

REFLECTIONS FROM
NEW AND SEASONED PASTORS
ON ENDURING MINISTRY

BEFORE

WE

FORGET

EDITED BY
NATHAN MILLICAN AND
JONATHON WOODYARD

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To my wife, Gina. Despite all my faults and failures,
she loves me still. To Calvin and Caleb.
I'm glad you are my sons. —Jonathon

To Jesus, my Friend and King. To my bride, Lauren,
my lover and friend. To Lucianne, Lydia, Samuel,
and LJ, may you always remember how much
you are loved and treasured by Jesus. —Nate

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Foreword

There is an authenticity in these pages that might make you uncomfortable at times. You might find yourself saying “I’m not sure I would have shared that.” It’s possible you will read some of the examples and think you could never think those thoughts or behave that way.

Nathan and Jonathon have brought together some remarkably honest accounts from young pastors who share their struggles and shortcomings. I commend them for pursuing this project. I have known both of them for many years. Nathan went through our student ministry when I pastored in Louisville, Kentucky. So, you can imagine—I am definitely familiar with some of his mistakes!

What they and the contributors have given us is a gift. A chance to go beneath surface issues and really dig down into some of the deep insecurities that cause us to behave the way we do and to make some of the mistakes we make.

If you read through to the end, this book might just save your ministry. It might convince you that what’s happening in your soul is infinitely more important than outward appearances. And it will remind you that the value God places on you—not your congregation or your peers—is what truly counts.

But the key to getting the most out of this book is to set aside any pretending you are doing with yourself so you can be brutally honest about your own downfalls and your potential to get off track.

I was born in the waning years of the Baby Boom. Our generation isn't exactly known for sharing openly about our weaknesses and mistakes. In fact, the attributes most opposite those would apply best to my age group. The whole idea is to cover up your vulnerabilities so no one can take advantage of them and damage you.

Unfortunately, that's exactly the wrong way to run a ministry and, more importantly, the wrong way to live your life. We are seeing an epidemic of pastor burnout right now. A shocking number of pastors leave ministry each year. Could it be partly that all of the time and emotional energy we spend on covering up and keeping up appearances is taking its toll?

Social media, for all of its positive potential, can compound the problem. Without even being conscious of it we play the comparison game. Does our ministry stack up? How does our family compare? Is our life as interesting? Are our experiences as fantastic?

I want to invite you into what might be a new-found freedom that you will find on these pages. The freedom from trying to be perfect. The freedom you will find when you stop trying to hide your mistakes and weaknesses. The freedom you will find when you depend more on God than on your own abilities.

Being honest about your mistakes, your fears, and your shortcomings is what will bind you to the hearts of those with whom you are ministering. It is also what will allow God to work in your life to heal you, to teach you dependence on Him, and to restore the things that are broken.

You will also find that when you are open and honest about these things, people in your church will be drawn to you and they will more openly share their personal struggles and failings.

What is most tragic about trying to hide our failures is that we're being honest with God and we're fooling ourselves. This keeps us from truly being able to pursue God's healing and become more complete in Him. He wants to restore us from the brokenness that sin and the world has brought upon us. To do that we have to set aside pride and the concern about how we might look to others. We have to give up on the futile effort to live a life that looks great on the outside but inside leaves us hollow and shallow.

As people who spend so much of our time in God's Word, we should have seen long ago that God has a long history of using people who have some pretty significant shortcomings.

Moses had trouble speaking. Gideon was nearly frozen by his fear. Rahab was a prostitute. Jonah ran from God's calling. Peter denied Christ. King David was a murderer. Paul persecuted believers.

God didn't overlook these weaknesses and mistakes, but He worked through these men and women when they were willing to let Him use them—weaknesses and all.

I am thankful that Nathan and Jonathon have called us to remember. We're facing a crisis of remembrance in our society. Everything is about now. Our phones and the pace of life keep us so distracted and focused on the moment that there is no opportunity for reflection and remembrance.

But God wants us to remember. As Nathan and Jonathon point out in their introduction, both the Old and New Testaments are filled with examples of God telling His people to take time to remember and to take steps so future generations will remember.

