

## CHAPTER 1

# THE OLIVE COUCH

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And this is the sound of the underground.  
Of history in the making, foundations shaking ...  
this is the sound of the underground.

— Pete Grieg, *The Vision*

Choose today whom you will serve.

— Joshua

fell onto my olive-colored couch. After years of friendship, it cradled my body intimately. The house was silent and I was about to force a crisis of faith. I'd prayed the New Year's Eve prayer again nine months earlier — the one about somehow forging a deeper relationship with God and the obligatory commitment to read more of the Bible this year. I remember asking Jesus, somewhat sarcastically, if there was any way I could honestly draw closer to him without someone having to die. It's easy to hold onto Christ when there's nothing else to hold onto. It's more difficult to hang onto faith when things are fine. Somehow this prayer found its way past a crack in the ceiling and floated up to heaven because there I sat at the end of myself, with real choices staring at me like a loaded revolver. Change had been blowing in with the summer breeze and now I had to choose.

My father had been a minister for thirty years, so I grew up under "the shadow of the Almighty." Christianity had been such a part of my life I couldn't really see the world any other way. I didn't know how to. My childhood was spent in a trailer behind a new church every couple of weeks while Dad supported us as a traveling evangelist. My days consisted of home schooling, entering the sanctuary and preaching the previous evening's sermon to the empty pews, and then making a cross in the parking lot with spare wood and crucifying myself with rock nails. I can't remember not

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knowing Jesus. He was woven into my life at the cellular level, but somehow the faith of a child becomes the faith of a ragged-out workaholic adult.

My folks never really outlined my life for me. They chose moral guidance over rigid authority, figuring I'd find my way. I never got too crazy. It wasn't until my late teens that I declared my independence, so they had to deal with a moody artist and a tough transition into adulthood; but they didn't have to deal with an overabundance of teen angst. I'd found my love early, and although I had my share of broken hearts, music had never failed me.

As an early teen, I could usually be found wearing a pair of headphones listening to anything I could get my hands on. I woke up to music, ate lunch to it, slept it, dreamt it, and started it all over again the next day. By the time I was sixteen, I'd decided that anything short of a career in the music world would be utter failure for me, and I threw out every plan B that had ever occurred to me.

Shortly after that I met a mentor. He just happened to materialize in church one Sunday as if he'd beamed in from the *U.S.S. Enterprise*. I became obsessed with the little demo studio in his basement, and all the minimum wage money I could earn went into recording there. I recorded my first song as a surprise while my parents were away on holiday. Bernard's style of mentoring worked sort of like my parents had reared me. I had to sort it out. I'd come upstairs after cursing the tape machine for not obeying me and ask him what I'd done wrong. He'd smile and say, "I believe if you just think it over carefully, you'll figure it out." I'd walk back down the stairs still cursing under my breath, but he was right. I learned fast and it stuck.

By the time I graduated from high school, I was making money producing records, and the busier I got, the faster

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life moved. Bernard had a streak of good luck as well. His little eight-track recording studio became the place to be in a matter of months when one of his records sold two million copies. It was off to the races, and I got to watch it from the front row. There was no going back. Within a couple of years I had a manager and the work kept coming. My goal was to pick up one day and survive in Music City, and it wasn't too long before I did.

Christian music and I came of age together. The Christian music industry was struggling to stand up and be something, and I was determined to be a part of it. It was my cause and mission in life to find my way to Nashville, where everything seemed to be congregating. I'd read every issue of any industry magazine I could find.

When I arrived in Nashville a few years later, I was ready. I thought I'd have to do music during the day and deliver pizza at night for a while, but it never happened. Although I was able to work right away, I learned quickly that Nashville was a lot different than the little Michigan city I'd come from. I was the little fish in a sea of world-class talent, and regardless of my mission, there was heavy competition. I put my head down and started plowing and didn't look up for ten years. I didn't look up until I found myself sitting on my couch all but ruined. Had music finally failed me?

