

"*Stop Chasing Easy* is both candid and compelling. It will reset your priorities and inspire you to greater service....this is a must-read."

- Hal Donaldson, CEO & President, Convoy of Hope



STOP CHASING EASY

**PURSUING A LIFE THAT COUNTS TODAY...
AND FOR ETERNITY**

STEPHEN BLANDINO

Foreword by Scott Wilson

**"*Stop Chasing Easy* reminds us why easy
isn't fruitful and hard isn't to be avoided."**

- Dr. Sam Chand, Author & Leadership Coach

STOP CHASING EASY

**PURSUING A LIFE THAT COUNTS TODAY...
AND FOR ETERNITY**

STEPHEN BLANDINO

Foreword by Scott Wilson

CORE

Stop Chasing Easy
Pursuing a Life That Counts Today...and For Eternity
www.stephenblandino.com
www.stopchasingeasy.com

Copyright © 2022 by Stephen Blandino

Published by The Core Media Group, Inc.
P.O. Box 2037, Indian Trail, NC 28079
www.thecoremediagroup.com

Published in association with the literary agency of WordServe Literary Group, Ltd.,
www.wordserveliterary.com

Cover Design: Stephen Blandino
Interior Design: Nadia Guy
Cover photo provided by Eoneren/Getty Images

ISBN 978-1-950465-47-7

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, scanning, or other—except for brief quotation in printed reviews, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Unless otherwise noted, scripture quotations are taken from the *Holy Bible*, New Living Translation, copyright 1996, 2004, 2007, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked MSG are taken from *THE MESSAGE*, copyright © 1993, 2002, 2018 by Eugene H. Peterson. Used by permission of NavPress. All rights reserved. Represented by Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

Scripture quotations marked NIV are taken from THE HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Scripture quotations marked TPT are from The Passion Translation®. Copyright © 2017, 2018, 2020 by Passion & Fire Ministries, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved. ThePassionTranslation.com.

Scripture quotations marked TLB are taken from The Living Bible Copyright © 1971. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All Rights Reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NCV are taken from the New Century Version®. Copyright © 2005 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NKJV are taken from the New King James Version®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations taken from the Amplified® Bible (AMP), Copyright © 2015 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. www.lockman.org.

Scripture quotations taken from the Amplified® Bible (AMPC), Copyright © 1954, 1958, 1962, 1964, 1965, 1987 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. www.lockman.org.

Printed in the United States of America.

*To Karen,
Together we're pursuing a life
that counts today...and for eternity.
I love you forever.*

Praise For *Stop Chasing Easy*



“Life is getting harder. At least for me. I thought it would get easier, but it’s not. It is getting harder because I have larger vision, greater influence, and more passion than ever. I’m guessing the same is true for you. In his latest book, *Stop Chasing Easy*, my good friend Stephen Blandino reminds us why *easy* isn’t fruitful and *hard* isn’t to be avoided. You’ll read, learn, grow, and share with all your friends—go hard!”

-Dr. Sam Chand, Leadership Coach, Consultant, and Author of *Leadership Pain and Bigger, Faster Leadership*

“Stephen Blandino’s new book, *Stop Chasing Easy*, is both candid and compelling. It will reset your priorities and inspire you to greater service. If you want to see the challenges of life from a different perspective, this is a must-read.”

-Hal Donaldson, CEO & President, Convoy of Hope, and Author of *Disruptive Compassion: Becoming the Revolutionary You Were Born to Be*

“Practical. Inspiring. Challenging. In *Stop Chasing Easy* Stephen has once again laid out a challenge to live a life that counts. Everyone can benefit from his well thought out process.”

-Darius Johnston, Lead Pastor, Movement City Church, Fort Worth, TX

“In *Stop Chasing Easy*, Stephen Blandino has given us a fresh, practical, inspirational and biblical perspective on how to live a fulfilling life that matters for eternity.”

-Steve Moore, President, Nexleader, and Author of *The Top 10 Leadership Conversations in the Bible*

“Stephen Blandino has written another gem! What a helpful and incredibly inspiring work on how to chase our God-given assignments without taking all the shortcuts our culture offers. A must read for anyone who wants to get to where we are going — God’s way!”

-Blaine Bartel, Speaker, Coach, and Author of *Death by a Thousand Lies*

“Stephen Blandino’s latest book, *Stop Chasing Easy*, is a practical call to all Christ followers about a true “road less traveled.” Stephen’s highly applicable insights map the journey for us to pursue making Jesus famous, even over ourselves. This approachable book is a must read for anyone on the journey of faith, reminding both veterans and beginners of what it means to follow Jesus in both the good and bad times of life and ministry.”