How have you built this process into your life? Do you set aside a time each week to look back on the week that just transpired? Do you ask yourself or anyone else how it went after your church's weekend ministries are complete? What about a similar process

monthly or yearly? Learning from our past—both the good and the bad that has occurred—requires intentionality and discipline.

Practicing times of reflection allows God to bring to mind His faithfulness, all the times He came through, all of the ways He is at work through the people and the world around us.

It also allows us to identify and learn from our doubts, fears, and insufficiencies. Ask God to show these areas to you. Don't look at them as negatives—view them as a chance to learn more about yourself and as opportunities for God to heal.

This battle ultimately comes down to where you choose to place your faith and your focus. You are filled with insufficiencies. Every part of you is riddled and mired down with them. It's a product of the fallen world in which we live.

The more we pile on the masks and the cover-ups, the easier it gets to hide other things. Before we know it, we reach a point where nothing about us is true. Nothing is authentic. Nothing is real. That's not where any of us want to end up.

In fact, where you want to end up is always a great thing for us to think about. The goal in life is not to get to the end and have a lot of people think you really had your act together pretty well. The idea is to demonstrate the love, forgiveness, and grace of Jesus in your life and how you shared that with others.

Of course, if it were easy, everyone would be doing it. What we're talking about is counter to our inclinations. Our drive for self-preservation tells us not to do this. If you're open about your shortcomings, there will be some who try to use it against you. But you don't want to live in hostage to that. You want to live in the forgiveness and acceptance that Jesus brings and to share that with others throughout your ministry and your life.

—Kevin Ezell

Introduction: A Theology of Remembrance

Jonathon D. Woodyard

From the beginning of the project, the working title of the book in your hands has been *Before We Forget*. Nathan and I came up with the idea several years ago while working together at a church in Indiana. We were young (and we still are), learning the ropes of leading a church and making mistakes along the way. In God's kindness, He was teaching us valuable lessons about life, theology, and pastoral ministry. Some lessons were harder to learn than others, but everything the Lord was teaching us was a gift of grace.

Today, we continue to learn. But we thought sharing how God was growing us in our walk with Jesus in days gone by was a worthwhile project to undertake. Because we are finite human beings, prone to forget, we wanted to put things on paper in an effort to remember.

In addition to the lessons we are learning about pastoral ministry, we invited several friends to share lessons they are learning as they serve in vocational ministries. Given the relative youthfulness of the friends we've invited to contribute, we thought it wise to

invite seasoned pastors to offer their reflections on the things we are saying. Our hope is the book will serve younger and older pastors as they strive to serve faithfully for the good of Christ's people and the glory of God.

The premise of the book is simple. We too often and too quickly forget the lessons God is teaching us. This whole book, then, is an exercise in remembrance. We want to remind ourselves of God's work in our lives as He has conformed us into the image of Jesus and molded us into (hopefully) more faithful followers and more careful and helpful shepherds. As the authors in this book remember and recount what God has done for them and in them, perhaps it will encourage others as they run their race.

An Ancient Idea: Remembrance in the Bible

Remembrance is an ancient idea. It isn't something novel but is rooted in biblical wisdom. Tony Reinke asserts, "*Remembering* is a key verb of the Christian life."¹ It "is one of the key spiritual disciplines we must guard with vigilance amid the mind-fragmenting and past-forgetting temptations of the digital age."² That seems like an apt description of the chapters ahead of you. Writing the chapters (and going through several rounds of edits) has been a discipline that has helped us "guard with vigilance" the biblical idea of remembrance. We are not eager to forget what God has taught us and is teaching us during these early years of ministry.

¹ Tony Reinke, *12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017), 188.

² Ibid.

Remembrance in the Bible

Bringing to mind the past (i.e., remembering) is one way we reflect the image of God. We are familiar with the fact that humanity is created in God's image (Gen. 1:27–28). John Piper says, "I think being created in the image of God means that we image God. We reflect God. We live in a way, we think in a way, we feel in a way, we speak in a way that calls attention to the brightness of the glory of God."³ Our effort to recall the past, to remember, is one way we point to a God who remembers.

