

I'm perfect

The Imperfect Pastor*

*Discovering joy in
our limitations through
a daily apprenticeship
with Jesus

Zack Eswine

“It’s hard to imagine a book packed with more grace and insight into the extraordinary life of the ordinary pastor. So I’ll quit trying and just read Zack Eswine’s *The Imperfect Pastor* again. No one today shows more insight into the perils and joys of everyday ministry in the local church—a refreshingly honest and beautifully written meditation.”

Mark Galli, Editor-in-Chief, *Christianity Today*

“I wish I’d read this book twenty-five years ago when I first began to consider pastoral ministry. The ground Zack covers is vital for novices and senior pastors alike. He steers us well clear of dangerous ambitions, absurd expectations, and corrosive work patterns. But he does so with wit, self-deprecation, and deeply felt realism. Eswine reignited in me a love for the Perfect Shepherd, who has the extraordinary grace to include imperfect shepherds in his kingdom work. This should be on everyone’s must-read list!”

Mark Meynell, Associate Director (Europe), Langham Preaching;
author, *A Wilderness of Mirrors*

“Zack Eswine has done it again. In *The Imperfect Pastor*, he extends the hand of brotherhood to every minister of the gospel. Too many weary soldiers guard the front lines; Eswine reminds us all that Christ is our guard and defender, and that strength in him is our strongest place.”

Lore Ferguson, writer; graphic designer; speaker

“This book needs to be read by every pastor, to rescue us and call us back to what matters. The expectation of large, famous, and fast ministry in a post-Christian culture can be a destructive burden. Zack’s wisdom is a healing balm bringing needed grace to help us minister with patience and endurance.”

Peter Boyd, Pastor, Shore Presbyterian Church, Auckland, New Zealand

“This is simply the best book on pastoral ministry I have ever read. In an upside-down ministry world that idolizes stardom and size, Zack opens our eyes to the only things that really matter. Prayerfully read and reread this beautiful, poignant meditation, and you will discover joy and true greatness in the midst of your extraordinary, ordinary life.”

Ken Shigematsu, Pastor, Tenth Church Vancouver; best-selling author,
God in My Everything

“Here is wisdom reminiscent of the gifted preachers of another era but expressed in the sound and tone of today. Here is pastoral theology written, preached, and lived out in the very real and checkered life of Zack himself. Here is humane and godly counsel. You should read this book!”

Leighton Ford, President, Leighton Ford Ministries

“Zack Eswine pokes his prose into a very sensitive area we pastors and leaders hate to discuss: we draw our sense of identity and esteem from the number of people who come to our churches, the size of the offering, and our social media followers. Yet this is a book filled not with condemnation but rather with winsome encouragement. I could feel Zack’s arms around me as God used him to point the way forward—toward a path of healing and hope.”

Bryan Loritts, Pastor for Preaching and Mission, Trinity Grace Church, New York City; Founder and President, The Kainos Movement; Editor, *Letters to a Birmingham Jail*

“*The Imperfect Pastor* is a refreshing reminder of what ministry is all about: walking with Jesus, recognizing our own desires and limitations, and reflecting a listening presence, hopeful patience, and restorative purpose. Zack’s personal experiences related to the ups and downs of ministry, along with his contemplative approach to spirituality, will challenge and encourage anyone who seeks to minister in the name of Jesus.”

Wendy Der, Director of Mobilization in Mexico, Avance Internacional

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a Daily Apprenticeship with Jesus

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The Imperfect Pastor: Discovering Joy in Our Limitations through a Daily Apprenticeship with Jesus

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*For Mamaw, Papaw, and Jessica
I look forward to introducing you*

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I am grateful for Riverside Church, out of whose life together in our daily and ordinary ways I write this book.

Introduction

I became a pastor. But I didn't know how to be one.

The Serpent saw this. He seized his opportunity.

“You can be like God,” he said. And I, the fool, believed him.

