



TRAPPED

GETTING FREE FROM PEOPLE, PATTERNS, AND PROBLEMS

ANDY FARMER

“Porn, food, work, bad marriage, dashed dreams—we all know someone who feels trapped. Maybe that someone is you. With over two decades of proven counseling experience, Andy Farmer takes his unique gift for ‘simplifying-the-complex’ and escorts the reader from the trappings of bondage to the soul-satisfying vistas of freedom. If you or someone you care about needs liberation, fresh hope and practical help await between these pages!”

Dave Harvey, Executive Director of Sojourn Network; pastor of preaching at Four Oaks Church; CCEF Board member; founder of AmICalled.com

“If you have ever been stuck, trapped, or cornered, then you know how hopeless it seems. You just do not know what to do. Andy Farmer wrote this book to help you experience the freedom found in a meaningful relationship with Jesus Christ. I encourage you to read it and let Andy lead you again and again to Jesus Christ.”

Rob Green, Pastor of Counseling and Seminary Ministries, Faith Church, Lafayette, IN

“*Trapped* speaks to a universal problem—feeling trapped in relationships, circumstances, and life. As Christians, we boast of the freedom that we have in the gospel and yet we still feel trapped. None of us are as free as we want to be, and many of us don’t even understand what real freedom is. We live as if we must set ourselves free. Using five case studies of common traps, Andy Farmer carefully explains how to gain a freedom that we can’t earn or win, a freedom that is a gift from God.”

Jack Delk, Pastor for Counseling, North Campus at Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, MN

“Andy Farmer has written a very insightful, readable, and biblically-based book that applies the gospel of grace to those who have become ensnared or feel trapped in life. Its liberating truth provides a pathway to freedom, pointing to Christ as our Redeemer. As a pastor who longs to see people living transformed lives, I see this book as a great resource and one that I will want to recommend to others.”

Ian Ashby, Lead Pastor, New Frontiers Church,
Portsmouth, NH; Northeast Regional Leader,
Newfrontiers USA

“Ever felt trapped and not known what to do? Andy Farmer’s *Trapped* will help you get out of your trap and find true freedom in Christ.”

Deepak Reju, Pastor of Biblical Counseling and
Family Ministry, Capitol Hill Baptist Church,
Washington, DC; author of *On Guard* and
The Pastor and Counseling

“*Trapped* is a book about what so easily entangles us, but more so a reminder that we are free in Christ. It invites us to take another look at grace and the provision we have to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives. If you have a bad habit, unhealthy relationship, or seemingly unsolvable problem, you need to read this book. Andy Farmer points us to the gospel afresh to break free from idols and to run to Christ and his redeeming grace. I recommend this for anyone who is trapped or those in the process of bearing with and restoring those who are.”

Garrett Higbee, Executive Director, Biblical Soul
Care at Harvest Bible Chapel; Executive Director,
Biblical Counseling Coalition

“There is something about being human that craves freedom and loathes confinement. So we try to bust loose from something or someone, only to find that we still don’t feel free. It is at this point—when we think that freedom might be an illusion—that Andy offers us a better way. Just read the first ten pages and he will engage you in this better way.”

Edward T. Welch, CCEF Faculty; psychologist; best-selling author

“Here you will not find simplistic formulas. But if you really want to be free from the complex webs that entrap you, read this book. Andy Farmer’s penetrating insight and wise guidance were learned through the struggle of escaping his own traps and decades of helping others escape theirs. He will lead you to the fundamental truth that will set you free.”

Jon Bloom, Author and Cofounder of Desiring God

Trapped

Getting Free from People,
Patterns, and Problems

ANDY FARMER



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This book is dedicated to my wife Jill,
who shared the message of redemption
with me thirty-five years ago.
She has always been the greatest example
of a heart set free to serve the Lord
that I have ever encountered.

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Chapter 1

REAL PEOPLE IN REAL TRAPS

I moved to the Philadelphia area back in the early 1980s. I've come to love the city for its rich culture and sometimes quirky history. Case in point. There is an old abandoned prison in Philadelphia called Eastern State Penitentiary. It's in an area that is now fairly gentrified—an eleven-acre fortress with thirty-foot brick and stone walls surrounded by an increasingly artsy neighborhood of townhouses, bistros, and coffee shops. The prison opened in 1829 and closed for good in 1971. Eastern Penitentiary is a place where notorious gangster Al Capone did prison time. His cell, with its accumulated creature comforts, still sits the way he left it in 1929.

