

INSTRUMENTS
IN THE
REDEEMER'S
HANDS

PEOPLE IN NEED OF CHANGE
HELPING PEOPLE IN NEED OF CHANGE

PAUL DAVID TRIPP

R&R
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PREFACE

What God has ordained for his church is both wonderful and sobering. It is wonderful because he is a jealous and determined God. His work in his people will not fail, but will continue until it is completed. It is sobering because this work follows an “all of my people, all of the time” model.

Many of us would be relieved if God had placed our sanctification in the hands of trained and paid professionals, but that simply is not the biblical model. God’s plan is that through the faithful ministry of every part, the whole body will grow to full maturity in Christ. The leaders of his church have been gifted, positioned, and appointed to train and mobilize the people of God for this “every person, everyday” ministry lifestyle.

The paradigm is simple: when God calls you to himself, he also calls you to be a servant, an instrument in his redeeming hands. All of his children are called into ministry, and each of them needs the daily intervention this ministry provides. If you followed the Lord for a thousand years, you would still need the ministry of the body of Christ as much as you did the day you first believed. This need will remain until our sanctification is complete in Glory.

That is what this book is about: how God uses people, who are themselves in need of change, as instruments of the same kind of change in others. This book’s goal is not just that people’s lives would be changed as they give help and receive it. The goal is to help change the church’s very culture.

I am persuaded that the church today has many more consumers

than committed participants. Sure, Joe and Sheila may volunteer for a specific activity like VBS or a diaconal project, but this frequently falls woefully short of the “everyone, all the time” model of the New Testament. Our tendency toward ecclesiastical consumerism has seriously weakened the church. For most of us, church is merely an event we attend or an organization we belong to. We do not see it as a calling that shapes our entire life.

But consider this: we could never hire enough paid staff to meet the ministry needs of the average local church. The “passive body that pays the professionals” culture of the modern evangelical church must be forsaken for the ministry model God has so wisely ordained. To that end this book has been written.

As always when I come to the end of a project like this, I am aware of how privileged I am. To be released for six months from normal ministry responsibilities to focus on writing is an amazing gift. My thanks goes out to John Bettler, the faculty and staff of the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation, and to all of God’s people who have sacrificially given to make this work possible. I must extend my thanks as well to Sue Lutz. Sue, your editing ability is outstanding. Thank you for being willing to turn my thoughts into words that make sense, and thank you for being willing to give me the “bad news” when you are convinced it will make the book better.

Finally, as you read, some of you may wonder why this book doesn’t have a chapter-by-chapter study guide. The reason is that this material has been developed as discipleship curriculum for local churches. The *Instruments of Change* curriculum contains twelve lessons with both leader’s guide and student manuals available. Each lesson has a threefold focus: concepts you need to know, how those apply to you personally, and how they set an agenda for your relationships and ministry.

The *Instruments of Change* course is the first piece of the *Changing Hearts, Changing Lives Curriculum*. This curriculum will also include courses entitled, *How People Change* and *Change and Your Relationships*. The *Changing Hearts, Changing Lives Curriculum* is an expression of the Christian Counseling and Educational Founda-

tion's commitment to do all it can to assist the local church to train, equip, and mobilize God's people for personal ministry.

If you would like to know more about the *Instruments of Change* curriculum or CCEF, you can log onto our website, www.ccef.org or call 215-884-7676.

I must thank my family. Luella, you are my helper and greatest supporter, but more than that you are my closest friend. I have benefited from your ministry day after day for over thirty years. Justin, Ethan, Nicole, and Darnay, thank you for being patient with a dad who is still learning how to live what he has been called to teach.

To you, the reader, may God richly bless you as you take up his call to be part of the most important thing happening in the universe: redemption.

Paul David Tripp

1 | THE BEST OF NEWS: A REASON TO GET UP IN THE MORNING

What is the best news you can imagine? What is your “If only . . .” dream? Is it becoming a multi-millionaire and buying the house of your dreams? Perhaps it would be the job you have always wanted. Maybe your spouse would suddenly become the person you always hoped for, or your child would finally turn out all right, living responsibly and married to a wonderful person. What would be your best news?

