

Yes,
& No,
Maybe

Living with the God of Immeasurably More

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Introduction

“What if this is as good as it gets?”

That’s the question asked by the obsessive-compulsive novelist Melvin Udall (as portrayed by Jack Nicholson) in the movie *As Good as It Gets*. Melvin is a recluse who only leaves his New York City apartment when he *has* to go somewhere. He eats the same breakfast at the same table in the same restaurant every day. He repeatedly washes his hands, checks his locks fifteen times, uses plastic utensils when eating out, and never steps on cracks in the sidewalks. He has a general hatred and distrust for all people—until he develops a relationship with Carol, his regular waitress. Something about her makes Melvin want to be a better man. But sitting in his psychiatrist’s waiting room, Melvin wonders, *What if this is as good as it gets?*

Though Melvin and I share very little in common, I can resonate with his cynical stance. Once upon a time, I uttered similar words myself. What about you—can you relate to Melvin?

Maybe life has worn you down. You attend church and even mid-week Bible study. On the Sundays when you aren’t greeting visitors,

you're rocking babies in the nursery or rushing back and forth between services to sing in the choir or on the worship team. The other six days of the week are no less hectic. The laundry pile is endless. The family insists on eating dinner every night. Homework is hard. School projects are complicated. You feel like an unpaid Uber driver in overdrive, with ballet lessons for Susie on Tuesday, karate for Sam on Saturday, dental cleanings for everyone on Wednesday, and a visit to the veterinarian for Rover this afternoon. In exhaustion, you collapse into the worn-out easy chair and survey your life ...

Or maybe debt is what keeps you up at night. Student loans loom. Jobs in your field of study aren't available. Working two part-time jobs to make ends meet, you still seem to run out of money before you run out of month. As you stare at your shrinking bank account, you examine your life ...

Or maybe you feel like your life is on track, but you long for a companion. You serve joyfully at church and in the community. Your dream job is booming. And reading all the books on singleness is teaching you how to meet the right person by being the right person—but the dating site still has not found your perfect match. As you open yet another invitation to a wedding, you evaluate your life ...

Whether we're stay-at-home moms or go-getting career women, devoted wives or single gals, we've all had those moments when we've been weighed down by the "uns" of life. These "uns" filter into our lives, no matter where we are or what we're doing:

Unmet expectations: "I thought God would ..."

Unfulfilled dreams: "Why didn't He ...?"

Unanswered prayers: "I long for God to ..."

Unwanted situations: "If only ..."

What is that old saying? *Been there. Done that. Got the T-shirt.* Is your T-shirt tattered and faded but still legible? My “uns” have faded in memory, though they’re not forgotten. But the life I now enjoy with Christ has taught me to cease fixating on what *isn’t* fulfilled and instead focus on what *is* taking place because of His grace.

THIRTEEN WORDS THAT CHANGED MY LIFE

The night did not differ from most other nights. I’d cooked dinner and cleaned up before my husband got home from work. Our kids, bathed and in their jammies, had headed to sleepy town already when Scott walked through the door. We exchanged our usual “How was your day?” banter before he headed upstairs to his man cave.

The words I had rehearsed all day were playing like a symphony in my head. It was time to have a talk with my man. Things had been silent between us for far too long. Something had to change. His overtime kept him away from our family. I was lonely, and raising the kids was hard work. Our children and I needed him home more, and I decided it was time to let him know that he needed to make some changes. I was poised and prepared for every comeback he could hurl at me—every comeback except one.

My heart pounded as I entered the room. I sheepishly sat down on the floor beside Scott and waited for just the right time to let him know how I was feeling. I asked questions as if I was interested in what he was doing. Then, when the forced conversation lulled, I lunged into my lengthy, well-prepared diatribe, ending with what I thought was a showstopper: “You don’t act like you ever want to come home.”

Scott paused for a moment before he spewed a comeback that all my rehearsing hadn't prepared me to hear. Much to my surprise, Scott had the real showstopper: "You don't make our house a place I want to come home to."

Hanging in the air were thirteen words that changed the course of my life forever.

Everything after that moment was a blur. I had no words to speak in defense of myself. No cute retorts or witty one-liners. Honestly, I can't even remember how the conversation ended. I only remember those thirteen stinging words.

"You don't make our house a place I want to come home to." Heavy, hurtful, convicting, and somewhat thought-provoking words. Was he right? Did I make our home unwelcoming to the very man who worked so hard to provide it? *Certainly not*, I reasoned with myself. *I clean, cook, and care for our children. He always has pressed clothes, clean underwear, and on most nights a hot meal.*

For days, my emotions fought with Scott's words. What he'd said messed with me in the worst—and best—way. Eventually the wrestling match ended; the words won. I hadn't decided yet to *agree* with my husband, but the thought of his words being remotely true jolted me to my core. After mulling over his words for several days, I had to admit there was truth in them. My heart wasn't happy, and therefore, my life wasn't happy. "For out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks" (Luke 6:45 BSB).

