

PREACH
to
YOURSELF

*When Your Inner Critic Comes Calling,
Talk Back with Truth*

HAYLEY MORGAN

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Preach to Yourself

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Requests for information should be addressed to:
Zondervan, 3900 Sparks Dr. SE, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49546

ISBN 978-0-310-34577-0 (softcover)

ISBN 978-0-310-35668-4 (audio)

ISBN 978-0-310-34578-7 (ebook)

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Published in association with literary agent Jenni Burke of D.C. Jacobson & Associates LLC, an Author Management Company. www.dcjacobson.com.

Cover design: Connie Gabbert Design + Illustration

Interior design: Kait Lamphere

First printing August 2018 / Printed in the United States of America

*To Noah, Cooper, Asher, and Eli—
may you learn
to always tell yourself good news.*

Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life. Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.

1 TIMOTHY 1:15–17

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Foreword

Hi, friend!

Every day, I get to look inside women's brains—well, their day planners (essentially the same thing). Each year, I am meticulous as I create our Simplified Planners, because I know that a great tool makes planning your time so much more enjoyable and so much easier. I love making sure the lines are spaced perfectly, the icons are adorable, and the experience is lovely. It's not a shallow pursuit. I squint and measure and plot and painstakingly improve our planners, because I believe in helping women simplify their lives to find greater joy. In growing our brand, Simplified®, I've come to see that the way we spend our days indicates a lot about the condition of our hearts.

I believe there is more to life than overwhelm, and that same belief applies to our minds just as much as to our days. The work I do means I get to be up close and personal with people's plans and hopes and dreams. I get to help them make room for the best things in life.

I believe simple is best. In a world that is busy, noisy, chaotic,

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and cluttered, I am absolutely positive there is a better way for us to move through our days. I live my life to inspire and empower women to simplify. I know the laundry will not wait. I know the kids will need to be fed—I have three of my own (including twins!). I know there is always a job to be done or some worthy task to complete. But I believe that with a little forward thinking, we can find joy and simplicity in the mess of life and the busyness in our heads.

My work with Simplified means I'm always looking for new and better ways to help women corral and conquer their days. In that same vein, *Preach to Yourself* is a tool for our minds. Just as our days tend to follow natural patterns and rhythms, our minds do the same thing. In our minds, we loop around and around familiar patterns so often that they sound good and true.

“This day is terrible.” “I should just give up.” “Why am I so inadequate?”

We'd never ever say these things to our best friend. So why do we let our minds run around without the same kind of intention we use to plan our days?

As much as we care for our time, we need to do the same for our minds. It all starts there. I've always felt that by looking at someone's day planner, you could see the stuff that's really important to them. What do they make time for? What is totally missing from their days? I think the same is true about the things we think about. The thoughts that run through our heads all the time show what we *really* believe to be true.

Preach to Yourself gives us a look at what is causing this mental clutter and this voice that's constantly telling us bad news. Hayley looks to the Bible for timeless ways of ordering our minds so that our heads and our hearts line up. It's about the hard but good work

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of filtering out the mess so we can hear clearly. And as our minds grow to be more like Jesus', we will find it easier and easier to have joy and peace there. It's possible and totally worth it.

Emily Ley, author of the bestselling
Grace, Not Perfection

Prologue

Let's kick this off with an honest confession, shall we? It's easy for me to get stuck in my head. That whooshing and whirring, loud and purring brain of mine can feel like the entirety of who I am.

Jesus was a whole human who had a head and a heart and a spirit. I forget that Jesus came to this earth, not as a brain in a Mason jar floating in formaldehyde, but as an embodied, incarnate, integral person. His head and His heart were in perfect alignment to obey His Father. His thoughts lined up with what He believed (*knew* even!) to be true, and His actions followed suit.

Our thoughts are both indicators of deeper issues and can be problems in themselves. It's wise that you're here reading this book. We're going to venture into the middle of ourselves, to the core of who we are. We're going to look at our heads and our hearts; we're going to look at the gap that stands in the middle; and we're going to ask God to close it. We're going to learn to obey with our minds and our hands and our feet so that we're living integrated lives, every part of us lined up to the glory of God.

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Our loud minds can be quieted with God's loving-kindness. Our wrongheaded thoughts can be put to death, and we really can live a life dwelling on—incarnating, really—resurrection truth. In order to live in this wholehearted and clearheaded integrity, we need to submit our beliefs and our thoughts to a God who is able to make sense of it all. I have tried, and I am convinced that trying hard is not enough. This kind of life change will require that we partner with a supernatural God.

I need to tell you that we have the opportunity to be living, breathing examples of Jesus walking around in the world. We do! But our flesh is not inclined to want to agree. And our brain, that beautifully complex organ that holds our thoughts, is quite literally flesh! Unreformed by God, we'll go about our days frantic, worried, dour, or fussy. This is not the way of Jesus. This is not a Christlike representation of Him to a hurting world. Neither is this the way you would want to spend this one life you've got.

I am guessing that if you've picked up this book, you know the dichotomy I feel sometimes. What I really believe, on a head level, is not what I actually dwell on in my heart. And because I dwell on other things, what I really believe doesn't make a home in me. It doesn't change me. I want the power of God. I want Him to change me. But I'm walking around like I believe this fuss and frenzy here in front of me is all there is.

