

9

Avoid the Fatal Fall

Practice Self-Control

It was late August, and after sleeping on the hard ground all night, I sat up in my sleeping bag and tried to unkink my sore body. I located my pants at the bottom of the tent and slid them over my chicken legs. I poked my head out of my tent to the fog rising off Crooked Lake in the early dawn; the cold morning air sent a chill through my body. We were seventeen miles from nowhere in the most remote part of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area (BWCA). It was day one in the Hog Hole, and I couldn't wait to start a fire and get the coffee going.

This is a hard and dangerous trip, and we take every precaution. Every year people die in the BWCA from hypothermia or drowning; others are badly injured from ankle breaks, cuts, and gashes. Bears are always a concern, but the water is what scares me the most, and canoes aren't the most stable vessels. The dark, tinted water never really warms up-in late August the water temperature drops to the low fifties-and there's a spooky undercurrent that must always be respected.

In twenty-five trips or so, we'd had only minor mishaps, until that August morning 2005. Oz Larsen and Chris Whachler were with me-both experienced canoeists and woodsmen. We had invited a fourth person on this trip, Dean Hager, who'd never paddled a canoe and knew nothing about the BWCA. As a rule, we don't bring rookies into the Hole, because we like coming out alive. But Dean's a good friend and always up for an adventure. He's also a triathlete, so he's strong; a high-level executive at a large software company, so he's smart; our church chairman, so he's a leader; and a father of three little girls, so he's outnumbered at home and needed a break. Dean was a good risk, or so I thought.

At 6:15 a.m. on that first morning, I slipped on a sweatshirt and a wool stocking hat; I could see my breath. I crawled out of the tent, and there was Dean standing on a rock, shivering and wearing only his swim trunks and goggles. He pointed across the water and said, "Is that an island?"

"That's a big island," I told him. "Maybe a mile all the way around it." I said sternly,

"Why don't you wait for it to warm up, Dean? Wait until midday when we can paddle alongside you."

Twice I warned him not to go, and he hesitated, but I could see it in his eyes, and I know the personality-determined and driven. He said, "I'll just swim across the channel, and if I feel okay, I'll keep going around the island. Be back in a half hour or so." I started gathering wood for the fire as I watched Dean swim away.

Ten minutes later Oz crawled out of his tent just in time to see Dean disappear around the corner of the island. Oz said, "He's nuts."

Chris crawled out next and said, "He's nuts."

The three of us muddled around the campsite getting breakfast ready, checking on bait, unpacking our fishing gear—all of us casting an occasional glance at the channel to where Dean should've been rounding the bend at any second.

Twenty minutes later Oz said to Chris, "We better take your canoe to go check on him." Chris had just sat down against a tree with his coffee and said, "Let me finish my coffee first." Morning coffee in the Hog Hole is a sacred experience.

Jokingly I said, "He's your bowman, Chris; be a long paddle back without him." After Chris finished his coffee, he got up, and I could tell he was a little miffed that he had to go out and retrieve the rookie.

Chris and Oz slid their Kevlar Minnesota III into the water and headed in the opposite direction around the island to meet Dean. Fifteen minutes later I saw them coming around the other side, and they lifted their arms and hands toward me as if to say, "There's no sign of him." I gestured back with the same motion—no sign of Dean anywhere.

Chris and Oz rounded the island a second time. It had now been close to an hour, and my mind started racing: "How could Dean have missed the turn? I forgot to tell him about the shallow reef halfway around—maybe he had hit his head; maybe he was hypothermic." All of us were thinking about the real possibility that Dean could've drowned; he wouldn't be the first.

I dug some firecrackers out of my pack that I carry to scare off bears, and I ran down the shoreline blowing them off one by one, hoping the loud echo would give Dean a reference point. No response. There are hundreds of little inlets and outs in the Boundary Waters, and the shorelines can blend together, making everything look the same.

Chris and Oz paddled back to the campsite to pick me up and grab some extra clothes and matches. A brooding silence hung between us. Finally, I said, "Let's face it, there are only two possibilities: either he's lost, or he drowned." Nobody responded.

