



DEAR SON

DAVE BRUSKAS

TEACHING PASTOR OF MARS HILL CHURCH

FOREWORD BY MARK DRISCOLL

DEAR SON

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A FATHER'S ADVICE ON BEING A MAN

DAVE BRUSKAS



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Dear Son: A Father's Advice on Being a Man

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The stories about the author's family are factual. In some of the stories about other people, names and details have been changed to conceal identities. The stories about Donald and Laura (page 50), Dan (page 55), Adam (page 115), and Nick (pages 140–141) are composite sketches based on trends the author has witnessed in ministry over several decades.

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FOREWORD

You do not have many fathers.

—I CORINTHIANS 4:15

GOD IS A FATHER.

He loves us with fatherly affection and pursues us with fatherly devotion.

The Father's desire is that men would have his heart for both their family and their church family. At the end of the last book of the Old Testament, one of the final things God had to say for some four hundred years was that through repentance of sin and faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, God "will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers" (Malachi 4:1-6). One significant aspect of God's work is different kinds of fathers who have different kinds of sons and daughters.

In our day, the lack of fathers with the Father's heart has become an epidemic. Homes are filled with sons who do not have fathers. And churches are filled with sons of God who do not have earthly spiritual fathers. The results are well known and widespread. The answer for many, if not most, of the problems in the church and culture is for biological

fathers to love their biological sons, and spiritual fathers to love their spiritual sons.

We see this played out in the Bible. There we read of a fatherless son named Timothy who was spiritually adopted by a sonless father named Paul. Their relationship is a model for what spiritual fathering should be like, according to God our Father. Their relationship is the heart of this biblical, practical, hopeful book.

Curiously, Pastor Dave's story is somewhat like Paul's. Pastor Dave and his wonderful wife, Kara, have four beautiful daughters, but no living sons. They had a son, but he died in infancy, as you will read about in this book. That loss has profoundly shaped my friend. Every time I walk into his office, I see the picture of his little boy on his desk. On a trip together to Dallas along with our fellow executive elder, Pastor Sutton Turner, we stopped by the grave of his son to weep and pray together as fathers. Every year I pray for Pastor Dave and his family, as his son's birthday is the same as mine, and I wish I knew him and could celebrate with him.

Rather than being embittered against the Father over the loss of his son, Pastor Dave has embraced the Father's heart and invested his life in spiritual sons. We labor together for the family at Mars Hill Church, which is filled with newly converted young men suffering from a gaping hole in their life that should have been filled by a father. I asked Pastor Dave to write this book to help older men become better fathers and younger men become better sons. He has been teaching this content for many years to many men of many

ages, races, and life stages. It was the core of his graduate studies at Dallas Seminary, the core of his leadership development in multiple churches where he has pastored, and the core of the development of the Mars Hill lead pastors who lead our network of churches. These men very gratefully sit down with Pastor Dave week after week and walk through the sections of Scripture regarding Timothy and Paul. Each man reports that this exercise is their favorite aspect of spiritual development and among the most valuable spiritual deposits anyone has ever made in them.

I am deeply thankful for the Father's heart I see in Pastor Dave. *Dear Son* is a great book, written by a great man, to meet a great need.

Pastor Mark Driscoll

INTRODUCTION

What I Wish I Could Say to My Son Now

February 17, 2013

Dear Son,

The last guests left the reception after your big sister Lisa's wedding a few hours ago. It's very early Sunday morning, but I can't sleep. I'm going through my mental photo album of the events of a day I will remember for the rest of my life. There's just so much to take in on a day like this. It makes me wish it could last a little longer.

David, you should have seen Lisa. She was beautiful and radiant and happy. As the doors swung open for me to walk her down the aisle, I started to weep. I wasn't sad about her marrying Tobin. I wish you could meet him. He is a solid man who loves Jesus, loves Lisa, and fits right into our sorority of a family with your three little sisters. I think I cried because the time Lisa spent in my life as my little girl had passed way too fast for my liking.

