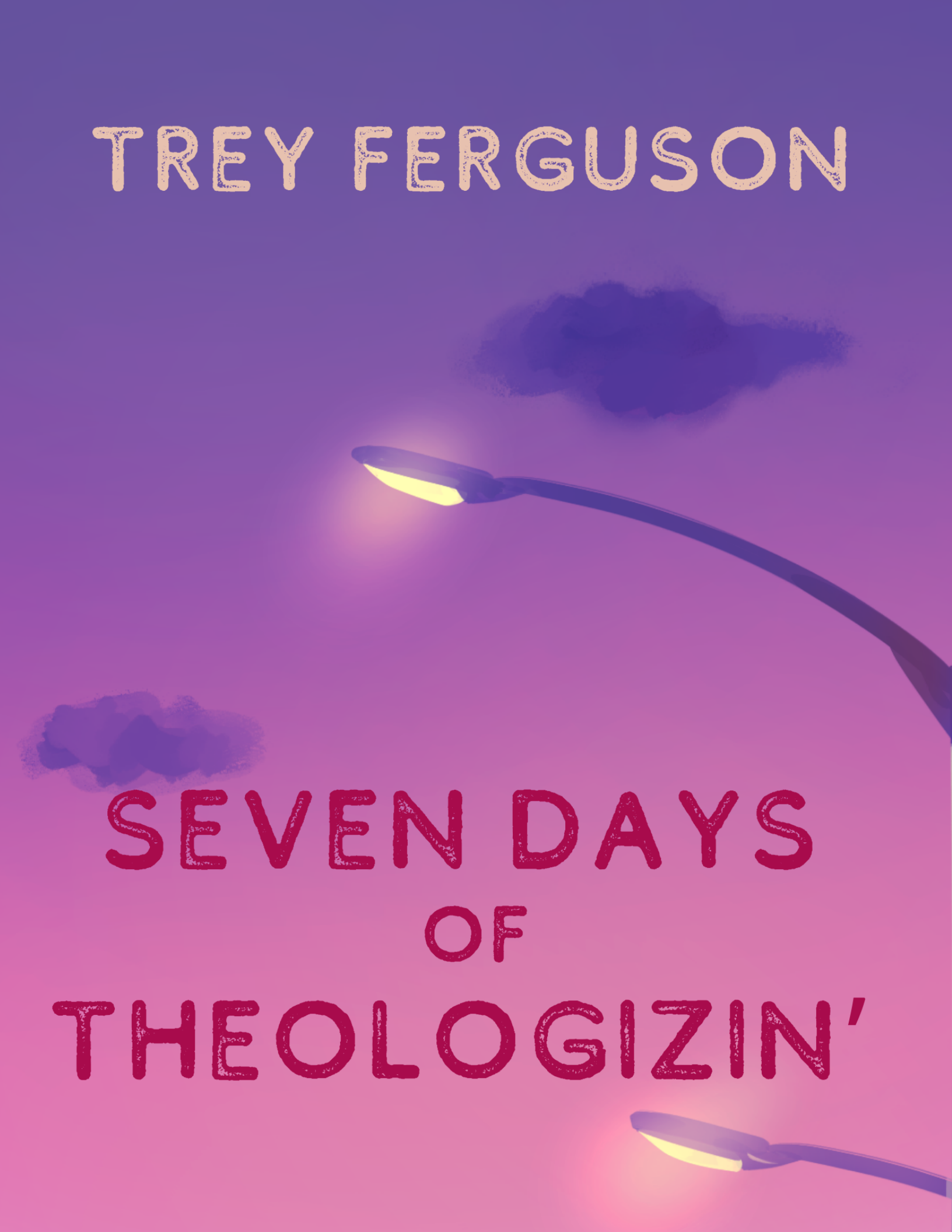


TREY FERGUSON



SEVEN DAYS
OF
THEOLOGIZIN'

*May God bless you and protect you,
May the face of God shine on you and be gracious to you,
May the favor and peace of God be with you,
And may your theologizin' grow bigger each and every
day.*

Amen.