-Dr. Aaron Cole, Senior Pastor, Life Church, Wisconsin, and Chairman of the Board at Convoy of Hope

“Stephen’s writing is always practical and he’s such a great storyteller! As his lifelong friend, I can tell you that he writes what he lives. *Stop Chasing Easy* is valuable wisdom born from scripture and Stephen’s daily life as a pastor, husband, dad, and follower of Jesus.”

-Jeff Galley, Central Group Leader, LifeGroups and Missions, Life Church

“Why do most organizations stop growing? They choose to. They choose not to make the courageous decisions they need to make and have the courageous conversations they need to have! Stephen has never tried to take the easy way out. He chooses courage and hard work, and it has paid off. This book is a look into his soul...and yours, and unlocks the pathway toward progress for your ministry or organization!”

-Shawn Lovejoy, Founder and CEO of Courage to Lead and Author of *Measuring Success*

“Stephen Blandino is a profound thinker and a prolific writer who writes from a place of wisdom and humility. As an author, he possesses the rare ability to take complex concepts, unpack them in language that can be understood by all, and offer very clear application for his readers. In *Stop Chasing Easy*, Stephen provokes the reader to consider a paradigm shift, to embrace a counter cultural mindset. While our contemporary society emphasizes the pursuit of easy, we are challenged to do hard things that matter. This book will inspire and equip you with the Biblical principles and practical steps to achieve God’s will for your life and to do something that echoes in eternity.”

-Ben Sterciuc, Entrepreneur, Professor, and Founder of Vital Solutions

“American Christians too often want to live on safe, comfortable Easy Street. In *Stop Chasing Easy*, however, Stephen Blandino argues that that Easy Street is really a dead end. Drawing on Paul’s letter to the Philippians, Blandino shows that God wants Christians to travel the path from pessimism to perspective, from comfort to character, from the temporal to the eternal, and from looking back to moving forward with the gospel. *Stop Chasing Easy* is an action plan for Christians who want to live a life that makes a difference.”

-George P. Wood, Executive Editor, *Influence Magazine*

“I like being around people who do hard things. Probably because I want my life, and those closest to me to be marked by bold obedience and courageous actions. In *Stop Chasing Easy*, Stephen Blandino invites us to follow Jesus in ways where we opt into hard things rather than out of them. He presents four trades that will transform our faith and leave an eternity shaping wake.”

-Jeffery Portmann, Director, Church Multiplication Network

“Right now we have an epidemic of leaders looking for a way out. Some are so desperate for Easy Street, they self-sabotage. This book is a charge against that, and shows us the noble pursuit of what matters most on this side of eternity. Stephen is someone who challenges and inspires my faith, and in *Stop Chasing Easy* he’s done it yet again. Highly encourage leaders and pastors to get your hands on this book!”

-Kurtis Parks, Songwriter and Lead Pastor, Bridges Nashville

Stop Chasing Easy made me realize that my mindset was set on comfort. A confession I wish I never had to make, but one that we so easily fall into. Stephen Blandino did it again! This book was like a conversation about my purpose, and now I have to change my entire perspective. *Stop Chasing Easy* is a brilliant read filled with stories that will steer you towards making a greater difference than you thought was possible! The only thing wrong with this book is that I wish I had read it 15 years ago!

-Preston Ulmer, Author and Founder of The Doubters' Club

Table of Contents



Foreword	11
Introduction	13

PART 1: MINDSET

TRADE PESSIMISM FOR PERSPECTIVE	18
Chapter 1: Thankfulness: Embrace the Perspective of Gratitude	21
Chapter 2: Growth: Cultivate the Perspective of Lifelong Learning	31
Chapter 3: Opportunity: Choose the Perspective of Possibility	37
Chapter 4: Big Picture: Nurture a “See and Serve” Perspective	43
Chapter 5: Perseverance: Develop the Perspective of Grit	49

PART 2: MATURITY

TRADE COMFORT FOR CHARACTER	55
Chapter 6: Love: Un-Bankrupt Your Character	57
Chapter 7: Humble Service: Develop “Step Aside/Set Aside” Character	65
Chapter 8: Obedience: Cultivate Character that’s “All-In” and “Awe-Inspired”	73
Chapter 9: Trust: Build Character on the Edge of the Diving Board	83
Chapter 10: Honor: Express Character by Elevating Others	93

PART 3: MISSION

TRADE TEMPORAL FOR ETERNAL	101
Chapter 11: Success: See Beyond the Temporal	103
Chapter 12: Significance: Embrace Your Eternal Mission	111
Chapter 13: Focus: Prioritize Your Mission Daily	121

