

Escaping Performance

BOUND TO BE FREE

to Be Captured by Grace

D. A. HORTON

This is D. A. at his best—gospel-rich, raw, in tune with culture, and deeply insightful regarding human nature. Written by one of this generation’s most capable communicators, these pages describe a struggle that consumes most of us, and they highlight a simple yet profound path of redemption—faith in God’s grace.

J. D. GREEAR, PHD

Author, *Gaining by Losing: Why the Future Belongs to Churches that Send and Jesus, Continued . . . : Why the Spirit inside You Is Better than Jesus beside You*

The opening pages of this book are gut wrenching, the story of a boy who learns he can never live up to the expectations of his dad. But what follows is exhilarating, liberating, and life giving. D. A. Horton is one of my favorite young leaders in evangelicalism, and this book will show you why. If you have ever struggled, as I perpetually do, with the temptation to believe that God is pleased with you on the basis of your performance, this is the book you need to read. With pastoral wisdom and sharp focus, D. A. Horton shows us how to rest in the most radical pronouncement that could ever be made of us: “You are my beloved son, and in you I am well pleased.”

RUSSELL MOORE

President, Southern Baptist Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission

The truth of God’s Word sets people free from a trap. D. A. walks us through his story of how the Word (Jesus) set him free. May we follow his example and find eternal freedom in Christ.

O. RAY HORTON

Father of D. A. Horton

D. A. Horton is brilliant! He's a gift to the church. As you read the beautifully and powerfully written *Bound to Be Free*, you will see why. In the midst of a performance-based culture where people are exhausted, D. A. invites us to come and rest in the performance of Jesus. Paradoxically, as we rest in Jesus' performance, Jesus lives out his glorification of God through us. You are going to love this book. Your life will be transformed.

DR. DERWIN L. GRAY

Author of *The High Definition Leader: Building Multiethnic Churches in a Multiethnic World*

Many today live enslaved to achievement and to the demand to impress others, and they burn themselves out in the process. Horton offers another path which offers true freedom and life to the full.

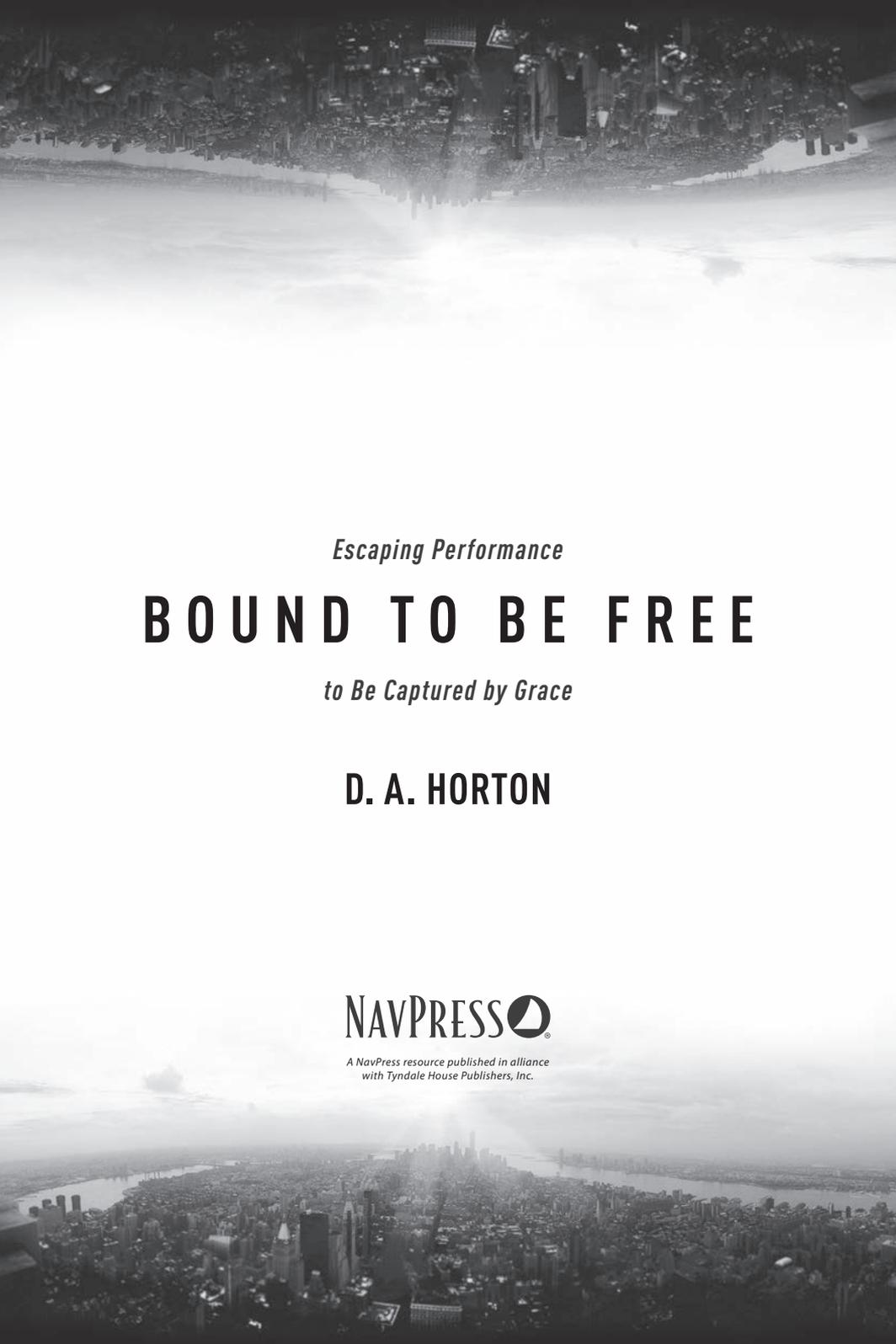
MICHAEL HIDALGO

Author of *Changing Faith: Questions, Doubts and Choices about an Unchanging God*

A life in ministry is hard, and while we serve God, we often find ourselves trapped in service to other motivations that lead us away from God's life-giving grace. In *Bound to Be Free*, D. A. Horton presents us with a transparent and compelling case for the liberation that comes only when we bind ourselves to the cross of Christ. This book will be an encouragement, especially to pastors and church planters.

ED STETZER

President of Lifeway Research, www.edstetzer.com



Escaping Performance

BOUND TO BE FREE

to Be Captured by Grace

D. A. HORTON

NAVPRESS 

A NavPress resource published in alliance
with Tyndale 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.

Bound to Be Free: Escaping Performance to Be Captured by Grace

Copyright © 2016 by D. A. Horton. 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.

Cover design by Stephen Vosloo

Cover photograph courtesy Björn Simon/Unsplash.com.

Author photo taken by Matt Engelking, copyright © 2015. All rights reserved.

The Team:

Don Pape, Publisher

Caitlyn Carlson, Acquisitions Editor

Published in association with the literary agency of Wolgemuth & Associates, Inc.

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations 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 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 NIV are taken from the Holy Bible, *New International Version*,® NIV.® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

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

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Horton, D. A.

Title: Bound to be free : escaping performance to be captured by grace / D. A. Horton.

Description: Colorado Springs : NavPress, 2016. | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015033533 | ISBN 9781631464676

Subjects: LCSH: Liberty—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Grace (Theology) |

Performance—Religious aspects—Christianity.

