

THE
**GREATER
THAN**
CHALLENGE

A GUIDE
FOR
REFRAMING
YOUR
LIFE



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THE GREATER-THAN
CHALLENGE:
A Guide for Reframing
Your Life

An ebook by
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Dedication

To my wife, Danalyn.

Your belief in me carries me on the days I doubt myself.

I love you.

CHAPTER ONE

The Greater-Than Option

Does it ever seem like our culture loves polarizing conversations? Us vs. Them arguments. Black and white choices.

Given two choices, which would you pick?
Democrat or Republican?
In-N-Out Burger or Five Guys?
Downton Abbey or Game of Thrones?
Katy Perry or Taylor Swift?
Apple or Android?
Starbucks or Dunkin Donuts?
Skinny jeans lover or skinny jeans hater?
Facebook or Twitter?

While some of these may seem like inconsequential debates, they can create some heated arguments. But the choices we face every day rarely look this clear cut.

The longer I live, the more nuance and texture I encounter. The more I experience, the less I know and the more questions I discover.

As much as I like to leave space for the grey, are there places where the choice is clear-cut? Where one option is undeniably better than the other? Where one direction will truly be definitively life-changing?

After 18 weeks on bed rest and a pregnancy-saving surgery, my wife gave birth to our twins in August 2014. One day, while we were hanging out in their room within the NICU (Neo-natal Intensive Care Unit), I pulled out my phone and began scanning Twitter. I came across a tweet from Stephen Brewster. Stephen is the Creative Arts Pastor for Cross Point Church in Nashville,

THE GREATER-THAN CHALLENGE

Tennessee. Cross Point is one of the fastest growing local churches in the country, producing incredibly innovative and creative experiences. Stephen shares about the creative process via his blog (stephenbrewster.me) and Twitter (@B_REWSTER).

On this day, his tweet was a simple message of encouragement using the (>), the mathematical sign for greater-than. While the use of the greater-than sign brought back memories of each of my high school math teachers (some I had intentionally blocked out my mind), Stephen's method of distilling a complex idea into a simple message captured my attention. He was on a roll over the next few days with other tweets (Get2 > Have2, Brave > Cool, Hustle > Talent).

Over time, I found myself creating my own greater-than messages and tweeting them out. I began filtering my experiences through the greater-than (>) filter. It became a challenge of sorts. How could I turn this experience, opportunity, or conversation into a greater-than statement?

As I have been working on writing a full-length book focused on my transitions from idealism to cynicism to hope, I discovered six areas where I had faced two options and one option proved much better than the other. Using Stephen's greater-than method, I want to explore these six areas with you and share the lessons I learned.

While I do not want to introduce these six greater-than statements as simplistic arguments, my personal experience has convinced me there are paths which lead to life and paths which lead to destruction. I have watched friends walk paths that led them to flourishing futures, while other friends have walked paths which produced lasting wounds and pain.

I believe you were created to live out a great purpose in the world. I believe our lives are a canvas and the people we become are the art painted upon that canvas. In the Scriptures, the Apostle Paul wrote to the church he planted in Ephesus saying, "For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago."¹

During difficult experiences, choosing the greater-than option will propel you towards a future filled with purpose, where you can flourish as God intended. By accepting The Greater-Than Challenge, you can get better at reframing your life every day.

CHAPTER TWO

Creating > Criticizing

Roger Ebert and Gene Siskel are recognized as two of the most famous critics of the modern era. In a world that had yet to be reshaped by high-speed internet, social media and smart phones, they defined what it meant to be a "critic" with their two thumbs. On many Saturday afternoons growing up I remember watching trailers for new movies. No one had created YouTube yet, nor could I watch them on-demand. I remember the seats Siskel and Ebert used to inhabit within a theater; the way they would banter about films they loved or hated. I remember plotting how I could convince my parents to see a movie their reviews had made me excited to experience.

Today, with our two thumbs, we have the ability to become critics too. But we are not simply reviewing this weekend's slate of new films playing at our local cinema. Now we can review anything and everything we experience. While few of us know how Siskel and Ebert took their "critic" approach into the rest of their lives, it is incredibly easy for us to move from critiquing something to developing a habit that criticizes everything.

Consider this opportunity for a minute. How easy is it to poke holes in the errors and faults of others as one observing from a distance? With no consequences, you can harm the reputation of a firm or company. You can drive away traffic from a church or organization. And then slide your phone back in your pocket. Pretty simple work, huh?

