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# Hog Hole Heaven

I'm a Minnesota boy; it's in my blood. Being in the north woods or along the north shore of Lake Superior is a spiritual experience for me. The aspen, balsam, and jack pine have a wild texture about them, and if I could bottle and sell the fresh smell of the north woods, I'd never have to work again. In the morning, especially, when you first step out of your cabin or tent and breathe in, you instinctively close your eyes and smile because you know you're back.

I'm writing this book at a cabin that sits on the Wisconsin side of Lake Superior, near Bayfield. It has that same smell. The first thing I do every morning is grind the coffee beans, but then I walk out the sliding glass doors and twenty paces to the end of the boardwalk. I look out over Lake Superior, take in a deep breath, and fill my whole being with that wonder-ful, intoxicating smell of the north. Then after a few hours of writing, I go back out for another hit and I'm good to go for another couple hours. It might sound strange, but that smell touches something deep inside my soul.

There's a remote spot on the Minnesota/Canada border that holds twenty-five years of smells and memories for me, and it's my favorite place on earth. It's a sacred place. If you were to think of your favorite spot in the world, where would it be? Sacred places are important because they recalibrate the emotional and spiritual gauges in our life. They reconnect us with thoughts and feelings that get suppressed by emails and traffic. Sacred places awaken our soul. For Norman and Ethel Thayer, it was Golden Pond. For Noah and Ally in *The Notebook*, it was a backwater passageway that opened up to an aquatic sanctuary. For me, it's a place on Crooked Lake, where every spring I return to catch world-class smallmouth bass and walleyes. The Merritt family calls it the Hog Hole. It's where we catch enormous fish, listen to the wolves howl at night, and watch the northern lights dance across the sky while sitting around a fire. I call it Hog Hole Heaven.

It's located in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area, so there are no boats or motors-only canoes and an occasional kayak. The Hole itself is no bigger than a tennis court, and if you're even a few feet outside it, you won't catch any fish. It feels like you're in another world when you're there. But there's a price to pay. The road to the Hog Hole is narrow, dangerous, and difficult. There's only one way to do this, and it requires that

you do the hard work first so you can enjoy the results later. It's the way of discipline.

To get there we leave the Twin Cities at 3:00 a.m., drive four hours straight north to Ely, Minnesota, buy our bait, and then push off at Mudrow Lake. It's a seventeen-mile, eight-hour paddle and portage through a series of lakes and rivers. Once you navigate through the rapids and boulders of the Horse River, you dump into Basswood Lake, where you have to portage your canoes and gear around Basswood Falls. Then it's another six-mile paddle through Crooked Lake, which has a million twists and turns. You come through Bear Paw Pass and around Table Rock and finally into the most remote body of water in the state of Minnesota. The Hog Hole has a deep current running through it, and it's so far back in the wild that only a few locals know about it. One-hundred-fifty-year-old white pines tower over the Hole, glacial rock formations surround it, and at its most narrow point you can throw a stone across from Minnesota to Canada. And at the right time of year, it's loaded with trophy-size walleyes and bass. It's a fisherman's paradise. I'd draw a map for you, but then I'd have to puncture your canoe.

But most people wouldn't want to go even if they knew where it was, because what lies between the Hog Hole and civilization is eight hours of muscle-burning, shoulder-ripping, tongue-hanging, knee-gashing, blister-popping, vein-bursting canoeing and portaging. Getting there isn't easy, which is partly why it's so pristine. It takes a full day of steady paddling and then portaging eighteen-foot canoes and sixty-pound Duluth packs over narrow, rocky paths. Everything you need for a four- to five-day wilderness trip is carried on your back, including food, tents, sleeping bags, cookware, fishing gear, and fourteen dozen minnows and leeches that are sealed in large plastic bags with water and oxygen. It's a narrow road. And it takes enormous effort.

One portage is so brutal that we named it Billy Goat Hill. You have to be a billy goat to get over it. I've seen strong, strapping men collapse halfway up the rocky hill with a canoe over their head and just lay there in exhaustion, unable to get up. But you can't lay there too long because clouds of black flies and mosquitoes swarm to your sweat and blood. And if Billy Goat Hill doesn't get you, swamp portage can bury you in muck. I watched my brother-in-law, Ozzie Larsen, drop down into a muck hole that went up to his knees while carrying two sixty-pound Duluth packs. I was ten paces behind him with the canoe. I trudged passed him and asked, "You all right?" Oz said, "Yeah." We do help each other, but Oz let me know he could manage it, so I kept walking, because everybody knows that you have to carry your own weight. If you twist an ankle or gash a knee, the whole group goes down, because everybody else depends on your ability to carry your load.

