

“Our lives get more busy yet more empty. Steve gets this—he gets *us*. He describes what you feel and why you feel like that, and walks with you to a better way. And, somehow, he does it in a way that makes you feel heard, even befriended. Within two pages you will be drawn in by Steve’s honesty and how he seems to speak to *you*. Then you read the entire book—hope rising with each chapter. Since one chapter will be uniquely yours, you will double back, re-read that chapter, and act on that hope.”

**ED WELCH**, *Counselor and faculty member at the Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation (CCEF)*

“Steve grabs your attention from the very first sentence. He sheds unique insight into idolatry through vivid imagery and solid biblical instruction. He powerfully points you to the only One who can and will quench your thirst. I will be sharing this book with those I counsel—both professing Christians and those who profess no faith at all.”

**TIMOTHY LANE**, *President of the Institute for Pastoral Care and co-author of “How People Change”*

“The idea that we are constantly sipping saltwater is an extremely helpful image which is then carefully applied to our battle with sin. This book is beautifully honest, packed with stories, and ultimately full of hope in Christ.”

**JONTY ALLCOCK**, *Lead Pastor, The Globe Church, London, and author of “Lost,” “Fearless” and “Hero”*

“In *Sipping Saltwater*, Steve Hoppe draws on his vast experience as a pastor and counselor. He writes not as an aloof professional, but rather, as a fellow traveler—broken, flawed, and in search of full redemption. With clarity and directness, he weaves together the timeless truths of Scripture, real-life stories of people in the pews, and his own journey of moving from brokenness to wholeness.”

**MINDY MEIER**, *Author, speaker, and Associate Director of Greek InterVarsity Christian Fellowship*

“Steve Hoppe uses vivid imagery and powerful stories to explain a problem plaguing us all—idolatry. But he doesn’t stop there. He gets practical by digging into dozens of everyday idols and showing how Christ is better than them all.”

**GABE LYONS**, *President of Q Ideas and author of “Good Faith”*

“This book has been so good for my foolish, thirsty heart, which so easily defaults to drinking deadly ‘saltwater.’ With great warmth, honesty, and insight, Steve exposes and redirects our hearts to the Lord Jesus, the only One who can and does quench our thirst and bring joy to our hearts.”

**ANDREA TREVENNA**, *Associate for Women’s Ministry, St Nicholas Church, Sevenoaks, UK*

“*Sipping Saltwater* is an invitation to find lasting satisfaction for our deepest longings. Steve offers biblical and relevant ways to think differently about work, sex, money, comfort, control, and much more. Compelling, practical, and transparent. I could not put this book down!”

**PETER GREER**, *President and CEO of HOPE International, and co-author of “Mission Drift”*

“Surrounded by saltwater inside the gut of a fish, the prophet Jonah said that when we cling to worthless idols, we forfeit the grace that could be ours. *Sipping Saltwater* is a thoughtful, helpful field guide on the idols Jonah grieved for, and to which we, too, are all susceptible. I highly recommend this book.”

**SCOTT SAULS**, *Senior Pastor of Christ Presbyterian Church in Nashville, Tennessee, and author of “Befriend” and “From Weakness to Strength”*

“With a pastor’s heart, a counselor’s eye, and a historian’s love of story, Steve draws from each to produce a helpful book on the idols of the heart. Steve unpacks the dynamics around why we return to destructive choices, even when we know they are destroying us. With insight that comes from years of walking alongside others, Steve sees into the human heart and provides hope for healing its brokenness. This book is real, a bit gritty, and immensely helpful!”

**NIKKI TOYAMA-SZETO**, *Executive Director, Evangelicals for Social Action (ESA)*

“How often have we all thought, ‘Why do I keep doing the same unwise things over and over again?’ In *Sipping Saltwater* Steve pulls back the curtain to help us understand what our unhealthy motives are and how the gospel can bring hope, clarity, and change to the darkest areas of our lives.”

**JACKSON CRUM**, *Lead Pastor, Park Community Church, Chicago*

# SIPPING SALTWATER

STEVE HOPPE

The logo features a stylized, curved line above the text "the goodbook" and "COMPANY".  
the goodbook  
COMPANY

*To Dad. I'll see you soon.*

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# THIRST

*“Water, water, every where,  
Nor any drop to drink.”*

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

“Prepare to crash.”

