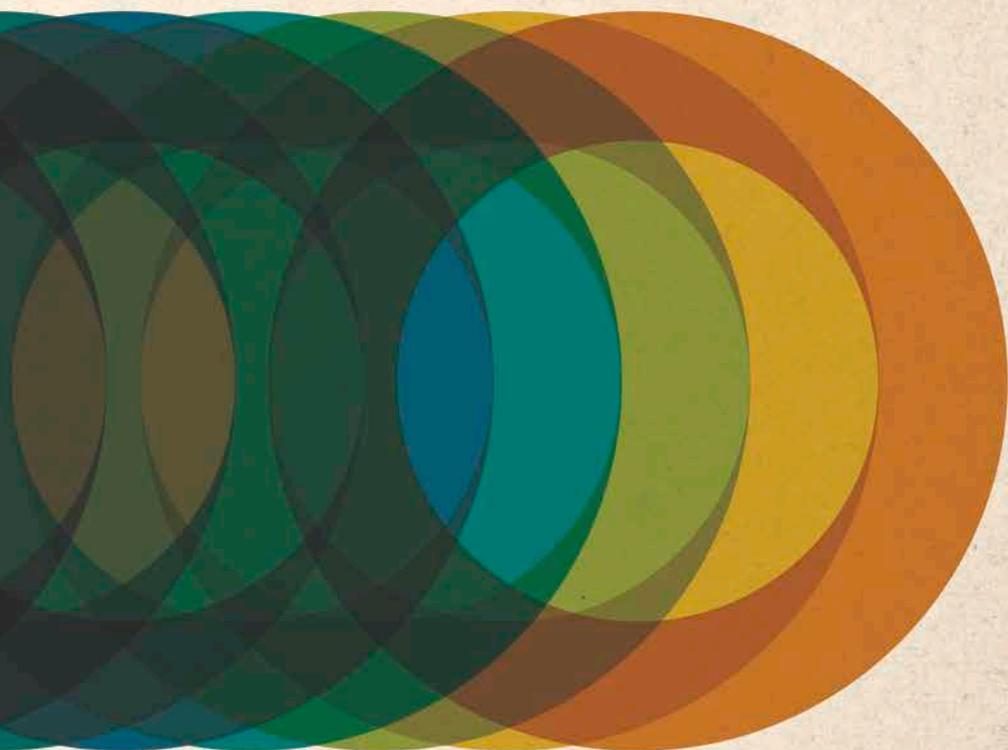


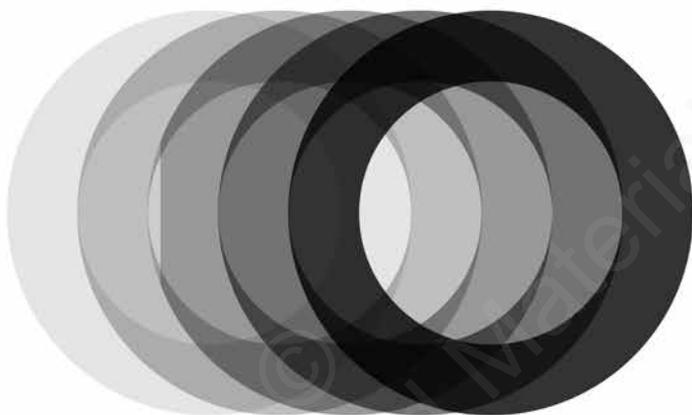
NOEL JESSE HEIKKINEN



**WRETCHED
SAINTS**

TRANSFORMED BY THE
RELENTLESS GRACE OF GOD

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DAVID  COOK™

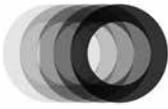
transforming lives together

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CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	13
INTRODUCTION: THE ENDLESS QUEST TO FIX A NONEXISTENT PROBLEM	15
1. WRETCHED SAINTS ARE WE <i>SILENCING SATAN'S CONDEMNING JACKHAMMER</i>	25
2. FAULTY SENSORS <i>THE DEADLY COST OF BELIEVING A LIE</i>	35
3. WRETCHED <i>THE GOOD NEWS STARTS WITH BAD NEWS</i>	47
4. JUST BELIEVE <i>IT'S MORE THAN A FEELING</i>	63
5. HIGH STAKES LOST AND FOUND <i>GOD'S SINGULAR POSTURE OF LOVE</i>	77
6. CHERISHED WHORE <i>A PARABLE OF BETRAYAL, MORE BETRAYAL, AND A LOVE THAT TRANSCENDS IT ALL.</i>	89
7. LOVING THE UNLOVABLE <i>THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS A LITTLE BIT OF GRACE</i>	105
8. YET, HERE WE ARE <i>PLAYING NICE WITH A TYRANT</i>	117

9. GRACE-RICH GOSPEL THERAPY	133
<i>INJECTING THE GOOEY GRACE OF GOD INTO YOUR DEEPEST PAIN</i>	
10. BORN-AGAIN NICK	147
<i>A CASE STUDY IN GRACE</i>	
11. DRIP. DRIP. DRIP.	163
<i>WHY IS GOD'S LOVE FEELING LEAKY AGAIN?</i>	
12. JUST CHILL	177
<i>JESUS WORKS SO YOU CAN REST</i>	
13. LIVING WITH GOD, OTHERS, AND MYSELF	187
<i>THE GLORIOUS NEW LIFE OF A WRETCHED SAINT</i>	
ONE FINAL THING	199
NOTES	201
BIBLE CREDITS	205



INTRODUCTION

THE ENDLESS QUEST TO FIX A NONEXISTENT PROBLEM

A few years ago, I was in the market for a used car. Like any car shopper, I had my list of nonnegotiables. And, like any middle-aged man, one of my nonnegotiables was *fun*.

I scoured through online listings from around the country with my list in hand and found the perfect car. The only problem was that it was in New York and I lived in Michigan. But I *knew* this was the car. It had everything I wanted: sweet styling, leather seats, a sunroof, a six-speed manual transmission, twin-turbo engine. In other words, it was *fun*.

