than you ever imagined. Such is the gospel of Jesus, who promised that after tasting these waters, you would never again seek another freedom.

Bill Tell insightfully explains that freedom also escapes many of us because we're so familiar and comfortable with captivity. Many of us "lifers" are not even looking for a way out of "serving time." Through decades of learning to perform to earn our freedom, many of us have concluded that this dutiful but largely lifeless existence is all there is. That our disillusionment and bondage are normal. Numb and listless, we've stopped hoping for a different way, content with a stagnant parody of freedom. We've forgotten to seek fresh water any longer.

You'll see through the windows of Bill's story that, while coming to Jesus brings us eternal life, it doesn't automatically unearth the unresolved issues of our lives. We may have considered the hope of becoming free *from* our unresolved life issues but counted the process too costly to pursue freedom *to* a life of joy and influence. We disastrously undervalue freedom. Attempting to avoid our reality, we convince ourselves we can manage or bury our stuff, tragically ignoring the fact that all unresolved life issues are buried alive. It doesn't matter whether they come from our families of origin, our own poor choices, or the violations that others inflicted upon us. Our unresolved life issues remain buried alive—and become a lot of work for others.

His first institutional training being in chemistry, Bill Tell

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brings to his research the thought process of a scientist. Bill is a master at asking the right questions. He is also seasoned in articulating the nuanced differences of true answers from false. Part of the gift of *Lay It Down* is to be guided by someone capable of confronting long-held clichés with the clarity of well-reasoned insight.

Did we mention that Bill is a good friend of ours? We know this story. We even know people who would not talk with him or hang around him before the transformation you will read about in this book. It overwhelms and astounds us to watch the before and after of God's grace at work in Bill. None of this may have taken place without the gift of his wife, Sue Tell. She faithfully endured his bluffing and loved him intently *before* freedom began replacing his unresolved life issues.

Lay It Down is a small book with enormous implications. Everyone in the next restaurant, refugee camp, or ministry you walk into needs this rare message of hope and freedom. But first it must find you. This truth will set you free, but only if you trust it. We urge you to carefully grapple through *Lay It Down*, for if you trust a lie while thinking it is truth, you will long remain in an unwelcome prison.

The author Joseph Cooke titled his autobiographical book *Free for the Taking*, a classic work on grace that was written a generation ago and is reminiscent of *Lay It Down*. It turns out the gospel of God's grace not only leads to freedom but also is free for the taking; through infinite sacrifice, Jesus makes it this way for us. We hope that you cherish this free

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gift *today* and that tomorrow you will secure *Lay It Down* for more thirsty pilgrims.

Friends, welcome to the fountain of freedom.

Bill Thrall, Bruce McNicol, and John Lynch
coauthors of *The Cure*, *Bo's Café*, and *Behind The Mask*, and
team members (with Bill Tell) of Truefaced, Inc.,
and Center for the Cure

Introduction

THIS IS A book about freedom—about allowing the freedom Jesus died to give us to transform our lives. Why write about freedom? Three reasons. First, living in “the glorious freedom of the children of God” (Romans 8:21, NIV) is at the very heart of the gospel. Tim Keller writes, “Everything about the Christian gospel is freedom. Jesus’ whole mission was an operation of liberation.”¹ Jesus didn’t die His horrific death and suffer the forever unequalled punishment of God only to free us from judgment and give us a future in heaven; the Son of God lived and died so we could begin experiencing the glories of eternal life *now* and the radical life-changing freedom of the gospel *today!* It is a freedom that changes *everything* about us; it’s a change we desperately need.

When we decide to trust the gospel, Brennan Manning says, we have enrolled in “the school of freedom.”² To not live in gospel freedom is sin—serious sin. It is an adamant refusal to embrace the work God desires to do in our lives, a work

that dearly cost Him. To not live in gospel-given freedom is to *distrust* that God knows what is best for us—and it is our *trust* that pleases Him the most (Hebrews 11:6). For some reason we think that the boundaries we create for ourselves are safer and healthier than the freedoms we are given in the gospel. This is a stinging slap in the face of God. We are declaring we know better than He does. I have a hunch that nothing grieves God more deeply than our distrust of His goodness and love for us, which we discover and experience only as we live in the fullness of our gospel freedom.

