

# Counseling the Hard Cases

True Stories Illustrating the Sufficiency of God's Resources in Scripture

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FOREWORD BY **John MacArthur**



NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

Counseling the Hard Cases  
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ISBN: 978-1-4336-7222-4

Published by B&H Publishing Group  
Nashville, Tennessee

Dewey Decimal Classification: 253.5  
Subject Heading: COUNSELING \ BIBLE—STUDY AND  
TEACHING \ SPIRITUAL HEALING

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Printed in the United States of America

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## PREFACE

**T**HIS IS A BOOK OF stories about real people—all of whom have sought counseling during crisis moments in their lives. In this book you'll meet “Ashley,” “Tony,” “Brian,” “Sarah,” “Clark,” “Mariana,” and others—real people with faces, addresses, lives, and people who love them. Each suffers from significant emotional and spiritual problems. They received some of the most serious diagnoses it is possible to receive in this world: anorexia, bipolar, postpartum depression, and dissociative identity disorder. They struggled with homosexuality, worry, and rage. They sought help from secular, medical, and religious professionals before finally coming to biblical counselors for help. This is not only a book about people with problems; it is also a book about how God uses his Word to guide his people to become instruments of grace in the lives of those with very serious problems, bringing restoration, hope, peace, and healing to them.

These stories are important. They are powerful accounts that testify to the effectiveness of God's Son, God's Word, and God's church in helping people with some of the hardest counseling conundrums. Large groups of Christians are not yet aware that God has given his people reliable and significant resources sufficient to help people with any problems that require counseling.

These stories must be told because we long for all Christians to know the Scriptures and the power of God (Matt 22:29).

### Our Audience

We offer this book with several different groups of people in mind. First, we write for ministers of the gospel struggling on the front lines of the kingdom of God. Daily you encounter people who are struggling in significant and profound ways. You are involved in the weary task of sitting with people and trying to help them anchor their lives to Scripture while pointing them to the Redeemer found therein. We want to encourage you in your labors. Our prayer is that this book will be effective to show you that Jesus Christ always has sufficient power to help, no matter how severe the difficulty.

Second, we write for students of biblical counseling. Many thousands of students are enrolled all across the country in undergraduate courses, master's degrees, and doctoral programs focused on biblical counseling. More Christians are being equipped by their local churches and various other training programs to help address and minister to the onslaught of problems faced in the modern context of ministry. We are grateful for your labors in preparing for gospel ministry. We pray that this book will strengthen you in the Scriptures. The Word of God is indeed adequate to help even the most troubled.

Finally, we write to those who disagree with us about the sufficiency of Scripture in the counseling process. Whether you consider yourself an integrationist, a Christian counselor, or a Christian psychologist, differences of opinion regarding the sufficiency of God's Word to administer an effective counseling ministry may divide us. Though the issues behind that disagreement are important and significant, we are united by something much more profound—the blood of Jesus Christ. In light of that union, it is regrettable when the exchanges between our various groups are not loving and productive. We want to confess plainly in this book that you are our brothers and sisters in Christ, and we love you. We hope you will not sense that we are bashing anyone or

that we think we have nothing to learn from those with whom we disagree. Instead, we hope you will see that the contributors of this book are men and women who are passionate about Christ and his perfect Word. We long for the most troubled people to find counselors who will point them to our matchless Savior, the only source for true and lasting healing.

We will build some fences in this book, but that is not a bad thing. Fences keep things organized, and you can always talk over them and build strong relationships despite the divide. We hope many conversations and relationships will continue to develop among our various movements. We offer this book to you—our coheirs in Christ—in humility and love, with many prayers that God might be pleased to give you some glimpse of the profundities of Scripture that you may not yet fully appreciate.

### A Few Words About Reading This Book

Whether you are a minister of the gospel, a student of counseling, or an advocate of a different counseling position, a few things will be helpful for you to understand as you read. First, our contributors are active counselors who describe actual people with real problems. They have endeavored to stay as true to the actual events as possible. Because of the personal nature of the issues, however, it is important to preserve the confidentiality of all those who sought help. We have protected their personal information in three different ways. Some case studies in this book change the identifying information of the person discussed. The details of the problem are the same, but the personal information has been altered so that the counselee remains anonymous. Other case studies are composites. In these case studies the counselor has helped a number of different people with the same problem and has chosen to show their approach to the issue by blending the stories of several different counselees. Finally, some contributors have obtained explicit permission from those they helped to share their stories without anonymity.

Second, this is a book of stories that describe how the various contributors proceeded through counseling with people in their

individual situations. It is not a methodology that describes how you should proceed with every counselee experiencing a similar problem. Of course there will be commonalities and overlap, but it is essential to affirm that in God's world no two situations are exactly the same. Though the chapters provide methodological guidance for how you might move forward in comparable situations, please do not assume that what is appropriate in one context is always appropriate in another.

### Acknowledgments

A project like this is always a collaborative effort, and so we have many people to thank. First, we are thankful to all of the contributors to this book. They each have very busy ministries and took the time to share their experiences. We appreciate their work on this project and their labor for the kingdom of Jesus in their other ministries. We have been encouraged in our walks with Christ as we have seen their ministries pictured in the chapters of this book.

Second, we are also grateful for the team at B&H Publishers. In particular, we are thankful for Jim Baird and Chris Cowan. Many of the contributors to this volume as well as both editors experienced family and medical emergencies during the work on this book. Such emergencies were often serious and made it difficult to reach deadlines. We were encouraged by the grace and flexibility of Jim and Chris in the midst of such circumstances. Working with them was always a joy.

Third, in our work of editing, we received a great deal of help. Many different people assisted in a number of ways, but it is important to mention the work of three people in particular. Joshua Clutterham took several days out of his busy schedule to help us do some massive work on a few chapters. David Powlison took an entire day to review the first chapter and provide helpful feedback. Finally, David "Gunner" Gundersen served as our editorial assistant for this book. Gunner carefully read each chapter, made helpful stylistic changes, and made sure each chapter was



formatted correctly. We *never* could have finished this book if it were not for his incredible efforts.