It is striking how often we read of God's remembering things. He remembers His covenant with Israel (e.g., Exod. 2:24; 6:5; Lev. 26:42; Deut. 4:31; Ezek. 16:60; Ps. 105:8, 42), and, in fact, His remembrance is the ground of our hope. That is, God moves to save His people because He remembers His covenantal promises (e.g., Ps. 105:8). Of course, we know God's remembering and our remembering are not the same thing. But in some profound way, our remembering reflects a God who remembers His promises and saves His people.

Not only does God remember His people, but God's people are commanded to remember their Lord. When Israel finally arrived in the Promised Land, the danger of forgetfulness loomed large. Moses warned them to be careful to remember their Lord: "Only be on your guard and diligently watch yourselves, so that you don't forget the things your eyes have seen" (Deut. 4:9). Namely, Israel must not "forget the LORD who brought [them] out of the land of Egypt, out of the place of slavery" (Deut. 6:12; cf. 4:23). That's an

³ Quoted in Tony Reinke, "Why Do I Exist," January 20, 2015, accessed January 16, 2020, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/why-do-i-exist>.

important lesson Israel needed to keep in mind. God was for them and had acted mightily and graciously to save the nation.

Unfortunately, the history of Israel is filled with instances when God's people forgot their gracious God and forsook Him for false gods (e.g., Judg. 8:33; 1 Kings 11:4–6; 2 Kings 17:22–26; Ps. 78:40–43).

When we turn to the hymnbook of Israel, the Psalms, we repeatedly find the language of remembrance. For instance, Psalm 78 reminds Israel to remember how their ancestors have passed on the faith and therefore they must be faithful to do the same (78:1–4). Israel's children should remember the Ephraimites, who “forgot what [God] had done, the wondrous works he had shown them” (78:11) and “did not remember his power shown on the day he redeemed them from the foe” (78:42). Instead, they should remember their Lord, His mighty saving acts (especially the exodus event), and make sure to steer a better course. By learning from their past, they'd be prepared for faithfulness in the future.

But remembrance is not restricted to the Old Testament. Remembrance runs through the New Testament as well. In the fight of faith, we must “remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead and descended from David” (2 Tim. 2:8). We must remember we were once far from God, but by His grace through our faith, we have been “brought near by the blood of the Christ” (Eph. 2:13). Simply put, our faith is built on something that happened in history two thousand years ago. We remember the person and work of Jesus on our behalf. We were dead in our sins (Eph. 2:1) and needed help. The help we need isn't found inside of us but comes *extra nos*, from outside of ourselves. By remembering the cross, we are reminded over and over again to hope in God and trust in Jesus alone for our salvation.

The list can go on, but it is plain that Christians should have a robust theology of remembrance. In the Old Testament, God's people needed to be careful to remember their God and His grace toward them. In the New Testament, the saving grace of God in Christ is never far from our mind. We remember Jesus, our sovereign, saving, and satisfying King. We let the Bible run through our veins, constantly remembering who God is and all He has done and will do for us through Jesus by the power of the Spirit.

Remembering God's Work in Others

This book, again, is our attempt to remember God's work in our lives. Furthermore, we believe paying attention to God's work in others helps us in our future fights for faithfulness. Indeed, there is biblical warrant to pay attention to God's work in the lives of other people.

In Philippians 3, Paul tells the saints at Philippi to "pay careful attention to those who live according to the example you have in us" (Phil. 3:17). As I type these words, I'm sitting in a conference listening to a speaker unpack the life of a figure from Christian history and help us learn how to be better followers of Jesus by learning from God's work in this particular man. By remembering this man's life, we are learning how to live lives that honor Jesus.

Again, that seems an apt description of what this book aims to do. We believe you should remember your God and His gracious work in history to redeem His people. You should remember Jesus, your faithful High Priest. You should remember who you are in Christ and how the Spirit has taken up residence in you and is presently conforming you into the image of Christ. And you should pay attention to those around you, learning from

them how to walk according to the apostolic examples we have in Paul, Peter, and the rest.