Let’s ask the question another way. What is your reason for getting up in the morning? What moves and motivates you through the day? What is so worthwhile that you are willing to give it your time, talents, and energy? What is so significant that you will build your whole life around it?

This book is about the best news a human being could ever receive. It is about something so significant that it makes everything we do worthwhile, even though we are just flawed people in a broken world. This news has nothing to do with fantasies, dreams, or unrealistic expectations. It is rooted in historical facts and present realities. It penetrates the harshest human situation with life-altering hope. It is the only thing really worth living for! It is *the* good news!

TO “GET” THE NEWS YOU HAVE TO UNDERSTAND THE STORY

For a brief period of time when God created the world, perfect people walked through a perfect world in perfect union with God.

The environment was lush and rich, with a menagerie of animals that inhabited the air, land, and sea. Every physical and spiritual need was fully met. There were no unfed stomachs or diseases to be feared. The gardens were free of weeds and thorns.

Man and woman, Adam and Eve, lived in perfect union with each other. There was no unhealthy competition, no power struggle, no vengeance or recrimination. There were no secret plots or harsh words, no fear, guilt, shame, or rebellion against authority. There was understanding, communication, and love.

There was no struggle with identity, anxiety, depression, or addiction. There was no painful personal history to overcome. There was no fear of what might happen next, no mixed motives, no struggle with inordinate desire. There was no temptation to sin.

With God, too, there was a perfect union. People loved, worshiped, and obeyed as they were created to do. In the cool of the day they actually walked with God in the Garden, enjoying perfect fellowship with their Maker. They were God's resident managers, placed there to govern what he had made, and they did their job well. God had no reason to confront them, and they had nothing to confess. All was right, day after day. Life was better than anything we can imagine from our sin-scarred vantage point.

But sadly, it didn't last long. In the most significant rebellious act ever committed, man and woman stepped outside of God's ordained plan. In a second it all came crashing down. All of the amazing beauty of that world was deeply and permanently scarred.

In an instant, fear, guilt, and shame became standard human experiences. People who once lived in perfect harmony now accused, deceived, and fought for control. Weeds and disease became daily concerns. People began to desire what was evil and do what was wrong. Rather than submit to God's authority, they lived as their own gods. The world that once sang the song of perfection now groaned under the weight of the Fall.

Sin altered every thought, desire, word, and deed. It created a world of double-mindedness and mixed motives, self-worship and self-absorption. People desired to be served, but they hated serving. They

craved control and nurtured delusions of self-sufficiency. They forgot their Creator, but worshiped his creation. Rather than loving people and using things to express it, people loved things and used people to get them. Humanity's second generation even committed murder. They began to lie, cheat, hide, and deny. People suffered at the hands of others, from momentary thoughtlessness to unspeakable acts of physical and sexual abuse. For the first time, people wept from grief within and suffering without.

God now saw his world ravaged by sin. He was unwilling for it to stay this way, so he devised a plan. It would take thousands of years. It would mean harnessing the forces of nature and controlling the course of human history, but he could do it. From the moment of the Fall, for generation after generation, he controlled everything so that someday he could fix what had been so horribly damaged. Into this world, at just the right moment, he sent his one and only Son.

NOW FOR THE BEST OF NEWS

The initial announcement of this good news is so brief that it would be easy to overlook. It comes at the beginning of the Gospel of Mark, just a few sentences in one little verse. Yet it was a fitting summary of Jesus' reason for coming.

Mark records Jesus' words this way: "The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:15). It is tempting to think that this is merely Jesus' way of introducing himself, but his announcement is more than that. It gives all of us who endure the harsh realities of the Fall the only valid reason to get up in the morning. It offers hope that is wonderfully practical and intensely personal.

The news begins with these words: "The time has come." Jesus is saying, "This is what God has been working on. All of history has been moving toward this one moment." God had not forgotten or lost interest in humanity. Since that horrible first fall into sin, he had been bringing the world to this day. What looked pointless and out of con-

trol was, in fact, the unfolding of God's wonderful story of redemption, which reached its crescendo with the coming of Christ.