Finally, we are thankful for you and your commitment to read this book. It is with great delight that we present to you *Counseling the Hard Cases: True Stories Illustrating the Sufficiency of God's Resources in Scripture*. As you read the stories of these men and women, we pray that your life will be gripped by the Savior who gripped them. May the same Word that strengthened them strengthen you.

Stuart Scott & Heath Lambert  
Summer 2011  
Louisville, Kentucky

## CHAPTER 3

### “BRIAN” and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder

Steve Viars

#### A Normal-Town Biblical Counselor

**T**HE LORD HAS GIVEN ME the privilege of serving as a pastor in Lafayette, Indiana, for nearly 25 years. Our county population hovers around 165,000, and our city is home to Purdue University. In many ways we are a typical mid-sized Midwestern town. We have an interesting mixture of engineers and farmers, radicals and soccer moms, athletes and couch potatoes. Lafayette is large enough to have a television station but small enough that there is rarely anything exciting on the news.

I became interested in biblical counseling as a seminary student when I took a training course that literally changed my life. The principles of the sufficiency of Scripture and progressive sanctification opened my eyes to the many ways God wanted to change me as a young married man. I learned a gospel-centered approach to soul care that was focused on the person and work of Christ. The training program included actual case observations where I was able to watch trained counselors read God’s sufficient Word and effectively apply it to the hearts and lives of troubled people. It was thrilling to see men and women fall in love with

Christ as they learned how his redemptive plan dovetailed with their own complex circumstances.

I later did doctoral work in biblical counseling because I wanted to keep learning more. I wanted to enhance my own trajectory of personal growth while becoming better prepared to counsel with Scripture others in their times of need.

### A Church-Based Counseling Ministry

In 1977 our church launched a biblical counseling center to serve our community. We wanted to glorify God in our town by offering counseling services based on God's sufficient Word. We also wanted to provide a place where other pastors, missionaries, and key lay leaders could receive training that would prepare them to offer similar ministries wherever God placed them. Decades later we offer 80–120 hours of biblical counseling each week to members of our community—all free of charge. We have found this to be a marvelous way to shine the light of Christ in our town by sharing his love with people in need. Through the years scores of men and women have been won to Christ through this ministry, and many Christians have found answers and direction for how to grow and change through applying God's Word to their lives.

As might be expected, our counselors encounter many garden-variety problems. We help many men and women who are struggling with problems in their marriages or with their children. We frequently minister to those wrestling with depression and anger. Many people come for help with financial problems, difficulties at work, trouble with extended family members, and many other common life issues. A fair amount of what we do is somewhat routine.

However, even in a garden-variety town like Lafayette, counseling occasionally brings a shock. It's like the way one of my friends describes his surgical practice: "98 percent mundane and 2 percent sheer terror." On plenty of occasions when counselees have begun to tell their stories, I have been startled by the personal complexities and situational conundrums that spring up in this "normal" town.

People who struggle with behaviors that fall under the secular label of "Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder" (OCD) have sometimes presented me with just this kind of deep and tangled complexity. I have often had the privilege of working with people diagnosed with this "disorder."

### The Many Faces of OCD

Not long ago I saw a man whose job involved emptying mail from postal sacks. His task seemed simple enough, but he had a problem: he constantly worried that he might have left an item at the bottom of the sack. After emptying a bag, he would begin processing the items only to find himself wondering whether he had completely emptied the sack. He would pick up the bag and look inside again. After confirming (again) that the sack was indeed empty, he would go back to processing the items. Soon his thoughts would be drawn back to the sack. His boss was not amused when he walked in one day and found the man with the empty sack on his head.

I also counseled a woman who constantly stared at her administrative errors. She worked in an office and believed that if she was careful enough, she would never make a mistake. If she accidentally copied something upside down on the copier, she would bring the wasted piece of paper back to her desk and go through a ritual of mental flagellation. Her boss would come in and find her in a coma-like state. His patience, understandably, was growing thin.

I will never forget the man who arrived with his face covered with small cuts and scrapes. I wondered if he had been in a car accident or had been attacked by a rabid animal. I would have never anticipated his story: his injuries were inflicted with his own razor while he tried to shave every vestige of whisker from his face. I later learned that he viewed facial hair as unsanitary and unattractive, but he could never get his face clean enough to meet his self-imposed standard of hygiene.

I once ministered to another man diagnosed as OCD who believed he needed to completely empty his intestines of all waste.

He would stay in the bathroom for hours at a time, often all day or all night. He had stopped trying to work long before I met him, and his wife told horror stories of having to clean up the bathroom after her husband emerged—exhausted after long hours in the bathroom.

### Brian, OCD, and Odd-Numbered Streets

Then there was a young man named Brian.<sup>1</sup> I was surprised when, during our first evening together, Brian admitted that he was unable to drive his car on odd-numbered streets. I was amazed at his tale of developing elaborate strategies to guarantee that he would never drive his car on anything but even-numbered roadways. I was exhausted listening to his story as I contemplated the obsessive lifestyle he had developed. I was also stirred to a silent prayer of thanks that our church is located at the intersection of State Road 26 and County Road 550.

Brian was in his early twenties when he contacted our counseling center for help. At first glance Brian was a friendly and likable person. He was holding down a job and serving in his local church across town. You would not have immediately known that Brian was struggling in any unusual way.

As he began to tell his story, his eyes shifted around the room to see how I and my two training assistants were responding. He revealed each piece of the puzzle slowly, and only after he was sure he would not be ridiculed or harshly judged, did he talk about an elaborate system he had concocted to navigate his way around town without ever being on an odd-numbered street. This system required that he spend hours looking at local street maps and determining his routes. Brian lived in constant fear that he might get lost or inadvertently make a wrong turn and foil his plan.

When Brian began realizing that his habits, like a python slowly suffocating its victim, were becoming more and more restrictive, he decided to contact our center. He knew he needed

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<sup>1</sup>Brian's name is changed here, but the details of his story are the same.

help and was desperate to find answers that would really help him change.