What we are doing in this book is trying to remember. We want to remember all that God has taught us and is teaching us. In our remembering, we have continued to learn, and we hope to help you learn. As you pay attention to those who are fighting battles you are currently fighting, or one day will fight, or even returning to battles you've fought in the past, perhaps you'll remember what the Lord has taught us, and it'll serve to aide your fight for faithfulness in the future. If that happens, then may God get the glory as you reap the joy.

Conclusion

Brothers, we must remember, as we spend and are spent for the good of Christ's bride, that we are not yet who we will be. We have not arrived. We stumble and fall and mess up in a plethora of ways. But we keep pressing forward. We learn important lessons along the way that we should never forget. May God use the recounting of these lessons for the good of pastors, the joy of the bride, and the glory of King Jesus.

Jonathon D. Woodyard—Jonathon serves as the lead pastor of Northfield Community Church in Northfield, Minnesota, and adjunct instructor at Bethlehem College and Seminary in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He is married to Gina, and they have two energetic boys, Calvin and Caleb. Jonathon earned a BA in Biblical and Theological Studies from Boyce Bible College, an MDiv from Bethlehem College and Seminary, and is currently pursuing a PhD in Historical Theology at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

The Insecure Pastor

Noe Garcia

. . . because of the extraordinary revelations.
Therefore, so that I would not exalt myself, a thorn
in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan
to torment me so that I would not exalt myself.
(2 Cor. 12:7)

Setting the Stage

This verse has penetrated the depths of the soul of God's people for centuries. Many Christians have taken on specific tasks only to find that a thorn awaits them in the midst of the work. The thorn comes in various forms but often causes the same emotional and psychological response: insecurity.

Paul tells the Corinthians that he was tormented during his ministry. The word *torment* means "to strike with a fist, to treat with violence and to harass."¹ It's an ongoing assault intended by

¹ https://www.amazon.com/Greek-English-Lexicon-Testament-Christian-Literature/dp/0226039331/ref=sr_1_2?crid=57B9NWR8KAHA&keywords=danker+greek+lexicon&qid=1582815796&sprefix=danker+%2Caps%2C-1&sr=8-2

the enemy to break you and intended by God to strengthen you. Paul acknowledges that the “messenger of Satan” was sent to torment him. We may not know exactly what the thorn in Paul’s life was, but we do know God either made the thorn or “okayed” the thorn.

Have you ever had a thorn in your life? Something that tormented you, something that nagged you and wouldn’t go away no matter how much you prayed. Something you prayed for God to remove, only to be met with, “My grace is sufficient”?

I have.

The pastorate provides fertile soil for thorns to grow. My thorn has always been insecurity.

It torments me. It harasses me. It breaks me. I am addicted to people pleasing and being liked. My fear is that I am not enough for people and I don’t meet their expectations. I am terrified of people not liking me because my leadership or preaching doesn’t measure up. Insecurity often paralyzes me. I find myself analyzing everything I say or do. I spend too much time trying to read facial expressions to see if I’m being accepted.

The truth is I don’t feel smart enough, strong enough, or wise enough. I simply don’t feel like I’m enough. So insecurity beats me up.

Every Sunday, about fifteen minutes before our worship service starts, you can find me hugging the toilet getting ready to vomit. The fear of failure and my insecurity in preaching are so strong that I have extreme anxiety. I’ve prayed, and I’ve prayed, and I’ve prayed, but God doesn’t remove the thorn.

Do You Plan on Your Preaching Getting Any Deeper?

I will never forget those words. I felt like I had been punched in the gut.

I was five weeks into my first pastorate and thought it would be a great idea to host meetings before service, with the idea that the congregation could have time with me and get to know my heart.² So there I was in front of several hundred people, and the question came, “Do you plan on your preaching getting any deeper?” (paraphrased).

