

ENDORSEMENTS FOR

Beyond self-help

“*Beyond Self-Help* is absolutely tremendous and genuinely important. Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s life is a reflection of what Jason Pankau talks about in this book based on the Omega Course. Communicating the things of God—becoming Christlike—is done person-to-person in Christian community. In terms of what the church needs in America today, this hits the nail squarely on the head.”

ERIC METAXAS

New York Times Best-Selling Author of *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*

“This is one good book!!! Jason Pankau engages us with a most comprehensive process of Christian discipleship. Being “trained in righteousness” is not a “sometimes” thing, but rather an exercise that emerges from intentionality, undergirded with a theology that touches the ground, all the while squeezing every bit of goodness out of the lives God gave us. This book cuts through the cultural clutter that so easily besets us and leaves us with the promise of a more authentic faith. It is a step-by-step “naming” of the exercise of living abundantly, claiming that profound resource of unconditional love of the Father, while staying anchored by and held accountable to the biblical text. For anyone searching for credibility, relevance, and impact in their Christian witness, this roadmap for personal growth and spiritual maturity is a must read.”

AMBASSADOR ROBERT SEIPLE

Chairman of the Board, Institute for Global Engagement
Former President of World Vision and
U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom

“Jason Pankau nailed it. His storytelling is both relevant and riveting. I laughed and cried reading this book. More importantly, I’m actually going to DO some things differently after reading it”

BOB MUZIKOWSKI

Founder and President of Chicago Hope Academy

“To a society that is sick with the notion that we can really help ourselves from “good to great,” Jason Pankau reminds us of God’s roadmap from a drifting existence to experiencing all that God has in His heart for our lives to be: filled with a faith you can lean on, aligned with His holy will, purposeful in His Kingdom, and truly satisfying because we are uncovering through the study of Scripture the “us” that He made us to be. *Beyond Self-Help* meshes the wisdom of God’s Word with the best research business and academia have to offer. Building on a decade of research and writing, Jason Pankau offers a systematic approach to the study of God’s Word that leads the reader from the illusion of “self” righteousness to a life both defined and driven by our Father. This book helps the Christian understand what it means to live the phrase from Martin Luther’s Morning Prayer “that all my doings in life may please You.” It is an application of what Lutherans call the “Third Use of the Law,” a guide essential for the sanctified living of Christians in our vocations, a pattern of God’s definition of *real* life. *Beyond Self-Help* breaks Babel’s notion that we can build ourselves up to God and shows the simple way the Bible teaches to build our lives on the Lord Jesus Christ.”

REV. DR. CHARLES S. MUELLER, JR.,

Senior Pastor, Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church, U.A.C., Roselle, IL.

“In this significant work, Jason helps us gain an in-depth, biblical perspective on what the ‘abundant life’ is really all about. ‘Beyond Self-Help’ provides for us a biblically-guided roadmap for how to identify, understand, and live out, the ‘life’ mission that God has defined for us. This is a great resource, filled with very useful and practical suggestions, for any Christ-follower who is serious about personally engaging in the transformative, disciple-making ‘way-of-life’ that Jesus calls us to.”

KEITH TOLLEY

President, Vision New England

“If discipleship is a core duty as Christians then why is it lacking in so many churches? It is because we lack the confidence and resources to span the scope of areas to be covered. Jason Pankau is committed to the church and development of disciples of Jesus. ‘Beyond Self-Help’ collects some of the best disciplines, strategies and principles he has learned so men and women can live the abundant life God desires. It is applicable and comprehensive—add this tool to your toolbox.”

DR. CARSON PUE

CEO Arrow Leadership

Author of *Mentoring Leaders: Wisdom for Developing Character, Calling and Competency*

“Today’s Church is program addicted, which is a manifestation of our society’s addiction to status and achievement, and neglect of real relationships. Real relational connection is the missing link in churches today. This book makes the case that this reconnection only comes as a result of being trained in righteousness. Only as we are relationally connected to God, one another and to our calling of servanthood will we become the Church that Jesus envisioned. We need a revolution in disciple-making if we are going to stem the tide of cultural drift away from God. Jason helps us see how essential mentoring is in God’s plan to make disciples. This book is significant and ground breaking. It clearly shows us the Biblical pathway to real holistic discipleship and guides us into what we need to experience the abundant life. It’s what the American church needs to reverse years of decline and grow once again.”

MICHAEL LEE STALLARD

President, E Pluribus Partners

Co-author of the Bestselling book *Fired Up or Burned Out*

“As a theologian, NT Wright has recently written about WHY Christian character matters. As a pastor, teacher, mentor and coach, Jason Pankau writes about HOW we can help each other grow in Christian character. God made us for relationship (with Him and with each other), and Pankau has spent over a decade thinking and praying about, and teaching and doing, covenantal relationships. Listening to Jason share his wisdom and insights on discipleship, mentoring and relationships can be like trying to drink from a fire-hose, but now *Beyond Self-Help* puts that collected wisdom in a format that can be sipped, savored and put into practice. This book is for anyone who believes that Christian character matters and is tired of just hearing theories or trying to do it alone.”

PAUL MICHALSKI

Management Committee Member, New Canaan Society, Inc.

Former Partner, Cravath, Swaine & Moore LLP

“Becoming a disciple of Christ is a lengthy process involving every area of our life. We can find books about individual facets of becoming a mature follower of Christ, but it is rare to find a discipleship process mapped out as clearly as in this book by Jason Pankau. Every person has a calling, but Jesus said that the road is narrow, and few people find the path toward the abundant life that can be realized in Christ. This book helps point the way.”

MARK CURTIS

President and CEO Splash Car Wash Chain

“Jason Pankau has identified the Western church’s key problem as having drifted away from Christ’s intention to make us a community of people who powerfully receive and express the love of God. Jason’s prescription for our malaise is to recognize that alone, we can’t recover what we’ve lost, and to rediscover the practice of mentoring, which he contends will restore the church to its God-ordained functioning. He has presented a carefully conceived and finely tuned process of mentoring and enriched it with vivid illustrations and fresh language, making *Beyond Self-Help* a delight to read. He is optimistic that with a Christ-centered mentoring network in place for each of us, the church will be able to learn to love, make disciples, and lead each believer to the abundant life Christ promises, where each of us reaches his or her full potential. Any Christian who is tired of mediocrity and wants to pursue a more dynamic and fruitful “abundant life” would do well to read and follow the game plan Jason presents here.”

REV. FRANK DRAKE

PRM International

“Becoming a disciple of Christ is a lengthy process involving every area of our life. We can find books about individual facets of becoming a mature follower of Christ, but it is rare to find a discipleship process mapped out as clearly as in this book by Jason Pankau. Every person has a calling, but Jesus said that the road is narrow, and few people find the path toward the abundant life that can be realized in Christ. This book helps point the way.”

REV. DAVID HERNQUIST

Senior Pastor, Van Nest Assembly of God, Bronx, NY.

“Jason has written an encyclopedia of Biblical thought with regard to living wisely in God’s direction. The questions asked invite you to a journey. The suggestions made form a focus for where your soul longs to be. The opportunities to live out Jesus’ words...to live *more* abundantly...should you so choose, are found in this book.”

WES ROBERTS

Leadership Mentor, Leadership Design Group

“Whether you’ve come to faith recently, believed in God your entire life, or are just seeking, you may wonder whether faith can be truly transformational. Can we really live the abundant life—that is, a life filled with love, peace, and joy? *Beyond Self-Help* responds with a powerful and practical “yes.” Be bold and go beyond self-help!”

STEPHEN PALETTA

Founder and CEO of GiveBack

“When you know it’s time for a change where do you turn? What do you do? In *Beyond Self-Help*, Jason Pankau provides you with insightful, motivational, and doable “next step” wisdom for the life you want to live! If you are courageous enough to take the challenge, this book will be a necessary companion for the road.”