### How Should We Understand OCD?

How should we understand this type of obsessive-compulsive behavior? One of the challenges with a concept like OCD is that the terminology obviously does not originate in Scripture. This is not necessarily bad, but it does require that Christians be careful in how we understand and make use of the label. In standard books like the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition (DSM-IV)*, secular researchers often do an excellent job of describing and organizing symptomatic behaviors. People interested in thinking biblically about life can use a book like the *DSM* to help them formulate questions that can then be taken to the Scriptures for answers. The goal should be to allow the Bible to interpret the observations we glean from a secular source like the *DSM*.

Secular observers accurately describe the behaviors common to OCD: "The essential features of OCD are recurrent obsessions or compulsions that are severe enough to be time consuming or cause marked distress or significant impairment."<sup>2</sup> The real people mentioned above whom I had the privilege of counseling fit this description well. These men and women reported that they spent substantial amounts of time each day on their rituals. They also acknowledged that they felt trapped in cycles that were both loathsome and familiar.

The *DSM-IV* states that obsessions are persistent ideas, thoughts, impulses, or images that are experienced as intrusive and inappropriate and that cause marked anxiety or distress. The manual further reports that the most common obsessions are things like repeated thoughts about contamination from hand-shaking; repeated doubts about leaving a door unlocked; a need to have things in a particular order and experiencing severe distress when they are not; aggressive or horrific impulses like hurting

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<sup>2</sup> *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-IV* (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 1994), 417.

someone; and finally, sexual imagery such as recurrent pornographic images.<sup>3</sup>

The *DSM-IV* goes on to define compulsions as a person's attempts to neutralize an obsession with some other thought or action. So the person worried about contamination repeatedly washes his hands. The woman concerned about whether she turned off the stove checks it repeatedly. The parent afraid of hurting his child counts backward from a thousand. These compulsions are not performed for pleasure or gratification. The goal is to reduce the anxiety produced by the obsession. The compulsions are clearly excessive and often are not connected in any realistic way with what they are designed to neutralize or prevent.

### What Causes OCD?

Secular observations and research can often help organize and describe behaviors like these. However, labels and descriptions can only take us so far. At some point we need to know not only what is happening but also *why* it is happening. Theorists suggest at least four possible answers to the question of what causes OCD: circumstances from the past, pressure in the present, genetic and physical determiners, or spiritual issues of the heart.

### Nurture: Are Circumstances from the Past to Blame?

Some theorists believe that OCD behavior is a natural and innocent response to certain conditions from the past. In other words, the fundamental problem is nurture or the way in which a person was raised. For example, consider a daughter who grew up in a controlling home environment where the mother placed inordinate attention on how her girls looked before leaving the house. Now this adult daughter has trouble getting to places on time because she constantly goes back for one more look in the mirror. Some would argue that such obsessive behavior is not the grown daughter's responsibility. The fault lies with the domineering behavior of the controlling mother in the past.

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<sup>3</sup>*DSM-IV*, 418.

If the Word of God is going to be our guide, is there any truth to the notion that past circumstances are partially responsible for present behavior? The answer is yes—at least to a point. Scripture does not shy away from the topic of previous sins and past suffering. Adonijah's mutinous rebellion is connected to David's parental passivity (1 Kgs 1:5–6). Hophni and Phinehas blasphemed partially because their father did not stop them (1 Sam 2:12; 3:11–14). Joseph's brothers were ruled by fear because of all they put him through (Gen 50:15–21). We all have been greatly impacted by the sinful conditions of the world in which we live. While we cannot use the dark realities of our pasts to excuse behavior that displeases God in the present, counselors should always recognize the potential presence of past suffering and should acknowledge the scars left by the jagged edges of life. This recognition should engender patience and compassion toward those struggling with repetitive behaviors that are seemingly uncontrollable. The apostle Paul, a Christian leader with a violently checkered past himself, wrote: "And we exhort you, brothers: warn those who are irresponsible, comfort the discouraged, help the weak, be patient with everyone" (1 Thess 5:14).

### **Environment: Is Pressure in the Present at Fault?**

Another possible explanation is that persons with OCD are living under tremendous stress or unreasonable expectations. Their behaviors are simply ways to cope with overwhelming external pressures. For example, perhaps the reason the woman I mentioned stared at her photocopying mistakes was that the copying machine was too difficult to operate. Her training on the machine was minimal, and the copier had many features. Her employer expected her to be productive, and she had many tasks to accomplish each day. Or maybe the man who checked and rechecked his mail sack worked under an overbearing tyrant of a boss who derided his employees whenever they made a mistake. There was no question that his particular situation was fast paced and highly controlled.



Does this potential cause of OCD have merit? In some senses, yes. Scripture clearly illustrates the powerful effect that present trials can have in a person's life. The psalmist felt afflicted, withered, restless, tearful, and thrown aside (Ps 102:4,7,9–10). The prophet Habakkuk “trembled” and “quivered” at the thought of the coming Babylonian invasion (Hab 3:16). The apostle Paul repeatedly pleaded with the Lord to remove his unnamed “thorn in the flesh” (2 Cor 12:7–8). Therefore, Scripture clearly instructs followers of Christ not only to rejoice with those who rejoice but also to “weep with those who weep” (Rom 12:15). Ignoring or minimizing the present suffering of the people we counsel makes us decidedly unlike our sympathetic Savior (Heb 4:15).

Scripture also summons the believer to faith, hope, and endurance—all with the promise of God's help. The psalmist chose to trust the Lord (Ps 102:12–22,25–28). Habakkuk found his joy in God (Hab 3:17–19). Paul discovered God's strength in the midst of his weakness (2 Cor 12:9–10). Our pressures in the present may be difficult and even demoralizing, but they do not have to be determinative.

