To Blair, Barrett, and Blake Sadler—
my triplet grandchildren
born during the writing of this book.
Amy and I pray that each of you would experience
a truly extraordinary life as you serve
the Lord Jesus Christ with all of your heart.
Contents

Acknowledgments     11
An Ordinary Person in Extraordinary Times     13
Secret #1: Discover Your Unique Purpose     31
Secret #2: Determine to Influence Your Culture     57
Secret #3: Wait On God’s Timing     85
Secret #4: Burn the Ships     113
Secret #5: Unleash the Power of Prayer     139
Secret #6: Learn How to Handle Bad Days     165
Secret #7: Live Life with the End in View     193

A Final Thought     221
Notes     223
About the Author     229
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An Ordinary Person in Extraordinary Times

My friend Dr. James Dobson has described the ordinary life most men live:

The straight life for a working man is . . . pulling our tired frame out of bed, five days a week, fifty weeks out of the year. It is earning a two-week vacation in August, and choosing a trip that will please the kids. The straight life is spending your money wisely when you’d rather indulge in a new whatever; it is taking your son bike riding on Saturday when you want so badly to watch the baseball game; it is cleaning out the garage on your day off after working sixty hours the prior week. The straight life is coping with head colds and engine tune-ups and crab grass and income tax forms.¹

This description, with a few variations, is just as apt for women as well. What Dr. Dobson calls the “straight life” I call the “ordinary life”—the kind of life most people experience from “the womb until the tomb.” But I have a sense
that the reason you picked up this book is because you want something more than an ordinary life. In fact, I bet you picked up this book because you desire a life that is marked by true significance. Haven’t you ever wished that your brief time on earth could have a greater purpose than the daily grind? If you are like most people, your answer to that question is a resounding yes! Guess what? God wants more for you than the humdrum as well.

No matter who you are or what your circumstances might be, God desires to transform your ordinary existence into an extraordinary life.

Now, I know some of you may be thinking, I am nobody from nowhere. What can I do? No one has ever heard of me and never will.

I understand your skepticism. It is natural to wonder, What can I do? I’m just one person. But never underestimate the difference one person can make in the world. Neither fame nor fortune is a prerequisite for having a significant life. God is in the business of using the ordinary to do the extraordinary.

If you find that hard to believe, consider the life of Edward Kimball.

Ed was a Boston carpet salesman and a Sunday school teacher at Mount Vernon Congregational Church. He taught teenage boys the Bible. One eighteen-year-old boy in his class did not seem interested in spiritual matters, often falling asleep in church and having complete ignorance of the Bible. Ed was concerned about the boy’s spiritual destination, so he screwed up his courage one April morning and determined to share the good news of Jesus’s death and resurrection with this young man, who worked as a clerk in Holton’s Shoe Store in downtown Boston.
Ed was no seasoned evangelist—in fact, he was so nervous that he initially walked right past the store, reconsidering his plan. Maybe talking about Jesus while the young man was at work was not the appropriate time or place. Maybe he should wait. But something inside of Ed said now was the time.

He offered a quick prayer under his breath, turned on his heels, and went through the door. He found the clerk in the back of the store. Placing his foot on a shoebox and a hand on the boy’s shoulder, Ed said, “I came to tell you about how much Jesus loves you.” They talked for a few minutes, and then the clerk knelt and professed his faith in Christ. Later, the clerk wrote about that moment, “I was in a new world. The birds sang sweeter, the sun shone brighter. I’d never known such peace.”

Ed left the shoe store rejoicing that God had used him—a simple carpet salesman—to share the good news of Jesus with this eighteen-year-old shoe clerk. But Ed could not have imagined how his one act of faithfulness would impact millions of lives during the next two centuries.

The young man Ed spoke with that day was Dwight L. Moody, who went on to become one of the greatest evangelists in the nineteenth century. Moody later counseled another young man by the name of J. Wilbur Chapman on the assurance of his salvation. Chapman became a Presbyterian minister and evangelist who greatly influenced an ex-baseball player by the name of Billy Sunday. With his brash and flashy style, Sunday led thousands upon thousands to Christ during his evangelistic crusades.

In 1924, in Charlotte, North Carolina, Billy Sunday held a rally during which many men and women were saved. Out
of that campaign came the formation of the Charlotte Businessman’s Club (CBMC), which continued to evangelize that region of the state. In 1934, the CBMC organized a series of meetings in Charlotte and invited Mordecai Ham to preach. It was at one of those meetings that another fifteen-year-old young man committed his life to Christ. His name was Billy Graham—a man who preached the gospel to more people around the world than any other evangelist.

In 1953, two years before I was born, in Dallas, Texas, Billy Graham held an evangelistic crusade during which my mother gave her life to Christ. In a very real sense, I am a follower of Christ and serving in ministry today because of an ordinary nineteenth-century carpet salesman in Boston who allowed himself to be used by God in an extraordinary way.

Through his simple choice to follow God’s leading into a shoe store, Edward Kimball made an incalculable difference in the lives of millions of people he would never meet. Nothing we know about Kimball suggests his immeasurable impact on the world can be attributed to abundant wealth, unusual giftedness, or phenomenal charisma. Instead, Ed Kimball was an ordinary person who simply made himself available to God . . . much like another man named Elijah who lived nearly three thousand years ago, in a world like our own.

As we will discover, Elijah was a man from humble beginnings who lived in Israel during some of the kingdom’s darkest days. He could have settled for an ordinary life, claiming his culture was too depraved and he was just one person. Yet, despite his circumstances, Elijah chose to fulfill God’s unique purpose for his life—and, as a result, he made an indelible impact on his world.
A Tale of Two Crumbling Cultures

Let’s be honest: the prospect of making an impact on our increasingly anti-Christian culture appears bleak. We look over the horizon of the American landscape and see nothing but desolation and despair. Sometimes we get discouraged, thinking, Things have never been this bad before! When we read in the Bible about men and women of faith like Abraham, Moses, Sarah, and Elijah, we think, Being godly was much easier back then without the temptations of the internet, the distractions of technology, and the challenges of parenting in a pagan world.

It’s true that we are eyewitnesses to a culture in decline. Today, we are increasingly pressured to bow to the god of immorality. Secularism is slowly and relentlessly crushing theism as the predominant ideology. And laws, no longer based on godly principles of truth and morality, are being enacted and enforced without regard for individual beliefs.

Yet the very same could have been said of the Israel in which Elijah lived in the ninth century BC. As dark and menacing as our culture is becoming, in reality there is not that much difference between our world and Elijah’s. When we travel back in time to the days of Elijah, we discover that the age in which he lived was just as dangerous and decadent as our own. Although Elijah lived in a nation that was sliding further into ungodliness each passing day, he resolved to change the world rather than allow the world to change him. In the pages that follow, we are going to discover how this ordinary person made the choice to have an extraordinary life.
The Dark World of Ancient Israel

Elijah’s story, recorded in the book of 1 Kings, opens and closes with death—the deaths of David and Ahab. In between these two funerals is about 150 years of history that tells the story of a nation that rejected God and fell headlong into national ruin.