Classification: LCC BT810.3 .H67 2016 | DDC 248.4—dc23

LC record available at <http://lccn.loc.gov/2015033533>

Printed in the United States of America

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

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments vii

Introduction ix

PART 1: THE PERFORMANCE TRAP 1

CHAPTER 1: Trajectory 7

CHAPTER 2: Relationships 37

CHAPTER 3: Affirmation 63

CHAPTER 4: Peers 81

PART 2: THE TRAP OF GOD'S GRACE 99

CHAPTER 5: Trust in God 107

CHAPTER 6: Reconciliation with God 125

CHAPTER 7: Affection from God 139

CHAPTER 8: Partnership with the Saints of God 149

Epilogue: Unfailing Love 161

Notes 173

About the Author 177

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To:

God the Father who unconditionally loves me. God the Son who saved me, is saving me, and will save me. God the Holy Spirit who lives in me, providing me with strength to mature spiritually.

Elicia, Izabelle, Lola, and Duce. Being free in Christ allows me to savor every moment I spend with you. You all *are* my first ministry. I'm so blessed to have you all in my life.

Ray and Rita Horton. Thank you for loving me at all times, Mom and Dad.

The elders and members of Koinonia Bible Church. Thank you for allowing me the grace to serve alongside you all.

BOUND TO BE FREE

Dhati Lewis, Kevin Ezell, Lecrae, Matt Letourneau, Nehemiah Weaver, and John O. Thank you for shepherding my heart. I'm privileged to call you brothers and friends.

Andrew Wolgemuth. Thank you for being more than an agent but also a friend.

Don Pape and Caitlyn Carlson. Thank you for helping me capture quality content and for shaping it to encourage believers everywhere.

INTRODUCTION

Growing up, I believed that if I didn't win all of my wrestling matches, if I wasn't perfect, my dad wouldn't want me anymore.

You see, before every tournament, my dad would give me a rundown of my competitors, tell me how I could beat them, and remind me that if I lost, he would be disappointed. Tournament after tournament and year after year I experienced one of two realities. If I won, I would have my dad's affection. If I lost, he would withdraw emotionally, and the ride home, no matter the length, would be filled with intimidating silence.

When I was thirteen, I decided I wanted to face my biggest fear head-on to see how my dad would respond if I purposefully didn't aim for perfection. My experiment couldn't have taken place in a more climactic environment: the state tournament.

I entered the tournament as the top seed and was picked to win my fifth state title. After breezing through the first round of competition, I entered the quarterfinals certain that I could beat my opponent—but focused more on putting on a show for all the people who crowded around the mat than on the match itself. I was, as my dad would say, *horsing around*. My plan was to remain in control of the entire match and earn a semifinal bid by scoring a takedown in the closing seconds of the third and final period. I had it all worked out.

Things were going according to plan until the unthinkable happened. As I tried to take my opponent down in the third period, he countered and quickly caught me as I slipped. The buzzer sounded, and the referee held up two points for my opponent. I had lost the match. But I wasn't disappointed—losing was just another way to get back at my dad after years of riding an emotional roller coaster.

I watched the referee raise my opponent's hand as he was declared the victor. As I nonchalantly smiled and shook his hand, he said, "Thank you," as if he knew I had not tried my best. I gave him a hug and told him that he was sure to be the next state champion.

As I walked off the mat toward the corner where my dad and coaches had sat just moments before, I noticed my clothes sitting on the floor in a pile.

INTRODUCTION

My dad was nowhere to be found.

At first, I figured he had stepped outside the arena to have a cigarette, a Coke, and a conversation with himself about my poor performance in order to cool down. I took the pocket change I had in my bag and grabbed some lunch before deciding to take a nap. When I woke up, most of my teammates had already gone back to our hotel. Suddenly nervous, I walked around the arena, looking at thousands of faces—but none of them was my dad's.

There's no way my dad left me here alone and drove back home to Kansas City, I told myself. We lived hours away. He wouldn't really leave me.

Hours passed as I searched and searched. You have to remember, this was before the era of cell phones, so it's not as if I could've texted or FaceTimed my dad. Finally, I asked one of my coaches for some change so I could call my older brother, who was back in Kansas City. My coach asked if I was okay, and of course pride kept me from confessing my fear that my dad had abandoned me. As I picked up the phone, my hand shook, and an overwhelming sense of panic overtook me.

I fought back the tears, my mouth trembling. When my brother answered the phone, my emotional dam burst. He was trying to make sense of what I was saying, asking me to calm down

and explain what was going on. Finally I yelled out, “He left me! I’m here at the state tournament all by myself! He left me, Raymond—he really left me!” My brother, thinking the best of our dad, began to interrogate me about what I had done to make our dad so angry that I’d think he might leave me at the state tournament. Embarrassed, I confessed that I hadn’t tried my best and had lost the quarterfinal match. My brother, still not believing my story, told me to go with one of my coaches back to the hotel and wait to hear from him.

Right after he got off the phone with me, he called our mom and dad’s house. Within two rings, he was greeted by my dad’s voice. I still don’t know what words they exchanged that day, which I think is for the best. Later that night, my brother met me at the hotel, checked into a room with his wife and daughter, and had me stay with them. Before we went to bed, he challenged me to forget about all that had taken place and to focus on the work I had to do to finish the tournament well.

The next morning I woke up feeling nauseated. I wasn’t worried about my performance or even walking away with a state plaque. I was afraid of facing my dad after the tournament was over. A myriad of questions ran through my mind the rest of the day. My emotions swung like a pendulum between anger and guilt. I thought I would feel this way for the rest of my life.

INTRODUCTION

My brother showed me how to use my emotions as fuel to drive me in my competition that day. I breezed through my first three matches and entered into the consolation finals, facing an opponent that I beat the week before in the district championship. Right before the match, my brother and I prayed together. Then he looked me in the eye and asked me if I was ready. By this time I was completely spent. I told him I wanted to go home. He just smiled, gave me a hug, and told me, as he did before every match, that he was in my corner. “Do your best, *mijo*.”

I lost the match 5 to 1 and received the fourth-place plaque for my age and weight division. As my brother and his wife drove me home, they counseled me on how to forgive my dad for what he had done and told me not to agitate him to the point of physical confrontation. I knew things would be okay when I got home because my dad, who worked the overnight shift, was probably at work.

The next morning I woke up for school, knowing that I had to be out of the house before my dad normally arrived home at 6:30 a.m. I got ready in record time, unpacked my wrestling bag, set my fourth-place plaque on the dining-room table, and walked out the door to my bus stop. Throughout the course of the day I felt a tug of war within my heart. I knew I had to eventually face my dad, and I didn't know what to say or how I would respond. In those days, I tried to avoid conflict

at all costs—I remember praying I'd meet with some tragedy like getting shot or jumped so he would extend me compassion instead of wrath.

The bus ride home that day was filled with the typical inner-city middle school aura: objects thrown, insults hurled at the bus driver, and threats of gang violence among rivals. In the midst of this chaos, I felt like I was in the eye of the storm, calmly awaiting the destruction that lay ahead. When I got off at my bus stop at the corner of 18th Street and Washington, my one-block walk home felt more like the Green Mile. I gave departing handshakes to the homies before looking up at my house, consumed by fear. Then I took a breath and walked up the stairs.

My dad was still asleep as he normally was when I came home from school. I knew he wouldn't wake up until around seven that evening to get ready for work. I had a few hours of peace to figure out if I was going to stay in the house or go hang out with my friends. As I approached the kitchen to get a snack, I looked at the dining room table and saw my plaque.