Various thoughts and emotions ran through me. I paused without responding for a few brief seconds; those seconds felt like an eternity. Though I bit my tongue, I wanted to let my emotions loose and respond with hurtful words. I scanned the silent room; time felt as if it stood still, and the facial expressions said it all. Some looked shocked, some expecting an answer, and many others looked disturbed at the audacity of this man to ask such a humiliating question.

That wasn’t all I saw that day. As I scanned the room, I saw my precious twenty-nine-year-old wife. I knew she felt the pain of the punches being thrown at me. That was a painful reality. As quickly as I could collect my thoughts, I responded to this man with courage and strength that could only come from Jesus. I said: “Sir, with all due respect, I know you mentioned that you have been at this church for a long time, but I am confident that God has called me here. If you don’t think my preaching is deep

² This is not a good idea to begin with. Pastors, don’t hold town hall meetings before you stand up to preach. You are setting yourself up for discouragement.

enough for you, you may want to begin looking for another church to attend.”

Was my response wrong? Maybe. Could I have been more mature? Perhaps. But one thing I do know: my reaction was *mild* compared to what I wanted to say. I ended the meeting earlier than expected and took my wife by the hand, and we silently walked back to my office. When the door closed behind us, we looked at each other with eyes filled with tears and fell to our knees and cried.

We were deeply wounded. This wasn't the first hard comment or email we had received, and we feared that we were simply not enough for this church. We couldn't understand why God had called us to a place where we didn't feel like we were wanted. I couldn't meet the demands, and I certainly couldn't meet all of the expectations. Questions started flooding my mind. *Why isn't my preaching deep enough for them? God, why am I not smart enough? Why do they hate me? Am I the wrong skin color to lead this church?* I simply didn't feel like I was enough for this historic congregation. It was only five weeks into my first pastorate, and here I was questioning my calling.

After that meeting and crying with my wife, I had to summon the energy to preach. I approached the pulpit wounded. Compounding the problem, I assumed everyone felt the way that vocal church member felt. From that Sunday on, I have wrestled with his words. I walk up to the pulpit fearing that failure awaits me. I know it's not about me. I know “His grace is sufficient.” But have you ever known biblical truth and still had trouble believing it in a tough moment? That's where I was, and too often, that's where I am.

Through this thorn-filled journey, God has taught me a number of lessons. These lessons have come through moments of failure and moments of victory. Through this journey, He has not only exposed His heart, but He has also exposed my heart. He has shown me that my heart is more deceitful, more bitter, more given to self-sufficiency, and more filled with pride than I'd like to admit. There are two paths that I've taken while dealing with the thorn of insecurity.

The Path to Bitterness

When I became embittered and my innermost being was wounded, I was stupid and didn't understand; I was an unthinking animal toward you. (Ps. 73:21–22)

I unfortunately can relate to the words of Asaph in Psalm 73. In my moments of insecurity, I acted like a brute. I was a beast before God. I found myself letting Him know why I shouldn't have this thorn. I even reminded Him of my faithfulness. I reminded Him of my struggles and the pain of growing up without a father. Didn't He feel sorry for me? Perhaps, with enough reminders, He'd give in. But He didn't.

In fact, if I'm being honest, it almost seems as if the thorn has multiplied and gotten bigger. As the Lord seemingly failed to respond to my prayers, I slowly turned into a bitter person. I found myself preaching with an angry tone. I found myself being short with people I was supposed to shepherd. My insecurity was at an all-time high. People-pleasing was never far from my mind, and my likability felt like it was at an all-time low.

A year into my pastorate, I found myself in the fetal position in my office. I couldn't think straight, but I also couldn't cry. I felt like I had lost my mind. I was having a nervous breakdown.

This infuriated me even more. I blamed the congregation. It was their fault I felt insecure; it was their fault I had a nervous breakdown; it was their fault I felt like I wasn't enough. To make matters worse, no one seemed to care about the pain they had caused.

But the honest truth was *the fault was mine*. I let the presence of insecurity drive me to bitterness instead of driving me to the throne of God where grace is found and strength is provided in times of weakness. This, I believe, is why God has left the thorn sticking in my side. He has heard my cry. But He left my insecurity in place. In so doing He forced me to trust Him.

