

Chapter One:

Mud and the Mire

“God never said that the journey would be easy, but He did say that the arrival would be worthwhile” – Max Lucado

There is something fun about getting dirty. Maybe it's a guy thing. It seems to me that dirt and boys go hand in hand. In my younger years, my friends and I loved taking our vehicles off roading through the mud. Living in Montana, we had plenty of places to indulge our love of trucks and mud. This inevitably always ended with us getting stuck.

Back then, I owned a 1986 Ford Bronco II. This was a short box, four wheel drive vehicle and a great off-roader. I remember a time when we had a college mud volleyball game. After the game I decided it would be a great idea to run my Bronco through it. I hit the gas and it jumped forward through this slippery field. As I approached the pit I began to spin out. To maintain momentum, I stepped on the gas and continued towards the pit. As I sped forward through the mud I hit this three foot deep mud pit. The front end started to sink and I came to an abrupt halt. As each tire sunk and spun in the mud, the entire Bronco dug deeper and deeper. After just a few short minutes, I was stuck in this thick mud all the way up to the door. The more I tried to gas it, the more I sank. After several attempts to back up and go forward I gave up and called out for help.

I can't help but think how closely this parallels our lives. One moment you're rolling along, and then next you're spinning your wheels as your life changes. I was just a typical college kid back in the year 2001. Like most, I was just trying to fit in and find my way. High school was behind me and I was now entering the big world of real life. I had taken a few graphic design courses through high school and chose to pursue a degree in graphic design.

I enrolled in a small college in Powell, Wyoming. For most college students time away is sort of like a kid in a candy shop. Everything you ever wanted is right in front of you, and nobody is there to say otherwise. This for me was the moment I felt empowered and in complete control. The danger in feeling this way is not seeing the inevitable disaster awaiting ahead.

It's the kid who overeats on Laffy Taffy (my favorite) and in the moment they are in a heavenly sugar-coma. Hour later, they are bent over with a stomach ache from those sweet delectables. I found myself living the life of what I wanted. Soon I was spending most evenings and weekends getting drunk and partying. Life for me was what I wanted, and I felt significance around those I partied alongside. However even in

the midst of this season, I knew deep down that my purpose and identity was beyond a drink or a party.

I grew up in a great Christ-centered family. We went to church, we prayed and read the bible. I had a relationship with Jesus all through out my life. During those drunken days, I struggled to grasp who I was. I completely relate to the Apostle Paul in the Book of Romans 7:1 when he says: *“I want to do what is good, but I don’t. I don’t want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway.”*

Over the course of a semester, I was continually slipping and living another life. My drinking had increased to almost daily. Along with the drinking, I was becoming increasingly angry and volatile. My emotions were all over the place, and I began to act out with violence and intimidation. With this mix, I was becoming more unstable. I felt like I was invisible and untouchable.

It was just like any other night. My friends and I began drinking early in the evening. As the night progressed we party hopped from home to home. Earlier in the week, I had gone through a personal breakup, from a girl I had an on and off again relationship with since high school. Combined, this turmoil with the mix of alcohol, had me on the edge. As we arrived at a house we partied at frequently, I noticed my ex-girlfriend was at the house. When I approached her, I saw she was with another guy and, something in me snapped. I engaged in an argument with this gentleman and his three friends. My usual approach to most of my conflicts, was to use my size and strength to intimidate.

We took our conflict outside, where our intensity grew. This moment for me was one that would determine my future. As I began to punch and fight, I reached out to grab a baseball bat that was sitting outside and I swung this bat with the intentions of hitting one of the guys legs out from underneath him. As I swung, I didn’t realize that the guy I was aiming for, had fallen over. As he was getting up, the bat struck him across the head. The sound rang out, and in a split second, he collapsed to the ground unresponsive. His friends immediately went to his aid and tried to wake him. Even in my unstable state, I knew this was serious. In a panic, I grabbed my friends and left.

I hoped things would be fine after we fled to the dorms. The news had quickly spread. Within twenty minutes, police were on the scene looking for me. My self-preservation kicked in, and I ran on foot to get away from the dorms. Within a mile or so, officers found me, and at gunpoint they cornered and arrested me. Handcuffed, sitting in the back of a police car, adrenaline kicked in. Emotions coursing through me, all I was thinking about was [how do I talk my way out of this?] I convinced myself that with the right spin on words the story, everything would be sorted out.

A Pit of Despair

As we pulled into the police station, the officer walked me to a room to begin the process. Paperwork and documentation of my side of the story was written. As I talked, I tried everything in my power to spin and lie my way out. After several hours they said, I was being booked into county and in the morning I would be arraigned in front of a judge.

The county jail was in the town of Cody, Wyoming, about 15 miles away. That drive seemed to last a decade. My thoughts were overwhelmed with fear and anxiety. I was a good kid, not one to be arrested and booked into jail. When we finally arrived at the jail, I was brought in and booked. The process was fairly quick. I removed everything on me and was searched head to toe. I was given the infamous orange jump suit, a pair of shoes, and flip flops. I was then led into a room with blankets, pillows, and bed mats. I was ordered to grab one of each, and then head to C Block. As we walked down this dimly lit hall, we came to a room within a room. The room had two cells joined together. On one side there were two toilets, a shower and a picnic bench. On the other, four steel framed bunk beds with a TV mounted on the wall.

