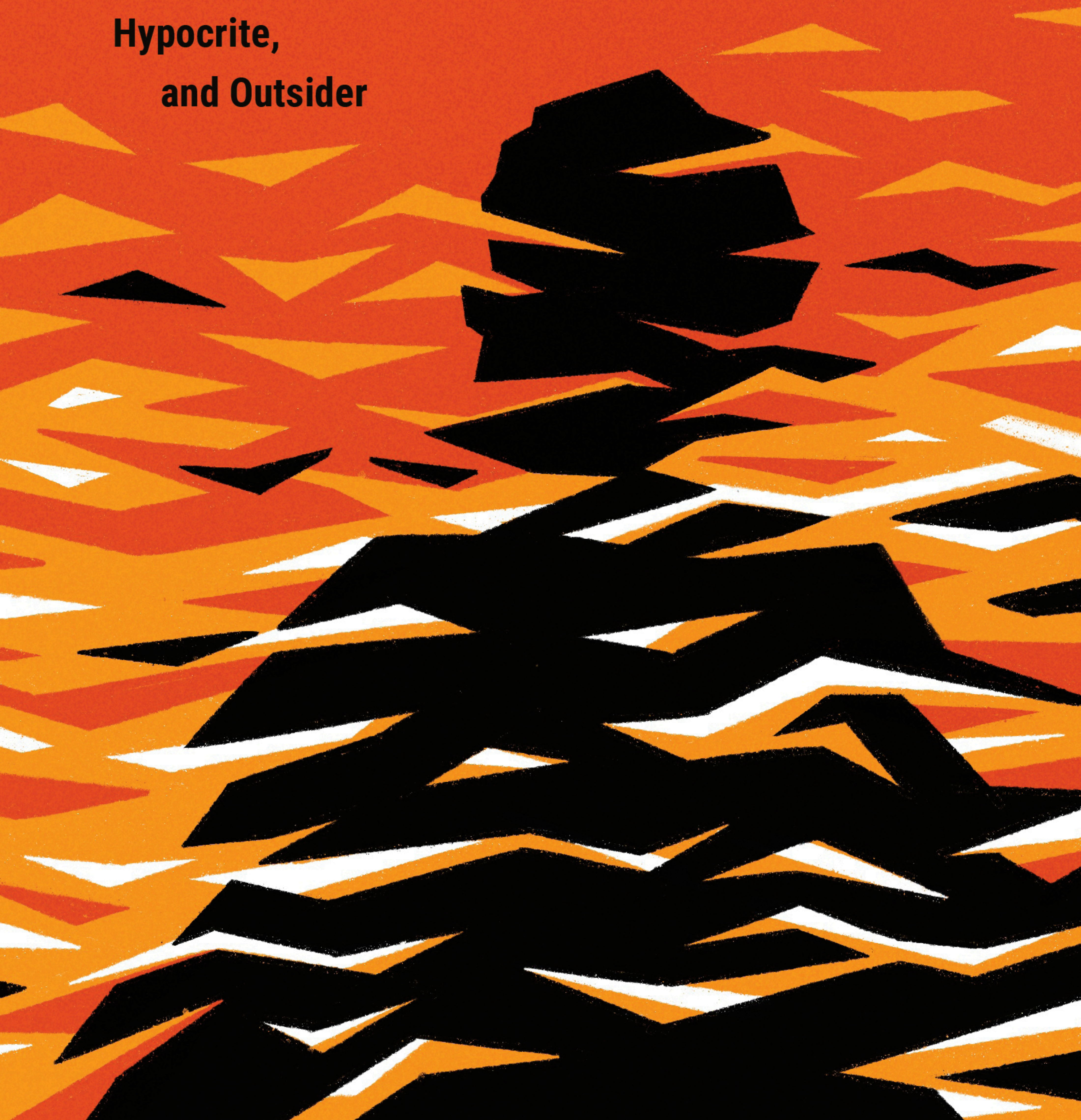


John Simons

The Man You're Meant to Be

**A Call of
Self-Examination
for Every Believer,
Hypocrite,
and Outsider**



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For my son, Noah.