The prison is historically significant for its design. It was built according to a new (at the time) corrections philosophy that recommended extended solitary confinement for inmates for the purpose of “personal reflection and reform.” The belief was that extended isolation was the way to cultivate “penitence” (hence the term *penitentiary*). The prison architecture consists of seven two-story cellblocks emanating like spokes

from a central processing building. Each cellblock floor has small, one-person cells along both sides of a single hallway. Its neo-gothic design added to its imposing emotional effect on prisoners. Today, the prison is a national historic landmark, but it is most popular for its “Terror Behind the Walls” Halloween haunted house.

TRAPPED IN THE PRISON OF LIFE

Imagine we are walking through a cellblock like the ones at Eastern State. On both sides are small dark rooms behind heavy wooden doors. Except this isn't a physical prison; it is a prison of human struggles. As we walk along the corridor, we see glimpses of prisoners through the small barred windows on the cell doors. In some cells we see prisoners busy at work at little desks, as if they don't even know they're behind bars. In other cells we see more troubling things—prisoners sobbing in misery, others pounding their fists against the walls in defiance of their situation. Some see us coming and run to the window, trying to get our attention, our sympathy, some human connection. Others just lie on their cots with faces turned to the wall.

We ask our guide, “Why are these people here?”

“Different reasons. Some, well, it almost seems like they wanted to come here. One bad decision after another and eventually this is where you end up. Others were just going through life and things happened, and they still don't know how they got here. Some have adjusted to it; it's almost like they would rather stay in the cell than get out. Others are fighting against it with everything they've got. But there's not much

a fist can do against a prison wall. Most give up after a while. It's sad, but I guess that's what spending your life trapped in prison will do to you."

That's not a cheerful opening illustration, but it gets at why I'm writing this book. As a pastor and counselor, I spend a great deal of my ministry in the prison cells of human need. The people I meet with are often bound in things that practical advice won't solve. Usually they are getting by in life, but not always. The problems are diverse but the experience is fairly consistent. People come to me because they feel trapped in something and they can't get out. They feel caught in problems, behavior patterns, or relationships that control their lives. They use words like "stuck," "tied down," and "bound up" to express the way life feels. People feel weighed down by chains or shut in by walls or locked up in cages. And yes, they talk as if they are hopeless prisoners of their own lives.

I want to take you on a tour of this prison experience as I see it. We're going to pass cells in which people are trapped in a life-defining struggle. Some you'll be very familiar with, some you may not. There are far more jail cells of human trial than we'll have the time to visit, but I've chosen several because they are very common in our world today. Perhaps we know the despair of one of these cells from our own experience or the experience of someone close to us. Maybe you'll see yourself in one of these traps. Maybe your trap is different, but like the redundant sameness of cell after cell in a prison, you see the same things in your trap as you do in one here.

The good news is that we are not going to leave these prisoners in solitary confinement. The goal of this book is freedom.

When we leave this tour, we'll consider what makes a liberating difference for the prisons that trap us in life.

THE APPROVAL TRAP

The resident of the first cell we come to is Ellen. Ellen has been caught in the approval trap. She grew up in a high-achievement home. Academics had been her parents' identity; they wanted education to be valued by their kids. As the youngest child, Ellen had the additional burden of two older siblings who were following in the family footsteps of high grades and academic accomplishment. But Ellen wasn't wired that way. She was artistic, and that didn't translate to success in her parents' eyes. She longed for their approval but found it only came when she did something notable in school. As she entered her teens, she stopped caring about school. Ellen resented her family because she couldn't achieve in a way that mattered to them. She looked for a different "family" at school, a group that would accept her as she was.

She found it in the "fringe" kids, a diverse mix of teens whose commonality was that they all felt like failures at school and nobodies at home. For the first time, Ellen felt liberated from the standards of her family and free to be what she wanted to be. She began to change—to dress differently, listen to different music, hang out in different places. Conflicts with her parents became the norm and this only pushed her further into her new world of freedom.

But this freedom had a cost. Even the fringe had clear standards of behavior if you wanted to belong. It included drug

use and, for the girls, it required participating in hook-ups and serial sexual relationships. Ellen did what it took to be accepted.

She dropped out of high school but then got her GED because her parents threatened to kick her out of the house if she didn't graduate. As her group got beyond the high school years, it began to fragment. By that time Ellen had fallen into a relationship with a guy she met at a party. "I knew he was kind of a loser, but he was there and it was better than being alone. Until he started drinking more and his anger came out. He had this instinct for manipulating my feelings. He'd use guilt and threats to keep me dependent on him. And if I ever started talking about leaving, he'd totally change his tune, telling me how much he loved me and couldn't live without me. That would just wrap me back under him again. Every time. Till he found a woman who made more money than me. Then he was gone without even saying goodbye."

