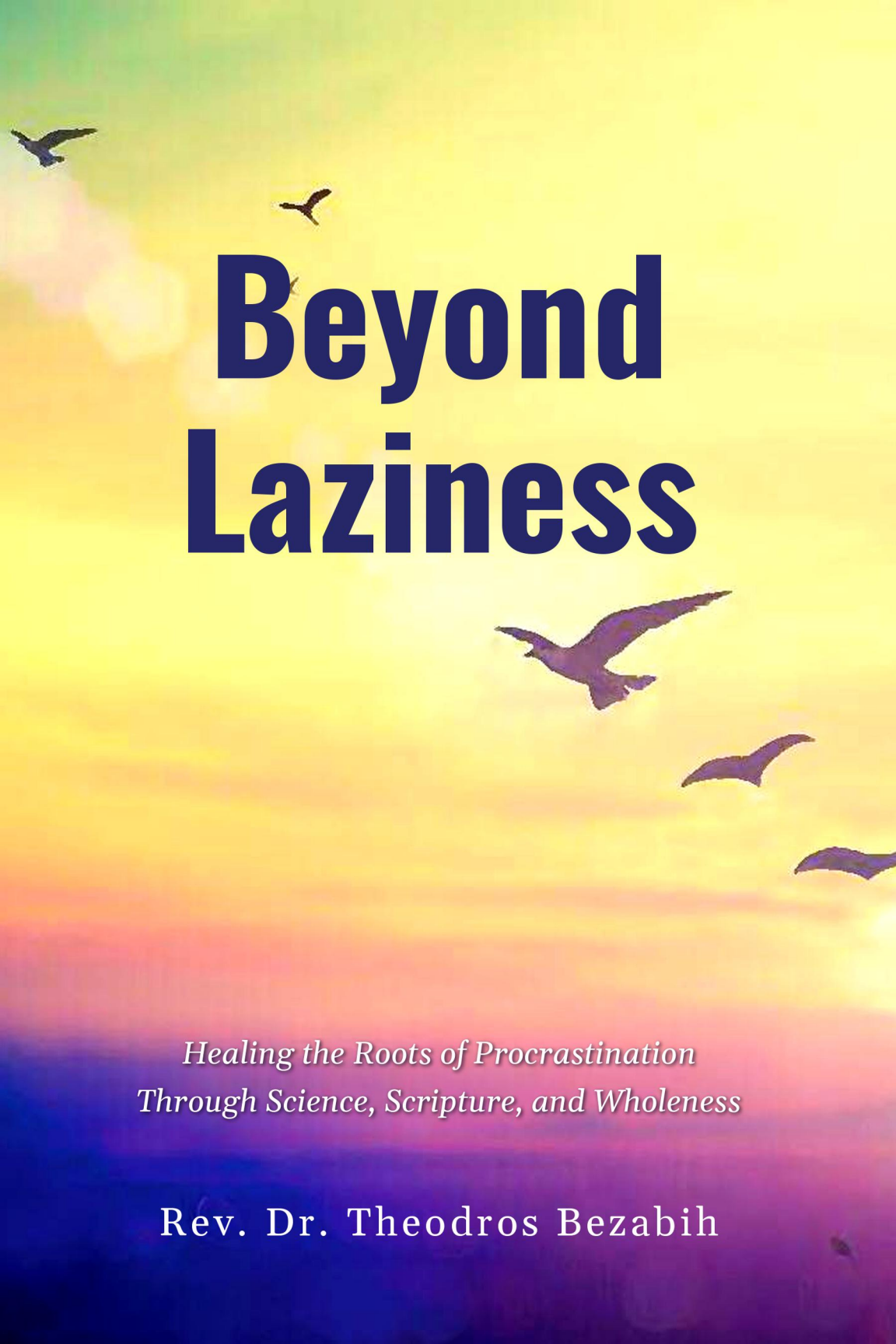

Beyond
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Through Science, Scripture, and Wholeness
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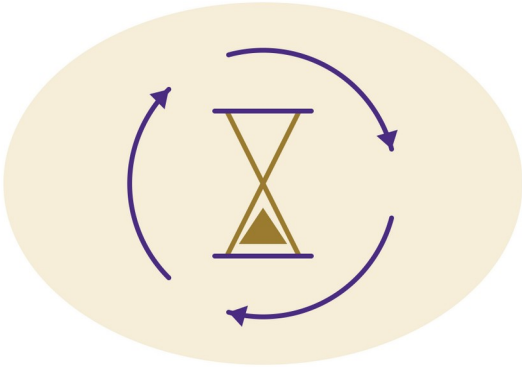
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CHAPTER 1