This jail was originally built in the 1950's and every door was open and closed with a traditional key. The sound matched every typical movie and tv show depicting jail. The guard opened the cell and I walked in, and he shut the steel door. I turned and saw six other inmates sitting in their bunks looking straight at me.

As you can imagine, I didn't sleep at all the whole night. When morning came, a different guard brought us our meal and we ate in our cell. After meal time, I was told they would come to get me when my arraignment hearing was announced. In the meantime, I ran through every scenario in my mind of getting out of this. Around 11:00 a.m. I was summoned. I was handcuffed on both my feet and hands and put in a police car. We took a short drive to the courthouse where we pulled into a garage on the backside. The car pulled in and waiting for me were two more police officers. The three officers led me into a courtroom, where I sat and waited along with others, to stand before the judge.

The judge called me by name and I rose and stood before him. The judge looked down at me and with a quick assessment he said, I was being charged with two felony counts of assault and battery. The words resounded through me, and I felt the cold grasp of fear. Everything after that moment was a blur my mind blanked. The judge set a bond amount and the police officers led me back to the jail.

It was a Friday and I was sitting in a jail in Cody, Wyoming. I was charged with two felony counts that held long term consequences with significant jail time. My mind was racing and I felt sick to my stomach. Who do I call? What do I do? How do I fix this? It was an all consuming concern for me. I wrestled with knowing getting out meant posting bail.

The only way I could communicate was through a pay phone within the cell. This phone allowed you to call out but the person on the receiving end, had to accept the charges of the collect call. I quickly called all of my friend's from college. I explained my situation, asked them to try and collect money for my bail.

In my ignorance and desperation, I thought they would be able to help me. However I quickly realized there was absolutely no way they could gather the necessary resources. I quickly realized I was on my own. After three days of sitting in jail, and exhausting all other options, I faced the reality of breaking the news to my parents. I knew I needed their help.

"I waited patiently for the Lord to help me, and he turned to me and heard my cry. He lifted me out of the pit of despair, out of the mud and the mire. He set my feet on solid ground and steadied me as I walked along." -Psalms 40:1-2 NLT

Did you catch the phrase? *"He lifted me out of the pit of despair, out of the mud and the mire.."* That is a powerful image. The NKJV says *"out of the miry clay."* the ESV says *"He drew me up from the pit of destruction, out of the miry bog"*.

Do you know what a miry bog is? It's a muddy swamp. When I think of a swamp, I think of a slimy, smelly, wet place. A miry bog is a place where our feet get trapped in mud...where we can sink down and get stuck. David the author of this psalm, uses this specific word to describe the feeling of despair. David appropriately offers joyful praise, in both personal testimony and public statement; to the God who pulls him out of a muddy pit.

You don't truly grasp the understanding of the heaviness of despair holds until you relieve or live it fist hand. Despair is unique emotion. Despair is defined in the dictionary as: *to lose, give up, or be without hope*. Its not something that can be explained but rather is felt. We live in a society where we can see people in despair all over the world; on social media, new's station stories, increased suicide rates, depression statistics, etc. Again, it's hard to understand until you've personally felt that weight.

Despair leaves us abandoned and hopeless. As I sat there in a jail cell stuck, and at the end of myself, I knew I wasn't able to fix this. I picked up the phone and I called my parents.

I can still remember every detail. The recording: “You are receiving a call from the Park County Jail, do you accept this call?” And my mom answering: “Hello? Zach what’s going on?” Everything inside of me felt sick. Over the next few minutes, I explained what had happened and my parents told me they were coming.

Chapter Two:

A Grace filled mess

“Nothing in the church makes people in the church more angry than grace. It's ironic: we stumble into a party we weren't invited to and find the uninvited standing at the door making sure no other uninviteds get in. Then a strange phenomenon occurs: as soon as we are included in the party because of Jesus' irresponsible love, we decide to make grace "more responsible" by becoming self-appointed Kingdom Monitors, guarding the kingdom of God, keeping the riffraff out (which, as I understand it, are who the kingdom of God is supposed to include).” — Michael Yaconelli, *Messy Spirituality*

After posting bail and facing my parents, I began the process of sorting through my legal matters. Over the next few months, I was appointed a lawyer and we began to look at my charges. Up to this point, I was willing to do whatever was needed to get this fixed. I knew that felony charges would have the potential to change the rest of my life. I would lose my right to vote, carry a firearm, and even the ability to leave the country.

This was a huge deal. During this time, I began to meet with my parent's church Senior Pastor, and he and I spent time praying and reading the Bible. For the first time in a long time, I began to really establish a relationship with Jesus. Like I said, I had grown up in church and had made a personal commitment to follow Jesus when I was a teenager. However, I had never really been hungry to know Jesus. I didn't rely on him like I did now, after the incident.