These were the last words spoken on the Green Hornet. In the spring of 1943, the American World War II combat plane and its eleven crewmen set off on a search-and-rescue mission over the Pacific Ocean. Roughly 200 miles into the trip, the plane lost its two left engines, spiraled toward the sea, and exploded upon impact.

On the Green Hornet was Louie Zamperini—a national celebrity at the time. Louie had finished eighth in the 5,000-meter run at the 1936 Berlin Olympics and was predicted to run the first sub-four-minute mile. The good news? Louie somehow survived the crash unscathed. The bad news? He was stranded in the middle of the largest ocean in the world. And nobody knew he was there.

Louie faced brutal challenges as he drifted for 47 days on the Pacific. His skin burned with sun blisters and salt sores. His swollen lips pressed forcefully into his nose and chin. Without food, he lost almost two pounds a day. To top it off, he had two enemies after him. The first came from below—a posse of twelve-foot sharks mockingly rubbing their backs against his flimsy inflatable raft. The second came from above—the Japanese. After weeks of aimlessly drifting, Louie was spotted by one of their planes. They shot up his raft. Somehow, they missed Louie.

Yet, with these and other challenges threatening Louie's life, perhaps the greatest threat to his survival came from within.

*Thirst.*

Thirst? How could this be? All he could see in every direction was water. Cool, crisp, clear water. It looked like drinking water, felt like drinking water, and even sounded like drinking water. How could thirst be an issue?

Louie was surrounded by 64 million square miles of *saltwater*. And he couldn't take a sip.

What would have happened if Louie drank the surrounding sea? First, the saltwater would have dried out his insides and left him thirstier than before. Second, he would have experienced the worst hangover of his life. He would have suffered explosive diarrhea, a pounding headache, muscle cramps, dizziness, a dry mouth, vomiting, increased blood pressure, a rapid heart rate, kidney failure, hallucinations, and seizures. If he kept drinking, he would have fallen into a coma, experienced massive organ failure, and sustained irreparable brain damage. Eventually, drinking saltwater would have killed him.

Louie resisted the urge to sip from the Pacific. And he survived. Not without a struggle. But he survived.



Why do I start with this story?

Because unlike Louie, *we drink saltwater*. Some people gulp it down. Most of us take tiny sips without realizing it.

And that's what this book is about...



# 1. OUR NAGGING THIRST

My father died while I was writing this book.

As I reflect on his life of 67 years, one thing stands out. It isn't his intelligence, which was exceptional. It isn't his witty sense of humor, which charmed people wherever he went. It isn't his long list of professional accomplishments, which his humility prevented him from ever revealing. It isn't his good looks, charisma, or attractive ability to self-deprecate. While these were surely defining characteristics of my father, one thing stands out above the rest.

My father was an alcoholic.

Unfortunately, my memories of my dad are dominated by an array of events, experiences, stories, situations, sights, smells, and sounds directly linked with his 40-year drinking problem. I remember him attempting to coach my basketball team but being too drunk to dribble the ball. I remember him trying to pitch at Little League batting practice but being too drunk to throw a strike. I remember him breaking his leg after a drunken fall outside his Chicago law office. I

remember the pungent smell of beer and Listerine that told me he was home from work. I remember the subtle slur in his voice that signaled yet another night of fighting between him and my mom. I remember crying in my bedroom while she desperately begged him to get help. I remember him insisting that he didn't need it. I remember his frequent yet empty promises to change. I remember feeling constantly confused, disappointed, sad, and embarrassed to be the son of an alcoholic.

I remember so much. A little good. And a whole lot of bad.

Growing up, it made no sense to me why my father drank so much. He was a handsome and brilliant Ivy League graduate working as an attorney for one of the most prestigious law firms in Chicago. He had a devoted wife and three healthy children who he loved and who loved him greatly. He lived in a beautiful suburban home and had more than enough money. Above all, he was a really nice guy. Everybody liked him. Everybody. However, after every day of work he still drank beer after beer until he was stone-cold drunk. Every. Single. Day.

