

THE ULTIMATE COMMUNICATOR

ONE MAN'S SEARCH FOR THE MEANING OF LIFE

WAYNE DAVIES

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Grace & Peace,
Wayne Davies

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INTRODUCTION:

WHY I WROTE THIS BOOK

Jesus told a parable about two sons and their father in Luke 15:11-32. One of the sons decides to take his share of the father's inheritance and leave the family to live in "a distant country" where he "squandered his wealth."

We call this young man "the prodigal son." The word "prodigal" means wasteful. The prodigal son wasted his life. Eventually, he realizes what a fool he's been, comes to his senses, and returns to his father, begging for mercy and humbly confessing, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son."

The father receives his repentant son with open arms and announces, "Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

I wrote this book because I, too, am a prodigal son.

What you are about to read is the story of my spiritual journey. You'll read how I made a conscious decision to leave my heavenly Father and live in a distant county, a spiritual no-man's land of practical atheism, ignoring my Creator and becoming my own God.

I'm 57 as I write this introduction. But I wrote the book about 11 years ago, soon after God orchestrated an amazing sequence of events to bring me to my knees and back to Himself.

If I wrote my story today, I would undoubtedly write it differently. When I wrote "The Ultimate Communicator" I was still in the middle of it all, only knowing "the facts and

circumstances" and not fully understanding what God was doing at the time.

Today I look back and see the hand of God in all of it – every event, every choice, every conversation, every relationship. What you are about to read is a testimony to the sovereign grace of God in my life. I'm not sure how well I communicate that amidst the details.

So that's the one thing I want to emphasize up front – my story is really God's story. It's an account of what He has done in me and for me. And for that I am eternally grateful.

You'll also see my pride throughout the book. I've wondered whether I should go back and re-write it, but decided to leave it alone. I've always had an inflated ego. Why try to hide it?

Most of all, I hope you'll see God at work in the pages ahead. And may God be at work in your life as you search for the meaning of life. King Jesus is The Ultimate Communicator.

CHAPTER 1. THE BLIND REFEREE

I couldn't believe what I just saw.

I stood up, furious. I raised my arms in disbelief, looking straight at the man wearing a black-striped shirt, the zebra refereeing my daughter's soccer game. He was only a few feet away. I was sitting at the mid-field line, smack in the middle of 50 other parents who were also screaming and yelling and carrying on like juveniles.

Courtney, my 12-year old daughter, was playing a soccer game on a sunny Sunday in June. But not just any game, you understand. It was the last game of the season, and it was her birthday. So there was much more at stake than usual.

Her team was locked in a 1-1 battle with 2 minutes to go. One of her teammates just launched a high arching pass down the left sideline. Courtney raced after the ball and got there first. All that stood between her and the goal was the goalie. She began a beeline for glory but was rudely interrupted by a defender, who came out of nowhere to cut her off.

Next thing I see, four legs become entwined and two bodies go down to the ground with a thud. Next thing I hear is the referee's whistle. Next thing I know, he calls a foul . . . on Courtney.

I couldn't believe it! Neither could anyone else who happened to be rooting for our team. The other half of the crowd was delighted, of course.

At that moment, standing there with my arms in the air, I was tempted to give the ref a piece of my mind. Really let him

have it -- "What are you, blind? Where'd ya get those glasses, at a garage sale?"

I started to form the words, but decided against it.

I had been down that road before, and remembered the simple fact that it wouldn't do any good. Nothing I said or did now could change the call.

Plus, I promised myself I would not act like an idiot today. Not on my daughter's birthday. So I just shut my mouth and sat down. The game ended in a 1-1 tie and another soccer season was history.

* * * * *

Ever been to a youth soccer game? Do yourself a favor and go see one -- every town has'em. You'll see kids having a blast and parents acting like kids.

What you'll also see is a great lesson in communication. Or more specifically, a lesson in how not to communicate.

What you'll see is dozens of parents all screaming simultaneously at their children, all telling them to do what the child already knows how to do. When kids are playing soccer and their parents are yelling at them, how much of that sideline yelling do you think the kids actually hear?

I asked my daughter that question. Her response: "I can't hear a word you say, Dad. So many people are all screaming at once, nothing any parent says makes any sense at all. It's just a bunch of jumbled noise."

These comments are applicable to many areas of life, aren't they? Let's start with the world of advertising, for example. If you own a small business or are involved in any type of sales

activity, isn't the soccer player just like your prospective customer?