The word *LOSER* was engraved four times all over it.

My fear morphed into blood-boiling rage. I looked at that plaque in utter disbelief. This couldn't be real life. Seized by anger and hurt, I decided at that moment never to let my dad

INTRODUCTION

have a hand up on me emotionally, mentally, or physically ever again. Never again would I give my dad entrance into my life, I swore. Not only had he abandoned me, he also had destroyed my plaque, which showed me once and for all that nothing I ever did would be good enough for him.

So why am I telling you this story? Because the way I saw my dad while growing up is the way a lot of us look at God. We can feel like He'll only affirm us, stay close to us, and acknowledge us if we constantly push ourselves toward perfection in our performance for Him. One definition of *performance* is "an action, task, or operation, seen in terms of how successfully it was performed."¹ And we can think that if we're successful in our performance for God, He'll be happy with us.

Up until two years ago, I was in a perpetual state of burn-out because I felt my endless performance was my reasonable service to God. Much like a shark has to stay in sync with the current of the ocean in order to breathe, I was sure that my life had to remain in constant motion for me to receive the attention and affirmation of God. The irony was that I allowed my *calling* to keep me divorced from resting in Jesus. I've been given the privilege by God to preach the gospel of grace, a truth centered on the work of Christ—and yet I felt the need to perform (work) in order to gain God's favor.

THE PERFORMANCE LIFE

I'm the type of person who, by design, is always on the go. My mom tells people that I began *running* when I was seven months old. You read that right—running, not walking! My teachers in grade school would pin notes on my shirt to tell my parents about the “ambitious” activities I performed in front of my class that day and how I would refuse to take my seat when asked. When I was five years old, my parents signed me up for wrestling, hoping it would serve as an outlet for all of my energy. As I grew older, my drive to “do something” never ran out of gas. I hated being still. That same high-energy level that was *cute* when I was young became a *curse* as I grew into adulthood.

Soon after my conversion to Christianity, I began laboring in the work of ministry. The thought behind this was, *I need to stay busy to stay out of the streets*. I'm wired in such a way that when I'm bored, I'm probably going to find something to keep me occupied—and whatever that *something* is, it's likely some form of mischief. So I joined as many ministries in the church as I could to keep off the streets of the hood that I was raised in.

I convinced myself during my initial days of salvation that busyness equaled holiness. If I was idle, I was sinning and God was mad at me. Couple this belief with the theological teaching that you can sin your way *out* of salvation, and the

INTRODUCTION

result is an explosive concoction that prompts many to turn their backs on the church, Christianity (at least the version they've been exposed to), and ultimately God Himself.

To say my life was packed beyond capacity would be an understatement. Day after day I would be the first to rise and the last to lie down (notice I didn't say sleep). Vacations? Nah, I never took them. Growing up poor, we could never afford one, so I learned to live without them—and just thinking about taking one day off, let alone seven, ushered the sin of anxiety onto the throne of my heart. I said yes to every conference I was asked to speak at, refused to delegate responsibilities to others who had a desire to help, and felt guilty asking any of the other church leaders for help because I was *paid* to pastor and they were not. I would regularly brush off the stern warning of “slow down” offered to me by my wife, employers, friends, and mentors. People would ask me when I found time to sleep, and my response would be, “I'll rest when I'm dead.”

I felt like an entertainer spinning a series of plates on top of long and limber sticks, hoping to keep the plates spinning so they wouldn't fall and shatter on the stage below. I believed the lie that God had sentenced me to a life of performing for His love. I lived in constant fear that if at any moment one of the plates (family and ministry responsibilities) were to come crashing down, I would not only

be at fault but would have to pay God back for the broken plate before buying a new one to start my routine all over again. Life was a never-ending performance for an audience of one who, according to my misguided heart, could at any moment leave the venue, heckling me and demanding a full refund.

The ugliest moment of this curse came during a phone call with my wife as I boarded a plane to Chicago to teach at a conference on healthy urban churches.

Elicia and I were arguing over my *being a resident but not present* at home. The core of her argument highlighted my zombie-like state of mind when I was at home, not on the road traveling or at work. During these times I lacked meaningful engagement with her and our two daughters. Elicia brought up this blind spot so much that I had grown inoculated to it. So when she started talking about it before I boarded the plane, I grew irritated beyond words. In this moment of frustration I chose to do what no husband should ever do: I interrupted Elicia mid-sentence and told her I needed to get off the phone. With a fearful tremble in her voice she uttered two words that still give me chills:

“I’m done.”

When I asked her what she meant, she hung up the phone.

INTRODUCTION

When Elicia said, “I’m done,” she meant she couldn’t keep up with the insane rhythm of life I was forcing on our entire family. Everything I was doing—working a full-time job, being a full-time seminary student, traveling to preach and perform gospel rap concerts, all while planting a church in the city—had run my marriage into the ground. At first I thought she was out of line, and immediately I pushed aside her feelings, rehearsing my cross-examination and rebuttal and deciding I would lay out the facts for her when I called her from Chicago. But as the plane took off, something happened. I began to hear Elicia’s voice replay in my mind. My first instinct was to ignore it and stay focused on the task at hand; however, as her voice grew louder, I became sensitive to the hurt and pain packed into every word. As her words began to take root, nervousness began to fill the pit of my stomach. My heart started beating as fast as our rhythm of life. Then the unthinkable happened. Tears began to pour out of my eyes.

I had arrived at the doorway of brokenness.

My first step into brokenness was only the beginning of a six-year process God used to free me from the performance trap. During this time, God extended mercy to me in the form of a sabbatical from the pastorate. He began to provide rehab to my weary soul, showing me my lack of balance and how it tainted my assessment of His character. This slanted view

of God was a prideful key inserted into my ignition of selfish ambition, fueling my actions to jump on the autobahn of a performance-driven life.

My heart was filled to the brim with suppressed hurt and pain rooted in my childhood. I was in dire need of shepherding. Although men in my church could have helped me, I was scared that if I let them in to my internal tensions they'd see me as a perpetual failure and fire me from my *job* of pastoring—though this thought was contrary to all of their character and their love for me. But as soon as I moved to Atlanta, I felt the overwhelming need to open my heart and expose my battle with the performance trap before men who loved Christ *and* were not members of the congregation I was the pastor of. And God, who knows all things, provided a way for me to receive it through transparent friendships with dear brothers in the faith. Just as how my older brother, Raymond, came alongside me when my dad abandoned me, my brothers in Christ living in Atlanta ran to my aid when I needed them most.

In this book I'm laying my heart on the line for two reasons. First: You're worth it. I bare the scars of all the mistakes I've made so that you can observe them, learn from them, and not make them. I value you as my brother or sister in Christ and entrust you with the content of my heart.

INTRODUCTION

My second reason for laying it all out on the line? I want you to share in the freedom of being captured by God's grace as I have been. There's nothing more heartbreaking for me than to see saints living in the performance trap, not knowing there's a way out through the words of Christ. If you're there now, stay with me. This book will point you toward the truth that Christ wants to lead you out of this personal prison you were not sentenced to live in. The road to freedom is paved with Scripture and illuminated by God the Holy Spirit who desires to navigate you into the loving arms of Father God.

