



for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

Hebrews 11:10

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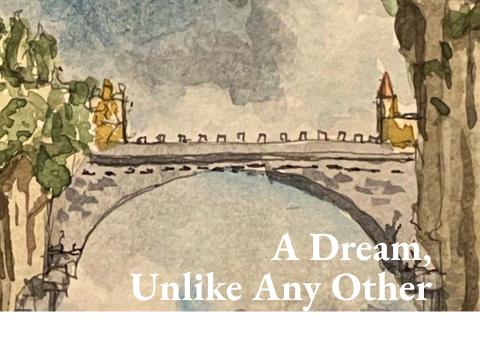
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# A Trekkers Guide to the City of God, 2023 © Matt Rawlins

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Simply put, please give it away with no strings attached.



Liam had a dream one night. His gangly frame was stretched out on the old hide-a-bed in his little apartment. The small window air conditioner hummed away to keep the humidity at bay. As he stared at the ceiling in the haze of almost-sleep, it suddenly came alive in a flash of brilliant imagery. The images took shape, movement, and drama, forming something like and yet unlike an ordinary dream; it was more like a vision of a deeper reality.

He longed for the dream to be real but was terrified that it might not be. He was tempted at times to say it was a nightmare, for the beauty of it captured him and would not let him go.

This is what he could remember of it and his trek to get to the City of God.

# The City of God: A Dream Worth Living For

It was a city. No, it was THE CITY. He immediately knew it was where he belonged—a place he was made for. A place where he had a house (he would have settled for a room) with his name on the entryway. It was home in the safest sense of the word.

If you understand how it feels when you slip into your favorite clothes, you know how he felt when he walked into that home. It fit him perfectly.

Had a decorator studied Liam's life for a hundred years and known the longings of his heart, his preferences, and all he valued, they could not have decorated the place better. The colors, the lighting, and even the style of the chairs were perfect. In his dream, he owned it all, free and clear. It was his space where no person or time could make demands on it.

It had an enchanting peace, such a peace that you could sit and revel in it. There were no bars on the windows, no locks on the door, and no walls surrounding with barbed wire or glass on top. No one could enter his home without an invitation, as it was his sacred place. He was aware there were neighbors, and he felt a strange longing to get to know each one and discover the beauty of who they were. He knew it would take forever to do so, but even that seemed right.

In Liam's vision, he saw crystal clear streams flowing through the City, like in old Europe. On the banks of the streams were sapphires, emeralds, and amethysts. He discovered secret walkways that led to little flowered gardens where friends met for tea. Large mango, apple, orange, plum, and other fruit trees lined the paths, each heavy with fruit. Raspberry, blackberry, blueberry, and grape vines also grew along some paths. Somehow, he knew it was for the pleasure of those who walked that way. If that wasn't enough, large, perfectly manicured parks were woven through the islands with bridges linking each of them up.

The streets were lined with shops and restaurants where artisans and chefs displayed the bounty of the nations. At each restaurant or store was a master craftsman, creating beautiful expressions of life and gladly conversing with people who took an interest in the work. You could spend your life wandering here, discovering goods and food while listening to musicians playing.

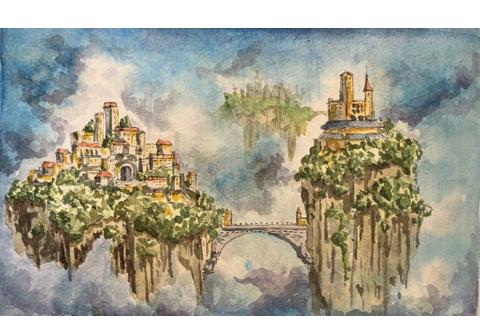
The smells—oh, the smells could hold you captive. You could be walking and catch a scent of roses and then pikakes a few moments later from the little gardens. The smells of the restaurants summoned you to their feasts. Each restaurant's smells were as good as a meal in themselves. As he walked, he caught sight of many bakeries: such sweetness hanging in the air.

Liam wandered into a great courtyard and saw a banquet so lavish it stunned him. There were people from all nations celebrating with music, dance, and feasting. The abundance he saw would have made the great King Solomon look like a pauper. Then, for a brief second, he saw a table. On it was a place set just for him. He thought he saw a tag on a chair with his name on it. A shiver of excitement ran through him at just the possibility of it. He longed to be there—with an aching unlike anything he had ever experienced—not just in a dream, but in reality.

Then he was taken back and saw the whole City before him. It was like ornamental jewels hanging in space. The smells, sounds, and sights that flowed vulnerably from every area of the City of God had a transparency that seemed to summon you to get to know it. There was a purity to it that invited you into an intimacy with it. There was also a power to it. It had an aura of importance that flowed from it, seeming to declare *This is* **the City of God.** He didn't know how he knew this, but he did. This CITY was the center of the universe.

Liam's dream made him ready to ditch his humdrum life and figure out how to take up residence in the City of God. If he was honest, he had a nagging question, "How could a place like that make space for me?" But he tried not to pay any attention to it, because he KNEW he was made for that City. This was written into his DNA.

However, we are getting ahead of ourselves in the dream. This is Liam's trek to the City of God.



### A Child

The vision then took Liam to a very odd place. He saw himself as a young boy in his family. The house he'd grown up in was ranch style, spreading out as a single story. The white porch with its pillars gave a cautious welcome to all who would come. The bricks on the lower part gave it a sense that it was here to stay. Liam never did like the brown color of the house but secretly loved the dark red door demanding your attention.

His mother was quiet and reflective. She was also the nervous type. In one season of her life, she would not leave the house without a pill bottle in her purse. She rarely took a pill, but the comfort of it close to her eased her persistent anxiety.

His father was outgoing, a hard-driving businessman who loved to drive Cadillacs. He was the youngest of ten kids, born dirt poor. Nine were boys, and they learned from their youth that you had to prove you were "somebody," because they all knew they were not.

Some kids grow up with a stuffed bear as a friend. Some have a close brother or sister they hang out with. Liam had an invisible friend for his life journey. His name was Insignificance. He was a constant companion and often helped Liam figure out the meaning of life and what Liam would do. Insignificance always had time to hang out with him and seemed surprised anyone cared about his young friend.

# Hide and Seek (Well, Primarily Hide)

One of the first games that Insignificance taught Liam was Hide and Seek. One of Liam's earliest memories was on the playground in fourth grade. He was on the basketball court, hiding behind the support post for the basketball hoop, feeling insecure and hoping no one could see him. Insignificance realized there was work to do to teach him how to hide where others could not see him at all.

No one was better at hiding than Insignificance. It was almost as if he could stand in a room full of people and no one would look at or even notice him. Slowly, Liam learned the art of hiding and became pretty good at hiding in plain sight.

"What if people do notice you? Isn't that good?" Liam often asked when he was younger.

"No, they'll only look harder once they do that. Humans have this desire to look inside of you. It's like they want to see 'the real you." Insignificance hesitated and then continued, "You don't want that conversation . . . not now, anyway."

It's a rule of close friends: if they repeat themselves often enough, their words become your reality.

### **New Friends**

The dream then took another twist. Liam saw his dreary teenage years blur past him. One unique thing about having Insignificance as your best friend is that others are drawn to him. He makes others feel safe—as if they have nothing to prove. As Insignificance worked his magic, three friends—Religion, World, and Flesh—came together with Liam, and they learned to put up with each other.

Religion always dressed cautiously and looked conservatively classic. He was the more cultured and refined one of the group. He always had an opinion and gave you the sense that he was right. If you disagreed, you were wrong. He was the team's conscience and could be relied on to tell you what was wrong. He didn't like World or Flesh but had such a good friendship with Insignificance that he learned to tolerate them.

World was perpetually immaculate and had a polished look to her everywhere she went. She always had a clear sense of what was happening around her and what was good in the moment. She loved fashion, beauty, cars, and selfies. She gave off the attitude that she didn't care what the others thought about her, and they all secretly adored this about her.

Flesh loved jeans and a T-shirt but could change in a moment if needed. He was raw, passionate, and wanted to suck the life out of every moment. There was no limit to what he was willing to do to reach his ends, and he had a natural leadership gift. Flesh

was the glue that held the team together because he saw the strengths of World and Religion and wanted what both had to offer.

They say tension is good for a team. If true, this team was surely in for good things, because there always seemed to be tension. However, Liam appreciated the help and looked to them for support. They all promised him love, life, and success. What more could he ask for?



# They Journey Begins

In the next scene of the vision, Liam became unsettled. It felt like he needed to do . . . something . . . or he would explode. He knew there was more; the City of God called to him. But he didn't know what to do about it. He knew it was time to act, but that was all he knew.

This was a massive challenge for Liam, because he was used to being passive and just following whoever had the strongest argument among his friends. But now, for the first time in his life, he was the one who felt strongly and needed to raise his voice and then do it. He gathered his friends and tried to put into words what was happening inside of him.

"I hope you won't think me crazy," he stammered, "but I had a dream—maybe even a vision—about a city. No, that sounds boring. It wasn't—it wasn't that. Whatever it was, it sure wasn't *that*." He laughed self-consciously, beginning to lose his nerve at the sight of his friends' blank faces staring back at him. "Sorry. I'm no good at this. Maybe I can describe what I saw, and that will help."

He then explained in detail the vision he'd had that night: the City, its tree-lined streets, the shops and restaurants, and the home there, just for him. After he finished, he took a deep breath as his eyes teared up and his voice trembled. "I've been dead up till now in my life," he declared. "I know that sounds theatrical, but I don't have the words to describe the beauty, the mystery, and the reality of its impact on me. It's as if I have tasted something so raw, pure, and vibrantly alive that all other tastes or desires within me mean nothing to me.

"So . . . here's the crazy part," he said, swallowing hard. "I want to go there but don't know where it is. Will you help me on my trek to the City of God?"

As this was the first time Liam had ever spoken up to his little group of friends, they looked at each other in shock, wondering what to do. Silence hung in the air for a moment. This was new territory none of them had ever traversed.

Insignificance spoke first. "My first response was to say no," he said softly. "We're safe here. But somehow . . . as you share, Liam, I have a desire for it, and I want it, too." He took a deep breath, just as Liam had not minutes before. "Let's be careful—but let's go for it."

World jumped in. "You'll lose your place here!" she said, flabbergasted. "You've worked hard to make a space for yourself. If we leave, we lose our place. It's not worth the risk right now. Dreams are just meant to be dreams, Liam. My vote is we stay here."

Religion stood in the background and watched the group. As Liam described the City of God, he pondered the name. *The City of God.* He liked the name . . . a *lot.* God was his area of expertise. He'd always felt like the odd man out of the team, but this could give him new authority and leadership. What opportunities might lie ahead, with such a goal? He couldn't wait to move forward. He slowly rubbed his hands together and smiled. "I think it's a great idea to go to the City of God." He gave the last word as much emphasis as he could.

Flesh stood up now, grinning. "Did you hear, Liam: a place with our name on it? We'll have status and can use it to build a stronghold for us in the City. I say we start on the journey *now*. The vision was about how we'll succeed, and I like that a lot."

So, Liam and his close friends finally agreed to a trek to the City ("—of God," Religion would insist they add whenever they referred to it; Flesh and World always just said the City).

As they laid their plans for departure, Religion saw the vulnerability of the group and jumped in. "We need structure," he said authoritatively. "A clear plan. We need to make sure we do this right."

"But I don't know where I'm going yet. I don't know where the City is," Liam replied.

"We must remember it is the City of *God*," Religion corrected him. "And if there's one thing I know about, it's God."

"But how can we make a plan when we don't know where we're going?" Liam asked again.

When all of them fell quiet at this, Insignificance whispered, "Liam, you need to be clear that you're in charge."

"Nonsense," said Religion, holding up a book. "All we need is in the King James Bible. It will not lead us astray."

