

Life On
PURPOSE

YOU MUST BE LED BEFORE YOU CAN LEAD

BETH TOWNSEND



Life On Purpose

You Must Be Led Before You Can Lead

By Beth Townsend

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Dedication



To my husband, Fred: Without you, this book would not have happened. Thank you for all the suggestions, edits, and help in getting this book to our publisher. It is a co-labor of love of the most delicate kind. Thank you for encouraging me to finally share my story.

To my kids, Reagan and Rhett: You've always made me want to be a better woman, wife, momma, and now, grandmother. It is my hope that you will take my hope in Christ and live it with joy, teaching it to your children and grandchildren.

To my mom and sistas: There is no bigger joy than getting together with you and laughing hysterically at our stories. While we had pain, we had purpose. God was showing us who he really was instead of who we thought he was. It is my hope that through these pages I honor our family and our Lord Jesus.

Preface



Would you like to sit down and visit with some of the world's most amazing people? Those magnetic people who are always so purposeful? People we see on the television news and realize that they are doing just what they were created to do? The evidence of their calling is apparent. Confident, gifted, happy and self-actualized people who make a difference and change the world. Those who are living life on purpose.

How do you feel when you are around people like this? Do you secretly wonder how they knew the direction of their lives? Often, some of us are jealous. Maybe jealousy comes from thinking a call to one's purpose is easy for others yet so hard for us.

Perhaps we Christians struggle with purpose because we know we are supposed to have a calling that gives us that critical sense of a meaning in life. Many devout believers ponder and wander aimlessly every day in search of their dreams. Sometimes our purpose stares us in the face but goes by unrecognized. We believe God put us here to do something, but we wait on some "light bulb" moment when we miraculously know what to do. Is identifying our purpose supposed to be hard? Shouldn't that be the easy part?

Many books talk about purpose. Few invite readers into the personal experiences that point the way to that sacred place in

tune with the Creator. They offer a life-changing focus that gives them a pep in their step and a sparkle in their eyes because they are living the way they were created to live. Can you imagine life like that?

How different would the world be if all Christians passionately pursued their purpose? How would your personal and business life change? Would your worldview be different if you lived your life on purpose? Imagine a society where people lived within their giftedness and woke up excited every day.

Over the last twenty years, my experiences as an interviewer and feature writer have allowed me to engage in amazing conversations with scores of confident, gifted, happy, and self-actualized people. People from whom we should learn—not look at with jealousy, anger, and scorn. Not only were these men and women living life on purpose, but they were loving, giving, transparent and willing to share. Each one had so much confidence that just being near them made me wish some of their enthusiasm for life might rub off on me. And it did.

A sense of purpose changes everything. It is easy to imagine the smiles on faces, the increased productivity at work, the positive learning environments in schools and universities, and the overflowing happiness at home. Our workplace would be filled with optimism, and the typically meaningless meetings would be transformed into career-enriching experiences. Conversations would be deeper and would matter more. The words would shoot straight from our hearts as arrows landing precisely on target. Houses would again become homes where parents burst with brighter hope for the ones we love. Family

dinners would take renewed meaning when the people seated around the table, confident of who they are and why they are here, put away smartphones and look loved ones in the eyes. And as the conversations at dinners resume, each would be dominated by discussion of that day's intentional pursuit of purpose and what each person learned along the way.

This is not some ethereal dream. It is a reality well within our reach, because living abundantly is God's will. It is his plan. He created us with a purpose, and wants us to know it and live it. We must live confidently in our God-given gifts and talents, keenly aware of our uniqueness. He wants us to live each day knowing he put us where we are and carefully created us to be who and what we are. He is meticulously at work in all aspects of our being.

Years ago, one simple question changed my life and clarified my calling. Answering it took me on a journey for two decades, interviewing prominent people, including athletes, political leaders, entertainers, philanthropists, and authors. But there were also many ordinary folks who were changing the world in near anonymity. My journey was life-altering. Oh, the question that changed my life? As I rapidly climbed the professional ladder, people kept asking me, "How did you know your purpose?" In short, I didn't. At least not then. I hadn't even thought about it. But that's how it started—the process of finding my purpose was to answer the calling. My purpose, it seemed, was to help others find their purpose. In the process, my worldview was reshaped, my perspective was broadened, and my faith was deepened.

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Introduction



Many Are the Plans

My plan was solid. The flight was booked. Conference reservations were made. The appointments I'd made with publishers and editors were carefully selected. My notebook was filled with sample chapters and carefully edited query letters. The different sections had color-coded tabs. Schedule, meetings, agendas, and the list of teachers. Plans. All this was carefully made by a person who lives by planning and prioritized to-do lists.

Going to the Writing for the Soul conference in Colorado was a dream come true. I'd been to other conferences, but this one seemed different, better. In addition, I could afford the expense. Fred and I were past the season of tight budgeting. The kids were now old enough to be relatively self-sufficient.

Could this be a sign? My friend Lorraine was coming with me. She had children the same age as mine, so this getaway would provide some relaxation from the stress of motherhood.

But there was still no doubt as to why we were going. We had big-picture career plans as Christian writers. Perhaps being able to meet the founder of Writing for the Soul would be an added bonus. Jerry B. Jenkins books have sold millions. Learning from a mentor like him was a unique opportunity for which I would be very grateful.

On the day of our travel, I left very early to pick up my friend. She was sitting outside, waiting in tears, alone on a bench. She was going through difficulties in her marriage. We talked about how much we both needed a change of scenery for the next couple of days. Being together made it more fun. We laughed about our packed itineraries and dreamed big dreams for each other.

In Colorado Springs, we gathered our luggage and went to get our rental car. Tired but invigorated, we were excited to be roommates in this luxury hotel for the next three days and nights. I put my carefully packed briefcase over my shoulder and rolled my luggage to the car.

I drove toward our hotel, which was not my strength without a GPS. My phone rang. Caller ID said it was my sister Jeanine. Why would she be calling at this hour?

“Hey Jeanine,” I said. “We just got here. We are driving to our hotel.”

“Good,” she said.” She seemed different, hesitant, almost stoic, and certainly not her normally effervescent self. “Well”—she sounded nervous—“I hate to call you, especially now, but I had no choice. Everyone is all right, but I think you may need to go back home.” I was stunned and then numbed by our

conversation. Jeanine revealed a serious issue with one of my children. The crisis needed my immediate attention.

“You’re right. I need to go.” Just like that. I turned to Lorraine. With tears streaming down my face, I solemnly said, “I’m going home.”

She listened carefully as I explained the situation. “I’m so sorry you have to leave,” she said, “but I understand.”

I called Fred to tell him what was going on. He was in the bedroom, watching television. Thirty feet down the hall, the enemy was at work to steal our child from us. Fred immediately sprang into action, but I knew the severity of the situation demanded my attention. He’d need every ounce of my strength to help him.

Lorraine and I checked into our room. While she unpacked, I made the necessary calls to get home. Rebooking plane tickets can be a hassle—trying to explain why I needed to go back less than an hour after my arrival. Within hours, I was back at the airport, my dreams left behind.

Through the airport-process, I cried to every single person I saw. My makeup had long since washed away with my tears, my face reddened. I didn’t care what anyone thought, and I wasn’t about to engage anyone in conversation. The ticket agent, the coffee shop cashier, and the others on the plane tried to console me. I had never cried so much—and for so many hours. My shattered dreams. All those plans. So much preparation had been wasted. But these things were of no consequence compared to the heartache of a mother facing what potentially was the loss of a child. My faith. My self-image as a mother. The happiness of our

home. A million thoughts. None of them were positive.

God? Is this your plan for me? Didn't I hear you right? With so much self-doubt, I interrogated God. Didn't you open this door for me to go to this conference? I felt lost and abandoned.

Then, I turned inward. "All my plans! How could I have been so wrong?"

There was no answer. At least not then.

One



In Search of Purpose

To my amazement, in my early twenties, I was teaching property management seminars, a career field I chose out of sheer necessity. Sometimes you do what you have to do.

After high school, I enrolled for a semester at the University of Southern Mississippi, and in the footsteps of my older sisters, pledged and became an active in Kappa Delta sorority. After the first semester, university officials told me to move out of Panhellenic Dorm immediately. Saddened but not surprised, I knew exactly why. My dad had not paid the bill. It wasn't the first time. Deep inside, I vowed it would be the last. It was a springboard to independence.

Still, the road ahead looked bleak. My friends were attending college. I was freaking out as an eighteen-year-old forced to start an independent life. No more pledge exchanges. No money, no job, and no place to live.

Dad was an alcoholic, married to his ninth wife, Mimi, who

was my final stepmother. Moving in with them was my only option. It was scary. Mimi suffered from mental health issues and took a daily cocktail of prescription drugs that seemed to make things worse, not better. One day while walking by her bedroom, the door was open, and I saw her slamming her head repeatedly against the headboard of the bed.

As I watched in horror, I asked why she was doing this. She just sobbed and said, “Trying to alleviate my pain.” I did not ask any more questions.

Finding a job went well. Local banker Dick Ainsworth hired me as a teller at a bank in Hattiesburg. The take-home pay was about \$700 a month. It was a professional job with some benefits. My new boss was a godsend. A father of five, Mr. Ainsworth was a family man who loved his wife—something not often modeled by my father during my childhood. He also loved and invested in his employees. He was a professional role model as well as a personal one. Under his influence, I became more responsible. My first job made me grow up and start to see the world with adult eyes. Not yet twenty, I was promoted to head teller.

There were five children in my family, four girls and one boy. I am the youngest. One of my older sisters, Lisa, was in her mid-twenties and facing her own financial struggles. But she could not stand the idea of me living with our dad and his wife in an unstable environment. Out of love and concern, she invited me to live with her in her apartment in Hattiesburg, where she had started a career as a court reporter. I only had to pay a nominal rent. It worked well. Living with Lisa was fun and gave me the stability that she had hoped for. We cooked together, went to the

apartment pool, and invited dates over. We made friends with our neighbors. Lisa and I became more than sisters. As true friends and roommates, our seven-year age difference seemed nonexistent. This season was normal and nice, but unfortunately short-lived. Even with token rent, making ends meet was challenging.

My older sister Dianne had married and moved to Virginia. Once there, she started a career in residential property management as she raised her first child. Dianne quickly moved up from leasing agent to property manager. Our mom divorced her second husband after Dianne left for Virginia, and eventually followed Dianne to Virginia Beach to get a fresh start. Mom joined the same apartment management organization.

Dianne offered me a job. It was a no-brainer. A leasing agent position at the company came with a salary and an apartment. I eagerly accepted. In that moment, I felt real hope. I quickly packed my few belongings in a small U-Haul trailer. Mississippi was in my rearview mirror, but despite the optimism, I cried all the way to Virginia Beach—928 miles from Hattiesburg. The crying was not because of any second thoughts about my new life. Leaving Lisa behind was just so hard. Together we had faced really trying situations in our family life. And she had become my confidante, my friend, and my favorite person to be around.

Leaving Mississippi also meant leaving my comfort zone, the only home I had known in my young life. But somehow, knowing that a world existed far beyond those rural counties of south Mississippi made me brave enough to finally slam the door on my past. Perhaps more importantly, it ended an unhealthy

relationship that had held me in its grip since the age of sixteen—a relationship with a man twice my age.

I made the long drive in a red Ford EXP compact car. Pulling a U-Haul made the drive seem even longer. At that age, how was I supposed to know this was a bad idea? And nobody warned me. A single, twenty-year-old woman putt-putting in an EXP from Mississippi to Virginia, towing a trailer. That was a trip made on a wing and a shallow prayer. Some really steep hills and the Appalachian Mountains in that 1,000-mile distance made for a tired little car that used up every bit of its limited horsepower. The fact that I made it at all was God's provision, though at the time I didn't know God's provision was a "thing."

Still, arriving in Virginia Beach was all I had hoped it would be. A fresh new start. With Mom and Dianne there, having my people with me made it comfortable. And a real beach! The job was amazing, and moving into my own apartment made it even better. Although it was far from upscale, the apartment was a good start toward professional and personal growth, a great opportunity in a beautiful part of the country. Slowly but surely, Mom, Dianne, and I gathered enough furniture to make a small apartment into a comfortable home.

The new job meant everything to me, because in my opinion, it was actually a lifeline. So I went to work in every sense of the word. I needed this opportunity to justify moving far away from Mississippi. There was also the self-imposed pressure to prove that Dianne's confidence in me was not just an act of nepotism. But most importantly, this situation was a foundation for adulthood and real independence. Learning and working, I saw

my attitude transform. Like a sponge, I soaked up as much as I could from every opportunity. My daily routine was full and action-packed from start to finish—meeting new people, showing apartments, managing maintenance requests, and so much more. I loved every minute of it. This was the light at the end of that long tunnel that started when a USM official escorted me out of my dormitory.

Rising from a leasing agent to a marketing manager took just three years. In my new role, I was responsible for multiple communities and supervised the people who managed each apartment complex. Just after this promotion, my oldest sister, Jeanine, and her husband, Thom, moved to an Atlanta suburb. The bright lights of a big city started to call my name. At just twenty-three, I had an impressive résumé, and I applied for jobs in the Atlanta area. The decision was made easier by having relatives there, an older sister and her husband, who was more like a big brother.

Just as it was after leaving Hattiesburg, I found it hard to say goodbye to Dianne and Mom. But they understood. So I packed up and moved in search of more. More of what? I wasn't sure . . . but more!

Living with Jeanine's family for a while was fun. It paved the way for me to step out into another new city with hopes of greater opportunity for my budding career. The decision paid off with a job offer to manage an upscale apartment community. This one was much nicer than any of those I had managed in Virginia. Moving into one of the luxury apartments was like winning the lottery. I thought I had panned for gold and hit a gold mine. The

management job was a solid career step in the right direction.

Not long after I assumed my new job, two professional young women leased one of our apartments. Liz and Vivian were recent graduates of the University of Georgia and about my age. They seemed so sharp, settled and fun, and I so wanted them to become my new friends. They were nice and said we could all hang out together. To say I was thrilled would be an understatement. Thanks to my strategic planning, they “happened” to get a prime, private spot near my apartment in the back of the community.

As I had hoped, the three of us became fast friends. Hanging out with them allowed me to make many other friends. My personal life and career began to solidify around a young professional crowd, which was a lot of fun. As I learned to navigate around metro Atlanta, my social calendar filled with dates, dinners, and dozens of Friday night chicken wings with Liz, Viv, and others at The Three Dollar Cafe. Thankful for this opportunity, I went to work every day as one happy camper.

My new employer had weekly information-packed meetings that taught me a lot about the industry. Our team was built to make investors happy so we could grow the company while making the residents comfortable enough to renew their leases and create a return on investment. Occupancy rates were great, and the investors grew. Their dollars allowed the company to build new and nicer properties each year.

Compared to the more laid-back fun atmosphere of Virginia, Atlanta was highly competitive and stressful. The president/CEO expected me to answer for every penny on our profit-and-loss

statement. I had to write and implement a budget. If my report was not up to his standards, he sent it back with a note: “Too much fluff.” He demanded real information in professional terms. He taught me property management by making me do and redo things to his standard of perfection. At times, my attitude toward him bordered on hatred. Years later, however, when I recognized how much his direction had helped me, I was compelled to call him and say thanks. The experience taught me to appreciate facts, communicate effectively one-on-one, and make group presentations with confidence.

So my climb up the corporate ladder began without the advantage of a college degree or insider connections. Yet early into the corporate world experience, I realized that success required my own competitive edge. This led to quickly adopting two habits: (1) a great work ethic and (2) a positive attitude. Never once did I take any of my opportunities for granted.

My sheer thankfulness for every job and its potential kept me from grumbling or complaining about petty things. By contrast, my co-workers engaged in superficial and negative chatter before every meeting. Even top executives moaned about silly policies or things they could not change. It shocked me at first that they did not appreciate the great opportunities our company afforded us. Perception truly is reality for most people most of the time. Of course, once the boss entered, the complainers were all smiles, rah-rah, and teamwork. Witnessing this behavior week after week and month after month made me determined to never become one of these people.

Survival requires us to be proactive problem solvers, not

complainers. At this point in my life, being close to the edge was not that far behind me, and going backward was not an option. Frankly, I was living the dream, and there was no way I was going to mess it up. That meant then, and it still means now, that it was vital to communicate effectively when something needed to be addressed. My experience in those management meetings taught me to carefully choose my battles.

In addition to work ethic and positive attitude, a third trait became necessary. I needed the right level of consistency in how others saw me. Someone in my early career inadvertently taught me the consistency lesson the hard way. It was at my bank job in Hattiesburg when I was working as a teller. My immediate supervisor was a nice person and good at her job. But she was completely unpredictable. Up one day and down the next. All the tellers watched as she got out of her car in the morning, wanting to determine how our day would go. Just by seeing her face, her body language, and how she walked into the bank told that story without words. Her team rode her roller coaster, and speaking for myself, I did not enjoy the ride.

Remembering the effect of working under inconsistent leadership, I decided to commit to consistency as a leader. There was no way I was going to become a guessing game for my colleagues. Effective leadership required discipline. Consistency in what others could expect from me was another important building block for an intentional approach to pursuing career success. Sure, I had bad days or sometimes became ill, but I did not shout it to the rest of the world or send invitations to my pity party. Discipline in how we interact with others is important to

create value for yourself everywhere, whether at work or at home.

To say Beth Goss was a cheerleader for the property management industry would be an understatement. Property management provided a way for a poor young woman with a high school education to establish a career solely on performance and ability, unencumbered by any past baggage or circumstances. Because my enthusiasm was evident, someone invited me to serve as a guest speaker about our industry. The event went well enough that I received invitations to speak to other groups.

Within a few months, my schedule was full. My career went from operations and training to speaking professionally to motivate others. How ironic was that? A few short years ago, I was a panicked co-ed ushered out the door at my university and freaked out about having no money, no job, and no place to live. Now, at just twenty-five years old, I was being asked to stand at the front of a classroom and train people—not just at my company, but at several other larger companies. The people listening were mostly older and more-educated, but they wanted to hear me talk about how to pursue and achieve excellence in an industry.

Using practical skills, I had worked my way to the top. I had a plan and followed it by using some new habits that worked well. I advanced to second in command, and I sat in the office next to the owner of a fast-growing property management organization, building, managing luxury apartment complexes in one of the nation's fastest growing cities. My point is not to toot my own horn. But at twenty-five, this young female executive

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from a dysfunctional family in a hamlet in south Mississippi was living life on purpose. In sharing how I found a way to create something out of virtually nothing, I am saying that if I can do it, you can too.

Before the end of my first training seminar, someone asked how I found my life's purpose. From then on, people constantly brought it up. They asked because it seemed my life was being lived purposefully and theirs were not. My life fooled people who neither knew their purpose nor lived with any direction. In retrospect, I realize that you can live purposefully without knowing your purpose. You just cannot be fulfilled until you know your calling.



Passion Is Evidence of Purpose

My recipe for success was working. Hard work, a positive attitude and a consistent personality seemed to be the right blend for me to embrace in my personal life as well as my professional career. These three character traits helped me succeed and proved to be essential in being promoted. These intentional life habits soon defined the woman I had become.

My personal growth was evident to others, and I recognized it in myself. The ability to pay my financial obligations each month, manage multiple multi-million dollar properties, and lead dozens of people every day laid a foundation for my future and tangibly represented my professional and personal growth. Becoming a trainer and getting paid to teach seminars was edifying and began to drive me.

While I was thankful for how quickly my career had progressed, there was still a lot more to learn. But even more success was within my reach, and I stretched out to grab it with

both hands. Audience members at seminars naturally assume that the speaker is an expert. In my case, my passion for my industry probably enhanced that assumption. Far from being an expert at the time, I was simply sharing my knowledge of the job and the fundamentals of how to do it well. I covered many topics of a complex industry and added more as my professional exposure increased. When you love something and are thankful for it, people sense a purpose in that passion. My enthusiasm was hard to hide.

Questions that were asked in one-on-one conversations during seminar breaks surprised me at first, then became routine, but they continually caught me off guard. Whether it was a group of ten or a hundred, representing a wide range of ages and experience levels, someone asked the same question every time. How did you know your purpose?

It was a loaded question. Each person who asked it assumed that I not only knew my purpose but was also living it. Wrong. When challenged to think about it with real honesty and self-analysis, the answer was embarrassingly trivial and not at all meaningful. My purpose was really just to pay my bills and have a cute date on the weekend. Industry-specific questions were easy to answer, but the life-specific question stumped me. Looking back, the truth is that I didn't have the spiritual depth required to answer. The question awakened my hungry soul and prodded me to search the depth of my being for a reasonable answer. At that time, I was not even thinking about an answer that might prove to be profound.

Purpose? Isn't that a God thing? With that thought, I

suddenly realized there was a hole in my heart. And that hole grew each time I heard that question and didn't have an answer. And I became aware of an internal whisper that grew louder every day. Like a rushing wind, it shouted, What is your purpose?

What seemed a strong foundation now appeared naive and a bit shaky. The fast track to success felt shallow and left me with an emptiness that cast a shadow on my happy-go-lucky persona. Suddenly, my well-planned career path and corporate goals looked less fortified. It was as if an essential piece of my plan was missing. My confidence waned as I realized there was more to life than self-sufficiency and independence. A solitary question rocked my world, and I had to know the answer.

My passion became the need to find the answer. My purpose was to share the answer with the thousands who were seeking to identify their own purpose. That is how purpose became my passion. Self-help books or reading about purpose was not enough. I felt an internal desire to talk to people who knew their purpose—to meet them, engage them about their plans, goals, and struggles along the way. There was a drive placed on my heart to look into the eyes of these men and women and ask tough questions about life: Was it easy? How did you find the money? What obstacles did you face? Did you lose faith? How can you help others? In my mind, these questions could generate answers and bring clarity to my own confusion.

It took years before those face-to-face meetings began. First, God challenged me to realize why the idea of purpose was so important. The self-discovery was essential, because it helped me realize that living without a purpose cost my family everything. It

eventually cost my dad, Zeno Goss, his life.

Deep down, it was clear to me that this self-analysis might help me make sense of the things that had most confused me. Our family witnessed the downfall of my dad, which started when I was just a toddler, and each of us was greatly impacted. My parents were married for more than twenty years. Their marriage only lasted that long because my mother was afraid to leave a self-proclaimed prophet of God, one persuasive enough to talk his way into and out of anything.

Dad was a creative genius who believed God had called him to do great things. Early on, faith was Dad's foundation and he was gifted in many ways and with many talents. And Zeno Goss oozed charisma. Unfortunately, the haunting phrase could have been his legacy. If it's true that people's greatest strengths can also be their biggest weaknesses, the saying certainly fit my dad. Because of his creativity, he constantly believed he was on the verge of success.

There was music. That phase came before I was born. Most notably, he wrote for and played with Governor Jimmie Davis, two-term Louisiana governor, a gospel music legend and Country Music Hall-of-Famer. He performed with other widely known artists as well. Zeno recorded several of his own original songs. He was a natural musician with a beautiful voice, and radio stations played his records in the late '50s and early '60s, though none was ever a hit. My children have googled the grandfather they never knew to find stories about him. My husband went online and even bought some of his old 45-RPM records as keepsakes for me.

Without knowing the whole story, it would be easy for someone to assume that little could go wrong for a man with such strong faith. People who heard him sing heard the lyrics sung with strong conviction. Dad's faith appeared solid to my mother and others in the early years, and he was well-versed in Scripture. However, being rooted one day does not eliminate the need to protect our path. It now seems that Zeno's foundation was, unfortunately, built on sand. It did not remain firm.

Dad started straying from biblical boundaries when his music career was not as successful or taking off as quickly as he had hoped. So then he moved on to the next thing and never wrote or played again. We have a huge file of music and writing, much of it unfinished, that he simply walked away from. Sadly, what my dad wrote and what he lived did not match. He died alone at fifty-eight.

Dad sought quick answers instead of showing the patience to wait upon the Lord. There seemed to be little appreciation for the concept of *kairos*. For some reason, he felt enabled to proclaim his own interpretations and act out decisions that were rooted in neither truth nor wisdom. After his music phase, Zeno became an inventor. He actually invented a disposable camera in the '60s, several years before the concept became a commercial success. Our family had an actual working model, although we lost it in one of our many moves.

Our memories have faded as to why the camera wasn't a victory for Zeno, but a similar invention became an international success for major camera companies. We guessed that he naïvely sent it off without patent protection to a major company in an

attempt to sell it and essentially gave away the technology and the idea. People who knew Zeno have told me that my dad could usually convince any investor that his next idea was going to be the big one that made them all rich. The camera was an amazing opportunity. I even participated as a young girl in a commercial to promote it, but it never aired. Then it was on to the next big thing. None ever panned out.

There was a season later when my dad got into glass fuses and bulbs. He ordered three very old, worn-out trailers and had them delivered to our front yard. One was an unsightly burned-out unit used as storage. Those trailers warehoused fuses and became a center of business activity for a short time. No one in the family knew, then or now, just how he paid for the trailers, much less the inventory, or if he made any money selling them. But at a reception I attended many years later, an old family friend reminisced about my dad's well-known antics. "Your dad could talk that bank president into anything and always left with a check in his hand," he said. Zeno was charming and quite believable, which explains how my dad paid for the trailers. I guess the banker knew how much the project lost.

Because of these lavish dreams and his passionate, if short-lived, pursuit of each, Zeno never really worked, at least not at a job. My only recollection of a job was when he landed a great one with a boss named Ben. The family hoped it would be a turning point for us, but within months Ben and Dad had a disagreement. The job came to an abrupt end along with our hopes for a normal life. It was back to Zeno moving on to the next great thing. Talk about a roller coaster! One day we had high

hopes that Dad found that it, and the next day Zeno was depressed and confused.

Those were dark times. The atmosphere at home was so tense that we all walked on eggshells. Zeno was increasingly sad, paranoid, afraid of almost everyone, and becoming more and more distant from us. From time to time he perked up with some new idea, but often that was just to placate the family and make us believe he might finally find work and help support us. It did not take many of those false starts before we realized there was more going on than just a lack of focus.

My mom, Aimee, had a limited education and little work experience. But she was left with no choice but to work to support five children while Zeno chased outlandish dreams. She once worked as a secretary during the day and at a convenience store at night while we slept. She got fired from one office job because she received too many phone calls from the kids. Mom demonstrated the work ethic to her children. That is certainly where I learned it. Her mantra was that you do what you have to do, and you do it well if you want to grow from the obstacles that stand in your way of forward progress.

We lived in rural south Mississippi off U.S. Highway 98 on the outskirts of the small town of Columbia. If we were not in the middle of nowhere, we were certainly close to it. Across the highway lived two African-American families with several children. This was the segregated south, and although whites and blacks rarely crossed paths in the contentious times of the civil rights movement, our black neighbors were more than just our friends. They were our extended families.

We made time for good old-fashioned country fun too. There was a huge rut in the rural road on our friends' side of the highway, and on rainy days or after storms, the drainage ditches filled up. When the water was deep enough, we rushed over and had neighborhood swimming parties. All the kids gathered gleefully to beat the Mississippi heat as we swam in our temporary creek. To hear us roar and surf about, one would have thought we were experiencing the thrill of white water rafting. The fun was clean, but our bodies were covered in mud.

This was a village, and our families worked together to help one another. Those two black women across the highway helped our mom raise us. When she went to work, one of them would come over and take care of us. My favorite was Lela-May, who could cook and called mayonnaise "mayon-egg." Every time I open a jar, I remember that funny word.

We did not have much, but because of our mother and the charity extended by several Christian merchants, we had enough, often just in the nick of time. One grocery store kept out-of-date food and sold it to Mom after they closed. We had great steaks from time to time, because they could no longer be sold, but we made good use of them. We ate a lot of baked beans. During leaner weeks, we had beans and Spam. Other times we had actual ground beef, which was our favorite. In the midst of all Aimee Goss had to do and on her meager income, our mom was a great cook and made us really great-tasting, if "make-do," meals.

In the meantime, Dad's quirkiness escalated to outrageous behavior. He proclaimed that God revealed to him that an earthquake was coming on a particular day and we needed to

leave home because it would be coming right down Highway 98. He convinced many people that his prophecy would prove to be true, including Sheriff Pittman, who closed the highway. The local radio station even broadcast warnings. This was big news in our small town.

An earthquake in Columbia, Mississippi? Leave home to avoid mass destruction? It was chaos and panic for our family. We packed up our car and went to our dad's office. Recalling that night is easy for me, because it was the same night I lost my first tooth. All I could think about was how the tooth fairy would find me if I wasn't home.

Of course, the earthquake never happened. For our townspeople, Dad's mistaken prophecy was excellent news for obvious reasons. But Zeno was devastated that it did not happen. Obviously, he now questioned if he was actually the prophet he claimed to be. Even worse was that people in town who believed his prediction no longer found him credible . . . and he knew it. My mom was confused and afraid. How does anyone make sense of this type of crazy situation? Our family went into a permanent crisis mode with no idea what to do.

This time, Dad could not avoid the fact that this was more than a credibility issue. No one really understood what was happening to him or what it was doing to the rest of us. Zeno finally agreed to seek help. This was a breakthrough. Prior to that, even in extreme cases, he had never admitted there was any reason for concern for his unusual decisions or prophetic proclamations. Up until this point, if anyone suggested Zeno had a problem, he made them feel that they were in need of help. It

was a vicious cycle trying to deal with someone who could manipulate words and situations into complete confusion.

The oldest of the five children was my sister Jeanine. Even as a pre-teen, Jeanine helped raise the rest of us. She was in charge of household duties after school. She monitored our schedules, cooked dinner, and supervised homework. She was a popular, cute high school cheerleader with motherly duties. She seemed to get it, but she had little choice. We all pitched in to help while mom worked long hours, and each of us had the task of house cleaning every day after school. Mom would come home and inspect. If we didn't dust well enough, we had to dust again. Vacuum tracks were expected on a daily basis. We learned that chores were not just a way to learn responsibility, but they were also a lesson in working together as a family to get the job done. We lived in a clean house. We appreciated everything we had, and I don't remember my mom ever once complaining.

Long before Jeanine reached the legal age to drive, she took us where we needed to go. My siblings and I can laugh now about our cars. Some of the stories are funnier than others. One of the stories demonstrated the downhill slide that Dad was on at the time. Our maternal grandparents, perhaps sensing that the family was in trouble, drove up to our house in a brand-new Volkswagen Beetle. Mom took one look at that adorable new car and asked for it. Honey and Gra, as we knew them, gave it to her. They loved their daughter very much and wanted good things for our family. Of course, the car was small, but as my sisters tell it, we crowded in and thought, at least for a while, we were just like the rich people in town. Two weeks later Dad sold it for a bigger

vehicle. He didn't tell anyone until it was too late. Needless to say, that did not go over well.

At one point we had a Mach 1. (None of us even remembers who built those.) It was a cool enough sports car, but it had one major problem. It leaked carbon monoxide! If we were going anywhere, it was that dangerous vehicle that got us there. We did not have the money to fix the leak, but Jeanine came up with a plan so we could save face among our schoolmates. We rode around Columbia with our windows down and our heads stuck out of the windows for fresh air — telling friends the air conditioning was temporarily out. It is very hot and humid in south Mississippi in the summertime.

Regardless of what others thought, we believed the plan was brilliant and rode around town like it was a brand-new Cadillac. When we arrived at our destination, we girls had to primp and wipe off a lot of perspiration to look good. And we went to great lengths to avoid explaining what was really wrong with that car. Then there was an old orange Chevy Vega with no windshield wipers. We could not drive in the rain, and if we got caught in a storm, we had to stop and start according to the speed of the wipers and how well we could see to drive.

It began with Jeanine, but out of necessity, each of us drove before we were legal. People seemed to realize it was required in order for us to survive and live like normal kids, even when our family was falling apart. Being involved in school activities, in addition to household duties, kept us all busy. Our friends seemed to understand that we needed social acceptance in spite of the town gossip. We lived too far out for anyone to give us rides, so

Sheriff Pittman knowingly nodded and begrudgingly offered a polite wave when one of us drove by. He knew none of us were licensed. A good man, he checked in on us often at the house just to see how we were doing.

When Dad finally did seek help, it was about as crazy as any of our other escapades. The seven of us went off to Dallas so Dad could meet with a psychologist. Dad chose Dallas because it was far enough away from home that no one would find out he was at a breaking point (as if most people had not figured it out after the earthquake prediction). Dad, Mom, and the five kids squeezed into the car, along with two pet chickens. Yes, two chickens.

That alone proves how much we needed help. Imagine the noise and smell of chickens in cages in a small car packed with people? But when we cried about the chickens being left behind, Mom brought them along. This was her way of softening the blow of a long trip to Texas. She was hoping for answers from the psychologist and some direction for our lives. But despite the effort, our family faced a setback. Dad met with the doctor and proceeded to disagree with everything he said. One long drive to Texas, one quick appointment, one long ride home. Refusing advice, Dad turned us around and we came home, chickens and all. This was when he began drinking, taking pills, and becoming increasingly depressed. A once effervescent man now sat and watched soap operas all day. No more chasing dreams . . . just hours in front of the television smoking filterless Camel cigarettes.

There were other prophetic proclamations, but nobody listened. Within the family, we did not really talk about it. Mom

feared Zeno, but she feared God even more, and deep inside she was afraid of being punished for dishonoring her husband or his calling. For his part, Zeno used the Bible to back up what he was saying, and that silenced us. We went to church, but obviously, our church activity did not match our home life. Mom could not shake the possibility that if God really was calling her husband to do these things, she might suffer greatly. So she stayed with him all those years when she probably should have fled.

Jeanine was old enough to have seen and heard it all. Being the oldest sibling had its share of unique problems. Once when a date brought her home too late, Dad marched outside and shot his pistol in the air to make his point. Words were not needed. His message was clear. When my sister did something wrong, as all teenagers do, we had to sit in a circle around her and Dad, and listen to a long lecture. Zeno believed in corporal punishment. My older siblings remembered whippings and verbal abuse, which together caused each to fear our dad. He was out of my life before that ever happened to me.

As I grew older, my father's struggles with fidelity became clear to me. He was charming enough to surround himself with younger, beautiful women. Of course, this made my mom try to look better. She took diet pills to lose weight and ended up hospitalized. She took black "mollies" to give her the energy to get her work done and suppress her appetite so she could look her best for her husband. To this day, my sisters and I all have some level of white-coat anxiety when we visit a doctor. It goes back to the day my mom was rushed to the hospital and the thought of losing her was too much for me to handle.

Zeno's womanizing finally did in his marriage to Mom, but the ultimate deal breaker was polygamy. He came home and announced that God's call on his life was now to have ten wives. Yes, ten wives! One woman had actually agreed to his proposal to move in with our family and bring her children into our home.

It was at this point that Jeanine had heard enough. She took a firm stand for her younger siblings and spoke to my mom in a way she had never before had the courage to do. "Mom, you have a chance to save six of us," she said. "If you don't, we are all going down."

Aimee was faced with a decision that had to be made quickly. Shocked by my sister's bold statement, Mom realized just how much her children had endured during the last few years and how this new crisis impacted all of us. The dysfunction had gone on for so long that we had lost sight of what was normal.

None of us really had faith. We struggled with what to believe . . . confused perhaps about just who God was, because of Zeno's slant on it. None of us were buying any part of the God our dad was selling. Despite this, when Mom realized she had to move out, find a new home, and support the family on her own, she prayed. It was an SOS prayer, a God help me plea that she was afraid of because of the convoluted beliefs of my dad. Instantly, in her heart, my mother heard a distinct message from the God of love. I will protect you and your children.

One word from God can instantly change everything. When we find hope, life is clearer and the burdens lighter. My mother did not understand much in that whirlwind moment that she surrendered to God, but she heard his message so clearly that she

trusted it instantly. This promise from God changed her with amazing precision. The new feeling had a sense of permanence, a real hope. Peace flooded her soul. Mom had the strength to do what she must . . . step out on her own by trusting a God that she barely knew, who made her the promise she most needed to hear. Mom walked out in her very own faith, clearly understanding why she had to go, if not where.

It would be nice to say that life got easier for us, but it did not. Taking that first step forward was every bit as hard for her and the children as anyone could imagine. But to start living a life on purpose often just means putting one foot in front of the other and taking one day at a time. There are some seasons in life when simply surviving is a purpose. Doing what you have to do for a while can be the only vision in front of you. After a childhood of witnessing purposeless living, though I didn't realize it at the time, Mom's faith to do what had to be done was the first real lesson in life on purpose.