I, for one, have spent too much of my life pointing out where others did it wrong. I know I am not alone in this. I know many of us take advantage of platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Yelp, or TripAdvisor to highlight the mistakes and inadequacies we observe in those around us. The problem is we easily, and sometimes unknowingly, develop a critical spirit in our hearts. We shift from criticizing to living with a critical spirit. We move from being a critic for a

moment to making it our default posture in life.

Having a critical spirit is different than offering constructive criticism. Constructive criticism seeks to build up and improve the work or personhood of another, while a critical spirit looks to tear down or wound another. Constructive criticism is an occasional offering, while someone with a critical spirit seems to seek out or obsess over what is wrong or broken in every situation.

My battle with cynicism exacerbated the critical spirit that developed in my heart. While I was not totally self-aware at the time, I realized some important truths later.

Being a critic is easy; being a creator is hard.

Sure, you can say from a distance, "That's terrible. That was lousy. What a disappointment." But, how about you do it better? What would you do differently? I realized that the challenge in front of all of us is to criticize by creating something new. And if that is the challenge, many of us – the critics and cynics – indict ourselves because we are not doing anything at all. We only criticize the people who are at least trying to do something.

Can I make a confession? As a follower of Jesus, I am often embarrassed by the manner in which some other Jesus-followers share their faith with others. Manifesting stories I have listened to, books I have read, videos I have watched online - they have embarrassed and enraged me as I observed people who "share Jesus" while looking nothing like the Jesus I read about in the Bible. What others think is okay often appears judgmental, antagonistic, impersonal and self-righteous to me. While I "may" have a point and some accuracy in my assessments (honestly I think I am 100% right), someone challenged me a couple years ago to describe how I was sharing my faith. This question stopped me in my tracks. I painfully recognized that I critiqued others for what I had failed to do myself. Sure, they were not doing it the way I felt they should, but they were doing something that I was not even attempting. Who was most in the wrong? Me!

Critics don't change the world; creators do.

Later, as I was reflecting on the conversation with that friend who asked me to describe how I shared my faith, I stumbled upon a blog post where I read the following words from Justin Zoradi: "If you look at the people who've made the greatest change in the world, they're the ones who spent the least amount of their time as critics and consumers."²

Zoradi's statement crystalized the change I needed to make. I recognized that critics and cynics do not change the world. People who create something do. It is not enough to identify the weaknesses and inadequacies of others' efforts. It is

THE GREATER-THAN CHALLENGE

not enough to point out broken systems, the incomplete theologies, the destructive tendencies or the ineffective efforts. Deconstruction is not enough. Generating ideas is futile without implementation. Ultimately, we have to move from deconstruction to reconstruction and from having ideas to making ideas happen. Pointing out where someone else stumbles is hollow if I remain on the sidelines and they remain in the game.

Our perception of criticism changes when we begin doing something that matters.

If you want to change the world, then leave your cynicism and criticism at the door and join others who are already working to do something to change the future. In that moment, I can promise you that you will have a certain experience. You will discover what it feels like to be the victim of criticism or experience the effects of someone else's cynicism. Instantly, your eyes will be opened to realize what it is like to be on the other side of the criticism your two downward-facing thumbs produced so well.

I've served on the staff of a large church for over eight years. Over the last couple of years, I transitioned from a role with a limited group of our members to a role that directly influences our entire church community.

The change in position has taught me a lot. One glaringly negative habit I noticed centered on the lack of empathy I had for other leaders I often criticized when I had a limited role (and frankly a limited perspective). While I still struggle with some of the decisions we made in the past, I now understand the pressures others faced at the level I now inhabit.

If you have shifted from criticizing to creating, I expect that you have already experienced the shift I just described. (If not, I believe you will very soon.) I hope you discover compassion and empathy for those you vilified or attacked in the past. They may still be wrong, but at least you now understand how they felt. I encourage you to at least try walking in their shoes for a bit before you begin criticizing others from a distance again.

If you are a cynic or a critic or a recovering cynic like me, my prayer is that we will finally realize that critics do not change the world. Leo Tolstoy once wrote, "And yet in our world everybody thinks of changing humanity, but nobody thinks of changing himself."³ Join me in abandoning the criticism and joining the revolution to introduce the change that is needed to create a better future.

CHAPTER THREE

Forgiveness > Bitterness

"Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference."⁴
-Robert Frost, *The Road Not Taken*

Throughout history, children transitioned into adulthood through rites of passages. In ancient times, it might have entailed killing an animal. Traditionally, entering into marriage was a clear moment of transition. Today, our rites of passage are events such as graduation, moving out, buying a car, or having a baby.

However, our transition into adulthood includes some difficult parts too. By the time we get deep into our 20s, we have all been wounded. Whether by a family member, an abuser, a boss or an ex-boyfriend, our late teens and 20s allow many opportunities for us to be hurt by those we trusted and allowed into the deepest places of our hearts.