So a trip to the Hog Hole isn't for everybody; complainers and freeloaders who don't

pull their own weight don't get invited because the trail is hard and unforgiving. And even if they wanted to, most people could never get to the Hog Hole because they lack the disciplines necessary to get there. Most have to settle for overcrowded, overfished metro lakes where they might catch a sunfish or two. I've seen many casualties along the seventeen-mile journey to the Hog Hole people who didn't plan, were not in shape, brought too much gear, or lost their food packs to bears.

Some people go in and never make it out because they underestimate the undercurrents common to that area. In August 2002, a church group came through Basswood Falls. Two of them went in for a swim but never made it out, even though they were wearing life jackets. The St. Paul Pioneer Press wrote:

The 17-year-old girl and her fellow church campers had been cautious at every step, including carrying their canoes around some of the more treacherous stretches of water. But a break to cool off in what appeared to be a calm stretch of water turned deadly for Jamie Christenson and Eric Hurst, 24, a canoeing guide who tried to save her. Both drowned near Basswood Falls, where a strong current first pulled Christenson under, then Hurst. Both had been wearing life preservers. A third person, an experienced 22-year-old guide who attempted to rescue Christenson, was sucked under, but she survived. "They call these hydraulic currents where the water swirls beneath," said Tim Smalley, boat and water safety specialist.<sup>1</sup>

So why do we do it? Why do we mark our calendars in January, take on a fair amount of risk, and then beat our bodies to near exhaustion to get there? Because once you've been to the Hog Hole, nothing else compares. It's that special.

Some trips are harder than others because of high winds or cold, driving rains. We've flipped a few canoes, lost a few packs to bears, and had our bait stolen by otters, which is bad because we always plan on fish for most of our meals. No bait, no fish. No fish, no food. But every year we return to our piece of heaven to the smells of the north woods, the taste of fresh coffee brewed over an open fire, and the pole-bending battles with Hog Hole walleye.

One of the realities of life is that few things of value ever come easy. A great marriage takes years of hard work-every day. There is never a time when I can say that I no longer need to work on being patient, tender, and conversant. I believe that marriage is forever, which means that you work through your problems and learn how to relate to each other no matter what it takes. Hog Hole marriages require daily effort and sacrifice. So do Hog Hole careers, friendships, children, and churches. It's never easy; few things of value ever are. A Hog Hole life is available to every person, but it takes determination, sacrifice, and work. In a word, discipline.

I'm going to make an assumption that all of us desire to have the best life possible. And when I say best life, I mean a life that's marked by what the Bible describes as the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. The best life is free of addiction, debt, and brokenness. The best life is one that is purposeful and makes a meaningful contribution to society. I'm assuming that you'd rather fish the pristine waters of the Hog Hole than the crowded, overfished lakes where there's one disappointment after another.

You can have that life, but it takes effort. And it all starts with relational wholeness. I'm a disciplined person. I eat right, exercise daily, set firm boundaries, know my strengths, and guard my priorities. I thrive on rhythm and routine and never face a challenge ill-prepared. I live by the adage that "hard work beats talent when talent doesn't work hard." I'm not that talented, so I've had to outwork and out-prepare the competition to be successful. But all of the discipline, fitness, and success in the world is pointless if you end up losing your marriage, kids, or friends.

A Hog Hole life is impossible without first applying life's disciplines to our relationships. It's what Jesus taught his disciples in Luke 11.

## **Bring Heaven Down to Our Earth**

One day the disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray. Jesus said, "This is how you should pray: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. May your will be done on earth as it is in heaven'" (Luke 11:2). Jesus said they should pray for God's kingdom to come to earth, just like it is in heaven.