Life On Purpose

Three

People with Passion

Hindsight truly is 20/20. It's funny how we can look back at tough situations faced many years earlier and realize it was all part of God's plan. Few of us could see it at the time. My seemingly crazy circumstances long ago were part of the lesson plans of a loving God, which built a solid foundation. Over the years it helped me grow stronger. If at times my mom and siblings wondered where God was in our circumstances, now it is crystal clear to me how he was at work.

Yes, some of my childhood lessons were really hard. It is crucial when we reflect on the past, however, to see things from the proper perspective. Otherwise how can what we learn be put to use? If we use what we learn for our personal benefit and to help others grow, we are the evidence that God is not just at work in our lives but in the lives of others. We glorify him by unselfishly sharing our stories. In other words, we are better stewards of God's goodness when we use our stories to

encourage others.

One of my most important life lessons was taught by Mr. Elmo, a gruff old horse trainer whom God inserted into my life one hot, humid Mississippi afternoon during my teenage years. Someone once told me that when the student is ready, a teacher appears.

Stepmother number eight (Mimi, the headbanger) was not all bad. She was wealthy, which is probably why Zeno married her, and she owned horses that God used to juxtapose my life with Mr. Elmo's. I had no clue that the crossing of our paths would prove necessary for me to experience one very important principle of a life on purpose: If you want something you have to ask for it.

Asking is especially important if you do not know what you're doing. And I knew absolutely nothing about horses. But when my stepmother fell ill and stayed that way, I grew concerned about the two beautiful Arabians she had stabled nearby. She made it clear these were well-bred animals with potent bloodlines. Someone needed to care for them, and since I was an outdoor enthusiast, that someone was me.

Both horses were in a barn where their basic needs were taken care of, but instinctively I knew they needed more. The stables were out in the country, down a steep red-clay drive. One Monday morning, turning off the paved state road, I drove down to the barn and strutted in, wearing new boots purchased for the occasion. After finding the correct stall numbers, I introduced myself to those two Arabians and began to imitate the horse whisperer.

In my youthful and blissful ignorance, the experience of having watched a Robert Redford movie and a few westerns seemed sufficient to take care of two purebred Arabians. How hard could it be? Hollywood made riding look easy. While the horses were easy to fall in love with, obviously I had no idea how to care for them. Scampering about and acting like a cowgirl was pretty easy, even if it made me look inept. Clean the stalls, brush them, pet them, and pick up ideas here and there, simply by watching others who were in and out of the barn. It seemed to work. The horses never complained.

To me, Mr. Elmo was scary. He was an experienced trainer for several racehorses that lived in our barn. He seemed ancient and had an angry scowl that caused me to take the long way around the stalls to avoid getting anywhere near him. If looks could kill, just one glance from Mr. Elmo could have had me on the ground. Just driving up to the barn seemed to anger him. In fact, it seemed that he avoided me like I avoided him.

Day after day, I did nothing right. Experienced people in the barn must have recognized my inadequacy. Refusing to acknowledge it myself, nobody offered any helpful suggestions. It was a predictable cycle that went on for weeks. Then one beautiful spring morning, badly wanting to take my first trail ride alone, I had to saddle and bridle the horse and get ready correctly rather than risk a terrible injury.

It took everything in me to do the unthinkable, but humbly approaching that old man, I asked, "Mr. Elmo, would you please help me?" For the first time, our eyes met as he turned toward me and said, "Good God, girl, I thought you would never ask. I was

afraid you were going to kill yourself!”

A little later, after the ride of my life, guess who waited at the barn to make sure I made it back safely. Mr. Elmo never said a critical word, though he was probably thinking of many. He just smiled and asked if I enjoyed my ride. That humbling moment and simple request for help started a two-year journey of learning from a man who knew what he was doing and was more than willing to teach me. The once-feared-and-deliberately-avoided Mr. Elmo became my teacher and friend. Maybe the biggest and best lesson was what I learned from his silence—what he did not do or say until asked. Pride can mask your ineptness but cannot teach you anything useful.

My cockiness, born of my ignorance, was replaced by the humility to ask for help. It taught me that if you want or need something, just ask someone who knows. Mr. Elmo would have likely been kind from day one. But my arrogance was obvious to him, and he needed me to admit I needed his help. Mr. Elmo taught me that you have to be teachable, and he confirmed the old saying that if you are ready to learn, a teacher appears.

After getting to be a pretty good rider, my developing skills gave me confidence to enter a few horse shows and rodeos. One weekend, my stepmother and my dad came and rooted us on. My barrel racing never resulted in a trophy, but it was fun to try. Many days in those teen years were spent riding off into the sunset, hours on end, in the middle of nowhere, through the hills of Lamar County, Mississippi. Sadly, when Dad’s final marriage ended, my stepmother sold the horses. Mimi, the Arabians, and Mr. Elmo all disappeared from my life like a vapor.

Mr. Elmo never knew just how much he helped prepare me for my future. If the experience of a teenage horsewoman swallowing her pride to ask for help was an early life principle, it came to the top of my mind again, years later, as that oft-repeated question about purpose weighed heavily on me.

One sunny summer day in 1999, just before my thirty-fifth birthday, I sat on the deck of our home in Roswell, Georgia, a serene setting that looked out over a beautiful neighborhood lake. My two children were preschoolers. As I asked God how I was to blend work with home and restart my career—not in an audible voice, but a voice heard by my heart—I felt God stirring in my soul. The stirring was so distinct that I took notes. He was leading me. There was no doubt that he asked me to write a book. A decade, a few reams of paper, and many rejections later, the book idea seemed almost unattainable. Questioning myself about God’s exact words, I dug through all my old journals and found my original post. Since then, I’ve continued to look over that sentence from time to time, just to keep my faith alive and continue to press forward.

Even with no experience as a writer, the calling that day on the deck did not seem unusual. It was like my approach to most things—somewhat backward. But my Mr. Elmo moment came back to me. I was determined to speak to people who understood their own purpose, because the answers were not just important to the book concept but also to my own pursuit of purpose.

When I told my husband, Fred, about this bold idea to write a book, which would be called *People with Passion* (I was even excited about the title), he responded calmly, “That is a great

idea, honey.” We had been married long enough by then that he realized there was usually a method to my madness. And yes, he probably thought it was madness.

While he did not really understand it, Fred gets me. So it was enough for the time being. Our conversation continued at about a hundred miles an hour about my desire to interview famous people everyone knew and who lived passionately in pursuit of their God-given purpose here on earth. Somewhere in the euphoria of my explaining the book idea to a loving but pragmatic husband, he must have asked just how I expected to get in to interview these people. So in my Mr. Elmo mode, my response was simply to ask for time from some busy and important people.

Fred liked the concept even if he thought the idea was far-fetched. He never mentioned that one of my biggest obstacles might be that I had never written anything. He helped cultivate the concept. People with Passion would be filled with stories about people who woke up every day absolutely certain of what God had called them to do. And they not only knew what God called them to do, they were doing it. Of course, the book would be a best-seller.

Together, we made a long list of people who could share amazing stories. Fred’s first suggestions were Millard and Linda Fuller, founders of Habitat for Humanity headquartered in Americus, Georgia. At first I thought the suggestion was mostly because he did not want to fund me going any farther away than absolutely necessary. But Fred had recently read one of President Jimmy Carter’s books, which included the story of the Fullers as

an example of men and women living in faith. The Fullers' goal was to eradicate homelessness. All I knew was that Habitat for Humanity was global and doing great things while growing every year. If this is how they think, I need to talk to them, I said to myself. Such huge goals had to come from God so they were high on my list of priorities.

We drafted a letter and put it in the mail. At the same time, a letter went off to Millard Fuller's great friend President Jimmy Carter, asking for a meeting. The latter sent a polite letter declining. But Millard Fuller called me himself and enthusiastically set up an appointment.

Next was Coach Bill McCartney. Fred was a huge college football fan and explained that Coach Mac had won a national championship and walked away at the pinnacle of his career to establish the Promise Keepers ministry, to which he devoted his life. Personally, this was huge, because my own father had not remained committed to my mom or our family. How could this football coach get men to "promise" to be good husbands and fathers?

For this topic, I needed to hear firsthand from the man who started such a ministry and movement. In the years of coming to grips with my own "father" issues, I realized that the fatherhood topic was near and dear to many people. Seeing pictures of stadiums overflowing with men of all ages, some on their knees and others with hands raised to praise God—made me hungry to hear more and understand what was happening in those filled-to-capacity stadiums. We drafted another letter and put it in the mail. The Promise Keepers said yes, and the meeting with Coach

McCartney was scheduled.

My weekly routine was to write letters and wait for a response. Thankfully, emails made communication much easier than if we had communicated only by snail mail. Many said no, but having the Fullers and Coach McCartney on my calendar helped get some skeptics over to a yes. The people who said yes were all amazing. Some of them, like Millard Fuller and Ruth Schnatmeier, have gone to be with Jesus. Others have retired from the national political stage. Many have continued to labor in relative obscurity, while celebrities like Jeff Foxworthy, host of the television game show *The American Bible Challenge*, put their faith on display during their very public careers.

Years later, *People with Passion* had still not happened, and many wondered why. Some probably assumed I had misunderstood the message that had been so clear to me on the deck of our home in metro Atlanta. As all believers know, God sometimes calls the unlikeliest person to do something for the Kingdom. Then he equips the ones he has called. That is me. So while I have had the chance to share my experiences with small groups and large audiences, and many have said, “Seems like you’ve had some incredible interviews! Have you thought about writing a book?” I always smile and think, If they only knew.

The questions are familiar, but the answers are too complex and difficult to give an answer. Many of the people I met along my writing journey were on their umpteenth book. Me—not even one. At times it seemed as if a brick wall had been erected that was impossible to get around, over, or through. Though tempted, I never lost sight of that original vision or forgot that journal

entry that morning all those years ago. Thankfully, one of the people I interviewed was a divine appointment from God to remind me not to give up. More on that later.

As I look back, it is obvious that when God calls you to do something, his timing goes to work in your life. A surrendered life becomes his to mold, and your wounds are his to heal. Was my faith tested on this journey? Yes, as was my husband's and our whole family. During one long season, we felt ripped to shreds. The trials we faced began a series of challenges over the span of a decade that would test our faith, fortitude, and the very fiber of our family. While I was traveling the country for answers about purpose, in hopes of writing a book that would change the lives of many, God was changing and shaping me. People with Passion never happened, but Life On Purpose became possible when my purpose was revealed by the journey.

Four

Know Your Nots

At the time God called me to write a book, I was raising two preschoolers, which didn't leave much time to travel or accept speaking engagements. To do so would mean going back on the road, and my commitment to the children was more important. Fred had a significant consulting practice, and traveled enough to be recognized by pilots and flight attendants. But we were struggling.

A year earlier, the New York Stock Exchange company that anchored my husband's consulting business had faced financial challenges and failed to renew his contract. Without this Fortune 500 client, finances got tight and our comfortable cash flow had a trickle. We had to rethink everything, including whether I should go back to work full-time. My freelance speaking engagements were part-time and manageable, and I knew that a lot of other speakers supplemented their income through book sales. That nagging What is your purpose question was a driving force

toward action, and Fred was encouraging me to work on the book.

Clearly, it was time. My career as an interviewer began, and what I learned from the first one was profound: To find out your purpose, you must know your nots! That is right. To know who you are, start with who you are not.

With Coach McCartney and the Fullers on the calendar, the third interview put on my schedule was with a relatively unknown individual recommended by my brother-in-law, Steve Townsend, who is well-connected in the college sports world. Steve's accomplishments are impressive, and he has known some of the world's most famous sports figures, athletes and coaches. He is a great guy, but we don't speak the same language. He speaks sports and is a statistical genius. I don't know any recent sports statistics, much less who accomplished what fifty or seventy-five years ago, or what mistakes were made by some coach in his game plan. Nor do I care. That means that after a hug, my talks with Steve were limited to how everyone is doing and sometimes his latest project. But Steve is also an accomplished writer and has authored several books. So my decision to write a book gave us something in common. Of course, it was easy for me to drop Coach McCartney's name. And sharing my quest for interviews, Steve was quick to offer an idea.

"You need to interview John Croyle," he said. "He will be your best one." Steve is quiet and understated. When he makes that kind of declarative statement, you stop and listen.

"Wow, okay, who is he?" I asked.

Steve filled me in on Croyle, the model of a man of faith, and I was immediately eager to meet him. Steve reached out to him and set up the interview in Croyle's home in Gadsden, Alabama, an easy driving distance from Atlanta. This would be my first actual interview. The time was set, and my pre-interview research was thorough and complete in preparation for our conversation.

During my drive to Gadsden, John Croyle called my cell phone and informed me that our interview would still take place, but that we needed to meet at the local hospital. A family member was there, and he would be spending the day to help. "But we'll find a place to talk, don't worry," he assured me.

It worried me anyway. My plan was well thought through. I'd read about him, planned my questioning, and determined the route I would like the conversation to go. With little say in the matter, I hoped for the best.

John met me in the hospital lobby, and as soon as I saw this giant of a man, I knew who he was. Some people have a dominant presence. John Croyle was one of them, and he commanded the room. He stands nearly six and a half feet tall with piercing blue eyes and a confident, magnetic personality. Everyone in the hospital spoke to him, and he knew them all by name. He reached way down to me to introduce himself, because he was at least fifteen inches taller.

We started by looking for a meeting room. We searched the halls together, but ended up in the cafeteria. Bustling with activity, the cafeteria was far from an ideal place. My cassette recorder picked up every bit of noise from those having lunch.

The constant motion around us was an enormous distraction. My facial expression must have spoken for itself, because John sprang into action. “I know it’s loud in here and hard to talk,” he said. “Let’s see what else we can find.”

Praise the Lord that he saw the fear in my face and heard the same voice that was apparently shouting, This is not what I had in mind. We ventured down more halls while John spoke to everyone along the way. Finally we found an empty conference room that was quiet and without distractions.

When he was five years old, John said, he watched his little sister die. She was three. They were at a funeral of a family member, and she had wandered away from the group. She was playing near some tombstones when he heard the noise of one that fell and crushed her. As anyone would expect, John Croyle was never the same. The hurt he felt from that early loss of his little sister was still evident in his voice when we discussed it.

As a boy, his dreams were all about playing sports. John was a great high school football player, which led to an exciting opportunity at the collegiate level. At the University of Alabama, John played under the legendary Coach Paul “Bear” Bryant on three Southeastern Conference championship teams that also won a National Championship one year. An NFL career awaited him upon graduation, but the opportunity to play professionally was not something that Croyle was sure about.

At nineteen, John attended a summer camp and felt that God placed a calling on his life to open a ranch for abused and neglected children. The tragic death of his sister shaped his heart to care deeply about children and help those in need or crisis.

That calling led to a struggle about whether to continue to play football. Other men might have rationalized that God's way of provision was making the big paychecks that could fund this dream of a much needed children's home. But this man with the larger-than-life personality believed in an immense God who had marked his heart with a clear calling.

John said no to professional football and yes to God. With wise counsel from Coach Bryant about following his dream and just twenty dollars in his pocket, Croyle put faith into action to start Big Oak Boys Ranch, trusting God to lead the way. As the deadline to buy the perfect property approached, John didn't have the financing. But an Alabama teammate, a first round NFL draft pick, contributed his entire signing bonus to the cause so that John could buy the real estate. The gift confirmed the soundness of Croyle's decision.

In the days after our interview, it was clear to me that saying no to who we are not is necessary to living a life on purpose. Though born of tragedy, John knew his purpose was to reach out and minister to troubled children. He could easily have taken another course, but he did not stray in the moment of temptation.

No one can do it all. If we try, then we are distracted from the purpose. If we think we are clear in recognition of our purpose, and we have a dream in our heart that is truly God-given, we must trust God to help us make it happen. That means we must reject what we are not and let God open a door so wide that all we can do is walk through it. John taught me that day the value of trusting God with writing our life story as we live it.

If we are called by him to a purpose, it requires that we

confidently say no in the face of temptations, opportunity, and the notion of greener grass on the other side of the hill. At this point in my budding career, the simple idea of learning to say no to who I was not made the day with John Croyle worthwhile. The concept to “know my nots” was transformational. It helped me focus on choosing wisely where to spend my time, and more importantly, where not to spend my efforts.

My time with John was a divine appointment unexpectedly set up by my brother-in-law, who was absolutely right with his assessment of the interview being the best. John taught me a lot that day. I can still clearly hear his voice and see his eyes. His confidence was not in himself or anything he accomplished. God used John’s unique set of experiences to teach him about that quiet trust in God’s will rather than his own.

Knowing my nots was just the first lesson that day. John was full of other life lessons. About halfway into our interview, he stopped, and an uncomfortable silence grew between us. He looked at me as if he had something else to say, but stalled. Finally, he continued. “Will you hand me all of that?” He meant my stuff—my portfolio full of notes, my pen and paper. Those were the very things that were important to me, and he was taking away my comfort zone.

After reluctantly handing him everything that was in my hands and wondering if I had lost control of the interview, it just made sense to me to submit to the moment. Feeling awkward, I decided the only thing to do was watch and wait. Looking down at the paper on the table, he appeared to be drawing. Quietly, he went about his own agenda for a few minutes.

Once finished, he looked back up and leaned in, making intentional eye contact. “I want to share something with you,” he said. “I see myself in you, I do. You are a go-getter, in charge and in control, prepared with your detailed notes and well-planned agenda. You are someone who can make things happen. That can be a good thing, but hear me out.”

He shared a pencil drawing with me—nothing spectacular, but the message was clear. He had carefully drawn mountains with varying levels of peaks and valleys. “You want to leap,” he said. “I can see it. You hope you can jump from peak to peak.” He went on. His index finger landed in one of the deepest valleys he’d drawn. He leaned in further to whisper, “It is here where you learn.” Let the valleys teach you. Also keep in mind, there is no leaping. That is not possible in a life of faith. You have to walk both the peaks and the valleys.”

At that point, I’d had more than my share of valleys, and the idea of more was a little daunting. Because of my circumstances in life, facing so much so early, I was fiercely independent. The strength John saw in me was as much about my drive for self-protection as anything else. My inclination was to act strong even when I felt weak. But Croyle saw straight through me. This big man who tackled even larger giants in life than those on the football field did not want to miss this moment with me as a mentor. It was like God gave John a word for me right there in front of my eyes. Forgetting my interview and my book concept for that minute, this time was for God, John, and me. John had something to say that would reach into the core of my being, and he was making certain that I did not miss one single word.

“You cannot lead and be led,” he said.

John was a man of experience who understood leadership. He’d played big-time college football and then said no to the pros in order to say yes to an awesome opportunity to follow God. He opened Big Oak Boys Ranch and helped raise hundreds of young boys to become men. By the time of our meeting, John was established beyond the boundaries of a humanitarian doing God’s work. He was a sought-after celebrity speaker with books about his experiences traveling around the country sharing and motivating others to make a difference. John Croyle learned and lived that delicate balance that few understand. And on this day, he was there to teach me personally. Little old me.

Being a leader is one thing, but being one who understands the importance of being led requires listening to God and being patient with his will.

“You must let God lead your life.” John warned me that the road ahead would, no doubt, be treacherous sometimes, and I would need to be real and even vulnerable in order to truly learn what it takes to live a life of purpose. “Be led.”

After our interview, I was eager to get home and list all the things to quit pursuing, including some I should never have pursued to begin with. Yes, pursuing purpose is not so much what we do with our life, as what we don’t do. Taking things off the to-do list became more important than adding more items that just made it a busy list. This was strategic thinking that made all the sense in the world, while making my course in the world straighter, narrower, and easier to navigate.

Over the years, there was something else that came from

those John Croyle moments. If we really want to know who we are, we must not fear who we are not.

No is a really great word to use. Saying no enabled me to dodge a few major mishaps in the years that followed. Even while “knowing my nots,” I nevertheless stumbled over myself many times trying to do too much. But there were fewer than there might have been, thanks to those glorious times when Croyle’s wise counsel gave me a measure of courage to say no to things that were not of God. It is always a work in progress, but we all need to become stronger at recognizing who we are not.

From that time forward, there was an emerging leader in me, softened in some areas and tougher in others. That fierce drive to be in control and to protect myself led me to make a big mess of many things at an early stage in life. But I was in my mid-thirties—still young! And inviting God to lead my life instead of leading it myself was perhaps the best thing I had ever heard. No one could take that step for me, but just knowing it was possible completely changed my perspective. Just as importantly, my experience and exposure subsequently taught me that the Creator places no time limit on us to make that change. You can let him lead if you are twenty-one or ninety-one.

Knowing my nots still required a huge personal commitment. In a world that screams 24/7 that you can “do it all,” we need to realize that “all” is not God’s plan for anyone. As life changes at work and at home, we are often required to recommit to that to-do list from time to time and to pare it down. Knowing who you are not certainly paints a clearer picture of who you are.

This played out for me over the years in important ways.

First, it was when my kids were in elementary school. One of my nots was the PTA. When those sign-up sheets presented themselves every year, it required no thought on my part. It was a predetermined not. Instead, my calling was to be a room mom every year. Being in meetings versus being in the classroom with my children was a no-brainer, and it is why that decision became easy. Being with my kids won the day every time.

Every decision has a cause and effect. We should not underestimate any one of those decisions and the direction that it might take us. The more difficult decisions often present themselves when friends want you on their team to join in their cause. This can be uncomfortable, and it is common. Saying yes can waste time with unnecessary distractions. Soon after the Croyle meeting, we were struggling financially when my friend Gina Ulicny approached me with nearly evangelical fervor.

Gina was always one to make a fashion statement. She wore mostly pink and glitter, with the perfect shade of lipstick. As friends, we were a match made in heaven, because my own personality is nearly as expressive. For years, she had been a top sales director for Mary Kay Cosmetics, with the pink Cadillac as evidence of her success.

She was always inviting me to join her team to make extra money and meet new people. “You’d be so great at selling and you can make such great money,” she would say with sincerity.

I knew she was right, and we needed the extra income. But after that first interview in Gadsden, Alabama, it was clear to me that my job was to tell people how to find their God-given purpose. It was an assignment from God. Who was I to argue

with God? Selling Mary Kay was not part of my life's purpose. Knowing that Mary Kay was a not gave me the courage to risk my friendship (or at least that was my unfounded fear) by just telling Gina the truth.

“Gina, I'm never going to sell Mary Kay,” I blurted out during a conversation one day. “I need you to know that it's just not part of what God is calling me to do. But I love you as a friend, and I will buy from you for years!”

Do you know that Gina got it? She was a sister in Christ who knew that I was doing what I knew in my heart was right for me. She did not ask again, and to my great relief, we remained great friends. But my decision had to be clear, or she would probably still be asking today (great salesperson that she is). These kinds of perfectly viable distractions happen to us every day, but we must be willing to say a confident no.

If you are like me, you have many little nots. Mine probably sound silly to some. Yours may sound silly to others. It doesn't matter. Energy expended on little things can end up becoming a very big thing. Some of my simpler nots were learned the hard way:

- Do not tell jokes, and if asked, say no, because I botch the punchline every time. As a speaker, sharing funny stories works better for me. And believe me, it leaves my audience feeling a lot better about me as opposed to feeling sorry for me because no one laughed at my joke.

- Do not discuss politics. That never led to anything good among my relatives, friends, or acquaintances. Instead, as a proud American, I do cast an educated vote with every election and keep up with the news. But it is not my cause, and it always leads to division.
- Please do not invite me to your party to use a hot glue gun as I don't do crafts.

You already learned that I am not a complainer, slacker, or a roller coaster. Those were nots before I knew about them. Disciplined planning creates a firm filter of solid thinking so that when opportunities flood into our lives every day, we do not have to think too much about how to respond.

It really boils down to this: If you are not going to do it with passion, then don't do it at all. We are not called to mediocrity. Ever. Only the things in life that require our best are the things that will get our best. Do not “nickel and dime” yourself through life. You are worth more than that. God calls all of us to run our race with perseverance. We cannot offer that kind of commitment without being focused on the prize—a life on purpose.

Five

A Vision Aligned

When God called me to write a book all those years ago, I could see it come to pass. I could see myself holding that published book and sharing my story as I toured the country. I assumed that it would happen quickly. It is easy to assume that if God calls us to a task and gives us a dream, it will be executed quickly, easily, and successfully with long-lasting results. Wrong. That is rarely the case.

If there is anything I have learned all these years later, waiting for that book to become reality, it is that if God calls us to do something, he must and will prepare us for it. Even then, it will not come to pass until the Lord knows we are ready and opens the door—a process that is on his time schedule, not ours. Spiritual growth, discipline, and learning are necessary parts of the process to ready us for moving forward. Setting out to write about others and their life stories allowed God to change me and helped me write mine. Each interview was a divine appointment

with men and women who said things that changed my heart and my paradigms. While I was writing about purpose for others, God revealed mine.

God wants us to dream big. Maybe because my dad was such a dreamer—convoluted as the dreams might have been—I was always a big thinker. My ability to dream big was therapeutic. If I could think it, surely it was attainable.

Other than the family trip to Dallas for my dad's psychologist appointment, travel was limited for our family during my childhood. Most of the time, we barely had enough money to make the trip from Columbia to Slidell, Louisiana, where my grandmother and uncle lived. The rest of the time we just did not have a car in good enough condition to make the two-hundred-mile round trip. Maybe that is why I joined the band in high school and played the clarinet (rather poorly). The band trip to Canada was reason enough. We took a Greyhound.

During my high school years, the oil industry flourished. Mom and my stepdad, David, were wannabe jetsetters. They invited me to tag along on a trip to Hollywood with a stop in Las Vegas. It was a dream come true. Bright lights, big cities, and a whole new world that exceeded not only my expectations but also my enormous imagination.

We were typical tourists. Pictures from the trip show us with the Hollywood sign in the hills beyond, at lunch at the Brown Derby, and on a guided tour of Beverly Hills. It was my biggest dream to meet Starsky and Hutch star David Soul. I was convinced that he would immediately want to marry me. Sadly, he was not at the Brown Derby or hanging around a Beverly Hills

street sign. Still, that dream continued for several years.

Las Vegas was amazing. The Dunes and the incredible bright lights of the strip remain vivid in my mind. My stepfather took Mom and me to a fancy steakhouse. He cringed when I asked for ketchup.

The California/Las Vegas trip was no arduous bus ride, but rather a sweet Delta Airlines excursion with a window seat. My first flight. The views are etched in my memory, because they were so eye-opening. It is hard to articulate the awe of seeing Los Angeles from the air, sprawled out endlessly from north to south until it ended at the Pacific Ocean. Or gawking at the neon skyline of Las Vegas from thirty thousand feet. These sights stirred the depths of my soul. In those moments, I wanted that life. It flashed in front of me as if easily within my grasp. My self-talk became, One day, I'm going to make something of myself. I don't know how, but I'm going to get back to this place and be a part of the excitement.

It took a little nerve, but when Mr. Allen, one of my high school teachers. asked about my trip, I did not hold back. "One day," I told him, "I'm going back to be a famous talk show host."

Mr. Allen responded positively and warmly. "I'm sure you will."

That affirmation meant so much. Someone in authority whom I trusted did not take my aspirations lightly. One little sentence spurred me on with a belief in destiny. A different response might have crushed me.

Vision is a powerful thing. Seeing the bright lights and a vast metropolis made me realize there was more in my life ahead than

working as a clerk in a small town auto parts store.

If ever there was anyone with vision it was the late Ruth Schnatmeier, founder of the Atlanta Day Shelter for Women and Children. I first encountered her when she traveled from her church in DeKalb County and spoke to our Sunday school class at Roswell United Methodist Church (RUMC), where we were members in the mid '90s. That morning, she shared her life's defining moment when God asked, "Ruth, when are you going to stop doing church work and start doing the work of the church?"

At the time, my immersion into church work was just beginning. A couple of years later, when I was drowning in it, God used Ruth's epiphany to teach me the difference and the importance of understanding God's priorities for his children.

Fred and I married in March of 1993. We decided on Roswell United Methodist Church as our place of worship before the marriage. The sanctuary was huge. We planned a small wedding. The associate pastor performed the ceremony at an old plantation house in downtown Roswell.

In December 1995, we bought a house in a neighborhood with a small man-made lake. Our back yard ran along the lake. Our daughter Reagan was one year old. We had big plans to teach her to fish, and we could envision her traveling about in our paddleboat. Steve, a handyman who had worked for Fred at his business, built a cantilevered deck as a fishing pier. He became one of our best friends. He constantly remodeled or fixed things, and he was an accomplished fisherman who patiently taught me. Steve showed me how to use stink bait to catch catfish. The bait was appropriately named.

A few years later when our son Rhett was little more than a toddler, the four of us were out on the lake in the heat of summer. With the nasty bait on my fingers and sweating profusely, I turned to my husband and said, “And I thought I was going to be a famous talk-show host.” God had a different plan. Probably that search for my purpose was gnawing at me a little more than usual in that moment. Fred reminded me that motherhood was a higher calling than rivaling Oprah.

RUMC was huge by most standards. Depending on who you asked, there were more than five thousand members. It was an affluent church with a dynamic, veteran pastor and an amazing staff of associate and assistant pastors who specialized in several ministries. Yet in that huge church, as basically a new Christian, I found a safe place to explore my faith and met mentors who were willing to guide me. So . . . a big thinker with no talk show and a sink-or-swim mentality . . . guess who jumped in head first? My excitement was apparent, and people noticed.

It started with Mother’s Morning In, a Tuesday morning Bible study for women with small children. The moms got together to visit and study while the kids played under the supervision of volunteers. After the program, most of us went to the playground with the children. There, God put me together with many lifelong friends. We still keep in touch as middle-agers with twenty-something children, and several of us are now grandmothers.

About the time Ruth spoke to my Sunday school class, and after I had been involved for just a few short months, my friend (affectionately known as “the other Beth”) and I were named co-

presidents of Mother's Morning In. Less than a year later, the senior pastor asked me to become the Director of Women's Ministries. It was a volunteer position, but it came with a lot of influence and responsibility. No one ever asked me about my background, and as a new Christian, my lack of qualifications concerned me. Unfortunately, willing volunteers are sometimes hard to come by. My enthusiasm and energy to get things done outweighed the fact that my faith was raw.

In the following months, everyone had my phone number, and none of them hesitated to call me to join this group and that committee. I even roped my husband into being my co-chair of the hospitality ministry. We had to recruit greeters to man every door of that church for three Sunday services each week to ensure that no one felt unwelcome. Then I was elected lay leader of the entire church, a position that landed me on boards and committees, not just at RUMC but in the district and the North Georgia Conference. The district superintendent encouraged me to go to Emory University to take courses to be certified as a United Methodist lay speaker.

Our family social life revolved around the church. At a weekly family supper at the fellowship hall, the district superintendent recognized my completion of the lay speaker courses and presented me with a plaque that read, "Beth Townsend, Certified Lay Speaker." The superintendent shook my husband's hand, congratulated him for having a wife with that esteemed accomplishment on her resume, and made the mistake of asking him what he did for a living. Fred's response was, "I'm a certified United Methodist lay listener." It was a good-natured

joke, but there was some truth to it. Fred traveled frequently for work, and because of my church responsibilities, we were rarely home at the same time. When we were, our conversations revolved around RUMC more than any other subject.

Very few people could walk unannounced into our senior pastor's office, but I could. It was nice to feel fulfilled and important. Being both wanted and needed was edifying. My committee meetings were often at night and required me to be away from home. My kids were little, so it was challenging. Significantly overcommitted, the family suffered the effects. How had I gotten so out of balance? And for what reason?

Perhaps the coup de gras was the district superintendent asking me to run as a delegate to the General Conference, an international meeting of United Methodist leadership from all over the world. A great deal of denominational politics were involved, and it seemed to them that I should be part of it. My job was already full-time with no pay. This added burden was too much for them to ask and unwise for me to accept.

Drowning in "church work" reminded me of the profoundness of God's question to Ruth. When internalized, it challenged my thinking and deepened my faith walk. My spiritual growth was rapid, and the church politics dampened my spirit. Then God gave me a vision to write a book to share with people how to understand and recognize his purpose for their lives. That seemed like the work of the church. Writing a book required me to move on from the church work.

God used Ruth to teach me all that. She was a role model, one of the most eloquent and classy women ever. She was erudite

and well read. She spoke with confidence and her own unique brand of southern charm. Every time we were together, she dressed as if she were headed for a bank board meeting, though she ran a homeless shelter. “These women deserve my best,” she always pointed out. All these years later, drawing from her strength and remembering how she never gave up, I am encouraged. When it got hard, Ruth dug deep within and drew upon the Holy Spirit to fill her and refill her time and time again. Due to her perseverance, many women and children have been blessed, finding hope in Jesus and a home for their families.

Ruth’s story impacted me greatly because our interactions gave me a greater insight into the difference between being a baby Christian and having a mature, personal relationship with God. Her story began years before we met. Ruth was president of the United Methodist Women at her church in DeKalb County, active on many committees and involved in community service. She recounted a meeting about a privacy fence for a church parsonage. As she sat in the meeting, God began to stir her soul in an unmistakable way, and she looked around the room as if God were speaking to her and she was trying to see him. Ruth, the people you are helping — do they really need it? She knew the answer. They did not. That day she started to wrestle with a new and different call to action. Then, while making phone calls to raise money for that fence, the Lord asked another question that loomed in her mind. Ruth, when are you going to stop doing church work and start doing the work of the church? This was the moment she had described the first time we met at our Sunday school class.

This admonishment from God was pivotal in her life. She examined her heart in search of compassion. What really hurt her heart were the homeless women and children who roamed Atlanta's streets during the day. There were numerous homeless shelters around Atlanta, but they were for nighttime refuge. In the hot, cold, or wet daytime, those hungry women and children wandered aimlessly, waiting for the evening when the shelters would finally open again.

Ruth's calling was to open a day shelter where women and their children could feel safe. It was to be a kind and friendly place with good food, a shower, a clean bed, job training, and health care. A place to get the help they needed to get back on their feet and become self-sufficient. It was a God-sized dream, and as she grew the ministry, he imbued her with a clear vision of the completed shelter. She was called to action for those who needed her.

Ruth went to the pastor for whom she had previously worked and asked for his help with the work of the church. He called the senior pastor of the First United Methodist Church of Atlanta, who agreed to let Ruth and a close friend open the day shelter in the basement.

"The room was small, but we put a sign out that said Atlanta Day Shelter for Women and Children," Ruth said as we met over a cup of coffee. "It didn't take long before people began to realize we were there because we loved God and wanted to share His love with them." Ruth told me how her eyes were opened to see beyond the women's faces to their needs. One was a nurse who lost her job because of epileptic seizures. Another had been

on the streets most of her life. “We all have the same needs,” Ruth said. “We all have the same concerns. It doesn’t matter if you are homeless or not.”

A year after the Sunday school presentation, as co-leader of Mother’s Morning In ministry, I had an idea to do some things differently. So “the other Beth” and I convinced RUMC to sponsor a weekly outreach at the Atlanta Day Shelter for Women and Children (ADSWC).

ADSWC had outgrown three shelters. They needed a large building in order to meet the needs of so many around the capital city, one that could serve those needs for years to come. The magnitude of the need truly tested Ruth’s faith, but God gave her a vision that might have frightened away others. Ruth was in the midst of a fundraising campaign to fulfill her vision when our Mother’s Morning In group took a tour of the new building she hoped to purchase.

Young mothers from one of the most affluent suburbs in the city filled the church van to see this future homeless shelter in one of inner-city Atlanta’s most indigent areas. We picked up Ruth so she could direct us to the proposed site of the new, expanded shelter. Ruth was excited to share her grand vision of this new building. Before we arrived at the site, we were totally sold on her hopes and dreams. What she described to us sounded amazing—sick rooms, after-school care areas, a dental office, all surrounding a large television room. Her enthusiasm was infectious, and we wanted to help make this a reality.

Then we arrived. The reality was startling. Instead of what we expected, we saw an old, dirty, dark warehouse with a

disgusting exterior. No one said a word. Like me, they probably hoped the interior matched the grandiose picture Ruth had painted. As we walked from the bus to the building, Ruth kept talking. “Over here will be the playground, and this will be where people park, and I’m most excited about the playground!” The smile on her face actually made me a bit uncomfortable. I was stunned at the contrast between what we were seeing and what she visualized.

It occurred to me that maybe Ruth was in over her head. When she opened the door, the first thing that hit us was the smell. It was the awful odor of rot and mold. The building was used by a restaurant supply company, and people were pushing fifty-pound bags of rice on dollies. Where Ruth saw a comfortable refuge for her clients and their children, we just saw rats. Big ones. We were all praying that none of the rice in those bags ended up in a restaurant where we might dine.