Think about it: How many sales messages bombard your customer daily?

Now jump to the other side of the fence and put on your consumer's hat. Reflect on the many sales messages you receive every day via a multitude of media: radio and TV commercials, print ads in newspapers and magazines, billboards, etc, etc, etc.

Probably hundreds of them every day, isn't it?

And with all this marketing "noise" coming at the consumer every day, is it any wonder that most advertising is ignored? We've become immune to it, haven't we? And we have to, or we'd do nothing all day but process incoming messages as fast as we can see or hear them.

If you are a businessperson, isn't your success determined, in large part, by the way you answer this question: What are you doing to cut through all that noise and get your prospect's attention? How do you get someone to respond to your message and purchase your produce or service repeatedly?

Of course, what I'm talking about isn't just applicable to business success. In any relationship, isn't your success determined, to some degree, by the success you have as a communicator? Parents communicating with children, children communicating with parents, friends communicating with friends.

We all have something to say and we all want to be heard. We want others to like us and affirm our worth. And the way

you go about expressing yourself is a big part of that, either good or bad.

So the process of communication is all around us. And the desire to be a successful communicator is an intrinsic part of the human experience.

All my life I've been fascinated by -- even obsessed with -- the communication process. I'm a businessman (a Tax Accountant) and within the past few years I've discovered a system of marketing communication that dramatically increased the size of my business in a relatively short period of time.

But the theme of this book is not marketing, although you may learn something about marketing by reading it. Rather, the purpose of this book is to tell you how my obsession with communication has changed every aspect of my life -- both materially and spiritually.

It's been said that the two topics you should never discuss are "politics and religion." This book is about both: politics -- because I'm a Tax Accountant and I can't tell you my story without telling you what I think about our tax system; and our tax system is simply one part of our political system.

And religion? What does that have to do with marketing and taxes? Well, in the process of discovering how to successfully communicate in the business world, I ended up being confronted with life's most critical questions -- questions like "does God exist?" and "what is the meaning of life?"

Everyone has a story to tell -- this is mine. It's my story of how a desire to communicate led me down a path of self-discovery I never thought would happen.

CHAPTER 2. PAPER OR PLASTIC?

The grocery store clerk looked at me impatiently, waiting for an answer.

“Paper or plastic?” she asked a second time.

I tried to say the word, but nothing would come out.

“P-p-p-p-p.” I couldn’t say “paper.” “P-p-p-pl-pl-pl”. And I sure as heck couldn’t say “plastic.”

Just my luck. Given a choice of two words, and wouldn’t ya know it, both of them start with the same letter. Not a good day for “p” words, I thought to myself.

I was standing in the express lane -- the sign read “10 items or less.” In the last few moments the line had suddenly gotten longer, and I felt the presence of several impatient customers behind me.

Now all eyes were on me and the marbles in my mouth. I finally gave up, walked a few steps to where the clerk bagged the groceries and pointed to the stack of paper bags.

“Paper?” she demanded. Now she was just plain mad.

“Y-y-y-y-y”. I nodded my head in the affirmative as I realized I was blocking on everything.

“Why didn’t you just say so?”

While glaring at the clerk, I reached for my wallet and suppressed the urge to reach for her neck and strangle her.

For most stutterers, the inability to speak a simple one-word command leads you into a world of frustration and humiliation that few understand. And like most stutterers, I've lived in that world for as long as I can remember.

So over the years I've worked hard to develop a particular style of speech designed to hide the stuttering. And I've gotten pretty good at avoiding it. If I sense a "block" coming, I can replace the problem word with another in a nanosecond. Or I just stop in the middle of a sentence, back up, and start over. Often, if I talk faster on the second or third try, I can get through the sentence fluently and mentally breathe a sigh of relief.

I've gotten so good at hiding it, most people don't know I stutter.

Truth is, I'm ashamed to admit it. I hate it. And it annoys me that I didn't get to say what I really wanted to say. And like any stutterer, we hate it when people finish our sentences for us.

It comes and goes like the wind. And it's degree of severity varies daily.

This lifelong struggle to communicate reached a critical point several years ago. I was an accountant for small CPA firm. One day the owner came in and said "I'm retiring. You can go look for a new job, or you can start your own business with my help -- I'll give you all the accounts you currently work on for free, to get you started."