Chapter 14: Mentors: Seek Wisdom for Your Mission	129
Chapter 15: Heaven: Remember Your Eternal Home	137

PART 4: MOVEMENT

TRADE REGRESSION FOR PROGRESSION 143

Chapter 16: Unity: Progress with a United Team	147
Chapter 17: Selflessness: Progress with a Selfless Yes	153
Chapter 18: Courageous Prayers: Progress with God's Help	161
Chapter 19: Attitude: Progress with a Positive Attitude	169
Chapter 20: Contentment: Progress with a Spirit of Enough	175

Acknowledgments	183
Notes	185
About the Author	195
Additional Resources	197

Foreword



One thing I've learned about life and leadership is that the most significant dreams are never easy to obtain. They always come with a price, and you can't take short-cuts to get to your goal. And yet, regardless of how inspiring our dreams might be, culture has a way of enticing us to pursue Easy Street instead.

Easy Street represents a life of ease, comfort, and convenience. It avoids anything hard, and as a result, accomplishes nothing great. While on the surface Easy Street sounds enticing, the apostle Paul makes it clear: "Easy street is a dead-end street."

In *Stop Chasing Easy*, Stephen Blandino offers us a better path forward. He takes us on a powerful journey through the book of Philipians where the apostle Paul confronts Easy Street and presents us with four important trade-offs to make our lives truly count.

Stephen begins with the first trade off—our *mindset*—by challenging us to trade pessimism for perspective. Having the right perspective helps us respond to challenges in a way that maximizes our growth and impact. Then he tackles the importance of *maturity* where we learn to trade comfort for character. As our character matures, God is able to trust us with greater responsibility and expanded opportunity.

Next, Stephen calls us to embrace a *mission* where we trade the temporal for the eternal. Rather than chasing empty success, he inspires us to pursue a mission that matters today and for eternity. Finally, Stephen equips us for *movement* as we trade regression for progression.

Rather than returning to the comforts of Easy Street, we discover the keys to keep moving forward with the mission God has called us to pursue.

Stephen not only challenges us to reject the empty lies of Easy Street, but he equips us with the strategies to get from where we are to where God wants us to go. *Stop Chasing Easy* is filled with inspiring stories, rich biblical insight, and practical application.

I've known Stephen Blandino for thirty years, and I've watched him practice the principles he teaches in *Stop Chasing Easy*. He has an unwavering commitment to personal growth, and his insights on leadership and purpose will inspire you to reach your full potential.

Don't waste your time chasing Easy Street. In the end, it will only disappoint you and leave you with a lifetime of regrets. Instead, catch a vision for a mission bigger than yourself, and discover how to make your life count today—and for eternity.

-Scott Wilson, CEO of 415 Leaders and RSG Leaders, Global Pastor of Oaks Church, and Author of *Impact: Releasing the Power of Influence*

Introduction



Nobody hits the gas when they're *knowingly* driving down a dead-end street. Especially at night, in the rain, when it's foggy. Doing so is a recipe for disaster. Even if the sun is up and the sky is clear, most of us avoid dead-end streets. They get you nowhere fast and you inevitably back-track, losing precious time.

But that's rarely our problem.

Unknowingly driving down dead-end streets is our *real* problem.

Dead-end streets show up in the most unexpected places. We spend money like there's no tomorrow, crashing into a dead-end street called bankruptcy. We race down the road of safety and security, only to find ourselves in a dead-end job. We hit the gas, driving as fast as we can toward success, only to end up in a ditch after we discover our definition of success is misguided. The examples are endless.

But there's one dead-end street that we're so convinced is good (even great), that we dream of building a home, raising our kids, and pursuing our futures nestled in its promise of perfection. You and I know this enticing street as "Easy Street."

All of us long for Easy Street. It's paved with comfort and lined with safety. It travels through the trouble-free hills of security, and its road signs point to a pain-free destination where blessings abound. Who wouldn't want to live on Easy Street? Who wouldn't want their friends and family to travel with them down a road of painless prosperity? After all, Easy Street is what many of us dream of, long for, and spend

our lives pursuing. It's the good life we were always told to chase when we were growing up. And it seems like a logical, wonderful pursuit... until it turns out that Easy Street is a dead-end street.

The things we enjoy on easy street are not inherently wrong. I'm not saying that blessings are bad or that the comforts of life are evil, and I'm not suggesting that we should intentionally make things harder than they need to be. The goal in life is not to accumulate a trophy case full of pain, suffering, and hardship. What I am saying is that the pursuit of Easy Street doesn't satisfy. In the end, it leaves you empty and deceives you into believing that the purpose of life is to avoid anything difficult. Nobody remembers those who parked their lives on Easy Street. Their names drift into oblivion.