Think about it: every good and bad thing that the Old Testament records had a purpose. All of the battles, journeys, trials, kingdoms, revelations, and miracles; all of the political and personal intrigue, were part of a careful plan to bring the world to this point. Long before the words in Mark were spoken, God had been telling his people that he would restore what was broken. But they rarely understood. Jesus begins his ministry by saying, "Do you understand what is finally taking place? This is the day spoken about by the prophets, when cloudy hope becomes a bright reality. The time has come!"

The question is, "The time has come for *what*?" Jesus is announcing the nearness of the kingdom of God. It is a quiet way of saying, "I am the King of Kings, and I have brought the power of my kingdom with me." Elsewhere Christ makes it clear that this kingdom is not a political, earthly rule. He calls it a "within you" kingdom (see Luke 17:20–21). God's redemptive solution would not come by political revolution or physical war. The primary battle would be fought and won in human hearts.

In our self-absorbed culture, we need to see the grandeur of this kingdom. We cannot shrink it to the size of our needs and desires. It takes us far beyond our personal situations and relationships. The King came not to make our agenda possible, but to draw us into something more amazing, glorious, and wonderful than we could ever imagine. Perhaps the best way to understand these grand purposes is to eavesdrop on eternity. In Revelation 19:6–8, the great multitude of the redeemed stands before the throne and, like the roar of rapids, exclaims:

"Hallelujah!

For our Lord God Almighty reigns.

Let us rejoice and be glad

and give him glory!

For the wedding of the Lamb has come,

and his bride has made herself ready.

Fine linen, bright and clean,
was given her to wear.”

Think about what they are singing. It is not, “I got that job! My marriage was fantastic! I was surrounded by great friends and my kids turned out well.” It is not, “I defeated depression and mastered my fears.” Two things capture the hearts of the assembled throng. The first is that Christ has won the final victory. His will has been done, his plan accomplished, and he reigns without challenge forever. God has gathered a people who have a passion for his glory and find ultimate comfort in his rule. They are people who followed by faith and obeyed at great cost, who sacrificed and suffered, but with no hint of regret. They have found lasting satisfaction in the person and rule of the Redeemer.

The second glorious thing is that the ultimate celebration has finally come, the wedding of the Lamb. A thunderous shout goes out as the multitude realizes that they haven’t just been invited to the wedding—*they* are the bride! They stand clothed in the finest of linen. All the scars and blemishes of sin are gone. All the rags of iniquity have disappeared. They are finally and forever clean. They stand before the Groom, pure and holy.

As we listen to eternity, we realize that the kingdom is about God radically changing people, but not in the self-absorbed sense our culture assumes. Christ came to break our allegiance to such an atrophied agenda and call us to the one goal worth living for. His kingdom is about the display of his glory and people who are holy. This is the change he came, lived, died, and rose to produce. This is the life and work he offers us in exchange for the temporary glories we would otherwise pursue. This kingdom agenda is intended to control our hearts and transform our lives.

Notice that Christ connects the good news to a call to repentance. The Bible defines repentance as a radical change of heart resulting in a radical change in the direction of one’s life. It is only possible if there is power to change. How cruel it would be to call sin-paralyzed people to repent without giving them the power to do so! This is

where the message gets most exciting. Jesus is saying, “Because I have come, lasting heart change *can* take place.” Yes, the world is terribly broken, but the King has come, bringing the power and glory of his kingdom with him!

Maybe you are gripped by a particular sin that you have never been able to defeat. Maybe you are part of a community that seems hopelessly divided. Maybe your own marriage has fallen far short of God’s good plan. Maybe you are lugging around painful relics of your own history wherever you go. Perhaps you are tired of good intentions gone sour, broken promises, and shattered hopes and dreams. Our need for change is around us and inside us.

The sin that grips our hearts makes everything more difficult. It morphs love into selfish lust. It takes the God-ordained safety of home and makes it a place where the deepest human hurts can occur. It corrupts the workplace, robs government of its good, and even stains the church. And at the end of the day, it results in death.

You cannot escape sin because it dwells within you. All the things you learn get twisted by its power. You can’t outsmart it or buy your way out of it. You can’t move to escape it. This is why the coming of the King is the best of news.

Change is possible! You can stand amid the harshest realities of sin and have hope that will never disappoint you (Rom. 5:1–5). That marriage can change. That teenager can change. That church can change. That friendship can change. That bitterness can be put to death. That compulsion can be broken. That fear can be defeated. That stony heart can be made soft, and sweet words can come from a once-acid tongue. Loving service can come from a person who once was totally self-absorbed. People can have power without being corrupt. Homes can be places of safety, love, and healing. Change is possible because the King has come!

