

A Proposal

The Bellowing of Cain

Perspectives for People Who've Wrecked Their
Lives... Or Those Just Considering It

by

Jeremy Gordon Grinnell

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Felt Need

One of the saddest realities of modern life is how frequently pastors and other leaders vanish from productive service due to self-destructive choices. Such leaders shatter, not only their own lives, but also those within their care. Much has been written to help the innocents hurt by failed leaders, but what resources are there to aid in the rehabilitation of leaders themselves? What happens to such leaders after they've disappeared from public view—after we've forgotten them? Who can even write to them with integrity or credibility? ...only, perhaps, someone who has survived his own self-inflicted wounds.

Purpose of Book

The Bellowing of Cain takes the reader inside the horrific journey of self-destruction, helps them process the losses, and even aids them in taking the first steps toward regaining some dignity, meaning, and joy in their new life.

Genre

While written in the form of a **theological narrative**, it will serve the reader as a Christian Living book about **processing trauma/grief**.

Brief Description

Written by a perp to perps, *The Bellowing of Cain* candidly explores the mistakes that lead to self-destruction, walks with the reader through the fallout stages of a blown-up life, and offers reflections on what it means to rebuild a life worth having—all while taking responsibility, grieving the losses, and experiencing the necessity and presence of divine grace.

Further, it provides counsel to these who love, live with, and minister to persons with self-inflicted wounds.

Overview

While many excellent books have been written on how to survive and grow through pain, why are nearly all of them written *by* victims *for* victims? The cancer diagnosis, the loss of the child or parent, the layoff, the unrealized dream—terrible things, yes, but things that come from without and happen *to* us. This fails to recognize that much of the pain we endure in life comes from our own bad choices—pain for which we are the perpetrators. This is especially true when the perpetrator is a leader in a church or other organization. For all its value, the “surviving trauma” genre fails to speak fluently to the leader whose pain is self-inflicted. Where are the books that speak to the lost leader after they've ceased to be a leader? Who writes to them about their unique journey? Who can?

**Do we believe in a gospel that seeks to redeem even the leaders who've so disappointed us?
Do we really want to?**

The Bellowing of Cain is written primarily to pastors and other leaders, who, like Cain, have made horrible life-wrecking decisions and secondarily to those who have a calling to live and

work with them. It is written by a fellow traveler who understands what it means to destroy one's life... for he once did so.

What are the ingredients of a ministry headed for self-destruction? How do you end up there? How do you survive the self-inflicted loss of the life you've built? How do you rebuild afterward? Is there any hope for you, any point in dreaming dreams again? And what do such people really need from Christ's Church?

The book even includes two chapters written by the author's wife, discussing how she processed both her husband's prodigality as well as the church's reaction which multiplied her own losses.

In the culture of disposable people, where leaders who've suffered moral failure are shamed, cast aside, and forgotten, we need a book like *The Bellowing of Cain* to teach us about the unique journey taken by people with such baggage—baggage like shame, guilt, and remorse. Such luggage is heavy and bends the back of those who must carry it, and they often walk alone. Who speaks for them? If they enter heaven at all, it will be minus an eye or a hand. **But unless redemption exists for the worst of us, it exists for none.**

Special Features

The book lends itself to group discussions, and a study guide would be a natural step.

Primary Audience

The first audience of this book are those who, like the author, worked in the world of Christian ministry, made bad choices, and were forced to leave it—and preferably those in the immediate crisis of loss. The primary task of the book is to create space for them to process what has happened to them, the role they and others played in it, survive it, and begin the process of rebuilding a new life on the other side.

Secondary Audience(s)

The book will also appeal to the following secondary groups:

1. Those in ministry who have not *yet* destroyed their lives but are in peril of it—the person who's life is in trouble, has a copy of this book put into their hands, sees what's coming, and turns away from the catastrophe. This might include seminary and ministerial students, churches, schools, and university staffs, missionaries, and so on.
2. Those called to help those who've blown up their lives—therapists and counselors, pastoral care organizations, and spiritual directors. It helps them understand the mental state and experience of the perpetrator as a person.
3. Spouses, children, congregants, and other persons who've watched a loved one blow up their lives—teaching them how to help and not increase harm, how to process what they've just witnessed.
4. The leadership of Christian organizations, who are called to pick up the pieces and do some sort of justice upon the offending person without doing additional harm.

Finally, although the author’s story is one of falling out of Christian ministry and is thus related within a Christian context, it would also address the failings, agonies, and losses of those whose failings occurred in any other context.

Reader Benefits

- In the best scenario, the reader will foresee the seeds of self-destruction in their life and make the changes necessary to avoid it.
- More likely, they will read it from the position of the choice already made, and they’re watching their life fall apart. That person will be able to reflect on the mistakes that led up to it and find some perspective on processing the losses they are now experiencing.
- Eventually, however, people with self-inflicted wounds must get on with living. The reader who is at some distance from their crisis will need advice, perspective, and hope that a new life, a good life, a life worth having—even though different—is available if they persevere.
- To the person (spouse, church leader, counselor, friend) who is reading this because they know or love a ragamuffin, they will gain valuable insight on their loved one’s journey, and how to actually help them.

Author Biography, Brief (one brief paragraph ideal for flap on book jacket)

Dr. Jeremy Grinnell is now a professional audiobook narrator/producer [gordongreenhill.com], fiction author [relicsoferrus.com], and theological blogger [homiliesofstasinus.com]. He is a stay-at-home-father of four wonderful kids near Grand Rapids, Michigan. After a long journey of reconciliation, he, his wife, and kids now re-attend the church he blew up, where he serves as an occasional teacher and preacher, while he constantly waits with “holy indifference” for God’s next assignment.

Author Biography

Dr. Grinnell earned his Ph.D. in Systematic Theology from Calvin Seminary in Grand Rapids, MI, and taught theology at Grand Rapids Theological Seminary for nearly 15 years. He was also the preaching pastor at a growing non-denominational evangelical church in the area. His life was good, and he had everything a person could reasonably want.

Then through a hideous cocktail of bad choices and clinical depression, he threw it all away in the most public way possible—complete with criminal charges and his mug in the newspaper.

Now nearly a decade later, his marriage and family have been restored. He’s been through formal restoration processes, and in a turnabout no one could have expected, including himself, he is worshipping again with his family at the very church up blew up.

Author’s Writing Experience

Before the crash, he produced weekly full-manuscript sermons, classroom lectures, and weekly radio spots. After that all went away, he began blogging and producing material via his various websites.

He has also recently published his first work of YA fantasy fiction *Flight of the Sky Cricket* under his long-standing pen-name Gordon Greenhill [www.gordongreenhill.com], with two additional volumes in this series written and ready for editing

He has also written several full-length novels for which he is seeking representation, and have two theological manuscripts at various stages of composition

In short, he writes a lot and quickly across multiple genres.

