

"Powerful. Beautiful. Compelling!"
STASI ELDREDGE, *New York Times* bestselling author

CHOOSE

+

CHOOSE AGAIN



THE BRAVE ACT OF RETURNING TO GOD'S LOVE
J. KEVIN BUTCHER

Powerful. Beautiful. Compelling! I'm so thankful that Kevin wrote this book. Read it too. It will help you to choose and to offer the love of God.

STASI ELDREDGE

Author of *Captivating* and *Becoming Myself*

In *Choose and Choose Again*, Kevin Butcher paints moving portraits of brokenness and healing. Kevin draws upon his own journey from despair to hope and faithfully recounts how the love of God has resurrected others. *Choose and Choose Again* is about life-and-death struggle to truly know that we are loved. Savor these stories, and taste of the deep love the Father has for you.

JEFF MANION

Senior pastor at Ada Bible Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and author of *The Land Between* and *Satisfied*

This book is beautiful. A truly authentic and powerful revelation of the deepest hunger of our heart met by the strongest force in the universe—love. May you read it and weep, and then have the courage to choose it for yourself.

DANIELLE STRICKLAND

Speaker, advocate, and author

The book you hold in your hands is dangerous. It is dangerous because it passionately and convincingly speaks to God's love for his children—for you! First it strips you down to your own emptiness, desire for love, and the false

beliefs that you are not worthy. Then it slowly builds you back up with the deep, abiding sense of the relentless and gracious love of God. *Choose and Choose Again* is a rare book that perfectly captures the character and voice of its author and forces you to grapple with stories—Kevin’s, those he writes about, and your own. This is one of the best and most transformative books on the love of God I know about.

KEN WYTSMA

Lead pastor at Antioch in Bend, Oregon, and author of *The Grand Paradox: The Messiness of Life, the Mystery of God and the Necessity of Faith*

One of the best life-changing books I’ve read in a while. In *Choose and Choose Again*, J. Kevin Butcher writes with vulnerability and the raw emotion of one on the brink of suicide until he finds healing in the power of God’s love. His story, along with others, resonates with our greatest hurt and deepest need—to know we matter. I wept over my own wounds and rejoiced in the restorative power of God’s sincere love for me. I’m convinced you will experience the same.

MICCA CAMPBELL

Speaker and author of *An Untroubled Heart: Finding a Faith That Is Stronger Than All My Fears*

Kevin Butcher has pulled together a collection of beautiful stories—including his own—that powerfully reminds us of the Father’s passionate, persistent love for us. It’s clear that

Kevin, as a faithful pastor, has a unique capacity to serve as a conduit for that love in a way that transforms the most unexpected lives. Be blessed and encouraged by God's work in and through him!

DR. JOSEPH M. STOWELL

President of Cornerstone University in Grand Rapids, Michigan

Wow! I felt enlightened, heartbroken, empowered, and overjoyed as I read chapter after chapter about the love of the Father meeting broken and wounded people. Real talk for real people seeking real help for real problems from a real Father! Our choice to choose the Father's unconditional, radical love and live it out in the community of faith takes courage, but it will help us live the life he has designed for us. Read and see what a difference his love makes in the lives of everyday, ordinary, struggling, and hurting people who choose to accept his love.

REV. LAWRENCE C. GLASS, JR.

President of the Council of Baptist Pastors of Detroit, Michigan

Millions all over the world long to experience the authentic love described in *Choose and Choose Again*. Let these remarkable stories convince you that God has also made it possible for you to choose this incredible life.

DR. BRUCE McNICOL

President of Trueface and bestselling coauthor of *The Cure* and *The Cure & Parents*

Not since Manning's *The Ragamuffin Gospel* have I read paragraphs that so connect me to the Father's love and grace. Don't think of *Choose and Choose Again* as a book. Think of it as God whispering comfort and love into your heart when what you have done or what has been done against you wakes you up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat of fear and doubt.

