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To My Two Sons,

KEP and KEN

whom I love with a passion
that time only strengthens.

My greatest privilege and deepest
prayer is to be used of God
to further the wonderful process
of your growth in Christ.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This is the first book I’ve written under the pressure of a deadline — and I almost met it. Had it not been for the help of many people, I would not have come even close.

My wife and I spent a week with my sister-in-law and her husband, John and Ann Martin, at their lovely lake home in New York. They graciously endured an unsociable guest who wrote half the night and slept till noon. As the deadline neared, we went away for a few days with special friends, Mike and Becky Grill. Although I managed a round or two of golf, I spent most of the time writing while Mike took the ladies sightseeing — and he never complained. Thanks to both couples.

No one has a better friend or more trusted colleague than I have in Dr. Dan Allender. He sat still while I read aloud the first drafts of lengthy portions of the book (he could never have deciphered my scrawl), and gave me invaluable feedback. My thinking has been shaped during countless hours of dialogue with Dan about our lives, the Scriptures, the process of change, and a wide range of other topics.

My father deeply encouraged me with the comment that the message of this book is needed in today’s world. Very few older men face their lives realistically and still cling passionately to Christ. Most are either realistic and disillusioned or believing and defensive. Because he
is both honest about life and rich in faith, I listen when he speaks.

Patty Warwick typed the entire manuscript from yellow pages filled with green ink that only her well-trained eyes could interpret. Her spirit was always cheerful. She worked hard, feeling the pressure of the deadline along with me. I’m very grateful.

Traci Mullins has earned my deepest gratitude and sincere respect for her editing. I turned in a rough manuscript, and she polished it into its present form. She had the wisdom and integrity to challenge me on difficult points and the sensitivity to encourage me along the way. Her personal involvement with the material and her unusual talent as an editor combined to make her an indispensable colleague in this project. My warm thanks for a new friend and a perceptive editor.

Rachael, my wife, endured a preoccupied husband without complaint. More than that, she demonstrated again that she is for me as only a godly woman can be for her husband. The pressure of writing created opportunities for rich movement in our ability to deeply touch one another.

Many others deserve thanks: colleagues at Grace Theological Seminary for encouragement and stimulation; the staff at NavPress for their support and excitement; and students in our counseling program for sharing their lives with me.

I pray this book will help us better understand what it means to really change so we can become increasingly like our Lord. Nothing matters more than knowing God. May we be deepened in our relationship with Him.
In 1988 I picked up my pen and wrote, “Modern Christianity, in dramatic reversal of its biblical form, promises to relieve the pain of living in a fallen world.” That sentence began this book in its first edition. My burden then was to return us to real Christianity where it is okay to hurt and where sin is a bigger problem than we think, where against the backdrop of inescapable groaning and unmanageable sin the gospel shines with all the brightness of heaven. That burden continues today.

Very few Christians feel their disappointment with life deeply enough to fix their hope on what is yet to come. Even fewer face their sin so thoroughly that forgiveness becomes their most valued blessing. But most Christians vaguely sense that they long for so much more than what they experience on a daily basis, and they suppress a terror that no one could know them fully and still want to be their friend.

Maybe that’s why the book hit a chord. The message of Inside Out is simply this:

Feel the deepest longings in your soul that will never be fully satisfied till heaven. Don’t be afraid of sadness. Face the hidden sin in your heart that makes it clear how thoroughly undelightful you are. Don’t be afraid of brokenness. Let the pain of disappointed longings and the guilt of terrible sin drive you
to consider the gospel of God’s grace in a new way. Only then will Christ enter your life deeply and change you from the inside out, instilling in you a growing awareness of His relentless, unfailing love and a sustaining hope for a better day.

I believe the message of *Inside Out* is even more vital today than it was years ago. Of all the books I’ve written, this one has generated the most mail. A few think I should forget about deep longings and self-protective sin and simply instruct people to do whatever the Bible says. But that message is another gospel, a poor substitute that reduces Christian living to mere conformity and robs it of its richest fare: the enjoyment of grace.

Some others wish I would more clearly advocate psychotherapy as an often necessary element in provoking real change. But the core issues that I believe must be addressed if real change is to occur boil down to two questions:

1. Does anyone love me with the power to satisfy my soul? What is the object of my deepest desire?
2. Can anyone love me as I really am—self-centered, self-deceived, and self-righteous?

The work of change involves answering these two questions biblically and well. If that’s what psychotherapy does, then I’m for it. However, I know that for one hundred years, we westerners have thought that peace and joy depend on personal “wholeness.” We’ve assumed that difficult relationships, particularly in earlier years, have caused psychological damage that we label as mental disorder. The hope of heaven and the forgiveness of sins and the work of the Holy Spirit are thought to address spiritual problems; but real change, the kind that helps us feel whole and healthy, requires professional help. We need to be fixed by therapy.

So we *diagnose* people.

- A long-time friend admits to holding a grudge over a thoughtless remark five years ago. She may be evidencing...
the beginnings of a Paranoid Personality Disorder.

- A temper problem might point to difficulties with impulse control, perhaps an Intermittent Explosive Disorder.
- A girl in her late teens who still thinks about her boyfriend after he ended a two-year courtship could be suffering from an Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder.
- A middle-aged wife decides she can no longer handle the pain of her marriage to a neglectful husband. Her screams for attention through uncharacteristic behavior like drinking and over-spending would likely be diagnosed with Histrionic Personality Disorder.
- A few sleepless nights might signal the onset of a Major Depressive Disorder.

According to this line of thinking, psychotherapeutic treatment for the mental disorder is the only remedy, just as smooth skin can emerge only after chemotherapy burns off the diseased surface.

But the comparison doesn’t hold. Psychiatric labels direct attention away from the real issues that must be addressed if spiritual fruit is to grow. We are not psychologically disordered; we are sinful people who believe lies about what must be ours in order to experience fulfillment. When the goals we set are blocked, we get mad. When they are uncertain, we worry. When we realize that nothing we do will help us reach our goals, we feel inadequate. The anger, fear, and self-hatred bred by disappointment become the internal basis for the problems we experience in handling life.