That was eight years ago. You would hope that Ellen had learned her lesson on how to avoid losers. But she hasn't. Her life seems to bounce from one bad relationship to another. When she dates rockers, she becomes a groupie. When she dates an artist, she dabbles with painting. One time it was an intellectual. By the time that ended six months later, she had a library of books she'd never read and a philosophical vocabulary she'd never use again. Ellen is a thirty-year-old woman with a lifetime of experience and no identity to show for it. What she longs for is freedom to be who she is, beyond the expectations and demands of others.

THE LAZINESS TRAP

Drew is stuck in the laziness trap. He has always been a likable guy. In some ways he's the ideal friend. He's low maintenance, he's willing to go along with the group, and he never argues. What you don't want to do is depend on him for anything that needs to be done on time or in a certain way. Drew may eventually get around to it, but keep your expectations low.

Drew's a habitual procrastinator. He makes plans and even puts things in his calendar. But if it's up to him to get something done, it will inevitably be at the last minute, hastily thrown together in a stressed-out frenzy of activity. He says he works best under pressure, but those around him wouldn't agree. Because when Drew is under pressure, he is not very likable. Easygoing Drew becomes irritable Drew. He expects everybody around him to accommodate his rush and he gets angry when something doesn't go his way. If he doesn't get things done on time, it's never his fault. Something he didn't plan for (but should have) got in the way. Somebody else dropped the ball.

Procrastination and unfulfilled commitments have become such a common theme in his life that his friends don't even confront him on it. He may say he's sorry, but they never feel he understands how his lack of follow-through affects people. He just seems to move on. His friends employ the catch-all phrase, "That's just Drew—you've got to love him; you just wish you could count on him." When he's by himself, though, Drew does realize he's lazy. "I don't want to be like this. I always feel like a failure. My boss says I could really move up in my career if I just put the effort in, but I just do enough to get

by. I've got all these ideas of things I want to do, but that's all they are—pipe dreams that will never happen. People think it doesn't bother me, but it does. But it's too hard to change. I joke a lot about being lazy, how great it is to be free from worry in life. But wasting your life isn't living. It's just getting used to being stuck."

THE EATING DISORDER TRAP

If it's six a.m., you know where to find Maria. She's at the gym religiously every morning, even on weekends. She's a treadmill beast. Other regulars at the gym ask her how she does it—how does she keep it up? She tells them she's in training. There's a 10K here, a bike race there—got to stay in shape! Except she's never entered a race in her life.

At work everybody likes to congregate around the office kitchen. It's a social time where employees talk about the news and vacations and whatever. Maria is typically there right around noon. If you see her, she's always smiling, always has a little banter for somebody at the microwave as she slips toward the fridge.

"Hey, Maria, we've got pizza from the meeting today. Come have some." "Thanks guys," she responds politely. "I love pizza, but I've got a race this weekend, so I just made myself some high protein stuff."

"Well, sit down with us. We're talking about our favorite shows." Maria glances at the empty seat at the break table and her little Tupperware container. "No thanks. I'm really backed up today. I'm just going to do a working lunch."

With a cordial laugh she leaves the kitchen and makes her way back into her office where she closes the door, opens her container, and dumps the contents into the trash. Every time.

From the moment she gets in her car at the end of the day, Maria has one thing on her mind. Double fudge chocolate cake. Today she doesn't have any more cake mix. She stops at the grocery store and buys five boxes, plus some extra cans of frosting. She gets home to her apartment, stops for a minute to feed the cat, and then retrieves her nighttime wear, a baggy warm-up suit from a drawer full of baggy warm-up suits. Just before putting it on, she steps on the digital scale. She doesn't like the number she sees. For the first time all day, her perpetually sunny expression is pierced by an angry scowl. She walks over to the full-length mirror to assess the damage. People tell her that she's too thin, but what she sees staring back at her is a repulsive hulk of misshapen fat and excess weight. She can't bear to see it, yet she can't bring herself to turn away. After a few moments she punches her leg hard, a common ritual that somehow frees her from her trance in front of the mirror.

In the kitchen she bakes in silence. She's made so many double fudge chocolate cakes that she could do it in her sleep. While it's baking, she surfs the net, always looking at fashion, at the thin but shapely models who seem to fill every outfit just right.

The cake is done. All that's needed is the spoon and the remote. Maria settles down in front of the flat screen with her only meal of the day. Within an hour she will have consumed an entire chocolate cake. Within an hour and a half she will have purged most of it in the bathroom. Within two hours

she is in bed, trying to bury the nightly shame under a down comforter.