I wonder how often people pray for God's kingdom to come to earth. Most everyone wants to go to heaven some-day, but how many of us are praying for heaven to come to us? How many of us are hoping to experience some heaven on earth before we die? Jesus says that heaven is not just a future reality; we can start to experience elements of heaven on earth, a Hog Hole Heaven. It's what my seminary professors called "the already but not yet." We have an opportunity to experience some of heaven's forgiveness, grace, joy, peace, and relational wholeness right now, already, but on this side of heaven it'll never be complete because we still sin, we still have relational and physical pain, we still have to deal with the process of dying. Heaven's already available, but it'll never be fully complete here on earth. That day when all sorrow, sin, and pain will be gone still awaits us.

Jesus instructed them to pray: God, whatever's going on up in heaven, bring that down to earth; may your kingdom come to earth as it is in heaven. If we can figure out how to bring some heaven to earth, then we'll be fishing in the Hog Hole instead of in

some overcrowded, overfished sinkhole.

## **A Hog Hole Life**

Relationships are the dominant theme of the Bible. Relationships are the essence of life. They are what movies are made of, songs are written about. They are what fuels Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter. Businesses like Kodak, Verizon, and Microsoft have built empires based on relationships.

God is a relational being, and he created us in his image, which means he created us as relational beings. Have you noticed that when your relationships are good, you are good, but when they're bad, almost nothing is good? We are relational to the core; it's how God made us. And the Bible identifies two relationships that are fundamental to a Hog Hole life on earth. In fact, if these two relationships are missing or broken, you cannot experience a Hog Hole marriage, career, family, or life. It's impossible.

What are those two relationships? The Bible says that our relationship with God and our relationships with others are the key to a Hog Hole life; they are the means through which wholeness, joy, and purpose are achieved. So when Jesus said that we should pray for heaven to come to earth, he meant that we should pray for relational wholeness between us and God, and between us and others. When those two areas are in good order, they lead to wholeness in every other area.

When Jesus was asked about the greatest commandment, he said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself." Then he said, "All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments" (Matt. 22:37-40). In other words, all the ways that God wants us to live are summed up in these two commands: love God and love others. If we get these two things right, we will be living the way God wants us to live. In fact, love for God and love for others are so closely connected that Jesus links them together. He says the second command is like the first. Love for God and love for others are inseparable, and they lead to wholeness in every other area in life.

So if you want to measure how much you love God, look at how much you love, care about, and are considerate of others. If you couldn't care less about other people if you're not considerate and generous toward others that's a sign that God's love has not fully penetrated your heart. C. S. Lewis said that we cannot love the whole world, but we certainly can love our neighbors.

It's in the everyday, one-on-one encounters with people that love gets tested. Jesus

said, "Whatever's going on up in heaven, bring that down to earth." And what's going on up in heaven, primarily, one-on- is love for God and love for others.

By the way, Jesus's instruction to love God and love others in the New Testament is a summation of the Ten Commandments in the Old Testament. The first four commandments address the specifics of loving God: have no other gods before me, don't make false images, don't misuse the Lord's name, and worship God on the Sabbath by keeping it holy. The next six address the specifics of loving others: honor your father and mother, don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't steal, don't give false information about others, and don't cover other people's things. The theme of the entire Old and New Testaments centers on loving God and loving others.

Paul the apostle repeats this theme in Galatians 5:14 when he says, "The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." And then he lists the fruit of the Spirit, which is the outcome of a love-filled life: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Gal. 5:22-23). These are the qualities that mark a loving person. Then he adds, "Against such things there is no law" (v. 23), which means that if we would treat others with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, there'd be no need for any other commandments because those qualities are the essence of loving God and loving others.

What I've discovered after fifty-three years of life is that when my relationship with God and my relationships with others are healthy, I'm healthy. But when I'm distant from God and when I'm at odds with my wife, kids, colleagues, and friends, I struggle. I go to work and put on a respect-able front, but it's with a heavy heart. I try to deal with hard decisions, but I do so with uncertainty and fear. I go golfing or fishing, but it's with loneliness and a lump in my throat.

I have found that when my relational world is out of whack-when I'm not relating closely with God and I'm in conflict with others-then there's not much heaven in any part of my earth. Jesus said that we should pray for God's kingdom to come to earth, and that means being in a loving relationship with God and others. It's the foundation to a Hog Hole life. I can be the most disciplined person in the world, I can eat right, work hard, exercise daily, stay focused, and delay gratification, but if my relationships with God and others are missing, I will miss life.