This was a big break. I had always dreamed of someday going it alone. And now I was being handed that opportunity on a silver platter. I could start my own business without having to build the business from scratch. What an opportunity!

And for the first couple years, things went well. I was doing what I loved to do, and I got to fly solo. For me, the freedom of self-employment was a perfect fit. I loved being my own boss and having control over my time.

But I wanted the business to grow. I had just turned 40 and had visions of entrepreneurial grandeur. But it became a struggle just to keep the business at its initial level of income.

You think an accountant has a bullet-proof, recession-proof business? Think again.

I mean, all those helpless taxpayers are forced to file a return every year, right? So they have to come back year after year to use my services, right? Not quite.

Clients move. Clients decide to do their own return. Clients find another accountant who charges less (price shoppers!). Clients die.

So I decided that if my business was to grow, I would have to be proactive. I found out the hard way that just because I do good work and provide good customer service doesn't necessarily mean that a business will grow.

As much as I hated to admit it, I was going to have to get out there and drum up new business, because my business, along with my elderly clientele, was dying a slow death.

I started reading everything I could about marketing, which I knew nothing about. Accountants don't study marketing in college. We study accounting.

I learned that successful marketing can be defined as follows: the profitable communication of the right Message to the right Market via the right Media. If a business isn't growing,

it's probably because there's a problem with one (or more) of these three things.

I also learned that no matter how "good" a product or service, without a profitable marketing plan, it don't mean squat.

So I took this 3-part formula described above (message, market, media) and applied it to my tax business.

First, the market: I knew I couldn't be all things to all people. I decided to market exclusively to one particular type of taxpayer: the small business owner and/or self-employed person.

Then I decided on a media: As a stutterer, I knew I had to find a way to get my message out to lots of prospects without a lot of face-to-face sales calls.

So picking the media was easy: direct mail. How else could I get my message out to my target market so quickly, easily and affordably?

Like most states, in Indiana, if you form a new business (like a corporation, partnership, or LLC) the basic info about your new business becomes a matter of public record. And that list of all new business start-ups in Indiana is available for for a nominal fee from the Secretary of State's office. OK, so I got my market and my media.

Now came the hard part. The message.

What do I say in my sales letter to convince a new small business owner to pick up the phone and call me for an appointment? I fired up the word processor and started working away.

I wanted to keep costs down, so I figured the shorter the better -- just one page should do it -- that way I'd save on paper, printing and postage. People are busy, right? So I just need a few paragraphs to introduce myself and tell them how to contact me. I was getting excited!

I finished my first sales letter and sent it out to about a thousand prospects. Then I sat down next to the phone and waited for the calls to pour in.

Well, you know what happened next, don't you? Yep, nothing. Nothing at all. Not one call. Man, was I depressed.

But I'm stubborn. Once I start something, I refuse to quit. Back to the drawing board I went.

I continued my study of direct mail methods. I continued reading and learning. I spent hundreds of dollars on books and audios about direct response marketing methods.

And I kept at it for several months: writing and re-writing that sales letter. I was gearing up for the upcoming tax season and I wanted my next direct mail campaign to be successful. Finally, tax season came.

Now, instead of a one page sales letter, it was a 12 page sales letter. I read somewhere, "the more you tell, the more you sell." I figured, why not? That one-page letter sure didn't do me any good.

And believe it or not, that 12-page sales letter literally changed my life. That one sales letter skyrocketed my business beyond my wildest dreams.

Here's what that one sales letter did for me:

My business doubled in size over the next 3 years.

My income increased to the point that many of my monetary goals were now attainable. My family was able to buy a larger house, so that each of our three children could have their own bedroom. And my wife was able to switch from full-time to part-time employment

Here's something else that still amazes me -- all this happened during a recession. And even though my target market was small business owners, one of the hardest-hit sectors of the economy, my business was booming.

I was giddy with success and on top of the world.

* * * * *

Now that I've told you my little success story, I actually feel guilty. I've debated for the past several days whether to include it or not, for these reasons:

1. I wonder whether it sounds like I'm bragging. And I guess I am. But I don't like to sound boastful. People are usually turned off by an attitude of cocky arrogance, and I'm afraid that's how this part of my story is going to be viewed.
2. It's not like I discovered the cure for cancer or accomplished some other unheard-of feat of greatness. The marketing strategy I discovered has been used by many businesses. Like any field, in business there truly is nothing new under the sun. I found something that worked for others and applied it to my situation.