After a bit of negotiation on price and a few video tours around the car, I bought it and had my new baby shipped to my office when I was out of town. John, my “car guy” friend, met the delivery to make sure everything was kosher. After he finished his inspection, he gave me a call.

“The check-engine light is on.”

“What do you mean it’s on? It was fine a couple days ago when the guy gave me the video tour.”

“Do you want me to check the codes?”

“Of course.”

A few minutes later, John called me back with the good news. The code was from a faulty sensor and it was an easy fix. We threw a new sensor in there, and just like that, the warning light went away.

Whew.

I have to tell you, that sensor sent fear running through me. Had I made a stupid decision to buy the car sight unseen? Had I been duped? Was this a lemon?

But no, it was just a faulty sensor. False alarm. Much ado about nothing.

A few weeks later, the light came back on. Again, the anxiety shot through me. We checked the code again. Same thing. *A bad sensor.*

Whew again!

The thing was, the car drove fine. More than fine, really. This truly was the most fun car I had ever owned. I grinned from ear to ear every single minute I drove it.

That was, until I would glance down at the check-engine light that continued to turn on and off, seemingly with a mind of its own. I took the car to my mechanic over and over, and there was never anything wrong. Except the sensors. It wasn't just one sensor that was bad, either. It was one faulty sensor after another. One time, a sensor actually blew up as I was driving down the street! Smoke, along with the smell of burning oil and rubber, poured out from under the hood. I thought for sure my engine was toast that time.

Nope, just the sensor.

The sad thing was, I started changing my behavior based on what I knew to be false information. I began to baby the car. I drove it with less passion and more care. I worried that maybe the way I flew through the gears or pushed the RPMs when accelerating was the real problem. Maybe the sensors were really telling me the truth, despite the lack of any evidence to support that conclusion.