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It reminds me of the very brief time you and I had together. Two months and four days were all we got, every minute within the four walls of the ICU at Children's Hospital. There were so many surgeries and procedures and shots and tubes and prayers and tears. We went from superhopeful to moderately hopeful to hopeless. But our time together during those sixty-four short days has given me a lifetime of memories to review. We had a deep father-and-son connection, and I vividly remember my time with you, and will for the rest of my life, much like I will remember Lisa's wedding.

Son, I cry a lot for a grown man. Especially as I grow older. At first it was embarrassing, but not so much anymore. I cry watching movie trailers, hearing the national anthem played at ball games, singing every Sunday in worship, and mostly when talking about you around the family dinner table. Lisa even broke down and cried a few weeks before her wedding because she wanted you to be there on her big day. She misses you. Your mom misses you. Lauren, Jennifer, and Jillian miss you. We all do.

There's rarely an hour that passes that I don't think about you. I dream about what you might look like if you were with us and how you would get along with all the girls in our home. I imagine us going on father-and-son outings, hanging out together while the Bruskas ladies shop, and cheering together as the

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Cowboys disappoint us season after season. (That's a family tradition handed down to you through three generations.) But I mostly rehearse the conversations I think we would have.

Son, as you would be twenty-two this October, I think about all the things I would need to teach you about what it means to be a man. This is a crazy, confused world. It is very difficult for young men to live for Jesus. Many of your peers not only don't have Christian dads to teach them about life but don't have dads at all. While I know the opportunity for me to teach you about being a man in this life will never come, since you are now with Jesus and have a much better knowledge of him than I do, I wanted to write down the lessons I would have shared with you. Hopefully, some of these lessons can help men who don't have dads of their own.

I look forward to our reunion. Your mom had a big gift from God a couple of years ago. She saw you in a vision, as a young man, worshipping Jesus with your sisters. She smiled, then cried and almost fainted. She said you looked tall and thin, with brown, wavy hair and seemed very happy to be with Jesus. That sounds about right to me. I've asked for the same gift but haven't received it yet. Nonetheless, I know where you are and who you are with. The Bible says, "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1).

DEAR SON

I'm glad you are with Jesus. But I'm also glad you still are with us in a significant way. I find comfort in knowing you still are making a difference in my life and hopefully in the lives of many young men who need a spiritual dad to care for them. I'm always pleasantly surprised how Jesus uses a sonless father like me to teach fatherless sons. And all this began with your short but meaningful life here with us. Thanks to Jesus and thank you.

For Jesus' fame,
Dad

• • •

As I write these words, almost twenty-two years after David's death, I find myself resonating more and more with the apostle Paul's perspective on true and loved sons found in his letters to Timothy and Titus. What follows in this book are the letters I wish I could have written to my son if he were still with us. Though David can't receive them here and now, my hope is that my fatherly heart somehow will come out and that I can encourage the other young men to whom I've had the privilege of being a spiritual father. I think of Mario, who was a non-Christian, single, impoverished, and broken young man when he began attending the church I pastored. Now he is married, has a daughter of his own, believes in Jesus, and runs his own business. I am reminded of Los, who was called by Jesus to plant a church. I am so proud of all

that he is doing to make a difference in his city. I also think of Justin, who came very close to believing in Jesus and then just vanished one day. He is most likely dead, and I often am haunted by his absence.

I am intrigued by Paul's inspired words to help younger men live for Jesus in a challenging world. I find that more and more young men are much like Timothy when he received Paul's letters; Dad is missing from their faithful legacy. I'm deeply grateful for the fatherless sons who have trusted me to be a spiritual father to them.

I wonder what Paul would say to Timothy today. If I can take what he wrote in 1 Timothy 4:12—"Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity"—and through the help of the Holy Spirit, transfer it to fatherless young men in the form of some letters to my son, David, perhaps a few lives will be transformed and legacies altered.