All I did was follow a formula that I learned from somebody else. I read a few books on direct marketing and simply followed the directions, much like you'd follow the directions on the box when baking a cake.

Having said that, I must now tell you something I've never told anyone else: even though I was outwardly happy about my success, at a deeper level I must confess that I was also a bit troubled by it.

Sure, it's nice to make more money. And it was very satisfying to give bigger and better material comforts to my family. I'm like most men – I've got a natural desire to be the "provider" and making more money certainly stroked my ego.

But in the midst of this success, there was a sense of emptiness that's hard to describe . . . an intangible realization that this success didn't really do for me what I thought it would do.

So what did I do? Well, I decided that I just had to . . . make even more money!

How much money does it take to make a greedy person happy?

Just one more dollar.

That's honestly how I felt. The desire to make money consumed me. I became obsessed with it. I thought about it day and night. I kept studying everything I could about marketing, and spent hours planning how to make my business more profitable.

I have always been a bit compulsive. Once I start something, I keep at it until it consumes me, body and soul. So after experiencing initial success in growing my business, I wanted more . . . lots more.

So I entered Phase Two of my grandiose entrepreneurial plan: today Fort Wayne, tomorrow the world! I was getting full of myself and figured the sky's the limit.

I've always liked to write. I have days when I don't talk too good, but I've yet to stutter when I'm putting the words on paper instead of in the air.

So I decided to write a book about tax reduction strategies for small business owners, and self-publish the book by selling it via my website. The "ebook craze" was going strong and I figured that would be a low-cost way to expand my business even further.

The strategy was simple: Put up a website, drive traffic to it, and a certain percentage of those visitors will buy the ebook, and a certain percentage of those ebook customers will become clients. It worked. People from all over the country started buying my ebook. I made a nice profit from the ebook sales, and I started getting new clients from around the nation, too. My advertising budget became a profit center.

Does it sound like I'm bragging again? Please bear with me.

But even with the success of my website and self-publishing, do you think I was any happier? Oh, at one level, I guess I attained a measure of happiness – the happiness that comes from accomplishing a goal and making more money.

But was I really any happier?

No, I wasn't. I was discovering the simple truth that money doesn't bring happiness.

And slowly but surely, I came face to face with the simple fact that deep down inside, I was not all that I pretended to be.

Financial and career success were not all they were cracked up to be. Something was missing, and now that I was 46 years old, it was time to find out what that something was.

CHAPTER 3. A GLASS OF WATER AND AN EARFUL OF WORMS

“I’ll have water, please.”

With that simple request, I about fell off my chair.

My teenage daughter had just ordered a glass of water with her meal at our local Bob Evans restaurant, and I was stunned.

Before leaving for vacation last summer, I came up with the brilliant idea that our family could save a ton of money if we simply drank only “free water” with our restaurant meals instead of overpriced soft drinks.

I have three school-aged children. And so my money-saving brainstorm went over like a lead balloon. “Drink water with our meals! You gotta be kiddin’ me, Dad. Get real.”

So much for that idea.

Now, a few months later, school was back in session and my older daughter Lindsay was a member of her high school cross-country team. The coach had been talking about the importance of a nutritional diet, and how soft drinks and other junk food were not conducive to athletic success.

Apparently Lindsay got the message. And now drinking water was suddenly a cool thing for a high school athlete to do.

Timing.

* * * * *

“Well, should I go?” I asked again.

My wife looked at me like I had worms crawling out of my ears.

“Of course you should go. If you don’t, you’ll regret it for the rest of your life,” she replied.

“But it’s tax season!” I protested.

“So what? You better go, or you’ll be sorry.”

As usual, she was right.

Even though it was tax season, there was no excuse for missing my grandmother’s 90th birthday party. My family had planned a big birthday in Delaware, and I was debating whether to take a few days off in March to fly from Indiana to be there.

I never take time off during tax season. I had reasoned that even though this was a once-in-a-lifetime event, the timing was bad and therefore I could justify my absence.

Then it hit me. Am I nuts? Where are my priorities? Julie was right. If I missed this event, I wouldn’t be able to live with myself. I finally came to my senses and realized I’d be an idiot to pass this up. As stubborn as I can be, I sure didn’t want to be an idiot.

Tax season or not, I had to go.

Timing.

CHAPTER 4. WHAT'S IN A NAME LIKE NAAMAN?

