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FOREWORD

THIS IS A RARE and much-needed book.

It is much needed because pastors experience loneliness and discouragement, even depression and despair, more often than most church members (and even other pastors) realize. Hard statistics show an alarming pattern of pastoral attrition in the early years of ministry. If you are a pastor, you may not be on the brink of letting go and dropping out this week, but you may remember your own counterpart to Clay Werner's days of soul anguish in the solitude of the Smoky Mountains. And quite likely you have a colleague in ministry, perhaps in a nearby congregation, who is even now where Clay was then. If you are a Christian who has a pastor (I hope you do—we all need shepherding through men called by Jesus, the Chief Shepherd), then Pastor Werner's testimony and his gospel-grounded counsel will enlighten your empathy and inform your prayers for your pastor.

This is a rare book because of its extraordinary blend of ruthless transparency, mature wisdom, conscience-probing questions, biblical and theological insight, and—most importantly—its profound grasp of how the grace of God in the gospel of Christ meets pastors in the depths of discouragement. If I didn't know Clay Werner, I would doubt that a book with such maturity and wisdom could be written after less than a decade in pastoral ministry. If I didn't know Clay, I would be surprised to hear a pastor (of any age) so thoroughly shed his veneer of competence and confidence, inviting readers (including many still hiding behind their own façades in quiet desperation) into the wrenching struggles of his heart. If I didn't know Clay, I might expect a book on dealing with depression in the pastorate to lead me to the counselor's couch—which, admittedly, sometimes helps. Instead, we have a book which leads us to Christ's cross, which, when we discover its implications, never fails to humble as it heals and heartens, giving solid hope for strong perseverance.

FOREWORD

I love Clay and his wife, Liz, as a brother and sister in Christ too much to have wished for him the ministerial traumas that he has undergone or to have wished for them the sufferings (both ministry and family related) that they have experienced together. But I am grateful that God's sovereign agenda for them is infinitely wiser and more loving than my limited perspective. Through the crucible Clay has been refined and formed into a more serviceable servant of Christ and witness to the Savior's grace. His fellow pastors and elders have recognized the Lord's work in "maturing" Clay beyond his years by choosing him to lead a committee charged to care for pastors' hearts and well-being. As he bears witness and brings counsel, his words ring true. He speaks with blunt realism and tender empathy as one who vividly recalls the darkness. For that very reason, he speaks with bold indictment of the idols of the heart that tempt pastors and lead them into darkness. He also speaks with bold confidence in the grace of Jesus, who leads his hurting servants out of darkness into the light of his mercy and his presence.

Be forewarned: in chapters 1 through 5, the diagnosis of the sources of discouragement and despair in pastoral ministry may cause severe discomfort. In the midst of soul-stirring biblical exposition and insights into the practicality of sound theology, our author relentlessly confronts us with the daily stresses that elicit from pastors all sorts of faithless, prideful, self-pitying, and self-defeating reactions. But just when you begin to wonder whether *On the Brink* has anything to offer beyond "Misery loves company," guilt trips, and "stiff upper lip" stoicism, Clay turns your attention to the Son of God, who loved you and died for you; to the freedom of grounding your identity in his grace, rather than in your ministerial productivity; and to the enduring hope that Jesus offers by letting us in on the secret that he tends his farm and expands his kingdom in gradual, unimpressive, but invincible ways.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

NEW TESTAMENT scholar William L. Lane once remarked, “When God gives a gift, he wraps it in a person.”¹ The greatest earthly gift I have is my wife, Liz. Through our years together, she has been a living and breathing “sermon in shoes,” as my friend Joe Novenson often says, of God’s steadfast love that never cools down and never gives up. Thanks, Liz, for your enduring faithfulness, beautiful smile, and simple joy through these years. I also want to thank each of my five children—Isaac, Claire, David, Noah, and Andrew—for their faithfulness in always welcoming Daddy home with huge smiles and hugs.

Early in my seminary career, I had a professor who not only was willing to say hard things to make me think more deeply and live more humbly, but also became a pastor to me. Dr. Dennis Johnson and his wife, Jane, brought gracious words and a healing touch as they invited Liz and me into their hearts and lives. To say that he has had a big impact on my life would be an enormous understatement. I want to thank him for his love and counsel through the years, his ability to help me and many others see the glory of Christ in the Word, and the tremendous amount of work he did in helping me along the way with this project.