In all of this, God’s ultimate goal is his own glory. Christ came to restore people to the purpose they were made for: to live every aspect of their lives in worshipful, obedient submission to him. He accomplishes this by breathing life into dead hearts so that we grasp our need for him. He lives sinlessly, keeping the law on our behalf. He

lays down his life as a penalty for sin, so that we can be fully forgiven. He adopts us into his family, giving us all the rights and privileges of his children. He daily conforms us to his own image. He enables us by his grace to do what is right. His Spirit lives inside us, convicting of sin, illumining truth, and giving us the power to obey. He places us in the body of Christ where we can learn and grow. He rules over every event for his glory and our good. He makes us the objects of his eternal, redemptive love.

The Bible calls this change *redemption*. We are not only changed, we are restored to God. This is what makes all other change possible.

OUR NEWS MUST BE THE GOOD NEWS

When Jesus commissioned his disciples to minister in his name, this is the message he told them to proclaim. As we face our own struggles with sin and minister to people who seem trapped by things they cannot overcome, this must be our message too. We must faithfully proclaim, “Hope is only to be found in Jesus Christ, the King of Kings. In him, lasting, personal heart change is possible.” Any other message encourages false hope.

People struggling with life in a fallen world often want explanations when what they really need is imagination. They want strategies, techniques, and principles because they simply want things to be better. But God offers much more. People need to look at their families, neighbors, friends, cities, jobs, history, and churches, and see the kingdom. They need imagination—the ability to see what is real but unseen. This is what Paul fixed his gaze on (2 Cor. 4). They need to look at a city and see the glorious company of the redeemed being gathered, amidst a brutal spiritual battle, to live in union with God. They need to look at their children and see a Redeemer pursuing their hearts for his own. They need to scan history and see God accomplishing his purpose. People need to see the shining hope of human existence: people can know, love, and serve God. They can commune with him forever and form a community of love that is pos-

sible no other way. All of this is possible because the King has placed his love and grace on them.

As sinners, we have a natural bent to turn away from the Creator to serve the creation. We turn away from hope in a Person to hope in systems, ideas, people, or possessions. Real Hope stares us in the face, but we do not see him. Instead, we dig into the mound of human ideas to extract a tiny shard of insight. We tell ourselves that we have finally found the key, the thing that will make a difference. We act on the insight and embrace the delusion of lasting personal change. But before long, disappointment returns. The change was temporary and cosmetic, failing to penetrate the heart of the problem. So, we go back to the mound again, determined this time to dig in the right place. Eureka! We find another shard of insight, seemingly more profound than before. We take it home, study it, and put it into practice. But we always end up in the same place.

The good news confronts us with the reality that heart-changing help will never be found in the mound. It will only be found in the Man, Christ Jesus. We must not offer people a *system* of redemption, a set of insights and principles. We offer people a *Redeemer*. In his power, we find the hope and help we need to defeat the most powerful enemies. Hope rests in the grace of the Redeemer, the only real means of lasting change.

This is what separates believers from our culture's psychology. Because it has fundamentally turned its back on the Lord, the world can only offer people some kind of system. It reduces hope to a set of observations, a collection of insights, or steps in a process. We, on the other hand, meet people as they desperately dig and lovingly ask for their shovels. We gently turn them away from the mound, and joyfully turn them to the Man, Jesus Christ. This is the essence of personal ministry.

But our inclination to replace the King with a thing does not die easily. It rears its ugly head even when we search for answers in Scripture. We approach the Bible with a "where can I find a verse on _____" mentality. We forget that the only hope the principles offer rests on the Person, Jesus Christ. And we forget that the Bible is not

an encyclopedia, but a story of God's plan to rescue hopeless and helpless humanity. It's a story about people who are rescued from their own self-sufficiency and wisdom and transported to a kingdom where Jesus is central and true hope is alive.¹

We cannot treat the Bible as a collection of therapeutic insights. To do so distorts its message and will not lead to lasting change. If a system could give us what we need, Jesus would never have come. But he came because what was wrong with us could not be fixed any other way. He is the only answer, so we must never offer a message that is less than the good news. We don't offer people a system; we point them to a Redeemer. He *is* hope.