Looking back over these twenty years of pastoral work, the words of a poet come to mind. They set the stage for conversation I'd like to have with you.

Chances are, the preacher reasons,

You'll be more willing to listen

Now that your city has fallen from what it was.¹

I'm listening more. I invite you in your fallen city to join me.

When I started, I did not know that a pastoral vocation in Jesus would limit me, slow me down, and painfully undo the misguided mentoring of my life. Now, I know that my success and joy as a pastor depend upon this.

So do yours.

The book you hold in your hands is, in some measure, an updated—and shortened—rewrite of my earlier work *Sensing Jesus*. I hesitated when I was invited to rewrite the earlier volume. Like any writer, I contemplated the loss of prized sentences, and I flinched. But now I give thanks for the opportunity and the effort. This new work, *The Imperfect Pastor*, is half the size of *Sensing Jesus*; nevertheless, one-third of the content is brand-new. *Sensing Jesus* will find its place in used bookstores and academic libraries, while *The Imperfect Pastor* will stand on its own with distinct language, size, content, and purpose. I hope that in its pages you will find the grace of Jesus for your life and ministry.

PART ONE

The Calling We Pursue

Vocation

The place He gives us to inhabit.
The few things He gives us to do in that place.
The persons He invites us to know there.
These our days,
our lingering.

It is enough then,
this old work of hands
His and ours
to love here,
to learn His song here,

like crickets that scratch
and croon,
from nooks unseen,

carrying on with
what they were made for,
the night craft of
unnoticed faces,
with our wings unobserved,

until He walks again
in the cool of the day,
to reclaim our names.

And we then,
with our stitched white flags,
will from behind His evergreens,
finally unhide ourselves
and with Him
we will stroll once more.

Desire

He thinks only of what he wants and he does not ask himself whether he ought to want it.

BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX

I remember sitting out on the carport at a picnic table at my grandparents' house in Henryville, Indiana. I was in the third year of my first pastorate. I had taken a brief study leave to write my first article for a ministry journal. Mamaw, glad for my extended visit, made the spice cake she always made when I came to town. As I took up my pen and looked down Lake Road, I felt what any person surely feels when he gets to do something that he knows he was made to do—that noble pleasure of feeling that somehow we are enough for the day, that the day cannot contain us because we will outshine it. In my case, I felt a growing desire to write something of significance for pastors. I wanted it to be exceptional.

That sabbatical week I devoured the subject that thrilled me most at the time—early Princeton Seminary and preaching. This probably sounds annoying or incredibly boring to some. But to me the subject was like Mamaw's spice cake. The first principal of Princeton, Archibald Alexander, and his son seemed to have so much to say that fed my soul about preaching. It offered delight-

ful food for the wounded pastor I was becoming. Looking back, it sobers me to realize how new I was in ministry, yet how deeply tired I was already.

But somehow, the feeling that we are doing something significant can enable us to tell ourselves that things are not as bad as they seem. A good memory can likewise join this feeling. Together they can fuel a respite of hope. Dr. Calhoun had regularly shared with me his living room and some tea. Over the months, he had passed his love of old Princeton on to me (and to others). With such a memory joining an opportunity to write and Mamaw's spice cake right in front of me, I felt energized. I had always hoped to change the world. I desired to.

Looking back now, I thought this kind of desire was made for an epic or grand moment. (Exceptional persons are not bound to a life of unexceptional moments, right?) Such epic moments when realized would leave nothing the same. Heaven itself will have touched us. This idea of a grand swoop flirted with my desires. The epic aspiration began to hold hands with my attempts to preach.

I was not alone in this. My colleagues with whom I graduated from seminary shared these cravings and dreams. Nor was this unreasonable in my mind. After all, my professors and my fellow students publicly recognized my preaching and affirmed these gifts. I had also read of how God attended preachers with his Spirit in the past, and I desired that he might do so with us in the present. But two years into my first church, all my preaching seemed to do at the time was give a lot of people cause for checking out other churches.