I also want to thank Pastor Joe Novenson. He has been an incredible mentor through the years, holding my hand and filling my heart when life seemed to be unraveling. In the midst of his busy schedule, he has always taken time to comfort, challenge, and encourage a young pastor who often has no clue what he is doing. Joe and his wife, Barb, through letters, phone calls, and meals together, have helped Liz and me endure by helping our hearts focus more on the treasures of grace we have in Christ.

1. Quoted in Michael Card, *The Walk: The Life-Changing Journey of Two Friends* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House Publishers, 2006), 4.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As you read along, you will notice the role an elder played in recovering my heart from a very dark time. He has always brought profound encouragement through his wise counsel and faithful guidance through the Scriptures. Many of the things I write about in this book are things I've learned by listening to and watching him.

Thanks also to the leadership and staff of P&R Publishing. In particular, Amanda Martin and Julia Craig have provided enormous help along the way with the manuscript. I am also grateful for their willingness to allow me to seek to comfort others with the same amazing and sustaining grace that has comforted me on this journey (2 Cor. 1:3–5).

“When I am wounded he heals me; when I faint, he revives me again. . . . Grace reigns. Be that my motto.” —John Newton²

2. *Wise Counsel: John Newton's Letters to John Ryland Jr.*, ed. Grant Gordon (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), 170.

INTRODUCTION

“Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.”
—Hebrews 12:3

“Never, never, never believe any war will be smooth and easy, or that anyone who embarks on the strange voyage can measure the tides and hurricanes he will encounter.”
—Winston Churchill¹

ONE LOOK AT JESUS hanging on the cross will teach you that if you make a conscious decision to deeply and sacrificially love sinners, it’s going to hurt something awful. I mean really, really, really bad. When the tears from the pain and agony and frustration and exhaustion of ministry cover the eyes of your heart, you begin to lose sight of the incredible power and amazing hope that the gospel of Jesus Christ gives to you.

One look at Jesus will also teach you that if God loved us even to the point of death on a cross, he’ll provide strength to endure and hope to persevere through the incredible and humanly impossible calling of loving *fellow* sinners. I’m still slowly learning these truths, and I would bet that if you’ve picked up this book and are reading this page, you may be, as I’ve been a thousand times in my first five years of ministry, on the verge of throwing in the towel.

Paul’s words to Timothy have rung in my head often: “I urge you to stay.” Paul’s term *urge* was also used in battle by commanders to force their

1. Quoted in Victor Davis Hanson, *The Father of Us All: War and History, Ancient and Modern* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2010), 187.

men back to the front of battle when they were running in retreat. This reminds me of a scene from *The Red Badge of Courage*:

He, too, threw down his gun and fled. He ran like a rabbit. . . . He yelled with fright and swung about. For a moment, in the great clamor, he was like a proverbial chicken. . . . He lost the direction of safety. Destruction threatened him from all points. . . . Directly he began to speed toward the rear in great leaps. . . . On his face was all the horror of those things which he imagined.²

There was a point in my own ministry when I too wanted to run. In one position as an assistant pastor and in another as a senior pastor, I had seen, heard, and experienced enough that made me consider any other job as a viable option in order to keep my sanity, and even my faith, intact. Like the young man in *The Red Badge of Courage*, I looked forward to victory and success, but thought about tucking tail and running away the moment the big guns started firing at me.

Four years earlier, I had entered into gospel ministry eager, excited, and theologically trained, thinking that three years of seminary and an internship had prepared me. But I was, in reality, extremely naive. Early on I had listened to an address that the president of my denomination's seminary gave, which revealed that many pastors leave the ministry for good after only five years.³ My initial thoughts were, "C'mon! Have a backbone. Nobody said ministry was going to be a cakewalk. I can't believe these guys are only lasting five years. Good riddance if they can't endure that long. The church needs pastors who are real men and who are tough and can last." You probably cringe just reading that. Now I do too.

