

WARRIOR FOR GOD

ONE MAN'S JOURNEY WITH JESUS

TRISTAN MOWREY



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CHAPTER 1: FADING INNOCENCE

There is a time in life when you know nothing of the world except that playing in the creek on the back forty acres is what you want to do all day and your best friend's name is Socks, Spot, or Daisy. When you don't know much of the world outside your home. When you are innocent. *Sin* is a word that you may overhear your mom and dad talk about after Sunday church, pick up from TV, or maybe see on a book cover. At the time, you have no idea what the word even means. For me, this time of life was the best.

I remember when it all started to change. I saw people lying to each other or taking things that weren't theirs, and I wondered why. Why do parents fight? Why do some get divorced? Why are some people mean and angry? Once I became more aware of others' behavior around me, I realized the world wasn't as I thought it was. That is when I think my innocence started to fade. This moment happens to everyone, some at a very early age and others in their preteens. I remember mine was right around the ripe age of twelve.

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Once I became aware of sin, it was everywhere I looked. I started seeing it when I looked in the mirror and when I looked at those around me. When I went to church, the preacher talked about sin and how I would go to hell for it. It seemed to me that the main focus of my relationship with God was to make sure I wouldn't go to hell, and that if I sinned, He wouldn't want anything to do with me. I now know that this isn't true, but as a child, this was my first impression of God. He was scary and angry, and if I did anything wrong, I would face eternal damnation.

I had a very hard time at this age of "awakening." It was painful to be able to see beyond the surface layer of people's smiles and see the sadness, anger, and despair within. I saw we lived in a world full of sin and every person I knew was either running from God or trying to be perfect enough to avoid hell.

As I entered my teenage years, I discovered how strong the pull to sin was and deeply felt the judgment of others. I still made sure to memorize my Bible verses and go to church on Sundays with my family. However, the whole time it felt impossible to be good enough. I tried and tried to be the perfect son, brother, and friend, but I always seemed to fail in one way or

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another. This vicious cycle was the reason I started to set very high expectations and standards for myself. My surroundings told me I needed to be flawless and successful.

Going Deeper

God's heart for His people is not for us to feel guilty for losing our innocence. We unfortunately live in a world rife with sinful thoughts, actions, and mindsets. We all fall into one or more of the enemies' traps in our lives. As Romans 3:23-24 tells us, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." The best part of the Scripture is "all are justified freely...by Christ Jesus." Jesus took all sins from all sinners. He didn't draw a line in the sand and say some are forgiven while others aren't. *All* are justified freely!