WHY HOPE RESTS ON A PERSON

If you are going to help someone, you need to know what is wrong and how it can be fixed. You go to your auto mechanic because he can determine why your car is malfunctioning and get it running again. Any trustworthy perspective on personal change must do the same. It must correctly diagnose what is wrong with people and what is necessary for them to change.

This is where our culture gets it completely wrong. In rejecting a biblical view of people, the world eliminates any hope of answering the "what is wrong?" question accurately. And if it wrongly answers this question, how can it possibly provide a proper solution?

Why do people do the things they do? Is my problem fundamentally an informational one? Will a well-researched, logical set of insights provide the solution? Or is my problem fundamentally experiential? Will dealing with my past solve my problem? Is my problem fundamentally biological? Will helping me achieve chemical balance solve my problem? Or is there something beneath all these things that is more deeply wrong with me? Scripture's answer to this last question is a clear, resounding, "Yes!"

Scripture would agree that my problem is informational, in that I don't know what I need to know. It also affirms the impact of our ex-

periences, though it maintains that our core problem precedes our experience and goes deeper. The Bible also acknowledges the complex interaction between our physical and spiritual natures, but it never locates our core problem in our biology. In this way, the Bible is radical compared to our culture.

The Bible says that our core problem, the fundamental reason we do what we do, is *sin*. What is being said here? Scripture is defining sin as a *condition* that results in *behavior*. We all *are* sinners, and because of this, we all *do* sinful things. This is why I said that our core problem precedes our experience. David captures it well in Psalm 51: “Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me” (v. 5). David is saying, “I was born with a fundamental problem. I had it long before my first experience. Something is wrong with my inner self that fundamentally affects the way I operate as a human being.” This has thunderous implications. Because sin is my nature as a human being, it is inescapable. It marks everything I think, say, and do. It will guide my cravings, my response to authority, and my decision making. It will alter my values, direct my hopes and dreams, and shape every interpretation I make.

If you are going to deal with your own difficulties or assist others who want to deal with theirs, you must correct wrong thinking. Yes, you must deal with the suffering of the past and ways the body isn't properly functioning, but you must do more. You must help them conquer the sin that distorts all these experiences. Consider two examples.

Pamela came from a very abusive home. The worst time of day was when her dad got home from work. Pamela would try to be out of the house or safely hidden in her room in order to stay out of harm's way. These were powerfully influential experiences. We should weep with Pamela, and we should be angry at the wrongs done against her. But we should do more.

As you examine Pamela's current struggles, you realize that her problem is not just her experience, but how she has dealt with it. Pamela is extremely controlling, so she is hard to work with or befriend. She is constantly arguing, always demanding to be affirmed as

right. She is obsessed with what people think of her, which shapes every interaction she has with others. Her personal mantra is “What’s in it for me?” She is critical and judgmental, seldom giving anyone the benefit of the doubt.

But when Pamela talks with you, she portrays herself as one who suffers deeply. She talks of feeling constantly rejected and alone. She is mystified that people find her intimidating. She feels like no one respects her opinion.

What is going on with Pamela? Are all her present issues the result of her past? It is clearly more than that. Pamela is not only struggling with the horrors of her past, but with how she has dealt with them. This is where Scripture always leads us. If sin is part of our nature, we will always be dealing not only with our history, but with how sin distorts the way we handle it. Help will only come as we deal with our past *and* own our sin. This is essential because *sinners tend to respond sinfully to being sinned against*.

This is why the only hope for Pamela (and for us) is a Redeemer. We cannot step out of our sinfulness. We need more than love and encouragement, information and insight. We need rescue. Anything less will not address what is really wrong with us.

Consider a second person, Jack. Jack’s dad was an active elder in their church, and his mom was committed to ministry. He was raised in a fine Christian home where family worship was a daily, shared experience. Jack’s dad worked hard and was very successful. His parents had a solid relationship and communicated fairly well with their children. Jack went to a Christian school, and his parents could afford to send him to a fine college. Yet all is not well with Jack.

