



February 2023

My Friend, Jeremy Grinnell

My favorite gift to receive from God is the gift of a true friend! I thank God for my friend, Jeremy Grinnell. He has blessed me in so many ways for over a decade. He has blessed me more than he will ever know. I am honored to call Jeremy my friend. When I look into his eyes I see a brother who loves me, and respects me, and only wants the best for me. I see a caring and compassionate heart of a man who loves God and loves people. I celebrate the fact that he is shy and introverted. He is a lover of God and a lover of God's Word. When he speaks, I always want to listen and take notes. Do you see what I see?





I am so delighted Jeremy accepted my invitation to share his story in the PastorCare West Michigan Newsletter this month. The Bellowing of Cain. A Book ... a Journey of Loss and Redemption. Dr. Jeremy Gordon Grinnell.

I was famous! Well, infamous anyway. What do you do when your fifteen seconds of fame consist in having your face all over the evening news for committing a crime? Fifteen seconds. That's all it takes sometimes to wreck a life, end a career, become a social outcast.

Blowing It All Up

I was a Professor of Systematic Theology at a local seminary and pastor at a growing nondenominational church. My life was good, and I had everything a person could reasonably want. Then through a hideous cocktail of bad choices and clinical depression, I threw it all away in the most public way possible – complete with criminal charges and my mug in the newspaper.

In the fewest words possible, in 2013, I became entangled in a consensual ten-month emotional affair with a woman who my wife, Denise, and I were helping through a home foreclosure and legal battle. I quickly lost track of personal boundaries and became fixated on her family's needs ... and then on her. It nearly destroyed my marriage and my health.

A few months in, I was clinically depressed, suicidal, and living a double life—trapped in a relationship I could not find a way to escape ... and didn't want to. By the time the obsession had run its course, I would find myself standing below her bedroom window, reduced from a rising star in the community to little more than a peeping-tom.

The fall out was swift and public in the form of felony invasion of privacy charges. I resigned from my pastoral position at the church. Then the press got ahold of the story, and I was publicly shamed. I then resigned my professorship at the university as well. In the end, rather than prolong the agony for my family in a useless legal defense, I took a plea deal, and the judge gave me a good long probation. The public record remains and is ugly.

In the immediate aftermath, our family went more or less into hiding. It was a very lonely time as relationships with the church and university had been mostly negated by leadership decisions. Additionally, most of our friends outside these two worlds decided that what we needed most was "space." This is an understandable belief and true in some measure, but if everyone adopts this strategy, you end up alone.

And we were.

But into this silence, a few voices did speak. One of them was John Smith of PastorCare West Michigan. John took me out to breakfast and simply affirmed my value. He spoke hopefully of my future when I could feel none. He has been a cyclical feature of my slow growth back to a place of health and usefulness.

Picking Up the Pieces

The next several years were a time of stabilizing and rebuilding. Denise, who has always been an in-demand mid-level IT manager at several firms, immediately landed a position at Gordon Food Service, which meant that we would not miss so much a single mortgage payment. What a gift!

I, on the other hand, had a much more difficult time finding my feet. Who was I beyond a professor and pastor? I had put my 10,000 hours in mastering the world of theological education and the church. What else was I fit to do? The only other asset I possessed was my undergraduate degree in theatre—not the most marketable of skills.

If it provided few income opportunities, it did offer some therapeutic ones. I began acting again in various West Michigan community theatres. This gave me a new set of relationships made up of people of diverse stripes—people who often had lived excessive lives with the consequent baggage. I was right at home.

In what I assumed would be only a transitional effort, I started my own audiobook narration and production company. I retrofitted our master bedroom closet into a studio and began bidding on work. This allowed me to work on my own schedule and be there for our four children—I was, after all, a stay-at-home father now.

A Rapprochement with the Church

As one might expect, I was pretty sore at the church, both the church I'd been a pastor of and *the* church in general. While I fully admitted that I was lying in a bed of my own making, that doesn't always change one's feelings. I was feeling bruised, unwanted, worthless, and ashamed. And except for the few people, like John Smith, who'd expressed concern for me, I was alone.

Denise, however, was showing her quality at this time. We were in the process of a reconciliation which she was in no way obliged to offer. Yet she did. So, our marriage was bouncing back with a momentum I could not have predicted.



Not so much with the church. I'd tried to keep going to other churches, but was weary of the staring and the whispering we met at most churches. And going to church was simply painful, like a constant reminder of all I'd lost at my own hand.



But Denise continued to remind me that the kids needed church. I told her to go ahead and take them wherever she wanted and if she found a decent one, I'd consider it. A few weeks later she called my bluff by telling me about a church she thought would be a good place to heal—Frontline Community Church about ten minutes from our home. Well, I had to go. I'd said I would.