Author's Platform

Platform? His primary qualification for writing this book is that he destroyed every platform he had. People who've been publicly shamed due to self-inflicted wounds don't have platforms. That's part of the problem. No one speaks to them or lets them speak. No one will take the chance. The platform has to be built on the book itself.

What's needed is a person with the integrity and skills to leverage the narrative into a platform (see the next section on Unique Qualifications).

That said, my current influence consists of the following...

- Facebook Friends: 500
- Instagram: Marginal presence
- Websites:
 - www.gordongreenhill.com
 - www.cslewiseditons.com
 - www.relicsoferrus.com
- Blog and Online Sermon : www.homiliesofstasinus.com
- 30+ audio credits on Amazon/Audible under the name Gordon Greenhill
- Half dozen speaking engagements yearly.

Unique Author Qualifications

“Best classroom professor I’ve ever seen,”—my former academic dean.

“He’s the best preacher I’ve ever heard,”—my own pastor’s teenage kid.

Objectively. My education, experience, and skills are uniquely suited to this venture:

- BA degrees in Theatre and classical rhetoric
- Numerous forensic (public speaking) awards in my college years
- Years of public speaking experience in every sort of venue
- 15 years of theological education with terminal degrees (M.A. and Ph.D.)
- 15 years teaching theology, bible, ethics, and philosophy at undergrad and seminary
- Many years of pastoral experience

- Many years of community theatre acting experience

Further, in my years at the seminary and even now in the community theatre world, I do news interviews several times a year either responding to cultural questions or promoting the show, so I'm comfortable in front of a camera and responding to touch questions. (Can provide sample links upon request.)

Subjectively. I stand in an excellent position to tell the story of what it is like to lose it all and to rebuild—not as a clinician, theologian, or therapist—but with the raw perspective of an insider, one who lived it... and is still living it.

Jeremy's qualifications for promoting this book and becoming a spokesperson on this issue are unique: High writing skills, VERY high public presenting/preaching skills, academic qualifications, flexible travel schedule, and **most importantly a willingness to talk unflinchingly about his own failures in life.**

Unique Positioning among Competition in the Marketplace

The primary difference between my book and what's on the market is nearly always one of the following two things (Haggard's being a *sui generis* exception):

1. *Cain* is written, not to victims of misfortune or loss, but to perpetrators—people who have actively destroyed their own or others' lives.
2. Many of these are written by grief experts—therapists, researchers, or clinicians—people whose lives are still intact. *Cain*, however, is not a clinical look at grief/loss, but an existential examination of it (more akin to Lewis' *A Grief Observed*).

Both these kinds of books are all wonderful for what they do, but they do not always well serve the community of the self-destroyed, who have unique burdens, threats, and sorrows.

A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows through Loss, Jerry L. Sitter (Zondervan, 2004)

Dr. Sitter wrestles with the loss of his wife, mother, and daughter in a single car accident. How to grow through loss. A beautifully written, honest, frank narrative.

Why I Stayed: The Choices I Made in My Darkest Hour, Gayle Haggard (Tyndale, 2010)

Ted Haggard's wife recounts the story of her husband's public and scandalous fall from grace and why she chose to stick with him. This book parallels my wife's journey and is similar to the two chapters of *Bellowing of Cain* that she wrote.

Good Grief: A Companion for Every Loss, Granger Westberg (Fortress, 2019 reprint)

Embracing Life After Loss: A Gentle Guide for Growing through Grief, Allen Klein (Mango, 2019)

Moving Through Grief: Proven Techniques for Finding Your Way After Any Loss, Gretchen Kubacky (Rockridge, 2019). Key difference is this is a clinician's view of loss. Very useful, but not the same as the existential perspective *Cain* offers.

Shattered Dreams: God's Unexpected Path to Joy, Larry Crab (WaterBrook, 2001)

Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy: Discovering the Grace of Lament, Mark Vroegop (Crossway, 2019)

Unique Selling Proposition (USP)

If people who've destroyed their lives (or those who love them) read *The Bellowing of Cain*,

Then then they will discover that their story is not unique, and that it is possible to survive and flourish, even with self-inflicted wounds.

This is so **because** they will have had a competent guide, who knows the struggle, lead them through the following:

1. A confrontation with the mistakes they made beforehand,
2. Perspectives on surviving the immediate losses, and
3. Developing their capacity to both hope and rebuild a life worth having.

Endorsements

"*The Bellowing of Cain* is a compelling story of someone who, through his sin, damaged his own life and the lives of others. That story, in itself, isn't unusual. What's unique is Jeremy Grinnell's willingness to tell with unflinching candor his story of failure and shame so that others might benefit from his hard-won wisdom and enter more deeply into the reality of God's extravagant grace. This is a must-read book which will stretch and enlarge our imagination for what restoration and redemption can look like in the body of Christ."

- Sharon Brown, author of the *Sensible Shoes* series (IVP)

NOTE: Sharon, who has been my spiritual director for many years, has expressed strong interest in writing a forward to the book, discussing my journey from the outside.

"I see this memoir being useful reading for seminarians, for example: 'This is how it starts.' 'This is how you get sucked in.' 'This is what self-deception sounds like.' 'This is how deep the betrayal feels to your spouse.' 'This is how long the suffering can last and how dark the night can feel,' and also 'this is how the light comes.' 'This is what redemption and reconciliation look like.'"

- Rebecca Konyndyk-Deyoung, author of *Glittering Vices* (Brazos) and *Vainglory: The Forgotten Vice* (Eerdmans)

"This is the book I've been looking for and couldn't find. It's an unflinchingly honest account about the messy complexities of sin and grace, repentance and forgiveness. It invites us to a gospel hope in the slow work of God."

-Shalini Bennett, Prof. of Spiritual Formation, Grand Rapids Theological Seminary

“Without apology, I’m one of his raving fans!”

-John Smith, CEO. PastorCare West Michigan

Other organizations who’ve expressed early interest in the book for their constituency...

- PIR Ministries, Farmington Hills, MI
- Alongside Ministry, Kalamazoo, MI
- PastorCare West Michigan, Byron Center, MI
- The Wesleyan Denomination of Michigan
- The Evangelical Covenant Denomination—Midwest

Marketing

Dr. Grinnell’s academic qualifications and history put him in an excellent position to talk to seminary faculty about the use of the book in courses on ministerial ethics, counseling, and ministry residency curriculums.

His years of pastoral experience puts him in an excellent position to talk to denominational leaders, church staff, and parachurch ministries about using the book as a resource for crisis or training.

Many topics in the book lend itself to trade magazine articles (eg. *Relevant*, *Christianity Today*) on the top of leadership self-destruction or how churches can better understand and deal with people with self-inflicted wounds.

The author is eager to work with a publisher’s publicity department to present this content in a variety of public speaking venues.

Further, his experience with publishing *Flight of the SkyCricket* has given him a great deal of experience at leveraging my social media accounts to promote the book. The key seems to be constant posting—pictures, reflections, events, announcements, anything—just so long as you’re producing content.