By the time you talk to Jack, he has had a string of short-term jobs and been married twice. He is palpably angry. Jack complains that he lives in a world of jerks who have no time to listen to someone who knows what he’s doing. He says he has lost his jobs because his bosses were intimidated by the fact that he knew more about their businesses than they did. He views his ex-wives as emotionally weak, unable to live with someone who was confident and had his “act together.”

Is Jack’s present life influenced by his family of origin? Of course!

But once again, there is more going on. Jack is fundamentally struggling with *Jack*. Sin not only causes me to respond sinfully to suffering, it causes me to respond sinfully to blessing. The smart kid teases the dumb kid. The athlete makes fun of the kid with two left feet. Something is so wrong inside us that we can't even handle blessing properly.

Jack needs more than insight. He needs to be rescued from himself, and for this he needs a Redeemer. This is why we cannot simply offer people a system or give advice on how to deal with their past. We must point them to a powerful and present Redeemer. *He* is our only hope. He has conquered sin on our behalf! He willingly offers us his heart-transforming, life-altering grace!

This is why Paul writes so pointedly in Colossians 2:8, "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world and not on *Christ*." The world's philosophy is deceptive because it cannot deliver what it promises. It may be well researched and logically presented, but it is not centered on Christ. Because sin (the condition) is what is wrong, true hope and help can only be found in him. Any other answer will prove hollow.

WHAT SIN DOES TO US

Sin is the ultimate disease, the grand psychosis. You cannot escape it or defeat it on your own. Look around and you will see its mark everywhere. Sin complicates what is already complicated. Life in a fallen world is more arduous than God ever intended, yet our sin makes it worse. We deal with much more than suffering, disease, disappointment, and death. Our deepest problem is not experiential, biological, or relational; it is moral, and it alters everything. It distorts our identity, alters our perspective, derails our behavior, and kidnaps our hope. As Moses noted when he described human culture before the flood, "The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart

was only evil all the time” (Gen. 6:5). This is what sin does to us. It is the ultimate disease!

Our first child was an incredibly active baby. He spent his days grabbing, clinging, and climbing on my wife, Luella, as if she were the ultimate jungle gym. Then, at eight-and-a-half months, this little boy took his first steps. Before long he was moving through our house with amazing speed. I remember thinking that it did not seem natural. He wasn’t supposed to be walking, but he was!

When a baby begins to walk, he needs protection from a whole new set of household perils. One way to protect your child is to get down on your knees, look him in the face, and warn him about specific dangers. You take him around the house, pointing out the things to be avoided. It seemed like a huge waste of time at his age, but I went ahead and warned my little boy about the electrical sockets in every room. I told him, “Don’t touch them, and don’t ever stick anything in them. It could kill you!” He looked at me with a blank stare, while one finger fidgeted with his t-shirt and the other traveled halfway up his nose. I asked him if he understood, he nodded his little head unconvincingly, and off he stumbled to his next toddler adventure. I was sure I had accomplished nothing.

A couple of afternoons later, I was reading in the living room when out of the corner of my eye I saw our baby peeking at me. He glanced at me and then at the wall, then back at me, repeating the cycle several times. When he thought I was sufficiently distracted, he made a beeline for the wall socket. But just before he gave it that first exhilarating touch, he did something that left me amazed. He stopped, looked back to see if I was watching, and then reached for the socket as I leaped to his rescue.

That final glance demonstrated that he *had* understood my toddler-sized lecture, that he *knew* he was acting against my will, that he was trying to hide his rebellion, and that he was inexplicably drawn to what had been clearly forbidden. At least three of sin’s devastating elements are clearly displayed in this little vignette.

The first thing sin produces is *rebellion*. This is more than breaking a few rules; it is a fundamental flaw in my character. It is not something I learn; I was born with it.

I did not have to teach my little boy to desire what was prohibited, to look for an opportunity to skirt around authority, and to reach for the “forbidden fruit.” I do the same thing myself, and so do you. Whether it’s parking in the no parking zone, fudging on income taxes, running away from Mommy in the toy store, refusing to submit to the counsel of an elder, or indulging in secret lust, rebellion is present in each one of us.