Now, this temporal world is *not* all there is. There is a perfect, renewed kingdom of God coming, and there is a foretaste of it here and now. We can almost hear it in the cry of a baby and the consoling words of its mother. We can catch a glimpse of it in the endless lapping of waves on the shore. We can sense it when we give a gift that costs us dearly. There is a deep satisfaction and

peace that follow Jesus everywhere, and if you're a believer, His Spirit has come to dwell inside *you*. This is good news!

I'm just reminding you of all these good things so that you can contrast it with the bad news you tell yourself. Do you spend your time telling yourself that nothing's ever going to change? That life is too hard? That it's all just hopeless?

Why when we *know* the good news of Jesus do we repeat to ourselves the bad news of this world? Why when Paul writes that "we have the mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:16) do we desperately hold on to our own bad news loops?

Let's look deeper into the source of the problem, to where things have gone wrong, because then we'll be able to look to God for the answer. It's going to take some brave and steady work on your part, as it has on mine. I have gone before you in this challenge, and I'm still walking beside you. This isn't a one-shot sort of deal. You will learn to embody truth, and that will be a skill you take with you and practice every day until you meet the very One who *is* truth.

PART ONE

*What Is the
Problem?*



CHAPTER ONE

We're Tired of Being Halfhearted and Double-Minded

I obviously need help! I realize that I don't have what it takes. I can will it, but I can't do it. I decide to do good, but I don't really do it; I decide not to do bad, but then I do it anyway. My decisions, such as they are, don't result in actions. Something has gone wrong deep within me and gets the better of me every time.

PAUL IN ROMANS 7:18–20 (MSG)

It feels delicious, this sleep. It's all mine, with no distractions and no one who needs me at all. No emails to read, no to-dos on my list, and time crawls in that unhurried and blurry way. My mind is silent like I don't experience in the daylight hours. As I rub my eyes, those sleepy liminal moments feel slow and quiet and delightful for someone like me.

I know it won't last long though. From the moment I tip over the side of the bed and plant my feet on the ground, my mind will be busy. It's loud, and it's often not a very companionable friend.

I kick the covers off, breaking out of my warm cocoon, and the cool air presses my mind to attention. I lie there, aware of the day now. As my mind wrestles to awareness, the thoughts are coming, slowly warming up like runners aiming to hit their stride. I know if I lie here too long, my mind will start racing and I'll never catch up with it the whole day long. This is how days get away from me.

I press my toes into the carpet and rise into the day. I have another chance to move through my day in a way I'd like to live—a way “worthy of the gospel of Christ” (Philippians 1:27; see also Ephesians 4:1), worthy of the God I've devoted my whole life to. It sounds heady and noble, but in reality, this service, this devotion, feels frustrating sometimes.

I make my way down the stairs, and I'm aware of stepping over the floorboards I know to be creaky. Those tiny noises have the power to awaken a whole host of sons I share my house with,

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my life with. I'm alone with my thoughts for now, and it's best that way. I power up the coffee maker, knowing that the jolt of this brew will invite a quickness into thoughts that isn't entirely helpful, but is welcomed.

The thoughts that pepper my consciousness don't match up with what I thought I'd be offering up two decades into my Christian life. I thought I'd have moved on to loftier things. More important heavenly things. But my mind feels particularly human. I know what Scripture spells out. I know what a Christian life could look like, but my mind doesn't seem to reflect what I see in Scripture a lot of the time.

I've believed in, followed, and modeled my whole life after Jesus for what seems like forever, and I still feel like an amateur. I cowrote a book called *Wild and Free*, which is all about living in the wild freedom that God has for us, and I still don't feel like I've mastered the message. And while I know that God and His grace stand every day in that gap, I still feel ashamed sometimes, if I'm honest. The gap between what I know with my head to be true and what I feel in my heart stings. It feels like I should have fully figured it out by now. I should be able to check "Live Wild and Free" off my spiritual to-do list. But instead, I'm still practicing every single day. My head knows that God doesn't call me or anyone to be perfect, and I know that practice is the story of the Christian life. And a beautiful practice at that! Yet I struggle to accept this truth sometimes.

It occurs to me that this gap is where I uncomfortably encounter the dissonance between my head and heart. I feel like I've learned enough to be an expert on "wild and free." I know all the right answers. But my heart still needs a steady reminding. I had already done all the research and know all the right answers.

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It isn't that I need to know more or know better. It turns out I need time to sit with the knowledge, boldness to preach it to myself, and discipline to exercise the truth every chance I get.

Of course, isn't that how life is? We never quite arrive in all our years on this old and broken earth. We are in constant need of grace, always cycling along the learning curve.

I sit at the table with my black coffee and sprouted grain toast with almond butter. This has become my routine, my regimen to start the day. And I know that like training myself to eat well, this believing what I know to be true is always going to be a muscle memory/faithfulness kind of thing.

No matter how long we are believers, God is always doing something new. He's always impressing something fresh into our minds and hearts. It's our job to follow Him. I need to train in order to move what I know in my head to be true down to a deep-seated belief in my heart.

I start my day with a basic, solid breakfast because I want to start my day in health. It hasn't always been this way. I'd be delighted with a steady stream of Diet Coke and Snickers, but I know that's not the kind of nutrition my body needs. But I'm training my body for health. And I can do that with my spirit too.

Many women I've met have voiced the same frustration of not being able to embody what they believe. It's like we are wearing the clothes, not becoming the person. Like actors in a really great adventure movie, it's as if we know the script inside out, but we still wish it was real life.