Length of manuscript

The current manuscript is currently 83,000 words (approximately a 250 page final book). The author is in the process of revising it to tighten and shorten it.

Manuscript completion time

A finished manuscript could be submitted within four months of signing.

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* Authored by Denise Grinnell, Jeremy's wife.

Sample Chapters

Preface

When I turned forty, I went insane for a little while. When I came back, I found myself all alone. That isolation drove me crazy. This second madness—the one imposed by others—was the one that changed me most. I do not know if it was a salvation or a castration—depends on the day. Perhaps they're the same thing. Says Linda Loman in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, "Life is a casting off." There is resignation in her voice for all that she really loves is being slowly stripped away by her husband's self-deception and pride.

It is deep wisdom. We have it on Jesus's own authority that heaven might be gained only with the loss of an eye or a limb. If *American Airlines* restricts my luggage to a couple of carry-ons for a mere hop across the country, what sort of baggage do I think will be allowed on the celestial journey? Surely whatever our possessions in the New Kingdom, they will be mostly made up, not of things we bring with us, but of thing given us when we arrive. "Life is a casting off."

This doesn't lessen by one degree the value of the stuff we have here and now or the choices we make with it. It is only the inevitable frame that encloses it all. I now believe that we would be wiser people if we kept the frame in view as we contemplate the stuff in the picture. "Life is a casting off."

That is the spirit with which I write this book.

I don't want to write this book.

I am told, however, that I have to write it. I'm told the Church needs to hear stories like this. I'm told it will be of great help to many people who travel roads like mine. I have no doubt that all that is true. Yet, I don't want to write it. It feels like death to me.

But that is the nature of the world. Sometimes you have to die a little bit in order to live a lot more—it's a solid farming economic—"first the seed must die." And since the only things that qualify for resurrection are dead things, let us get busy dying. There are many other books I want to write, but they all seem to run through the grave door of this book. So I write the book of which I'm ashamed, so that I may earn the right to write the books of which I can be proud. I hope you will not think less of me for such a self-serving motive. There are so many better reasons to think less of me. Choose one of those.

If then I must write this book, I will not waste your time by pandering. This is not a Christian self-help book. We have those in abundance, and in general they strike me as a missed opportunity. Our unfiltered experience of suffering before it gets baptized in Christian jingoism is too valuable a thing to waste.

If our pain is to matter—to be beneficial to others—it must at least be honestly dealt with. We process pain in stages. I've discovered that I suffer first as an animal, then as a fallen man, and only then a Christian. Those early stages of raw animality and unredeemed rage often receive short shrift from Christian writers because of a perceived need to get on to the redemptive elements of the story.

Yet great truth lies in those more sensualist grapplings with suffering, and much is lost when faith prematurely tempers and temporizes our pain. Show me the God-fearing man who says bravely of his suffering, "It hurts but little for I have Christ," and I will show you another equally God-fearing man sitting on an ash heap, scraping his sores with broken pottery, lamenting he was ever born. Which account better accords with your own experience of suffering?

Well then, understand, this is to be a medium-rare account of a man who built a wonderful life and career, the depression and life-destroying choices that followed, the sorrow it brought to him and everyone he ever knew, and yes, the manner in which his faith preserved him. But whatever integrity he yet retains requires him to treat of darkness as much as of light.

I don't know if this makes me more or less reliable as a narrator, but I know that I can no longer pretend that every square on the board looks alike—or is supposed to. The journey changes you, and things you thought true at one stage turn out to be false at another...and vice versa.

This shouldn't surprise us. At the moment of greatest bitterness, that bitterness may be the most legitimate response, even if some future point reveals that bitterness is one of those heavy trunks that must be set down and left behind. Both things were true in their turn, and I have not sought here to make one false at the expense of the other. "Life is a casting off." I have been bitter, then I have been content. The one gained only by the passing away of the other—perhaps only by passing *through* it. Which one is right? The answer, I think now, can only be "where are you in the journey? How many steps have you taken? Oh, that many? Well, then of course you are bitter. Only wait a bit..."

This does not make bitterness an end—God forbid—but rather a single and perhaps inevitable foot-fall on the road. You can neither jump over that spot safely nor remain ditheringly in it. You must walk bracingly through that square at whatever you speed you can and then leave it. That is what progression looks like. We are temporal creatures. We cannot simultaneously occupy all the squares in the game. "Life is a casting off." We leave one square on the board behind so that we may occupy one further along. Whether that square contains a snake or a ladder is often irrelevant; it is the next square. When we do happen upon the snake, a little

resilient stoicism may benefit us more than pious memes, so be it. Faith is a longer term game. It is revealed in the will to keep walking, in the belief that the game ends on a ladder, rather than a snake—that life continues even after life itself has been cast off.

—Jeremy Gordon Grinnell
April, 2019

Chapter 1: Cain Speaks

Once upon a time there were two brothers. The older's name was Cain, and the young was called Abel. Now in the course of his life Cain experienced a great disappointment with his God, Yahweh, and in the midst of the agony of his soul, he decided somehow that his brother was the cause... or at least a constant reminder of it. So, it came to pass that...

Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let us go out to the field." And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel, and killed him.

Then Yahweh said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?"

He said, "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?"

And Yahweh said, "What have you done? Listen; your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground! And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you till the ground, it will no longer yield to you its strength; you will be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth."

Cain bellowed, "My punishment is greater than I can bear! Today you have driven me away from the soil, and I shall be hidden from your face; I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and anyone who meets me may kill me."

Then Yahweh said to him, "Not so! Whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance." And Yahweh put a mark on Cain, so that no one who came upon him would kill him. Then Cain went away from the presence of Yahweh, and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

—Genesis 4:8–16 [based on the NRSV]

I used to teach systematic theology to seminary students. It doesn't matter what systematic theology is—at least it seldom mattered to my students. They only wanted to know whether or not I could answer their questions about Christianity and the Bible—if I could explain hard things in simple terms. They wanted to know, not if the thing I was saying was true (oh, occasionally that mattered), but whether it was useful. While this is of great annoyance to a professional theologian, in fairness to them, it is possible for a thing to be both true and irrelevant.

I spent a lot of time working with the stories in early Genesis—the creation of the world, creation of humanity, the fall into sin—for exactly these reasons. I even wrote my dissertation on them. Although students were often divided on how these stories could be *true*, they seldom questioned that they were *useful*. They explain two-thirds of our human experience.

First, they give the Christian explanation for why so many things are beautiful and wonderful in life. A good God made all these good things with the intention that humans use and enjoy them for the purpose of proclaiming divine glory in the world. Second, these stories explain why the world *we* meet is so filled with wretchedness and sorrow. Humanity chose to rebel against this good God—an act which shattered both themselves and all that had been entrusted to their care—which, was everything. Further these stories even hint at the driving force of the rest of the story—that broken things can be restored, not by mere human efforts but by that same good God condescending to work through human hands—which in wonder of wonders eventually show themselves to be God’s own hands. Enter the mystery of the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

I say all of this because this view of the world is central to my thinking and without it, much that is said here will make no sense. But I rehearse it also because this book is specifically about the difficulty we have moving from the second to the third movements of the story—from Fall to Redemption.