### The End of the Beginning

The previous year had started like the rest: work hard and then work hard to get more hard work. I'd tossed my New Year's prayer earnestly enough to God, the one about getting closer to him, but I had all but forgotten it by the second week of January. I earnestly wanted to read more of the Bible too. I started sitting in church and reading Scripture,

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taking careful notes on the things I thought were inconsistent. I thought I'd eventually get through the whole Bible and present this document to God so that he might defend himself against my scrutiny.

This was about as far as my commitment went because I'd found my way into the fast track of an emerging company that was buying up the entirety of the independent Christian music landscape. They were spending money like they had it, and I was right at the ground level. It seemed I'd hit the mother lode. Apparently I'd be making records for years to come for these guys. When I was asked to extend myself and complete a couple projects without payment while they got their subsequent rounds of funding in place, I went against my better judgment and continued. Records were completed, turned in, and released, and before I knew it, I had lived a year on my savings.

Things quickly turned south, and I had broken a cardinal rule in the music business: never begin work without a budget check in the bank. I'd broken the rule — and it had about broken me. In a quick maneuver, the upper tier of leadership was shaved off. I was asked to step in and try to work with the team to salvage the company's burning carcass. I didn't have a choice. All my money was at stake. If it didn't survive, I assumed I wouldn't either.

For eight months I worked eighty-plus hours a week trying to turn the ship. The one bright spot was Red Bull, cigar smoke, and a fledgling friendship with a kindred soul forged in the fire of stress. Brad and I took barrage after barrage of heavy artillery as I tried to create low-cost product while he juggled how we would get it to market. Everyone on the team worked their hearts out, but in the end it was too far gone. We started late and failed. I walked out of that office building in Franklin, Tennessee, knowing that as soon as

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the owners filed the bankruptcy papers, my life savings were gone.

So I sat in an empty house, alone with nothing left but a friendly couch and a few painful decisions. I found it ironic that my choices were matters of the heart rather than business maneuvers. All I'd known for eight months were business maneuvers with a thin veneer of faith over the top in hopes that God would bless the effort. Psalm 127:1 says, "Unless the LORD builds the house, the builders labor in vain." This was a defining truth, and it created the fulcrum on which my life was delicately balanced.

I considered the poverty of the semi-agnostic life I'd been living. Let's be honest: Isn't that pretty much how many of us live as Western Christians? We acknowledge God and possibly even go to church regularly. Perhaps we even donate generously. But when push comes to shove, what kind of spiritual foundation do we really have? I had little. There was a little boy with the faith of a warrior in mothballs locked away in the attic of my heart, but now as a father with little boys of my own, my faith was anemic and my existence was balanced on a frail ledge. To say I was a good spiritual leader for my wife and children would be like calling Billy the Kid a good pastor to his band of outlaws.

I couldn't deal with it anymore. The kingdom I'd built had just tumbled before my eyes in a matter of months. I considered atheism. I thought about forgetting faith and finding solace in not having to deal with a moral compass of any sort other than what would serve me. I considered picking up a vice or two and jumping back into the fray. I'd just kill or be killed because that's what it felt like my life had boiled down to. "It's nothing personal; it's just business" were the poisonous words I'd heard one too many times. But behind

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door number two was the chance to give faith a fair play. No holds barred. An all-expenses-paid, one-way ride to absolute surrender.

Sitting there on that couch, the choice stared me in the face. It was one of those true existential moments, and in the end, I chose to honor my heritage and actually give faith a genuine effort from my heart. I vividly remember the prayer. It wasn't a sinner's prayer, and it wasn't eloquent. "Jesus, I'm done with the crap. I'm finished. If you want me to go to Des Moines and make hamburgers for a living, I'll pack up our stuff tomorrow and leave. I'm fine with that." It felt as if I was standing at the edge of a precipice looking out over waves of the vast unknown. What I was contemplating was jumping.