Eventually, I couldn't take it anymore. The sight of the warning light was "driving" me to distraction. So I sold the best car I'd ever had.

Now I drive a decidedly less fun, more practical car from a company with a reputation for reliability.

It's fine, I guess. But I don't smile when I drive it.

I've learned that I'm not the only one duped into making a rash decision by a false sensor. Turns out, it happens all the time.

THE *ALLEGEDLY* LEAKY OIL PAN OF GOD'S LOVE

My on-again, off-again love affair with an amazing car with a faulty sensor is a picture of my spiritual life. Perhaps you can see something of yourself in it as well.

I'm a Christian—a pastor, even—and wholeheartedly believe in Jesus and all His works, grace, and promises. But as I'm cruising along in my life, it feels like something important is leaking out.

I don't know about you, but I can almost never shake the feeling that something has gone haywire. Maybe I've sinned too much or I haven't mastered spiritual disciplines enough or I'm just not quite up to snuff in God's eyes. And now I have this sinking suspicion that God's mad at me or that I'm in the doghouse or that He's finally figured out what a lost cause I am.

It sounds silly to write it out like that. Of course He's not mad. His grace covers me permanently. My sins, all of which Jesus paid for on the cross, were all in the future as He sacrificed Himself. So why do I *feel* like His atonement paid for all my sins before I came to Him (which were in the future as He hung on the cross) but any sins I commit after salvation (also in the future as He hung on the cross) are not covered? Or maybe all my sins up to today were covered, but midnight marked the dividing line, and now I need to earn my way back into His favor.

Stupid. False. Crazy.

Sometimes I act like I think I've outrun Christ's forgiveness, dumb as that sounds. I know in my head that I could never out-sin His atonement—and I would tell *you* that about yourself until I was blue in the face—but in the day-to-day reality of my Christian walk, I think differently. I have this nagging feeling that I've finally sinned too much and I'd better do some good deeds or make some sacrifice or get people to approve of me so I can feel (or fool people) that I'm in right relationship with God.

Seriously, would I be such a total screw-up if I were really walking with God? The Bible says I'm a saint (Romans 1:6–7), but I don't think anyone who *really* knows me would look at my life and confirm, "Yup, that guy is a saint."

I guess that's why I keep feeling that God's love leaks out of me. Sure, I confess my sins and work to make restitution and change my behavior, but the sins continue. No wonder it feels like He's unhappy with me. Who wouldn't be? No wonder I cling to all the songs we sing at church about how much God loves me ... because I need to keep hearing that it's true.

I wish I could see your face right now to measure your reaction. I wish I could ask you (and hear your reply) if you could relate to what I'm saying. I'm guessing you can relate, or else you'll probably put the book down soon.

This is a book for saints, for sure, but *Wretched Saints*. Saints—in the sense of believers in Jesus Christ—who don't have it together and who, despite so much effort spent trying

not to, continue to sin. And feel wretched about it. They feel that they've got a leaky oil pan of God's love.

FAULTY ENGINE LIGHTS

What if I were to tell you that you don't have a leaky "God's love pan" at all? What if I told you that God's love is permanently full in the Christian's life and is hermetically sealed, a closed system that is not capable, not with any tool or disaster or tinkering, of ever being opened or of leaking?

We think the problem is that God's love and approval and affection for us leak out and have to be continually topped off. But that's not your problem at all because it's not even true.

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He did not even spare his own Son but offered him up for us all. How will he not also with him grant us everything? Who can bring an accusation against God's elect? God is the one who justifies. Who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is the one who died, but even more, has been raised; he also is at the right hand of God and intercedes for us. Who can separate us from the love of Christ? Can affliction or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ...

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.
(Romans 8:31–35, 37–39 CSB)

There is no leak. There can't be a leak of God's love because nothing in this universe can cause a leak. Not you, not Satan, nothing. The problem isn't that God's acceptance of you leaks away; it's that you've got a faulty sensor.