When we are wounded, we come to a crossroads. Like Robert Frost describes in his poem, "The Road Not Taken," we face two options. On one hand, we can allow bitterness to take root in our hearts. On the other hand, we can take "the road less traveled by", the path of forgiveness.

When we refuse to forgive, something terrible and unintended happens. Instead of hurting the one who wounded us, we get hurt. We further wound ourselves when we chose bitterness over forgiveness. As the proverb goes, refusing to forgive is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die. Bitterness is dangerous. When it takes root, it produces fruit that will wound anyone who tastes it.

I can remember when I was first betrayed by a boss. I began working in the

THE GREATER-THAN CHALLENGE

President's office at the university I was attending. Part of my job as an assistant in that office evolved into internal marketing projects, where I sold employees and students on the merits of the new administration. It was a tough sell to a skeptical crowd. But I believed in what I was saying and I communicated it well.

As my classwork took up more of my time, I chose to resign that position. As soon as I informed my bosses of my resignation, they turned on me. I went from a trusted teammate whose input they took seriously to "you're dead to us" in approximately 0.6 seconds. They took my prioritization of my life as a student as an act of betrayal.

During my final day in the office, one of my bosses told multiple coworkers about my transition from "The Apprentice" to "The Quitter."

As the weeks and months passed after my resignation, I began to see all sorts of holes in the stories I sold to others. I realized that the concerns other employees and students had brought to me, which I had initially brushed off, were actually legitimate. I felt so betrayed and became embittered. I was embarrassed because I misled my friends and compromised my reputation by intimidating and bullying people. My anger boiled because I felt like I had been abused and taken advantage of for my bosses' agenda.

A few weeks later, a good friend sat me down and called me out. He told me that my bitterness was costing me respect, trust and influence in relationships with people I cared about deeply who were not involved in my former position. He challenged me to forgive, even though my former employers had not changed. He pushed me to forgive them for my own benefit, not theirs. When he painted a picture of all I would lose if I kept living in bitterness, I relented and began pursuing forgiveness.

So what did that new pursuit look like? What do you do if you realize you are bitter too? Consider these three ideas as a guide.

Recognize that forgiven people forgive.

Forgiveness is a gift we receive from God and give to others. Jesus tells a parable in Matthew 18:21-35 about a man who was offered forgiveness but did not fully receive it. After he had been forgiven an astronomical debt, this man went out and imprisoned another man who owed him a paltry sum. The man who refused to forgive ended up in debtors' prison himself when his loan source heard of his duplicitous actions.⁵ He simply failed to understand the gift he received. In reflecting the heart of this parable, the Apostle Paul wrote, "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you."⁶

If you have experienced the power of being forgiven - a gift you did not

THE GREATER-THAN CHALLENGE

deserve, you know that power of forgiveness to change you. You recognize the power of a second chance. When you experience God's forgiveness, you realize this truth - the greatest gift you can give to others is what you've fully received from God. When you experience another person's forgiveness, you accept a gift that should not stop with you. Forgiving someone else is the greatest thank you note you could give the person you wronged.

Embrace forgiveness as a decision and a process.

Forgiveness is a "both/and" experience rather than an "either/or" proposition. In the Book of Acts Chapter 15, we read about how the greatest missionary combination, Paul and Barnabas, split over Paul's inability to forgive a young man named John Mark who abandoned them.⁷ We do not see forgiveness completed until the end of Paul's life, when he calls for John Mark in 2 Timothy 4:11, saying "he is very useful to me for ministry."⁸

We must accept that forgiveness can be an incredibly slow process. Whether it is the slowness of our heart to change or the heart of the person we offended, we must embrace patience. Remember, God is more patient with all of us than we are with Him or each other. Choose to forgive and begin the process.

Make the distinction between forgiveness and reconciliation.

Forgiveness is something that is dependent on me. Reconciliation takes two or more parties. Reconciliation is not always possible, nor always the best result. My wife spent nearly six years prosecuting domestic violence cases as an attorney. While I learned a lot from her experience with both victims and offenders, the most powerful lesson may have been the dangerous, even deadly, consequences of reconciliation in that context. Banish naïveté. Time, wisdom and discernment are necessary when it comes to reconciliation. Forgiveness requires a change in my heart, while reconciliation requires a change in our hearts.

After my friend intervened about my lack of forgiveness towards my college employer, I began addressing what was happening inside of me. With God's help, I dug up the root of bitterness from my heart. I experienced God's healing power. The wounds I received from the season I mentioned earlier ceased to negatively impact those closest to me. But I never worked for those men again and to this day, I carry with me the lessons I learned from that season.