1

CHRISTIAN

October 11, 2013

Dear Son,

Tonight we celebrated what would have been your twenty-second birthday. I was on the road with your older sister, Lisa, her husband, Tobin, and your younger sisters Lauren and Jennifer in Lubbock, Texas. We had a late night party at Chili's, complete with chips, salsa, skillet cookies, and ice cream. It was an inexpensive but fun evening. I think the waiter was hoping we would rack up a bigger tab, but I tipped him well. Your mom remained in Seattle with Jillian. They, too, would have joined us so we could all be together, but Jillian couldn't break free from her commitment as a Roosevelt High School cheerleader. David, you would be so proud of your sisters. They are smart, strong, loving, and happy. They have become the young women that I prayed they would be, which is a miracle in itself,

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as I have been far from the perfect dad. I still don't understand women, but I am really thankful for them.

Your birthday is the hardest day of the year for our family each and every year. In a surprising way, it is far more difficult than the day that marks your death. It causes us to dream about what could have been if you were still with us today. We have a tradition on your birthday where each family member answers two questions: *What is your favorite memory of David?* and *What do you think he would be like if he were with us today?* I love how your three younger sisters, who never met you, talk about memories of you as if they were actually there while you were alive. I feel like your mom really has done a beautiful job of including them all in your life. We are very specific in our descriptions of what you would be like today. Everything from your height and weight and hair color to the clothes you would wear and the teams you would pull for. Everyone is convinced you would have been tall and thin with wavy brown hair. Your sisters think you would have liked music. We're all certain you would have been a die-hard Dallas Cowboys fan because that is a birthright in the Bruskas home. But who really knows for sure?

What I do know for sure is that we miss you so much. We each have an ache in our hearts that varies in pain but never goes away. Your birthday is a tough day. Mostly, we cry a lot. I always make sure to give your

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mom flowers. They remind her you are with Jesus and a reunion is coming someday.

Every year on this day, I also think about what I would have wanted for your life. The truth is, although I would have had many dreams and ambitions for you, I really would have wanted only one thing. I would have wanted you to be a man who lives for Jesus. Everything else is flexible and tends to fall into place when a man lives for Jesus. But even if everything seems to be going well for a man—except for knowing Jesus—life is empty and failed.

The apostle Paul tells his spiritual son, Timothy, “I long to see you, that I may be filled with joy. I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you as well” (2 Timothy 1:4-5). I would love to say the same words to you. If you were still with us, I would want to know that such faith—the faith that dwelt in Kathleen, your great-grandmother; and in Tom and Betty and Dale and Mary, your grandparents; and in your mom and me; and dwells in your sisters, Lisa, Lauren, Jennifer, and Jillian—also would dwell in you and your children and your grandchildren. I would love to have seen you be another link in the chain of faith through generations of people who have our same last name!

Happy birthday, David! I miss you. There’s not an hour that passes that I don’t think about you. While

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I want to live a long life if that helps your mom and your sisters, I will be more than ready when my time comes to join you and Jesus.

Until then, know I love you,
Dad

• • •

How is life working for you? Being a young man, as I recall (although it has been a while), is really very good. You are as energetic and strong as you will ever be. You are also free and unencumbered. Free to pursue the work of your choosing. Free to pursue women. Mostly free to live where you want and do what you want when you want. Free to pursue, as our Founding Fathers desired, life, liberty, and happiness. Right now, you are free to go after all that you want from the world. But what if your freedom is blinding you to what actually may be enslaving you? What if, in the energy and idealism of young manhood, you are in the process of losing the only thing that matters while chasing everything else? Jesus warned everyone, including young men, with this terrifying question: “What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?” (Matthew 16:26).

I was more of a boy than a young man when I saw how empty life could be. I grew up in a very loving home. Both of my parents worked hard to provide for my needs. They also did everything they could to protect me from danger. They nurtured me and guided me toward a good and decent life.

But for the first eleven years of my life, my parents weren't Christians. And I'm sure I wasn't either.