The engine is fine. Nothing is wrong. Nothing is leaking. But something is telling you that there's a problem. And it's such a scary, compelling warning light that you've done what anyone else in your situation would've done: you've believed it.

And if you're like every other Christian I know, you've got *several* faulty sensors, all or most of which you've believed.

Faulty sensors can make you do really dumb things and can leave you absolutely crippled. Absolutely wretched.

In these pages, I'm going to show you how to spot faulty sensors, remove them altogether, and leave your "engine" free to roar down the open highway of the Christian life, living the way it was meant to be lived. You've believed a lie—several, probably—but you're actually just fine in God's eyes. Even if

you've got sin that needs to be cleaned up (which I'm sure you do, if you're like me), you can *know* that you haven't lost God's love and you don't need to earn it back. You never lost it. You can't lose it. You don't leak.

The most serious false leak a Christian can believe is the one that results in us doubting God's love for us again and again. That's the one that could blow up and send smoke billowing out from under the hood of your life. It's a lie straight from hell, but it has the power to leave you despairing and miserable. So it definitely has to go.

We're wretched saints, but we're still saints. We're often disobedient children of God, but we're still His children. Our measuring sticks, and the measuring sticks of those around us, are not the same ones God uses. The diagnostics God performs on us are not the diagnostics the world uses. As far as He's concerned, you and I are right on schedule. We are being sanctified. We are being transformed by the radical grace of God, whether we *feel* it or not.

In time, I pray you'll come to see that you don't have to worry about the faulty sensors that are telling you God's love for you has expired. We'll take care of that problem and show you how to spot false readings yourself. Not by assuring you in a hundred different ways that God does still love you. Nope. That's a useless exercise. The system in question is sealed and doesn't need fixing.

The solution to the problem that you don't feel God's love isn't to give you more happy feelings and reminders about His

love ... but to take away the voices saying His love might leak away. The solution is to remove the faulty sensors.

Then your “car” will run fine. Then you’ll operate in the truth and get beyond the roadblocks of trying to keep filling or repairing a leaky engine that isn’t really leaking and move into the works Christ has prepared beforehand and crafted for you to accomplish (Ephesians 2:10).

Let’s explore how.

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CHAPTER 1

WRETCHED SAINTS ARE WE

SILENCING SATAN'S CONDEMNING JACKHAMMER

I have a unique vantage point as a preacher. Weekly, I stand onstage and look at you (or a rough approximation of you) as you look at me. I get the impression that sometimes you forget that I can see you, but oh yes, I see you.

I see all of you.

I see the teenage boy trying to cop a feel with his girlfriend in the front row. I see the puffy red eyes of the woman who undoubtedly fought with her husband (he's the guy with the steely stare sitting next to her) all the way to church. I see the tired mom and the bored son. I see the faithful Bible studier

and the hungover college student. I see the soccer moms and investment bankers and small-business owners and lawyers and assembly line workers ... and you are all looking at me.

Crap.

What am I doing up here?

Don't they know I'm a fraud? Don't they know I've got every bit as much sin in me as they do—and lots of the time, even more than they do? Why should they listen to me?

When everyone walks out of this place today, will any of what I say or do make even the tiniest bit of difference? Will the transformative message of the gospel of Jesus penetrate those inky black parts of their souls ... or is this just a mediocre way for all of us to kill an hour?

I'm asking this not just for you, but for me too. Will the gospel penetrate *my* inky black parts?

Double crap.

I used to think this way all the time, but more and more God is changing my perspective. Now I understand that all the inky black parts were melted beneath the extreme light of Christ's forgiveness when I came to Him in salvation.

Oh, I still sin. Much more than I'd like to admit. But not because I have inky black corners of my soul that God's holiness hasn't penetrated. His Spirit is very thorough. I still sin because:

1. I have a sinful nature—so, as long as I live in this world, I can't possibly be perfectly sinless (Ecclesiastes 7:20; Romans 7:15–25; 1 John 1:8);

2. I live in a fallen world that sings siren songs of seduction to that sinful nature (1 Corinthians 10:13; 1 Peter 5:8–9; 1 John 2:15–17); and
3. I believe lies (faulty sensors) that cause me to act as if certain things are true about me that are not true in the least (Proverbs 3:5–6; John 8:44; Colossians 2:8).