It all began with Solomon, David’s son and heir. “King Solomon loved many foreign women” (1 Kings 11:1). Because of Solomon’s voracious sexual appetite—he had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines—he violated God’s command against marrying foreign women (Deut. 7:1–3). The Lord knew that the king’s disobedience would cause the people to “turn [their] heart away after [foreign] gods” (1 Kings 11:2). Nevertheless, Solomon ignored God’s commands and “held fast to [his wives and concubines] in love” (v. 2). He set up pagan places of worship for his many wives (vv. 4–8), which began a series of destructive events that culminated in civil war and the division of the nation.

The northern kingdom, which retained the name Israel, slid into ruin as it fell deeper and deeper into idolatry. Jeroboam, the northern kingdom’s first ruler, instituted bull worship, much like the worship of the golden calf in the wilderness (12:25–33). Building on Jeroboam’s wickedness, each successive king persisted in pursuing idols and sexual perversion.

But nothing could have prepared the Israelites for the reign of King Ahab (c. 874–852 BC). Ahab’s father, Omri, was a skillful king, moving Israel’s capital from Tirzah to Samaria (1 Kings 16:21–28). However, the writer of 1 Kings focuses not on Omri’s political achievements but on his idolatry. “Omri did evil in the sight of the LORD, and acted more wickedly
than all who were before him” (v. 25), so he was cut off and “Ahab his son became king [of Israel] in his place” (v. 28).

If you were one of Ahab’s political insiders or a citizen more concerned about your pocketbook than about your prayer book, then the days under Ahab did not look so bad. In fact, Ahab’s reign of twenty-two years appeared stable compared to the previous sixty years that had been filled with bloodshed and assassinations.

Unlike his father’s administration, Ahab’s reign was marked by peace and prosperity. Ahab and the nation benefited from a trade deal his father had negotiated with Phoenicia, and shipping boomed—along with the royal treasuries of Phoenicia and Israel. Under Ahab it could be truthfully said, “There was a chicken in every pot and a chariot in every garage.”

However, God is not impressed by a nation’s GDP (gross domestic product) but by its GBP (godly behavior product)—and by that standard Ahab and Israel were running a serious deficit! Ahab was uniquely evil, doing “more to provoke the LORD God of Israel than all the kings of Israel who were before him” (v. 33). Translation: Ahab ticked God off more than any other monarch in Israel’s history. What made Ahab Israel’s MDP (most despicable player) in God’s eyes? He married a woman named Jezebel:

It came about, as though it had been a trivial thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, that he married Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians. (1 Kings 16:31)

The marriage of Ahab and Jezebel was a political pact between Omri and Ethbaal that accounted for Israel’s financial
prosperity. But in spiritual terms, the marriage catapulted Israel into its darkest days. Like Solomon before him, Ahab’s marriage to an idol-worshiping wife turned his heart away from the Lord.

Jezebel made a sport of hunting down and killing God’s prophets (18:4). And at the top of her hit list—for reasons we will soon discover—was an ordinary man named Elijah.

Why is Jezebel the only queen named in the list of Israel’s kings? She was the real power behind Ahab’s throne. Ahab made no moves without first consulting Jezebel. We would say that she wore the pants in the family.

The fact that Ahab—a man with the backbone of a chocolate éclair when it came to Jezebel—allowed his wife to entice him into Baal worship is the reason that the writer of 1 Kings recorded that it was “a trivial thing” for Ahab “to walk in the sins of Jeroboam” (16:31). In other words, the sins of Jeroboam were child’s play compared to the heinous sin of Baal worship introduced by Ahab and his wife Jezebel.

Baal was the sun, rain, and fertility god of the Canaanites—their chief god. His name means “lord” or “owner.” Jezebel was the one who introduced Baal worship in Israel. Jezebel’s father was the king of the Sidonians—a people at the center of Baal worship. And when she married Ahab, Baal worship was part of her dowry.

What made Baal worship so odious was the belief that Baal was greater than God, the Creator of heaven and earth. According to Baal worshipers, Baal controlled the environment and brought about climate change. Baal worship was accompanied with horrific sexual perversion, self-mutilation, and child sacrifice.
Idols of Baal were often made of hollowed-out sheet metal. Fires were placed either underneath the idol or within its belly, and children were placed either inside the belly of the idol, where they slowly roasted to death, or in the outstretched arms of the idol, where they slowly burned to death. Baal worshipers sacrificed their children to the god who promised to bring the warmth and rain needed for prosperity in an agricultural society.

This was the god Ahab and Jezebel worshiped and enticed the Israelites to serve as well. In fact, Ahab was so sold out to this pagan deity that he built a temple to Baal in the capital city of Samaria and erected a wooden likeness of Baal’s female consort, Asherah (1 Kings 16:32–33). Ahab and Jezebel were such devout followers of Baal and Asherah that they regularly entertained up to 450 priests of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah in their ivory palace (18:19; 22:39).

This was the world of ancient Israel—a depraved and dangerous place to live, especially if you worshiped the one true God. However, the darker the night, the brighter the light! It was against this dark background of immorality and idolatry that God would place His diamond of hope—an ordinary man named Elijah.

Extraordinary Attributes of an Ordinary Person

Elijah burst onto the scene when it appeared that God was in retreat. From a human perspective, God had been de-throned, and Baal—along with his puppet king, Ahab—now reigned over Israel. Evil ran rampant throughout the nation, unchecked and unchallenged.
But Elijah refused to sink into despair. He knew God would never be defeated. Though it seemed that things could hardly have been worse in Israel, God was not caught off guard or surprised by Ahab’s wickedness. At just the right time—at Israel’s zero hour—God raised up the right person.

Elijah was not afraid to stand toe-to-toe with the king of Israel. Don’t misunderstand: Elijah was no spiritual superman. The New Testament writer James describes Elijah as “a man with a nature like ours” (James 5:17). That means Elijah was an ordinary person who struggled with the same issues that you and I battle. He experienced fatigue, got depressed, wrestled with temptation, and at times doubted the goodness and even the existence of God. Yet Elijah made an extraordinary impact on his world, becoming one of Israel’s most famous heroes, because of three attributes that characterized his life.

Elijah Was a Man of Passion

When Elijah appeared in the pages of Scripture and introduced himself to Ahab in 1 Kings 17:1, he told the king that he served the living God. This was not only a dig at the dead god Ahab served but also an expression of Elijah’s passion for the one true God. In fact, God was more alive to Elijah than were Ahab and Jezebel.

Furthermore, this power couple who thought they controlled Israel were as temporal as blades of grass that die within a year. But Elijah served the King who was eternal. He lived with an overwhelming sense of God’s presence that fueled his passion for God. Twice Elijah said, “I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts” (1 Kings 19:10, 14).
Elijah was a man consumed with God. He was passionate about upholding God’s reputation in an unbelieving world. Elijah’s passion burned especially hot against Ahab, Jezebel, and the prophets of Baal who were deceiving Israel by denying the true God and elevating a false god.