"I'm going to believe that you're nearby and that you can seize me before I hit the bottom," I prayed. "If you don't, I'm dead. I believe my heart will die, and I fear it will be the last time I care about anything."

I jumped — and in the falling, I finally understood that as much as I needed to live by faith, I also needed to surrender my identity. For years I had been trapped in believing that *what I did* was *who I was*. This free fall gave me the oddest sense of release. In that leap of faith, who I was and what I did separated, and my sense of self was stripped clean.

I'd like to say the burden lifted and a ray of sunshine came through the window accompanied by the scent of fresh lavender, but it didn't happen like that. I was utterly numb. It was one of the only times I felt perfectly at peace with whatever might come next. Then the phone rang. I was offered immediate work for immediate cash. Grocery money. Then another call and an email. Monthly bills. Provision never stopped after that, but that's only the beginning of the story.

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### The Bible and the Epiphany

In the flames of hardship as I thrashed about to save what I thought was my sense of identity and financial security, I had started to read the Bible every day. My friend Brad and I were traveling so much in the end that I had gotten into the habit of reading it aloud to him in the car. Now that was over. I had now chosen sincerely to give faith an honest place in my life, and I found I missed the Scriptures. I missed the rhythm of reading them. They had become a source of comfort to me. I can't confess to giant leaps of spiritual growth during that time. All I can really own up to is trying to pilfer a little consolation for my frayed nerves while trying to look clean and pretty for Jesus so he'd save me in the midst of my trials.

In spite of this, something was happening to me on the inside, and when I ceased exposing myself to the words contained in the Scriptures, I knew something was different. The bizarre piece of this equation is that I wasn't reading the Bible to gain deep insights into the mystical regions of the soul. I wasn't trying to solve theological quandaries either. I was just reading it for what it said, and often it said something that got stuck in a corner of my mind and loitered there for days.

Stuff like, "The person who plants selfishness, ignoring the needs of others—ignoring God!—harvests a crop of weeds. All he'll have to show for his life is weeds! But the one who plants in response to God, letting God's Spirit do the growth work in him, harvests a crop of real life, eternal life" (Galatians 6:7–8 MSG). This was my life right there on the page, echoing prophetically over a couple millennia. It not only contextualized what I'd been experiencing; it gave



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me a north star and a measure of hope that I couldn't rationalize but I couldn't deny either.

When I removed the Bible from my routine for a few days, I started to feel vacant; but as the equilibrium returned to my life, I found the old struggles returning. These weren't struggles of faith. My faith was steadfast. When I made the choice to take the leap, the tectonic plates of my soul shifted. "I choose to believe" has been my mantra since that day in the face of doubt.

The struggle was for time. I began to rationalize that I was reading something I didn't really understand anyway. When I would take the time to read the Bible, the calm would return, and sure enough something would invariably leap off the page that I'd never understood. I knew a lot of the Bible. I could quote Scripture. But I'd never read the Bible in context, and the more I did, the more fascinating it became. Soon it was less about footprint poems and promise verses and more about a story that was unfolding. It was less about extreme customs and animal sacrifices and more about the epic story of God. I started seeing things that I could relate to in spite of the cultural differences. I began to find my own face staring back at me from the pages.

## Podcast

In October 2005 I was working on a lengthy design job. I'd expired the battery on my iPod and I remembered reading about an emerging technology called podcasting. I did a quick Google search and in a few minutes I was listening to a guy driving home from his job just verbally trashing everyone around him. It was hideous, but a flicker of possibility began to glow in the back of my mind. I searched more and located podcasts that were seriously making a go of it in

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the underground world. They were funny and engaging in an indie sort of way that I hadn't heard in a long time. This was grassroots, and I thought it could be a revolutionary marketing tool for the music world. Little did I know that the core plates of my life were about to shift again, and this time I was about to experience a sudden and immediate change of direction.