This message of freedom in grace is for all Christians, but I pray that my words are particularly timely to my fellow church planters and pastors and their families. For us, living in the performance trap can be the difference between life and death. Seventy-one percent of pastors reported to the Schaeffer Institute that they are burnt out and wrestle with depression daily, fifteen hundred of us leave the ministry each month because of moral failure or burnout, and 70 percent of pastors say they do not have at least one close friend.² And pastoral suicide is on the rise.³

Shortly after moving to Atlanta, I was stopped in my tracks one morning by a news report about a well-known and loved Atlanta pastor's recent suicide. My wife and I were glued to the television as his family shared about how they hadn't

seen how much internal turmoil he was dealing with. When the reporter talked about the increasing frequency of pastoral suicide and symptoms to watch for, I was floored by how many symptoms were present in my own life!

Elicia asked me if I wrestled with what was being reported. I told her about a sermon John Piper preached about the life and ministry of David Brainerd and how Brainerd on at least twenty-two occasions asked God to take him home because of his battles with physical ailments and depressions.⁴ When I told her I had prayed similar prayers, her eyes began to well up with tears. We prayed together, and she pleaded with me to share my heart with other brothers who were capable of shepherding me through this struggle. The content of this book is the result of the healing process.

By the Holy Spirit's empowering (Romans 8:9-13), you can walk in the freedom Christ has provided you with from sin and the encumbrances that weigh you down (Hebrews 12:1-2). I'm convinced that once you begin to realize that God's unfailing love is being poured out on you nonstop, you will naturally be compelled to proclaim the truth of the gospel to both saints and sinners. The fruit of your labor, when coupled with the supernatural work of God the Holy Spirit, will be made known through the disciples you raise up to enjoy the trap of God's grace. Freedom in Christ from the performance trap comes with a responsibility: to invite others into

INTRODUCTION

a relationship with Him and walk into maturity together with those whom He saves.

It's time to leave our striving for perfection behind. Let's walk in a balanced relationship with Christ according to His Word, all the while enjoying the life everlasting He's given to us upon regeneration.

An aerial, black and white photograph of a city skyline, likely New York City, viewed from a high angle. The city is densely packed with skyscrapers and buildings. A bright light source, possibly the sun, is positioned in the sky, creating a strong lens flare and illuminating the city below. The sky is filled with soft, wispy clouds. The overall mood is dramatic and atmospheric.

PART 1

THE PERFORMANCE TRAP

TRAJECTORY

RELATIONSHIPS

AFFIRMATION

PEERS

Every believer willfully resides inside one of two traps: the performance trap or the trap of God's grace. In the performance trap, we run ourselves ragged trying to find *success*, all in the name of earning God's love. We maintain a lifestyle that's always on the go, and when we fail, we start seeing our holy God as a callous taskmaster who views us no longer as His *beloved* children but as disposable slaves.

And in the midst of the performance trap, we can easily fall into *self-induced legalism*. Self-induced legalists think they can earn a right standing with God by living a life of complete moral perfection. They externally bathe others in grace (unearned favor) while internally holding themselves to an impossible expectation: meeting the demands of their own subjective interpretation of God's righteous laws.

As a self-induced legalist, I used the alarm clock on my cell phone as a whip to "beat my body into submission." Every night before going to bed, no matter how early or late, I would set my alarm to wake me at 5:30 a.m. sharp. Even if I was shepherding in a crisis situation until 3:00 a.m., the law of 5:30 a.m. knew no mercy.

But when my alarm would go off at 5:30 a.m., I (normally exhausted from the day before) would walk over to my phone, turn off the alarm, and convince myself I'd sleep for only a few more minutes. When I woke up an hour or two later, I'd jump

THE PERFORMANCE TRAP

out of bed feeling as if I spent the last hour living in sin because I overslept! Most of my days started with me begging God to forgive me for being selfish, for choosing to sleep rather than pray and have a private devotional time. Needless to say, the remainder of my day was exhausting, as I would try to “work” myself back into a right relationship with God. Seriously, I felt like I wasn’t back in good standing with God until I forced myself to fast from eating lunch.

I woke early most mornings to pray (most of the time interceding for other pastors and Christians), study Scripture, and meditate on the text I was working through. Yet despite this, I could not figure out how to *rest* in Christ’s finished work on my behalf. My struggle with self-induced legalism caused me to believe that God was only pleased with me when I practiced my spiritual disciplines.

I would often look out the window of my legalistic cell and admire the freedom in Christ others had. I would congratulate the brothers and sisters in our local community and offer praises to God for their freedom—only to turn around and become enslaved by the thought, *I’m glad they are free, but I’ll never be able to receive freedom like that*. Deep down I wanted out of this prison, but I never took time to realize that the door to my cell was unlocked and off the hinge! The gospel is the cure for self-induced legalism, and when I failed to remind myself daily of the gospel, I remained trapped in the performance-driven life.

You see, it's one thing to be used by God to communicate truth and see others benefit from it. It's another thing altogether to be the recipient of that same truth by applying it to your own life.

NAMING THE WALLS

When we're inside the performance trap, we can't see its framework, so we remain ignorant of our enslaved condition. But as God led me into grace, I began to see how the trap was shaped.

The performance trap has four walls. Together, these walls spell the word *trap*:

T: The first wall is our *trajectory* in life. This wall represents the direction our life is headed in as we pursue God's will.

R: The second wall deals with our *relationships*. It's constructed by the scars we've amassed from the emotional pain endured through all of our past failed relationships, from childhood to adulthood.

A: The third wall identifies our lack in receiving *affirmation*. Brick by brick we've built this wall out of all the insults that have been hurled at us over the years, and for the mortar we use the bitterness we feel from the lack of affirmation we've received from those we look up to.

THE PERFORMANCE TRAP

P: The final wall is our internal competition with our *peers*. When we don't see the fruits that we desire in our ministries or our lives and yet see fruit in the lives of our friends and family members, we naturally tend to build a wall of hostility between them and us by comparing ourselves to them.

I have found that when my focus is on my trajectory, my relationships, my lack of affirmation, and the success of my peers, mental anguish hovers over me like my own personal rain cloud. It is during these times that I begin to doubt God's call in my life, my effectiveness for His glory, and even my call as a minister of the gospel. It's also during these times that I feel disconnected from both God and His Word, and the Scriptures become black-and-white words on pages that everyone else receives nourishment from except for me.

If you feel this way, there is hope. My conviction is this: If I can communicate the truth of God by coupling it with my own life's transparency, I believe God the Holy Spirit can do the transforming work in your heart that He alone is equipped to do. He can illuminate your heart to see not only the performance trap you're living in but also the exit sign you're being guided to.

Chapter 1

TRAJECTORY

PLANS CHANGE

Before Elicia and I were married, a trend in our dating relationship troubled me. Whenever we settled on plans to do anything, from seeing a movie to deciding whose family's house we would go to first on holidays, it was guaranteed 100 percent of the time that the plan would change.

The issue I had was not with the change itself but with a slight inconsistency that I began to notice. If I initiated the change, Elicia would express frustration, but if she was the one to change plans, my own frustrations went unheeded.

It's understandable for circumstances to change, because life is always in transition. In our day and age, most of us not only expect change but also try to plan for it, as oxymoronic as that sounds. Technology keeps us on our toes as we plug in an address on our phone's GPS only to be rerouted because of accidents or other unforeseeable incidents that happen along the way. Baseball games are rained out, and flights are delayed.

It's impossible to have everything in life go according to every plan we set. We all know there is a high probability that the plan we have in our minds won't come to pass exactly the way we always imagine. But we tend to hold on to the romantic, picture-perfect view of how we wanted our day to go. This tendency comes out in our attitude and how we treat others while we're dealing with disappointment.