I've found that there is no shortcut or easy answer to this

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problem of our lives not lining up completely. Ultimately, small steps of obedience have allowed me to close the gap between what I've learned and read in the Bible and what my head and heart are really doing. I need to make an intentional effort to make these good beliefs part of my actual, everyday life. They cannot live on pages but need to come and make a home in my heart. When I start to bring things out of my pool of knowledge and into my life, I don't just *know*, but I *understand* new, deeper parts of Jesus' hope for us and experience a deeper connectedness with God.

There is a big difference between head knowledge and embodied understanding. The first stays in the brain, while the second unfolds into the real world. It may not seem like it at first, because these words are used pretty much interchangeably, especially in the context of learning. But let's get comfortable with nuance, because nuance helps us see things more fully.

Knowledge is about being aware. It's about comprehending facts and figures. It's retaining what you've read or remembering what you've seen in a movie. Knowledge is the yield of acquiring a certain teaching from someone else. You've received their transmission. Knowledge is being able to repeat what you have received.

But somehow, understanding is different. It seems deeper and more enduring. It's more akin to wisdom. What does it look like when you really get something on a gut level? Does it look different when you've lived and learned a deeply transformational lesson?

Understanding is more about mastery and absorption. It lends a more subjective tone rather than the objective stance of knowledge. It's almost like knowledge is a multiple-choice test and understanding is the essay.

I'm an excellent test taker. Standardized tests were made for the weird way my mind works. Even when I hadn't studied or

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really mastered the material, I could still score well on a multiple-choice test in my high school and college days. But an essay test is harder to manipulate or complete halfheartedly. An essay test demands a thorough understanding of the material.

My husband, Mike, is always finding insightful videos online, and he found a YouTube account called Smarter Every Day. In this video, an American engineer named Destin Sandlin ruined his ability to do something he had taken for granted since he was six years old. It all started when his friend Barney, a welder, gave him a gift. Wearing Carhartt jackets in a chilly garage, several friends and coworkers gathered to watch it all unfold. They all wondered what would happen.

You see, Barney had fashioned a bike for his buddy Destin. He had welded gears to the body and the bars, meaning that the handlebars, although they looked the same, functioned backward.

The nervous laughter was heady. You could see the steam of their breath as they chuckled and gathered in a circle. Everyone was passing the bike around, swiveling it back and forth as though to do a quick hand-eye coordination test. The men looking on wondered how hard it could be to ride a backward bike. As it turns out—very hard!

Like most of us, Destin knew how to ride a standard bike. He'd learned twenty-five years earlier, in the fading sunlight of an autumn evening. His smile was as bright and wide as the stripe on his 1980s sweatshirt when his six-year-old self finally figured it all out. We all remember that feeling. Instead of wobbling back and forth, something clicks. We find our balance, and then we glide away forever. They say some things are “just like riding a bike”—meaning that you never forget.

Now, intellectually, Destin knew how to ride this backward

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bike. Instead of the standard “turn left, go left” and “turn right, go right,” it should be the opposite. When he turned the bars to the left, the wheel should go to the right. When he turned the bars to the right, the wheel should go to the left. It’s a simple thing to see and know. He could have spouted off in a quick speech how he was planning to ride this crazy backward bike.

It all sounded easy enough, so Destin hopped on the bike before a crowd of cold, but good-humored onlookers. He sat his rear end on the seat and pushed off. Destin didn’t last two whole seconds before the tire slid out from under him, causing him to plant his foot on the ground for balance, effectively ending the bike ride before it even got started.

Like a six-year-old, Destin tried again. The second time wasn’t even marginally better. Picture it—a grown man getting on a bike confidently and falling off in a matter of seconds. He was giggling like a child, but inside he was embarrassed and frustrated that his mind was not taking the information it knew and transferring it into something his whole self understood.

Now, isn’t that something we all want to know? Why can’t our brains take something we intellectually know, something that seems easy, and process it into something we just get with our whole selves. We’ve all experienced the difficulty of putting our head knowledge into life practice. As I was learning about Destin’s difficulty with this backward bike, I deeply identified with his frustration. How many times in my life had I been confronted with the fact that I knew what I needed to know but still couldn’t make those things happen?

Many people who believe in God get stuck here, finding the rich Christian life out of their grasp. They may hit this point of frustration, but at some point, they relent and settle. One cannot

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struggle in frustration forever, so they keep God in their heads and tuck away the hope of ever knowing Him in their hearts. They intellectually believe in God, but they do not functionally experience His presence or His goodness in their life.

If we get stuck here, we're giving up before the going gets good. We're settling for less of Jesus—and a diminished Jesus is not the true Jesus at all.

It's not just you or me. There is a dissonance in the life of every believer. I've heard it called an integrity gap or even hypocrisy. In my Christian life, the words *integrity* and *hypocrisy* have felt loaded and burdensome. But this idea of an integrity gap is describing what it's like when our heads and our hearts are not lined up. These may be apt names for the mismatch, but I think it's actually more banal and run-of-the-mill than those words suggest. I'm telling you, *we don't actually believe what we say we believe*. We don't have that bone-deep belief that we want, and it causes us to live halfheartedly, settling for a watered-down, cheap counterfeit of the greatest love story of all time.