If Paul was correct when he said, "For freedom Christ set us free",⁹ we must never embrace the self-inflicted bondage of bitterness. Move toward forgiveness today.

CHAPTER FOUR

Gratitude > Entitlement

Can I make a confession? As a millennial, I get so tired of reading articles in my news feed that slam my generation. There are so many critiques. We are lazy and feel entitled. We are narcissistic. We are addicted to our phones. We cannot go five minutes without checking social media. We cannot commit to anything. We mooch off our parents, prolonging our adolescence. In the words of Louis CK, millennials are “the crappiest generation ever.”¹⁰

Many of the things out there being said about us are broad, sweeping and inaccurate generalizations. But honestly, our generation struggles with some of these areas. Sometimes the critiques we receive are warranted.

I wonder, what if we were conditioned to feel entitled? Every time we competed, we earned a trophy or an award. We grew up in a world where everyone had cable TV and internet. We attended college at a time when owning laptops was typical and cell phone ownership seemed universal. I mean, by the time we got to college we had graduated five times! Think about it —preschool, kindergarten, 5th grade, 8th grade, and high school. There is a reason we think we are awesome!

While our sense of entitlement has been honestly developed, it has quickly become a major barrier to our future. Entitlement is not only a barrier for millennials, though, as it can limit anyone's development. Entitlement produces a demanding nature in our interactions. Entitlement makes it more difficult to endure the challenging and painful seasons life inevitably sends our way. When we feel entitled, we easily default to passivity and laziness, while expecting things to come our way without hard work and perseverance.

Entitlement confuses many of us. We focus on the outcome we experience and ignore the process that produced it. We love using our iPhones but forget

the long, painful, failure-ridden road Steve Jobs took before he created this amazing piece of technology. When we become entitled about enjoying the outcomes of other people's hard work, we fail to pursue paths ourselves that expose us to struggle and possibly failure.

My sense of entitlement nearly cost me my future. Entitlement produced a lack of teachability in me that a supervisor would later critique. Entitlement prevented me from appreciating the good things I had, the advantages I enjoyed that others envied. This sense of entitlement left me unprepared for the struggle of leadership. I could not comprehend how necessary difficult seasons and painful moments would be to my personal growth and transformation. I failed to realize what James, the brother of Jesus, knew when he wrote, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance."

While in that season, I discovered gratitude as an antidote to the negative aspects of entitlement. In a blog post on the power of gratitude and the danger of entitlement, pastor Steven Furtick writes, "Your sense of gratitude ends where entitlement begins...You cannot be grateful for something you feel entitled to."¹¹

Gratitude reminds our hearts that everything we have is a gift. When we begin to look at what we have—possessions, relationships, opportunities, positions and experiences—as the gift of God's provision or the gift that came after a hard season of work and waiting, their status as gifts shifts our experience of them. Many of us do not use the word very often, but we begin to "treasure" what we have when gratitude is our posture toward life as we experience it.

If gratitude is so important, how do we cultivate it in our lives?

Exercise your "gratitude muscle."

In his book *Today We Are Rich*, Tim Sanders shares how his grandmother, Billye, taught him to think of gratitude as a muscle and not a feeling.¹² Sanders teaches that a daily discipline of giving thanks builds a strong muscle, just like a daily trip to the weight room. This idea echoes the writing of the apostle Paul, when he says to "give thanks in all circumstances."¹³

Understand that gratitude does not change your experience, but rather gratitude changes your perception of your experience.

The difference between gratitude and entitlement is not found in what happens to us, but rather our response to and perception of what happens. When we exercise our gratitude muscle, we accept the information and assessments that fit the gratitude grid instead of the entitlement grid. We can try to force change in our circumstances or we can work to shift our perception and

attitude regardless of our circumstances.

Stick with gratitude long enough for it to build generosity and contentment.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus describes the growth and development of a disciple using agricultural terms. By placing his illustrations in this context, Jesus communicated an important truth—development comes slowly, requiring a plodding, patient perspective. Instead of being patient and letting gratitude do its slow work in us, most of us treat gratitude like a can of Red Bull. Rather than building gratitude consistently and faithfully in our lives, we look for quick fixes. While gratitude is not a quick fix, its lasting power far exceeds any “buzz” we might get from other paths. (For more on this, check out my favorite book by Eugene Peterson entitled *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*.)

I think entitlement is a dangerous disease. We have seen diseases rob friends and family of their futures. If entitlement has the potential to steal our future in that kind of scenario, our relationship with gratitude could be a life-saving proposition. Do all you can to cultivate a grateful heart, allowing God to shape your perception of your past, present, and future.