REV. DR. MARTIN SANDERS

Author *The Power of Mentoring*, President Global Leadership
Professor, Alliance Theological Seminary, Nyack, NY

“Jason Pankau has written a systematic and compelling book about life change. He is a creative writer and thinker who challenges his readers to evaluate the depth of their own discipleship and impact on culture. Jason has translated many of his life successes on the athletic field, in the classroom and real ministry experience into Biblical principles that can transform any life. Dig in and seek after the abundant life in Christ.”

REV. DR. MCKENZIE PIER

President, The New York City Leadership Center

“Jason has created an instruction manual for a full life! Filled with scripture’s truths and wisdom, *Beyond Self-Help* lays out a logical road map for individual growth that is readable and actionable. Jason has inspired so many people with the desire to grow into their full potential as Christians. This book is the perfect way to begin the journey.”

LYN S. KRATOVIL

Managing Partner, Bridge 1 Advisors

“Jason Pankau is **on target** with *Beyond Self-Help*! His approach to discipleship training (training in the Lord’s mission) is remarkably consistent with the training conducted by the U.S. Army’s Special Forces. America’s elite fighting forces do not reach the pinnacle of their craft by accident. It is the result of sacrifice, discipline, dedication. Most of all, it requires a well designed and executed training program. The same holds true of developing our relationship with God. In this book, Jason coaches us in the art of Mission Analysis: determining God’s mission requirements for us, followed by a plan for executing that mission. In Special Operations, Mission Focus is a key characteristic used to seize and retain the initiative in attaining strategic objectives. Coach Jason has truly cracked the code for gaining and maintaining mission focus through his Life Focus Process. This book is your mission essential asset for living a truly abundant life.”

MAJOR ERIC ROITSCH U.S. ARMY (RET.)

Former Green Beret Commander

“It has been said that amateurs train until they get it right but professionals train until they cannot get it wrong. In his spiritual journey, Jason is not content just to get it right but is in constant training with God to press in to the richness of life in God. Nobody gets great without a coach. Jason has been well coached in His life’s journey and he is able to coach you into that abundant place in God. In this book he pours himself out as a spiritual life coach to you.

Church leaders will love the spark this gives to their congregations. If you are looking to be challenged to greatness and trained for the Kingdom of God, then *Beyond Self-Help* is for you. I encourage you to use all the power tools he makes available in the book. Take the time to press into the questions. Pay attention to the coaching moments. Ponder over the stories of people like yourself who know there is more of God than what they have been experiencing. Get together with friends to share in the ways of God as you work through this book. In this way I can assure you that you will come into that abundant life God has for you where you experience and express the passion of His love in every part of your life.”

JAMES LEACH

Co-founder, SageFire Ministries,
Author of *Field Guide to Your Dreams*

“Jason has captured the essence of life in his masterpiece, ‘Beyond Self-Help.’ Here Jason unlocks the principles of true biblical transformation. Christianity is more than just being saved from the penalty of sin. It is stewarding our lives for the glory of God, being conformed into His image. But how do we do that? How does God do this in our lives?

We tend to complicate the truths of God’s word. Jason simply but thoroughly walks you through the path to spiritual greatness. Jason helps you understand God’s mission for your life, challenges you to commit to the process of transformation, understand yourself and where you are in that process, then helps you chart the course you need to take to get the job done. The Christian life is all about the journey, growing to be more like our Savior and enjoying Him through the process. This is truly the way to really live.

We have been applying the principles Jason has skillfully unfolded from God’s word in this book and have seen tremendous spiritual growth at Standing Stones Church. My own life has been transformed as I have been working through the concepts Jason teaches.”

REV. BOB POWERS

Pastor Standing Stones Church, Vice President Hands on Africa

Beyond self-help

The True Path to Harnessing
God's Wisdom, Realizing Life's Potential
and Living the Abundant Life

By Rev. Jason K. Pankau
with Lisa Leach and John B. Donovan

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The 18 Natural Laws, Identity Roles Paradigm, P.R.E.P.², Life Focus Process, 7 Values of Abundant Living, The Belief Model, The Road of Life, The Cycle of Renewal, P.U.R.P.O.S.E. Paradigm © 2008, Life Spring Network, Inc.

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To my wife Jennifer,
whom God has used to grow me the most as my soul mate
and partner in life; asking you to be part of my inner circle
and letting God use our marriage to hone my character has been
the wisest thing I have ever done.

To my children Jarod, Jaden, Julianne and Josephine,
this book encapsulates the wisdom that God has
taught me to this point in my journey. It also describes
the true inheritance that I desire to pass on to you.

Acknowledgments

I owe an incalculable debt to the mentors, fellow church members, ministry team partners and those motivated by the Holy Spirit whom God has used to shape me and train me in righteousness.

I have included a list of the mentors that God has used to grow me as a disciple of Jesus over the past 22 years. This list is incomplete, and as with any list I have run the risk of leaving some names out, but here are those that have had the most impact on my journey.

Mentors – past and current intentional, peer and occasional mentors include: Tony Schwartz – South Barrington, IL; Jeff Hatton – Providence, RI; Rev. Frank Drake – Norfolk, VA; Bob Treichler – Providence, RI; Rev. Jack Diamond – Barrington, RI; Bob Kalander – Jamestown, RI; Jim Frost – Cumberland, RI; Dick Scoggins – Providence, RI; Rev. Dr. Ken Lyle – Northboro, MA.; Rev. Dr. Michael Lewis – Swansea, MA; Rev. Dr. Andrew Lee – Northboro, MA; Jeff and Mindy Caliguire – Newton, MA; Bruce Driesbach – Wolfboro, NH; Neely Towe – Greenwich, CT; Rev. Dr. Martin Sanders – Nyack, NY; Paul and Christa Schoeber – Vancouver, B.C.; Bobb Biehl – Mount Dora, FL; Rev. Dr. Carson Pue – Vancouver, B.C.; Joe Zimmer – Greenwich, CT; Mark Curtis – Greenwich, CT; Parker Stacey – Greenwich, CT; Don Osgood – Stamford, CT; Steve Paletta – Greenwich, CT; Kris Revelle – Montgomery, NY; Jim Leach – New Canaan, CT; Rev. Dr. Charles Mueller Jr. – Roselle, IL; and hundreds of others whom I have lived in covenant community within small groups and on ministry teams. To the members of the churches that I have been privileged to serve as an ordained minister of the Gospel – Power Street Christian Fellowship, Beacon Community Church and Stanwich Congregational Church – God has used my time journeying with you to help me see His Kingdom vision.

A special thanks to John Donovan and Lisa Leach, my writing partners whom God has used to help make this book a reality. Also to Scott Greenlee for cover design and layout. You have worked tirelessly helping me to put this book together – well done, good and faithful servants.

Finally, to the Board Members of the Life Spring Network and all of the prayer and financial supporters who believe in the vision of reproductive disciple-making through mentoring networks and want to see the Church become the radical force for good in the world once again, this book is for you.

Give 'em Heaven.

Rev. Jason Pankau, President, Life Spring Network

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*“Christianity without discipleship is always
Christianity without Christ.”*

– Dietrich Bonhoeffer

FOREWORD

Have you ever had a moment that altered the whole course of your life? I’ve noticed they tend to arrive when we least expect it...

In my senior year, our high school football team was ranked third in the state and I was the MVP of our team. I played both offense and defense, and also served as the place kicker. Even though we had a couple of guys who were out with injuries going into the state playoffs, I expected that we would still go far. Instead, we lost in the first round to a team we had beaten 20-0 a few weeks earlier. I had worked very, very hard to help get our team prepared. The sudden loss stunned me. Now my high school football career was over, and I was left trying to figure out what happened. A few weeks after the end of the season, Mike Swider came to speak at a Fellowship of Christian Athletes meeting held at our high school. He was the strength and conditioning coach at Wheaton College; he also coached several Olympic athletes, including his sister who was a four-time Olympic speed skater. At that time, I had Olympic aspirations as a discus thrower and was eager to hear what Coach Swider had to say.

Swider looked like he could play Tarzan in a movie. He had shoulder length blond hair and the v-shape build of a sprinter. He looked more like a professional athlete than a coach. He stood in front of us and looked us over like we were a platoon of raw recruits.