The people you and I remember, admire, and celebrate are those who invested their lives in pursuit of a noble mission. The people we uphold as heroes are the men and women who endured hardship, overcame great odds, and marched boldly into a future of significance. Yet while these are the names we remember, we often forget the price they had to pay and the fears and uncertainties they had to face.

For example, we remember the victory of David slaying Goliath, but we forget the hardship of betrayal as he ran for his life from King Saul. We remember the stunning 52-day leadership feat where Nehemiah rallied the Israelites to rebuild the wall around Jerusalem, but we forget the unrelenting ridicule he experienced along the way. We remember the magnitude of the apostle Paul's missionary journeys, divine miracles, and life-giving letters found in the New Testament, but we forget the hardship he faced when he was beaten, shipwrecked, and imprisoned. For each one of these heroes, faith flourished in the halls of hardship.

A life that counts today—and for eternity—isn't a matter of being famous or well-known. Avoiding Easy Street doesn't guarantee your life will be written about in books or celebrated at conferences. In fact, most legacies are draped in shades of anonymity. But that doesn't mean their life counts any less. You can be faithful without being famous. You can be a legacy-maker without being renowned in your field of work. Your legacy begins when you stop chasing easy.

The greatest victories of life are not won on Easy Street; they're won on the road that weaves through the mountains of resistance, the valleys of suffering, and the deserts of hardship. Everybody longs for

significance, but few are willing to travel its winding path. We would rather relax on Easy Street and simultaneously experience the reward of a disciplined life. That cozy duo doesn't exist.

Interestingly, we get a frank look at Easy Street in a New Testament letter written by the apostle Paul around A.D. 62 to the church in the city of Philippi. The opening verse begins, "This letter is from Paul and Timothy, slaves of Christ Jesus. I am writing to all of God's holy people in Philippi who belong to Christ Jesus, including the church leaders and deacons" (Philippians 1:1). Paul must have had fond memories of the church in the Roman Colony of Philippi. It was the first church he founded in Europe during his second missionary journey (Acts 16).¹ And yet, as his letter unfolds, he addresses a series of disturbing issues among the Philippian believers...issues like persecution, false teachings, and conflict in the church. But it doesn't stop there. Paul also addresses the deceptive lure of Easy Street. He writes:

*"Stick with me, friends. Keep track of those you see running this same course, headed for this same goal. There are many out there taking other paths, choosing other goals, and trying to get you to go along with them. I've warned you of them many times; sadly, I'm having to do it again. All they want is easy street. They hate Christ's Cross. **But easy street is a dead-end street.** Those who live there make their bellies their gods; belches are their praise; all they can think of is their appetites"* (Philippians 3:17-19, MSG, emphasis added).

Paul didn't mince words when he described Easy Street, and yet, it's still so enticing. I don't like pain. I'm guessing you don't either. There's nothing appealing about suffering, rejection, resistance, or discomfort. Indulging in luxury is far more desirable. Satisfying our appetite is much more appealing. But comfort and abundance were never meant to be our chief aim in life. They're wonderful blessings but horrible taskmasters, because the appetite for comfort is rarely satisfied.

The purpose of life is not to chase pain, but it's not to avoid pain either. Author and pastor Louie Giglio once said, "We don't choose discomfort, and that's why God usually chooses it for us."² God is good...so good that He calls us out of mediocrity and into a life of significance. It just so happens that a life of significance is always

accompanied with some form of hardship. You can't have one without the other.

We desire a pain-free and prosperity-filled life. We seek after a problem-free path that leads us to a promise-filled future. Simply put, we spend so much of our lives pursuing Easy Street, and yet, Jesus—the greatest example of significance the world has ever known—travelled nowhere close to Easy Street. Instead, he pursued the most important

Easy street is a dead-end street.

eternal mission known to humanity. But it came with a high price—one pierced with nails and woven with a crown of thorns. It wasn't easy, but it was more than worth it.

The question is, are we willing to follow His example? Are we willing to stop chasing easy and pursue a life that counts both today and for eternity?

Maybe you're pushing back, remembering Jesus' words when He said, "For my yoke is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light" (Matthew 11:30). When Jesus spoke these words, He was contrasting what it was like to be His disciple versus that of the Pharisees. In fact, Jesus once said of the Pharisees, "They crush people with unbearable religious demands and never lift a finger to ease the burden" (Matthew 23:4). But Jesus offered a different yoke, one that was fitted with grace and love. That didn't mean life would be problem-free, nor did it void Jesus' words when He said, "If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross, and follow me" (Matthew 16:24). As William Barclay observed, "It is not that the burden is easy to carry; but it is laid on us in love."³ God's grace and love gives us the power to follow Jesus and to fulfill His purpose for our lives. It doesn't erase "hard" from life.