CHAPTER FIVE

Humility > Arrogance

Protests on college campuses in the '60s and '70s catalyzed resistance to United States military involvement in the Vietnam War. Facebook, the world's largest social network, began in the dorm room of one of America's oldest institutions, Harvard. College students and young adults stood at the center of these cultural-changing developments.

We often enter our 20s and post college life with enough confidence to believe we can change the world. Passion and enthusiasm, mixed with intolerance for the status quo, fuel a drive to make our mark on the world. These qualities are invaluable when shifting culture and introducing change.

However, confidence can easily become hubris and arrogance. To cope with feeling overwhelmed and in over our heads, we often choose to "fake it until we make it." Out of insecurity and fear, we project that we know more than we do. We want to impress others and confidence can morph into something contrived. The confidence we once faked becomes the arrogance we really possess, impeding our ability to learn and grow. We give off a vibe that pushes other people away, including older, wiser, and seasoned men and women who could be great mentors. Passing on their wisdom in a season when we could go further, faster because of their investment in us, we are slowed and stunted instead.

During my final year of seminary I was required to establish a meeting of volunteers I led in the church. These people were asked to give me feedback on my leadership. After a couple of meetings with this diverse group, one team member pulled me aside. He had a difficult piece of feedback and did not want to embarrass me with it. He said, "You are not very teachable. Especially when you interact with older people, your posture is closed, like you have nothing to gain from them." He challenged me to meet with several older men in our

church, to buy them coffee or a meal and ask them questions about their story and life experience.

Over the next couple of months I met with five men in our church, all over the age of 60. I learned several important lessons. First, my friend was right. I had been closed off to this group of people. Second, they had some very different life experiences from mine. They grew up in a world that was far friendlier to Christianity than the one I inhabit as a young pastor. While their world had been shaped by world wars and a huge period of American prosperity, I was becoming an adult in a world shaped by 9/11, the Great Recession, globalization and rapid technological development.

Third, our divergent perspectives did not prohibit me from learning from them. I left each conversation with at least one substantial new perspective to consider. I look back on that difficult feedback as an invaluable gift that changed my life.

What if we could move beyond arrogance to true humility? The apostle Peter wrote, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”¹⁴

So how do we move beyond arrogance to humility? I would like to unpack several steps to build humility based on the Apostle Paul’s words in his letter to the Philippians.

Decide other people are more important than you.

In verse 3, Paul writes, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.”¹⁵ When we decide to make other people more important than ourselves, we open ourselves to new friends, lessons and experiences.

The member of that feedback meeting who identified my lack of teachability recently left our church staff. We got together one final time before he transitioned, and I thanked him for giving me a gift. He had forgotten about that conversation, but I had not. Nearly six years later, I was still benefitting from a simple observation he provided when he decided to make my growth more important than his own nervousness.

Think about how something impacts others before you consider how it impacts you.

Paul challenged the Philippian believers (and us today) when he said, “Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.”¹⁶ Humility changes our perspective, enabling us to see an issue, problem or circumstance from someone else’s point of view. Considering how something impacts others will make us better friends, leaders and followers of

THE GREATER-THAN CHALLENGE

Jesus. Considering how something only impacts us leads to loneliness, isolation, and insignificance.

Choose to serve rather than to be served.

Jesus becomes Paul's shining example of humility when he describes Jesus' attitude. "Have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant."¹⁷ Many of us remain comfortable discussing serving others until someone treats us like a servant. In those moments, this choice becomes terribly painful. Many of us never transition from talking about serving to becoming a servant. The pain to our ego is simply too great.

I can promise you that you will feel a lack of confidence in the near future. Fear will tempt you to fake it, to appear confident in the eyes of others. In that moment, you can change everything by choosing to humble yourself. When we humble ourselves, we discover teachers who surround us with gifts and insights to help us grow immeasurably.

Humility is a gift we can all cultivate if we shift from focusing on ourselves to focusing on others. Confidence and success can coexist with humility. In the words of 19th-century Jesuit priest Father Strickland, "A man may do an immense deal of good if he does not care who gets credit for it."¹⁸

CHAPTER SIX

Hope > Cynicism

"The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong in the broken places. But those that will not break it kills."

-Ernest Hemingway¹⁹

Becoming a cynic was not on my five-year plan after I graduated from college. I excitedly accepted a seminary internship at a large, established church, and was grateful for a job and help with tuition costs. I had grand visions of what the Church (the global Church) should and could be. I had ideas about how we could improve, grow and change. Again and again, though, I had encounters with certain people I met which made me feel like I had been living in a fantasy land. My dreams looked more like a fairy tale and real life frustrated and angered me. My idealistic expectations careened into a local church in transition, with some big questions it needed to answer. I lost my idealism and replaced it with sarcasm and cynicism, insulating myself from the pain of unmet expectations.