GOOD.

Then God looked over all he had made, and he saw that it was very good!

-Genesis 1:31 (NLT)

I was not a “good” student. Calling me a class clown would be fair. Mostly disinterested in all of the subjects I was assigned, I didn’t do much work outside of class. Maybe some of that was because I didn’t pay too much attention in class either. But some teachers looked at me and saw something I wasn’t in the right position to see.

They saw potential.

In the class clown, they saw someone who could command and hold attention. Where I felt disinterest, they saw a curiosity that was not being welcomed and addressed. And so they did not call me by the shortcomings I exhibited. They spoke of what they knew I could be come.

Some suggest that believing in the inherent sinfulness and evil of humanity was a core belief of Christianity. If that’s the truth, then I am something other than Christian.

It’s not that I don’t believe that humans are capable of (and sometimes even prone to) evil. It’s that word inherent that trips me up. Inherent means essential. It describes a characteristic attribute. To call something “inherent” means that it does not merely describe the reality of something. It defines it.

I do not believe that human beings are born essentially evil.

I believe that we are born in a world that shapes us that way.

If there is any validity to these beliefs, then the problem is not with a defective individual. The problem is with the habits and systems that many peoples across areas and ages have formed over time. The solution to that problem is not viewing people as inherently evil.

The solution to that problem is recognizing that we are inherently good, and that we have the potential to build better ways of being right now.

God, help us to remember that when you created us, you called us good.

Let that truth shape our testimony. Amen.

TOGETHER.

Then the Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone."

-Genesis 2:18 (NLT)

Pretty sure it was 1994. It was take your child to work day, and my parents had a miscommunication of some sort. One of them took my sister to work. Nobody took me with them. So four-year-old me woke up at home by myself in Jamaica, Queens. I didn't have a ton of life experience, but everything I'd experienced to that point in my life suggested that wasn't how it was supposed to be.

I searched the house. Upstairs where the bedrooms were. Downstairs in the living areas. I even checked the basement to make sure I wasn't trippin. After I swept the house and came up empty, I stepped outside in my footie pajamas to see if someone was waiting in the car for me. I'm mainly comfortable sharing this true story with you because I'm fairly certain the statute of limitations on child neglect is passed.

Them people left me at home alone. It wasn't as exciting as the movies. Eventually, my mom called my dad to check how my day at his job was going. That's when they realized. And it was probably a bad idea for me to be alone.

Things can get dark when you're alone. That's part of the reason solitary confinement is widely considered cruel and unusual punishment. Community is the solution to so many of our problems.

The very first thing that God calls "not good" in the story of creation is loneliness. It's not good for us to be alone. God's first solution for that loneliness is to create animals. But it is quickly apparent that community among the creatures is not sufficient to cure the precarious situation the first man finds himself in. So God shapes another human out of his own substance and essence. "At last," the first man says. And finally, humanity and divinity could agree. It was all good.

God, we know you in part by the people you surround us with.

Help us to keep the loneliness at bay. Amen.

JOURNEYING.

The Lord had said to Abram, "Leave your native country, your relatives, and your father's family, and go to the land that I will show you."

-Genesis 12:1 (NLT)

My mom and sisters still live in the same metropolitan area I grew up in. I won't lie, sometimes I get homesick. I'd built my life in Richmond, VA, but after graduating high school, the prospect of college was exciting too exciting to pass up. I thought about staying close to home. Virginia Tech was on the table for a minute. At the end of the day though, I knew I wanted to go to the University of Miami. I thought it'd be a quick four year journey before I came back to rejoin my family. I was wrong.

By the time I graduated, I had a job, a wife, and my third child was on the way. Some people went on trips. I'd gone on a journey.