When Religion handed it to him, Liam looked bewildered. "I tried to read that, but it made no sense." With a scrunched face,

he gave it back to Religion. "You need to tell me what it says, because I don't get it."

"Of course, I can make it clear," Religion said—though rather stiffly, offended that Liam didn't share his reverence for the Bible.

World leaned in. "Well, if we're going on a trek, I do know of a great city to help us on the way." A big smile came across her face. "It's called Entertainment. We need some excitement to get us moving and make this trip worthwhile."

"Any direction is better than just sitting here," Liam said, throwing up his hands. "Let's go."

And so, the team was on their way.



# The Fog

They hadn't gone far in the dream before a fog moved in. It swirled gently around each of them like clouds moving amongst the hills. Out of the fog, Liam heard the words:

#### Love doesn't exist.

He looked around. "What was that?"

The group stopped walking and looked at him. Insignificance asked, "What was what?"

"Oh, sorry, I thought I heard someone say something."

"No one said anything," Religion declared.

The group continued. Before long, however, Liam heard it again, the faintest whisper:

#### There is no such thing as love.

Liam glanced around in the mist and wanted to ask again who had spoken, but somehow, he knew no one else heard the whisper: not even Insignificance. He recalled the words and felt a coldness down into his very core.



He began to recall the pains of his own life as if agreeing with the whisper he heard. He thought of his family and the lack of love there. He could almost hear a mocking tone in the fog, ridiculing Liam's struggle to find love.

He pressed on, trying to think of anything else but love. But it was no use. He couldn't shake the memory of those words and the doubt they'd planted in his mind. He even began questioning the City of God and their trek to it. Was there any point?

With no answers, he nudged the argument out of his mind. Soon the fog shifted, and Liam pushed on.

## A City Called Entertainment

In the dream, it was evening when they arrived at the last hill before the city of Entertainment. World was rushing ahead. Her excitement affected all of them, and they hustled behind her to see the view ahead.

They all gasped at the sight of the city. Brilliant neon lights turned night into day on its bustling streets; massive fountains pushed water high over small lakes, and colossal screens enticed visitors to try new products or see their shows. It was truly stunning.

"I give you the city," World said, sweeping her arm wide to encompass the entire panoramic view. "You can spend your whole life here and never have a dull moment. I know you'll love it as much as I do."

Religion gripped his Bible as his knuckles turned white.

World took the lead; she had many friends in the city. She found her companions a beautiful suite with a room for each of them. Liam and Insignificance decided to room together, as they were inseparable.

Once they'd settled in to where they were staying, World faced the group with a commanding air. "This city is extraordinary," she said. "It used to be a place where people congregated to discuss and dialogue. But *that* didn't last." She laughed. "This supposed push for higher thought only slowed us down, you know. We got all mired in facts, truth, and arguments about

what or who is right. Which is a worthless waste of time, if you ask me." She waved her hand as though to sweep all those pesky facts and truths from the room.

"We've worked hard to change all that," she went on proudly. "We've found a more effective way to communicate. Now we use colorful images that capture and hold the emotions. Research tells us to change the image every three and a half seconds. The mind barely has time to hold a thought, much less evaluate it.

"And here's the great part," she said, leaning in excitedly. "The focus of all the images is emotional gratification. Our goal isn't *truth* anymore, thank God. Our focus is glorious *entertainment*. Thus, the name of our city. It's a magnificent new world where emotions rule. We can amuse ourselves to death." She sighed, a blissful expression on her face. "What more could you ask for?"

Insignificance muttered, "Odd how they've thought it all through and then downplay rational thought."

Liam looked around at the suite. The beautiful art on the walls and the lighting gave it an artificial sense of home. "What does this cost?" Liam wondered out loud. "How can we afford it?" He was acutely aware of his empty pockets; he'd not had much in the way of cash to bring with them on this journey.

"Oh, don't worry about *that*," World said. "They put it on a tab that you can pay at your convenience. I know the right people. It's cheap." She passed a card to Liam, winked at him,

and said, "Just tell them to bill our room. We'll worry about the cost later."

Flesh stood rubbing his hands together. "Let's get it on!" he cheered, nearly as excited as World herself. "Music, movies, food, beautiful people, rides, shows, and maybe some gambling! Not a glorious moment to spare!"

Insignificance listened cautiously and looked over at Liam, slowly shaking his head at his friend.

Seeing this, World quickly grabbed Liam by the hand and pulled him up and out the door. She would have no passive observers in her world. She wanted him engaged immediately.

She wanted him hooked on her city.

The first show they saw was Cirque du Soleil. They all walked out of the theater in shock.

"Beautiful," World murmured happily. "I loved every moment of it."

"It was better than I imagined—and I have a good imagination," Flesh agreed.

"I was breathless the whole time," Liam said, smiling hesitantly. "I had no idea people could do such amazing things." He looked at the bright, eager faces of World and Flesh beside him. *Maybe this place won't be so bad*, he thought. Religion, stalking stormily behind the group, said nothing. Insignificance stayed beside Liam, but he too kept silent.

"Come on," World said, pushing her companions down the street. "There's a water fountain laser show a short walk away that we won't want to miss."

Their next week in the city was as fast and fluid as that show. Every moment was filled, and every sensation in their body was exploited. It was sensory overload, with each show pushing harder to hold their attention.

Religion soon disappeared, and no one knew where he went. Flesh and World's relationship grew deeper; they seemed of one mind, perfectly matched in their desire for Entertainment. Flesh's influence over the group also increased, and with it, he demanded more and more from them.

The days were long and mostly sleepless. Flesh used their fear of missing out to the point of exhaustion. One night, after another show and an after-party in a local club, Liam collapsed on the couch. "I don't know if I can keep this up," he groaned. "What's the bill? World, I want to know how much all this costs."

This immediately prompted a tooth-and-nail argument, with World and Flesh doing all they could to avoid answering, but Liam finally won. World phoned the desk downstairs and held a furtive, whispered conversation.

After she hung up, she was quiet for a second, then turned to the group with a brilliant smile. "Great news!" she said. "I managed to get us a discount. The first week's bill is only \$650!"

Liam's jaw dropped in shock. "How can I pay that?" he gasped. "World, that's—I've only got a few dollars. How on earth—"

But Flesh cut in before he could finish his thought. "This is a once-in-a-lifetime experience, Liam," he said. "You wanted to see the City. This is it! Think of how few people can do this. You need not trek on any farther."

"That's right," World said quickly. "You're such a special person to be able to do all that we've done. It's like a lifetime thrown into a week. Besides, you've enjoyed it, YES?"

Liam barely heard either of them. He just lay on the couch, stunned, numb from the week. Quietly, Insignificance sat on the floor beside him and took his hand.

"I'll have to get a job to pay for this," Liam muttered to his friend. "I've never been in debt before."

"Let me figure it out for you," World said briskly, overhearing him. "I have the perfect person. You simply *must* meet her. She can help you jump-start some work."



#### Meet Media

The next scene in the vision saw World opening the door for a stranger: a woman named Media.

Media was tall, with long legs and high heels to accentuate them. Dressed elegantly in a striking red dress, she walked into any room as though ready for seduction. She had no trouble capturing the attention of everyone present.

"Welcome, Media," World said, almost bowing in deference to this striking figure. "Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to help us. We have a young, impressionable man here who wants to make a difference in the city and earn a few dollars."

"Hello there, Liam," Media said smoothly. "I'm sorry my schedule is so full, but let's see if we can make you a *Somebody*. What do you know about influence and making yourself known?"

"Nothing," Liam said honestly. "I've tried *not* to be known, if the truth be told."

"Hmm, yes, interesting," Media purred. She turned to World. "You're right. He's going to need a lot of work."

"Now, Liam," she said, turning back to him, "I'm going to give you a crash course. This should jump-start your ability to make a living as a celebrity."

She walked to the window and looked out. She knew every eye in the room was looking at her backside. She stared out the window momentarily and then adjusted her skin-tight dress to ensure everyone noticed what was beneath it.

"Most people are weak, pathetic little things," she said. "Lost, looking for help. Picture them as a little whirlpool that wants to know two things: *Who am I? And why am I here?* 

She spun on her heel and looked at them all. "All this is foreground and only relevant for this one point," she said. "If someone pays attention to them, praises them, writes about them, or discusses them, their two questions are answered. They're *Somebody*. They matter.

"This is what you're up against in this city," she went on, slowly pacing up the length of the room. "It's every man, woman, and child for themselves. This strong, sucking desire or need for attention drives every one of their lives. They almost consider it a right." She stopped pacing for a moment and leveled them with her stare. "Are you tracking with me? Because this is important."

"Yes, ma'am," Liam said nervously. "We don't know who we are, and since we don't know how we got here, it seems like we're trying to fill these deep needs by getting attention."

"Oh, there might be hope for you yet," Media said, smiling at him. "Well said. If people don't have the balls to live their own life, they want to live it through others. For those who *do* have what it takes, who wish to be exalted and rise above the

pathetic masses, there's an endless battle to be on talk shows, get your own YouTube channel, write best-selling books, manage Tik Tok and Instagram accounts, and get featured in magazine articles. Let me say this bluntly; you don't exist unless you occupy space in another person's mind."

Liam just stared at Media.

"What?" She stared right back at him, unfazed. "I'm only telling you the truth. And you need to hear it if you want to be known and make some moolah. Become what they want you to be. Be an extreme version of it. Make them pay attention to you, and you can write a ticket to any show in town. *Kapish*?"

"So, that's what you call a celebrity?" Liam asked.

"Yes!" Media said, snapping her fingers impatiently. "You must be the most arrogant person in the city. You must stand there and declare, 'Bow down and worship me, for I am your god."

And with that, Media turned and exited the room. She strutted across the floor without a single glance back.

Liam watched her in amazement. "She just modeled precisely what she was talking about," he said to Insignificance. A perfect way to end. He would forever remember that scene, as she now took up space in his head that no one else could fill.

"Oh, my God, I'm in *love*," Flesh cried, standing up and applauding—and then breaking into a wolf howl for good measure. "That was *perfect*. Liam, this is it! This is what

we need. If you can control the space in others' minds, we'll have arrived."

Insignificance just sat quietly at Liam's side and said nothing. He had concerns he wanted to raise with Liam, but he knew now was not the time.

World took a deep breath and just drank in the moment. "She's amazing," she gushed. "I love that woman. She takes my breath away each time she does that."

Liam, meanwhile, looked at Insignificance. "You taught me to hide," he whispered to his friend. "What do you think of all this?"

Insignificance whispered back, "It's a game. Play the game; just be careful. We know it's not real. It's all about power."

Liam nodded. He looked at Flesh and World and said, "Okay, let's make it happen."

World pulled out some paperwork and brought it over to Liam. She set it on the table and stated, "I went ahead and signed you up for some credit cards that we can use to borrow money. This will allow us to pay some bills and buy the equipment we'll need."

"Are you sure about this, World?" Liam asked.

"Trust me. This is how everyone works here in Entertainment. You're expected to be in debt. Now, if you'll just sign here, we can get you moving forward to make some money."

With World taking the lead, Liam would work in the morning doing odd jobs that Media arranged. Then they would hit the city at night. At dark, Entertainment came alive with lights and energy.

Liam bought a camera and lights on credit. He had a natural gift for film and began to understand editing and how to capture the emotions in an image. He also practiced acting, posting dramatic video clips to create the illusions he wanted.

He was becoming a bit of a celebrity and was amazed to find that the easiest place to hide was in plain sight. Give people what they want to see, and the "hidden" you didn't matter.

Insignificance was always by his side, and he kept a close watch over all that Liam did. He made sure he was never too vulnerable or open about his presence there. He knew any sign of weakness in Entertainment was like blood in the water to sharks.