The Anatomy of Delay

"For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice."
— Romans 7:19, NKJV

The Cycle That Keeps You Stuck

Daniel is a thirty-eight-year-old youth pastor in Atlanta. He loves his students, he loves his wife, and he loves the work he gets to do on Sunday mornings. But on this particular Tuesday night, he is sitting at his kitchen table at 12:15 a.m., and the sermon he was supposed to finish six hours ago is still three paragraphs short. His Bible is open to a passage he has read four times. His coffee mug is empty. And he has just spent the last forty-five minutes reorganizing the bookshelf behind him

because the books looked uneven and he could not think straight with them like that.

Writer Tim Urban offers a memorable picture of this cycle. In a widely read essay on his blog Wait But Why, he pictures the procrastinator's mind as a rational decision-maker sharing the controls with an "Instant Gratification Monkey" that grabs the wheel whenever a task feels hard. The image is humorous, but it captures the cycle well: the moment of discomfort, the grab for relief, and the regret that follows.[2]

> *"He who observes the wind will not sow, and he who regards the clouds will not reap."*
>
> **Ecclesiastes 11:4, NKJV**

Daniel is not lazy. If you watched him with his students on a Wednesday night, you would never say that word. He is not disobedient. He is not spiritually weak. What Daniel is experiencing is a cycle, and it has been running in him for years. Understanding that cycle is the first real step toward changing it. Not as an idea you nod at and forget, but well enough that you can catch it in the act and name what is happening while it is happening.

Here is how the cycle works, at its most basic. An uncomfortable task appears. Most of the time it is uncomfortable because it stirs up a feeling, not because it is hard to do. Daniel's sermon is not hard to write. He has written hundreds. But this one touches a theme that feels personal to him this week, and every time he sits down to write it, something in him pulls back. So he avoids it. He reorganizes the bookshelf. He answers a text. He reads one more commentary. The avoidance works, briefly. The discomfort drops. And that relief is the reward that teaches his brain to do it again.

But the relief never lasts. The sermon is still due. The clock keeps moving. And now Daniel has less time, less energy, and more guilt than he had when he started. The pressure goes up. The discomfort comes back stronger than before. So he avoids again. And the cycle tightens. By 12:15 a.m., the task he needed to finish in an hour is now a crisis, and he is exhausted, ashamed, and still not writing.

You probably recognize this, even if your version looks different. Maybe you lose hours to email, to the news, or to a project that suddenly feels more urgent than the one that matters. The shape is the same. It moves in six steps: a difficult task, an uncomfortable emotion, avoidance, temporary relief, increased stress, and repeated avoidance. And here is the part that matters most: the cycle is not a sign that something is wrong with you. It is a sign that you are human, reacting the way human beings react to discomfort, and it can be interrupted once you see it clearly.

What makes this cycle so difficult to break on your own is that it feels so reasonable from the inside. When you choose the easier task, you are not thinking, I am avoiding my sermon. You are thinking, I will just clear this one thing first, then I can focus. That thought is not a lie. It is a story your mind tells you to make the avoidance feel productive. This is why willpower alone rarely solves the problem. You are not fighting laziness. You are fighting a deep mental habit that has been rewarded hundreds of times.

The good news is that a cycle is not a trap. A cycle is a pattern, and patterns can be interrupted. The first interruption is simply naming the step the moment you notice it. When you catch yourself reorganizing a bookshelf at midnight, you can say to yourself, This is step three. I am

avoiding. That sentence does not fix the task. But it wakes you up. It gives you back one moment of clear sight, and that moment is where change begins.

Daniel eventually finished that sermon. He preached it the next Sunday, and it went well. But he told me later that what bothered him most was not the late night. It was that he could not tell you how many other nights had looked exactly the same. The cycle does not announce itself. It just runs.

What Avoidance Costs You Over Time

One late night is not a crisis. One missed deadline is not a life sentence. But the cycle does not happen once. It happens hundreds of times, over years, with the same kinds of tasks, and the costs pile up in ways that are easy to miss because they arrive slowly. This is worth looking at honestly, not to shame you, but because seeing the real bill helps you understand why this is worth changing.