After months of meetings, I finally had a court date. It was the day I would find out my fate. I showed up to the court house in Powell, Wyoming and met my lawyer out front. He asked if I was ready and if I had any questions. I asked what he thought would happen, and he replied "it could go either way". I remember sitting down in the court room waiting for the judge. As he came in, we rose and were seated again. The judge read through some charges and statements, and asked the prosecutor what they suggested. My lawyer asked the judge for all my charges to be dropped to misdemeanors, because of my compliance and no prior arrests. The judge stated because the victim was medically okay, and because of my clean record, he would drop my charges to misdemeanors, and I was given one year probation along with a 60 day suspended jail sentence. And just like that, I felt like a weight had been lifted.

I spent most of my time isolated from friends. When I was home during the summer, I just worked and kept to myself. My goal was to get through the year of probation and get back to my life.

When I went back to college in September, I knew I had four more months of probation. I had spent the summer engaged in church, and was starting to really grow in my walk with Jesus. I knew I had to weather the fall, and I would see life turn around for me.

Beautifully Messy

Fast forward to December, I was a month away from the ending of my probation. A friend of mine, who lived off campus, invited me over for a bbq to hang out. After spending almost the whole semester staying focused and out of trouble, I told myself; *it's just a small group of friends, it wouldn't hurt to go and have fun.* I arrived and a handful of us were hanging out, shooting hoops, and grilling. After dinner, we started playing video games and drinking. I didn't think anything of it, as it was just a few friends, no crazy party, and I would just crash at the house. That way I wouldn't be driving, and there would be no chance of getting pulled over. The night continued, we drank and hung out.

All of a sudden we heard a knock at the door. When we opened it, two police officers were standing there. With a stunned look on our faces, the officers asked if we had been drinking. Once they saw there was alcohol and we were under age, they gave each of us breathalyzers. The test came back that I was intoxicated and the officer gave us tickets for minor in possession. In the blink of an eye, I had broken my court ordered probation, and now would be faced with jail time.

I was exactly one month away from being off my probation. Everything I had sacrificed and worked for the past 11 months was all for nothing. What I didn't realize until later, was that the police officers who showed up at my friend's house, were actually responding to a domestic call and showed up at the wrong address. Coincidence? The irony was not lost on me. I knew it was God's way of getting my attention. I received a letter requesting my immediate appearance in court for breaking my probation. I knew I would now have to serve my suspended jail sentence.

I was beginning to see and understand grace. Up until then, I had always read and viewed grace as this neat, crisp concept all dressed pretty with a bow. It had this sterile-like image in my mind. What I realized through this situation was there was nothing sterile or neat about it. Grace is beyond complicated. We don't do it justice when reduce it to a simple act.

We need to shift from talking about grace as a squeaky clean thing to realizing that Grace is beautifully messy.

Jesus illustrates what beautifully messy grace is, in a famous story about a family with two sons. The younger of the two sons came to his father and requested he give him the portion of family inheritance. This request was a sign of disrespect in their culture. Some Bible scholars believed that in order for his father to grant him the inheritance, he would have had to sell some of his assets to accommodate this early request. The son was bringing disgrace upon his family. Yet his father, full of love, granted his son his inheritance.

“A man had two sons. The younger son told his father, ‘I want my share of your estate now before you die.’ So his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons. “A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and moved to a distant land, and there he wasted all his money in wild living. About the time his money ran out, a great famine swept over the land, and he began to starve. He persuaded a local farmer to hire him, and the man sent him into his fields to feed the pigs. The young man became so hungry that even the pods he was feeding the pigs looked good to him. But no one gave him anything. “When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, ‘At home even the hired servants have food enough to spare, and here I am dying of hunger! I will go home to my father and say, “Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired servant.””

-Luke 15:12-19 NLT

Grace finds the wayward son smack dab in the middle of a pig pen, dirty, broke, and ashamed. This is the true picture of *grace*. Grace is always beautiful but usually is never clean and easy. Like the son in the parable, I encountered grace where I least expected it. Grace got down in the mud and mire with me and believed in my potential, instead of only being discouraged by my mess. Instead of giving up on me when I failed, grace realized that my journey with Jesus was a process, not a destination.

This is what makes it so beautiful, that in the midst of our messiness God makes us beautiful. This is not because of what we can and can not do but through what Jesus accomplished on the cross. Grace flips our understanding of what is fair. Grace changes everything.

“So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him. 21 His son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. 22 “But his father said to the servants, ‘Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet. 23 And kill the calf we have been fattening. We must

celebrate with a feast, 24 for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found.’ So the party began.” -Luke 15:20-24 NLT

As the wayward son came to his senses; he knew the need to go back home. As he approached, there was a need to make a conviction of his choices. He wanted acceptance, and would do anything to get it back. But when the father saw him in the distance it says: *“He was filled with love and compassion and ran to embrace him.”* The son expecting the worse was met with an embrace - which is grace! The father not holding his mistakes against him lavished him with a robe, ring and sandals.