When we understand people and their problems within a biblical framework, we can see that there is no mental disorder to be fixed. Rather, there are disturbing internal realities to be faced: the realities of unsatisfied thirst we are determined to quench and of self-protective strategies that we think might do the job. That’s what an inside look must expose. When we feel our pain and face our sin, we learn to more richly value the gospel of Christ that provides hope and forgiveness. And, in the process, we find the strength to carry on until we sit...
down at the banquet table to enjoy the richest of fare.

The overwhelming majority of mail is well represented by one person who wrote to say:

Reading *Inside Out* was one of the most painful experiences of my life. It opened up a thirst I had never before faced and selfishness I never knew existed within me. But the more I felt my pain and faced my sin, the more valuable grace became. Something has changed deep inside me. I no longer feel hopeless or alone. I’m trusting Christ in ways I never even knew I could. He’s becoming more real to me. I feel freer, more alive, less defensive, more willing to wait for heaven’s joys than demanding them now, more aware that I want to give to others the hope and acceptance God has given me.

God has used the message of *Inside Out* to stir a deeper appetite for God in hundreds of thousands of people. I’m both surprised and grateful.

But for several years I’ve had a growing sense that something is missing in the book that I wish were there. One reader put it this way:

I was deeply helped when I read *Inside Out*. But as I finished the last chapter I found myself thinking it shouldn’t have ended. I wanted there to be one more chapter. I’m not certain what I want that chapter to be about, but I think maybe it’s joy. When I take an inside look, will I find nothing but disappointed longings and self-protective motives? Isn’t there something beneath all the pain and sin in a redeemed heart that, if released, creates a new kind of joy? Just a thought.

A good thought, I’ve decided. Does inside-out change as I’ve described it lead merely to getting on better as an empty, sinful person who is persevering till a better day and, in the meantime, trying to sin less? Or does it lead to joy inexpressible? Does the raw experience of disappointment and the admission of selfishness create joyful

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gratitude and hope, or something less?

With these questions stirring in my mind, I read *Inside Out* ten years after writing it and decided to add to the anniversary edition, not only this foreword, but also a new closing chapter I’ve entitled *The “Good Stuff” Beneath the Bad.*

To the nearly half-million people who have read *Inside Out,* may your journey toward real change continue and be deepened by re-reading the book and its new last chapter. To those who are reading *Inside Out* for the first time, may the reality of joy bubble up from the hidden places in your Spirit-indwelt heart, like springs that send warm water from below to melt the crust of icy snow that keeps the flowers from blooming. May an inside look lead to joyful maturity.

There is joy. There is hope. There is love. There is more in relationship with Christ than we’ve ever imagined. Press on! He’s coming soon! Until then, remember that real change, joyful change, is possible if you’re willing to start from the inside out.

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NOTES

1. See *Connecting,* a more recent book of mine for further development of this idea (Waco, TX: Word, Inc., 1997).
MODERN CHRISTIANITY, IN dramatic reversal of its biblical form, promises to relieve the pain of living in a fallen world. The message, whether it’s from fundamentalists requiring us to live by a favored set of rules or from charismatics urging a deeper surrender to the Spirit’s power, is too often the same: The promise of bliss is for now! Complete satisfaction can be ours this side of heaven.

Some speak of the joys of fellowship and obedience, others of a rich awareness of their value and worth. The language may be reassuringly biblical or it may reflect the influence of current psychological thought. Either way, the point of living the Christian life has shifted from knowing and serving Christ till He returns to soothing, or at least learning to ignore, the ache in our soul.

We are told, sometimes explicitly but more often by example, that it’s simply not necessary to feel the impact of family tensions, frightening possibilities, or discouraging news. An inexpressible joy is available which, rather than supporting us through hard times, can actually eliminate pressure, worry, and pain from our experience. Life may have its rough spots, but the reality of Christ’s presence and
blessing can so thrill our soul that pain is virtually unfelt. It simply isn’t necessary to wrestle with internal struggle and disorder. Just trust, surrender, persevere, obey.

The effect of such teaching is to blunt the painful reality of what it’s like to live as part of an imperfect, and sometimes evil, community. We learn to pretend that we feel now what we cannot feel until heaven.

But not all of us are good at playing the game. Those whose integrity makes such pretense difficult sometimes worry over their apparent lack of faith. “Why don’t I feel as happy and together as others? Something must be wrong with my spiritual life.” To make matters worse, these people of integrity often appear less mature and their lives less inviting than folks more skilled at denial. And churches tend to reward those members who more convincingly create the illusion of intactness by parading them as examples of what every Christian should be.

Beneath the surface of everyone’s life, especially the more mature, is an ache that will not go away. It can be ignored, disguised, mislabeled, or submerged by a torrent of activity, but it will not disappear. And for good reason. We were designed to enjoy a better world than this. And until that better world comes along, we will groan for what we do not have. An aching soul is evidence not of neurosis or spiritual immaturity, but of realism.

The experience of groaning, however, is precisely what modern Christianity so often tries to help us escape. The gospel of health and wealth appeals to our legitimate longing for relief by skipping over the call to endure suffering. Faith becomes the means not to learning contentment regardless of circumstances, but rather to rearranging one’s circumstances to provide more comfort.

Orthodox Bible preachers are rarely lured into proclaiming a prosperity gospel, but still they appeal to that same desire for relief from groaning. They tell us more knowledge, more commitment, more giving, more prayer — some combination of Christian disciplines — will eliminate our need to struggle with deeply felt realities. Yet there is no escape from an aching soul, only denial of it. The promise of one

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day being with Jesus in a perfect world is the Christians only hope for complete relief. Until then we either groan or pretend we don’t.

The effect of widespread pretense, whether maintained by rigidly living on the surface of life or by being consumed with emotionalism, has been traumatic for the church. Rather than being salt and light, we’ve become a theologically diverse community of powerless Pharisees, penetrating very little of society because we refuse to grapple honestly with the experience of life.