“Men!” He bellowed. From that moment on, I was utterly glued to his every word.

“How many of you guys go to church?”

Nearly every hand went up.

“How many of you guys have read the Bible?”

The hands went down.

“That doesn’t make any sense to me,” he said. “You’re going on the field and you haven’t even read the playbook. How does that make sense to you?”

I nodded my head and thought to myself that it really didn’t. Listening to Coach Swider speak that afternoon, it became clear to me that I needed to go deeper in my journey of faith. I needed to give it the same kind of commitment I gave to athletic endeavors.

A BIT OF MY JOURNEY

When I look back, it seems clear that God had been working on my heart for years. On some level I knew Him. I remember that both my maternal and paternal grandparents prayed for me. As a young boy, I sensed something special every summer when I spent two weeks at my grandma and grandpa’s farm in Indiana. Every night at bedtime Grandpa would rub my back and pray out loud for me. It gave me a warm feeling. I felt loved and I looked forward to these times with my grandpa. Following high school, I attended Brown University in the Ivy League. By senior year, I was pre-season All-American and captain of the football team as well as a national qualifier and school record holder in the discus. After graduating with degrees in organizational behavior and business economics, I led Bible studies for athletes and coaches at Brown while I worked in the business world doing financial planning.

After three years working in the business world and leading various ministries as a volunteer, I heard my official call to ministry. I’d been fasting and praying, really seeking God for direction, especially with regard to my desire to dig into Scripture on a deeper level. One day I sat alone in a conference room during the lunch break. Everyone was gone, and as I wasn’t eating, that gave me more time to spend seeking God. I looked up at the chandelier and heard God say, “*Get ready.*” It was as if I heard an audible voice. Nothing like receiving your marching orders from the top! Out of obedience I embarked on a

journey over the next seven years in which I attended seminary and helped to start two churches, one in Providence and one in the Boston area. It was during this time that my ministry to executives also began and I was invited to become a pastor at Stanwich Church in Greenwich, Connecticut, a suburb of New York City.

Greenwich is known as the wealthiest town in the wealthiest state, in the wealthiest nation in the history of the world. It is the home of many chief executive officers, investment bankers and hedge fund billionaires. Living amidst this extreme material prosperity and witnessing how it affects people opened my eyes to some important insights, which in turn led me to become an executive life coach to some very wealthy Americans.

In 2006 I was commissioned out of Stanwich Church to share what God is doing through this ministry of training, mentoring and equipping people to live their faith. Life Spring Network was created to take this ministry beyond the walls of Stanwich. God has used our team to train, mentor and equip communities of Christians to steward their lives from God's perspective and realize life's potential as reproductive disciple-makers.

TIME FOR A CHANGE

Like many people today, I am tempted to be an “achieve-aholic.” Of course the New York City area is the achieve-aholic capital of the world. This lifestyle is marked by a continuous drive to accomplish more, not to mention receive recognition for it. Each day I see the damage it causes in people's lives. There have been times in this journey when my own achieve-aholism has spun out of control. One year, (my wife and I call it “the train wreck year”) when I was simultaneously training for the Olympics, starting a church, attending seminary, meeting with athletes on campus, working as a financial planner by day and a watchman by night—all “for the cause of Christ,”—I hardly ever saw my wife Jen, the love of my life. Needless to say, my life's imbalance, well-meaning as it was, caused us great hurt. It took a crisis to bring this situation to a head and force me to rearrange my priorities.

With God's grace and guidance, I began to value relationships over super-achievement; since then our circle of family and close friends has grown in love. And by His grace that will continue, as we allow ourselves to be trained in His ways. It's great to be part of a flourishing ministry, but these days I'm mindful that it should not be at the expense of my wife and our four beautiful kids: Jarod, Jaden, Julia and Josie. No other way but God's way.

THEY CALL ME "COACH"

Coach. It certainly fits who I am. I love to encourage and mentor others to become the people God longs for them to be. I would like for you to think of me as your coach too. Interwoven throughout this book is my story; what I've learned along the journey. It is an honest account of my ups and downs, the times I tried to do it my way and the times I followed God's lead. My aim is that you can learn from my mistakes, from the ways God redeemed those mistakes and from the wisdom that I have been used by God to speak into people's lives.

Watch for this symbol Ω as you read along; these are your "coaching moments" where I ask you to take time to reflect, work out issues, or take action in your life.

COACHING AGAINST THE GRAIN

Following God's plan goes against the grain. God's ways can feel counterintuitive. Because of our imperfections and separation from God, we are blinded. Have you ever heard stories of people who are lost in the wilderness? They begin to believe the compass is wrong, and research shows that left to their own devices, they walk in circles and wear themselves out. That's how it is in daily life too; it's human nature. Yet, we are made in God's image and He's given us His life, His Word and His Holy Spirit as our compass. When we stay connected with Him and with each other, we experience the joy and peace that comes from living the abundant life.

WHY I WROTE THIS BOOK

Even in my college days, I was a good example of one of the church's most significant problems. I was a Christian but my life was all about me. I tried to self-help my way to greatness. (More on that in Chapter One.) Now I realize something about our culture: What was true for me on a personal level has also been true of the Church, at least in the West. We have collectively drifted away from the command of Christ to "*go make disciples*" (*Matthew 28:19*) and join with God in His Kingdom work here on earth. This book is an outgrowth of my concern over the collective ineffectiveness of the church and how I have experienced God reversing this trend in people's lives.

THE BAD NEWS

You've heard about the advancing secularization in society. Yet more disturbing is another trend, the secularization of the Church. It's not that the hymns, the prayers, the pews or other elements of church services have changed appreciably; it's rather that the rise of social pathology is no different *inside* the church than it is *outside* of it. In fact, the rising volume of atheist propaganda now cites this as evidence to bolster the idea that God doesn't exist!

What would you think, hearing that the social statistics on the Church (rates of divorce, pornography, etc.) are about the same as the world outside the Church? Would it not raise some questions in your mind? What would be your reason for seeking the Christian life in that case? I've noticed many in the Church who find no serious fault with their moral condition; they assume God has no expectations of them beyond their diligent but basically self-directed lives. Why would anyone be drawn to such mediocrity, given that the same life experience can seemingly be found outside the faith?

The ups and downs of people's faith in history reflect this basic fact about human nature: When there is outward prosperity, human beings rely on themselves; following God's ways is an afterthought. Not until there's a need or a crisis do people eventually cry out to God in their pain. America's current state of affairs shows clearly where

we are on this continuum. Our faith has grown dull. Countries that used to receive missionaries from America are now sending theirs to us (we are the third largest missionary receiving country in the world) so far have we fallen into the dangerous trappings of the comfort zone. In fact, the present troubles we are facing as a country may actually be good news, if we respond to them by crying out to God for help.

“Then if my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sins and heal their land.”

(2 Chronicles 7:14)

WHICH ONE IS POORER?

If you compare life in America to many rural areas of the developing world, the contrast is staggering. Here indoor plumbing is the rule; there it is a rarity. Here electricity and modern appliances are the rule; there such things are beyond the reach of the common person. Here we take television and telephone communication for granted; there one person out of two has never made a telephone call and the vast majority have no access to television. We view ourselves as prosperous, but from God’s point of view we are poor. The less fortunate of our world who know God have a love, a peace and a simplicity in their lives that far surpasses ours in the West.

Our outward wealth has led us directly toward inner impoverishment. Material prosperity has risen to historic highs as spiritual health (our desire to submit the will of God) has sunk to historic lows. The ready accessibility of media entertainment grows less and less effective in soothing the malaise in our innermost being. Statistics show that during the last half century, our broader society has been damaged. Consider that (according to research by David Myers in *American Paradox*) the divorce rate in the U.S. has doubled, the teen suicide

rate has tripled, the recorded violent crime rate has quadrupled, the prison population has quintupled, the percent of babies born to unmarried parents has sextupled, co-habitation has increased sevenfold, and depression has soared to record levels.¹

If you go to church, you may feel better informed by the teaching and uplifted by the music and the prayers. But if you do not engage in God's training in righteousness, then you will find yourself Monday morning just as empty as you were on Saturday night. It's possible that those attending church are in even graver danger, as they suppose themselves to be better off.

