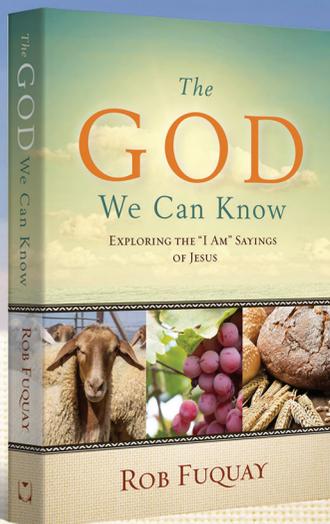
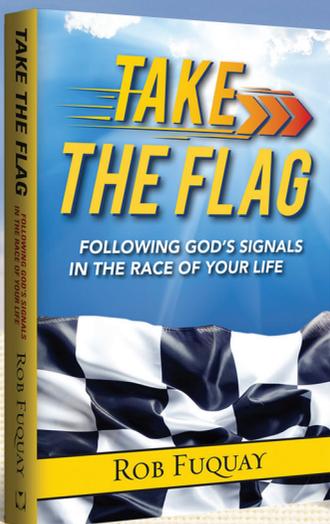
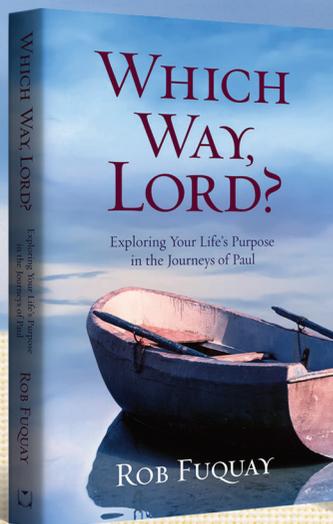


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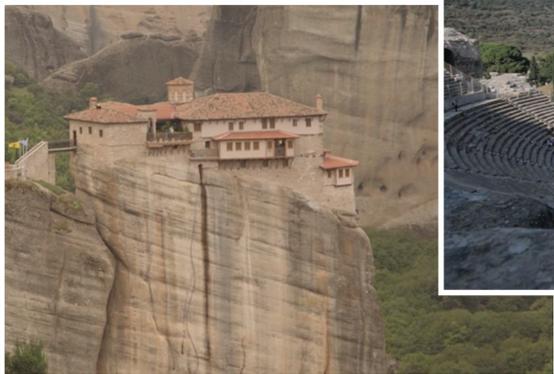
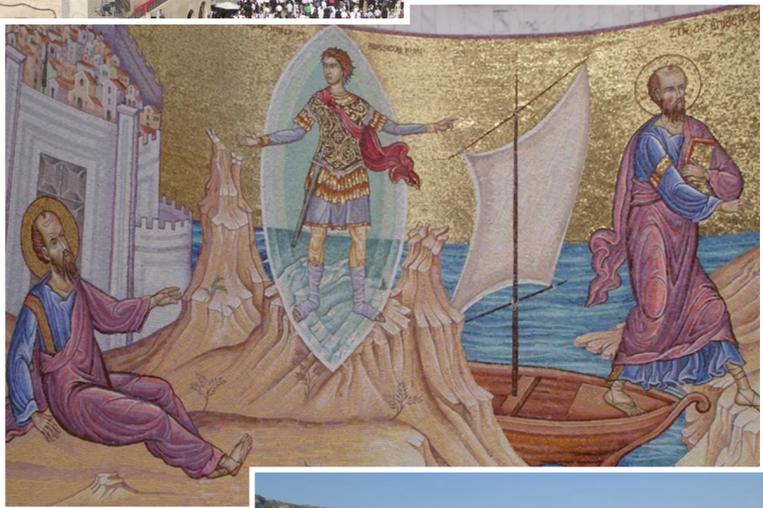
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ROB FUQUAY  
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SAMPLER

# Are You Ready to Go?



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STUDIES  
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Writers of various books of the Bible may be disputed in certain circles;  
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# CONTENTS

Churchwide Series from The Upper Room

About the Author

## **THE GOD WE CAN KNOW**

Contents .....	10
Introduction.....	11
Chapter 1 .....	15
Reflection Questions .....	23

## **TAKE THE FLAG**

Contents .....	26
Introduction.....	27
Chapter 1 .....	31
Reflection Questions .....	41

## **WHICH WAY, LORD?**

Contents .....	44
Introduction.....	45
Chapter 1 .....	53
Reflection Questions .....	67

Series Descriptions .....

Additional Information and How to Order .....

## CHURCHWIDE SERIES FROM THE UPPER ROOM

Rob Fuquay has written three churchwide studies designed for your entire congregation: *The God We Can Know*, *Take the Flag*, and *Which Way, Lord?* These invitational series will unite your congregation and support faith formation at every age level. Each study is designed for use in multiple settings such as worship, Sunday school, small groups, and in the home.

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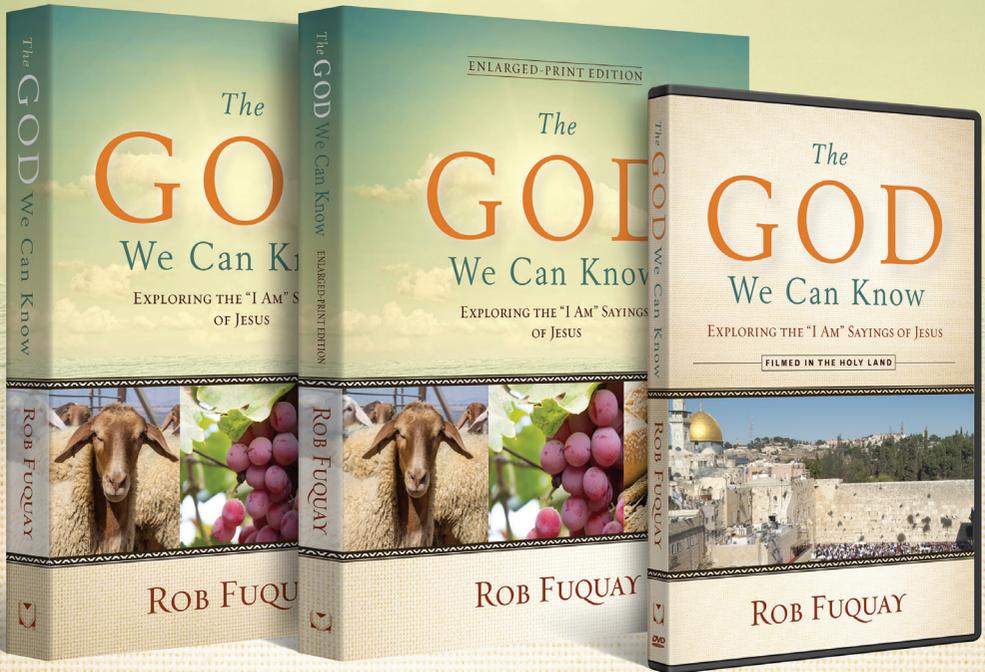
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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ROB FUQUAY serves as senior pastor at St. Luke's United Methodist Church in Indianapolis, one of the largest churches in the denomination. Prior to 2011 he served several congregations, both large and small, in North Carolina. Rob earned degrees from Pfeiffer University in Misenheimer, North Carolina, and from Candler School of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta. He loves the outdoors and enjoys hiking, climbing, and golf. Rob and his wife, Susan, are avid sports fans. They are the parents of three daughters, Julie, Sarah, and Anna.

# “Who Do You Say I Am?”



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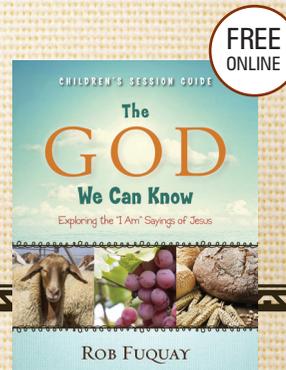
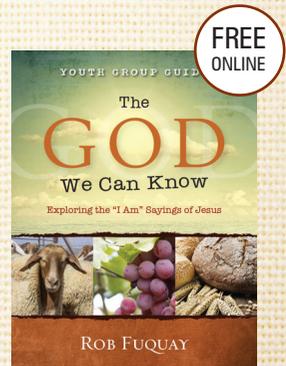
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G O D

We Can Know

EXPLORING THE “I AM” SAYINGS  
OF JESUS

ROB FUQUAY



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# CONTENTS

Introduction ~ 7

1

Knowing the Great “I AM” ~ 13

2

“I Am the Bread of Life”: Knowing God’s Satisfaction ~ 25

3

“I Am the Light of the World”: Knowing God’s Guidance ~ 39

4

“I Am the Good Shepherd”: Knowing God’s Care ~ 55

5

“I Am the True Vine”: Knowing God’s Power ~ 69

6

“I Am the Way, the Truth, and the Life”: Knowing God’s Way ~ 87

7

“I Am the Resurrection and the Life”: Knowing God’s Possibilities ~ 105

Notes ~ 119

About the Author ~ 123

*See the accompanying children’s, youth, and adult group guides  
and supporting materials for this worship and study series at*

[www.TheGodWeCanKnow.com](http://www.TheGodWeCanKnow.com)

# INTRODUCTION

*Let us occupy ourselves entirely in knowing God.  
The more we know [God] the more we will  
desire to know [God].*

—Brother Lawrence  
*The Practice of the Presence of God*

I once went to a mountain-climbing school. Actually, my wife Susan sent me to a mountain-climbing school. I had taken an interest in alpine climbing but didn't really know what I was doing. Susan figured if I was going to risk my life it might be good to get some training. Besides, my life insurance wasn't paid up.

The next summer I traveled to the state of Washington where I spent a week on a glacier in the Cascades with a guide and two other "students." My fellow learners were a couple from New York City. Our experience began early in the morning when we were picked up outside our hotel in Seattle. We went first to a park where introductions took place, and we spread out our gear to make sure we all had what was needed. The next stop was a coffee shop before heading to the mountains.

Standing in line for coffee, the guy from New York, who was significantly bigger than me, turned around and said, "Okay, I understand you're a pastor. Is that right?" I could tell by his tone he was not excited about this possibility. I said, "As a matter of fact I am." He continued, "Well, let me get this straight right now. I don't want to hear a bunch of religious stuff all week. Got that? My girlfriend and I are on vacation, and we don't want to be preached to!"

I responded, "It's a deal. I'm on vacation and don't feel like preaching." He swallowed a shot of espresso like it was whiskey and

then ordered an extra large dark roast. This was not someone to mess with! I would learn later that he was Jewish but not active in his faith. His girlfriend had never claimed any religious preference, and our guide had dabbled in many religious systems, currently Buddhism.