With me at the head of the class, our group of upper middle-class Christian women stepped over nasty stuff. We probably looked like snooty, spoiled women afraid that we might catch the black plague from one of the giant rats. If Ruth noticed our trepidation, she didn’t seem to care, and she didn’t slow down. Instead, she kept demonstrating to us what would be here and what would be there.

That is when it hit me. Ruth saw it! God gave her a very specific vision. She did not even see what we were looking at with such horror. Instead, she saw the finished product—The Atlanta Day Shelter for Women and Children—clean, shiny, new, and welcoming. God gave Ruth the power of vision and

now there was no doubt in my mind that he would use that passion to bring about exactly what she saw. Even when we did not.

A year later as we sat in her office at the beautiful new facility that was once a rat-infested warehouse, Ruth was transparent. The journey had been hard. There were days when she wondered how or if they would make it. But the ministry achieved its goal, and the new 22,000-square-foot shelter was everything she had visualized—a safe space for homeless women and their children. Fourteen months earlier when we toured that detestable building, if Ruth had asked for my opinion, my response would have been emphatic. “Ruth, I don’t think this building is a wise decision. It’s ugly, it stinks, and I don’t see how it could ever be what you think it can be.” But Ruth did not ask me. She did not need or want my opinion. Armed with a vision from God, a willingness to act in faith, a passion to pursue it, and the perseverance to overcome, Ruth had everything she needed. God provides what is sufficient.

Many people try to push doors open on their own time schedule and not on God’s. Patience is a virtue that far too many people lack. And impatient accurately describes me all too often.

My response to God’s call was to push down the door, with an unsuccessful result. A publishing group approached me, not about my book proposal, but instead about being one of several co-authors of a “sure to be best-selling book.” They sold it to me as a great opportunity that could help launch my writing and speaking career to new heights. The sales pitch reeled me in quickly. It is not that my chapter was not good, but by my own

admission, it was mediocre. Frankly, the book itself probably did not even rise to the level of mediocre. The publisher's pitch aimed at my ego and hit it hard. It was not a good decision, and it was even worse timing. It is a good example of trying to make things happen on Beth's time, not God's. This false step was a setback.

We cannot push, pull, hurry, or worry God's plan into the fast-forward mode. His timing is not our timing. Satan uses impatience to test our faith. One of the devil's minions sits on our shoulder and encourages us to rush to get ahead of God's leading. Then that demon creates the lie that the blame rests with God. See, you were never really called to write that book! Or What were you thinking, you dreamer. Just go back to your ordinary life and your ordinary job and your ordinary expectations.

Ruth Schnatmeier taught me that to achieve God's purpose for our lives, we must submit to a process. Though she died in 2008, her legacy is the ministry of the Atlanta Day Shelter for Women and Children. It exists because Ruth surrendered to God and exchanged church work to pursue a God-given vision to do the work of the church. It's a distinction that is crucial for Christians to have clarity about their purpose. My experience taught me that if it is not in God's plan, you are on your own. That is especially true if your plan is about you. Yet if he called you to it, you must wait until he opens the door. Waiting on God is always necessary.

In my impatience, wondering about my book vision and whether it was a delusion, I admit to throwing a few pity parties. There were proposals, queries, research about which publisher

wanted what kind of book, even a strong recommendation from a nationally renowned pastor of a mega-church with a personal phone call to his publisher. All that and nothing happened.

“God, didn’t you give me this vision? Aren’t I supposed to be doing this? I’m hitting a brick wall here, Lord! Do you hear me, God? This demon is testing my faith. And what about the impressive litany of interviewees living their passion? It seems to me that it was worth hearing about just to read about so many amazing people and the way you used their lives for your purpose.”

God could see the future when I could not. Now I can say, “Thank you, Lord,” because he protected me from myself by saying no until he prepared me. It became obvious when a trip home to Columbia showed me how my perspective had changed—how I could see things from a position of strength rather than sadness. In 2018, Fred and I drove to Hattiesburg, where my sister Lisa and her husband, Donnie, raised two amazing sons. We attended an engagement party honoring my nephew and his fiancée. Our drive from Baton Rouge to Lisa’s house takes us on the bypass around Columbia, but on the return trip, I suggested that we drive through Columbia. It had been a long time since I’d traveled down Memory Lane.

As we passed my high school, I could hear the cheering at those long-ago football games. I saw myself, the student body vice president, raising and lowering the American flag. As we passed our old house, I remembered fun times and Christmas trees, the kids’ Nature Club, and the trees we climbed. In my mind’s eye, the neighbor’s old ponies still grazed in the pasture,

and I could plainly see us as we attempted to ride them. Downtown still had its old small-town charm, and this time, maybe for the first time, I enjoyed my trip down Memory Lane.

Even our past has purpose. It is not like God did not see our lives during difficult seasons. He did not abandon us in our grief or pain. He was with us. It is tempting to bring glory to our past or to bring others into our current crisis. Every family has some level of dysfunction. Most people create their own cycle of dysfunction through sin. If we learn from our past by talking about real life with a plan and a strategy, God uses that to nurture us.

For so many years, my recollections of childhood focused on the hard times, uncertainty, and family crises. There were only occasional sprinklings of anything positive. Now it is clear that God knew it was not right for me to share someone else's story unless and until it was a part of mine. Before that cathartic trip through Columbia, it was impossible not to filter through the negative prism that haunted me. God saved me from sharing my journey and my stories until he helped me with the finality that comes with letting go.

When God gives us a vision of his plan for our life, we must surrender it completely to him. Let him have the vision—after all it's his. Only he can bring it about if we surrender and do the work. We do our part to plan and set a strategy through a foundation of hope in Christ. If that had been my approach years ago, I would have saved myself a lot of money, trouble, and sleepless nights. If our story is not his story, it is not ready to be shared. My big teenage dream of being a famous talk show host

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was all about me, not about bringing glory to God. That means I took the wrong road en route to my purpose. God knew that I needed his healing before he turned me loose to share my story or anyone else's, or to write a book that anyone would actually read.

Six

When Pain Becomes Purpose

Every day after school I routinely checked the mail in the Main Street post office Box 565. I was always filled with hope and joy when Dad called from Dallas to say he was sending a surprise. It didn't happen often, but when it did, I'd find an envelope with a little note and a twenty-dollar bill tucked inside. A little gas money or mad money. At least it was something, and I certainly needed it. But what really mattered was that Dad was thinking about me and was taking the time to send something in the mail, even though he was married to wife number whatever and living with a new step-family in Texas.

One of the most crucial seasons of my spiritual growth came nearly twenty years later, when I finally talked about what I called my father wounds. Now, I can thank the Lord for being the perfect father. But then, I only knew that many of my decisions resulted from father issues that led me to become too worldly for my age and caused me great pain. Roswell United Methodist

Church had a counseling center, which I had never noticed until I learned that it offered a Faith over Fear seminar. It was a day set aside to seek God by using breath prayer to focus on how the Holy Spirit could do a deeper work within us. Knowing that I had fear that needed to become faith, I was ready to attend. The Faith over Fear seminar led me in a new direction and touched my soul. In the middle of trying to deal with my past, Fred suggested Coach Bill McCartney and the Promise Keepers movement as a chapter for my book. The ministry for Christian men of integrity was committed to their families. This concept was the opposite of my experience and seemed too good to be true.

At sixteen, I met a thirty-two-year-old law enforcement officer. He was good looking, an authority-figure who made me feel safe. Not long after we met, we secretly dated, and within a couple of weeks, we began a physical relationship. I often met him at his home, hopeful no one would see my car. I felt so adult to be in a relationship with a distinguished-looking older man. A couple of my friends knew, but I went about my normal routine thinking no one else had a clue. There are no secrets in small towns. Everyone knew, and they were talking.

My mother found out pretty early in the relationship. She invited him over, told him to leave me alone, and said that my life was just beginning while his was virtually over. From my perspective now, the relationship was obviously sick and inappropriate, but at the time, it seemed to be what I needed. Despite Mom's objections and warnings, my infatuation continued, and I was willing to do anything to be with him. We continued to sneak around.

Several years after my parents' divorce, Mom married a man named David, who moved in with us in Columbia. The two of them went into the oil business, a growing and prosperous industry, and traveled back and forth between Columbia and an apartment in Shreveport, Louisiana. The booming oil industry afforded them an exciting lifestyle. They were like teenagers dating, always doing fun things. It was the happiest my mom had ever been. During horse racing season, they spent most of their time in Shreveport, so they often went to Louisiana Downs for drinks and to bet on the horses. A few times I tagged along. It was fun, but I was too young to do anything other than watch the horses and try to pick a winner. No one begrudged Mom her happiness after years of her life with Zeno. But in her absence, there was no one home in Mississippi to supervise me. Her frequent absences from Columbia made it easy to continue my relationship with the "older man." I was essentially on my own.

Mom and David also traveled for pleasure. They bought a boat, named it Wee-Go, and docked it in a nice marina on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. When the racing season ended at Louisiana Downs, they spent weekends on the water, fishing and making friends with other boaters. They invited me, but a cool high school girl does not spend weekends on a boat with her mom and stepdad. They often went to New Orleans to visit and shop. Sometimes they came back to Columbia after a trip to Schwegmann's, a huge New Orleans supermarket like nothing I'd ever seen in small-town Mississippi. David was an adventurous cook, so they enjoyed trying new recipes and inviting people over to enjoy his newest culinary inventions. It

was always fun when they were home.

One of David's sons lived with us just long enough to cook a batch of marijuana brownies, which he offered to my friends and me. We did not fall for his stupid stunt, because the leaves were visible. David's mom also lived with us, since she was dependent on others. Mrs. Clayson was old and crippled with arthritis. She used a walker and couldn't bathe alone or cook for herself. It was not in my heart to do much to help her. Instead, she paid a taxi driver to deliver food and vodka. When I think of her now, I see her passed out and hunched over a TV tray.

My bedroom was a finished, closed-in garage. When I was home alone, I'd often invite one of my friends to spend the night. One Friday evening, my girlfriend Mary Mac agreed to sleep over, which proved to be a godsend because something unthinkable happened that night. If everyone in our little town knew that my boyfriend was a cop twice my age, they also knew that I more-or-less lived alone. The man who invaded my home that night probably knew about the small, vulnerable teenage girl who lived there, and saw an opportunity to prove his manhood or demonstrate his dominance over someone.

About 3:30 a.m., I woke up with a man sitting on my bed. He whispered, "Get up. You are coming with me." He held a shiny silver gun that glistened in the dark, and I saw the shadow of a baseball hat. At first it seemed like a nightmare, but then he put his hand inside my underwear and firmly grabbed me. It jolted me awake, and I realized that this was no dream. My survival instinct kicked in, and I made sure to make a mental note of anything that might help me. My brain was recording everything.

Unidentified man in my room. Dark shadow of a baseball hat. Silver pistol in his hand.

Still whispering, he repeated, “Get up. You are coming with me!” Manhandling me, he forced his way behind me while holding my mouth shut with his left hand, his right arm wrapped around me with the pistol in his hand. “Don’t look at me.” He pushed me toward the center of our house. He cursed as I wrestled with him, and he worked hard to prevent me from seeing his face when we entered a room where there was more light.

Somehow Mary Mac was still asleep. My brain was working overtime. Adrenaline pumping, I tried to yell, but his hand covered my mouth. It happened quickly, and my friend remained clueless about what was happening to me just a few feet away. The kidnapper pushed me toward the back door and around the side of the house that opened on to a thicket of pine trees. Once outside, I sensed a deafening silence. We were headed into those woods. Fearing for my life, I fought him, grabbing on to the lawn furniture—anything to keep us from entering those dark, ominous woods.

By the grace of God, my muffled screams finally woke up Mary Mac. We were less than five yards from the woods when she came through the back door, yelling at the top of her lungs, “Beth, Beth, what’s happening?” The kidnapper, potential rapist, or possible killer had apparently counted on me being alone. Mary Mac’s screams caused him to release me and run. The neighbors heard the commotion and called the police. I called Mom. She and David immediately headed home.

This was a turning point in my life. After that, Mom did not

travel much and felt tremendous guilt for having left me alone. And I had not managed my freedom very well either. Only halfway through high school, I made most of my own decisions and not many had been smart. Now the victim of a sexual assault by someone we could not identify, I was scared. My mother was scared. The whole town seemed to know what had happened. People made accusations and spread rumors that I knew the invader. Believe me, I did not, or he would have been arrested. After the incident, it felt like everyone looked at me differently. No one really knew what to say to me. Every man I saw was a suspect. The school counselors unsuccessfully tried to help me through my emotions.

The town police were nice, but they weren't used to investigating serious crimes. One of them felt compelled to inform me that the invader might return, since he did not get what he wanted, which of course frightened me even more. Mom moved me to a different room and installed an alarm. This event had occurred in the midst of my "not-so-secret relationship," and he came to my house in a hurry that night. Since he was not part of the local police force, it seemed natural for me to seek his help. He followed me around town and often checked on me. Mom reluctantly agreed to let me date him as long as he would protect me. Everyone who knew us disapproved, but she felt safety was the main issue.

We dated openly for nearly four years. It was ugly when our relationship ended. He betrayed me, and I was heartbroken. I'd given this man so much of myself, physically, mentally, and emotionally. Yet when things got tough, he did not treat me like a

real man should treat a woman. I was deeply disappointed, because I expected more maturity from someone who was much older.

Not long after the assault, Mom's marriage started to fall apart. The oil business took a nosedive and finally went bankrupt. Mom and David separated, but he was in and out of our lives. One night he came into our house totally drunk. In a fit of anger, I told him to leave. Even though I was just a kid, he knew I meant business. With no job, no money, no marriage, and a broken heart, Mom was desperate. My sister Dianne lived in Virginia and offered Mom a new start there, working as an apartment-leasing agent. No one questioned that my mother wanted to start a new chapter after two failed marriages. With few options, she quickly sold the house and moved to Virginia.

Mom's plan made sense but left me with nowhere to live. I was technically an adult, and whether I was ready or not, it was time to grow up. Even though home represented an unstable and sometimes unhappy place, the idea of no home was frightening. I was about to graduate from high school, and like most of my friends, I'd been accepted to the University of Southern Mississippi. I went about my college plans in a daze, as if nothing had happened.

Dad's eighth wife divorced him. He moved from Dallas back to Hattiesburg, Mississippi, and married for the final time to Mimi. He offered to pay for my college, but based on past history, I should have known better than to believe him. Even so, I moved into Panhellenic Dorm on the USM campus with a great roommate, and like my older sisters, I pledged Kappa Delta and

started making new friends. I was having a great experience. Though nervously hopeful that Dad would make good on his promise, deep down I sensed that my time as a coed was limited. When Dad failed to pay for school, the USM officials quietly asked me to move out of the dorm. With Mom in Virginia and my childhood home no longer an option, I had no choice but to move in with Dad and Mimi.

Uncomfortable as it was, living with them, my new job at the bank was going well, and I was promoted to head teller. This meant more responsibility and the keys to the vault. Not long after the promotion, a co-worker approached me one morning, clearly tense. She stopped in front of me and stood closer than usual. Uncharacteristically serious, she said quietly, "He has a gun." The customer at her window was robbing the bank. Acting nonchalant, I slowly looked over at him. In his hand was something that looked like a make-up pouch, which he calmly opened so I could see the pistol. I nodded as if to say, "Okay, I get it." Emotionless, he responded with a slight nod.

Turning back to Joyce, I whispered, "What does he want?" She locked eyes with me and said, "Twenties and tens." My response was loud enough that both Joyce and the robber could hear it. "I'm going to the vault and will be right back." I returned quickly with small bank bags of money and handed them to my co-worker. She walked over to the robber, gave him the bags and he calmly walked out of the bank.

The bank president, Dick Ainsworth, chased the man to no avail. In retrospect, it was not a smart move for a family man with a house full of kids. Dick quickly returned and took over.

We locked the doors and called the police. The bank was closed for a few hours. We looked at suspect line-ups at the police station. We talked about the event and learned from it, but never had a clue who it was or if he ever robbed another bank.

This was the second gun incident of my life, and I had not yet celebrated my twentieth birthday. It was also a second, unsolved violent crime that endangered my life. Now there was yet another man walking the streets free from any consequences for what he did, not just to me, but to others. Small wonder that I started to believe if anyone in this world was going to protect me, it would have to be me. Few men in my life proved worthy of trust.

Fast forward to my nearly idyllic life as a twenty-something property management rock star. The decade of the eighties was behind me. It was 1990. Living the upwardly mobile bachelorette life in Atlanta was a good feeling. There had been a couple of serious boyfriends, both older, but now mostly out of my life. I had my girlfriends from the apartments, an expanded roster of guy and gal friends from work, and an on-again off-again relationship with a new, rich, older boyfriend. Deep down, I wanted to settle down with an honorable man, and like most young women, my ultimate dream was the house with the white picket fence and a happy, healthy family. But there was no one on the radar with the potential to make that dream come true.

Then one night I met the man of my dreams—or so it seemed. My girlfriends and I were at a ladies' night event at Cash McCool's in Buckhead, a metro Atlanta hot spot where all the affluent singles gathered on Tuesdays. He was dressed in a

tailored sport coat and looked kind as well as handsome. He bought me a drink, and we talked for hours, tuning out the rest of the club. We danced to a slow song, and the physical attraction was mutual and immediate. The night went on—more drinks and dancing. He was a Delta Airlines pilot, single and very much available. He mentioned that he had an early morning flight the next day and told me the flight pattern he would take across the country.

When it was time to leave, he made a gentlemanly offer. “We’ve both had a few drinks, so let me follow you home just to make sure you get home safely.” I declined, but he insisted. He seemed genuinely concerned. Once we arrived at my apartment, he got out of his car. I thanked him, said goodnight, and told him I looked forward to seeing him again when he came back from his trip. “I’ll just walk you up the stairs to the door and then be on my way,” he said. Reluctantly, I agreed. Before I knew what was happening, he was in the door, and I knew I was in trouble. He was aggressive, and the more I said no, the more he did not listen. At some point, I stopped fighting, realizing I could not overpower him. He was not violent, just strong and determined. After he finished, he left, saying that he would call. This had been his plan all along. Not one thing that he said was true. This man of my dreams was a nightmare.

Of all the bad moments of my life, this was the worst. I considered myself a smart woman, but I’d been had. I had seen it coming but couldn’t stop it. I asked myself why I was too weak to say no in that parking lot. Maybe it was my deep-seated hope that a well-established professional man might have a real

interest in me. Maybe that had caused me to lower my guard and ignore my instincts. I had actually thought that perhaps he was the one.

The next day, I vowed to clean up my life, get rid of the wrong friends, and put my life on a different track. Burying the truth, I went about as if nothing had happened. But that night stayed in my mind, haunting me. For years, I never told a soul. The reason I finally broke my silence is not surprising. God did not want me carrying the burden of that night for the rest of my life. More about that later.

As the 1990s passed and a new century dawned, I was a wife and mother who had been following Christ for less than ten years. I realized that most of what I learned early in life needed to be relearned. My life journey started with a dysfunctional family. From there, I created my own seasons of dysfunction. Some of my experiences were not my fault. But the bad decisions affected not only how I viewed the world but also how I viewed God himself. My husband, Fred, was an honorable man who loved our family with every fiber of his being, one who worked hard and loved deeply. My faith was growing, and God was gracious and kind with me as I tried to unlearn many things.

Despite how far my faith walk had taken me, the terrible memories of abandonment, betrayal, threats, and violence at the hands of men flooded my mind as I planned to interview Coach Bill McCartney. The men in his Promise Keepers ministry were making covenant promises to be good men, better husbands, and fathers who loved and protected their children.

Despite being a believer, I was skeptical of Promise Keepers.

Could there really be a movement of men who surrendered to God? Was it more than a guilt trip or a need to repent? This was personal and I wanted answers from Bill McCartney. Why would a successful football coach who seemed to have it all want to start a movement like this? Men of integrity? Living lives of commitment to their wives and families? Given my experience, it was hard to believe. I wanted to meet Bill McCartney to look him in the eyes and see if this was real.

It surprised me that he agreed to the interview. His secretary called, and we talked about my book plans. We discussed meeting at a Promise Keepers rally in Kansas City in late September. I bought a ticket for the flight just before my press pass arrived in the mail. Neither of us could know at that time that our meeting would not happen as planned. The rally was two weeks after the 9/11 terror attack and I was too scared to travel. Coach McCartney graciously agreed to reschedule. It wasn't going to be easy to make this happen, but I was determined to meet this man. It would be an important step in healing from my past.

Our meeting finally took place in Orlando, Florida. While I was skeptical about men keeping promises, God used these circumstances to teach me that his word is always good. He keeps his promises, even when we fail to believe.

At the last minute, Coach Mac's secretary decided to not attend the Orlando rally. She was my only contact and without her, I was on my own. She sent my credentials and assured me everything was set and gave me the name of the head of security as my new contact. But the head of security seemed unimpressed

by my press pass. “You have an appointment to interview Coach?” he asked. Honestly, he looked at me as if I were crazy and said he would get back to me.

With nothing but a press pass and nowhere to go, I sat alone on the top row of an arena looking down at several thousand men crying out to God. I was crying too. With no Bill McCartney interview, my emotions went from anger to sadness to confusion. “God, why am I here? Did you call me to write this book? I went to great expense in tough times to even get here. I’m so confused, Lord, about all of this. Please help.” As one of the only women in that building, I felt completely alone and did not care who saw my tear-stained face and streaked mascara. I went back to my hotel in disbelief that I had come so far at such personal expense—all for nothing. Hoping the security man or someone else would contact me, I waited in my room, crying, until I went to bed at eleven o’clock. At 11:30 p.m., the phone rang. It was Bill McCartney. He talked about travel delays and busy agendas, but most important, he made arrangements to see me the next day during a one-hour break in his jam-packed agenda. Instantly, I went from feeling like a nobody to a VIP with a legitimate appointment with Coach Mac.

As we entered the executive green room set aside for speakers, Coach McCartney announced to everyone there that “Mrs. Townsend is here for an interview with me, and she has made a lot of effort to get here. I’d like for everyone to clear out so I can give her my undivided attention as long as she needs.”

When we had the room to ourselves, he opened with a prayer. “Lord, even as Beth wants to extract something here that

has redemptive value, that would communicate the Gospel, that would advance the Kingdom, that would bear fruit—we realize that apart from a touch from you, it’s just noise. Should you anoint this work, it could have redeeming value. It could go far beyond anything we could hope or imagine. We just put this interview and this book and chapter in your hands. In Jesus’ name.”

What a prayer to start our time together. For the next hour, I had Coach Bill McCartney to myself. I asked questions, and he opened his heart and soul to share his life with me. I was there to find out about men of integrity, but I learned much more. It was another divine appointment. It was obvious that Coach Mac was a man rich in faith with Holy Spirit-guided wisdom.

When he started Promise Keepers in 1990, Coach Mac was at the height of his career at the University of Colorado. His teams were conference champions from 1989 through 1991, his 1990 Buffalos were crowned National Champions by the Associated Press, and he was named National Coach of the Year, along with three Conference Coach of the Year awards. In my heart I wanted to know his perspective on that old nagging question, “How did you know your purpose?” I thought of my children (then ages 7 and 4) and how quick they were to say what they wanted to be when they grew up. So why do so many adults—at thirty, forty, or even fifty—struggle with their purpose as if they are still trying to answer the same question?

Coach’s Scripture-grounded answer was profound. “Proverbs 29:18 says, ‘Where there is no prophetic vision the people cast off restraint.’ They don’t try as hard. A man needs to

know what the end looks like. If you have a clear picture of where you're going, that is where passion comes from. Passion comes from seeing clearly. When you're passionate about something, it means you're willing to discipline yourself to doing the hard work of making it happen. That takes risk. With the Lord, we know where we are going and we know that God loves us. If we receive that love, he seals us in that love. We're supposed to bear fruit in that love and we spend all eternity in that love. A man of God has a clear picture of what eternity looks like because we know that there will be no more fear, no more heartache, no more despair. We know that the dominant expression in Heaven is joy. So when you tell me a guy is thirty or forty years old and doesn't know, that guy is not walking with the Lord."

Coach Mac knew from the age of seven that he wanted to be a coach. "Coaching is compelling. It's intoxicating," he said. "But it doesn't compare with the Gospel. What we are doing here, there is nothing like this. When you hear me speak, you won't hear a preacher. You will hear a reacher. How does a seven-year-old know he's going to be a coach? I did. God did that. When I worship the Lord, I worship him as Jehovah, who fights the battles before you get there. He takes me to Colorado and resurrects a program that's down and out. He uses me. During that time, he teaches me things about men, about principles. I had to go from coaching men to get the ball across the goal line to coaching men about the goal lines in life.

"The Lord put it on my heart that we would fill stadiums with men," he said. "I shared that vision with other men and we

all agreed to pray and fast about it. He birthed it in my heart. It was way beyond anything I could have orchestrated or facilitated.” Then he recalled traveling the country encouraging people to understand that God would show up if they brought men together in large venues. “He did,” McCartney said with a smile.

But Coach Mac’s vision gained a new perspective when he and his wife, Lyndi, heard Jack Taylor, a guest speaker at their church, talk about character. He recalled the convincing words that led him to resign as the head coach at Colorado.

“Do you want to know about a man?” Taylor asked. “Do you want to know whether a man has character or not? All you need to do is look at his wife’s countenance, because everything he has invested or withheld will be in her face.”

Then McCartney added, “He showed us from Genesis through Revelation that Almighty God mandated that every man bring his wife to splendor in Christ. I turned to Lyndi. We had been married thirty-two years, and I didn’t see splendor. I saw torment. I didn’t see contentment. I saw anguish. I realized this guy was saying that I didn’t have character. When I really thought about it, I realized I’d been selfish. Marriage had been mostly about my dreams. Lyndi’s stuff was on the back burner.”

This was the defining moment of his shortcomings as a husband and the wounds he had unintentionally inflicted upon his wife. Coach Mac began to seek ways to help Lyndi seek her dreams, and within a few years, God restored the splendor in his wife. “I’m thankful Lyndi stayed with this selfish guy,” he said. “I’m thankful God has a plan and showed me how I was missing

the mark. It didn't matter if we filled stadiums. What mattered was my wife's heart and dreams."

Coach Mac also talked about his role as a father. I asked about his daughter's well-publicized out-of-wedlock pregnancies. In 1989, nineteen-year-old Kristen McCartney was secretly seeing the team's quarterback. She became pregnant and decided to have the child. The father tragically died of complications of stomach cancer in 1990, shortly after the baby was born.

In retrospect, McCartney realized a great deal about himself in the role of father, saying he should have spent more time with his daughter rather than with his players. "If I had poured into her like I poured into my career, she wouldn't have had to go looking somewhere for affirmation, for affection. You've got to understand from the very moment she said, 'Mom and Dad, I'm pregnant,' I didn't look at her. I looked at myself. I have long regretted the fact that my precious daughter (my sons were all in the locker room with me) wanted to be in the room with me too. Even when I was home, I wasn't there for her. I was thinking about the next game plan. I was thinking about the next opponent."

As we talked about the number of young people being raised in fatherless homes, McCartney lamented that the children are "scarred for life." When I asked if it was worse for boys, he said they are scarred differently. "Boys are visual," he said. "When a boy looks at something, he gets sucked in. You cannot turn on network television without a scantily dressed woman. That's why pornography is a multi-billion-dollar business. Do you know what segment of society is most afflicted? Boys eleven to

fifteen—these young kids don't have restraints built into their lives. These kids can't say no. What the boys do with young girls age eleven, twelve, thirteen—they require oral sex. They consider it less than a kiss. The boy demands it. The girl wants to be accepted. She's insecure—just like boys, girls are desperately in need of a daddy, desperately in need of affirmation, a real man in the home, a servant leader, a godly man. A girl needs that so much or else she's going to get caught up in the competition of the culture and she can't hold off.”

Coach Mac was transparent. He failed his wife, his family, and most of all, his only daughter. Yet he had no shame facing his shortcomings as a man, because he was confident of forgiveness in Christ. Just as important, he wanted to share that freedom with men around the world. His pain became his purpose. As I pursued the common thread of people living on purpose, I realized that God sometimes uses our pain to lead us to our purpose, which then ignites a passion within us. You can't teach what you haven't walked. He had been down the same road many men had traveled.

My soul was nourished as I heard Coach talk about how a fatherless home affects women. It was as though he was talking about my life. I didn't share my story with Coach Mac, but God knew my heart would be softened. Through this accomplished man, God showed me how my life had been shaped by my family experiences. I was wounded by what happened to me growing up, but I never knew what to do about it. So many of my poor choices were simply cries to understand love and to be accepted and valued. At the time of my divine appointment with Bill

McCartney, I was trying to sort out my feelings. His wisdom helped me accept who I was instead of acting like who I wanted to be. I could become a happy-go-lucky-mom who adored her home and family, but the road ahead required more intentional work on my part. Certain things had to be exposed before I could be healed.

That night, my father wounds met my perfect Father. Only God could fill that void. Sometimes our purpose is born from pain.

Seven

Truth Brings Joy and Peace

Hollywood depictions of beautiful homes and picture-perfect families make the idea of “happily ever after” seem so easy. As a child, all I wanted was a happy home. As an adult, my goal was to marry well, break my family’s cycle of divorce, and have a home filled with love, acceptance, and happiness. Isn’t it the goal of every mother to fix what’s wrong in her family of origin by making it right in her own?

Because we are wounded, we want to become peacemakers. But we can’t do that without being at peace. We must deal with our wounds. Isaiah 53:5 says, “But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.” We can’t attain joy without first finding peace. Living life on purpose requires that we first uncover our wounds, seek and find healing, then receive peace, which allows us to experience joy.

Happiness is a daily choice. Not because we have a magic “happy” brush, but because we must believe that even in the hard times, God is crafting his message. That simple sentence is the hardest part of my faith. I’ve often asked, “How can any good come from that? Is there an easier way to achieve happiness than by simply choosing to trust God?” I want my faith to be real, so I ask the Lord to teach me to trust him even when the journey is hard.

Every Christmas, my dad asked for the same thing. With a sad basset-hound expression, he often made a one-word request: peace. Years after his death, someone asked me what I wanted for Christmas. Without hesitation, I said, “Peace,” as if my dad was speaking through me. It was a “wow” moment. I even told my family that I was beginning to understand my father a little better. He died alone at fifty-eight, never having found peace. My siblings would agree that he never dealt with his own woundedness. And he certainly never shared it with anyone.

Happiness was not only my goal, but it was also the only emotion I showed in public. Somehow, I believed it was the only acceptable way to express myself in order to have personal value or solid relationships. When I was angry, I worked out. If I was sad, I waited until I couldn’t hold the emotion in any longer and then cried by myself. If I was stressed, I prayed and hoped the situation would improve. Rarely did I acknowledge my other emotions.

This approach worked for me and my siblings when we were children. We didn’t know what to do, so we did nothing. We acted like everything was okay. The people in our town knew

better but went along with our act. So when I grew up, I wanted to be the peacemaker. I thought the job required me to paint everything with a “happy” brush.

Now I understand it’s not realistic to be happy all the time. As a child, I never learned to deal with my emotions. This reality hit me one day when I met a woman who confronted me about my “happiness.”

At my kids’ preschool in the late 1990s, I met Pam, who was a lifelong member at the RUMC, where I was a lay leader. I was dealing with self-doubt, wrestling with my past. I wondered why no one ever asked about my qualifications. Pam plainly stated that she didn’t like me, and we could never be friends. “You drive me crazy,” she said. “You have it all together, don’t you? You work out and have a nice figure. You have adorable kids and a great husband. Your personality is magnetic. You’re a great speaker, and it all seems so natural.”

I appreciated the compliments, but I also felt conflicted. For an instant, I thought she might be jealous of my position at the church, because I was a relative newcomer. Perhaps, as a lifelong member, she felt slighted. But that wasn’t it.

Pam challenged the very core of my being. She had assumed that I woke up happy every day and stayed that way 24/7. Stunned by her candor, I realized that I was cheating her and others from knowing everything Christ had done in my life. I’d changed so much and had grown even more, yet I was taking credit for the positive person I’d become.

It hit me like a bullet—I had been living a lie. God had done amazing things in my life. Anything good in me was because of

Jesus himself.

“Pam,” I said. “I’d like to have coffee with you one day.”

We met one morning, and I shared my life story. I told her of my father, our family, my failed relationships with men, and my days of darkness and sin. I didn’t hold back anything about the troubles I’d experienced. For the first time, I’d been honest with someone outside my closest circle of family and friends. I felt so free.

That conversation made me realize how healing that honesty could be. Pam then talked about her own life and we forged a great friendship. It was a lesson for me to be bolder about what God had done in my life. From then on, she saw Christ in me, not someone who seemed to have it all together. But this conversation could never have happened if I hadn’t already replaced my woundedness with Truth.

My commitment to peacemaking backfired on me more than once. Lisa and I were roommates enjoying the single life when our brother Lance again got into trouble and was missing. We never knew the details of his problems, but he always spun his explanations to make himself look innocent. This time we didn’t know if he was dead in a ditch somewhere, alive but in hiding, or locked away in jail. While we were worried, we had no idea how much pain that not knowing caused our parents. Every time the phone rang, we feared the worst.

Shortly after Lance disappeared, my dad told us to expect an important phone call. “Lance has knowledge of a murder, and he’s going to be called to testify,” Dad said. “You are going to be placed within the witness protection program.” We had heard

crazy stories before, but this got our attention. Apparently, our whole family was being threatened to keep Lance from testifying. Our dad was adamant that the call would come any day. We would get new identities, new lives, and new jobs. It was the only way to keep us safe.

Lisa and I were thrilled. With so much heavy childhood baggage and the last name Goss, the future didn't look great. Since Lance was missing, the scenario seemed plausible, despite Dad's credibility issues. Lisa and I began to fantasize about our new life. Her name was going to be Lisa St. James. It sounded so "Hollywood." I don't even recall mine. We planned our new jobs, dreamed about the nice big city where we'd move, and hoped we would be on a fast track to a fresh start and a stress-free life.

After the initial euphoria, however, we were scared to death. I'd already been robbed at work, sexually assaulted, and nearly kidnapped. Were murderers really coming for us? The glamour of the witness protection program wore off quickly, and we began to suspect everyone. We were constantly checking to see if someone was following us. In our daily self-protection ritual, we put tape on our car doors to see if they had been tampered with. We looked for bombs under the hoods of our cars before starting the engines. It seems crazy now, but at the time, we were panicked and did everything we could to feel safe.

Lisa was a court reporter for a prominent local judge, and she told him about our situation. He was well aware of my father's and Lance's histories, and he offered police help if we ever needed it.

At the bank, I kept an eye out for anything out of the ordinary. When a customer drove slowly around the building and then backed into the drive-in window, I panicked. “Mr. Ainsworth, this could be them,” I said. “The ones who are after us. These people are acting very suspicious.” He was always calm and he listened carefully. There is no doubt God had this godly man in my path for that crazy season. “Okay, Sport, let’s go see who they are,” he said. By then, another teller had discovered that an elderly customer had just gotten turned around.

Witness protection never happened. I went to a mall in Jackson with my then boyfriend, Greg Robbins, and heard Lance’s loud, unmistakable voice. Greg and I were shocked. My brother was laughing with a barber in the hair salon, a beautiful woman at his side.

“Lance?” I called out and looked at him with equal measures of relief and anger for what he’d put everyone through. While our entire family worried about him, he was nonchalantly laughing and getting a haircut. He didn’t seem to have a care in the world. I don’t recall what he said to us, but after a brief conversation, I called my dad. Me, the peacemaker at work, trying hard to be the hero and bring good news to this awful situation.

“Daddy, I just saw Lance at the mall in Jackson. He is fine!”

Dad hung up and telephoned the police. Within minutes, seven police cars surrounded my brother as he left the mall. Officers handcuffed and arrested him, and our fantasy of new identities and glamorous new lives ended. A harsh new reality set in. Lance had been in and out of jail since he was a teenager, but

this time he went to jail for several years. Lance knew I had called our dad, who then called the police.

“He is safer behind bars,” my dad assured me. But this was little consolation. In trying to bring my family together, I had helped send Lance to jail.