PROSPERITY UP, HAPPINESS DOWN

It should come as no surprise, then, that during a period when economic prosperity has soared, the National Opinion Research Center has recorded a decline in happiness among Americans. The question is why? And once we know why, what can we do about it?

NOTHING NEW OR IMPROVED

First, some myth-busting: According to Barna research, the most widely-known Bible verse among adult and teen believers is "God helps those who help themselves," which is *not* in the Bible, and contradicts its teaching. Our culture glorifies self. This way of life infuses every level of the Church, causing us to seek God and the abundant life in our own way. Like the companies who place a new label on an old product and call it "new and improved," Christians have simply transferred over their old habits and put them under God's Name. Even the way we do church in the West fosters an environment of self-help.

What is missing?

We know that multitudes are professed Christians, weekly assenting to the truths of the faith. Therefore, what in the world is going on? Why is there such a disconnect? How can we get back on mission with God? THAT is the subject I've set out to tackle in this book.

THE GOOD NEWS, REVISITED

Let's take a closer look at what the Bible *does* say. Jesus didn't promote self-help. Nor did He promote the kind of church growth models that have become popular. Jesus didn't say, "go make converts and bring them to church." Rather, He said, "*go and make disciples of all nations*" (*Matthew 28:18*). Disciples. That means those who enter into ongoing discipline or learning. It is urgent that we identify and deal with this missing factor of discipleship in our churches. It is rare to find church members submitting to Christ as Lord of their *entire* lives and being trained in righteousness.

Another thing: Jesus didn't say, "Go witnessing." He said, "*You will be my witnesses*" (*Acts 1:8*). Note the difference: One emphasizes doing it ourselves; the other indicates a relational truth about who we will *be*. Instead of believing a truncated Gospel, thinking only in terms of getting to Heaven or doing church, we are to enter a relationship with God as His disciple and *become* more like Jesus as eternal-life learners. The journey doesn't end when we come to Christ; it begins.

We face a stark choice: It can be summed up in the word "submit." Either we submit to the guidance and power of God in every aspect of our lives, or we will have to submit to the advance of secular values, both in society and within the church itself. The choice is as simple—and as basic—as the one posed in Deuteronomy 30:19: "*...I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life....*"

SELF-HELP OR SUBMISSION?

I've visited a lot of churches, coached a lot of churchgoers. Many churches spend the bulk of their resources putting on worship services to inspire, entertain and educate people, rather than focusing their efforts to actually train people in how to live their faith. As important as worship services are, without the requisite discipleship, people run off on their own to take what they have seen and heard and figure out how to integrate it into their lives—as if they *could*.

You might feel that submission is a form of “giving up”—something that should only be done when you are sure you can't handle something yourself and need to escape. But the Christ-centered life isn't about escape; it's about engagement and victory. Godly submission is the diametrical opposite of self-help. It is like the submission of David who, while facing Goliath, declared, “The battle is the Lord's.” He knew that his own human skills would be inadequate but that the guidance and power of God would be invincible.

Hardly a week passes when those who keep up with the news are not given some evidence of the widespread weakness of Christianity in its efforts to engage the culture. The number of Americans who claim no religious affiliation has nearly doubled since 1990, rising from 8 to 15 percent. According to Barna research, only 10 percent of Christians profess to living with a Biblical worldview. This statistic is echoed by research done by a former mentor of mine, Bruce Driesback in the New England Research Project. He discovered that 90% of Christians say they don't know how to live their faith and wouldn't know how to make a disciple if they had the opportunity to do so. It is time we faced the facts the church is dying in every way that really matters to God.

It has become clear that the current approach to accomplishing the great commission isn't working. We can't just continue to offer more worship services and educational programs, as good as they are, and blindly hope that the drift we are experiencing will change. Nor do we need a fatalistic throwing-up-our-hands in desperation. Christians in the West face an important turning point. We will either continue

along our current path of cultural drift and social corrosion or we will reverse the trend and be the head, not the tail. If we submit to God's ways and train, mentor and equip each Christian in how to live his or her faith and make disciples of others, we will become much more the salt and light God intended us to be. We'll have a transformative impact on the culture.

Sometimes it takes a crisis. Just as it took the "train wreck year" to get my attention, it may take some pain to help the Church make changes. When people you know are struggling with addictions, they don't usually change until they hit bottom; **our church culture is addicted to self-help, and crisis may be what we need.** We can pray for the "bottom" to come up so that we don't have to go so far down before seeking help from God. We must each renounce self-help or we are in danger of cutting ourselves off from God's blessing. The old phrase, "Christ is the answer," must take on a new urgency but not as mere assent to propositional truth. A truly Christ-centered life—serious discipleship—must be the goal of the Church and each of its members, no matter what the cost. That means submitting to the guidance and power of God.

DRIFTING OR TRAINING?

Followers of Christ don't "drift" toward abundant living. On the contrary, the drift that comes so naturally to us human beings is toward the negative. As an athlete, I know and appreciate that you can't take the field and play to your potential unless you have trained for that moment spiritually, emotionally, mentally, physically and relationally. Drifting is easy; training takes dedication and sacrifice.

We don't drift toward greatness any more than Michael Phelps drifted toward record-breaking Olympic victory in Beijing. Greatness requires training. This is not to assert that we can train our way to godliness in and through our own strength. Remember, apart from Him we can do nothing (John 15:5). This is training which is submitted to the guidance and power of God in our lives. It is allowing Him to form new habits and Christ-like character in us as we submit to His

guidance in His strength. N.T. Wright described this as “developing our second nature” in his recent book, *After the Call: Why Christian Character Matters*.

For us to be filled with life and transform our culture, our training in righteousness must begin. I’m so convinced of this that I’ve spent years developing this material and sharing it with people all over North America in the forms of the Creating a Connection Culture Seminar, the Omega Course and the Omega Experience Seminars. The transformational impact that our ministry is having on many lives has encouraged me, and at the prompting of other Christian leaders I felt compelled to write this book so that yet more people can grow as real disciple-makers.

One of my main objectives in this book is to provide tools and suggestions that will help you submit to God and be reshaped and empowered in order that you might know the life that is truly life.

The tools I offer are designed to help you identify areas in your life that you may have never examined in quite that way before. Together we’ll examine terms like vision, priorities, values, identity roles, attitudes, perspectives, beliefs, and character. We will point out ways to unlock parts of your life that you might not have noticed before by seeing them from God’s perspective.

If God is calling you to greatness, you must not allow the lure of becoming a “good moral person” to satisfy you. Striving to be good without the power of the Holy Spirit results in pride. Mark Twain was referring to this when he described some people as “good in the worst sense of the word.” The bottom line here is, why settle for good when God is calling you to partake of His divine greatness? This book was created to help you seek and find God’s plan for greatness in and through you.

LET THE TRAINING BEGIN!

In order to properly train, you need to first see where you are going and how life really works from God’s perspective. Coach Swider challenged me to read the Bible in order to understand the playbook. That same Bible describes a very clear picture of life that is very

different from the training that we receive from the world. In my own mentoring experience, (both giving and receiving) I have discovered and refined 18 truth statements that I call the 18 Natural Laws of Life Stewardship. They describe God's perspective on how life really works. Natural laws are fundamental patterns of nature and life. They describe things as they really are, as opposed to how we think they are or how we wish they were. A natural law is a law that cannot be repealed.

The existence of laws implies that we need some guidance. Just as the world we live in has natural laws such as the law of gravity, God created life to function according to spiritual laws too. When we live according to these truths, we thrive and experience the life God intends for us. When we don't, we gradually, almost imperceptibly, experience spiritual death.