ED UNDERWOOD, THM, DD

Pastor at Church of the Open Door and author of *When God Breaks Your Heart*, *Reborn to Be Wild*, and *The Trail*

I could not put down this book! Why? It is biblical, honest, riveting, heart-rending, and hopeful. As I read the stories in *Choose and Choose Again*, I cried, I laughed, I prayed, and I healed. Kevin has been my close friend for decades, and I know firsthand that he has tasted the love of the Father deeply and very personally, and it has healed him . . . and it will heal you! I'll be recommending this book to my church family because I love them.

THE REVEREND CARLTON P. HARRIS, TH.M.

CHOOSE + CHOOSE AGAIN

CHOOSE

+

CHOOSE AGAIN

THE BRAVE ACT OF RETURNING TO GOD'S LOVE
J. KEVIN BUTCHER

NAVPRESS 

*A NavPress resource published in alliance
with Tynedale House Publishers, Inc.*



NavPress is the publishing ministry of The Navigators, an international Christian organization and leader in personal spiritual development. NavPress is committed to helping people grow spiritually and enjoy lives of meaning and hope through personal and group resources that are biblically rooted, culturally relevant, and highly practical.

For more information, visit www.NavPress.com.

Choose and Choose Again: The Brave Act of Returning to God's Love

Copyright © 2016 by J. Kevin Butcher. All rights reserved.

A NavPress resource published in alliance with Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

NAV PRESS and the NAV PRESS logo are registered trademarks of NavPress, The Navigators, Colorado Springs, CO. TYNDALE is a registered trademark of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc. Absence of ® in connection with marks of NavPress or other parties does not indicate an absence of registration of those marks.

The Team:

Don Pape, Publisher

Caitlyn Carlson, Acquisitions Editor, Development Editor

Alyssa Force, Designer

Cover photograph copyright © Paul McGee/Getty Images. All rights reserved.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are from the Holy Bible, *New International Version*,[®] *NIV*.[®] Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.[®] Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide. Scripture quotations marked ESV are taken from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*[®] (ESV[®]), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. ESV[®] Text Edition: 2011. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Scripture quotations marked NLT are taken from the *Holy Bible, New Living Translation*, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved. Scripture quotations marked NASB are taken from the *New American Standard Bible*,[®] copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. Scripture quotations marked NKJV are taken from the *New King James Version*,[®] copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Scripture quotations marked BLB are taken from *The Holy Bible, Berean Literal Bible*. Copyright © 2016 by Bible Hub. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide. Scripture quotations marked TLB are taken from *The Living Bible*, copyright © 1971 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, IL 60188. All rights reserved. Scripture quotations marked HCSB are taken from the *Holman Christian Standard Bible*,[®] copyright © 1999, 2000, 2002, 2003, 2009 by Holman Bible Publishers. Used by permission. Holman Christian Standard Bible[®], Holman CSB[®], and HCSB[®] are federally registered trademarks of Holman Bible Publishers. Scripture quotations marked WEB are taken from the *World English Bible*, public domain. Scripture quotations marked NET are taken from the *NET Bible*,[®] copyright © 1996-2006 by Biblical Studies Press, L.L.C. <http://netbible.com> All rights reserved. Scripture quotations marked JUB (or JBS) are taken from the *Jubilee Bible (or Biblia del Jubileo)*, copyright © 2000, 2001, 2010, 2013 by Life Sentence Publishing, Inc. Used by permission of Life Sentence Publishing, Inc., Abbotsford, Wisconsin. All rights reserved.

Some of the anecdotal illustrations in this book are true to life and are included with the permission of the persons involved. Some names have been changed to protect privacy. All other illustrations are composites of real situations, and any resemblance to people living or dead is purely coincidental.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Butcher, J. Kevin, author.

Title: Choose and choose again : the brave act of returning to God's love /

J. Kevin Butcher.

Description: Colorado Springs : NavPress, 2016.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016015615 (print) | LCCN 2016030733 (ebook) | ISBN 9781631465246 | ISBN 9781631465277 (Apple) | ISBN 9781631465253 (E-Pub) |

ISBN 9781631465260 (Kindle)

Subjects: LCSH: God (Christianity)—Love.