After only four years of ministry, I was ready to throw in the towel, feeling more than comfortable to be a statistic. Heart-crushing and soul-clogging memories began to fill my mind. When I was young, the church I grew up in split because the pastor had an affair with someone in the church. He merely took his followers five miles down the road to start another church. When I was in high school, hardly ever attending church

2. Stephen Crane, *The Red Badge of Courage* (Huntington, WV: Empire Books, 2012), 39.

3. Studies by The Fuller Institute and George Barna show that over 1,700 pastors leave the ministry every month, while 1,300 are terminated by their churches, often without cause. For these alarming statistics and more, see "Statistics in the Ministry," *Pastoral Care Inc.*, accessed September 9, 2013 <http://www.pastoralcareinc.com/statistics>.

at all, another pastor was let go over morality issues. I hated the church and wanted nothing to do with it, ever. Ironically, God saved me through some faithful friends who shared the gospel with me right before I got to college, and I immediately became involved with a faithful gospel-preaching church. It was there that I began to sense a call to ministry due to the faithful preaching of, and brief interaction with, the senior pastor. As soon as I entered seminary, he took his own life. Once again, I was crushed.

The past horror stories and the battles that were currently going on made me greatly doubt the life-giving, heart-transforming power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. I was on a spiritual drip, barely alive. I even wondered if the resurrection was true. But one thing I knew for sure: I was done with gospel ministry.

Then God showed up. Not in any miraculous vision. I didn't hear any strange voice or get a message from an angel sent from God. I read and reread Exodus and Numbers, all four gospels, Paul's life, N. T. Wright's *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, and a book from an old favorite of mine, Jonathan Edwards, *Charity and Its Fruits*. Slowly God breathed life back into me. Slowly my idealistic vision of ministry was being crushed, and the reality of the gospel began once again to enliven my soul.

I'm sure you have your own stories of being bruised and beaten up and other stories of letdowns, shakedown, bitter fights, draining meetings, and the list could go on forever. My hope is that you'll take a journey with me and relearn some of the basic truths of the gospel and hammer out implications along the way that sometimes we totally miss.

Before we begin our journey together, I want to look briefly at two things that will be essential to keep in the back of your mind as you read. The first is understanding the difference between a theology of glory and a theology of the cross, and the second is Kevin Vanhoozer's concept of "fitting participation" in the drama of redemption.

To begin with, although many pastors profess a theology of the cross, they often function unconsciously with a theology of glory. A theology of glory maintains that we come from glory and are headed for glory, and in between we strive to stay on "the glory road."⁴ Like the young soldier, these

4. For a brief explanation of these two theologies, see especially Gerhard O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 1–22.

leaders expect little suffering and many successes, and either run in fear or remain with bitterness and anger when things break down. Hardship, suffering, self-denial, and patience are all anathema to a heart driven by a theology of glory. A theology of the cross, however, accepts suffering as the lot of any Christian, realizing that just as Christ suffered and then entered into glory, so we must follow the same path.

Second, Kevin Vanhoozer writes that proper doctrine enables us to understand how to have “fitting participation” in the continuing drama of redemption.⁵ When we have an underlying theology of glory of which we are often completely unaware, fitting participation in the drama of redemption as leader-servants of God’s people will always remain an impossibility. The first part of this book, chapters 1–5, deals with these realities. Chapter 1 will lay the foundation as we look at the life of Moses through the lens of *simul iustus et peccator* (at the same time just and sinner). Chapter 2 will explore the external difficulties of ministry, while chapter 3 will dive into the inward idolatries that reside in the hearts of many ministry leaders. Chapter 4 will take a look at how we often possess an accurate theology that is not being lived with a heart-level functionality. The first part concludes with chapter 5 outlining the variety of reasons for potentially leaving ministry for another calling.

The second part uses the theology of the cross to explore how the gospel guides, equips, and empowers leaders to endure through the incredible joys and the dreadful pains of ministry. In other words, the gospel will reveal how to “fittingly participate” as a servant of Christ’s bride. Chapter 6 will outline how the resurrection restores our hearts and our hope, so that we can enter back into ministry. Chapter 7 shows that we need to be motivated by love, while chapter 8 considers how Jesus’ rescue of chief sinners inspires leaders to jump into every aspect of ministry. Chapter 9 will look at servanthood, and then chapter 10 will explore how to serve in the midst of significant conflict. Chapter 11 will round off the study by standing in awe of God’s steadfast love.