Just for the record, this discussion of laws is simply about things that are demonstrably true. I'm not interested in promoting any form of religious legalism. That would only lead to an empty or false spirituality (at best) or worse, the kind of oppression that results in deep woundedness. I am concerned that we are not seeing life from God's perspective and are therefore missing out on abundant living. As one of my mentors told me long ago, "If you can't see it you can't do it." These laws are an attempt to help us see and align our lives with these vital truths of real discipleship.

As your coach, I will walk you through 18 Natural Laws of Life Stewardship and explain how you can use them to guide your training in abundant living. I will also introduce you to a pattern of thinking I have used to help people focus their lives and "get on with it" called the Life Focus Process®.

The Life Focus Process



The Life Focus Process begins by clarifying God's mission for our lives. Life experience and a biblical worldview teach us that when we choose to guide our own lives, we lead ourselves away from God's abundant life. We were never created to lead our own lives. Rather, we were created to be led by God and seek out His mission for our lives.

In keeping with other forms of training, the 18 Natural Laws of Life Stewardship are laid out in a sequence that moves logically from first principles toward those that are more advanced. Their progression also follows our journey through the Life Focus Process.

The early laws can be categorized under the label of clarifying God's life mission for us. This includes understanding God's vision, priorities, values and identity roles. The second set of laws details the anatomy of transformation, including our tendency to resist that process. This works with the Life Focus Process to guide us in making a true commitment to transformation. The third set of laws guides us in discovering an objective sense of ourselves. In this stage of the Life Focus Process we will discover who we really are from God's perspective, looking at both the nature and nurture components of our lives. The fourth set of laws helps us to wisely chart our growth

towards Christ-likeness. In this stage of the Life Focus Process we learn how to set God-discerned goals for our lives and discover spiritual disciplines that can train us in righteousness in the various areas of our lives. The fifth set of laws guides us in staying on mission with God through the various seasons of life and adjust our lives according to the new revelation that He brings. Through this process you will find a roadmap of core essentials that align our lives under the Lordship of Christ and train us in the fullness of what He has in store for us.

TRAINING IS REIGNING

Training is work. You will encounter obstacles along the way. (You may have noticed that life is full of adversity, whether we're followers of God or not.) However, once you've committed yourself to the journey of transformation, every adversity can be used by God to move you more quickly along the road than you'd move without obstacles. How cool is that? That is the difference your turning to God will make. Think of your struggles as personalized weight training, and you may approach them with a whole different mindset. Hebrews 12 exhorts us to treat hardships as discipline. God will use every difficulty you face to grow your character and strengthen you as you turn to Him. The end result is the transformed person that God designed you to be. You may be the most surprised one of all, once you begin to see the kind of profound changes God works within you.

Are you, right now, where you have dreamed you would be? Have you settled for being a “good person?” Do you feel that the word “great” is a stretch in describing you? Are you ready to seek after more?

PACE YOURSELF

Is this a quick fix? No. It would be a mistake to think this is an overnight makeover; that's why I call discipleship a “journey.” It would also be a mistake to think this book is a quick read. Don't rush through the material. Rather, as you find yourself challenged at various points,

stop and reflect on what God may be telling you. You may not be accustomed to listening to the Holy Spirit's promptings, but that too is a habit you can cultivate. Just as Jacob wrestled with the angel of the Lord and said, "*I won't let go until you bless me,*" (*Genesis 32:26*) you may find that encountering these truths feels like a wrestling match at times. You are indeed doing some spiritual, mental and emotional weight lifting. As with most wise exercise plans, you should train to the point where you feel fatigued, then put the book down, rest, and pick it up again later. Press on, but pace yourself.

Another word to the wise: As with many other things in life, you will get even more out of this material if you engage in it with other people. This will not only give you moral support, but will also greatly enhance your growth process. Sometimes others can see things in us that we can't see. While I am offering to be your coach and will share with you through these pages, I wouldn't be doing my job if I didn't encourage you to find others who want to grow with you. Work with mentors and put yourself in a position of accountability so you can be that much more encouraged.

Is this book *The Answer*? No. It is, however, an introduction, a "primer for abundant living." **My intention is to give you the big building blocks. Your challenge is to grab hold of them, one at a time, and to work together with God and His covenant community to seek and find His abundant life.**

God is the Author and Finisher of your faith, so all I can do is cheer you on and share what I've learned. Before I made the choice to submit to God's authority in my life and engage with Him in His training process, I was trapped in a dungeon of self-help. The best I could hope for was worldly good, fame, money or prestige. But these prizes pale in comparison with what God has in store for us. A life of real meaning and powerful love that lasts forever is not some kind of fairy tale, it's tangible and accessible to us, starting now. Our Heavenly Father is offering it to us, daily. It's your birthright! **Are you ready to unpack this awesome gift that He put in you?**

As we begin this journey, let the words of a master disciple-maker (Coach) the Apostle Paul, encourage you:

⁷But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. ¹⁰I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.

¹²Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. ¹³Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. ¹⁶Only let us live up to what we have already attained. (Philippians 3:7-16)

How Hungry are You?



To learn more about the Omega Course, the Omega Experience and the ministry of the Life Spring Network visit our website at www.lifespringnetwork.org.

SECTION 1

Getting On Mission with God

CHAPTER 1

Does Your Life Belong to You?

LAW 1

The Law of Stewardship: *Life is a gift that we are responsible to steward with the decisions that we make until we die.*

Picture it with me again: There I was, running down the football field, king of the game. I was no slouch; I'd worked hard. The team had worked hard. We'd beaten the other team 20-0 a few weeks before; the state championship was in the bag!

But we lost in the first round...

You might see a trend in some of my stories: It seems that the times I was most disappointed and befuddled were times of deepest spiritual growth. What's with that trend? Could it be that those were the moments when I was more likely to listen? The super-confident MVP might not have asked for help. But the crushed high school senior with dashed hopes of a grand football career might be a tad more teachable. Just a tad.

"How many of you have read the Bible?" Coach Swider had challenged us a few weeks after that defeat. "You're going on the field and you haven't even read the playbook!" Maybe to some this would sound like a stretch. What would the Bible have to do with football? How could he assert that the Word of God was the playbook for an athlete?

Coach Swider knew a basic fact that we all need to know, whether we're athletes or not: *The earth is the Lord's and everything in it (Psalm 24:1)*. That word "everything" includes you. You are the Lord's, whether you believe it or not. You do not own your life; it is a gift from God. Your life is infinitely precious to God, and He hasn't given it to you as something to squander. In fact, God has given you the responsibility to be His steward over your life. Yes, you have free will—another precious gift. But consider this: Each of us will stand before a holy God one day and give an accounting of how responsible we were with what He entrusted to us.

HOW DO WE "STEWARD" THIS LIFE?

Think of it: God has blessed you with the gift of life. He will guide and empower you to steward it wisely so that you will experience and express His love in the world. A steward is the manager of property that is owned by someone else. Some of you might use the word "trustee." In this case the owner (God) has placed confidence in us—and resources at our disposal—to make something good into something great. He has not simply left us here all alone to fend for ourselves or play in the football game without any playbook or training. But many of us live as though He does. We try to do it ourselves. But what kind of owner does that make God out to be? There's a better way! Coach Swider might have sounded tough, but it's true love that makes sure you're equipped before sending you out on the field.

It may seem radical to think of your life in these terms, that you are accountable to God for how you manage your heart, your soul, your mind, your strength, your life. It may seem like an imposition to suggest that God owns you, as though you don't have a free will. You may feel as though you don't have personal discretion over the most cherished aspects of your life. But in actuality, God's ownership of your life is not an imposition but a great relief. He hasn't taken away your free will, but neither has He asked you to perform solo. He wants to partner with you the whole way. And the buck stops with Him. St. Augustine wrote, "to serve him is perfect freedom."

That's not a head-in-the-clouds, mystical statement. St. Augustine was a man who knew what it took for the rubber to meet the road. He'd tried doing it his way, grown miserable and finally found relief in that awesome submission to God.