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Despair settles within our bones
Our precious time rusts away
All that I cherish deteriorates
Everything I have left to hold
Will come to a close

We labor endlessly
Only to raise tattered hands
We could rupture every levee
And still, it would never be enough

For every one we mend
We sever a hundred
For every good we build
We tear down another thousand

We lift our praise
To cover each other's eyes
How deceiving we can be
When we neglect the accruing cost

But for you, my son
I will not turn your gaze
Ignorance will not pave your way

When I leave you
I will walk into dusk
Learn from these fractured steps
Listen carefully and heed these words I speak
A Wisdom that was not of me

Introduction

This book is about growing into the man God called us to be. It's about the narrow path every man is called to journey upon, as we are formed into the image of Jesus. Too often, our conceptions of manhood do not centrally revolve around the formation, teachings, and work of Christ himself. And any view of manhood that does not begin and end with Jesus's life is no biblical view at all. He illuminates our true calling and identity as image bearers of God—drawing us closer to our good heavenly Father, inviting us to surrender to a Spirit-led life, as we learn to cultivate wisdom from *above*.

At the heart of this book is an invitation to walk *with* God. That's not to be dismissive of the fact that each year we grow more and more biblically illiterate as a culture and nation. It's a major problem. However, we won't solve our crisis of manhood by merely learning more *about* God. Rather, we must get to know him by learning his ways. The journey of becoming a godly man begins by surrendering ourselves to him—the good, bad, and ugly. Our cultivation of true wisdom must be empowered by the Spirit, helping us arrive at vulnerable self-examination before his throne. We need to be convicted that

we need less of ourselves, less of our ways, and more of Christ and his way if we are to become a man like him.

You'll recognize there are two parts of this work—the central task of part 1 is to help each man grasp what kind of wisdom is currently taking root and influencing our deepest desires and pursuits (because there isn't just one). Part 2 meets us in the trenches of life. The goal of the book is to help each of us foster a deeper relationship with God, cultivate godly character and wisdom, and become the presence we need to be for our wife, kids, family, and friends. It's to meet the call to walk on the narrow path of discipleship. However, as we venture on this path, we also must reconcile our assumptions about God, what we project onto our relationship with him, and meet him for who he really is.

Yet, to be clear, this book isn't just for men inside the walls of the church who wish to grow deeper in their faith. It's also for those who no longer walk through its doors, whether because they've been wounded by its people or become disenfranchised by what occurs inside its walls. If we're honest about the conversation between men and the church, those inside and outside are angry, cynical, discouraged, and frustrated. And more than likely, they feel like outsiders in a world that doesn't seek to equip or affirm them in leading, caring for, and serving like a godly man should.

However, the world doesn't get to dictate the narrative of how things ought to be—God and his Word are the

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final authority. So, even in a twisted, wayward world, we must remain steadfast, meeting our true call to grow into Christlikeness as we lead, love, and care for our families, friends, and community in the trenches of life. Above all else, our deepest desires should revolve around pursuing those ends for the glory of God.

I've prayed that this book falls in the hands of the addicted, defeated, empty, and lonely. We aren't meant to walk through life alone, and I hope this book encourages each of you to step forward in courage to seek after such. I promise it'll be worth it. And I would be remiss not to point out that this work is especially for those who currently hold shame around their necks, like a noose that suffocates the true joys of life. Each of us has blind spots and wounds that need mending. I hope this is just a first step in many men's lives to hand over their burdens to our good Shephard.

As we set out on the journey together, may we also each find another brother who's walking on the same narrow path of discipleship. In a world that's largely void of intentionality, friendship, and mutual spurring on, this book can be an opportunity to find each of those. May we each experience the depths of God's love and grace and recognize, as men, that we are to lead with the same posture of care and wisdom of our good Father.

Part 1



Navigating the Cultural Landscape

1

True Wisdom in a Wayward World

*“Our heart is restless until it rests in you.”*¹

St. Augustine

For all the modern technology in our world, times haven't changed as much as we think. Certainly, our basic quality of life in the twenty-first century has drastically improved, even since the early 1900s. Yet, with every giant step forward in innovation, we seem to only be reminded that behind every machine is still a human. A sophisticated, complex, yet flawed person, who longs for beauty, meaning, and happiness. Though the truth is, we still battle the same demons and wayward desires as those who stood in his place a thousand years ago. As true wisdom continues to remind us, there is nothing new under the sun, or afoot in human history (Eccles. 1:9).

No matter the historical period—we find stories of good men who set out to do hard things. We find heroes of war,

artists and intellectuals who crafted their work into masterpieces, and true leaders among the ordinary who pushed forward in conviction when others would not. We find loving and courageous fathers, who did everything they could to ensure a better life for their families. We read of wild adventures of crossing oceans, trekking up mountains, breaking down on frontier plains, and enduring chilling ice storms because those brave enough wanted to be the first to do it. We discover men that sought God and found him.