A life of faith is a life of journeying. It is trusting the God within you to ensure that the ground before you is sturdy enough to handle the steps that you are taking. The stories of the Bible do not point to the protectors of the status quo as examples of faith. It is the people who are willing to leave the safety of certainty behind that God calls righteous.

In the past, I imagined Abram's faithfulness being easy. He heard God tell him to do something, and he did it. He left all of his relatives behind in Haran and went to a place he didn't know. A place full of people with different customs and languages and ways of relating. But the more time you spend living, the harder a move like that seems. It's easy to deal with what we know. It can be frightening to walk into what we don't.

But that's where we find the promise and blessing of God.

God calls us to places beyond our comfort zones to expose us to wonderful things we've yet to imagine.

That's where we find out who we were supposed to be the whole time.

God, give us the faith to journey where your Spirit leads us, even when it means leaving the comfort of certainty behind. Amen.

SEEING.

She gave this name to the Lord who spoke to her: “You are the God who sees me,” for she said, “I have now seen the One who sees me.”

-Genesis 16:13 (NLT)

Back when I was just the troublemaking class clown, I was probably dealing with a bit more insecurity than I was willing to admit. Not that I was neglected. Insecure in the truest sense of the word. My father died during my freshman year of high school. I genuinely didn't know what security looked like. I was searching for a new normal.

I found refuge in humor. Humor allowed me to see the world in ways that were less depressing than my reality felt. Humor allowed people to see me as more than a victim of my circumstances. Humor allowed me to claim my own identity after the world threatened to give me one of its own choosing.

Humor didn't make things easier to bear. It just helped me put words to the things I was bearing in the first place. Humor helped me to see. And by that same humor, I was seen.

The first person to name God in the Bible was not Adam nor Eve. Not Noah. Not Abraham, the “father of faith”. It was an enslaved Egyptian woman by the name of Hagar.

I find Hagar's story largely discomfoting. Because I'm a Black man in the United States, it's hard for me to see slavery as anything less than abhorrent regardless of how normal it was in the ancient world. Hagar being used by her mistress and master as a surrogate mother without her consent does not cast the best light on Sarah and Abraham. And they treat her poorly, which is why we find a pregnant Hagar running away from her mistress and master.

But in the middle of her flight—in an unfathomably insecure situation—she encounters God. The God who hears her misery. The God who promises to provide for her. And she names that God “El Roi”: the God who sees me.

Encountering this God does not immediately change Hagar's circumstances. It does immediately changes her focus. Seeing God helps her see things differently. She sees promise on the other side of her pain. And she sees that she is indeed seen by God.

God, help us to see that, through it all, we are seen. Amen.

WRESTLING.

This left Jacob all alone in the camp, and a man came and wrestled with him until the dawn began to break.

-Genesis 32:24 (NLT)

I remember the time I almost stopped believing. Not just in Christianity. In any and everything unquantifiable. I almost stopped believing that there were people who wanted to see me thrive. I almost stopped believing that there were any possibilities for me beyond what I could already see and imagine. I almost stopped believing in love. I almost stopped believing.

It took a lot of wrestling for me to keep believing. Because the moment I tried to let go of believing—the moment I was prepared to let the present hold me captive—was the moment that promise grabbed a hold of me. And wrestling with promise can be a painful process.

The story of Jacob wrestling with the man in the wilderness always resonates with me. By this point in his story, Jacob done seen some things. He's schemed with his mother to take hold of his brother's birthright. He's out-schemed his crafty father-in-law to build a fortune of his own. When he's finally attempting to branch out on his own for the first time, he has to deal with the fact he's been a schemer his whole life, and that schemers tend to make a few enemies.

On the way to trying something new, Jacob encounters a man. The story doesn't tell us who the man is upfront. I'm not sure if Jacob knew. I suspect he didn't. Because they got to grapplin'. And Jacob wasn't about to get caught slippin'. Jacob gets his hip dislocated in the scuffle, but he ain't prepared to let that take him out. He extracts a blessing from his opponent-turned-prophet, and Jacob's name is henceforth changed to Israel. His name was a memorial of his struggle with God. And he had to earn that name the hard way.