This halfhearted acceptance of a religion based on try-hard regulations instead of on embracing the provision of the kind of power it takes to raise a person from the dead is achingly sad. You'd do just as well to be living in the time of Moses when the Law was all they had.

But you live in the twenty-first century, with the benefit of hindsight and a whole book alerting you to the fact that Jesus is alive. You live in a time when Jesus has fulfilled the Law and invites you into a life of grace and righteousness through His very nature. This is fantastic and utterly life-changing news.

Why is there a gap between Sunday certainty and the loop that plays in our heads? Even the most sincere Christian battles this

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lackluster and defeatist kind of faith. There is a gap between the kind of faith they're experiencing and the truth they profess to believe. The problem is that this gap robs the believer of the abundant life and peace that Christ has for us. It also massively diminishes our testimony, because we're often living joyless, fruitless lives.

- “My head believes that Jesus is real and His death has given me life, so why do I feel so blah about it?”
- “My head believes I am a beloved daughter of God, so why does my heart feel so ashamed?”
- “My head believes that God is my Helper and Provider, so why does my heart feel the anxieties of scarcity?”
- “My head believes that God will direct me, so why does my heart feel so afraid to follow?”

This dissonance is evident in every believer's life to some degree. As followers of Christ, God is constantly sanctifying us and making us more Christlike. So as we grow and mature in our Christian life, the gap between what our heads know and our hearts believe should narrow. However, the here and now is still a reality we must face.

The gap is present from the top down. It's present in our Christian leaders, and it's present in the saints who are barely getting by. This dissonance is a sign that our beliefs are lining up correctly. We may *say* we believe something, and a Christian leader may *say* they believe something, but our actions are really our beliefs with flesh on. Whether an exhausted church girl or a pastor of a church, we all need to make sure this gap between our heads and our hearts doesn't get away from us.

May I ask you a question? How are you? If I was sitting down

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with you, looking into your eyes, what would you tell me? What does your heart tell you?

I often find that a head-heart gap shows itself through easily recognizable signals.

1. You feel bogged down. You are feeling the weight of the world, and it's heavy! You know you're not supposed to be the one in control, but you feel like it's all on your shoulders. If it's going to get done, it's going to have to be you. The details feel like they're piling up, and it's all so much. You're not sure you'll ever get out from under how you're feeling.

2. You feel chaotic. You can't keep it all straight. It feels like you're being tossed around. You feel like a tiny one-person kayak in the middle of the perfect storm. The tempest is swelling all around you. It feels like a sudden bolt of lightning and a roaring clap of thunder—and your boat is taking on water. You don't know which stressor to fight first. It all feels overwhelming.

3. You feel afraid. You're constantly fearful. You're terrified to make the wrong next move. It feels like the worst thing you can do is fail, and you think it's likely to happen. You are afraid of what people will think and what will happen to your heart if you sink miserably. You're making yourself sick just thinking about how many risks there are in life.

4. You feel unsure. You have no confidence in the Lord's direction. You're waffling. You're on the fence. You don't know the next right move to make, and the only thing you're sure of is that God is going to be mad if you get it wrong. You feel like you might step out of God's will if you make a wrong turn.

5. You feel like you're going around in circles. You're indecisive. You're in a traffic roundabout and stuck there. You don't want to pick a direction and leave the roundabout, so instead of

taking action, you just keep returning to the question at hand. You go around and around and around. You analyze everything in eighteen different ways. You think maybe if you give it enough time, God won't let you make a wrong choice.

6. You feel like a phony. You know deep down that something isn't right. You don't feel like a whole person, but kind of like a halfway, watered-down version of yourself. You don't do what you think you should do. You don't feel what you think you should feel. You're terrified that people can see through you. Can people see that you're having a hard time with how living a Christian life goes?

7. You feel powerless. You don't feel the power of God. You feel weak and far from powerful. You wonder if you have any strength left. You're tired of fighting with yourself, weak from fighting for yourself, and exhausted from trying to do the right thing all the time. You're positive that nothing is ever going to change.

8. You feel frustrated. You are annoyed, bitter, and frustrated that nothing you're trying to do to have an abundant life is working. You've set goals; you've made vision boards; you've chased hard after your best life. But you're tired of strong-arming your way into a new life when Jesus promised that His "yoke is easy" and His "burden is light" (Matthew 11:30). Why is it so hard for you when it doesn't seem like it's hard for other people?

9. You feel lackluster. You feel like you're hardly paying attention. You're bored. You feel like the noise of the world is drowning out any hope that God's voice will speak to you. You're feeling dulled by the constant barrage of bad news, both inside your head and on TV. If nothing is ever going to get better, it might be better just to shut down.

10. You feel let down. More than anything, you're disappointed. This isn't what you thought being a Christian was going

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to be like. It feels like you were sold a false bill of goods, and none of this is what you wanted. Instead of seeing your life changed, it's more of the same—only now you have an extra helping of guilt because of the Jesus thing.

This disconnect has been around for as long as we've had a disconnect with God. In fact, I trace it all the way back to the fall of humanity in Eden. When Adam and Eve first sinned in the garden (Genesis 3:1–7), they experienced dissonance for the first time in human history. I want us to look carefully here, because I believe that Genesis 3 has a lot to teach us about our own affliction of dissonance.

There is great hope in knowing where it all started, because we have a God who has already made a way. He has already conquered this particular human affliction and has provided a way for us to move forward and become whole. Let's first go back to the beginning and read all of Genesis 3 together—don't skip over this part; it's important.