Now my students were often more interested in the movement from the first to the second—Creation to Fall. They would ask how Adam and Eve eating an apple in the garden—admittedly a small thing—could cause the whole world to go to heck in a hand basket. The punishment seems so much greater than the crime, so disproportionate. Our hearts stiffen under the idea that small mistakes could bring so such great destruction. It doesn’t seem just. I understand the question, and while I believe good and adequate answers exist, I admit that on the surface, it chafes.

But even here, we’re not consistent in our interest. In fifteen years of teaching graduate theology and many years of pastoral work, not once did anyone ever ask the same question of

Cain's fall from grace. I have heard Cain called a whiner; I've heard him labeled impenitent; I've even heard him called fortunate because, *his* evil being so much greater than his parents', his punishment should have been harsher than it was. I John 3 even takes up Cain rather than his father as the ultimate foil to Christ. The early church writers, following John's example, use Cain as the archetype of the Fall at least as often as they so speak of Adam. He is even considered by many the father of the line of evil that stands against the line of his righteous brother Seth—such that the children of righteousness are always persecuted by the children of evil—in other words, the unredeemable children of Cain.

Now I do not dispute the theological truth, utility, or rhetorical power of any of that. I do not wish to mitigate or down play the evil of Cain's actions in any way. I do not question that his punishment is just, but I am intrigued by our lack of curiosity about what became of him, of his emotional and spiritual journey after his banishment.

Cain remains an outcast. We do not care if his heart ever changed. He is just an outcast. We are not curious about any lessons his banishment may have taught him. He is just an outcast. We are not concerned of the nights of solitude, shame, and sorrow that were his. We do not care, because he is just an outcast. He bellows his grief and misery at a cold and indifferent moon, and there is no one to hear. He is beyond redemption.

Yet Cain's journey matters to me, because I am like Cain, and I too frequently wonder whether we really can move from Fall to Redemption. All our rhetoric aside, is redemption really available to people's whose wounds are entirely self-inflicted. I, too, bellow and get no reply.

A Son of Cain

I no longer teach theology at a seminary. I no longer pastor a church. I'd like to say that the details don't matter, but that's hardly the case. If all Cain talked about was the exile, it would be very inadequate. You would ask *exiled for what?* And you'd be right in asking. Cain's crime was not a small thing. It does matter.

And so I will give at least the barest of details here at the front (with more to come throughout) so that you may understand why Cain matters to me. The problem is, I don't actually know how to do it. Every attempt to rehearse it is open to critiques like *you're being defensive, you're rationalizing, you're victim-blaming, you're avoiding*. I've tried it in fiction and been told that it's too vitriolic. I've tried by means of fake letters (like C. S. Lewis did with Malcolm or Screwtape), only to be told it's too emotionally distant. There is no good way to tell my story that successfully takes responsibility for my own choices while likewise fairly sampling the complex soup of choices made by others.

So instead of trying to reinvent the wheel, I'm just going to paste an explanation here that I wrote several years ago. Once an editor of a major Christian publisher expressed interest in printing my dissertation. That was gratifying. But I also knew it was no good trying to go forward without him knowing my backstory. Publishers are as risk-averse as anyone else. I crafted a delicate email knowing that hitting *send* would require him to retract the offer. Nevertheless, I wrote...

That you are prepping a contract for my dissertation is a significant step forward for me. I have told you that I left the academic world under a cloud, and so long as I was only doing [uncredited audio work for your publishing house], the details of my story didn't seem relevant.

But we're entering a new phase wherein our reputations will depend on each other for success, and after much prayer and conversation with Denise, I think it is important to give you more details lest you ever think I've not been forward with you.

In 2013, I endured a 10 month clinical depression in relation to a woman Denise and I were attempting to help through a home foreclosure and legal battle. I lost track of personal boundaries and became fixated on her and her family's needs. She further encouraged this obsession. It nearly destroyed my marriage and my health.

Ultimately the depression and obsession led to an indiscriminate invasion of privacy (a David-like case of being at the wrong place at the wrong time and not walking away when I should have). It was not done by design, and I attempted to resolve it immediately with both a confession and a placing myself under the discipline of the elders, and even offered my resignation of my pastoral responsibilities at the church. Exercising her legal rights, however, she decided to press charges. The press got ahold of the story, and I was publically shamed. After which I also resigned my professorship from the university. Ultimately, rather than prolong the agony for my family, I took a plea deal, and the judge, apparently realizing the convoluted nature of the case, gave me only probation. But the public record remains...and is ugly.

The depression mercifully broke, and my marriage was restored, but it was the beginning of two very dark years of almost total isolation. To go from a career in ascendance to unusable and unwanted was almost more than I could bear...But God is good...

This is what I wrote then and have included it unredacted except for the name of the publisher and certain personal details about the woman, who for sake of her privacy, I will hereafter refer to as "Lorelai"—after a television character to whom she bore a vague emotional resemblance. Even as I reread it, I do not think I could improve on it for brevity or emotional

distance. Of course, such a story would sound very different coming from Lorelai's side, or from the elders of my church, or my dean at the seminary, or one of my parishioners, or especially Denise. I admit this. But all stories must begin somewhere.

Why This Book?

So now I'm a child of Cain. I do not mean that I've ceased to be a Christian, nor that God's love for me has slackened, nor that I feel that I am beyond forgiveness. I mean that like Cain, I, too, was thrust beyond the sphere of human society because of my sins. I have bellowed at the consequences of my choices—both those which were organic and expected and those which seemed beyond the realm of the bearable. And so I ask again. When we speak of the third chapter of the story—the redemptive chapter, does it exist for people like me? And am I alone in such questions?

One of the most shocking things about my journey is that in the first three years following the implosion, I had more people tell me of their comparable journeys than in the fifteen years that preceded it. I can only explain this by means of a gently cynical observation that once one is damaged goods, other people feel you are a safe person with whom to share their own failures. After all, who am I to judge?

I've had people confess to me that they've done exactly what I was convicted of, only never been caught. That they labor under unbearable weights of shame over it and can't tell a

I write to those who live in terror of someone asking “where's Abel?” because they know that each repetition of the lie upon which their survival depends only deepens their guilt and shame.

soul. I've had pastors confess their own emotional (and occasionally physical) indiscretions and their overwhelming ulcer-inducing fear, knowing that if anyone ever

knew, they would be out of their positions and unemployable forever. I've listened to wives and husbands going through the same feverish obsessions over everything from losing their youth, to losing their respectability, to losing their legal freedom. I've seen their fear. The fear of being found out, of forfeiting everything. They live in terror of someone asking *where's Abel?* because they know that each repetition of the lie upon which their survival depends only deepens their guilt and shame.