The alarm clock went off at 5:00 am and I sat up in bed, bewildered.

The room looked unfamiliar and I couldn't figure out where I was. Then I remembered – I was in a hotel in Wilmington, Delaware, during tax season, to visit my Grandmother and celebrate her 90th birthday.

My 8-year old son, Russell, was sound asleep on the other bed just a few feet away, oblivious to the obnoxious sounding clock that wouldn't stop.

I reached over to turn it off, pushing every button I could find, when I realized that the clock in my room wasn't making the noise -- which even amidst my sleepy stupor made sense, because I somehow remembered not setting it.

Then I figured it out -- it was the alarm clock in the room next door, which happened to be located against the wall right next to my bed.

So I assumed the occupant of the room next door would wake up soon and turn it off. But he never did. The alarm kept ringing and ringing. Twenty minutes later, I finally realized there was nobody in the room next door and that this clock would ring forever.

I got dressed and headed down to the front desk to complain. Man was I mad. The employee followed me back down the hall and went into the vacant room next door to turn off the clock.

“Don’t worry, Mr. Davies. This won’t happen again.”

By now it was 5:30 am and I went back to sleep.

* * * * *

The next day, the alarm clock in the room next door went off at 5:00 am. Again.

I sat up in bed, hardly bewildered.

I got dressed and repeated my trek down to the front desk. I was trying to remember the last time I was this mad. Have you ever seen a short, bald, stuttering tax accountant when he’s really mad? I could feel the steam coming out of my ears.

A different clerk was on duty this time, and I persuaded him to not only turn off the alarm clock, but also to un-set it.

“Don’t worry, Mr. Davies. This won’t happen again.”

I went back to my room at 5:15 am, wide awake and unable to get back to sleep. Once again, Russell slept through the whole proceeding.

But I was all wound up with nowhere to go. Anger has a way of doing that.

I’m an avid reader and always travel with several books. I pulled out my little stack and decided to read a motivational book based on selected Bible verses.

Have you ever started reading a book, and then can’t remember exactly where you left off? That was me – I knew I had read Chapter One before coming to Delaware, but couldn’t remember if I had read anything after that. So I just started thumbing through the book and at random decided to

read Chapter Three, which had the intriguing title, “But – The Conjunction That Invites Self-Inventory”.

This chapter was all about a little-known Old Testament Bible character named Naaman, based on 2 Kings 5:1, which starts out,

“Now Naaman was commander of the army of the king of Syria.”

Nothing too earth-shattering there. The Bible is full of kings and generals and armies.

But I sat there mesmerized. I could hardly believe I was reading about a man named Naaman. Was I really awake? Did that alarm clock really go off at 5:00 am for the second day in a row? Or was I dreaming?

Let me explain.

What's in a name -- like "Naaman"?

I lived in Wilmington, Delaware for the first 20 years of my life, always within a few miles from one particular road -- Naaman's Road. For many years I traveled on Naaman's Road every day – we lived in three different neighborhoods that required you drive on Naaman's Road to get wherever you wanted to go, whether it be school, the mall, the grocery store or a little league baseball game.

For four years I played little league baseball in . . . Naaman's Little League.

When Russell and I traveled to Delaware for my Grandmother's birthday party, we flew into Philadelphia, rented a car and drove to my Grandmother's house. On the way, we had time to drive around my old stomping grounds

and I showed Russell where I grew up -- the schools I attended, the houses I lived in.

Driving down I-95, we got off at the Naaman's Road exit, the starting and ending point for this tour of my childhood landmarks.

Some coincidence? Timing.

So I read with great curiosity the story of Naaman. Was I ever interested to find out about this guy!

And it turns out he was quite a man . . .

“He was a great man in the sight of his master and highly regarded, because through him the Lord had given victory to Syria. He was a valiant soldier . . .” (2 Kings 5:1)

So here's a man with great worldly success, a strong military leader, highly respected by his country's political leaders and undoubtedly revered by the soldiers under his command.

The next sentence just leaped off the page:

“He was a valiant soldier, but he was a leper.” (2 Kings 5:1)

For all his success, Naaman was not all that he seems to be. There is a flaw in his life that restricts him from social circles. Because of his debilitating and humiliating skin condition, he faced social ostracism beyond our imagination. Leprosy was a dreaded disease and those inflicted by it were considered “unclean” and excluded from society.