So, what is "Easy Street"? "Easy Street" is a mindset. It's an approach to life that says, "If it's *easy* it must be good, and if it's *hard* it must be bad." Easy Street is an attitude that looks for short-cuts and makes avoiding difficulty the highest priority of life. It feels entitled to perks, influence, and opportunity without having to pay the price of discipline and risk, or endure the struggles of pain, hardship, and suffering. Easy Street is also an appetite. It's consumed with the temporal, and it gives little thought to the eternal. Every good and perfect gift comes from God (James 1:17), but Easy Street elevates the blessings of God

over the God of blessings. Easy Street makes a god out of easy. It puts conformity before Christ and comfort before character. An uncontrolled appetite for easy is the Achilles' heel of Easy Street. When easy becomes the carrot, we chase it all the way to a dead-end street.

So, if we're going to stop chasing easy and pursue a life that counts, where do we start? The apostle Paul provides a roadmap in his letter to the Philippians. Yes, he clearly states that "easy street is a dead-end street," but he also paints a picture of what it looks like to pursue significance. A closer look at the four chapters in his letter reveals four keys to stop chasing easy, coupled with four unique trade-offs:

1. Mindset: Trade Pessimism for Perspective (Philippians 1)
2. Maturity: Trade Comfort for Character (Philippians 2)
3. Mission: Trade Temporal for Eternal (Philippians 3)
4. Movement: Trade Regression for Progression (Philippians 4)

These four keys—mindset, maturity, mission, and movement—are the roadmap for steering clear of the deceptive lure of Easy Street. In other words, to live a life that counts, we must cultivate the right mindset, continually grow in maturity, commit to an eternal mission, and create forward movement. So, if you're tired of chasing the empty promises of ease, comfort, and security and you're eager to do something that matters both today and for eternity, keep reading.

In the pages that follow, we'll discover Paul's insights to live a life of significance, and we'll learn how to successfully navigate the hardships that accompany it. We'll discover how to travel the road that builds impact without losing heart when obstacles, roadblocks, and resistance rear their ugly heads. Together, we'll stop chasing easy and trade it for a life that truly counts.

So, where do we begin our journey to a life that counts? It starts with mindset, as described in Philippians chapter one. Without a change in mindset, we remain trapped by the lies of Easy Street. On Easy Street, we let old thinking patterns rob meaning and purpose from our lives and bad attitudes and toxic thoughts undermine the plans God has for us. The Easy Street mindset leads us to settle for mediocrity.

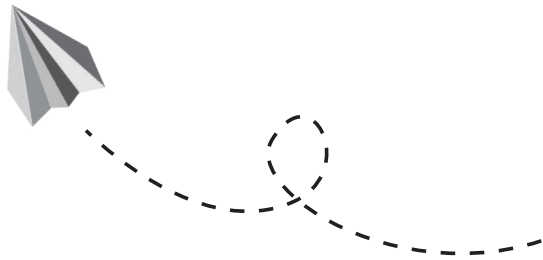
However, when our mindset changes, we're able to see a way out of the neighborhood where Easy Street keeps us confined. We're empowered with an attitude that rises above riskless nonsense and boldly asks, "What if?" What does that mindset look like? Philippians one reveals that it's a...

- Thankfulness Mindset
- Growth Mindset
- Opportunity Mindset
- Big Picture Mindset
- Perseverance Mindset

These mindsets take the limits off your life. They are oriented around positivity and possibility. They enable us to trade our pessimism for a perspective that breaks through the fears and the lies that keep us tied to Easy Street. This is the first key to making your life count today... and for eternity. Let's get started.

Part 1: Mindset

Trade Pessimism for
Perspective



Chapter 1

Thankfulness

Embrace the Perspective of Gratitude



It's the week of Thanksgiving as I write these words. People are heading out on vacation to visit family and friends. Office work is winding down, ovens are heating up, and recipes are being dusted off. Some are boarding flights the day before Thanksgiving (one of the busiest travel days of the year). Others are expecting family to arrive any moment. As everyone gathers around the table to give thanks, hearts will be warmed with the blessings we enjoy.

But then something strange happens.