Psychologists Fuschia Sirois and Timothy Pychyl help us see what this costs. They describe procrastination as a choice to repair our mood now at the expense of our "future self." We treat the person we will be next week almost like a stranger, and we hand that stranger the stress we did not want to feel today.[3]

> *"The soul of a lazy man desires, and has nothing; but the soul of the diligent shall be made rich."*
>
> **Proverbs 13:4, NKJV**

The most visible cost is lost opportunity. The job that went to someone else. The book proposal that was never submitted. The client who moved on. The student who graduated without the thesis she was proud of. We tend to grieve these losses

privately, as though admitting them would prove something bad about us. But they are real. A delayed task, done at the last hour, is almost never the best version of that task. It is the version that survived. There is a difference.

The second cost is damaged trust. Not trust in yourself, at least not yet, but other people's trust in you. The friend who waited on a reply. The team that covered for you. The spouse who has learned not to ask whether it is done yet because the answer is too often no. Every time the cycle runs, the people around you absorb a small piece of the cost. Most of them will not say anything. But over time, they adjust. They stop expecting the best from you, and you can feel it.

The third cost is harder to see and harder to repair. It is the slow loss of self-respect. Every time you avoid something you know matters, a small accusation is filed away in your mind. I am the kind of person who does not follow through. I am the kind of person who says one thing and does another. You would never say this out loud. But the file grows. And eventually you start to believe it. This is the deepest cost, because it shapes not just what you do, but who you think you are.

There is a fourth cost that is rarely discussed. Avoidance teaches your brain that the task really is unbearable. Every time you turn away from the sermon, the spreadsheet, the conversation, the dissertation chapter, you reinforce a lesson. This is dangerous. This is too much. And the next time you face the same kind of task, the resistance is stronger. The task did not get worse; your fear of it simply got more practice. You are training yourself, by accident, to be more afraid.

I do not share these costs to guilt you into action. Guilt does not interrupt this cycle. In fact, as we will see in the next

chapter, shame is one of the fuels that keeps it running. The point of looking at the costs is honesty. You are not just losing an hour here and there. You are losing something bigger, and you deserve to know what is on the table.

When Daniel finally sat down and listed what the cycle had cost him over the last decade, he did not write a long list. He wrote three things. An opportunity to train other youth pastors that he missed. A friendship that had cooled because he never returned the calls. And a decade of Sundays where he stood behind the pulpit feeling like an impostor, even though he preached well. That list changed how he thought about his procrastination. It stopped being a bad habit. It became something worth fighting.

That is what an honest look at the cost does. It does not shame you into trying harder. It gives you a reason to stop treating this as a small thing. A cycle that quietly drains hope and trust is not a small thing. It is worth interrupting.

The Difference Between Ordinary Delay and Something Deeper

Not all delay is the same. This matters because the wrong response to the wrong kind of delay can make things worse. If you assume every struggle is laziness, you will try to fix yourself with discipline and willpower. If the real cause is something else, you will fail, and the failure will feel like proof that you are defective. So before we go further, we need to make a careful distinction.

This struggle is not new. Sixteen centuries ago, Augustine of Hippo described this same tug-of-war in his Confessions. Before his conversion, he remembers praying, "Give me chastity and continence, but not yet." The struggle to want

what is good and still postpone it is as old as the human heart.[4]

> *"The LORD is near to those who have a broken heart, and saves such as have a contrite spirit."*
>
> **Psalm 34:18, NKJV**

Ordinary procrastination, the kind this book mostly addresses, looks like this. You have the capacity to do the task. You know how to do it. When you finally sit down, you can usually make progress. The problem is not ability. The problem is the emotional weight of starting and the cycle we described above. This kind of delay responds well to the strategies of naming the emotion, breaking the task down, planning the when and where, and shaping the environment. It is frustrating, it is costly, and it is changeable.

There is another kind of struggle, though. It looks similar on the surface, but it does not respond to the same tools in the same way. If your delay is tangled up with depression, you will likely notice that motivation is missing not just for the hard tasks but for almost everything, including things you used to enjoy. Sleep may be disrupted. Appetite may change. The world may feel gray and heavy in a way that does not shift when the sun comes out. This is not the ordinary discomfort of an avoided task. This is a mood condition, and it deserves a different kind of care.