Beneath much of our claim to orthodoxy, there is a moral cowardice that reflects poorly on our confidence in Christ. We trust Him to forgive our sins and to keep us more or less in line as a community of decent people, but is He enough to deal with things as they really are? Do we know how to face the confusing reality of a world where good parents sometimes have rebellious children and bad parents produce committed missionaries? Can we plunge into the disturbing facts of life and emerge, as the writer of the seventy-third Psalm did, with a renewed confidence in God and a deeper thirst for Him? Can we enter those hidden inner regions of our soul where emptiness is more the reality than a consuming awareness of His presence and where an honest look reveals that self-serving motives stain even our noblest deeds? Is Christ enough to deal with that kind of internal mess? Or is it better never to look at all that and just get on with the Christian life?

When we reflect deeply on how life really is, both inside our soul and outside in our world, a quiet terror threatens to overwhelm us. We worry that we simply won’t be able to make it if we face all that is there. In those moments, retreat into denial does not seem cowardly, it seems necessary and smart. Just keep going, get your act together, stop feeling sorry for yourself, renew your commitment to trust God, get more serious about obedience. Things really aren’t as bad as you intuitively sense they are. You’ve simply lost your perspective and must regain it through more time in the Word and increased moral effort.

There is something terribly attractive about knowing what to do to make things better. If we can explain why we feel so bad in terms
of something specific and correctable (like not spending enough time in devotions), then we can do something about it. And we like that. Nothing is more terrifying than staring at a problem for which we have no solutions under our direct control. Trusting another is perhaps the most difficult requirement of the Christian life. We hate to be dependent because we have learned to trust no one, not fully. We know better. Everyone in whom we have placed our confidence has in some way disappointed us. To trust fully, we conclude, is suicide.

Fallen man has taken command of his own life, determined above all else to prove that he’s adequate for the job. And like the teen who feels rich until he starts paying for his own car insurance, we remain confident of our ability to manage life until we face the reality of our own soul. Nothing is more humbling than the recognition of (1) a deep thirst that makes us entirely dependent on someone else for satisfaction and (2) a depth of corruption that stains everything we do—even our efforts to reform—with selfishness. To realistically face what is true within us puts us in touch with a level of helplessness we don’t care to experience.

A woman admitted to herself that she’d lost all romantic feeling for her kind and thoughtful husband. On the advice of her pastor, she was praying to regain her warmth while at the same time moving toward her husband in chosen obedience. She wanted to believe that the spark was rekindling, but it wasn’t. She then tried to convince herself that it didn’t matter how she felt; obedience was all that counted. But her lack of romantic feeling for a man who treated her well troubled her deeply. There was nothing she knew to do that could change her internal condition. She felt hopeless.

If awareness of what’s inside forces me to admit that I’m utterly dependent on resources outside my control for the kind of change I desire, if helplessness really is at the core of my existence, I prefer to live on the surface of things. It’s far more comfortable. To admit I cannot deal with all that’s within me strikes a deathblow to my claim to self-sufficiency. To deny the frightening realities within my soul seems as necessary to life as breathing.

It must be said that this state of affairs is thoroughly
understandable. We don’t like to hurt. And there is no worse pain for fallen people than facing an emptiness we cannot fill. To enter into pain seems rather foolish when we can run from it through denial. We simply cannot get it through our head that, with a nature twisted by sin, the route to joy always involves the very worst sort of internal suffering we can imagine. We rebel at that thought. We weren’t designed to hurt. The physical and personal capacities to feel that God built into us were intended to provide pleasures, like good health and close relationships. When they don’t, when our head throbs with tension and our heart is broken by rejection, we want relief. With deep passion, we long to experience what we were designed to enjoy.

In the midst of that groaning, the idea that relief may not come is unbearable. It is horrible. How can we continue to live with the ache in our soul provoked by our daughters’ abortion or our wife’s coldness? How can life go on with a husband who looks for every opportunity to be mean while convinced of his own righteousness? How do we cope with a disfiguring illness, with our guilt over the bitterness we feel as we care for an elderly, helpless parent, with an income that never lets us get ahead?

Into that personal agitation comes the soothing message of modern Christianity: Relief is available! Either the disturbing elements in your world will settle down when you develop enough faith, or you can enter a level of spiritual experience in which the struggle to cope is replaced by a fullness of soul. Satisfaction is available, one way or another, and it’s available now.

Modern Christianity says it is within our power to arrange for the relief we long for. We can learn to claim promises with more faith; we can classify sin into manageable categories and then scrupulously avoid it, thereby guaranteeing the blessings we covet; we can practice new forms of meditation; we can become more involved in church activities and Bible study. It says, Something we can do will advance us to a level of spirituality that eliminates pain and struggle as ongoing, deeply felt realities.

The appeal is great. When our soul is thirsty, we can dig our own well. Christian leaders provide the shovels and point out likely spots
to dig, and off we go. Discipleship programs, witnessing strategies, Bible memory systems, new forms of community, richer experiences of the Spirit, renewed commitment: the list goes on. Good things to do, but the energy to pursue them is often supplied by the expectation that I’ll find water that will end all thirst. No more struggle, disappointment, or heartache. Heaven now.

Not everyone, of course, is teaching this theology. But many are, and many more communicate the same hope by neither sharing honestly their own current struggles nor addressing realistically the struggles of others. It’s tempting to stay removed from the problems for which we have no ready answers. It’s much easier to preach that we need less counseling and more obedience than to involve ourselves in the messy details of life where obedience comes hard. One result of extricating ourselves from the tangled complexity of life is simplistic preaching that fails to deal with life as it is. Rather than penetrating life with liberating truth, such preaching maintains a conspiracy of pretense that things are better than they are or ever can be until Christ returns. We end up unprepared to live but strengthened in our denial.