Think about it: If this is how we treat our daily plans, how much more invested are we in our life's trajectory and our most dearly cherished dreams? When we face transitions that challenge our life's trajectory, we often cope by creating a romantic view of our trajectory and refusing to let it go. When we strongly desire to make our dreams reality, our flesh and all of its aspects (mind, will, and emotions) romanticize the steps needed to do so. Often this romanticized ideal has no connection to the reality of our current situation. Our goals have tangible and measurable signposts, but in our

TRAJECTORY

fantasies, all the stars align out of reach because we live on the ground and not in the clouds.

Please understand, I'm not saying we need to abandon our dreams. But when doors close and refuse to open, we must begin to assess whether the direction we want to go is in harmony with God's plan for our life. Our chief desire should be to glorify God by advancing the gospel message as we live in community with other saints and make disciples. This truth is a filter to safeguard our hearts as we consider our trajectory.

In my life, a respirator of willful ignorance kept my fantasies alive when I encountered challenges that hindered what I thought was my life's trajectory. Day after day, as the Lord would close doors and answer my prayers in ways I didn't want to hear, I kept refusing to pull the plug on my fantasies. I kept using isolated Scriptures as a tool of manipulation, thinking I could force God to give me what I was asking for. I quoted Psalm 37:4 and Proverbs 3:5-6 in my prayers, trying to hold God hostage until my fantasies became reality. I was convinced that my life *had* to go the way I imagined.

In conversations with other believers, I've noticed that my practice of fueling fantasy with Scripture is a common thread woven into the fabric of human hearts. We use an abundance of isolated Scriptures, presumptuous declarations, and

decrees to distract ourselves from stewarding where we are in our walk with Christ. We search with a conspiracy theorist's passion for signs of *confirmation*—to the point where we'll find them even when they don't exist. We listen to the words people tell us and force-feed them into our fantasy in order to keep it alive. If we're not careful, when we merge these fantasies with the sense of God's calling on our lives, we can begin trying to convince ourselves and others that we are stepping out in faith because we know God's trajectory for our lives. When reality hits and the fantasy that, deep down inside, we knew was false finally ends, confusion begins to set in. We lose hope regarding our life's trajectory. Some who have landed here have walked away from their profession of faith in God, while others, like myself, will admit that this reality check was a needed wake-up call for their heart to be realigned with God's.

THE PRESSURE OF TRAJECTORY

When I speak about this wall in the performance trap called *trajectory*, I'm identifying the progress we make while traveling on life's path toward becoming what we're *supposed to be*. I'm fully convinced every believer shares the same God-given job description: the great commission (Matthew 28:19-20). We are all missionaries called by God to make Him famous in our world—and our mission field is every piece of ground that we walk on throughout the day. Where we live, work, and shop *is* our mission field.

TRAJECTORY

Yet although we as the body of Christ bear this corporate calling, God has also provided each of us with the ability to be good at something in order to make an impact on the mission field He's placed us in. These individual gifts allow us to proclaim His excellence to those who appreciate our work. The question we all must ask is, "God, how do You want to use me for Your glory?" The answer to that question and how God leads us to do what He's called us to is what I call our life's *trajectory*. Please understand, not every Christian is called to lead or pastor a local church (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:6-16) or be in professional ministry. We are all called to be excellent in our careers while impacting the area we live in through evangelistic and discipleship efforts that lead back to our local churches.

Our trajectory is not something sinful in itself, because most often it's what God has called us to do *while* we're living on a mission, making disciples of all ethnicities (the great commission). The danger we often face is when we lose balance, taking our eyes off Christ and instead fixing our gaze on the ideal destination we want to arrive at with or without Him. It is dangerous to assume God exists for our benefit instead of living a life for the sole purpose of glorifying Him (Isaiah 48:11; 1 Corinthians 6:20; 10:31; 1 Peter 4:11).

For some of us the destination is earning a degree from college, landing that dream job, writing a book, securing a record

deal, starting a family, owning a home, planting a church, being in full-time ministry, or enjoying retirement. None of these destinations are in themselves sinful, but when we lack the correct perspective on our trajectory, our destination turns into a place of idolatry. We've allowed our hearts to stray from the course of life God desires to lead us on. We must regularly ask ourselves this gut-punching question: *Do I still want to arrive at my ideal destination if Jesus or His body, the church, isn't there?*

Surrounding the trajectory of our lives are three pressures that can distract us, causing us to take our eyes off Christ, remove our trust from God, and place it instead in our own abilities, gifts, and talents. These three pressures are the *tension*, *turmoil*, and *timing* of our trajectory.

Tension

We are constantly fighting the tension between what we desire to become, what others want us to become, and who Christ has called us to be. Sometimes we sense God leading us toward a specific destination, but we feel like the road to get there is taking too long. We find comfort in seeing the finish line from the starting line—but God doesn't always supply us with such a breathtaking view. In those times, we doubt Him, His Word, and even the calling He's placed on our lives.

To make matters more complex, family and friends often feel they have insight as to what our trajectory is. Conversations

TRAJECTORY

with them are filled with the dreams they have for us, and sometimes it seems as if they're trying to live vicariously through us. Phrases such as "if I were your age again," "I didn't have the opportunities you have," and "if I could do it all over, I would . . ." become cues for us to mentally check out of the conversation. These people mean well, but their comments and suggestions may block the clear picture of the future we once had in mind.

As I mentioned in the introduction, I spent thirteen years of my early life fully engaged in the sport of wrestling. By God's grace I had success early on, winning my first state championship at the age of seven. By my freshman year in high school, I had won five additional state championships, two regional runner-up silver medals, and the attention and interest of a few colleges. No one in my household had ever been to college, and my family didn't have the money to send me. So I was told at a young age that the only way I would be able to go to college was through wrestling. And growing up in a gang-infested neighborhood, I felt I had only three options for what to do with my life: join a gang, join the military, or go to college on a wrestling scholarship.

I couldn't join a gang because the Crips in my neighborhood who had dropped out of school wouldn't have my back while I attended a school that was dominated by Bloods, Latin Counts, and Spanish Disciples. My cousins and friends, with

whom I spent most of my time, lived on the other side of town; joining their gang wouldn't make sense, because when I went back to my neighborhood I wouldn't have any backing. I didn't want to join the military because I didn't want to go through boot camp. So my only option was to be good enough at wrestling to earn a college scholarship.

Now, that doesn't sound like a bad plan . . . except for the fact that by the age of ten, I no longer loved wrestling. In fact, my hatred for it was so deep—the stress level to make weight, to win every single one of my matches, and to continue gaining national respect was so intense—that I started losing my hair. Simultaneously I found myself enduring severe stomach pains that sent me to the doctor repeatedly for MRIs, blood tests, and specialist consultations.

When my mom began to notice the missing patches of hair on my head, and the remnants in the bathroom trash can, she intervened. During the family talk that night, my mom and my dad asked me if I wanted to continue to wrestle. Now, for the outsider the easy answer was a simple no—but as you know from my story, I felt that if I said no I would lose my relationship with my dad. I also felt the pressure of knowing that the only way out of the poverty-stricken community I called home was wrestling—and don't neglect the fact that I only ten years old! So I said begrudgingly that I wanted to keep wrestling and that I would work to manage my stress

TRAJECTORY

better. I felt like I was on the verge of throwing my life away at a young age. I found myself competing in a grueling mental wrestling match. My opponent was the tension of my life's trajectory. The reward for winning this match wasn't a mere plaque; it was a successful life outside of the poor neighborhood I lived in and a chance to do something with my life other than become another statistic.