If you are a college student or 20-something, consider this - one of your greatest offers is your idealism about the world and your ability to change it. Your sense of belief is as large as the obstacles we work to overcome. However, in this season, many of you could tell a story like mine where you realized you were naïve. In place of idealism, we often resort to cynicism as a coping mechanism.

Our cynicism protects us from being wounded again. While it may protect us, cynicism also prevents us from making a difference in the world. Cynics do not change the world. Think of the people whose lives and messages have changed the world - Ghandi, Mandela, Mother Teresa, Dr. King, Steve Jobs, Walt Disney. None of them were cynical. They passionately believed in their message and gave their lives working to make their dreams come to life.

THE GREATER-THAN CHALLENGE

How do we reject cynicism and embrace hope? The following three transitions may seem simple, but they are not easy. They start by helping us to stop allowing our past pain to determine the limits of our future.

Process the pain.

Wounds are an unavoidable piece of life in our 20s and 30s. Inviting others into the intimate places of our lives provides an opportunity to be wounded. The question is not "will you be wounded?" but rather "what will you do with your wound?" If you do not process the pain, you will pass it on to others. Processing includes patience, forgiveness, counseling, the support of friends and God's healing power. Processing involves how you relate to God. God longs to meet you in your pain. Jesus said, in Matthew 11:28-30, "Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you...and you will find rest for your souls."²⁰

Processing can be improved by getting help. One of the best decisions you could make in your life is processing your painful experiences with a counselor who can help you unpack the damage and identify healthy coping mechanisms. Processing can ultimately lead to forgiveness. While not all of us forgive easily, God's grace can enable us to let go of the retributive desires that rise in our hearts.

Filter your inputs.

The voices we listen to shape our future. Our transition from cynicism to hope depends on whose voices we value and empower.

During my battle with cynicism, I discovered this truth while reading voices that critiqued the modern church. My experience was not unique and others had similar experiences in their local churches. As I struggled to process the pain I experienced there myself, my reading only served to exacerbate the pain. Many of the authors I read spent more time talking about what was broken than how it could be healed. They spent more time deconstructing what had been and not nearly enough time reconstructing what could or should be in the future.

Paul called the Philippian church to be intentional about what occupies their mind. In Philippians 4:8, he said, "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."²¹

As I battled cynicism, I did not want to ignore the brokenness experienced by myself and others. But I needed to renegotiate my relationship to these voices

if I was going to rediscover a healthy existence myself.

Initially, I cut off some voices entirely. Over time, I began filtering who I read and the purposes for which I read them. I began reading some authors for critique and read others for prescription. I had my deconstruction voices and my reconstruction voices. Eventually, my reading found a balance that helped me to become thoughtful and healthy.

Get to work.

Jennie Allen, founder of the IF: Gathering, recently tweeted, "Somebody asked me recently - how do you overcome cynicism? My response - start building things. Then there's no energy to tear down."²²

As I look back and process through my experience with cynicism, I realize that the opportunities I had to serve others saved me. I watched friends battle cynicism, in part because they lacked an opportunity to get the focus off them and their pain and onto someone else's needs. When we are focused on doing something for others, we can shift gears from the critical and introspective to an outward, creative focus.

I am currently re-watching the seven seasons of NBC's *The West Wing* on Netflix. It's my show to watch while feeding our newborn twins overnight. I was recently watching an episode near the end of the show's run and one particular scene sparked some serious introspection. Played by actor, Jimmy Smits, President-Elect Matt Santos called out a recruit for a rebuttal of his job offer, implying that her "outside" role as a lobbyist has made it easy for her criticize others. Santos said, "It is easier to throw rocks at a house than it is build one."²³

It may seem odd to you, but this dialogue from a fictional TV show provoked me on a deep level. Personally, I have wasted too much time throwing rocks. For an extended period of time, I was content to throw rocks from a safe distance, while others did the hard work of creating something out of nothing. I am grateful to say I moved from cynicism and toward hope. To borrow Santos' line, I eventually dropped my rocks and picked up a hammer.

In the Old Testament, Nehemiah encountered resistance as he neared the completion of the wall around Jerusalem. Some men wrote him a letter urging him to come down from the wall and meet them. I love his reply in Nehemiah 6:3, "I sent messengers to them, saying, 'I am doing a great work and I cannot come down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and come down to you?'"²⁴

Nehemiah gave himself to this task and nothing would distract him. His response illustrates the truth behind Allen's tweet. He simply did not have the time for anything but the work he had given his hands to completing.