### Nature: Is My Body to Blame?

Physical factors are a third possible explanation for OCD-type behavior. Researchers use the term *ego-dystonic* to refer to the intrusive and inappropriate quality of obsessions. “This refers to the individual's sense that the content of the obsession is alien, not within his or her own control, and not the kind of thought that he or she would expect to have.”<sup>4</sup>

Are such persons correct in believing that OCD is an alien set of thoughts or behaviors for which they are not responsible today? Is the problem really one's nature? Some counselors and theorists may dismiss such ideas out of hand because they do not want to absolve people of personal responsibility. Before answering too quickly, however, certain facts should be considered. In his helpful booklet, *OCD—Freedom for the Obsessive Compulsive*, Dr. Michael Emler points out several possible brain-based influences

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

of OCD. For example, familial and genetic studies have shown that OCD occurs more often among identical twins than fraternal twins. Children with strep throat may also experience the sudden onset of OCD behaviors, and antibiotics not only relieve the strep symptoms but also alleviate the OCD. PET scans or functional MRIs of those diagnosed with OCD sometimes show an overactivity in the basal ganglia and frontal regions of the brain.<sup>5</sup> These findings should come as no surprise because the Bible clearly states that our physical body is a critical element of our created state (e.g., 2 Cor 5:1–4). Therefore, it is appropriate for a counselor to encourage a counselee to have a complete medical exam while continuing to try to understand his past to present story.

Ideas like these are not a source of concern for biblical counselors. On the contrary, those ministering the Word through counseling should be friends of good science and desire to promote the research and development of hard data in every area of human existence. Nevertheless, there will always be deficiencies in the answers the world gives regarding the question of ultimate causes. Observable changes in the brain could easily be explained as the *result* of mental-behavioral choices, just as they could be the *cause* of those same thoughts and actions. While offering some clarifying observations and useful research, the nurture, environment, and nature theories ultimately fail to go far enough because all three fail to grapple with what Scripture reveals as the fundamental issue in every counseling case.

### Heart: What Does My Behavior Reveal About My Worship?

Yes, it is possible, if not likely, that a person struggling with behaviors labeled as OCD has been impacted by some aspect of his upbringing. It is equally possible that he is facing present trials or even that physical or biological issues may be contributing factors. The power of suffering in a sin-cursed world is an

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<sup>5</sup> Michael R. Emler, *OCD Freedom for the Obsessive Compulsive* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004), 7–8.

ever-present reality in the counseling room. Scripture, however, prods us to go deeper. Much deeper.

God created mankind in his image and entrusted each of us with a heart. The word “heart” is used over 700 times in Scripture. It refers to our inner man, the core of our being, our mission control center. The heart is the composite of thoughts, desires, emotions, and beliefs that guides our daily choices. This is why Solomon urged his son, “Guard your heart above all else, for it is the source of life” (Prov 4:23). We all use our heart to worship *something*—whether the God of heaven and earth or something else we believe will bring us comfort, joy, and satisfaction.

In counseling a person struggling with OCD, the core issue is this: What do a person’s behavioral choices reveal about his functional god? Delving into past experiences, present challenges, and physical factors should always serve the purpose of determining what is occurring in the heart of the person struggling with OCD-type behaviors. The heart is the most fertile ground for biblical counseling; and gently unearthing the spiritual issues lying beneath the surface enables the power of the gospel to shine hope and help.

### Counseling Brian

All of these observations, research, definitions, debates, and scriptural realities compel us to ask one crucial question: Can the truths of the Bible really help Brian learn to drive on even-numbered streets again? Is the living and active sword of God’s Word really sharp enough to penetrate the knotty complexities of bizarre behavior like OCD? Can Brian really change? The answer is a resounding *yes*, and the rest of Brian’s story testifies boldly to this hope.

### The Importance of Loving Involvement

On a few previous occasions Brian had ventured to share his struggles with other Christians, but he had not been treated with the comfort, help, and patience urged by Paul (1 Thess 5:14). Instead, Brian’s fellow believers had shamed and ridiculed him.

At other times Christians had offered shallow counsel, suggesting that he change his behavior simply by memorizing random Bible verses or forcing himself to act differently. Because of these painful experiences, Brian was a bit tentative in our initial meetings.

Recognizing Brian's apprehension, I sought to assure him that while he was struggling with certain issues, I had areas in my own life that needed attention as well. Our goal would be to go to the Lord together to "receive mercy and find grace to help us at the proper time" (Heb 4:16). It was fascinating to watch Brian warm up to the process when he knew he was going to be treated with Christian love. Within weeks he went from being shy, quiet, and evasive in his answers to being animated, lively, and thorough in describing what was occurring in his heart and life. He actually grew to enjoy the counseling sessions and reported that he looked forward to coming in each week to examine more of what God said about the process of change.

Biblical counseling must always be done in an atmosphere of relational compassion. We should emulate the apostle Paul who was able to tell the Thessalonians, "We were gentle among you, as a nursing mother nurtures her own children. We cared so much for you that we were pleased to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become dear to us" (1 Thess 2:7-8). Biblical counseling presents not just biblical content but biblical compassion. We are not just offering scriptural truth but scriptural tenderness.

### The Necessity of Hope in a Redeemer

Just as Brian's earlier ventures in vulnerability had ended in disappointment, he had also grown convinced that he would be stuck in his obsessive-compulsive patterns for the rest of his life. In fact, even though he reported that he was a follower of Jesus Christ, he believed his OCD would continue to worsen until he was entirely unable to function. This is one of the common themes I have observed in every person with whom I have ever worked who exhibited OCD symptoms—profound hopelessness.

This is also one of the primary reasons I love being a biblical counselor—the Word of God is filled with hope. One of the first verses Brian and I considered together was 1 Cor 10:13: “No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to humanity. God is faithful, and he will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation he will also provide a way of escape so that you are able to bear it.”

Brian was deeply encouraged to learn that his situation was not unique. He took God at his Word that his problems were “common to humanity” and that the Lord was powerful enough to help anyone overcome the most significant challenges. Because so many of my counselees have given me permission to use their stories whenever it will help another person, I was able to tell Brian about other men and women who had overcome OCD through the power of the gospel. He turned these words over and over in his mind like a person sucking on a sweet piece of chocolate—*my situation is not hopeless*. By God’s grace Brian was being empowered to marvel at the fact that God himself is “the God of hope” (Rom 15:13). God had made him, God had saved him, and God could change him.