Scott's words propelled me to change my heart. I wasn't sure how this metamorphosis was going to happen, but as Melvin had tried to be a better man for Carol, I wanted to try to be a better wife and mother for my family. In the pursuit to become what my family deserved, I

cried out to God my version of Melvin's words: "Surely this isn't all there is, God. I've got so much life to live; this can't be as good as it gets. What do I need to do to fix this mess?"

On the surface, our house looked like a place Scott would want to come home to. But it didn't matter how things *looked* inside our four walls—what was in my heart and came out of my mouth were the things that created the unpleasant atmosphere. Snippy words. Angry responses. Long sighs of disappointment. Passive-aggressive behavior. All these affected my family and the tone of our home. Once I recognized this, I looked for the root of my negative actions. What I found was general unhappiness and numbness.

Asking ourselves *Is this as good as it gets?* digs deeper into the source of our troubled heart. This question doesn't mean we are ungrateful for Jesus's sacrificial death but implies our determination to get to the root of our discontent. It's not just about where we live, what kind of car we drive, or how much money we have in the bank. Our numbness is the result of "un" roots growing in our heart, choking the life out of joy. We succumb to the power of every unmet expectation, unfulfilled dream, unanswered prayer, and unwanted situation. The "I thought God would," "Why didn't He?," "I longed for God to," and "If only" scripts run on auto-play, and we don't know how to change the playlist. Our response to life becomes cynical and pessimistic. The roots grown out of numbness become deeper, the scripts play louder, and without realizing it, we begin operating on autopilot, running life's race, hurtling from one task to the next, all the while leaving behind an unpleasant atmosphere for those around us.

My race was stale. Each morning I'd plaster on a "today's a new day" face. The wear pattern of my shoes never changed—I ran the

same path, dodged the same obstacles, and crossed the same finish line day in and day out. In all honesty, I was just going through the motions of a good Christian life. I was trying my best to do the right things that Christians should do. You know?—the *right* things:

- Have a relationship with God (of sorts)
- Know Jesus as your Savior (of course)
- Pray (sometimes)
- Be involved in activities at church (and make sure others see it!)
- Tithe (though giving cheerfully might be a stretch)
- Help the less fortunate (as long as it's not too inconvenient)
- Read your Bible (does falling asleep with it open count?)

The way I was living life was wearing me out. Maybe that's why I identified so closely with Melvin. He was trying so hard, but all his efforts seemed to be in vain. Melvin was ready for a change, and so was Wendy.

THIS IS NOT AS GOOD AS IT GETS

I have great news! You and I were created for more than mundane motions. This is *not* as good as it gets. What awaits us is *life with the God of immeasurably more*: “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine” (Eph. 3:20).

Let's see how great this great news really is by unpacking this New Testament verse with a few simple word studies. We will start with the phrase *immeasurably more*.

The apostle Paul's letter was written mainly to the Greeks in the city of Ephesus who had become followers of Jesus. The phrase *immeasurably more* comes from a compound Greek adverb: *hyperekperissou* (hoo-per-ek-pe-rees-soo'). If we break this word down to look at its roots, *hyper* (hoop-er') means "for the sake of, more and beyond."¹ *Perissos* (per-is-sos') means "exceeding some number, measure, rank or need," and (my favorite part of the definition) "over and above, more than is necessary."² Some Bible translators express the phrase as "superabundantly more." God is able to do superabundantly more than we ask or imagine. This great news is getting greater, isn't it?

Paul wrote this letter to the believers in Ephesus to remind them of who they were in Christ—not Jews, not Gentiles, but one body. And they were no longer to get caught up in their old way of life—to get lost in some stale routine. Instead, they were to realize that they were made alive in Christ and that they had an all-access pass to the peace and power and joy and grace of our amazing, loving God.

That's why this letter, written so long ago, still speaks to us right now. The Ephesians had faced challenges. They had been discouraged. They were disappointed—in themselves and in others. This life following the King of Kings maybe didn't seem as royally awesome as they thought it might be. And this guy who had taught them about Jesus was now locked up for it.

Disappointments aren't fun to ponder, and painful scripts aren't easy to replay, but let's pause for a moment and consider your "uns." (I promise this little exercise will be worth it!) Right here, right now,

we are gonna write new scripts. Are you ready? Remember the power you have access to: God can do *more than*. Feel this power: God can do *superabundantly, immeasurably more*.

Unmet expectations? Say: “God will superabundantly exceed my expectations.”

Unfulfilled dreams? Say: “God will superabundantly surpass my dreams.”

Unanswered prayers? Say: “God’s answer will be superabundantly greater than I expect.”

Unwanted situations? Say: “God’s resolution will be superabundantly better than mine.”

Now, read the list aloud. Do you feel the power of this awesome news!?

Even if your good is really good, your really good is not as good as it gets.

Repeat the new scripts aloud. Let them marinate deep into your soul. God will transform your greatest disappointments and repair your most hurtful rejections. He wants to do this for you, and He can do this for you: “Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine.” He gave His Son so you could have a life that is greater than the sum of your sorrows.

The *immeasurably more life* is

- Greater than the sum of your failures.
- Greater than the sum of your past experiences.
- Greater than the sum of your hopes.