Christian writer A. W. Tozer knew something of this passion and how it separates some Christians from run-of-the-mill believers—to say nothing of the rest of the world. Tozer wrote:

The moment we make up our minds that we are going on with this determination to exalt God over all, we step out of the world’s parade. We shall find ourselves out of adjustment to the ways of the world, and increasingly so as we make progress in the holy way.¹

Elijah was such a man “out of step with the ways of the world” but in perfect step with the ways of God. And if we are to make a difference for God in our world, as Elijah did in his, then we need to continually fuel our burning passion for following Him.

**Elijah Was a Man of Purpose**

Elijah understood that it was God who set the direction of his life. It was God who called Elijah to be a prophet. It was God who placed His message in Elijah’s mouth. And it was God who would ultimately hold Elijah accountable for his faithfulness to that purpose.

Because Elijah had a purpose that came from the Lord, he knew he had nothing to fear from Ahab. Elijah was a living
An Ordinary Person in Extraordinary Times

illustration of Proverbs 28:1: “The wicked flee when no one is pursuing, but the righteous are bold as a lion.”

In Elijah, Jesus’s words in Matthew 10:28 were on full display: “Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.”

Courage comes from the certainty of a calling. As someone has said, “Every man is immortal until his work on earth is done.” Elijah—like all of us—had God-given work to do. And he knew that no one—Ahab, Jezebel, or even hundreds of false prophets of Baal—could touch one hair of his head until that work was finished.

Elijah Was a Man of Prayer

The foundational secret of Elijah’s success was his belief in the power of prayer. We learn of this from James: “Elijah . . . prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months. Then he prayed again, and the sky poured rain and the earth produced its fruit” (James 5:17–18).

The key phrase is “prayed earnestly,” which can be literally translated “prayed with prayer.” Don’t misunderstand what James is saying. God does not answer our prayers because we squeeze our folded hands so tightly they turn white or because we spend so much time on our knees that they are bruised. To pray earnestly means praying habitually and continually, like breathing.

Do you have to remind yourself or have a doctor admonish you to take a breath? Hopefully not! For Elijah, prayer was not a painful discipline that had to be developed or a last
resort after everything else failed. Instead, talking with God was as natural as breathing. And, like breathing, he prayed continually rather than sporadically.

The apostle Paul communicated the same idea when he commanded the Thessalonians to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17). The Greek word translated “without ceasing” was used to describe a persistent or hacking cough—one that seems to grab you by the throat and refuses to let go. Elijah prayed and prayed and prayed, speaking with the Lord throughout the day—like an uncontrollable cough. And that simple, continual practice of conversing with God was instrumental in the extraordinary accomplishments of this ordinary man.

The Secrets of True Significance

God can transform your life from ordinary to extraordinary, just as He did with Elijah. As far as God is concerned, there can never be enough Elijah-like men and women walking the earth, standing for His truth, and upholding His glory. How does such a transformation take place?

In the chapters that follow, we will explore the seven secrets of significance, which are resolves you and I must make in order to experience the incredible life God desires for us.

Secret #1: Discover Your Unique Purpose

Every follower of Christ has a general purpose in life—to bring God glory and to enjoy Him forever. But each of us also has a unique purpose that answers the question, “Why has God placed me in this world?”
Elijah’s life offers clues to how we can answer that question in our own lives. Elijah’s unique purpose was serving faithfully as a prophet of God, confronting a wicked king and queen, and calling his nation back to the worship of the true God. Your call is probably different, but, like Elijah, you have a specific purpose in life. In the next chapter, we will discover two questions that will help you determine God’s unique purpose for your life.

**Secret #2: Determine to Influence Your Culture**

The first reaction of many Christians to an increasingly anti-Christian culture is to retreat, like a turtle pulling its head and legs into its shell. And though holy huddles—hanging out only with other Christians—offer safety and security, they communicate to the outside world an attitude of “us four and no more.” To put it bluntly: holy huddles tell the world it can go to hell.

In contrast to the silo spirituality that so many Christians practice today, Elijah stepped out and determined to make a difference in his world. And what a difference he made! Elijah’s example reminds us that God has left us on earth to influence the world, not to isolate ourselves from it.

**Secret #3: Wait On God’s Timing**

No matter how old we are or how much life experience we have, no one likes to wait. We think of waiting time as wasted time. It’s not—especially when we are waiting on God. God’s most significant people learned how to wait, even if they had to wait a long time. Elijah had an extended
period of waiting and training before his climactic showdown with the prophets of Baal.

You might be a student studying for a career that seems out of reach, a pastor ministering in obscurity, or a single adult wondering whether a mate will ever cross your path. But whoever you are and whatever you are waiting on, God hasn’t forgotten you. Our heavenly Father is not interested in microwave Christianity or microwave Christians. It takes time to develop Elijah-like men and women.

*Secret #4: Burn the Ships*

If you decide to pursue an extraordinary life, then there will come a time when you must be prepared to go all in. As the saying goes, you must be willing to “burn the ships,” eliminating all possibility of retreat. Hedging your bets and holding back is not an option when God is ready to move forward.

Elijah went “all in” when he challenged the priests of Baal to a winner-takes-all match on Mount Carmel. The stakes could not have been higher. Israel’s future, not to mention Elijah’s own life, hung in the balance. This was Elijah’s burn-the-ships moment. In this chapter, you will discover how you can be ready for yours.

*Secret #5: Unleash the Power of Prayer*

Someone has observed that you can do much more after you have prayed, but you can do nothing of significance until you have prayed. Survey the Scriptures, and you will discover that those men and women who stood tallest for the Lord were those who knelt lowest before the Lord. And Elijah was no exception.
The New Testament writer James uses Elijah as Exhibit A of how to pray persistently, precisely, and powerfully. Using Elijah’s prayer life as our model, we will learn how to experience God’s power in our lives through prayer.

**Secret #6: Learn How to Handle Bad Days**

Elijah was not a super-saint but a normal person who even as a sold-out servant of God had to battle despair, depression, and doubt. One moment we find this man courageously standing for God on Mount Carmel, and soon after we find him curled up in a fetal position, wanting to die.

You and I are going to have experiences like that—periods of time when we doubt the goodness, the wisdom, or even the existence of God. Everyone who pursues an extraordinary life is going to have to deal with his or her share of bad days that include everything from flat tires and sore throats to genuine crises of faith. Elijah’s life offers some practical and profitable ways to navigate these discouraging periods in our lives.

**Secret #7: Live with the End in View**

Perspective is one of the most difficult things to gain and maintain. With the hectic pace of life in the twenty-first century, it is tempting to get so caught up in today that we never think about tomorrow.