I’ve sought throughout to maintain a “reporting from the battle” feel. I’ve read other books by older and more experienced men that convey that they’ve gone through the battles of ministry and are reflecting on what

5. See Kevin Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), esp. 77–114.

they've learned.⁶ This book has much more of a feel that the battle is still very current and that the temptation to quit is still very real as I myself am still only in my seventh year of ministry—which is why I need counselors and “conversation partners” throughout, like John Calvin, John Newton, Francis Schaeffer, Martin Lloyd-Jones, and other veterans from whom rookies can learn. I am also the current chair of a regional committee that oversees the spiritual welfare of pastors in over fifty churches, which has allowed me to see both the incredible blessings and the profound burdens that many other pastors have to walk through on a daily basis.

The young soldier in *The Red Badge of Courage* lost the direction of safety in the battle as he ran from the chaos. Strangely and paradoxically, in ministry the “direction of safety” is toward the chaos and difficulty, because that is precisely where God promises to meet with and strengthen us. Are you ready to run toward the battle?

6. Charles Bridges, *The Christian Ministry* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2001); Charles Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (Pasadena: Pilgrim Publications, 1990). More recent treatments that I highly recommend are Zack Eswine, *Sensing Jesus: Life and Ministry as a Human Being* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013); Paul David Tripp, *Dangerous Calling: Confronting the Unique Challenges of Pastoral Ministry* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012); Dave Kraft, *Leaders Who Last* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010); Michael A. Milton, *Hit by Friendly Fire: What to Do When Christians Hurt You* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2008).

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SEEING HIM WHO IS INVISIBLE

AFTER A REMARKABLY grueling and severely discouraging leadership meeting in the middle of a churchwide, long-term, multiyear conflict, I met with an elder while I sobbed uncontrollably. I was tired and exhausted, had lost all hope, questioned why I ever went into ministry, and practically promised that he would have my resignation in the mail in a few days. In my heart, I had really committed to quitting, demitting the ministry, and moving closer to family to get a high school teaching job, coach football, and be a rafting guide during the summers (this was my original life goal before God seemingly messed it up by calling me into ministry). In the meantime, I was going to go sit next to a river in the middle of the Smoky Mountains and have a temper tantrum with God.

It was in those mountains that I picked up my Bible and prayed about what I needed to read to find encouragement. I read and reread and cried through Exodus and Numbers. I marked all the times Israel rebelled. Angrily, I circled every time the word *grumble* or *complain* showed up. Proudly, I paid careful attention to how difficult it must have been for Moses to lead a people who were so hard-hearted and rebellious, immature and impossible. I began to sympathize with Moses. If he and I could have met at Starbucks, he would have gone beyond sympathy and actually *empathized* with me and all I was going through. I was sure he could give me some wise counsel. Perhaps he would tell me to get out while I could, while I still had a little skin left, and do something less painful and debilitating than leading God's people. I felt like Moses' anger justified my own anger.

Next I turned to the Gospels and marked every time the disciples failed or said something silly or disappointed Jesus. I paid careful

attention to the times when Jesus was deeply grieved in his heart over the hardness of his own disciples. Deep down in a hidden place in my heart, I secretly whispered to myself, “See! Even Jesus can sympathize with how difficult leadership is. If he sat with me at Starbucks, we could swap stories about how awful and tiring leading sheep can be!” At this point, I was becoming pretty happy with myself—perhaps I could continue in ministry. Just follow the example of Moses and Jesus; commit to getting thicker skin and a deeper resolve; commit to being more vocal and rebuking people more often. I was on the fence, not knowing which way to go: was Jesus leading me to resign or not to resign? I was hoping for a still small voice, but all I heard was rippling water and the sound of tourists driving by.

But there was one thing I was missing, and it was the most important thing—the gospel. I had totally missed it. I had a blame-retardant coating on my heart and refused to see the sin inside, yet I was relentless in pointing out the flaws of others. I identified myself as a leader, pastor, and shepherd, and had forgotten that I too was a hard-hearted, rebellious, idolatrous, angry, frustrated, slow-to-learn, impatient, prayerless sheep-disciple filled with self-righteous anger, fair-weather faith, and unrealistic and dangerous expectations of the sheep in the congregation I pastored. I wasn’t Moses or Jesus, but one of the complaining Israelites and one of the faltering disciples. The story of their faltering and their failure was the story of my heart. I was like Israel, constantly wanting to quit when things got tough, feeling entitled to better living conditions and more faithful followers. I was like the disciples, constantly grieving Jesus with my hard heart and slowness to learn.