We did attend church once or twice a year with my grandma. She would bribe us with the promise of an after-church brunch at her country club. My dad owned a small and struggling lumberyard, and my mom was a bookkeeper. They weren't country club material, so getting to go with Grandma was a real treat. I didn't like church, but pulling endless clumps of bacon from a silver tray using tongs was more than worth the hour of suffering I had to endure in church.

I found church to be creepy and confusing. The building's high ceilings, hidden balconies, tall curtains, dark corners, stained-glass windows, and musty, padded pews led me to think I was worshiping a ghostly god in his haunted house. The robed choir didn't help ease my fears. Worst of all were the bizarre sounds of the pipe organ, played loudly as if to summon the ghostly god to come out and haunt his houseguests.

To my juvenile mind, the point of all this seemed to be scaring me into living a good life so this god would bless me rather than punish me. I would be frightened into sharing with my little brother, telling grown-ups the truth, and making good grades in school. At least I would be for a week. Then I was supposed to come back the next Sunday, because the impact of church seemed to have a six-day shelf life. This was like a wash, rinse, and repeat cycle. It certainly wasn't my grandma's fault that I felt this way. Truthfully, it wasn't the

church's fault either. I would find out later that my perception was really distorted. I was blind and deaf to what actually was happening.

My childhood was mostly happy. My dad loved sports, hunting, fishing, and most of all, his sons. So he religiously put together the things he loved, and we all had a great time, especially on weekends. My mom was caring, nurturing, and hardworking. She always made sure we were well prepared for each day. Our family was healthy in nearly every way but one: we were spiritually bankrupt. No matter how many things are right, if this one thing is wrong, everything else is too.

My dad was agnostic and was hostile toward religion. Mom considered herself a Christian because of her upbringing in church. She was mildly religious. But she seemed as uncomfortable at Grandma's church as the rest of us. Her life slowly was coming apart because of an alcohol addiction.

Mom was a binge drinker. I remember being at several parties with her as a child—parties that would end with Dad carrying her to the car as we left, suddenly and with much embarrassment. No one felt worse about this problem than Mom. So much so, that as she arrived one night at a New Year's Eve party, she began weeping even before she took her first drink. She knew what was coming: the night would end with her being carried to the car as a sloppy, drunken mess.

But this party *wouldn't* be like the others. This night would end very differently. Soon our whole family would change forever.

One of Mom's friends compassionately noticed her tears. This woman carefully listened to her story of shame. The woman then did something unexpected. She invited my mom to join her and some other women at a weekly meeting to study the Bible. Mom first went out of desperation. Desperation turned to hope as she grew to know the Jesus she had heard preached and sung about in church for most of her life. My mom became a Christian and was transformed. No more drinking binges. No more lampshade-wearing, vomit-soaked partying. No more shame and no more guilt. One change among all the others impressed me most. She loved my dad, my little brother, and me better than she had before. She always had been a kind and good mom, but now she was more loving and happier than before. But for me, at least, there was a huge downside to her conversion. My little brother, Bill, and I now had to go with her to church every Sunday instead of just twice a year. And there was no bonus of country-club bacon anymore.

We went to a lot of different churches. It seems as if we tried every one in town until Mom found one that she believed fit our family. My dad, as devoutly agnostic as one could be (it seems odd to be passionately certain about something you profess you aren't sure of), refused to go with us. He was my golden ticket out of church. As long as he held out, I knew I could miss a fair number of Sundays in the woods hunting, or at the lake fishing, or even yelling with him at the TV set as we watched the Dallas Cowboys.

Then, much to my dismay, he showed up at the breakfast

table one Sunday morning before church wearing his favorite powder-blue leisure suit. He announced, “If this is the only way I can spend time with my family on Sunday mornings, then I will go to church.” My goal to be a casual and infrequent church attender was dashed. I wasn’t happy. I couldn’t hold out on church. But I certainly could hold out as long as needed to avoid becoming a Christian. Or so I thought.