A deeply ingrained passion for independence — a legacy left to us by Adam — and a legitimate thirst to enjoy the perfect relationships for which we were designed make us respond eagerly to the hope that heaven’s joys are available now — and on demand. When teenagers rebel, hurting parents would love to believe there’s a way to replace the terrible heartache with happy confidence. When singleness seems more a prison than an opportunity for expanded service, it would be wonderful to quickly transform the loneliness into a contentment that feels no loss.

Maybe these understandable desires are not within reach. Perhaps the anchor that enables people to weather life’s storms and grow through them is gratitude for what happened at the cross of Christ and passionate confidence in what will yet take place at His coming. Could it be that the only source of real stability in the present (a kind of stability that does not require the character-weakening mechanism of denial) is appreciation for the past and hope for the future? Maybe
the presence of Christ now, in His Word and Spirit, can be enjoyed only to the degree that it causes us to take both a backward and a forward look.

But such talk seems hopelessly non-immediate, a pie-in-the-sky kind of comfort. We want something now! And something is available now, something wonderful and real. But we will find only its counterfeit until we realize that the intensity of our disappointment with life coupled with a Christianity that promises to relieve that disappointment now has radically shifted the foundation of our faith. No longer do we resolutely bank everything on the coming of a nail-scarred Christ for His groaning but faithfully waiting people. Our hope has switched to a responsive Christ who satisfies His hurting people by quickly granting them the relief they demand.

That hope, however, is a lie, an appealing but grotesque perversion of the good news of Christ. It’s a lie responsible for leading hundreds of thousands of seeking people into either a powerless lifestyle of denial and fabricated joy or a turning away from Christianity in disillusionment and disgust. It’s a lie that blocks the path to the deep transformation of character that is available now. We can enter into a rich awareness of being alive as a Christian; we can taste His goodness in a way that whets our appetite for more. But to demand that our groaning end before heaven keeps us from all that is available now.

God wants to change us into people who are truly noble, people who reflect an unswerving confidence in who He is, which equips us to face all of life and still remain faithful. Spirituality built on pretense is not spirituality at all. God wants us to be courageous people who are deeply bothered by the horrors of living as part of a fallen race, people who look honestly at every struggle, who feel overwhelmed by what we see, yet emerge prepared to live: scarred, still troubled, but deeply loving. When the fact is faced that life is profoundly disappointing, the only way to make it is to learn to love. And only those who are no longer consumed with finding satisfaction now are able to love. Only when we commit our yearnings for perfect joy to a Father we have learned to deeply trust are we free to live for others despite the reality of a perpetual ache.
This book is not about relief; it is about change. Its message is not, “Here’s how to feel better now.” Rather, it deals with the route to transformation of character.

That route, it should be noted, takes a surprising twist that cannot be seen from the narrow gate leading into it. After traveling the route for some time (one never knows how much time, but certainly more than those who are committed to immediate relief would ever endure), something unexpected and wonderful occurs. A hint of one’s substance develops and a glimpse of what it means to be alive awakens the soul to its unrealized potential for joy. And that glimpse so clearly reflects the beauty of Christ’s involvement with us that a self-sufficient pride in one’s value becomes unthinkable.

The ache remains, and even intensifies, as more of the fallen reality of our own soul is exposed. But the notion that our present suffering is nothing in comparison with the glory ahead begins to make sense.

I’m not very far along the path to deeply felt life and joy in Christ, but I think I’m on it. Consider with me what is available in this life: a change of character that enables us to taste enough of God now to whet our appetite for the banquet later.

The kind of internal change that permits a richer taste of God is possible, but it requires surgery. The disease blocking our enjoyment of God has spread beyond the point where more effort to do what we think is right will be enough. And there is no anesthetic as the knife penetrates our soul.

But this kind of change — change from the inside out — is worth the pain. It makes the Christian life possible. It frees us to groan without complaint, to love others in spite of our emptiness, and to wait for the complete satisfaction we so desperately desire.
part one:
LOOKING BENEATH THE SURFACE OF LIFE

“Don’t look inside me — I’m not sure I like what’s there.”

CHAPTER ONE:
Real Change Requires an Inside Look

CHAPTER TWO:
An Inside Look Can Be Frustrating

CHAPTER THREE:
Knowing What to Look For
A LTHOUGH THIS BOOK is written to anyone who wants to better understand how we can really change, certain groups of people come to mind as I write. First, those who are trying hard to do what the Bible commands but feel frustrated. You are doing all you know to do — not perfectly of course, but sincerely. And yet things just aren’t right inside, and you know it. You feel more pressure than joy. God isn’t changing either you or things in your world the way you ask Him to. You wonder if He listens to your prayers or if He simply doesn’t care about your struggles.

Worries over money or children, hurt caused by a friend or spouse, fears about whether you can handle whatever problems may arise tomorrow — all keep you awake at night. Tears are for the night, the Bible says, but joy comes in the morning (Psalm 30:5). But the sunrise brings no relief for you, just more pressure. You don’t know what else to do to find those green pastures and still waters. You plug along but with a weight on your back that keeps you feeling heavy.

My message to you is, There’s hope! More effort isn’t the answer. Continued obedience is required, of course, but looking for more
hoops to jump through before God becomes real is not the way. Freedom and quiet rest can replace the pressure and churning in your soul. But finding peace requires an honest look into your life at some hard things. Jumping through more hoops is sometimes easier than facing troubling things inside. But an inside look can lead to real change, change from the inside out.

Second, I think of those who are doing quite well and feel content and happy most of the time. You really do love the Lord, you have proved Him real and faithful in hard times. Time in His Word is often a rich experience. Prayer is far more than mere ritual in your life. You like your church, you’re blessed with good friends and family, you feel satisfied with your work, and you enjoy your leisure time. Your life is not without tensions, but God gives you the strength to press on with confidence. By the grace of God, life is good.