As Brian grew in hope, he came to understand that he was not placing his confidence in a counselor, a counseling center, or a counseling system. His hope was in a Redeemer, the Lord Jesus Christ. Eventually Brian would come to understand what Elyse Fitzpatrick and Dennis Johnson so helpfully explain:

Most of us have never really understood that Christianity is not a self-help religion meant to enable moral people to become more moral. We don’t need a self-help book; we need a Savior. We don’t need to get our collective act together; we need death and resurrection and the life-transforming truths of the gospel. And we don’t need them just once, at the beginning of our Christian life; we need them every moment of every day.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Elyse Fitzpatrick and Dennis Johnson, *Counsel from the Cross* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2009), 30.

As Brian pondered all of this and reviewed the way he had been attempting to handle his struggles, he readily acknowledged that he had not considered the way his relationship with Christ should inform and empower his daily lifestyle. Such an understanding was groundbreaking for Brian. An entirely new set of resources was being placed on the table. My prayer for Brian was the same as the apostle Paul's desire for his friends in Rome: "Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you believe in Him so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit" (Rom 15:13).

The theme of hope became a focal point of several of Brian's initial homework assignments. I asked him to journal the times he felt hopeless in his pursuit of change, carefully describing the context in which his discouragement appeared along with recording his feelings, thoughts, desires, words, and actions. Brian also began writing passages from God's Word about hope on index cards. He reviewed his cards nightly and during stressful times throughout the day. In our counseling sessions I also asked him to share specific examples from the previous week where he had chosen to reflect on truths from God's Word about hope and how these reflections impacted his heart and his actions. Like Ruth and Naomi thousands of years earlier (Ruth 2:19–20), Brian was coming to realize that he had a Redeemer, and hope was springing up in his heart.

### The Necessity of Additional Questions

Competent biblical counselors believe in spending significant amounts of time gathering additional information by asking questions that help both counselor and counselee focus on issues of both the outer and inner man. The counseling room is often illuminated by the wisdom of Prov 18:13: "The one who gives an answer before he listens—this is foolishness and disgrace for him."

This is one reason it is so valuable to do counseling ministry in the context of a local church where counseling services are offered free of charge. The conversation is not rushed by financial concerns, and we are free to take the necessary time to get to know

a counselee on a deeper level. The counselee, in turn, becomes convinced that we are not simply going to toss out pat answers or shallow solutions. Many people even report that their biblical counselor was the first person that truly seemed to care enough to ask meaningful questions and patiently hear their story. So what kinds of questions should be asked to obtain a complete picture of a person's story and get to the heart of the matter?

**Feelings.** Biblical counselors believe in ministering the gospel to the whole person. This ministry starts by taking the time to learn what is happening in the emotional lives of those who come to us for help. This was especially important in my relationship with Brian. I explained to Brian that I wanted to understand what was going on in his mind and heart. We looked at several of the psalms of lament and talked about how godly people in the past cried out to God in a way that was honest and authentic. I told Brian that I wanted to create an environment where he could have similar conversations with me but, more importantly, with God. This notion seemed to surprise him. Somewhere along the way he had picked up the common idea that Christians were to ignore their feelings and hide their emotions. Passages such as Ps 61:1–4 framed our discussion about a more genuine way of talking with God:

God, hear my cry; pay attention to my prayer. I call to You from the ends of the earth when my heart is without strength. Lead me to a rock that is high above me, for You have been a refuge for me, a strong tower in the face of the enemy. I will live in Your tent forever and take refuge under the shelter of Your wings.

When Brian became convinced that it was permissible to cry out to God and to me, he began to describe a lifestyle that was ruled by fear. He would do literally anything to avoid driving his car on an odd-numbered street. His heart was gripped with the fear that terrible things would happen to him the moment he disregarded his self-imposed driving rules. When I asked him if he was experiencing any other fears, it was as if a dam broke. He looked around the room as if to say, “Is it OK for me to talk about

this?" When I assured him that I really wanted to know what was happening, he went on to tell me about an entire catalog of fears ranging from the concern that he would fondle a young woman in a worship service to the fear that he would lose his salvation because of what was occurring in his heart.

Brian also described feelings of shame. It took several sessions before he was willing to look me in the eye. In our initial conversations he had frequently looked down at his feet or around at different points in my office. When he began to talk about his reluctance to let people at his church really get to know him because he was afraid they would learn his secrets, he began to calm down and looked at me directly. What if someone asked him to drive them somewhere? How would he explain his bizarre rituals to a casual acquaintance who had simply asked for a ride?

Brian knew that his emotions were not the only component of his problem, but he was relieved that someone was willing to join him in lifting the lid off of what he believed was the garbage can of a confused life. I was again reminded of Solomon's wisdom:

Two are better than one because they have a good reward for their efforts. For if either falls, his companion can lift him up; but pity the one who falls without another to lift him up. Also, if two lie down together, they can keep warm; but how can one person alone keep warm? And if someone overpowers one person, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not easily broken. (Eccl 4:9–12)

Yes, other significant layers of Brian's life still needed to be addressed, but having someone who would allow him to be honest about his feelings was a great encouragement to Brian.

**Thoughts.** One of the crucial transitions in the process of biblical counseling is moving from the emotional component of the problem to other aspects of the inner and outer person. I often start with what is occurring emotionally because that is where people in crisis are living. Their emotions are consuming them. They often even report that they have an "emotional problem."



At the right time (and hopefully in the right way), I try to point out that their emotions are simply performing one of their God-given purposes: to indicate habits of thinking, desiring, speaking, worshipping, and behaving that the Lord wants them to learn to change through the power of his Word.

In one of our early sessions, I asked Brian to describe what he typically thought about before, during, and after each of his OCD episodes. At first he found it difficult to remember. He had been so focused on his bizarre behavior that he had paid no attention to the issues of the inner man that were producing his actions. This was a strategic point in the counseling process to assign a simple “journal of upsets.” The journal would function like a daily schedule where Brian was asked to note every time he had an OCD episode and to describe carefully what he was doing, thinking, and wanting in each stage of the event.

The results of this exercise were fascinating. Brian recognized a major thought pattern. His fears of driving were always preceded by episodes of sexual lust. By this point in our relationship, I had developed a level of trust with Brian, so he was willing to divulge that he was locked in a significant struggle with sinful thinking about women. Ironically, this battle was especially intense during times of worship at church. He was attracted to some of the young ladies on the worship team, and he would mentally undress them while supposedly singing and praising the Lord.

