

# GETTING STARTED

## DO ANY OF THESE STATEMENTS FIT?

- You feel out of control. What began as an escape from the hassles of life has become hazardous. Something—drugs, alcohol, gambling, food, sex—is taking over. You feel like its slave.
- You still love your addiction, but it is no longer friendly. You think it is time for a change.
- You think it is time for change—you want to leave your addiction—but you aren't sure how to change. You have already tried a few strategies, and they didn't work.
- Someone told you that you'd *better* change.
- You are sick and tired of the lies, broken relationships, and nagging conscience that accompany all addictions.
- You are already off and running, already leaving your addiction behind.

Whichever fits, welcome to reality. You are closing in on it.

Reality is not as bad as you think. Yes, the world around you can be miserable at times. It can be miserable *most* of the time, as a matter of fact. You have known that misery. Otherwise, you wouldn't have preferred an altered reality. But there is more to reality than what you see. Usually you are looking through glasses that are smudged, scratched, and out of focus, and things don't look good. But reality—true reality—is better than you think.

Your addiction has taken you to the woodshed for a good whuppin'. At those times it is hard to see hints of beauty, goodness, justice, love, and joy, that are always peeking out of this life, but they are still there.

Let me put it this way: What if you were invited to the greatest feast ever? What if you received a promise of great treasure? Would that be enough to lure you away from an addictive way of life? It, at least, would get your attention.

Think of this book as a treasure map. At times you are reluctant to give up your addiction, in which case a map, even a map to someplace beautiful, isn't powerful enough to guide you. Yet at other times you are sick and tired of being owned by something that is killing you, and you are ready to leave it behind. The problem at those times is that you simply don't know how to get away. Every trail seems to loop right back to where you began. It is as though the object of your addiction sucks you into its gravitational pull and there is no defense against it. The purpose of the steps ahead is to orient you and direct you to a path of change that has been proven to transform people.

A few points before you get started.

First, *your struggle is a common one*. Don't begin with the idea that your experience is out of the ordinary. It is, of course, unique—no one completely understands your struggle (not even you). Still, we are all cut from the same cloth. All of us, if we are truly honest, would have to acknowledge a familiarity with that tug of addictions. A lot of *wanting* is in the human heart. The desire for drugs, alcohol, sex, and food are the more dramatic ones, but they aren't fundamentally different from our cravings for comfort, significance, relationship, money, love, and so on. Try to find one person who has successfully and consistently said no to any of those wants. You won't succeed.

If you consider yourself a special case—the worst addict, the most victimized—stop and think about what you are really saying. Right below the surface is the idea, *Whatever worked for other people is not going to work for me*. And right below that idea is the private thought, *I am not going to change*.

You might be saying, "I *can't* change." You are afraid to get your hopes up for what could be another failure. Or you might be saying, "I *won't* change." You virtually dare people and programs to take their best shot at you so you can show them that they are not as good as advertised. Either way, you have already decided that nothing will help. You are certain that you are not normal, so normal treatments (this book, for instance) won't help. You may genuinely hope that *something* will come along and be the answer, but you suspect it never will.

If that's you—if you believe that your case is unique—perhaps you still love your addiction more than you love anything else. That doesn't

mean that a guide such as this is a waste of time. It just means that you are starting at a disadvantage.

Second, *the path you will be traveling has much to do with God*. That should come as no surprise. Books about addictions always say something about God. But much more is happening between you and God than you may think.

- You will be surprised to learn how you avoid him.
- You will be surprised to learn how he pursues you.
- You will be surprised that you know him more than you think.
- You will be surprised that you know him less than you think.

If you find yourself shutting down when the conversation turns to God, don't just wait for the conversation to move to something else. When you shut down at the mention of someone's name, the issue is *not* that he is irrelevant to you. The issue is that he is more relevant to you than you are comfortable with. Take a quick look, and you will probably find a history of misunderstandings and fractures in the relationship. Your addictions are linked to your relationship to God more than you realize. You can't ignore that.