I've seen the hunted lost look in their eyes because they know that when it all comes out, it will not matter the demons with which they've struggled. It won't matter how long they've fought to keep them under control. It won't matter that they did everything in their power to do the right thing even as they were doing the wrong thing. It will make no difference at all. In the eyes of everyone, they will be the perp, and all sympathies will be with the victim. They will be cast aside. And they are not wrong to fear this. This is what will happen. They will be like Cain.

If you've such skeletons hiding, or if they've been dragged out and put on display in your front lawn, or if you've been that person's spouse or friend, you know the terrors of which I speak. This book was written for you—the perpetrator, the shamed, the fugitive, the outcast. I wrote this book so that you may know that you are not alone. Others have walked this road...and have survived.

Yes, But...

Now slow down a minute! Why all this worry over culprits and malefactors? Shouldn't our sympathies be entirely with victims? Am I saying that Cain ought not to be punished? Am I saying that bad actions should not have bad consequences? What of poor Abel?

Let's get all this foolishness out of the way up front. No, I am not saying any of this. It is understandable and right that our sympathies are with Abel. They have to be. He is the victim. Cain gets what he deserves, and it is just. I cannot disagree. He is guilty. His punishment is not administered by some fallible human judge, but the infinitely perfect Judge who knows all things perfectly. It is God who lays out Cain's sentence, and if we are to call ourselves believers in this God, we have no choice but say that the sentence is just. Although my heart bellows with Cain, "This is more than I can bear," I must in the end agree with this Judge against even my own heart. This is an act of faith, and I here confess it.

Yet even after I have made that disciplined act of agreement with God, there is a leftover, a remainder. Even after I have remembered that Abel has lost far more than Cain did. After all the sorrow Cain has caused his parents, his brother, the human race, and his God are considered, a drunken sentiment still staggers around my heart crying, "But poor Cain."

And now that I know Cain's feeling from the inside...

Now that I know his need to bellow at the weight of his punishment...

Now that I know the hideous shame that stands behind that bellowing and all that it tries to hide, I cannot turn my back to it. Nor can anyone who has ever made a horrible choice and lost precious things. This book is about that bellowing cry. It is about the one who makes it, about those who are called to deal with it, those who suffer because of it.

This book does not release Cain from the thing he did. He did it. He must own it. Rather, the goal is twofold. First, to put words to his cry—and to yours—so that you will know that you are not the first to bray uselessly at the universe. Second, to give others a fighting chance to understand your journey and perhaps be of some help to you.

Perhaps the image of the defense attorney will be useful. My job is not to make you innocent. You are not. You are guilty...and so was I. The point of the defense is to make sure your story gets told with integrity. To make sure you are treated with dignity and in accordance with the law. To make sure that your side of things—as horrible as they may be—gets heard. It may not change the outcome. You may still lose your marriage, your friendships, your livelihood, your reputation, your liberty. But you will have some peace in knowing that you are not alone.

And for all those who have been hurt by Cain—his spouse, friends, children—to all the victims, these essays are not intended to marginalize your suffering. It is real, and I would not distract from it in the least. You will even sometimes hear from persons in your shoes in these pages. But I would humbly remind you that, while you may not have chosen this journey, if you are a Christian, then your Lord has laid certain obligations on your shoulders as well. So you will find sections of the book aimed specifically at you to help you understand the hell that Cain endures because of his choice. Use the information wisely.

Otherwise, the essays form a kind of chronological development. The first section will offer reflections on the various defenses that are breached in the run up to the self-destruction. The second discusses what it's like to watch your world crumble around you and how to face the immediate consequences. The third part is mostly aimed at churches, spouses, friends, and others who are watching someone destroy their life. The final section offers thoughts on rebuilding a meaningful life after all the immediate furor has died down—the longer game. This book does not need to be read in order. Feel free to jump to the point in the journey you find yourself and start there. Or if you don't know how where you are, just start at the beginning. Sooner or later you'll say, "Ah, here I am."

So what are we to do with Cain? Can he be brought back into the human fold, or does he bellow in vain? Tragic literary figures may deserve what they get, but they are still tragic. We must, if we wish to be *good people*, believe that the sinner may be recovered. Deep down we need to believe this because we either remember being in Cain's shoes or know we are only one decision away from being so.

If, in the end, forgiveness does not exist for the worst of sinners, it exists for no one.

Part 1: So You've Decided to Throw It All Away...

Perspectives on the run up to self-destruction

“I don't know what it is,” answered Fiver wretchedly. “There isn't any danger here, at this moment. But it's coming—it's coming. Oh, Hazel, look! The field! It's covered with blood!”

—Richard Adams, *Watership Down*

Chapter 2: Self-Deception

A traveler happened upon a remote village in the mountains. The people were friendly enough and bid him come to a great feast of welcome. Upon arriving at the table, he was revolted to find all the meat rancid and all the vegetables rotten. Unfazed by the fetid food, the villagers consumed the meal with gusto.

Staring sullenly at his plate, the traveler mumbled, "Ugh, how can they possibly enjoy this?"

"Just keep chewing," replied the man next to him. "Keep telling yourself you like it. You'll eventually convince yourself."

To this day when out in public and someone's iPhone gives off that **Yoo-hoo!** incoming text-whistle, I get PTSD-like tremors. I've dropped glasses of water in restaurants when hearing it, frozen immovable in grocery store aisles, lost my power of speech mid-conversation. That sound was my summons. I could be called out of bed at 2:00AM by that sound.

...and I came willingly.

I'd never texted before and had no other contacts. This was all new to me. I didn't even have a cell phone, only my iPad. But I was being shepherded into this technology by an expert with hundreds of contacts, a master of multiple concurrent text-versations, an emoji shaman.

But as the whistles grew more frequent, I knew that their meaning was changing. My wife, Denise, knew too. Where at first the texts were always work related, as things devolved, I began being summoned to offer comfort, perspective, advice, or even just company.

It began in December with, *"*Yoo-hoo!* You said you thought there might be some help for my house?"* This began an eleven month campaign of pursuing housing advocacy agencies and raising local funding to keep the mortgage from defaulting.

In February, the text read, *"*Yoo-hoo!* I can't come to work today because I can't afford daycare."* This began a nine month stint of Denise watching the tyke along with our own new born during work hours.

In April, “*Yoo-hoo!* I have some legal trouble with the welfare office. Can you help?”

This was the start of a seven month effort of hunting up pro bono legal representation, contacting state representative’s offices, and learning about policing overreach.

Then on a July evening, “*Yoo-hoo!* I’m so lonely. I wish you were here tonight.”

...and by then, I wished I were too.

Where’s the Line?