My message to you is, There’s more! Gratefully enjoy the blessings of God and live out the maturity He has developed in you—but don’t settle for it. Don’t let your legitimate comfort become complacency or your joy slip into smugness. There is more to knowing God than the most mature Christian has ever envisioned. Be willing to have the steadiness in your life disrupted if knowing God better requires it. The good fight is fought with a sweaty passion that develops only when the evenness of our soul is upset. God wants to change good disciples into powerfully loving servants who leave an indelible mark on people they touch. But His method of changing us, from the inside out, can be disturbing. Be open to new levels of struggle.

Third, I think of those who are hardened. Nothing has really gone your way. The promises of God you were taught don’t seem to materialize, at least not in your life. Perhaps you’ve always felt different, never a good fit like your brother or sister. Youth leaders never considered your name for “boy or girl of the year” in your church. Your parents never held you up as the model for other kids to follow. Teenage years (perhaps you’re still there) were rough. You indulged in some drinking and drugs (more than your parents ever suspected) and sexual activity beyond moral boundaries. You made promises to God to reform that lasted a week after youth camp ended. You feel
discouraged, hard. You attend church. Perhaps others are convinced that you’re a nice normal Christian; you know how to play the game. But inside you’re angry, cold, scared. Why “try God” again? It never worked before.

My message to you is, *There’s life!* Pat answers won’t do and you know it. Commitments to read your Bible every day and keep a spiritual journal may be good medicine for a lesser disease, but it won’t work for you. Promises to make better friends, to spend more time in church, are not the paths to life. You’ve tried it. Maybe there is no life for you, just continued pretending with the occasional relief of “worldly pleasures.”

If you’re willing to be honest about some private matters that people rarely look at, to face some things about your life beneath the indifference and hardness, then talk about an abundant life can become more than irritating rhetoric. Meaning, relationships that stir you to joy and a sense of quiet wholeness as you face life are all available. But not easily and not overnight. The route is uphill, but you can change from the inside out.

Fourth, I think of those who are in positions of Christian leadership. The pressure to model for others what maturity looks like can lead to breakdown or pride. You realize that others think of you as better than you know yourself to be. It’s hard to maintain an image. But the pressure to encourage people by displaying what God can do in a life surrendered to Him makes you hide a few of the real struggles.

Some of you are rightly grateful for the maturity that years of commitment have yielded. But you know the line between gratitude and pride is thin. Some of you are tired, close to burnout, weary of the loneliness that comes from battling with temptations you feel free to share with no one.

My message to you is, *There’s love!* The church needs leaders who can involve themselves in other people’s lives with the joy of integrity and transparency, confident that their love is unfeigned, willing to be deeply known for the sake of helping others. That awful distance from people that the aura of leadership creates can be bridged. The struggles that sometimes tear at your soul can be dealt with. Vulnerability,
humility, intimacy, power — qualities of character that the pressures of leadership often weaken — can be developed. The model of a loving servant that our Lord both illustrated and taught can be followed. But more is required than keeping your head above the water of expectations and responsibilities. A long hard look at your life, preferably with a trusted friend, may be necessary to slow down the hectic pace of a life committed to ministry and to identify those internal issues buried beneath the demands of leadership. The joys of influence are available to people who change from the inside out.

Perhaps you don’t easily fit into any of these groups. But you do bear God’s image; you were built to resemble God. The message of Christianity is that a relationship with Christ is available that can reach into every part of your life and can move you toward becoming the person He saved you to be. Real change is possible!

Be patient as you read this book. Some of what I say will be unclear at points and may seem more relevant to others than to you. I urge you to read on. When we get down to the bottom line of who we are and what struggles we experience, we’re all pretty much alike: We long for a life that’s real and full and happy, and we all think we can make this kind of life happen.

Our Lord came to bring life. We can possess His life now and look forward to enjoying perfect life later. Between the time when He gives us life and the time when He provides all the joys His life brings, He intends to change us into people who can more deeply enjoy Him now and represent Him well to others. The surgery required to make that change is always painful. But God will settle for nothing less than deep change in our character, a radical transformation and restructuring of how we approach life. This book is about that kind of change, change that flows from the inside out.

What Does It Mean to Change?

A good friend of mine recently sat in my office thinking out loud about whatever came to mind. The topics ranged from his marriage (which had its share of disappointments), to his future plans for
ministry, to the quality of his walk with the Lord. As the conversation continued his mood became increasingly thoughtful — not gloomy, but quietly and deeply reflective, the kind of mood no one ever feels in a fast-food restaurant.

My friend, I should point out, is a committed Christian, a gifted counselor, and an unusually clear thinker. His life has known a few trials, but nothing remarkably different from what most middle-aged men have experienced. His friends describe him as friendly, hard-working, loyal, and sincere. A few see his spontaneous fun-loving side. Everyone agrees he’s a solid, well-adjusted Christian.

After nearly an hour of reflective rambling, his thoughtful mood shifted into a profoundly sad, almost desperate, loneliness. As though talking to no one in particular, he quietly said, “I wonder what it would be like to feel really good for just ten minutes.”

His sentence struck me. Did I know what it was like to feel really good for ten minutes? A fair number of people look reasonably happy. Do they feel really good? Utterly happy with no hint of emptiness or sorrow?

Maybe the question is wrong. Perhaps Christians are supposed to ask, “Do I know what it means to be consistently obedient?” and not worry about their feelings. But then, what is Peter referring to when he speaks of inexpressible joy (1 Peter 1:8)?

What is a maturing Christian like on the inside? What will he feel? Will he have a consistent desire to do what’s right? Or will he fight a raging battle within between urges to do wrong and commitments to do right?

Does maturity feel good? Or is there a deepened sense of loneliness and struggle? Will there be the awareness of a thoroughly changed set of motives that delights to do God’s will? Or will there continue to be evidence of corruption within? Will the pursuit of holiness lead to an increase in happiness? As we grow stronger, do we feel stronger — or weaker?

Some people honestly feel quite happy. Are they pretending? Should they be struggling more? When others show deep pain and overwhelming frustration, these folks can’t relate to them any more
than someone well fed can feel the horror of starvation. Perhaps these “happy” people’s lives reflect a healthy stability and contentment that we could wish for everyone. What does it mean for these folks to press on toward higher levels of maturity?