Third, if at all possible, *do this work with someone else*. Addictions are private, so doing this in public is a way to take a stand against your addiction. God has always planned for people to live and grow in a community, where we give and receive, pray for others and get prayed for, and learn wisdom and offer it.

This book has its roots in a book called *Addiction—A Banquet in the Grave*. The image of the banquet comes from the book of Proverbs. Just insert "Addiction" for "The woman Folly" and it will make sense.

The woman Folly [Addiction] is loud;  
 she is undisciplined and without knowledge.  
 She sits at the door of her house,  
 on a seat at the highest point of the city,  
 calling out to those who pass by,  
 who go straight on their way.  
 "Let all who are simple come in here!"  
 she says to those who lack judgment.

“Stolen water is sweet;  
 food eaten in secret is delicious!”  
*But little do they know that the dead are there,  
 that her guests are in the depths of the grave.*  
 (Proverbs 9:13–18, emphasis added)

Vivid, accurate, and tragic. Addictions lure you. They look attractive until the lights are turned on and you see the ugliness, horror, and death swirling around you. This is not the banquet you were hoping for.

But Dame Folly’s banquet in the grave isn’t the only banquet. There is another one. *The* God has invited you to *The* Banquet. This banquet is in his honor, and he has picked up the tab so you can come.

Who would have thought? The treatment for addictions is to want something better than your addictions.

“Come, all you who are thirsty,  
 come to the waters;  
 and you who have no money,  
 come, buy and eat!  
 Come, buy wine and milk  
 without money and without cost.

Why spend money on what is not bread,  
 and your labor on what does not satisfy?  
 Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good,  
 and your soul will delight in the richest of fare.”  
 (Isaiah 55:1–2)

Inviting, isn’t it?

## STEP 1:

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# Listen

**MAIN IDEA:** The path away from addiction begins by waking up and listening, really listening. Such listening also goes by another name: it is called humility.

The rumors are true. There really is a way through the addictive fog. When you consider the number of times you tried to stop and then went back to your addiction, you can easily believe that life is a revolving stage, always returning to the same place. But there really is a guidebook to life, and, contrary to what you think, it is available to everyone, including you.

Wisdom calls aloud in the street,  
 she raises her voice in the public squares;  
 at the head of the noisy streets she cries out,  
 in the gateways of the city she makes her speech.  
 (Proverbs 1:20–21)

Wisdom means knowing how life is supposed to work—how it works best. To get it, you just have to listen.

## TWO VOICES

But listening to Wisdom is not that easy. As you know, another voice calls out in the street. That voice is Folly.

**Folly.** Folly—also known as Addiction—offers the flash and cash. Consider what she promises, and it’s no wonder she is difficult to resist:

- Something secret
- Quick money
- Pleasure
- Rest, relaxation, and ease
- No problems (at least for right now)
- “Friends” who will encourage you in your foolish path

It’s what she *doesn’t* say that is the killer.

She cries out, “Now! Now! Now! You can have all this now!” Who wouldn’t listen to such a promise even if she hasn’t delivered? But here is reality. Her speech is a trap that is barely camouflaged. As she invites

you to her banquet, she tries to shield your eyes from the death all around you. The stench is masked by cheap perfume. Even while you become contaminated, as the disease spreads and your own flesh begins to rot, she promises that *more* of your addiction is the only tonic that will heal. Death is her trade. Lies are her native tongue.

**Wisdom.** It would be nice if you could simply say, “Oops, I lost my way,” then start following the voice of wisdom. But as you know, the work in front of you will be a battle. Think of the cartoons where a person has two miniature creatures—a “Mini-Me” on each shoulder—whispering in either ear: foolishness in one ear and wisdom in the other. Foolishness usually wins. Foolishness is the hip contrast to wisdom. Who wouldn’t follow it? From a distance, foolishness sounds ridiculous. It makes promises it can’t keep, and it has nothing to give except death anyway. But close up, when it conjures up a mirage that matches our desires, foolishness sounds like life itself.