We circled the island a third time, scanning the dark water for a body. An hour and a half had passed. I thought, "How long do we search? When do we paddle six hours back to Ely for a float plane? If he's lying on land somewhere, how much time before hypothermia sets in and his whole body shuts down? How will I face his wife, Jenny, and the girls? What about our church board, his company, his funeral. Why didn't I insist that he not go?" I felt sick to my stomach.

It was the first time the three of us had ever lost a friend like this, and our emotions ran from fear, to regret, to remorse, to utter disbelief. The thoughts I had of facing the moment when we found him are beyond description. As each half hour passed, our hope for a good outcome dwindled. Before he left the campsite, I remember Dean saying, "I'll keep the island on my left at all times; that way I won't get lost." Even though it looked as if there was no way he could've missed the turn up the channel that led to our campsite, we started thinking through all the possibilities, all the shoots, bays, and shorelines he could've taken.

One by one we eliminated the options, finally settling on one final possibility, one final hope. It had now been two hours. "Maybe he missed the turn, kept swimming down the shoreline, and turned into the next shoot..." We set out, paddled a mile or so past the channel that he should have come through, followed that shoreline, rounded the bend, and turned down the next shoot, which dead-ends two miles down. We paddled a hundred yards down the shoot and let the canoe drift to a stop. Nothing. In silence, we put our paddles in the water to turn around, when suddenly Oz said, "There he is!" Where? Was he on land, floating in the water? Oz said, "Way down there. He's waving his arms."

Chris and I looked up, and about a mile down the shoreline we could see a person that looked like a tiny speck. We hung our heads in relief. Dean had swum more than four miles in fifty-degree water. He was alive, but Chris wanted to kill him. So I said, "Give him a break, then we'll kill him." We paddled up to Dean, who was slapping his body trying to keep warm. He looked pale and shaken. I said, "Did you think this is Dead Moose Bay?" which is where our campsite was. Dean said, "I have no idea where I am." After two hours of swimming in ice-cold water, Dean had collapsed onto that rock. His feet were numb, and his body was shutting down. He'd begun hallucinating and thought he was seeing our campsite across from where he'd collapsed.

Dean came close to losing his life that day. He was able to clothe himself and stumble

into the canoe. He apologized repeatedly and thanked us for not giving up on him. He wondered how he could ever make it up to us. I said, "Don't worry. You just became prime sermon material for about twelve thousand people. Might even show up in a book someday." A week later I received a handwritten note in the mail that was signed, "Thanks for not giving up, Dean."

The question is, why do really smart people sometimes do really dumb things? Dean knew the risks. I warned him twice, told him about the currents and about people who lose their lives every year in the Boundary Waters. Later he admitted to us that he's prone to getting lost. When he travels on business trips, Dean is famous for going for a run and not being able to find his hotel again. He once went on a half-hour run in Paris and found his hotel four hours later. The reason smart people do dumb things is not because they lack knowledge, information, or intelligence. Dean had all of that. It's something else.

Moral Falls

Move into the realm of sexual morality. Most of us could readily list really smart, often prominent, people who forfeited their career, marriage, family, and future for an affair or an illegal business move. Presidential candidate John Edwards is extremely intelligent and successful, a United States senator. Edwards had to know that having an affair during his 2008 campaign for the presidency would jeopardize his chances, if not eliminate them altogether. What was it that caused him to ignore all wisdom and intelligence and risk his chance for the presidency for a fling?

Ted Haggard, former pastor of New Life Church in Colorado Springs, was a rising star in the church world, appearing on media outlets like CNN, Larry King Live, FOX News, and Oprah. I used to watch him speak on TV and marvel at his charisma and ability. He and his church were in the national spotlight for their explosive growth and ministry impact. He'd written books and was the president of the National Association of Evangelicals. Ted Haggard preached against sexual immorality; he knew this stuff backward and forward. He's extremely intelligent and gifted and, I think in most areas of his life, moral. Ted Haggard knew that visiting a male prostitute, even if it was just for massages, was way out of bounds. He knew that kind of behavior would wreck his reputation and strip him of everything he'd accomplished. But he did it anyway. Thankfully, under new leadership, the church is regaining strength. But what was it that caused Ted Haggard to ignore all reason and intelligence and do irrevocable damage to himself, his marriage, his church, and his future?