This picture of grace is beautiful. No place is beyond the reach of God’s grace! Like the father God didn’t love us any less before we knew him and anymore after we encountered him. God’s grace extends past our grievances. Met with Grace. The Bible says God is the same yesterday, today and forever. I would define *grace* as “God inexhaustibly meeting us at our point of need.”

God’s grace found me in the midst of my mess. I’m not saying there won’t be consequences for our mistakes. I knew I would have to take responsibility for breaking my probation and ultimately that would mean jail. Even when we fail, God still comforts and leads us. I realized that God’s pursuit was one of love not punishment. Grace is God’s endless pursuit of us, even when we rebel and push away.

Grace is Messy and it Changes Everything

When we are at our worst, God sent His best; his son Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul writes in Romans 5:8, *“God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”* Grace did not encounter us when we had everything together. No, grace encountered us when we were messy and could offer nothing in return.

“Grace is most needed and best understood in the midst of sin, suffering, and brokenness.” - Justin Holcomb, “What is Grace?”

We come to God with nothing in our hands to offer, but our brokenness and sin. He gladly takes it and gives us life as His child. God’s grace is a gift, it cannot be earned. The son in Luke 15 is at his absolute worst, with nothing to offer up. He is dirty, and messy. In that moment God accepted him and gave his best. Who does that? We all typically think we need to get things figured out or at least cleaned up before we ask for acceptance. God seems to like the messier the better.

As I awaited my consequences for breaking my probation, I realized it was time to take responsibility. I knew that in this, God was giving me a second chance, I had to

take this opportunity to point others to God's amazing and undeniable grace. I received my punishment, the judge was adding another year of probation, and I would have to serve 30 days in jail.

This time around I was going to make the most of this situation. I knew I had to make changes. I decided I needed to take time away from school and those I was connected. I dropped out and went back home after my jail sentence, and start over. I showed up to the jail and served my 30 days.

During this month, I spent most of my time reading books, the Bible and in prayer. It sounds cliché, but I was hungry for God's word. I would go onto spend the evenings talking to my cell mates about Jesus, and learning about their lives. I remember doing group Bible studies in our cell and discussing God's purposes. I knew for me ,to get through these hard long days, I needed to stay focused. I asked family and friends not to visit. I wanted to get through this and remember God's hand in it all. When my 30 days were up, I left the jail with a new sense of purpose. I was experiencing God's grace first hand.

Chapter Three:

A Jesus Disruption

"Relying on God has to start all over everyday, as if nothing has yet been done."

–C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*

Life is best admired or appreciated from a distance.

I remember one summer as a kid I went on a camp backpacking trip up in the mountains of Kalispell, Montana. I remember packing our bags and loading up the car. When we arrived, it was a misty and foggy day. We could only see fifty to one hundred feet ahead of us. The fog was set in thick. We loaded up to set off on the trail. With every step we climbed in elevation. It was a grueling and difficult trail. The challenge was that we couldn't see the distance needed to climb.

For most we like to see what is coming up and the length to endure it. As we climbed in elevation, the sun began to lessen the fog. When we arrived to the top, we were able to look below. We saw the switch backs and miles of trails we had completed. This perspective was not only rewarding, but put life into perspective.

While in the midst of life we tend to see the current obstacle, the challenge we face. Within the midst of it, it's fuzzy but we push forward and keep moving. Only when we look back that we can see what we actually went through. Those moments, we can clearly see our struggles, failures and triumphs. This is where grace shows up. The outcomes of grace are unbelievable.

After jail, it felt similar to backpacking and looking down the trail of life ten thousand feet below. Internally I was relieved but also nervous of what was next, or if I could make it. I remember walking out of the county jail in Cody, Wyoming, and getting in my car. I drove from Wyoming to Montana. I was filled with this new sense of hope.

I was different. I couldn't explain this hope and joy that was flooding my emotions and thoughts. I felt guilty for not being more remorseful, for having served time in jail, but there was this excitement to pursue Jesus with all my heart.

This appreciation of grace and love was all consuming. I settled back in at home, found a job, and started to take my next steps. I knew I had to get plugged into a church body, and find a place to belong.

Before my jail time, my parents had started going to a new church. My parents tried to talk me into going a few times while I was home on break a few times. However I was not interested in what the church had to offer. I knew being back, that I would need to give it a second chance.

Much to my surprise, the church was actually great. It was a smaller church in size, and had a good mix of younger and older people. It was very welcoming, and I noticed how the pastor was practical and transparent.

Over the next few months, I made time to meet with the pastor, and plug into a small group that the church offered.

Life was good. It was the season of new. New friends, new job, new purpose. Yet, we all know the season of new has an expiration date. Some have called it the “honey moon season”.

I was realizing that change was hard. I believed making the decision was going to be the toughest part. I found I discovered, it was the process that was grueling.

Jesus will disrupt your life

Nobody likes to be disrupted. We are busy people, prone to getting feathers ruffled when plans are delayed. I had a plan in my mind, and Jesus was ruining it.