We can't do much about items one or two. For us humans, life on earth comes with a sinful nature, and that sinful nature is mightily drawn to “the worries of this age, the deceitfulness of wealth, and the desires for other things” (Mark 4:19 CSB). We can and should do whatever we can to put those things to death, but they represent a struggle we're going to have for life.

Item number three, though ... Ah, item three.

WHY WE THINK GOD'S LOVE LEAKS AWAY

I was talking with a friend recently who would probably rank her identity as mother first and lesbian second. She told me that she and her wife had recently been oscillating between attending a Unitarian Universalist church and a Buddhist temple because they “enjoy the conversations.” I couldn't help but wonder if they were looking for a place to anchor their identities.

It's what we all do, whether we realize it or not. We look at the entire composite of who we are (or at least those parts we

can figure out) and we wonder, *Where did this come from? Why am I like this?*

My own identity is anchored in two paradoxically opposite directions: my sin and my savior.

Yeah, I'm a pastor, but don't let my vocation fool you: I am still a hypocrite—more than I care to admit. It pains me to say it.

The truth of the gospel of Jesus is this: I am nothing more than a wretch ... and yet so much more than a saint. I am a *wretched saint*, and that's exactly what I am supposed to be. No more; no less. That is my identity; it is who I am.

If you are a follower of Jesus, it's your identity too, regardless if you like it.

The problem is that we wrap our heads around all of this only *some of the time*. Most days, we feel like a wretch only. Every once in a while, we feel downright saintly. But we rarely experience the power and grace of bringing those two realities together into one glorious identity.

Take Christopher, for instance. Fresh off a painful divorce with the woman of his dreams, he darkened the door of our church because a friend had told him it was the best thing he could do for his daughter. Turned out, it was the best thing he could do for himself. One service in, and he was hooked on Jesus.

Over the months and years that followed, Chris found ways to sprinkle gospel conversations into his workplace and

gym, and it was not uncommon for him to fill a church row with people who were trying to figure out what had so radically changed their friend.

But as the painful memories of his ex-wife faded and he and his daughter settled into their new normal life rhythms, he just, well, drifted away. Sunday mornings became the perfect time to work on his physique instead of his spirit, and his daughter was happy enough to sleep in. Bible reading gave way to social-media surfing, and small-group meetings to channel surfing.

Some people would call Chris a backslider. I call him “normal.” I actually find it kind of weird when people *don't* go through this stage.

I have known too many Chrises to call this a fluke.

In so many cases, we Christians can sometimes come to feel that our souls are a leaky bucket and the whole Jesus thing just keeps drip-drip-dripping out.

Growing up in a Christian home, Sarah knew so well what a follower of Jesus was supposed to look like that she unwittingly slipped the mask on each week without missing a beat. It was only when she recognized and made eye contact with *that guy from Tinder* while singing about the blood of Jesus that she noticed the disconnect. Why had she felt the need to find acceptance with him?

Drip.

As Angie looked around the living room at the girls in her Bible study, she thought, *We are in this for life*. That was before

her husband lost his job and her best friend stabbed her in the back. What was it about her that always invited betrayal?

Drip.

It can seem like everything about the Christian faith leaks. It's not just the initial excitement of a brand-new worldview (church camp high, anyone?); it's also the feeling of acceptance, the supposedly unconditional love, the immeasurable forgiveness. All of it feels like it leaks away.

It's especially painful when we don't see the change in our own lives that we expect to see. We look at others around us and we are amazed at how perfectly put together their lives are.

Can I let you in on a dirty little secret? Those perfect people around you who seem like they have their life together?

They don't.

But when we believe the lie that they *do*, it makes us feel like there is something wrong with us—something permanently jacked up—that keeps us from being truly worthy of the life they apparently have.