THE GREATER-THAN CHALLENGE

The loss of idealism seems inevitable for all of us as we grow older. The difference in who we become will be shaped by our response to that loss. Some will emerge from a cynical season with a renewed sense of hope, developing resiliency. Those who remain stuck in the quagmire of cynicism will grow weaker in Hemingway's "broken places."

Our culture faces incredible challenges today. The world needs us to be driven by a belief in change, and hope in possibilities. If I could go back in time and say something to the seminary-student-Scott who was discovering an imperfect church with big challenges, difficult choices and rocky transitions, I would say three words. They are the same three words I would say to you if you are facing this challenge.

Relentlessly reject cynicism.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Courage > Fear

"Everything you want is on the other side of fear."²⁵ -Jack Canfield

What are you afraid of?

You likely have one of the many common human phobias. Many of you are afraid of things like public speaking, death, blood, spiders, snakes, heights, darkness, rats, confined spaces, the dentist, thunderstorms, zombies, clowns, needles and crowds. Needless to say, we have a lot of fears!

While these kinds of fears populate Top 10 lists all over the internet, some of the most dangerous fears did not even make the list. Many of us are terrified of failure. We are so scared what we are working on will not succeed and we sabotage our efforts or pull back from what we feel called or driven to do.

Some of us are scared of hearing a "no" from someone else. We fail to make a phone call, send an email or take someone to lunch because they could say no to our request. Even more of us are mortified of feeling uncomfortable or awkward. We resist new experiences which expose us or make us vulnerable. Instead, we give in to the temptation to stay in the safe, familiar places we know so well.

Donald Miller wrote about the nature of fear and the consequences of letting it drive our stories in his book, *A Million Miles in a Thousand Years: How I Learned to Live a Better Story*. He writes,

"The most often repeated commandment in the Bible is 'Do not fear.' It's in there over two hundred times. That means a couple of things, if you think about it. It means we are going to be afraid, and it means we shouldn't let fear boss us around. Before I realized we were supposed to fight fear, I thought of fear as a

subtle suggestion in our subconscious designed to keep us safe, or more important, keep us from getting humiliated. And I guess it serves that purpose. But fear isn't only a guide to keep us safe; it's also a manipulative emotion that can trick us into living a boring life."²⁶

Like Miller, I believe our approach to fear has harmed our lives and enabled a dysfunctional decision-making process. So how do we change? In working to clarify what the shift has looked like for me, I established some rules for defeating fear and embracing courage. These rules can be summarized into seven statements.

Allow God's love to transform your fear.

In his second letter to Timothy, the Apostle Paul writes, "For God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love and self-discipline." When we know that we are unconditionally loved by God, this sense of identity frees us from fear. Fear does not have to imprison us. Instead, God's love can enable us to acknowledge the fear and do what we are called to do anyway. With our identity established outside of our performance, fear ceases to have the power it once did.

Never say no for other people.

I've learned so much on this subject from Ben Arment. Ben is the founder of STORY (a conference for creators, dreamers and storytellers) and the author of *Dream Year*. In writing about our fear of failure, Ben challenged me to remove the power from someone else's "no", to look at the asking process as if you're always one "no" closer to hearing a "yes." Ben writes, "When it comes to making things happen, everyone has a job. Your job is to dream audaciously, act courageously and make big asks. Their job is to say yes or no. And this is their job alone. Never say no for other people."²⁷ Fear would have us pull back from asking because we might get rejected. Stop pulling back and let people do their job (replying yes or no), while you do yours (dreaming and creating).

Keep asking "What's the worst that could happen?"

Steven Furtick discusses this concept in great detail in his book, *Crash the Chatterbox: Hearing God's Voice Above All Others*. In the book, he encourages his readers to lean into the question, "what's the worst that could happen?" After each answer, Furtick encourages asking "and then what?" until we can come to the place where we realize the realization of many of our wildest fears would still leave us alive and with more in our favor than we might believe.²⁸ This simple practice of following the "what's the worst that could happen?" has surprising power to set us free from fear.

Assume adversity and conflict are a normal part of your road to success.

THE GREATER-THAN CHALLENGE

No matter what you are pursuing in life, you will encounter adversity and conflict. Accepting these inevitabilities helps you prepare for their arrival and the shock they often introduce. As a writer, I expect that I will have much to overcome on the road to publishing my first book. For a long time, I was afraid of getting my book proposal rejected. (I got my first rejection last month.) I regularly resisted asking other people to help me achieve my dream because I might get a no and still battle fear when I hit "call" or "send." As I realized I would need to write at least 50,000 words to finish my book, I wondered how painful it would be to put all this work into a book and not see it work out. Again and again, I recognize that writing this book is as much about me improving throughout the process as it is me getting a final manuscript.