What does it mean to change, to grow, to conform more and more to the image of Christ? What kind of change is possible, and how does it come about?

The Appearance of Maturity: Looking Good

Not long ago I spoke to a large group of Christian leaders, men and women who had distinguished themselves in both business and church circles. The setting was a large, comfortable auditorium with thickly cushioned, theater-style seats. The mood was pleasant and cordial. People looked happy. Their appropriately fashionable clothing and the social ease with which they mingled before the meeting suggested that, unlike my friend, they felt really good. There was no evidence of struggle. Things looked fine, much as they do on a Sunday morning in church, where people chat warmly in the hallways and sit attentively during the service.

Sometimes when I stand before a group of such together-looking people, I feel a bit intimidated. I study the sea of faces before me and wonder: Am I the only one who feels a nagging sense that something is badly twisted within me? Is no one else struggling with the quality of their relationships, aware that despite their best efforts the depth of their love is still pretty shallow? Does no one else feel like a failure, at least occasionally?

Perhaps I’m an obsessive perfectionist who has yet to learn how to relax, to take life as it comes, appreciating the good and accepting the bad. Maybe people healthier than I have come to depend on God in a way that permits a more balanced life with less internal confusion and struggle. Yet as I looked out on the group I was about to address, I knew some were struggling with significant trials. In any large group, including an impressive collection of respected and successful people like the group I was addressing, there are, of course, some whose lives
are breaking apart under the weight of financial pressures, health problems, rebellious teens, and strained marriages.

In the front row sat a missionary friend of mine who had just completed twenty-five years of faithful service in a difficult situation. Earlier that week he’d confided in me, choking back tears as he spoke, that his marriage was full of tension and he had no idea how to move closer to his wife. His teenage sons were adjusting to life in America by listening to rock music, and he wasn’t sure whether to put an end to it or to say nothing. He told me he felt like a failure, able to do missionary work but incompetent to lead his own family. I was certain he wasn’t the only one in the audience struggling with hard things.

But even among the strugglers there were undoubtedly a fair number who were sailing through their trials with an evenness and stability I could only envy. I’ve been with people when they heard news that would have shattered me. And their response was to thank God for His faithfulness, pray for strength, and press on.

Was that real? Do people like that not feel the crushing weight of bad news as a heaviness that sometimes robs them of a desire to go on? Do they not wrestle with their own ability to handle tough decisions? Are they as calm and confident as they appear?

Certainly there are those whose problems get the best of them, people who seek escape in drinking or drugs or spending or sex, others whose internal tensions find expression in depressed feelings or anxiety attacks or thoughts of suicide. These folks, most agree, need special help to get back on track. But the other people, those who even on close inspection seem to be doing well, are the ones who disturb me. They look so together. Have they really found a way to live that keeps them calm and happy and motivated to do right? Some, I think, have.

But I wonder if most people who look good all the time are really out of touch with themselves, unaware of how they impact others, and covering up deep pain with the pleasures of activity and achievement. Perhaps much of what passes for spiritual maturity is maintained by a rigid denial of all that is happening beneath the surface of their lives. Maybe in this life it’s impossible to be as together as some people look.
The Way Things Are Beneath the Appearance

No matter how together we may appear, even to ourselves, buried deep within our heart is the vague sense that something is wrong, dreadfully wrong. We feel a twinge of discomfort when someone puts us on the spot; we sense a pressure to play it safe when a friend’s tone becomes critical; we well up with anger when a spouse misunderstands us; we’re aware of shifting conversation to a topic we can handle; we look for opportunities to modestly share some information that makes us look good; we pretend to be more spiritually minded than we actually are; we avoid subjects that put us in touch with unpleasant emotions.

Just a quick glance beneath the surface of our life makes it clear that more is going on than loving God and loving others. It requires only a moment of honest self-reflection to realize that, no matter how much we may have already changed, we still have a long way to go. Most of us know things about ourselves that no one else would guess: thoughts, fantasies, things we do in private, secrets that make us feel ashamed. We know things are not as they should be. Something is wrong.

Ever since God expelled Adam and Eve from the garden, we have lived in an unnatural environment, a world in which we were not designed to live. We were built to enjoy a garden without weeds, relationships without friction, fellowship without distance. But something is wrong, and we know it, both within our world and within ourselves. Deep inside we sense we’re out of the nest, always ending the day in a motel room, never at home. When we’re honest, we see we handle our discomfort by keeping our distance from people, responding more to our fears than to another’s desire for love.

We wish we were better than we are, but we’re not. And that realization brings shame, a desire to hide, to avoid real contact, to present to others only that part of us we think will be well received. We want to hide the rest — not because we desire to avoid offending others with our ugly side, but because we fear their rejection. We live for the purpose of self-protection, clinging to whatever brings us happiness and security. The effect is a discouraging distance between
ourselves and the people we long to be close to. The quality of our life diminishes.

Unlike the proverbial alligator under the bed, our problem is real. The little children who sometimes keep their hands away from the sides of their beds to prevent the alligator crawling on the floor from biting them off are genuinely afraid, but their fears are entirely unfounded. There is no alligator in the bedroom. But there really is something wrong in our world. Reality is not as we want it to be. We sense that something is badly twisted within us and in our world because it is. Our longing to feel really good is not always neurotic discontent; it may be legitimate. We desire what we do not have and cannot have until Christ returns and restores everything, including ourselves, to the way it was meant to be. Until then, that intuitive awareness of trouble that clouds our happiest moments is reflecting not the fear of an imaginary alligator but a basic truth about life in a fallen world.