Not Elijah. He knew his time on earth was very limited. Elijah knew that when his work on earth was finished, God’s work on earth would continue. So Elijah made provisions for his departure by training a successor. People who choose extraordinary lives live each day as if it were their last and...
make adequate preparations to ensure their godly legacy will outlast them. In this final chapter, we will discover how to do that by following Elijah’s example.

A Majority of One

Someone once said, “One person with courage makes a majority.” That was true in Elijah’s day, and it is true in ours as well. On September 11, 2001, Welles Crowther, an ordinary young man, became a majority of one. He was simply known as the man with the red bandanna, and writer Peggy Noonan told his story on the fifteenth anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on New York City.4

Welles received the bandanna from his father when he was a child. Dressed in his first suit, Welles stood as tall as he could while his father placed a white handkerchief in his breast pocket and the red bandanna in his back pocket. As Noonan tells it, “One’s for show, [his father] said, the other’s for blow.”

Welles worked as a junior associate for Sandler O’Neill, in the south tower of the World Trade Center, on the 104th floor. Whenever Welles took the red bandanna from his pocket, his coworkers would tease him about being a farmer. His usual reply was, “With this bandanna I’m gonna change the world.”

The plane that struck the south tower ripped through floors 78 to 84. With his red bandanna tied around his face, Welles made his way down to the 78th floor, where he saw a group of people, some badly injured, waiting for the elevator. He picked up a woman and told the group to follow him to the stairwell. Eighteen floors below, the air began to clear.

29
He placed the woman on the floor and told the group to continue down. He then turned and went back up.

When Welles got back to the 78th floor, another group of people was there waiting. Through the fire and smoke, they heard a voice: “Everyone who can stand now, stand now. If you can help others, do so.” And he guided another group to the stairwell.

No one knows how many trips Welles made to the higher floors or exactly how many people he saved. Recovery personnel discovered his body six months later, in the lobby of the south tower. He was found lying beside many firefighters, at their command post, and was only identified because of his red bandanna. Welles Crowther had made it down and could have run for his life. Instead, he gave his life for others.

God placed us on earth to do as Welles did—and as Elijah did—to rescue people. Our culture is decaying and dying. One day, this entire planet will be destroyed by fire, and many will lose their souls by following false gods who offer no hope of escape. Jesus Christ is the only Way of escape from this world into the next world, and He has given us a mission to point as many people to Him as possible, without regard for our own popularity, prosperity, or life. The secret to an extraordinary life is understanding God’s purpose for our lives and then living it, just like Elijah.

When we pursue God’s purpose, He will transform our ordinary existence into an extraordinary life. Nothing could be more significant than that.
SECRET #1
Discover Your Unique Purpose

In his poem “The People, Yes,” Carl Sandburg sums up the history of humanity in three simple words: “Born, troubled, died.” Unfortunately, that depressing description is closer to the mark than most of us are willing to admit. I’m reminded of the Chicago sewer worker who described his life this way: “I dig the ditch to earn the money to buy the food to get the strength to dig the ditch.” Get up, go to work, come home, eat dinner, watch television, go to bed . . . and the cycle continues.

Life is meant to be more than an endless and mindless treadmill. Jesus said, “I came that [you] may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). Jesus is in the business of saving and satisfying lives—of making life rich and rewarding. One way He accomplishes this is by giving each of us a unique purpose to fulfill during our brief stay here on earth. This purpose could be described as the specific story God wants to communicate to the world through your life.
Although the story God has created you to tell is unique, it is also connected to a larger story God is proclaiming to the entire universe.

The Bigger Story

When God decided to create human beings, He determined to create them in His image. Genesis 1:27 tells us, “God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.”

God then commanded His image bearers—Adam and Eve—to have children, rule over the earth, and create a thriving culture. Before sin entered the world, Adam and Eve experienced a deep, intimate relationship with the Lord.

From the beginning, the story God was communicating was that obedience to and fellowship with Him were the secret to experiencing abundant life. Theologians have summarized God’s overarching purpose for each of us like this: “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and enjoy him forever.”

Let’s unpack what that general purpose means.

Glorifying God

Each of us was created to glorify God. The apostle John emphasizes this truth in Revelation 4:11 when he pictures the twenty-four elders—who represent the church in heaven—encircling God’s throne and saying, “Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created.”

32
The word glory comes from a Hebrew word that means “heavy.” When we glorify God in our lives, we are showing Him to be heavy or substantial to others. He takes center stage. He becomes the big deal. The true weight of our lives is not measured by our temporary possessions—money, fame, achievement, awards, or degrees—but by the centrality of God in our lives.

God created you to glorify Him in everything you do. This is why the apostle Paul instructs us, “Whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31). In other words, the overriding question we should use to evaluate every decision and every activity is this: “How will this action or this decision make God look bigger and better to others?”

Elijah grasped this primary purpose in life. His entire existence revolved around demonstrating to a largely unbelieving world that the God of Israel was the only true God.

Is that true of you? Can you honestly say that your priority in everything you do is to motivate others to follow God? Our story begins with making God the priority in our lives so that others will be encouraged to do the same.

Enjoying God

Yes, we have a duty to glorify God, but there is also an accompanying delight in doing so! In fact, as John Piper says, “God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him.” God wants our lives to glorify Him, but He also wants us to enjoy Him, just as David described:

You will make known to me the path of life;
In Your presence is fullness of joy;
In Your right hand there are pleasures forever.  
(Ps. 16:11)

We spoke earlier of the unbroken fellowship Adam and Eve experienced with God. But the Lord wants to give us more than His presence; He wants to give us “pleasures.” In Hebrew, this word means “sweetness” or “delight.” What are the delightful gifts found in God’s hand? David lists some of them in Psalm 103: forgiveness of sins, healing from sickness, deliverance from death, enrichment in life, and compassion for the oppressed. For all these—and more—David declared, “Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget none of His benefits” (Ps. 103:2).

One way we enjoy God is by thanking Him for His blessings and mulling over His attributes. For example, when you go to a nice restaurant you (hopefully) do not wolf down your meal. You savor every course—the appetizers, the soup, the salad, the entrée, the dessert. You linger over the food, taking your time to relish every dish, taste every morsel, and enjoy every moment of the experience.

That is what God wants us to do with Him—to savor in our hearts and minds His blessings and character. Again, this is what Jesus had in mind when He said He came to give life abundantly (John 10:10)—that our relationship with God would be so rich we would want to spend every minute of every day in His presence, living to bring Him glory, and enjoying the unending benefits of His favor.

Elijah: A Case Study in Glorifying and Enjoying God

As I noted in the last chapter, Elijah was not a spiritual superman. He was a spiritual everyman—“a man with a nature like
discovering your unique purpose

 ours” (James 5:17). Yet, even though he was an ordinary person, he understood he existed for an extraordinary purpose—to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. From the moment Elijah showed up on the scene, he said his whole purpose was to be “zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts” (1 Kings 19:10).