I wept for hours. I had superficially prayed through phrases from Psalm 19 and 139: “show me my hidden faults”; “know my heart and thoughts and show me if there is any grievous way in me.” I just never really expected God to answer. But he did—again and again and again. My hard heart began to be softened through a gospel-focused, Spirit-empowered repentance. I wasn’t called to “be like Moses” and go back and tough it out. No, I was called to go back and keep the eyes of my heart firmly placed on the author and perfecter of my faith—the always perfect, never grumbling, always interceding, forgiving, patient, compassionate leader of the new and better exodus—Jesus Christ. He wasn’t just confronted with the

grumbling and hard-heartedness of myself and all his people, but bore its condemnation and never complained—not once.

He responded with complete perfection to his Father’s will and never complained about it, but humbly submitted to becoming a curse for me and all the other grumbling and almost-quitting leaders of his people. He who never grumbled was condemned as a grumbler so that I might be accepted by the Father.

I took along a commentary that one of my seminary professors had written, and the knife of repentance was thrust deeper into my soul. In a powerful passage, he states that much of our frustrations come from trying to be the “functional saviors” of our people. If we could just “fix” our people, he writes, we would have a sense of personal achievement and joy.

“We would then be able to bask in the glory of our renovation, feeding our pride and sense of self-worth. The Holy Spirit, however, is not eager to share his glory. He bears his fruit in the lives of his people in *his* season, not ours, so that it may be clearly seen that the work is entirely of him.”¹

I was trying to be a savior and play the role of the Spirit as a leader in the church, and I finally began to let go of the reigns of the universe and put the situation and the results back into the hands of my loving Father. By the faithful work of the Spirit, my eyes were redirected to the splendor and wonder of the gospel once again, and I sought for the remainder of my time to submit myself to the gospel surgery that Jesus had already begun in my life. I sought to place my own gospel renovation and the gospel renovation of the church I pastored back into the lap of the Holy Spirit, trusting in his sovereign work and sovereign timing—in my heart first, and then in theirs.

I’m always encouraged when I see leaders in the Bible want to give up. They deal with the same external problems and internal heart struggles that we do. It is here that Moses is a particularly helpful example. With our hearts focused on the gospel, we are now ready to dive into his story, which may have many similarities to your story. As we do, I’ll use Jonathan Edwards’s chapter on long-suffering in his book *Charity and Its Fruits* as a lens to read the story of Moses and gain pastoral insight for our own day-to-day ministry. If anyone had the pastorally earned authority to write on

1. Iain Duguid, *Numbers: God’s Presence in the Wilderness* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), 254.

such a subject it was Edwards, who himself had gone through his fair share of crushing conflict.²

WHAT MOSES ENDURED

“Overwhelmingly difficult” doesn’t even begin to describe the life and calling of Moses. Perhaps “outrageously difficult” gets closer. His experience was heart crushing, soul depleting, mind numbing, strength sapping, frustrating, and exhausting. Reading the story of Moses in Exodus and Numbers in one sitting almost makes you wonder whether Moses was a real person. How can any mere human survive or even put up with being “provoked” for forty years (Heb. 3:15–17) by a hard-hearted, forgetful, stubborn, and rebellious people that he himself has helped to deliver? If I’m provoked for four minutes, I begin to lose it—but forty years? Can this really be true?

Edwards begins his chapter on long-suffering by stating the obvious but frequently forgotten truth that the ways in which we will be hurt or disappointed by others are various and innumerable.³ This is something that anyone involved in ministry is painfully reminded of on an almost daily basis. Before we move forward, then, it will be crucial to understand *what* Moses endured before we seek to answer the question of *how* he endured.

His life began with difficulty. His mother had to hide him and then send him away lest he be killed. He was raised by someone other than his own parents and in a foreign land. After seeing the suffering of his people, he initially tried to deliver them, but they didn’t understand him (Acts 7:23–28). He spent the next forty years in the howling wilderness. Would you have given up yet?

He then faced increasingly more difficult situations, with increasingly more challenging people. Early on in his calling, after a remarkable display of God’s terrifying, potentially death-causing glory, God told Moses that he would deliver the Israelites from the hand of Pharaoh. But think about it: God basically told him, “Moses, I want you to deliver my people. I’m going to crush Pharaoh into the dust of the earth. But just know this: when you

2. To see the reasons behind some of Edwards’s ministerial difficulties, which led to his eventual expulsion from the church he pastored, see Iain H. Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2000), 271–87.