One morning during the second week of December 2005, I awoke after a restful sleep to a message that was apparently waiting for me to open my eyes. "I want you to podcast the Bible," it whispered. I sat up, shook off the dream, and made a pot of coffee. "I want you to podcast the Bible" became the tape playing over and over in my subconscious. I thought it was one of the more stupid things to get stuck there. First, I didn't know anything about podcasting other than how to listen to one. Second, I had no time for something like that. And third, I had been generally comfortable being a behind-the-scenes sort of guy. Podcasting the Bible would be completely against the natural order of my life.

"I want you to podcast the Bible" played on. After several days, I finally sat down and asked, "Jesus?" Bingo. A bona fide directive from the Lord delivered in a way that rang true to my heart and was an instruction to do something I would never, ever have done on my own. My willingness to move all our stuff to Des Moines and make hamburgers wandered back into mind. I sighed deeply. "Okay."

As I started preparing, I noticed that this burgeoning technology had little help for a regular person. You had to have some geek credentials hidden behind your front pocket penholder to offer a podcast, but somehow I managed to sort it out enough to put my first recording on the Internet by Christmas. I told cyberspace that I had no idea what I was doing and that I had no idea who might come into contact

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with the message, but that I was planning to start reading the Bible every single day starting on January 1, 2006, and hopefully I would get all the way through it by the end of the year, one day at a time.

The premise was simple enough for me. I was going to just do what I'd been doing. I was going to read the Bible every day in a good meal-sized portion and process it in context. I was finding that the Bible was making more and more sense to me as I digested it in chapters rather than random verses. I thought I'd just flip on a microphone, read a chunk, and react to it just like a normal person.

By this time I thought God was pulling a practical joke on me. Part of me thought the whole thing would get called off. I'd get a blue star on my obedience sheet, and a more qualified person would step up. Another part thought this was how God was finally going to get me through the Bible. By the end of the year I expected there might be five people who would sign on to go through it too, and we'd be Internet pals and sort of hold each other accountable. This is how I would tell my grandkids about how I came to read the whole Bible.

These were incorrect assumptions.

By the time January 1 rolled around, 257 people had emailed to say they'd be joining me. By June, the Daily Audio Bible podcast had been downloaded 200,000 times. As I write these words, the number has exceeded forty million downloads reaching every corner of the globe.

There was a strength building in me along with a battle. I'd sworn to myself that I would never be a minister and never be in ministry. I'd watched up close and personal the cost of those sorts of activities. My father remains the most ethical and godly man I've ever known, but I grew up with the keen awareness of what Christians are capable of doing

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to each other. This whole notion of never being in ministry was being challenged by the day as emails of averted suicides and restored relationships started appearing in my inbox. The Bible was working almost like magic — almost like it promised to. I'd shake my head at some of the things people were saying to me and look skyward and ask once more, "Why am I the guy? There are more qualified people for this, you know."

As my spiritual life continued to grow, my exterior world was beginning to fray. My commitment to the Bible was taking a toll on the well-worn habits of my life. My plans and the agreement that I'd made with myself about avoiding ministry were starting to come apart at the seams. By July of 2006, I nearly had a meltdown. I was so fantastically irked that God had asked me to do this, I couldn't see straight.

Yes, there was genuine spiritual fruit coming from the effort. The calls and emails of lives being changed continued to mount, and many of them reduced me to tears. But the stress level and the sense of battle surrounding the ministry was taking me out. I was already as busy as any two men, and to produce a quality podcast every single day, seven days a week had pulled forty full days out of my schedule. I didn't think it was fair. I was begging for relief.

It was then that I realized forty days was about a tenth of my year. It was an epiphany. I might be willing to give cash to the cause of Christ, but I was desperately holding onto my time. When I got my head wrapped around the fact that I'd been inadvertently holding out on God what I thought was most precious to me, I began to carve out time in my life like a front-end loader clearing a field for construction. I assumed that I would simply hold on and finish well; December 31 would be a day of celebration and liberation. I would have read the Bible all the way through — and I

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would be done with it. I'd replay the reading on the Internet and quietly frolic off into yonder fields.