I did not, however, want to create churn for some unsuspecting pastor by showing up, so I reached out to Pastors Brian and Blake and asked them to go to coffee. Over my vanilla latte, I told them my story of which they knew only rumors, and eventually asked permission for my family to come and just be there—a place to heal up.

I should add that I'd had these conversations before at other churches earlier on. I'd met with responses ranging from "let me check with my elders" to "I'm not sure we're equipped to serve a person in your ... situation." This had only increased my hopelessness.

I expected a similar response here.

Instead, Brian and Blake exchanged looks and said they didn't understand the question.

I repeated it.

"You're asking us if you can come to church?" Brian seemed taken aback. "Um, that's what the church is for—for people in your situation. Of course, you can come."

And after helping me gather my jaw back up off the floor, he continued with, "In fact, with your background, I think you'd be an invaluable voice in our preaching team meetings." He put me work as a sort of *theologian-in-residence* at their weekly service planning and postmortem sessions. Could it be that I still had work to do? That I was, beyond all hope, still wanted by someone?

This was the start of my recovery. Over the next few years, Brian shepherded me through the hard work of restoration—sometimes asking hard questions, other times inviting me into additional areas of service—even to the point of having me present my story (or a sanitized version of it) on a Sunday morning. Low and behold, I discovered in the feedback that I was not the only hurting person with self-inflicted wounds in that congregation. Who knew?

Brian did.

He performed a restoration service over me bringing me back to the Lord's Table.



At about seven years post blow out, I began to sense that God was calling me back to something. But I didn't know what. I had more waiting to do.

Reconciliation with My Old Church

Somewhere in this time I heard that the person who had taken over the pastorate at the church I'd blown up was an old college acquaintance. I found this out because he called me one day out of the blue and asked to go out to coffee.

I prepared for the worst.

What I got instead was a blessing. The first thing he did after we got our coffee was *to thank me for all I'd done at the church*. Again, my jaw succumbed to heavier than normal gravity. He went on to tell me that I was still fondly thought of at the church and that many still spoke of my time there as having been a blessing.

This began a periodic conversation over several years that ended with Denise and me attending that church again with the blessing of the church and its elders. We left Frontline to worship again in the church I'd nearly destroyed, complete with me telling my story on a Sunday evening special meeting, asking the congregation's forgiveness, and receiving in return their embrace of welcome. We attended that church for the next several years until God took us on to the next chapter of the story.

I suppose the lesson to be gained at this point in the tale is how little it really costs to save someone's life—just a little sensitivity, honesty, and time. The absence of judgement and the presence of mercy, no downplaying of the evil I'd done, but an honest expression of divine grace expressed through fellow ministers of the gospel.

Monica Lewinsky, no stranger to self-inflicted wounds and the public shame they bring, once said, "One of the things that happens with these kinds of experiences is that you start to disappear, you start to feel like you don't matter. And I think that when somebody sees you and just acknowledges your humanity in the smallest way, it really can make a world of a difference, and you don't know, it could help save someone's life."

This is what I think John, Brian, and Dennis did. They affirmed my value. They saved my life. More, they brought me back to the church.

Two Steps Forward and One Back

I wish I could say that all the relationships within the blast radius of my choices experienced similar reconciliation.

Somewhere in here I had reached out to my old dean at the seminary, and with Pastor Dennis in tow, had lunch with him and another administrator and former colleague of the university. I told them of the reconciliatory journey I'd taken with the church and that I sensed it was time for me to attempt the same with the college. They, old friends both of them, eagerly agreed, and in January of 2020 (you'll remember this season as our last taste of normalcy before the pandemic hit), I attended a seminary faculty meeting. There, just as with the church, I told my story, asked their forgiveness, and received an outpouring of affirmation and forgiveness.

A month later, I was in conversation with my two former colleagues about what it might look like to have a draft of a letter from the university describing the reconciliation we'd achieved—something I could take with me as I pursued whatever was next.

What I received instead was an email indicating that the university lawyers had killed the idea as it might open up the institution to some mysterious risk of litigation. Consequently, the net effect was that they would not affirm or deny that the meeting or any reconciliatory steps ever took place.

Here we discover another lesson: Institutions remain institutions even when they claim the gospel as their guide. I could say much here, and indeed, it was a heavy blow that put me back in bed for a despairing week. But it is an important lesson in the grander sense. The goal must not be *to get it all back*. That doesn't happen.