## **Conviction on the Cranberry River**

Some of the best trout fishing in the upper Midwest is near Bayfield, Wisconsin. The Brule River is famous for its large steelhead and brown trout that run in the spring and

the fall. Steelies can weigh up to twenty pounds, and when you hook into one, you have to run up and down the stream to try to stay with it.

Early on in my writing. I had come to the end of a long day. It was 5:00 p.m., and I had an unrelenting urge to go trout fishing in a nearby stream called the Cranberry River. The only problem was I didn't have a Wisconsin license. I had arrived late the night before after driving through a bad rainstorm and thick fog. I hadn't seen any bait shops open, and I was just thankful to have made it without hitting a deer. So I had gotten to bed late and then had dove into my writing the next morning. But I had this unshakable hanker-ing to go fishing that evening. It's the same hankering I get every night for vanilla ice cream over a warm brownie with hot chocolate sauce-it's virtually unstoppable.

The stream is less than a mile from where I was staying, but the only place to get a license is eight miles away at the Fish Lips bar in the town of Cornucopia, probably a forty-five-minute round trip. I was planning on going to Cornucopia the next day to get some groceries, and I was going to get my license at the same time. But the urge to go fishing wouldn't go away, and I wanted to get out of the house and get on the stream so badly that I rationalized, "Would the DNR really care if I made a few casts today knowing that they'd get my sixty dollars tomorrow? I just want to get out of the house, make a few casts, and see if the fish are there. What's the harm in that?"

So I suppressed my conscience and drove up Cranberry River Road. I took a right turn toward the river, turned down a dirt road, and there it was, flowing wildly through a valley that was heavily shaded with spruce, birch, and balsam. I was mesmerized. But as I was driving and gazing at the river, I got too close to the ditch, which was muddied by heavy rains, and I sank my Ford Explorer up to the axles. The truck was tilting to one side so badly that I wondered if it might tip. So I shifted into four-wheel drive and tried to back up. The wheels went about a foot and then began to spin. I rocked the Explorer forward and backward, which only sank it farther. I was hopelessly stuck.

It was Saturday evening. I got out of the truck and walked down the dirt road toward a little house. Two big black dogs came running at me barking loudly with their teeth showing. I hesitated, but I had no choice. So I braved the dogs, told them they were nice doggies, walked tenuously up to the one-room, smoke-filled house, and knocked gently. I didn't know if I'd be met with a warm welcome or the barrel of a shotgun.

There was a husband, a wife, and a mother-in-law inside. The man of the house wore a baseball cap, a long ponytail, and cutoffs. His name was Dennis. He had a couple front teeth missing and was watching NASCAR on a forty-inch flat screen TV. Jeff Foxworthy would've had a heyday. When I explained my predicament, the mother-in-law said in a

raspy voice, "Good, some excitement." Evidently I was going to be their entertainment for the next hour or so. The mother-in-law looked like she could pull my SUV out with her bare hands. I have a hunting buddy who says, "This is a town where the men are men, and so are the women." She was that kind of woman.

I asked Dennis if he knew of a towing service, and he said, "I have the Toyota truck out there, and if that don't work I have a tractor."

I said, "Really? That'd be awesome." So he backed up to my truck and hooked it up with chains. We slung mud all over the place, but Dennis yanked me out and saved me about a hundred dollars. I said, "Thanks, man. Would you take twenty dollars?"

He grinned and said, "I'm always willin' to take twenty bucks."

Now that should've been enough to convince me to go into town and get my license, but instead I thanked them for their help, opened the back end of my truck, started getting my gear ready to go fishing, and continued to push back my con-science. The three of them were walking back to their house when the mother-in-law stopped, turned around, looked straight at me, and said, "Do you have a fishin' license?"

I was shocked because who does that, and why did she even care? So I said, "Everybody needs a fishing license." And as soon as I said it I thought, "Nice. You're a Christian pas-tor who just deceived a chain-smoking, NASCAR-watching mother-in-law. How low are you going to go?"

As an aside, one of the ways we love God is by obeying his commands. Deuteronomy 11:1 says, "Love the LORD your God and keep his...commands always." That includes being transparent and truthful.