Wisdom, or at least the stereotype of it, seems boring by comparison. Slow and steady. How many ways can you make “Don’t do it” sound interesting? But wisdom doesn’t just fade away when it loses to the slick appeal of foolishness. Instead, wisdom goes into overdrive. It speaks more beautifully, exposes the ugliness of folly, and makes promises that it will keep. Wisdom woos you. It beckons. It persuades.

Do not forget my teaching,  
 but keep my commands in your heart,  
 for they will prolong your life many years  
 and bring you prosperity. (Proverbs 3:1–2)

“Lay hold of my words with all your heart;  
 keep my commands and you will live.  
 Get wisdom, get understanding;  
 do not forsake my words or swerve from them.  
 Do not forsake wisdom, and she will protect you;  
 love her, and she will watch over you.  
 Wisdom is supreme; therefore get wisdom.  
 Though it cost all you have, get understanding.  
 Esteem her, and she will exalt you;  
 embrace her, and she will honor you.” (Proverbs 4:4–8)

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 Though it cost all you have, get understanding.  
 Esteem her, and she will exalt you;  
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My son, pay attention to what I say;  
listen closely to my words.  
Do not let them out of your sight,  
keep them within your heart;  
for they are life to those who find them  
and health to a man's whole body. (Proverbs 4:20–22)

Listen and you might hear hope, which you may not have heard for years. Wisdom actually seeks you. Your job is to hear the voice of wisdom and learn to love it.

**The Source of Wisdom.** As you can already tell, wisdom isn't a system of steps to memorize. Wisdom is quite personal. It comes from God; it is his voice. You already knew that, but it still might surprise you. Perhaps you thought God was peeved and waiting for you to finally get it right; *then* he *might* grace you with his presence. Or maybe *you* were peeved at God and waiting for *him* to finally get it right. Or both. In any case, you probably aren't accustomed to thinking of God as the One who goes out into the most dangerous streets, in the middle of the night, searching for you and calling out your name. Perhaps you didn't know that when you veer off into your addiction, he ratchets up his persuasive appeal a few notches.

## TWO KINGDOMS

God is the voice of wisdom. He invites you to his kingdom. Your relationship with him is an uneasy and strained one, so it will take some work.

That other voice? Listen to how familiar it sounds. The cartoons have it partly correct: the voice of your addiction really is your own Mini-Me. That's *your* voice you're hearing. Yes, other voices join in, but it is, at least, your own voice. How else would it know you so well? How else would it know exactly how to entice you?

It is the voice of your desires.

The map is now in front of you. The path you are on always comes to a crossroads. One path leads to folly and death, the other to wisdom and life. Study the map, and you will notice that you are actually walking toward a kingdom. You are traveling either toward the kingdom

where God is your King and Father, or you are committed to a rival kingdom in which you try to manage life on your own, apart from God. In other words, these decisions are about allegiances. Addiction is the battleground where your loyalties are revealed.

Here is where addicts have an advantage over most people. Addicts know the deeper reality that life is set up according to kingdoms. Addicts know that there isn't one square inch of neutral territory. Everyone is on the way to one kingdom or the other. This may sound like religious gobbledygook to many people, but you know different, even if you aren't sure what you believe about God. You know from your own experience that this is reality. You know all about the crossroads: you have lived with the Mini-Mes battling for your soul on either shoulder. You know that your addiction is a matter of loyalty, of decisions for God or against him. You even know that the central question—not just in addiction but in all of life—is, *Who will I worship? Who will I bow to?* After all, that's what you do with exalted kings.

Some bow to God. If they do, they can't take any credit for it. God pursued them first, in the same way he is pursuing you. Others worship themselves and their own desires through the pursuit of money, security, comfort, prestige, power, drugs, or sex. What distinguishes you from most other false worshipers is that you have chosen to worship something illegal, something more dangerous, or something that carries a higher possibility of bad consequences.

? How do you feel about being identified as a false worshiper? Do you believe it? Do you believe that your life is ultimately about kingdom allegiances?

## TAKE ACTION

The stakes are high. Listen carefully. Two different voices call out to you. It may not feel like it, but you still have the capacity to hear the voice of God who wants to guide you into wisdom and life. You will find that God speaks plainly, not in code. To hear God, you don't need any special skills. You just have to listen to him.