Adam and Eve may have been forgiven, but they do not get Eden back. Moses may have been forgiven, but he loses the promised land. David may have been pardoned, but his life becomes a hell-hole of trouble. Sampson may get a reprieve, but dies with his enemies.

Yes, Peter does get it all back and more, but we mustn't learn the wrong lesson from his story. He shows us what God is *capable* of doing, not what God is *obliged* or even *likely* to do. There is no reason to think that my story would be like Peter's rather than Adam's—in fact statistically I'm more likely to be like Adam than Peter.

This is not a fact we should hide from. It is not a negative commentary on the grace of God. If we wish to make the best of our lives with God, we must be honest to how God manages the universe. Theologians must do with it what they may. Whatever forgiveness, redemption, and reconciliation mean, they seldom involve *getting it all back*.

No, ultimately, we are promised something better—not the restoration of what we lost, but the promise of a new beginning. Resurrection is not about getting the old life back, but growing something new in the midst of death. Remember, the only things that qualify for resurrection are dead things. Learning to embrace death is the first step toward life.

The Seeds of New Life

Indeed, I began to encounter small foretastes of new life.

In the years prior to the explosion, I had authored some young adult fantasy fiction and had been on the cusp of publishing it when everything fell apart. My editor had informed me that it as unwise to try to release anything at that time, so we sat on it for a number of years.



Now he said it was time to move forward, and in 2019, we released *The Relics of Errus, volume 1: Flight of the SkyCricket*. This was followed in 2021, with the second volume *Plight of the Roka Boy*, and a third is hopefully to be released before the end of 2023.

None of these were commercially successful in a grand or dramatic way—no Brandon Sanderson or J. K. Rowling here—but they taught me how to write, publish, and promote my work—a skill I was going to need for a much more important project.

Near the beginning of 2022, it was suggested to me by Pastor Brian at Frontline that I pursue ordination through the Wesleyan denomination, of which Frontline is a part. This had never occurred to me, but it continued to be affirmed that I still had gifts the church needed and I should be exercising them. We returned again to Frontline Church to prepare for the ordination journey.

Then in October of the same year, I became eligible for expungement. We filed with the court, and the motion was granted. The judgement against me was set aside. I now found myself in a place where I had no excuse for sitting on the sidelines any more. It was time to look forward. But toward what? I hardly knew.

The Bellowing of Cain

My editor, watching me put my life back together, had been after me for several years to turn my story into a book of some kind. He claimed this was important first because no one would ever take me seriously unless I dealt honestly and openly with my mistakes (that groan you just heard was my soul dying a little bit—who wants to be forever known as *that guy?*). But more importantly, he said, the church needed stories like mine. Of course, in one sense we have too many of them. There is no shortage of people in leadership positions who destroy themselves and others with bad choices. But in a more important sense, we have too few of them. Such people usually just slowly fade away and are never heard from again. A lot like Cain in the Bible, who wrecks his own life by taking his brother's, and then simply dissolving into the backdrop of the biblical narrative, where we never think of him again—no resolution to his story, no hard-won truths gained from his weary journey, no legacy of any kind—merely a disposable character, an outcast. That is the predictable journey of the failed minister. And yet, here I was living a different sort of story—a story he said needed telling.

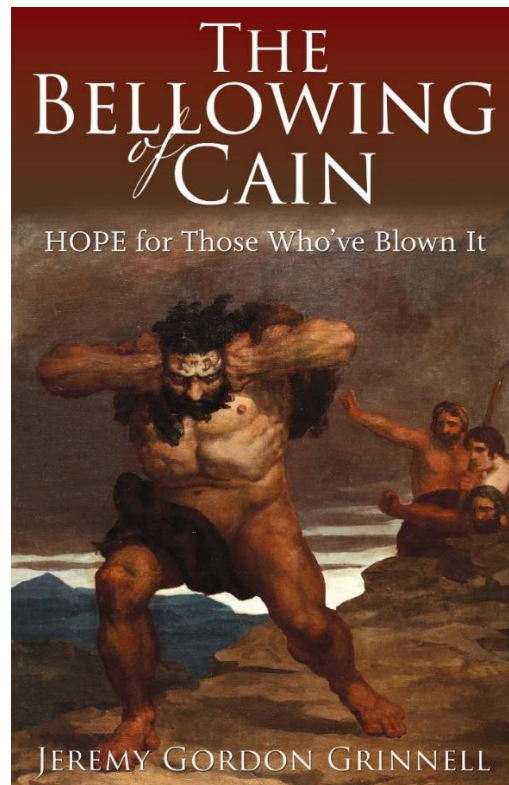
I tried. God as my witness, I tried. I wrote it as a fictionalized novel—names changed to protect the innocent sort of thing. It was too *distant*. I wrote it as a book of letters, like *Screwtape*, it was confusing. I wrote it a series of essays. It was simply dull. I even tried writing it as an angry rant of self-defense. The problem with that approach was obvious.