If you listened carefully to their private conversations, you might hear Insignificance whisper to Liam, "Watch how the biggest names do it. They'll say whatever is on their mind and act awkward about it. They'll fool people into thinking they are open and honest. It's the cheapest trick in the books and one few will be able to catch."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Isn't that the same as being open and honest?" Liam asked.

"Don't believe your marketing, Liam; you know better than that. Vulnerability requires thought, reflective questions, and digging deeper to explore your humanity."

Liam was caught off guard and sat quietly thinking about the comment. He had so much to learn about himself. It was a brief glimpse within, and then it was gone.

Liam was constantly exhausted, as there was no time for himself. He became solely preoccupied with what others would think about him and whether he could get—and hold—their attention as Media did. He was not paying off his bills. In fact, his debt was getting worse, because if he made any money, he had to pour it back into the business to buy more space in people's minds. It felt like an endless cycle.

One day, Liam was walking out of a casino and looked over at a slot machine. On the spur of the moment, he took out four quarters, put them in the slot, and pulled the one-armed bandit. He just stood and stared as the machine lit up. To his utter shock, a loud siren went off. He'd won!

He did a little dance and then remembered: he hadn't recorded it, so it didn't exist yet.

He quickly got out his camera. "Who just won \$10,000 at Casino Royal?" he cheered into the lens. "That's right, baby, it's me! Oh, don't you love it when everything goes your way? This is my day. Stick around to find out where I'm gonna spend it. Party on, my friends, party on!"

Flesh clapped and did a little dance with Liam, saying, "Now we can move our influence up a notch and rock the city. This is our chance to be a god."

World beamed. "You have favor right now, and we need to make sure Entertainment knows this. I'll get the word out on all our social media accounts and make sure everyone knows we're hot."

But Liam stood frozen for a moment as all these words came together in his thinking. "Wait a minute," he said, letting the camera drop. "I just had an epiphany."

World whispered, "Put it on camera, please—put it on camera. Capture it so we can use it while we have this momentum."

Liam held up his hand. "No . . . no, no . . ." He stared around at his friends. "Don't you see? It's never enough . . . I can't win this game, and it's just hit me: that's the whole purpose of it. To keep me distracted, preoccupied, and too busy to think of anything else." He gave an astonished laugh and stepped away from the slot machine, which was still ringing from his win. "You know . . . I don't want all this." He turned to World, saying, "Gather the winnings; they're yours. Pay off my bills. If there's any leftover, you can keep it. I want to go to the City of God."

World hesitated with her eyes downcast. "You know I can't continue with you," she said. "I forgot how much this city means to me. I belong here."

"I'm happy you've found a place that fits you," Liam said. "I have to admit that it doesn't fit me. I must press on."

With that, Liam gave World a hug and left the hotel, with Insignificance at his side.

Flesh, who had watched this interchange with horror, now screamed after him, "No, that's not an epiphany, it's insanity. We were getting what we longed for! You can't *do* this to me!"

Flesh wasn't sure if Liam even heard him, but he stood still and refused to move for as long as he could before running to catch up. He would do everything in his power to get Liam to change his mind and come back.



# The Fog

In his dream, when they left Entertainment, Liam stood on a hill overlooking the city as Flesh was talking to Insignificance ahead of him. He wanted one last look at the dazzling lights of the city. To his amazement, fog was settling over the city, making it disappear before his eyes. The fog turned and started to move towards him quickly.

He heard a whisper:

Get all you can, for this is all there is.

He looked around to see who was speaking, but his companions were ahead of him, and he stood on the hill alone. For a moment, he wanted to run back to Entertainment. He felt compelled because he hadn't got it all. What if there was more to the city, and he just hadn't found it yet?

Then he felt the chill in his bones and realized he was alone. He hated being alone, so he did what he always did: ran after the others as quickly as he could. It was all confusing, and after all, who was he to figure it out?



### A Storm

As they continued their trek, they saw Religion walking towards them.

Flesh, still hurting from leaving Entertainment behind, asked irritably, "Where have you been?"

Religion raised himself up and stated, "I had other priorities."

At that moment, large clouds loomed around them, and it started to rain. They quickly gathered under a small group of trees. A bolt of lightning struck and lit up the sky; then a second later, there was loud thunder.

"This is the hand of God," Religion shouted above the now heavy rain and wind. "He is pushing us forward. We must make it to the Sacred City."

Flesh, looking longingly back at the way they came, said, "We can go back to Entertainment. This is miserable, and we have a warm place there."

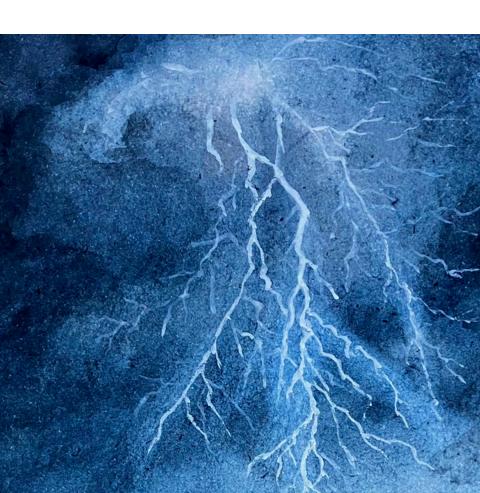
Religion yelled louder, "We're in danger here. If we're not careful, God may send us to the City of Hell. It's a terrifying place where maggots eat your flesh: where you live in the fires of destruction and have no relief."

Liam's eyes opened wide as these words flowed from Religion. At that moment, another lightning bolt struck a tall tree a stone's throw away. It was the loudest *crack* Liam had ever heard, and it terrified him. They were cold, wet, and lost.



"God is angry with us for being in Entertainment and enjoying the time there," Religion cried confidently. "Quick, come with me, or you are doomed."

The little group started off at a run and soon slowed down to a walk so they could be close to each other. Liam looked around him, waiting for the next lightning strike from an angry God. He had reservations about the City of God if this was the way God worked. He even thought of going back, but another lightning strike in the distance pushed him forward with the others.



# The Sacred City

The soaking-wet and anxious little group finally saw the next city and walked towards it. A sign on the road declared *No Soliciting*. Liam was so relieved to make it that he didn't give this a second thought. The rain had stopped, and there seemed to be a severe and somber air around them. They all felt nervous as they walked into the city. Liam struggled to put what he was sensing into words. He had a feeling that if he laughed, the whole city would rise up against him.

Religion came to Liam, took him by the hand, and pointed down the street towards a large old cathedral with many smaller buildings around it. "This is the Sacred City. We have created a consecrated place to live, free from the evils of Entertainment."

The little group walked towards the ancient stone cathedral with its high tower and steep slate roof. The storms of life had not changed it one bit, except for the moss growing on its rock walls. Liam began to look at some of the businesses on the street as they walked. One was called "Hallelujah Plumbers." Another, a restaurant, was called "Manna from Above," and a nearby clothing store was named "The Garment of Praise." They were walking down Kingdom Street and turning onto Sacred Place Road to get to the church. The more he looked around, the more he saw religious language on everything.

Religion's loud voice caught his attention. "All entertainment is strictly forbidden here. We have created a place where only good may dwell."

They shuffled into the cathedral and settled onto hard wooden benches. Maybe for the first time in months, Liam relaxed. His brain raced as he realized how driven he had become. He stood still for a moment and just listened, suddenly noticing this unexpected . . . silence. It was deafening. He reached up with his hand to the vein on his neck and felt his heartbeat. When was the last time he'd noticed his own heart beating? He felt a pain in his back that he didn't know he had. He just started to listen to what was going on inside of himself wondering what he would find when . . .

"Oh, no you don't," Religion snapped, walking up behind him and quickly occupying the silence. "No time to relax. Now is when we do the real work of God. You've left the secular behind, and now your life matters."

"Can't I just sit here for a moment?" Liam asked.

"Idle hands are the tool of the devil," Religion declared. "There are classes, and we can get you into a training program to extend the reach of our city. Let me introduce you to Works. He's the driver in the Sacred City and has a long list of needs that must be met. You worked for World in Entertainment. Now you must do the work of God. Can you feel the joy of the Lord as He sees all the good work you will do?"

A heavy-set man appeared from behind a pillar. He wore an old threadbare suit with shoes that looked like he had patched them together himself. He had a dour look, and you had a strange sense that if he spoke, you must listen. He stepped toward the group with a dusty old book in his leathered hands. Staring Liam in the eyes, he passed him the book.

Liam cautiously reached out and took it. Works then quickly turned and walked out. He had to make sure all the projects in the city were getting done, and there was no time for chit-chat.

Flesh leaned over and said quietly, "Let's get this right. Don't ask too many questions. Watch what others are doing and do that. Be careful. This is a seriously scary place."

Liam held the dusty old book, looking first at its cover and then at the initial pages. It was the city's rules, he realized. He began slowly reading them.

Lights out by 10.

No loud noises after 9.

Up at 6, time to read the Bible, pray, have breakfast, and then work.

No foul words...

The list continued. Color of clothes, what you should eat and drink—no card games. Liam took a deep breath.

Religion put his hands on his hips and smiled a satisfied smile. "We've worked hard to study the scriptures and reduce all its complexity down into simple guidelines," he said, gesturing proudly at the rule book. "Follow them, and you'll be able to live in peace."

Liam sat and fidgeted, then looked over at Insignificance for a moment.

"What?" Insignificance said softly. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

Liam smiled, leaned over to him, and whispered, "Sorry. I'm still thinking of this silence. It's eerie. I'm a bit lost in it. Can silence speak?"

Insignificance whispered back, "If Religion would stop talking, maybe we'd find out."

They both started to chuckle and tried hard to stop, but of course that made it worse.

Religion gave them a stern look, then continued as if nothing were happening. "If you follow this logic, you'll fit in well here," he explained. "Our goal is to know the truth. If we're right, we're safe. If you disagree with the truth, you're wrong. If you're wrong, we can't trust you and will avoid a relationship with you. Stick with those who know the truth."

To control himself and stop chuckling, Liam asked, "How do I get to the City of God? That's the truth I need."

"You must study to show yourself approved of God," Religion replied. "The City of God will come later. First, you must start with the classes and listen to our teachers. They'll help you work through a systematic theology that will teach you how to defend yourself on the way. But for now, trust us to know the right answers."

Days settled into weeks, and nothing changed once the schedule was set up. Studying, classes, then repeating what the teacher said from memory. Doing what you were told was all that mattered. As more time passed, Liam's initial fear began to wear off, and the rules slowly lost their hold on him. He found himself asking questions about more and more things. Entertainment had awakened a curiosity in him; he could not stop thinking about the City of God, and each time he did, it raised questions.

One time stood out clearly to Liam. He was in a class and started to ask the teacher another question. Before he could begin, the teacher countered, "You are not here to ask questions. You're here to get answers. Now stop your questions and focus on the answers we give you."

"But you're not answering the questions I have," Liam protested.

"Then you're asking the wrong questions," the teacher declared as she stared down over her glasses at Liam, sitting at his desk.

The teacher returned to the class and began another session of what Liam called "trivial pursuit," as she droned on about tenses in Hebrew and how they played a part in looking at a particular word.

More days slipped by. Early rising, prayers, reading, worship at the chapel, and a message. It seemed the goal of it all was to bore him to death. He found himself at times wishing he was back in Entertainment. Life was fun there. Here, it seemed like they were trying to perfect boredom. It was almost as if Religion and his cronies sat down and thought of anything fun or exciting, then made rules to ensure no one did it.

At times, the silence hanging in the air was so loud that he wondered if he was going crazy. "I can see that Entertainment kept me from looking within," he confided in Insignificance once. "But I find myself just as busy and frantic here, which also keeps me from looking within. How is it that two radically different cities accomplish the same thing?"

Finally, one day, Liam wandered out for a walk, asking Insignificance to join him. They found Flesh, who had taken to hiding. That was when Liam signaled it was time to escape.