Lance was fifty-seven when he died of a heroin overdose. By then, he had tasted and tested freedom. Peace could have extended and enhanced the quality of his life, but like my sisters and me, he had “daddy” wounds. We all sought help on our own terms, and as we looked for spiritual healing, God met us where we were. But Lance could only focus on his hatred for our father and never learned to forgive and move on. My sister Dianne tried to help, but Lance would neither listen nor talk about the pain in his heart. No amount of love or forgiveness from my mother or my sister could bring him peace.

For a few months after leaving prison, Lance was high on freedom. But the world has many different kinds of bars to imprison us. When freedom wasn’t enough, Lance was high on drugs. Dianne welcomed him into her family, loved him, and helped him the last few years of his life. But even though he worked and earned an honest living, he never overcame his drug addiction. Watching him self-destruct was hard on everyone.

A few months before his death, Mom had a salvation talk with him. “Son, if you are going to be reckless with your life, I need to know if you know Jesus.”

He answered, “Yes, Mom, I know Jesus.”

Still my mother pressed him. “But I need to know if you let him into your heart?”

“Yes,” he assured her.

Lance’s lifestyle spoke volumes about his desperate need for peace. He accepted Christ and the Lord’s forgiveness. Ironically, what Lance hated most was that he had chosen to follow Dad’s example. Perhaps anticipating his own death, two weeks prior to passing away, Lance asked Dianne to help him understand how to forgive our dad. Dianne walked him through the process. On the day he died, Lisa said, “Maybe he and Daddy are finally hashing things out.”

You can’t hide what’s inside. People can say their lives are fine, but the Bible says, “Thus you will recognize them by their fruits” (Matthew 7:20). Lance could have made better decisions, but frankly, he sometimes preferred crime over honest work. Lured by the promise of easy money, just like my father, Lance thought the easy button really did exist. He could have lived a better life saying no to drugs, but he didn’t. He chose temporary relief over real health, which is spiritual healing. Thankfully, his family knows that he found Christ and finally has peace.

Years ago, shortly before Pam and I had that brutally candid conversation, I had to face my own woundedness. When Fred and I were invited to be pilgrims on a Walk to Emmaus weekend, I was already striving to stop hiding my emotions and unveil the true me. With baby steps, my husband and I were both growing in our faith, so signing up was a bit intimidating. Emmaus weekends are divided into separate men’s and women’s retreats. I’d never done anything like it, so I was a little fearful. Instead of looking forward to the experience, I tried to “self-protect” with planned responses to the scenarios I might face. I worried that I’d

have to recite all my sins in front of the group so my forgiveness would set in and become permanent. Had that been the case, I'd still be there.

As it turned out, the weekend was about learning to accept the agape love of God in order to have a better sense of identity and freedom in Christ. The agenda featured speakers with captivating presentations and opportunities to pray with leaders, meet with pastors, and spend silent time at the foot of the cross. Maybe you have experienced moments during Sunday worship when you squirmed in your seat, feeling as if the minister's message was crafted just for you. That was my Emmaus experience.

While the atmosphere was relaxed, the Lord used this weekend to help me dredge up an awful memory I had buried long ago. I had not told anyone about this sin, not even my husband, and had planned to keep it that way forever. I thought if I didn't mention it, I'd never have to deal with it again. But in his kind mercy, the Lord was clear that it was time to not only talk about it, but to deal with it. When one of the women spoke about her life, she mentioned an abortion and how it had affected her.

Around the room several women burst into tears. Not me. No, I wasn't going there. My emotions were under control. But as the weekend continued, abortion came up numerous times. I sensed this wasn't a coincidence. God was gently nudging me to open my soul and let him in to that dark dungeon I had remained locked for so many years. He didn't want me to hide my shame anymore. He wanted me to be free.

The fact that I'd never told anyone spoke volumes. The

thought of sharing my pain with anyone made my heart race. My secrets needed to be confessed and forgiven. Refusing to talk about it couldn't make it un-happen. If God was bringing this topic up so I could be healed, what would that healing look like? Would I have to share my story with someone at the retreat? Get up in front of the room and make an announcement? Could I say, "I'm Beth Townsend and I had two abortions before I was twenty years old"? Wrestling with this terrible truth brought me to my knees. "Lord, I've never told anyone about that! Now? Am I supposed to tell people about this?" In His loving kindness, he gently said to my heart, just share it with your husband.

I had kept this from Fred for a decade. Would he be angry that I'd lied or omitted something so shameful? I had somehow convinced myself that he didn't need to know. Each passing year had made sharing such a deep dark secret harder. Being more authentic was becoming increasingly difficult. There was so much I'd never shared with anyone. My "happy" brush was failing me.

These were tough issues. The thought of telling Fred something I should have told him before we were married made me feel angry, afraid, and sad all at the same time. Confident that I was being led by the Lord, I decided I'd just go home and do it. After praying with one of the Emmaus retreat leaders, I felt ready. Yet day after day, week after week, I couldn't find the courage. The thought of sharing this with him made me feel sick. I realized I was harboring deep-seated feelings from something I had refused to face, but God was pressing me forward toward healing.

One morning, I finally blurted it out. Standing in a hot shower with the curtain between us, I said it so softly it was almost inaudible. “I need you to know something.” As I spoke, the tears fell as though a flood gate had opened. I’d lost control of my emotions. “I had two abortions and I was date-raped,” I said. I finally shared with Fred those secrets tucked away in the corner of my mind that believed it was best to let the past remain hidden.

I said everything from behind the shower curtain, hiding my face the only way I could. When I finally emerged, we sat together in a big recliner and he held me in his arms. “Did he hurt you?” he asked when I talked about the date rape.

“Well, yes and no” I explained how it happened and how I’d never told a soul. I cried so much my face was red, as if the tears were draining some sort of poison from my body. They stained my face in a way I’ve never seen before, as if each year of holding them in had given them more power. Finally released, I felt so much better.

Fred was kind and understanding. He asked a few questions and we went back to life as it was before. No shame, no guilt, no condemnation. If only I’d done this sooner.

I recognized my need for healing and enrolled in a post-abortion Bible study. Still hiding my shame, I signed up at a church on the opposite side of Atlanta, where I could be reasonably sure I wouldn’t run into any of my friends. After all, I was a ministry leader, for God’s sake. I was sure to be fired from my volunteer job if anyone knew. I spent six weeks with other women who’d had similar experiences. We talked about the circumstances that led us to choose abortion. We didn’t sugarcoat

anything. We acknowledged that we'd killed those babies. Accepting what we had done was part of the healing process. Then we named the babies, prayed over them, and pictured them in Heaven. We bonded deeply, though I've never seen any of those women again and don't recall their names. This was my healing journey, where I had to dig something up in order to finally bury it on that cross where Jesus took on my sin. Opening this horrific wound was the first time I expressed emotions other than happiness. The fear of facing my sin had kept my secrets locked away for too long.

Before that Bible study, I was confused. Deep down, I was afraid I'd ultimately be punished for my sin. I had two wonderful healthy children, and I feared something would happen to them because of what I'd done. After all, it was what I deserved. I couldn't bear to think my sin might affect my children and my home. That was the real secret—my silent fear of punishment. I knew that God had forgiven me and had blessed me with a great family. But in my thoughts, God's grace and what I deserved were in conflict. I realized I had not forgiven myself. When I watched the film *Passion of the Christ*, I saw how Jesus suffered and died. The horrific way he took on the sin of the world helped me see the gravity of my sin and what he endured for me. It was a moment of truth, and when I was tempted to "punish" myself, I remembered that graphic movie scene. I often think of Mom's words when I'm stressed: "He took a stripe for you too, honey." He did indeed. Over the years, I've learned to accept that and truly be thankful for freedom on the cross.

Before the Emmaus weekend, I was good at keeping my

emotions at bay. So I'd never dealt with my past problems. That's why, for so long, I was committed to the mantra, "The past is the past. Let's leave it there." Yes, that sometimes makes sense, but I realized that the effects of many of my decisions were still hurting me. Many self-help experts champion a "get over it" approach when it comes to pain. But I never got over it, no matter how much I pretended.

The Bible promises peace. If you have Jesus, you can have peace. When we lack peace, we lack Jesus, because even as believers, we can choose fear over faith. The enemy wants us to be imprisoned behind self-doubt based on our sinful nature, not freed by the grace we receive from Christ. The struggle to find peace is an exhausting way to live, so you might eventually quit trying. When I look at life going on around me, I constantly seek opportunities to make everything better. That was my role in my family of origin, and it seeped into my family life as an adult. Dealing with difficulty is a necessary part of life.

Speaking out about difficulties and sharing emotions is a great way to be genuine with others. Let's use family dynamics as an example. When several strong personalities are living under one roof, dealing with reality is a must. Learning to accept one another and giving everyone an equal voice is an important part of navigating relationships. Learning to love one another is vital to a healthy family. Satan wreaks havoc on today's families by deceiving us into thinking perfection is the standard by which we must judge ourselves as parents. Social media intensifies this perception and leads to what I call *compari-sin*—comparing ourselves to others. Too often, we assume that others have it

easier. No wonder Jesus said the peacemakers shall be called the children of God. It's hard to keep peace, even in a family. Peacemaking requires that we deal directly with conflicts and not hide them.

If we attain peace in our lives, we no longer need a “happy” brush that paints a false picture. Peace opens the floodgates of happiness and joy. I once laughed out loud at a church sign that read, “If Jesus is in your heart, please notify your face.” Christians should be the happiest people on earth, yet many of us look so unhappy. At some point in the last 2,000 years, Christianity created dour curmudgeons who found outward displays of happiness to be irreverent, as if we should sing, “Joy, joy, joy, deep in our hearts,” without smiling.

The Emmaus weekend really advanced Fred's and my faith walk. The peace that exceeds understanding made it clear that the “happy” brush could paint a picture of real happiness. Maybe that's why I got so excited when I saw a flyer announcing comedian Jeff Foxworthy's upcoming appearance at a Christian school. The believers I had interviewed had shared many deep thoughts and painful experiences, but Foxworthy might be the one to demonstrate that Christian living doesn't mean giving up fun. Having a cheerleader for a “fun” faith meant I could hand Jeff a “happy” brush and let him go to work.

Trying to reach a famous celebrity is no easy feat. I reached out many times to no avail. This was before social media, so it was difficult to find contact information. It was like detective work. Through friends of Jeff's brother Jay, a request was made on my behalf. Months later, the phone rang while I was cooking

dinner. I looked at our caller ID and saw Jeff Foxworthy's name. I couldn't believe it. After all that time, he was actually calling me. Totally unprepared, I panicked and let the call go to voicemail.

Fred laughed at me in the craziness of the moment. I burned what I was cooking. "Call him back, right now," Fred said.

I wondered how I could have chased Jeff for so long, only to let his long-awaited call go to voicemail. It seems antiquated now, but before cell phones, people commonly used *69 to redial a missed call. So I hit *69. The phone rang and suddenly on the other end of the line I heard that famous, familiar Jeff Foxworthy accent. "Hello?"

I hesitated. "Hi Jeff. It's Beth Townsend. I just missed your call."

Funny from the start, he asked, "Did you just 'star 69' me? That means I'm going to have to change my number. I'm sure the pizza man will call me back too." We talked for thirty minutes, and he was practical and serious, as well as funny. I told him about my book concept, *People with Passion*, and he agreed to meet me at North Point Community Church, where both our families attended.

"I'm sure you don't mind that I brought my iced tea?" he said when we met. As we walked down a long hall to a small counseling room, Jeff was kind, approachable and genuine as he greeted others. We settled into comfortable, oversized chairs, and I explained that my goal was to shed light on how to be a happier Christian. Jeff started by making me cry.

During a visit with his mom, the comedian shared, she

brought up the subject of her death. Divorced from Jeff's father since he was nine, Mrs. Foxworthy raised her sons as a single mom, and she was the foundation of his faith. It's one thing to think about death, but discussing it with someone you love takes it to another level. Jeff was brought to tears as he recalled the conversation with his mother about her will. When she finished reviewing the will with her sons, she said, "I'll see you when you arrive."

"She had such assurance of their eternal home. Gosh," Jeff said, "I cried then, and again in church on Sunday. That line . . . what faith!" He fondly recalled his childhood. Saved at seven years old, he split his time between his parents' homes in vastly different environments. "Both of them had taught Sunday school, and then something just happened to my dad. He went on to marry six times. At his house there was drinking, smoking, cussing, and women coming and going. As a kid you just know when something isn't right. I never viewed my dad as a non-believer. He just wasn't walking in it."

Jeff said his sense of humor developed early on, making light of family situations and choosing to be happy in the midst of chaos. After his parents divorced, his family moved in with his handicapped uncle for several years. "He was a huge comedy fan," Jeff said. "He'd play records of famous comedians. I would memorize what they said and go say it to my friends at school. I learned when I was little that I could make people laugh."

Like his dad, Jeff worked for IBM. After five years, he wasn't happy with his job. A group of co-workers told him about a contest at a local comedy club called the Punch Line, and they

dared Jeff to enter. “I went and watched one week,” he said, “and thought, I can do that. I went home and wrote about my family. I entered the contest and won. I just knew, thirty seconds into it, this is it. This is what I’m going to do with my life. I wasn’t married, and if I was ever going to do this, the timing was now.” He laughed. “When I told my mom I was quitting my job, she thought I’d lost my mind. ‘Are you on drugs? We can get you help.’”

Jeff convinced his mother that he was serious and had a plan. Just five years later, he appeared on *The Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson. Deciding to become a successful comedian required a sense of purpose. “I’m actually doing what I’m supposed to be doing,” he said. “It’s not work. The travel—that part is work. But being on stage—each time is like the first time. I love it.”

We laughed together. My favorite part of the interview was a routine about rednecks in the Bible. “God loves rednecks too,” Jeff said. “The longest recorded conversation in the Bible is with the woman at the well, who had been divorced five times and was living with guy number six. If there had been trailers in the Bible, she would have lived in one.” It’s true that all good humor is rooted in some level of truth, and the fact that both of us had fathers who married multiple times made the humor even funnier.

There were serious moments too. “There are times when you’re not going to be happy because of circumstances that are real,” he said. “But I think when you are willing to let go, which is part of faith, you’ve got to quit praying prayers already married to an outcome.”

This is advice I hold on to even now. So often, I've said my heartfelt prayers, already committed to the outcome I'd prayed for. "Lord, please help Fred get that great job. Help Reagan pass her science test. Let Rhett get invited to that party that everyone is talking about this weekend." You know the story. It rarely happens the way we prayed it would, and then we wonder what is wrong with our faith. When prayers are not answered the way we want, it's because God loves us, not because he doesn't. He knows what is ahead, and we don't. He has the plan for our life, and we don't see the full picture. Often, he reveals only one small step at a time. We must be patient and let God lead, without running ahead of his plan.

"If you've been told to walk," Jeff said, "you don't need to see what is over that hill. You just walk until he tells you to quit walking, and then you go somewhere else. That is part of faith. You let go of the outcome. A lot of people get in the car and go to a job they hate. I think it's very important to do what you love, even if financially it's not the most lucrative. I think you have to realize what your gift is. Too many of us don't cherish that gift. I have grown to cherish mine. Passion is also part of fulfillment. I think that is why so many people are unhappy. They are not passionate about their jobs, about their relationships, or even their families. When I was a kid, I used to hear about that peace that surpasses understanding, and I never understood it. But now I do, because I have it. Love one another. If you do that, it creates passion. Passion is a real contagious thing, but to have that passion, you've got to slow down."

After meeting Jeff, I looked over my life to find humor in the

midst of the hardships. I discovered that it's not about "happy" or "sad" but about how you choose to look at life, to grow and mature in faith. Trusting God to teach us as we grow is key to learning how to live by faith. In the wisdom Jeff shared, I came to understand that a surrendered life is a peaceful one. It's the only way to find real peace, because it is born of trust. Letting go of the outcome when we pray means we trust that our Father is leading us where he can best use what we have and who we are.

Peacemakers fail when they avoid dealing with real life. It's not fair to overlook an issue because it creates sadness or anger. We must be willing to forego simulated peace and find real peace within our hearts and in key relationships and friendships. Jesus is our peace, our wonderful counselor, and the best model for how to live in a difficult world. He had no problem walking away from crowds of people and seeking time alone with his Father. He also carefully chose a tight circle of disciples.

There is no actual "happy" brush, but there is genuine happiness that comes from hard work and great communication with people. To find real peace, we must go to God to get to the root of our anxious thoughts and accept his grace. For a Christian in a relationship with Jesus, a life on purpose creates pure joy that surpasses all understanding.

Eight

Purpose and Provision

Eating out was an unaffordable luxury in my childhood. Mom or sometimes my oldest sister Jeanine prepared all of our meals at home every evening. Not only did Mom cook, but she enjoyed every minute of it, even after working all day. Mom was always thankful to be fulfilling the needs of five growing children. I don't recall her ever grumbling about the work either. I'm sure Jeanine would have preferred doing a more teenager activity, but she didn't complain. She certainly set a good example for her younger siblings. She did what she had to do: be a mama when our mama was working.

My mother's gratitude was a reflection of her attitude, and she passed it down to each of her daughters. My sisters and I view laboring in our kitchens as a blessing. You won't hear us complaining about such tremendous opportunities to take care of our own families with a nice home and plenty of food. We each share the gift of hospitality, because we remember where we

came from. Thank God we've all come a long way from those days of scrimping, now grateful for our godly husbands who work hard to provide for their families.

But the burdens of our childhood are sometimes difficult to shake. My sisters and I have raised our families and are beginning to enjoy grandchildren. When we get together, we laugh at the idea that we hoard food just in case there is a famine. Our husbands find it even funnier, agreeing that we have more groceries in our homes than Kroger, and that the warehouse food stores were invented for people like us. Without exception, each of us could feed a small army at a moment's notice.

"Why do you need all of those cheese crackers?" I asked my sister Jeanine.

She laughed and said, "Just in case."

Dianne has enough water and soft drinks to supply her entire neighborhood for weeks. "Have one now and take one for later," she tells her guests.

Lisa has four refrigerators in her garage plus the one in the kitchen. Walk in the door and her first words are, "Let me fix you something to eat!"

No one enters the home of one of the Goss sisters and leaves hungry or thirsty.

My mother viewed a trip to the grocery store as a luxury. We had to buy enough food to last awhile, because we didn't know when we'd have enough to shop for food again. The events after 9/11 and the ensuing months brought all of that childhood baggage back to the top of my mind. Fred's Fortune 500 client had disappeared. He had some success replacing the dollars with

several small entrepreneurial clients, trying to diversify from dependence on a single major client. But the tragedy of 9/11 meant many companies immediately cut their travel and training budgets, which threw Fred's consulting practice into a financial crisis. Simultaneously, his industry was burdened with a significant economic tailspin related to availability of consumer lending. Nearly all of his business's income dried up. By the end of 2001, we shifted from positive earnings to losses and negative cash flow.

We ran through all of our savings, and borrowed more and more.

Fred had grown up in a family with modest means, with a father who was laid off from work during any economic downturn. Therefore, my husband was determined to be a success on his own and to control his own fate. Being a flamboyant entrepreneur, he might be broke one day, but the next day, an idea popped into his head, and the money faucet just turned back on. So he never seemed to fear debt. When the faucet turned back on, the problem would be resolved. This time, no idea got traction, and the faucet barely dripped. We both now realize that God was using this season to teach Fred that he should trust God, not himself.

I remember crying on the telephone with my mom. "I'm so scared. I don't know how I'm going to buy milk for my children." She didn't have much money, but she sent me twenty dollars in the mail that day so I could buy groceries. Earlier that week, as I strolled through the Super Target, carefully choosing necessities and calculating my limited funds, I nearly threw a fit.

It upset me to see all the other moms with buggies filled with their kids' favorite foods and snacks. Then the pity party set in. Part of me wanted to say to them, "Are you thankful that you can pay for all that food? Your buggy is overflowing, and not everyone can do that." I wanted them to know how blessed they were. But another part of me was jealous because so recently I too had filled my cart to overflowing.

At this point in our faith walk, we were members at North Point Community Church. We were in an intimate community group, sharing our lives with friends who knew the truth about our situation. They listened and prayed with us, but they also gifted us enough money to help us pay our bills. No one ever claimed to be our special angel, but we are certain they all donated enough money to get us through. One day, we found an envelope full of cash in our mailbox, which kept us from missing a payment on our home. Thankful does not come close to describing the relief of knowing that there are people who will make sacrifices to help you when you need it most.

Of course, during my childhood we were on a tight budget. Our mom worked hard to provide for our basic needs. Her greatest joys were those rare occasions when Dad sent extra support money. She went to the grocery store and actually had "fun" buying things we wanted as well as what we needed. Even today, as we are about to eat, I offer a prayer of gratitude birthed all those years ago. "Thank you, Lord, for our food . . . not just what we need, but what we want." When my kids were little, I don't recall a single occasion that I was not thankful to be able to feed them. With every bite, I'd silently give extra thanks. "Lord,

thank you so much. Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

Our kids are grown now, but as I recall those tender moments, tears quickly form from that same heart of gratitude.

After that terrible financial season, Fred got a great job with a great company—but not before God taught us a lesson of humility and gratitude. Rebuilding our finances took a few years. As we were rebuilding, we learned about a Bible study called Crown Ministries, which focused on the relationship between money and faith. Fred and I had made many mistakes. My upbringing created a great deal of fear about money and not having enough. It became such a deep-seated issue in my heart that I could never really relax, even if we were financially comfortable.

Looking back, I realize I might have made my husband’s new job success more miserable than happy.

He was leading an operation for a large company, and I peppered him with questions daily. “Is everything okay at work? Did you hear from your boss today? Did you make your numbers? Were you able to solve that issue at that sales center?” I badgered him with questions that were not born in faith, but were immersed in fear. Even today, my fearfulness finds its way into our conversations. Though I’ve gotten better, the words sometimes escape before I can catch them. Choosing to live by faith instead of sight still requires daily perseverance for me to keep my mouth shut.

When I met Howard Dayton, he was the chief executive officer of Crown Financial Ministries. An internationally recognized expert on the Bible’s teachings on finances, he later

established a similar ministry called Compass. My approach with Howard was different from my other interviews. We met after Fred and I completed the Crown Financial Ministries course. I'd learned in amazement that the Bible addressed money even more often than prayer. The Lord knew money was an idol for so many of his believers. The Bible addressed it in numerous settings so we could choose to live in wisdom rather than foolishness.

Because of his expertise and experience speaking throughout the world, Howard was the obvious choice to address the bottom-line topic of God and money. Surely he could offer helpful tips on better stewardship. Again, I was trying to address a difficult topic with an easy set of answers. "Do this, God will do that." My oversimplified approach to the Howard Dayton interview was "God and Money 101." Get quick answers to problems I'd been living with for years. If only it were that easy. Information and applying that information are two different things.

I had attended a Christian Leaders, Authors and Speakers Seminar (CLASS) in the midst of our financially troubled season. Thinking I was about to publish a bestselling book and embark on a national tour, I wanted to learn from professionals how to go about this authoring process. Part of the training was about personality types and how they relate to one another. I'd taken similar profiles before, but not one that considered spiritual gifts and how our faith affects our interactions. The results from my profile showed that Fred and I were quite similar. I asked one of the leaders, "What does it mean if my husband and I are the same personality type?" After a brief discussion, one word took my breath away. "Debt. It means you will be in debt, both of you

making emotional decisions.”

I was floored. How could she possibly know the amount of debt we were carrying? It’s as though she had seen my bills by peering into my mailbox. And she was right. We were in debt up to our eyeballs.

Fred and I both “believed” good things would happen. He had a generous income and bonus package, so we were on a seemingly solid financial path. But once you get into debt, it’s hard to dig out. Sometimes the right first step in getting where you need to go is accepting where you are.

At the time of my meeting with Howard, I was mentally prepared to learn.

Our work was cut out for us, and we realized that we had to live within our means, not what we wanted our means to be. Up to this point, there was always a new car in our garage that we’d “bought” with a big car note attached. I felt I “deserved” that brand new car. Deep down, however, I wondered if it was a wise decision, but I recall that feeling of entitlement. After all, we were working hard and being good Christians. I believed God was going to bless us out of our messes. Rationalization is easy. We had precious cargo—two children—so we needed that car with its high safety rating. We convinced ourselves that we’d be able to afford the high payments.

All these years later, it is easy to see that meeting with Howard was more for me than for my book.

His passion for the children of God living within their means is central to living life on purpose. It’s a huge issue in our nation. According to nerdwallet.com, in 2018 the average U.S.

household with credit card debt had an estimated \$6,929 in revolving balances. Most of us are in the habit of buying things now, knowing we won't pay until later. This is dangerous. Financial pressure is a leading cause of divorce. Living paycheck-to-paycheck creates so much stress that couples can hardly discuss the topic without becoming emotional.

Growing up, I didn't know anyone who was rich. In our town, the people I thought were rich were simply comfortable. Everyone else was just getting by. I often thought how nice it must be to never have to worry about money. When I moved to Atlanta and took a job with a luxury apartment company, having things was a new world and one I learned to like very much. I got to live in a luxury apartment and hobnob with those who could pay the outrageous rents.

The company seemed eager to interview me soon after I applied. While I had a great job in Virginia and solid references, the owner put me through a series of interviews with the company's top executives. The process continued with a psychological profile and brief meeting with the administrator of the test. I'm surprised they didn't escort me out that day. After making it that far, I finally was scheduled to meet with the owner. I was told that he would determine if I got the job. Oddly, at least in my view of the work world at the time, my meeting was on a Saturday. And the other executives were at work too. So a Saturday was no different from a Monday. The owner was three hours late to the interview, but I didn't get upset. If he was the boss and owner of this massive portfolio of luxurious real estate in Atlanta, he could pretty much do what he wanted. He hired me

that day.

As I climbed the corporate ladder, the owner and I developed a social relationship. He would call me on a Friday and ask, “What are we doing tonight?” He had planes, boats, and lots of money.

I’d gotten good at including my friends. “Well, a group of us are going out to dinner,” I said. “Why don’t you come join us?”

He always paid the tab.

My friends were spoiled to the point that they’d ask, “Why don’t you invite your boss?”

The odd thing is that he was by far the most miserable man I’d ever met. We had fun times, but he was never happy. He was demanding of everyone in his organization, and his greatest joy in life was barking orders and seeing others jump.

For the life of me, I could not figure him out. He had a daughter whom he adored, a beautiful home, a vibrant company, and a reputation as a brilliant developer. He drove a Porsche for fun and a Mercedes for work. Still, he seemed angry and miserable. I realize now that his wealth was not a blessing, but was used to manipulate people and buy loyalty. He was an excellent host, who threw awesome parties that attracted hundreds of people. But I don’t recall that he ever had one true friend. The man who was both my boss and someone that I wanted to befriend was alone in his huge mansion.

Money doesn’t buy happiness. When I was growing up, I would have argued that it would. If we had money, we could . . . you know the drill. Money and possessions are often the cause of serious spiritual issues. At one point in my life, I thought the

Bible was just about dos and don'ts, shoulds and shouldn'ts. Now, I know that direction from God is about love and common-sense wisdom. If only I had read the Word and listened to it earlier in my life. I would have made much better decisions. I'd have saved myself and others a heap of heartache. I'm reminded of a phrase from my favorite pastor, Andy Stanley: "Knowing Jesus makes my life better. Knowing Jesus makes me better at life."

Money is the main subject of nearly half of Jesus' parables. One in every seven verses in the New Testament deals with the topic. The Bible offers 500 verses on prayer, fewer than 500 verses on faith, and more than 2,000 verses on money. In fact, fifteen percent of everything Jesus taught was on the topic of money and possessions—more than his teachings on Heaven and Hell combined.

I knew that taking detailed notes would be imperative when I met with Howard Dayton. There was so much for me to learn. Growing up in survival mode did not lend well to planning, saving, or having emergency funds. That piercing word debt from the CLASS leader earlier in the year had hit me hard, because it was filled with truth and conviction. Someone in our household had to manage money better, and that someone was me. This was a second chance for us to manage our blessings with wisdom and responsibility. Fred worked long, hard days while I learned the skills needed to do a better job at budgeting and living within our means.

Howard's comments went beyond money to life in general. "One thing the Lord put on my heart was a high regard for

Scripture,” he said. “What Scripture said, I believed, and to the best of my ability, I tried to apply it to my life in such a way that it would be both biblical and very practical for folks.” The teacher in him presented the information in such a way that it was doable for the average family, which fit me perfectly. His approach made sense.

Ministries like Crown and Compass not only reveal Scripture, but counsel people on how to change their habits and align themselves with the principles of the Bible. The only way I know to actually change is with God’s help. Howard’s view of Scripture was refreshing, positive, and uplifting.

“We found everything about our study to be so encouraging,” he said.

Encouraging? The Bible? Far too many people view the Bible as a rule book, but Howard viewed it as a way to live a simpler life, with Godly principles as boundaries.

I was moved by how easily Howard spoke of hearing from God personally.

“I think there are a few things we should do to prepare ourselves to hear from the Lord,” he said. “It’s under the heading of spiritual discipline, which is very important for any Christian.” One that he practiced daily was time in the Word. “I have a list each day of folks and issues I pray for,” he said. “I meditate on one scripture a week. I put it on a three-by-five notecard and really chew on it. I think that is one of the most powerful ways that I can hear from the Lord.”

This made sense to me, since I had other areas of discipline that were an important part of my daily commitments—health,

marriage, and parenting, for instance. It made sense that biblical studies could be an area where we must apply the same type of discipline. If I believe in working out regularly each week to improve my health and reduce stress, couldn't I also prioritize reading the Bible?

Howard's explanation sounded practical. "There is a retreat center I've found, and I'm going to go once a week," he said. "Just take the Bible and a piece of paper and allow the Lord to speak. Whatever God is saying to you, I'm totally convinced God will direct you. Obviously, there are issues and times where you're crying out for direction. He will direct us because he loves us."

Being a good communicator was always a goal of mine, and Howard touched on this heart-issue. Communicating effectively is necessary for success in our physical lives. And it was evident that communication with God was necessary for a successful faith life, not just by reading the Bible, but by seeking to hear from God as I made daily decisions. Howard's intimacy with Jesus brought him peace in every area of his life. He trusted him as his Lord and his guide for living. Howard helped me understand that I could also have that type of personal relationship with Christ. It seemed so possible and comforting, so inviting.

Contentment is a learned skill. At age thirty-seven, as my faith walk deepened, I realized I had never been able to sit long enough to enjoy my faith. I rarely stopped to just "smell the roses." But as a wife and mom, I wanted to enjoy every moment with my husband and children. Being able to stay at home with

them when they were little meant the world to me. It was a dream come true, and I didn't want to take anything for granted. But the money issue had erected barriers to that peacefulness.

Many people who are flat broke are not content. Then again, many rich people aren't either. Adding the faith element brings a new understanding of how the two blend.

“When you look at Scripture,” Howard said, “the Lord brought into prominence unlikely candidates. We simply need to be faithful in doing what God has put before us, and he can choose if he wants to promote us or elevate us. The root is recognizing God's part. When you understand God is sovereign, that he has placed you where you are, that he's given you the resources he's given you . . . you can be content.”

These words gave me a fresh perspective. There is no harm in dreaming or having lofty goals, but I have to stop and be thankful for what I have today. Enjoying my home and family, cooking a meal, playing outside, or getting dirty and silly with the kids should be fun. Date night with my romantic husband? Choose to enjoy that too. That is contentment. It is a powerful choice we can make every day. The same is true during difficult seasons of life.

Howard shared what he learned during hard times. “I do believe God allows difficult circumstances. I've grown so much during those times. It's those times when our faith is no longer fluff, that we find out if it's real. Some of the circumstances are initiated by demonic stuff. I don't question that a bit. But the Lord will use it for his purposes.”

My paradigm about work and money were rooted in my life

experience, and people can't just change those lifetime patterns of belief overnight. It takes work . . . no different than going to school for years to study a topic and become an expert. Even after years of study, we are tested to determine if we know enough to graduate. Success in learning new skills is based on one's desire to learn and persevere through the lesson. Sometimes it's a lengthy process, much like my experience with Mr. Elmo. Trying to tell me what I didn't know was not nearly as effective as waiting until I was ready to learn. This is crucial in how we live life. How we manage what we have and who we are determines so much. Inviting God into every aspect of our decisions is the ultimate wisdom.

After all these years, my husband and I still make mistakes. We've tried to be better stewards, and God has blessed us on many occasions, yet there have been seasons when I was so scared I couldn't sleep. But God has been faithful. Over the years, we've seen God move in times of need. As a child, our son Rhett had a hormone deficiency that cost us tens of thousands of dollars, and we had the needs to give him what he needed. Looking back on Rhett's life, I think it would have been so different had we not been blessed to provide the care that his pediatrician recommended.

Similarly, our daughter went through a terrible time and needed a significant season to heal. That led us to place her in a setting far from home, at costs beyond our means. When I sought solutions, my heart sank with every phone call. Our family was in a crisis. Our hurt was gut-wrenching. Finally, one phone call paved the way for answers. Fred got a promotion with a pay raise

that allowed us to take care of her needs. Right on time, God met our need. He does this often. Not because we are following all the rules, but because he has a plan and he loves us. Just as Reagan turned the corner to life-changing acceptance of Christ's grace, Fred lost the job and income. But we no longer needed that extra income. We had our daughter back.

Through the years, my time with Howard has caused me to think and rethink decisions. After all, each one has a profound effect. While God has given us free will to make choices, he also gave us his Word to use as our instruction book for life. It's up to us to understand just how powerful that free will is. It affects us and those we love, and it lays a foundation for our future. Money is a powerful example of how wisdom is more about love and protection than rigid rules.

Proverbs 16:9 says, "The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps." This verse could sum up Life on Purpose. My intention to write a book in 2001 was a good plan, but God had a bigger one. He kept me from getting out on my own and making a big mess. Instead, he led me to people who could teach me principles that I needed to learn. His purpose prevailed from day one. While I may not have seen it then, it is so much clearer now. Knowledge about money changed everything for me. As I grew in my faith, this became important, because every decision I made would demonstrate either my faith or my fear.

Often, my fear would demand that I back down, bound by the regret of past mistakes. At other times, my faith allowed me the freedom to trust God. The incredible thing is this: God could

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use either. He loved me enough to show me that I belonged to him based on what Jesus did on the cross and not on my own performance. This is when I began to understand the grace of God at work in my life.

Nine

Words Have Impact

“What do you want to be when you grow up?” Mr. Allen asked his students. In the estimation of most of his students, he was the “coolest high school teacher” ever, a good-looking man who loved to scuba dive. The classroom was filled with posters that said, “You’d better Belize it.”

Of course, I thought I was already a grownup. I was dating a grown man to prove it. So I was self-assured enough to ignore the “grownup” part and boldly answer his question. “I’m going to Hollywood to become a talk show host.” It wasn’t the first time he’d heard it from me.

Mr. Allen said, “I know you can do that.” At the end of the school year, he signed my senior high school annual: I hope all your dreams come true.

Mr. Allen’s words probably meant little to him, but they meant a lot to me. As seniors, we were trying to decide what we wanted to be when we “grew up.” Always a dreamer, I was

thinking big—and far away from Mississippi. My inquisitive mind was filled with questions about the world. Even then, I knew I wanted to interview people who had answers about life. From time to time, I shared my dreams with close friends, but affirmation from a teacher that I admired really meant something. In a quick moment, he validated a dream of a small, shy high school senior. His words helped me believe in myself, so I still think about him today.

That divine appointment with Mr. Elmo led to life lessons that helped shape my thinking for the rest of my life. Frequently I reflect on those days and how much I appreciate how Mr. Elmo understood the value of silence until speaking was necessary. In certain situations, an absence of words says more than the words would. His dirty old boots and cowboy hat masked his wisdom. But Mr. Elmo knew how to handle my arrogance. God's plan for me was at work, even at that stage of my life.

Not having a college education made me feel an imperative need to be self-educated, and it caused me to seek the right kind of people to mentor me. My passion for property management and knowledge of the job led me to become a public speaker. I could speak for hours about the relational side, balanced with the technical side, but always one-on-one, not in front of an audience.

Despite my enthusiasm, my industry, and the positive work experience, speaking to a group for the first time did not come easily. I'll never forget standing in front of an office filled with people, introduced to share about an upcoming presentation that I was to give in front of an even larger audience. Even though this

was a small gathering, the moment the host said, “Say hello to Beth Goss,” my throat went dry. I choked. My mouth opened, but no words came out. I felt my face turning red. My mind played tricks on me. I saw myself as an idiot. Who was I to think I could speak professionally to people who were much older?

