

1

PART ONE

DON'T WAIT
TOO LONG

Don't Wait Too Long

I was at peace. All was right with the world.
And then life got even better.
Until it went to worse, and then plunged to worst.
But worst eventually turned, and now I'm headed toward best.
Stay with me, and you'll hear the story.

I had finally made the honorable decision. For several years, I'd been selfish and less than honorable. But now I'd done the right thing, and I was at peace. The decision I made also opened the door to a chain of events that has led to you holding this book right now.

For some reason, it seems I've always had to learn life lessons the hard way. Perhaps my stumbling can save you weeks or even years of pain. Whether you're a man or a woman, feel free to learn from my mistakes. My story might have its own unique personal details, but the principles God has established are universal and applicable to all of life.

I had been selfish, and that trait will not nurture a healthy relationship. However, I know I'm not alone. Selfishness is the cause of so many problems in life, and often, we don't even recognize that trait in ourselves.

Following the death of my wife, Mary, I was a bit unmoored. It's a common state for many men who have lost a spouse after a lengthy marriage. We have so much pain and loneliness to deal with that we grasp at any relief, whether temporary or permanent. I was no exception. I reached out to a woman who had been in a difficult marriage but was then praying diligently for a godly husband.

She believed I qualified as that. I did not.

However, I kept seeing her for a season. Then I'd initiate short periods of separation. Acute loneliness resulted, and I'd begin another season of seeing her.

In 2016, decision time came. In the fall, I spent several weeks hiking in Israel. During my time there, I contemplated what it meant to follow Jesus. I wanted a clearer vision for my life. I was also contemplating that ongoing relationship back home. When I left the U.S., my friend had given the directive to have my answer when I returned home. Should I stay in the relationship, or end it?

I determined it was best to be apart. I did not realize how that decision crushed her dream and her spirit. I thought she was an emotionally strong person who could accept my choice and move on with her life, but she was headed for a year of heartbreak and pain. She finally gave her all to God and became a whole, godly woman. She now leads a ministry for hurting women.

Me? I spent the next two months at home, waiting on God. I rarely left the house. In a two-month timeframe, I had only one social event. But for the first time in years, I felt at peace with God and myself.

It had been ten years, though, since my wife died, and although

my life had been filled with adventures, books to write, and speaking engagements, I was tired of doing life alone. I wanted to share it intimately with someone. My prayer then was that if it were possible, I wanted to feel love again. I wanted a love like we experience when we first feel that love for a special person. Heart-pumping, spirit-lifting love.

God, is that even possible at my age?

Yes! It's possible.

One evening in late January of 2017, an email arrived from a lady whose husband had passed away. Although his recent health had not allowed strenuous activity, he had enjoyed hiking in his younger days. This man had purchased my book *Hiking Through* and read the story of a man who made a difficult choice, a choice to not wait too long to enjoy the blessings of life. The man was financially able to retire early, and that became his plan. He sent a note to his best friend, who also enjoyed the outdoors and hiking, and recommended that he, too, read *Hiking Through*.

Then this man suddenly became deathly ill. The diagnosis was cancer, and within two weeks, the man died. During those final two weeks of his shortened life, he dreamed of writing a book encouraging people not to wait too long to retire and follow their dreams. But he never had the chance to pen his thoughts.

Following his passing, his friend gave the note to the deceased man's wife, telling her that *Hiking Through* was somewhere in her husband's library. It was about hiking the Appalachian Trail to find peace after the loss of a spouse.

The grieving wife searched through her husband's books and discovered *Hiking Through*. She had just begun to read it when she emailed me and relayed her husband's desire to write a book about "not waiting too long." She inquired about the book-writing process, thinking that perhaps she herself should author the book.

I've received several thousand emails and letters in response to *Hiking Through*. I can't reply to all of them. However, if someone asks a question, I do reply. This question about writing a book is one I've often been asked. I gave this lady the same response I give others: Whatever you write, convey a message with significance. Your goal in writing is to have the reader close the book the final time and say, "I learned something that will make me a better person."

The message of "Don't wait too long" is also one I've delivered for years. This is one of those lessons that I've learned through pain. That's why I encourage people to enjoy the journey now. Don't wait for someday.

Mary and I worked hard all of our married life. At times, too hard. It's what so many couples do. The plan is to work hard, get out of debt, and someday retire and then do things we "want" to do. Mary and I dreamed of retiring in our late fifties and giving time to volunteer work. But for many of us, while we're still looking ahead for "someday" to arrive, house payments, raising kids, college debt, career building, and countless other issues distract us from the real joy of everyday living.

Mary and I waited too long.

One day in May, I rushed into Mary's hospital room in great excitement. I showed her the bank coupon—the last one! "Honey, it's our last house payment. We are completely out of debt! Finally!"

She looked at me sadly and quietly said, "Yes, that's great."

But it wasn't. Four months later, my wife passed away.

We had too often missed the joy of the journey by postponing daily joys and looking only toward future possibilities.

How about you? Are you waiting for that elusive someday to really enjoy life?

Don't wait too long.