So I began to desire finding an epic moment outside the pulpit. I'd try to pastor people to this grand end. But the level of strife that existed among my elders confounded me. I was hitting that stretch of highway in the desert that most new pastors must drive through in the first two to four years at a new call—the desert when most of us bail out. But I didn't realize that then. Nor did I realize the large brokenness a little church can muster. At the time, I did not

understand what I now feel compelled to tell you. Pastors are no different from anybody. We too can get “lost in our longings.”¹

Desire

The Serpent knows this. The trees in the garden were desirable, good, and pleasant (Gen. 2:9). But when Eve saw the one tree, she craved it in a way that was bent. She and Adam sought to consume it apart from God and in spite of his stated purpose for that tree (Gen. 3:6). They pined for a desirable thing but in all the wrong ways. We can do this with ministry too.

Make no mistake. Desire is a firework. Handled wisely it fills the night sky with light, color, beauty, and delight. Handle desire poorly, and it can burn your neighborhood down (James 4:1–2).

I know firsthand about the beauty and arson of ministerial desires. I know what it is to get lost in these desires and to need finding again in Jesus. I was one of those guys to whom people would say, “You are among the finest preachers I have heard, and you are so young. I can’t wait to hear you in ten years.” Well, ten years have long since passed, and I have not become what was once projected.

I do not mean this morbidly. I hope you will soon see that I am writing to you as one who feels profoundly rescued from himself by the abounding grace of Jesus. But the stale waters of celebrity, consumerism, and immediate gratification had infiltrated my drinking water. My pastoral desires had become tainted, and I did not realize it. A lot of us don’t. We and our congregations suffer for it.

So let’s establish the fact that pastoral vocation begins with desire. The apostle Paul says as much:

The saying is trustworthy: If anyone *aspires* to the office of overseer, he *desires* a noble task. (1 Tim. 3:1)

Peter agrees: “Shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight,” he says. “not under compulsion, but *willingly*” (1 Pet. 5:2).

Reflect with me for a moment if you can. When did you first make your desire for the ministry known? Were you older or younger? Who did you tell? For me, I was in second grade at Saint Anthony's Elementary School. Mrs. Canter had written a question on the chalkboard: "What do you want to be when you grow up?"

I answered, and Mrs. Canter patched two words together in chalk for all to see: "Zack—Priest."

I had not yet associated pastoral desire with the love of money (Luke 16:14), networking for position (Matt. 23:6–7), the lust for power (Acts 8:18–21), or the advancement of my own name. I did not know yet that serving God could be used, even by me, as means to try, in line with the Serpent's old whisper, to become like God (Gen. 3:5). All I knew as an eight-year-old was that I desired to serve God with my life in vocational ministry. I wasn't restless then, not at all. It was marvelous.

Since then, I've learned something, though not as a priest it turns out, but as a pastor. There are many kinds of desires at work in this world, and not all of them are kind.

What If You're an Unnamed Mountain?

My desires began to run after the wrong kind of mentoring. I interned as a youth pastor at a small church, the place of my beginnings of pastoral ministry. My pastor spent hours and hours mentoring me for three years. But I noticed something. As we walked into regular regional gatherings of pastors and church leaders, he and I entered quietly while other pastors periodically entered the room to a kind of fanfare. They were the large-church pastors. Some of them had written books, moderated assemblies, and preached for thousands. Though years later I would know something of that kind of fanfare, my faithful mentoring pastor never would.

Along the way, I found out some of the reasons why. I was part of a team that offered an annual conference for pastors. The year we tried to resist a celebrity mind-set, we barely funded the confer-

ence. Our speakers were longtime, veteran ministry leaders who were nonetheless unknown. The registration for the conference was woeful.

The next year we returned to getting big names so people would come. Sure enough, it was packed. In our land, a pastor's experience and wisdom have little monetary value unless we know his name. Where did that idea come from? I don't know. But take note. The message was loud and clear for me as a young minister in training.