We got to the mountains, hiked the long trek to the glacier, and set up camp. Each day we spent ten to twelve hours learning climbing skills. During break times and lunches we sat on rocks and chatted, and the most curious thing happened. Spiritual conversations developed! Sometimes they started quite naturally while talking about the grandeur of the mountains and how they were created. Other times someone brought up an issue of violence in the news and wondered how God could allow such things to happen. Inevitably they would turn to me as the local expert on the topic of God and ask what I thought.

The most amazing episode, however, came on the last morning. For our “final exam” we would summit a local peak. Wake-up call was 2:00 A.M. After the hour-plus it took to eat and gear up, we roped ourselves together and prepared to climb. Right before we departed the guy from New York said, “*Wait!* Before we start we need the Rev to say a prayer.” Yes, this was the same guy who threatened me five days earlier about preaching. I just about fell out of my harness! A prayer request—from this guy?

I regrouped, asked everyone to hold hands, and led us in prayer roped together and standing on the ice under a clear moonlit sky. I was reminded all over again that we all have yearnings. Deep yearnings. The kind of yearnings that make us wonder about life and this world and what it’s all about. They’re part of what binds us together. Even those of us disinterested in religion, and perhaps even faith, often wonder if there is a God; and if so, what does this God have to do with us? That is what this book is about.

This book is about knowing God and, more specifically, knowing God through Jesus. In many ways the Bible is a story of humanity's attempt to know God. Sometimes this effort is as obvious as the tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1-9). Other times the story describes people working hard to avoid God. Many passages in the Old Testament describe people's fear of what would happen if they saw God's face. It's as if we want to know God, but then we're not so sure.

The Bible also tells a story of God's desire to be known. The scriptures relate an unfolding drama of God's never-ending desire to come to us—of God's revealing. The highest expression of that desire is the gift of God's self in the person of Jesus.

John's Gospel records a collection of self-revealing statements by Jesus known as the "I Am" sayings. These statements, rich in imagery and steeped in historical meaning, provide powerful insights into the heart of God and God's desire to know and be known. In this book we'll explore those sayings with a threefold aim:

First, we want to understand the images Jesus uses to identify himself: bread, light, good shepherd, gate of the sheep, true vine, way of life, resurrection, and life. Appreciating the historical Jewish roots behind these images opens up a myriad of possible meanings.

Second, we want to discover how those broad meanings connect with our lives today. Jesus defined himself in the context of ordinary, everyday images people easily understood. We can translate these ancient images into applications for contemporary life. What does it mean to experience hunger or need guidance or desire security or want greater power for living? Better yet, how does a relationship with Jesus fulfill these needs? That is the purpose of the "I Am" sayings, which brings us to a third aim.

Even more than insight or application, taking these sayings to heart can bring us into closer connection with Jesus. Christianity is not a religion. It is a relationship. A living relationship requires

nurture and attention. It is deepened with trust and respect. The “I Am” sayings of Jesus invite us into that kind of abiding relationship.

Think of this book as a journey into the world where Jesus spoke these sayings. Use all of your senses as you read. Visualize the landscape. Smell the sheep pens and the fresh bread (yes, I know those two aren’t exactly compatible). Taste the fruit of the vine. Hear the voices of people in the stories. Feel the light and heat of the giant torches at the Temple as well as the bitter grief of Mary at the tomb of her brother. These images are meant to be experienced. God is in these experiences. They tell us that God can be known.

I hope you may be able to read this book as part of a small group experience in which you view related video segments filmed in the Holy Land. The videos are available on DVD with accompanying children’s, youth, and adult group guides. Supporting materials for this worship and study series can be found at [www.TheGodWeCan-Know.com](http://www.TheGodWeCan-Know.com). This study is ideal for use during the season of Lent, a time set apart for focusing on Jesus and knowing God better. But whether exploring the book and video with a group or simply reading this book with your imagination in gear, I invite you on this journey not only to know more *about* God but to *know* God yourself.

Order your coffee, strap on your pack, and let the journey begin. God wants to be recognized.

# 1

## KNOWING THE GREAT “I AM”

*Exodus 3:1-14*

God wants to be recognized. Begin this study with that simple thought. God is not hiding. God doesn't avoid us. God wants to be known. That's the story of the Bible. God wanted to be known by Adam and Eve. They didn't have to look hard to find God. Even when they tried to hide, God came looking for them. God likes being recognized. God came to Abraham. Abraham recognized and welcomed God's presence; they had a special relationship. Abraham was called a friend of God. God came to the prophets so they could speak God's message to people: "I want to be recognized by you."

Eventually God stepped away from the script. God no longer used a spokesperson. God came directly to us in Jesus. Why? Because God wants to be known. Sure, God's presence is not always easy to recognize or feel. Even Jesus quoted the psalmist, "Why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46). God's presence is sometimes mysterious and difficult to understand. But if there is one overarching truth in scripture, it is that God likes being recognized. God is always in motion coming our way. God can be known.

On several occasions in the Gospel of John, Jesus begins self-revealing statements with the words, "I am. . . ." They remind us of God's words to Moses on Sinai. While investigating a burning bush that wasn't consumed by the fire, Moses encounters God. God meets

him on the mountain to give him a life-altering, history-changing mission. God calls Moses to liberate the people from bondage in Egypt.

*But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"*

EXODUS 3:13-14

Thousands of years later Jesus declares "I am. . . ." He identifies himself with the God of Moses. Yet, he does more than identify. He reveals further truths of this God, this God we can know and who wants to know us.

In the following chapters we will look at the six most recognized "I Am" sayings of Jesus: Bread of Life; Light of the World; True Vine; Good Shepherd and Gate of the Sheep; the Way, the Truth, and the Life; and the Resurrection and the Life. The study before us will be a journey. Like any journey it requires openness to new encounters and experiences. I hope the chapters and group sessions will give you not only a fresh understanding of Jesus' words but also new ways to experience God's presence in your life. Before we examine them individually, let's think about the words "I Am" and what they tell us about God, Jesus, and us.

## WHAT THE "I AM" SAYINGS TELL US ABOUT GOD

What is in a name? Have you ever thought about the meaning of your own name? For instance, my name, Rob, means "bright fame." Fuquay comes from a French word for "people." So Rob Fuquay means "famous person." When I tell my daughters that, they say, "In your dreams, Dad!"

So what does God's name tell us? Let's go back to the Exodus story. Why does Moses ask for God's name? God is calling Moses to a dangerous mission. Moses knows he will need some kind of evidence of just who this God is. Perhaps his Egyptian upbringing influenced him. Egyptians believed names possessed magical powers. Knowing one's name transferred some of the namesake's authority.

No wonder Moses wanted to know God's name! God was sending him to tell the most powerful man in the world what to do. Calling for the release of Hebrew slaves who were responsible for much of Egypt's prosperity sounded like lunacy. Moses had not been in Egypt since the day he fled for his life. Despite being a prince in Pharaoh's palace, Moses had killed an Egyptian soldier for beating a Hebrew slave. He was a wanted man. Now God tells him not only to return but to demand the release of God's people! Moses could lose his life. This expedition was more than risky; it was ridiculous. How could he know this mission stood any chance of success? He might not be the Prince of Egypt, but at least in Midian he was secure and comfortable.

If God was calling Moses to go, then he needed some reassurance. If he possessed some of the power of a God who could set a bush on fire without consuming it, then maybe he stood a chance. He probably remembered that in Egypt knowing a person's name gave you an advantage. He inquires of God, "If they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?"

This request comes in the midst of numerous excuses on Moses' part to get out of the assignment. Moses' protests include the following: "I am not respected . . . I am not eloquent . . . I am not brave . . . I don't even know your name!" To each of these, God replies, "I will be there." God does not say, "I'll make you feel important enough, or eloquent enough, or brave enough, or knowledgeable enough." Instead God simply says, "I will be there."

Everett Fox in his commentary on Exodus explains there is not a precise interpretation of God's name, which clarifies the mystery behind it. Some translate the word phrase, "I AM who I AM"; but Fox says others also interpret it to mean, "I will be there," so that what God is saying to Moses is, "I will be there howsoever I will be there."<sup>1</sup>

That interpretation gives new meaning to God's name. Moses desperately craves power and confidence. He seeks assurance that he will have what it takes to face this challenge, and God says, "I will be there. You need me more than power and ability. Let that be enough."

Moses has a decision to make. Will he wait to be faithful until God makes him feel adequate, or will he act faithfully and trust God's adequacy?

I heard a Christian comedian named Michael Jr. describe performing at a maximum security prison. He didn't go to the prison planning to do a show, but when the warden requested one, he felt a nudge from God to say yes.

Passing through the security scans, Michael thought, "Lord, I'm not prepared." He entered a room of rough-looking, expressionless men sitting in their prison jumpsuits. He kept thinking, "Now, Lord, would be a good time to give me something funny to say."

Michael walked toward the front of the group but still had nothing. His mind was blank. He stepped in front of the microphone. Right as his feet landed in the spot to perform, he looked down at the front row. There sat a guy with a long white beard named Moses. He thought, *Thank you, Lord. I can do something with this!*

Michael said, "Who better to be in prison with than a guy named Moses?" He pointed at the man and said, "Listen, I want you to go to the warden right now and say, 'Let my people go!'" The place erupted. It started an amazing routine of comedy that had the room howling. Michael Jr. said it was an experience unlike any he's

ever had, and he learned a powerful lesson that day. He discovered that God would give him what he needed when his feet were where God wanted them to be.

The original ex-con named Moses had his feet where God wanted them to be that day on Sinai. God invited him to show up in Egypt. God's promise was simple, "You show up, and I will give you what you need. I will be there as I will be there. Let that be enough."

Have you ever wished God would do more to reassure you? Have you ever waited to act faithfully until feeling adequate? Have you ever delayed saying yes to a challenge because you were confident any number of people could do it better? Have you ever declined an opportunity because you were certain your skills weren't sufficient? Have you ever dodged an assignment because accepting would require you to grow?

Just remember, God's name is not "I Already Have." It is not "I Will Be." God's name is "I AM." It means God works in real time. God gives us what we need when our feet are where God wants them to be. God's promise is "I will be there as I will be there."

## WHAT THE "I AM" SAYINGS TELL US ABOUT JESUS

Now, let's jump to the New Testament. What do the "I Am" sayings tell us about Jesus? As mentioned earlier, by using these words Jesus identifies with the God of Moses. The God called "I AM" can be fully known in Jesus. Also, Jesus relates himself to very earthly things: bread, light, vine, shepherd, way.