Before the day ends, we start ramping up for an early start to *Black Friday*. The deal-buster shopping day after Thanksgiving (which often begins Thanksgiving night), Black Friday is where people hunt for the best deals on the latest gifts and gadgets. Although I usually stay home on Black Friday, I have nothing against those brave shoppers who venture into the fray. But I do find it bizarre. Each year we see the casualties of the craziness. Some people have even been trampled to death as shoppers fight to get their hands on the best bargain.

It's a modern-day version of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. The same people who were so nice at the Thanksgiving table have transformed into beastly shopping bullies. Kind of ironic, don't you think? A holiday of *gratitude* is followed by a hectic day of *greed*. How quickly we forget.

Gratitude has also been replaced by complaints. We complain about everything from people to politics, homework to office work, and date

nights to late nights. Heck, we even complain when the doctor that saved our lives doesn't check us out of the hospital quick enough. The act of complaining has become so commonplace and yet doesn't eliminate our problems, it only *extends* them.

We forget gratitude quickest when traveling down the streets of pain and suffering. The apostle Paul certainly understood this when he was under house arrest, chained to a Roman soldier, writing his letter to the church in Philippi. He was suffering, facing the threat of death, and he understood that his words to the Philippians might be his last. Paul doesn't open his letter with a gripe session, although he certainly could have. He could have griped about the length of his stay (likely imprisoned for two years). He could have complained about the uncomfortable quarters, being chained to a Roman guard, or the lack of decent food and a comfortable pillow. But he didn't. Easy Street wasn't even on his radar. Instead, Paul opened his letter with these unlikely words of gratitude:

May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you grace and peace. Every time I think of you, I give thanks to my God. Whenever I pray, I make my requests for all of you with joy, for you have been my partners in spreading the Good News about Christ from the time you first heard it until now. And I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns. So it is right that I should feel as I do about all of you, for you have a special place in my heart. You share with me the special favor of God, both in my imprisonment and in defending and confirming the truth of the Good News. God knows how much I love you and long for you with the tender compassion of Christ Jesus. (Philippians 1:2-8, emphasis added)

Notice the words Paul used to describe his mindset—thanks, joy, special place, favor, and love. Those sound like the words you'd hear on Easy Street, not while chained to a Roman soldier. Even though Paul's body was imprisoned, his mind was not. He faced his hardships by giving thanks for the good in the midst of the bad. That mindset served Paul well as he pursued a life that counts.

Good vs. Bad

Giving thanks is not how most of us respond to adversity, but Paul's perspective wasn't shaped by adversity; it was shaped by eternity. He was able to see beyond the physical hardship and discovered the *good*.

"Good" is open for interpretation.

Most of us translate "good" to mean *easy* and "hard" to mean *bad*. If something makes life easier for us, we chalk it up as an acceptable definition of "good." But if something feels hard, we immediately throw it in the "bad" column. The problem is, we assume God takes the same approach.

He doesn't.

God's "good" is often tied to our growth, and the things that make us grow the most are rarely easy. The question is, can you, like Paul, be thankful during the hard times, recognizing these are the situations and seasons that lead to the greatest growth.

Something that helped me recognize the *good*, when things are *hard*, was a challenge I received a few years ago. I was a part of a coaching cohort with a group of pastors, and during one of our meetings our coach challenged us to keep a "Gratitude Journal" for thirty days. I thought, "No big deal, this will be easy enough." Each night, before going to bed, I would open my iPad and write down two things I was thankful for that day. When I started the journal, I focused on the big things.

"God, I'm grateful for salvation in Jesus Christ."

"God, I'm thankful for my wife Karen and our daughter Ashley and her husband Dylan."

But something unexpected happened over the course of that month. I suddenly became cognizant of the small things that I was thankful for as well. One night I wrote down how I was thankful for an unexpected dinner that Karen and I had with some friends we hadn't seen in a long time. Another time, I was thankful for rest, and another time I was thankful for Italian food.

God's "good" is often tied to our growth, and the things that make us grow the most are rarely easy.

The longer I journaled, the more I began to express gratitude for the simple things in life. And because it was a *daily* practice, it forced me to find something good, even when

the day was hard.

A few months later I gave this same challenge to our church: “What would happen if you took the next thirty days to write down two things you are thankful for in a gratitude journal? How would your perspective, and your life, change?”

Nearly a year later, I was having a conversation with a lady in our congregation when she suddenly said, “Oh, I can write that in my gratitude journal.”

That struck me.

Gratitude journal?

She was still writing two things she was grateful for each day in her journal. The next week, I asked her to tell me more about her gratitude journey over that year.

She looked at me and said, “Each day, after I spend some time praying and reading Scripture, I open my journal and write down two things I’m grateful for that day.”