Eventually he lost everything. He lost his dream job and a series of successive jobs that gradually diminished in prestige and pay. He lost his wife, who divorced him after eighteen years of marriage. He lost his children and was forced to accept the role of a weekend-only dad. He lost his quaint suburban home, eventually landing in a dingy one-bedroom apartment in the low-income section of a neighboring town. He lost tens of thousands of dollars. He lost countless relationships. He lost his dignity. He lost his reputation. He lost everything.

And yet he continued to drink.

Why?

## A Thirst for Paradise

Why did my father drink so much? Why did he consciously choose to slam beer after beer, knowing the terrible consequences of each and every sip? Why did he willingly keep consuming a substance that was ruining his life? Why would my dad choose beer over everything else of value to him?

The knee-jerk answer is simple—addiction. My father was addicted to alcohol. He started drinking in college as a stress-release valve, continued drinking to cope with the challenges of marriage and fatherhood, and eventually became hooked. The addiction took over his mind, body, and soul. It ruled him. And he let it rule him.

But this explanation isn't good enough. Why not? Simply labeling my father an addict doesn't get at the root of his problem. It barely scratches the surface. There's a deeper, more profound reason why he chose to drink in the first place and continued to do so even after he lost everything. It starts with one word.

### *Thirst.*

My father was thirsty. I'm not talking about a physical thirst for beer. This thirst wasn't physical. It was spiritual. Although he didn't realize it, my father was thirsty for something more than beer could offer. More than this *world* could offer. Something more satisfying. Something more powerful. Something more gratifying, refreshing, and rewarding. Something that could fill the nagging void in his heart. Something that could bring peace to his unsettled soul. Something that could remove his existential emptiness. Something transcendent.

Something heavenly.

My father had a thirst for paradise. He tried to quench it with beer, but it couldn't do the trick.

The Bible talks about this thirst for paradise in the book of Ecclesiastes. There, the author says that God has “set eternity in the human heart” (Ecclesiastes 3 v 11). In other words, God has created us—all of us—with a restless yearning for a never-ending, perfect world. A world of boundless love, comfort, and beauty. A world in which we can never smile enough, laugh enough, or play enough. A world in which our bodies remain strong, our minds remain sharp, and our hearts remain pure. A world without fighting, fearing, or failing. A world without sickness. A world without wounds. A world where *nothing* hurts. A world of bottomless pleasure and infinite joy.

A world we can't get by cracking open a beer.

We're born thirsty for a world beyond this one. We're thirsty for paradise. My dad was. We all are.

But this presents a problem.

Our world *isn't* paradise. Our jobs are stressful, taxing, and unfulfilling. Our relationships are quarrelsome. We get cancer. We break bones, throw up, and get hemorrhoids. We feel nervous, afraid, angry, and upset. The Holocaust happens. 9/11 happens. Poverty, genocide, and starvation happen. Terrorists set off bombs. Our cars hit potholes. Books are ridiculously difficult to write. We go years without speaking to relatives. Divorce splits families. Hurricanes, tsunamis, and earthquakes destroy the planet. Love fades. World peace is a clichéd impossibility. We get wrinkles, zits, sunspots, and bald spots. We rarely smile. We rarely laugh. We rarely let loose and play. Our minds fail us. Our hearts ache. We constantly itch for more.

Eventually we die.

The world as we know it is anything but paradise.

Why? Why is paradise nowhere to be found?

## Paradise Lost

The answer goes back to first book of the Bible: the book of Genesis. In Genesis chapter 2, we're introduced to the original paradise—the Garden of Eden. We're also introduced to the dynamic naked duo of Adam and Eve—the first human residents of this paradise.

In the garden, Adam and Eve have a unique privilege. They're allowed to live with God. They can speak directly to him, listen to his audible voice, and experience every ounce of pleasure he provides. They're roommates with God. Their home is heaven on earth. Forever.

There's just one rule. A simple dietary restriction. God tells them they can't eat from one tree—the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Why not? A bite of its fruit would give them a heightened level of wisdom that would lead to independence from God instead of dependence on him. If Adam and Eve eat from this tree, God promises that their eternal life in paradise will be stripped. They're promised death.

Next, the devil—disguised as a serpent—enters the scene and deceives Eve.