I've had three close friends who went through seminary, were respected leaders in their churches, taught regularly against sexual immorality, yet took devastating falls in this

area. In each case, I was blindsided when it became public knowledge and it always becomes public knowledge. Each of them was able to save his marriage and gain some restoration in ministry, but the price he paid in lost time, friends, trust, and future opportunities was steep and ongoing. What was it that caused these three incredibly smart people to set aside their intelligence and go down a path of certain loss and regret?

Some are able to recover a portion of their former life, but not without deep losses and lifelong regrets. Tiger Woods will always be talented and wealthy; he'll win more golf tournaments. But what good is it if he loses his wife and children? Again, why do really smart people sometimes do really stupid, often career-ending, family-ending things?

It's not because they lack intelligence or even some degree of morality. There's something more, something that over-rides intelligence.

Not surprisingly, the Bible gives us the answer. Fatal falls are not new to mankind; they started with the fall in the Garden of Eden. And we've been tripping and falling ever since.

A King's Fall

One of the most famous falls happened to Israel's most successful and intelligent leader. The Bible says that David became king when he was thirty years old and reigned over Israel for forty years (2 Sam. 5:4-5). David was a fierce warrior, the Braveheart of his day. In one campaign, the Bible says, "David captured a thousand... chariots, seven thousand charioteers and twenty thousand foot soldiers" (2 Sam. 8:4). When the enemy sent in reinforcements, "David struck down twenty-two thousand of them" (v. 5). The guy was a stud in battle.

He was also an intellect. He wrote some of history's most articulate and thoughtful prose. Next to Jesus's Lord's Prayer, David's Twenty-Third Psalm is perhaps the most widely quoted prose of all time. First Chronicles 18:14 says, "David reigned over all Israel, doing what was just and right for all his people." David knew right from wrong. He was a brilliant military strategist, a fierce warrior, an accomplished author and musician, and to top it all off, he did what was just and right for all his people. He was a good king, and he treated people fairly. David did the right things.

But one day, a day when David should've been on the battle-field leading his men, he got out of bed, and the Bible says, "David... walked around on the roof of his palace. From the roof he saw a woman bathing. The woman was very beautiful, and David sent

someone to find out about her. The man said, 'Isn't this Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam and the wife of Uriah the Hittite?' Then David sent messengers to get her" (2 Sam. 11:2-4).

Consider the pain and loss of that single, selfish decision, Pain and loss to Bathsheba, a married woman, who would bear the shame and guilt of being forced to lay with another man and bear his illegitimate child. She would also bear the loss of her husband, Uriah, whom David arranged to have murdered to cover up his sin.

To Uriah, who was murdered to pave the way for David to marry Uriah's wife.

To David's family. The prophet Nathan said to David, "Why did you despise the word of the LORD by doing what was evil in his eyes?... Now, therefore, the sword will never depart from your house, because you despised me and took the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your own" (2 Sam. 12:9-10).

The Bible says that sin always brings death-death to pu-rity, innocence, and relationships. Death came to David and Bathsheba's newborn son. It came to David's son Amnon, who forced himself on his sister Tamar and as a result was murdered by his brother Absalom. Death came to Absalom, who ended up hating David, his own father, and was killed while trying to chase down and kill David. The price David paid for one careless choice was a never-ending wave of death and destruction to his family. David wrote in Psalm 38:17, "I am about to fall, and my pain is ever with me." Some falls are fatal, and the pain never goes away. Is there forgiveness and restoration? Yes, but not without lasting consequences.

So how could this incredibly intelligent and righteous man do something that was so stupid and wicked? It wasn't due to a lack of intelligence, and it wasn't because David was completely immoral. After all, Scripture says that "he did what was just and right." There was something else that made David vulnerable to a fall. It's the same thing that makes us vulnerable.

The Emotional "Want To"

The reason so many smart people are capable of committing life-altering blunders is because something overrides intellect and knowledge, and that something is emotion. When you allow yourself to get too close to something that you're at-tracted to, your emotions kick in, and the emotional "want to" becomes so strong that it overrides your ability to back off and say no. When push comes to shove, whether it's a financial, relational, or even recreational decision, emotion trumps intellect every time.