Again, I was incorrect.

September rolled around, and I began to sense deeply a community developing around the Daily Audio Bible. I began to see people shouldering the loads of those they'd never met in regions of the world they'd never visited. I saw people confessing things that would get them crucified were they to bring them up in their local church. I began to realize that God wasn't asking me to read through the Bible once and then check it off my things-to-do-before-you-die list. This was to be a way of life for me.

The community was full of people who had been wounded in one way or another by religion but were not willing to give up on God. It was full of losers trying to find hope. It was full of seekers looking for the truth. It was full of people who felt they were unwelcome in church. It began to dawn on me that even though I'd sworn I'd never be in ministry, the identity that had fallen away was now being transformed. I was being invited into ministry, and I was passionate about it.

## Passion and Irony

When I was a kid, I used to sit in church and listen to missionaries tell of distant Africa or the dangers of China with a twinkle in their eye and a slideshow to prove they'd been there. Like most of my friends, I cringed at the idea. It actually made me *not* want to pray too much or get overly serious for fear God might ask me to live in a hut and drink water that people did their laundry and perhaps other business in. I talked to my father about this. His advice was that I really didn't need to worry about such things because if God were

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inviting me to Africa, I'd begin to feel a passion about it that would grow until I couldn't think about anything else. This was a big relief because all I could think about was music and girls, two subjects I was passionate about, so I felt that being a rock star would be my rightful calling.

The irony is my father was exactly right. My friendship with the Bible has taken me the scenic route from who I was to who I was created to be. My path began with an act of obedience to read the Bible every day, and it wound its way almost backward to the beginning, forcing me to deal with the stresses and compulsions of trying to carve out an identity that was mine alone with God relegated to a back-up plan. It took me back to the wounds that life can bring and invited me to compare what they were saying about me with what God was declaring over me.

The Bible isn't hocus pocus and reading it doesn't give you magical powers, but it does reveal to you who you really are and illumines a path that you were created to walk. When I began to believe its words and obey its instructions, life began to align with what it said, and this has made all the difference. My heart has been transformed completely. I find myself passionate about things that previously seemed drudgery. The neon blinking lights of culture do not seduce me as they once did. I have little use for the plastic life that makes many promises but rarely delivers on anything at all.

The apostle Paul said, "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength" (Philippians 4:11–13). This pretty much sums up what the Bible seems to do to us when we allow it access to the deeper places in

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our lives. The discontent aligns with God's will, the broken heart is healed, the chaos of the world fades to a distant drone, and life becomes vibrant because there is a reason to live beyond the next paycheck.

When I completed my first full revolution through the Bible, I recall looking in the mirror and realizing that I didn't see anything the same. The realization hit me that I had been unwittingly transformed from the inside out, and I looked at just about everything through different eyes. I looked at God differently; I looked at my wife in a new way; I saw my role as the head of my home from a much more sobering point of view; my need for community was solidified—everything had changed inside of a year.

I began throwing out the challenge to the Daily Audio Bible community that I am tossing to you now. If you will commit yourself to spending every day in the Bible for one month, you will notice something shifting inside. If you'll do it for three months, you'll feel as if major places in your heart are coming back to life. If you'll stick to it for a year, you will have been transformed from the inside out.

I've read through the Bible in large portions seven days a week for well over two thousand days consecutively. The man that I was is no longer here. I don't look at the world the same in any way. I liken this to working out at the gym. If you stick with it a month, you begin to feel healthy. Sweat it out for a quarter of a year and new lines of lean muscle begin to appear. Hang with it for a year and you'll have a new body and the energy to go along with it. Our hearts seem to work the same way. I'm inviting you to the adventure, and I am quite certain that if you expose yourself to the Scriptures every day for a while, there is no way for you to remain the same.