In the process of growing and learning about Jesus I began to feel passion to lead and help youth. I was seeing God shape me into a leader. I wanted to help others like myself not go down a road I had. I remember one day, meeting with my pastor, I came to him and shared that I felt God was calling me to lead, and develop a youth group at our church. I expected him to agree and confirm my vision. Yet, as he listened, he replied with “Why don’t you commit to mowing the churches lawn first...”

Say what? That had nothing to do with youth. He explained to me, he wanted to see if I would be faithful with the little things, before given bigger things. I left with frustration and annoyance.

The church’s lawn was a thorn covered dead field. Everything in me wanted to say screw it, and go find someone that would affirm my passion. However I knew that wasn’t the correct path.

What was Jesus doing? This was not part of my plan. My small group leader made a comment once, after a meeting. Sometimes we miss the truth of a calling. We shape calling, in our own preference. He said “*The need is the calling*”. Being faithful to mow the lawn is the need, thus making it my calling. I had been shaping my calling instead of allowing Jesus the chance to create it.

Following Jesus was disrupting my life. Jesus will disrupt our lives to initiate growth. As followers of Jesus, we are meant to become more like Him. The process in that disruption, was not going to be found in my own efforts.

In the bible, is the religious man Nicodemus. Nicodemus had an impressive religious resume. He was a member of the Sanhedrin, an elite ruling council. He was a scholar and teacher. Many bible scholars believed, he may have even been the main religious influencer for the Jews at that time. Nicodemus would have had the torah

memorized, and he knew the 600 plus traditional religious laws. He was timely in church attendance and tithing. He would have also been an expert in prayers and fasting. Nicodemus was the All-Star Christian, with a Ichthus stamped on his donkey. Yet Nicodemus tidy living would soon be disrupted by Jesus. We see in the book of John that Nicodemus meet Jesus after dark one evening. He was rattled knowing Jesus was different. In verse three Jesus replied,

“I tell you the truth, unless you are born again, you cannot see the Kingdom of God.” “What do you mean?” exclaimed Nicodemus. “How can an old man go back into his mother’s womb and be born again?” Jesus replied, “I assure you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. Humans can reproduce only human life, but the Holy Spirit gives birth to spiritual life. So don’t be surprised when I say, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows wherever it wants. Just as you can hear the wind but can’t tell where it comes from or where it is going, so you can’t explain how people are born of the Spirit.” “How are these things possible?” Nicodemus asked. -John 3:1-9 NLT

Jesus completely rattled Nicodemus’ religious foundation. He found himself unsure and disturbed. Nicodemus was at a cross road. All his life devotion to achievement, money spent, sacrifices and lawful study was being questioned. Now, a man named Jesus informs him that it was all for nothing.

At the crossroads of our *disruption* Jesus leads us to a place of change.

We try, but we don’t *train*.

We love DIY projects. From YouTube to Pinterest, we have access to ideas to creative things. The problem is most of us, myself included suck at DIY projects. Sorry if thats hurts. We watch Youtube videos, browse Pinterest pages, on the hunt for the perfect craft. We try to recreate it, often failing to reproduce the same results.

Our relationship with Jesus often times looks like the perfect Pinterest craft. In reality it’s like the failed project. When we read about the fullness of life Jesus and the New Testament writers exemplify, what do we think? Surely, we are drawn to this beautiful way of life — it is holy, peace-filled, and spirit empowered under God’s good and generous being.

This process has a roller coaster effect. It starts out going good then it drops off. It’s the process of trying and working without a plan.

I love the passage in 1 Timothy 4. Timothy along with Paul, explain the process of changing.

"If you explain these things to the brothers and sisters, Timothy, you will be a worthy servant of Christ Jesus, one who is nourished by the message of faith and the good teaching you have followed. Do not waste time arguing over godless ideas and old wives' tales. Instead, train yourself to be godly. "Physical training is good, but training for godliness is much better, promising benefits in this life and in the life to come." This is a trustworthy saying, and everyone should accept it. This is why we work hard and continue to struggle, for our hope is in the living God, who is the Savior of all people and particularly of all believers." -1 Timothy 4:6-10 NLT

Timothy is saying that we our growth is not found in our own spiritual knowledge or acts. It is found in training for godliness.

For most christians we lean towards maturing in knowledge and spiritual acts. We believe this based on Christian culture. All maturity is found in knowledge. I would argue, based on my experience; maturity is produced when we put into action what we believe. Jesus encountered this throughout his ministry, when he came against the Pharisees and teachers of the law. They were more concerned about status.

"The average Christian is about 3000 bible verses overweight."
-HOW THE CHURCH TODAY IS GETTING DISCIPLESHIP WRONG By Carey Nieuwhof

The hard truth is to train ourselves for godliness requires, sacrifice and discipline. If I were to decide to ever run a marathon (I am almost positive I will never do that), I wouldn't just show up on the day of the race. No, for me to actually accomplish a twenty six mile run, I would have to train my mind and body. I would have to be dedicated and disciplined to run and train for the actual race. Can't assume it just happens, I must train.

