

How Is Your Soul?

*“And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world
but lose your own soul?”*

Mark 8:36

We wrote this book as one voice from two authors. Few places will we identify ourselves; however, in the introduction we thought it was important for you to hear from each of us.

From Jason

In the front of one of my prayer journals is written nine words, “This is the year I get my mojo back.” I had spent the previous two and a half years drifting; actually sinking would be a better way to describe it. After pastoring a church for five years, my soul was stuck in the equivalent of emotional quicksand, and by the time I realized, it felt as if I was too far gone to ever find my way back.

My story is probably no different from others you’ve heard before. Some would call it depression, maybe a form of burnout, I’m not sure what to call it, but I was taking on water, and the ship was going down.

It’s difficult to pinpoint when exactly I lost my way. It could have been when my mom passed away, or maybe when some staff members left the church unexpectedly, but one thing was for sure; I wasn’t pastoring... I was pouting.

My soul was toxic. I had lost the awe of the calling of God. I was bitter towards other pastors and churches experiencing what I deemed success, and I was pouting that God wasn't doing what I expected Him to do. Worst of all, I didn't share what I was going through with anyone else— It was all playing out in my mind.

Other people who know me best knew something wasn't right, but I never talked about it. I kept preaching, leading staff meeting, posting positive updates on Facebook about how much I loved my church, but I had lost all confidence in myself, and in God's calling on my life.

Looking back now it was inevitable; I started pastoring at the age of 24, which was probably not the wisest decision at the time, but you couldn't have convinced me otherwise back then. I was a cocky, stubborn, opinionated young leader convinced I knew what needed to be done to grow a church.

I remember when I told my dad I was becoming a senior pastor, he warned me, "Jason, pastoring is hard work." "I'm sure it is for a lot of guys," I said with the arrogance of a boxer who had never been punched in the mouth, "but I know what I'm doing. Our church will be running 1000 before I'm 30." I cringe thinking about it now. I had no idea what I didn't know.

God was gracious enough to allow me to fail. The church experienced little wins here and there, probably due to stubborn work ethic, but my soul, the staff culture, and church health were all toxic. That's why it shouldn't have come as a surprise when our congregation of almost 400 people came crashing down like a house of cards. Over a period of six weeks, the worship pastor, children's pastor, and half the elders left the church, which led to a steady leak of 200 people over the next 12 months. When the dust settled, 175 people remained, ready to follow me, their pastor, but I wasn't sure I wanted to be a pastor anymore.

Fast forward a few years, it was Christmas Eve, and I was

opening a gift from my sister in law— a Nike Tiger Woods Golf shirt. Golf is a big deal in my family, and a passion of mine, so receiving a golf shirt was not a new thing. However, this shirt was not just a shirt. It was a prophecy.

My sister in law looked at me in the living room of her house, in front of the family and said, “Jason when you walk onto the golf course you have confidence. You know you’re a good golfer, and you expect to win— you’re not afraid. You used to pastor like that, but not anymore. You’ve lost your confidence, and I’m tired of seeing you so defeated. Jason, it’s time to get your mojo back.”

My sister in law is not the type of person to just come out and say something like that, but I’m glad she did. God used her that night to light a spark in my soul that had burned out. After everyone went to bed, I grabbed the new journal I would use for the next year and scribbled down those nine words, “This is the year I get my mojo back.”

From Jeremy

The closest I ever came to “crashing and burning” was the night I had a panic attack or an anxiety attack, or maybe it was a nervous breakdown. Whatever it was, I thought I was having a heart attack or dying, or both. What led me to that moment wasn’t directly connected to my pastoral leadership, but it had everything to do with issues inside of me that had gone ignored.

My mom passed away just a few weeks before her 49th birthday, and my wife was pregnant with our fourth child. Mom’s passing wasn’t necessarily a shock to us because she had been battling cancer for nearly two years, but her diagnosis rocked me.

During those two years I jumped in to help where I could, I spent time on the phone with mom as she battled her own anxiety and fear of dying. I tried to be there for my dad helping him

process his emotions as primary caregiver. Literally thousands of people who were impacted by my parents' ministry sent well wishes, but in the middle of everything happening I never processed what I was feeling.

I spent most of her last three weeks at mom's bedside, spoke at her funeral, then returned home and jumped back into family life and ministry at my local church. I knew work needed to be done, people were hurting and needed my help. Sermons had to be preached. Events had to be planned. But it never occurred to me, work needed to be done in me.

One night, while eating dinner with my wife, I got up from the table to retrieve something from the kitchen. While walking back toward my chair the room started spinning. My lips went numb. My eyes got foggy, and I heard ringing in my ears. Corrie saw my dazed expression and asked if I was okay. I told her "no." I was certain I was having a heart attack.

What happened next was uncontrollable, inconsolable weeping, for several hours. All the things I'd suppressed in my soul were tired of hiding. My emotions threw a coup, took control of my body, and I had no choice but to comply.

Good Company

Pastoring is hard. You might assume the people chosen by God to carry out his message and purpose would be the most emotionally stable and healthy, but that has never been the case. All you have to do is search the Bible to find countless men and women being used by God in amazing ways, while at the same time struggling to keep a pure heart and emotional strength.

Noah saved civilization but drank himself to sleep after the flood.

Jacob battled insecurity and fear, expecting to reap the deceit

he had sown in his family.