I survived, but I’ll never forget the panic I felt on stage. Inadequacy. Fear. You name the emotional turmoil, I felt it. Yet several speaking dates were already pre-determined. I would be speaking, able or not. This moment was a cruel test. Could I, or would I, press through my feelings of inadequacy?

I did press through, though I’m always a little nervous and fearful when I speak. After deciding to go from secular speaking to become a “Christian speaker and writer,” someone told me about Florence Littauer and her training program, Christian Leaders and Speaker Services (CLASS), which was a highly acclaimed certification program to be a successful speaker in that market segment.

My research showed CLASS to be a well-rounded series of workshops by seasoned presenters, with an opportunity to be critiqued as both a speaker and writer. Besides the book work, role-modeling provided an opportunity to craft a message while there and present it to a small group for feedback.

In my secular career, I had learned much about business, but entering the world of Christian speaking and writing was new and different. My personality and disposition was to jump out there and get started, ready or not. While I had real passion for my faith, all I had to offer was an hilarious salvation story, a journal entry about God calling me to become a writer, and a vision that

this was going to be a “piece of cake.”

My high school teacher had been right to affirm my dreams. A you-can-do-it mentality works if there is a process in place to get where you want to go. I had the passion, but I needed a plan. Fred agreed that CLASS was just what I needed. So in search of the process, I attended my first CLASS event in Florida in 2001.

Before going, I researched the speaker team and was eager to meet Florence Littauer. I read every bit of information about her on the Internet. She was the principal leader and a prolific author. What a powerhouse she appeared to be. I was so excited. With so much to learn, the chance to be in such a fertile environment was exhilarating.

From the time I started working in professional environments, I habitually dressed for success, a practice that my maternal grandmother, Honey, modeled for me from the time I was a little girl. I inherited Honey’s sense of fashion and flair, with a lot of color and cute shoes that led to my own sense of style. Looking classy was a big part of my day, and it still is. You’d never catch me heading out for the day without the whole effort of clothes with accessories, hair, and makeup. If you look your best, you will usually feel more self-confident.

On the first morning of the conference, I dressed for coffee and breakfast at the hotel restaurant. Moments later, Florence came in, and she was all I had imagined. She was beautiful, confident, and dressed like a model. Getting to know her and learn from her was crucial, and I wanted to make every opportunity count.

Florence was a successful business woman with vast

experience. As she worked the room, greeting strangers, she exuded confidence. Without being overly aggressive, I wanted to meet her before the conference began. While I was considering what to do, she walked toward me and sat at the table just five feet away. Before I could speak, she leaned toward me as if we'd been friends for years. "Can you believe how people come to breakfast?" She discreetly nodded at the people who'd arrived in pajamas and slippers.

Florence, it turned out, was always dressed to impress. Her makeup and hair looked television-ready, just in case the lights came on and a camera focused on her. We were kindred spirits. What an incredible first impression.

We formally introduced ourselves.

By launching into a fascinating discussion over breakfast, she made our first conversation easy. I met other speakers too. By the time we entered the conference room, I had met at least half the CLASS staff. Being early and prepared pays huge dividends.

Florence's commitment to image was part of her identity. I'd learned in business that how you look will often determine how people treat you. But she was more than image. She was charismatic, eloquent, and warm toward strangers. As we got to know each other well over the next few years, she became my role model and mentor.

As a graduate of the CLASS program, I frequently attended invitation-only events. These events helped facilitate meetings with publishers, editors, and others who could help solidify a graduate's career.

Positive environments and words of affirmation are a

powerful influence in shaping a person for success. Unfortunately, negative words are an equal and opposite force that can break a person. After graduating from the CLASS program, my status with the organization allowed me to get appointments with people at the Christian Booksellers Association (CBA), who might advance my writing career. As usual, I did my research and identified the publishers who were interested in the type of book I was there to propose. With little time to waste at these conventions, I was careful to do my homework, making sure I would meet the right people. With my query letter and book proposal ready, I followed specific instructions, filling in the appointment times on the calendar with the editors that I wanted to meet.

Any novice needs a lot of guts to meet with these editors. Already on edge, you make good use of their valuable time by presenting the idea quickly. They don't have time to linger. I'd prepared and practiced my elevator pitch repeatedly in front of a mirror. I was particularly eager to meet one editor, but he was not at the booth at our appointed time. "No," a publishing house associate said, "he's not here. He's at the booth next door. Why don't you go over and let him know you are here for your appointment?"

So I approached him at the next booth. "Hi, Mr. 'Smith,' I'm Beth Townsend. I'm here for our ten-o'clock appointment." As soon as he looked at me, I knew things were about to go badly.

"What? I don't have time to meet with you. I don't know why you people think you can just walk up and meet with us." He grumbled a bit more and stormed about.

I apologized, though I'd done nothing wrong. I'd followed the protocol for making appointments, and he had overlooked ours. I went into the bathroom and cried. I went from hoping he was "the one" to make my career, to never wanting to see him again. Rejection is just part of life though meanness should never be.

I didn't cry for long, because I had another appointment. After quickly reapplying makeup, I put on my game face and returned to the busy show floor. Before my next meeting, I came across author and speaker Steve McVey signing his book *Grace Walk*. I'd recently read that powerful book, and I was excited to meet him. I told him I loved his work and how much I enjoyed his in-depth studies on the grace of God. He sat with me, and we talked for a few minutes.

"Thank you so much for reading my books," he said with such humility. He asked me about my book idea and wished me well. *Grace* wasn't just something Mr. McVey wrote about in books. He lived it. His kindness in that few moments helped me recover from the earlier bad experience and regain my determination.

Words are powerful. One man had addressed me, not as who I was, by including me with some undefined "you people" for which he obviously had great contempt. Another man of equally professional stature took time to talk with me and say thank you and good luck. Christian publishing is a business, and yes, business is business. Perhaps "Mr. Smith" had a bad day. Lord knows everyone has their share of those. In fairness, he did apologize to me later that evening, but only because of Florence.

CLASS had expectations of professionalism of the industry, and for that, I was thankful.

Later, I was the local organizer of a CLASS seminar in Atlanta. Fred and I had the honor to chauffeur Florence and her husband around town. We had so much fun getting to know them. My husband and I were a great deal younger than the Littauers, but over the years we used them as our example of what we might accomplish together in our own careers. “One day, let’s be like them,” I’d tell Fred. Being fourteen years older than me, he would retire, and I’d launch my career to full-time ministry, since our kids would be grown. I’d still be young enough to work a full schedule and travel, and he would enjoy coming with me to do things around the country. Now, we’re there.

At a CBA convention in Southern California a year later, I interviewed Florence. I’d learned so much and had met so many people because of her ministry. Her commitment to teach others all she had learned over the years was uncommon.

Florence began her platform speaking at just three years old. “My dad had me memorize the entire second chapter of Luke for a Christmas pageant,” she said with a smile. She accepted Christ as a child and fell in love with words at an early age. She came from humble beginnings, from a material standpoint maybe even impoverished. “We had no house,” she said. We lived in two rooms behind a store.” But she never lacked love and encouragement from her parents.

Leading Bible studies in her home started her ministry. Her first book was published in 1978, and more than forty followed.

Because she wrote many impactful books, it's hard for me to pinpoint one favorite. *It Takes So Little to Be Above Average* touched my heart. That message is so simple and true that it's profound. Especially impactful was *Silver Boxes*, which focused on the power of encouragement and realizing the impact of our words.

I heard Florence speak multiple times on the topic of words and encouragement. She always emphasized that when we speak, we should choose words as if they are gifts in silver boxes. The concept of being that intentional about the use of words changed my life. I'd always been a positive person. Therefore, valuing words already had a deep meaning in my heart. While my "happy brush" was a coping strategy, this new idea about words being "gifts" helped me to finally articulate why this positive mentality was so important.

Words should be used as tools to accomplish things. The Bible says in Genesis that God spoke the entire world and all creation into existence. Adam, created in God's image, had the gift of speech. God and Adam had conversations as they walked through the Garden of Eden. The fact that God created man in his image means that our words have power too. Our words matter.

It is important to use words filtered through godly wisdom as we believers speak to one another, or to non-believers. Many Christians miss the importance of this truth. Words are how we most effectively communicate and either build up or tear down. Speaking without thinking is the worst form of unintentional living, damaging and often destroying relationships. For those who make a personal commitment to consider words as "silver

boxes,” begin to experience the value of these words: “With [the tongue] we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water” (James 3:9–12).

We are all guilty and have regrets about something we said to someone we love. As a teenager, I told my mother that I hated her. She was standing over a vacuum cleaner, probably on break between her two jobs. I don’t remember why I said it. She had probably said no to something I wanted to do or buy. In my selfishness and immature anger, I said something hateful to a woman who had sacrificed everything for my welfare.

You can’t unhear words. They pierce like a sword. While I didn’t mean what I said, I could not take the words back. I don’t recall what was said before or after, but what I said then still breaks my heart today. My mother is a hero to all her children. Without her commitment to do what it took to keep us afloat, life would have been very different for all of us.

Unspoken words also have an impact. Fred has spoken blessings over our children’s lives since the day they were born. His unconditional love saw them through several challenging seasons. Even terrible mistakes did not keep him from believing in them. While there have been arguments and angry words on occasion, my children have heard the words we all long to hear—a father’s blessing. Both my son and daughter know that he is

unconditionally there for them.

The absence of my dad's blessing in my own life caused untold pain. Had I realized how "daddy wounds" might affect my decision making, I'd have addressed it much earlier, in time to avoid awful mistakes. Instead, I did what many girls in the same situation do—try to fill my emptiness with worldly promises.

From the time I was little until now, my mother has said to me, "You have wisdom beyond your years." Part of that wisdom came out of simple necessity due to the difficult family environments. Much too early in my life, I became street smart and was forced to think like an adult. For years, I counted on my mother's words. When I need wisdom, I still hear her voice and believe. Now, I realize that a seed was planted long ago to help me grow in godly wisdom.

Florence Littauer was a mentor who spoke life-changing words into my life. I doubt she would recall a lengthy conversation she and I had about personalities, but it is still fresh on my mind. I'd taken the personality profile and the results revealed that I was part sanguine and part choleric, which said I was a socializer who could and would get the job done. When the two of us were driving together around Atlanta, we laughed as we talked about those results.

"No, you are not part sanguine," she said unequivocally. "You, my dear, are choleric all the way. You are a powerful young woman."

Coming from her, a powerful woman that I respected and admired, her statement astonished me. That one statement caused me to think differently about myself. It helped unshackle me

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from the weight of my past and made me feel so powerful. Her strong sense of identity helped me understand that I too could have a strong sense of identity. Being able to watch and learn from her example over the years has been impactful and enlightening.

The wonderful world of words is best when we choose our words wisely and send them out carefully. They are valuable, like a precious gift presented in a beautiful silver box.

Ten

Faith over Fear

“What was that?” I asked, as if my sleeping six-pound toy poodle could answer.

His ears perked up.

Did he hear what I heard? I asked myself.

Then he laid his head down, and in seconds he was asleep again.

If only I could get over fear that quickly. Hours later, my heart was still skipping beats, and my eyes refused my brain’s command to close.

The violent events when I was younger, coupled with the various bizarre situations of my childhood, left me constantly on-edge. For years. I was afraid of many people and skeptical of everyone else. Being afraid was just part of life. More than that, fear was my friend. It helped me navigate circumstances to avoid scary situations and frightful people. My radar was always on high alert, my thought process geared to assess any potential

danger and warn me accordingly. My internal radar was sounding “beep . . . beep . . . beep.”

Fear and I were an excellent team for self-protection. Even during my early years in property management, when companies provided me with an apartment as part of my compensation, roommates helped me pay the bills. When I reached the point where I could afford to live alone, I rented a beautiful two-story apartment in north Atlanta, with a fenced-in patio, upstairs master bedroom, and parking out front. My own little place to live. I’d had enough roommates.

After working all day, coming home to the privacy of my own space felt good. Being able to pay my bills, cook my own dinner, and decorate how I wanted was a dream come true. I didn’t have much, but I’d accumulated enough to make my new home cute, cozy, and comfortable.

The first night in my new home wasn’t what I expected. I heard strange noises. They were likely just typical sounds of my neighborhood, but I repeatedly got up to investigate. This became an exhausting nightly ritual, with my watchdog poodle by my side, ears perked. Check the windows. Make sure the door was bolted and chained. Had I left my porch light on? Final checkpoint: be sure no one is in the closet. If I heard another sound, my routine started over.

Noises kept me awake for years. I’d had panic attacks, but this was a different kind of fear—post-traumatic stress syndrome from the home invasion ten years earlier. Every noise rekindled my fear that it might happen to me again.

How do you face your fears?

My niece posted on Facebook a cute picture of her son. They'd been out to dinner celebrating a significant milestone for her adorable three-year old. The reason for the party? My little man faced a fear today, she wrote, and we are out celebrating tonight. His dad and I are so proud of him. I didn't ask what fear he had overcome. It didn't matter. His parents helped him face something, and he did it. The sweet smile on his little face revealed his pride.

Many of our fears are childlike. Monsters under the bed or in the closet. Mommy whispering, "You don't have to be afraid," doesn't always do the trick. Childlike or not, fears are tough to face. Once, I had been grabbed by a real monster, wrestled out of the house into the backyard, and barely escaped the fate he had in mind for me. There was nothing childlike about it.

When I was living alone, my faith was barely skin deep, which gave me little to draw upon for solace. My nightly ritual helped, but the slightest noise wreaked havoc within my emotions. I prayed, "Lord keep me safe," but my desperation prayers helped very little. My nightly survival rituals continued until after I was married. After I was married and had children, I was just as fearful for my family as for myself.

I was born in the summer of 1964 at the height of the American Civil Rights Movement, only weeks after three young civil rights workers were kidnapped, shot dead, and buried near Philadelphia, Mississippi, my home state.

I only recall two events from my childhood related to the Civil Rights movement. One evening, my family drove by Columbia's quaint downtown square, with its prominent copper-

domed courthouse, as we'd done many times before. But this time was different. Dozens of hooded men were chanting. What they said was unclear, but it was eerie, making me fearful and wanting to get away. Later, Mom was driving toward our home with all five of us kids, down a dark stretch of U. S. Highway 98. Men were standing in a chain across the highway, their arms locked together at their wrists. She had two choices: either stop and risk our safety or keep going. She chose the latter. The chain broke and we sped by. To this day, we don't know who they were or why they were there.

The 1960s was an explosive, divisive, and dangerous time in the south. Many people died, including young children. Some Civil Rights advocates were tortured before they died. Thousands of others marched into danger, facing police dogs, angry mobs, and armed police officers who were often more intent on harming marchers than protecting them. Leaders at the head of the marches preached non-violence.

Ten years before I was born, Reverend Andrew Young, newly graduated from theology school, became the pastor of a small church in Marion, Alabama. He received his first death threat for encouraging voter registration for blacks. Marion was also the hometown of Coretta Scott, who married another young black minister, Martin Luther King, Jr. By the time of Dr. King's death in 1968, Young was the executive director of the Southern Christian Leadership Council, and had become one of King's closest friends and lieutenants.

When I met Andrew Young, I'd been dealing with my fears for years. He was a passionate Christian hero of the Civil Rights

Movement and was with Dr. King on the night he died. By that time, I was married with children and just as fearful for my family as for myself. Ambassador Young was no longer a young theologian and preacher, but was an elder statesman who had lived an amazing life as a congressman, ambassador, and mayor of Atlanta. As an international business consultant, he was instrumental in bringing the 1996 Olympic Games to Atlanta.

Despite my thorough research and detailed notes for our interview, my heart never quit pounding during my elevator ride to the top floor of the downtown skyscraper where Young officed. The fear wasn't the scary kind, like from the nighttime noises. It was the intimidating anxiety that comes with the anticipation of facing the most noteworthy person you've ever met.

Ambassador Young's assistant led me into his office, filled with photographs chronicling his participation in the Civil Rights Movement. Pictures showed him with diplomats and dignitaries from around the world. Silently I wondered how I'd gotten this appointment. I was just a mid-thirties suburban wife and mother. Now I was with an historical figure who worked side-by-side with MLK and was a trusted counsel to the president of the United States. Another divine appointment. Thank you, Lord, I thought.

Impeccably dressed, Ambassador Young was kind and approachable. After a few minutes of small talk, we were eye-to-eye, talking about Jesus, dangers we'd faced, and our momma's prayers.

Meeting him face-to-face made it hard for me to picture him

in the context of the civil rights marches. He was calm and peaceful, showing no evidence of anger. I wanted to identify the source of his courage when he, his associates, and their followers had endured those violent times.

The depth of his courage, I found out, was born of his faith. As a young man, he'd had a mountain-top experience. As he was looking out from King's Mountain, he learned to follow his instincts and be led by God. "When I ran up that mountain and got the top of that hill," he said, "I never doubted again that everything had a purpose. Trusting God with life circumstances became easier that day."

But I had to know how they stared death in the face when he and his fellow movement leaders bravely walked into such hatred. "Mr. Young," I said, "how could you do it? Go out every day, knowing you might be killed? The violence had to be scary."

"Dr. King taught us well," he said without hesitation. "He said, 'If your life has nothing in it worth dying for, then you are not fit to live anyway.'" Mr. Young spoke so calmly of the passion they both shared. They were men of great faith, each certain that God had called them to stand tall for what they believed. Even if it meant death.

We talked about the work still to be done in bringing together the body of Christ—to continue to seek protection for the rights of men and women of all nations and color. So my next question seemed a natural follow up. "How do we know when we have achieved our goals for equality as a nation?"

He got up from his chair, walked slowly across the office, and picked up a picture from his desk. Both black and white

children, boys and girls, were all smiling. They appeared to be close friends caught in a “moment” during a playdate. The enlarged photo in a big frame served as a daily reminder of our human potential. “When we are all treated as equal,” he said, to answer how we achieve equality.

Many Godly people died before seeing God’s promises to them fulfilled. Abraham never saw the great nations he fathered. Moses never made it to the promised land. As I recalled time spent with Ambassador Young nearly twenty years ago, I realized that sadly, like his friend Dr. King, he might not either.

That courageous man illustrated to me, at a time when I was trying to face and overcome my own fears, choosing faith over fear is essential. That was when I knew what I needed to do. Mr. Young explained that to live in the face of his fear you must set your heart on God. But even hearing directly about the courage God imbued in him and the other civil rights leaders didn’t explain how to do that for myself. While I was inspired, I was equally puzzled. Was their level of faith something available for the average person? How could I take those scary experiences in my life and use them for good?

Up to that point, I’d done a pretty good job of pressing forward and enjoying my life, despite the underlying fear. I wasn’t sitting around, hiding from the world. Quite the contrary. For years, I’d been busy learning the value of work and building relationships. Too busy to think about my past, I was enjoying learning from others. Yet I knew I must face my fear, especially as a woman growing in her faith. Motherly instincts drove me to want a mentally healthy mom for my kids. I also wanted my

husband to enjoy coming home every day. A healing process was overdue in many areas of my life.

Attending the Faith over Fear seminar at my church began my commitment to search deeper into my soul for anything that needed to be dug out and replanted. There was no reservation. If anything, I was excited about another opportunity to learn a life skill. The program was designed for a small group, with only a handful of students. The meeting was quiet and controlled. Surrendering fully to the workshop agenda, I found myself uncharacteristically lying on a mat, in a dark room, allowing myself to be guided by a team of trustworthy counselors.

I attended with Pam, my friend who had confronted me about my having it all together to the point she could never be my friend. By now, we'd become close enough that she realized I wasn't as "all together" as she'd thought. The agenda included the technique of "breath prayer," a way of breathing slowly and meditating on the Holy Spirit.

The counselor spoke quietly, almost hypnotically. "I want you to go in your mind to a place of peace. Don't try to force a place. Let the Lord lead you."

Typical of me, I was ready to go from zero to sixty in seven seconds. As they were guiding us to seek God, my mind went searching for places I wanted to go. My internal banter was something like, Well, I'm going to Kauai, to the beach at Polihale State Park, where I went on my honeymoon, beautiful and isolated.

The leaders kept reminding us to let God lead us to where he wanted us to go. While I could picture that beach clearly, my

mind couldn't get me there. Here I was again, getting ahead of God. My best effort wasn't working.

Okay, I get it, I thought, determined to relax so I could be led. None of my happy places seemed to be working. Finally, I quit trying to be in control. I just lay there on my mat, breathing deeply, waiting for God to show me where he wanted me to go.

This was requiring patience and a stillness of mind and body, a real challenge for me. Then, in a moment of truth, one place seemed vivid. God was leading me home. Not to some beautiful beach nor some peaceful vacation memory. Home. This was intimate and personal, yet very comforting. I saw myself sitting on our deck, looking out over the lake that bordered our back yard. A beautiful spot. One of my favorite places. I'd always been a home body. Okay then, the place God was leading me to was my home. As I freed myself to be led, I easily pictured myself on that deck, surrendered to the Holy Spirit.

The counselor continued to guide us slowly. "Now that you have your place, keep that in your mind. Now I want you to envision a second place. Again, let God lead you. He is doing a work in your heart."

By then, I was all in. Whatever God was doing, I didn't want to get in his way. Breathing slowly and listening carefully, I wanted the hand of God to do what he was about to do. The second place was easier to find, because I was surrendered. Not too surprisingly, the second spot was my childhood home in Columbia.

The two places God led me were to my homes—one where I lived with my husband and children, the other where I lived

during my middle school and high school years.

“Now,” the counselor said, “let God build a bridge between the two places, and let him lead you on how they are to work together to free you from the fear that has been keeping you in bondage for so long.”

It became clear what God was leading me to do. My “bridge” connected my current home and where I lived as a teenager. Even though they were hundreds of miles and years apart, God had allowed them to come together in my mind. It was as if God said to me, You’ve brought things with you that are of no use now. You need to take them back to where they came from. Then go back to your home and family without the old baggage.

While I knew about “being a new creation in Christ,” God had to show me a physical way to let go of the old. The revelation was so remarkable I can’t explain it.

God helped me dump my old self and step into my new identity in him. I’d never felt that so close to God, and his Spirit was so kind, yet with a clear mission to do a healing work in my heart. I’ll never forget that amazing day.

I’m still learning to let go of that old me. It’s a process. While the mission was made clear that day, God has helped me bring that vision into better focus every day over the years. I wasn’t suddenly rid of all of that “yuck,” but the heaviness was lifted. I was finally free to accept who I am and who I no longer am. Understanding how to know my “nots” was helpful.

Later, I read in Ephesians 6:10–17 about the shield of faith as part of the armor of God. As I envisioned my armor, I could

see a shield of faith around me. Beyond that shield, dangers lurked—the kinds of things my radar had detected for so many years. Potential problems—beep, beep, beep. Then I realized that the shield of faith wasn't doing me any good, because I wasn't using it. In my self-protection mode, I was so adept at recognizing warning signs that I had become a skilled problem solver. So good, in fact, that rather than letting God protect me and my loved ones, I wrestled him for control. When my “proactive Beth” detected a smidgeon of a problem, I tried to resolve it before it even happened. Deal with this or that before it caused pain. Then it hit me. Most of the time I was fixing problems the shield would prevent from getting to me. God was my protection, if I would just wait and let him.

Because of my problem-fixing habit, I was creating problems instead of solving them—not only for myself but for those I loved most. As I read Scripture, God allowed me to grasp that shield of faith and receive a calmer disposition. Then I realized that most of the time, a potential threat would resolve itself before it made its way into my life.

Waiting on God provided another breakthrough in facing my fear—which was necessary for me to live a life-on-purpose. If Andrew Young and the young God-followers leading the Civil Rights Movement had depended on self-protection, they couldn't have done anything to change our country. They would have detected danger and stayed home rather than face the fear. But by trusting God, Young and the others saw God's will and pursued it. God's purpose for them became their passion. Ambassador Young's testimony bears witness to his faith, which was

complete trust, not just words. It meant a life surrendered to the will of God and a job well done.

Because I'd learned so much in the Faith over Fear seminar the first time around, I attended another workshop a few months later. I was certain God had a plan that would help me to grow even more into my new identity. While the second program was similar to the first, what I learned was much different.

I wanted to discern if becoming a Christian speaker and writer was God's plan for me or one that I'd just dreamed up. The counselor again guided us to two places. This time started with me being surrendered, so I let God lead with less of my own agenda. The first place was a huge stage in a large arena, with a podium. Seeing myself in a place I had dreamed about was very exciting. But then, when I looked toward the audience, there were no people, not even one. In complete silence, I stood alone at the podium.

In my heart I heard God clearly say, Would you do all this for me if I'm the only one in the audience?

Wow! I wasn't sure if I could answer the way I knew I should. "Sure God," I said, just you and me." Deep down, I knew this was my problem. Feeling important and wanting recognition had always been my dream, as if I had to prove my worldly worth to everyone—as if to say, Hey, everyone, look at me now. I have value.

The second place was the same room, stage, and podium. This time, the auditorium was filled with people. I was having fun speaking to the audience, fulfilling my dream, but realizing whose glory I needed to share.

My life since has been about learning who my life is to glorify. It's a hard lesson, but one that I recall daily. I'm thankful God has held me to that vision. There have been seasons when, if given the chance, I would have been all about me, me, and more me. I've fallen prey numerous times as I browsed Facebook or Instagram, jealous over someone else's success. Such comparisons are a thief of joy, and it has been a kill joy for me many times.

As I was discussing in a group my quest to become "fearless," someone told me about Psalm 91. That day I read the Psalm of Protection. After a second reading, I was wowed at all that it said, the numerous promises about personal safety. Could this be true—for me? Not only were there promises for physical safety, but also spiritual. A place to hide, find safety and refuge. That psalm became a daily reading until I could recite every word. I read it out loud so many times that the words found life in me. I realized the power of that truth and that my heart had changed.

Though my nightly ritual had gotten better over time, I heard a noise one evening. I didn't automatically jump up to investigate. There was no beeping radar of what-if circumstances warning of danger. For the first time, I wasn't afraid. Amazing. If I could repeat that experience, I'd get my husband to take me out to dinner to celebrate. I'd take a selfie, smiling broadly, and post it on Facebook for the world to see. I'm finding real freedom.

Choosing faith over fear is a choice you make daily. God knows where you need to go to find freedom. Ask him to take you.

Life On Purpose

God is your counselor and guide. While you can learn from others, you can't assume that someone else's road to victory is the route you should take. It's a personal journey between God and you.

I'm a work in progress. The old me and the new me argue frequently. Sometimes I go back over that bridge and dump some stuff I've let creep back into my life. But the lessons I've learned are irrevocable.

One thing is certain to me now. Fear was not my friend.

Eleven

When Performance Counts

“Can you interview the governor tomorrow?” David Sparks the publisher of Atlanta Christian Family Magazine sounded a little desperate. Two days earlier, he didn’t want to talk to me about writing for his magazine. But things changed.

Months earlier, someone had told me about a Christian Writer’s Conference near Asheville, North Carolina, that featured Jerry Jenkins. Fred and I were pinching pennies, so at the time it was cost prohibitive. But Fred recognized in the literature the name of the man who was directing the conference. He was certain it was someone who had worked for his brother Steve, who’d set up my John Croyle interview. After a phone call, it turned out that the conference director was exactly who Fred thought. Steve made a call, and I got in with a discounted fee, because someone miraculously cancelled at the last minute and forfeited their fee. So there was an opening. God works in mysterious ways.

To save money, I shared a room at the retreat center with someone I'd never met. She was a nice lady, but she snored. Loudly. Consistently and constantly—like a leaf blower running in the other bed. When she got up to take a shower the next morning, she was surprised where she found me. I had finally dozed off, lying in the bathtub with the bathroom door closed to muffle the noise of her snoring. The roommate was sweet, apologized that she snored. Somehow, I got a private room the next night, or I'd have never slept.

The conference was a great learning experience. Many aspiring, budding, and even successful writers were there. Among them was Marilyn Tinnin, the owner of Mississippi Christian Living magazine. She was sympathetic to my plight. I was a novice trying to go from never writing anything to publishing a best seller. "Have you tried writing articles for magazines?" she asked, as we discussed my quest to write a book. It was something I should have considered years before. Marilyn went on to tell me that her magazine was a franchised business and part of a network of Christian publications, including one in Atlanta. She offered to put me in touch with the publisher, with the idea that I could write freelance articles for that monthly publication. "Great idea!" I said. It was a great connection that I was eager to make as soon as I returned home.

David Sparks seemed glad when I called him that first time. Then he asked about my experience. "Where did you get your journalism degree?" I explained that I didn't have one. "No problem." He brushed off the lack of a degree. "Just send me some things you've had published." My silence probably

answered him before my words. “Well, I don’t actually have anything published . . . yet. But I’m working on a book.” With nothing other than my perky sales pitch to qualify me as a real writer, he abruptly ended the phone call. “Thanks, but no thanks,” he said.

To say I was disappointed would be an understatement. Attending a conference taught by a best-selling author and a great referral was not enough to overcome “no real experience”.

Two days later, David called back. “Beth, it’s David Sparks. We spoke about you writing for my magazine a couple of days ago. Are you still interested in writing for the magazine?”

My answer was instantaneous. “Yes, I’d love to!”

“Can you interview Governor Perdue tomorrow? My feature writer quit, and I have an appointment and a press pass. They are expecting us. Can you go?” I could hear the worry in his voice.

Sometimes, God opens a door, and it’s so obvious you just sit back, shake your head in amazement, and go to work. There was no way in my wildest dreams I could have made this set of events happen. Many inexperienced writers might have been intimidated by getting their first interview with no less than the governor of their state. But I’d been interviewing well-known people for my book for a couple of years, so I wasn’t intimidated by needing to meet with our governor. However, the short notice made me a little concerned about my preparation. I did as much research as possible. With my best interview persona, I showed up at the Governor’s Mansion the next day. I soon found myself engaged in enjoyable conversation with Governor Sonny Perdue and the first lady, his wonderful wife, Mary.

David was quite happy about me saving the day for him. I was equally happy that he'd made mine. I became the magazine's lead writer, developing a great monthly cover story. He needed me, gave me a chance, albeit reluctantly, and yes, I needed him. Finally, I was being published monthly, making sure I helped my publisher create a successful magazine. I was even getting paid. Gladly paying my dues required a lot of extra work. It was my first chance to prove myself as a writer, and I learned a lot.

My work with Atlanta Christian Family Magazine lasted four years, until my husband accepted a job opportunity and our family moved to Tennessee. I'm so thankful for those years, because they were crucial in bringing me to where I am today. Many of the interviews were with well-known, local personalities and politicians who were proud to discuss their faith—including the contemporary Christian singer Babbie Mason, businessman/radio talk show host and one-time presidential candidate Herman Cain, and U. S. Senator John Isaacson. I had interviews with then University of Georgia football coach Mark Richt, Atlanta Falcons running back Warrick Dunn when he was NFL Man of the Year, and Jeff Francoeur, a young star outfielder for the Atlanta Braves. While I didn't set out to meet these amazing people for my *People of Passion* book, each interview sharpened my writing skills.

As I faced decisions over the subsequent years, I often thought about my amazing interview in June 2005 with Coach Richt. Like Bill McCartney, he was a competitive man's man who brought out the best in his players. Twice the SEC Coach of the Year, the ACC Coach of the Year, and the National Coach of

the Year, Mark had the coaching success that allowed him to speak from a position of authority. He was fervent about a “spirit of excellence,” with a unique understanding of how Christians could most effectively interact in the professional, secular world.

After three years as head football coach at his alma mater, the University of Miami, Coach Richt announced his retirement. As his reason for leaving, he said, “My true desire is for our football program to return to greatness, and while terribly difficult, I feel that stepping down is in the best interests of the program.” According to an article in ESPN, his answer was simple yet to the point. “The decision came after a great deal of thought, discussions with my family, and prayer . . . This was my decision.” The statement mirrored everything he had shared with me many years earlier and everything that he personified in his career.

Not only was he a great coach, but Mark Richt was also a committed family man. Married to Kathryn in 1987, he had four children. Our meeting was held in his office directly above his panoramic view of the University of Georgia football field. That beautiful view was filled with a hub of activity, with summer crews getting the field ready for football season. His excitement was evident. With his obvious tan and sunglasses held around his neck with a band, he appeared ready for any challenge.

No Hollywood casting agent could have picked a man who appeared so suited for the job. His movie-star good looks and athletic build made him a perfect match for the high-profile job at one of the best universities in America. In fact, in the 2006 film *Facing the Giants*, Coach Richt played the role of the main

character's former coach. His outspoken faith made him a national role model for Christians. A strategic winner and highly competitive, he had a kind heart and warm soul that were always a large part of his public image.

For over twenty years, eighteen as the head coach, he viewed his mission field as the sidelines of a college football field. Richt wanted his players to understand their godly purpose and how it would affect their performance. He challenged his players, not only to be winners but also to be men of integrity. This blend of expectations required Richt to establish consistency, whether at home as a dad or at the university, as a coach. Laying out clear goals and consequences made his leadership effective.

The day we met and talked about his success, he leaned in to emphasize a critical part of his story. "Bottom line is, you don't win, you don't stay." He spoke without hesitation. He fully understood the strict demands of coaching in one of the most competitive programs in the country.

UGA provided a huge platform to witness for the Lord. No doubt, God had provided the opportunity, but Richt had to be the coach he was hired to be. That meant work, planning, strategy, prayer, and above all else, a spirit of excellence.

"You don't win, you don't stay." That one sentence speaks volumes. No matter how great he was with the students or how effective his strategies were, to keep his job he still had to be successful on Saturday afternoon. Winning was not just expected. It was a job requirement. Even if he worked harder than any other coach, if he didn't win, he didn't stay. Nor did faith give him any edge over other coaches. It was all about performance and the

results that he was able to produce through his team.

Our faith, our career experience, and our commitment to our family doesn't give us a credit or an exemption when we compete in a worldly job. We face predetermined expectations that require complete surrender to both God and the authority of the person placed over us.

Blending Godly purpose and worldly performance are necessary to succeed in a secular world. This concept is crucial when operating a ministry in a business world. While trusting that God is involved in our work, we must also respect the human authority who has been placed over us. When in ministry, we might think, It will all work out because it's for God. This misconception can kill a great cause overnight. If we are to have a winning ministry, we must operate a sound and successful business.

When the publisher of Atlanta Christian Family Magazine asked me to interview the governor, it was clear to me that God had opened a door for me to finally become a writer. I knew these opportunities did not happen often. While the door was open, I had to walk through with total commitment. It was my one chance.

While I knew that God had opened the door, I also knew I had to make the opportunity as good for David as it was for me. Otherwise, that door would quickly close. I worked smart and hard, because time was short. My first article required me to hit a home run—nothing short of excellence. It meant late-night hours in preparation, many more hours reviewing the interview tapes, and then even more hours critiquing, writing, editing, and

rewriting. Before I submitted the final version to David, Fred read and re-read the article until he was bleary-eyed. Thankfully my publisher loved it. God blessed me with an incredible opportunity, and I'd earned a job.

A few months later, after my epiphany of the “don't win, don't stay” from Coach Richt, what I'd started with the magazine became more focused. Mark Richt's initial dream was to play professional football. While he earned a couple of NFL tryouts, he didn't make it. “I learned valuable lessons by not getting what I wanted,” he said. “That is how we grow up. If we get everything we want, we become spoiled quickly.” As I began to face rejection and book-publishing setbacks, Richt's words reminded me that I was growing. They also echoed the lesson taught me by another football player, John Croyle: “You don't leap from one peak to another peak—you have to walk the valley in between.”

Coach Richt left me quoting Colossians 3:17: “Whatever you do, do it heartily, as for the Lord rather than for man,” he said. “I don't know if there is one thing, as in one purpose, but scripture is clear,” he said. “Whatever you do, do it heartily, meaning the very best you can do. Motivation would not be money, praise, adoration, or glory. The motivation is to please God. If you make choices accordingly, chances are, whatever you do, you will do it well.” Sound advice, always.

The clear lesson is that if we are to do anything for the Lord, we must do it with a commitment to excellence. Otherwise, we should not do it at all. That is how one can best determine his or her notes. When we are not willing to give something our best

effort, then we shouldn't do it at all. God never called anyone to mediocrity.

After we relocated from Atlanta to Knoxville in 2007, I discovered a local Christian magazine like Marilyn's in Jackson and David's in Atlanta—owned by a young mother who was trying to publish the monthly magazine working part-time. It was a full-time job, and she was on the brink of closing. She wanted me to buy her out, but that was not a project I felt led to. I did write a couple of cover stories for her. She was amazed that I picked up the phone and set up an interview with U. S. Senator Bill Frist, who was a shining star on the national level for the Republican Party. As I expected, the magazine didn't survive for long. It was a reminder to me of what Coach Richt said: "Whatever we do, we must do it well." If we feel called by God to something, our full-time commitment is required. In an endeavor that demands so much, part-time effort will never be successful.