BIGGER THAN YOU THINK

Most people think of “stewardship” as having to do with a percentage of your income that you decide to donate to the church. Others have a slightly broader view, and include “time, talent and treasure” under that umbrella of stewardship. You might be picturing it right now: An upstanding, responsible citizen, neatly dressed, nice family, using his or her free time to volunteer for charities. Honest, dependable, generous... That's all well and good.

But the law of stewardship blows that picture wide open. It's a Copernican Revolution for your life: This law says IT'S ALL GIFT. Your whole life. This law says you're not the owner and you're not ultimately in charge. But this law also says that everything you do counts. Everything. If we don't get a hold of this basic truth, the wisdom of scripture will not make much sense. Concepts like we must die so that we might really live only make sense in light of the reality of life stewardship.

Consider the vine: *“I am the vine, you are the branches,”* Jesus says in John 15. We may know the verse well, but stop to observe the way fruit is produced. Do the branches strain and toil to push those grapes out? No, they just hang in there. Life flows through every stem—plenty is going on—but it's not supposed to be a stressful thing for the branches. Unless, of course, the branch is on its own. Try producing fruit when you're not on the vine; that is a quick recipe for death. We can be put out about the fact that we need to stick to the vine, or we can be in awe of the way God has designed us to flow with abundant life. To experience and express His love in everything is what it means to live the abundant life. Your choice: abide or die.

In short, you were designed to live a supernatural life. Nothing less than that will satisfy. Maybe—just maybe—that's the reason so

many people are restless, ambitious, hungry for more. Is that you? You are right to hunger for more. But to look for this kind of life on earthly terms alone is like a branch trying to produce fruit all by itself. God has some divine sap for us that may seem hidden from view at first, but it's real and it's the stuff of a truly fruitful life. Not only that, but it's free for the asking; it's Standard Issue! South African devotional writer Andrew Murray quotes God as saying it this way: *"All that I have is yours. I have given it to you in Christ. All the Spirit's power and wisdom, all the riches of Christ, all the love of the Father—there is nothing that I have that is not yours. I am God who will love, keep, and bless you."*²

SO YOU'RE RICH: NOW WHAT?

So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God. Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive His praise from God. (1 Corinthians 4:1-5)

Consider that phrase: *"The secret things of God."* It's not that God wants to keep His riches a secret. Rather, like life in the blood and sap in the vine, His secrets are well-protected but there for discovering. Yes, it does take a particular kind of hunger to discover them. In a way, that makes these riches all the more valuable. God has a built-in guarantee that they won't be opened to anyone who really doesn't want them. So if you do have this gnawing hunger, this sense of dissatisfaction that tells you there's something more, it may help to know that you have a gift in disguise. God doesn't give physical hunger without also giving something to satisfy it; the same is true for spiritual things.

A LEGEND IN MY OWN MIND

In my own mind, I had it all when I was a student at Brown University. Not only was I accomplishing all of the goals already mentioned, but my relationships were going well and my classes were too. My nickname on campus was the “total package.” Was there anything wrong with this picture? Despite appearances, something was radically wrong. Deep inside, I was crying out for something more. I had begun my journey with God as a senior in high school, but it wasn’t until my junior year in college that I made the biggest, scariest and most profound decision of my life. That decision was to truly engage God as the Lord of my life.

Here’s the difference: Until that point I treated my relationship with God like the bulk of the Christians that I knew. I went to church, prayed and worked hard while I asked God to bless *my* life. Sound familiar? I knew where I wanted to go and I believed that God would give me the desires of *my* heart. (Notice the key word: MY.) Granted, I definitely experienced some change in my life due to the different disciplines that I engaged in, **but every now and then I would meet a Christian who had a noticeably different kind of love than the love I was striving to muster up in obedience. I noticed an ease and release to their lives that I didn’t have yet. These people had a power in their lives that I had tasted on occasion but had not experienced moment by moment. I would read the Scriptures and learn about the power of the Holy Spirit but I had not yet let that power flow through me.**

At the end of my junior year in college I became convicted that all of my diligent study of the Scripture and desire to implement it into my life was not producing loving fruit. That is when I came to understand that I was simply trying to self-help my way to God and to a better life. What I didn’t know at the time, but could *feel*, was that there was something more to life that I was missing. (Hint: It’s called the abundant life.) Abundant life is rarely connected with the external trappings of success, and it is not something that we can obtain through our own guidance and strength.

I needed to adjust my relationship to God in order to experience

that powerful release I saw in those people. I needed to go on a journey, one that I am still on. That journey has made me aware of real life from God's perspective, and I started to retrain in this new way. I have had to unlearn many things so that God could train me in His ways of desiring, feeling, thinking, behaving and relating. God wanted to revolutionize my life, not just die for my sins. When I engaged with Him in this way, I began to understand what it means to live the abundant life. While the desire for the abundant life is good, the way I was pursuing it kept it far out of reach. I was like the guy who bends down to pick up a ball, but his own foot kicks it farther away just as he steps up to it. And so on, down the road. The invitation of God to live the abundant life is not an invitation to self-help your way to godliness, but rather a life of submission and release of control.

THE DANGEROUS PRAYER

It was during this season of my life that I prayed a dangerous prayer. It went something like this: *“God, take away my pride and my desire to control life. Be the Lord and King of my life, and if there is anything in my life that resists your Kingdom from coming and your will from being done in my life please remove it. I give you permission to rewrite the story of my life. You are the potter; I am the clay. Mold me and make me. Have absolute sway. Guide and empower my life according to your will for me, Lord Jesus.”*

That was my revolutionary shift, a sample moment of submission. (You will note in this prayer that God is God, and I am not.) Most of us don't like the idea of losing control. But God's control brings your life under a higher order than what you could muster. It's a paradox: As we submit to God's control, we gain greater control over our lives and become more effective in our life's purpose. Anything less is sleepwalking through life from God's perspective.

Which is better: Trying to scrounge up the love and power on your own, or letting God's love and power flow through you? God has destined you for greatness. But He doesn't call for greatness as a mere burst of extra effort or performance on your part. His main plan is to

live His life of love in and through you.

KINGDOM THINKING

God is offering us His Heavenly Kingdom on Earth. Even better, He's made available His Kingdom *within* us! His aim is not for us to wait until we're in Heaven to live in His Kingdom but to use our lives to help usher it in, right here. I'm not talking about sitting around blissfully twiddling harps, either. Nor am I talking about trekking through the jungle to bring the Gospel to a remote tribe, though some of you may certainly be born to do that. I'm talking about the Kingdom of Heaven having everything to do with our everyday lives. We need to let go of our stereotypical views of Heaven and bust myths surrounding words like "mission." God's Kingdom is misunderstood and difficult to see when we are in control of our lives. But as we begin to let go of our old mindsets and controls, His Kingdom reality has more room to show up in our lives. We can begin to experience the lasting richness of life that God intends for us, a richness that is far beyond all we can ask or imagine.

If you're like most people, you may have assumed that we get to the Kingdom of Heaven after we die, and that it has no influence in our present lives. Yet one of the most important (and overlooked) teachings in the history of Christianity has been the Kingdom of Heaven as a present, not only a future, reality. Scripture makes it clear that Jesus came to earth to proclaim and usher in the Kingdom of Heaven (*Matthew 4:17*).

Not only that, but Jesus said, "*The Kingdom of Heaven is within you*" (*Luke 17:21*). Notice he did not say the Kingdom of Heaven *will be* within you but *is*. We may not have tapped into it all yet, but Jesus meant what He said. The Kingdom of Heaven, meaning the life that flows from God, is available to us, right now.

SPRING UP, O WELL!

If the Kingdom of Heaven is a present reality, then how do we access it?