These episodes produced extreme guilt. Brian believed he would lose his salvation if he didn't atone for his sins in some way. Early in the struggle he had conjured up a self-imposed punishment of counting backwards during worship services each time he lusted after a young woman. This approach only made matters worse. At some point he graduated to the notion that he could especially please God if he only drove on certain kinds of streets. We were never able to establish any kind of rational connection between Brian's guilt and his behavioral choices. Brian simply erected a new perfectionistic standard in his heart, believing that if he practiced this kind of vehicular lent, God would forgive him for his lust and still allow him to go to heaven.

This was the first time Brian had ever connected the dots between his sexual lust and his obsessions about driving. On the one hand it was hard for him to admit what was going on in his heart, but he was also encouraged that his bizarre patterns of behavior could be explained.

*Desires.* One key biblical passage for Brian was Jas 1:14–15: “But each person is tempted when he is drawn away and enticed by his own evil desires. Then after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and when sin is fully grown, it gives birth to death.” Brian was all too familiar with the concept of sexual lust. He was surprised to learn that in the Bible lust is a much broader category than he had previously understood: it includes all kinds of inordinate desire. I encouraged him to think about what he hoped to achieve from these behaviors—what lusts of the heart were producing his bizarre thoughts and actions.

The more Brian thought about this concept, the clearer the answer became. Brian wanted to pay for his own sin. He had truly convinced himself that performing certain rituals would absolve him from the guilt associated with a lustful heart. Brian wanted atonement without a substitute and righteousness without a Redeemer. He was trying to solve his problem by turning from Christ to himself. He needed to learn how to turn to Christ and rest in his finished work.

### Connecting Brian to the Gospel

When Brian began to contemplate what was occurring in his heart, he was horrified. Although he had placed his faith and trust in the finished work of Christ for his salvation several years earlier, he had since convinced himself that he was earning daily righteousness by his unusual rituals. He wept when he realized that his relentless attempts to gain God’s favor on his own were a rejection of the saving work of Jesus Christ. He was broken when he finally saw his self-righteousness for what it really was—a mockery of the cross.

## The Importance of Confession

As he became overwhelmed by the darkness of his sin, Brian needed to embrace the bright gospel reality that “where sin multiplied, grace multiplied even more” (Rom 5:20). Brian cried out to God and confessed his sin of believing he could find atonement in his own work. With David he said, “Be gracious to me, God, according to Your faithful love; according to Your abundant compassion, blot out my rebellion. Wash away my guilt and cleanse me from my sin. For I am conscious of my rebellion, and my sin is always before me” (Ps 51:1–3).

## The Necessity of Repentance

Brian was starting to understand what produced the OCD symptoms, but this was just the beginning of the process of change. Brian had taken the initial step of confession and was experiencing divine help. As Solomon explained, “The one who conceals his sins will not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them will find mercy” (Prov 28:13). Brian had come to understand the source of his problem and could confess it accurately. After confessing his sin, he needed to learn what it meant to forsake his lifestyle and replace it with an inner- and outer-man approach to living that honored his Lord.

## The Process of Progressive Sanctification

At this point Brian did not need a rigid 15-step method for growth because Christian growth comes not through a series of steps. There is no magic formula. At the same time the Bible is filled with principles that help God’s people change progressively into the image of Christ. The apostle Peter ended his last letter by saying, “But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen” (2 Pet 3:18). In a similar way Paul told his friends at Philippi,

So then, my dear friends, just as you have always obeyed, not only in my presence, but now even more in

my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God who is working in you, enabling you both to desire and to work out His good purpose (Phil 2:12–13).

Brian was encouraged to learn that the Bible contained practical principles to help him change from a life that was obsessive and unproductive to a life characterized by freedom, joy, direction, and controlled choices in both the inner and outer man that brought glory to God.

It was important, however, to help Brian understand that he could only make the necessary changes through the power of his resurrected Lord. The last thing we wanted to do was to replace self-centered atonement with self-centered sanctification. Brian needed to learn what it means to preach the gospel to himself every day. As Milton Vincent explained:

God did not give us his gospel just so we could embrace it and be converted. Actually, he offers it to us every day as a gift that keeps on giving to us everything we need for life and godliness. The wise believer learns this truth early and becomes proficient in extracting available benefits from the gospel each day. We extract these benefits by being absorbed in the gospel, speaking it to ourselves when necessary, and by daring to reckon it true in all we do.<sup>7</sup>

Brian had a long road ahead of him. His patterns of living were established and ingrained, but understanding that he was forgiven, accepted, and empowered "in Christ" gave him confidence that he had all the resources of heaven at his disposal if he really wanted to change in God's way. Together we examined a number of Scripture passages to drive this point home:

- I am sure of this, that he who started a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus (Phil 1:6).

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<sup>7</sup> Milton Vincent, *The Gospel Primer for Christians* (Bemidji, MN: Focus Publishing, 2008), 5.

- And I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me (Gal 2:20).
- I am the true vine, and My Father is the vineyard keeper. Every branch in Me that does not produce fruit he removes, and he prunes every branch that produces fruit so that it will produce more fruit. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in Me, and I in you. Just as a branch is unable to produce fruit by itself unless it remains on the vine, so neither can you unless you remain in Me (John 15:1–4).
- What should we say then? Should we continue in sin so that grace may multiply? Absolutely not! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Or are you unaware that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too may walk in a new way of life (Rom 6:1–4).

I talked with Brian about how to use passages such as these to begin thinking about his identity in Christ. His mind had previously been consumed with his own sexual lust and his man-made attempts to pay for his own sin. He had been focusing exclusively on himself. Over time Brian learned to focus on the beauty of the finished work of Christ and the joy of being found “in Him.” The result was a growing love for Jesus and a confidence that through the power of Christ working in him, he could change. It would be a process, but it was not meant to be a performance.