How many of us have set a specific dollar amount for the purchase of a car, home, boat, dress, or electronic gizmo that we vowed we would not exceed but ended up spending hundreds, even thousands, of dollars more? I have, and most of you have. Why? Because the emotion associated with newer, brighter, and better trumps all reason. We do it because our emotional "want to" overrides our intellect.

The apostle Paul is one of the heroes of the Christian faith, but even he admits, "I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out" (Rom. 7:18). He knows what he should do, he even has the desire to do it, but he can't execute. What's his problem? He tells us a few verses later: "In my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind" (vv. 7:22-23). In other words, he knows and agrees with what's right and good—he delights in God's law. But there's another "law" at work inside him, and this other "law" wages war against his mind, against what he knows to be right and true.

A few verses earlier Paul identifies this other "law" as "sinful passions" and "evil desires." Passions and desires are connected to our emotions, not our intellect. And this "law" is like a law of nature—it's there, it can't be altered or eradicated. Our passions and desires wage war against our mind or intellect. And if we allow them, they will override our intellect, which is why Paul says, "I have the desire to do what's good, but I cannot carry it out." It's why really smart people are capable of doing really dumb things. There's a point at which they get too close to the line, their passions and desires rise up, and their emotional "want to" overrides their intellect.

When my friend Dean stood on that rock at 6:15 a.m., he knew the water was cold, the current was strong, and the area was unfamiliar; he knew about his proclivity to get lost. But his "want to" was so strong and his desire to train for the triathlon had such a pull on him that he ignored his intellect and let his emotions override all common sense. And he almost paid the ultimate price.

So if Paul says, "I have the desire to do what's good, but I cannot carry it out," are we doomed? Is there no hope? There are three safeguards you can employ to prevent you from taking a fatal fall.

Know Your Vulnerabilities

Where are you weak? What stores, websites, images, people, or places trigger your passions and desires? People have vulnerabilities in the area of spending, eating, relating, and recreating. Take a moment and reflect on where you're most vulnerable. Determine where you are weak, because that's where you're most likely to take a fall. If you know where you're vulnerable, then you know what to guard against or avoid

altogether.

Avoid Areas of Vulnerability

I do mentoring work with some Norwegian pastors and churches, so I've been to Oslo several times. One night I got to my hotel room late after traveling all day, I turned on the TV, and as I was flipping through the channels I came across the Exotic Entertainment channel with a ten-second trailer that was about as raw as could be. This happens in most European hotel rooms. These channels entice hotel occupants to watch for about thirty dollars a day. All you have to do is enter your room number. Nobody knows, nobody sees; it's just you and the TV. And that's the moment of truth. That's the moment when your character is tested.

How will you decide? Will you enter your room number and subject yourself to something that'll violate your marriage, damage your mind, and start or feed an all-consuming addiction? Or will you quickly flip to CNN? In that split second, you have to use an inner strength that's been built up over time that overpowers enormous temptation; there has to be an ingrained response that enables you to immediately turn away. If you linger, if you contemplate, allowing your thoughts and emotions to drift toward that channel, you're doomed. Your emotions will override everything you know about the addictive, progressive nature of pornography, and you'll fall.

One of the ways I've learned to avoid this pitfall is to ask the front desk to remove all access to such channels before I get to my room. Not because my marriage is weak, because it's not. I have a great marriage. It's because of what I've observed that really smart people who are devoted to their marriage and family cross this line all the time and suffer for it.

Sexual temptation is so insidious that I don't trust myself. When I see really smart people do really stupid things, I say, "Bob, note to self, smarter people than you have fallen." One of the pet phrases I've repeated to my kids, congregation, and myself is, "Never put yourself in a situation where something could happen." Don't put yourself in a situation where an emotion gets triggered, a spark gets lit, a line gets crossed. Call me extreme, but I don't think colleagues of the opposite sex should ride alone in a car together, have lunch alone, or meet in an office without first telling an assistant or colleague what's happening. I'd even make it a work policy. We had all our church offices built with a six-foot-high, one-foot-wide window by each door so that everything's visible and everyone's accountable. Several times I have stood before our staff of two hundred, drawn a single line down the middle of a whiteboard, and said, "Here's the line. Don't ever get near it."