3. Jonathan Edwards, *Charity and Its Fruits* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2000), 67–71.

tell him what you're supposed to tell him, I'm going to harden his heart so that he won't listen to you!" Interesting plan. Would you have given up yet?

God told Moses that the Israelites would listen to his voice (Ex. 3:18). Yet later on, we read, "they did not listen to Moses" (Ex. 6:9), and Moses complains to God about this very thing (6:12). In fact, you could accurately say that the exodus and the forty years in the wilderness were characterized by the Israelites refusing to listen to Moses (Acts 7:39). Have you ever wondered whether Moses began to think that God might have lied to him? What was God doing? Could his word be trusted? In the early days of Moses' calling, God hardened Pharaoh's heart, the people would not listen, and his life was threatened. Would you have given up yet?

Let's get a more detailed picture of what Moses endured. *Hatred* would be an accurate term for how his own people frequently thought about him (Ex. 2:15; 5:21). If Moses didn't provide *what* the people wanted, *when* they wanted it, stoning him always remained a possible option (Ex. 17:4; Num. 14:10). Although Moses was "very meek, more than all people who were on the face of the earth" (Num. 12:3), the people described Moses as a supremely prideful man, seeking his own glory in their deaths (Num. 16:3, 12–14). Israel could also be described as having spiritual Alzheimer's or redemption amnesia and never being cured. They forgot God's delivering power in the plagues when they were chased by Pharaoh's army (Ex. 14:10–14). They forgot the parting of the Red Sea when they were confronted with the report of the spies returning from the Promised Land (Num. 13:31). They forgot the majesty of God's glory and the importance of his authority and "turned aside quickly" to other idols (Ex. 32:8; Num. 25:1–3). They forgot God's severe judgment on grumblers and rebels *the day before*, and continued grumbling the next day (Num. 16:41). After seeing displays of God's glory in the pillar of fire and the cloud, his voice from Mt. Sinai, his commands from Moses, his provision of water and manna and quail—after forty years of God's incredible faithfulness—Israel had learned nothing and remained hard-hearted and rebellious. Would you have given up yet?

We should not forget two more things that Moses repeatedly endured: grumbling and betrayal. The Israelites had a selective and faulty memory, thinking that Egypt was paradise—where the weather was always nice, the food was always great, and life was always good—and supposing that

anything less than going back was idiotic (Ex. 16:2, 7–9, 12; Num. 11:4–6; 14:1–4; 20:2–5; 21:5). They grumbled because God’s provision wasn’t as lavish and tasty as they would have liked (Ex. 15:24; 17:2). They grumbled because they were envious of Moses. In fact, to put it bluntly, in their minds anything and everything was a justifiable reason for grumbling (see especially Num. 11–14).

Moses also regularly felt the piercing and deep knife thrusts of betrayal. Aaron came up with the lame excuse that the golden calf magically appeared on its own (Ex. 32:2, 24), and later he teamed up with Miriam, out of severe envy, and sought to depose Moses (Num. 12:1–9). Two hundred and fifty men joined hands with Korah and viciously opposed Moses because they thought he was an arrogant son-of-a-gun, and afterward some of Moses’ most crucial leading men abandoned him (Num. 16). And that was just the tip of the iceberg! We could go on about the day-to-day complexities of the administration that was required in feeding and providing sacrifices for all Israel, or the constant political and military threat and opposition from outsiders, but you get the picture. Moses endured. Would you have given up yet?

Remarkably, even the end of Moses’ life was marked by difficulty. Even in his last days he didn’t get a reprieve. God announced that he would not let Moses into the Promised Land because he struck a rock rather than speaking to it (Num. 20). God also enabled Moses to see the future of Israel, and it was not full of roses and rainbows—their hardness and rebellion would only continue and worsen. They would be “devoured” and provoke the Lord to anger in such a way that he would abandon them (Deut. 31:17). Moses would see the Promised Land, but not enter it (Deut. 34). Yet Moses endured. He endured a difficult life and a difficult calling for 120 years.

The story of Moses, and perhaps your story, proves Edwards right on his first point—we will face various and innumerable situations and people that will deeply test and sadly try our patience and endurance over and over and over again.

MOSES: SIMULTANEOUSLY JUST AND SINNER

After reminding us of the frequent need for endurance in light of the broken world we live in and the broken people we live with and minister

to, Edwards goes on to show the precise nature of long-suffering and how God's love creates the fruit of long-suffering in our hearts.