Expect courage to move you towards your fears.

One of my favorite verses in the Bible is Joshua 1:9. God is speaking through a messenger and He says to Joshua, "Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go."²⁹

A couple years ago, when preaching on this verse, I researched the meaning of the Hebrew words used by the writer of the book of Joshua. I learned the word for strong means "rooted and anchored in truth, the core of who you are."

When I think of that meaning, I imagine a TV weather reporter covering the arrival of a hurricane, standing amidst the wind. As I remember watching countless reports like these, I imagine the strength it takes to remain standing and not fall over.

In addition to strength, I also researched the meaning of the Hebrew word we translate as courage. The Hebrew word for courage invokes the idea of "urgency, momentum, moving forward into the unknown, that which produces fear." If strength stands in the face of hurricane-force winds, then courage stands against the wind, leaning into that which makes us afraid. We will discover courage when we stop running from our fears and start running towards them, realizing they do not need to dominate our lives.

Fear is often a red light for us, indicating that it is time to stop. Fear can actually be our green light, telling us to go and move forward. Fear can show us that we are moving in the right direction.

I believe you were created on purpose, for a purpose. I believe Jesus Christ came to earth to save you from the power of sin, death and brokenness, so that you might achieve the purpose. The worst part of your life story would be if you did not pursue your purpose because you were afraid.

THE GREATER-THAN CHALLENGE

While the movement from fear to courage can be complex, the essence of courage comes down to a simple act - a person says "yes" to an opportunity. One act of courage may have monumental consequences. One act of courage may change everything.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Take the Challenge

Life is not simple. We need nuance when processing what to do with our lives in this complicated world. When we get overwhelmed, we would prefer to gloss over the messiness and edit the complex details into a simple solution. While certain situations never become as simple as we'd prefer, there are also paths that lead to life and paths that lead to destruction. Our responses to the events we did not plan for and the pain we did not anticipate do determine our future. Our choices can be life-altering.

Our ability to build and maintain healthy relationships could begin with embracing forgiveness instead of bitterness. Our level of contentment and happiness during a difficult season in life could begin by practicing gratitude instead of entitlement. Our dream could actually move from idea to implementation because we are driven by courage not fear.

As a follower of Jesus, I believe that the same God who created the universe, including the planet we call home, remains completely in charge of all creation. For me, the experiences I've recounted to you have not put my belief in God's sovereignty up for debate. Additionally, I have become more convinced of the power of human agency to alter the course of our future.

The posture we take in response to the life we did not plan for will shape who we become. We have very little control over life's hurts and wounds. We don't plan for getting fired or divorced. Death surprises us. Opportunity catches us off guard. Luck falls in our lap.

To get the lives we always wanted we have to embrace the attitudes we often resist. It is not easy to be hopeful when you're afraid. It is safer to criticize instead of creating. We risk less when we become cynical instead of courageous. Popular people often seem to be the arrogant ones, while the

THE GREATER-THAN CHALLENGE

humble never get the moment. Entitlement appears normal, while gratitude feels peculiar.

In this short ebook, I've shared 6 greater-than scenarios...

Creativity > Criticism
Forgiveness > Bitterness
Gratitude > Entitlement
Humility > Arrogance
Hope > Cynicism
Courage > Fear

These greater-than responses lead to the life we were created to live. They enable us to achieve the purpose God created us to achieve. They empower us to connect with one another in ways that lead to life and not death. They make us fully alive and fully human. They make us most like the God whose image we were created in from the beginning.

Please do not seek insulation from the difficult experiences that come with being human. Easy things do not change us; the difficult things are shaping agents. My hope and prayer in writing this ebook is that you would be shaped, molded and ultimately transformed by your greater-than responses in the depths of those difficult experiences.

Will you take the challenge?

Every day for the next seven days, I want you to construct at least one greater-than statement in light of your experience. Simplify your situation down into _____ > _____. It doesn't have to be spiritual; it doesn't even have to be serious. Begin processing your experience using this tool and embrace the life-altering choices in front of you. Once you begin processing your experience using this "frame", you're going to be coming up with more greater-than statements than you'll know what to do with.

When life seems overwhelmingly complicated, we can embrace the simple, clear paths that lead us to life. Those paths can bring clarity and definition to your next steps.

When we accept The Greater-Than Challenge, we get better at reframing our life and make better decisions.

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²¹Philippians 4:8. *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*. Crossway Bibles: Carol Stream, Illinois. 2001.

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THE GREATER-THAN CHALLENGE

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