At the same time, Jesus talks about these images in contrast to their opposites: bread versus hunger; light versus darkness; a good shepherd versus a hireling; a true vine versus a false one. In other words, Jesus is an answer for hunger, darkness, fear, emptiness, and so forth.

Gail R. O'Day, Dean and Professor of New Testament and Preaching at Wake Forest School of Divinity, says, "The 'I am' sayings . . . use symbols that come from the common fund of ancient Near Eastern religious and human experience. Through these common symbols, Jesus declares that people's religious needs and human longings are met in him."<sup>2</sup> Just as the Great I AM would be with Moses in his challenges, so Jesus vows to be with us in ours. In Jesus our greatest needs are met.

It's an old but beautiful story. A young boy walks into a pet shop to buy a puppy. The owner shows him what he has. The boy looks over each one carefully and finally makes his pick, one with a misshapen leg.

The owner says, "Son, you don't want that one. He can't even stand well. He'll never be able to run or fetch anything. Pick another."

The boy hikes up one pant leg revealing a prosthetic leg and replies, "Nope. This is the one for me. I know what it's like not to be able to run or play. I'll really be able to help him."

In Jesus we know a God willing to identify with our challenges. Jesus says, "I know what it's like to hurt. I know what it's like to receive news that a friend has died. I know what it's like to be betrayed by someone you love. I know what it's like to be treated unfairly. I know what it's like to be misunderstood. I know what it's like to suffer. I know what it's like to die. . . . I'll really be able to help them." For those who struggle, grieve, feel alone or rejected or afraid, Jesus says, I am able to satisfy, comfort, give meaning, and offer hope.

## WHAT THE "I AM" SAYINGS TELL US ABOUT OURSELVES

Finally, the "I Am" sayings make claims about us:

- Jesus said, “I am the Light of the World” (John 8:12), but in another place: “*You* are the Light of the world” (Matt. 5:14, *emphasis added*).
- He said, “I am the Good Shepherd” (John 10:11) but also: “Feed my sheep” (John 21:17).
- He said, “I am the True Vine” (John 15:1) but as well: “You are the branches” (John 15:5).
- Jesus said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6), but later his followers were known as belonging to the Way (Acts 9:2).
- He said, “I am the Resurrection and the Life” (John 11:25) but equally promised us life abundant (John 10:10).

What each of these statements claims about God, it also claims about us. Together, they describe our nature and who we are.

*Getting to know God means getting to know ourselves. The more we know who God is, the more we know who we are.*

Phillip Newell, the former Warden of the Iona Abbey in Scotland, spoke one morning in the church I serve. One of the statements he made really stuck with me: “We are not just made by God, we are made out of God.” Think about that for a moment, and say it to yourself in the first person: “I am not just made by God, I am made out of God.” It means we are made out of God’s goodness, power, strength, and love.

Getting to know God means getting to know ourselves. The more we know who God is, the more we know who we are.

Try this little exercise. Begin a statement with the words “I am. . . .” and finish it with six to ten characteristics that are true for you. What words do you use? Are you tempted to think first of your less desirable traits? “I am forgetful. I am out of shape. I am messy.”

Does it get worse? “I am hateful. I am prejudiced. I am addicted. I am ugly. I am hopeless.”

If your first tendency is to think about what you wish were different about your life, then try another list. Write all the attributes you believe describe who God is. What does that include? Loving? Powerful? Forgiving? Beautiful? Creative? Compassionate? Gracious?

Remember, we are not just made *by* God, we are made *out of* God. Those attributes describe us too. Ultimately, they define us.

## WHO ARE YOU? WHAT DESCRIBES YOU?

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent. In churches everywhere people come forward to receive the sign of the cross smudged on their foreheads using ashes made of burned palm fronds from the previous Palm Sunday. Each year on Ash Wednesday I invite people to live with this question: “What do I have that cannot be reduced to ashes?” Just about everything in this life—our houses, our belongings, our clothes, and even our bodies—will all eventually be reduced to ashes. Yet God gives us something that cannot be destroyed. What part of you cannot be reduced to ashes? What word would describe it? That is who you really are.

*What do I have that cannot  
be reduced to ashes?*

I write these words after a visit to a woman in a hospice care center. She is a longtime member of my church who has battled cancer much of her life and recently learned it had returned. She probably has only a few days to live.

She was napping when I stopped by, but the family insisted I wake her because they knew she would want to see me. When she opened her eyes she smiled and said words she has spoken every time I have visited—literally every time! She said, “I am so blessed.” With

barely the energy to lift her arm or comb her hair she said, “I am so blessed.” Sad that she wouldn’t see her grandchildren graduate from high school, she said, “I am so blessed.” Wishing she had many more years to spend with the love of her, life she said, “I am so blessed.” About to depart this life she said, “I am. . . .” Her faith finished the sentence.

How does God help you finish your “I am. . . .”?

### REFLECTION/DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Do you know what your name means (both first and last)? If not, try researching it and see if you think your name truly fits!
- Why was knowing God’s name so important to Moses?
- What do you think is significant about God’s name in Exodus 3:14? What message is God sending Moses by telling God’s name?
- Based on the example of Moses, what can we learn today about carrying out tough assignments from God?
- Thinking about Jesus’ use of the words I Am, what does it mean that Jesus associates himself with symbols like bread, light, shepherding, a grapevine, a way, and so forth?
- What does the statement “We are not just made by God, we are made out of God” mean to you?
- How do you end a sentence that begins, “I am. . . .”?

## I KNOWING THE GREAT “I AM”

1. Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy (The Schocken Bible, Volume 1)* (New York: Schocken Books, 2000), xxix.

2. Gail R. O’Day in Leander E. Keck, ed., *The New Interpreter’s Bible* Vol. IX (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 601.

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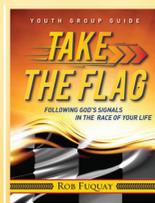
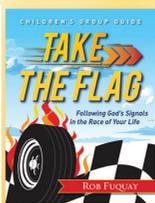


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IN THE RACE OF YOUR LIFE

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# ***TAKE THE FLAG***

*FOLLOWING GOD'S SIGNALS  
IN THE RACE OF YOUR LIFE*

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## CONTENTS

	<b>Introduction</b>	
	You're in the Driver's Seat . . . . .	7
<b>1</b>	<b>The Green Flag</b>	
	Let the Race Begin . . . . .	13
<b>2</b>	<b>The Yellow Flag</b>	
	Heeding the Cautions. . . . .	27
<b>3</b>	<b>The Blue Flag</b>	
	Moving to the Outside Lane. . . . .	41
<b>4</b>	<b>The Red Flag</b>	
	The Importance of the Delay . . . . .	57
<b>5</b>	<b>The Black Flag</b>	
	When It's Time to Leave the Race. . . . .	71
<b>6</b>	<b>The White Flag</b>	
	Getting in Position for the Final Stretch . . . . .	87
<b>7</b>	<b>The Checkered Flag</b>	
	Experiencing Victory . . . . .	103
	Acknowledgments . . . . .	119
	Notes . . . . .	123
	About the Author. . . . .	125

## INTRODUCTION

# YOU'RE IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT

Maybe I'm going out on a limb here, but if the apostle Paul were alive today, I think he'd be a big fan of car racing. Why do I say that? Because Paul had an obvious fascination with the racing of his day. In his first letter to the Corinthians, notice the way he illustrates the spiritual life: "Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it" (9:24). He often spoke about the race of faith. And look at how he sums up his life in his letter to Timothy: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (2 Tim. 4:7).

There's no doubt Paul witnessed footraces, and obviously he saw a larger meaning in them. In this day and age, when life moves at breakneck speed, why wouldn't Paul be attracted to the thrill of car racing? I know I am and, like Paul, I can easily see symbolism in this modern-day sport. Auto racing can help us describe our lives. One day we will cross a finish line. The engines will stop. But what are we racing for? The aim of this book is to help us think about that question.

I didn't start out as a car-racing fan. I was five years old, growing up in North Carolina, when I went to my first race with a friend whose dad was a big fan. All I remember of that experience was clamping my hands over my ears, trying to block out the roar of

the engines, and then having a headache that lasted three days. Not exactly the way to make a kid fall in love with the sport.

Yet all that has changed since I've served churches in the two biggest auto-racing cities in America: Mooresville, North Carolina, and now Indianapolis, Indiana. Mooresville is about thirty miles north of Charlotte, which most people consider the home of the National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing—of course more popularly known as NASCAR. Yet Mooresville is where most of the NASCAR race teams locate their garages and offices, and many drivers live in the surrounding area of beautiful Lake Norman. A Mooresville water tower declares it's "Race City USA!"

During my time there I got to know drivers, team owners, and people involved with various aspects of racing, such as crew teams, mechanics, and suppliers of car and engine parts. I learned more about stock-car racing and began attending races. From Mooresville I moved to Indianapolis, which, of course, is known for one of the biggest racing events in the world, the Indy 500.

It's easy to tell the difference between IndyCars and stock cars. IndyCar features open-wheel racing; their wheels extend outside the car body. The wheels on stock cars are located under the fenders. IndyCars go significantly faster than stock cars because of their light weight and low-to-the-ground design.

There's lighthearted jesting between fans of the two series. After I moved to Indianapolis, a new friend gave me a greeting card that depicted two guys in ball caps and overalls standing by a shiny automobile. Below it was the caption, "Ever wonder how NASCAR got its name?" Inside the card one fellow says to the other, "That's a nasss car. Yep, that's a real nas-car." I got a good chuckle out of my friend when I read it aloud with my own Southern drawl.

Over the years I've grown in my appreciation for car racing and all the traditions that go with it. One that especially intrigues me is

the sport's use of flags to send signals to the drivers. It's amazing to think that, for all the sophisticated engineering that goes into today's cars, the racing world still sticks with this age-old form of communication. The use of flags in competition can be traced to bicycle racing in France in the 1860s, and they became a common sight when car racing was born in the 1890s.

Historians have tried unsuccessfully to trace the origins of racing's most famous flag, the checkered flag, but they speculate that perhaps someone improvised with a checkered tablecloth to signal the end of a race. Other flags eventually came along to send different messages to the drivers: start, yield, caution delay, disqualification, final lap. However the use of flags began, they're obviously practical. Early racing, especially, was a dusty affair, so drivers could see the flags through the haze. Flags also speak boldly amid the deafening noise of the race.