I don't know if it was because I had already sinned plenty that I figured why not sin a little more, or if I was just trying to outrun my conscience. But whatever it was, I dropped down into the stream, stripped some line off my fly rod, and made my first cast, right into a high-hanging tree branch. One cast, one lost fly in a tree. Not to be denied, I got out my cheaters, tied on another fly, made sure there weren't any branches above me, and made a perfect cast, and then another, and another.

I love the sound and feel of a cold trout stream beating against my waders. There's something timeless and native about stepping into a stream that has flowed through the same ravine for hundreds of years. It reminds me of my boyhood when my dad would take me to the Slippery Rock Creek, which cuts its way through the foothills of the Allegheny Mountains in Pennsylvania. One early morning in May, my dad let me



skip school, and he dropped me off to fish the Slippery Rock all by myself. It was one of the best mornings of my life. By noon I had caught a limit of eight fat, brown trout on a #2 Meps Spinner. I can still see them swirl out of the current to grab my lure. My dad knew that trout fishing on the Rock is sometimes more important to a boy than sit-ting in school.

That day on the Cranberry took me back. It was a perfect day, a perfect setting, a perfect stream-and I didn't enjoy any of it. After ten minutes of fishing, I lost my second fly in a tree. So how was I doing? So far I'd sunk my truck, lost twenty dollars, deceived a mother-in-law, lost two flies, and caught no fish. I thought, "That's it. I have to make this right."

So I left the stream, drove eight miles to Fish Lips, and handed the lady my credit card. She said, "There's a five-dollar charge if you buy your license with a credit card. So I pened my wallet to pay cash, and I had fifty-seven dollars-three dollars short for the sixty-dollar license. I would have had plenty had I not paid Dennis twenty dollars for pulling me out of the ditch.

So now how was I doing? I'd sunk my truck, lost twenty backs, deceived a mother-in-law, lost two flies, caught no fish, and paid sixty-five dollars for a sixty-dollar license. Beautiful!

But with my license in hand I drove back to the Cranberry, dropped back down into the stream, and on the very first cast caught a ten-inch brook trout with gorgeous red spots on its side. I stood there all alone in the middle of the stream with shards of sunlight filtering through the trees, and I felt the smile of God again. And I was free. I caught seven more trout after that, and I let each one slip out of my hand and dart back into their hiding places for another day.

When I later phoned my wife and told her about my escapades, she said, "Brilliant. You're writing a book on discipline it doesn't sound too disciplined to me." Then she said, "You make my whole body hurt." (Laurie has a full-body reaction to my boneheaded missteps.)

What I've noticed is that there's a direct link between loving God and loving others. Whenever I disobey God, it almost always affects other people in a negative way. In this case, by inconveniencing and deceiving complete strangers and causing my wife's whole body to hurt.

I've also noticed that when I'm in the process of disobey-ing God, I never feel like praying, reading the Bible, going to church, or hearing the truth, because I don't want

the truth to get in the way of my disobedience. I don't want to feel God's disapproval or conviction. I don't want to be close to God when I'm intent on disobeying him. Instead, I want to distance myself from him because drawing close to him exposes my sin and shame. I've noticed that disobedience separates me from God, and when I'm distant from God, I'm in a dangerous place. When I'm out of step with God, I become out of step with everyone and everything else, and when that happens, there's not much heaven going on in any part of my earth.

Jesus told us to pray for God's kingdom to come to earth, and that can happen only when we are in right relationship with God and right relationship with others. That's the key to a Hog Hole kind of life. So I am slowly learning that if I want more of heaven to come to my earth, I have to keep my relationships with God and others healthy and whole, and the following three directives have helped me do that.

### ***Watch Out for the Little Indiscretions***

If I want more of heaven to come down to my earth, it's usually not the big blunders that get in the way-I've been able to avoid most of those. It's the little indiscretions that I try to rationalize away. I've always tried to trivialize the little stuff because compared to the big stuff, what's the big deal? The big deal, I'm learning, is that little stuff often leads to big stuff. And indiscretions are habitual. When I allow myself to cut corners, I'm tempted to do it again and again until it becomes a normal way of behaving that no longer bothers me. The truth is, God isn't concerned about the size of dis-obedience; he's concerned about disobedience.