I really don’t exactly remember how long my dad attended church before he, too, became a Christian. I just recall being disappointed in how rapidly he went from being a religious agnostic to a born-again believer. Surprisingly, it wasn’t going to church that led to his conversion. It was watching the television series *Jesus of Nazareth* that captured his heart. His conversion was every bit as dramatic as my mom’s. If there was a single characteristic that defined his transformation—much like with Mom—it was the radical love he had for his family. It was a newer, deeper, more loyal and joyful love than we had ever seen before. This surprised me because I thought being a Christian was about doing all the right things while avoiding all the wrong things. I quickly learned it had much more to do with love. This wasn’t a Hallmark-card, sticky-and-sloppy type of love but a sacrificial, active, and thick love. It was a love that looked like the type of love Jesus said he had for his disciples: “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). More than ever before, I saw the many ways my mom and dad sacrificed themselves for my brother and me. While I was very skeptical of their new beliefs, I was compelled by their new lifestyle.

After my parents became Christians, I began to feel pressure to become one too. Not so much from them. They made me go to church with them, but beyond talking a lot about the Bible and Jesus, they didn't force their beliefs on me. Yet every time I went to church, I felt a pull in the pit of my stomach, especially when the preacher would invite people to walk to the front of the sanctuary at the end of the service and publicly give their lives to Jesus. My prejudice—that Christianity was just another world religion to help people cope with the unanswerable questions about life and death—began to fade. To me, Christianity was becoming less about a philosophy or lifestyle and more and more about the person of Jesus, this man who claimed to be God, and who backed up his claim by rising from the dead. At least that's what those who believed in him told me.

The more pressure I felt to become a Christian, the stronger my resistance toward church grew. I took a flyer that was mailed to my house inviting me to a youth retreat and hid it in the trash. I knew my parents would make me go if they saw it. The day before the retreat began, I went to school confident I had succeeded. I would be shooting hoops with my unbelieving buddies while my churchy friends studied their Bibles on the retreat. While I was in class, my youth pastor called my parents to personally request that I attend. I came home to the bad news of my fate and two days later had the most profound conversation of my life.

Vern was a youth pastor from Missouri. He was leading my small group during the weekend retreat. He asked if

we could meet one-on-one. I thought this request was really strange but agreed anyway. When we met, he opened up the Bible and with laser precision read verses that confirmed what I was beginning to understand about Jesus. He was real. He was God. He had unfinished business with me. He wanted to forgive me for all my active and passive rebellion. He wanted to free me to live my life for him moving forward. I felt two strong, paradoxical emotions simultaneously. On one hand, I had the deepest remorse for resisting this Jesus who had pursued me. I realized I was responsible for his brutal death. I was cut to the heart. Strangely, at the very same time, I felt Jesus loved me rather than hated me and would accept me. I also felt he could change me. He was going to give me a new life instead of killing me for opposing him. That's exactly what he did!

With Vern right there with me, I prayed to Jesus. I told Jesus I wanted to be forgiven and freed. I told him I hated my sin and wanted to leave it all behind. I also told him I loved him and wanted to follow him for the rest of my life. On Saturday evening, March 10, 1979, I turned from sin and trusted in the person and work of Jesus. I was born again. I was converted.

A change of heart and mind came upon me at the very same time in life that my voice and body were changing, my very own mid-puberty conversion. Both were drastic. I quickly grew to love the Bible. I read it every chance I could get. I loved my family more than I ever had before. I even loved my little brother. I really loved telling my friends who

didn't know Jesus about him. And some of them, too, met Jesus just as I had.

I also began to love the church. I loved being in worship services and now understood what was happening. I loved being with other Christians and hearing about what Jesus was doing in their lives. Probably more than anything else, I enjoyed connecting my friends who didn't yet know Jesus with those who already did.