"I can't tell Religion we want to leave," Liam said. "He'll shame me or warn me of the City of Hell. We need to just *go*. Let's get out of here and find the City of God."

As they padded past the last building on their way out of the city, Liam couldn't help himself. He looked into the classroom to see who was teaching. Religion stood in the front of the class, gesturing, no doubt explaining some finer point of doctrine to the listening students. Suddenly, just at that moment, he looked out the window and saw Liam. Liam watched his face change as he realized that Liam was leaving.

With a scowl on his face, Religion turned to the faithful in the class with self-assurance and importance.

Liam mumbled to himself, "Goodbye, Religion. I'm sorry, but I must be moving on with my trek. This isn't the City of God."

With that, Liam turned, and they slipped out of the Sacred City. Liam kept looking around, expecting a lightning strike from an angry God. But thankfully, there was none.



## The Fog

As they left, Liam caught a glimpse of the fog moving in. Soon the fog was everywhere. The fog and haze it created had been there all along. How could something so obvious be hidden from him for so long? In the vision, he remembered this moment clearly, as it was the first time he realized the fog was everywhere.

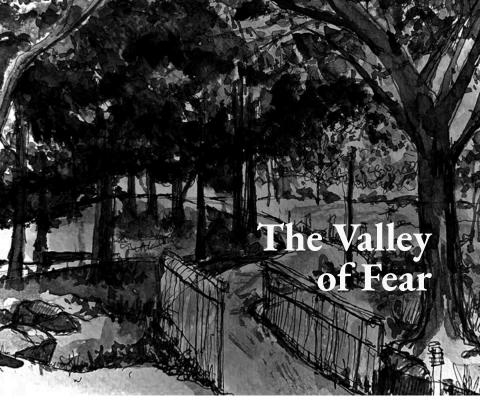
With the fog came the almost familiar whisper:

It was a waste of time. You don't belong...
anywhere. You're a misfit.

This time, Liam did not try to fight the voice.

He sped up his walking and tried to ignore the whisper. Liam saw through the fog a large mountain ahead and a small forest that seemed to open before them. He focused on it, desperately hoping his forward movement would keep the whisper at bay.





As he came to the trees, the path narrowed into a bridge over a long dried-up creek. The dream changed and turned to black and white. He realized that the fear in the air distorted his view of life. Could fear narrow your vision and force things into a black-and-white world? He had no idea, but what he did know was that he felt the trees closing in on him and fear slowly building.

By the time they made it through the small forest, the only words he could use to describe it were *liquid fear*. It seemed to soak its way into his very being.

When they finally arrived at the Valley of Fear, Liam had been dreading it for a while. Sheer rock formations loomed on each side. Some of the walls went straight up; some were sloped. Nothing grew in the rocky soil, and it seemed like light itself had to fight to find any way in. If you took a match and threw it in gasoline, it could not have been worse than the explosion this valley made to his imagination. Every rock formation, cave, or shadow became evil incarnate, waiting, watching you for the right moment to crush you.

They toiled on. He felt like there could be rockslides at any moment. There were streams of water rushing down at critical points, and he wondered where all that water went and if it would wash out the path. The trail they were on seemed to have a tentative grasp on the mountain walls, and you could not help but wonder when they would slide a thousand feet to their death. Insignificance and Liam walked closely together, drawing comfort from each other. Liam looked at the mountains and saw the fog there, swirling around. Even the fog seemed more ominous here.

Flesh was trying to find a place to put his trembling hands as his eyes darted back and forth with each sound. "I've always hated even the thought of this place. It mocks you. The smallest rock could knock you out at any moment. I shiver to think of what a boulder will do."

Despite their fears, they trekked on. Time appeared to slow down, and each step felt heavier than the one before. The mountains seemed to groan as if they needed to shed the burden of their load. The team's emotions seemed as precarious as the path itself. As they rounded a sharp corner, a young man sat on the ledge, his feet hanging over the side. He looked over the valley and the sheer wall faces of rock around them.

He looked at Liam and said, "So glad to meet you. I am Faith."

Liam walked over and tried to pull him back from the ledge.

Faith smiled, got up, and stepped back. He said, "You're uncomfortable with heights?"

Liam replied, "I'm uncomfortable with all of this." He pointed at the sheer rock cliffs around them, shuddering.

"Where are you headed?" Faith asked.

"I'm headed to the City of God. Do you know about it?"

"Yes, of course. My master has sent me here to help those traveling to it. That's why I love this place. I seem to thrive here."

"You *love* this place? Are you crazy? No one could love this place."

Faith looked at Liam. "You confuse respect with fear," he said. "It's right to respect things that have the power to hurt you. You would be a fool not to respect those things. But go a bit deeper. What is behind your fear of the rocks?"

Liam looked over at Insignificance. He nodded, so Liam admitted, "I'm afraid of being weak."

Faith flashed a smile. "Honesty. I appreciate that."

"First time I've ever acknowledged that to anyone except Insignificance," Liam confessed.

There was a loud rumbling, and a large rock broke free from the wall face and hurtled down the cliff ahead of them. It made a crashing sound as it landed on the path, bounced over, and rumbled down the side. Small rocks rained down behind it and bounced down the wall.

Liam wanted to grab Faith and hide. But Faith simply watched in fascination. "I'm not an adrenaline junkie," he said. "So, yes, this is a place you must be cautious in, but there's a raw, inyour-face aspect to being here that I love. You can have the best heart-to-heart conversations here. There's also a mystery to respect that is vital to the journey you are on. You cannot avoid this valley on the way to the City of God.

"Most people stop their journey when they get to this valley," he continued, shaking his head. "They're more afraid of the fear of fear than the actual fear itself. But I think it's vital that you understand that this valley does not cause anything to be in you. It only reveals what is already there."

"I'm not buying that," Liam said. "I didn't have this terror when I came here."

"Of course, the surface fear of a rock falling on you will only be in this place," Faith agreed. "But the deeper fear of appearing weak—that, you've had since you were a child." "How could . . ." Liam started to say, stopping as another man appeared on a side trail walking towards them.

He wore a new suit; his hair was combed perfectly; not a scuff could be seen on his shoes. He called out, "Welcome, travelers. I'm so glad to see you. God sent me to take you out of this fear. There is another valley ahead. I can show you the way to it, and you'll be safe there."

"Hi, I'm Liam. What's your name?"

"Oh, I'm so sorry," said the newcomer. "I was in such a hurry to get you out of here that I forgot my manners! I'm called PG. It's short for Prosperity Gospel. You should have no doubt that God wants you to prosper. I'm building an organization to help more people out of this terrible place and find a life of health and happiness. However, I'm getting ahead of myself. Let me help you so that you might help me help others."

Liam looked at Faith and then over at PG.

Faith murmured, "He'll say what you want to hear."

PG saw the look on Liam's face, so he raised his voice. "God wants you to be happy. I know how to help you, but you need to trust me. Come, follow me; just around the corner is a valley we can get into—and out of this misery."

Flesh leaned over and whispered to Liam, "Nobody in their right mind hangs out here. This place has *naïve* and *foolish* written all over it. We must get out of this place, and I mean *now*."



"You won't need me in there," Faith interjected. "This is where PG and I differ. He'll ask you to put your trust in him, and that won't get you where you want to go."

PG gently placed his hand on Liam's arm and moved him forward. "I know exactly what you need. Just trust me."

Faith responded, "You know where I am. Any time you want more, just come find me here."

Liam, Flesh, and Insignificance followed PG, walking around the corner and up a side path. Sure enough, there was a very narrow walkway into a small valley with a stream running through it, beautiful fruit trees, and a large meadow.

### Prosperity

PG smiled. "You'll feel immediate relief from that horrible, godless place we were just in," he reassured them. "You can thank me later with a love gift. Just remember that fear is our enemy, and God has overcome it. God gave me the location of this valley, and I'm glad to share it with you."

"How can we get out of here?" Liam asked.

"Get out of here?" PG stared at him. "Why would you want to do that? You're safe with the people of God here. I'm here to help you find your way. It would be best if you stuck with me, and we'll succeed together. I have great plans for this valley. We can prosper here, and I need your help to do it. If you invest in me, God will open new valleys for you.



"Remember," he continued, waving them forward, "God desires to make you happy and prosperous. You can't let fear in here. Oh, no. We're not in the Valley of Fear anymore. Let me show you my new house and give you a sense of what God can do for you."

So, a tour began. They visited PG's mansion, situated on the only hill in the valley. They walked along a tall wall and then came to a guardhouse at the gate. As they walked through, they saw a two-story white manor above them. White marble stairs led up to its front door. There was a water fountain in the middle of the courtyard, with the stairs winding around it on both sides. Huge stone lions guarded the first steps up to the entryway. At the top were two large pillars holding up the porch. You could not help but stop for a second just to stare at it.

As they stood on the porch overlooking the valley, Liam asked, "Whose shacks are those over there? I thought you wanted people to prosper here."

PG declared, "They are the people in this valley who are waiting for their harvest of wealth so they may join me."

Liam looked at the mansion and noticed how the wall around it took up much of the valley. The garden and trees took up another chunk of land. The last little part was where all the valley's "other people" were huddled together. PG saw the alarm on Liam's face and quickly pointed to another area. "Over here is a very special area." It was a small patch of land that was cleared out and looked as though it were waiting for something.

"I'm believing God for a helicopter," PG said proudly. "I believe for the best, because that's the heart of God for all of us. I'm creating a special group for those who have faith in me, who have this same vision—and if you join it, I'll arrange for you to join me in trips out of this valley into a whole new world waiting for you out there. Let me be clear: if you join this inner circle through your giving, you will never have to go through the Valley of Fear again."

"How much does it cost?" Liam asked.

"That's not the question. The question is, what can you believe for, and how much seed do you want to invest for a future harvest?"

Herein was the dilemma. Liam didn't want to live in a little valley as his goal in life. His vision of the City of God was always at the edge of his consciousness.

Slowly, the days settled in, and Liam realized he was only here because he dreaded the Valley of Fear. In hiding here, anxiety still controlled his life and told him what he could and couldn't do. This is just a comfortable extension of the Valley of Fear, he thought to himself.

That nagging thought never left his mind. He found himself drawn to the little walkway out of the valley. That little path called to him daily. He often thought of Faith, who knew something he couldn't imagine. Faith was able to embrace life in the Valley of Fear. He was not terrified of it. Never, in his whole life, could Liam have imagined someone like that.

From time to time, he talked with his friends about what they should do. Flesh's advice was typical for him. The thought of being in the inner circle and having access to helicopter flights was rarified air to him. He loved the idea of copying PG and creating his own valley with his own mansion.

Insignificance needed little and didn't say much. He was just a calming presence in everything Liam did. He didn't like to rock the boat or demand anything. He was just there to be with his friend.

Liam found himself wandering over to the small walkway out of the valley more and more. He made a bench there and sat watching new people come in as PG would use his personality to draw them in, then prey on their fears.

## The Valley of Fear Again

One day, for a reason he could not explain, Liam stood up and declared, "I'm leaving. I'm tired of hiding in this valley. I know it's not the City of God."

"But it's safe," Flesh said.

"Safe from what?" Liam countered. "I can still hear myself confessing to Faith that I was afraid of weakness. As soon as I said those words—no, *admitted* those words—something changed in me."

"If you go back into the Valley of Fear, you'll be hurt. You might *die*. There—I said it," Flesh breathed out, looking relieved.

But Liam's mind was made up. He grabbed Insignificance's arm and walked towards the Valley of Fear. Flesh reluctantly followed. They walked to the edge of the little valley and stood for a moment at the dark path lined by precarious rocks.

Then Liam stepped into it and didn't look back.



#### Victim

Just before they came to the valley, Liam stopped and turned, bending down to investigate a cave. He thought he'd heard someone in there. He stooped under the low entrance and then came to the other side, finding himself in a large room. To his shock, a young woman was there, hovering in the shadows.