Is it like a well that we already own, but just need a pump or a bucket to help us drink? You can begin with your own “dangerous prayer,” too. Ask God to release His Kingdom reality within you. Or ask Him to show you something new that you need to understand. Use your words as a “pump” by simply saying to the well, “I submit Lord, command me and I will follow!” When we do this, God’s life springs up within us and He builds His Kingdom. Our words are powerful. God created the world with His words, and then made us in His image, with the same kind of creative word power that He used. We have that pump or bucket and don’t even realize it. We tend to think of the Kingdom of Heaven as an abstract concept, but God longs for us to dip into His well within us and “make it real.” Submitting to Him is the way we tap into all the promises in Scripture that we think sound too good to be true. Our challenge is to let the Kingdom of Heaven be released into every part of our being so that God can use our everyday lives to build His Kingdom.

HOW WISE ARE YOU?

Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom. (Psalm 90:12)

Maybe you are familiar with the phrases “carpe diem” (seize the day) and “life is short.” But how familiar are you with the Scripture above and the truths contained in it? Here the psalmist is crying out to God for His guidance in life. Without God, no one is truly wise. **I define wisdom as knowledge applied to life that makes life work the way it was meant to work by God.** So how truly wise are you, using this definition of wisdom? God has given each one of us a gift of time before we die. How will you unpack this gift? God wants to act in your life, but you need to perceive that He is for you, active on your behalf, before you can be guided by Him. The way you see is crucial. Your perception of God and your perception of yourself will determine how you live. Once you see that He is God and you are not, you have a fighting chance at wisdom.

*The fear [respect, awe] of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.
(Proverbs 1:7)*

DRIFT AND SELF-LEADERSHIP

I'll say this again and again: Without deliberate training, our natural tendency is drift. To drift is human; to train is divine! Without a conscious decision to invite God into our lives—not just as an observer but in His role as Lord of our lives—the drift factor sets in. We must get used to the fact that our relationship with God is to be one of dependence and not independence. We resist dependence, thinking it's unbalanced (as in co-dependence) or not “grown up.” But it's more grown up to depend on God, and it's safe, because He's the only one who is truly healthy. Our dependence can grow with *every* event in our lives and *every* act of obedience to Him. It may not suit our egos that life works this way. On the other hand, that will no longer be a concern to us when we experience the supernatural power of God. In fact, God's love will begin to flow not just into us but also through us, and we'll know the joy that comes from being a blessing to others as God bears fruit through our lives. That is, *“fruit that will last”* (John 15:16).

Not long ago, I listened as a young man told me about an opportunity he had to move to a more senior position at two different companies. The companies were similar and he was trying to make up his mind which to choose. There were no ethical considerations with respect to the industry the companies were in. On the surface, the two companies looked the same. Equal choice, right? That's what this young man thought. “God doesn't care about which company I go to,” he said, and picked the one he wanted.

Soon, however, he began clashing with one of the company's top managers almost daily. Before accepting the position, he had met the manager briefly; there was no way to tell from that meeting that the man's personality and character could cause such difficulty. But it did. I urged my friend to consider that God does care about the decisions he makes. He cares about everything pertaining to his career. Also,

only God has the inside knowledge of all the people and other factors involved. He created them, remember? *Nothing is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of Him to whom we must give account (Hebrews 4:13)*. As a committed Christian, this young man now realizes that in order to steward his life well he must not only think things through rationally, but also seek God's wisdom and guidance before making decisions. He has come to believe that God wants to speak to him and guide him in every area of life.

How can we avoid this drift into self-leadership? And what's the right balance? How much does God do and how much do we do? We might not know God's will in minute detail every hour of the day, but when we acquaint ourselves with His revealed will in Scripture, wise principles and listen for His promptings, we'll start to see His fingerprints on our lives more and more. The more we see Him at work in us, the deeper our peace. That is the *peace that passes understanding (Philippians 4:7)*. That peace is but one fruit that develops when you are *abiding in God (John 15)*.

HISTORY AS YOUR STORY...

Did you ever sit in a history class in school, wondering, "What does this have to do with *me*?" Then, if you were fortunate, you found out that one of your grandparents remembered something about the era you had to study, and suddenly you realized that history wasn't a bunch of random stuff that the teacher made up, but had to do with what actually happened. It still might have seemed ancient, but making a personal connection brings history to life for us. In the same way, we might hear the Scriptures differently if we see more clearly the connections in it for us, and remember that it all really happened. If you put your own name in all the slots that say "My people" or "Israel" or "Zion," you might perk up a bit in your awareness of the Scripture's application to your life. (Try it! I dare you!)

At the very center of history is the Atonement, or Jesus' restoration of our relationship to God as His children. Through His sacrifice, He made available to us the Father's rich resources, at His own expense.

It is critical to understand what we have lost in history so that we have a clear concept of what has been restored, what God wants to see manifested in our lives. It's like an inheritance already laid out in the will, but not yet drawn upon daily. I'm going to make a brief sweep through the last few thousand years in order to recap history's highlights and emphasize its relevance to your life. As you read, you might even picture yourself in there where it says "mankind."

GOD AND US, THROUGH HISTORY

In the beginning, mankind was created by God and existed in a perfect loving relationship with Him, filled with His presence, including His guidance and His power. But then came a succession of events:

The Fall and the Flood. When Satan entered the picture in the Garden of Eden and offered Adam and Eve an opposing will to follow, they chose to disobey God. Consequently, they lost connection with the guidance and power of God and fell from the perfect relationship status that they had enjoyed with Him. Out of His great love for us God began creating a pathway through which we could reconnect to Him. His first gift to humanity was to create physical death. Before the fall we were destined to live with God in perfection forever. Death is a gift to humanity because it limits our exposure to the influence of evil and gives us the possibility to reconnect with God's perfection in Heaven. Instead of simply destroying His creation, the gift of continued life that ends in a physical death gives us the opportunity to reconnect with God and be retrained as His followers. Upon death, those who die as God-seeking and God-fearing men and women are fully renewed as he removes our sinful desire, perfects our desire to do His will and gives us resurrected bodies to live in. It is true, one day we will all eject out of our earth suits.

So the descendants of Adam and Eve have found themselves in a bad state, separated from God and tempted by the Evil One to behave in destructive ways ever since. In short order, humanity devolved to the state that the desires of their hearts were "only evil all the time" (Genesis 6:5). This season in history proved that left up to our own

guidance and power we choose evil and that life does not work unless we abide in God. It is in that corrupted life experience God found a righteous man and his family and decided to rebuild through them. So he brought the Flood.

God Fathers a Nation. After the Flood, God started over with Noah and his family and began to rebuild a people who would seek Him and experience and express His love. It is interesting to note that the lifespan of people after the flood decreased dramatically. As a general rule of thumb people today live one-tenth as long as before the flood. Another gift from God limiting our exposure to sin, but also creating an urgency for us to decide who we will follow as Lord of our lives. His plan was to use this nation to retrain humanity and restore the experience of life in His Kingdom. As they sought after God and followed His guidance for their lives, they re-entered His blessing, learning how to experience and express love again, God's way. During this season of history, people related to God primarily as Father, and their relationship with Him was very much like children learning how to love from a parent who is training them in righteousness (right living). They never broke out of the bad state into good, however; they only experienced better levels of bad with spurts of growth toward righteousness. Some people became God-fearing and God-following men and women, but on the whole the nation was still lost and in need of saving. It was during this season that God restored His guidance through the giving of the Law (Ten Commandments, etc.) and speaking through angels and prophets. Yet this, as we learn in the New Testament, served only to clearly illustrate that we can't follow God's guidance *without His power*.