Most of us spend our life trying to pretend things are better than they are. When reality breaks through — perhaps in a glimpse of how disappointed or imperfect we are — we’re strongly inclined to do whatever restores our feigned sense of well-being. We may count our blessings, cut the lawn, pray for strength, eat something sweet, consult a counselor, join the church choir, fight with our spouse, read a favorite psalm, turn on the TV, scold ourselves for being a downer, re-surrender ourselves to God, or go out with friends for pizza — anything to get away from that nagging sense that something is missing, something is wrong. Most of us are not consciously aware of trying to get rid of personal discomfort by eating pizza. We just happen to like pizza. But perhaps more often than we know, the things we do are designed to bring relief from a vague sense of emptiness we may hardly notice.

Maybe my friend who wondered what ten minutes of pure good feelings would be like was touching that painful reality of wanting to be home but always living in a motel. Maybe he was more honestly aware of how things really are than the together people, most of whom would express concern for someone as gloomy as my friend.
Perhaps the majority of people who report pleasant feelings with only occasional struggles are building their houses on sand by preserving their happiness through pretense; or, to change the image, maybe they’re rearranging the furniture in the motel room, hoping it will feel like home. When we succeed at arranging our life so that “all is well,” we keep ourselves from facing all that’s going on inside. And when we ignore what’s happening on the inside, we lose all power to change what we do on the outside in any meaningful way. We rearrange rather than change, and in so doing, we never become the transformed person God calls us to be. We never experience freedom from destructive patterns of living.

In this book, I want to explore what it means to change. How can a woman who was molested as a child enter joyfully into sexual union with her husband? How can a man who feels easily threatened become a strong leader in his home? How can well-adjusted people whose lives are working reasonably well become rich people whose firsthand knowledge of God draws others to Him? How can parents go on with their lives when their kids are moving in terrible directions? How can we change into noble people whose source of strength and joy is in finding our home in Christ?

I am not primarily concerned in this book to look at specific problems we face, but rather to study a few basic ideas that underlie all biblical efforts to change. Most of us make it through life by coping, not changing. We rearrange what we do, but somehow the core problems involving who we really are remain only partially addressed.

Change as our Lord describes it involves more than cleaning up our visible act. He intends us to do more than sweep the streets; He wants us to climb down into the sewers and do something about the filth beneath the concrete. He directs us to enter the dark regions of our soul to find light, to experience His presence when we feel most alone. Biblical change never requires us to pretend that things are better than they are. Christ wants us to face reality as it is, including all the fears, hurts, resentments, and self-protective motives we work hard to keep out of sight, and to emerge as changed people. Not pretenders. Not perfect. But more able to deeply love because we're more aware of His love.
Can I Make It If I Face It?

Perhaps the most frequently expressed fear people feel when they begin to look closely at their lives is this: “I’m not sure I can make it if I face all that’s inside me.” It requires courage to explore our life honestly. There really is an alligator. Our fears have substance. In fact, a clear awareness of even a small part of how lonely and self-serving we really are is overwhelming. Every new insight into our soul feels like one more nail in our coffin.¹ How people really feel about us, what our motives are as we interact with a colleague or tell jokes at a party, how disappointed and angry we are with our parents or spouse or children — the list is long.

Most of us make it through life with some level of stability because we refuse to think about troubling things going on within us. We just keep on keeping on, stifling that nagging sense that something’s wrong, that there has to be more. We want to think we’ve found the key to life, that now we can manage, that our empty heart is filled, that our struggle against sin is now a march of victory. But in order to maintain that happy conviction we must insulate ourselves against the feedback of others who find us still unloving, and we must stubbornly deny the evidence in our soul that more is wrong than we know how to handle. Denial for many becomes a way of life. And years of practice make it possible to seal off from our awareness any data that contradicts what we want to believe. It’s frighteningly easy to become deluded about our spiritual maturity.

Hosea scorned the Jews of his day for having heads sprinkled with gray hair and not knowing it (Hosea 7:9). Normally, we’re the first to spot evidence of physical decline and aging, such as gray hair. But just as normally, we’re the last to notice signs of spiritual deterioration. And that’s Hosea’s point. We’re capable of believing we’re doing far better than we are.

Our Lord reserved His harshest criticism for people who made denial into a trademark. The Pharisees specialized in looking good. They managed to preserve their image by defining sin in terms of visible transgressions and then scrupulously adhering to the standards
they established. Their source of joy was the respect of others, and they found effective means of gaining it. They performed well. Their level of disciplined conformity to external expectations was high. I suspect very few of their numbers would have reported a longing to feel good for just ten minutes. These were the together people.

Had I been invited to address one of their meetings, I think I would have felt more than a little intimidated. They didn’t seem to be struggling. They’d found what they were after and were proceeding confidently with an enviable degree of personal adjustment. These people looked good.

But listen to our Lord’s remarks when He spoke to them. They impressed others, but not Him.

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.” (Matthew 23:25-26)

He went on to make the unfavorable comparison between their lives and attractively whitewashed gravestones, telling them that a look beneath the surface of their outwardly righteous behavior would reveal the stench of decay and corruption, just as removal of the gravestone would expose the rotting flesh of dead bodies. Small wonder He wasn’t a favorite speaker at their conventions.

In His rebuke to the Pharisees, our Lord declared a principle that must guide all our efforts to change into the person God wants us to be. He made it clear that there is no place for pretense. We must come to grips with what’s going on behind the whitewashed appearance of our life. It seems to be His teaching that we can’t make it if we don’t face all that we are. To look honestly at those parts of our experience we naturally deny is painful business, so painful that the analogy of death is not too strong. But to change according to Christ’s instructions requires us to face all we prefer to deny. Real change requires an inside look.
Shallow Copers Versus Troubled Reflecters

People tend to fall into one of two categories: (1) those who successfully ignore the inward ache and corruption and get on, more or less effectively, with life; and (2) those who, for whatever reason, are gripped by an awareness that something is terribly wrong and, as a result, struggle in their efforts to move along through life.