"Hello," she whispered. "I'm Victim. I've been waiting for you. I'm alone. I was chased here, and I have no place to go. Come in, join me. I can comfort you here. I know how difficult this journey has been and how hard it is to get to the City of God."

"Hi," Liam said, adding, "Yes, it has been a challenge."

"I know you," Victim said. "No one understands you. No one knows what you're going through. You shouldn't be in the Valley of Fear. You deserve to be happy like everyone else. They don't get you."

Liam was surprised by her words. He did indeed believe no one (outside of Insignificance) had ever really understood him. But how, then, did this woman know him? He stepped closer as his eyes slowly adjusted to the low light. Victim reached out her hand.

Liam reached out and took it. At first, it was cold to the touch and clammy, but after the initial shock, it warmed up and felt strangely familiar. "You don't have to be alone," she said soothingly. "I understand you. We can make a home here. Come, I have a safe place in the back."

She turned and pointed down the hall as Liam leaned over to see another room that was lit with warm candles. There was a couch in it with another soft recliner sitting there. Flesh leaned over as well and looked.

Victim whispered, "I have a special relationship with PG. He makes sure I have all the food and supplies I need. It makes him look good, and I'm taken care of."

Flesh, thinking of the Valley of Fear ahead, piped up. "It's not the Taj Mahal, but it's safe, clean, and a good place to hang out for a while. I say let's keep this fine young lady company."

"No one should have to go into the Valley of Fear," Victim said, shivering. "It's the most God-forsaken place on the planet. Just stay here. We can help each other."

As Liam started to lean towards her, Insignificance walked over and stood next to him. He looked at Victim, and the two stared intensively at each other. Victim soon turned away; she could not look long at Insignificance. She spat at him and grabbed a rock to throw at him.

As Liam watched her bend down, she turned and looked up at him, and their eyes met. Her eyes were dark . . . and vacant. It was the most eerie thing Liam had ever seen. If the eyes were the mirror of the soul, this woman had no soul. She was empty,

bankrupt, hollow, void. Suddenly, the phrase came clear that described her. *She was dead inside*.

Victim quickly dropped her gaze, slipping back into the darkness. She knew she had been exposed.

I have to get out of here fast, Liam thought, turning to go.

"No, Liam!" Victim called out from the shadows. "You can't leave me here all alone. I can't take being alone anymore. Pleeeaaasseeeee! It's not my fault I'm in here. I can't face the Valley of Fear on my own."

But as he kept retreating, Victim raised her voice angrily. "The Valley of Fear will kill you!"

The words echoed off the walls. Liam felt a cold chill run down his spine.

He couldn't get out of there quick enough.



# **Meeting Comfort**

They dashed out of the cave, turned the corner, and hurried down the path. Once back on the main trail, they stood there gasping for a moment. The disturbing rock walls rose on each side, reminding Liam of where he was and why he didn't like this place. He saw Faith sitting on the ledge just as Faith turned to see him.

"Nice to see you again, Liam," Faith said, standing up to greet him. "I was hoping you'd find the courage to join me."

"What do I do now?" Liam asked him. "I admit I'm afraid of being weak. And yes, I also realize I've had this my whole life," Liam confessed. He wanted to say it quickly, as those words had haunted him for weeks.

"Anything else you want to say?" Faith probed. "Putting fears into words forces them to take on a specific identity that we can then deal with; otherwise, they are just 'ghosts,' or wandering spirits within you."

"I'm terrified of being alone," Liam said, looking at Insignificance.

Insignificance smiled, put his fist to his heart, and then pointed at Liam.

Faith beamed, and he seemed to grow bigger and stronger before them. "Let's move on now that we know what we're dealing with," he said. They turned and walked deeper into the Valley of Fear.

Flesh could barely walk because of the terror he felt. A thousand things could go wrong at any moment, and he couldn't stop his mind from focusing on them.

There was a loud rumble as the earth began to shake around them. Rocks were falling, and a boulder flew over their heads. Then a rock the size of a baseball struck Liam in the leg. They all heard the impact, and Liam collapsed before them.

Flesh turned on Faith and stabbed him with his finger. "That's your fault! You put these stupid ideas in his head. You said there was nothing to fear in here!"

Faith took Liam's hand and said, "Liam, you must silence Flesh. He will not help you. He'll lie to you, as he just did. I never said you wouldn't get hurt; I only said you must respect this place. I'm not leaving you, and you need to trust me."

Liam looked over at Flesh between short gasps of breath. His eyes were wide open, and his nostrils flared. "Please, Flesh. Just relax."

Faith said, "He would have you believe you can't handle anything. You are much stronger than you thought. Ask for what you need!"

"Would you please help me, God?" Liam cried. "I'm hurting and need help."

In his vision, an old woman walked up the path. She was pudgy with drab clothes and glasses that slid down her nose. Her head was covered with a brown silk scarf. As she came to him, she knelt beside him. It was her presence next to him that changed everything.

"Liam, my name is Comfort," she said softly.

His leg was throbbing, and he should have been freaking out, but he wasn't. The presence of this strange woman brought him peace.

Comfort had worked with many people needing help. She knew Liam's leg was hurt but not broken.

"May I introduce a friend to you?" the woman said.

Liam nodded.

An old, weathered man appeared next to Comfort. His full grey beard and matching grey bushy eyebrows filled his face. A large nose jutted out amid all that hair. He could have been a thousand years old for all Liam knew. Despite all that "age," Liam saw in his eyes a remarkable strength. He was perhaps the strongest man Liam had ever met. Liam could only look at those eyes for a moment before he had to turn away.

Flesh began shouting, "Oh, no. He's the angel of death. We're going to die!"

Comfort and Faith looked at Flesh and then at Liam. Liam said, "Please, Flesh, no comments for now."

The old man sat down beside Liam. "I am Job," he said. "Some call me *Suffering*, but I prefer Job. I've become good friends with Comfort. However, I must admit that I was so self-righteous in my journey through this valley that I never asked her for help."

Liam leaned back and took a deep breath. "I must be honest; I've never liked the book written about you. I have avoided suffering my whole life."

"Yeah, I get that a lot," Job chuckled. "Some people are mad at God because of my life. They hold a grudge against God for how He treated me. How odd is that?"

Liam asked, "You're not mad at God for what He did to you?"

Job shook his head. "What He did to me? Have you read the story?"

Liam replied, "Okay, He allowed it to happen. Did you get your answer? What did He tell you that made it all okay?

"I never got my answer. He just changed the question; and with that, it all changed."

"Changed the question?"

"Yeah. My question was, how could He let this happen to me? He changed it to, 'Who knows more about stars, storms, tides, creation, birth, death, sea monsters . . . life?'

"I assumed, just as you do, that an answer was all I needed. If I could get an answer, it would give me certainty. A sense of control. I realized when He changed the question that what I was struggling with was, 'Could I trust Him?'

"Don't get me wrong," Job said, seeing Liam's confused expression. "He answers the question, but in a radically different way."

"How does he answer it? Please—I want to know."

"All in good time. This pain, this valley, will expose you. You must first decide how you'll get through it. You must learn who you are to understand how He answers your questions."

"Okay, whatever," Liam finally said, feeling disappointed with all the non-answers. "Can we get out of here?" he begged.

Faith didn't move. "I know you want to hurry to get out of here, but you can't hurry this," he said gently. "There are certain things you have to learn, or you'll have to come back repeatedly until you do."

Flesh fidgeted and paced. Insignificance just sat quietly next to Liam.

Faith continued, "Remember how I said this place doesn't cause anything to be in you—how it only reveals what is already there?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;Yeah."

Faith leaned down, put his hand on Comfort's shoulder, and said, "As strange as it might sound, we are for you. We understand. Your family, this broken world, and relationships cause you to build a crust around your heart that slowly chokes you. Entertainment, Religion, and PG were only distractions to you. You never really enjoyed them, but the diversion slowly choked you out. Pain and suffering awaken you, allowing your heart to take a new look at life."

Flesh could take it no more. "Don't listen to these old fools," he said, practically spitting out the words. "Look at them. They're out of touch with reality. Can you imagine anyone older or uglier than these two?"

But his words didn't land. To Liam, what Faith, Comfort, and Job said was true. The Valley of Fear exposed you.

"I know how strongly you want to protect yourself," Job said. "I get it. I know this valley intimately, and I was much angrier than you. Oh, I fought God tooth and nail."

No one could argue with Job; they knew the story.

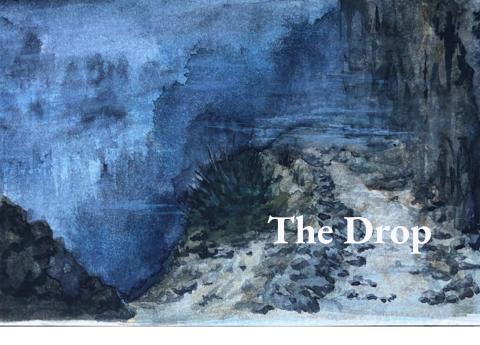
Job continued, "This journey is worth it. I can share that from my personal experience. But you must decide if you want to take it. Have no illusions: it *is* challenging. But again, I will say: it is worth it."

Comfort's hand was on Liam's leg, and the throbbing eased. Her touch was helping, and his head could not argue with that. He also knew Job was right but couldn't bring himself to admit it before them all.



But between these new friends' ministrations and Flesh's panic, they were at a bit of a standstill, and Liam knew it rested on him to determine how they moved forward.

He slowly raised his hand. "Flesh," he said, "chill, please. I need help and they're offering it. Let's see if we can get through this valley, and then we can figure out what comes next."



They rounded a corner as Liam held onto Comfort and hobbled along. But then Liam stood and stared as he realized the path ahead ended. A mist had formed, so he stood for a second to make sure the path was not simply hidden in the fog. No: the path stopped right in front of them, falling away in a sharp drop. It didn't help that it was almost dark, and the last bit of light was fleeing the valley.

Flesh whispered, "I knew they were crazy. They've led us to a dead end. We'll have to spend the night on this ledge and probably die."

Faith, standing on the ledge, said, "You can see the path below in the light, but the mist has hidden it. There's a small cave just below us. We can stop down there for the night." Liam, Insignificance, and Flesh inched their way to the edge of the path and looked down. They could see nothing in the darkness and mist. It was almost as if the darkness taunted them. Flesh would later swear he heard a mocking laugh coming out of the darkness.

They all quickly moved back. "Below us? Helloooo, is anyone home?" Flesh jeered. "You can't see anything. There's nothing there."

"Yes, there is," Faith said calmly. "Job, you go first."

With that, Job sat on the ledge, turned around to face them, braced his hands on the edge, and lowered himself down. Then he let go. There was a light thump; then he called out, "Next."

Liam leaned over and looked down, but he saw nothing but blackness. "Are you there, Job?"

"Yes, right below you," came Job's voice.

"It's dark," Faith said as Liam stood hesitating. "The temperature will drop. We'll die if we don't get food and a warm place to sleep. It's all down there. You will have to do it to move on."

Comfort just held his hand and nodded gravely. Before anyone could say anything, she let go of his hand, slowly lowered herself, and let go.

"I'm safe," she called out. "Ready for the next one."

Faith looked at Liam and said, "Your turn."

"I can't land on my leg," Liam protested. "I don't know how far it is. I don't like heights. I can't do it."

"Can't or won't?"

Flesh was frantic. With a shudder, he attacked. "They're just trying to kill you. They're insane, and this proves it. I refuse to have anything to do with them."

"You want to go to the City of God," said Faith. "This is the only way. Trust us. We would not lie to you." He watched Liam's face, concerned. "If you can, trust yourself right now," he encouraged. "What does your heart say?"