You will not certainly die ... For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil. (Genesis 3 v 4-5)

The serpent calls God a liar. He tells Eve she won't die if she eats the forbidden fruit. In fact, he promises she'll be God-like if she takes a bite. And Eve takes the bait. She bites into the fruit and her husband follows her lead.

God's response? He punishes them. He tells Eve that childbirth will be agonizing and marriage will be a power struggle. He then tells Adam that his job as a farmer will be exhausting. The ground will be cursed, his body will be

inadequate, and he'll work until the day he dies, at which point he'll return to the cursed ground from which he came (Genesis 3 v 16-19).

But worst of all, they're expelled from paradise.

After Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit, God casts them out of Eden. Never to return. Never to live in the home God originally intended for them. Never to experience the joy, beauty, delight, and satisfaction he meant for them. They're banished from paradise, sentenced to die apart from God.

And so are we. We've also been banished from paradise. You have. I have. We all have.

## **Same Team**

Why have we been banished from paradise?

We're on the same team as Adam and Eve. We're just as greedy. Just as self-centered. Just as rebellious. Just as sinful. In fact, we've inherited their sinful nature. We're ruled by the passions of our egocentric hearts. We follow our flawed wisdom. We do things we shouldn't and don't do things we should. We belittle our spouses, disrespect our parents, and ignore our children. We cheat on our taxes, tithes, and time cards. We're passive aggressive, profane, and proud. We forget to give thanks, refuse to sacrifice, and stink at love. We're on Adam and Eve's team of rebels against God.

So we face the same consequence as them. We've been expelled from God's presence—cast out of the metaphorical garden. Instead of coexisting with him face to face in eternal euphoria, we're separated from him in this world—a world filled with suffering and turmoil.

Paradise is nowhere to be found.



## Meltdown in Michigan

I became painfully aware that life was *anything* but paradise during my freshman year at the University of Michigan.

To the outside eye, my life was incredible. I was at my dream school in a top engineering program. I lived on a lively co-ed floor with a cohort of down-to-earth, light-hearted hallmates. I had a lovely girlfriend at a nearby college who I saw every other weekend. I was in a top-notch fraternity. My school won the national championship in both football and hockey that year. I *should* have been happy.

Instead, I had a nervous breakdown.

A week after my college arrival, I became consumed with inexplicable anxiety. From the second I woke up until the moment I went to bed, I felt as if I had nine cups of coffee in my system. My thoughts raced. My heart pounded. Sleep was rare. Panic attacks were routine. I was paranoid—obsessively questioning my girlfriend's faithfulness for no reason. On multiple occasions I had to leave group study sessions because I was nervously dripping with sweat. Depression eventually set in. I spent many nights roaming the campus weeping. I felt alone in my dysfunctional head.

I decided to reach out for help. Over Thanksgiving break I met with a psychologist. She listened well and taught me some helpful breathing exercises. But the anxiety didn't subside. Over Christmas break I saw a psychiatrist. She put me on a strong dose of antidepressants and asked a lot about my sex life. Neither the drugs nor the sex talk helped.

I returned to school for my second semester and things got worse. Suddenly the classroom became nerve-wracking. I became anxious about being anxious, which only made me more anxious. I couldn't eat or sleep. I felt trapped. I wanted to escape.

To where?

I had no idea. A place without anxiety? A place where I didn't feel crippled and crazy on the inside? A place where I didn't appear distant and awkward on the outside? Where I was mentally stable? Where there were no more heart palpitations, stress headaches, or excessive sweating episodes? Where people accepted me? Where nervousness, crying, and paranoia were no more? A world without suffering?

Although I wouldn't have said so, I was thirsty for paradise.

And God was offering it. He was offering a beverage that *would* have quenched my thirst for paradise lost. One that would have quenched my dad's thirst. One that will quench yours. One that satisfies not just your body, but your soul. One more pure, precious, potent, and pleasing than anything this world can provide. One that God offers me every day. One that he's offering you. One offered to anybody who'll drink it. *Anybody*.

But I foolishly turned down the offer. I looked elsewhere to satisfy my thirst. I sipped a different drink.

You might be sipping it too.

What drink did I sip? Read on and find out...