I realize I have a choice with the thorns in my life. I can fall into bitterness and self-destruction when God chooses to leave them, or I can fall into the grace of God and trust in His sufficiency.

My bitterness and anger ultimately led to broken relationships, distant church members, and a culture of fear for those who worked alongside me. This is not something I am proud of, but I hope never to forget the lessons I learned along the way. Perhaps, brother pastor, you wrestle with insecurity. Maybe you wrestle with different thorns. Whatever thorn you find in your life, pray and ask God for help. Hopefully, He'll take it away. But if He doesn't, don't let the thorn lead you to bitterness; let it lead you to Him. That's where grace and mercy and strength are supplied.

The Path to Strength

My grace is sufficient for you, for my power
is perfected in weakness. (2 Cor. 12:9)

The right path in life is usually the more difficult path. The path filled with pain and suffering is often where we find God. Jesus knew that path well. Jesus knew the only path to appease the wrath of the Father, and thus please His Father, was the path that led to the cross. And this painful path was not in vain. Through the cross Jesus purchased a people for God.

In Matthew 10, Jesus told His disciples everyone would hate them because of Him. In John 16, Jesus stated plainly that in this world His disciples would have trouble. If you walk with Christ, suffering awaits (cf. Phil. 1:29). Following Christ does not solve our earthly problems. Life doesn't magically become easy after we say, "I do" to Christ. Any prosperity theology that says the opposite is not only false but also dangerous and deadly. In the Bible we see the opposite. We see men and women following Christ and dying as martyrs. We see Jesus, the Son of God, God in the flesh, come to His knees in the garden and pray three times for the cup to be taken away. Yet suffering awaits Him (Luke 22). The path of suffering is a path Jesus and Jesus' people know all too well.

Though we want to bypass suffering and hardship, fruit often comes through suffering. Thankfully, Christ provides grace and strength in the midst of the struggles. God upholds. Jesus sustains. The Spirit keeps. And thus Paul says that he can do all things through Christ who strengthens him (Phil. 4:13).

The Path to Strength Is through the Pain

I get it. It doesn't seem to make any sense! But it's true. This Greek word for power in 2 Corinthians 12 is *dynamis*. This word means "power, mighty work, strength, and ability." I love that! Paul is strongest when he is weak. Why? Because when he is weak, he depends on the power and strength of Christ, who is unbelievably strong.

Remember the story I told you in the beginning of the chapter? That's right, the part about someone telling me my preaching was weak. Well, I still had to get up and preach after that humiliating moment. Here is the rest of the story. I got up off of my knees and wiped away the tears, made my way to the sanctuary and then the pulpit. I preached with a different power that morning. It doesn't happen every Sunday morning, but it did that Sunday. I had an overwhelming sense of dependence on the Spirit of God. I was desperate for God to speak through me. I was desperate for a Holy Spirit moment. This desperation was birthed out of my brokenness and insecurity; it was birthed out of my weakness. Without feeling weak and broken, I may not have depended on God as much as I did that morning. That sermon led to the invitation, which led to a multitude of people giving their lives to Christ!

Is this what happens when we empty ourselves and admit that we are weak? Is the result God's moving and getting the credit and glory? Yes—though the way God moves will vary from moment to moment and day to day. It might look like multitudes coming to Jesus, or His moving might not be visible to the naked eye. What we do know is God works through humble servants. Therefore, I have learned to boast about my weakness. I want more of that Holy Spirit power, not for my fame but the fame of Jesus' name.

If the path to more of God is pain and the journey to see God glorified in my life is the continual presence of a thorn, so be it.

Too many pastors love to display their strengths for their own renown. However, I believe God is looking for pastors who know they are weak, pastors who understand they are sinners saved by the sheer grace of God. God is looking for pastors who are not afraid to pour their soul out to Him, acknowledging their weaknesses and relying on His strength.

Before I Forget

God has left the thorn of insecurity in my life to teach me to trust in His power, not my own. In leaving this thorn in my side, God has taught me several lessons. These lessons have transformed the way I approach ministry, life, and God. Before I forget these lessons, I want to share them with you.