Liam nodded slowly, then sat down and peered into the darkness below. In that moment, it looked like an open mouth ready to swallow him. He never realized before this instant that there was a tangible fear that you could sense (smell?) in the air. Maybe it was just Flesh sweating. All he knew was that he didn't like it.

Faith sat beside him. "What are you afraid of?"

"I'm terrified of the unknown," Liam whispered. "I want certainty. If I could see it and knew the distance, I might do it, but I can't see anything . . ." He started shaking. "Letting go and trusting you terrifies me."

Faith nodded. "Yes, you don't trust anyone, not even yourself. You will have to learn to trust something more than your fears, and this is the time to begin. You must confront your fears. You cannot get through here without doing that."

Liam held Faith's hand and leaned over, but nothing magically changed as he hoped it would. He let go of Faith's hand, who stood up and gave him space. He felt panic rising within him. He knew with certainty then that if he didn't do it now, he never would.

So, he closed his eyes, turned around, and slowly lowered himself down. He just hung there for a minute. It was as if his fingers had a life of their own, clinging to the edge despite him willing to release them. Gradually, they grew weary.

"Job, Comfort, are you . . ." His voice trembled as he could barely get the words out. "Are you ready for me?"

"Ready and waiting."

With that, Liam disappeared. There were some shuffling noises, and then Liam's voice rose with laughter: "All is well."

Faith turned around and lowered himself down, and Insignificance followed.

"Flesh," Liam called out, "we are going into the cave. Come join us if you want, or you can stay up there on your own."

Below, they built a fire and ate dinner. Flesh refused to come. So, they snuggled into their blankets and went to sleep.

When they all woke up in the morning, Flesh was down with them, staring into the fire and mumbling to himself. Liam wondered if the light of the fire reflecting off the rocks had helped him with the descent, but Flesh refused to speak to anyone.

As the companions began to gather around Liam, he asked, "Faith, how can I grow and understand myself better? I've let fear define my life for as long as I can remember. That feeling I felt up there, holding on to my life and terrified of the unknown—it's been a part of my life for as long as I can remember."

"The key is the heart," said Faith. "You must be honest about what's going on inside you. Last night, it wasn't really about the drop. It was about your fears and who you would listen to. You were in a situation where you weren't in control, and it exposed you. You faced it and trusted us to show you the way."

"I was terrified," Liam said.

"Of course you were. Nothing is more wonderful or terrifying in the Valley of Fear than exposing your heart to it."

Job leaned over and whispered to Liam, "You know, when I 'met' God there in my pain, I realized that pain is the ultimate intimacy. He understood me. He was with me in it. All the lies I believed about God melted away in that moment, and I was humbled. You must learn to lean into the pain, too. You'll be amazed by what it will produce in your relationship with God."

Liam leaned back and looked at Job, who had a smile on his face, his eyes full of compassion. The message Job conveyed seemed foreign to him. He wanted—no, he longed—to understand Job's words about pain, but they made no sense to him.

"First things first," Job said, standing. "That will come later, but first, you need a God big enough to handle the difficulty you're facing. You will always face things that are beyond your control. That's the very condition of being made from dust. You don't know God's greatness; thus, you can't trust Him to be big enough to deal with all this. That was a core piece that I needed to hear. Before I connected with how great God was, all I had was myself. And I can say clearly—that was not enough."

The words of Job were rushing around in Liam's mind. Somehow, the walls in the Valley of Fear looked less daunting, and the walk seemed easier; yet nothing around them had changed.

"Isn't God already big?" Liam whispered to Insignificance.

Insignificance whispered back, "I don't think he was talking literally about how big God is, but about how much you trust that bigness."

#### Success

In his vision, a new scene became clear. They came to the edge of the Valley of Fear, and a sigh of relief rose collectively from them. A broad plain with a few trees and vibrant green grass was set out before them. What stood out most to Liam was the deep blue sky above them. It seemed to go on forever. A few scattered puffs of white clouds only made it appear more spectacular. He wondered if he had ever seen such a beautiful sky in his whole life.

As they stood reveling in the plain before them, a stranger stepped out from a side path they hadn't noticed. He wore a solid gold Rolex with diamonds, designer clothes, and perfectly white teeth. "Greetings, travelers. My name is Success. I see you made it through the Valley of Fear. That is no small task, and you are to be congratulated on your hard work."

Liam stared at the man's beautiful watch and clothes. He had never seen anything like them and wondered what it was like to wear them. Then he smiled at the words of encouragement. It seemed a while since he had felt encouraged.

"As you have made it this far, may I encourage you not to give up?" the man said. "Where are you headed, if I may ask?"

Liam replied, "We're going to the City of God."

"Brilliant. I hear it's a beautiful place," he said, nodding. "Now, may I suggest you come with me? You know you're not allowed into the City without a gift. I have a path that will take you to the top of this mountain, help you secure just the right gifts, and make you successful."

"I didn't know we had to bring a gift," Liam said, worried.
"I've heard nothing about that."

"Oh, yes," said the man. "Since you've survived that nasty Valley of Fear, we can now groom you to succeed. We can help make you the best in your class, to make you stand out in the City."

"I like the sound of that," Liam said slowly.

Flesh stepped forward excitedly. "Now you're talking my language," he crowed. "I want to be the best and for everyone to know it. Let's find our groove and build a reputation. We want them to roll out the red carpet to us when we get to the City. We can carry the momentum from this, become leaders in the City, and build the best house there. Oh, I like the sound of this."

Success grabbed Liam's hand and held it for a moment, and Liam felt a strong self-confidence beginning to grow within himself: a sense of self-assurance, self-reliance, and selfsufficiency. It was a rare feeling for him.

He began to take a few steps and even noticed his walk was changing. He glanced up the mountain, looking forward to the challenge ahead—a chance to prove to all around him that he was somebody.

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Amid all the new feelings within him, he saw Faith, Comfort, and Job out of the corner of his eye. Now that he was out of the Valley of Fear, he wanted to ignore them and find his own way.

In that moment of decision, he saw something that stopped him in his tracks. Comfort was coming towards him. Running slowly down her rosy cheeks were tears. He did not want to be weak and vulnerable, but her tears had the power to expose his cold heart, and he was undone.

Liam looked at Success intently and then stepped back. This was the hardest decision he had made so far. Finally, Liam walked over to Comfort.

"Why do you care?" he asked her.

Comfort took the tear running down her cheek, held it on her fingertip, and reached out to Liam. Before knowing why, he put the tear on his finger and then touched it to his eye.

For a moment, Liam saw Success, who had been transformed into a very ordinary-looking man. When he turned to look at Comfort, however, he saw the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. As quickly as it appeared, it all disappeared. Success stood there, impatiently waiting for him to come along, and Comfort stood smiling at him.

Liam felt confused at this "unseen" world. His fear began pushing him back toward Success. Meanwhile, Flesh was *literally* pushing him towards Success to finish the deal. Liam thought of trusting his heart and what he saw in Faith, Comfort, and Suffering.

At that crucial moment, Insignificance reached out and touched Liam. That was the final piece for him. He turned away from Success and faced Faith, Comfort, and Suffering. "You know, I like your company," he said. "I can't explain what just happened, but I want you in my life. Shall we find our way forward?"

With that, Flesh stood firmly in his way between them all. He refused to let Liam go and moaned out loud at what horrible things were happening before him. "Success, wait!" he called out, when the man turned to walk away. "He doesn't know what he's doing. He's confused. Just give him a moment to get clarity, and we'll go with you."

Liam took Flesh, put him aside, walked over, hugged Comfort, and said to Faith, "Let's get out of here. I need some space to catch my breath." They walked the rest of the way down the mountain into the valley.

Flesh dragged himself behind them. He was constantly, longingly looking back, hoping to see Success standing there. He muttered as he grudgingly walked behind them, "We could do great things. I have so much to give, and these jerks won't listen to me. I must find a way to stop them and get back there. This was our chance."



The next scene in the vision came as the team was walking up to an insurmountable wall that rose above them and stretched as far as the eye could see. They had been walking for a while, and Liam was tired. He stood and looked cautiously at the wall. The enormous blocks of granite were perfectly aligned and connected to each other. If he'd had a piece of paper, he could not have slid it between them. The workmanship was stunning, which made the wall even more impressive.

"This wall is incredible. Surely, this must be the first part of the City of God!" Liam said.

Faith looked at him, puzzled. "All of this journey is the City of God. When you began this trek, every step was on the land owned by the City of God. I'm sorry I didn't make that clear."

"You mean the City owns all this?"

"All of this is God's. How could it be anyone else's?"

"How do we get in?" Liam asked, scanning the wall for any sign of an entryway.

"Through the Gate," said Faith.

"What gate?" Liam asked.

"There," said Faith, pointing. Liam, following his finger, saw a small gate at the bottom of the wall. It was so small that he'd missed it earlier. He could be forgiven, as it looked more like a hole for a mouse than a gate.

"How do we get around this wall?" Flesh asked.

"That Gate is the first step for entrance," Faith replied.

Liam walked over and then knelt and put his hand through the tiny gate, but his arm got stuck, and it took a few moments to free it.

"You're joking, right?" he said, rubbing his arm.

"I love a good joke," said Faith, "But this isn't one. Think of this as emptying yourself. What do you need to get rid of to become small enough to access it?"

Flesh stood up, started pacing, and slowly shook his head back and forth, "No. No. NO. We get access by what we give. We aren't beggars who enter the City with nothing. That's not the way this works."

"Silence him quickly before his argument takes hold of you," Faith stated firmly.

"But his argument is good," Liam protested. "It gives me a different point of view that I need to keep perspective. Flesh, work with me. We'll get through this."

"We will *not* get through this. Can't you see I can't make it through that gate? I WILL NOT EMPTY MYSELF. After fighting my whole life to become something, I will not become less of *anything*. I WILL NOT DO IT," Flesh declared, his fist raised in defiance.

"I think it's just for a moment," Liam replied. "Then you can get it all back on the other side."

Faith looked at Liam and said, "No, you leave it behind for good. Nothing that is given up here is ever given back as it is. It is gone."

Liam looked at Faith and then turned and looked down the wall to his right and left to see if there were any other access points. He looked behind him for branches or anything that could be dragged to help as a ladder. There was nothing around them.

Finally, he mumbled, "Gone? That's serious. I sense you're wanting me to give up Flesh. He's been with me this whole journey. He's had my back and only wanted what is best for me . . . Well, sort of. Okay, well, what's best for him *and* me."

"Please, Liam!" Flesh begged. "Don't go ahead with this. They hate me and have no idea of the good I can do. I can help you to become the real you. You know me better than anyone. I'm for you."

"Oh, this is hard," Liam cried. "What am I supposed to do? How does this work—if I was to get through that gate?"

Faith responded, "It begins by agreeing with me. I ask you to give me the authority to deal with Flesh. You put him in my hands. I will deal with him."

"You'll take care of him for me?"

"Yes, I will do whatever is necessary and appropriate. I will give him what he deserves."

"Please, Liam. NO. They don't appreciate my gifts and how much I bring to our relationship. They'll torture me endlessly. I can't bear the thought of not being with you. Please, I'll do better. I may have been a bit excessive at times in what we need, but I will do better. I promise."

Liam put his hand on the wall before him. He jokingly tried pushing it, but it was solid and unmovable.

He turned to Faith, pleading, "Can't we work on him a bit? Maybe I can train him . . ."

"No, you cannot train him," Faith responded gently. "I'll deal with him as is best for all of us. That is how it must work. The choice is yours; what will you do?"

Liam looked down the wall one more time in desperation, then up to see how tall it was. There were no other options. He lowered his head and said slowly, "Okay, Faith, I give you authority to deal with him."

Faith turned to Flesh, saying, "Become what you have been, what you are, and what you always will be."

At that moment there was a flash of light, and Flesh disappeared. He was gone.

"What happened to him?" Liam yelled.