But to fulfill that purpose, Elijah had to demonstrate his zeal for God in concrete actions. To fulfill his general purpose, he had to discover his unique purpose in life. He had to tell the story God had specifically written for him.

The same is true for you and me. All of us are called to point people to God, but the path we follow to do that is unique for each of us. Every Christian has both a general purpose—to glorify and enjoy God—as well as a specific purpose (or “calling”) through which we do so.

Elijah’s specific calling was to serve God as a prophet to the nation of Israel. He would spend his life confronting the Israelites for forgetting the only true God. Whether it was through his courageous denouncement of the nation’s wicked king and queen, his challenge to the false prophets on Mount Carmel, or his quiet faith in God’s supernatural provisions, Elijah understood that all the puzzle pieces of his life were part of God’s unique calling that, in turn, fulfilled his ultimate purpose of glorifying God. And it was his dogged pursuit of this purpose that made Elijah such a significant, successful, and satisfied individual.

When we read about Elijah in the Bible, his introduction is sudden and stark: “Now Elijah the Tishbite, who was of the settlers of Gilead . . .” (1 Kings 17:1).

Little is known of Elijah’s life before his appointment as God’s prophet. Nevertheless, we can piece together some clues as to how he came to understand his purpose in life.
His introduction tells us something significant about his background and his personality.

**His Background**

Names are a big deal. In our culture, we generally name our children after loved ones—a grandmother or grandfather, for example—or because we simply like the sound of certain names, especially how first names sound with our last names. But in the biblical culture, names were often given as a distinctive symbol for what parents wished for their child’s future or were given as a descriptive indicator of their child’s character. For example, the Old Testament patriarch Jacob’s name literally means “heel catcher,” which was appropriate since he “came forth with his hand holding on to [his twin brother’s] heel” (Gen. 25:26).

The Hebrew word for Jacob could also mean “trickster.” Jacob lived up to this meaning when he tricked his brother, Esau, out of his birthright (25:27–34), and tricked his father, Isaac, into giving him the blessing of the firstborn (27:1–38). Years later, God changed Jacob’s name to Israel, which means “he strives with God,” when Jacob wrestled with the angel of the Lord (32:24–28; Hosea 12:4).

If we look closely at Elijah’s name, we’ll discover that it is made up of three Hebrew words: El, which is short for Elohim (God), Jah, the abbreviation for Jehovah, and the letter I, the personal pronoun “my” or “mine.” Putting all three together, Elijah’s name literally means “My God is Jehovah” or “The Lord is my God.”

Think about that. Every time his mother called him by name to wash up for supper, Elijah was reminded that one God ruled
supreme and made an exclusive claim on his life. “Hurry up, ‘The Lord is my God’ and wash your hands before the meatloaf gets cold!” When his friends came to the house, it was as if they asked, “Can ‘My God is Jehovah’ come out to play?” After a lifetime of being reminded that he belonged to God alone, it makes sense that when Elijah appeared before Ahab, he would say, “As the L ORD , the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand” (1 Kings 17:1). (By the way, parents, regardless of what we name our children, we should continually remind them of their duty and privilege to serve the living God.)

But Elijah’s entrance on the scene in 1 Kings 17:1 gives us more than the name of the prophet who would confront Ahab and Jezebel. The verse also tells us where Elijah came from: Tishbe. What is interesting—and it gives us a clue as to how ordinary Elijah really was—is that his hometown is somewhat of a mystery. Archeologists have not found the exact location of Tishbe, but wherever it was, it was about as significant a place as Mud Lick, Kentucky; Oatmeal, Texas; or Boogertown, North Carolina. (Yes, these are real places!)

A friend of mine once owned a hunting cabin in the wilds of West Texas. On one hunting trip he invited his pastor to come along. After driving for hours, weaving this way and that, and bouncing over rut-filled roads, they finally arrived at the location. The pastor had been warned that the cabin was in the middle of nowhere, but when he got out of the truck and looked around, he said, “This is truly nowhere.” My friend thought the comment appropriate, so he named his hunting lease “Truly Nowhere.”

That’s the kind of place Elijah was from—truly nowhere.

At some point, Elijah moved from Tishbe to the region of Gilead, just east of the Jordan River. It was a rough and
rugged place, a place of solitude and silence. Dense forests covered its hills, and wildlife teemed in its valleys. No doubt the people who lived in Gilead were just as rough and rugged as the landscape—tanned, muscular, and leathery. And Elijah was one of them, dressing as a backwoodsman in coarse camel hair and leather (2 Kings 1:8). He was no spit-shined, polished, and sophisticated person of wealth and position. He was an ordinary, hardworking man. But it did not matter. God had a difficult mission for Elijah—a purpose that did not entail cocktail parties and diplomacy. God needed a rough and ready man—a nobody from nowhere to become God’s somebody to confront a godless and wicked king.

It is not just Elijah’s hometown that is a mystery, however. We know nothing of his family, his parents, whether he had siblings, or to which tribe he belonged. However, his parents—whomever they were—must have instilled in him an understanding that his purpose was to glorify the living God. They must have impressed upon him a love and fear of God—a passion to see God worshiped as the true Lord of Israel. They certainly taught him the Scriptures. The first thing Elijah said to King Ahab, after introducing himself, was “surely there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word” (1 Kings 17:1).

Elijah’s message was one of judgment and was based on God’s Word as recorded in Deuteronomy. Elijah declared that God would judge Israel for her idolatry. Moses had warned the children of Israel that God would “shut up the heavens so that there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its fruit; and you will perish quickly from the good land which the LORD is giving you” (Deut. 11:17). That was exactly what Elijah predicted. And for three and a half years it came

The false god Baal was believed to control the weather. But Elijah’s “no dew, no rain” pronouncement was a direct challenge to the imaginary Baal under whose spell the Israelites had fallen. Ahab and Israel would see what sort of god Baal was. If he could not produce rain, then he would be found to be what he in fact was—a blind, dumb, and deaf hunk of metal.

Elijah’s parents—though unknown and unnamed to us—taught their son well. The knowledge of God’s Word they instilled in Elijah was instrumental in his discovery of God’s unique purpose for his life. Elijah’s parents remind me of my parents, now in heaven. My father was the reason that my mother came to faith in Jesus, taking her to a Billy Graham crusade in Dallas where she placed her faith in Christ. He and my mother joined First Baptist Church of Dallas—the church I have the honor of pastoring today. Two years after I was born, my dad traveled to Chicago for one purpose: to visit the Moody Bible Institute bookstore and to purchase the best collection of Christian books he could find for me. He invested $200—about one month’s salary at the time—to ensure that I grew up knowing, loving, and fearing the Lord. And Elijah’s parents did the same for him.