Tomorrow is another day. She'd like to be free of the self-loathing, but she knows what she'll see in the mirror tomorrow. And the mirror never lies. That's Maria's life. She is trapped by an eating disorder and thinks that this prison is where she belongs.

THE PORNOGRAPHY TRAP

Steven looked around the room at the other men in the circle. It was about as ordinary a gang of guys as he could imagine. Guys in jeans, in suits, with beards, with tattoos, with polo shirts, with baseball caps, with shaved heads. And here he was—yet again.

Charlie, the group leader, starts the meeting. "How are we doing? Anyone struggling this week?"

This is Steven's cue. He knows the drill.

"I really blew it last night. My wife took the kids to see her mom for the weekend. I told her where I'd be the whole time she was gone. Promised I'd just read and go to bed. I had the guys in my accountability group on alert, only a text away from me. But I guess that wasn't enough."

All eyes turn toward Steven. "What happened?" Charlie asks.

"I was sitting on my porch reading and I saw a woman walking her dog. She was pretty far away, but from a distance she reminded me of this girl I used to date. I started thinking about her and those times. Ask me now and I can tell you how bad that relationship really was. But right then all I could

remember was how good it felt, no kids, no responsibilities, no disappointed wife. Just passion and breakups. I knew I was going down a bad road, but I couldn't help wondering, *Where is she now?* So I went on Facebook to look her up. Most of her info is private but I saw a couple of pictures. Not bad for twenty years later. But I thought, *That's it, I'm too close to the line.*"

"Then what?"

"You know those little ads on the sidebar in Facebook? For some reason I hadn't blocked access and one came up—you know what they are. I was on my phone so I couldn't see it much. But the girl in the picture, well, I couldn't resist. I clicked on it. Next thing I know, there's another link, then another. I was gone. It was like I was in my own little world—again. It must have been four hours by the time I got done."

Ken jumps into the conversation. "What about your rescue calls? Did you think to call somebody?"

"Sure I did. I thought, *I'm one click away from getting out of this.* But I couldn't do it. The pathetic thing is that I got two calls during that time. One was from my wife—I wasn't about to take that one. The other was from Tom, my accountability partner. I couldn't believe he'd call. I let it go. Then I told myself, *I've already screwed up big time. What's the point of turning back now?* So I just kept going. But it wasn't exciting anymore. It almost felt like, well, like I had to give in to it—that drive, you know what I mean.

"So here I am. More guilt. A wife who's disgusted with me and won't even leave me at home alone to go to the store. And all these images floating around in my head, coming at me in my sleep, at work, in church. And I've got to come in here and

talk about it with all of you. It's humiliating. I'm trapped in porn and I don't even know if I want out anymore."

All the eyes in the circle turn toward the floor. It's an all-too-familiar story.

THE SUBSTANCE ABUSE TRAP

Dear Joan,

I hope you and all your family are doing well. I'm writing to let you know that Lorraine is back in rehab. We thought the last time had really done it. She came out and seemed so much like her old self. We were able to get her a job as a waitress at Bobby's restaurant. It wasn't much, but it's not like her track record with jobs was that good. She seemed to be excited to go to work and was bringing home some good tips. She enrolled again in community college, said she could go to school during the day and work nights. We were worried it might be too much right off the bat, but she was so positive we didn't want to dampen the enthusiasm.

That lasted for a couple of months. Then we started seeing the same old things we saw when she was using. We noticed she was sleeping in a lot after a night at work, missing classes. Of course we'd ask her if everything was okay and of course she would say it was great, just tired and stressed from school and work. She started smoking again; that's never a good sign. We really got worried when she'd start getting all these texts and calls on the weekends. She says they were friends from work. She'd never talk to anybody in front of us—she'd just get up and go into another room. Sometimes she'd come out and say it was somebody in trouble who needed to talk with her and she'd leave without telling us where she was going.

She started stealing from us. A couple of weeks ago I confronted her. I asked her if she was doing drugs again and if she had taken my money. She got really defensive and accused me of being paranoid and judging her. Usually I get intimidated but this time I stood up to her. I told her I didn't trust her, and that this is the kind of thing she does when she's abusing drugs. I told her to prove it to me if she wasn't. She just cursed at me and rolled over and wouldn't talk anymore.

I thought we were heading down that awful road where you just don't know if you're going to get a call from the police saying your daughter is dead of an overdose. But fate intervened. She overslept a mandatory meeting with her probation officer and then, when they did a blood test, they found drugs in her system. I hate to see her back in trouble, but I feel like some time in jail and then rehab again is better than the hole she was digging for herself.