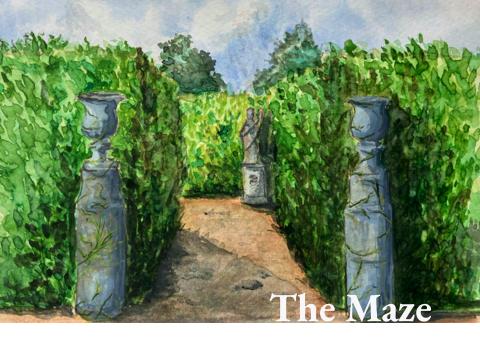
Faith replied, "If you were to bend down and look at a grain of dirt at your feet, he would be that grain. You came from dirt and will return to dirt. He never could embrace that. He wanted to be God."

Liam turned and looked; somehow, the gate behind them had grown and became so huge they could pass through easily.

"Be aware that the old Flesh will try to reconnect with you at some point," Faith warned. "His 'words' will be in your head, and you must constantly give them to me. I'll deal with him."

Inexplicably, a huge weight lifted from Liam's shoulders. He smiled. "I don't feel heavy and don't need to compete or prove anything. I like this—a lot."

With that, Liam turned and walked through the gate. Insignificance padded behind him and said nothing. He had a look of worry on his face, but he dared not say anything.



Liam was enjoying this part of the journey. He couldn't explain it, but being small was liberating. He couldn't believe how much Flesh had influenced him up to this point.

They traveled through the day and into the afternoon, eventually coming to a tall hedge as strong as any wall. Liam looked at the entrance and then to Faith. "What now?"

Faith smiled. "This is the Maze. It stretches for miles, and you must embrace your need for help."

"Yes, I see that. It's okay not to know. I want help. Who can help me?"

Faith stood for a moment and looked at the ground. He reached down and took a handful of dirt and stood up, holding out his hand with the small pile of dirt in it.

"You are enjoying being small and finite. You know you need help. That freedom is a great gift. Come closer," he said, beckoning to Liam with his other hand. "I want to show you something.

"The problem wasn't Flesh," he said when Liam stood beside him. "The problem was the breath of rebellion in him. Like the scent of a flower rebelling from a flower, so our rebellion against God was our death. We were cut off from Life itself."

Faith raised his hand high and slowly upended it. The dirt became dust in the air, gently drifting down to the earth. A light caught it, like dust seen in a beam of light cutting through a dark room. For a moment, the dust simply floated in the air. Then to Liam's shock, it slowly began to take shape.

"Come, breath of God," Faith said reverently. "We invite you into our midst."

Liam could never honestly describe what happened next. There was a loud sound, like a breath of air rushing towards them. It had a deep, resonating quality to it. Then the dust in the air took on color. At first, you could see blue, then yellow, and finally red. As these danced together, more colors were born, forming a living rainbow twisting and turning in the light. Then it changed in a moment and became a fire. It—no wait, be—was a living fire.

Liam's eyes opened wide as this all happened before him. Finally, he said, "Flesh, is that you?"

"This is Fire," Faith said, smiling. "He will guide you." Fire laughed out loud, and with it came a melody. If I said it was worship, you might think of a hymn, but it wasn't that. It was Life itself in notes and rhythm.

Tears rolled down Fire's face. They were icy blue, the color of the hottest flame. "Liam," he said, gazing at him. "I honestly can't say it's me—Flesh—as strange as that sounds. I am the dust, but the breath within—one of rebellion and shame—was killing me, and I didn't know it. To be free of that burden and to at last have the breath of God within is more than I could have imagined. Thank you for this gift."

Faith's eyes came alive as he rubbed his hands together. "He uses beautiful, wonderful dirt. This is what Flesh was always meant to be. Dust with the breath of God in it. He will guide you now that the breath of God is in him." Faith turned to Fire and nodded.

Fire put his hands together and formed a small bowl. He breathed up into the air, and like a fountain, the fire came out and became a blood-red wave of fire, which he caught in the bowl of his hands. Fire held the bowl out and said, "Drink in, breath in the life of God."

Liam stood there, staring at this beautiful, deep red fire dancing around in Fire's hands. He hesitated and then looked Fire in the eyes and saw compassion there. He reached out, took Fire's hands, and breathed or drank in the fire—he couldn't have said which.

It was not hot in the sense of heat. It was hot in the sense that it revealed whatever it touched: just as gold became more beautiful in the fire, a fire also exposed and burned away its impurities. Liam felt a warmth beginning within, as though a hug took hold of his cold heart. He realized he was made for this, like putting on a glove that fits perfectly.

Liam waited for something magical to happen, but nothing did. He felt warm and an ever-so-gentle nudging drawing him into the Maze, but that was it.

In the next moment, Fire was gone. There was still a sparkle in the air, but he was not there.

"Don't be fooled," Faith said when Liam looked worried again.
"He is now a part of you and will guide you. You must lean
into him to instruct you on how to go."

With that, Liam turned and walked into the Maze. Each row had its own unique shadows. Depending on which way the path went, the light varied with each turn. Liam came to the first turn.

"Right or left?" he asked.

He waited for directions, but nothing came. He stood and waited for a minute, gradually getting impatient.



"Come on, Fire. I need your help; let's have it." He stood waiting, and still nothing happened.

Rather than commanding Fire to speak again, Liam slowed down, and this time spoke to God. "I need you in my life to show me the way," he said quietly. "I can't do it on my own. Be with me, and as I love and follow you, please guide me."

He felt a warmth, and the slightest nudge, sense, or awareness (words couldn't define it).

"Sorry, I'm new to this relationship and need to work on it. Thank you." He made the turn and wondered out loud, "A relationship with Fire . . . who would have thought it possible?"

Liam came out of the Maze a different man. He was learning to trust his relationship with God and the Fire He sent to purify and guide. Confidence was born in him that gave him the passion and conviction to move ahead.



## Entry to the City: A Gift

In his dream, the scene shifted, and they were strolling up a grassy incline. Faith slowed and said, "We have one last challenge you must face ahead."

"Okay," Liam replied. "I'm feeling good about how things are working out so far."

"You need to bring a gift," said Faith. "You can't start the final journey without one. It is something you and Insignificance must figure out with Fire. It must be from the heart. Also, remember that the streets are paved with gold, and the entry gate is a single pearl. So, think carefully. The gift you choose will be the single most important choice you make in this whole journey."

"Oh boy," Liam said as he took a deep breath. He nudged Insignificance, jokingly saying, "What can we do to buy our way into the City of God?"

Faith turned and looked Liam in the eyes. "One last thought. Trust Fire, the Breath of God within you. He alone will be able to lead you to the gift that only you can bring."



The vision took a twist, and Liam found himself standing in a beautiful room. The ceiling was alive with intricate designs carved into it. Gold trim around the squares built into it continued into the gold molding running along the edge of the ceiling (it might have been real gold, but he couldn't tell). There were brown marbled pillars equally placed along the wall. A large glass chandelier was suspended from the ceiling in the middle of the room. There were a hundred crafted pieces of glass hanging from it, each one reflecting back into the room the light bouncing off it. The wallpaper was a light green with a beautiful floral design. The floor had a stunning red Persian carpet that you sank into.

However, what caught Liam's attention were the four large mirrors hanging between the pillars. Each had a hand-carved gold frame. The mirrors reflected the light, gave an illusion of depth, and pushed the colors and designs of the room to new places. Each one captured the glory of the room in its own unique view and celebrated it by allowing you to see the beauty of the room in a new way.

Liam was tempted not to move, as the vision before him was glorious. When he did take just one step, the room changed before him, because he could see it in a new way through the mirrors. This strange relationship with the mirrors held him captive. To move or stand in a moment's glory seemed to go on indefinitely. Time seemed to stop, and he was content to take one step, glory in the moment, and then take another.

His first impression (after time awakened him) was excitement. Was he in the City of God? But no, he couldn't be; he didn't have a present yet. If this room was any indicator of what was to come, his gift had to be something special.

A question was nagging away at him: What do you give to someone who has everything?

### The Mirror of Words

Faith's words came to Liam's mind. The problem isn't Flesh but the breath of rebellion in him. He felt a nudging from Fire (the breath of God) and walked slowly over to the first mirror hanging on the wall.

He turned and looked directly into the mirror. This was no ordinary mirror. In it, his words came to life. "Buy your way into the City of God." He'd said it as a joke, but even saying it meant it had a seed in his heart. He thought of his vision for the City of God and its beauty, mystery, and worth. If the streets were of gold, how could he pay anything to get into it?

His words had revealed his heart, and he saw it clearly in the mirror. Fire was burning within, exposing him. In a moment of connecting the points, he thought of Flesh's outrageous words and, at a deeper level, understood they were his own words.

I will not empty myself.

Keep your heart safe at any cost.

Don't listen to these old fools.

This is our chance to be a god.

He knew then that his words were the words from the breath of rebellion within him. He grew up in a world where you twisted, distorted, and bent words to your own liking, to fit your will, without giving it another thought if they were not true, accurate, right, or good. His tongue had learned the ways of the breath of rebellion and knew nothing else.

New words rose from deep within him: Nothing you do is ever good enough. You are pathetic and will never enter the City. Fire then exposed them as Shame within him. He was shocked; he had not "formally" met Shame and knew little of her. Fire turned up the heat again, however, and Liam admitted he was familiar with these emotions but had never told anyone—not even Insignificance—of the painful words that had haunted him his whole life.

He turned from the mirror, not wanting to see any more of his words come to life before him.



## The Mirror of Fog: Terrors of His Own Making

Liam knew there was no turning back at this point. He turned his head, took a few steps, and looked into the next mirror.

In it, he saw the Fog that seemed to follow him along this journey. He looked closely and saw that the Fog was not some moisture in the air but a demonic presence. He had read Dante's *Inferno* in school, with its images of Dante's snakes and terrors; cultural images of Lucifer flashed on the mirror. Liam jumped back and fell over.

No one told him there was a real devil. No one explained that it was genuine warfare against the City of God.

He thought of the words the Fog had spoken: words that challenged the very nature of love. He was certain love existed in the City of God. That was the reason he wanted to live there. He had grown up in a society that belittled the devil and made him a cute figure or spoke of "playing the devil's advocate" as if it was a valid point. Never in the greatest stretches of his mind had he thought that evil was a living, breathing being out to destroy all those interested in the City of God.

He felt shame within, pointing a finger at him and declaring, Coward. You're a foolish coward. You can't do anything right.

The breath of rebellion then tried to take hold of his mind. No, you're a hero! Whatever this devil stuff is, it wasn't your fight. It takes great courage not to fight someone else's fight. Yet somehow, Liam sensed he should have stood up for God and His love and goodness. The Fog existed because people like him didn't even know it was a fight. It had never entered his mind that his choices mattered in defending the City of God from lies.

He remembered that God owned all the land on the way to the City of God, and that was where the battle was being fought. Fire exposed his heart, and he was in trouble.

He was stuck and didn't know what to do about it. He couldn't go back and desperately wanted to make it to the City of God, but all he knew to do when he was in trouble was to hide—and there was no place to hide. Fire stirred within him.

It was time to stop running from himself and hiding.



# The Mirror of Value: Who Is Worthy?

Liam closed his eyes and took a deep breath. A strange verse came to his mind: When you walk through Fire, I will be with you. The Breath of God was within him. It was His presence that was at work within: the same presence from the City of God. Liam could trust Him. He could let go of control, as he let go of the wall in the Valley of Fear. He could abandon himself to Fire.

He let go.

A peace settled upon him as he had never experienced before. He stood and welcomed it into his life. He dared not move, for to lose this moment would leave him in despair. Fire pushed him to the next mirror, and with great relief, peace went with him when he took the step. He would be all right.

He turned and faced the next mirror. In it, he saw an image of Success standing before him. He stared at Success' gold watch. He had lusted after it and remembered how impressed he was at their first meeting.