Sadly, I must confess that up until two years ago, I was still worried about my trajectory. The tension at that point in life dealt solely with my ministry. God allowed me to pastor an urban church, and I was offered more opportunities to speak at conferences and write books. The feedback and affirmation I received from people were based solely on my ministry endeavors. I became convinced that if I wanted to be embraced, I had to preach, rap, teach, and write as excellently as possible—and that if I didn't, I would lose my family, my friends, my church, and my relationship with God.

Conversations were one-way streets. People would walk away more confident in God while I stood there feeling like an ATM. People would press my buttons, get what they wanted by making a withdrawal, and walk away, leaving me alone until they needed to repeat the process. I felt like there was no escape from this attention because, after all, this was what God *called* me to do. My calling was beginning to feel more and more like a prison sentence instead

of a privilege. I was being torn apart by the tension of what I thought people wanted from me and what I thought God wanted from me.

I'm the one who is to blame—not God or the precious people who sought me out for shepherding. My lack of balance in life and ministry kept me in a place where I was a glutton for punishment. Looking back, it's safe to say I was an ATM because I felt that I needed to flood my life conversations with *All Things Ministry* and nothing else.

As you know from the war going on in your soul, the struggle with the tension of life's trajectory is real. You know the depth of the dreams and calling God placed on your life for His glory, yet you can't see it through the nightmare of your current circumstances. In this tension we're prone to make God a genie in the Bible—we rub a few verses together that we've taken out of context, hoping they'll manipulate Him into making our future trajectory manifest itself immediately. I challenge you to avoid doing this, as it only furthers a distorted view of our God and His Word.

Instead, we must work through Scripture to identify God's pattern of using this tension to mature us spiritually. His desire for us is not instant gratification but rather growth in Christ as we walk out our faith with the saints in our church (Ephesians 4:11-16) and endure together whatever life

TRAJECTORY

throws our way (James 1:2-5). God has already determined our steps, and in our daily walk with Him we progressively *discover* what He's *determined*.

Embracing the tension of our trajectory helps us depend on God as we mature in Christ. And walking alongside brothers and sisters in our local body while we do this helps us work through the turmoil we face relating to our life's trajectory.

Turmoil

We can face turmoil regarding our life's trajectory because of the anxiety we feel about our stewardship of the spiritual gifts and talents God has blessed us with—and whom we're honestly looking to benefit while using them. First Corinthians 12:11 tells us, "One and the same Spirit is active in all these, distributing to each person as He wills." The word *these* in this verse points back to the gifts Paul listed in 12:8-10. Verses 4-7 identify God the Holy Spirit as the one who gives gifts to each and every believer as He determines. And as C. K. Barrett expresses, there are two benefits of God the Holy Spirit being solely responsible for believers' gifts: "so that none has occasion for boasting, or for a sense of inferiority."¹

When it comes to using our Holy Spirit-given spiritual gifts, we must realize that our flesh can fall victim to pride. We distort the spiritual gifts the Holy Spirit has given us when we use them *solely* for personal edification or gain. In the

entire context of 1 Corinthians 12–14, Paul communicates that the *primary* use of spiritual gifts should be in love, for the edification of the body of Christ. This includes 1 Corinthians 14:4, where Paul says, “Anyone who speaks in a tongue edifies themselves, but the one who prophesies edifies the church” (NIV).

Some scholars interpret “edifies themselves” as a positive action, while others see it as negative. Gordon Fee says that Paul was speaking in a positive manner regarding the “personal edifying of the believer that comes through private prayer and praise.”² This interpretation doesn’t fit the context Paul addresses, which is in a church service with other people present, not a person’s personal time in prayer. Robert Wilkin says that Paul was speaking negatively about the gift of tongues being used for personal edification: “The person speaking in a tongue (uninterpreted) edifies [only] himself. He is not operating in love because love *does* not seek its own (1 Corinthians 13:5). The Corinthians must understand that the gifts are not given for personal enhancement or for building up their egos (cf. 1 Corinthians 12:7; 1 Peter 4:10-11).”³

Adding balance, Thomas Constable offers great insight as to *how* the person is edified:

The person who spoke in tongues in church edified *only* “himself” or herself. He or she praised God and

TRAJECTORY

prayed to God while speaking in a tongue. He or she also benefited from realizing that the Holy Spirit was enabling him or her to speak a language that he or she had not studied. This would have encouraged the tongues-speaker, but this speaker did not edify himself or herself in the sense of profiting *from the message* the Holy Spirit had given. He did not know what his own words meant unless he also had the gift of interpretation, but in this discussion Paul left that gift out of the picture almost entirely (cf. 1 Corinthians 14:5). Had he known what he was saying, he could have communicated this to those present in their language. . . . Paul's point was that edifying the church is more important than edifying oneself. He did not deny that speaking in tongues does on some level edify the tongues-speaker (cf. 1 Corinthians 14:14-15, 18-19).⁴

Constable believes, in essence, that the reality of a believer's edification is rooted in the fact that they are active in using the spiritual gift God blessed them with but that no one else would benefit from the use of the gift, and the church at large would not be edified.

I walk you through these different perspectives to show you that Paul's use of "edifies" suggests that the use of spiritual gifts is *primarily* for the edification of the Body and not *solely*

for the building of a platform for the individual. When we begin to use the spiritual gifts given to us for our own personal advancement, we run the risk of becoming arrogant, thinking *we're* God's gift to the church. On the other hand, if we start comparing ourselves to our brothers and sisters in the Body who have been given different gifts, we may feel like second-class citizens in the Kingdom; the feeling of inferiority can lead us down the path of self-pity. Arrogance and inferiority create the turmoil we feel regarding our life's trajectory as it relates to our spiritual gifts. We're to counter these thoughts by remembering two truths: God the Holy Spirit distributes spiritual gifts as He desires, and the gifts we've been individually given should be used primarily for building up the saints in the local church.

In addition to all of this, God also provides each of us with various talents and natural abilities to do certain things with excellence, for His glory alone (1 Corinthians 10:31). Some of us have a giftedness to perform musically without ever having one lesson, while others have talents in the areas of academics, cooking, fine arts, or sports. Often with these talents comes a desire to improve our abilities, and we search for training and opportunities to hone the craft He's given us. There's nothing wrong with having been given a talent by God since every gift He gives is good (James 1:17). The challenge for us lies in stewarding our talent and, when we excel, giving all glory to the Lord instead of to ourselves.

TRAJECTORY

Many saints who are dear to my heart have confirmed that God blessed me with a unique gifting in the area of communication. In elementary school, the music teacher pulled me aside one day and asked if I would accept the lead role in the school Christmas play. I didn't really understand what was going on, but I knew that I wanted to be on stage to entertain people (I was still an unbeliever at this point in my life). In the fourth grade I got my first taste of entertaining people and receiving praise for it, and I was hooked! Over the next several years I did anything and everything—from rapping to playing the trumpet—to get back out there on the stage. By high school I began to see that people paid attention to what I had to say . . . and to a pride-consumed, sinful heart, attention is the drug of choice.