But every coin has two sides, and so we also find tales of avoidable tragedy, heartache, sickness, and suffering. There's unchecked power that was left unchallenged and allowed to ransack the innocent. We encounter cowards and chameleons, who betrayed others for the sake of coin and influence. We uncover the reality that envy, greed, lust, and murder are found in every city. And we confront the fact that wickedness exists too, and it stalks and lures in those willing to walk in darkness. We see that real evil walks among us, and it lies behind the eyes of vile men, who seek to take the world and its people, as their own possession, through horrendous and disgusting acts.

Why do I say any of this? Because, if we study history long enough, eventually we stumble onto the great through line: everything and nothing have changed. The constant has always been the human condition, itself. And the men of this generation need to hear such and take heed and become the men God has called us to be in this world.

Just as it is with the history of humanity, the challenge and calling for us, as men, has not changed since the earliest of time. The same idols that sought to be worshipped on the altars of the first century are the ones that call for our attention, devotion, and sacrifice today. Yet, rather importantly, the same God who raised the dead, made the blind see, the deaf hear, gave rest to the weary, and freed the addicted calls us to build our lives on him. He calls us to be wise men who hear his words, practice them, and stand on his foundation (Matt. 7:24).

Throughout the rest of this work, we will be unpacking together what it means for our lives to reflect God's calling for us as men who represent him in this world. We will take heed on how to cultivate such a life. But the thing is: I don't think we should just assume we're already on that path; we must begin with discernment and self-examination before God on where we actually stand. That is the beginning of discovering true wisdom. I'll examine my own life, alongside yours. We're in this together.

I won't lie; this will require work. But if we truly desire to grow into the wise and godly men God calls us to be, we must recognize that this path is not for the faint of heart. This calling is a lifelong journey, full of setbacks and victories, mountaintops and valleys. And I'll acknowledge from the outset, becoming the men God intended us to be will never wholly happen until we meet Jesus face-to-face. So don't make

this book a checklist. We can't outgrow or graduate from its lessons. We can only wrestle with its content in different ways during each of the changing seasons of life. In time these truths will also come alive and grow us in new ways. To grow into a wise and godly man is a call few take up, but no other journey is as rewarding to the soul.

Wells of Wisdom

It may sound strange, but the influence of wisdom in our lives is akin to a well we drink from each day. Every morning we lower our buckets down beneath the ground's surface, reel it back up, and take a heaping scoop to drink. Yet not everyone consumes the same quality of wisdom from their wells. Some of our wells are crystal clear, free of any impurities, while others are filled with something far murkier. Some of the wells we drink from have become so polluted with contaminants that it's difficult to ignore the reality that it's making its drinkers sick. However, the sad truth is that this man doesn't realize that he continues to drink what's killing him because he's never experienced fresh clean water. He's never been given a reason to question what is the difference between what's life-giving and toxic.

But now, stick with me. Imagine that our wisdom wells had more of a mystical nature. What if these wells did more than rehydrate our bodies but also replenished and influenced

our will, values, and sense of meaning in life. What if their water guided our moral cravings and had the power to shape *who* we are, *what* we long for, seek to belong to, find satisfaction in, and yearn for approval/praise from. For every bucket of water we draw up, it not only has a bodily effect but a spiritual sway that either reinforces God's best for our lives or seeks to twist our deepest desires.

Here's the crux of the matter—this is how wisdom practically works in our lives. As Scripture reveals, the kind of wisdom we drink in ultimately guides our choices (even subconsciously). It conditions our thoughts and molds our character and habits to become *who* we are. It influences the deepest longings and desires of our heart and the ways we seek to find meaning. Wisdom is not just a bunch of old adages that help us find greater skill or understanding about life.

Don't miss this—wisdom is the formative source/power we draw upon to cultivate discernment and action in our lives. No matter the quality of the wisdom we are drawing up—we do so daily because we rely on it to navigate life's greatest tension points, everyday worries, seasons of chaos, disappointment, and success. There's a living component to the wisdom we drink in, as it shapes our decision-making to choose one of two different paths and destinations in life—and both are eternal in nature.

The right question then becomes, what kind of wisdom are we currently being guided by? Let me be clear because this

is too important. Scripture doesn't suggest every kind of wisdom produces a better, more flourishing life. In fact, it warns us of the opposite condition—that we ought to be mightily aware of the possibility that we may be digesting and guided by a worldly wisdom, which eventually leads to our own downfall, devastation, and death—yet it will feel so satisfying going down.