**His Personality**

If you like fire and brimstone type preaching then Elijah is your man. He was not one to mince words. As one of my mentors put it, Elijah was not a “mild-mannered man...
preaching a mild-mannered sermon, teaching people how to be more mild-mannered.” Elijah’s preaching was pointed, like a sharp stick shoved into someone’s sternum. Appearing at Ahab’s doorstep, Elijah went right to the heart of the matter: God’s judgment was coming. He declared, “As the Lord, the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, surely there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word” (1 Kings 17:1). Remarkable! This nobody from “Truly Nowhere” appeared before the king of Israel and predicted a national calamity.

When I read this verse, I think about my own experience preaching to the President of the United States and his family on the day of his inauguration. Although I knew the president and considered him a friend, there was something quite intimidating about staring into the eyes of one of the most powerful people in the world and delivering God’s message, even though my message was one of encouragement, not condemnation.

By contrast, Elijah had a hard message to deliver to the king. “It is time to make a decision,” Elijah told Ahab. “Who will it be: God or Baal? Until you abandon Baal and return to God, there will be no dew or rain unless I say so. Period.” For Ahab and Jezebel, it was time to get rid of Baal and return to God—or Israel’s rivers would dry up, crops would fail, and people would die.

This was Elijah’s story, his God-ordained purpose for living. He heard the call of God and faithfully began to carry out his responsibilities as a prophet to the nation of Israel. God’s assignment for Elijah was not easy, but it was clear: deliver a politically incorrect message of judgment to a wayward and wicked nation.
Discover God’s Unique Purpose for Your Life

Your specific story is different than Elijah’s, but it is just as significant and important. Elijah was a unique individual, never to come again. The same is true of you. You are a unique individual, never to come again. In the words of David, “The LORD looks from heaven; He sees all the sons of men” (Ps. 33:13). And what does God see in each of us? A life individually fashioned by Him (v. 15).

Every baby is a brand-new creation from the hand of God—uniquely created to accomplish a unique purpose. Peter affirmed this when he wrote, “God has given each of you a gift from his great variety of spiritual gifts. Use them well to serve one another. . . . Then everything you do will bring glory to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 4:10–11 NLT).

If you are going to have an extraordinary life—a life of significance—then you must discover your special purpose. But before we learn ways to uncover it, let’s examine some of the benefits of understanding your purpose in life.

The Benefits of Discovering Your Purpose

I recently read a story about a group of analysts at Bank of America Merrill Lynch who concluded that there is a 20 to 50 percent chance that the world in which we live is not real—it is a virtual simulation, like the Matrix movies made popular in the late 1990s and early 2000s. (Their speculation made me wonder if my weekly deposits to their bank have disappeared into some imaginary virtual reality as well!)

You may chuckle at such an absurd idea, but many scientists and philosophers believe it is possible. They argue
that the future of humanity will take one of three courses: “extinction before reaching a ‘posthuman’ stage, reaching posthuman existence but not simulating evolutionary history, [or] we are in the matrix already.” If we are in the matrix, they contend, we cannot know that we are in it.

In other words, we cannot know if what we call reality is really real. And if that is the case, then can we really say life has a purpose? This reminds me of something I read from Christian thinker Os Guinness:

Out of more than a score of great civilizations in human history, modern Western civilization is the very first to have no agreed-on answer to the question of the purpose of life. Thus more ignorance, confusion—and longing—surround this topic now than at almost any time in history. The trouble is that, as modern people, we have too much to live with and too little to live for. Some feel they have time but not enough money; others feel they have money but not enough time. But for most of us, in the midst of material plenty, we have spiritual poverty. Could anything be more spiritually bankrupt than believing that you are living in a computer simulated, virtual world—that everything you know and love is not real? I can only imagine what the apostle Paul would say to such nonsense—probably something like this:

Live life . . . with a due sense of responsibility, not as men who do not know the meaning and purpose of life but as those who do. Make the best use of your time, despite all the difficulties of these days. Don’t be vague but firmly grasp what you know to be the will of God. (Eph. 5:15–17 Phillips)
Discover Your Unique Purpose

We are to live with the knowledge that life has meaning and purpose, “firmly [grasping] what [we] know to be the will of God.” What a reassuring word in our complex and strange world! You are real, living in a real world, sent out by our real God to accomplish a real and unique purpose. Once you fully grasp this truth, it will serve as a prescription lens on life, correcting and clarifying reality. In fact, knowing your purpose—your story—clarifies three challenges we face in life.

**Knowing Your Purpose Clarifies Priorities in Life**

Paul said to “make the best use of your time”—make the most of your days on earth. Literally, this means to “buy up the time.” Do not waste your life by wasting your time. As someone said, “Life is like a dollar bill. You can spend it any way you wish—but you can only spend it once.”

Instead of spending your life on frivolous endeavors, invest your life in things that really matter—things that count for eternity. Practice the discipline of saying no not only to evil activities but also to unproductive activities. Unproductive things may not be bad in and of themselves, but they distract you from achieving your unique purpose in life.

For example, I could fill my time with counseling appointments. I pastor a large and diverse church, and people in our congregation have large and diverse problems. But counseling is neither my passion nor my giftedness—it does not fulfill my specific God-given purpose. Nevertheless, people need help, so we have pastors on staff whose purposes are fulfilled by counseling others. To have a significant life and tell the story God wants you to tell, you must never mistake the good for the best.
Knowing Your Purpose Clarifies Uncertainties in Life

Paul said we ought to be wise when it comes to understanding God’s will for our lives. Each of us faces daily decisions—some small, some large. Most have little impact on our lives, while a few have tremendous impact on our lives. Knowing and wisely applying our unique purpose to these decisions—especially major decisions—can save us years of regret.

For example, suppose you are offered a promotion in your company. While the prospect of a higher salary and more prestigious title are appealing to you, the promotion will require you to uproot your family and move to another city—and spend many more hours at work. Should you accept the promotion? It depends. If you still have children at home, your primary way of glorifying God and expanding His kingdom may be through rearing godly children. If the promotion would cause you to neglect that primary responsibility, then accepting it may be the wrong decision. However, if your children are grown and your new job would both maximize your gifts and expand your influence for God, then accepting the promotion might be exactly the right decision.

Knowing Your Purpose Clarifies Difficulties in Life

The apostle Paul was no Pollyanna. He knew life was filled with “difficulties,” as he put it in Ephesians 5:16 (Phillips). In fact, as he wrote these words, Paul was in prison facing possible execution. Had Paul’s life purpose been that of most Christians today—peace, prosperity, pleasure, and the avoidance of pain—his “difficulties” of imprisonment and
possible death would have been perplexing. “Why is God allowing this to happen to me when I’ve been so faithful to Him?” Paul could have lamented.

But firmly grasping God’s purpose for his life provided Paul with a completely different perspective on his problems. As he wrote in his letter to the Philippians, he could “rejoice” in his circumstances, knowing that his difficulties were opportunities in disguise for him to fulfill his life purpose of sharing the gospel with as many people as possible (Phil. 1:18).