Here’s a question—At what point of reading the above did you say to yourself, “Whoa! Stop. Danger, Will Robinson?” Any competent professional would’ve recognized early on that I was dealing with a situation bigger than I could handle. Not one of the things mentioned was I in any way competent to deal with. I have no social work training. No law degree. Never held a public office. Never even had so much as an introductory counseling course. It wasn’t even in my job description—I was a teaching pastor. I was supposed to be writing sermons.

I can actually broaden the pool of people who could see the brewing trouble beyond professionals to any human who wasn’t me. My wife saw it. Colleagues in the office saw it. What kept me from seeing it? What keeps any of us from seeing our own impending trouble?

Proximity.

Because I always see all the complex motives behind my actions, it is actually harder for me to see them for what they are. External observers—a spouse, a friend, a colleague—cannot see the internal motivations. They only see the actions themselves.

You’d be tempted then to say, “Well, how can they possibly know what’s really going on?” It’s counterintuitive perhaps, but when you have fewer facts, you can often make a better guess—one that’s closer to the truth. The conflicting motivations inside you often blind you to which motivations are really central to your choices. People on the outside, however, seeing only

the actions, will jump Ockham-like to the most probable and obvious motive... and they are often right.

Oh, I was awash in motives. The publically stated one was absolutely true—I wanted to help. I was a pastor. It was my job to help. The Church and its clergy are commissioned to minister to the hurting. But such company—that is, people who need to need you—are also pleasant to be around. They stroke the ego. They are overly grateful. They let you be their savior with all the accompanying good-feels that come with it. Now if she is somewhat pretty or vivacious or even just close, if she thanks you profusely for caring when no one else does, then how can you be sure of your own motives?

The noble motive is always available as cover, and worse, we may even believe it. We have the power to assert integrity where corruption has already eaten the bone hollow. Not only assert, but believe.

We have the power of self-deception.

The Truthful Lie

Self-deception is the capacity to say something false while believing it true, and there are few limits on how egregious a self-deception can be. In the lowest point of that relationship—and you'll need the following chapters on depression and obsession to really understand my record-breaking limbo skills—I had convinced myself, not only that I didn't love my wife of 22 years, but had *never* loved her, that our whole marriage had been a fraud—especially compared to the golden warmth I was feeling now in Lorelai's presence.

This was of course demonstrably false. We'd had a remarkable and beautiful marriage. Every person who'd ever known us could have told us that, and plenty did. You can go back and

watch the VHS tape of our wedding. That young man on stage is obviously smitten—madly in love with that lady in white.

Yet I couldn't tell her. I couldn't tell myself. All my affections were against me. All the sentries of my soul on guard lest I should let slip the truth to myself and make plain the death into which I was willingly walking. The river of my feelings was damned at the source, and consequently so was I—damned, that is. But a person engaged in the act of self-deception must be careful. You'll out yourself in the most ironic ways. Even something like alcohol, with its reputation for enabling folly, can work against self-delusion.

Now I could count on one Simpson's hand the times I've been drunk in my life. I'm a control freak, and the feeling of not being in control is really unsettling to me. Alcohol is a celebratory experience for me. That said, the drunkest I've ever been came on a night where I'd just gotten reamed out by my brother over the phone for being an ass who was throwing his life away over a "woman of questionable morals." I hung up the phone in a state of inner torment. I ran out of the house, drove to the local grocer, and bought a bottle of Malbec with the words "*Stark Raving*" on the label, drove home, climbed up on the roof of my car in my driveway, and drank the whole bottle in 20 minutes. The quantity of alcohol plus the speed with which I put it down left me stewed like a tomato, but also thankfully, very numb. I eventually stumbled in the house and fell down in the dining room, unable to walk. Denise helped me up, took me to the bathroom, stripped me, and shoved me into the shower. So slaving drunk was I that I'd lost the capacity to lie. As I fell into the shower, I remember stammering out a rambling apology and telling her that I loved her so much, I always had, and was sorry that I wouldn't be able to tell her again in the morning. And with that she went to bed, and I sat in the shower until I was sober enough to resume my lie.

We've never spoken of that incident, but to this day I wonder if that's why she stayed, because she knew the truth. It had come out when I'd been too drunk to maintain the lie I insisted on when sober.

The Hard Work of Self-Deception

And with the truth well buried in my soul, I was ready to walk out. I was convinced with my whole heart that the wonderful beautiful life we'd built together with our four children was all a waste and a lie... a lie that required a lot of effort to maintain.

That's the problem with self-deception. We have to work really hard at staying self-deceived. When the church counselor showed up in my office mid-summer and asked me if something was going on between Lorelai and me, I told her we were just good friends—and meant it with all my heart. I believed it. I really wanted to believe it. ...I mostly believed it.

But I had to work at it. As Al Gore argued once upon a time, truths are inconvenient things that can only be pushed aside with varying degrees of success. Losing a fifth of your body weight in four months is a difficult thing to ignore... but I worked diligently at it! I eventually persuaded myself that, despite my suits hanging off my frame like the scarecrow's rags, I was back to my college weight. That's a good thing, right?

I spent more time texting Lorelai on my iPad than talking face-to-face with my own wife and kids. But that too was not beyond diligent spin-doctoring. I'm a pastor, that's my job, right? You're supposed to spend all your time helping the down trodden.

If you say it to yourself enough times, there's nothing you can't actually come to believe. I actually had myself convinced that I was a good pianist because I'd memorized and could stumble through the theme to Bill Bixby's *The Incredible Hulk*. I'd sit in the sanctuary with the lights off and play it for an hour at a time. Honestly, when you're sitting in the dark playing a

song entitled *The Lonely Man Theme* badly over and over and don't know why, you... are not... okay.

Undeceiving Yourself

What then is to be done? How does one regain the truth? Well, the key problem with self-deception is the "self" part. We are so close to ourselves that we cannot recognize when we're doing it. It requires a set of external eyes to notice it, eyes we don't have. Like living in a world without reflective surfaces, how would you know what you look like? You could only get an approximation by looking at others, and they at you. In such a world, the ugliest man would of necessity think himself more handsome than he was.

Yet even in this world, God did not construct the human frame with the capacity to look at itself unaided. The first act of self-examination in the Bible happens when Adam and Eve eat the apple and experience shame and inadequacy over their nakedness. Nakedness was presumably a fact they knew beforehand and also knew the truth that it was beautiful. In their rebellion, they learn to lie to themselves by looking at themselves. And within minutes Adam is ready to throw Eve under the bus, "It was the woman you gave me!"

By definition self-deception doesn't really know it's happening. If a person can think to themselves "I am deceiving myself" then they're really pretty bad at it. The really talented sophist truly believes that everything is alright, that they are not drowning, that, "oh, it's just a bump in the road, it'll pass." The idea that they should go ask someone else to check their perceptions is out of court by the terms of the deal. The self-deceived are omnipotent and omniscient. If you think you're in need of help, then you're not doing it right.