When we are provoked, he says, we should not seek revenge, but should remain calm and grieve more that their sin is against God than it is against us. Anguish should characterize us more than anger. Our internal disposition, no matter how deep the wound and how constant the hurt, should always be one of love. We should be willing to suffer the loss of our own peace or property rather than defend ourselves or respond in kind. Our love for the incomprehensibly glorious God should make us meek and humble toward others; our love for the immeasurably wise God should make us submit to his sovereign hand, knowing that all things are under his control—even the hurts we endure and the difficulties we walk through. These things come about “by his love and wisdom” and are ordered “justly and even kindly.” We should adore his long-suffering toward us and seek to imitate it in our relationships with others. We endure much from them because we love them. We pray for them, because we seek their welfare and long for them to be restored to God and others. If you've endured anything for any amount of time in ministry, does this paragraph sound impossible to you? If you're like me and have even an inkling of self-knowledge when it comes to your heart, you know how impossible that is apart from God's renewing grace in your life.

This is the point where it gets hard, humanly speaking, to believe at times. Moses never *ultimately* gave up. We have no record of Moses dusting off his sandals and running in the opposite direction as far as he could, like a later prophet named Jonah. There is no record of Moses killing a fellow Israelite after months or years of pent-up frustration and anger. Instead, we often see him falling on his face, imploring God, who is slow to anger and abounding in love, to powerfully deliver the Israelites—not only from the Egyptians, but from their own hard hearts. We see him standing in the gap when justice is being meted out, imploring God to stop, so that the nations would know that he really was powerful enough to rescue and redeem such a stiff-necked people. We see him praying for the restoration of Miriam's health right after she sought to overthrow him. When he was reviled, he often did not revile in return, but rather pleaded for God to pour boundless grace into their hearts. It really is true that Moses was one of the most humble men who ever lived.

We might be tempted to think that Moses was so holy that he levitated three inches off the ground and had a constant halo over his head and smile on his face (well, his face did shine for a while!). However, he was a fallen man, constantly in need of grace, compassion, and forgiveness from God. He was a man of contradiction: one moment he was humbly and passionately praying for God to forgive the people who hated him and were trying to kill him, but then he was asking God to take his life or slaughter all the Israelites. In the midst of this tension, Luther's phrase comes in quite handy—*simul iustus et peccator* (at the same time just and sinner).

It's very clear, even from the beginning, that Moses didn't want to accept God's calling. His initial hesitation turned into a pure rejection of God's call, with Moses suggesting to an all-wise God that he should just send someone else. Moses, at times, doubted God's ability to deliver the Israelites. Sometimes he doubted God's faithfulness. When things became too difficult, he said that he would rather die. It wasn't hard for the grumbling of the Israelites to make him a grumbling leader. Unbelief could take over in Moses' heart when he took his eyes off the powerful Rescuer of Israel and focused on the disappointment, discouragement, and difficulty. At times he was self-centered and self-absorbed. There were moments of furious anger and pent-up rage. Surrounded by rebels, Moses too became a rebel and didn't listen to God (Num. 20). Now the story is beginning to be believable. Moses is becoming more human. Maybe he didn't have a halo. Maybe he was just like you and me.

In the final analysis, Moses didn't only respond rightly by long-suffering in the way that Edwards discusses, but also responded in the ways that Edwards warns against: seeking revenge, responding in arrogance and pride, defending oneself, "dealing tyrannically" with others, or even desiring their downfall. By God's grace, Moses had his good days. Because of his sin, he had his bad days. But by God's grace, he did endure, and was ultimately considered faithful as a servant over God's house (Heb. 3:5).

BUT THE QUESTION REMAINS

We are still left with the question: how did Moses endure without calling in a strategic military strike to obliterate everyone or going crazy himself? How do we endure when we've been through hard times, are going through hard times, and will continue to go through hard times?

If time allowed, we might look at the promises that God made when he called Moses, or his constant presence in the pillar of fire and cloud, or his constant provision of food and water. But let's look briefly at what the New Testament has to say, particularly the book of Hebrews: "He endured as seeing him who is invisible" (11:27).

Is that it? Is that the best key to endurance that can be given? Is this a letdown to you? Were you expecting something far more profound? I would suggest that this verse is deeper and more profound than we may initially realize.