Wisdom from Below

James, the half brother of Jesus, cautions us that there are two different kinds, or streams, of wisdom that can influence us. The first kind of wisdom he mentions is that from below, steeped in evil, sourced in the realm of the demonic. It stirs disorder, envy, fleshly desires, and every other vice one could imagine in those who are caught in its grip (James 3:14–16). The apostle Paul also speaks of this lower wisdom, as “the wisdom of this world” (1 Cor. 3:19). It's a false, or imitational, wisdom that promises us the world and the skill set to gain it. Though its followers might believe they're on a worthwhile journey toward success and influence, in reality, it's leading them down a set of crooked steps toward their eventual own self-destruction (Prov. 11:3).

In a fallen world, we each are tempted to drink it in because, initially, it tastes sweet, prompting the belief that it's enjoyable. But it's like a veiled poison, which gradually inflates our ego, producing an unquenchable thirst for success,

acceptance, control, and influence in every sphere of our lives. At all costs.

Wisdom from below has a way of weaving itself into my thoughts in everyday ways. It called my name when I'm exhausted after a long week, and I selfishly believe that I'm owed sleeping in, or extra alone time (every introvert knows what I'm talking about). Or when I buy something over our typical budget and believe that I deserve this splurge because I'm the primary provider for our family. It uses the same line of reasoning to then suggest a late-night relapse of porn wouldn't hurt anyone but myself. Sometimes wisdom from below comes calling when I blatantly know I'm at fault in my marriage, and I consider the odds of whether I can successfully deflect ownership and place blame elsewhere.

It whispers in my ear, even now as I write this chapter. It tells me that if this book sells well enough, then I'll finally accept myself as valuable, worthy of love, and appreciation. I felt it seep into my soul when I was pastoring at one of the largest megachurches in history, and it told me to tie my identity to its status. And if I decided to walk away from it, no longer would anyone be impressed with me or value my voice as trustworthy. The phone calls from other growing churches asking for me to coach them on discipleship, small groups, or men's ministry would stop.

Wisdom from below was waiting to whisper to me outside the doors on my last day, slithering its voice into my mind that

I'd no longer matter or be important enough for those here to keep in touch with me. When I started having friendships with and earning the respect of other authors, pastors, and scholars, I heard its forked tongue say, "Don't you love that they respect you, John."

Notice a common theme for how wisdom from below attempts to work itself into our lives. It's a perverse invitation to make ourselves the absolute center of our world, to dominate, possess, and control the outcomes to our liking/acceptance/influence/version of joy.² It's listening to the snake in the garden of Eden and believing we too could become like God. We too can be knowledgeable and in control of all things and worthy of praise and glory (Gen. 3:5). Yet, at its core, it's evil, demonic, and worldly. Because that's exactly who's behind it—the devil, his demons, a wayward world, and your flesh—and they crave chaos, disorder, and rebellion in our lives (James 3:15).

I don't say any of this to scare you. It's merely a warning for both of us about the consequences of the wisdom we allow to shape us, as men. So let us not be ignorant—wisdom from below is a poison that slowly and shrewdly corrupts our mind, will, and desires. However, the irony is, the longer we drink in this poison, the greater the temptation grows to continue putting ourselves at the center of our world. And the greater our will is hollowed out from God's best for our life, the easier it

becomes to be enslaved to the twisted passions and vices from below.

It's the ultimate plan of the devil to coerce us into following his false wisdom. Maybe this is already the wake-up call you needed in life—just as Christ calls you to surrender to him, so does the devil. The enemy desires for us to become like him, filled with twisted desires, and to carry out a life fulfilled in the crooked ways of the father of lies (John 8:44). He tempts us to believe we are gaining success or freedom to do as we please, but the opposite is true. The tragic part of being guided by wisdom from *below* is that all along we believe it was worth it, until the end, when we realize the terrifying weight of hitting rock bottom.

The truth is, we become what we love.³ And ultimately, what we love shapes who we are and what/who we decide to worship in life. Wisdom from below pursues each of us, whispering in the shadows, tempting us to follow an empty inward descent that will send each of us hurling toward our own demise. I don't want this to be any man's life, and God doesn't want that to be your story. There is a different path we can take. There is a far better, richer, source of wisdom that we can drink in and allow to take root within our souls.