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Self-deception is simply not correctable by yourself. You need another set of eyes with which to see yourself. Since you are not in possession of such a pair of optics, the only solution I know of is to spend time building good close relationships with people who are willing to really look at you. But this has to be done during the good times. You must construct systems of formal and informal accountability when you don't think you really need them. You may be right that you don't need them at the moment, but you will later. Or you may in fact be self-deceived and not know you need them. Build them anyway, just in case. Make it a discipline to set up such systems as a matter of course, independent of what you feel you need, regardless of how strong, healthy, capable, holy, or in-control you think you are.

One of the pastors that I respect the most in this world has an almost identical story to mine—found a person in need, got too close, texting constantly, heading toward an affair with both feet, just a matter of time. Then one day a friend noticed that he'd texted the person twice just during their conversation. "Brian, what's up with that?" says the friend. "Nothing." But the friend knew him well enough to know the difference between nothing and *nothing*. The truth was forced out before anything really bad had happened. Elders got involved. He was rescued and is still a pastor today in a flourishing church community.

What saved him? Another set of eyes. A friend saw, recognized that it wasn't "normal," and got in his face. Why didn't that work for me when the church counselor approached me? God bless her. She did right, but she was nice about it. She either believed me when I said I was fine or didn't know how to push upstream against a very popular teaching pastor. I wasn't her boss; we had a mutual boss, but public popularity made anything I said credible.

No, it's not sufficient to have merely concerned bystanders or colleagues. I'm talking about a close friend, a spiritual director, a mentor, someone who really knows you. Someone

who is tasked with watching your soul. Someone who won't accept a "no" or an "it's fine."

That's what I lacked. In the two years I was at the church, I had not cultivated even one relationship for the purpose of the defense of my own soul. Is it any wonder I lost it?

Part 2: Watching the Explosion in Slow-Mo

Perspectives for when it all comes apart

“There are some things from which a man can never recover.”

-George Orwell, *1984*

Chapter 12: Enter the Google—When your public reputation gets shredded

A priest of elder days had lived an austere and abstemious life. He fasted twice a week and seldom ate meat. For more than four decades he had been a model of restraint to his parish and was regarded as a man of stoic and upright character. Then one night in pursuit of an errant member of his flock, he found himself in the local pub.

“Aw, Father have a drink with me,” slurred the prodigal.

“No, my son, you must come with me. Your wife and children are...”

“Tell you what, Father. Have one little drink with me, and I’ll come along peaceful as a lamb.”

So against his better judgement, the priest yielded and received his pint. Unaccustomed to such spirits, the night concluded with the priest dancing on a table with his congregant, singing a bawdy tune.

Next morning as the two men nursed their aching heads, the rake said, “Now Father, I hope you’re not regretting our little bit of fun. No harm done, and we needed ever speak of it again.”

The priest groaned, “Oh, I could live with the indiscretion, if only the town crier would shut up about it.”

If I’ve said it before, I’ll say it again: You get to pick your choices. You don’t get to pick your consequences. They’re going to be what they will be, and no amount of raging, grieving, or bartering will change that. When my story went public in the most depressing and dramatically inaccurate ways, I was shocked by the surreal directions of the fallout. Suddenly strangers I met on the street thought they knew more about me than I did. And the hardest part was dealing with the suspicion that the horrid things they said about me might not after all... be true.

A month later I showed up for my appointment at the barbershop where I’d been getting my haircut for three years, except this time Joanne met me at the door. “I’m sorry. I can’t cut your hair.” I stood on the sidewalk with one eyebrow cocked. “The management knows what you did and they won’t let any of the girls here cut your hair anymore.” Well, to this day I don’t know if that’s the truth or if she just didn’t want to cut my hair anymore and made up the story as cover. I don’t fault or blame her either way. The things the media said were as horrible as they were distorted. But that’s the point. If you’ve made a choice that’s blown up your life and public

reputation, then what comes with that is a loss of control over your own story. You are no longer in a position to dictate what people think of you.

Now a moment's reflection will make clear that this was always the case. We never have any real control over what people think of us. "Some of the people, some of the time..." as Jacque Abaddie said. No amount of suave or carefully managed PR or selective social media splashing can save your reputation from a single negative word from a source people like or trust more. And nobody it seems actually has any control over Google searches.

The only thing of real importance that has changed here is that the truth of your situation has become unavoidably clear to you. Now anything that makes us more aware of our real circumstances is always in the end a friend, but what is ultimately for our good seldom feels good. Eating less sugar is ultimately for our good, but is certainly less pleasurable than a dish of ice cream.

The real question now is, not how to I rehabilitate my public image, but what place in the new person I must now become will my public image have? How important will what others think be to me? My guess is that it will now have to play a much smaller role than it has heretofore. This may be one of those things that you must release. A death which must be mourned and laid aside. And the reason is a very simple one.

If you make restoring your public image the thing you aim at, you will without fail cut corners to get there, and "while you may fool some of the people some of the time..." you will not really be the person you are trying to present. You will only be a marketed representation of a fictitious self.

Whereas, if you allow concern for your public image to die, you will then be in the position to look deeply within and actually change tiny bits of your soul. You have the

opportunity, not to appear different, but actually become different. I admit this is the harder journey. It takes longer, and the outcome is much less predictable. You will discover that you are suddenly open to being changed in directions that you did not anticipate, and may not like. Places you did not know were even deficient will suddenly find themselves in the crosshairs. God, family, friends, even your enemies will now become a source of information about your core person. You will no longer be able to glide over the small faults in your efforts to hide your great ones.

Don't misunderstand, this new person you will become is not a repudiation of the person you were. I still like the person I was before my trouble. In some ways I liked him better. He was a more conscientious, more dedicated, more visionary, had more energy and drive, was in so many ways a more interesting person than the one I have become, but he was also very troubled. He was consumed with his image and his destiny. He spent far too much of his energy... being afraid.

Digging Down

Last summer, the county tore up the main road at the end of our street. They ripped off the black top and, instead of just laying down new asphalt and fixing the thing that was bothering us—a cracked up road—they ended up digging down a dozen feet with backhoes and making a royal mess of the whole highway.

See, the engineers know something that we, mere drivers, do not. Just putting new blacktop down will not fix what's really wrong—the fact that rainwater has no place to go. So they are engaged in the messier, deeper, more time consuming work of digging down and replacing the old and cracked drainage tiles. This is much less attractive work than just laying

new road, and no driver would ever think to demand it, but it is the more important work, and it can only be done while the road is torn up.

We're much the same way—we can't reach the deep things that need fixing until the surface concerns have been torn away—often painfully. Having one's image publicly shredded is horrible, and no one would choose it, but it does present you with a choice—an opportunity. Are you going to just lay new road over the old one, or are you going to take this opportunity when the road is already torn up, to dig down and fix the deeper issues? You may never get another chance to dredge so deep, and you'll never be more aware of the need than now.