“How has that impacted your life?” I asked.

“There’s so much pain and difficulty in the world,” she said, “that it helps me *focus* on the good.”

There it was—*perspective*. Deliberately choosing to give thanks for the good, despite how dark the day might look. This simple practice had changed her life.

My wife, Karen took up the gratitude journal challenge as well, but she put a twist to it. She said, “I’m going to write down two things I’m thankful for—one is something I can see, and one is something I cannot see.” I found her comment curious, so I asked her to explain. “I want to thank God for something that has already happened (something I can see with my eyes). But I also want to thank God for something that hasn’t happened yet, but that I’m praying and believing God will do (something I can’t see yet).”

For Karen, giving thanks had become an *act of gratitude* and an *act of faith*. I believe that God finds delight in that perspective. And if you think that gratitude is overrated, consider the science behind it.

Research has shown that people who keep a gratitude journal feel more optimistic, feel better about their lives, exercise more, and have fewer visits to the doctor.⁴ And in a study of adults who reported clinically low levels of mental health (and who were seeking mental health counseling), those who also wrote one letter of gratitude per week for

three weeks, experienced significantly better mental health four weeks, and again twelve weeks, after their writing exercise ended.⁵

Three Types of Thanks

Why is gratitude such an important mindset if you're going to stop chasing easy and start pursuing a life that counts? Without an attitude of gratitude, you'll complain each moment life gets hard. Your thinking will turn south, and your negative perspective will cast a shadow over the possibilities that exist beyond Easy Street. Proverbs 4:23 give us a clear warning: "Be careful what you think, because your thoughts run your life" (NCV). Without a perspective that's soaked in a spirit of thankfulness, complaining thoughts will drive your life back to Easy Street.

Without an attitude of gratitude, you'll complain each moment life gets hard. Your thinking will turn south, and your negative perspective will cast a shadow over the possibilities that exist beyond Easy Street.

So, what does thankfulness look like in our day-to-day lives? As I've reflected on the importance of gratitude, I've come to discover three forms (or maybe even three levels) of thankfulness as it relates specifically to adversity. Each one is more difficult than the previous, and honestly, from a human point of view, they seem progressively irrational.

1. END Thanks

This type of thanks usually occurs *after* something—whether good or bad—has happened. Paul practiced END Thanks when he expressed gratitude for the Philippians' partnership with the Gospel (Philippians 1:3-5). But END Thanks also shows up *after* tests and trials. For example, we might express END Thanks when we say, "Thank God I don't have to take that class again!" or "Thank God that sickness is behind me!" Simply put, "END Thanks" happens when we're out of the woods or out of the storm. It's how we give God thanks for helping us, healing us, or meeting us in our darkest hour.

2. IN Thanks

The second type of thanks occurs *during* tests and trials. Paul captured this form of thankfulness in 1 Thessalonians 5:18 when he said, "Be thankful *in* all circumstances, for this is God's will for you who belong

to Christ Jesus” (emphasis added). Notice, Paul wasn’t selective about his thankfulness. He gave thanks in ALL circumstances. “IN Thanks” doesn’t make sense IN our pain. It requires courage and a willingness to see our circumstances from an entirely different perspective.

3. FOR Thanks

The final type of thanks feels the most irrational and unrealistic. This form of thanksgiving can take weeks, months, even years before it is realized, and there’s no shame if you find yourself struggling with what I’m about to share with you. “FOR Thanks” occurs when we choose to thank God FOR the trial because of the *gifts* we received in it.

I’m not saying that God is the source of your pain. I’m not saying that God is the cause of your suffering, or that he takes joy in seeing you weep, because He isn’t, and He doesn’t.

There are many causes of pain, but God isn’t one of them. Satan, bad decisions, people with evil intentions, and unfair circumstances outside of anyone’s control are the cause of pain. But God is good, and God is the cause of every good gift (James 1:17). What we often forget is that God is so good, that He doesn’t waste pain, regardless of its cause. Instead, God meets us in the middle of our pain and offers us a gift.