Classification: LCC BT140 .B88 2016 (print) | LCC BT140 (ebook) | DDC 248.4—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016015615>

ISBN 978-1-63146-524-6

Printed in the United States of America

22	21	20	19	18	17	16
7	6	5	4	3	2	1

Prologue

DEATH WITHOUT LOVE

Late have I loved you . . . In my unlovely state, I plunged
into those lovely created things which you made. You were
with me, and I was not with you . . . You touched me, and
I am set on fire to attain the peace which is yours.

ST. AUGUSTINE, *Confessions*

I still haven't found
What I'm looking for.
U2, *The Joshua Tree*

I WANTED TO DIE.

Driving down I-94 that night on the east side of metro Detroit, I was suddenly overwhelmed by the impulse to veer into the cement embankment of the Allard overpass to silence the screaming emptiness in my spirit. There had been an agonizingly vacant cavern in my soul for thirty-five years, but I didn't have a clue how to make the pain go away.

It sure wasn't for lack of trying. Achievement was my drug of choice for almost four decades. Athletically I was moderately gifted but worked really hard to make up in effort what I lacked in raw talent. When I finally received notice I had been named a 1975 NAIA Division III Football All-American, the

emptiness in my gut was bathed in a morphine-like hit of achievement and approval. But thirty seconds later, the pain started screaming again.

It was the same story with academics. I'm certainly no genius, but I labored intensely and excelled at every level from grade school through a rigorous four-year master's degree in theology at Dallas Theological Seminary. Co-receiving the Charles A. Nash Historical Theology award in front of a gallery of my fellow fourth-year DTS students gave me a euphoric high—until it didn't.

And spiritually? Overachieving rule-keeper, that was me. Growing up, I was a Bible-reader, verse-memorizer, parent-obeyer, youth-group leader, and no-booze-sex-or-drugs, six-times-a-week church-attender. Look, I'm not saying those are bad things. But this rule-keeping was my identity—and it never, ever quieted the howling emptiness in my spirit. My Christianity was always about performance. *Hey, I'm the chaplain of my college class, I speak to church youth groups about Jesus, and do you know I've led dozens to believe in him?* And later, *I'm a pastor of a church—did you like the sermon I preached last week? I'm dying for someone to tell me that I matter, that I'm enough.* But none of the performances, sermons, articles, or counseling sessions *were* enough to fill the inner emptiness for more than a moment.

So now I found myself with what looked like the perfect life—married to the woman of my dreams, father to three beautiful daughters, pastoring a historic church that was coming back to life, watching people trust in Christ,

landing speaking engagements and approval for my teaching and leadership and courage . . .

And I still just wanted to die.

I'd love to say I heard a voice, saw a vision, or had some kind of supernatural impression of God's great plans for me to be healed and save the world. But I'm still not entirely sure why I didn't jerk the wheel of my car toward the concrete barrier that promised to stop the weeping in my tortured, empty spiritual heart. All I remember is the grace of God pressing the faces of my three little girls—Andrea, Leigh Anne, and Caroline—into my suicidal consciousness. I saw them looking at me, depending on me, loving me—often despite myself. And I couldn't bear the thought of those three precious lives dealing with the legacy of a dad who wouldn't face his pain and chose to pass it on to them instead.

So, shocked and confused, I limped to the next exit and found my way home to my family. But that night, like the prodigal son in Luke 15, I hit bottom. After a long, long journey in my particular version of the "far country"—through one terrifying "I don't want to live anymore" moment of grace—I finally came to my senses. Don't get me wrong. There was no immediate epiphany of deep theological truth or insight. But that night, I came face-to-face with a reality that had taken me years to confront: my own inner emptiness and my absolute inability to fill it. I couldn't live with that emptiness any longer. If I didn't find a way to be whole, to be secure, to be at peace, I was already dead.

I first believed in Jesus when I was five years old, sitting

in a small church in northern Indiana one winter evening as the pastor told us about the One who loved us enough to die in our place. While most kids my age were ripping the pages out of the hymnbook, I actually heard the guy and got it and believed. From that moment on, I had a relationship with God. I was forgiven. To use the evangelical buzzword—but also a favorite word of Paul’s—I was saved. But in terms of a relationship, that was as far as it had ever gone. Before now.