I'm trying to tell you that by the time I was twenty-six and finishing seminary, the purity of my second-grade desire to serve God for his own sake was fading, and I knew it. It was becoming quite clear to me that if I was to prove successful in ministry, I needed to do something great, and I needed to define something great in terms of how large, famous, and fast I could accomplish it.

Looking back on those early introductions to pastoral culture, an anecdote shared between the famed Richard Foster and his son, Nathan, now comes to mind. Nathan was eager to quickly conquer the famous mountains of Colorado. While resting on the rocky side of one of those celebrity mountains, Richard pointed his son to the beauty of an adjacent mountain:

Nate, see that mountain? It has a stunning ridge. That's a perfectly good peak. If it stood a few feet higher, you would know its name and want to climb it. As it stands, it's an unnamed mountain that no one bothers with.²

Desiring to Do a Great Thing for God

So by the time I was in the third year of my first pastorate, eating spice cake on Mamaw's porch, I was growing increasingly restless. Like many of my colleagues, I craved making an epic difference for God in my vocation as fast as possible. Contrast the synonyms for *ordinary* with the synonyms for *epic*, and who can blame us?

I aspire to serve as a common, ordinary, mundane, normal, routine, average, usual, and humdrum pastor for an unexceptional,

commonplace, everyday, run-of-the-mill congregation. As a preacher I am unremarkable and middling.

Or:

I aspire to serve as an Olympian, uncommon, surpassing, extraordinary, special pastor for a marvelous, remarkable, singular, exceedingly great congregation. As a preacher I am stellar and unforgettable.

I felt anything but stellar. *Maybe this article is just the beginning, I thought. I'm not an epic pastor or preacher. But maybe I could write what just might change the world for God.*

That was twenty years ago. I did publish that article, but I still had to brush my teeth the next day. In the years since, I've seen people come to saving faith in Jesus, marriages healed, addictions overcome. I've traveled, preached, gotten a PhD, taught, counseled, and written books. Jesus has revealed himself so kindly, truly, presently, and powerfully. But as I mentioned, there is beauty and arson in desire. Of those attending my ordination to the ministry those years ago, one pastor mentor took his own life, and another is no longer in the ministry due to moral misconduct. One elder and one deacon were painfully disciplined, one for raging mistreatment and the other for a devastating affair. Other friendships eventually gave way amid the ugly politics of ministry. And twelve years after my public vow to gospel ministry, my marriage ended. The only thing large, famous, and fast about me and much of my ministerial crowd is our brokenness.

When I spoke desire for ministry in Mrs. Canter's second-grade class, I would never have imagined that my future would require me to learn to do life as a single dad with primary care of my three children amid a community of "scandal" and rumor. I've had to take a long, hard look in the mirror of my own tainted desires. I'm asking you to do the same in hopes of sparing you the cost I've paid. Being declared "innocent in the matter" didn't remove the whispers or the slanders either in the community or in my own

head. Neither did these remove what it meant for each of my three children and me to daily learn together to see the sun again and smile. But take note, in case you now believe that you are not like me. I've also had to examine those who projected what I was "supposed" to become in their eyes in ten years' time. You will have to contend with this too. We have to take a hard look at the "large things famously and fast" desire that congregational members and pastoral constituencies seem constantly to yearn for. The absence of our attentiveness to these misfired desires is making us a ragged bunch.

So now here I sit, all these years later, typing these words as pastor of a little church in Missouri. An irony whispers to my thoughts. I am hoping that what I write to you now will prove significant. I shake my head and almost laugh—that short exhale of a laugh through the nose. Funny how I once thought that significance lay somewhere beyond Henryville and Mamaw's presence—a local place and an ordinary love—as if an article in a journal or a pulpit sermon would do more to glorify God in my generation than attending faithfully to either of these other created gifts of his.