How so? Paul’s imprisonment gave him the opportunity to share Christ with the Roman soldiers assigned to guard him, who in turn shared the gospel with the highest-ranking military officers in Rome (v. 13). Not only that, but ordinary Christians were being emboldened to share their faith because of Paul’s example (v. 14). Had Paul’s life purpose been self-focused, then he would have thrown himself a giant pity party in prison. But because Paul understood and embraced his unique purpose—to spread the gospel to the Gentiles—he declared, “In this I rejoice because Christ is proclaimed” (see v. 18).

Understanding your unique purpose gives you a different prism through which to view the difficulties that God allows or even brings into your life. When I think of that truth, I am reminded of the example of Staff Sergeant Travis Mills. He was on his third tour of duty in Afghanistan when he set down his rucksack on an undetected IED (improvised explosive device). When Mills came to—on his twenty-fifth birthday—he discovered he had lost all four limbs and the purpose of his life. As he tells the story in his book, *Tough As They Come*, Mills tried to persuade his wife, Kelsey, that she
Choosing the Extraordinary Life

should divorce him; she could take all their possessions and start a new life with their baby daughter. Kelsey reminded him that’s not how marriage works. She would stick by his side and see him through this trauma.

Mills questioned why God had allowed this to happen to him. He even demanded his sister-in-law remove a plaque she hung in his hospital room with the promise of Joshua 1:9 written on it: “Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous! Do not tremble or be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.” But, in time, Mills came to understand that God had a purpose for his life—even without his arms and legs.

Today, Travis Mills works through his foundation to assist wounded warriors and travels the country speaking to veterans’ groups, large corporations, and civic organizations about never giving up and never giving in—about being brave and courageous. A man who heard Mills’s testimony and message credits him with saving his life. I would say that is a significant purpose in life, wouldn’t you?

Like Travis Mills, those with a clear focus on a purpose bigger than themselves see difficulties as opportunities both to grow in their own faith and also to glorify God to others.

The STORY God Wants to Tell through You

Since God made only one version of you—custom designed for a one-of-a-kind assignment—it is important to understand how to discover the unique purpose for which God created and gifted you. This is the story God wants to tell through you, so let’s use the word story to help us.
Discover Your Unique Purpose

Start with Scripture

God’s great desire for all of us is that we come to faith in Jesus Christ and then mature in our faith. This is the surest way for us to glorify God and enjoy Him. What does maturity look like? Paul gives us a clue in 1 Thessalonians 5:15–18:

See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all people. Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.

Seeking the best for others, rejoicing, praying, and giving thanks does not come by osmosis. This kind of maturity only comes through marinating our hearts and minds thoroughly in God’s Word. Paul told Timothy:

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work. (2 Tim. 3:16–17)

Scripture is given to teach us who God is and who we are—and how He has fashioned, equipped, and gifted us. The Bible provides lessons and instruction on life so we might develop the skills, knowledge, and insight necessary to identify and fulfill our purpose.

God’s Word is also given for reproof and correction. When we sin we turn away from our purpose of glorifying God, and God uses His Word to point us back to the truth. Scripture highlights and rectifies errors and persuades us to conform
to God’s standard. When we do that—when we are living in the truth—the Lord reveals His unique purpose for us and blesses us as we seek to fulfill that purpose.

Scripture is also given to train us in righteousness. The Bible would only be a punitive book if all it did were rebuke and correct. But God uses His Word to gently guide us toward maturity—toward being the kind of believers described in 1 Thessalonians 5.

None of these benefits can be experienced apart from reading and applying the Bible. God’s Word is His immediate means of communicating His will—including His unique purpose—to you. Do not misinterpret what I am saying. You will not discover your profession in the Bible (unless you are into fishing, tax collecting, or shepherding). Nor will the Bible reveal to you the name of your mate (unless it is Boaz or Mary). But saturating your mind with the commands of God and the unique stories of God’s servants in the past is the beginning point for discovering God’s specific purpose for your life in the present.

Talk to Others

Proverbs 13:10, 20 says, “Wisdom is with those who receive counsel. . . . He who walks with wise men will be wise.” When it comes to discovering your unique purpose, it’s wise to talk with those who know you best. They can see things you cannot see—both your abilities and your inabilities. All of us have blind spots, and if we are wise we will ask trusted family and friends to point out areas in our lives that are hidden to our eyes.

Theologians and pastors often refer to a person’s unique purpose as a “calling,” which one scholar defined as “an inner
You may think you have a knack for something. And as a believer growing in your faith and spending time in God’s Word, you feel called to use that gift in a particular way. Good. You are on the road to discovering your special story. But to be sure you are on the right road, God provides an important road sign you ought not to ignore: the wise counsel of other people.

You see, “God has given us different gifts for doing certain things well” (Rom. 12:6 NLT), but we do not always appreciate or understand the gifts He has so graciously given. That’s why we need other people in our lives—people who can guide and confirm what we believe to be our unique purpose.

My ninth-grade speech teacher, Nancy Fry, did this for me. She was a petite, older woman who barked like a drill sergeant and wore what appeared to be laced-up army boots to complete the image. Her students were scared to death of her—and for good reason! When timid students would take their turn to stand up before their peers and deliver their assigned speech, Miss Fry would often climb on the top of her desk at the back of the room and yell at the top of her voice, “Louder!”

But for some reason, Miss Fry took a special interest in me. She would work with me after school, and one day she said to me, “Robert, you are going to make a great preacher someday. You could sell anyone anything—and that’s scary!” She was the first person outside of my family who envisioned success for me as a speaker. And while I could have used my speaking ability in any number of ways, I obeyed the Lord’s leading and chose to dedicate that ability to preaching God’s Word.

Years later, when I was just beginning my ministry, I received word that Miss Fry had passed away—and in her will
she stipulated that she wanted me to conduct her funeral service. Knowing how particular she would have been about who spoke at her service, I considered that the highest compliment of all! I am so grateful that in those formative years of my life, when I was trying to determine God’s unique purpose for me, God placed someone like Nancy Fry—and many others afterward—whom He used to steer me toward my life’s calling.

However, God can also use the counsel of other people to point out our liabilities. When I had finished my Master of Theology degree from Dallas Theological Seminary, I was burned out on school, having spent three years in college followed by four years in graduate school. I had thought about pursuing a doctorate, but frankly, I was looking for an excuse not to.

One day I scheduled lunch with an older, more seasoned minister and told him my dilemma, laying out all the reasons I really didn’t need a doctorate. “Look at pastor so-and-so,” I said. “He doesn’t have a doctorate, and he has a huge church and a thriving ministry.” My friend looked at me and said, “That’s right, Robert. But you don’t have his looks or his voice. You’d better get your doctorate!” Ouch! I saw that not-so-gentle-reproof as God’s leading and followed my friend’s advice. Seeking counsel from those who know us is one of God’s primary ways for us to discover His specific calling for our lives.

**Obey Your Passions**

Many people are shocked when they hear me say, “One of the primary ways God directs you is through the desires He
puts in your heart. If you want to know what you should do, ask yourself the question, ‘What do I want to do?’