The breath of rebellion within him reminded him, You could have been someone. You could have been powerful, with people looking up to you wherever you went. They would have welcomed you into the City of God if you had followed my advice.

At that moment, Fire made a connection in his mind, and Liam recognized that Shame and the breath of rebellion worked together. When the breath of rebellion said *you could have been someone*, the unspoken assumption was that he wasn't anyone and needed the watch, clothes, and white teeth to protect himself from the fears within him. Shame was feeding off his fears so that the breath of rebellion felt justified in whatever he did.

Then Faith's words about "streets of gold" came to mind. Liam was stunned with the trinkets he wanted to wear. He almost chuckled at the thought of Success wearing "asphalt" on his wrist.

What did you wear into the City of God? He had no idea. All his life was built around shame and the breath of rebellion's attempts to fight it.

Shame or the breath of rebellion could not be trusted in the City of God, because they would break up the streets of gold or tear down the Pearl Gate for their own benefit. Liam realized that without the breath of God within, he would tear apart the City of God to look good. That capacity was all that he had grown up with, and he knew nothing different. He had come so far, and yet he was seeing all his progress as only baby steps in the journey he was on.

# The Mirror of Righteousness: Exposing Fear

Liam looked at the last mirror hanging ornately on the wall. What would he discover in it? He was strangely encouraged that he only had to face one more mirror. He took what little courage he had and walked over to it, looking up into its polished surface.

To his surprise, it seemed like an ordinary mirror. He saw his gangly self, standing there looking back at him. He stood and stared at himself for a minute. What could he give to gain entrance to the City of God?

The longer he stared, the more uncomfortable he became. He never really liked looking at himself, and now, especially in this hall, he didn't seem to belong.

Shame and the breath of rebellion rose up within him. You stepped up and had the courage to leave your family and what was familiar to you. You left Entertainment. You left Religion. You fought hard in the Valley of Fear. You said no to Victim and Success. You deserve to be here. It's your right.

Their argument continued inside him: You are a nice person.

Liam believed with all his heart. He was a nice person. That was the one confidence in his life. Shame and the breath of rebellion were right in that, surely.

Fire pushed him to look closer in the mirror at his righteousness. He saw that his goodness was defined by being a "nice" guy. He was convinced he would never hurt anyone and felt good about himself.

In a moment, it all changed. He would have screamed aloud if he could have, but he was frozen by the image before him. He saw himself in the mirror, severely beaten, looking like he had been in a fight.

His first thought was, "Who would do this to him?"

The violence of it shocked him, and his heart twisted with pity as he looked at himself in such pain. Anger stirred over the injustice of this treatment.

But when he saw the next image, it terrified him even more.

He was beating himself.

Liam desperately wanted to turn from the mirror and run, but he could not take his eyes off the image it showed: himself, hurting himself. The fear of man and "being nice" had turned him into a self-abusive person who was mean, aggressive, and even violent against himself to please others. He treated himself as if he had no value. He belittled himself in his thinking and took the negative opinions of others as facts, even when he knew they were wrong. To say something against himself was—dare he use the word—justified?

Shame then stood in the mirror before him in the form of Victim. Her hollow eyes bore down on him. You're a disappointment, Liam, she said. You will never measure up, and if anyone saw you as you really are, they would reject you, and you'd be alone. You'll never belong to anyone. It's not your fault you are such a screw-up. That's just who you are.

The breath of rebellion admitted, It's true. I've known this the whole time, and I was trying to protect you from it. We could have earned our way. Or, at the very least, we could have gone out fighting—fighting till the very end. We could have kept this hidden your whole life, and no one would have ever known. You're a fool for bringing this into the light.

Liam suddenly realized the courage to be present, to be who he was made to be, was completely absent in his life. His being present in life was the mirror of God. He had not been abusive to others, true; but he was abusive to himself. His niceness to others came at the cost of the self-destruction of who he was as an image-bearer.



## The Light

In the next moment, Liam's vision changed. He saw a penetrating light in the room. His first hope was that it was an exit, but he was quickly disappointed.

This was the light for all the mirrors in the room, but it was also more than that. It was the origin or source of all light. At this point, Liam's words fell short. Imagine starting to cross a river, and you step on a log, only to discover that it is an alligator. Or you reach up to grab a large branch, and it is a snake.

So was Liam's discovery that the light was a living being.

He desperately tried to look into the light to see the person he knew was there, but the light blinded him to any clarity. Only then did he understand that darkness cannot see the light, for the light repelled it.

He was reminded of his first impressions of the mirrors in this room: how they reflected the glory of the room and brought it to life. Instantly, everything in the vision switched. Now he saw himself looking at the light, and *be* was the mirror.

The change disturbed him deeply. When he was the source of the image in the mirror, he was in control of the image. He felt like he could fix the image, and with time, everything would be okay. In the twinkle of an eye, all the images of himself in the mirrors came into the light. Whereas before, he had no standard but only a sense of his own lack, now he had a clear standard. The Being giving the Light was the standard, and Liam knew he was to express it in his life. He thought again of the mirrors in the room and how they resonated and repeated the beauty of the room. In this was their glory.

He felt the light summoning him, so he inched forward. There was a growing weight and intensity (it was pure joy) in the light, and it multiplied with each advancement. Then he stopped, for he knew he could not get any closer. It would kill him. He savored the moment, feeling pure, uncompromising joy. He also felt peace, rest, harmony, energy, and a sense of belonging. It was as if time stood still, and he would be forever grateful if it did.

As quickly as it came, the joy left. In its place was soulwrenching grief. He knew he would never be able to see the Being in the light, yet he longed for that more than he longed for life itself. Falling to his knees, he wept in agony.

How long did he remain kneeling, crying as though his heart would break? It could have been a moment or a month; he did not know.

At last, Liam felt a change in the air and looked up at the light.

In the dream, the light intensified and slowly took on the shape of a human. An unspeakable joy took hold of Liam. He could not go to the light, so the light had come to him. How . . .? Why . . .? It was incomprehensible, and yet . . .

The willingness for God to do such a thing was like a tsunami washing over him. As the image became clear, Liam saw the Son of God standing before him. Jesus—that was His name—His life, and His heart. Liam saw how Jesus made no room in His heart for the breath of rebellion, even though He was human. He was the perfect reflection of goodness and righteousness.

Jesus was the very word of light on display: perfect words in complete alignment with the heart of God. No corruption or twisted aspect to anything He said. You could trust His words with your life.

Liam understood that Jesus fought the devil's lies that sought to destroy the character of God.

The courage of Jesus to be fully present in all of life with NO FEAR hit him the hardest. Jesus reflected the righteousness and love of God in a pure, raw, and unfiltered way, even when confronted with a horrible death. He was the untainted image of the unseeable God on display.

What Liam saw in Him was a vulnerable display of God's love, goodness, beauty, and purity for all those who wanted to live in the City of God. He was the perfect mirror of God.

Liam viewed himself in that light, and he was undone. New tears began to flow; he had never understood his role in life.

He had misrepresented the light.

### The Choice

In his vision, Liam was now out of the room of mirrors and standing before Faith, Comfort, and Job. He'd been so overwhelmed by the revelations that came upon him in that room that he couldn't remember when—or even how—he had left it. Insignificance stood at his side quietly. He wanted to feel a sense of relief for not having to look into any more mirrors, but all he felt was grief.

He was so close and yet so far from what he longed for.

Liam turned to the others in tears, stuttering, "I'm so sorry . . . You've shown me nothing but friendship and caring, while I . . . I have seen my heart, and it's not a pretty sight." He breathed deep, for these next words were the hardest words he had ever spoken. "I know that I cannot enter the City of God," he said. "I don't belong there."

Tears ran down Comfort's cheeks as she walked over to him, wrapped her arms around him, and pulled him to her. She held him as Liam wept and wept and wept.

Faith and Job nodded in understanding and said nothing.

With no tears left to cry, Liam kissed Comfort on the cheek. Insignificance took his hand and grasped it tightly.

"What can you give to the King of the City?" Faith asked.

"I have nothing to offer," Liam declared, tears rolling down his cheeks.

"Do you remember my words at the end of my story?" Job asked.

"No," Liam replied.

"I have heard of you with my ears, but now my eyes have seen you. I repent in dust and ashes.' What do you think I saw in myself that brought me to that place?" Job asked.

"But it says that you were a righteous man, blameless and upright," Liam said.

"I did the right things, but my heart was corrupt. I blamed God for it all. I had the arrogance to judge Him for the pain in this broken world, and when I saw the light, I was undone."

"You saw the light? You were undone?" Liam gasped.

"Do you know what I had to give to Him?" Job said. "I had a broken, rebellious heart with nothing good in it."

"He accepted that?" Liam asked, with hope stirring him on.

"The hardest part is admitting it and having the courage to bring it to Him," said Job. "All He asks is that you surrender yourself to Him. Reject the breath of rebellion and refuse Shame space in your heart. That is the very nature of Grace. He needs nothing from you. Come before Him as you are. That is all you have. That is all Fire has been trying to teach you this whole time. Know that you are loved and accepted as you are."

As the words hung in the air, Liam reached out to grab them as a source of hope. He couldn't believe his ears. *Was it even possible?* 

Faith stepped back and asked, "Would you give up Insignificance to go in there?"

Liam's whisper of hope was now completely gone. He turned to Insignificance, and tears flowed down his face. "He's been the only friend who hasn't judged me," he whispered. "He's stuck with me this whole trip. I couldn't have made it without his support, and you want me to turn on him now?"

"His job was to get you here," Faith said gently. "You cannot go forward with him as he is. You must give him to me, and I will care for him."

"I can't do it!" Liam cried. "I've given everything, and I have nothing left. Now you ask for my only friend—my soul mate the companion from my youngest days? I don't want to go forward without him. I can't do it."

To his astonishment, Liam heard Insignificance's voice in his ear.

"Please, Liam, give me to him," said his friend. "I want this for you more than you want it for yourself. I know you can find your way to the City of God, which would be my greatest joy. You must do this, or all we've done together is now lost. Please—turn me over to Faith."

"He'll turn you into dust or something worse," Liam cried.

"I can handle it," said Insignificance, smiling softly. "But you must let go of everything you've trusted to get here, or you can't enter the City of God."

Liam turned to Faith and whispered, "He's yours. Please be kind to him and take care of him."

Faith put his hands on Insignificance's shoulders. "Be revealed for what you are," he intoned.

In a moment of brightness, Insignificance disappeared, and a tall young man stood before them. Or rather—he was a man, but also a child. How could that be? Liam blinked, but he could think of no other way to describe him. His heart burst with joy, for he recognized his old friend in this new body.

"You're alive!" Liam breathed.

"Liam, meet Humility," said Faith. "You can't approach the City without humility. All life must be exposed for what it is before entering the City of God. You needed a guide, and now that you have embraced humility, he will show you the way."

Liam hugged Humility, saying, "I had no idea who you were, but now I understand it all."

They both turned, let out a long, deep laugh, and began the final journey into the City of God.



And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. Revelations 21:2

# The City of God is the Bride of Christ.



"Welcome, my beloved. I have so looked forward to your coming."

### About the Author

Matt spent twenty years working in missions in Asia and the Pacific, submerged in different cultures and working with people from many diverse backgrounds.

He then studied to try and understand all the questions his interaction with so many different people raised in him. He finished his Ph.D. in leadership and communication from the University of Wales in 2001.

Since then, Matt has made it a priority to help people understand who they are in God and how to express Him in whatever situation their faith finds them.

Currently, he splits his time between working with churches and missions agencies, writing (he has written 20 books), and serving as CEO of a marketplace consulting company in Singapore. He works closely with leaders and their organizations to address the challenges of a changing world and how to be fully present in the midst of tension.

He is married to Celia, and they have a son who is married and living in Oregon.

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A Line Drawn in the Sand

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