After that night on the freeway, in those few days of post-trauma clarity, I asked God to show me the way, to show me what to do or what not to do to fill up the emptiness inside.

What I remember next is finding myself with a book in my hands—Brennan Manning’s *The Ragamuffin Gospel*—and then reading and sobbing from a place deep within. It was suddenly so clear: The emptiness in my spirit was meant to be filled with the personal, unconditional, experiential, deep and long, wide and high love of Jesus Christ. It was this love, *his* love, that I had always known about in my head but had never, ever experienced in my life or heart or emotions or spirit. I had preached about this love to thousands of people, all the while having no idea that he really, personally loved me. I had for years and years been a travel agent “handing out brochures to places [I had] never visited.”¹ The howling agony that launched me into a thirty-year addiction to achievement, approval, and applause—the pain that almost ripped my life from my wife and girls on an urban freeway—was Augustine’s God-shaped vacuum. My spirit simply longed to

hear my heavenly Father say, “I love you, son. I truly, freely, unconditionally, and forever just . . . love . . . you.”

So I tried something novel. I asked the God who said that he loved me to show me what was going on. And then I asked him, “Please, I beg you, show me the way.”

That’s how my journey began—a journey to wholeness, fullness, and freedom, to knowing the love of Christ that fills us with all the fullness of God (Ephesians 3:17-19).

+ + +

Most—and I really mean most—of the believers I have met and served over the last twenty years in Africa, Europe, and South America; in the suburbs, cities, and rural areas of the United States; and in the rough urban neighborhood of Detroit where I pastor now are filled with this same kind of emptiness. It’s not about color or ethnicity or money or poverty or gender or age or education or denomination. It’s about the human soul. God longs to fill us with his love, but the enemy wants to convince us that we can be filled with anything and everything else.

In my experience, the biggest issue in the body of Christ today is not that believers don’t love God—but that we aren’t really sure he loves us. And if Jesus’ words in John 13 are true, then knowing and experiencing this love in the depths of our spirit is the most important reality of all.

Do you remember some of his last words to his core group of eleven followers just before he died? “A new commandment I give you, that you love one another, *as I have loved*

you. Because if you love one another, all will know that you are my followers” (John 13:34-35, author’s paraphrase). This isn’t plan B or a sidebar quest of the Christian experience. If we don’t first take his love into our own hearts, then we have no love to give. And the world doesn’t see him. Or believe in him. Or know him. If I understand Jesus correctly, knowing the love of Christ is everything. And you know what the Greek word for “everything” means? Yeah—everything.

If love is the core of God’s character and the very heart of his relationship with us, we shouldn’t be surprised to find his love *everywhere* in the biblical story. God didn’t just talk about his love in Deuteronomy and leave it at that. He came back in Ruth with the story of his redemptive love through Boaz and once again in the Song of Solomon with epic poetry about his love. In Hosea we read the story of God’s love for us even when we sleep around on him, and we see in Isaiah that God tattoos our names on the palms of his hands. Over and over in all four gospels Jesus loves us through each human encounter, and in Romans we read that “God commends his own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8, WEB). Later in the same letter, Paul passionately reminds us to call God “Abba” (8:15), the cry of a child for their beloved Father, and says that “nothing can ever separate us from his love” (8:38, TLB). Paul’s still not done—he comes back with powerful doses of God’s love in Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians. And then Peter comforts us with the bottom-line truth that “love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8, NLT).

Apparently God thought we couldn't read it enough, hear it enough, discuss it enough, or experience it enough. In fact, John tells us in his first letter, "God *is* love" (1 John 4:8, emphasis added). If we don't get the truth about his love for us, not just in our heads but deep down in our spirits, then nothing else really matters. With his love, we truly live. Without the experience of his love, we're empty—and have already begun to die.