Maybe you have a loving father who brought you to church and sent you on Christian retreats. But please don't feel a sense of hopelessness if your biological father *hasn't* helped you to meet Jesus. Maybe you don't have a reliable earthly father who loves Jesus. Maybe you don't have a reliable earthly father *period*. You may have nothing but a legacy of wrongs, losses, and pain. But there is hope for you to meet Jesus and become the man he calls you to be, even if you lack a positive legacy and a good biological father. Timothy, from the Bible, found such a man in Paul.

Timothy was raised in an ancient city called Lystra, in modern-day Turkey. Acts 16 mentions that his mother was a devout Jewish Christian. All we know about Timothy's dad is that he was ethnically a Greek. There is no mention of his faith. It would seem that Paul stepped in and took on the spiritual responsibility that was entrusted to Timothy's biological dad. We read in the Bible that Timothy and Paul were very close. It is quite possible that Paul led Timothy to Jesus. It also is a possibility that Timothy, as a young man, watched his spiritual father being stoned by an angry mob. Left to die,

Paul miraculously recovered and continued on with his ministry. (You can read about that in Acts 14:19-21.) Imagine the trauma and emotional scars young Timothy would have felt! His biological dad wasn't helpful, and Timothy almost lost the man who was most helpful to him to a murderous mob. That sounds much like the pain I find in so many young men today.

Max grew up in a rough part of town, without a dad. He soon found an alternative to his dysfunctional family in a street gang. Young manhood began for Max before he even became a teenager. He was dealing drugs and having sex by the time he was twelve years old. He became a cocaine addict. When I first met Max, he already was stricken with AIDS, was in the throes of addiction, and had children of varying ages with several ex-girlfriends. I've seen few lives that were worse than Max's. But then Max met Jesus. And his life, although far from perfect, is being reshaped and redeemed. He's beginning to see God as his true Father. And as he relates to God as his Father, Max is becoming a father to his children.

John best could be described as a good kid. His mom and dad split up when he was young. He still has contact with his dad but receives very little spiritual support from him. His mom remarried, and John's stepdad is more religious than helpful toward his stepson. Jesus has interrupted John's life much as he did Max's. Now, although John still lives with the pain of his biological dad's not being a spiritual father to him, he is learning through Jesus to be the dad, biologically and spiritually, he wishes his father had been to him.

Paul's greatest gift to Timothy wasn't being a surrogate father through good deeds. He wasn't a big brother or a recovery sponsor. He was way more than that. Paul's best gift to young Timothy was being his spiritual father through the gospel of Jesus. *Gospel*, as you may know, literally means *Good News*. Much like Paul, I believe what young men like Timothy—and you—need today is Good News from God.

The essence of the gospel message and the most important thing I can teach you is summed up best by the apostle Paul to Timothy in this statement: “The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost” (1 Timothy 1:15). If you forget everything else I tell you, make sure you remember that verse. The gospel is most basically the great news that **Jesus saves sinners**. Let me unpack that for you word by word in reverse order.

The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

—1 Timothy 1:15

- **Sinners:** You and I and everyone else who has ever been born are sinners by nature and by choice. That's not a popular notion in our culture, but we are born guilty of treason against the very God who created us. Our common forefather, Adam, represented the entire human race before the God who created us all. Adam sinned

against God by disobeying God's only prohibitive order. So the tragic and cosmic result is that we inherit Adam's guilt along with his rebellious nature toward God. We also inherit his death sentence of eternal separation from God.

To further our misery, we continue to live out of our instinctive nature as sinners. According to the Bible, we are born idolaters. We worship the created world, and most commonly ourselves, rather than the God who made us to worship him. Our ears are deaf, our eyes are blind, and our hearts are dead toward God. So we hopelessly continue down the path of rebellion. God is right to be angry with us as we all oppose his rule. There is nothing whatsoever we can do to change ourselves that will lead him to change his mind about us. But God *can* change his mind, and he did. He sent his Son, Jesus, on a rescue mission to save sinners from the power and penalty of sin.