It's no giant leap to garner greater understandings from this symbolic form of communication. God too is signaling to us amid the bustle and noise of our fast-paced lives. As I reflected on the racing flags, I began to see how their messages correspond to the important moments in our spiritual lives as God seeks our attention. And so in this book I will be using the flags of car racing as a jumping-off point to discuss different aspects of faith:

**The Green Flag (start):** How do we start our journey of faith?

**The Yellow Flag (caution):** Our life decisions can put us in peril on our journeys. How do we learn to heed God's cautions along the way?

**The Blue Flag (yield):** All of us may run our own race, but it's also essential that we respect others. How does God help us focus on other people's needs?

**The Red Flag (delay):** When life throws us unexpected and unwanted interruptions, how does God help us get the most out of these stops?

**The Black Flag (disqualification):** What happens when our own violations take us out of the race, and how does God help us get back in?

**The White Flag (final lap):** As we head to the finish line, how do we steer according to God's will?

**The Checkered Flag (victory):** If we persevere—navigating the hazards, managing the pit stops—then victory is ours. But how does God want us to experience victory?

If you are a racing fan, I hope this book will give you new appreciation for your race of faith. Even if you are not a race fan, I hope you find relevance in the meaning behind the symbolism.

I wrote this book not to make you into a racing fan but a greater follower of Jesus Christ, the author and perfecter of our faith. Just as God sends us signals, Jesus holds the key to the ignition of faith.

But that still puts you in the driver's seat. So buckle your seat belt, strap on your helmet, and in the words of NASCAR announcer and former driver Darrell Waltrip, "Boogity, boogity, boogity, let's go racing!"



# THE GREEN FLAG

Let the Race Begin

*Romans 10:5-13*

The first NASCAR race I attended was the Coca-Cola 600 in 2008. This race, held every year in Charlotte, North Carolina, is run on the same day as the Indy 500. I knew auto races could be really loud (remembering my experience some forty years before), but for this one, I would be joining church members in an enclosed suite. I figured it surely wouldn't be as noisy as in the stands.

While the drivers took their warm-up laps, I turned to my friend and said, "This isn't as loud as I thought it would be." He nodded knowingly and said, "Wait until they wave the green flag." I thought, *The cars are already running. How much louder could it really get?* Then the green flag was waved. Honestly, I *felt* the difference before I heard it. My seat started shaking, and the walls vibrated. Then it came: the deafening roar. There was no point in even trying to speak. No one could hear a word I'd say.

Until the green flag appears, drivers leisurely move around the racetrack, maintaining positions that have been determined by their qualifying runs. But the green flag changes this coasting into a full-throttle, earth-shaking experience. As long as there are no caution flag, delays, or halts, a race continues “under the green flag” until the very last lap. This means drivers are free to reach top speed. A green flag signals that the race has begun.

Now, think about this image in relation to the spiritual life. If you are a person of faith, have you ever felt as though you were just coasting, driving warm-up laps? Nothing is wrong. You wonder why your faith doesn't have more energy and power. Or perhaps your faith life consists mostly of practices and routines that make you feel like you're simply going through the motions. You are looking for something more dynamic, something that will make a difference in your life and in the world around you. Have you ever wished someone would wave a green flag of faith that takes life from coasting to a full-throttle, earth-shaking experience?

As you think about that question, it's crucial to understand what we mean by faith, and specifically the Christian faith, since this will be the baseline for all we talk about in the following pages.

Defining faith shouldn't seem all that complicated. We all have ideas of what it is, but I suspect we formed some of those ideas in childhood when our difficult questions may have received easy answers. So it's equally important to understand what faith *is not*. Faith isn't a feeling or a proposition to believe. It's not religious knowledge or an endless list of good deeds to be done. That's not to say doctrine and works are unimportant. Or that rituals, symbols, and traditions have no significance. By no means! Yet without something more living and dynamic, faith is pointless. John Wesley, founder of Methodism, described this kind of faith as “having the form of religion but not the power.”

So what is faith?

First, faith is a trust—a trust in a reality that has yet to be fully realized. That reality entails more than a belief in heaven. It informs a confidence that one day there will be heaven on earth, that someday the kingdom of God will arrive, and life will become what God intends it to be. Hebrews 11:1 puts it this way: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Interestingly, the Gospels use the words *kingdom of God* and *kingdom of heaven* interchangeably. They don’t describe a place so much as a way of life, life as it looks when God’s reign is in full effect. As far removed as that way of life seems at times, faith holds on to the possibility that one day God’s way of justice and mercy will be in effect.

Faith also is action: stepping out in trust. In Genesis, we read about Abraham—the father of the Jewish, Muslim, and Christian religions—leaving behind his native country and everything familiar to him to go to a new land because he trusted in God’s will and purpose. Faith is moving to the place where we give full control to God’s direction. In this sense, it is more verb than noun. Faith is trusting in God’s picture for our world and actively moving toward it.

So *Christian* faith means trust and action have a name. We trust that God’s ideal way of life is embodied in the person of God’s son, Jesus Christ, and we show that trust by following his teachings and example. The apostle Paul wrote his letter to the Romans to define what it means to live out Christian faith. The recipients were people for whom faith had become a matter of coasting along by following rules and rituals. Paul said the way to turn faith into a full-throttle experience was to take the green flag!

Well, not in so many words. But he did say that turning faith into an experience of energy and excitement requires going to the starting line. What is that? Just this, says Paul: “If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom. 10:9). In

essence, the green flag of Christian faith is accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

Okay, before stepping on the accelerator, let's pause for a moment. Just as we defined faith by first saying what faith is not, let's do the same with this statement. For some, the expression "accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior" rubs the wrong way. It takes people back to altar calls or invitations of faith that felt forced, coerced. Perhaps you have your own experience of worship services or camp settings where a preacher or some leader told you the words to say, regardless of your questions. I know some people who succumbed to this pressure for fear of rejection by family and church members.

For other people, accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior reminds them of a simplistic, other-worldly focus. "Is your life a mess? Are things not right? Just accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior!" *Hocus-pocus, everything will now be fine because you've said the magic words.* It's even easier than Jack's beans and a lot less work than climbing the beanstalk!

In my own life I've had people tell me that accepting Christ as Lord and Savior means all kinds of things, from speaking in tongues to never having any doubts in my faith. Really? No doubts? Speaking in tongues? You can imagine the second-guessing this caused me, particularly during my adolescence. At times I felt like a teenage faith wannabe. Thankfully, years of spiritual growth, good faith friends, mentors, and my understanding of scripture helped dispel some of these ideas. But that still leaves us with an important question . . .

What does accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and accepting Jesus Christ as Savior really mean? Let's consider those positions one at a time and start with the second first.

## WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO CALL JESUS SAVIOR?

The Bible gives God many names and titles, but Savior is the most common. It defines God's work: God saves people. God saves people

from danger, like David who escaped the threats of Saul. God saves people from their enemies, like the Israelites who fled through a parted Red Sea and avoided slaughter by the Egyptians. God saves people from distress, like the disciples in the boat who were calmed during a storm when Jesus walked on water.

Of course, not everyone gets spared from enemies, threats, and storms. Even Jesus wasn't saved from death on the cross. The worldly examples of salvation illustrate the critical spiritual meaning of the word *salvation*. God saves people from sin.

The word for salvation in the New Testament, the Greek word *soteria*, is also the same word for health. It is a word with physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions. To speak of salvation is to talk about being made whole. When Jesus quoted the Shema, the central prayer of the Torah, he was relaying God's concern for our wholeness: "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength" (Mark 12:29-30). God yearns that we be one with God. Eventually the physical health of every person will give way, but our spiritual health, our oneness with God, does not have to. God ultimately desires to save us from the forces that can rob us of spiritual wholeness.

Most of us hunger for wholeness. Most of us desire a sense of purpose, meaning, and contentment. As Christians, we want to love others, ourselves, and God more completely. We want to live in such a way as to have no gap between ideals and actions.

This is the sense of wholeness the Bible first depicts in the opening story of Adam and Eve. They lived with each other and with God with no fear, separation, or shame. What damaged this condition of wholeness was sin. We will explore the topic of sin more fully in chapter 5, but for now let's simply think of sin as the force that makes us prefer our way to God's way. Sin is less about our actions and more a description of our condition. We feel inclined to seek our

own way. As the hymn writer described in “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing”: “Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, prone to leave the God I love.” We create this separation on our own; this is part of our human condition. But we alone cannot remove the separation. Only God can do that.

The story of the Bible is the stunning drama about God’s ongoing action to bridge the distance between us and God. Over and over again, God uses sacrifice as a means to forgive, beginning with Adam and Eve. When they became aware of their nakedness and were ashamed, God sacrificed animals and used their hides to clothe the couple. When the Israelites broke the laws God gave them in the wilderness, once a year God directed them to tie a scarlet ribbon onto the head of a scapegoat representing all the sins of the community and release the animal into the wilderness, symbolizing God’s taking away the sins of the people. Eventually, God arrived in person in the form of Jesus, who died on a cross. Christians came to view the cross as a symbol of God’s sacrificial love and readiness to forgive and restore a broken humanity.

The story of the Bible is the story of God’s willingness to sacrifice for the forgiveness of sin. God could choose to forgive us without making a sacrifice, but where are we without that sacrifice? Deep down we all know that sin costs. Just being told that God loves us and forgives us seems shallow and unconvincing. The actions we commit that come out of brokenness do damage. Sometimes we can pay for the damage. For example, if we break something of value, we may be able to pay for the cost of the repair ourselves. But what happens when the item is irreplaceable? Sometimes our sin damages in ways money can’t repair. Words cut deeply. Dignity and self-worth are not easily restored. The cross reminds us that only God can make the payment to restore us to wholeness.

For my daily devotions I read *The One Year Bible*. At the time of this writing, I am slogging through the Old Testament book of

Leviticus. There's nothing like starting your morning with pages of ancient laws and rituals! But a few days ago I read details about what the Israelites were to do after they had wronged someone or offended God. Depending on the infraction, they brought certain types of sacrifices to the tabernacle. They presented their offering to the priest, who burned it on the altar. As the fire consumed the gift and smoke billowed to the sky, it signified the cleansing of their sin.

As I read this, the thought occurred to me that Old Testament people believed they could take action that would bring forgiveness. We know the practice of sacrifice created problems over time. Forgiveness became bound by what people did. What was meant to be an experience of God's mercy—making an offering—became a requirement for earning or meriting God's forgiveness.

Then came the story of Jesus and the cross, and God made it quite clear: Forgiveness is freely given, not earned. The cross represents cost, and grace is not cheap. Only God can pay the price. Jesus' death on the cross is a gift, and salvation comes through this self-sacrifice. Accepting it acknowledges the cost of sin and God's ceaseless effort to redeem and restore us.