Lesson 1: Guard Your Heart

Guard your heart above all else, for it
is the source of life. (Prov. 4:23)

Guarding your heart is a matter of life and death. An unguarded heart is one of the things the enemy uses to order our steps. He gets a hold of our emotions and thoughts, and we begin to believe the whispers of the enemy. The enemy is on the prowl, seeking whom he can devour (1 Pet. 5:8). If everything we do flows from our heart (Prov. 4:23), and our heart is unguarded, then what flows out of our heart will be ugly.

Remember, I was five weeks into my first pastorate and hosting meetings before service so the congregation could have time

with me and get to know my heart. And then the question came, “Do you plan on your preaching getting any deeper?” Various thoughts and emotions ran through me. This question exposed the insecurity that resided in my heart.

When God doesn’t answer your prayer to remove the thorn(s) in your life, you can easily feel like He isn’t listening. If we’re not careful, if we fail to guard our hearts, slowly we’ll end up like Asaph in Psalm 73. We’ll become brutish, a beast before God. We grumble. We complain. We become bitter. I realized that when I left my heart unguarded, I was becoming bitter and unpleasant to be around instead of humbling myself before the throne of God where strength is found. So, I plead with you, guard your heart.

Lesson 2: There Is Freedom in Boasting in Our Weakness

Therefore I will most gladly boast all the more about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may reside in me. (2 Cor. 12:9)

This was one of the most difficult things for me to do. I was too proud. I didn’t want anyone to know I was struggling. I didn’t want anyone to know what darkness lived in the depth of my soul. I was ashamed and embarrassed. So I held it in. I didn’t want to boast in my weaknesses. I wanted to maintain an image of strength. I wanted people to think I was a strong leader and wasn’t weak.

I finally broke.

Being fake was too exhausting. I finally mustered up the courage to confess my insecurity, my bitterness, and my brokenness.

In confessing my powerlessness, when I boasted in my weakness, I found freedom and strength in a powerful Jesus.

Lesson 3: Accept the Thorn

I pleaded with the Lord three times that
it would leave me. (2 Cor. 12:8)

What a sentence! Paul mentions in verse 7 that the thorn was given to him to keep him from being conceited about the “extraordinary revelations.” In the previous verses Paul mentions that he was caught up into the third heaven and saw something that had never been seen before, something that was definitely worth boasting about. In order to keep Paul from becoming conceited, he was given this thorn. Scripture doesn’t identify the thorn, but we learn at least two things.

First, the thorn was to keep Paul from being conceited. Second, God’s grace was sufficient. So we can have confidence that God made it or okayed it. Imagine praying for the removal of something God never intends to take away. What do you do when you keep praying for one thing and God does another? Well, you keep praying! But you also learn to accept God’s will. I don’t mean accept it and throw a fit about it; I mean acknowledge the painful reality of the thorn while trusting that God is using it for his glory and your good (cf. Rom. 8:28; Eph. 1:11).

Brothers, don’t forget to embrace even hard things from the hand of a good God. There are lessons to learn in the pain.

Lesson 4: For Your Good and His Glory

. . . because of the extraordinary revelations. Therefore, so that I would not exalt myself, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to torment me so that I would not exalt myself. (2 Cor. 12:7)

Have you ever thought a thorn may be sent to protect you from yourself? Let's be honest: as pastors, we are prone to pride. We compare ourselves with other pastors. We jump on their websites to listen to their sermons, sometimes just to find reasons to think we are better than they are. Since we are better (or so we sometimes think), we wonder why we don't have the bigger church. *Why do they get invited to speak at the conferences and not me?*

Have you ever had those thoughts? It breaks my heart that while people are dying and going to hell without Jesus, pastors are sizing each other up as if we are in competition. Sometimes I feel like we are more burdened for success in ministry than we are for the lost in our communities. Lord, save us from ourselves!