- Greater than the sum of your accomplishments.
- Greater than the sum of your bank account.
- Greater than the sum of your titles and degrees.

Friend, even if your good is really good, your really good is *not* as good as it gets. With Christ, good gets better, better gets great, and great, well, gets extraordinary. The immeasurably more life is the extraordinary life. It's the life you've longed for but only dreamed of living.

Let's settle something before we move any further: because we live in a fallen world, we *will* experience numbness and the heartaches of "uns." But they *do not* have to have power over us. In *Yes, No, and Maybe*, we are going to trade our *unmet* expectations, *unfulfilled* dreams, *unanswered* prayers, and *unwanted* situations for an *inconceivable* and *indescribable* life.

Our journey to living the immeasurably more life will begin in the book of Acts, where we will meet a man named Saul who had an unbelievable encounter with God. After this life-altering event, he became known as the apostle Paul. We will travel with him, read his letters to the early churches, and discover how to live the life Jesus died to give—the immeasurably more life.

In the how-tos, we will learn how and when to use three simple yet powerful words: *yes*, *no*, and *maybe*. Each of the three main sections of the book focuses on one word and its related theme:

- Yes Cultivates Trust
- No Invites Revelation
- Maybe Welcomes Freedom

A SPECIAL FEATURE

One of my favorite features of *this book* is the active role you have in our journey. *Yes, No, and Maybe* is a real-time, reader-participatory book. Your role is greater than a reader and a Bible-study-question answerer. (I'm pretty sure I made up that title, but I can, because I'm the author.) You are a participant in an expedition to discover the life you were meant to live.

Yes, No, and Maybe provides you with the opportunity to experience real-life change as you apply God's truth to your real-life circumstances. How? *You* write the final chapter!

Hold on. Did you just break out in a cold sweat? Are you already thinking of excuses not to participate? No worries. You and God will be the only ones who will read your answers.

At the close of each chapter is a section called Ask and Imagine. I provide writing prompts that summarize the teachings we learn in each chapter. After reading the prompt, you will turn to chapter 10, "My Immeasurably More Life," and respond.

Your participation starts now. "My Immeasurably More Life" is full of blank lines. There won't be a teacher with a red pen in hand, ready to correct misspelled words, incorrect grammar, and typographical errors. It's okay for the pages to be stained with tears as you pour out your heart to the God of immeasurably more. Or the pages may be filled with happy doodles as you dream of ways your life can bring God glory.

You may love the idea of writing in your book ... or you may dislike it. If journaling on the pages of this book doesn't appeal to you, that's no problem. Feel free to write your thoughts and answers in a

notebook or type them on your computer or phone—whatever works for you.

God’s waiting to meet with you. He longs to intersect your hurts with His mercy, fill your emptiness with His love, and wash away your guilt with His grace. With God, life gets better and better. Your immeasurably more life awaits.

ASK AND IMAGINE

Turn to chapter 10, “My Immeasurably More Life,” and make an honest list of the “uns” in your life. Then draw a line through each of them. Write out the new superabundantly scripts we created when studying Ephesians 3:20.

Section One

Yes Cultivates Trust

*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and
this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.*

Ephesians 2:8

Obedience: Our First Yes

Okay. You may be dismayed by the title of chapter 1, particularly this one word: *obedience*. Maybe you even rolled your eyes and released a deep sigh when you read that word. In the introduction, you got all hyped up about the immeasurably more life, only to turn the page and read a word that sticks in your teeth like a kernel of popcorn.

Please don't put this book down. And please don't take it back to the store and ask for a refund.

Obedience and *obey* are not among popular Bible words like *grace*. Oh, we welcome God's grace. Then there's *mercy*. Don't we love God's mercy? We can't forget *cleansed, forgiven, washed away, and dearly loved*. We flock to these Bible words. But *obey*? Not so much. However, when we survey feel-good, inspirational words, we might consider that each word is experienced in its fullest when our heart is in alignment with God's—when we are obedient to Him. How would we respond to God's instructions if we knew the impact our obedience to God would have on the immeasurably more life we long

to live? Saying yes to obedience cultivates trust—our trust in God as well as God’s trust in us.

I’ll go ahead and admit that I’m a rule follower. I haven’t always loved or embraced regulations. But I’ve matured and come to understand that most rules are for the greater good. Speed limits and stop signs are put in place to keep drivers, bicyclists, and pedestrians safe. Imagine the chaos that would ensue with unrestricted speeds and no stop signs! As a former non-lover of rules, I now find security in knowing and following the expectations before me. A flood of joy fills me when I adhere to instructions, even those I don’t like or understand.

I am the mom who clocked every minute of her teenagers’ driving hours in order for them to receive their driver’s licenses. Nope, I didn’t fudge at all. The sign at the movie theater clearly states “No outside food,” so no candy smuggling into the theater for me. When the hotel checkout time is at 10:00 a.m., we leave by 10:00 a.m.—even when no one is around to verify our on-time departure. Some women can make a dish with a little of this and a pinch of that. Oh, do I admire these women! My rule-abiding heart just won’t let me ad lib in the kitchen. If the recipe calls for a teaspoon of oregano, I get the measuring spoon out and level it off.