Conversations with a Young Pastor

In this light, listen in for a moment. Years later, on the other side of the ruins, I found myself listening to a young pastor's desires. I saw and heard myself in him. Maybe you will too.

"No matter what, I want to go all out for the ministry," he said.

His passion inspired me, but the context worried me. We had just spoken at length about his difficulty as a husband and father along with a recurring bend within the road of his soul. I took a breath and paused, staring down at the bowl of pad thai in front of me.

"If the ministry is what we will go all out for," I began, "then how we define 'the ministry' seems important, you know?" I took a bite and chewed.

"I just want to preach the Word," he declared. "No matter what

happens, as long as I keep saying what God said, he will bless it. I know God has given me purpose.”

There was urgency in his voice, hurry in his eyes. Both were like a mirror to me. I twirled peanut and noodles around my fork (the chopsticks had long ago begun their humbling work with me). I was hunting for words.

“Yes, God will bless his Word,” I ventured. “You do have purpose,” I affirmed.

I lingered more with the bowl, trying to find what to leave unsaid. “I spoke at a conference once,” I began. “I preached five times. It was one of those moments when God’s presence was tangibly felt. In fact, after that particular conference, the rest of my year was planned full with preaching all over the country. God does bless his Word. I’ve seen him do it firsthand.”

“But,” I said, and then stopped. I stood at a crossroads in my mind, wondering how to say what was next. “On my way home after that last sermon amid the divine blessing of that night, my wife of fifteen years told me she was leaving me.”

There was a quiet between my young friend and me. I sipped my Coke. I was afraid I’d said too much too soon. He knew the circumstances of my life. But was he ready to learn something of what such circumstances might have to teach us? Moreover, was I ready to try and give some kind of voice to it?

“I’m trying to suggest,” I said, “that ‘the ministry’ involves more than the question of whether our sermons are powerful and we influence crowds of people. Going all out for God means more than going all out for sermons and crowds.”

Later that night we stood beneath the stars.

“When I get back home,” he said, “I finally begin as a pastor. Maybe soon I can get to seminary and get equipped and then become a professor somewhere. I can’t wait to get there. Two years as a pastor and then . . .”

I found myself staring at the gravel driveway like it was a bowl of pad thai. I searched again for what to leave unsaid. I heard my

voice in his. He was restless to do something great for God. His pastoral work was a platform to use to help him get somewhere other than where he was. And yet he did not know how to include changing diapers or holding his wife's hand in his definition of greatness.

“What if you are there already?” I tried. “I mean, what if you are already what God has in mind for you? You are a blessing to people in Jesus already. What if the place of ministry where you are with the family that you have is the place where God means for you to be with him?”

His face seemed pained.

“Please forgive me if I'm saying too much,” I said. Then I paused. “It's just that you are talking to a man,” I mustered, “who got everything he dreamed of and lost most of what really mattered, and all of this in the name of going all out for the ministry and serving God. I'm just trying to say that it seems really important to know what we mean by ‘the ministry’ if we are going to go all out for it. My desire is that what you are going all out for is actually the thing God intends with the definition God gives it.”

He looked away into the sky again. “I don't know where to start with all that,” he protested.

Homeless in Our Living Rooms

The following week, I sat for lunch with an up-and-coming pastor. The church he served was only four years old but had several hundred already in attendance. He was rising in our community as the next big thing.

Yet there was something troubling him. “The first two years of our explosive growth,” he admitted, “I related poorly as a husband and father.” He stared into his ice water and grimaced. “I hid in my success as a pastor,” he continued. “I think I used it to avoid my failing ways at home and in my heart.”

This man was the epitome of what my younger friend was striving to be. But both men revealed the same struggle—the realization

that one can receive accolades for preaching Jesus, yet at the same time know very little about how to follow Jesus in the living rooms of their ordinary lives. They could communicate love to a crowd from the pulpit or in an office or a classroom, but when called upon to give themselves (and not their gifts), they were fumble prone. I see this in me.