Rebellion is the inborn tendency to give in to the lies of autonomy, self-sufficiency, and self-focus. It results in a habitual violation of God-given boundaries. Autonomy says, “I have the right to do what I want when I want to do it.” Self-sufficiency says, “I have everything I need in myself, so I don’t need to depend on or submit to anyone.” Self-focus says, “I am the center of my world. It is right to live for myself and to do only what brings me happiness.” These are the lies of the Garden, the same lies Satan has whispered in generation after generation of willing ears. They deny our basic makeup as human beings. We were not created to be autonomous. We were designed to be in daily submission to God and to live for his glory. Living outside this design will never work.

This rebel spirit affects the way we approach difficulty and blessing. Independence, self-sufficiency, and self-absorption lead us to think of ourselves first and to climb over the fences between ourselves and our desires. We want control and hate being controlled. We want to make up the rules and change them whenever it suits us. Essentially we want to be God, ruling our worlds according to our own will. No matter what else we are rebelling against, our rebellion is ultimately directed at God. We refuse to recognize his authority, robbing him of his glory and usurping his right to rule.

Sin also produces *foolishness* in us. Foolishness believes that there is no perspective, insight, theory, or “truth” more reliable than our own. It buys into the lie that we know better. It causes us to distort reality and live in worlds of our own making. It is as if we look at life through a carnival mirror, convinced that we see clearly.

My little boy had been warned of danger, but in his foolishness he thought he knew better. Foolishness controls the man who is open to

no one's counsel and the person who sees little need to study God's Word. This foolishness distorts our sense of identity, destroys relationships, retards growth, and derails change.

Foolishness convinces us that we are okay, and that our rebellious, irrational choices are right and best. Foolishness is a rejection of our basic nature as human beings. We were never created to be our own source of wisdom. We were designed to be revelation receivers, dependent on the truths God would teach us, and applying those truths to our lives. We were created to base our interpretations, choices, and behavior on his wisdom. Living outside of this will never work.

When David says in Psalm 14:1, "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God,' " he gets to the foundation of foolishness. Our foolishness is a rejection of God, an inborn desire to replace God's wisdom with our own. Beneath it all, we want to be our own gods, revealing to ourselves all the "truth" we need.

Finally, sin renders us *incapable* of doing what God has ordained us to do. This *inability* colors every situation and relationship of our lives. It is not just that I don't want to do God's will, or that I think my way is better, it's that even when I have the right intentions, I can't pull it off. I always fall short of God's standard.

Have you ever prepared yourself for a difficult conversation with a friend? You rehearse your lines and anticipate the other person's possible responses. You try to identify where the conversation could go wrong, and you prepare yourself not to say something you will regret. You don't want to "lose it" this time. But when you have the conversation, in the middle of it, something happens. The other person hurts you, the emotional temperature spikes, and you let him have it. In the aftermath, you can't believe it! You did exactly what you had decided not to do!

The apostle Paul powerfully captures this experience in Romans 7: "For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing." Haven't you been there too? Paul continues, "So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war

against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members” (vv. 19, 21–23). Paul says in effect, “Even when I desire to submit to God’s authority and listen to his wisdom, I end up doing what is wrong! I fail despite my best intentions!”

It is not just that we are rebels and fools. Sin makes us moral quadriplegics. We are fundamentally *unable* to do what is right. Which of us could say that our anger toward our friends has always been righteous? What husband could say he has always loved his wife as Christ loves the church? What person consistently loves his neighbor as himself? We fail at these things even when we desire to do right, because our moral muscles have been atrophied by sin. We simply cannot do the good we were created to do. This is one of the most tragic results of the ultimate disease, sin.

As human beings, we cannot walk through life on our own. We need rescue, healing, and forgiveness. In short, we need God. We need the good news, the news of the King who has come, making lasting change possible. This alone is our personal hope and the basis of our ministry to others.

The good news of the kingdom is not freedom from hardship, suffering, and loss. It is the news of a Redeemer who has come to rescue me from *myself*. His rescue produces change that fundamentally alters my response to these inescapable realities. The Redeemer turns rebels into disciples, fools into humble listeners. He makes cripples walk again. In him we can face life and respond with faith, love, and hope. And as he changes us, he allows us to be part of what he is doing in the lives of others. As you respond to the Redeemer’s work in your life, you can learn to be an instrument in his hands.