***Saying yes to obedience cultivates trust—our
trust in God as well as God’s trust in us.***

Some may say I have a problem. I get that. Really, I do. But for me, if I know the guidelines, I feel convicted that it is my responsibility to follow them.

However, when it comes to obeying God, that's a different story. Please tell me I'm not the only one who winces at the word *obey*. That word stirs up different reactions. *It's too hard. I really just want to live like I want to live. What exactly am I supposed to obey? Obedience brings me great joy!* And each of us, at any given time, has probably experienced each statement.

The bottom line is this: obedience makes our life in Christ come alive. The single most important yes you will ever say is when you accept God's invitation to eternal life.

OUR FIRST AND BIGGEST YES

Let's start at the beginning. As in "In the beginning"—that part of the Bible that starts the whole story, found in Genesis 1 and 2. God in all His creative genius established the whole world. From the first "Let there be" on day one, until the fashioning of Adam on day six, and rest on day seven, God laid out His plan for mankind. God enjoyed fellowship with Adam and Eve in His breathtaking garden. He provided everything they would ever need and protected them from what they didn't. God's good plan for mankind and the earth was set into motion. But one day Adam and Eve took it off the rails.

Adam and Eve disobeyed God (Gen. 2:16–17; 3:6–7), which severed their perfect connection with Him. This act of disobedience brought sin into the world and birthed our need for a Savior. Unless Adam's sin was paid for, we would be separated from God forever. "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16 NASB).

Jesus is sometimes referred to as the second Adam or the last Adam (see 1 Cor. 15:45). The first Adam represented the natural life, which was marred by passing sin from generation to generation. From him, all people have inherited a sin nature. Jesus represents the spiritual life. Jesus's birth, death, and resurrection didn't remove our sin nature. But His gift of salvation does give us a new, spiritual nature. It gives us the possibility of life without the power of sin reigning over us. Note the word *possibility*; we will revisit the concept later.

Let's go back to the Garden for a minute. God saw that everything He created was good, even the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. If God knew that having knowledge of good and evil wouldn't benefit Adam and Eve, then why would He create such a tree and tell Adam and Eve not to eat from it?

God could have made Adam and Eve do exactly what He wanted them to do, like a marionette controlling puppets by their strings. But God wanted the first family to *choose* to obey Him—to build a trust relationship with Him. He wanted them to look at the tree and say, "This tree is beautiful. The fruit looks delicious. I don't know why God said we can't have it, but I will trust and obey Him, even when I don't understand." But we all know that's not what happened.

The *possibility* of a Spirit-filled life, free from the pulling power of sin, is available to us. But we can't even see that possibility until we accept God's invitation for salvation—our first and biggest yes to God.

SIN, MEET SALVATION

Jesus's sacrifice on the cross is the bridge between sin and salvation. God's desire was to be in uninterrupted fellowship with His creation.

However, Adam and Eve's sin put a kink in that perfect plan. So God sent His Son to satisfy the debt of our sin. He died in our place to close the gap between mankind and the punishment of sin, which is death.

God invites us to be His sons and daughters through the free gift of salvation (see Rom. 6:23). No strings attached, no price to pay, and no good works necessary (see Eph. 2:8–9). Everyone, without exception, is invited to be part of God's family, to know and live with the God of immeasurably more, free from the power and penalty of sin.

At the tender age of seven, I accepted my invitation. The tub was filled with Mr. Bubble and my momma was helping me with my Saturday night bath. (We always got clean on Saturday for church on Sunday.) We started talking about Jesus. She explained salvation. I told her I wanted Jesus to live in my heart.

The next Sunday, I met with my pastor in his study. I remember it vividly. The room was big and filled with lots of books. The morning sun shone through the big window, and the smell of my pastor's Old Spice tickled my nose. Without hesitation, I hopped up into one of his big, comfy chairs, my legs hanging over the soft leather because they weren't long enough for my feet to touch the floor. It was intimidating and exhilarating at the same time. I felt so grown up.

Believing is an ongoing decision, not just a onetime event.

My pastor shared the plan of salvation as he read through a blue-and-white pamphlet. On the last page were two hills separated by a divide. He labeled one hill "God," the other hill "Wendy," and the divide "sin." With his black pen, he drew a cross connecting the two hills and wrote "Jesus." In my mind and heart, I crossed that bridge.

Then we prayed. The following Sunday, my chubby seven-year-old legs carried me down the aisle. I took my pastor's hand and made my private decision public. I believed in Jesus, and my sin met salvation on January 19, 1975. Everyone who believes Christ is Lord will be saved: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile" (Rom. 1:16).

The word *salvation* in the Greek is *sótéria* (so-tay-ree'-ah). It means "deliverance, preservation, safety, and salvation." *Helps Word Studies* defines *sótéria* like this: "God's rescue which delivers believers out of destruction *and into* His safety."¹ For what better promise of hope could we surrender our earthly life and eternal life? If we confess our sins—all our sins—"he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). Our old self is made new: "This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!" (2 Cor. 5:17 NLT).