Donald Gray, in his book *Jesus, the Way to Freedom*, writes,

We are freed not only from the fear of death but also from the fear of life; we are freed for new life, a life that is trusting, hopeful, compassionate. God wants us to be well and whole now. That is the good news.³

Well and whole . . . *now!* No shame making us hide, no chains binding us to our past, no captivity to unbreakable compulsive sins. This wellness and wholeness is found only in one place—in one relationship: in God’s protective love and healing freedom.

Second, as I speak to students and young people around the country, I find that the New Testament is not seen as very good news. The standards for living a godly life are high, and fulfilling them (and thus becoming acceptable to God) seems impossible. One young person put it this way: “Why come to a book every day that makes you feel like a failure?”

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Too many people read the Bible and miss the good news of freedom.

Third, this is a book about freedom because it is a book about me. What you are about to read is highly autobiographical. You will see a successful leader with a dark side. You will see the lies that held me captive and the things I craftily hid for years. As you read, please handle me carefully.

These are things I can now share because I realize they don't define who I am. I was free and didn't know it. In the midst of a "dark night of the soul," glimpses of gospel freedom pierced my darkness and I began to grasp—hesitantly at first—the freedom Jesus so intensely wanted me to have.

Do I still hear the chains of captivity rattling in the background? You bet. Probably every day. But they are the rattling lies of our enemy. They no longer need to control my motives, my decision making, my actions. They no longer tell me who I am. There is now a voice speaking to me that tells me truth—truth that releases me to live as God intended. Free.

You have your own lies that hold you captive. As I share my lies, reflect on yours. Then as I share how the gospel sets me free, allow the gospel to set you free. I'm trusting that when you close the last chapter, this book will no longer be about how the gospel set *me* free, but how the gospel sets *you* free.

I need to tell you two things this book is not.

First, this is not a book about independence. "Christianity promises to make man free," Anglican priest William R. Inge

writes; “it never promises to make them independent.”⁴ Freedom and independence are polar opposites. The former leads to wellness and wholeness. The latter leads only to disillusionment and emptiness. Freedom always moves us toward people and into community (Galatians 5:13), and so freedom allows us to love and be loved. Independence separates and isolates, leading to deep loneliness. Independence says, “I do not need you. I am self-sufficient.” On the other hand, freedom protects me with a healthy dependence; it lets others love me by meeting my needs. God has created us with needs so we can be loved. Freedom positions me where others can speak truth to me; in independence I am alone and therefore deceived.

In Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son we find a young man who confused the freedom he had in the love of his father with the deceptive allure of independence. That young man discovered that independence does not work. Not even a little. Ever. Returning home and being a slave would be better than the deceitful bill of goods labeled independence.

Second, this is not a comprehensive theology on the gospel. We will travel through large parts of the gospel landscape that we often miss to our deepest detriment. We are going to focus on how the gospel frees *us*. But the gospel is not just about us—it is about the glory of the triune God. The New Testament repeatedly tells us we believe and suffer for the sake of *His* name.

As you read, you will be following the trail of my footprints as I discovered in the gospel the freedom that was

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already mine in this life. There are a lot of gospel places my feet still need to tread. Hopefully you have been places I have yet to go, and you can add chapters to this book.

As you journey with me, may the shackles that bind you loosen and drop off. May the chains that have held you captive become only distant rattles. But as you read, handle yourself carefully. Don't let the chains of the past become sources of shame and condemnation.

CHAPTER I

Into Dark Depths

THERE WAS NO air in the basement guest room. My heart was pounding. I was dripping with sweat. The room was spinning at warp speed, and I was clutching the bed lest I be flung helplessly across the room.

I managed to get my feet on the floor and sit on the edge of the bed. Whatever was happening, it seemed like I would have more control sitting up than lying down. Control was important. It was still dark. I turned on the light . . . four in the morning.

My wife and I were a thousand miles from home. We had left the day before to participate in a missions conference

in Illinois, at one of our former churches. The days were crammed full—four days of conference activities and every meal scheduled with close friends and financial supporters. We were eagerly looking forward to reconnecting with many of the special people in our lives. And yet here I was, scared like I had never been in my life.

Elbows on my knees, head in my hands, I sat fighting for control. Tears were rolling down my checks. Then it happened: Overwhelming feelings of dread I never knew existed washed over me in debilitating waves, each one filling me with greater fear and confusion.

In a few hours the Sunday morning I had been anticipating would dawn—a day filled with magnificent worship and overflowing with dear friends. It was supposed to be a good day. Now all that was to be good in the coming day morphed into fear-filled encounters. The thought of being with people was more than I could handle. I couldn't do it.