**Do something.** Listening and action go together. If you are ready to listen, you are ready to act. If you are *not* ready to act, you are not ready to listen.

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law [God's words] that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but *doing* it—he will be blessed in what he does. (James 1:22–25)

? How would you explain this piece of wisdom?

Are you ready to act? The next step will address more about this. But when it comes to addiction, the strategy is to act NOW. Take a step.

Addictions generate a lot of momentum. To act against them seems like a superhuman task. As a matter of fact, it *is* a superhuman task; and you aren't feeling as if you have any superpowers. You're in a rut. You instinctively follow your desires wherever they lead you. You don't question, don't think, and don't resist. But no matter how dead and powerless you feel, at least you are *not* dead. That's good. Change will not be easy. It won't seem natural at first, and you will be sorely tempted to give up after an hour or two. But that resistance is part of the process of becoming a real human being.

You need to do *something*. Keep a pen handy. Write all over this book—in the margins, in the blank spaces. Go ahead and cover it with graffiti. Argue, write down questions, state your disagreements, and jot down ideas on how to put up a fight against temptations. You have been lulled to sleep by Folly. It is time to wake up (Ephesians 5:14)!

Are you awake yet?

How can you tell?

Here are some ways you can take action.

**Talk to God.** Start by asking for help. Admit it now to God. Simply say, "I need help."

Have you said it?

You may have heard that your problems are usually rooted in your selfishness and pride. Wisdom comes when we take steps of humility. Humility acknowledges a need for help.

Being humbled is not the same thing as being shamed or embarrassed. Being humbled means that you are getting the knack of being human the way God intended. The addict's motto is, "My will, my way." The more human alternative is, "Your will, God. I need help and I am listening."

**Talk to another person.** You should talk to another person for two reasons: First, by talking about what you have just heard, you will know if you really heard anything. Second, you may need some practice asking for help. If you ask God for help, it should be easy to ask a mere human like yourself for help.

? Who can you talk to?

? What will you ask?

**Read.** If you want more background on the two voices and the two kingdoms, read the first nine chapters of the book of Proverbs, which is found in the Old Testament of the Bible. You could also read its New Testament counterpart, the book of James. Then tell someone about what you read.

? Will you begin to read it? Who will you discuss it with?

You probably have all kinds of true and false ideas about the Bible—everyone comes to the Bible with lots of assumptions. Regardless of what you believe, the Bible will be your map, compass, guide, eyes and ears, comfort, defense, ammunition, and even your food.

One reason people avoid the Bible is that it makes them feel guilty, and most people feel they have enough of that already. It is much more helpful to think of the Bible as a light in the darkness. In the darkness you can do forbidden things and believe that nobody sees. That feels

like freedom at first, but eventually darkness comes to feel like an isolated prison. Light is always good. It might make you squint. It might make you feel exposed. But it is always good.

Your interest in the Bible will be a gauge. It will measure your desire for change.

**Run.** Since the crossroads you face is about life and death, here is some sound advice: RUN. Run like a maniac. Run away. Run from death and everything that it touches.

? What would it mean to run from your addiction?

? What people or places are contaminated by your addiction?

? How will you run from those people and those places? Don't forget, if you get near them, they pull you toward death.  
Change your phone number.  
Have all the computer sites you hit sent to someone else.  
Throw out your secret stash.

? Who will you tell of your plan?

Even if you aren't yet sure what you are running toward—even if you don't know where the safe haven is—you still have to run.

**Be afraid.** It is best to go into this with a little bit of fear. After all, life and death are being set before you. But don't just fear your addiction. Have a bigger fear. Be afraid of YOU.

You are tuned to folly's frequency. You are programmed to hear the lies and believe them.

Though you can see the disaster of addiction when you are away from it, as soon as you get close, it starts to look good again.

You think you can manage life on your own.

Though independence is impossible, you prefer the myth of independence to living under the God who created you.

? What are some reasons why you should be afraid of YOU?

Welcome to the path of wisdom and hope. It is honest and clear. You have good reasons to look forward to traveling on it.