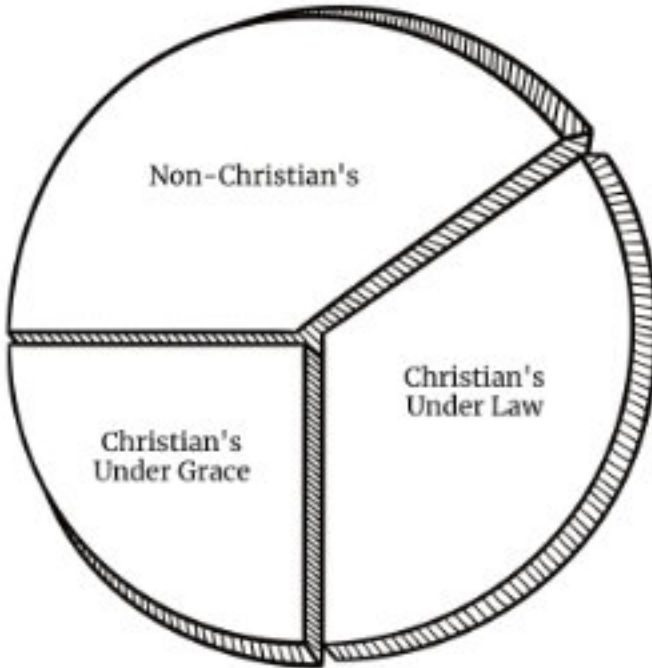
CHAPTER 2: UNACHIEVABLE STANDARDS

During my late teenage years and into my adult life, I

operated by the Old-Religion “eye for an eye” and “earn my place in Heaven” mindsets. These mindsets trace back to the Old Testament, when the Law of God was enacted with the Ten Commandments. I tried to live up to those expectations and those commandments, and when I failed, I felt like I needed to punish myself. At first, my self-punishment comprised of increasingly risky acts that would cause me pain. After those stopped being effective, I started burning myself with fire. I also took scalding hot showers—the hotter the water, the more sin was washing away. I felt better, more worthy, because that was how the Law of God worked. I had to punish myself for any mental or physical sin I thought I committed. My innocence at this point faded to nothing. As a teenager I remember thinking that faith stopped with Jesus dying on the cross. I did not truly understand what His death meant. On some level I knew He died for my sins, but I could not grasp how one man's sacrifice could really wash away all my sins from the past, the present, and the future.

I was a Christian who didn't understand what it meant to be Christ-like. I believed in Jesus, but I was still living under the old Law of God. *{Figure 2.1}* I didn't

Figure 2.1



know that after Jesus died on the cross, the old Law was fulfilled and a new was created. That Jesus' death was actually the only way to break that old Law. I was not the only person who felt this way. Many were raised to live under this old Law and carry life's burdens as if they were ours to carry. I attended many churches during this time that didn't preach anything past the Crucifixion. I did not yet recognize that laws and rules provide a sense of control to those who are thought to

be responsible for the fates of many; that it's easier to move a flock of sheep with the fear that the dog may bite than with the voice of the Shepherd.

The grace of God was a foreign concept to me at this time. God's grace is not earned, nor is it something you can ever fully grasp. I was trying to earn every little ounce of "hell avoidance" that being nice or obeying my parents could get me. I was constantly trying to be that "good son of God." The Law that was preached over me started to stir up a new resentment in me. The resentment boiled and brewed because I couldn't live up to the expectations and the standards that were put on me, by myself and others. The resentment slowly but inevitably turned into anger. I lashed out multiple times as a teenager. I was angry, and in my anger, I was destructive. The punishment I felt I deserved grew ever greater. At one point, I wished I had died before learning about the sin in this world. I held that gun loaded and ready, but I could not pull the trigger. God flooded my mind with the fact that I would not go to heaven if I took my own life. I felt out of control, and the intention to take my own life put me back in control, but still I could not do it. Even more than I wanted control, I wanted to go to heaven.

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I had been taught more of what God was against and hated than of His love and grace. I was taught that if I got a tattoo, did drugs, had sex before marriage, watched porn, stole, cheated, or lied, I was going straight to hell. Under the pressure of approaching adulthood and yet still dealing with issues I had had since I was a young child, I ended up having a mental breakdown. I couldn't handle the pressure anymore.

I started seeing a therapist. I remember keeping calm and collected and not saying anything for the first forty-five minutes of our hour-long sessions. However, by the last fifteen minutes, I guess I couldn't hold it in any longer. I would dump every thought, image, and decision that was bothering me out to the therapist. Then she hid the clocks in her office, thinking it would help me open up sooner, but it didn't. After a while, she passed me on to another therapist. He didn't do much but prescribe me pills. I did as I was told and took them, but they numbed my mind and made me sleep all the time. And I still had all that angst and condemnation rolling around in my head and heart. During this time, though, I learned to bury the anger and put on a smile for the world. My perfectionist side

came out in full force. I was determined to be that “good son of God” no matter the cost.

Going Deeper

The Law of God is impossible to fulfill. As 2 Corinthians 3:10-11 tells us, “For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory. And if what was transitory came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!” Jesus is our enduring glory. His sacrifice is what allows us to put all our burdens on Him and step out from under the condemnation. And as Romans 8:1-2 adds, “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death.” Jesus is the answer.

CHAPTER 3: TIDAL WAVE OF GRACE

The year I turned thirty started out horrible. I lost my big brother without any warning. He was in the prime of his life, and just like that he was gone. I went numb.

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I couldn't comprehend the loss, so I didn't deal with it. I just wanted to be strong for everyone else around me. I wasn't necessarily putting on a happy face, but I wasn't allowing myself to feel the sadness. I started to handle all aspects of my life with that same numbness—except work. I had followed in my big brother's footsteps and entered the tech field when I was in my twenties. Now, I dug my heels into my job and career. I couldn't control things going on around me, but I could control how I performed at work. As a result, my job started to become a huge part of who I was.