Interestingly, this is not new. Could you imagine the social media attention Paul would receive if word got out about his third heaven experience? Retweets would abound. Conference engagements and megachurch positions and book deals would soon follow! But God knew. God knew what those things would do to Paul's heart. He knew how Paul's ministry could be destroyed. So God did what He does. He protected Paul from himself by sending him a thorn that would keep him from becoming conceited. He gave Paul the thorn for Paul's own good—as difficult as it was. And God gave Paul the thorn for God's glory.

Brother, you may not be able to see the reason for the thorn, but thankfully, God does. Just maybe He's protecting you from you. Don't forget that while God is for your good, He is ultimately after His glory, and these two things are not mutually exclusive. The route to get there just may not be what you expected.

Conclusion

Even though I pray over and over for God to remove the thorn of insecurity, the hard reality is that He has not. I still approach the pulpit with fear and insecurity that my sermons won't stack up. I still want everyone in the congregation to like me. I am still addicted to pleasing people. All of these emotions are fueled by my insecurity, the thorn still sticking in my side.

While I cannot control the thorn, I can control my reaction. The thorn is painful, that is certain. I do not like it. I pray that it goes away. Yet I know that God is for me and this thorn is His way of drawing me closer to Him. Though I can't control the thorn, by the grace of God, I can control how I react to the thorn.

Which path will we take when the thorn strikes—the path of bitterness or the path of strength? The path of bitterness believes God is wrong, that His plan isn't best. We believe we deserve better. When we don't receive what we think is better, we become bitter.

The path to strength runs in an opposite direction. It takes us to the throne of grace where strength is found. It is a path marked by admission of weakness and powerlessness. It is a path that says we are weak but God is strong. It is a path that flees to Jesus as the all-sufficient Savior and Sustainer.

But we don't arrive there all of a sudden without any grace-driven effort. Running to the throne means we need to guard our heart in order to keep from turning bitter and cold. Bitterness will keep you from experiencing the strength grace provides. Traveling this path means acknowledging the ugly realities of self-sufficiency that hide in the depths of your soul. This path includes accepting the reality that God may never remove the thorn but knowing that in the midst of your pain, He will prove strong.

At the end of the day, our thorns, our struggles, our trials are for Christ and His kingdom. Paul said that the thorn kept him from being conceited. It kept him humble. As Paul humbled himself, he pointed to the strength found in Christ. Though we pray for God to take away our thorns, in the midst of the pain, as we rely on the strength found in Jesus, all glory goes to Him.

Noe Garcia—Noe is the senior pastor at North Phoenix Baptist Church in Phoenix, Arizona. He and his wife have four children and celebrate nine years of marriage. He holds a Doctorate of Ministry and Executive Leadership from Southern Seminary. He serves on the Evangelism team for the North American Mission Board, is a trustee for Union University, serves on the ERLC leadership council team, as well as being the second vice president of the Southern Baptist Convention.

HOW CAN PASTORS ENDURE IN MINISTRY? HOW CAN THEY FINISH WELL?

The pastors who have contributed to *Before We Forget*—some early in their ministries, some with decades of experience—believe remembering is the key to endurance. Remembering their first love. Remembering God's call to ministry. Remembering the lessons God taught them in the early days of their service.

We too often, and too quickly, forget the lessons God is teaching us. The authors want to remind themselves of God's work in their lives as He has conformed them into the image of Jesus and molded them into more faithful followers and more careful shepherds. As they remember and recount what God has done for them and in them, their reflections will encourage pastors as they too run their race with endurance.

Before We Forget includes chapters from the following leading pastors and more:

- **JIMMY SCROGGINS**, lead pastor of Family Church in South Florida
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- **KEVIN EZELL**, president of the North American Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention
- **JASON MEYER**, pastor for preaching and vision at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota

Nathan Millican serves as the team lead for church planting with the North American Mission Board in the state of Indiana, as well as the pastor of church planting partnerships at Graceland Baptist Church in New Albany, Indiana. He is a graduate of the University of Kentucky and the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Jonathon Woodyard serves as the lead pastor of Northfield Community Church in Northfield, Minnesota, a plant out of Bethlehem Baptist Church in 2016. He is pursuing a PhD in historical theology at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.