My young friend wrote to me during the first week in his new pastorate:

I am full of anxiety, mostly about what I do with all this time. I keep asking myself, have I done X-number of dollars of labor for the church today? I am unaccustomed to this free of a day, and it makes me anxious. I get things done better when my schedule is packed and I'm going a million miles an hour. I've known nothing but pressure for years, and now that God is providing space, I want to sabotage it somehow. How can I turn from this and find life?

My friend did not know how to do a pastor's day if efficiency, quantity, speed, and economic measures were removed from him. He hadn't been taught about the other kinds of treasures that were his in Jesus and that he could desire for use in his day. Me neither. His time with me over the years hadn't helped him.

Desire, Haste, and the "Mattering Things"

But I hope by pains that you and I could help him now. We could say something like this, couldn't we?

As you enter ministry, you will be tempted to orient your desires toward doing large things in famous ways as fast and as efficiently as you can. But take note. A crossroads waits for you. Jesus is that crossroads. Because almost anything in life that truly matters will require you to do small, mostly overlooked things, over a long period of time with him. The pastoral vocation, because it focuses on helping people cultivate what truly matters, is therefore no exception.

Why? What are these mattering things, meant for our desires? Well, first, love for God. This noble desire takes time. Forgiveness; reconciliation; coming to our senses; spiritual growth in faith, hope, and love; knowledge of and surrender to the teachings of Scripture in Jesus; growing in obedience, gentleness, peace, patience, kindness, and self-control; along with facing addictions, idolatries, and sins with the gospel; learning contentment in Jesus whether we abound or are desolate; waiting for the coming of the Lord and his kingdom and the fulfillment of all God's promises for his glory and our good. The finish line for satisfying these desires can't be crossed with a forty-yard dash, no matter how furiously we try.

Second, love for others in their delights also matters, and this likewise takes time. Learning how to walk and talk and count, growing up, doing math, being able to drive or be on one's own, along with starting or joining a church or ministry. Hurry cannot accomplish such things, much less remaining single, finding true friendship, thriving in marriage, making satisfying love, parenting, grandparenting, or creating integrity and reputation at your job. Learning how to play an instrument, rising to the top in a sport, or becoming expert at a craft or trade doesn't happen overnight. But many people you minister to believe that this kind of love for God and neighbor is supposed to happen instantly.

Take an exasperated husband, for example. He said to me, "I just can't take this; it's too much! Either she deals with this issue, or it's obvious that she doesn't care about this marriage! I'm not going to put up with it anymore!"

When he said this to me, he had been married a total of three months. The issue he referred to was six days old. He quoted the Bible and talked in epic terms about what God wants for a marriage and a life. Yet if he had to wait six days to fix this issue in the context of having been married for a total of eighty-nine days, it was obvious to him that God was not in the marriage or that his wife didn't love him, and that he had to prepare to move on. This man can quote the Bible, but he has no stamina to wait upon God

amid something that he does not like. For all the grand talk about stellar things that God wants, it does not occur to him how grand a thing God says it is to learn how to persevere and wait upon him. Many of us pastors express the same kind of emotional inability to wait on God in and for our congregations.

Our problem is that most of the God-given joys we seek get damaged when words like *instantly* and *haste* and *impatience* are thrown at us. Many of us are confused about what it means to have true joy if we have to embrace a delayed gratification amid the slower speeds required by the things that most matter to Jesus.