Oh, and if you're wondering whether I ever get my haircut? Yes, I did. I booked an appointment under my pen name—Gordon Greenhill—at another location of the same company, and ended up with Emily, who's been cutting my hair ever since and doesn't care about my backstory because I'm a good tipper. And incidentally, she's far better than Joanna ever was. So keep that in mind. Maintaining a good public reputation may be hard, but finding a good reliable haircut... well, that's nearly impossible. You never can tell but that some kinds of blessing only grow out of ashes.

Part 4: I Thought There'd Be More Color

Thoughts on building a new life

“Everybody has their moment of great opportunity in life. If you happen to miss the one you care about, then everything else in life becomes eerily easy.”

—Douglas Adams, *Mostly Harmless*

Chapter 30: Living with Guilt over Hurting Others

A new doctor in a psychiatric unit asked the nurse about a young patient who lay unmoving in her bed all day long without speaking.

“Oh her? Tragic story. She used to be a bus driver, poor thing. One snowy morning, her bus slid over the edge of an embankment and rolled. Bunch of kids died. Courts never figured out why it happened—faulty brakes, slick road, another driver, maybe all of it— but she hasn’t said a word since.”

The doctor decided to make it his mission to reach the young woman and spent weeks at her bedside, speaking to her inert form, encouraging her that she must not blame herself. After all, it might have happened to anyone.

*Then one day her lips moved and she mumbled, “Tell all that to the children.”
And he realized he could not... for they were already dead.*

I used to do a lot of my sermon writing at a local microbrewery. It had a second floor that was always abandoned on Tuesday nights. Nothing promotes good homiletics like a Hefeweizen in a quiet public house. One night the bar tender walked up to me and said, “I started coming to your church.” Turns out she was a recently divorced single mother of two, trying to figure out the next chapter of life. I waved at her at church on subsequent weeks, and our children’s pastor told me her kids loved the program. Every few weeks, I’d see her at the pub and ask how she was. I learned that her divorce had been a brutal one and that my sermons were really helping her heal up and move on.

But a few months later, my scandal broke and the church blew up. I didn’t leave my house for six months, so I wasn’t at the pub to see how she was doing, but at one point I did ask the children’s pastor about her, and he said, “Oh her? She hasn’t been back in months.” That was one of the lowest points of my whole journey.

What are you supposed to do with the knowledge that your choices have destroyed other people? How do you live with the memory of the faces of the people you hurt? What do you do with the powerlessness you feel to fix, redress, or in any way mitigate the damage of your own choices? Everyone has regrets. No one gets through life unscathed. We’ve all been hurt by

people and have surely hurt others in innumerable ways. So this question haunts all of us in one form or another.

I think leaders, however, bear a special responsibility for the harm they inflict on the people who follow them. It's a special class of sin, less like a starving man stealing a mutton chop, and more like a shepherd who eats his own sheep. As Plato rightly reminded us in *The Republic*, the only reason leaders exist at all is for the sake of those who follow, so when they do things that destroy those people, it is a uniquely pungent form of evil. If we deny this, then we need to stop reading here and go back to Chapter 2, for self-deception of a particularly insidious kind knocks at our door.

The only alternative is to admit the guilt, own it, and deal with the crippling shame that such a confession brings.

From Despair to Gospel

It is a horrible thing to realize that someone's life may have been better for *not* having met you. Someone like that poor young woman at the pub. When I was finally up to going out in public, I eventually went back to that little taproom. She wasn't there. She'd moved on. God alone knows where.

I have died a thousand deaths in my heart over what I did to her. I only vaguely and probably wrongly remember her name, and I wouldn't actually recognize her now if I passed her on the street, but the thought of her journey—how she was finally beginning to find some hope in my preaching, but has now shrunk back into the shadows perhaps with deeper wounds than when she met me, perhaps has left the whole Church in disgust—well, that tears me up, wakes me at night in cold sweats. And she is just one of many such stories.

I've had a few people tell me that they still remember my time at the church with fondness, that they learned a lot, that they still appreciate things I taught, and I'm grateful when such stories come to me. They help mitigate a bit of the sense of absolute failure. But they don't release me from the burden that many hundreds of others may have thrown up their hands and walked away from the Church, from God, from their own lives because of me. No, such well-wishers cannot release me. They don't have the power, and I don't have the right to let them. You don't get to weigh in the scale the good you've done in life against the evil, and if the good outweighs the bad, you get to think well of yourself. That's not how the world works. And it is certainly not how God works.

When confronted with your failures, you don't get to wave your successes in God's face and say, "See here, I have compensated for my sins with my righteous acts." That is not Christianity, and is not the gospel. If I may be blunt, the gospel, at least as the prophet Isaiah forecasts it, says that if I am attempting to clothe myself in even my most righteous actions, they will be revealed to have only the value of used menstrual rags, yes, that's literally what Isaiah said. (64:6) Who would sanely wrap themselves in those, stand before the mirror, and say, "See, my fancy new clothes?" The naked emperor in all his pompous self-deception was better off than that.

No, the gospel of Jesus Christ never weighs our good actions against our evil ones and then takes a sum. The stains of our sin are not removed by any amount of countervailing good. We do not diligently darn our bloody rags into wedding gowns. As Aslan said to the dragonish Eustace after his repeatedly failed attempts to shed his scaly skin, "You must let me undress you." Our rags must be shed, and we must be dressed in another's clothes—in another's righteousness.

This is an old truth, one of the oldest, and if you are reading this because you were once in a position to proclaim that truth, then you already know it well. I am reminding you that the message you once proclaimed to others, applies to you still. You cannot remit, remove, or reduce your agonized conscience by any subsequent act of virtue. Nor can it be answered by anyone sincerely reminding you of the good you did once upon a time. Be grateful for such reminders, but do not rest your heart upon them. They are not strong enough to silence for long a disturbed and voluble conscience.

Learn again that first lesson of the faith, my friend. Our sins cannot be outlived or outlasted, they can only be forgiven. And there is only one who has the power to answer the recriminations of our heart. St. John reminds us that “*even when our own heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart.*” (I John 3:20) There it is. That same Christ you spent all that time pointing people toward, now beckons to you to come again and find rest in the only place it is to be found.

I cannot undo whatever I did to that poor young lady at the brewing company, or a hundred others just like hers. I cannot make it right. It is beyond my power. I must live with it. I can only come to Jesus, offering my remorse and shame as the only offering I have to bring, believing in faith that *he* has not lost track of her or anyone else. That he has the power to redeem even where I destroyed. He has done it for Adam’s folly, and he can do it for yours and mine. He bids me to lay *this* burden down as with all others, and let him carry it.

This does not in any way make me less responsible for the things I did and the hurts I’ve caused. It means only that those who are now lost to me are not lost to him, and I have to rest in that. That is what faith looks like. You once gave your own life to Christ? Perhaps it’s time to give him all those other people’s lives as well.