According to William L. Lane, the author of Hebrews is claiming that Moses' "fixed habit of spiritual perception," by God's sustaining grace, kept him in the ball game until the end.⁴ Another commentator suggests that Moses' "lifelong vision of God was the secret of his faith and perseverance."⁵ In other words, the reason our frustration runs so deep, our anger gains so much control, and our endurance dries up so quickly is that we take our eyes off God and his Word and begin to focus on the dust and dirt and the hardness and stubbornness of the situations and people around us. Although we theoretically affirm the truth of the Word and intellectually grasp the reality and presence of God, we begin to live as functional atheists, with God nowhere to be seen in the way we look at things, feel about things, and talk about things. But Moses endured, and you must endure, and I must endure by "seeing him who is invisible." We need the ministry of the Spirit to constantly remind us that God really is working behind the scenes—someone who is infinitely powerful, incredibly wise, and unfathomably loving, and who has a perfect plan that will be executed in his perfect time and in his perfect way. Knowing this doesn't take away the difficult situation or people, nor does it numb any of the real and deep pain that we experience, but it places everything in the context of a world and a ministry and lives that God reigns over in mercy and will one day bring to perfection. Perhaps even now you need to join with me in praying to be filled with the faith that is "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1).

Even though Moses endured by "seeing him who is invisible," God did make himself audible. God preached a sermon to Moses once, saying

4. William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, WBC (Waco: Word, 1991), 376.

5. F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 313.

that he was “merciful and gracious, *slow to anger*, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Ex. 34:6–7). But God’s patience came to an end when years of constant rebellion and total rejection had turned into decades, and decades into centuries, and centuries into millennia. So what did God do? He became visible in his Son. God’s forbearance led him to pass over former sins, but his patience finally came to an end, and his wrath and anger were finally poured out.

The invisible God made himself audible to Moses, but in these “last days” (Heb. 1:1) the audible God became visible in the Word incarnate. They saw him, heard him, and touched him (1 John 1:1–4). It was this visible Word, the Son of God, that God the Father, who is merciful and gracious to us, caused to become sin and to bear the curse, and upon whom he exhausted his furious rage against sin. The God who is slow to anger finally exhausted his wrath on his Son at Calvary, so that he could exercise his grace toward us in whatever calling we have received. Christ is once again invisible to us as he reigns in heaven at the right hand of the Father, but even though we don’t see him, we believe in him and rejoice (1 Peter 1:8–9).

A CONCLUDING CHARGE FROM THE APOSTLE PAUL

Paul prays in Colossians 1:11, “May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for . . .” For what? Paul is praying for an incredible amount of power for followers of Christ. Why do we need such incredible power, and why does God long to strengthen us with it? Perhaps it’s to fly faster than a speeding bullet or jump higher than a skyscraper, or maybe it’s to speak really powerfully to people and be a super charismatic and influential leader around the world. But what does Paul actually say? He prays passionately for us to be strengthened “for all endurance and patience” (Col. 1:11). Seriously?! Listen carefully: Paul realizes that we live in a terribly broken world with profoundly broken people. He knows that we will frequently be tempted not to fight the fight and to walk away from the race and from those to whom God has called us to minister. So he prays for our strength to endure. But he not only prays for endurance, but also says that we should be clothed with it (Col. 3:12–14). What Moses endured and what we endure, although painful, shouldn’t surprise us. We should rather expect it and be prepared for it by the grace

of the gospel. This God-given strength to endure flows to us from the grace purchased for us on Calvary.

I hope you will keep walking on this journey with me. This was just the beginning of the gospel surgery that Jesus put me through that weekend and throughout the first five years of my ministry. In this chapter, I merely wanted to begin by showing something of a worst-case scenario in leadership and by saying that the broken man God called actually endured to the end. In the following chapters, I want to dive deeper into the realities that make us want to quit and the grace that keeps us from doing so. I hope we can keep on walking through these pages with the cry coming from the deepest part of our hearts, “Help me to see, with the eyes of faith, him who is invisible!”

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What are you currently walking through that is testing your endurance? Have you so focused on these things that you have lost sight of the glory of “him who is invisible”?
2. How does the story of Moses’ endurance and God’s provision of grace for him encourage and strengthen your heart?
3. Read Isaiah 40:29–31. Spend some time in prayer, asking God to strengthen you to be faithful in the midst of what you are presently dealing with.