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'"

Satan plants the seed of a lie that God is holding out on us.

The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, 'You must not eat

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fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.”

Eve tries to talk back to Satan, telling him the truth of what God said. She doesn't make a value judgment here—whether His commands are good or bad. She simply states the command as God told it (with added commands He didn't give—about touching, for example). God essentially said, “There's tons of fruit here and you can have it all, but don't eat from this tree because that fruit isn't good for you. It will cause you harm.”

“You will not certainly die,” the serpent said to the woman. “For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

The serpent pushes forward here, accusing God of keeping something interesting, important, and powerful from Adam and Eve. Don't we all fear this sometimes? Aren't we tempted to believe that if we don't act now, we're going to miss out? The same accuser in this garden story is the accuser of God and man today. Satan is still out to get us, still out to pit us against God.

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.

Eve decided that the fruit looked mighty delicious, and she wanted to know everything God knew. So she chomped down

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on that fruit and shared a bite with her husband. She knew better, and she did it anyway. How often are we like Eve? We know, but we don't understand.

Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

Adam and Eve didn't know nakedness or shame before that apple, but now they felt the air on their nude bodies and felt vulnerable. Why did they feel less at home in the garden now that they were supposed to be more like God?

Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, "Where are you?"

God knew where Adam and Eve were, but the perfect harmony between them had been severed. He asked them where they were in order to make it clear that all could no longer be as it had been.

He answered, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid."

But Adam already knew this. Adam knew he was hiding from God. We all hide from God when we're afraid to be seen as we are. When we fall short of expectation, we want to

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shine up, cover up, or split up. We want to make ourselves look better, hide, or cut off the relationship all together.

And he said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?”

God knows, but He’s always going to ask us anyway. Admitting what we’ve done is part of repenting. We cannot be forgiven of what we don’t own up to.

The man said, “The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.”

Adam blames Eve. But he admits that he ate the fruit. This is the dissonance now existing between each other.

Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this you have done?”

The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.”

Now God comes to Eve and asks her to own up to what she’s done. Eve blames Satan, but admits that she ate the fruit.

So the LORD God said to the serpent, “Because you have done this,

“Cursed are you above all livestock
and all wild animals!
You will crawl on your belly

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and you will eat dust
all the days of your life.
And I will put enmity
between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and hers;
he will crush your head,
and you will strike his heel.”

This is the curse on Satan. That serpent is going to eat dust forever, and eventually God says that Eve’s offspring will crush him underfoot.

To the woman he said,

“I will make your pains in childbearing very severe;
with painful labor you will give birth to children.
Your desire will be for your husband,
and he will rule over you.”

Giving life was going to be excruciating for the woman. It was going to take labor—hard work—for it to come to pass. The next part is harder to understand, because one would think a woman desiring her husband would be a good thing. The easiest way to explain this verse is that it’s marking that Adam and Eve (and therefore humankind) will be in conflict with one another from here on out. The NLT translates v. 16b as such: “And you will desire to control your husband, but he will rule over you.” The words “he will rule over you” are not a biblical command, but a reality of what will happen because of the fall.

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To Adam he said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate fruit from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat from it,'

"Cursed is the ground because of you;
through painful toil you will eat food from it
all the days of your life.
It will produce thorns and thistles for you,
and you will eat the plants of the field.
By the sweat of your brow
you will eat your food
until you return to the ground,
since from it you were taken;
for dust you are
and to dust you will return."

God also broke the happy agreement between Adam and the earth. The earth previously grew anything Adam and Eve needed. Now Adam was going to have to work against the cursed ground and work for his food. The ground that produced life-giving food was also going to produce thorns and thistles.

Adam named his wife Eve, because she would become the mother of all the living.

The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them.

God shows His mercy to Adam and Eve and covers their shame.

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And the LORD God said, “The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever.”

Being kicked out of the garden is also a mercy. Our death will keep us from living forever in this fallen state. After we die, if we are believers in and followers of Jesus, we will be made completely new and be in perfect communion with God again.

So the LORD God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.

This dissonance is a curse of the fall. It is a condition of our humanity, part of our fallen nature. We aren't lined up perfectly with God, because the only way to do that is through Jesus.

It's not only with God that we suffer misalignment, but we're also not in sync with ourselves or with others.

DISSONANCE WITH GOD

In the Garden of Eden, God and Adam and Eve walked together in uncompromised communion. When you hear “the cool of the day” in Genesis 3:8, the garden seems like a really lovely place to

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be. I imagine it to be that kind of refreshing, dewy cool of the morning. I imagine the garden being a wild place rather than a tamed, cultivated garden. I imagine Adam and Eve squishing down tall grass as they walked. They were living in absolutely unsullied connection with God, so why did they so easily believe the lie that God was holding out on them? Why did they begin to feel like they wanted to hide from Him?

Our dissonance with God shows itself in many ways:

- We believe He created us, but that He's disinterested or not intimately involved now.
- We don't believe He's good, because we're afraid of Him.
- We believe He forgave us once, but now it's up to us.
- We feel like He's constantly rolling His eyes at us.
- We believe He likes (and blesses) some people more than us.
- We believe God is holding out on us (like Eve believed in the garden).
- We believe He's more interested in what we do for Him than in who we are in Him.