Before that magazine closed, I got another freelance writing job for a local business magazine. Again, I was getting paid and published each month, which led to my own opinion column. An editor at the Knoxville Sentinel must have read some things I wrote, because he hired me to do an interview with best-selling author David Balducci.

A lot had been going on in our family, and that grew into turmoil after we moved to Knoxville. Wildlife shows on television show predators chasing an animal herd, looking to make a kill. The predators single out the weakest of the herd. Human predators, who reject God and follow the evil one, are no

different. Without a doubt, the enemy worked hard. A full-blown attack on our young daughter derailed my book-writing ambition. Fred was immersed in his career. His promotion required him to oversee a large organization with employees in eleven states. He was constantly on a plane, flying off to somewhere. But I made great personal friends and developed life-long relationships with some godly women. These friends helped sustain me through the attacks that might have brought other families down.

In 2012, Fred lost his job. His professional success and reputation didn't leave him unemployed for twenty-four hours. One phone call to an old friend cemented a new job, but we had to move to Baton Rouge, which was the last thing I wanted to do. Fred was an LSU alumnus, and he had friends and relatives in the area. Our son Rhett, a rising ninth-grader, was raised by his dad from infancy to be a Tiger fan. That made the move less painful for him, though leaving behind his friends was hard. He had fully expected to spend four years of high school in Knoxville and then go to LSU like his dad.

Reagan was at a Teen Challenge residential facility, attending Columbus Girls' School, where she graduated from high school. We'd suffered through a difficult season in her life. After months of trying to get her the help she needed, we opted to send her to a safe place. At just sixteen years old, she needed help that we couldn't provide at home. The first fifteen months of her three-year stay was a rehabilitation program. After high school graduation, she stayed for two more classes and worked as a volunteer counselor. Then she spent a year and a half to complete leadership courses while serving on staff.

I struggled with how to start over, building a new life in Baton Rouge. In both Atlanta and Knoxville, I'd left behind fulfilling work and exciting opportunities. While I was eager to seek my Godly purpose in Louisiana, developing friendships wasn't easy. For years, Mom had lived in Mississippi, south of Jackson, in the house she inherited from her parents. The move took me closer to my mom, which was good, because she was growing older. Living closer to my sister Lisa, who still lived in Hattiesburg, was also an immediate victory. I would definitely see her on a regular basis.

Leaving some of the best friends in Knoxville was tough. And our daughter's crisis was just one more thing that turned my life topsy-turvy. Rhett had just completed his favorite year at a great school. He didn't want to leave his friends to live among strangers. Nevertheless, the job demanded a move, so we packed our bags.

Soon after arriving in Louisiana, I attended real estate school and got my license. It seemed a perfect fit, given my successes years earlier in property management. After a year of full-time effort, despite several sales, I decided the real estate profession wasn't part of God's plan for me. I didn't like several aspects of that business. Real estate became a clear not in my life.

There was that haunting old question: "How do you know your purpose?" Well, for sure I'd been sidetracked, and I wasn't living it. Frustrated with my career choice and feeling aimless, I met with a Christian career coach. After a few hours of talking through my experience and passions, and working through some tough questions, we began to see a pattern. She suggested I go

back to writing and no longer pursue a real estate career, which confirmed my decision. I let my real estate license lapse with zero regret.

For years, I had thought about starting a magazine, but the timing never seemed right. I might have taken over the Atlanta magazine, but we moved to Knoxville. I might have taken over the Knoxville magazine, but I didn't know one side of town from the other. About two years after we moved to Baton Rouge, I started the Baton Rouge Christian Life Magazine, partly because I didn't think we would ever move again. I wanted to plant permanent roots in that community. I never anticipated how those earlier opportunities would pave the way for what lay ahead.

Since the publication was a business as well as a ministry, I remembered Coach Richt's observations and wanted to effectively blend those two worlds. We never planned to fund the magazine as a ministry. It had to pay for itself, covering its expenses each month. I spent months finding advertisers who could see the value of our vision for a magazine in Baton Rouge. After a few months of planning and preparation, I launched our first magazine in April 2015. Each month, we printed 10,000 copies and filled forty full-color glossy pages with amazing testimony-based articles. Initially, our staff was just a graphic designer and me. Planning, interviewing, writing, selling, and delivering—I did all of that. In those first few months, delivering 10,000 copies myself taught me a lot and nearly wore out my car.

One of my goals as a publisher was to highlight what God was doing in our city and state. We covered stories on many ministries that seemed worthy of great success. I've never been a

fan of ministries being forced to beg for funds. God blessed us so we were able to help a few. The magazine brought exposure to what many selfless, godly people were doing and why. But I always felt bad about not being able to give them more exposure and increased funding for their ministries. Many were barely making ends meet, which was eye-opening for our whole team. Yet my favorite task as a publisher was getting to meet so many people that God was raising up to change the world.

In 2018, I joined a group called Christian Women in Media (CWIMA). It's an international organization that brings women together to help one another by sharing ideas and encouraging others to step out in faith and have an impact in the world of media. From day one, this was a good decision, with such a strong network of successful leaders. One of the events CWIMA sponsors each year is the Global Media Summit held in Dallas.

When I attend an event such as this, my prayer is always that the Lord would lead me to one or two key relationships that are meaningful. I'd spent years going to huge events, trying to meet everyone and never really connecting with anyone. With simpler goals, I went expecting to have divine Appointments. "Lord," I said, "lead me to the people you want me to meet." With no agenda other than being there and enjoying the event, I was excited as I saw God moving. I met Donna Skell, executive director of Roaring Lambs Ministries. Because our magazine was testimony-based, several people who were familiar with that organization suggested we meet, because their ministry is also about sharing testimonies. They have an excellent program that has been years in the making, providing the perfect tool to teach

people how to share their testimonies.

Donna and I hit it off quickly. I was eager to consider ways we could work together. A few weeks later, Fred and I went to Dallas to meet with the Roaring Lambs staff. At that meeting, I met with their publishing specialist, Frank Ball. Years after leaving mounds of interview audiotapes and published articles boxed and packed, I found encouragement to finally write that book. Different from anything I'd imagined, these divine appointments, like many others in my past, energized me and showed me how God had prepared my field for harvest.

After years of business success, Fred was retired, now at home to reevaluate things he'd like to do in the next season of his life. Having worked for so long to provide for our family, he was in a unique position to think with a new sense of purpose. Years before he went into the operations part of business, he was a marketer with experience in television production. As we talked through the concepts of the needs of so many small ministries, their funding requirements, and the need for exposure, he started to consider innovative ways to use that experience alongside my ministry efforts. In today's technology-driven culture, magazines are less and less about paper and more and more about online Internet pages. We both felt led in that direction, so this was the track we decided to follow.

All believers are called to ministry. While that may look different across the globe, there is one thing we all have in common: our stories. The Bible says, "In your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you;

yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame” (1 Peter 3:15). One thing I can do, no matter what, is share what God has done in my life. My conviction on how to change the world is “one story at a time.” I’m convinced this is how we impact the media giants that ignore or even loathe Christians. Each story is worth sharing.

Christians are called to win. Our victory was won by Jesus on a Sunday morning. The great commission is that we share his victory with the world.

Twelve

The Purposeful Path

Because of our ages at the time we married, Fred and I were eager to start a family. We were married just over a year when I found out I was pregnant. My vision was a happy, perfect family life. Finally the day had come when I could live the dream of being both a wife and mother. Fred supported my preference to become a stay-at-home mom. My career had changed from property management to motivational speaking and training. So I started accepting speaking engagements on a limited basis.

Long before my pregnancy, the remnants from my own family experiences left me eager to pay close attention to other families' interactions. I wanted to learn from people who had a strong parenting foundation. I often wondered what could go wrong for families that seemed to have it all together but then fell apart. How could Christian households have a kid on drugs? How could that model family have a prodigal child? How could that seemingly perfect marriage end in an ugly divorce? The

dysfunction in my childhood made sense. We had far too much brokenness to not be a mess, but I couldn't understand why other families had their issues.

As a new wife and mom-to-be, my simple goals were to love my family enough that our togetherness would stand the test of time. We'd be a team, committed to one another. Yes, life would be "perfect." When I saw strangers with disrespectful or disruptive kids, I shuddered, thinking, I'm so glad that I'm going to teach mine how to act. Each time I saw people with obvious issues, I was certain that such problems could never happen in my family. With my radar in protect mode, constantly on high alert, I carefully avoided families with troubled kids. I planned playdates for my children that avoided anyone with even the remotest potential of a problem. After all, identifying the good influences was the job of a good parent. While thinking I was wise to judge others ruthlessly, I couldn't discern my own ignorance.

Ultimately my plan to protect my children from bad influences failed. After years of judging others and wondering how good families could end up with kids in trouble, it was my Reagan who was the "troubled kid." A traumatic incident when she was only ten years old led to behavioral issues that expert counselors predicted. Reagan guards the privacy of the details of the incident, which are painful, and we agree that it is her story to tell. One day, maybe we'll write a book about it together. But the predictable behavior was followed by bad adolescent decisions that escalated over time. My first-born became the isolated child, and I felt alone, heartbroken, helpless—and a failure as a mother.

How did our family get from my vision of a perfectly adjusted well-loved team to a seven-year family crisis? Hadn't I carefully planned to avoid this very thing? The daughter suffered the hurt, but the rest of us learned that when one suffers, the whole family suffers.

When Reagan's trauma took place, we were members at North Point Community Church. Pastor Andy Stanley was a powerful influence on the faith walk of both my husband and me. We bought and read every new book he wrote. At the apex of our family crisis, I read Andy's latest, *The Principle of the Path*, which helped answer my question. Each decision we make and the path we choose can lead to unintended consequences.

At about the same time of our daughter's incident, I interviewed a young baseball player in the Atlanta Braves' dugout, for the cover story of Atlanta Christian Family Magazine. A beautiful afternoon welcomed my visit to the Braves' dugout. The young men in pristine white uniforms would soon be covered in the red Georgia clay.

If ever there was someone who followed the path that God intended it was that young man. At twenty-two, Jeff Francouer had his picture on billboards around metro Atlanta. He was the star in the Braves' television promotional advertising. Using his God-given talents, he was living his boyhood dream and following a path to fulfill his purpose. And he was outspoken in his faith, with Joshua 1:9 written on his batting-glove strap.

Role-model status was important to Jeff. Wearing Joshua 1:9 on his glove helped him share his faith on national television with every game. "You go through a hundred pair of batting gloves a

year,” he said. “When you are done, you can toss that glove to a kid.” The scripture, “Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go,” became the prayer of his mother at his bedside in 2004. He was hospitalized for surgery after he was hit in the face with a 95-miles-per-hour fastball.

But I must admit that my first thoughts of the baseball player bordered on being judgmental. I bet it must be easy to be you, going from high school to playing in the big leagues. He was good looking, athletic, the perfect profile for a collectable baseball card. I could see why the marketing people made him the face of the franchise. Deep down, I wondered how some people just seemed to draw four aces. But I quickly learned that he was more than just another gifted athlete stepping onto the elite stage of professional sports.

Jeff wore his number 7 proudly, a bright and shining star of a group that the media dubbed the baby Braves. His smile was genuine. He was easy to talk to—humble and clearly thankful to be where he was. “This is where I’ve lived all twenty-two years of my life,” he said. “I’ve been coming to Braves’ games since I was two or three years old. Now, playing for family and friends is awesome.”

David and Karen Francouer nurtured Jeff’s faith as far back as he could remember, attending Sola Fide Evangelical Lutheran Church in suburban Atlanta, thirty minutes from where we lived.

A gifted athlete, Jeff was a star football player with a college scholarship offer to play at Clemson University. Mentored by the Parkview High School football team’s offensive coordinator, who

helped mold and shape his faith, Jeff surrendered his life to Christ as a sixteen year old. But the young man's path was clear, and he walked away from the scholarship after the hometown Braves picked him in the first round. Mature in Christ as a twenty-two-year-old, Jeff said, "Baseball defines a part of my life, and it's a joy. But at the end of the day, it's not what makes me who I am."

There is a fine but important line between being judgmental and discerning. My tendency toward judgmentalism was rooted first in the disingenuousness of my dad, and as it turned out, with my brother, Lance, who followed in our dad's footsteps. For both, life was a con job, so I didn't believe anything either of them said—even on the rare occasion of their truthfulness. When Lance called and asked for money, I assumed it was not for honorable reasons.

Fred was at a golf course with two friends with whom he was planning a business expansion. Because I rarely interrupted him during the day, he sensed the need to answer my phone call.

I blurted out, "Honey, Lance called, and it's urgent. He desperately needs me to wire money to him as soon as possible." I was crying and wanted to do the right thing.

Fred said, "Just tell him no, honey."

Deep down, I knew my husband was right, but I struggled with what to say to my brother. What if he was hungry? He wasn't. The money would have just facilitated another con.

As he aged, Lance grew even more savvy with his words. He said just what he needed to convince his siblings and our mom that he'd changed. "I've accepted Jesus, Mom. I'm going to do better now."

My brother's acceptance of Christ, of course, was an answered prayer for my mom. She elatedly praised the Lord. Then Lance took the conversation one step further and asked for money so he could get a fresh start with a real job. It was my dad all over again, a vicious cycle that went on for years.

Even knowing this, after telling Lance we'd not be sending him money, I felt somewhat guilty because of what the Bible says about giving to your brother in need. "If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen" (1 John 4:20). While I loved Lance, I struggled with how to show it without becoming an enabler.

As a Christian, I came to an unhealthy conclusion that any negative thinking about another person was playing God and being a sinful judge. My understanding of the difference between judging and discernment was impacted by a wise, elderly lady at Roswell United Methodist Church. She said there is a significant difference between judging people and just paying attention to how they live. By paying attention to their decisions, we can see the fruit of their lives. She went on to explain that the "fruit" meant action. She changed my way of thinking, and I learned to be more discerning. What kind of decisions was Lance making? Did his words and actions match?

The woman shared from Matthew 7:15-20: "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears

bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.”

Jesus simplified an otherwise confusing thought process. We don't judge people with false assumptions. We can look at their lives, see what kind of fruit they are producing, and make decisions accordingly.

Jesus also said, “Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you” (Matthew 7:1-2). For a long time, I was being judgmental. But a conversation with a wise woman and Scripture led to my new way of thinking, which made it clear that it's plain common sense to match peoples' words with their actions. That is discernment. Picking your friends wisely avoids trouble.

Understanding family dynamics can be a puzzling part of navigating a life on purpose and divert us from God's intended path. Walking in wisdom and love at the same time can seem to be a rocky road. There were necessary seasons when I had to “judge” our children based on their behavior. Unacceptable behavior required discipline. When words did not match expectations, their actions directed our parenting decisions.

Modern culture is saturated with the notion of doing what we want, when we want, and how we want. If a college student needs to study but decides to go out with his friends the night before a test, more than one simple grade can be affected. A bad test-score might cost him a scholarship, block admission to an

honor society, or lead to academic probation. By anticipating these outcomes, the student might make a mature decision to study, stay on the path, and make his life much easier in the long run. Seeing potential consequences leads to wiser decision-making.

When we consider the dynamics of the sound-byte media, pop-culture icons, and social media, the world not only sucks in our children but us adults as well.

Secularists regularly take Christians to task. If we don't accept someone, we are accused of being judgmental. If we aren't careful, we prove them right. Frankly, I cringe when one believer criticizes another believer caught in sin, allowing non-believers to point fingers at hypocrisy. When Christians rip believers to shreds in social media, whether over a sin or a theological disagreement, they do nothing to help win the world for Christ. Therefore, it is important to reject those who bear no fruit. While hating sin, we need to love as Christ loved others—sinners all.

Even if I pray every day for God to protect me and those I love, should I choose to text and drive, I'm violating my own path principle. I'm compromising my purpose by choosing potential danger. If I were to inflict harm on others, I would violate God's will by being stupid. While he could still protect me, he might also teach me a valuable lesson to make the best choice next time.

We can't get where we are going without first accepting where we are. When I decided to write a book, I wasn't a writer. I'd never written anything, and I had no formal education in how to become a writer. I'd been a speaker who traveled and wanted

to be a stay-at-home wife and mom when my kids were little. By decision and a sense of calling from the Lord, I became a writer. This was big leap overnight. It seemed so simple at the time.

My big thinking and hearing from God wasn't the problem, nor was I incorrect. What became my problem was the lack of anticipation that I'd have to work extra hard in innovative ways to become what God was calling me to. Submitting to the process became imperative in the path toward my purpose.

Self-deception can come when living out the Christian faith. We sense God is calling us to something, and we fall into believing we can simply pray and get it. Sometimes that can happen, but not always. My leap into writing a book was costly in many ways. God taught me not to jump into something without a proper plan. When I started my own magazine, I spent weeks in planning. I knew better than to jump out and seek to accomplish something apart from a path of wisdom and common sense. Wisdom had taken root, because I'd learned a better way. A plan for my purpose.

Proverbs 3:6 says, "In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths." How do we acknowledge him? By praying, reading the Bible, listening, and most of all, trusting him to lead us. We can't rush that process. We must fall on our knees in surrender to the God who put us here in the first place.

God making my path straight as a writer took over twenty years. There was no leaping from being a corporate trainer to best-selling Christian author. I simply had too much to learn. God was growing me and strengthening my relationship with him. He quietly led me down a long, educational road, one that seemed

unfair at times. Yet looking back, I can see he had me on purpose every step of the way.

Just because we are called into ministry does not mean we are ready for that ministry. With God's help, we grow into who we must become. Many years of preparation may be needed before we are ready to step into that role we envisioned. Look at Joseph in the book of Genesis. His dream of who he'd become took fourteen years through some very difficult seasons.

Was God testing Joseph? Psalm 105:18-19 says, "They bruised his feet with shackles, his neck was put in irons, till what he foretold came to pass, till the word of the Lord proved him true." Does God test us? Have you been tested? If he tested Joseph, he will test us.

Is there a fast track to a life on purpose? Is there an "easy" button to where you want to go? In my years of interviewing people who experienced what it took to live their life on purpose, I found this to be rare. Most stories are about a great amount of surrender to a loving God and a great deal of perseverance.

Everyone's journey is different. Why one family struggles and another doesn't likely won't make sense this side of Heaven. While we can learn from sound principles, we must ultimately surrender to the Lord.

Our family struggles were difficult, but God was faithful and brought us through. When we can't make sense of things, we must trust God. Being ourselves, becoming what God intended, is simple, eliminating a lot of confusion. Every individual on Earth is like no one else, so we should not imitate anyone other than Christ himself.

We can protect our path by daily refusing to compare our journey with others. Everyone is different. No two stories are alike. Seeking God's plan for our lives is an intimate process between him and us. He is our source of everything we need to know and do. He created us, gifted us, and comes to live in us so that our life can be in line with his will. The power of the Holy Spirit will lead and guide us to wherever we need to go. No great Bible teacher can lead you on a more direct route than the One who created you to be you.

Our identity must be in Christ. This is not something we simply have. It's something we choose to have and recognize each day. Jeff Francourer explained it to me when he was just a young player. Baseball was a part of his life, but it did not define him. We must deny our self in order to receive his self. By casting a vision for our life, dreaming those God-sized dreams, we must stand in complete opposition to anything that could deter us from his best for us.

If we understand the concept of living our life while protecting our purpose, we know why Jeff never strayed from his path. His ability to remain grounded and committed to the Lord throughout high school and then as a famous athlete helped him avoid the pitfalls that many young people fall into.

Later, Jeff was named the lead color commentator for the Atlanta Braves. No longer playing baseball, he again reaped the benefits of staying true to the man God had called him to be. Now a husband and father of three, he serves as an example of what can happen when you don't compromise the path toward his purpose.

There are two things I remember most from that experience. The first was something Jeff said that stuck with me all these years, “Be yourself. Our Godly purpose is a sacred understanding between us and God.” The second was at game time. The media coordinator had press seats for my photographer and me. Bob could not have been happier. “Wow, that is going to be so much fun,” he said.

What Bob didn’t know was that my son’s little league team had a game that evening. As we were finishing up with our interviews, our son and his nine- and ten-year-old friends were warming up to start a game on the other side of Atlanta.

Bob was disappointed. “We are going to leave press seats at the Atlanta Braves home game to go to your son’s little league game?”

“Yes,” I said, “and we are about to be late. We have to get out of here to get ahead of rush-hour traffic.”

Packing his camera bags, he smiled.

There was no question in my mind about which game was most important.

An hour later, I was in the stands, cheering my son when he was up to bat. As soon as we arrived, Bob had started unpacking his bags, and he was taking pictures.

“Thank you,” I said. “I’m so excited to have you take pictures of Rhett and his team during their game.”

Bob laughed. “Well, I must admit, this is fun too.” He enjoyed the contrast and commented on my determination to get to that game. “You are a good mom.”

I smiled, as I knew deep in my heart that I was right where I

was supposed to be.

Sometimes your purpose is all about your people.

Thirteen



Marriage Matters

We took a picture, which I proudly posted: “Happy 26th Anniversary to Us!” A smiling couple out to dinner at the best steakhouse anywhere—Ruth’s Chris. Our server Jennifer used my iPhone to take the snapshot so we could always remember the special evening. Then she brought a complimentary dessert: blueberry cheesecake with a pecan crust, colorfully decorated with Happy 26th Anniversary swirled on top. It was beautiful night. Fred has always been a thoughtful romantic. Well-planned date nights are one of his specialties.

We were happy to share our special moment on social media with family and many friends. The next morning, we sat in our living room, drinking coffee as we do on most mornings. Many Facebook friends had already liked the picture. When I posted it the night before, I felt a little guilty. Getting in a rush to make it on time for our reservations got the best of me. I’d assumed that we would take a picture to share, so I’d been thinking of ways to

post with a purpose, but I didn't take the time to do what I'd intended. "I feel really bad posting that happy picture," I said to Fred. "I really wanted to say something like, We've been married 26 years, but it's not been easy, or Without God we wouldn't have made this milestone, or maybe, Committing our relationship early on to Christ was the best thing we've ever done."

It was a happy moment, but that picture said much more. I'd cheated God out of the glory he was due for his hand in our marriage. Our experiences throughout marriage were as varied as they were vast, with so many ups and downs. Yet God had been ever present, so faithful, and kind to us. When I stopped to think about all that moment meant, I was overwhelmed with gratitude. Thank you Lord. Thank you so much.

Our marriage story started like most couples, I suppose. We didn't know much about being married, other than that we'd need all the help we could get. A decade earlier, Fred had been married briefly. In my family, divorce was practically a hobby. Early on, we decided to put God first in our marriage. Inviting God into our lives had to be a good idea, but we didn't know what that meant. It just seemed a wise step toward a good future together. Fred gave me the task of identifying a church home where we could get involved and learn more about God.

Our journey up to this point of our marriage was unique. We met five years earlier. One evening, my sister Jeanine and her husband Thom Cross introduced us in their home in Lawrenceville, an Atlanta suburb. If Jeanine wasn't matchmaking, Thom was.

Fred moved to the area to join Thom in a business venture.

They were close friends as well as business associates. Before me, Fred had met several people in my family. My mom loved him when she met him. My nephews Blake and Brandon adored him, and he felt the same way about them. Later, Fred told then ten-year-old Blake that he was going to marry his Aunt B, but that was not my plan.

Our introduction was timely. Fred needed an apartment. I was new to the Atlanta area and was the general manager at Autumn Ridge, an upscale apartment community in Roswell. Instantly we were not only new friends but neighbors. When he cooked gourmet Cajun, I went over to enjoy a great meal. He often joined my friends and me at a municipal park to run or play racquetball—or just hang out.

As it turned out, the business venture was doomed before it started. The dying company was spread thin operationally and thinner, talent-wise. Both Thom and Fred realized that there wasn't enough money coming in to support both salaries. Since Thom was the boss, Fred went job hunting. After just a few months, he moved far away from Atlanta, to Allentown, Pennsylvania. He went north to join a friend who was a successful trainer and needed Fred's energy and a business growth plan. Fred added strategic thinking and creativity, and the small company soon grew a client base from coast-to-coast, including Canada.

We did stay in touch. He was a Braves' fan before being a Braves' fan was cool, and he was a Delta frequent flyer. Since nearly every Delta flight from ABE (Allentown-Bethlehem-Easton) Airport went through ATL, Fred tried to see Braves'

games whenever he could. He visited the Cross kids, Blake and Brandon, to watch their games or go to their birthday parties, and I was on his agenda too. Mostly we had lunch dates. Nothing serious. He was my friend and part-time career advisor. During these years of friendship, we got to know each other well. Fred invited me to be more than just a friend. But I enjoyed being a single, young professional adult in one of the most active cities in the world. It was a fun season in my life, and I was simply too young to think about serious things—like marriage, settling down, and having a family. Living in a metropolis with bright lights had always been a goal and I was taking full advantage of the life experience. If Fred was nothing else, however, he was tenacious.

Grayson Schwepfinger was a professional sales expert in the recreational vehicles and manufactured housing industry, known as a great trainer/motivator. He was born and reared in Allentown, and he recruited Fred hard to relocate. Fred had grown up a die-hard New York Yankees' fan, with Mickey Mantle as his boyhood hero. Schwep's partner, Marilyn, had an in with the ticket office at Yankee Stadium. The sales pitch to relocate included regular weekends in New York, with great seats down the first-base line. Fred's new job was to plan growth strategies to expand into other industries while leading marketing and advertising seminars in Schwep's two fields of expertise. After a year, both men were booked solid, naturally complementary business partners and best friends.

On Monday morning before Memorial Day 1992, Fred phoned to ask what I was doing on the holiday weekend. I said I

was planning to attend a high school class reunion—unless he had a better offer. I accepted the plane ticket to New York City instead of driving to Columbia, Mississippi.

Schwepfinger/Townsend was busy enough to need another trainer. Since I'd done so much training in the apartment industry, Fred suggested at Schwep's annual holiday clam bake that they consider me. I was offered the job.

Fred and I had both been in unhealthy relationships. Perhaps we were poster people for Dr. Phil's famous line: "When most people get married, they are either running from something or to something." For us, it was both. He was running from a relationship with a magazine model, an alcoholic suspected of cocaine use. When driving his car while he was away on a business trip, she had a hit-and-run accident while under the influence. After she refused rehab and wouldn't admit that she even had a problem, Fred called me. At the same time, I had dated a young man who could have easily been on the cover of GQ magazine. He was sexually abused when his famous artist father loaned him out for sexual favors. Both Fred and I knew that if we allowed our unhealthy relationships to continue, we were headed for a train wreck of epic proportion. So we turned the other way and ran toward each other.

Everyone in my family joked about Fred's ulterior motives in hiring me. He just laughed. The growth in our friendship laid a strong foundation for our life together, when we faced challenging times. The relationship did start professionally, but the lines blurred soon afterward.

After polling their client base to find out what type of

additional training they wanted, Schwep and Fred hired me to develop, write, and teach a seminar on telephone sales. For three months, I researched the topic and learned the national trends. I was ready to hit the road with my new program. I wrote a book on how to present products, make appointments on the phone, and close a sale quickly. My new “bosses” booked me in Dallas, Houston, and Albuquerque for a three-day back-to-back series of one-day programs. To say I was intimidated would be an understatement. I was speaking in front of mostly experienced men, many of whom were twice my age. It was sink or swim. Thankfully, I swam.

While Fred and I were working together and then dating, I lived in Atlanta and he lived in Allentown. My visits to see him seemed always to be cold. On that first Memorial Day clam bake, I wore a short romper in the morning and ended up freezing after a cold front came through, dropping the temperature into the fifties. Schwep assured me that it was freakish weather, not the norm. In July, we were in New York for the weekend. I have a favorite 1992 photograph of us taking the ferry to the Statue of Liberty. The World Trade Center was standing tall above the city skyline in the background. Fred wore a sweater, and I had to buy a jacket that morning because of the uncharacteristically cool weather. New York/Pennsylvania cold fronts seemed different than the ones we got down south. Did I mention that I don't like cold weather?

Fred and I had a long-distance relationship, both professionally and personally. We had many weekends of romantic dinners, either in New York or Atlanta. When I went

north, we had travel adventures with Schwep and Marilyn.

Fred worked hard to win my heart, and I finally fell in love with New York. Months later, Fred popped the marriage question. We ate dinner at Sardi's in Manhattan, then went to see Phantom of the Opera on Broadway. He wined and dined me, took me to see an Andrew Lloyd Webber masterpiece, and there in the heart of the theater district, he stopped, looked at me, and said, "Will you marry me?"

With a stunned look, I responded firmly. "Maybe!"

To quickly eliminate the confusion of my maybe answer, I smiled and hugged him. "Can we live in Atlanta?" My cold nature and southern blood came out. If he had said no, that we had to live in Manhattan, I think I would have shivered but still said yes.

"Yes," he said, "we can live in Atlanta. As long as I'm near an airport." He was probably thinking about how much less the cost of living and taxes would be.

Looking back, I can see God's hand at work in the unique way our relationship started. We built trust in small doses for years, never really knowing how sacred that would be, years later. Today, we still laugh about those years when we were "just pals." Now we know it was all part of God's plan, that he led us toward a life together. Each morning when Fred prays for us, he thanks the Lord for his plan for us as a couple.

"Thank you, Lord, for your plan to give me Beth as a wife," he said. "She completes me."

Yes, God knew we would face challenges, and he knew what those challenges would be. We complete each other in facing

them.

My “life on purpose” journey started years ago, with God at work on his plan. One of my hopes when we got married was to break the cycle of divorce that was so prevalent for my parents, although I had no idea how to do that. In his perfect timing, the Creator of the universe was way ahead of us. The Father provided pertinent teaching even before we knew we needed it. Only he could look ahead and pave a way that would prepare us for our purpose as a married couple. Fred was a driven man: self-reliant, independent, and difficult—a workaholic control freak. He believed in God. He just liked his plan better.

The first interview for my *People with Passion* book was a divine appointment. When Linda married Millard Fuller, he was probably very much like the man I married. But when it came to the concept of a Christian marriage and commitment, they travelled a road different from the one they’d started. Millard had changed.

We met in Americus, Georgia, world headquarters of Habitat for Humanity, which the Fullers founded. I’d sent my first letter inquiring about their interest in letting me interview them for my book. The day I opened that letter in which they said yes, I couldn’t contain my excitement. “You won’t believe it,” I yelled down the basement stairs at Fred in our office. “Millard and Linda Fuller agreed to an interview.” I knew he’d be excited too, because he had suggested them after reading President Carter’s book *Living Faith*.

My plan was to talk with the Fullers about their ministry, how they started Habitat for Humanity. But it was our discussion

about their marriage that changed my life. God has a way of doing that. The message was subtle. Their life together and the growth of their ministry had resulted from a marriage built on a solid foundation. When their relationship was tested, faith in Christ and commitment to their family helped them persevere.

The office walls were covered with photographs of the Fullers with former presidents and Hollywood superstars, because many famous and powerful people supported the Habitat cause to provide adequate housing. Those pictures made it obvious that well-known celebrities were working alongside two purposeful people who were changing the world for the better. The Fullers were busy, and their office was a whirlwind with people bustling about as the phones kept ringing. They took time to talk with me for one reason, because I was writing about something important to them—passionate Christianity.

For Millard, this subject was especially intoxicating. He was a large man who energetically exuded passion. An excellent communicator, he was gifted at exhortation. He loved the word “passion” and saw it as a missing link in the modern world. “I believe,” he said, “that all of us were created for a purpose. For instance, it always amazes me how God gifts people.” He described how one person flies a plane, another takes the stage as an actor, and someone else cooks a great meal. “But a lot of people flounder through life,” he said. “They just play around the periphery in terms of using the talents that God gave them. But Jesus said, ‘Ask and you shall receive; seek and you’ll find. Knock and the door will be opened.’ If you want to know why God put you here, you just need to ask. Pray about it. Ask God.”

Fuller grew up with a love for building things. As a child, he helped his dad build farmhouses, barns, and fences. His grandfather was a carpenter, and he occasionally helped. With Fuller as president and CEO, Habitat for Humanity enjoyed phenomenal growth since it began in 1976. After a thousand home dedications, he was still impacted by the response of those receiving Habitat homes, saying, “I’ve seen people cry. I’ve seen people shout.”

The story of the Fuller’s ministry and its international impact is widely-known. It has often been told. But the story Linda shared about their lives explained that a marital crisis created the 180-degree turnaround. Millard and his partner had built a very successful marketing business. When only twenty-nine years old, he became a millionaire. When his net worth reached seven figures, his accountant asked, “Millard, you’ve made a million dollars. Now what?”

Fuller said, “I’d like to make ten million.” He was a rich and powerful young man with a larger-than-life personality. Money had become more important to him than Christ, much like the rich young man described in Chapter 19 of Matthew.

Linda didn’t like the change she saw in her husband. “Millard was working night and day,” she said. “He was under so much pressure. I became so lonely, more and more miserable. I didn’t want any part of the money.”

As the business prospered, the marriage suffered. On the verge of losing his wife and children, Millard realized he was paying a heavy price for his work. After Linda left for New York with the children, he was devastated. He was equally elated when

Linda said there was still hope for reconciliation.

“Let’s give it all away,” she said, almost straight from the scriptural solution, the only way she knew to keep money from being Millard’s god.

Unlike the rich young man who sadly walked away from Jesus, Fuller agreed. That radical step was what it took for him to get his family back. Even though many people tried to talk them out of it, the Fullers followed through with their commitment.

“People thought we were crazy!” The Fullers laughed as they recounted the moment of truth.

This couple in crisis agreed on a plan and did what it took to come back together. They gave away their possessions and their money to the poor. Then they searched for a new focus for their lives, beginning with a family trip to Florida—a chance to prepare for a new season to seek God and what was truly important to the Fuller family. On the way home, they stopped at the Christian commune Koinonia Farm, near Americus.

“We were going to stay two hours, and we stayed a month,” Linda said.

They met Koinonia’s founder, Clarence Jordan. “This was a man who was in touch with God. I’d never heard anyone communicate with God like Clarence. It was so refreshing, so new,” Millard said. While being mentored, Millard found Clarence to be “the most like Jesus” that he’d ever met. “When the student is ready, the teacher appears,” Millard said.

The Fullers’ total time in and out of Koinonia Farm lasted nearly five years. There they began building houses for those in need, but on a trip to Africa, Millard saw the potential of a

worldwide organization. If they could make a difference in South Georgia, they could make a difference in the world. Their pain became their purpose. Their plan to do what was necessary to save their marriage led to a ministry that made a difference worldwide, just as Fuller had envisioned.

Marriage is a marathon in the best of circumstances. In even the best of relationships, there are seasons of testing. We read damning statistics when it comes to divorce rates. Most studies conclude that half of American marriages end in divorce, which holds true even in Christian households. And the statistics don't account for the failed relationships of people who live together outside a legal marriage.

Why do so many Christian marriages fail? If you are married, you know you've been tested. The world works against successful relationships. People rarely communicate well with people they love, and less well with people they barely know. This problem is exacerbated by the digital revolution. Each of us is influenced by many factors, not the least of which are our human insecurities, the endless barrage of hyper-sexualized marketing and media messages, personality-style differences, cultural or religious divides, and the old standby of childhood influences. I suffered greatly after my parents divorced. Plus there were my dad's crazy religious beliefs, lies, cons, and multiple marriages. The pain followed my siblings and me into adulthood and our marriages. As we faced these childhood memories, very adult realities required healing.

Where we "come from" created its own issue for me as well as for many others. Women are bombarded with media messages

of how to view ourselves as defined by some pop-culture notions: thinner, tanner, tighter—to be sexually appealing. How God sees us is left out of the picture altogether. The ability to talk one-on-one with each other has been diminished to cryptic text messaging and social media babble. No wonder the societal and cultural drift from the foundation of Christian marriage has taken the institution from a sacrament to a sacrilege, and to many, an irrelevant nuisance.

Scripture offers a clear vision of marriage based on Godly love. 1 Corinthians 13:48 may be the most frequently repeated reading at weddings. Pay attention to the depth and imagery of the passage: “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.” This scripture describes the foundation of a real marriage, not the Hollywood-type—a relationship based on love, trust, and complete acceptance of the other person. It’s about intimacy, not sex. True love means really knowing someone and accepting them for who they are. A physical relationship on its own is not an intimate relationship. It’s sex, often not very satisfying or meaningful.