There's a story about a wealthy American who ordered a custom Rolls-Royce from England. Not long after he started driving it, he experienced a mechanical problem. He called the company, and a mechanic flew over from England to fix it. Many weeks later, the owner still hadn't received a repair bill, so he called the company to ask about it. The person who answered the phone could find nothing in the records and summoned the manager. A few minutes later, the manager came to the phone, and in a distinct British accent said, "Sir, we have no record of a Rolls-Royce ever having had mechanical failure."

I tell this story because I think of Jesus as the mechanic sent from God to repair us. (Maybe not a stretch in a book with a car-racing theme.) When we accept this gift, then one day God will check the

record of our lives. We will expect to hear a review of all the damages we have caused, but God will look up and say, “I have no record of failure for my servant.”

Some may ask, If God bears the entire price for our sin, then why doesn't that give us a blank check to sin? Why isn't God's unmerited forgiveness an invitation to do whatever we want, knowing the price has already been paid? And the answer is pretty simple: because breaking down is no fun. We are intended to run the way our Creator designed us.

### WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO CALL JESUS LORD?

Now, let's look at the second important word in the apostle Paul's counsel: *Lord*. Keep in mind that in the Bible, the word *lord* was not exclusively religious. It applied to anyone who had power and authority over others, such as “the lord of the manor.” It also designated nobility, as Great Britain still does with its House of Lords.

But what is a lord? Let's borrow an analogy from auto racing and see if that helps. Let's consider the crew chief.

This is the person who leads the pit crew, coordinates pit stops, makes sure the car is in tiptop shape, and stays in radio contact with the driver throughout the entire race. Working from an elevated position beside the track, the crew chief actually has a much better view of the race than the driver does. The crew chief anticipates challenges in ways the driver can't. He can see opportunities to shave time off the clock that the driver can't. For instance, Richard Petty won the 1981 Daytona 500 because his crew chief called off a tire change, saving him precious seconds and giving him the edge. Gordon Johncock won the 1982 Indy 500 by 0.16 seconds because his crew chief made the call to give the car just enough gas to get through the race rather than topping off the tank, again saving precious seconds.

Without crew chiefs, drivers would be on their own—and that would create chaotic conditions. Our lives are the same way. We all need a higher authority to direct us, guide us, and help us steer through the challenges of life.

Accepting that we can't go it alone means letting God be God. Sometimes what sounds like faith is actually a veiled attempt to maintain full control. We fervently pray, asking God to do what we want done. This may seem like deep trust on our part, but in reality it is an attempt to use faith to get our way, not God's. When such efforts fail, we grow resentful or miss the larger ways in which God provides answers.

By admitting we need God's help and guidance, we are trusting that God is seeing the bigger picture, just as the crew chief has a better view of the track. Admitting that we aren't in full control means conceding that there are mysteries too big for us to fathom and problems too great for us to understand, much less solve.

I was only sixteen years old when I realized how much I needed a crew chief, someone to direct my life. I remember the power of wanting to be accepted and to fit in. I recall how much I wanted to go it alone, and yet I realized how quickly I could steer myself into a wall. Along the way, through the influence of my church, my pastors, and my mentors, I learned what it meant to have a Lord and Savior. I discovered that Jesus loved me no matter what mistakes I made and that he knew me better than anyone. And one day I took that step and crossed the starting line of faith.

In his book *Running on Empty*, Fil Anderson, former national training director for Young Life, recalls reading an interview with a member of the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra. The interviewer asked the orchestra member how it feels to get a standing ovation after a performance or a negative review the next morning. The musician said she once was greatly affected by audiences and critics, but over time she came to value only the conductor's approval. Now

listen to this important sentence in Anderson's book: "Her logic was simple; her conductor was the only person in the crowd who really knew how she was supposed to perform."<sup>1</sup>

Fil Anderson could have just as easily been talking about a crew chief who knows how the car and driver are supposed to perform. This is what Jesus Christ does for us. When we invite Jesus to be our Lord, we aren't asking him to be our boss. We are inviting him to bring out our best. He is the only one who knows how we are supposed to perform.

Whether we intend to or not, we pick up a lot of lords in life. To quote the great theologian Bob Dylan, "You're gonna have to serve somebody."<sup>2</sup> We have people whose opinions of us can greatly affect us. Their words can lift us up or tear us down. But as well-intentioned as some people might be, there is only one Lord who knows everything about us, who understands us completely, who will help us to be our best. This is a conviction we need to embrace over and over again because the other lords will never stop vying for our attention.

It's not enough to accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior once and call it good. That asks too much of our human condition. We all need restarts.

The same is true in auto racing. There's never been a race run where the green flag appeared only once. For various reasons, every race has pauses and even full stops many times before the winner crosses the finish line. The green flag comes out again after every pause and every stop to restart the race.

I've found that I often need to take the green flag over and over. I need to return to the basics, the truth that first and foremost God loves me and forgives me, and that God offers God's power to bring out my best.

How about you? The crucial spiritual message about the green flag is that God is a God of fresh starts. That's plural, not singular.

Frequently we need to say, “God, I accept again your forgiveness. I need your direction in my life. I don’t want to just coast. I need to be revved up. I need a fresh touch of your mercy. I need your healing. I choose all over again to make the one you sent, Jesus Christ, my Lord and Savior.”

Do you feel the roar?

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

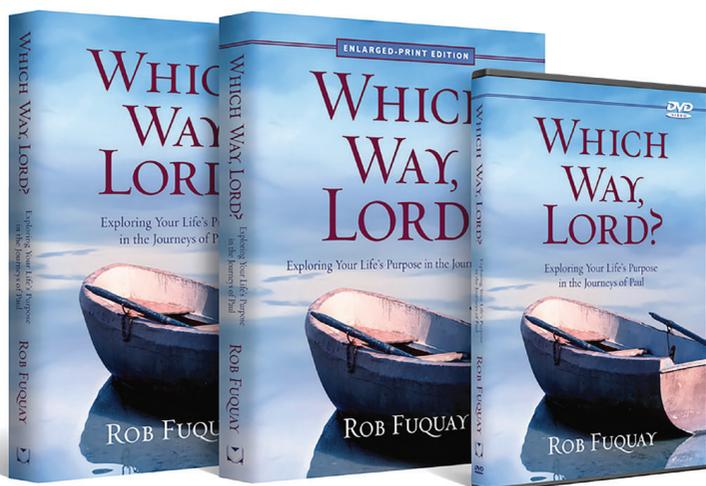
1. How would you describe the pace of your spiritual life right now: Full throttle? Reduced speed? Just coasting? Or some other description?
2. How do you respond to the idea that faith is trust and action?
3. What does the phrase “accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior” mean to you?
4. Why do you think sacrifice is associated with forgiveness of sin?
5. How does the idea of Jesus as a crew chief match your relationship with Jesus?
6. How have you experienced a time when you needed to restart your race?

### I. THE GREEN FLAG

1. Fil Anderson, *Running on Empty: Contemplative Spirituality for Over-achievers* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook, 2005), 65–66.
2. Bob Dylan, “Gotta Serve Somebody,” *Slow Train Coming*. New York, NY: Columbia Records: 1979.

# How do we live the life God intends for each of us?

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# WHICH WAY, LORD?

Exploring Your Life's Purpose  
in the Journeys of Paul

ROB FUQUAY



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# CONTENTS

Introduction: Locating Your Starting Point	9
1 Consulting Your GPS	17
2 Understanding Yourself	33
3 Facing Adversity	51
4 Dealing with Detours	67
5 When You Doubt Yourself	83
6 Tenacity	99
Acknowledgments	115
Notes	117
About the Author	123

## INTRODUCTION

# LOCATING YOUR STARTING POINT

What does it benefit you to know how beautiful a creature a human is if you ignore humanity's purpose, which is clearly to worship God in order to live eternally?

—Martin Luther

For everything, absolutely everything, above and below, visible and invisible . . . *everything* got started in [Christ] and finds its purpose in him.

—Colossians 1:16, THE MESSAGE

First there was Saul. And then there was Paul. I like the fact that the apostle Paul went by another name before he began his mission to the Gentiles. That makes it easy to distinguish between the “before” and “after”—not that the two didn't have a lot in common. Both acted with a singular devotion to the God of Israel. Both knew scripture backward and forward. And both sought purpose in their daily lives.

But Saul the Pharisee persecuted Christ-followers and was present at the stoning of one of Jesus' original disciples. Paul the Apostle, a dynamic communicator, advanced the cause of Christ. What happened? How did Saul become Paul?

The pivot point lies on the road to Damascus from Jerusalem. As Saul travels on it, the startling appearance of light from heaven halted him. Speaking directly to Saul, Jesus makes himself clear: *You need to choose another way.* Talk about an attention getter!

At this moment, the Saul-to-Paul transformation begins. But now comes the hard part. Paul has to figure out which way.

Isn't that the predicament we all face? As Christians, we yearn to live out God's purpose for our lives, but how do we know for certain which way to go?

The aim of this book is to help you understand God's direction for your life. Your guide for this journey will be Paul, the globe-trotting hero of early church history. Along the way you'll gain more than an introductory insight into the background, education, experiences, writing, and theology of this man who changed the world.

Yet more than the *whats* of his life, we'll examine the *whys*. We won't simply look at where he went and what he said. We want to know how Paul got where he did. What determined his direction, and, more importantly, what determined his *changes* in direction? Did Paul have a pipeline to God that average people like you and me don't have? Or does Paul have something to teach us about what it means to discern God's guidance and direction for our lives? This study will answer those questions.

There are a lot of books about Paul as well as books on the subject of finding purpose. For that matter, there's no end to life coaches, secular psychologists, and social commentators weighing in on this matter. But this book approaches the topic solely from a faith perspective.

That perspective also helps us understand what separated Saul from Paul. Remember that both sought purpose in their lives. But only Paul sought God's purpose as made manifest in Jesus Christ. The difference lay in the direction.

Saul's purpose grew out of intellect and knowledge of scripture, his certainty of what God wanted from him and, above all, of following the letter of religious law. Perhaps he believed his obedience would earn him God's love and acceptance. But let's face it: When you're persecuting people in the name of God, something is amiss.

I'd like to think that part of Saul evidenced an openness to trying a different direction by the time Christ appeared.

Once transformed, Paul turned Saul's belief system upside down. Love eclipsed the law. God's acceptance wasn't the goal—it was the starting point! Knowing God's love made manifest in Jesus Christ became the primary motivating force of Paul's life, as it is intended to be for all of us.