There was a time when God led Joshua and the Israelites into the Promised Land. Before they crossed the treacherous Jordan River, which was above flood stage, God promised to open a passageway through the river, lead them into Canaan, and drive out the pagan nations they would encounter in battle. God promised them victory at every point as long as they remained obedient. The first people they defeated were the Amorites, who occupied the city of Jericho. God promised victory over the Amorites, but he gave the Israelites a warning before they went in to conquer the city. He said, "Keep away from the devoted things, so that you will not bring about your own destruction by taking any of them. Otherwise you will make the camp of Israel liable to destruction and bring disaster on it. All the silver and gold and the articles of bronze and iron are sacred to the LORD and must go into his treasury" (Josh. 6:18-19). God made it very clear that the devoted things were to be set aside for the corporate good of the nation.

So they went in, the city fell as God had promised, and the Israelites were on their way to overtaking the land that they had dreamed about for forty years. All they had to do

was remain obedient in this one small area: don't touch the devoted things. But Joshua 7:1 says, "But the Israelites acted unfaithfully in regard to the devoted things; Achan son of Carmi. took some of them. So the LORD's anger burned against Israel."

It was just a small indiscretion. What's the harm in siphon-ing off a few coins from the huge plunder? But God isn't concerned about the size of disobedience; he's concerned about disobedience. If they couldn't obey in the little things, how could they obey in the big things? So when Israel tried to overtake the next city of Ai, God removed his hand of protection, and the armies of Israel were soundly defeated.

After the Israelites were defeated, Scripture says that "Joshua tore his clothes and fell facedown to the ground before the ark of the LORD, remaining there till evening" (Josh. 7:6).

But in Joshua 7:10-11, the Lord commands Joshua, "Stand up! What are you doing down on your face? Israel has sinned; they have violated my covenant.... They have taken some of the devoted things; they have stolen, they have lied, they have put them with their own possessions." In other words, they had disobeyed in the small things, leading to the defeat of the entire nation. Not much heaven on earth.

Scott Waddle committed an indiscretion nine years ago when he chose to bend the rules and show off his billion-dollar submarine to some guests. It was a momentary indiscretion that destroyed his career and nullified twelve years of training. Scott was captain of the USS *Greenville*, a nuclear submarine. He had graduated at the top of his class and had been handpicked out of 250 naval officers to command this fast-attack sub. His life was a success in every way; he had a great marriage, a beautiful daughter, a bright future.

But then on February 9, 2001, he violated protocol and did an incredible maneuver. In front of his guests, at a high rate of speed, he took his sub from deep ocean waters toward the surface. But just before the sub breached the surface, there was a loud crash. It was one of those moments when you have a full-body reaction. When Scott grabbed the periscope, he saw a Japanese crawler and high school kids scrambling into life rafts. Nine of them died. It became an international crisis, and Scott Waddle was relieved of his command that. Near the end of his book *The Right Thing*, Scott writes these words:

All of us have those pivotal moments of life when you take your eye off the road and suddenly there's a child on a bicycle right in front of you. Or you allow yourself a momentary indiscretion that has lifelong implications, those seemingly insignificant choices that can suddenly take on a proportion we never dreamed possible. We think, "It could

never happen to me," but it did. And in eight minutes my life was totally changed.<sup>3</sup>

At age forty-two, Scott Waddle was able to piece his life back together, but it was at great cost to himself and his family.

I wonder how many of us have allowed ourselves a small, momentary indiscretion that turned out to have lifelong im-plications. We may think, "Just this once I'll drink and drive. Just this once I'll steal from my company. Just this once I'll have sex before marriage. Just this once I'll cheat on a test. Just this once I'll show off my submarine." As a parent of two teenagers, I found myself repeating things like, "Be careful kids, don't be careless, think about what you're doing and with whom you're doing it, because one bad choice, one small indiscretion can alter your entire life." So watch out for the little indiscretions, because "just this once" can have lifelong implications.

### ***Operate on the Belief That God Rewards Obedience***

What it comes down to for me is, do I really believe that God exists, that he's involved in my life, and that he rewards obedience and punishes disobedience?

It's a matter of belief.

And my belief gets tested whenever I'm tempted. Belief is easy when I'm not tempted to cross a line, but belief is difficult when the temptation is strong, and I'm all alone, and nobody is looking. But if during the temptation I really believe that God is all-present and all-knowing, and if I really believe that God rewards obedience and punishes disobedience, then there's no question what I should do. So the challenge for me is to operate on the belief that God rewards obedience every time I'm tempted to cut corners, manipulate the truth, or allow myself a little indiscretion. It comes down to belief.