The best example of this tendency happened my sophomore year of high school. My speech teacher told me I needed to stop blowing off my speech assignments and start getting credit for the gift of communication with which I was blessed. She said I was bound to flunk the semester but offered to cut me a deal: If I gave a demonstration speech, all would be forgiven for the *entire* semester, and I would get a passing grade. There was just one problem: I couldn't think of anything I could use as a prop for a demonstration. But when she asked if I had any books in my locker that had recently inspired me, I remembered the Bible in my backpack.

Now let me explain exactly why I had a Bible in my backpack. I had been raised in church since the age of five, and I was constantly told that if I were ashamed of Jesus, He would be ashamed of me on the last day. And I figured that one way to not be ashamed of Jesus was to carry a Bible with me at school. So I didn't really see the Bible as God's authoritative Word; rather, it was a good-luck charm that I kept in case someone asked me if I was ashamed of Jesus.

As I stood in front of the class with that Bible, I had no idea what I was going to say—but I knew I had to hit a home run to pass the class. Over the next ten minutes, I began to speak with conviction about the Bible being God's Word, regurgitating pieces of sermons I'd heard time and time again. When I was done, I said I believed the Bible was true and that's why I carried it with me.

At the end of my speech two extraordinary things happened. First, my entire class—made up of inner-city public school kids from the hood—sat utterly silent, staring at me. Silence in an inner-city classroom was a complete culture shock! Second, my teacher looked down at her grade book and began to move her shoulders almost uncontrollably. I initially thought she was laughing because my lifestyle didn't match anything I said. To my surprise, she took her glasses off before looking at me with tears streaming down her face! I couldn't believe it—this teacher, who had on a few occasions

earlier in the semester kicked me out of class and threatened to call security on me, was crying.

She mumbled the word “beautiful” over and over before she was able to put together a full sentence: “Damon, that was absolutely beautiful! You are an extremely gifted communicator. This was one of the best sermons I have ever heard in my life!”

Now, you would assume I was moved with conviction by her affirmation—perhaps even moved to repent for my sins and get my life right with Christ. But that was not to be, at least on this day. Boastfully I responded, “So I’m getting an A, right?” Talk about arrogance personified. That was me, in the flesh, using my God-given talent for my own glory and not His.

After the Lord saved me, He began to work on my heart regarding proper stewardship of the gift of communication He blessed me with. But over the course of time, as He opened doors for me to preach and teach, I began to lose focus on stewarding the spiritual gift of teaching and the ability to communicate. I began to wrestle with wanting a greater platform, comparing myself to others and feeling inferior.

The more opportunities God provided me to preach or teach, the more angst I felt toward not being the “best”

at using spiritual gifts for Christ's church. This angst was amplified because of my insecurity. As other saints and believers affirmed the spiritual gifts and talents God blessed me with, they would also seek to speak into my life by telling me what they thought God wanted to do through me for all of my days. Most often these words centered on our church growing in both membership and financial stability, me receiving greater opportunities through speaking in larger conferences, and me modeling what it looks like for American ethnic minorities indigenous to the urban core to obtain leadership status inside the world of evangelicalism.

Sometimes I was told I was going to be the next Francis Chan or John MacArthur but with an urban swag. Deep down I began to believe what others were saying, and once I allowed my mind to run away with their words, a disconnection from reality took place, and the affair with a fantasy ministry began. The turmoil I faced forced me to wrestle daily with insecurities that had previously been nonexistent. If a conference didn't invite me back the next year, I felt like a failure. If months went by without someone asking me to preach or teach somewhere, I thought God no longer wanted to use me because of some *secret* sin I couldn't identify. Turmoil fed pride's hunger in my heart. Daily I confessed any and every sin I could think of, even going back into my childhood. I was sure that once I

TRAJECTORY

found the hidden sin still staining my record before God, He'd open the doors of heaven and bless me with more opportunities to minister.

Living in the performance trap can cause our minds to run a mile a minute when we lie down at night. As we toss and turn, turmoil causes us to dwell on thoughts contrary to the gospel. We question God's love for us and assume He's forgotten us. If we give in to turmoil, we'll try to rush God's plan, attempting to open doors in our own strength because our omniscient Father seems off with His timing and needs our help.

Timing

In the performance trap, tension and turmoil combine to serve as the double-edged sword that lodges deep in the heart of our ambition. With every life movement we make, the sword drives deeper into our souls, causing restless pain. We can live in fear that making one wrong decision will ultimately cancel out the trajectory others sense for our lives. Fear can paralyze us to the point that we feel we can't make any substantial decisions in life unless we have the comfort of at least a dozen people affirming our decisions. When I was in the midst of this anxiety, I constantly asked God *when* what others saw would become a reality. When I felt like I wasn't following in the footsteps of both Chan and MacArthur, a sense of pain would consume me as if life had passed me by and God had written me off as damaged goods.

What got me through these times were fantasies about what seemed to be “around the next corner” in life. These fantasies served as my emotional painkiller.

But I began to grow immune to the regular dose of fantasy, as happens with any painkiller, and I needed something more. At the same time, I saw no sign of what people were saying my trajectory was. I felt like a failure. The season of harvesting and seeing an increase evaded me daily. During times of private prayer I asked God why people identified fruitfulness as part of His trajectory for my life while I felt sentenced to a ministry filled with laborious plowing, planting, and watering that rarely produced any fruit.

The pressure of the timing weighed me down emotionally. My daily opponent was the idea that I was another millennial who suffered from having big dreams and little success. Worry and doubt must have tracked me down on Twitter because they both followed me every minute of every day, *favoriting* and *retweeting* every one of my insecurities. If anything I’ve shared resonates with your heart as it does for me, then you know this pressure is real and that it cripples us to the point that we paralyze ourselves from being effective agents of God’s grace.

You may feel paralyzed in your walk with Christ because you’re making seemingly little progress toward what you

TRAJECTORY

sense God has called you to do. Anxiety, doubt, and frustration might have your heart flirting with thoughts of giving up, throwing in the towel, no longer being faithful to God or His body, the church. In those moments of spiritual warfare, I challenge you to follow the apostle Paul's instructions in Ephesians 6:17: "Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is God's word." Paul challenges us to guard the most vulnerable part of our body: our mind.

How do we do this? By taking every one of our thoughts captive to Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5) and dwelling on things that edify us (Philippians 4:8). Whenever we think God has stopped loving us, has abandoned us, or is not pleased with us, we are to take those very thoughts and compare them to God's Word. If our thoughts are true, they will line up with Scripture. But if our thoughts are not supported in God's Word—and thoughts that make us feel paralyzed in our faith are not!—we must reject and renounce them. The key to victory in these moments is reading God's Word, memorizing it, and quoting it. The perfect model we have of this practice is Jesus in Matthew 4:1-11. When Satan tempted Him, He didn't physically beat Satan down, nor did He call on legions of angels to take care of Satan. Instead, He quoted Scripture. Scripture provides us with profound insight about how to respond to the tension, turmoil, and timing of our trajectories.

THE TRAJECTORY OF ABRAHAM

Abraham's story in Scripture speaks to those of us trying to navigate through life while dealing with the pressure of our life's trajectory. God asked Abraham to leave the country that he knew because He was going to bless him by making him a great nation (Genesis 12–15). God also promised Abraham that his family line would serve as a blessing to all the nations on earth—and indeed, his story points us to an eternal hope in God that was promised through the person and work of Jesus Christ. Abraham provides us with a model of what it looks like to trust God while enduring the pressures of tension, turmoil, and timing.