- **Jesus Saves:** The God of the Bible is triune. He is one God in three persons: Father, Son, and Spirit. Each person of the Godhead is coeternal, without beginning. Each person of the Godhead is coequal and coworthy of worship. Each person of the Godhead is coexistent, living eternally in perfect relationship with honor, love, and esteem for one another. But each person of the Godhead plays a different role in saving sinners. The Bible teaches us that God the Father sent God the Son

on a mission to save sinners. God the Spirit breathes new life into dead human hearts so they turn from sin and trust in God the Son.

Jesus—God the Son—entered our world as a human. Much like Adam, he represented the entire human race before God. He was like us in every way except one: he didn't inherit Adam's guilt and sinful nature, so he never rebelled against God his Father. Jesus wasn't a sinner by nature *or* by choice. Through the empowerment of God the Spirit, Jesus lived the only perfect life that ever has been lived. Jesus died the death we deserve. He died on the cross, the perfect God-man taking our sin upon himself and paying the penalty we deserve. He was buried. Then three days later, just as he had promised, he physically rose from the dead. Within weeks, after being with his followers, he ascended into a realm known as heaven.

Jesus has made it possible, through his perfect life, his sacrificial death, and his victorious resurrection, for you and me and anyone else who trusts in him to be forgiven from the penalty of sin and freed from the enslaving power of sin. This is the great news of God through Jesus: Jesus saves sinners.

The question then arises, *What can we do about it? How can we be saved?*

Tragically, this is where so many people get it wrong. There are basically two ways to respond to Jesus' rescue mission. The Bible divides these paths into the categories of law and grace.

To respond to Jesus by the law is a futile attempt to bridge the chasm that exists between God and us by keeping rules. In this sense, a person becomes righteous by keeping the commands (613 in total) recorded in the Old Testament. While this approach *sounds* noble, it is terribly ineffective and devastatingly useless.

I remember Ryan, who showed up at the church I was pastoring some time back. I really enjoyed the friendship we developed. But Ryan never grasped how to relate to God through Jesus. He loved to say, “Pastor Dave, to be a Christian, you have to want it, work hard to get it, and work even harder to keep it.” In other words, Ryan thought the path to Jesus was about doing certain things that were good while avoiding things that were bad. It was all about what we do for Jesus instead of what Jesus has done for us.

According to Paul’s warning in another letter, that was never the purpose of the law. Paul states, “By works of the law no human being will be justified in [God’s] sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin” (Romans 3:20). In other words, this legalistic approach never works. Here’s why: the law can’t make us right and acceptable to God. It does have a good purpose if understood correctly. It can make it obvious to us that we need an obedience we don’t have and can’t attain. The law can lead us to the reality that we really need Jesus.

Jesus’ obedience, resulting in his right and perfect standing before God, is offered to us as a free gift. It is gratis, the truest and freest gift, because righteousness is offered to those who least deserve it. This is what the Bible refers to as grace.

Again, God does for us in Jesus what we never could do for ourselves. The law guides us, if used correctly, to the desperate awareness that we need grace.

When I first came to Jesus, I had a bad temper. And since I have known him, he has helped me grow in this area. But I still have a ways to go. I knew before

I was a Christian that it was wrong to kill someone. Although the idea had crossed my mind, I never acted on it. But I had many fistfights with my little brother, my friends, and neighborhood kids. I knew one of the Ten Commandments was “You

shall not murder” (Exodus 20:13). But when I read Jesus’ words, I realized I was already guilty: “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire” (Matthew 5:21-22). Right there in red print in my Bible I was condemned to hell! I hadn’t killed anyone, but I was angry with my brother and had called him worse things than a fool. And no matter how resolved I was never to do it again, it was too late. I was guilty. And I needed Jesus to take away my guilt and give me in its place his obedience to this law. And that is exactly what he did!