Incidentally, when God punishes, he doesn't cause bad things to happen to people; he simply removes his protective presence. In Joshua 7:12, God said to Joshua, "I will not be with you anymore unless you destroy whatever among you is devoted to destruction."

When we are disobedient, it's usually God's protective presence that we forfeit, and that makes us vulnerable to attacks, loss, and failure. God said that the Israelites had made themselves liable to destruction. God doesn't have to punish disobedient people directly; he simply has to remove his protective presence, making them liable to destruction.

Part of the problem is that sometimes obedience doesn't make mathematical sense.

Let's say, for example, that I had decided not to buy a license because I was going to fish just that one time. There's a 99.9 percent chance that I could get away with that and avoid paying the sixty-dollar out-of-state license. (My wife frequently comments on how I have a fishing license for every state in the nation.) From a mathematical and human point of view, I would clearly come out ahead.

But what I would have failed to calculate is the God factor. God created the world, he owns the wealth of the world, and if I operate on the belief that God rewards obedience, I will dutifully pay the sixty dollars every time, even for a few minutes of fishing. Maybe God will reward me with the successful publication of a book, a great budget year, or new and fresh insights for my messages. Maybe he will reward me in less obvious ways that I'm not even aware of, like personal health, the protection of my kids, and the well-being of our church and staff.

Or I could disobey and try to cut corners, and maybe God would allow me to slide into a ditch, lose twenty bucks, and end up paying sixty-five dollars for a sixty-dollar license.

In Psalm 119, David writes these words:

Blessed are they whose ways are blameless,  
who walk according to the law of the LORD.  
Blessed are they who keep his statutes  
and seek him with all their heart.  
They do nothing wrong;  
they walk in his ways.  
You have laid down precepts  
that are to be fully obeyed. (vv. 1-4)

David says that God has laid down ways, laws, statutes, and precepts, which are different words that mean the same thing; he's talking about God's instructions for life. He says that God has laid down these things for us so that we don't have to guess what God wants us to do or how he wants us to live. He's made it clear, and David says, "They are to be *fully* obeyed."

He also says that those who fully obey God's ways will be blessed. How will we be blessed? He doesn't specify, but we can infer that we will be blessed in various ways-in relationships, health, careers, protection over our family, even financially. Even when it doesn't make mathematical sense, the Bible says that when we do what's right, God rewards us. In Joshua 1:7, God told Joshua, "Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go."

It's a matter of belief.

### ***Evaluate the Condition of Your Relationships***

I'm a fairly independent, self-reliant person. So I've had to learn how to delegate and let other people do things for me and with me. Sometimes things don't get done exactly the way I think they should get done; sometimes they're done wrong or below standard, and I'm tempted to take them back and do them myself. But one vital lesson the Hog Hole has taught me is that I can't get anywhere alone. I need a team of at least three other guys to make the trip to Hog Hole safe and successful. I need them to help me load the truck, drive at 3:00 a.m., carry sixty-pound Duluth packs, paddle the canoe, cut wood, make fires, filet fish, and clean dishes.

And I need them to keep me safe when bears stroll past my nylon tent at night looking for food.

I need people.

I need people to laugh with me, lift with me, and help me achieve things that are beyond me. It's taken me about fifty years to learn that the best part of the Hog Hole is the people with whom I share it. And the best part of my marriage, family, work, and recreation is the people with whom I share those things.

So the Hog Hole life really goes back to loving God and loving people, even for those who've recently lost a job, home, or loved one, or who've gotten rejected by a school, or who can't pay the bills right now. You can overcome if you have a family who loves you, a small group of friends who pray for you, and a God who promises to never leave or forsake you. You will be able to find the strength and resources to overcome any problem if loving God and others is the top priority in your life.

But if you're so out of step with God that he removes his protective presence, and if you're so out of step with others that you find yourself isolated and alone, that's when things tend to spiral downward and living a disciplined life becomes somewhat hollow. It's the "loving God and loving others" part of my life that has allowed me to achieve and excel. The "loving God" part has given me an ongoing flow of wisdom, protection, and strength, and the "loving others" part has given me the tangible love and support to get me through school, build a family, manage a staff, and lead a church. So I have to watch the little things, believe that God rewards obedience, and constantly evaluate the condition of my relationships.