But I kept running into people who told me to keep going. One of them was John Smith, who, over breakfast at a local eatery, insisted that I give it one more go. *It's important work. Don't give up!*

So, on the first day of Lent 2019, I told God I would try one last time.

Bang. The damn broke. 83,000 words poured out of me in 40 days. It was both the easiest and most traumatizing thing I'd ever written. I had to pour back over old emails. Face my darkest insecurities and fears. Meet again through old emails and texts my co-conspirator in crime—a thing I had doggedly resisted for many years.

But it was done. And my editor loved it. He said there was nothing like it on the market. No help out there for people whose greatest sorrows were *self-inflicted*. Not a book for victims. A book for perpetrators.



I was surprised to discover that Cain himself had become the metaphorical center of the story—*The Bellowing of Cain: HOPE for Those Who've Blown It*. How can good grow again out of a life that has blown itself up? Once we leave the spotlight, bellowing like Cain at the hideous consequences of our choices, what sort of life is there to be had? What hope is there? A great deal as it turns out—*so long* as we learn how to face things like shame, despair, loss, and grief.

With my editor's help, we were able to put the book in front of several of the top Christian literary agents in the country. Their feedback was unanimous—great book, useful, unique, raw, honest, helpful ... and unplaceable. Any traditional publisher would love the book but wouldn't want to deal with the author's negative public profile. At best they'd want to sanitize and baptize the book into something more widely palatable.

We were left with only one option—bootstrap the project by fundraising the needed capital. Now I understand why God has sent me down the hybrid-publishing route with my fantasy fiction. I had the pipeline already in place to produce this important book—editing, design, marketing, warehousing, distribution, and fulfillment.

I'm ecstatic to let you know that on January 10, 2023, *The Bellowing of Cain* hit the market, and the feedback has been quite positive. You can learn more about the book and its journey to press at the book's website: bellowingofcain.com.

Looking Forward

I now find myself looking forward once again with a measure of hope. My marriage is healthy as are (thankfully) all my children. We are finding new ministry opportunities through the Wesleyans, through the book, through the very story that was previously my greatest liability. It was almost as if the mark on Cain's forehead—that constant reminder of his shame had unexpectedly also become his salvation.

I have had more than one pastor say to me after filling their pulpit, "Jeremy, you are in a position to say things I never could. People understand where you've been and where you've come to and they recognize their own journey in it. If God can bring healing to you after all you've done and been through, then there is hope for anyone."

It's true. I cannot deny it. I own my story. I *am* that guy.

And I have learned a mighty lesson through it: God does not love me *in spite of my brokenness* but *in the midst of it*.

So too of your greatest self-inflicted sorrow. You are loved, not *in spite of what you've done*, but in some great and holy mystery, you are loved *right in the middle of it*.

Surprise is not a divine attribute. God is at work all the time, like a celestial Bob Ross, taking the tragic splashes of color we've applied to the canvas of our lives, and—not erasing them—but incorporating them into a larger composition. Oh look! At the hand of the divine artist that stroke of self-inflicted tragedy has become a mountain, a tree, or a sunset.

No, perhaps not a sunset. With God there are no sunsets, only the promise of new mornings. So have hope. The divine artist is more than capable of creating beauty where we sowed only chaos. He has done it with Adam's failures. He can do so with yours and mine.



We must write books like this. We must write to perpetrators as well as victims. Not the same books, perhaps. But Christ's death was not only for victims. The cross was a criminal's death, meant to atone for criminals' deeds. A gospel of reconciliation demands a place on the shelf for this book next to all those that offer help to victims.

No book—certainly not this one—can release Cain from the things he did. He did it. He must own it. Rather, the goal of a book like this is to put words to Cain's cry—and to yours—so that you will know you are not the first to bray uselessly at the universe and, in that knowledge find hope.

So, to restate the central question: What's Cain to do? Can he find his way back into the human fold, or does he bellow in vain? Tragic literary figures may deserve what they get, but they are still tragic. Is redemption a mere idea or a real possibility?

If, in the end, redemption does not exist for the worst of us, it exists for no one.

I am so thankful for my friend, Jeremy, and his willingness to share his heart, life, story, and journey with us. I am proud of him! He provided a learning opportunity for all of us. I pray for God's continued blessings, favor and guidance on his next steps of faith.

If you, or someone you know is going through a similar situation, please reach out to me.



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