Wisdom from Above

Just as Paul modeled in the first century, we, too, can decide to walk in righteousness, putting our pride, ego, and

sin to death and reject the ways of the world (Rom. 8:13; 1 Cor. 1:20). Maybe reading that sentence overwhelms you because you're stuck in shame. You loathe yourself for the sins you've committed or that you're still shackled to. If that's the case, I want to remind you that Paul was a former persecutor of Christians and felt every bit of the weight of sin you carry. Yet, God moved powerfully in and through him. No sin, past or present, can hold us back from God's calling in our life. As James describes, we can become a man filled with a wisdom not found in ourselves or this fallen world but from *above*: God himself (James 3:17–18).

I realize some of us reading right now are struggling to comprehend how the God of the universe, the maker of heaven and earth, would want anything to do with you. My friend, let go of the influence of the wisdom from *below*. Jesus does not carry himself in the ways we treat ourselves. The true wisdom he offers is sourced from his own love, goodness, and faithfulness. He did not come to earth to shun and turn us away but to offer rest from our weariness and relief from our heavy burdens (Matt. 11:28). Where each of us have condemned ourselves for self-destructive decisions and habits, he invites us to learn the depths of his gentleness and lowliness for you (Matt. 11:29–30).

Wisdom from above is tied to the heart of Christ. James characterizes it as pure, full of mercy, peace loving, sincere, and full of good fruit (James 3:17–18). To follow wisdom

from above is to embrace a life defined by Christ's character and to be in an ever-deepening friendship with him as our risen Savior and King. It's to be Spirit-led in our formation, cultivating the character of a good godly man—being loving, joyful, peaceful, forbearant, kind, good, faithful, gentle, and self-controlled (Gal. 5:22–23). It's to have heard Jesus's words to the woman at the well, pondered them yourself, and chosen to desire a life shaped by eternity. It's to accept Jesus's offer to drink *living* water (John 4:10).

As we will discuss later, drinking in wisdom from *above* is neither a call to escape our world nor a need to feel like we must have life all put together and every sin under control. Rather, it's a life grounded in self-examination, repentance, confession, and trust in Christ's redeeming work on the cross. That is the starting place in learning the way of wisdom from above. It's a life surrendered to Jesus and to walk in fear and trembling before the Lord (Prov. 1:7). This book is an invitation to learn the great depths of his love and mercy for us, to live wisely, and to grow in Christlikeness. That's always been God's calling and challenge for each of us.

Wisdom and the Habit of Self- Examination Before God

Before the close of this chapter, I want to encourage each of us to find a quiet place and take as much time as we need

to wrestle through these important, yet difficult, questions. Throughout the rest of the book, we will navigate through what God says about these very questions together.

Who am I yearning to become in this world?

Whom do I want to be fully known by?

Why is their love and acceptance so meaningful to me?

Who am I willing to lay down my life for?

How do I believe God sees me?

If you can write down the answers to these questions, then you've begun to do the hard work of self-examination. We have to peer below the surface and see what is influencing our deepest desires and longings. Maybe without ever realizing it to be the case. And you're not alone if you're anticipating not liking what you're going to find. Quite frankly, most of us don't. Yet, I hope each of us also comes to feel the immeasurable depths of God's grace in the following: The *fundamental* part is that we've begun to *recognize* and *acknowledge* what lies in the depths of our souls and the often-hidden destructive parts of our own self. And to recognize darkness in oneself is also to invite light to shine on it (John 1:5).

Now, think about your answers in relation to our discussion about the two sources, or kinds, of wisdom. Ask God to help bring clarity and a conversation around the following:

TRUE WISDOM IN A WAYWARD WORLD

What kind of wisdom has shaped my answers?

Have I held back from honestly answering any question?

Where am I letting wisdom from below encroach into my life?

*Do I trust God to be my foundation and source
of wisdom in life?*

Reflection and Group Discussion Questions

1. What did you learn about yourself by answering the closing questions of the chapter and later comparing them from the perspective of *wisdom from above* and *below*?
2. There's a temptation to think of *wisdom from above* and *below* in theoretical abstract terms. But how do you see each source of wisdom in our everyday life—in your personal life, at work, and in society?
3. Share a personal story of a time when you regret following the ways of *wisdom from below*.
4. If you found yourself identifying some of your *wisdom from below* (which we all are regularly tempted to do), what was the specific aspect of it? What are your plans, or whom can you invite in, to help you be accountable for this area of your life?
5. Where did you find hope and encouragement to greater grow in intimacy with God in this chapter? How has growing closer to God impacted your character and the way you live your life?