DISSONANCE WITHIN OURSELVES

We're out of whack with ourselves. Adam and Even felt shame in their nakedness after their sin. They didn't even know what nakedness was before the fall, but afterward they couldn't stop thinking about it. Inherent in the story of the fall of Adam and Eve is that confusion entered the mix. They were still going to have food, but there would now be thistles and thorns growing with the good plants. They'd have to labor through the bad to get

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to the good, and they'd have to discern which was which. This is a consequence of having the knowledge of good and evil. You have to decide between the two—what is good and what is evil? What was meant for their good, now that they had eaten from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, became confusing and muddled.

Here are some examples of the dissonance we feel with ourselves:

- We believe we're worse than other people.
- We believe we're victims of other people.
- We believe we'll get it right next time.
- We believe we can do it on our own.
- We feel shame, fear, frustration, and despair all the time.
- We believe ourselves to be as wise as God (like Eve in the garden).

DISSONANCE WITH OTHERS

Prior to Genesis 3:10, Adam had only ever talked about himself and Eve in the plural term “we.” They were one. But after he ate that tempting, shiny apple Adam used the pronoun “I” for the first time. Adam felt like his helper had hurt him. The one he was supposed to be able to trust had led him into temptation. And now, Adam was motivated by his own self-interests, his own self-protection, which means he and Eve were pitted against each other. We experience this break in relationships across the board today. It is exponentially more difficult to have unity than disagreement.

We have come to believe these things about other people:

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- They exist for our use.
- They're out to get us.
- They're less than us.
- They're not safe.

This is the world we were born into, and this is our spiritual DNA until we are renewed by Jesus. This is our flesh and what we battle in the world. This dissonance that we feel, the misalignment within ourselves, should not surprise us. It should not make us feel alone or like a misfit. This is the norm, even in the Christian life, but God has given us a way to bear up under the burden and to have victory, to be changed, to be made more like Him.

We need to get to the root of the issue—a root that lies in the way we were created. Our minds were made for complex connection making. It's at the base of our humanity. When used for good, for its intentional purpose, the way our minds make connections is godly and fosters a deep dependency on the Lord. I don't want us to miss the good ways we were created.

But in our humanness, in our less-than-Eden world, our minds can play tricks on us. They can become glitchy and frustrate us. If you're anything like me, I know your mind isn't quiet and well-behaved all the time. So let's dive deep into the words we hear over and over, so we can begin to preach to ourselves the good news instead.

CHAPTER TWO

The Bad News Is on Repeat

Have you realized that most of your unhappiness in life is due to the fact that you are listening to yourself instead of talking to yourself? Take those thoughts that come to you the moment you wake up in the morning. You have not originated them, but they start talking to you, they bring back the problems of yesterday, etc. Somebody is talking . . . Your self is talking to you. Now this man's treatment [in Psalm 42] was this: instead of allowing this self to talk to him, he starts talking to himself. "Why art thou cast down, O my soul?" he asks. His soul had been depressing him, crushing him. So he stands up and says, "Self, listen for a moment, I will speak to you."

MARTYN LLOYD-JONES,
SPIRITUAL DEPRESSION

I've been thinking a lot lately about the idea of the stories we tell ourselves. My mind is never, ever quiet. I was starting to feel limited by the stories my mind was telling me. For some reason, I was my own worst enemy. I had long felt like I was not enough, even when I knew better, and my inner monologue was backing up this belief.

My first thought upon waking and realizing life was going to require energy from me *again* was, *I can't do this*.

My mind chatters all throughout breakfast with Noah, Cooper, Asher, and Eli, thinking, *I'll never be a good enough mom for all these boys*.

At the end of the day as I pull the covers up to my chin, I think back on a day full of failures and few measurable victories and wonder if anything will ever change.

It seemed I wasn't living in the power that God promises, and I couldn't exactly pinpoint why. But I had an idea that the loops playing in my head were not helping the matter.

I suspected I was not the only one with this problem of a loud and bossy mind. One day, I hopped on my computer and dashed off a quick Google Forms survey with the question, "What kind of bad news do you tell yourself every day?" I am not a research scientist, and I almost always believe *done* is better than *perfect*, so I called it "good enough" and sent the survey to my contact list and followers on social media.

Immediately, I started receiving answers. It was as if women had been waiting around to tell someone all the junk rattling around in their minds. As I pored over the answers to the survey, my own mind pinged around, quickly identifying patterns. I kept scrolling, cell by cell by cell on this long spreadsheet. I barely paused, because if I lingered too long, the weight of the answers threatened to sink me. I had been tallying the responses as they came in, and after all was said and done, nearly five hundred women had taken the time to answer my question.

By midnight that same day, I had already collected hundreds of replies. It was obvious that women were eager to off-load the mess that was invading their thoughts. I don't blame them. It's a heavy burden to carry when you really stop to think about what you're ruminating on. My own mind pings around like an over-caffeinated, frenetic pinball machine most days, and I don't want anyone to watch the way the ball moves. I bounce my way through the day, and the thoughts I have aren't always welcome.

I've come to believe that this is how most of us spend our days. Instead of having ordered and disciplined minds, we've become accustomed to the high-paced back-and-forth. We're used to arguing with ourselves amid our own mental civil war. This is not what we want, but this is what we do.