Abraham's Response to the Tension

In Genesis 12:2-3, God asked Abraham to go somewhere he had never been and to stay in a place that was uncomfortable. At this point, Abraham was seventy-five years old. It's not as if God came to Abraham with this message while he was young, when life would have been a little bit more flexible. Put yourself in Abraham's shoes. In that season of life, you wouldn't be dealing with SAT or ACT scores, varsity tryouts, or social media updates. Or contemplating whom you're going to marry or what career you should consider going into. Or focusing on signing the final documents to secure a home loan or working sixty-plus hours a week in order to climb the corporate ladder. And you wouldn't be settling into the new normal of retirement, ushered in by an empty nest and an RV purchase.

TRAJECTORY

Rather, our text identifies Abraham within a time of life where permanency, not transition, is the goal. Certainly he must have felt the tension between what God was calling him to do and what everyone else in his culture expected of him. As uncomfortable as it was for Abraham to receive those instructions from God, he still chose to obey God's call, leaving his lifelong comfort zone.

Remember, the tension in our life involves our calling from God as well as what others want our life to look like. Our initial call from God was to the Cross, so that we might receive salvation through the work of Christ. We once spent our lives running from grace, and then all of a sudden we heard the gospel preached and were moved by God the Holy Spirit to put our trust in the work of Jesus and be born again (John 3:3-8).

Perhaps our family and friends had no issues with us *finding religion*, but over the course of time when they saw a genuine change in us, they may have begun to express doubts because seriously following God looks like giving up a life that chiefly pursues personal comfort and pleasure.

God's commands have been known to shake up the life trajectories of those who follow Him. The goal is to focus not on the trajectory we desire but on obeying God's command. In Abraham's case, he was commanded to move away from

his entire family. Imagine the tension when he dropped this news on everyone at the dinner table! The Bible doesn't capture such a moment, but I assume the air was filled with more than awkward silence. Yet despite whatever resistance he got from family and even his wife, Abraham chose to push through the tension by obeying God.

Abraham's Response to the Turmoil

When we get to Genesis 15:2-3, we see that the question Abraham asked earlier—*what would You give me?*—has now transitioned into a declaration: *You haven't given me anything.* This transition is the unveiling of turmoil. We sense God leading our life in a specific direction, we have a desire to obey God by using our spiritual gifts, but we're not making any progress toward our trajectory being realized. Like Abraham, our *yes, Lord* turns into *when, Lord?* It's here where insecurities cause us to question our identity in Christ—to the point where we may begin to wonder if we're even saved!

Abraham probably struggled with something like this. There's a ten-year gap between Genesis 15:2-3 and Genesis 16:3. Abraham was now a vivacious eighty-five-year-old who had endured a decade of constant transition. Yet in the midst of this turmoil, Abraham continued to believe God and obey Him, even when there was still no child given to him and his wife as God had promised.

There are times in life when we see the promises of God as being delayed—but what we see as God’s *procrastination* is actually His *preparation* of our hearts so we will be able to steward well what He blesses us with. In Abraham’s case, God was preparing him the son who would end up being in the lineage of Jesus Christ. This type of realized promise would take a great deal of stewardship—not some haphazard fleeting excitement that fades when the newness wears off. It does us good to wait patiently for God during our season of preparation.

Abraham’s Response to the Timing

In Genesis 21:5, Abraham finally receives his promised son, Isaac. By this time, Abraham is a hundred years old. Let’s look at the timeline: Abraham received a promise at the age of seventy-five that was not realized until the age of one hundred. Let this sink in—what took you and me five minutes to read took Abraham twenty-five years to live! That’s twenty-five years of failures and victories, lows and highs captured for you and me to learn from. Although Abraham did not perfectly obey God, God’s grace saw him through a life filled with simple mistakes. And as I said earlier, I believe his story remains today to point us not to his success but rather to God’s faithfulness to keep His promises—specifically through the incarnation of Jesus Christ, who was born in the line of Abraham. God’s timing is perfect, and it is part of a plan we can’t begin to fathom.

THE PRESCRIPTION FROM SCRIPTURE

Since Abraham's story points us to Christ, let's fast-forward out of the Old and into the New Testament to Romans 4:20-24, where we see how Abraham's response directly affects those of us who are in Christ:

He did not waver in unbelief at God's promise but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, because he was fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform. Therefore, it was credited to him for righteousness. Now *it was credited to him* was not written for Abraham alone, but also for us. [Emphasis added]

The word *credited* was used frequently in the financial world of Paul's day, communicating the action someone performed when he put money into another person's bank account.⁵ Paul used this word to unpack the reality that Abraham's belief was not in himself, because he was too old to father a child. Rather, his belief was in God. Abraham believed that God's promise in Genesis 12 was something he would receive simply because God said it. The Scripture tells us that before Abraham received what God promised him, he already believed God, who then credited Abraham with righteousness.

As you look at the passage, take notice of the phrase "it was credited to him was not written for Abraham alone, but also

for us” (Romans 4:23-24). This truth parallels nicely with Romans 15:4, which says, “Whatever was written in the past was written for our instruction, so that we may have hope through endurance and through the encouragement from the Scriptures.” The word Paul used for *endurance* means “the capacity to hold out or bear up in the face of difficulty.”⁶ God has provided us with encouragement during those seasons in life when we’re questioning our trajectory because we feel like our fate keeps avoiding us. According to Paul, the narrative of saints in the Scriptures was documented to give us models of what endurance looks like in the face of the tension, turmoil, and timing of our trajectory. So when you’re battling fear, doubt, and unbelief, get into the Scriptures and learn from the lives of other saints.

We must work to realize that, like Abraham, all of us were born spiritually in debt because of sin. We were not righteous; in fact, we were the opposite. We should be encouraged by Abraham’s story—he serves as a model for what it looks like to believe in God and have our debt wiped away and replaced by a deposit of righteousness into our account.

You see, we were all born in a state of guilt before God because we inherited a sinful nature from Adam (Romans 5:12) and were seasoned sinners because it enslaved us (John 8:34). While in this state of being, we did not have the innate ability to change ourselves. We needed to believe what

God has said regarding how we can be “declared righteous.” The only way for us to be declared righteous is by believing that Jesus Christ is the only qualified Savior to save sinners out of their state of sinfulness (John 14:6). We’re declaring spiritual bankruptcy.

What happens next is truly amazing. God meets us where we are, hears our cry of spiritual bankruptcy, forgives us for our sins, and then credits to our account an unlimited amount of righteousness! The righteousness we are given comes directly from Jesus Christ, who is Abraham’s promise realized. So what we must understand is that when we embraced Christ as Savior, God not only forgave us for our sins but also clothed us in the righteousness of Christ. When He sees us, He sees the perfect life of Christ that covers us (Romans 13:14; Galatians 3:27).

So what does all of this have to do with trajectory? Our life’s trajectory should not be focused on what others want us to become or even on what we want to become, especially if our desires are not in harmony with making disciples. We should no longer fuel our fantasies with romantic future plans that are unlikely to become reality. Rather, in our life’s trajectory we should focus on gaining a greater understanding of who we are in Christ Jesus. As we understand who we are in Christ, we will become content in the

TRAJECTORY

journey of life on which God walks with us while we're living in community with other saints in our local body.

By understanding our identity in Christ, we will apply the endurance we've been given by God to persevere through the season of preparation in which God has positioned us. With our identity in Christ at the forefront of our mind, we'll rejoice during our seemingly endless seasons of plowing, planting, and watering. In Christ alone will we be able to enjoy a freedom from the pressure of our trajectory and a renewed trust in God.