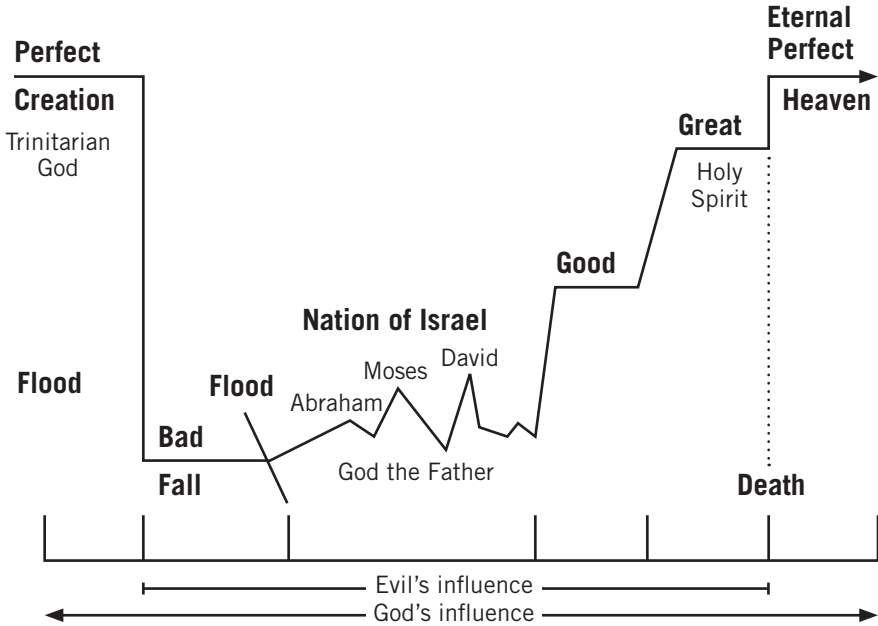
The sacrificial system implemented during this season of Israel's history, was given to us as a graphic reminder that the wages of sin is death and in order for God to be just, something must die for our sins. Sacrificing animals never fully paid the price for our sins, however. In order for a real atonement to be accomplished for humanity's sin a perfect human sacrifice would be needed. Until that was accomplished in Jesus, humanity was simply paying it forward.

Arrival of Jesus the Son. Then God sent His only Son Jesus to

be our Savior (pay the debt that we owe because of our sin) and our Lord (guide and empower us to live). For those of us who accept His payment for our sins, God no longer holds our sins against us, and our relationship with Him begins. In so doing, we move from bad to good. Unfortunately, most Christians' journeys of faith end right here. We are not properly instructed how to align ourselves under the Lordship of Christ. Such alignment leads to life lived through the guidance and power of God.

God Sends His Spirit. Christ's redemptive work for us on the cross is not the end of the story. God sent the Holy Spirit to empower us to experience and express the love of God in a supernatural way. This can happen when we are living in and through His strength. The Cross and Resurrection restored the Kingdom. Even though we cannot experience the Kingdom perfectly this side of the grave (because of the impact of our sinful nature, the Evil One's relentless attack and the fallen world system within which we live,) it has been restored in its perfection for us to draw upon. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we can draw on much more of the Kingdom's abundant life than we realize. As we submit to God's Lordship and live in and through the power of the Holy Spirit, our lives move from good to great. Now that we live in the season of the Spirit, good isn't good enough. Greatness is being offered to all who will bend their knees in obedience to God the Father, receive Jesus as their Savior and Lord, and submit to the power of the Holy Spirit to guide and empower their lives.

Our Eternal Dwelling. For those who die connected to God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—we will be restored to the perfect unhindered relationship that was experienced with God before the Fall. One significant difference from the previous perfect state in the Garden is that this time it is a permanent state of perfectly experiencing and expressing love. It is permanent because we chose to love and follow God during our life on earth. Upon death, God purifies and perfects our will to do the will of the Father, and since the Evil One has no influence on us beyond death, we perfectly experience and express love forever. I like to picture the story of God and mankind through history using the following diagram.



This is true history (His story). Now we must ask ourselves: How do we respond to what He has done? What will be our story? What kind of life experience do we want to choose for ourselves? How can we draw on the abundant life in the here-and-now Kingdom of Heaven within us?

ARE YOU READY TO DIE?

You might interpret this question two ways. Both are useful: Literally, are you done yet? Have you been all that you were born to be on this earth? Are you totally convinced you've fulfilled God's purpose for your life? Are you ready to move on to the next life? (If you're reading this, I am guessing the answer is "not yet.") And spiritually, are you ready to die to your agenda and whatever might be in your heart that is not of God? Are you at a point where you're willing to let go? You may notice that for a plant to flourish, it needs to be pruned, and anything that constitutes dead wood, withered old fruit, even extra foliage that

is ungainly—needs to be cut off in order to give that plant a fresh boost. Just so, we need to die to self-leadership and seek God’s plans for us if we are going to experience the abundant life. God wants to renew our heart, soul, mind, and strength and begin transforming the way we relate and what we do. That’s how we become new creations. Priorities shift so completely that we enter into new passion, new power, new devotion, new understanding...

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, He is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come. (2 Corinthians 5:17)

By the way, dying to self-leadership and becoming a follower of God does not mean you will not be a leader in your sphere of influence. Godly leaders are needed. The world of business abounds with leadership courses, leadership books, leadership programs with their leadership CD’s and DVD’s. You see leaders everywhere scrambling to develop their capabilities so that their organizations can attain their competitive edge. Much of that material may be terrific and even applicable in a Christian setting. Just be mindful that leadership happens to coincide with our egotistical tendencies in a way that “*followership*” does not. When we are truly in Christ, submitted to the guidance and power of God, He will lead through us. And the best leaders are those who know first how to be excellent followers and let God lead through them.

God has good plans for us. Those plans may allow our shortcomings to come to the surface in ways that should help us become more dependent on Him. If we react by accepting deeper dependence, that’s the kind of “dying” we’re talking about. In return for what we’re letting go, we receive guidance and power from God in a way that helps us meet the next challenge. Again, in our culture we associate growing up with becoming more independent. But in God’s Kingdom, it is the more mature who are most dependent.

JESUS BUSHWHACKED THE TRAIL FOR US

Therefore, since Christ suffered in His body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because he who has suffered in His body is done with sin. As a result, he does not live the rest of his earthly life for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God. For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do – living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry. They think it strange that you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation, and they heap abuse on you. But they will have to give account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. (1 Peter 4:1-5)

Jesus is not merely a good example. Nor is He wringing His hands over the terrible condition of Creation. What Jesus came to do two thousand-plus years ago is a cataclysmic action that exists outside of time: The power of the cross reaches as far as your personal struggles and is still potent to put the old sinful patterns to death. But we must be willing, as this scripture states, to put following the will of God above everything else, even our own physical well-being. We have all experienced what life is like when we walk according to the patterns of this world. We have all experienced the lifelessness of it all. When we choose to follow God's ways, we will experience persecution from those who are still enamored with chasing after evil, sinful desires. They don't like the fact that we are experiencing and expressing the love of God. We will also struggle with our old sin tendencies which need to be healed and retrained in righteousness. During this retraining, you might think of the cross as the most powerful weapon God could ever place into your hands. It is the only weapon that can effectively put to death sinful cycles.

NO MORE VICTIM MENTALITY

No doubt you know many people who feel helpless to change their lives. They've fallen into a victim mentality and have not found a way to break the vicious cycle. As helpful as many helping professions can

be, none can offer the complete transformation found in the cross. Only God deals cleanly with guilt, through our confession and His cleansing of unrighteousness. And only God cuts through false guilt and shame in a way that sets us free from a victim mindset. The enemy can duplicate many miracles, but only God can change a life for good, from the inside out.

Just as resurrection is only possible after death, new life patterns come into play only after we put the old ones to death on the cross. We do it first verbally, by “handing them over” to God with our mouths. With continued submission, you will begin to see change. Don’t be surprised if, as you grow closer to God, you become more aware of sin. Don’t dismay! That is a sign that you’re growing in holiness. Often, the more healing we experience, the more sensitive we are to what grieves God’s heart. As you abide in Him, you’ll find that balance between hating sin yet also growing in forgiveness. As you are filled with His divine sap, you’ll find yourself less daunted by the forces that try to slime you or pull you in the opposite direction. The more saturated you are with His Holy Spirit, the more easily those negative influences will roll right off of you, like water off a duck’s back. God’s ownership of your life includes a pretty awesome Protection Plan!

BORN TO OVERCOME

“In this world you will have trouble. But take heart, for I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33)

You were made to be an overcomer. You were born for greatness. It is found in submitting to the One who invented greatness and created you to take joy in His life expressed through you. Being owned by the Creator of the Universe has its privileges.