***Every yes we offer God demonstrates our
present-tense trust in Him.***

Oh, and we can't ignore the word *believes* in Romans 1:16. I'm not normally a grammar geek—only a word nerd—but this is really good stuff. The Greek word for "believe" is *pisteuó* (pist-yoo'-o).² *Pisteuó* means to believe and to have faith in. This use of the word is a present-tense verb, an action taking place currently. But the word can also describe things that happened in the past or certain events that are planned to happen in the future.

Believing is an ongoing decision, not just a onetime event. Every yes we offer God demonstrates our present-tense trust in Him.

Accepting Jesus's free gift of salvation is the beginning of our trusting relationship with the God of immeasurably more. A yes to salvation brings about internal changes that make us rethink our way of living and motivate us to live fully for Christ (we will discuss this more in the next section of the book). Salvation is available to *anyone* who believes. And God is patient with people. His Spirit can change the hardest of hearts and redirect the lifestyle of the most stubborn and willful. There is no one God won't pursue and can't use—even a Jesus hater.

THE HARD-HEARTED CHRISTIAN HATER

About the same time as Jesus's birth in Bethlehem, another boy was born in Tarsus, a Roman province of Cilicia (modern-day Turkey): Paul, whose Roman name was Paulous Saulos. His parents were a prominent, wealthy, Jewish couple from the tribe of Benjamin, and they were Pharisees of the largest Judaic branch.

The Pharisees were a sect of individuals who perverted the law of Moses into a legalistic way of life, rather than embracing its security and protection. This dogma became embedded in Saul from the moment he could toddle around a tent. Judaism is a religion based on the law given to Moses by God. The keeping of the law was the most important duty a Jew or believing Gentile could fulfill as a member of the "covenant community" of believers.³

The prominence and wealth of Saul's family afforded him educational opportunities that most would only dare to dream of. According

to the Jewish Mishnah, which is the oldest official compilation of Jewish oral laws (created after the Bible writings), a young boy is able to learn Scripture at the age of five, and that was exactly when Paul's training began. At twelve, he moved with his family to Jerusalem, where he continued his training under the well-known and esteemed Rabbi Gamaliel, who exposed him to a broad education in the law, philosophy, ethics, and classical literature.

From the outside, Saul had it all: a prestigious family heritage, scholastic achievements, and community recognition. We first meet him—full of himself—on the outskirts of town, standing witness to the stoning of a Christian named Stephen.

At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep.
(Acts 7:57–60)

Saul's Jewish roots ran deep. There was no compromise in his commitment to the law and practices of Judaism. Under no circumstance was he going to allow Christianity to flourish. Any teaching other than the law was heretical. Like Stephen, anyone who taught about faith in Jesus Christ had to be confronted and condemned.

No one is beyond God's reach, and everyone is savable.

Saul was a Christian hater of the worst kind. His murderous actions and staunch convictions would have given modern-day missionaries pause to pray in abundance before sharing Christ. In fact, many Christians these days would steer away from a man like Saul and write him off as a lost cause for the kingdom of God. But no one is beyond God's reach, and everyone is savable. Aren't you thankful for this truth? Just like God sees potential in you and me, He saw potential in Saul.

However, Saul didn't want just to contain Christianity; he wanted to eradicate from the world anything having to do with Jesus or the Christian faith. Stephen's stoning marked the beginning of Saul's mission: "But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison" (Acts 8:3).

Persecution of the church ran rampant in Jerusalem. Christians scattered, and news spread like wildfire far and wide of Saul's aggressive approach to believers of the Way. (The Way is the name Christ followers were referred to in Scripture. See Acts 9:1–2.) But Saul's tactics didn't stop the advancement of the early church, which made him even more determined to hate Jesus and His followers.

In an effort to take his persecution to a higher level, Saul asked Caiaphas the high priest for permission to travel to Damascus. His intent was to find men and women who followed Jesus and take them to prison in Jerusalem.

Let's put a paper clip on this page of the story for a minute and think about the why. Why was Saul so set on persecuting Christians?

There was great hostility between the Jews, converted Jews, and Gentile Christians. The conflict involved the concept of following the law—following the one true God of Moses—and the message of the gospel of Jesus, who claimed to be the Son of God. It is apparent that Stephen's preaching in a Greek synagogue about salvation through Jesus set Saul off. However, Saul's family and religious beliefs didn't teach him to have such a profound hatred for Christians, nor did it teach him to kill. So why did he advocate and encourage murder? Because he was born with a sin nature.

All the religious training in the world won't remove our sin nature. The sin nature rises up and oozes out of all of us. If it's not contained, it can affect even a little girl who is about to have her first sleepover with her best friend ...

We were both four years old when Christie and I played under the magnolia trees at Hickory Grove United Methodist Church, and she picked *me* to be her very best friend. In many ways, this decision directed the course of my life, but we will save those stories for another day. Part of being Christie's best friend included slumber parties at each other's homes. The excitement of our first sleepover was too much for my eager heart to bear. I couldn't wait to spend time with my new bestie, so I slipped into her classroom to begin our weekend together early.