Over the course of that year, everything just kind of fell away. I lost interest in love and ended a marriage. I lost interest in having a house and sold it. I felt like God was stripping things away from me. I thought I was being punished for the sinful things I had done in my past. I thought somehow I deserved all that was happening to me. I am a very logical person, so it made sense that my world had to be evened out. I had been given the ability to go to college and have a great job. I took this year as being my turn to lose. I gave up completely on ever being in a relationship again or owning a house. I would live the bachelor life until it was time to go to Heaven.

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The very last day of that crappy year, December 31, 2011, was the day my life shifted again. That day I decided to take a number from one of my brother's friends. This woman was someone my brother had wanted me to meet for years. With him on my mind, I said sure. I had such a hardened heart that I thought, "I'll just dump every piece of baggage and dirty secret I have on her." The very first phone call, I unloaded all my skeletons. I was trying to drive her away, but she didn't seem to mind. I know I weird-ed her out, but she took everything with grace and love. That was the first time in my life someone had showed me such grace. This acceptance—that no matter what I had done in the past, I was accepted as a good person—perplexed me. The grace that I saw in her took me aback. I wondered what was different in her mindset that she was able to think this way. She told me about her life and upbringing, which wasn't easy. She had her own struggles and sadness, but she handled it all with a big smile. I did not understand how someone with such a hard start in life could be so happy. Over time I realized what was different about her was the fact that she walked every day holding hands with Jesus under the grace of God. I did not know this part of God, but I knew

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I wanted more. With God's blessing and His grace on us (unbeknownst to me), I married this godly woman.

Thanks to my wife, I started to learn that there is this whole other part of God and Jesus that I never knew about—grace. Grace is unmerited favor that God gave us. He gave it by sending His Son, Jesus Christ, to die a death that He did not deserve but accepted willingly. He took the final sacrifice required for the sins of the world so that we could finally live an eternity with God. I had never looked at Jesus' death on the cross in such a way before. I had never understood the overwhelming freedom that I could have. I didn't have to punish myself anymore. He wanted me and He accepted me just the way I was.

I had tried and failed many times in life to put down the things that caused me harm. For example, I started smoking after losing my brother. It was a habit that turned into a coping mechanism for me. I tried to quit so many times. But as this tidal wave of grace washed over me, I grabbed my remaining packet of cigarettes and threw them in the trash. That was the last time I picked up a cigarette. I was only able to do this because I had God's grace helping me. Another addiction I had was getting lost in my head. I would disconnect from

reality whenever I could and slip into a world I had created in my mind. This may not sound like a big deal, because everyone dreams, but I would get depressed by real life because it was not as good as the life I imagined. I fell to wishing that my fake reality was real. But God's grace revealed the joys of real life and the destructiveness of this habit. God showed me that everyone has emptiness and we try to fill it with everything except Him. He helped me feel whole after He removed the sin in my life, and that is the greatest part of the love of Jesus: He never leaves you empty. He always fills the inner void with what you need to make you feel whole.

Going Deeper

I had to accept that God did truly forgive my sins and that each day moving forward I was a new man. As 2 Corinthians 5:17 tells us, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come. The old has gone, the new is here!" God accepted me knowing I would still struggle throughout the rest of my life, but He would be with me every step of the way. And Deuteronomy 31:6 says, "Be strong and courageous. Do

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not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.” Now, I am not saying you will never deal with sinful thoughts or desires, but their hold over you will weaken. Once you experience the love of God, that is what you’ll find yourself yearning for more of.

CHAPTER 4: SURRENDERING

Life went on and God continued to amaze me. He did not leave me, in the good times and the bad that followed. He continually showed up and showed off. God guided my life even when I tried to put on the brakes and dig my heels in. Jesus loves us with such an intensity that He can’t leave us where we think we are “okay.” He always knows what’s best for us.

Like everyone else’s, my life was turned upside down in March 2020 with COVID-19. There were statewide curfews and mandates, and it seemed like the whole world shut down. My wife was blessed to have a job where she was deemed essential and still went to work every day, and I was able to work online from home. I saw people losing their jobs all around me, though. I