The apostle Paul gives us a personal example. In his second letter to the church in Corinth, Paul expressed “FOR Thanks” when he described his “thorn in the flesh” (or his handicap). He wrote:

Because of the extravagance of those revelations, and so I wouldn’t get a big head, I was given the gift of a handicap to keep me in constant touch with my limitations. Satan’s angel did his best to get me down; what he in fact did was push me to my knees. No danger then of walking around high and mighty! At first, I didn’t think of it as a gift, and begged God to remove it. Three times I did that, and then he told me, “My grace is enough; it’s all you need. My strength comes into its own in your weakness.” Once I heard that, I was glad to let it happen. I quit focusing on the handicap and began appreciating the gift. It was a case of Christ’s strength moving in on my weakness. Now I take limitations in stride, and with good cheer, these limitations that cut me down to size—abuse, accidents, opposition, bad breaks. I just let Christ take over! And so the weaker I get, the stronger I become. (2 Corinthians 12:7-10, MSG, emphasis added)

Notice the phrases Paul used to describe his trial: “gift of a handicap,” “I was glad to let it happen,” “appreciating the gift,” and “with good cheer.” Paul’s attitude doesn’t sound like a rational response to pain and hardship. In another passage, Paul said, “I am glad when I suffer for you in my body, for I am participating in the sufferings of Christ that continue for his body, the church.”⁶ Paul’s perspective allowed him to see his hardships correctly and give thanks FOR his tests and trials—even though they didn’t come from God—because it was the very place where he received God’s good gifts of *grace* and *strength*.

Pain isn't a gift from God, but within the pain He offers us a gift. It's up to us whether we'll accept His gift or not.

Pain isn’t a gift from God, but within the pain He offers us a gift. It’s up to us whether we’ll accept His gift or not. FOR Thanks help us recognize the gift.⁷ Let me give you a personal example.

Heart Failure

In 2014, I faced a hardship that introduced me to gratitude in a measure I had never known before. On March 16, my heart’s mitral valve unexpectedly ruptured just nine days after my annual heart check-up. My lungs filled with fluid and I simultaneously experienced heart and pulmonary failure. I was sedated, intubated, and transported by helicopter to the heart center at Harris Hospital near downtown Fort Worth. The doctors performed open heart surgery, installed a mechanical valve, and I spent eight days in the hospital before returning home for a six-week recovery.⁸

Less than three months after my surgery, my understanding of thankfulness had completely changed. I was filled with deep gratitude to my wife, daughter, family, friends, pastors, doctors, and nurses who supported me beyond imagination. And, of course, I was thankful to the Lord for sparing my life and helping me recover.

However, gratitude also showed up in a strangely different, unexpected way during this journey. Yes, I encountered “END Thanks” when the entire ordeal was finally over. And I experienced “IN Thanks” as so many friends and family extended God’s love in the most tangible ways. They prayed for me, brought meals to our family, and stepped up

to help carry the load during my absence. But I'll never forget reading Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 12 and sensing the Lord say to me, "Can you thank me *for* your heart failure?"

That stopped me in my tracks.

"God, what on earth do you mean, thank you *for* my heart failure?"

It just doesn't sound right, much less feel right. I'm not looking to sign-up for heart failure or pulmonary failure again, and I certainly wouldn't want to put my family through those critical moments of uncertainty again. Besides, God didn't *cause* the heart failure. Why would I thank him *for* it?

That's when it suddenly hit me.

When thanking God for the trial, I was actually thanking Him for the *gifts* I experienced in the trial—gifts that included greater trust, bigger perspective, answers to prayer, personal and spiritual growth, and a deeper connection to my family and friends. It was all a matter of perspective. I could either focus on the *trial* or I could focus on the *gift* within the trial, it was my choice.

Again, FOR Thanks sounds irrational and illogical. In no way am I making light of your pain, abuse, brokenness, hardship, or persecution. God did not cause my heart failure, and He did not cause the horrific events that still leave you feeling violated, betrayed, forgotten, and victimized. But when pain strikes, God doesn't run for cover. He offers gifts to help us get through what we're going through. Like Paul, those gifts may be God's grace and strength in new measures and new ways. Or it might be a friend, a loved one, or a kind neighbor. It could be as simple as a co-worker's words of encouragement, or it could be as thorough as a counselor's wisdom to help you navigate the chaos. Whatever God's gifts look like, I promise He's faithful to give them to you during your most difficult seasons.

Thanks in the Thick of It

Without an attitude of gratitude, you'll complain about everything the moment it gets hard. It takes no effort whatsoever to complain about our problems or to dream about the false promises of Easy Street. That's why a mindset of gratitude is so imperative. If you're going to pursue a life that counts today—and for eternity—giving thanks in the thick of hardship equips you with the perspective that will keep you in the game.

What's your plan to embrace the mindset of thankfulness as you prepare to leave the safety of Easy Street? Why not start with a gratitude journal? It will help you put "END Thanks," "IN Thanks," and "FOR Thanks" into practice. It will turn thanksgiving into an act of gratitude *and* an act of faith. Most importantly, it will fortify your heart when you feel discouraged, and it will help you mine for hidden gifts when the path forward becomes difficult.