I can hear some people protesting, “Wait a minute! Doesn’t the Bible say that our hearts are wicked, deceptive, and can never be trusted?” That’s certainly true about our desires before we become a Christian. But one of the results of salvation is the transformation of our hearts—our desires—to conform to God’s desires. The closer we move toward God, the more our desires reflect His desires for us.

If you are in a growing and intimate relationship with God, then the Bible teaches that He will mold your desires to conform to His plan for your life. To put it another way, when God controls your life, He controls your desires, just as David explained in Psalm 37:4–5:

Delight yourself in the LORD;  
And He will give you the desires of your heart.  
Commit your way to the LORD,  
Trust also in Him, and He will do it.

Another word for desire is passion. To discover your unique purpose, ask yourself, What am I passionate about? What needs do I see in the world that must be met? Sometimes our passion arises from a deep hurt in our life. Candace Lightner lost her daughter to a drunk driver and as a result decided to devote her energies to removing the menace of drunk drivers from the nation’s highways through the organization she founded, Mothers Against Drunk Driving.

Other times, our passion flows out of our desire to glorify God. As a teenager, Bill Hybels was always looking for ways to share Christ with his fellow students. One day he invited
a non-Christian friend to go to church with him. The poorly presented music and mediocre message so embarrassed Bill—and so turned off his friend—that Bill determined to devote his life to creating a church where everything was done with excellence and where Christians could bring their unbelieving friends without apologizing. That experience was the beginning of Willow Creek Church—and thousands of other churches like it.

Christian writer Frederick Buechner said, “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” One of the primary ways God reveals the unique purpose for our lives is through the passion He has placed in our hearts—a passion that will meet a very real need in the world.

Yet many Christians live under a black cloud of doubt, believing that their passion to accomplish their purpose is somehow sinful. They are convinced that the best way to discover God’s will is to ask, What is absolutely the most miserable thing I could imagine spending my life doing? That must be God’s will for me! They are convinced that God’s plan for them should be the hardest, most distasteful existence they can possibly imagine. Nothing could be further from the truth! God is more interested in your discovering His unique plan for you than even you are. And one of the primary ways He reveals that purpose to you is through the desires He places in your heart.

Recognize Your Gifts and Abilities

God will not only give you the desire (passion) to fulfill His purpose for life but He will also endow you with the
Discover Your Unique Purpose

gifts and abilities you need for that purpose. The apostle Paul affirmed, “It is God who is at work within you, giving you the will [desire] and the power [gifts and abilities] to achieve his purpose” (Phil. 2:13 Phillips).

The common idea that “You can be whatever you want to be in life” is a feel-good sentiment that has no basis in reality. For example, many of us were told as children, “Anyone in America can become the president of the United States.” Yet the truth is that most people do not have the gifts, temperament, or skills necessary to perform that job.

Although you cannot be anything you want to be, God has given you all the gifts you need to be everything He wants you to be. Just as understanding your desires is key to discovering God’s purpose for your life, recognizing your gifts and abilities can help you determine the story God has designed you to tell.

The apostle Paul encouraged us to perform an honest assessment of our gifts and abilities when he wrote, “I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment” (Rom. 12:3).

Paul is encouraging us to be realistic when it comes to evaluating our gifts. For example, if you feel like God is calling you to become a doctor but you have no gifts in science and pass out at the sight of blood, you might want to rethink your vocation! Perhaps you envision yourself preaching God’s Word to thousands. Yet if you break out into a cold sweat when you face a large crowd and have the “gift” of putting people to sleep when you speak, you might consider another calling. I realize there are examples in the Bible of God occasionally calling people to roles for which they had no gifts, but usually God’s purpose for us aligns with God’s gifts to us.
This principle is clearly seen in Exodus 31, when the Lord tells Moses that He has uniquely gifted Bezalel as a skilled craftsman:

I have filled him with the Spirit of God in wisdom, in understanding, in knowledge, and in all kinds of craftsmanship, to make artistic designs for work in gold, in silver, and in bronze, and in the cutting of stones for settings, and in the carving of wood. (Exod. 31:3–5)

God did not call Bezalel to be the leader of God’s people—that was Moses’s job. Nor did God call Bezalel to be the priest of God’s people—that was Aaron’s role. Rather, God called Bezalel to be the craftsman of God’s tabernacle. If Bezalel had tried to lead the people and Moses had tried to carve the stone, both would have been a disaster.

“God normally calls us along the line of our giftedness,” Os Guinness observed.8 If you don’t have a clear understanding of your gifts, ask yourself the following questions:

• What do I enjoy doing?
• What things do other people see me do and say, “You were born to do that”?
• What do I do that seems effortless to me?
• What is the common denominator in the three most satisfying and successful things I’ve done in my life?

Accurately assessing your gifts is key to discovering the purpose for which God has created you. Remember, God did not create you to tell someone else’s story. Instead, He has...
gifted you to communicate a unique message through your life that will glorify Him.

**Yield to the Leading of the Spirit**

Saturating your mind with Scripture, consulting with others, following your passion, and determining your gifts are all vital in discovering your unique purpose. But living out your purpose requires surrendering your life to the control of God’s Holy Spirit.

From the time I was a little boy, I felt that my life’s work would be as an executive producer in the television industry. I was interested in communication and finances—both integral parts of that profession. I spent every spare moment I could reading professional journals and books about the television industry. I had no doubt this was how God wanted me to spend my life.

But all that changed one summer day when I was fifteen years old. After the noon service at our church’s youth camp—as everyone was racing to be first in line for lunch—God communicated to me very clearly that He had a different plan for my life than I had thought. On that summer day God told me I was to be a pastor. (Sometimes people ask if God spoke to me audibly. I jokingly reply, “Actually, it was louder than that!”)

None of my gifts or interests changed that day; they were just redirected toward another calling. But before I could start fulfilling my purpose, I had to surrender to God’s Spirit and say, “Yes, Lord.”

We must learn how to listen when God’s Spirit speaks to us and then learn to obey—even when obedience seems
absurd. For example, from a human perspective it was foolish for Abraham to strike out for an unknown land or to offer Isaac as a sacrifice.

It was idiotic for Joshua to march his army around Jericho with nothing but shouts and trumpets.

It was impractical for Gideon to go into battle against larger numbers with only three hundred men.

It was dangerous for Rahab to harbor the Jewish spies who scoped out Jericho.

It was risky for Elijah to confront the king and pronounce God’s judgment.

But each of these men and women knew they had heard the unmistakable call of God and responded with total and unconditional obedience. Had they chosen not to surrender to God’s plan for their lives, we would not be talking about them thousands of years later.

Pastor and author Max Lucado has a simple formula for discovering your purpose in life: “Use your uniqueness (what you do) to make a big deal out of God (why you do it) every day of your life (where you do it). At the convergence of all three, you’ll find . . . your sweet spot.”* Discovering your “sweet spot” is the first step to living an extraordinary life.