If you're married and have a Facebook account, have you built in safeguards? A work colleague told me that she and her husband have agreed not to add former girlfriends or boyfriends as friends on Facebook. It starts out so innocently. Someone tries to "friend" you, or you're just "reconnecting with an old college friend." You might even innocently send them a message. Then they write back and suggest meeting for coffee. And if you happen to be in a place where things aren't the best at home, you're a prime candidate for a fall. Online can move off-line in a hurry.

The American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers says 81 percent of its members have used or faced evidence plucked from Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter over the past five years.

So don't put yourself in a situation where something could happen, because you and I are one touch, hug, note, email, lunch, kiss, emotion away from endless pain and regret. Don't even go near it. First Corinthians 6:18 says, "Flee from sexual immorality." Proverbs 4:14-15 says, "Do not set foot on the path of the wicked or walk in the way of evil men. Avoid it, do not travel on it; turn from it and go on your way." The best way to prevent your emotions from overriding your intellect is to avoid your areas of weakness. Don't get near them. Avoid them. Turn and walk away.

Whenever I talk about setting firm boundaries around relationships, I get emails criticizing me for being too rigid. People will say, "I have lunch dates and business appointments alone with people of the opposite sex all the time. These are some of my best friends." Certainly, whether you're married or single, it's good and healthy to have friendships with people of the opposite sex. I do as well.

But I've grown weary of sitting across the desk from highly intelligent people who let their friendship slip into an emotional or physical affair that wrecked their life. The reason we need to take every precaution is because there is a line that gets crossed by well-intended people all the time. They say, "I don't know how it happened." And they're right. They don't know how it happened, because it wasn't about knowing; it was about emotion. They crossed an invisible line where their emotions nullified their intellect. And once that line gets crossed, it's almost impossible to turn back. Not knowing where that line is should scare you into imposing some firm boundaries that you simply will not violate. You have way too much to lose. So do I.

Learn from Others' Mistakes

It amazes me how often I encounter people who are going along fine in life have a decent job, a great spouse, wonderful kids, respect in the community-but then totally sink them-selves by having an affair, stealing something from work, or getting arrested

for a misdemeanor. Or I see teenagers who flunk out of school, get sexually careless, or form an addiction that puts them at an ongoing disadvantage. You don't have to wreck your life. It is possible to avoid the fatal falls that cause lifelong loss and regret.

One of the ways to avoid a fatal fall is to learn from others' mistakes. It doesn't take a person of great intelligence to watch someone hurl themselves off a cliff on a bicycle, see them crash and break numerous bones, to say, "Hmm, that looks really painful. I think I'll avoid that."

It doesn't take much intelligence to watch fellow students binge drink, puke all over themselves, engage in high-risk behaviors, miss class from hangovers, form an addiction, fail out of school, and end up in low-paying jobs to say, "Hmm, that looks really messed up. I think I'll avoid that."

It doesn't take super intelligence to watch people travel to a casino each weekend, blow their earnings, neglect their kids, form an addiction, and eat away at their savings to say, "Hmm, that looks like it destroys homes and makes people poor. I think I'll avoid that."

You have a choice. You can learn from either your own pain or someone else's pain. There are countless examples of how not to do life. You don't have to experience it yourself to learn how painful something is.

Wayne Cordeiro, pastor of New Hope Church in Hawaii, says that the average person makes about three hundred choices every day: when to get up, what to wear, what to eat, whom to call, what to tackle first at home, school, or work. Of those three hundred choices, about thirty of them have potentially life-altering outcomes: which relationships should I pursue, should I go to college and where, is it time to start a family, should I consider that job offer, do I try to beat this red light?

To narrow it even further, Erwin McManus says that "most of us can summarize our lives around five or six defining decisions—decisions that if we'd chosen differently would have radically altered the trajectory of our lives."³

One decision can cause years of regret, while another can produce a lifetime of benefit. Every decision you make will have either a positive or a negative effect on your life, and there are a few decisions that are absolute deal breakers. It's your life, and you have the freedom to choose. But after fifty-three years of watching and listening to hundreds of people who have either succeeded or failed, my advice is to avoid the fatal fall.