By this time Sue was awake and aware that something was wrong. The only thing I could say was, "I can't. I can't do it." This became my recurring reply for the next ten months.

Sue went to church by herself that morning and canceled all our appointments for the day. I stayed behind to rebuild my reserves so I could go to the evening service. People were expecting my presence there; I was a long-time missionary of the church, a vice president of The Navigators with responsibility for our student ministries across the country. I needed to show up. A day by myself should replenish whatever it was that had drained out of me.

Yet as we left for the evening service, I was filled with anxiety and a sense that being in a friend-filled public was beyond my ability. Yet it seemed reasonable I could dredge up enough adrenaline and willpower to do it. There had always been reserves to draw on. And after all, I was a leader and *ought* to be there. And so we went.

For a small wall of protection, I sat with Sue in the very last row in one of my favorite sanctuaries—one filled with wonderful memories. But tonight, the organ I loved to listen to was harsh and way too loud. The congregational singing sounded like the raucous crowd at a hockey game. It was awful. The conference speaker seemed to be constantly yelling at me in the back row. After the service, friends surrounded us, and with each handshake and hug I felt something draining out of me. I returned to our hosts' home worse than when I had left, emptier than had I ever felt in my life. My reserves that had always been there were gone. At least tonight I had lived up to people's expectations and performed like a leader . . . or so I thought. Each next event at the conference seemed more demanding than I could handle. For four days I would hide during the day from the endless encounters that would take more than I had to give, then show up in the evening with a smile and try to give what I didn't have.

Sue and I knew something was very wrong. I called home to my doctor, a wonderful Christian brother, and shared what I was experiencing—the feelings of fear and anxiety, the dread of meeting with people and of being in public, the panic attacks. He assured me that I was not going to die. I

needed to hear that; I was beginning to wonder. He asked me to journal my feelings. This would be new for me, and yet I felt it would be easy—my feelings overwhelmed me. I couldn't miss them.

After the conference we drove to St. Louis to visit our son Jeff, who was in seminary. It was more than I could handle. I needed to hide and be alone. I climbed into bed in the early afternoon. I couldn't do this.

The next day Sue and I were hosting a reception for a significant number of seminarians with backgrounds in The Navigators. All were dear friends and co-laborers. We wanted to communicate our love and affirm their calling to be pastors. The reception was both wonderful and horribly hard. It was good to affirm their callings. It was good to bless them. But with every blessing I was giving what I did not have. "It is one thing to be empty," Macrina Wiederkehr writes, "but when you are asked to feed someone out of your emptiness it can be terrifying."¹

The thought of traveling home the next day filled me with fear. Returning the rental car, maneuvering through a large congested airport, cramming my 6'2" frame into a cramped airplane filled with people sitting way too close to me—I wasn't sure I could do it. Knowing I was returning to the solitude and safety of our home in the Colorado forest, however, infused me with enough tooth-clenching determination to press through the anxiety.

Home. A visit to the doctor to share my journal, a little rest after an unusually busy summer and fall, and all should

be well. But it wasn't. I got worse—much worse. The panic attacks continued. They seemed like heart attacks. Fear and anxiety were my constant companions. All my thoughts became dark and negative. Every one. I knew I was going to die. I knew I had a brain tumor. I knew I had cancer. And heart trouble. The sense of impending doom was inescapable.

Sue is an extrovert and has a huge circle of friends that often call on the phone. I couldn't deal with it. It was like they were all in our house and crushing in on me. There was no way I could dredge up the courage or resources to talk on the phone. If a visitor came to our door, I hid in the bedroom. It was all way too much.

I couldn't watch TV. A video was unthinkable, requiring emotional responses I did not have. I couldn't read; the newspaper was far too stressful, and even my favorite Louis L'Amour cowboy novels were too much. The Bible? No way.

Driving was out. Being in public was out. Church was out. Ministry was out. It seemed as if all of life was out. "I can't" was my response to everything. I had a total inability to tolerate real or anticipated stress, no energy to respond to any demand. My days consisted of sitting in my favorite chair and trying to survive. The darkness was impenetrable. What was happening to me?

More trips to the doctor. Anti-depressants. Sick leave. Isolation.

After several months, the darkness slowly began to lift and there were minutes of light, of positive thoughts. Maybe there were some good things in the future? Another month

passed, and the feelings of dread, fear and anxiety continued to lessen. The old me seemed to be returning in timed increments.