It was logical to my mind that since I was sleeping over at Christie's house, I should stay in her classroom rather than go to my room—where I belonged—with Mrs. Knowland and Mrs. Highly. I was sitting in my “rightful” place (as I thought), beside my bestie, when her teacher Mrs. Greene asked why I was not in my *own* classroom. Without stuttering or stammering, my pink lips stated an eloquent, well-spoken lie: “Since

I am sleeping over at Christie's house tonight, Mrs. Knowland and Mrs. Highly said I could stay in here today."

Yes, I told that lie and went right back to what I was doing, never noticing that Mrs. Greene left the room to verify my tall tale. You can probably guess what happened next.

My teacher promptly and abruptly escorted me down the hall to my classroom. Rather than playing on the playground that sunny afternoon, I had the pleasure of sitting in the "principal's" office (aka, a hard chair beside the secretary in the church office, but still very scary). Did I learn my lesson about lying? For that day and in that moment, yes, but it wouldn't be the last time I would sin.

No one had to teach me how to lie. Adults taught me how to tie my shoes, make my bed, and ride a bike without training wheels. Other children taught me how to play tag and skip rope. Yet, as a young child, I knew how to tell a fib all by myself. I sinned on my own accord—and in a church preschool no less! Because of Adam's original sin in the Garden, all of his descendants (that's us) inherited a propensity to sin. We need an encounter with the Savior to help us not give in to temptation. Just like the Savior met me in the pastor's study, the Savior met Saul on a dusty road between Jerusalem and Damascus.

WHEN THE PERSECUTOR MET THE PERSECUTED

With official papers in hand and a regiment of men by his side, Saul readied himself for the 6-day, 130-mile journey to Damascus. He was in full pursuit to put an end to the Christianity craziness. In all his zeal and fury, I feel quite certain that Saul never considered that he himself was being pursued.

***It's often in the unexpected moments that we
receive more than we expect from God.***

Just about a mile or so from his destination, the pursued met the Pursuer in a bizarre and extraordinary way. The persecutor met the Persecuted. Saul met Jesus. God seeks His own, whether they're in a sycamore tree, like Zacchaeus; in the hull of a boat, like Jonah; or at a well in Samaria, like the woman with many husbands. God pursues His people. Saul had no idea that his immeasurably more life was going to begin while on a mission to steal the immeasurably more life from so many. "As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him" (Acts 9:3).

Suddenly. Unexpectedly. Without warning. A light flashed from heaven. We know by reading Acts 22:6, another account of Saul's Damascus road moment, that the encounter occurred at midday. We'd expect the sun to be brilliant at noon, but we wouldn't anticipate a light brighter than the sun to blaze from heaven (Acts 26:13). The light was so bright that Saul and his brigade fell to the ground to protect their eyes. It's often in the unexpected moments that we receive more than we expect from God.

The encounter with sudden, unexpected light wasn't all that Saul and his companions experienced. Out of the piercing flash of light spoke a voice that everyone heard but only Saul could understand (see Acts 22:9). Jesus, in some manifestation of His glory, appeared to Saul. Without beating around the bush, He asked a question as piercing as the light that had blinded Saul's eyes: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (Acts 9:4).

The proof of a Damascus road experience isn't whether someone hears us say a prayer but how we live our life after saying yes.

Jesus made sure that Saul had no doubt whom the message was intended for. With deep sentiment Jesus repeated Saul's name. Fear-stricken, with his eyes clinched, and his face buried, Saul dared to address the voice: "Who are you, Lord?" (Acts 9:5). Without hesitation, Jesus identified Himself and told Saul to get up and head into the city. The men stumbled to their feet and assisted Saul, because he still could not see. Totally bewildered, they walked through the city gate.

God used Ananias, a man from Damascus, to restore Saul's sight and nurse him back to health (Acts 9:17–19). Scripture does not record Saul repenting, or reciting a "sinner's prayer," or meeting with a priest to hear the plan of salvation. Saul met his Pursuer, and his heart said, "Yes"—the first and biggest yes of his life. The proof of a Damascus road experience isn't whether someone hears us say a prayer but how we live our life after saying yes. As believers, we do repent, and we do publicly confess Christ, but that mark of Christianity is in the fruit we bear over our lifetime, not during a onetime event like walking the aisle or praying with a pastor.

"Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God" (Acts 9:19–20). Notice the words *at once*. Saul wasted no time living fully for God. His new life began when his eyes were blinded and Jesus spoke to his heart. I love the way Bible expositor and preacher Alexander Maclaren reports Saul's heart change:

Paul's Christianity meant a radical change in his whole nature. He went out of Jerusalem a persecutor, he came into Damascus a Christian. He rode out of Jerusalem hating, loathing, despising Jesus Christ; he groped his way into Damascus, broken, bruised, clinging contrite to His feet, and clasping His Cross as his only hope. He went out proud, self-reliant, pluming himself upon his many prerogatives, his blue blood, his pure descent, his Rabbinical knowledge, his Pharisaical training, his external religious earnestness, his rigid morality; he rode into Damascus blind in the eyes, but seeing in the soul, and discerning that all these things were, as he says in his strong, vehement way, "but dung" in comparison with his winning Christ.⁴

We are all born spiritually blind. We all grope through life searching for our story until our Pursuer invites us into His. Every soul saved has a Damascus road experience that's just waiting to be told. Your story may not be as spellbinding as Saul's, but it is no less significant to God.