"To train means arranging our life around those practices that enable us to do what we cannot now do by direct effort. The point of training is to receive power, so we arrange our life around practices through which we get power."
— Dallas Willard, Living in Christ's Presence

Dallas Willard had a point, learning to arrange our life in such a way that enables us to be effective. Too many times we are intentional with arrange our life. I think most of us don't understand the full concept of training. Many of us want things to just happen or come easy. Dallas Willard said in *Living in Christ's Presence*, *"To train means arranging our life around those practices that enable us to do what we cannot now do by direct effort."*

Changing in any significant way involves training. Training required to play an instrument, to master a sport. It is needed for our spiritual life. We tend to exaggerate what we can do through trying, and we tend to under-appreciate what we can do through training. I would argue that significant transformation involves training to do something— not just trying. The apostle Paul says, “*Train yourself to be godly*” (1 Timothy 4: 7). And Jesus says, “*A disciple is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully qualified will be like the teacher*” (Luke 6: 40).

In the church world we use the phrases *spiritual disciplines*. I believe spiritual disciplines is a terrible term. It conjures up those self righteous belief. Disciplines don't result in spiritual gold stars. God is not sitting up in heaven with a clip board, measuring our training. Discipline depends on what you are training towards. If you want to train to run a race, you will have to run often... If you are training to lift more weights, then each time you push your self further than the last time.

Everyday discipleship

I think for most of us we see the task of changing as an overwhelming job. What I love about Jesus' process of discipleship is the daily process. He taught and walked alongside his disciples. At every step along the way he showed and allowed them to learn from everyday moments. I tend to be someone who likes to create systems and programs to develop things especially in discipleship. It is not a bad thing but we can miss the natural discipleship of the everyday. My pastor saw an opportunity to teach me faithfulness with small things through mowing the church lawn. I would of missed this every day lesson if I would have decided against it. I believe there are three keys to everyday discipleship. These were instrumental to my personal growth, and still to this day are keys I try and live by each and everyday.

Be Teachable

For most of us we think we are teachable. The reality is we are not easy. The test of being teachable is when someone corrects or rebukes you. Its the moment when we can either receive or reject.

Being teachable was something I had to learn. It was not natural.

I would intentionally ask my pastor and small group leaders for advice and input into my life. This was the key. This allowed them to speak into your life..

Be Available

In our fast paced lifestyle being available is counter cultural. I have come to realize that we are never readily available. I recently reached out to grab coffee with someone, when I was greeted by their online scheduler. I wasn't offended, but

I recognized we are that busy! I think being available is an important part of discipleship.

We have to be intentional with being available, to serve, to listen. Be available.

Be Open

This sounds like a no brainer. Finding those you can be real and share struggles is challenging. We are accustomed to putting on masks and hiding who we are. Yet everyone of us needs real, honest people that love and care. When we find those we can be open and transparent with, we allow them to have a voice in our life. This process enables us to grow and be accountable.

Chapter Four:

Unleashing Obedience

“In our abandonment we give ourselves over to God just as God gave Himself for us, without any calculations. The consequences of abandonment never enter into our outlook because our life is taken up in Him.” — Oswald Chambers, My Utmost for His Highest

Have you ever noticed every January we are bombarded with gym membership advertisements? It's the time of year most people make commitments to get healthier and lose weight. We buy new gym shoes, workout outfits, and sign-up for a gym membership. We start off with these ambitions and hopes to conquer our goals. After about two months, we slowly slip from our hopes of working out less and less.

I remember my first attempt at the notorious gym membership. I got the new gear and paid for a full year membership. I was given a steal of a deal. If I paid for an entire year upfront, I would receive 2 months free! It was a hook, line and sinker. I was all set, had my new gear, and gym membership. Guess how many times I went? Big fat Zero! Not once. I never stepped foot back into the gym after signing up.

National research found that 4% of new gym attendees don't make it past the end of January. 14% drop out by February. They also state only about 18% of people who buy memberships use them. I don't share this to shame anyone, but having good intentions isn't enough. We have to follow through.

God's purposes not my preferences

I learned to be faithful in mowing and serving in my church. God began to entrust me with more responsibility. From mowing to youth ministry, God was giving me an opportunity to lead. Over the next few years I learned what it was to work and lead a team, and the commitment a pastor needed. In my growth spiritually, my pastor gave me the opportunity to lead both middle and high school ministry.

In 2005 I met and married my wife Sarah. We meet through mutual friends. Sarah and I both had a heart for ministry and together we pastored the youth. Over the next 5 years we loved leading youth. We had never really thought about any other ministry beyond youth. But after having our first daughter, and with my wife pregnant with our second daughter; God began to stir our hearts. We began to wonder what did God have in store for us? This feeling of wondering what God's will is, is something every person seeks. Over the years I had come to the realization that God's will was not

intended to be found, but rather followed. The more we walk with Him and obey Him, we begin to understand His will for our lives. In 2010 we began to feel God calling us to plant a church. This was never something I had set out to do, but after years of pastoring we felt God was calling us to step out in faith. We prayed and talked about this crazy idea with our church elders. We began to see God confirming and opening doors.