If you forget everything else, remember this: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

The Bible is clear: we receive the amazing gift of salvation

by grace *through* repentance and faith (see 2 Corinthians 7:10; Ephesians 2:8). Repentance is turning from sin with our whole being: *intellectually knowing* that independence toward God is loathsome to him, *emotionally feeling* that God has been greatly offended, and *willfully choosing* to turn away from sin as an exercise of the will. To repent literally means to turn away from something. It means to change. It's like when a child accidentally follows someone he thinks is his dad in the supermarket, realizes the man he's following isn't his dad, and turns from that man toward the man who is his father. In this way, repentance is turning away from following sin and turning toward our Father God through Jesus.

Hand in hand with repentance must come faith. Faith is trusting in God and his reliability to say what he means and mean what he says. Faith also is trusting entirely in the finished work of Jesus for the forgiveness and freedom from sin.

So What Now?

I don't want you to be like my mom in understanding grace. She was surrounded by the gospel message yet had not received its great offer of grace. She was working toward being a better person, being more religious, and doing good works. But she still was brutally enslaved by the power of sin and obligated to pay its horrific penalty. She was blind to see and deaf to hear grace. That's when Jesus stepped in and saved a sinner. He showed her all her sin, broke her heart, and then gave her a brand-new one.

I also don't want you to be like my dad. He was so lost. He believed all religions were the same and therefore equally futile. From his perspective, all that mattered was the here and now. But Jesus stepped into my dad's life unannounced as well. Even though my dad didn't get it for years, he, too, was blind to see and deaf to hear grace. In a different way than my mom, he was working toward being a better person through his own religion of unbelief and good works. While he didn't live to please God, he did try to live a good life to help himself and others. But despite his very best efforts, he was empty in a way he couldn't change. He, much like his alcoholic wife, was brutally enslaved to a life of rebellion against God. Then Jesus broke my dad's old heart and gave him a whole new one.

Mostly I don't want you to be like me before I met Jesus. I watched those around me being transformed, yet I fought the tug I felt on my own heart. I have a simple warning for you: resistance is futile. It's time to give up and give in to Jesus' working on your heart. It's time to repent. Turn from sin and trust in Jesus. Become the man you were created to be. Join the legacy of faith that exists for those who trust in Jesus. If you have grown up without a spiritual mentor or a legacy of faith, begin a new legacy today by being the first of many who believe and obey Jesus!

We don't need to become *better* men to become Christians. We need to become *new* men. Jesus refers to this as being born again (see John 3:3). The big idea is that something radical happens to us that we can't make happen for ourselves.

We can't make ourselves be born again any more than we can make ourselves be born in the first place. But God wants us to be born again. And he *is* able to give us new lives. He does so through the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. I believe you are reading this book because God desires to give you the gift of repentance and faith so that you might become a new man. And as you read this, the Holy Spirit may be working in you.

If so, you likely are experiencing a couple of paradoxical things simultaneously. You are feeling a sense of remorse and guilt over your sin. You realize, perhaps for the first time, that you have lived independently and rebelliously toward the God who created you to worship him. But here is what likely feels strange: you feel this very same God reaching out to you in love through Jesus. He is offering to forgive you of sin and to free you to live a new life for him. And all that is left for you to do is receive his offer by turning from sin and trusting Jesus to forgive and free you.

When you become a new man, one who is transformed by Jesus and indwelt by the Holy Spirit, you will have at least three new dimensions. First, you will have a brand-new identity. According to the Bible, "If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: the old has gone, the new is here!" (2 Corinthians 5:17, NIV). As a Christian, you aren't an improved version of your old self; you are an entirely new man. Second, the new you will have new desires (see Romans 7:4-6, for instance). Practically, this means you will have a newfound hatred for rebellion against God and a new

passion to worship him in everything he is and does. Last, you will have a new power to live according to your new identity and new desires. The Holy Spirit will empower you to live an obedient life (see Romans 8:9-13). Your new manhood will most be characterized by becoming a young man who thinks, feels, acts, and speaks like Jesus.