Now imagine loving God and others through the desolations of life. Desolation cannot easily endure an accelerated pastoral pace. This explains why many of us have no patience for pastoral care. Broken bones and minds are not hurry prone. Burned skin or victimized souls have to get to the miserable itching in order to heal, and we who wait by the bedside must wait some more. Death, grief, loss, recovery from addiction, as well as emotional or physical trauma, parenting special-needs kids, adjusting to chronic illness, depression, disability, or disease—all of these desolations are handled poorly when “efficiency” and “quantitative measures” are required of them. To the important pastor doing large and famous things speedily, the brokenness of people actually feels like an intrusion keeping us from getting our important work for God done. I write that last sentence, and it undoes me. Reread it. Then fall with me, won’t you? Fall to your knees with me before the Savior. He is the lifter of our heads. We need this gracious lifting, for we haven’t even spoken yet of how words like *instant* and *impatient* offer us no resources to handle the mattering thing of loving our enemies in ministry. And make no mistake: eventually you will have to learn this hardest of neighbor loves too.

As a rule then (and this often surprises us), haste is no friend to desire. The wise man says so, because “whoever makes haste with his feet misses his way” (Prov. 19:2). His point is clear enough. Haste has a habit of not coming through on things that truly matter.

In a crisis it can help. But when it comes to understanding, sorting out, and fulfilling the desires of a human soul, haste constantly and legitimately gets sued for malpractice. Haste offers immediate promises to our desires for a mate or ministry or work or our kids, but haste actually can never deliver on these promises for what is most precious to us.

The point I'm now making is this. Our desire for greatness in ministry isn't the problem. Our problem rises from how the haste of doing large things, famously and as fast as we can, is reshaping our definition of what a great thing is. Desire greatness, dear pastor! But bend your definition of greatness to the one Jesus gives us. At minimum we must begin to take a stand on this one important fact: obscurity and greatness are not opposites.

What Do You Want Jesus to Do for You?

Jesus poses the question of desire so plainly in his training of ministers. "What do you want me to do for you?" he asks (Mark 10:36).

Pause here for a moment. Slow down if you can. Do you have a bucket list for ministry, all the great ministry achievements you want to accomplish in his name before you die? You would not be alone if you did. Just read the classified ads, and myriad desires of those who make up your congregation and community reveal themselves too.

James and John had bucket lists. "We want you to do for us whatever we ask of you," they said. "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory" (Mark 10:35–37).

James and John had begun to subtly yearn that their ministry with Jesus would provide them a platform for greatness. Their cravings began to wreck their community (Mark 10:41). Jesus did not stop this friction or potential wreckage from happening. He still doesn't. Did you mark that down? James and John were dearly loved, gifted, called, fruitful, and central to Jesus's earthly ministry. He graciously heard their desires. But their closeness to Jesus and their fruitfulness in ministry didn't mean that everything they did,

said, or craved was blessed by God, or that everything they did was good, right, and helpful to those who knew them.

Instead of giving them such immunity, Jesus responded. What he says sobers us. It is possible for ministry leaders to desire greatness in ways no different from anyone, anywhere in our culture. Attaching Jesus's name to these desires doesn't change the fact that they look just like the cravings of the world.

Pause here. Read that last sentence again if you need to. Prayerfully slow down for this. Human leaders everywhere desire greatness and to lord it over others. "It shall not be so among you," Jesus declared. If it is greatness that you desire, you must from now on surrender your life to greatness of a different kind. "Whoever would be great among you must be your servant" (Mark 10:43). Servants give their days to small, mostly overlooked tasks over long periods of time with no accolade.

Jesus then takes James, John, and his other students in ministry into a living case study. He shows them an unnamed mountain of a man. This man was poor and blind. Jesus offers this poor orb-shattered man the same powerful question that he gave to those who were a "big deal" and traveled with him: "What do you want me to do for you?" (Mark 10:51).

Right here, the grace of Jesus humbles us in the contrast of desires he unearths. James and John were in the thick of ministry with Jesus and among Jesus's prized pupils. Yet this was not enough for them. They wanted better seats. Meanwhile, the poor man asked Jesus only for two things, and the first thing was mercy. The second was sight.