Paul not only put his faith in Jesus Christ, but he also believed Christ put his faith in him—again, as Christ does in all of us. This is key: From this reciprocal faith flows the wellspring for doing good, for being useful, for achieving a sense of fulfillment. In other words, for purpose.

Paul didn't arrive at this realization in a day, a month, or even a year. In fact, he spent several years discerning this new understanding of faith (and we'll explore the significance of this phase of his life in chapter 1). When Paul's first call finally came, he set off to serve a growing Christian congregation in Antioch of Syria. If you believe God has a sense of irony, then this story won't let you down: Among the members of this church reside some of the very Christ-followers whom Paul had persecuted in his former life. What could have gone terribly wrong instead turned into an expression of Christ's love that would be seared on Paul's heart. The Christians of Antioch embraced him as a leader, and he experienced the warmth of their fellowship.

Here we evidence the power of community that plays a crucial role in Paul's transformation. Christianity doesn't operate in a vacuum. It flourishes when we share God's love with one another, which ignites further transformation in ourselves and in others.

The transforming power of community is not Paul's story alone. John Wesley, the father of Methodism, shares a similar one.<sup>1</sup> By the time Wesley boarded a ship in 1735 to bring his ministry to America, he was an up-and-coming preacher steeped in religious study

and spreading the gospel of personal holiness and righteousness. No doubt he intended to live out God's purpose. Yet an experience on that voyage led him to acknowledge a lack in his own faith.

When a storm raged on the Atlantic one night, Wesley's English companions screamed and cowered; surely Wesley felt fearful himself. But he marveled at a group of German Christians called Moravians who worshiped and calmly sang hymns while the storm raged. What accounted for their composure? One Moravian explained to Wesley that the group was "not afraid to die"—strange words to a man who believed he had to be sanctified, that he had to live a holy life, before God would accept him.<sup>2</sup>

Like Paul's moment of reckoning on the road to Damascus, the episode began a lengthy period of discernment for Wesley that led him to learn more from the Moravians. Upon his arrival in Georgia, he sought out a Moravian pastor who posed the question: "Do you know Jesus Christ?"

"I paused," Wesley wrote in his journal, recounting the conversation, "and said, 'I know He is the Saviour of the world.' 'True,' replied he, 'but do you know He has saved you?'"

Wesley wrestled with this question even as he struggled to bring people to Christ. Two years later he departed Georgia, depressed and defeated. "I who went to America to convert others," he wrote, "was never myself converted to God."<sup>3</sup> Imagine his desperation at this point. How many times do you think he was driven to his knees to pray, in so many words, Which way, Lord?

Back in London Wesley accepted an invitation one evening from the Moravians to attend a religious meeting. It was there, while listening to Martin Luther's preface to Romans, that Wesley felt his heart "strangely warmed."<sup>4</sup> *God touched his heart!* I'd call that another attention getter.

Wesley realized he didn't have to *earn* God's acceptance. He'd found the starting point to a new, God-inspired direction. His

purpose grew from God's love, and he lived out that purpose by taking the message of this boundless love to his parishioners. Eventually, Wesleyan theology would spread throughout the world.

I find it hard to believe that either the apostle Paul or John Wesley would have found his purpose without the influence of strong faith communities, which makes their stories my story too.

I grew up in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, and was baptized as an infant in a Methodist church. My mother, a registered nurse, often drew Sunday shifts so my family grew out of the habit of attending church by the time I got to elementary school.

Fifth grade was a tough year for me. My teacher assigned me to a desk between two troublemakers, and she unfairly lumped us all together in her mind. My confidence disappeared. My grades took a nosedive. I felt lost. My parents kept asking me what was wrong, but my answers all sounded like excuses.

Then in sixth grade, my family moved to another neighborhood, and I changed schools. Suddenly, I realized I'd been given a new chance to figure out who I was and who I wanted to be. A neighbor invited me to a Boy Scout meeting that met in the basement of a Methodist church. Since most of the scouts were active in the church, I soon followed. This was my first real exposure to the gospel—in the midst of a church community that made me feel like family.

But don't think I was now on the fast track to becoming a preacher. No way. I wanted to be a lawyer. I'd made a pact with my best friend to be partners in our own firm one day. My Plan B was to be a basketball star.

In ninth grade, I took a career test that supposedly identified occupations that lined up with my strengths. I can't remember my top option, but I'll never forget what I saw at the very bottom: minister. I certainly agreed with that, though I was disappointed by the occupation ranked second to last: attorney. But truth be told, I was

just fourteen and in no great hurry to figure out what to do with the rest of my life.

Around the same time, I started working on my God and Country Award in scouting. One requirement involved shadowing my pastor. I went with him on visits to hospitals and calling on members in their homes. I remember how energized I felt when I finished those visits. Yet that feeling didn't come close to comparing to the one I got from another assignment: speaking in church!

All I had to do was read scripture one Sunday morning. I felt so nervous I had to take medication. Yet when I stood to speak, all fear disappeared. I read with ease. When I sat down next to a friend, he gave me the highest compliment, "Hey, you didn't stink."

This opportunity led to many more experiences of leading and speaking in church. By now my family had joined me in worship, and I remember our next-door neighbor saying to my mother as we walked out of church, "That son of yours is going to make a preacher someday."

Overhearing the remark, all I could think was, *Yeah . . . don't bet on it.*

But I couldn't deny that something had been lodged inside of me. Over time, I would come to understand this lodging as God's call. Many more experiences confirmed this direction: youth leadership roles, teaching opportunities, leadership in weekend spiritual retreats. Where did I find the confidence to pursue these opportunities? I know without a doubt it came from my growing understanding of the concept that sits at the foundation of faith: God loves me. How powerful to realize that you have worth in God's eyes!

I talked with my pastor to try to gain an understanding of what was happening to me and what I was feeling. He counseled me about what it means to be called and offered this magnificent advice: "If you pursue your call," he said, "the feeling will either grow stronger

or weaker, and that is how you will know. If you can't do anything besides ordained ministry and be happy, then for God's sake, do it!"

Sitting on a pew in the empty sanctuary we prayed that night, and I began a journey I still travel today. This call continues to take me down paths I could have never predicted. I've wished some moments could last forever as I've seen people come to faith, be renewed in faith, and experience transformation and hope. But not every step is one I've wanted to take. At times I've resented this sense of call that places its demands on me. Still I journey on, regularly asking, "God, am I on the right path? Am I going your way? Please, Lord, lead me."

Yes, I still struggle to know if everything I'm doing aligns with God's purpose for me. But I feel certain that God's love never fails to guide me. I also carry with me a gratitude for the Methodist church that embraced that teenage boy. Without this community, I don't know how I would have found my purpose.

I'm sharing my story so you can see how it has shaped my understanding of what it means to live with purpose. But let me state the obvious: You don't have to be a minister to have a God-given purpose! Far from it. The God I love has provided us all with bountiful ways to express God's love. God has offered us the gift of fellowship to help us in our quest for fulfillment.

What's your story, and where will it take you?

I hope this book will help you, whatever your stage in life, to discern God's leading and how you can get there. I also hope you will use this book as part of a small-group fellowship that can encourage you along the way. A group experience also provides the opportunity to watch this study's videos, which will transport you to the actual places where Paul lived out his call.

In the chapters ahead you will explore your gifts, develop your ability to discern God's signals, respond to times when you can't live out your purpose the way you want, learn how to endure hardships and doubts, and find ways to persevere with hope and faith.

As we begin, I invite you to pray this prayer:

Lord, help me remember that my life is a gift from you. One day I will give it back. Between now and then I want my living to matter and my days to have meaning. I believe you want me to have purpose and fulfillment, and I am open to the ways you can provide it. Show me the way, Lord. Amen.

God's love, unearned and unbound, is your starting point. Now let the journey begin.

# 1

## CONSULTING YOUR GPS

Having a life mission implies that the world has need of you.

—GREG ANDERSON

It's in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for.

—Ephesians 1:11, THE MESSAGE

On the evening of July 16, 1999, John Kennedy Jr.; his wife, Carolyn; and her elder sister, Lauren, took off in a private plane from a New Jersey airport. Kennedy sat in the pilot's seat, still not certified to fly with instruments and with less than an hour of experience flying at night without an instructor. Earlier, he had refused his instructor's offer to ride along because, as the instructor said, "He wanted to do it alone."

Once in the air, haze obstructed Kennedy's view of the horizon, creating a disorientation that kept him from knowing whether the plane was level or banking. He did not realize he was taking the plane into a dangerous downward spiral. It crashed just off the coast of Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, killing all three on board. The New York Safety Board ruled pilot error as the cause of the tragedy.<sup>1</sup>

Kennedy's desire to "do it alone," despite his lack of training and experience, had terrible consequences. But we understand the impulse, don't we? Self-reliance is an inherent human drive. We also live in a society that prizes individualism and independence.

This urge to “do it alone” becomes especially powerful when we seek to find our own purpose. After all, who knows better than you what direction your life should take, what you are capable of doing, and what makes you happy?

Yet research pokes holes in that notion. For instance, according to a 2013 Gallup Poll conducted globally, fewer than one in five adults worldwide described themselves as liking their daily work and being motivated to achieve their goals.<sup>2</sup> In 2015, according to another study, more than half of adult Americans, 52.3 percent, reported they were *unhappy* at work—compared to 61 percent who said they liked their jobs in 1987, the first year the annual survey was conducted.<sup>3</sup> A 2008 study concluded that four in ten adult Americans had not discovered a satisfying life purpose.<sup>4</sup>

We may possess the ability to do whatever we want with our lives, but it doesn’t mean we can create the meaning and value we seek while doing it. We need help finding purpose. In fact, we were made that way.

## RAISING A QUESTION FOR THE AGES

Our search for purpose seems coded into the fabric of our being. We are wired to live a meaningful existence, but we can’t begin to discover what that purpose is unless we know the One who created us for a purpose. As Os Guinness says, “There is no calling without a caller.”<sup>5</sup>

Yet this quest has long vexed people of all walks of life. Among the earliest recorded searches for answers is Ecclesiastes, an Old Testament book written in the ninth century BCE under the *nom de plume* “The Teacher.” The entire book represents the writer’s attempt to address the question, What is the meaning of life? But early on The Teacher recognizes the futility of the quest: “None of us can ever fully understand all [God] has done, and he puts questions in our minds about the past and the future” (3:11, CEV).

It seems a cruel paradox: God has given us the desire to understand the meaning of life, yet the answers lie beyond our ability to grasp. Over and over, The Teacher repeats, “Meaningless! . . . Everything is meaningless!” (1:2, NIV). Then, just about the time you think the book will end without hope, the writer concludes, “After all this, there is only one thing to say: Have reverence for God” (12:13, GNT).