The first step in the church plant journey was this question where was God calling us? I secretly hoped that like Jonah, God would speak clearly to what city we needed to plant a church. God spoke to Jonah and clearly communicated where and when he wanted him to go.

“The Lord gave this message to Jonah son of Amittai: “Get up and go to the great city of Nineveh. Announce my judgment against it because I have seen how wicked its people are.” -Jonah 1:1-2 NLT

Unlike Jonah’s call, God was not clear in his direction for us. For months Sarah and I sat down and created lists of cities we considered living. I look back I may have made a mistake, I should of considered Hawaii with its warm weather and sandy beaches. We had spent the past seven years ministering in Billings, Montana. A city with 100,000 plus people. The size of city was appealing and comfortable. Another reason we wanted to stay near Montana was because of the relationships we had developed with a network of churches across the state. After months of visiting and searching online, we narrowed it down to three cities.

The first two cities were in South Dakota; Rapid City and Sioux Falls. I had only been to Rapid City a few times growing up, and I never visited Sioux falls. As a kid we made a trip out to South Dakota to visit some family members who lived northwest of Sioux Falls. However my experience was limited. We visited Sioux Falls and fell in love.

It was twice as big as Billings, but had many family friendly amenities. We didn’t have contacts personally besides our friends parents. After a great few days, we left Sioux Falls feeling good but not set. The distance away from family and our home church felt too far away. Our next stop was Helena, Montana. This was smaller in population, but it was still in Montana, and close to a few churches we had great relationships with. After our first day we felt there, it offered what we had hoped and prayed in a place. The following day Sarah and I began to discuss what we thought. Both of us felt God confirm in our hearts that this was not the place. We knew where we were suppose to plant. We looked at each other and said “Sioux Falls”. We knew the only reason we didn’t originally see Sioux Falls as an option was because of the

distance. Sioux Falls stirred something in our hearts and it was always on our mind. Allowing distance to be the determining factor wasn't being faithful.

Deeper

Sometimes we think obedience will be an easy choice. Life will be smooth. I don't know why we trick ourselves into believing that. In Isaiah 54:17 NLT it says, *"But in that coming day no weapon turned against you will succeed. You will silence every voice raised up to accuse you. These benefits are enjoyed by the servants of the LORD; their vindication will come from me. I, the LORD, have spoken!"* The Bible doesn't say no weapon will be turned against you, it says no weapon turned against you will SUCCEED.

When discerning God's call many times we set out to find the end result God has planned. However, I have discovered that God's concern does not match our own. We are concerned about point A to B. We want smooth and clear routes. God's ultimate concern is that you and I, would know him more deeply as we trust him completely. This method of thinking results in unmet expectations, both relationally and spiritually. The bible shares plenty of examples, of people learning this lesson first hand. One in particular is a man named Jonah.

"The Lord gave this message to Jonah son of Amittai: "Get up and go to the great city of Nineveh. Announce my judgment against it because I have seen how wicked its people are. But Jonah got up and went in the opposite direction to get away from the Lord. He went down to the port of Joppa, where he found a ship leaving for Tarshish. He bought a ticket and went on board, hoping to escape from the Lord by sailing to Tarshish.

-Jonah 1:1-3

Jonah found this out the hard way. God ultimately, gave Jonah a clear and precise call. Jonah didn't want to obey God, and decided to go in the opposite direction.

When God calls you to obey to step out in faith, it will draw out our greatest gifts and weaknesses. Similar to Jonah I had a choice to either step out in faith and obey or I could resist and run. God uses these moments of obedience to bring us to a place of dependence upon him and develop a deeper relationship. If we are willing.

In January of 2012 we announced our decision. We along with 3 families were planting a church in Sioux falls, South Dakota. We were naming it Red Door church. The name is in reference to the passover when God commanded the Israelites to cover their doorpost with the blood of the lamb. This would save their family. Today its Christ's blood that covers us. The Red Door represents not only Christ saving us but a symbol of refuge.

In April, I flew out to Sioux Falls to interview for jobs and rent a house. During this trip I was hired as a graphic designer, and signed a lease on a home. Things were coming along. We packed up our house in Billings, and loaded a u-haul.

July 1, 2012 my pregnant wife and I, our two girls, and my parents left Montana. Up to this point everything was smooth sailing. We had a home in Sioux Falls. I had a job. We had plenty of time to get settled before the rest of our team would arrive to help plant Red Door.

Then things changed. After arriving to Sioux Falls, unpacking and exploring the city a bit with my parents we had to say good bye. We stood in the parking lot of the hotel in Mitchell, South Dakota hugging and saying good bye. When the realization hit us that we were on our own, tears began and doubts flooded our minds. In that moment, I was scared and nervous about our choice to move.