As the apostle Paul writes in Romans 7:18–20 (MSG), “I obviously need help! I realize that I don't have what it takes. I can will it, but I can't *do* it. I decide to do good, but I don't *really* do it; I decide not to do bad, but then I do it anyway. My decisions, such as they are, don't result in actions. Something has gone wrong deep within me and gets the better of me every time.”

On Sunday, we go to church; we worship; we connect with other believers. We hear the good news preached—that Jesus died

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for us and that He's still at work in the world today. We most likely believe this good news *most completely* during these ninety minutes every week.

If our minds kept repeating the truth we heard on Sundays, our inner monologue should sound something like this: "I'm beloved! I've been saved for great things! This world is not my home, and that's okay! I have a family of faith who loves me! I belong in the family of God! My hope is assured!"

However, when we walk out the church doors, what we repeat to ourselves can quickly change. The other six days of the week, we can be tempted to allow our minds to run on a loop of bad beliefs.

I started to call this pattern "The Loop," because that's what it feels like. It's like my mind is a hamster wheel that just keeps spinning. It's the scroll that never ends. I never even questioned it, because these bad beliefs just looked like the landscape inside my head. It's very hard to disbelieve what you hear over and over in your own voice every day. This experience just starts to feel like reality.

These bad beliefs aren't necessarily big, earth-shattering sinful patterns. I'm not talking about debilitating lust or frighteningly violent anger (although there is freedom in Jesus in those things too!). I'm talking about the banal, run-of-the-mill antigospel you probably hear so often in your head and that sounds so much like your own voice that you don't even register it as bad news.

I spent weeks combing through the results of the survey about the bad news we tell ourselves. I read every single answer. With almost a thousand versions of bad news, I found that, with few outliers, they all fell within three main buckets.

These are some of the word-for-word responses I received when I asked the question, "What kind of bad news do you tell yourself every day?"

I can't do this. This is a question of capacity and ability. Do I have what it takes? Will I make it through?

- I'm a failure.
- Am I sure I can do this?
- I'm never going to succeed.
- If I can't handle everything I've taken on, I'm unworthy.
- I'm immature and will never keep up with those around me.
- I'm not cut out for motherhood.
- I'm not smart enough.
- I won't make ends meet.
- I'm too tired.
- This is too hard.
- I'm so bad at this.
- I can't handle this.
- I'll never find time to get this done.

I'm not enough. This loop speaks to the question of identity and worth. Who assigns the value to my life? Is it something that is earned, or is it something that is given? What happens when I don't measure up?

- I'm a mess.
- There's something wrong with me.
- I'm not cool enough for that.
- I am just not measuring up.
- I'm not pretty or skinny enough.
- I'm too quiet and don't talk enough.
- No one likes me.
- I don't make a difference.

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- I'm not interesting.
- Others have it easier because they are "blessed."
- I disappoint everyone.
- I am so weak.
- I'm not patient enough.

Nothing is ever going to change. This is a question of futility. Does any of this even matter, and is there hope? I look for words like *never*, *ever*, and *always* in this loop.

- I will always struggle.
- I will never change.
- This is never going to get better.
- I will never get married.
- I will always be gripped by anxiety.
- I'll never accomplish my goals.
- My life will never look the way I want it to.
- I'll never lose the weight.
- This will never get any easier.
- My dream will never happen.
- Will I be alone forever?
- God can't use me.
- I'm done. I give up.
- Why do I even try?

We aren't static creatures. Our minds don't exist in a vacuum apart from the rest of our being. When we believe a lie, we either stuff it down or rev ourselves up to prove it wrong.

If you believe you're not enough, you may stuff it down and drown it out with Netflix, thoughtless shopping, or constant social

positioning. You may try to cheer yourself up and forget you ever thought such a thing. You may just say, “I’m great. I’m fine. Life is good. #TooBlessedToBeStressed.”

If you believe that nothing is ever going to change, you may go into hyperdrive trying to prove yourself wrong. You may become like Wonder Woman with all your planning, dreaming, goal setting, and executing in the hopes that someday life will be different.

These behaviors are coping mechanisms, and they’re two sides of the same coin. The problem with a coping mechanism is that it functions more like a Band-Aid than a cure-all. Coping mechanisms are meant for short-term “getting through.” They’re part of your emotional repertoire, the tools you’ve had since you were born. They helped you feel safe when you were a child and had no power for yourself.

But you don’t need to only cope anymore. You are an adult, held by the Creator of the lowly ant and the mighty oak, loved by the God who doesn’t let even a sparrow fall from the sky without His say. It’s time to focus on what’s going on in your thoughts so you can begin to put a stop to the noise in your head.

These are some of the responses to my survey question, “How do these thoughts affect your days?”

- They make them full of anxiety and unneeded pressure.
- They make me sad.
- They make me second-guess my decisions.
- They stop me from trying.
- My days feel heavy and unjoyful.
- They weigh me down and hold me back.
- I find myself tense and stressed all the time.