Maybe as you are reading Paul's story you are reminded to pray for someone you know who isn't saved. Perhaps you may have read Saul's story and realized you don't have a Damascus road story of your own. And after reading my story and Saul's, you hear a voice from heaven speaking to your heart or feel a tugging at your heart that you've never felt before. You've had enough of the spiritual blindness and groping through life. You want today to be your day, the day of your salvation, your very own Damascus road experience.

Our focal verse for this first section of the book is Ephesians 2:8, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.” The invitation of salvation is being extended to you from God. God sent His only Son, Jesus, to cover the separation sin has caused between you and God.

We are all born spiritually blind. We all grope through life searching for our story until our Pursuer invites us into His.

In the space below, draw two hills. Write your name on the top of one hill and God’s name on the top of the other hill. Label the space between the hills “sin.” Now draw a cross connecting the two hills and write “Jesus” on the cross.

Oh, won’t you open your beautiful gift of salvation today?

Perhaps you are thinking, *Salvation sounds wonderful, but you don’t know what I’ve done. God surely wouldn’t invite me, would He?* Yes, He

would, and He does. Jesus invited Saul, a Jesus-hating, Christian-killing Pharisee. Jesus invited His disciples, a group of cowards, extortionists, and traitors. Jesus invited me, a liar and deceiver. And Jesus invites you. Jesus invites *you*. He extends His invitation to you in John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” You are a *whoever*.

Tell God that you are sorry for your sins and that you are thankful for His invitation to live eternally with Him. With your mouth, tell Him you believe He is Lord. In your heart, believe that Jesus rose from the dead and that salvation is yours forever (see Rom. 10:9). Step confidently into the life Jesus died to give you. And like Saul, *at once* begin to live fully for God as we learn how to do that in our journey together ... and tell someone. If you don't have someone to tell, tell me: My contact information is in the back of the book. I'd love to celebrate with you.

NEW LIFE, NEW NAME

Everyone has a name, and every name has a meaning. My name is Wendy, pronounced Wen-dee. Its origin is English and means “friend.” The name was created for the heroine in James Barrie's play *Peter Pan*.

Earlier, I introduced you to Saul by his full name, Paulous Saulos Paulus. *Saul* is derived from Hebrew and means “desired” or “asked for.” *Paulus*, or *Paul*, is Greek in origin and means “small” or “humble.” Following his personal encounter with Jesus, Saul *desired* to be identified as Paul. He no longer wanted to be known, but to make known the only one worth knowing—Jesus.

Our decision to follow Christ has the potential (I'll expound on the word *potential* later in the journey) to completely change us from the inside out. God longs to work in us through the power of His Holy Spirit to transform our life so that we can be His witness to the world. However, until we are standing on a solid foundation of faith, our old identity, things we used to do that pleased our flesh, will wrestle with our new identity, the thing we know we should do that pleases God.

Saul realized this truth. He knew himself as *desired*, and others knew him as *desired*. And moreover, others knew him as a murderer, God hater, provoker, and powerful evildoer. God changed his life, and Saul chose to go by his other name so he could live out his calling. Dual Hebrew and Greek names were commonplace in this day. One reason Saul may have chosen to drop *Saul* was because *Paul* was a less regal name (think of King Saul in the Old Testament). With a more common name, he could totally immerse himself in his role as the "apostle to the Gentiles": "I am talking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I take pride in my ministry" (Rom. 11:13). You see, we live out the name we call ourselves.

My son, Griffin, is fun loving, hardworking, and knows so much about so much. Once, when he was around eight, he collected scrap wood from our neighbor's building project. He used the remnants to build his own little house, complete with a floor, a front door, a window, and a roof with shingles. When I asked Griffin how he knew how to build such a structure, he responded, "I was born knowing." I stood back in awe of his construction project and his confidence in growing into a young man. What I couldn't see behind his wide smile, however, were the doubt and feelings of failure he struggled with in other areas of life. He hid these nagging thoughts when he talked with me and

Scott, so I never saw doubt and failure creep into his young mind, or his witness about Christ.

We live out the names we call ourselves, but through our salvation we are given new names.

When did doubt creep in? How did the weight of failure climb on his back? Perhaps these things happened on the playground when he didn't catch the football as well as the other boys. Maybe they plagued him when he noticed his grades weren't as good as other students'. Though fully aware of his salvation in Christ and a young man now, Griffin's old identity, doubt, and failure continue to wrestle with his new identity, one of no shame or condemnation. He's learning to live with his new names and to take on a new identity.

I'm not a stranger to Griffin's type of struggle; maybe you aren't either. For most of my life, I called myself negative names. We live out the names we call ourselves, but through our salvation we are given new names. When we live by our new names, we experience our new life.