I was still clueless, however, as to what had hurled me into the months of darkness. Well-meaning friends had plenty of ideas. Lack of whole grain. The wrong vitamins. No discipline. Somehow, deep in my spirit I sensed the root was buried in something more serious. Something was there. The Spirit of God was beginning to gently nudge me to take a look.

There was no question I had a serious case of depression. The genetic tendencies are in my family. Yet could this also be a spiritual crisis? Could it be what Saint John of the Cross described in the sixteenth century as a “dark night of the soul”? He described an extended time in which all the spiritual disciplines lose their appeal, a feeling of abandonment by God. In reality, God is busy working deep in the soul. It is a time of God’s loving discipline, of healing what is lame “so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed” (Hebrews 12:13). Was something lame and deformed in my life?

With periods of normalcy returning and the encouragement of The Navigators’ US president, I cranked up the courage to have dinner with a counselor. After I had told him my story, he invited Sue and me to spend a day with him and his wife.

Little did we know that this time with Bill and his wife, Grace, was to be the beginning of the most life-changing

relationship we have ever had. They were living a truth that we both desperately needed. They understood the grace of God. They understood the gospel. The environment Bill and Grace created for us in their home was incredibly safe. They listened and asked some gentle questions. Bill's comments were few, but he started wondering with me if there wasn't something out of whack in my relationships that had finally sent me into burnout. He closed our time with a suggestion that would change our lives forever: he proposed that we meet with a trusted friend of his for a counseling intensive.

The Missed Warning Signs

Sue and I had always been leery of counselors; we thought they were only for problem people. But I was willing to do anything to avoid a repeat of what I had just been through. Anything—even going to a counselor. I was an accomplished leader of a national ministry; why was I suddenly so incapable of facing the activities of everyday life?

I had joined the national leadership team of The Navigators a couple of years previous to my burnout and depression. I immediately volunteered to direct our national staff conference, a once-every-four-years event for all our American staff. I had experience directing large conferences, so it was natural for me. The bigger the event, the more I loved it. Cameras, lights, hotels, contracts, staging, speakers, bands—I got to orchestrate and control it all.

Two years of hard work culminated in four energy- and Spirit-filled days in Orlando, Florida—the fun capital of

America. My adrenaline was surging. I was on top of my game, or so I thought. I was completely unaware of the energy I had expended trying to please twelve hundred Navigators staff. It seemed like they all had opinions of how the conference should or should not be run. My reputation was at stake—twelve hundred times over!

Sue and I knew we would be tired after the conference, so we spent the following week vacationing. I was exhausted, but sleep was fitful and shallow. Strange. While driving back to Colorado my mind would jump ahead to student ministry activities scheduled in the next few weeks, and I found myself not wanting to participate. Strange again—I normally loved student ministry events.

After a few days at home I attended a small retreat with our collegiate ministry leaders. Four days with some of my closest staff friends, and yet I did not want to go and didn't know why. Strange.

It got stranger. The first night of the retreat I woke with a jolt at 3:00 a.m. filled with anxious energy—enough to light up half the state. It happened again the next night, and the next, and the next.

After I returned home my disruptive sleep worsened, along with other vague symptoms. We thought I must be more exhausted than we realized. We canceled upcoming ministry trips and substituted a week in the mountains. There was only one trip we did not cancel: the missions conference at our former church. We figured that after a week in the mountains, we should be ready for normal life again.

But there was one problem we were not yet aware of: The issues creating these symptoms were not commitments on my calendar, they were in *me*.

Inability to rest, lack of desire, disrupted sleep, worry, fear—these were like tremors before a big earthquake.

Two Intensive Weeks

After the missions conference and the dark times that followed, after my ability to engage with people gradually returned, we headed to Denver for the “counseling intensive”—whatever that was. How long it would last was uncertain: maybe one week, maybe two weeks, maybe three.

Our counselor was a gifted, godly, grace-filled man. Sue and I met with him every morning for three hours. In the afternoon there were books to read, videos to watch, and other assignments. That was our routine for two weeks.

We quickly learned why it’s called an “intensive.” Those two weeks were filled with discovery, both incredibly good and horribly bad. It was beautiful; it was ugly. It was deep. It was internal—inside-out kind of stuff. Those two weeks jump-started transformation in our lives. They were the first steps of a long journey of learning to live by the gospel of grace and not our performance.