I remember one time you said you pray to God. I'm not a spiritual person but I'd appreciate if you'd pray for Lorraine. And if you think about it, pray for me as well.

Ann

TRAPPED IN A TROUBLED MARRIAGE

Michael:

I don't know what happened to her.

Tina:

I don't know what happened to him.

Michael:

Before we got married, she worked out and kept fit. I felt like, when we went out, people looked at her and she turned heads. It made me proud to be with her. Now

she doesn't seem to care what she looks like. No makeup, frumpy clothes, never does anything with her hair. It's like she doesn't care.

Tina:

Before we were married we'd go for long walks and just talk. I felt like I could tell him anything. Now he just comes home from work and turns on the tube. If he isn't watching sports, he's on his laptop or his phone. If I want to ask him a question, I feel like I need an appointment. I don't know the last time he actually looked me in the eyes. It's like he doesn't care.

Michael:

All she cares about is shopping. Every time I come home there's something new in the house. Some little knick-knack she got on the internet because she saw it on one of those home decoration shows she's always watching. Buying things is like a drug to her; she just can't get enough. When I try to get her to budget, she just laughs. All I am is an ATM in this marriage.

Tina:

All he cares about is work. He's out of the house before I get up, even though I know he doesn't need to be in till nine. I'm shocked if he gets home before seven. He expects dinner as soon as he gets home, which he eats in front of the tube. I can pretty much guarantee weekends are going to be about his job. We'll start a project and he'll get a call; then he's done for the day. All I am is a property manager in this marriage.

Michael:

And when she gets mad, oh man, that's out of hand! I know the neighbors think we're nuts. She'll say anything in an argument. And then won't even remember it later

on. What really gets me is that she can be in the middle of screaming and get a call on her cell phone. She takes the call all sweet and nice and, as soon as she's done, she's at it again. It's like a war with her. And she always needs to win.

Tina:

I don't like to argue, but sometimes that's the only thing that gets through to him. He'll do something mean or cut me down and then, when I react, he just stands there with that look like I'm crazy, and just say "What?" I try to tell him what he did and he starts the debate. He starts firing off all these arguments like he's at work. He never, ever admits he's wrong. It's like a competition to him. And he always needs to win.

Michael and Tina:

I had always hoped that I'd marry somebody I could build my life with. How did we get here? I feel like I'm trapped and I don't know how to get out.

TRAPPED BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

William is one of those guys of whom it is said, "He was born with a silver spoon in his mouth." His family lives in a big house in the best part of the town. William comes from a line of movers and shakers. He grew up with all the trappings of privilege—private school, acceptance in society, the best advantages. But he also experienced some of the downside of being well-to-do. You wake up every day with the expectations of people you never even met focused on you. You can't be just good; you have to be the best. At everything.

William came from a family of church-goers who understood being religious primarily as a duty required of those with good social breeding. But something unexpected happened to William. He encountered some people who seemed to have an authentic faith that went beyond religion. They called themselves Christians. He came to see himself the same way. Religion stopped being a duty for William and started being a way of life.

After graduation from college, he moved as expected into the family business. But William the Christian constantly wrestled with how to live out his faith in a world that seemed to trivialize Christianity, if not dismiss it altogether. Today he continues to find himself between two worlds. Both call for his allegiance, his best time, his heart. He doesn't know how to navigate between the two—how to be successful in the one without compromising in the other. Every choice is a moral dilemma. Should I make this deal, should I go to that party? Can I be friends with these people?

Sometimes he struggles with guilt about how much he has and how much others lack. And he carries a deep burden for his family, who think he's nuts and hope this is just a religious phase. Would things be easier if he just tried to go into some type of ministry? At least he wouldn't feel so torn all the time. He hopes to make a difference in both worlds, but he more often feels like a failure and hypocrite. Does he love this world too much? Is he so heavenly-minded he's no earthly good? Sometimes he'd like to find an escape from the trap of living between this world and the world beyond.

WE NEED HELP TO GET FREE

The stories above are about real people, though I've changed details as necessary to keep them confidential. In some sense they are composites; in fact, I'm in more than one of the vignettes myself. My guess is that you are too. We're going to revisit each of these stories in the second half of the book. Metaphorically speaking, we'll go into each cell and look more closely at what it's like to be in these traps and how people get there.

You and I want out of traps, but we don't know how to get free. The good news is that, for every person caught in a trap, there is hope of freedom. There is life beyond the prison doors. And you can get there.

But first we need to consider the story of a man, a box, and a quest for freedom.