Jacob wrestled with God through the darkness and emerged at dawn with a new identity, walking differently.

God, even and especially through our struggles with you, we ask that you would help tune our hearts to the possibilities and new things that you have set before us. Amen.

REMEMBERING.

And please remember me and do me a favor when things go well for you. Mention me to Pharaoh, so he might let me out of this place.

-Genesis 40:14 (NLT)

Forgetting where you came from is one of the gravest offenses you can commit around my way. If you hear somebody suggest that you “forgot where you came from,” you’d better be prepared to either remember very quickly or fight.

To suggest that someone forget where they came from is to accuse them of betraying the people who helped make a way for them. They’ve neglected to do community with the people who nurtured them.

The inverse of “forgetting where you came from” is “puttin’ on” for where you came from. It’s bringing the totality of your story when your fortunes shift. It’s trying to extend a hand to other people as you climb, and working to better the conditions of those who didn’t catch the same breaks you did.

If forgetting where you came from is betrayal, then remembering is integrity. Puttin’ on for your people is righteous activity.

Joseph spent a lot of time in tight spots. Sold into slavery by his own brothers. Imprisoned for an offense he did not commit. Before he was announced to us as an interpreter of dreams, he was revealed to us as a dreamer of dreams. Sharing them dreams in the wrong time and place got him jammed up. There’s a lesson there.

But there’s also a lot to be learned in how Joseph handled adversity. He remains present. He connects with the people who share his plight. And all he asks is that he be remembered. He asks that his cell-mates not forget where they came from.

One of them doesn’t make it out. The other one does. And he almost forgets where he came from, until Pharaoh has need of Joseph’s gifts. But the mere memory of where he’d been helped him to remember the people who’d helped him get where he was. And when he remembers Joseph, it changes Joseph’s fortune. And changing Joseph’s fortune changed the trajectory of the world around him.

In this instance, remembering was the key to saving a people.

God, help us to remember where we came from so that we can help change the world. Amen.

SAVING.

You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good. He brought me to this position so I could save the lives of many people.

-Genesis 50:20 (NLT)

Grocery shopping is in my top five least favorite parts of adulthood. It's trash. I have to spend money to buy all this food that I still gotta turn around and cook. An absolute racket. I can't believe we put up with this!

Sometimes, I get lazy and the veggies I bought tryna be healthy start to wilt a lil' bit. They start going bad. But because groceries are expensive as all get-out nowadays, I can't just toss 'em. I gotta chop the sad looking parts off and use what I can. When I serve the meal, no one ever notices I did all that. They just see the finished product. They don't know all that them veggies went through just to feed them. They're not thinking about the neglect and abuse they suffered in that long forgotten crisper. At the end of the day, my laziness could never override my desire and obligation to feed the people I get to spend my days with.

Joseph's brothers did him dirty. Sure, he might've been a bit of a dweeb to them when they were younger, but I feel like selling him into slavery was overkill. If my brother's sold me into slavery where I then got locked up and I had to keep rebuilding my life in strange places, I don't know if I could have kept Joseph's temperament. I'm almost certain I wouldn't have been as gentle with my brothers as Joseph was when they were eventually reunited. I'd want my lick back.

But Joseph's focus is a bit different. After dreaming all those dreams and helping interpret the dreams of others, he sees God's hand everywhere. He sees God's favor in the beginning when he dreams his own dreams. He see's God's protection when he finds himself enslaved and imprisoned. He see's God's plan unfolding as he's freed and employed in Pharaoh's administration. And when disaster strikes, he see's that God has been working to save people the entire time.

Through every human hell that the people around Joseph construct through deviousness, forgetfulness, or poor administration, he recognizes that a God who wants to spend many days with creation is working overtime to save the people from their own destruction.

God, thank you for working on our behalf even when we work against it ourselves. Amen.