### The Beauty of Freedom

One aspect of the gospel that was especially important for Brian to grasp was that the blood of Christ freed him from any enslavement to sinful patterns of thinking and behaving. He learned that every time he started to believe the lie that his situation was hopeless, he needed to remind himself of the rich resources he possessed in Christ. One passage that especially connected with

him was Rom 6:17–18: “But thank God that, although you used to be slaves of sin, you obeyed from the heart that pattern of teaching you were transferred to, and having been liberated from sin, you became enslaved to righteousness.”

I encouraged Brian to begin thanking the Lord regularly for the freedom he enjoyed in Christ, just as the believers in Rome were exhorted to “consider yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Rom 6:11). Hope was blooming in Brian’s heart as he continued to learn how the sufficient blood of Christ, and not a man-made behavioral ritual, was the basis of his relationship with God. As Brian Borgman observed:

The sovereign king of the entire universe is our Father. He has not only created us, but he has also recreated us in Jesus Christ and has provided everything we need. Paul tells the timid Timothy, “For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind (2 Tim 1:7 KJV).” Unbelieving, sinful fear is contrary to what God has put in us at conversion (Rom 8:15). We overcome the grip of fear by knowing what God has done for us and in us through his Son. We break fear’s grip by realizing God did not give this fear to us; rather, he has given us the spirit of power, love, and self-control.<sup>8</sup>

### The Relationship Between Gospel Indicatives and Gospel Imperatives

At this point in my relationship with Brian, we arrived at an important crossroad. We had spent much of our time together discovering who Brian was in Christ. Now it was time to discover some of the new behaviors Brian should live out in the power of Christ. Theologians speak about the importance of distinguishing between the gospel indicatives (who we are in Christ) and the gospel imperatives (how we should act as a result). The organization of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians is a classic example of this

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<sup>8</sup> Brian Borgman, *Feelings and Faith: Cultivating Godly Emotions in the Christian Life* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2009), 129.

principle. Chapters 1–3 are saturated with gospel indicatives and 4–6 are filled with gospel imperatives.

In Ephesians 1–3, Paul expounded the gospel indicatives and gives us a beautiful and robust understanding of what it means to be a child of God. Our new identity includes earthshaking truths: we have been chosen “before the foundation of the world” (1:4); we were adopted “through Jesus Christ for Himself” (1:5); we enjoy “redemption . . . through His blood” (1:7); and we have received the “forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace” (1:7). This is only a sampling of the marvelous truths regarding who we are in Christ. No wonder Paul ends these three remarkable chapters with a prayer that we would comprehend our identity in Christ (Eph 3:14–21). As James MacDonald wrote, “To really be gripped by your identity in God’s greatness you must wade out of the shallow waters of self-absorption into the deep waters of praising him at all times for all things. Remember, God formed you for that very purpose. Embrace your identity as a forgiven worshiper of this all-patient God.”<sup>9</sup>

Only after comprehending the love of Christ and our marvelous position in him can we ever begin to live in a way that honors him. This is why there is a critical transition in the book at Eph 4:1: “Therefore I, the prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk worthy of the calling you have received.” Paul then described how God’s children should behave in order to please him.

Many Christians are spiritually stunted because they are trying to fulfill the commands of Ephesians 4–6 (the gospel imperatives) without soaking themselves in the foundational truths regarding their identity in Ephesians 1–3 (the gospel indicatives). Counselors must also avoid falling into either side of this ditch. On one side counselors must not focus on good behaviors while excluding the gospel indicatives that empower those behaviors. On the other side counselors must consistently explain how the heavenly realities of who we are in Christ translate into real-life actions.

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<sup>9</sup> James MacDonald, *Gripped by the Greatness of God* (Chicago: Moody, 2005), 166.

The primary issue in Brian's story had little to do with his driving and had everything to do with his identity. He had to learn to think biblically about his Savior and himself (Rom 12:3). That new thinking needed to produce new patterns of living.

As Brian moved from recognizing who he was in Christ to behaving rightly in Christ, he had to keep inventory of his thoughts. Self-absorbed thinking had generated Brian's bizarre efforts at self-atonement. Now Christ-centered thinking would be necessary to generate new, godly behaviors. Brian needed to learn to evaluate every thought about the Lord, himself, his past, his environment, his struggles—everything—through the lens of God's Word. Brian had been telling himself lies over and over again; he now needed Jesus to renew his mind along the lines of Phil 4:8: "Finally brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable—if there is any moral excellence and if there is any praise—dwell on these things."

As the filter of Phil 4:8 began to catch his sinful thoughts, Brian had to begin putting to death (Col 3:5) any thought that was displeasing to God. Wonderfully, by the power of the Holy Spirit, Brian actually had the ability to catch and put to death (Rom 8:13) these selfish and sinful thoughts as they appeared in his mind.

One dominating thought that Brian had to begin attacking was his sexual lust. He had to learn to put to death lustful thoughts about women and replace them with biblical ways of thinking about the people the Lord placed around him. James 1:21–25 became a critical weapon in Brian's arsenal at this stage of the battle:

Therefore, ridding yourselves of all moral filth and evil, humbly receive the implanted word, which is able to save you. But be doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. Because if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man looking at his own face in a mirror. For he looks at himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. But the one who looks intently into the perfect law of freedom and



perseveres in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but one who does good works—this person will be blessed in what he does.

As Brian was learning to act on God's Word and put to death his lustful thoughts, he humbly allowed me to hold him accountable as he took practical steps toward developing a renewed mind through the truth and power of God's Word. Eventually this accountability was transferred to a trusted friend who would continue to discuss this area of life with Brian on a regular basis. At first it was difficult for Brian to be open about the struggles he was having in his thought life. Over time, however, he began experiencing the joy of authenticity and the freedom that comes from "taking every thought captive to obey Christ" (2 Cor 10:5).