The first ugly reality that was unearthed was a hurtful and painful lie that had been planted deep within me as a young child and adolescent: the lie that I had less worth and value than everyone else. We began to discover how I subconsciously lived to prove to myself and to others that the lie

was not true. But my efforts to disprove the lie did not and could not work. All they did was exhaust me.

The Lie Planted

During high school and college my mom entrusted me with some carefully guarded stories and memories from her growing-up years during the Great Depression. They were not pleasant. As with so many of that generation who lived through the Great Depression, there was deep wounding and scarring. She and her younger brother had been physically abused by her father. As punishment for some infraction he would turn on the gas stove and press their hands against the burner. When she was sixteen, she and her brother ran away from home. To get by she worked as a maid and house cleaner. She cut up cereal boxes to put in her shoes to patch the holes in the soles. Clothes were scarce. So was food.

The sad thing about unhealed wounds and unresolved issues is that we never keep them to ourselves. We may think we do, but we don't. Everyone sees them; they affect everyone around us. And so our unresolved issues pass from generation to generation, mutating as they go. "If we don't learn to transform the pain," Richard Rohr warns, "we'll transfer it."²

When I was a preschooler, Mom would take me on the bus to the ghetto. We would spend the morning going from rummage sale to rummage sale, buying clothes for a nickel, or a dime, or a quarter. These rummage sales were often sponsored by churches. I can still see them in my mind: old, narrow ghetto stores with dirty windows and tin ceiling squares

half falling down from their high perch, brick walls and bare light bulbs illuminating old church tables piled high with wrinkled old clothes that were never folded, never stacked, just heaped in piles. I hated those rummage sale mornings. Part of my dislike was the boredom of a young boy. But there was more—something that did not feel good about buying used clothes others didn't want.

At the same time, my dad provided well for the family. In a few years we would move to a new home and add an in-ground swimming pool.

In my high-school years clothes were important. They were key to being a part of the “in-crowd.” But when I would ask Mom for a particular shirt or jacket or sweater the answer was always “No.” The “in” clothes were never on the sale table. I can't remember ever having clothes I really wanted. What were the “in” students thinking of me?

Then I went to college. Being a typical college freshman, I always had more important things to attend to than laundry—things like tennis, fraternity rush, panty raids. One fall morning I dragged myself out of bed, showered, and opened my closet to get a clean shirt. There was only one left: my one and only dress shirt. No problem. I was a chemistry major and intended to spend the day in the lab, so I put on my dress shirt, threw my lab coat on over it, and headed for the chemistry building. That night I returned to my dorm room, took off my well stained and acid-eaten lab coat, and noticed a round, crusty brown spot on my dress shirt. I poked it with my finger, and the cloth disintegrated.

My one dress shirt now sported a hole the size of a quarter. Sulfuric acid will do it every time.

To this day I vividly remember going to the JC Penney store in downtown Holland, Michigan, to buy a new dress shirt. One I liked. One I wanted. One that was “in” and would earn my place in the “in” crowd. But I found myself paralyzed in front of the shirt counter, with questions flooding my mind. What would my parents say when I took it home for Christmas? Was I worth having a shirt I liked? Was I worth such an “expensive” shirt?

What was going on in me? Why the paralysis? I was immobilized because I was struggling with a lie. John 8:44 warns us we have an enemy—“the father of lies.” His goal is to plant untruths in our lives, and he uses the events of life, the unresolved issues of those around us, the sins of others against us, and our own sins to deposit them in us.

The used and unwanted clothes gave the enemy of my soul the opportunity to whisper in my ear: “Bill, you’re only worth five-cent shirts and marked-down sale clothes that no one else wants. You are not worth anything nice. You do not have much value.” And so a lie was planted—a lie that would shape how I lived for the next thirty or forty years. It controlled me until it exhausted me, and I woke up in the middle of the night with no reserves left to keep disproving the lie.

We all have one, two, maybe three core lies that the enemy has planted in us. Do you know yours? They are lies about who we are, about our worth, about our identity.

They tell us we are ugly, unwanted, unlovable, broken, dirty. On and on the list goes. What they tell us about ourselves is so painful and embarrassing that we become addicted to hiding, and to proving to ourselves and others that what they say is not true. They are lies that contradict the gospel and what God says about us: that we are worth the death of His son, and that He has created in us a new identity that is good and beautiful—an identity that does not need to be hidden.

Even when we are working hard at following Christ, how we live affirms the lie and denies the gospel. The gospel is theory but not reality for us. So at some point there is no option left but to wonder if the gospel message of being a new creation is really true. After all, the me I live with every day does not seem new or beautiful; it feels ugly, second class, and embarrassing, and it needs to be hidden.