Listen, my story isn't unique. It's the human story. We're all born with a deadly emptiness in our spirits that cries out to be filled with the Father's love. Perhaps you've come face-to-face with this emptiness in your own heart. Don't despair. Because I promise, God is pursuing *you* and calling out to *you* with his love. But if you're in that place where you can't quite yet hear his voice—well, this book is full of real, raw stories of other painfully empty sons and daughters who are finally experiencing a grace that is now bringing them home to his healing love. I'm praying you will let these brothers and sisters give you hope that *you* don't need to live empty anymore, that his love for *you* is very real and very near. That you will let their stories give you courage to bravely choose—and choose again—to allow his love to bring *you* home.

Chapter 1

THE POWER OF LOVE

Sometimes I am frightened
But I'm ready to learn 'bout the power of love.
JENNIFER RUSH, "THE POWER OF LOVE"

Love covers a multitude of sins.
PETER, I PETER 4:8, NLT

"WILL YOU GO SEE HIM?"

Christine came up to me after church, fidgeting nervously. *Him* was her ex-husband, Dan Schoenfeld—#227495 in the Macomb County Jail.

"Of course," I said, not really sure what I was getting myself into. I was still a rookie when it came to experiencing the love of God in my own wounded heart. Did I have what it takes to love another profoundly broken brother—like Dan?

A few days later I sat down across from an angry, scary, tattooed, muscled, 225-pound inmate whose glare shouted, *You're wasting my time, you sissy Bible thumper. I've got no use*

for your religion or your god. His hands and feet were chained, but it didn't matter. My heart was in my throat, and my gut was churning. This wasn't going to go well.

There was good reason for all the hate I was feeling in the room. As a child, Dan was consistently and brutally beaten by his alcoholic father. Dan's dad also beat his mom, and Dan constantly got in between her and his father, thinking that if he wasn't there to defend her, she was going to die. At the age of eight, Dan started shoplifting and then breaking into homes and stealing whatever he could get his hands on. He loved the thrill of getting away with petty crimes but also secretly hoped that he would get caught. Maybe then his dad would start paying attention to him in some kind of positive way.

Later Dan began partying, drinking, and drugging—and after a failed first marriage where his wife cheated on him with his best friend, he started shooting heroin to try to numb the pain. His depression, anger, and emptiness increased until one day he tried to kill himself with that same mind-numbing heroin—but he woke up eight hours after tying off his arm and injecting the poison, his body literally blue. He didn't care about anyone or anything because in his mind, no one, including God, cared about him.

At the end of his second failed marriage, this time to Christine, Dan's violence escalated. He silently broke into a neighbor's home, threatened a woman with a broken broomstick handle that he used to simulate a gun, and raped her. And then he ran. He lived a couple of more tortured years in

Florida, angry and paranoid, always looking over his shoulder, until the system finally caught up with him and brought him back to Michigan to face the rape charge.

Sitting across from him at a bolted-down prison table, I opened the Bible—to John’s gospel, I think—and began to speak a little of the good news of Jesus. Dan didn’t say a word. He just stared at me. He wasn’t having any of it. After about ten minutes, I knew the visit was a failure.

Closing the Bible, I began to silently ask God, *What now, Father? What do you want me to do?* And then it happened. As I looked down at the prison-gray tabletop, my heart began to break for the broken human being sitting across from me. As tears came to my eyes, ran down my nose, and hit the gray surface, I began to love this brother who obviously hated me. Almost without thinking, I walked around the table, threw my arms around Dan’s neck, whispered in his ear that I loved him, kissed him on the cheek, and asked him if I could come back.

“Yeah,” he said. “Come back if you want.” He told me later that in the moment he wasn’t sure why he responded the way he did.

As I walked out of the jail, I mentally beat the heck out of myself. *Why did you kiss him? And fine, tell him that you love him in the name of God or Jesus or the church or whatever, but did you need to whisper it IN HIS EAR?* I had acted like a fool in front of a rock-hard felon who obviously needed something I didn’t have to give.

Little did I know that when Dan went back to his cube that day, his knees buckled like a prize fighter who had taken

one too many blows to the head. His heart and spirit were rocked by the raw power of the love of God. He said to himself, “What just happened to me? No one has ever hugged me like that. No man has ever kissed me and told me he loves me. And no one has ever cried over me. Not over someone like me. Please, God, if there is a God, I’ve got to have more of what just happened in that room.” And so began Dan’s journey to the arms of the Father.