Yet Brian not only had to learn to kill sinful thoughts; he also had to learn to put to death the sinful desires which produced those thoughts. So together we studied Jas 1:14–15, and Brian began to ask himself questions like, "What am I wanting in this situation?" and "What desires are motivating this kind of behavior?" As Brian answered these questions, he began to recognize one fundamental desire: "I want to atone for my sinful lust by driving my car in a particular way." By the end of our time together, Brian acknowledged the bizarre nature of that desire. But we were both reminded that when we neglect to focus on the transforming truth of God's Word, we are all prone to thoughts, desires, words, and actions that are senseless and even absurd. Solomon made exactly this point in Eccl 9:3 when he observed that "the hearts of people are full of evil, and madness is in their hearts while they live." Thank God that, by his grace and through his power, even our most heinous desires and thoughts can be put to death in Christ.

### The Beauty of New Life in Christ

The gospel summons us not only to put off what is wrong but also to put on what is right (Eph 4:22–24). For Brian this meant taking the focus off of himself, forfeiting any supposed righteousness he might be able to earn, and turning his gaze to the finished work of Christ and the complete righteousness that has

already been accounted to every one of God's children. Second Corinthians 5:21 became a crucial focus of our discussion: "He made the One who did not know sin to be sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." Brian was learning to follow the path of the apostle Paul outlined in Phil 3:7–11:

But everything that was a gain to me, I have considered to be a loss because of Christ. More than that, I also consider everything to be a loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. Because of Him I have suffered the loss of all things and consider them filth, so that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own from the law, but one that is through faith in Christ—the righteousness from God based on faith. My goal is to know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, assuming that I will somehow reach the resurrection from among the dead.

The orientation of Brian's heart was turning toward the beauty of his Savior and the joy and privilege of growing in the knowledge of him. He learned the same lesson that C. H. Spurgeon had learned many years before:

Oh, there is, in contemplating Christ, a balm for every wound; in musing on the Father, there is a quietus for every grief; and in the influence of the Holy Ghost, there is a balsam for every sore. Would you lose your sorrow? Would you drown your cares? Then go, plunge yourself in the Godhead's deepest sea; be lost in his immensity; and you shall come forth as from a couch of rest, refreshed and invigorated. I know nothing which can so comfort the soul; so calm the swelling billows of sorrow and grief; so speak peace to the winds of trial, as a devout musing upon the subject of the Godhead.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, *The New Park Street Pulpit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 1:1.

In the course of time, Brian's bizarre behaviors began to change naturally. This natural transformation should not be a surprise because Scripture teaches us to "guard your heart above all else, for it is the source of life" (Prov 4:23). Brian's heart was being restored and guarded by the gospel; as a result, new, godly behaviors were springing up. As a result, we did not have to find all sorts of creative ways to manipulate his driving habits back into normality. As Brian allowed the Lord to change his heart, the need for ritualistic behavior became unnecessary.

It was delightful to listen to Brian's reports about his joyful ability to drive anywhere in town he desired. He spoke of seeing places in our community he had never seen before. He also found driving to be a pleasant and happy experience as he rejoiced in the way God changed his heart and life. Most importantly, he found the solitude of driving to be a perfect opportunity to focus on the finished work of our Savior. Brian had become a gospel-centered motorist who could say with the apostle Paul, "Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do [including freely and joyfully driving your car around town], do everything for God's glory" (1 Cor 10:31).

### Conclusion

Working with someone like Brian was both a challenge and a privilege. Often the Lord chooses to use opportunities like this to teach the counselor foundational lessons that will impact his own life in the present as well as the way he approaches future counseling opportunities for years to come. My relationship with Brian left me reflecting on three vital realities.

#### The Sufficiency of Scripture

Every counselor must decide which source of truth will serve as the fundamental grid through which he will develop and practice both his counseling theory and his counseling process. The competing explanations for OCD coming from the secular world are unsatisfactory because they are based on the ever-shifting opinions of man. Only one approach can claim the authority,

"Thus says the Lord." God's Word announces its sufficiency for all matters related to life and godliness. For example, Ps 19:7 says, "The instruction of the LORD is perfect, renewing one's life; the testimony of the LORD is trustworthy, making the inexperienced wise." And 2 Tim 3:16–17 declares, "All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." Also, 2 Pet 1:3 says, "His divine power has given us everything required for life and godliness through the knowledge of him who called us by His own glory and goodness."

This does not suggest that every helpful thought about OCD has to come from the pages of Scripture, but the Word of God should be given functional control over the ultimate explanation of the core problem expressed by OCD-type behaviors. The Word of God will always bring clarity and depth to the core issues of the heart, and it will address with precision the elements necessary for a struggling person to change. Brian reminded me of this truth.

### The Centrality of the Heart

Brian also reminded me of the centrality of the heart. Hard cases involving bizarre behavior can tempt the counselor to look mainly at the outer man. While biblical counselors should place appropriate attention on matters of the body, the central focus must always be the heart. The good news is that God is powerful to help his children change in their innermost being. Teaching shallow behaviorism is fruitless and unnecessary because God's Word teaches that God's power is effective at the deepest levels of who we are. "For the word of God is living and effective and sharper than any double-edged sword, penetrating as far as the separation of soul and spirit, joints and marrow. It is able to judge the ideas and thoughts of the heart" (Heb 4:12). Brian helped me reflect on the necessity of deep-level change in the heart.

## The Beauty of the Gospel

It was a personal honor and privilege for me to watch Brian grow in his love for Jesus Christ. I would never trade the opportunity God gave me to help him learn how Jesus replaces idolatrous efforts at self-atonement with a passion for the cross of Christ. Paul told the Romans, “How beautiful are the feet of those who announce the gospel of good things” (Rom 10:15). Brian reminded me of how thankful I should be for the opportunity to announce to desperately struggling people how the gospel rescues and restores.

Brian’s was a difficult and seemingly bizarre case. Some believers hesitate to get involved in biblical counseling because they fear cases just like this one. Truthfully, from a human perspective, some counseling cases are unbelievably difficult and seemingly impossible. The challenge of such cases should drive us deeper into the pages of God’s sufficient Word, allowing his truth to build our confidence in his power to understand and help even the toughest cases. Often these “impossible” or “bizarre” ministry opportunities draw you closer to Christ as a counselor and teach you about his sufficient grace. Never forget that “the One who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world” (1 John 4:4). Let your confidence in him motivate you to handle hard cases with gospel-centered biblical counseling and watch God’s power work mighty things in your counselees—and in you.