Genesis. 2:24 says, “A man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.” While “one flesh” can certainly be physical, it’s not just physical. Oneness means that “I am a part of you, and you are a part of me.” Having not waited until marriage for sex, I did not understand true

intimacy or love from a man. I had no role model for intimate relationships. When a man first said he loved me, I needed to believe him. This was a huge dilemma for me. We dream about what our relationships will be like, and it turns out they aren't what we'd hoped. In this cycle, we are confused about how to fix something without defining what is broken. Many women blame God for not "sending" the right mate. But had we waited, we would have seen for ourselves that this guy wasn't the one. Wisdom sometimes requires waiting. Most often, we get ahead of God, so our hopes and expectations are misguided.

Yes, my husband and I maintained a friendship before a physical relationship began. Friendship, we found, laid a strong foundation for the deeper relationship that came later. I knew what kind of man he was, and he knew what kind of woman I was. When we moved from friendship to being romantically involved, we knew right away that we were likely to end up married. We were in fast-forward mode, neither of us getting younger and both wanting children. Still, there was so much we didn't know about each other. Thankfully Tom Davis, a young associate pastor at RUMC, gave us excellent premarital advice:

"Don't go to bed angry with each other."

"Don't talk about money in bed."

"Don't talk to your family about your marital issues. Your family will always take your side and they won't forget the hurt caused by your spouse."

"Learn to communicate well, make sure you can talk things out when you disagree on things."

After all these years, both Fred and I can still tick these

points off like we heard them yesterday. It was common-sense advice, mostly about talking things out and learning where and when to have the harder discussions.

When I met the Fullers, Fred and I had been married eight years, and our children were elementary school age. We'd already had our challenges. Fred was an entrepreneur with successes and failures. He was driven to make money because he liked to spend money. I was driven for him to make money because I liked to spend it too. As a child, I learned to panic about money, which caused a lot of problems. True to his entrepreneurial personality, Fred saw financial blips as speed bumps. I saw them as huge walls. Over the years, he learned to understand me better, but it would have been easier had we talked about hard things before we faced them. This type of deep-seated issue causes my heart to race and my stomach to hurt.

Fred could be domineering. His confidence level sometimes made him seem arrogant. He always had a plan. My dad always had a plan too, with no success. Fred came from a financially strapped family, which drove him to be successful. His religious philosophy allowed him to convince himself that "God only helps those who help themselves." That isn't scriptural, but there is some truth in the statement. He saw God as passive toward our worldly accomplishments. His answer to my fears were to just not worry about it. He'd fix it.

I often thought about the Fullers' family life and the challenges they'd faced. Remembering how they rallied to overcome the brokenness helped me put things into a better perspective. Their ultimate success was a bright light pointing

toward hope and commitment. Fighting about anything is rare with Fred and me. When we do, we typically settle things within a few hours of uncomfortable silence. Sometimes we've had to go backward to go forward. His growing walk with Christ made a difference in his drive and has caused him to more clearly understand that he must be part of God's plan, not vice versa.

I believe in choosing my battles. If Fred and I are struggling to communicate, I may bring that up. "I really need you to hear me about . . ." He knows to listen, and I know to make it quick. Most people seem surprised that I'm the quieter one. He's more wordy and has to work hard to listen. I am quieter when something is really bothering me. Hostility or anger sends me deep into a mental cave where I am likely to stay awhile. This cycle does not bring healing.

If Fred had known about the depth of my family issues, it probably would have been easier for him to understand my approach to parenting. Because I was an unprotected child, I'm a super-protective mom. I keep tons of food in the pantry, fearing we might not have enough to eat. The key for us was to have the harder discussions, which is where many relationships fail. This ability to address troubles directly stands alone as a skill that all successful marriages must have. Lack of communication and inability to talk through hard things causes misunderstandings that lead to failed relationships. Never assume anything of another person. Always be mature enough to ask and clarify before jumping to a conclusion.

I have grown tremendously in my faith, but I can still overreact. When something happens, my mind races with

recollections of old, negative experiences. My old self is sometimes the biggest enemy of my current self. Sometimes I just need to hear, Everything is going to be all right. After I calm down, I remember the power to choose faith over fear and stand in my new identity in Christ.

Fred has the same problem when it comes to fighting against his old self. Because of my past, feeling safe and protected is a huge issue. When I'm feeling threatened, those emotions rear their ugly heads. In those moments, I'd rather be alone than feel vulnerable or unsafe.

I crave stability and consistency. Fred is different, because his perspective is so different. Fred thrives on chaos. He finds challenge in strategy, tactics, and fixes. He feeds on winning. Our marriage is healthy but not perfect, which is normal.

One of our toughest times came after twenty-five years of marriage. We thought, by the time the children were grown, we'd be done with all the hard stuff. Dealing with runny noses and late nights of sickness are challenging enough. But issues become much more challenging when the kids are adults.

We had significant differences concerning our twenty-year-old son, Rhett. We agreed on how to deal with our son's decisions that we felt were unacceptable. I feared for my son's well-being and saw many of his decisions as not only reckless but dangerous. Fred understood my feelings. Because Rhett was still under our financial care, we made decisions of how to confront him. When the time came for the three of us to meet, the conversation deteriorated quickly. Things got heated, and words felt like arrows. It did not go according to plan.

I felt attacked by my son, and I didn't respond well. I was so angry that I walked out of the room, feeling that my husband had not "protected" me. I felt hurt, invisible, and devastated. I'd never done anything like that before. After packing a sparse overnight bag, I left home for the first time in our marriage and spent the night in a hotel room.

The next day, Fred left a message that he was traveling for work, and I could come home because he was gone. I got a sinking feeling in my stomach and sensed a long road ahead of us. Fred stayed away for nearly two weeks, and we did not even talk. We finally shared emails so we could communicate without becoming so emotional.

We both wanted the same things: our son to be safe while living within certain boundaries, and to preserve our marriage.

But, we allowed emotions to overshadow facts, which drove us apart. It was a long few days. I didn't know if our marriage would survive. We were both scared and angry. He felt betrayed that I'd walked out on him. By the time we finally spoke on the phone, feelings and words had been softened by a fear of life apart. Twenty five years of history is hard to walk away from. All those memories, years of holidays, so much love.

It's not like we hadn't faced problems with our kids. We had faced major problems. That is the crazy thing. Because we didn't want to end up in this place again, we sought that counselor for a few months. Having a Godly-perspective from a third party helped us set our emotions aside and get to the facts. While the counseling helped, it was our commitment to stay together and honor our vows that got us over that awfully big hump.

Fred came to me several times when reading this book manuscript and said, “I never knew that.” When he gets together with my family and we talk about things we remember, he is no longer stunned. But it seems that new information continues to leak out. Even after thirty years of friendship and a marriage living side-by-side, he is still learning the deeper parts of my soul that yearn for comfort and a safe place to talk with someone who wants to listen.

Life on Purpose requires someone to initiate safe and productive conversation in a loving environment. Then you must not forget what was said, which honors the person you love and care about. Each person must recognize just how hard it is to be vulnerable. But that produces growth and intimacy. Set reasonable expectations, and don't compromise what is best in the long run. Start with spiritual and emotional intimacy. When a couple starts with sex, they zoom right past the heart and soul of the tender hearts attempting to unite. Unknowingly, the couple sacrifices real intimacy for the cheap version sold in movies. When animosity and bitterness have already taken root, it's hard to go back in time and get to know each other better.

How do you handle a crisis with your key relationships? We devise plans for emergencies like fires, hurricanes, earthquakes, or floods. Yes, we plan for any type of foreseeable need, even if it is remote. But what about a crisis in your marriage or family? Have you discussed what to do if things get ugly? Have you ever said to your partner, “Just so you know, I'll do whatever I have to do to make our marriage work”? Remove the doubt by saying, “If you are ever wondering, I want us to be together forever.” Make

Life On Purpose

a declarative statement that defines your ultimate goal. “I’m here for life.” Don’t give the darkness a door.

Fourteen

A Great Family with Great Problems

After four children, my mother was not supposed to be able to have another “healthy” child. Yet here I am, thankful to have been born healthy. Though small, I came with a healthy set of lungs. Maybe that is why I’ve been a talker ever since, thankful to be a part of this world, a member of my unique family and a child of God.

Do you ever wonder how you fit into your family and why you are here? My role as the youngest of five only made sense to me later in life.

When I sent the written highlights of my testimony to a radio talk show producer/host, she prepped to interview me. After reading it, the host naturally started with a question about my unusual childhood, referring to my father’s multiple marriages and the spiritual confusion. For the first time, I was asked to talk publicly about my childhood. My career had focused on other people’s stories, so talking about mine was different. The little

girl who grew up with lots of questions was suddenly on the receiving end, answering the questions, not asking them.

“Tell us about your childhood experience and how that affected your life,” the host asked.

My best answer became clear in a one-sentence summary: “I come from a great family, which had some great difficulty.” There. No glitz or glamor, just a simple truth.

My family is the best. In our brokenness, confusion, and disillusion, as the hit television show reminds me, “This is us.” No one gets us but us. For example, if I call my sister Dianne and tell her I’m drinking blueberry tea, she knows it isn’t the latest overpriced drink at a hip coffee shop. She knows about not-so-freshly-brewed iced tea, which sat too long and tastes stale, a bit tart instead of sweet. Yes, she knows when nobody else gets it. Sometimes I’ll just text blueberry tea, and she empathizes with my frustration. But it’s not just tea that we discuss in our own language. We talk about our faith, families, and futures. She encouraged me and helped me through many tough situations in life. She gave me my first real job and helped me to grow into a promotable employee. All I needed was a break, and she gave it to me, expecting nothing in return.

Dianne opened the door that was a pivotal first step to who I am today.

My brother Lance and I were the youngest of the five siblings. We were pals as kids, but later in life, we weren’t very close. I got my “tomboy” side from him. He was tough, so I had to be too. We built forts, rode ponies, and shot BB guns. His sense of adventure was infectious. One day, one of my best

childhood friends came over to play. She fell into a hole that had been dug for a septic tank. Covered in mud and muck, she refused Lance's help to pull her out, mainly because he was a boy. We were still in that phase of childhood where boy-germs were far worse than whatever might be lurking in a muddy hole for a septic tank.

Lisa and I are both high-energy, scurrying about and always busy. We look alike, act alike, and think so much alike that we can almost finish each other's sentences. After years of living far apart, we now see each other frequently. Baton Rouge and Hattiesburg are close enough that we regularly meet in Jackson to take Mom and her friends to lunch. Afterward, the two of us "shop 'til we drop," running from store to store while Mom sits in the car, peeking into her smart phone. "Go check on Mom," Lisa will say, which means we've hit a jackpot and are trying on clothes. Our time together is fun. We laugh and talk incessantly about our kids and families. Not only are we sisters, but we are also very close friends who bonded as roommates all those years ago, when she bailed me out of a miserable situation living with Daddy and a stepmom. Leaving her when I went to Virginia was one of the hardest things I'd done, so coming back together was especially sweet. We talk on the phone constantly. Our true feelings are shared openly, without fear of judgment. We encourage each other and have a mutual vibe that cannot be imitated or replaced.

Jeanine and I also share a unique bond. As the oldest of the five, I was truly her "baby sister." Throughout high school, she was a cheerleader and my surrogate mom. She was the

homecoming queen and the kids' carpool driver. While my mom worked two jobs, Jeanine balanced trying to be a normal teenager and caring for four younger siblings.

Jeanine and her husband, Thom, now live in Wilmington, North Carolina. As the head nurse, she has a demanding, time-consuming job at a hospital. Thom, with whom Fred was good friends before they introduced me to my "husband," is an active businessman in the boating industry. With our separate agendas, a thousand miles apart, the four of us don't see one another very often. So Fred and Thom plan trips—one for us to go there and another for them to visit us. The plan for each trip is to have no plan other than to spend a few days of old-fashioned, no-agenda visiting. Even with months between visits, it's as if no time has passed since our last visit. During one of those visits, Fred's and Thom's conversation really helped me appreciate my family history.

"Beth is so much like Jeanine," Fred said.

His statement took me by surprise, because I'd never heard that before. Most often, I'm compared to Lisa. Yet at our core, Jeanine and I are much alike. We are both organized to a fault. Our lists are our lives, and if Queen Elizabeth II is not listed on our agenda, we might not squeeze her in. We love to shop, but we probably will not buy a thing if it's not incredibly sale-priced. We each plan and then we plan some more. We are structured, driven people with the energy to get it all done. We like to go places and do fun things, but spontaneity is not our gift.

When I interviewed Warrick Dunn in 2005, I met a superstar athlete who knew all about the importance of family and the

importance of accepting one's role in that family, no matter what the cost. As we talked, I saw my sister Jeanine in him. Tough and driven, but humble and kind. As we talked, there was little doubt in my mind why the National Football League chose him as its Man of the Year.

Warrick was the oldest of six children of a single mom, Betty Smothers. They moved around a lot, he said. By default, he was the man of the house, so important that his mother called him "mom's little man." Betty worked long hours as a Baton Rouge police officer. Warrick started driving when he was fourteen. He cooked for his siblings and helped them with their homework. At the same time, he balanced his home life with high school, where he was quickly developing into a football superstar. When Warrick was in the final semester of his senior year at Catholic High School, trying to decide what college football scholarship to accept, Officer Betty Smothers was ambushed and killed while escorting a local businesswoman to make a night deposit at a bank. On January 7, 1993, eighteen-year-old Warrick Dunn was truly now the "parent" in the family. In the midst of finishing high school and deciding on college, this devastating blow altered his life.

The city of Baton Rouge rallied behind the Dunn family and helped them adjust to the abrupt loss. They raised money so the family could move forward. Warrick used his mother's life insurance to purchase a home for his siblings. He ultimately chose to fulfill his mother's dream and play at Florida State University for Bobby Bowden. With the help of his grandmother, Warrick managed to both parent and be a big brother to his

siblings from a distance, while becoming one of the best running backs the Seminoles had ever seen. After rushing for 1000-plus yards three years consecutively, Warrick was picked in the first round of the 1997 NFL draft by the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, where he became the league's Rookie of the Year. Warrick divided twelve seasons equally with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers and the Atlanta Falcons where he was playing when we met.

But my interview was not because of his impressive on-field accomplishments. The Walter Payton NFL Man of the Year award recognizes the charity work of one of its players (I'm proud to say memorializing Walter Payton, who was from my hometown and a classmate of Jeanine's). Like Payton, Warrick was a young philanthropist. As a rookie for Tampa Bay, Warrick founded the Homes for the Holidays program to fulfill his mother's dream of home ownership for single-parent families. The program partners with local organizations to turn houses into homes for single-parent families through home furnishings and down-payment assistance. The impact of Homes for the Holidays inspired Warrick to expand into three additional programs: Count on Your Future, Sculpt, and Hearts for Community Service Scholarships, all housed under the Warrick Dunn Charities umbrella. The four programs are dedicated to strengthening and transforming communities by combating poverty and hunger and by improving the quality of lives for families academically, socially, and economically.

Warrick's purpose was revealed to him as he was forced to become the man his mom and siblings needed him to be, his young shoulders carrying the weight of his entire family. "I feel

like a grandfather now,” the then thirty-year-old said as he recalled those days when he had no choice but to step into to the necessary role of fatherhood. He was humble, not cocky like we often picture superstar athletes. It was the prime of his career, and his faith had taken root. Obviously, his strength was not only physical but also spiritual. Betty Smothers raised him and his siblings in a Christian home and taught him that faith comes from within. “It’s the strangest times when you are tested,” he said, “and I suppose I was tested. I was mad at God, but I had to believe that things do happen for a reason. Mom had a heart that would do anything for anybody.” Since its inception, Homes for the Holidays has furnished 169 homes, provided over \$800,000 in down-payment assistance, and served over 457 single parents and children. Warrick has honored that legacy of faith and commitment.

Warrick’s wisdom impacted my desire to live my life of purpose, perhaps because it was a reminder of my oldest sister. Unpretentious and soft-spoken, he said to me, “Nothing is easy. Try different things. You have to have faith. You have to believe you have a purpose. Not everyone will be a rock star or athlete. Find a niche and perfect it. People get blinded by doing things they don’t do with their heart. The will comes from within. Passion comes to the forefront when you look for things that make you happy.” That was sage advice that I’ve tried to follow. “I’d take my mom back over anything and everything else,” he said. “The necessities in life are your family.”

Each sister held my life in the palm of her hand during very special seasons. Without them, I might not have made it. Through

my struggles, I never wondered if any one of them would take me or my children in, if needed. That security is worth so much. Today, when we get together, we laugh until our bellies hurt. Old times, new times—you name it—we find it funny. All of us being together doesn't happen often, but when it does, we are grateful to be together. Unlike Warrick Dunn, my siblings and I still have our mom. She is our hero, like Betty Smothers was her son's hero.

Mom is not a hero because she was a perfect wife or mom. When my father went wayward, picking up the pieces of what was left of family was nothing short of miraculous. It wasn't just about keeping a roof over our heads and food in our mouths. It was her unconditional love. She never made any of us feel unworthy. She saw the best in us, and her belief in us, even at our worst, never wavered. Never once did she give up on us, although at various points, we might have given her reason. As moms, we have done that for our kids. It's one of her many legacies. "Hang in there. Don't give up. Look up. Trust God." As my mother's faith grew over the years, our faith mirrored hers. As she grew, we grew. When she stood on a promise of God, we could stand. Even when she had only that one promise from God for her family, that was enough. If God would take care of her kids when she did not know if she could herself, he was more than worthy of our trust and praise. He was worth getting to know better. Mom spoon-fed us truth for decades. When it came to faith, we were far behind when it came to knowing the character of God. She relentlessly dug into the Word to relearn what we needed to know so she could teach us. Call her for advice, and she will give

you love and a Scripture.

When she departs this earth, she will leave no estate. What she will leave, we just may fight for—custody of her Bible, books, and journals. There are notes she has taken over the years and spoken into existence. She spoke truth to oppose the lies we believed. She chose faith over fear. From those hobbled knees of hers, she waged many a war on behalf of her family. As arthritis took its toll, she never let any amount of pain keep her off those knees. She's opted for pain to humble herself before that throne of grace. I pray for a faith as deep as hers.

Through the years, I've learned that coming from a dysfunctional family simply means you are normal. There are no perfect parents, no perfect family dynamics that make for an easy life. No matter how much we get right, we are still in a world where a lot seems to have gone wrong. Indeed, nothing came easy in my family. We faced many problems, compounded by my dad's confusing behavior. We guessed our way through to what a family does to make it and stick together. We tried lots of things. While we didn't know much, we always knew we had one another. That has not changed.

As Warrick said to me years ago, you must have faith and that faith comes from within. We must believe there is a purpose for our lives. So if you aren't sure, the idea is that you try different things. Most people think it's all about money. That's what the world tells us. It's a lie. As the star football player, while basking in the spotlight, said to me a decade and a half ago, we can't all be a rock star or an athlete. Indeed, fame and fortune are elusive. But the man honored by the NFL was recognized, not

for his stardom on the field, but for his humanitarian philanthropy, which was grounded in the faith passed on to him by a loving mother. Between a professional athletic career and the philanthropy, there is no doubt which has a longer lasting impact on the world. Therefore, seeking purpose on anything that shines the light on a person is the wrong motivation.

We can't all be rock stars and athletes, true, but the importance of our purpose is to shine the light on the Creator and glorify him through aligning ourselves with his will, growing spiritually, and making life better for others. My dad had great creative talent. Now I can understand that he wanted fame and fortune, so he tried many things in search of that elusive purpose. Despite Dad's struggles, I claim his brilliant creativity every day for myself and my family. While my dad went far afield and missed many chances, I ask God each day to keep me on his journey. Surrendering to the Lord's leading helps me stay in his will. Learning from what I think were my dad's pitfalls keeps me from repeating his patterns. He lost sight of his purpose by losing sight of God. Trying to rush God can be devastating and costly for yourself and those you love.

While imperfect, each of us has a role in our family to bring about good, to seek health and well-being for everyone. Still, in all my years of interviewing, I never met anyone who came from a family that had never suffered pain. Everyone seems to have come from a broken family, though broken in different ways. Families are broken because our world is broken. I've met strong folks who walked through horrific abuse and awful situations at the hand of someone they should have been able to trust. I've met

strong people who suffered great losses and survived terrible tragedies—loss of loved ones, loss of limbs, or loss of health. Some were burn victims, scarred by physical disfiguration. Sometimes one must go backward to move forward. We aren't called to be weaklings, nor are we called to be victims of our upbringing or circumstances. We are called to seek healing from our Heavenly Father through salvation in Jesus Christ, in the learning of his Word, and by surrender to the Holy Spirit.

Being in a community of believers from whom we can find wisdom and accountability is a necessary component to grow as Christ followers. This helps so much when we need healthy conversations with others who want to help us grow. Make sure you share your questions with someone who knows how to help, someone who understands the value of inner strength and personal growth. For those who are following Jesus, we learn how God can use our journey to help others.

I'm especially thankful that God did not let me share my story until I could do so from a positive perspective. When God says wait, then wait. I've spent a lot of energy learning to think and recall my upbringing from a position of strength instead of weakness. Trusting God with our past is a giant leap toward living our life on purpose, because it is central to placing our present and future in his hands.

Fifteen

Called to the Local Church

When Reagan was sixteen, we entered her in a fifteen-month Teen Challenge program. The months before the intervention were hell-on-earth.

Reagan spent three years at Teen Challenge. After the standard program, she stayed for leadership courses and served as a staff member. She went from a student who screamed, cried, and cursed at me about the decision to enroll her at the Columbus Girls' School Teen Challenge to becoming a guide, mentor, and counselor to incoming girls. Our daughter's life was saved through that ministry. Afterward, I told people that she went to a boarding school to finish high school, which was technically true. But she corrected me, saying, "No, Mom, it's a recovery program for addicts."

Addiction had stolen a lot from my family. My dad, my brother, and others whom I loved deeply lost their lives to addiction. We all need healing, and thankfully there are many

options to get help. Whether a program, meeting, or counseling, there is a season when we need that added level of care and accountability.

God used experiences with families that suffered like ours and Teen Challenge teaching to help us through a horrible season. We love those wonderful people who walked us out of the deep valley of our lives into a period of growth and healing. In many ways, they were as important to Fred, Rhett, and me as they were to Reagan.

So when my friend Sherry Fox, director of Women's Ministry at Chapel on the Campus, was considering a Celebrate Recovery program, she asked if I would be a part of the start-up team. I answered with an enthusiastic yes.

What I knew about Celebrate Recovery was limited to what I'd heard on a Christian-radio talk show, *New Life Live*, hosted by Steve Arterburn. Steve and a team of experts took listeners' calls and offered support and biblically sound counseling. Many calls were about addiction. Others were about various family and life issues. I learned a great deal from the experts' answers.

I attended a Celebrate Recovery summit in Nashville with the Chapel team. I was surprised to learn that CR was not just for addicts. Two out of three attendees were not dealing with addiction. The program provided an uplifting environment where anyone could seek healing for hurt, hangups, or habits. I had an interest in all three of those. Hurt? Check. Hangup? Yep, several. Habit? Many.

Since *Life on Purpose* is a testimony-driven ministry, my favorite part of the summit was the heartfelt testimonies from the

speakers. Celebrate Recovery is Christ-focused, because it recognizes the only one who can and will heal hurts, hangups, and habits. It was obvious that starting the program at our church would require a great deal of work and commitment.

When I said yes to Sherry's invitation, she said, "I'm so glad you can help us start Celebrate Recovery. With all you've got going on, I was afraid you might not be able to add this to your list of things to do." As long as we'd been friends, she thought I was crazy to take on such huge projects. "Who comes to a new town and starts a magazine?" she said, when introducing me to someone new. My friend knew I had taken on writing this book and was exploring production of a television series. Pureflix had just agreed to distribute the series on its various streaming networks. The week after returning from Nashville, we went into studio production of eleven new television episodes. While I understood her thinking, God was calling me to this ministry.

Being an on-purpose person, I stay busy. Everyone needs to have room in their 24/7 for what is important. I've learned to manage my time. By knowing my notes, I can eliminate what seems urgent and make room for what is really important. I don't like getting behind or feeling frazzled, because I don't rush well. I'm careful not to put myself in the too-busy mode.

The Chapel had been our church home for over eight years, but I'd never felt called to a particular ministry there. The word "recovery" awakened my soul.

When it came to recovery, I had three important reasons to participate. I asked myself several questions: Where would I be today without the counseling, therapy, and wise people who

spoke into my life? Where would I be without some place to bare my hurting soul? My broken dreams? Someone with whom I could confess my sins? What if I was still burying my misunderstood life events and situations rather than understanding and dealing with them? The answer was obvious. The second reason came from asking, Where will I be five years from now if I don't accept this opportunity to grow and continue to recover? Not only did I want this ministry for others, but I also wanted it for myself. Placing myself in healthy Christian growth environments could only mean good things. I'd be helping others who would be helping me. The third consideration, and maybe the most important, was a healing ministry required a body of believers who reflect Jesus in their community.

The groundwork for my thought process began years ago, when God gave me an up-close opportunity to meet someone so grounded in his purpose, despite international fame and acclaim, that he never left the main thing in his life at his local church.

Mark Hall is the founder and lead singer for the amazing contemporary Christian-group, Casting Crowns. Years ago, at the apex of their careers, the band did a show at a mega-church in a northwest Atlanta suburb near where we lived in Roswell. I met Mark there for a magazine interview, intent on spending my time focused on his life and ministry as much as I would focus on his music.

Most interviews like this take place in a green room or an isolated place designed for quiet. While my press pass gave me access to Mark, it didn't give me a quiet environment or even a place to put my papers, notes, and recorder. Despite his warmth

and cooperation, the environment wasn't conducive to digging deeper into his faith. Instead, it was more like a typical press interview that takes place in the field, adlibbed on-the-fly. We were surrounded by people, and the room was loud. We talked one-on-one, but crowds of people were looking and listening, waiting for us to finish so they could talk with Mark. The Christian-music superstar was gracious, accustomed to tuning out distractions. He stayed focused on my questions and handled the situation much better than I did.

A year earlier, I had encountered another Christian music superstar in a similar environment, at an outdoor venue at Six Flags over Georgia. My cameraman and I were backstage with press passes. My only goal was to carve out a minute for the lead singer of that popular band to give me enough time to rationalize putting him and the band on the cover of Atlanta Christian Family Magazine with exposure to tens of thousands of readers. As the show ended, I knew my time to ask questions would be brief at best. In this harried scene, the singer was surrounded by bodyguards. He had just poured out his soul on the concert stage, so I felt sure he was exhausted. I was especially respectful as I approached. "Sir, we'd like a minute to talk to you so we can feature your band in our magazine."

No smile.

No eye contact.

He simply said, "Can you call _____?" He gave me the name of a contact at his management firm. That was that. End of the evening. Though I'd gotten to see some of the show from backstage, the whole reason for going was to talk to this man for

a minute or two. Disappointed, I went home with no interview. On Monday morning, I reached out to the person the singer had suggested. She declined the interview. No reason. Just no.

Over the years, many people said no to interviews for a magazine story or for my book. That is part of the work. A folder in my file cabinet is filled with rejection letters. While none of these rejections deterred or even slowed down my effort, some of them stung more than others, because I expected Christians to be better than the average.

Mark Hall was a superstar in Christian-genre music, but he did not see himself as any different from his fans. He did not need a green room, because he was more comfortable in the hallways, meeting people. That is why the members of Casting Crowns left such an impression on me. They were superstars, but there were no bodyguards or people on crowd-control duty. Mark milled about the hallways with everyone else, taking pictures and carrying on conversations. The band members were smiling genuinely, having a great time meeting their fans. My meeting with Mark was difficult, because he was so eager to engage with anyone who approached him. He was everything that I'd expected a Christian celebrity to be—different in all the right ways.

Mark grew up singing with his dad at church, which paved the way that for him to be a youth leader. “When I got around kids,” he said, “it was an it.” His passion for youth was undoubtedly the purpose for which God had created him. He was the youth pastor at the First Baptist Church in Daytona Beach, and Casting Crowns was formed as a youth worship praise band.

He later moved to Eagles Landing Baptist Church in McDonough, Georgia, a suburb on Atlanta's south side.

The band made CDs of youth gatherings for friends in 2003. On the CDs, Mark would talk about what they did on Wednesday nights, inviting others to join them. One of the young men from the youth group took a CD with him to a basketball camp at Flagler University, where a kid just happened to meet Mark Miller, lead singer for Sawyer Brown and said, "You need to hear my music pastor."

Casting Crowns rapidly gained popularity. Yet Mark's passion for youth ministry and those kids each Sunday did not diminish. "God opened the door for Casting Crowns," Mark said, "but he did not close the door on the church."

At the time of our interview, Lifesong had moved to ninth in Billboards Top 200 charts. Soon after that, the album Lifesong was the Dove Award winner for Pop/Contemporary Album of the Year. It received a Grammy Award for Best Pop/Contemporary Gospel Album. But each Sunday, Mark Hall was just Mark Hall, the youth pastor at Eagles Landing.

My conversation with Sherry about Celebrate Recovery caused me to dig out my file on the interview with Mark. Over a decade earlier, he had said something that I wanted to recall exactly. In the conversation, he said something about never forgetting where you came from and sticking by your local church. As I re-read my notes, several of his quotes stirred my soul. In 2019, Casting Crowns is still performing in concerts before millions of people, still touring, still relevant with lots of airplay. After ten million records sold, with a Grammy Award,

two Billboard Music Awards, four American Music Awards, and fifteen Dove Awards, Mark Hall had become a household name in Christian-genre music. He was still writing and singing hit songs and headlining concerts. I googled him to catch up on what he was doing. I just had to know if he was still involved in his local church. By now, surely he had changed his mind about the whole “serve your local church” topic from years ago.

When I went to the Eagles Landing Baptist Church website and clicked on the staff page, I found a photo of Mark Hall, Youth Pastor. No asterisk indicating his celebrity or Casting Crowns—just the title that fits his purpose as a youth leader.

The humility was astonishing. Don’t they play concerts on weekends? Isn’t it next to impossible to be at home for church on Sunday mornings when concert halls across the world are selling out to hear them sing on weekends? Well then, how could I not make time for a healing ministry to hurting people in my church home?

My guess is that not much has changed in Mark’s philosophy that he shared in 2005: “What matters is what is going on in the life of those 400-plus kids. What matters is whether that teenage guy really “gets it” that God loves him. What really matters is whether that teenage girl knows she’s loved and wanted by the God of the universe.”

Their music and messages are written because of the lives that Mark and the Casting Crowns band members live each week. Their lyrics reflect their hearts, summed up by something else that Mark shared with me: “We come home every week to people who desperately need a relationship with Jesus. This is the

ministry God has called us to do.”

In my notes I found this: “When something happens in your life,” Mark said, “and you know full well that there is not a single thing you did to make that happen, you know that for some reason God wants it to be. So a big part of this whole thing is not having too many dreams for our futures. I constantly find myself thinking, God, if we get ahead of you on this thing, then it’ll all be gone. We are husbands and wives and parents first. We are supposed to be in the church, doing what we are doing. We are going to bloom where we are planted in this season and keep doing it until the next season comes.”

Casting Crowns never outgrew their local church. They are still committed servants and humble leaders who bring glory to God. But being connected to their home church reflects the character of the Casting Crowns members. A body of believers at their church has probably helped keep them humble, still blooming where they were planted.

I said yes right away to the invitation to help with Celebrate Recovery. I didn’t need to pray about it. God’s plan for me prepared me for it. My family had experienced so much pain as a result of drugs and alcohol, how could I not be eager to serve and learn? If one of the most successful recovery ministries was coming to my church, I wanted to be a part of it from day one.

I’ve spoken in many churches and at Christian events at various venues. There were always problems, deficiencies, sin, and hypocrisy.

Churches are filled with imperfect people. Admittedly, I’m sometimes tempted to go church shopping, looking for something

different, perhaps more exciting. Then I remember that being part of a church is not about what I want or need. Maybe I'm there to serve others. I'm definitely there to worship. If I make it solely about how I feel, then I'm making church about me and not about God.

"Your purpose is to worship God with your life," Mark Hall said to me, "with everything you have." That thought helps me make decisions about how I can best use my experience to help others.

The church in America is under vicious attack. We read about membership declines, the rise of the "nones"—the no-religion people, and those who choose to stay home on Sunday mornings. Some think it's easier to listen to a podcast or stream a sermon from their favorite preacher. There are often schedule conflicts with kids' sports or plans for weekend getaways. There are many reasons to miss church, but they usually boil down to poor excuses.

Who can change this trend? Christians? Polling data suggests that 75 percent of Americans identify themselves as Christian. Yet to read or watch the news, you'd think Christianity is gasping its final breath. While the number of people in this country who believe in God is measured in the hundreds of millions, you'd never know it by walking down the street. There is an incredible opportunity for change, but Christ-followers must take back their voice and shout. We've allowed a small minority of secularists to dictate that faith-related monuments—including crosses in military memorials—do not belong in public spaces. Where are the believers? Why aren't we fighting for what we believe in? It's

been said that if we don't stand for something, we will fall for anything. It is time that we stand for our faith.

Many Christians treat church as if they were playing musical chairs. They don't like something: the music, the associate pastor, the way the greeter at the door smiles. When they go somewhere else, they discover that they are in the same pew at a different church. To get beyond the superficiality and down to the living water that feeds us, we need to be deeply rooted in our local church. Shallow roots create observers, not worshippers.

Sometimes after the service, I serve as a greeter, standing at the information kiosk to meet visitors or anyone with questions. Those moments are so important to someone who may feel a little out of place. As 1 Corinthians 12:27 explains: "Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it." Just as one body has many parts and all its parts form one body, so it is with Christ. We are the body of Christ to the world. Many are seeking Jesus all around us. Sometimes their search leads them to a local church. We must be in church to worship, but we must also demonstrate the love of Christ to those seeking his peace.

Building up the church starts with you and me. It takes commitment, sacrifice, and a willingness to serve others, expecting nothing in return. Being positioned to receive others at their point of need is a huge part of making disciples. Sometimes, just being there can change someone's life. A smile, a hug or handshake, an introduction to another person can be just what someone needs for the next step in a relationship with Jesus Christ.

The first Sunday after 9/11, churches were filled. I remember

unfamiliar, frightened faces in our worship service that morning. People look for God in troubled times. For a few weeks, church attendance remained high, but before long, it was back to normal.

No one can be oblivious to what today's headlines say. We are concerned, but we are no longer shocked by the darkness in our world. We've become desensitized to the murder of children, human trafficking of sex slaves, and mass shootings of innocent people in stores, malls, and places of worship.

Jesus offers the answer to darkness: "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead, they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house." When Jesus said you, he meant the church. We are called to be the light.

Even the unbelievers are concerned with the hatred we witness daily. But 1 Peter 1:8 tells us love covers a multitude of sins. More love means less hate. We are that love that can cover sin. The good news can outshine bad news. We can help. We can fill our social media posts with good news—not about politics but about the good things in our lives, in our churches, and in the purposeful, unselfish deeds that we witness.

Share God moments with your friends and families. Speak boldly of what God is doing in your life. Talk about the changes God is making in the lives of his children, which far outweighs darkness and hatred. Sharing such stories is a powerful way to encourage others to walk by faith. It is an amazing way to encourage seekers to trust God.

Instead of the tragedy du jour, what if today's headline said, Church Attendance in America Reaches All-time High? How

many visitors would our local churches get on the following Sunday, from people searching for answers or wanting to see what was going on? Today's silenced Christians might again speak freely of their faith, no matter where they were, and face-up to the hateful atheists. We can be the light on the hill that cannot be hidden. But it only starts when we go, and then God will do the rest. He will cause the world to notice.

When I think about my faith life, my defining moments were inside the walls of a local church. As a youth, I walked down the aisle numerous times at North Columbia Baptist Church until the pastor kindly whispered to me, explaining that accepting Christ once was all that was required. For years, I was not connected to any church. Then Fred and I joined Roswell United Methodist Church and made it our home away from home. We raised our children in that church, and not just on Sundays. While Fred and I visited with others at the Fellowship Hall during Wednesday night suppers, Reagan and Rhett played on the chalkboards in nearby teaching rooms or ran around with their friends. The two of them were in church school from the two-a-day twos until they started kindergarten. At North Point Community Church, I learned so much about how the Bible applies to my life. In Knoxville, Tennessee for a short time, we made many close friends at our church home there. Now we go to church in the heart of the LSU campus, where our son will follow in his father's college footsteps. My life was changed during pivotal moments with God. He met me at church, accepted me there, and changed me because I was there. Thank God for the local church.