Moses had a temper and allowed past failure to traumatize him so badly that when God personally invited him to be the deliverer of Egypt, he repeatedly turned Him down.

Elijah and David battled extreme mood swings and depression.

Many of the disciples were egomaniacs with a thirst for power, and the Apostle Paul was tormented by something so significant he refused to talk about it. Fortunately, for you and me, having all of our issues resolved has never been a prerequisite for being called by God.

Maybe you've never had a "crash and burn" experience, but you're not exempt from some soul searching. We know pastors well enough to know you've spent time questioning your calling, feeling like a failure, resenting your senior pastor or resenting your staff. You've probably written a few resignation letters that are saved on your computer, or dreamed about how much money you could make out in the "real world." Somewhere along the way, doing the work of God stole your heart for God, and you're not quite sure how to get it back.

If any of this sounds familiar, don't let the devil lie and convince you you're weird or alone. 1 Corinthians 10:13 reminds us, "No temptation will seize you except that which is common to man." The enemy would love to deceive you into believing your struggles are unique, that your temptations are an anomaly and that your private things should remain private. But this verse reminds us there is a commonality among the human race. Someone somewhere is struggling with the same things you're struggling with, and I bet it's more than one or two.

So much of your work as a pastor is public, but private things have a way of shaping public moments. You can hide your fears, sin, struggles, insecurities and pain for a while, but eventually,

they will find a way to surface. It doesn't matter what the private issues of your life are; they will find a way out, often when you least expect it.

Jesus asked a question worth repeating, "what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul?" Logically it makes sense, no one consciously chooses compromise, but you don't lose your soul the same way you lose your car keys; it happens gradually, over time, until one day you can't remember where you lost it.

We've spent our life around pastors. As fourth generation pastors' kids, it's not a stretch to say we've probably met close to 10,000 pastors in our lifetime. Sadly, many of us serving in ministry are jaded and disheartened. We are angry, lonely, depressed, discouraged, bitter, confused, cynical and hopeless. We have lost the joy of our salvation somewhere in the process of working for God.

Of course, we don't lead off conversations with confessions of despair; we usually do just the opposite. The conversation usually starts with statements like, "the church is doing great." "God is really blessing." But if you listen closely enough you can hear it in our words, you can see it on our face.

We know what it feels like to spend time trying to help spiritually dead people while feeling dead yourself. It's miserable. You feel phony. The devil keeps telling you you're all alone—you're the only pastor who is struggling. He whispers in your ear with statements like, "If people knew who you really were they would never want you to be their pastor." But it's not true.

That's why we've written this book, to help you find healing for your toxic soul; to recover your passion for ministry and overcome discouragement and defeat. No doubt, serving and building God's church can be challenging, downright impossible at times, but if God didn't believe you have what it takes to help

him build his church, He wouldn't have called you. He has the utmost confidence in you, and your best days are ahead of you, whether you believe it right now or not.

Results, Relationships, and Realities

This book has three sections: *results*, *realities*, and *relationships*. Over the course of your ministry, the chances are good your results, realities, or relationships will cause you to be discouraged— and that's okay. Discouragement is a part of life, what's not ok is lacking a healthy way to process and deal with discouragement. After enough discouragement, you become disappointed in yourself, maybe in God. Disappointment eventually leads to depression and ultimately feeling defeated. No one intends to end up with a toxic soul, but the compound interest of discouragement, depression, and defeat steals your passion for building God's church.

It doesn't have to be that way. God doesn't want you leading with a toxic soul. He wants you leading from the overflow of an emotionally healthy heart. Here's the best part: it's possible! It's possible to lead and love Jesus at the same time. It's possible to pastor and not have your family resent the church. It's possible to have friends in ministry and not see every other church as a competitor.

Over the next 10 chapters, we'll talk about many of the issues that cause our souls to become toxic— issues like comparison, loneliness, people leaving the church, dealing with criticism, and lack of resources, just to name a few.

If you gain the world but lose your soul, what's the point? God cares more about *who* you are much more than *what* you do; it's time you feel the same way about yourself. God wants you to be healthy; your family wants you to be healthy; your church *needs*

you to be healthy.

Let's make a commitment together not to become a statistic giving the best years of our life to build God's church only to crash and burn in dramatic fashion. Let's commit together to preserve our souls. It's possible to serve in ministry without being jaded, burned out, and cynical. It's not easy, but it's possible, and it is what God desires for your life and leadership.

We wrote this book to encourage you and remind you you're not alone. We hope as you read you will ask the Holy Spirit to identify places in your soul that are becoming toxic. I can't promise it will grow your church. But I promise it will grow you.

At the end of each chapter, we have included stories from other pastors, friends, and mentors in our life. We hope these stories remind you— you're not alone. No matter the size of your church or your tenure, we all deal with the challenges and stress of ministry.

Don't read this book alone. Find another pastor or church leader to read with. Consider starting a small group for pastors in your community or online to take this journey together.

God's church is at its best when pastors and leaders are at their best. Let's make a commitment together to grow ourselves as much as we strive to grow our church. When we do, and we begin to lead from the overflow of a healthy soul, our lives and God's church will thrive.

If you've lost your passion for ministry, or your personal relationship with God, as you read through the pages of this book God is going to resuscitate old dreams and passions. We're in this together. We believe in you and are praying for you.