Could it really be that simple? Perhaps, but that doesn’t mean it’s simplistic.

Every search for purpose is meant to lead us to the One who gave us the drive to search. Seeking meaning must take us to the Maker of all things. Understanding our purpose begins with knowing the One who put eternity in the hearts of people.

So let’s begin this journey with a straightforward proposition: We don’t know ourselves completely. We need help figuring out why we are here. We need a reliable instructor. As Max Lucado says, “You cannot be anything you want to be. But you can be everything God wants you to be.”<sup>6</sup>

## USING GPS

What did we do before GPS? Honestly, I wonder now how I ever found parishioners’ houses or meeting locations without a global positioning system.

But despite the reliability of GPS, anyone who’s used it for any length of time knows it’s not totally accurate. Anything human-made has possibility for human error. Therefore, let’s look to the truly perfect GPS to help us find our way: God’s positioning system. As the well-known verse from Proverbs says, “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding” (3:5, NIV).

We are not without help. While God gave us a desire for purpose, God did not leave us alone to find it—but we have to desire the Instructor’s help.

What does it look like to access divine direction? Let's return to our guide just before he started his own journey.

By the time Saul reached his early twenties, he had studied to become a Pharisee, a member of a Jewish sect that strictly observed religious law. He counted himself among the many religious leaders in Jerusalem who advocated a zero-tolerance policy for the growing numbers of Christ-followers. They aren't called Christians at this point. The movement is simply known as *The Way*—perhaps a reference to the way followers found direction for living with purpose and meaning.

In his own words, Saul has an obsession with persecuting followers of the *Way* (See Acts 26:11, NIV.) We can't say for sure why, though some speculate that his ambition led him to gain recognition in this manner. What we do know is that he witnessed the stoning of the first Christian martyr, Stephen (Acts 22:20), and he arrested both men and women and admitted complicity in some of their deaths (Acts 22:4).

Saul is on his way to Damascus from Jerusalem to secure more arrests when the risen Christ appears to him in a light that literally blinds him. The significance isn't lost on Saul. He has become blind to God's truth.

During the encounter, the voice of Jesus asks Saul, "Why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads" (Acts 26:14). What is Jesus trying to say? Adam Hamilton points out that goads were sticks used by shepherds at the time to prod oxen or cattle.<sup>7</sup> In like fashion, God nudges and guides us. Resisting God's goads, Jesus says in so many words, is futile. The way to have peace comes through surrendering to and welcoming God's direction.

Now blind, Saul retreats to Damascus to fast and pray. Three days later, a Christ-follower named Ananias who has been called in a vision visits Saul to heal him. With his sight restored, Saul will never see the world in the same way again. And, of course, you know the

rest: Now equipped with a new faith and a calling to share grace with the world, the Paul sets out to begin his work as an apostle, right?

Not so fast.

There's inconsistency between the book of Acts and Paul's own references to what happened after his conversion. Acts, which was written by the author of Luke, states that "immediately [Paul] began to proclaim" (9:20, NIV). But Paul's own account in his letter to the Galatians differs. He writes, "I went away at once into Arabia . . . then after three years I did go up to Jerusalem" (1:17-18). There he spent fifteen days with Peter, one of the twelve disciples who experienced Jesus' life and teachings firsthand. After Jerusalem, Paul returned to Tarsus for another fourteen years (2:1). Total up all this time, and Paul refers to as much as seventeen years spent in private before setting out as a missionary.

How do we account for the difference between the account in Acts and Paul's letter? These silent years may not have fit Luke's agenda. After all, his book came to be known as *The Acts of the Apostles*. Luke focused on the actions that took place in the early church. We don't have a definitive record of any action during the years Paul refers to in Galatians. But seventeen years is a long time. What did Paul do during this time?

Let's attempt to sketch a picture of his life during these years. I say "sketch" because Paul's letters do offer some clues about those years—years that will prepare him for his groundbreaking ministry.

## STUDYING SCRIPTURE

In First Corinthians Paul writes, "I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures" (15:3). Exactly when did Paul receive that information? Surely he isn't talking about his conversion experience. There's no mention of Jesus giving Paul this crucial insight. Maybe Paul receives this information in the days he spent with Peter.

Maybe it comes to him in Arabia. Or maybe in Tarsus. One thing we know for sure: From this brief passage, Paul lines up this understanding of Christ with the scriptures. Considering he began at a point that justified the killing of Christians, we know he required a long time for study and reinterpretation.

What scriptures did Paul study? The New Testament did not exist at this time. In fact, Paul's letters predate the Gospels. His account of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection are the first written proclamations of these truths. So when Paul writes about Christ dying for our sins "according to the Scriptures," he is talking about what we now know as the Old Testament, especially the Torah (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy); the Prophets, particularly Isaiah; and historical books like Kings and Chronicles.

As a learned Pharisee, Paul could have recited large amounts of scripture from memory. But his experience with Christ forces Paul to interpret these familiar passages in a new light. He feels compelled to align his new revelation of God's presence in the world with the old revelation that has always informed his living. Returning to the scriptures he knew so well, he now finds compelling prophetic evidence not only of the coming of Jesus Christ but also of Christ's mission in the world.

Paul doesn't throw scripture out the window. Instead, he seeks to bring all he has known into accordance with all he has just learned from his conversion experience.

## STICKING TO HIS KNITTING

Paul does more than figure out his new faith. The book of Acts says he begins preaching in the synagogues and "proving that Jesus was the Messiah" (9:22). The word *prove* in Greek means "to knit together." Even as Paul preaches in the synagogue, he knits together his new understanding of scripture and his experience with Christ.

When we talk about someone preaching today, we picture a person standing before a congregation and using a one-way form of communication. But given the meaning of the Greek word, could preaching have looked different in Paul's day?

My own observations from travels in Greece make me wonder. On a recent trip I saw people gathering at sidewalk cafés, especially men. Our guide explained the importance of this practice to the culture. These public places provide forums for people to meet and discuss issues and politics. Instead of allowing the media to be the sole influence, they hash out significant matters through dialogue.

Could this represent what preaching was like for Paul? Maybe the synagogue offers a time and place for discussion and debate. Perhaps he uses these gatherings as opportunities to present his reasoning on how Jesus can be the Messiah and what that means about the nature and character of God.

In the church I serve, the word *connect* holds great significance. The church staff and members stress the importance not only of coming to worship but also of joining small groups and classes. Typically these groups study and reflect on the same passages of scripture. The insights I hear in groups I'm part of always amaze me. People often share reflections and wisdom about scripture that give me a new understanding and appreciation (not to mention occasional envy that someone sees something I didn't!).

Christian faith in the New Testament is understood in the context of community. If we choose to live our lives in isolation, our skills and talents are unavailable to others and the qualities we lack remain outside our reach.

## LISTENING AND PRAYER

Paul refers to "revelation" several times in his letters. For example, he writes this to the Galatians: "I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for

I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ” (1:11-12). In his letter to the Ephesians he speaks of “how the mystery was made known to me by revelation” (3:3).

I believe these revelations come because Paul takes the time to develop a personal, living relationship with Jesus Christ. Surely Paul had never had a spiritual experience like the one he had on the Damascus road. He must have spent the following years learning to listen and live in communion with God through Jesus Christ.

When I traveled to Tarsus to film the video companion to this book, I got to spend an afternoon by the quiet pools and waterfalls of the Cydnus River. I imagined Paul spending hours there alone, sitting on a rock or by a secluded riverbank praying and listening to God. This time clearly had a huge impact on his life as an apostle. As we will see in the pages ahead, God interrupts Paul many times—sometimes to redirect him, other times to give assurance. That ability to recognize God’s voice results from Paul’s investment of time in the years between conversion and calling.

## ESPOUSING A CHANGED WORLDVIEW

Last of all, Paul probably spends this time transforming his worldview. Before the Damascus road, Paul had a clear and simple purpose: Tell people how to live and let them know where they’re falling short. Now Paul’s experience with Christ changes his understanding of God’s nature. Paul shifts from telling people how to live to understanding what they need.

As Paul writes to the Ephesians, “Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things. . . . This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that

he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord” (3:8-9, 11). Paul takes seventeen years to put all of this together. In that time he reinterprets scripture, prays, listens to God, and meditates on the meaning of his revelations for God’s larger purpose in creation.

So what does this mean for us? How do we emulate Paul’s steps to discover our purpose for living?

First of all, let’s understand that when we spend time as Paul did—praying, meditating, studying, talking, listening, growing—we aren’t unlocking the mystery to our purpose. We are already living out our purpose! God made us for relationship with God and one another and to revel in the life God has given us. As Paul wrote in his second letter to Timothy, “[God] saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to [God’s] own purpose and grace” (1:9).

## STARTING WITH GOD

Paul begins living out his purpose when he stops trying to gain God’s favor and simply embraces the fact that he is already favored. He finds out the hard way that trying to earn God’s blessing can lead to things not of God’s blessing. But at least he discovers it! As theologian Paul Tillich wrote, “Man must accept that he is accepted; he must accept acceptance.”<sup>8</sup>

Living with purpose means living with the constant affirmation that we belong to God and are meant to enjoy God’s company. Paul writes to the Ephesians: “It’s in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for” (1:11, *THE MESSAGE*). We exist to pursue a relationship with God in the company of a spiritual family that helps us experience God’s presence and hear God’s voice.

Living out a purpose of knowing God means we also desire what God desires. What does God want? The Bible makes that clear in its continuous story of God’s determination to liberate people—from

themselves and the power of sin; from conditions of injustice and poverty; and from others who enslave, oppress, and exploit.

God relies on us to hasten this vision of God's reign and find our place in the grander scheme of eternity.

Living out a purpose of knowing God also means giving ourselves away. Jesus' words inspire our calling: "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45, NIV). But in that sacrifice, we also receive the promise of new life, just as Jesus assures with these words: "Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds" (John 12:24, NIV).

God's purpose for us is awesome—and greater than any particular expression of that purpose. What does that mean? That our own purpose should be adaptable to whatever station or stage we find ourselves in life. Think about it: If we define our purpose as our career, what happens when we retire? If we define our purpose as raising a family, what happens when our children grow up and leave home? The fact is, true purpose refuses to be compartmentalized. Following God's direction means being available to the ways God can use us at any moment in our lives . . . which takes us back to Paul.

What Paul does during those seventeen years isn't a matter of downloading coordinates on where to go in life. Instead, he tunes his receiver and boosts his amplifier. He spends time learning how to live in constant communion with Christ.