Into the Captivity of Hiding

As a young adolescent, I found the lie of having no worth incredibly painful. I needed a plan to prove it was not true. To eliminate the hurt. Or if the lie was true, at least I needed to fool people. This was going to take some work—a lot of never-ending work, work that would eventually take everything I had and then demand still more.

In their book *The Sacred Romance*, John Eldredge and Brent Curtis write, “We come into the world longing to be special to someone.”³ But it’s hard to be special when you know you are flawed. Who would want to be around

someone who is defective? “If I am not pursued, it must be because there is something wrong with me, something dark and twisted inside.”⁴ They go on to identify a core anxiety: “We long to be known and we fear it like nothing else. Most people live with a subtle dread that one day they will be discovered for what they really are and the world will be appalled.”⁵

I desperately needed a plan to hide my worthlessness. I needed to hide it from myself to anesthetize the pain; I needed to hide it from others so they would believe I had some value. The strategy that subtly took shape was that I would *figure out everyone’s expectations of me*, and I would *meet and surpass every one*. I would be everything people wanted and approved of.

Little did I know it would lead me straight into captivity, the captivity of being a people-pleaser.

Performance expectations were suddenly everywhere. There were acceptable grades in school. There were acceptable majors in college. Excellence was always the standard. Every swing needed to be a home run.

After I joined the staff of The Navigators, I felt the added pressure of ministry expectations. How large and fruitful did our campus ministry have to be so that I would be accepted and valued? It probably needed to be bigger, and I probably needed to work harder.

As I moved into leadership roles the number of people I had to please increased exponentially. The higher the leadership positions, the more crushing the expectations. Were my

decisions pleasing those I led? Was I heading in the direction *they* would head? Was I friendly enough? Too forceful? What in the world were their expectations? Why couldn't they be easier to figure out?

Then there were our financial supporters to please. How would they react to my buying a car? New or used? Would a Toyota be extravagant? What size house is acceptable? Could I buy a table saw? Is a vacation okay or does it communicate that I am lazy and not working very hard? One week? Two weeks? Where's the line?

These questions exposed my performance addiction. Whenever we hide what we consider to be wrong and worthless in us, we are in captivity. Always. And it's a captivity we cannot escape by working harder to hide our flaws. We are held captive to what we sense are the expectations, standards, and values of others. (I use the word *sense* very deliberately as I discovered later that what I sensed and what was reality were two different things.) Curtis and Eldredge describe this as "living out of a script that someone else has written for us."⁶ My problem was that I wasn't held captive by just one person's script; I was held captive by *hundreds* of scripts. I was trying hard to be what I thought I was not.

But captivity runs deeper than being held hostage by other people's scripts. We are also captive to lies that guide our behavior. Lies that determine our relationships, shape our decisions, and form our reactions. These lies hold us tight. No matter how hard we work at proving that the lies are not true, we stay stuck in their grasp.

To put it bluntly, when we allow our lives to be shaped by lies rather than the truth, we are in the captivity of sin. Sin is our master. We are its slave.

Whatever we hide is never healed. Brennan Manning writes, “If we conceal our wounds out of fear and shame, our inner darkness can neither be illuminated nor become a light for others.”⁷

And as long as I try to fool others by my behavior so I can hide the “real ugly and worthless” me, I will always be a lonely and unloved person. All another person can love is my mask, my performance. If they begin to see behind the mask, I drive them back by getting angry, by disappointing them, maybe by pointing out the speck in their eye (Matthew 7:3-5). My lie tells me that if they get close enough to see the real me, they will reject me.

Now I am not only unloved and lonely, unable to develop close and intimate relationships, but fear becomes my daily companion—in all my relationships and in all my undertakings. I live in dread of people discovering the real me. What if my friends get too close? What if I blow it in school or miss a quota at work? What if people see I am really a failure? What if . . . ? What if . . . ? What if . . . ?

I was captive to my perception of other’s expectations. I was incarcerated in the grip of sin by living out of untruth. In my hiding I was confined to a place where I could not heal. I was enslaved to being unloved and lonely.

Discovering the destructive impacts of my defining lie was very painful. At the same time, thanks to the insights I

was gaining through the counseling process, I was discovering a longing to be free. And God was beginning to break through with glimpses of how the gospel had *already* set me free.

This is the message of the rest of the book. But first a little more story.