I think back to Mrs. Canter's class, my seminary internship, my first pastorate, Mamaw's porch, and the shattered remains of my ministerial crowd. When did it happen in my ambitions for ministry that I no longer felt my need to desire mercy when with Jesus? When did I begin to presume upon the privilege of my eyes working properly and define greatness from the vantage point of my privilege rather than the vantage point of Jesus's grace?

There is a way of desiring to go all out for the ministry that will

split you in two, cause pain to those you serve, and reveal how far off from Jesus's definition of greatness you've drifted. I know this firsthand. But I'm learning something else too. There is more grace and more hope here than you may yet know—a vocation of pastoral work among the greatness of slow, overlooked people and places can become in God's hands, all gift, true joy, abiding contentment, and good life. Why? Because this is Jesus's way. Where Jesus is our portion and desire, we lack no true treasure.

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. (Matt. 13:44)

Could it be that joyfully selling all we have includes letting go of our misguided ministry bucket lists? What if the joy we desire in Jesus is like hidden treasure in a field that many people, even in ministry, overlook and rarely buy?

Do you remember what it was like before you desired vocational ministry? You had no training. You were unknown in the world. Jesus was lovely to you. He had saved you. He had communicated his love to you. He was all treasure, true, pleasurable, satisfying, and altogether beautiful. He was your portion. He was your desire. It was this ravishing provision of Jesus that roused your affections to serve him in the first place with your life in vocational ministry. No wonder, when Peter declared that he would excel and outdo all his ministry colleagues, the rooster's crow wasn't long in coming. To restore Peter to ministry, Jesus took Peter all the way back to first things, first loves. "Peter, do you love me? Then feed my sheep" (see John 21:15–17). This is where our vocation begins. Pastoral calling to feed others is secondary to and flows out of a prior desire for the loveliness of Jesus himself. The old hymn comes to mind: "Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, prone to leave the God I love." But Peter learned what we all do in the ashes of ministerial rooster crows. Jesus comes for us. He hasn't left us. His steadfast love endures forever.

Conclusion

Let's close this introductory conversation about pastoral desire with this real-life parable.

Two men left home to plant a church in a city of need. The first one to arrive dreamed of a city reached for Jesus with the gospel. Through this first pastor, people came to know Jesus, believers gathered, and a community of Jesus followers was born. It was a slow work, but it was happening. His prayers were being answered.

In time, he began to meet with the second one, at the time a church planter. He did so to encourage this second pastor in his fledgling work. The old-timer and the newcomer prayed for Jesus to reach the city. Through the newcomer, people came to know Jesus, believers gathered, and a community of Jesus followers was born.

Ten years later, the one who had come first serves as pastor of an "ordinary" church. Its two hundred-plus members demonstrate the love of Jesus in ways that did not exist there ten years earlier. The newcomer who came second pastors an "epic" church. Its thousands of members and multiple sites around the city demonstrate the love of Jesus in ways that did not exist there ten years earlier. The prayers of both men were answered.

Why then is one of them sad?

Why then does only one of them receive our invitations to speak at our conferences and give us advice?

Dear Pastor,

Desire burns within you. You've trained and dreamt of doing large things in famous ways as fast as you can for God's glory. But pastoral work keeps requiring your surrender to small, mostly overlooked things over long periods of time.

You stand at a crossroads. Jesus stands with you. You were never meant to know everything, fix everything, and be everywhere at once. That's his job, not yours.

So what now? Let the apprenticeship begin.

"No one today shows more insight into the perils and joys of everyday ministry in the local church—a refreshingly honest and beautifully written meditation."

Mark Galli, Editor-in-Chief, *Christianity Today*

"This is simply the best book on pastoral ministry I have ever read."

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Vancouver; best-selling author, *God in My Everything*

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ZACK ESWINE (PhD, Regent University) is the pastor of Riverside Church in Webster Groves, Missouri, and is the author of several books, including *Preaching to a Post-Everything World*, *Recovering Eden*, and *Spurgeon's Sorrows*.

CHRISTIAN MINISTRY