Anxiety can look similar too, but it has its own signature. The delay may be driven by a specific fear that feels enormous. What if I fail? What if I say the wrong thing? What if everyone finds out I do not know what I am doing? With anxiety, the avoidance is usually very specific and very intense. You can do some things easily and feel completely blocked on others. The

block is not about discipline. It is about fear that has grown larger than the situation warrants.

Attention challenges are a third category. If you have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), or simply find it very hard to hold your focus, you may notice that the problem is not that you do not want to do the task. You may want to do it very much. The problem is that your attention does not stay where you put it. You sit down to write and fifteen minutes later you are somewhere else entirely, not sure how you got there. You lose items, you lose time, and you lose track of what you were saying in the middle of a sentence. This is not a failure of discipline. Your brain is wired differently, and it responds best to specific kinds of support and, often, to a professional evaluation.

Finally, there is exhaustion. There is a kind of tiredness that no amount of coffee or willpower touches. It can come from illness, from grief, from caregiving, from chronic stress, or from seasons of life that simply demand more than a person has. If you are in that place, the honest answer is that the problem is not your task list. The problem is that you are running on empty reserves, and the first move is rest and sometimes medical care, not productivity strategy.

I want to be very clear about what I am not doing here. I am not diagnosing you. I am not a physician, and I am not sitting across from you. What I am doing is giving you language to bring to a conversation with someone who can help. If any of the descriptions above felt uncomfortably accurate, that is worth noting. It does not mean anything is wrong with your faith or your character. It means you may need a different kind of support than a book chapter can offer, and there is no shame in that.

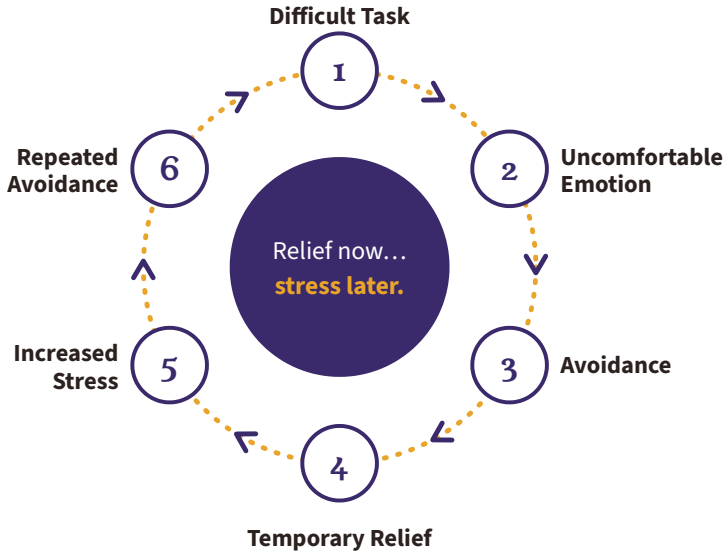
If what you recognized in this section is ordinary procrastination, you are in the right place, and the rest of this book was written for you. If what you recognized is something deeper, stay with us anyway. Many of the strategies in these pages will still help. But I would also encourage you to bring what you noticed to a doctor, a counselor, or a trusted pastor who can help you see the whole picture. We will return to this conversation later, with more specific guidance on what seeking help looks like.

For now, one question matters more than any other. If the delay in your life is not caused by laziness, and we have good reason to believe it is not, then what is driving it? What feeling shows up every time you sit down to do the thing that matters? That is the question the next chapter takes up, and it is the question that turns this from a book you read into a change you actually make.

FREE SAMPLE

Thank you for reading Chapter 1

You have just seen how the cycle works. Here it is in six steps, the way we teach it in the Procrastination Cycle Check:



Each step is a place where the cycle can be interrupted. The rest of *Beyond Laziness* shows you how: naming the feeling underneath the delay, taking the smallest honest step, recovering after a slip, and finding wholeness before willpower.

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Notes for Chapter 1

2. Urban, Tim. "Why Procrastinators Procrastinate." *Wait But Why* (blog), October 30, 2013. waitbutwhy.com.

3. Sirois, Fuschia, and Timothy Pychyl. "Procrastination and the Priority of Short-Term Mood Regulation: Consequences for Future Self." *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 7, no. 2 (2013): 115–127.

4. Augustine of Hippo. *Confessions*, Book 8, chapter 7.