The 60 mile drive from Mitchell to Sioux Falls Sarah and I and our two girls cried. Not a few tears, I'm talking full ugly cry. Snot running down your face cry. Questions raced through. *What have we done? Is this God? Are we sure this is what we were supposed to do? Why is this so hard?* At that moment I was empty. Arriving home we prayed for God's peace and comfort. Knowing God's grace is sufficient we were folded with His peace. This would be a day by day process. A process of choosing to obey. We decided to rent a family movie, bought a pizza, spent the night enjoying one another.

Over the next few months, these would become the hardest seasons we endured as a family. We had no friends. No connections. We were eleven hours from our home church and family. Plus we were expecting our third child in less than a month. In this moment one can't help but question. *Is this God's will? Did we make a mistake?*

Faith always obeys

I am always reminded of Abraham because of his faithfulness. He was obedient and faithful in the midst of uncertain circumstances. The greatest test in the life of Abraham came after he received God's promise.

In **Genesis 22:1-19** *"Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about."*

God had promised He would bless him, that he would have many sons. Now God was calling him to go and sacrifice his one and only son. This test was to prove Abraham's faith and obedience to God. God's test had to defy logic; it had to be something Abraham wanted to resist.

Biblical Examples of obedience:

1. Noah's obedience to build the ark saved his family from the flood. (Genesis 6:9-9:17)
2. Abraham's obedience by faith.(Genesis 22, Hebrews 11)
3. Moses led the Israelites out of Egyptian bondage. (Exodus 1-10)
4. Joshua won the battle of Jericho. (Joshua 5:13-6:27)
5. Peter obeyed Jesus' command to fish in the heat of day. (John 21)
6. Paul followed God's will and took the gospel to the Gentiles. (Acts 21:1-16)

Faith only becomes faith in the act of obedience. The Apostle Paul speaks to this point in **Hebrews 11:8-9**

"It was by faith that Abraham obeyed when God called him to leave home and go to another land that God would give him as his inheritance. He went without knowing where he was going. 9 And even when he reached the land God promised him, he lived there by faith—for he was like a foreigner, living in tents. And so did Isaac and Jacob, who inherited the same promise."

It was by faith that Abraham obeyed. We obey by faith even when everything around us seems and feels uncertain. We have the tendency to make obedience subjected to our preferences, and not God's purpose. It's in these moments of obedience and faith, that God works through us.

The key is getting out of our own way.

Obedience will cause doubt

Some people say that believers never doubt, since doubt is said to be the opposite of faith. However doubt is a true reality. When we step out to obey God many times we are met with uncertainty. Obedience can be uncertain and uncomfortable at times. This can at times create a sense of doubt. Doubt sometimes suggests that there is a lack of faith somewhere, but a person can doubt and still have a perfectly sound trust in God. Doubt is rather a state of uncertainty. When we stepped out to plant a church we felt uncertain. We questioned if we were doing the right thing for our family. We knew God had directed our steps, but even knowing we still doubted. This inevitably drew us closer together and to God. We experienced God's peace in the midst of feeling uncertain. We are not alone in having doubt while obeying. John the Baptist was in prison awaiting what would later be his death in **Matthew 11:1-11**

"John the Baptist, who was in prison, heard about all the things the Messiah was doing. So he sent his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the Messiah we've been expecting, or should we keep looking for someone else?"

John sent two of his disciples to Jesus to ask a twofold question. John wished to know if Jesus was the Messiah or if he should be looking for someone else. It is difficult to know exactly what was on John the Baptist's mind, but it is very likely that his doubt was prompted by emotional circumstances surrounding his imprisonment.

Obedience will bring *opposition*.

Obedience will usually be met with resistance. Whenever we obey God it causes a domino effect. One, it's finding resistance from within. Our selfish sinful flesh. Obedience to God means we have to disobey our desires and wants. If we obey God, we must disobey ourselves; and it is in this disobeying ourselves, wherein the hardness of obeying God consists. This is why it's important to know God's word. God's word teaches us to rely and trust in Him. The scripture tells us that the word of God is living and active. It has the ability to judge our hearts and motives. When we commit to know and read the word of God it helps us to test our desires. Another resistance is the enemy. In fact in 1 Peter 5:8 it says, "*Stay alert! Watch out for your great enemy, the devil. He prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour.*" The enemy is looking for every opportunity to kill and destroy us. He wants to keep us doing our thing and not God's purposes for our life.

Obedience is a *moment-by-moment, day-by-day* action.

It's one thing to say your obedient; it's another thing to demonstrate. Everything inside of me wants to filter my obedience through my feelings. We filter obedience through questions like, "*How does this affect me? or "How does it make me feel?"*" Jesus didn't say; if you love me, obey me when you feel like it, or when it's comfortable. I rarely find obedience comfortable or convenient. We are asked to give up our preference, in exchange for what God wants. I found out right away when we moved to Sioux Falls to plant, everyday was a test to obey. This required time in the bible and prayer. Many times I found myself slipping into an attitude. I would be jealous and envious of others who had it better than me. I would sulk and feel sorry for myself. To keep myself from slipping I asked others to hold me accountable. These little things I had to keep in check everyday.