## Hanna's Hugs

Her name is Hanna. She was seven years old at the time and had a mild case of Down Syndrome. I'd seen Hanna on and off for three years because Hanna's brother, Tim, played on my son's soccer team. During those three years, we got to know the other soccer families, and Hanna became a central part of the mix.

But I have to admit that when I first saw Hanna, I felt sorry for her parents and her brother, who sometimes seemed em-barrassed by Hanna's bold interruptions. Sometimes she'd wander out onto the field during play, and her parents would have to reel her in. At times she'd walk up to complete strangers and engage them in conversation. And at first I was annoyed by her behavior, but the more I got to know her, the more I began to enjoy her.

Always wanting to be a part of the action, Hanna once wedged her way into the pregame huddle as the boys were getting ready to take the field. Her brother, Tim, gently but firmly nudged her away and said, "Hanna, this is a boys' team," to which Hanna replied emphatically, "I am a boy."

Another time Hanna was pacing along the sidelines. One of the parents was admiring her little outfit and said, "Hanna, are you a cheerleader?" Hanna spun around and said with conviction, "I'm the coach!" Cheerleader, shmearleader.

But something happened one day that won me over forever. It was the first time I'd seen Hanna in a long time, and I was surprised to see her wearing her own soccer uniform. She was now playing on her own team, and they'd just finished playing at another field. And there was Hanna, working the sidelines as usual, only this time it was different. She started down on one end, and whether she knew you or not, she walked right up to you, got six inches away from your face, and said, "Guess what, I won!" And she said it with such joy and delight that you had to respond, especially when she threw her arms around your neck and hugged you cheek to cheek. One by one, men, women, and children got a "Guess what, I won!" and the most genuine, full-body hug.

I was standing at the end of this procession, and our daughter, Megan, age thirteen at the time, was sitting in a lawn chair dreading her turn. Meg likes her space and isn't much of a hugger, so I knew she was dying inside. Hanna came up to Meg, Meg looked up at me to see if I'd bail her out, but it was too late. Hanna stood about six inches from Meg's face and shouted, "Guess what, I won!" and she threw her arms around Meg's neck. The biggest smile beamed across Megan's face as she embraced Hanna back. *Interesting.*

And then, I couldn't believe it; nobody could. Nobody has ever done what Hanna was about to do in the history of spectator sports. She was about to commit the ultimate soccer sin, the ultimate fan faux pas. Hanna was about to go over and hug the enemy parents who were sitting smugly on the sidelines, I watched with delight as Hanna snuck up on her first victim.

She was a proper-looking lady sitting in a lawn chair, a complete stranger who never saw it coming. Hanna boldly walked up to her, stepped right into her personal space, and said, "Guess what?"

The lady kind of coiled backward and said, "What?"

Hanna threw her arms around the lady, pressed her cheek up against the woman's cheek, and said, "I won!"

What could the lady do? She put her arms around Hanna and said, "That's wonderful."

One by one, men, women, and children-it didn't matter-Hanna stepped right up and gave them each a hug. I noticed that everyone was smiling and laughing because Hanna brought a little bit of heaven to everyone's earth. She sent an electric charge of joy through two opposing teams who now seemed strangely united. And as I watched her, I thought, "Why does it take a little girl with Down Syndrome to do what everyone wants to do but is afraid to do? When do we lose our ability to love boldly and freely, like a child?"

I've often wondered what Jesus meant when he said, "I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it" (Mark 10:15). Hanna will probably never be a soccer star, probably never run a business, teach a class, or even have a family of her own someday. Her list of accomplishments won't be long. But she accomplished something on the sidelines that day that nobody else could do or was willing to do: Hanna brought a little heaven to earth, and she showed all of us what Jesus meant when he said, "Love your neighbor as yourself." That's God's kind of love. That's kingdom love. That's how you receive, enter, and experience the kingdom of God on earth, even as it is in heaven.

So you really can have a Hog Hole kind of life, job, marriage, education, career, and soccer team, but it starts with love for God and love for others. It's not easy. It requires enormous effort and sacrifice, but once you've been to the Hog Hole, you'll never want to settle for safe, easy, placid waters again.

It really is that special.