God's Word says you're His chosen child, wholly and dearly loved—yet someone else gets the job you are more qualified for and you identify with *rejected* instead. “Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience” (Col. 3:12).

You select the “I am fearfully and wonderfully made” graphic for the lock screen of your phone, but when you look in the mirror, you identify more closely with *ugly* and *unworthy*. “I praise you because

I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well” (Ps. 139:14).

You sing, “I know You’ve cast my sin as far as the East is from the West,”⁵ but you identify better with *condemned*. “As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us” (Ps. 103:12).

I WAS	I AM
Guilty	Forgiven
A Failure	Redeemed
Shameful	Holy
Cursed	Blessed
Unwanted	Chosen
A Sinner	Blameless
Abandoned	Adopted
A Beggar	An Heir

Review the lists above and feel free to add to them. Take your pen and cross through every old name you’ve called yourself. Put a star beside every new name. Thank God for renaming you. The next time one of your old names tries to set up a rematch with your new names, picture yourself crossing through the old and starring the new.

Oh, friend, let’s call ourselves by our real names: *forgiven, redeemed, holy, blessed, chosen, blameless, adopted, and heir*. We live out the names we are called, so let’s call ourselves by the right names. Let’s desire to make His name known and allow the Spirit to do His work in us so that we can be His witnesses to the world.

AND WHAT WAS THAT ABOUT OBEDIENCE?

Let's remove the paper clip and pick up Paul's story on the Damascus road. We've gone through this story but have yet to read the word *obey*. Paul accepted the invitation to live for Jesus, but where in his story of conversion to Christianity did Paul say, "Lord, I will obey you"? Unless we take a deeper look at his response to Jesus, we will miss his commitment to obey God. Saul, the Christian killer, hears a loud voice, is suddenly blinded by a bright light, and falls down. With his face in the dirt he asks, "Who are you, Lord?" (Acts 9:5).

*The immeasurably more life extends beyond
Christ's accomplished work on Calvary.*

Paul's commitment to obey is found tucked in the meaning of the Greek word for *Lord*. *Kurios* (koo'-ree-os) means "ruler, master, one who exercises authority."⁶ To accept and acknowledge Jesus as Lord means to obey or submit to His authority. As Saul stood to his feet and headed toward Damascus, he surrendered his will to Jesus, declaring to obey Him.

Jesus identified Himself, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" (Acts 9:5). *Jesus* means "Yahweh saves" (or "Yahweh is salvation").⁷ We acknowledge and surrender to God's authority when we call Him Lord.

This idea of surrender is where the rubber meets the road. The immeasurably more life extends beyond Christ's accomplished work on Calvary. It's more than accepting His free gift of salvation. The immeasurably more life follows the example of Paul: the giving up of our

wants, whims, and wishes in order to obey the will of God. You may accept the free gift of salvation, ensuring your eternity, but if you never surrender to His lordship, you won't experience the life that the God of immeasurably more has to offer you. And you may find yourself asking, "Is this as good as it gets?"

Maybe you are new to the idea of obeying God, and giving up your will for His will seems a little over the top. Perhaps you are a little apprehensive about trusting Him with the everyday affairs of your life. I get it. Really, I do. I lived most of my Christian life leaning on my understanding, living my way, and keeping my pew warm on Sunday. But all that changed when, in my early thirties, I was confronted with how poorly my plan was working out.

Do you remember where my story started? Those thirteen words—"You don't make our house a place I want to come home to"—that pierced my heart? After Scott said them, I lowered my face to the ground and asked God to help me fix my messed-up life. Like Saul with his face down in the dirt before heaven, I knew I had to make Jesus the Lord of every area of my life. My first yes when I was a little girl secured my salvation. But the next yes of my full surrender to God's will and His Word as an adult, as a wife, and as a mother ushered me into a life beyond anything I could have asked for, thought of, or imagined. I still live with unmet expectations, unfulfilled dreams, unanswered prayers, and unwanted situations, but my relationship with God through Jesus makes it possible to live fully in spite of the "uns."

Jesus wants to be more than our Savior. He wants to be Lord of our life—directing our decisions, guiding our steps, calming our fears, enjoying our company, inhabiting our praise, and showering us with blessings from His bountiful riches. Total surrender to God and the

work of His Word aren't for the faint of heart. There are obstacles along the way and an enemy who seeks to impede our progress. It's through surrender that we experience God, and it's through our experience with Him that our trust in Him grows. Saying yes cultivates trust. Trust empowers us to overcome the obstacles that stand in the way of our living with the God of immeasurably more.

ASK AND IMAGINE

Turn to chapter 10. Write about your Damascus road experience. And if you haven't had such an experience, write about where you are with your belief in God right now. End the section by listing every one of your new names. When did your sin meet Jesus's salvation? What is your new name?

If you think you might be ready to take the next step toward knowing and accepting Jesus Christ as your personal Savior, the best thing to do is to get involved with a local church family. The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association also has some great resources to help you take the next step in your faith, including the website PeaceWithGod.net and their church-finding tool at <https://churches.goingfarther.net>.