If we desire to live in harmony with God and to be open to the ways God can use us, then how and where we express our purpose will change many times. In the chapters ahead we will explore what it means to face the changes and challenges of following God's direction; but for now, let's continue this journey with the most critical step in the process: identifying our reason for living.

## CRAFTING A PERSONAL MISSION STATEMENT

*Why* comes before *what*. Understanding why you're here helps define what you do.

Jack Groppe, cofounder of the Johnson & Johnson Human Performance Institute, an Orlando-based coaching firm, encourages clients to identify their *why* through a personal life mission statement. He points to the frequent failure of keeping New Year's resolutions as an example of the need to have a defined *why* in life.

"A resolution is a well-intended action plan," Groppe says, "but because a person hasn't really connected to the 'why' behind it, the old way of life, the chaos, comes back into play and they can't really sustain it."<sup>9</sup>

Knowing our *why* helps us focus on doing the important *whats*. How do you go about crafting a personal mission statement? Here are some guidelines to help you:

- Make sure it is in keeping with the purposes of God and the character of Christ. Before God calls you to *do*, God calls you to *be*. Who do you believe God calls you to be?
- Make it about more than you. A purpose that focuses only on your happiness or success, no matter how altruistic, can set you up for disappointment. What positive impact can you make and bring to others?
- Don't limit your purpose to a specific role or location. Can you carry out your purpose up until the day you die?

With that in mind, let's take a look at some popular mission statements. The condensed version of Jesus' personal mission statement is Luke 19:10, "The Son of Man came to seek and save the lost" (NIV). Earlier in the same Gospel, Jesus expands on this notion using the words of Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me

to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19, NIV).

Paul states his personal mission in this way: "God has appointed me as an apostle and teacher to proclaim the Good News" (2 Tim. 1:11, GNT).

Clearly all these statements are in keeping with the purposes of God and not limited to specific jobs or places. And obviously, both Jesus and Paul lived out these mission statements to their deaths.

The personal mission statement of my episcopal leader in Indiana, Bishop Julius C. Trimble, is "to encourage all people with the love of Jesus Christ to rise to their highest potential."<sup>10</sup>

My personal mission statement is "to honor God and help others find and give hope through Jesus Christ."

So now it's time to work on your statement. Start by thinking about specific words that describe how you seek to live out your relationship with God. Write them down in a list. Read through the list, and see which ones resonate with a yes! Now consider how your life can reflect the values of God. What does God want to do through you? What reflects your own passions, interests, and abilities?

As you work to form a statement, keep it simple and direct. These words are meant to guide and inspire you, not to specify all the ways you might live out your purpose.

It's also crucial to resist reducing your statement to something you know you have always lived up to. When I placed "to honor God" in my statement, I acknowledged it as far more of a challenge than a reflection of reality—because I often fall short. Some days I have to ask myself if I am honoring God with a slumped spirit and defeated attitude. Other times I question whether I am honoring God in the way I treat people. I may not always get it right, but when I recognize my faults, I seek to make amends, and I believe I get back on track with my mission.

## CONSIDERING THE END OF IT ALL

We aren't told how Paul died, though we know he was imprisoned in Rome, and tradition says he was beheaded there. Imagine a conversation with Paul in those last days:

Paul, how did you get here?

*By boat.*

No, I mean, why are you here?

*Because I was faithful to the end.*

Faithful to what?

*Doing what the Lord Jesus Christ called me to do, to share the good news of his grace. I believe what I did was worth it. You see, I know firsthand the misery of the human heart when we either don't care about pleasing God or we believe we can never do enough to please God. When I started from the point that I already please God, I became a different person—a person who sought to give life and hope. That is what Jesus Christ did for me, and I saw the difference he made to thousands of people as I invited them to accept Christ. That's why I'm here.*

I can imagine Paul saying something like that. And then I can imagine him asking me: Now why are you here?

## SERVANT SPOTLIGHT: ERIC HOWARD

In 1994 I found myself full of what this world had to offer yet constantly parched, empty, longing, knowing life held something more. I grew up with a nominal faith, having never heard the gospel message. In July 6, 1994, in a hotel room in Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania, I let Christ in. That one event forever altered the trajectory of my life, what for me redefined purpose and flipped my world upside down. That one moment is seared into my heart. Christ captured my heart.

I walked outside the room down the hall and through the bar. On my way outside a man stopped me, an acquaintance of sorts, and he asked if I would like to talk about what had just occurred. I was

floored. How did this person know I had just had a powerful spiritual experience? We walked around the town as he shared what it means to be a follower of Christ. We spoke about freedom, challenge, and a battle that would last for the rest of my life. We spoke of change, dying to self, and what it means to feed the soul.

Over the next twelve months I made important decisions, separating from unhealthy influences that had entrenched me in sin and defrauded me emotionally, while at the same time seeking forgiveness from individuals I had hurt and taken advantage of. I started changing behaviors and developed a relationship with Christ. During this time I discovered this amazing verse in Micah—6:8—to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. This flipped the script in my world.

During this period of time I read a report about homeless teens in Indianapolis. Something inside me wanted to leap into action. If Christ could change me, Christ could extend hope to anyone. I was told I lacked the background and education to start serving the homeless. I was told it was too dangerous. With what I perceived as overwhelming odds and armed with nothing more than peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, I got started. I met kids on the street and offered them something to eat. Overwhelmed and tired, questioning if I had heard *God's* call correctly, I received an anonymous note one day, "Eric, God sometimes calls the qualified but always qualifies the called." That affirmation kept me from bailing on this mission to help homeless teenagers.

Twenty years later, the ministry of Outreach, Inc. is still going strong seeking to authentically love homeless young people in the Indianapolis community. Many religious communities and organizations support our work now. We are changing a generation one life at a time. There's nothing like hearing a homeless young person say, "I'm alive because of Outreach." All we do is show love. We talk and listen to kids. We visit them in the hospitals and jails. When they are

selling their bodies or struggling with addictions, we see the persons behind the problems. It all started in a hotel room where God found me, gave me hope, and said, “I have a job for you to do.”

### REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- Do you currently have a purpose? What is it? From where has it come?
- What does your purpose or lack thereof say about the meaning of life?
- How do you currently seek God’s guidance for your life?
- Who do you believe God calls you to be?
- What positive impact can you make and bring to others?
- What would it look like for you to take God’s call on your life and your ability to make positive impacts and combine them into a lifelong purpose?

## INTRODUCTION: LOCATING YOUR STARTING POINT

*Epigraph:* Translated from D. Martin Luther's *Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimarer Ausgabe), Volume 42: *Genesisvorlesung (Cap. 1–17)*, ed. Karl Drescher (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1911), 98.

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## SERIES DESCRIPTIONS

### *Which Way, Lord? Exploring Your Life's Purpose in the Journeys of Paul*

This series is not a biography of Paul nor a Bible study based on his letters or theology. It employs Paul's life to illustrate how, despite the odds, one person kept the faith and made a significant difference in this world. His life and experiences provide a template to see how God is working in and through our lives.

### *Take the Flag: Following God's Signals in the Race of Your Life*

*Take the Flag* does not intend to turn readers into race fans but to help them become stronger disciples of Jesus Christ by paying attention to the signals God gives us each day. Fuquay uses the flags from auto racing as a way to discuss aspects of our life of faith.

### *The God We Can Know: Exploring the "I Am" Sayings of Jesus*

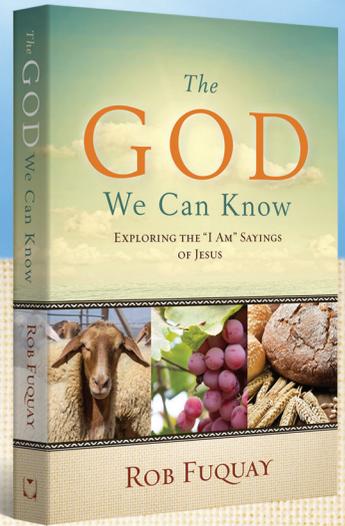
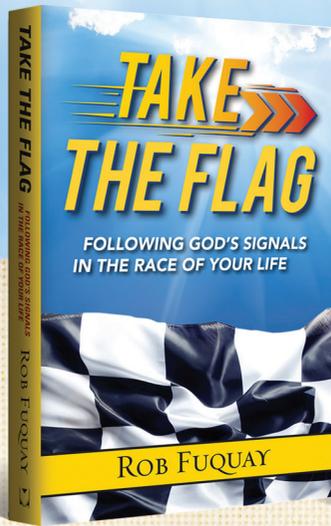
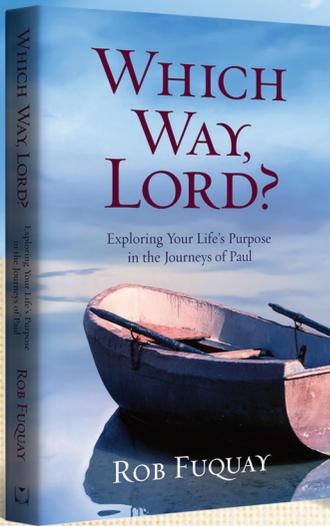
The Gospel of John records several "I Am" sayings of Jesus. These statements not only grab our imagination by revealing more about his purpose, they also shape our own Christian identity and connect us to the God of Moses, the Great I Am. These sayings help us find and form an answer to the most essential question in the Christian faith, "Who do you say I am?"

### *RobFuquay.com*

The website provides additional free content to help you plan a church-wide series or tailor the book to your setting.

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**IN THIS SAMPLER WE'VE PROVIDED** the Table of Contents, Introduction, Chapter 1, and the Reflection Questions for each of Rob's three series:

- *The God We Can Know: Exploring the "I Am" Sayings of Jesus*
- *Take the Flag: Following God's Signals in the Race of Your Life*
- *Which Way, Lord? Exploring Your Life's Purpose in the Journeys of Paul*

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## ENDORSEMENTS

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*"This outstanding resource [The God We Can Know] for churches, small groups, and individuals will help people grow in their faith. Rob is an excellent teacher and guide, and I look forward to studying this resource in my own small group."*

—**Adam Hamilton**, pastor, author of *The Way: Walking in the Footsteps of Jesus*

*"Rob Fuquay's inspiring book Take the Flag is a creative, innovative challenge to us to respond productively to God's basic signals in the race of life. Rob is familiar with the racing world and its crucial, lifesaving flag signals to its drivers—and sees in them (and in the sport of racing, like Paul) fascinating lessons for living life meaningfully in a world that often moves at breakneck speed."*

—**James W. Moore**, retired United Methodist pastor, best-selling author of over 40 books, including *Yes, Lord, I Have Sinned, but I Have Several Excellent Excuses*

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