A life on purpose requires that we don't just go to church.

Life On Purpose

We must meet a need. Consider starting a ministry using your life experiences. Walk with someone else who needs you. Sometimes, it's just a matter of making yourself available. Sometimes, it means that we must step out of our comfort zone to help another person grow deeper in their faith. But that grows our own faith too.

In church, people pursue purpose together and encourage one another along the same path.

Sixteen

“Getting” Grace

One morning, I was riding my bike. Praise music blared in my ear phones, a fair attempt to infuse a big dose of hope to assuage my overwhelming feelings of fear. Just two weeks earlier, I had suffered my first panic attack in decades.

My Apple watch notified me of my accelerated heart rate. It kept popping up, alerting me. Boom-boom, I didn't need technology to tell me what I knew. The pounding. I felt the blood rushing through my veins. More pounding.

It started with a fight with my husband. We didn't have many squabbles, but when we did, they brought out the worst in me. When he was angry, I hid emotionally and had a hard time coming out of my cave. It was the old me—in self-protection mode—again. Within a few hours, he apologized, and we discussed our disagreement. Time to move forward, right? But our getting crossways wasn't the only problem. There was a disagreement with our son. Besides that, my daughter and I

couldn't find common ground to discuss life issues that concerned both Fred and me.

Days later, my sisters and I gathered several friends to celebrate our mother's eighty-fourth birthday. What should have been a happy event ended in tears and angry words, with enough hurt feelings to circle the table several times. Friends and family had come to have a good time, but it didn't turn out that way. After the celebration-gone-sour, with a huge sense of personal defeat, I cried like a baby the entire drive home from Mississippi. Somehow, I took the responsibility for my family's falling out.

In a few days, after deep conversations, each situation was mostly resolved. Now it was time to move forward in peace and trust in the deeper intimacy of each relationship. Yet here I was, with my heart still racing.

My prayer was simply, "God help me!" Tension. Second-guessing. Assumptions. Fear. Feelings of condemnation. These thoughts rattled my brain and shook my spirit. The praise music refused to drown them out. I said aloud, "Lord, what is wrong with me?" almost shouting over the music. By now, shouldn't I have this Christian thing down pat? Instead, I kept reliving each scenario, wondering what to do so none of this could happen again.

While showering and getting dressed for a day at the office, I felt even worse. It was as if my faith was failing. How could I be having panic attacks, now that my life is so great, my faith walk so advanced, my relationship with my Savior so deep? Heck, I'm in ministry! I've been growing in my faith for decades. Shouldn't I be stronger than this by now? I asked myself.

About to explode with mixed emotions, I had to share my feelings with someone. Fred came into my office and sat down. As tears streamed down my face, I blurted it out: “Mom is having blood pressure issues and is going to the doctor today. I’m so scared that if something happens to her, everyone will blame me.” There, I said it. Because of our messy lunch celebration, I feared the worst outcome possible. And it would be my fault.

“Honey,” Fred said, “your mom is eighty-four years old. You have nothing to do with her blood pressure.”

He was right, and deep down I knew it. But I was bursting with anxiety and just had to get it out. Telling someone the worst of what was going on in my head helped. I began to let the fear go and quit letting it wreak havoc in my mind. My mom and I had talked about what had happened, and we were good. I was the one left laboring with spinning emotions.

Joyce Meyer’s *Battlefield of the Mind* is a best-seller for good reason. It made me realize that I wasn’t the only one who has struggled with anxiety. Many times I prayed in frustration. “Lord, why am I still fighting this battle? I just don’t get myself sometimes.”

Earlier that week, a friend texted me. She was traveling and had a packed agenda, so I was surprised to hear from her. She simply wrote, You got a minute? I knew it was a 911 and to call right away.

“Hey,” she said. My generally bubbly friend was anything but bubbly. I heard her tears. “Do you ever just want to check out?” Obviously, she was feeling at her all-time low. After we talked for a while, she was better.

Venting with someone who cares always helps. When I felt defeated, it helped to know I wasn't alone. We lifted up each other and agreed to get together after she returned home. We were actually giggling before we got off the phone, thankful to have each other for authentic conversations that pointed to our true identity in Christ.

Feelings of guilt and shame are nothing new. Yet scripture reminds us: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). God gave us those words as a battle cry when condemnation brings a dark cloud to rain on our life of purpose. The enemy wages war in our minds. Satan seeps into areas of discouragement and digs with accusations. "That family mess, it's all your fault. You should work harder on being a better wife and mom," he says. Of course, Satan is the author of all lies and uses false notions as his sharpest weapon. It sometimes seems that every time I experience the obvious move of God's hand in my life, the enemy counterattacks with a vengeance. John 10:10 tells us, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." Yes, Jesus came that you and I might have life and have it abundantly.

As we moved forward with *Life on Purpose* as a book and a streaming television series, God opened doors. We were amazed with the ways the Lord demonstrated his hand at work in our plans. In what should have been such an exciting time, I sometimes felt like I was in a wrestling match. This comes as no surprise to many followers of Christ. The thief comes after us, because he does not want our ministry to be effective.

Satan does not want any believer to be happy. He does not want us to bear witness to the hand of God. And he certainly doesn't want us to glorify our Creator. Therefore, it is in your best moments as a child of God that the enemy comes to steal, kill, and destroy. While God won this battle for all eternity through Jesus, Satan is still the prince of the air. He is at work waging war against God's people. He comes to take what God gives us—our families, our callings, and yes, our very purpose.

Because of Christ's victory at the resurrection, we must claim our position of victory. Even if we feel worthless, we must stand tall and firm. Our identity must be firmly rooted in Christ. The moment we start to feel less than a child of God, we need to fall to our knees and surrender again, saying, "Lord, take over." Jesus' example is all we need to face down the enemy. Follow Christ's example, turn to the Word, and use truth.

This example from Matthew 4:1–11 is our call to action: "Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.' Jesus answered, 'It is written, Man shall not live on bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.' Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God throw yourself down, for it is written: 'He will command his angels concerning you, and 'On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot your foot against a stone.' Jesus said to him, 'Again it is written, 'You shall not put the Lord your God

to the test.’ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. ‘All these I will give you if you will bow down and worship me.’ Then Jesus said to him, ‘Be gone, Satan! For it is written, You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.’ Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and were ministering to him.”

Jesus did not offer his opinion, blame anyone else, or add anything to this dialog. Nor did he seek to think through the situation or go pray about it. He was ready and armed with scripture. He applied the truth of God’s word against Satan’s lies. No matter what Satan tried, Jesus knew how to stay in his Father’s will. A simple strategy, which ended in victory each time.

I’ve come to a point of surrender many times. Even though it’s a daily prayer, there are a few key seasons when I come to the end of myself and have to surrender all over again. The enemy will come after our family, our marriage, our finances, and our minds. Get ready, arming yourself with a few key scriptures, and take your position. Stand in the open, because you can’t hide from “It is written.” Those are three powerful words.

I went through this battle at the same time I wrote this chapter on grace. My message about grace is indeed my story. Recalling God’s grace in my life is so easy, because I’ve experienced so much of it. That I’d be tested made sense. I’d have to dig even deeper to seek God for comfort. But my grace is just that: “mine.” Jesus died so I’d have enough of it for each day. No one can take it away from me. Even when I’m on the

floor crying out to God, he is sufficient.

His grace has been so evident throughout my life. Sometimes it's not been evident until I look back over certain situations. Then I can see his grace so clearly. A couple of examples come to mind.

When I became the director of Women's Ministries at Roswell United Methodist Church, I wondered if the church leaders and pastoral staff would find out about my sinful past, if they'd have no choice but to fire me. Imagine. I was fearful of being fired from a volunteer position. Were they so desperate for volunteers that they'd take anyone? Even me? Was any warm body who said yes considered fit for service? But day after day, my enthusiasm and leadership ability seemed to be sufficient. They were happy to have me, and I was happy to be had. Knowing that I had a lot to learn, God placed me in a great environment. Those ladies understood grace and poured it out on me. I was a worker bee who got things done, and they kept me in check if the enthusiasm was over-the-top. Those pillars of the church loved me, taught me, challenged me, and corrected me when I needed to be corrected. It was, in a word, grace.

At that time, my kids were toddlers. Busy me needed a morning quiet time. No matter how early I got up, one of them got up too. Sometimes it was both. They'd want to cozy up and visit while I drank my coffee. They also liked the unhurried pace and time to snuggle before our day got going. As sweet as it was, I wasn't getting my quiet time. When talking to my mom, I mentioned my frustration.

She knew exactly what I was thinking. "You are feeling

guilty about wishing they'd sleep later," she said. "You are afraid God will take one of them from you if you are not more grateful for them."

Mom was right. I was so afraid I'd get into trouble with God if I prayed about them sleeping later. God might punish me for not being more thankful. How could I complain? I had two healthy kids, a wonderful husband, and a happy home. Yet here I was, wishing for a few moments of solitude.

I was seeing God like a state trooper sitting over the hill with his radar gun, waiting for me to speed by, just so he could pull me over and write a ticket. "Oh my goodness, you are right," I said to her. "I'm scared to pray about that. I'm scared of God."

The Walk to Emmaus weekend retreat was a pivotal point in my faith walk. Grace was a major topic from the speakers, including the various kinds of grace. Prevenient grace. Justifying grace. Sanctifying grace. Being introduced to grace was a new way of thinking, and I really wanted to know more. I was confused about which kind of grace was which, and then there were subcategories of grace within grace. My head was spinning. I hadn't been raised in faith. I had little biblical knowledge. I was easily confused by the Christian lingo—Christianese, I like to call it. Like the time when someone said they wanted to disciple me. That might have been the nicest thing anyone had ever wanted to do for me, but I fled in fear and confusion, not knowing what discipling was all about. Was it snake-handling? Discipling sounded extreme, and I was afraid to ask what that meant. It was no different with grace. I knew I needed grace, but what kind? I wanted all that God would give me.

To understand and receive grace, it helps to know what grace is not. What is the opposite of grace? Performance. The standard that says if you are good enough at this, you'll earn that. Performance means that the quality of my life is the direct result of how well I do things. Performance demands doing more to accomplish more. I'm a recovering people-pleasing performer. I'm not afraid of God if I'm doing all the right things, if my performance is acceptable. Keeping everyone happy? My specialty. Paint the happy brush? The artist in me comes alive. But the moment I feel unworthy or think I've done something wrong, I have to guard against becoming afraid of impending punishment. That is when I get on my own nerves for being tricked into thinking more like I'm riding a roller coaster than a child of the Most High God and King of the Universe.

When I talked with a friend and mentor about my family feuding, my stomach had been in knots for days. "Where is my faith?" I asked. "Why am I so worked up about this situation?"

"Beth," she said, "you've been trying to be peacemaker since you were seven years old. It didn't work then, and it won't work now."

Bullseye.

From my days as a child, I'd stand in the midst of conflict, desperately trying to bring peace. The moment I felt the tension building, I started churning. No, I was panicking, trying to quickly resolve the situation. It was a relentless cycle, in most cases with no resolution.

That feeling of strife was much heavier in our own home. I was the mom, right? The loving, caring, problem-solving mom.

The loving, caring, problem-solving wife who wants everyone to have a great place to call home. When the kids were little, I kissed a mean boo-boo, gave a real momma-bear hug, and offered a wide smile that fixed minor pains. That was then.

The children are now grown up, and we have a precious granddaughter. No matter how much I want to help our children avoid pitfalls, they will step right into messes on their own. As their mom, I'm likely going to walk right beside them as they suffer the consequences of their decisions.

Living a grace-filled life is the opposite of living a performance-built life. It's the difference between trusting God and trusting yourself. It's independence or dependence. God has already won the battle by sending Jesus to bear the weight of our mistakes. Jesus took our need for performance to the cross at Calvary. We must let him have all our failed attempts at living a successful life. While this is easier said than done, knowing it can relieve so much pressure. Yes, we are to work and pursue successes. We don't just sit back and hope God does it all for us. He won't insert himself. However, if we invite him into all our circumstances, we can trust him to lead us and help us get back on track.

This vital knowledge empowers us to rest in our walk with Christ. Over my early years as a Christian, I heard a lot about grace. Our salvation is because of grace. Eternal life? More grace. Forgiveness of sins? An epic amount of grace. Not only did I believe in grace, I had to have it in order to follow Jesus. There was no way I could come to Christ outside of what he did for me on that cross. Seeing *The Passion of the Christ* movie

brought a personal revelation. When I watched Jesus taking a beating, I knew that beating was for me. His horrific death was exactly what I deserved. I visualized what I'd done with my life. Yet Jesus took that brutal punishment for me. He took my sin upon himself. He died for me so I could live in freedom and carry his life into the world. My sins died with Jesus. Only when I accepted that kind of grace could I live a life on purpose.

Grace at work in our lives means a lot more than salvation. Someone gave me a copy of the book *Grace Walk: What You've Always Wanted in the Christian Life* by Steve McVey. It was such an eye-opening book, with the first chapter titled "Miserable Mediocrity." It was Steve's story on how to live every day under the grace of God. As a pastor he'd come to the end of himself. Filled with weakness, he faced his own brokenness, front and center.

McVey's book started with his need to surrender his life to the Lord—not because he'd had a heartfelt moment with God but because he was suffering miserably in his own personal weakness. Life was spinning out of control, and nothing he did helped things get better. His performance wasn't helping. That was when he discovered grace at a whole new level.

His honesty got my attention. A pastor at the end of his rope, sharing that fact with the world? In his book, he exposed the naked truth without one ounce of shame, guilt, or fear of an angry God who would destroy him for his terrible sin.

My childhood circumstances forced me to become fiercely independent. As an adult, I never had time to linger in sadness over a broken relationship or because of poor decisions. Pushed

down, I got up quickly. Bouncing back was imbued in me. Not getting back up was never an option. Missing work meant being really sick or going out of town. When I broke my leg at a company function, I went back to work the same day, and I never thought about taking a pain pill. Yet as my faith grew, I realized that I needed to trust God more and let him show me how to live with purpose. But I was concerned that surrendering to God might cause me to give up all I'd worked so hard to become. I didn't want to soften my assertive nature. I never wanted to go back to being shy or insecure. Those traits weren't things I was born with. They were fostered over time. Because each day required confidence, I'd become confident—and I liked that part of myself.

This driven mentality was part of what made me want to interview others. My questions about purpose were constantly on my mind. I needed answers quickly. It made sense to personally ask those who could answer. It seemed a good idea to sit across from professional athletes or politicians and find out how they made it to the top of their fields.

When I found myself sitting across from Steve McVey, the *Grace Walk* author, at a Christian Booksellers Association convention, my feelings had been hurt by an awfully rude editor. Then, around the corner, I saw Steve McVey autographing his book, which I was already reading and captivated by. At this point, it was obvious that a Christian event didn't always have everyone demonstrating the Golden Rule. But Steve was different. He took time to sit down with me, look me in the eyes, and hear some of my story. He didn't just sign my book; we

lingered in conversation. Steve McVey didn't just talk about grace, he gave the definite impression was that he lived it.

When I returned home, I wrote him a thank-you letter and asked to meet again for an interview. He responded as one would expect a best-selling author on the subject of grace to do: "I'd be honored." Like I said, he lived it. Whatever Steve possessed, I wanted. That peacefulness and genuine joy. He enjoyed life and found pleasure in meeting with others. He didn't seem self-consumed, flustered, or pressured. That level of calmness was refreshing and attractive.

We met at his home in suburban Atlanta, joined by his wife, Melanie. Our meeting was delightful, comfortable, and intimate. His story was compelling. He'd been a Christian his entire life. His parents were Christian leaders and active in their church throughout his childhood. "I became a believer when I was eight-years old," he said. "I had a hunger for God from an early age." At age sixteen, he spoke in a church for the first time. At just nineteen, he was a senior pastor.

God started to refine Steve's focus when he was thirty-seven, causing him to see that his heart was right toward ministry but his head was in the wrong place. Desperate for answers, he prayed, "God, if this is ministry, I want out. If this is the Christian life, it's overrated. It's good for getting to Heaven, but in the meantime, what's the big deal? Where is that abundant life you promised?"

This man who trusted God did not fear being punished for praying wrong words. This was a man who trusted God's love and saw him only as a perfect Father, who was shaping him into a

man worthy of grace. With that prayer came the revelation that Steve had a legalistic viewpoint and was approaching the Christian life from a performance-based mentality. “Legalism,” he said, “says we make spiritual progress or gain God’s blessings based on what we do. Grace is God saying, ‘I’m going to bless you and move you forward, not because of how good you are but because of how good I am. I’m going to bless you because you are in Jesus Christ.’” And so it was that God allowed Steve McVey to fail in his performance as a pastor so Steve could understand how to live by grace and share that message with others. The church he was pastoring wasn’t growing. Attendance was declining. After a year of feeling like a failure, he was on his face before God. “It was out of my brokenness that God began to teach me,” he said.

He described how his prayer life changed. He’d become skilled at praying as a pastor, asking God for help. Now was different. This pastor took his hands off his own life and put control completely in God’s hands. “This was,” he said, “the Lord-I-give-up-in-surrender prayer.”

This way of thinking was a complete paradigm shift for me. Since our culture rewards performance, we tend to fall prey to demands for task-mastering and listing our accomplishments.

Even as Christians, we are admonished to pursue purpose and run our race with perseverance. This might seem confusing or contradictory. Run the race while at the same time wait on God? The only way to find the balance is to know Jesus. “We don’t develop a passion for Jesus by doing things for him,” Steve said. “We develop a passion for Jesus by coming to know him.”

He then explained that doing is not wrong. Doing should be the natural outcome of understanding who Jesus is and who we are in him. As the Grace Walk author adeptly put it, “I define grace as the divine enablement, by virtue of the life of Jesus Christ in us, for us to be all that he’s called us to be and do all that he’s called us to do.”

Learning about grace from Steve McVey was life-altering for me. Hearing him talk about a life of grace gave me hope that I could take some of the pressure off myself and learn to live under the grace of God too. But I had work to do. This shift in thinking required retraining my mind and repeated effort.

I’d mastered the art of self-sufficiency, with independence as my mantra. Even after becoming a believer, that work-harder mentality was reinforced by everyone I’d worked for. So for me, once again it was back to a key life question: “Do you live your life based on facts or feelings?” Steve had said, “Feelings lie loudly.”

Living by grace means accepting the fact of Christ in us. Sometimes we take a simple gospel message and allow it to appear complicated. It’s not. When we dilute the gospel, we pollute the gospel.

I don’t keep up with the British royal family. In fact, Fred couldn’t get me past the first few episodes of *The Crown*. It’s impossible for me to understand the British infatuation with the royals, so I really can’t fathom why so many in our country keep up with which family member is doing what on a given day. But a news story about the royals caught my attention. The royals’ countenance was based on their identity. They acted like royalty.

They dressed like royalty. They spoke like royalty. Everyone in the family was trained on what it was like to be a part of royalty.

They are people—human beings with thoughts and feelings just like you and me. For them, however, being told they are royal changes everything. The Windsor family is different because of who they believe themselves to be. It starts when the children are told who they are. Being born or marrying into that family comes with enormous wealth, outrageous benefits, and constant scrutiny. In my shallow perspective of them, I thought, It must be easy to be you. You don't ever have to worry about anything. Mansions, cars, people to take care of your every need. Nannies to see to your children while you are in meetings about how to be a good standing member of the royal family. Their entire life was set for them.

Then I realized that Christians should live like royalty. After all, we too are part of a royal family. Unfortunately, we don't always choose to view our lives as that of royalty, even though we are sons and daughters of the King. Not just any king. The only true King to whom one day every knee will bow and every mouth confess his lordship. Your life and mine are set for us, the same as the Windsor family. God has a plan and a purpose for you and me. Somehow, people have bought the lie that the family members of King Jesus are to be weak, meek, and mild. Instead of spending all day on our knees, confessing our terrible sins, we should act like people who are proud of their family heritage.

It is more than okay to boast about whose we are, because we are much more royal than the Windsors. Our King is the King above all kings. We should shout from the rooftops, "Jesus is our

Lord.”

“While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light” (John 12:36), Jesus said. We must live in the world in such a way that others see us and are drawn to the light of Christ that they see in us. If we are truly the salt of the earth, we have the flavor that others want.

On the day that I inadvertently watched the royals, despite my long-standing indifference, the Creator of the Universe used that story to motivate me to act like a daughter of my King Jesus. Like it is said, God works in mysterious ways. Seeing the Duchess of Cambridge, born Catherine Elizabeth Middleton, inspired me to take a better version of myself into the world each day. Ever-smiling and camera-ready, the young woman is classy and eloquent, but careful with her words, prepared and always dressed to perfection. Being at her best each day is what followers of the royal family expect.

What should we all learn from that? After all, even members of the royal family have worries. Perhaps not about how they’ll make their next mortgage payment or send their children to college, but they must navigate the hurts, stresses, and illnesses of life and relationships, similar to what you and I face. Their marriages and family lives require work and sacrifice much like ours. The difference is that they’ve been trained on how to act in public, to protect the image of the royal family.

Like the Windsors, we are told how to act. God himself inspired the compilation of the guidebook for life. How we represent the Body of Christ, our royal family, should be Priority One. Our actions either invite others to join the family or drive

them away. How should we live as members of a royal family? Here are some for-it-is-written rules for our royal family to live by:

Love God.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment” Matthew 22:37, 38.

Love one another.

“And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself” Matthew 22:39.

Honor God at work.

“Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men” Colossians 3:23.

Honor God at home.

“Now you have been pleased to bless the house of your servant, that it may continue forever before you, for it is you, O Lord, who have blessed, and it is blessed forever” 1 Chronicles 17:27.

Seek God.

“By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome”

1 John 5:2-3.

Live in unity.

“May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus” Romans 15:5.

Live Boldly.

“And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness” Acts 4:29.

Speak boldly.

“So they remained for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord, who bore witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands” Acts 14:3.

Speak life.

“The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life, but the mouth of the wicked conceals violence” Proverbs 10:11.

Speak truth.

“For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. As for you . . . do the work of an evangelist fulfill your ministry” 2 Timothy 4:3–5.

Share our stories.

“But the testimony that I have is greater than that of John. For the works that the Father has given me to accomplish, the very works that I am doing, bear witness about me that the Father has sent me” John 5:36.

Renounce fear.

“There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love” 1 John 4:18.

Encourage each other.

“Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing”

1 Thessalonians 5:11.

Teach with words.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise” Deuteronomy 6:5–7.

Teach with praise songs.

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly . . . singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God” Colossians 3:16.

Protect our health.

“Do you know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own” 1 Corinthians 6:19.

Live in his forgiveness, forgiving others.

“Forgive us our debts, as we have also forgiven our debtors” Matthew 6:12.

Reject sin.

“No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it” 1 Corinthians 10:13.

My worldly lesson is grounded in spiritual truth. We must choose which identity we will live. Will it be royalty or the same old self? Grace or performance? Love or hate? Hopeful or hateful? Peace or anxiety? Each day, we make decisions about who we are going to take into the world. Our job is simple: glorify God by the lives we live. Invite others to know Christ, because they see Christ in us, which leads to grace.

Even if we sink back into performance-based living, we are still covered by God's grace. My anxiety attacks and worrying did nothing to change the circumstances I fretted over. Yet God's grace was still at work. He does not punish me by allowing me to mess things up. I've surrendered my life to him. I've asked him to be the Lord of my life, so he is still the Lord.

We must wake up every day and speak truth against the lies we hear in our head. Like Jesus, we keep it simple. Speak the Word to each lie: "It is written." You might laugh if you heard me when I'm walking around, speaking scripture. It's what I call "defeating dialog"—speaking Truth to defeat the enemy. But it works. "I'm a new creation in Christ. I am a child of God. Jesus loves me. All things work together for good for those who love the Lord."

There is nothing I want to do more than what God says do. But he does the work. My job is to seek him and trust him to order my steps, to align my circumstances with His will. It's never up to me. One key scripture I pray helps me rest in the sovereignty of God. This is my surrender prayer each day over my work: "Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and establish the work of our hands upon us; yes, establish the work

of our hands” (Psalm 90:17). It’s a win-win. I rest in the fact that I’m covered in his favor, and he will establish the work of my hands. I’m free to go to work, knock on doors, pursue my dreams, and think big things for my life. However, I’m to leave outcomes to him. If a door closes, I say, “Thank you Lord.”

If his favor rests upon us, we cannot miss anything he has for us.

My anxiety attacks were a clear indicator that I’d reverted to performance-based living. Feeling the weight of the world is not God’s plan for me. Taking on the guilt and shame of family problems is not my cross to bear. I can help bring peace and restoration, but when I start feeling responsible, it’s time to fall on my knees and cast those cares upon the Lord. The Word says, “Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him because he cares for you” (1 Peter 5:6-7).

God does not change. But he will change us if we invite him in. When we are on our knees, seeking him for direction and answers, he ushers in grace upon grace. “Lord save me” is an invitation to shift from a performance-based life to a grace walk. Each day, we get the grace we need if we don’t rob ourselves of the peace of Christ by looking backward at our transgressions or looking forward, getting ahead of him. His grace is sufficient for today. Scripture tells us, “His mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness” (Lamentations 3:22-23).

If we accept grace, the identity we step into each day will determine the outcome of our efforts to live a life on purpose.

Seventeen

The Lord's Purpose Prevails

God gave me a vision. Even years ago in my youth and immaturity I was ready to bolt out to Hollywood and become rich and famous, making a name for myself. I've been an optimistic dreamer my whole life. Somehow in my younger days I could quickly escape to the place where my hopes and dreams became a reality. It's like I could see it, that happy and unblemished family and talk show on national TV. The vision was so vivid, I could almost reach out and touch that season of my life where I would look back and see how my life had made a difference and how my dreams had come true.

Over the years I've learned a tragic reality in our body of believers. People give up on their hopes and dreams. My heart broke when my best friend in high school died in a car accident soon after we graduated. She was just nineteen. It was only months after she wrote a note in my high school yearbook boding me well in the pursuit of my dreams. "I guess you'll be on your

way to Hollywood to becoming a star!” It was as if she had bought into my dreams, and we both believed my bags were as good as packed.

Yes, kids have big, maybe even outlandish dreams. Rock star, movie star, professional athlete, even President of the United States. For them, there is no shame in announcing to the world what they are going to be when they grow up. With great pride, they share their unabashed confidence in themselves to conquer the world. The trouble comes in the transition between childhood and adulthood. What happens that causes us to give up so easily?

There are the pat answers: bills, work, family, climbing the corporate ladder only to find the ceiling. Before you know it, life is hectic and even more demanding than you’d imagined. The daily grind is exhausting. During this lifecycle, many start thinking, Isn’t there more to life? Shouldn’t it be more than carpools and bill paying? Not only are we missing the big dreams for our lives, but we’ve also lost any sense of purpose. Survival becomes the daily agenda. We become like robots, on automatic, doing the same routine every day, wondering if and how anything can change. No wonder anxiety and stress are at an all-time high.

Instead of digging deeper and hanging on to our dreams, we shelve them. That’s easier. “One day” becomes our mantra. How hard is recalling our childlike faith and confidence? When is the time to resurrect that genuine optimism and regain that vision? If we truly believe what we profess and trust who we say we trust, God’s people should be passionately leading the cause in living a life of purpose. Christians, of all people, should believe that our dreams have merit. Our living expression of our faith and

perseverance should cause others to seek God's best.

As a professional speaker, I like to use various props to illustrate points. Recently before an audience of writers, I compared two cookie options. One package was colorful, with vibrant packaging that was a popular name brand. In comparison, I showed a less noticeable, generic package of cookies. The company producing the name brand product actually makes a fairly successful effort of overcoming moms' objections that eating a cookie is not a healthy option. "Only 140 calories and two grams of fat per two cookies." That same package alludes to a party with its well-known cookie as the star of the show. While the other product is presentable, it does little more than offer the necessary information at a cheaper price. One option draws attention. The other simply blends in with everything else on the shelf.

Of course, there was intentionality behind the branding of the well-known cookie. Focus groups likely led to a decision on the most effective coloring and wording on the packaging. Each word was thought through, carefully planned, and tested prior to product roll-out. Yes, before the cookies hit the shelf, a strategy—predetermined to accomplish its sales goal—to be the cookie of choice of the consumers.

If there was a plan in place to ensure the success of cookie sales, the same should be true for you and me. We were never called to be "generic people" and blend in with the world. Christians are called to be different.

Celebrity spokespersons get paid a lot of money to represent a product. When people sign a contract to represent a label, they

also make personal commitments to the brand. Often, the spokesperson's commitments include contractual character clauses. If you get paid to represent the brand, you have to keep your life clean and maintain a polished image. A spokesperson either makes the brand look good or that image is tarnished.

Think of those who've been fired. You may recall some. Athletes from golf, football, baseball, and basketball. Hollywood stars, comedians, and even public figures. Spokespersons got into trouble that cost them millions of dollars. If people make the news for all the wrong reasons, they lose their contracts with brands. No more commercials. No more free clothes. No more big checks. In a moment, often because of only one bad decision, it's over.

Christians represent Christ, the most powerful and important brand in the world. Yet in an instant of wavering faith, we can forget the power of whose we are. Every day, you and I are the face of the Christian brand. We are the packaging. We are the spokespeople who sell Christ to the world—or we might have the opposite effect. Let's use the media stories for example. When a pastor falls, Christians are the first to criticize. If a speaker makes a misstatement, Christians can be the worst critics. If Christian singers are interviewed on national television and give a faulty answer to a difficult question, Christians start posting that they will no longer listen to their music. But Scripture says, "Know this my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger" (James 1:19).

The ultimate purpose of Christians is to win the world for Christ. We are to be best known for our love. That starts with

seeing ourselves as winners who are excited to share the Good News. Christ is our victory, and the battle has been won. We can never win souls by pointing out the mistakes or poor choices of a brother or sister in Christ. We are better together. We are called to stand with our brothers and sisters in Christ. “If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together” (1 Corinthians 12:26). When one is troubled, we are all troubled. When one falls, we step down with them to help them get back up. If someone has faulty theology, we don’t get on Facebook and tell the world we no longer approve of them. Isn’t that God’s call to be made? Can’t God reach his own child and provide the proper counsel and help in their time of need? Do we really believe in the power of the Holy Spirit?

Together we represent Jesus. We are one in Christ. We don’t stand with others because it’s our job to defend someone else’s poor decision or sin. We do it because we trust Jesus to redeem them and their situation. We would not need restoration if being restored was not necessary for everyone. Now is the time for believers to come together and re-energize our Christ-given mission. We can achieve our awesome responsibility each day. To do so, our daily activity must impact others in such a way that they want to meet our Jesus. If we are to be the “light of the world” and the “salt of the earth,” we must ask whether people are seeing Christ in us. This is a difficult but incredibly important question. Eternity is at stake. We must accept the responsibility we’ve been given to reach the world for Christ. What better purpose is there to be excited about than that?

Consider this: when missionaries are called to take the

gospel to faraway lands, they spend months in preparation. They surrender their personal comfort so they can fulfill the Great Commission. Many risk everything to do one main thing—share Jesus. And they must share Jesus in such a way that others are attracted to their way of life, our God. These missionaries are the face of Christ, and they know it. When they leave home to go to foreign lands bringing the gospel to an unreached group of people, do you think they attempt to change the native culture? Definitely not. Do they complain about learning a strange language and having to understand a foreign way of thinking? Of course not. They become a part of that culture. They speak the native language, eat foods they may not like, and respect the people they've gone to live among. What missionaries do is difficult. Denying themselves the pleasures of their own families, heritage, and cultures for Christ is incredibly hard. We can't even imagine how hard it is unless we've actually done it.

Christ lives in us. Now even you and I, who may not be called to a remote Chinese province, have social media to devise innovative ways to reach the world for Jesus. While others are using their social platforms to talk about mindless news or babble about dessert recipes, why don't we share the Good News? We are called to make the most of every opportunity.

What is your story? What has God done in your life? When I started writing, I was naïve. I thought writing a book would be easy. Twenty years later, I realize that it was more about the process. God was changing me as I pursued my purpose. In 2007, when a family issue forced me to come home prematurely from the Writing for the Soul Conference, I felt my dreams were dead.

My life was so consumed with that family trauma, I couldn't think about my writing goals for months. I feared my time had passed. My interviews were too dated. My moment had come and gone. It was over. Yet in the midst of that, I reached out to a local business magazine about writing short articles. Wait! Hang on a minute, the Holy Spirit whispered, and my dreams started to resurface. One article led to another, and then I was given my own monthly column, which I wrote for years. I was hanging on by a thread, but I was still hanging on to those dreams. Those 500 words each month were a lifeline to my dreams.

When Fred and I relocated to Baton Rouge in 2012, after a short attempt at a real estate career that I liked nothing about, I went to see a Christian life coach and counselor. I put all my skills sets on a page, and our discussions began to resurrect my dreams. We discussed what I liked and what I didn't like. She reminded me that I was gifted by God to accomplish his special mission for my life. After a few short sessions, I decided to go back to my obvious passion, writing and speaking. That started with a decision to publish a Christian magazine. Talk about jumping in headfirst. After forty-three editions and three-and-a-half years, I realized that the testimony was the most powerful opportunity for Christianity to grow itself. Is it possible to change the world, one story at a time? Yes. If we will speak boldly about what God has done in our lives, we would give him glory and help multitudes who are starving for good news. Nonbelievers want what we have through Christ—a life of purpose and meaning.

As print media lost market share to the digital world, it

became evident that a television magazine built around testimonies was a better “mousetrap.” Instead of 10,000 Louisiana readers, we can reach hundreds of thousands of viewers faraway.

The timing seemed good. Fred had once owned a television production business, and he was now retired. Even so, this idea was far beyond my ability to consider. He was a visionary about a streaming outreach. Describing what came next is nearly impossible. But with God, all things are possible. It’s like God’s momentum was taking us where we were going. I met a publisher in Dallas that helped me determine how to repurpose my years of interviews, and Roaring Lambs agreed to publish this book.

Soon afterward, we met a PureFlix executive by chance at a charity media event. We mentioned our show idea and one thing led to the next. After a few months of discussion, we eventually had an agreement to stream our show on the largest Christian streaming site. In a matter of months, Life on Purpose TV and Life on Purpose as a book became a reality. Only God can do that. Suddenly all my dreams were becoming a reality. God finally said yes. That is when you understand kairos and fit into his timing. Details came together, relationships formed, television shows were produced with super HD technology, and chapter by chapter, the book was edited.

Wow! God’s purpose prevails. He opened doors when he knew I was ready—in such a way that I couldn’t take credit for this new momentum and energy. When I started to write this book, the timing of my dreams was interrupted.

One phone call with my sister changed everything. Suddenly

my role as wife and mom consumed every ounce of my energy. Coming from a family that lived in crisis, I wanted nothing more than to fix it in my own family. I longed deeply to create a perfect home and create decades of happy memories. So as you read, my plans changed. My story took detours from that well-planned trip to meet with publishers and editors and to instead come home to my family.

Dreams come true in seasons, but in others seasons dreams can be shattered and leave us aching. In my case, I questioned God, and my husband and I questioned each other. We struggled to stick together. We lived one day at a time because that was all we could handle. Looking back, I can see that we learned so much. God was there, and we clung to him even when we were tempted to give up.

There is another story to share. My prayer is that Life on Purpose 2 will be our family project, each sharing more about our collective story as a family restored. As we grow and continue to heal, our pain is becoming our purpose. Events that once drove us apart now bring us together. “Her story is her story. His story is his story,” a wise friend told me one day. It’s not up to me or Fred to share Reagan or Rhett’s story. That too is God’s timing, but we believe it is a powerful family testimony that also needs to be shared.

Purpose is a process that requires patience. All those years, I thought I was going to interview others to share their stories, and all the while God was changing my story. Each interview was a life-changing divine appointment. God used each person I’ve written about and others that I’ve not yet mentioned. They shared

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their stories with me so I could see how God works in people's lives. He changed me, grew me, and used me. He did an eternal deep work in my heart over a long period of time. He prepared me for my life on purpose.

In summary, I pray that you don't give up. Wait on God. He is always right on time. Dream big dreams and trust his timing. His purpose prevails. In his perfect timing, your dreams will come true. He gave you the vision. It's his to manifest at his appointed time and your anointed season. When he says yes, his presence in the process will be undeniable. He will show his hand when you are ready. That is called a Life on Purpose.