Eight years later, at the Lakeland Correctional Facility in Coldwater, Michigan, almost a decade into a fourteen- to forty-two-year prison sentence for rape, Dan Schoenfeld—a man so wounded and broken that he hated the world and would just as soon beat you as he would speak with you—bowed his heart to the love of God and put his trust in Jesus.

What melted the steel in his soul? What began to heal the wound? What overcame the abuse and the rage-filled defense and the pain? The power of the love of a God who reveals himself in Jesus Christ. Just as one of Jesus’ main followers Peter once said—this love “covers a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8, NLT). Peter should know. He was the guy who denied he even knew Jesus, right when Jesus needed him most. And a few weeks later, Jesus powerfully loved Peter back to life—because that’s what the love of Jesus always does.

I didn’t plan to weep over Dan. The love of God compelled me to beyond reason. I was barely in the beginning stages of realizing God’s love for me personally, and yet that same love was already pumping through my slowly healing heart into the heart and life of another of God’s wounded sons.

That same love followed Dan through all eighteen years in the Michigan correctional system. It began to break him at Jackson—one of the most dangerous prisons in the Midwest—where in solitary confinement Dan looked in the mirror and with tears running down his face cried out in brokenness, “My God, this is all my own doing. What have I become?” It kept him safe in the institutional hell of men fighting men with death-dealing weapons made out of everything and anything. It protected him from gang involvement and even from violently acting out when he was threatened, accosted, or violated. In almost two decades in the system, Dan didn’t catch one major ticket. Not even one. That’s a miracle. That’s the power of the love of God.

I watched the love of the Father heal the rage and hate and damage of Dan’s lost childhood. He clung to that love when he was sent back into the system five times after first being eligible for parole. The Father’s love kept us walking together all eighteen years of his sentence, through letters, visits, and phone calls—and even my little girls sending pictures they had drawn of Christmas trees, puppy dogs, and birthday cakes to, yeah, a violent sex offender. That love led him to Jesus in 1999 and finally released him from prison almost ten years later.

I will never, ever forget the day Dan first shared his story with Hope Community Church of Detroit, the group of Jesus’ followers I am privileged to shepherd and the church that became his church because they wrote him, sent him money, and loved him when he had almost no one else. Dan closed out his talk that day with these words: “To my Hope

family, I want to say that I understand if you don't want to be close to me. I understand if you don't trust me because I am a felon and I was a violent man and did some horrible things to human beings just like you. But I want you to know that if you do approach me these days, not only will I not hurt you, but I will more than likely throw my arms around your neck and kiss you on the cheek and whisper in your ear that I love you. Because of the power of the love of God, I am not the same man that I used to be. I am a new man. I am a new creation in Christ Jesus.”

Just a few moments later, Dan stood at the front of the church with some other brothers and sisters, serving the Eucharist—the body and blood of Jesus—to all who were willing to get out of their seats and take a walk down the aisle to receive it. One of those who came that day was Dan's ex-wife Christine, a woman he had cheated on and abused. Two others walked right beside her—Dan and Christine's grown son and daughter, whom Dan had hurt and abandoned so many years ago. I watched as this wounded, shattered family took the body and blood of a loving Christ from the calloused hands of the husband and father who had damaged them so deeply. And I watched as God began to heal relationships so broken and human beings so emotionally and spiritually injured that any sane person would have said there was no way they'd ever be whole.

But for the power of love. A love that had begun to miraculously heal me. A love that would continue to heal Dan and is still healing his family.

Listen, we're about to embark on a hard road, you and I. A road through our emptiness and shame and woundedness. As you wrestle with your pain along the way—and even struggle with the difficulty of believing God loves you—remember Dan's story. Because no matter where you've been, what you've done, or what you've been through, you're heading toward a love that Jesus and his followers said was the power behind the covering and healing of all the sin and all the mess in all the world. A love that is powerful enough to heal . . . *you*.