The great majority of Christians, myself included, would much rather enjoy whatever is pleasant, do what we should, and learn to endure whatever trials may come our way. Growth for most sincere Christians means continued effort to do all we should as we avail ourselves of whatever means of enablement we believe God has provided. Some seek a fuller experience of God’s Spirit. Others try to get to a point of decisive surrender. Still others try to find the help to live as they should through prayer, fellowship, and learning God’s Word. The focus in all these approaches is to do what God commands with God’s help. And that focus is, of course, right and proper. There is no growth without a commitment to follow Christ and to live in dependence upon Him for the power to do so. The priorities of obedience and dependence are essential to real change.

But a focus on the responsibility to obey and to appropriate God’s power sometimes leads us away from the regions of our life that present the greatest challenges. We work at cleaning up our outside, sometimes feeling an almost unbearable pressure to change as we should. Like the Pharisees, we reduce sin to manageable categories and expend all our energies in maintaining the standards we set. Spirituality then comes to be measured by not attending movies and never missing church rather than by an improvement in the quality of our relationships. The hard-to-handle issues in our soul that keep us from relating to others deeply and constructively are ignored; and easier to handle matters, such as social courtesies and appropriate language, become widely accepted barometers of spiritual health.

When this focus on measurable, superficial behavior serves to divert attention away from troubling realities within our soul, as it often does, then its effect is to help us cope by conforming our
behavior to whatever standards we set. Change is largely external. It’s not from the inside out. And its effect is to increase a deep sense of pressure, not freedom.

Call this first group *shallow copers*, people who cope with life by dealing with whatever they can handle and ignoring all the rest. Among these folks, the priority of the pulpit may reduce fellowship to mere activity and tough accountability. Rich encouragement and stirring love may be lost. Discipleship sometimes becomes only an opportunity for more teaching rather than an honest grappling with the real problems of life. Looking deeply into one’s heart is discouraged as unnecessary and self-absorbing.

A second group of people have difficulty adjusting in a community of shallow copers. They cannot rid themselves of the gnawing awareness that more is wrong than renewed efforts at obedience seem to correct. Call these people *troubled reflecters*, folks who wrestle honestly with at least some of the disturbing parts of their lives for which they have no real answers.

The route to real change is more often found by people who realistically face difficulties than by those who manage to preserve pleasant feelings by ignoring the tough things in their lives. An honest look at problems creates struggles that have more hope of leading to deep change than does a complacency supported by denial.

Shallow copers may become troubled reflecters when something traumatic happens to upset their confidence in their ability to handle life, like a daughter developing anorexia, a spouse deserting the family, or a son retreating into rebellious anger. Even then, they tend to search for some way to cope without ever looking honestly at the issues in their own hearts and at the quality of their relationships. “Yes, it’s true that my son is far from the Lord. We’ve done everything we know to do, but for now Satan is getting the upper hand. We’re just committing him to the Lord, praying in faith that God will bring him back soon.” Case closed. The effort to cope with life is not only shallow, it has now become rigid. Any suggestion that more could be looked at, including the possibility that the son may never return or that Dad may have angrily demanded a high level of obedience less
for his son’s sake than for his own, is regarded as a violation of trusting the Lord.

Too often, a commitment to obedience reflects not a passionate desire to pursue God, but a stubbornly fearful determination to not feel deep frustration and personal pain. When the energy behind our obedience is supplied by the desire to deny pain, the warm, fleshy parts of the human soul are not engaged in following God. We become stiff. Dogmatism, a demand that we indoctrinate others with our understanding of what is moral, replaces an openness to investigating what God might really want from us. We lose touch with the throbbing reality of honest communication with people. We become rigid moralists who push people to keep God’s standards rather than passionate Christians who entice others to know Christ better.

Comforting thoughts about God’s faithfulness can keep us living on the surface of life, safely removed from a level of pain and confusion that seems overwhelming. But God is most fully known in the midst of confusing reality. To avoid asking the tough questions and facing the hard issues is to miss a transforming encounter with God.

Change Requires an Inside Look

More and more people are having trouble maintaining a comfortable adjustment based on denial. Life is just too confusing, relationships too difficult, experiences too disappointing, and responsibilities too burdensome for people to easily pretend that the keys to effective living are just doing their duty and denying all that troubles them.

Parents are finding little help in all the popular formulas and principles as they try to deal with their daughter who is lying to them more and more. They no longer feel confident as they do all they know to do. Too many other kids from good homes have gone bad to permit a happy confidence that everything will turn out well.

Women are admitting to themselves that their womanhood is more a neutral fact than a unique source of joy. And beneath that dull neutrality, more women are recognizing a deep fear of being hurt that keeps them from enjoying their opportunities to give of themselves.
Men sense their weakness and wish with all their hearts that they knew how to be meaningfully involved with their families. But their efforts to lovingly lead end up in failure. They then retreat to whatever sphere of life offers them a sense of competence, and live without the rich joy of being involved husbands and fathers.

Christians are realizing that their version of church involvement, time in the Word, commitment to do right, claiming God’s promises, and surrendering to God’s power is somehow not getting at the core troubles of their hearts.

We want more, and are therefore vulnerable to following anyone who convincingly holds out the promise of more. We try the latest spiritual fad, we attend the currently popular seminar or crusade, we listen diligently to the tapes of our favorite preacher — and we always come up short. Nothing satisfies, nothing works. In our heart, we know that our latest effort to follow Christ has left deep issues in our soul unaddressed.

Is it possible to change at the core of our being? How much change can we expect? The disturbing reality within us, which we try to pretend isn’t there, makes us wonder just how changed we can become.

This book is about changing from the inside out, a process that begins with an honest look at whatever is happening in our life and continues without ever pretending things are better than they are. The courage to be honest is necessary if we’re to experience the kind of change our Lord makes possible. Real change requires an inside look.

NOTES

1. I must anticipate later discussion by mentioning now that the lethal blow is dealt not to our humanity, but to its corruption. Because our soul is so thoroughly stained with self-reliance, the death of pride feels like the death of our self. However, the more terrible the blow to our efforts to preserve our own life, to arrange it so we experience the minimum amount of pain, the more we emerge as truly alive. The process seems confusing only because it cuts across all our ideas about how to live.