I'm uniquely a loser.

I'm uniquely stupid.

I'm uniquely worthless.

I'm a unique disappointment.

It's a damned lie straight from the pit of hell.

These are lies. We listen to them, and we behave accordingly. But the secret isn't to counter the lies and heap up an even bigger pile of statements, memes, and affirmations that say we *are* worthy of God's love. The secret is to get rid of the lies, because

then God takes care of the rest. He's already done so. It's only these lies keeping us from enjoying what He's done.

When you have bad information, bad intel, you make bad decisions.

But in the meantime, we feel we don't have the life we should, and we whip ourselves over it. To combat this spiritual disjoint in our lives, we employ a whole host of foolish strategies. Right at the top of the list is buying a book we think will help (sorry for the ironic disappointment). Try-harder sermons and goofy self-help seminars and intense exercise plans and so-called spiritual disciplines (don't get me started) are also common additions to this list, but none of this stuff works.

Sure, we get a shot of adrenaline or a few good days (or even weeks) from these things. But, like a rubber band stretched to its limit, the inevitable *snap* back to reality really stings. And more of God's love leaks out ... or so it seems.

Maybe this is why the apostle Paul screamed at his beloved friends:

You foolish Galatians! Who has cast a spell on you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified? I only want to learn this from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning by the Spirit, are you now finishing by the flesh? (Galatians 3:1–3 CSB)

And to his friends in Colossae:

If you died with Christ to the elements of this world, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations: “Don’t handle, don’t taste, don’t touch”? (Colossians 2:20–21 CSB)

What are you doing? he was saying. *Why are you trying to fix something that ain’t broken?*

You read that correctly: You ain’t broken. You are wretched, but not broken.

You don’t leak.

You don’t need to earn God’s love or earn it back. You don’t need to keep the feeling of His love alive in your heart and mind. You don’t need to prove you are a Christian to yourself or other people.

As crazy as it sounds, you can actually just live.

You know how it’s hard to think when someone else’s music is blasting in your ear or there’s a jackhammer pounding away right outside your window? That’s a picture of how Satan makes the Christian life for believers. He’s called “the accuser” for a reason, you know (Revelation 12:10). He’s the master of blasting all the oldies from your life—all your shame, all your false beliefs about yourself, and those old messages that keep you handicapped in your life—and he pounds away with the jackhammer of accusation, shame, and fear.

He knows that, if he can keep the noise loud enough and give you a pounding headache, spiritually speaking, you won't think clearly, and you won't be able to even see the reality he sees all too well.

The reality he knows intimately is that you don't have to commit another sin in your life.

Now, don't hear me wrong: I'm not saying you will never commit another sin or even that you can pull off a day without sin. None of us can do that. But if we could perfectly execute the teaching of this book, which we can't, we would be unlikely to sin again.

Because *all sin comes from believing lies about God and ourselves*. Adam and Eve were motoring along fine until the serpent came around and lied to them. They bought it, and *boom* ... here we are.

Satan knows he's defeated (Hebrews 2:14). He knows the love of Christ has *sealed* you up into a perfect system of un-leaking permanence (2 Corinthians 1:22; 5:5; Ephesians 1:13–14; 4:30). But you and I don't know that. We've forgotten it or never learned it. So he gives his all to keep us from seeing it. Thus, the noise and the headache.

If your enemy has defeated you utterly, about the only vain hope you have left is to keep everyone else from finding out that the war is over and that you lost. Because if they know, they won't listen to you anymore.

To be brutally honest, Christian friends and pastors haven't always been much help here. And I say that as someone who

is both of those things. We want to help. We really, really do. That's why we create programs and classes. It's why we tell you over and over that God loves you. It's why we meet with you and cry with you and yell at you and plead with you. But deep down, it doesn't help much as long as you believe lies about yourself. The answer isn't to hear more about God's love.

The answer is to stop listening to lies from Satan's hate.