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- It's essentially learned helplessness—this is the way things are, and it will always be this way.
- They sound real—they sound like truth—so they keep me in a funk, not trusting the people or relationships around me.
- They deter me from stepping out or living loved.
- They make me want to be lazy and just not try.
- They keep me focused on the past or the future, not the present. They make me feel bad about myself.
- These thoughts make me feel tired, down, and weak.
- They feel isolating, particularly from family.
- I waste my time thinking how I should have and could have done or said things differently.
- They take a toll on my confidence and cause me to stumble.
- These lies are the framework for everything.
- I feel anxious—overthinking, worrying, and paralyzed by the thought of making a wrong move.
- They weigh heavily and rob so much of the freedom the Lord has created me for—now freedom seems so impossible, and it's easier to stay in the bondage.
- It's difficult to see or feel light when my mind is fixed on these dark or heavy thoughts.
- I think they impact my days more than I even know—by how I view myself, how I interact with friends, how I view my job, how I think God sees me, and how I view God.
- I'm exhausted. I need a nap just from mental battles.
- They place too much pressure on my performance.
- They make me want to give up.

I'm the kind of girl who likes silence in the car. With four children, the only silence I get is when I'm alone. You can normally

find me pondering lists like the one you just read. I'm always trying to find connections between ideas and information—and silence is the best ingredient for connection making.

One particular day, though, I had what NPR calls a “driveway moment.” That summer day felt breezy and hopeful, and I was listening to *This American Life*. I got to the end of my drive home, parked in the driveway, and sat for twenty minutes enthralled by an episode called “The Devil in Me.” Nancy Updike, a producer on the show, had asked around to see if people ever felt like they were being influenced by an inner voice that gave them impulses and thoughts they'd like to not have. These people were battling a voice inside themselves that sounded an awful lot like their own voice. It was keeping them in patterns of unwanted behaviors.

The moderator Ira Glass remarked that people had a lot to say when asked about the idea that they are compelled by a voice inside their head—“it was like people had been waiting all their lives for somebody to ask them this question”¹—and that mirrors my experience with my loops survey. When I asked about the false beliefs that people held and heard all the time in their heads, it seemed like the respondents had been waiting for someone to ask.

This voice people are dying to expose is their inner critic. I believe we all have one. What I call the “inner critic” can also be called your “inner monologue” or “self-talk.” Our self-talk illuminates what we believe to be true about ourselves. It is hypothesized that our self-talk is developed by messages we heard in our childhood, by our experiences, and by our takeaways from those experiences. Our inner critic can also be developed by what we observed in others—the things that went well and elicited praise and the things that fell short and elicited criticism.

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The inner critic often sounds just like our own voice, but it's negative, condemning, and condescending. We often experience this voice, even though it is silent and internal, as though we are being audibly spoken to.

The things our inner critic tells us may seem all over the place. However, it's fair to say that our inner critic is actually fairly consistent in its message. If we spend the time to look for them and ask God to identify them, the patterns of our inner critic will show us our "core beliefs." Seth Gillihan, a professor of psychology, wrote in *Psychology Today*:

Core beliefs can be hard to change because they've generally been with us for a long time, and we assume that they're true. Perhaps the biggest obstacle to changing our core beliefs is that *they are strongly self-perpetuating*. When we have a fundamentally negative view of ourselves, we're biased to interpret negative outcomes as evidence of our shortcomings.²

NPR's Nancy Updike got an earful when she asked people about what their inner critic sounded like or communicated to them. Here are some of the answers:

- **MAN:** The voice is irresistible, always. I'm in the thrall of that voice.
- **WOMAN:** Totally out of control. It's got this life of its own, and I can't tame it anymore.
- **MAN:** I remember somehow realizing just how finely calibrated the voice was to every nuance, every part of my feelings, including the feeling that I didn't want to smoke

cigarettes. And it's just like, *Might as well have another cigarette, because this is it.*

- **MAN:** The voice definitely brings in also an element of shame. It says, you want everyone to think that you have money. You want everyone to see that you're generous and you can give and put yourself out there financially. It will prove that you're not a poor kid.
- **WOMAN:** And it also says a lot of mean things too. Your husband's too good for you, you may as well have a glass of wine because without it you won't be as entertaining.
- **WOMAN:** You better try your hardest to make sure he doesn't take [the ring] away, because he's going to find out the truth about you and how much you suck. So you better distract him with a really thin body.³

We all have these inner conversations going on all the time. Yours may sound a little different, depending on your life circumstances. At some point, we've all had this drone of bad news playing out in our minds. But as believers, we know the best news in the world. Why do we struggle to stay anchored in Christ? I am constantly wrestling with this question. I have come to the conclusion that there must be some benefit to us as believers to struggle in this way, or else God could have eliminated it from our life at the point of conversion.

I believe we have a choice right here and right now to see this wrestling as a *good thing*—as something allowed so that we'll prosper. Let me try to convince you. This struggle will push you toward truth more than any other I've known. You'll have to do work that is tedious and exacting. You'll be forced to go over the same ground again and again. It is in this learning and

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relearning that we see God. We see Him change us, and we yield to His will.

So while we examine the reasons we fall for this liar of an inner voice, let's hold on to hope that this is the good stuff of the faith, that this struggle is a gift, because it deepens our faith from knowing to understanding. We not only intellectually get the truth, but we deep down in our bones *believe* the truth.

Before we can begin to have our hearts changed, though, we need to understand how our brains were made and how our minds work in the first place.

Notes

Chapter 2: The Bad News Is on Repeat

1. “The Devil in Me,” *This American Life*, transcript 340, *NPR*, www.thisamericanlife.org/340/transcript.
2. Seth J. Gillihan, “What Makes Us Think Such Negative Things about Ourselves,” www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/think-act-be/201802/what-makes-us-think-such-negative-things-about-ourselves, italics original.
3. “The Devil in Me.”