. . . but he was a leper . . .

That little word “but,” that conjunction of contrast, puts Naaman's situation in a whole new light, doesn't it?

Well, it turns out that one of Naaman's recent military victories was against Israel, Syria's neighbor to the south, and a young Jewish girl was taken captive and now was a slave in Naaman's household. She had the courage to suggest a solution to Naaman's problem: go to Elisha, the prophet of Israel, and seek healing.

And that's what Naaman did – he swallowed his pride and went to the land he had recently conquered to get healed. Elisha told Naaman, "Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed." (2 Kings 5:10)

Naaman balked at first, but finally submitted to these simple instructions and did what Elisha commanded: "So he went down and dipped himself in the Jordan seven times, as the man of God had told him, and his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy." (2 Kings 5:14)

The devotional reading ended with these words:

Does this message call for critical self-examination? Is there a debilitating flaw in your life so noxious by its potency and dangerous by its "invisibility" that it calls for a conscious effort for fervent self-inventory?

As I sat there in my hotel room just a few miles from Naaman's Road, I felt like a modern-day Naaman.

Yes, it was time for me to take a hard look at my life, time for a self-inventory. So I took out a notebook and recorded these thoughts:

"Like Naaman, I am successful by the world's standards -- I have everything that a 21st century man is supposed to have – a loving family, a rewarding career, all the material

comforts of a capitalistic society. By many standards, I have an easy life.

But like Naaman, am I a spiritual leper? Do I have a spiritual sickness that only God can cure?

I've got everything a man is supposed to have that brings happiness, but deep down inside, I know that something is missing. In the midst of my success, I feel a sense of alienation that is hard to describe -- I've been feeling this despair for some time. There's a dissatisfaction, a restlessness, the stark realization that life is meaningless.

Does God have the cure for that meaninglessness?

What does God want me to do to be cured of this disease?"

CHAPTER 5. WHICH WAY IS UP?

Perhaps you've heard this story before:

One very foggy night the captain of a large ship saw what appeared to be another ship's lights approaching in the distance.

The two were on a course that would mean a certain head-on collision.

So quickly the captain signaled to the approaching vessel, "Change your course ten degrees west."

The reply came, blinking back through the thickening fog, "You change your course ten degrees east."

The captain became insulted, pulled rank, and angrily sent a message back: "I'm a sea captain with 35 years experience. Change your course ten degrees west."

Without hesitation, the signal flashed back, "I'm a seaman, fourth class. You change your course ten degree east."

The captain, now becoming enraged, realized that the two ships were rapidly approaching one another, and would certainly crash in a few short minutes.

So he sent his final warning: "Now you listen hear. I'm a fifty thousand ton freighter. Change your course ten degree west - now!"

A simple message came blinking back: "I'm a light house."

Sitting in that hotel room in Wilmington, Delaware, the city of my birth and where I spent the first 20 years of my life, I was confronted with the reality of my situation: I was headed in the wrong direction. Was it time to change course?

I needed to make a change in the way I was living my life, and I knew it. I was at a turning point, tired of living a life that lacked meaning, yet uncertain that God could make a difference in my life.

For the past 21 years I had created a life devoid of God. I wanted nothing to do with Him, the church, or any organized religion.

Everyone's life can be viewed as a spiritual journey – mine is no exception. One's life can also be viewed as a play with several acts – if my life was performed on a stage, here's how it had gone so far:

Act One: Life With God (Age 15-25)

In high school I started attending church with a good friend and his family. With their help I made a profession of faith in Christ, was baptized and got involved in a local Bible-believing church.

As a high school senior, I decided to commit my life to full-time Christian service. I felt called to the ministry, and so attended college and seminary to prepare for a life of preaching and teaching the Word of God.

After graduating from seminary, I started working in a church as the Assistant Pastor. Things started out well. Then, over the next year, my whole world fell apart.

The stress of public speaking became too much to handle. Like most stutterers, I had good days and bad days -- days of fluency and days when I could hardly talk. It was humiliating to spend hours preparing for a Bible class, only to get up in front of a group of people and be unable to talk.

Over time, the good days became few and far between; the bad days became the norm. And I became discouraged and started to question my decision to serve God.

The weeks and months dragged on and I started to hate my job. And most significantly, I started to hate my God. Why would He let me go through such stress and humiliation? Where was His power that I read about in the Bible?

My faith deteriorated rapidly, and I soon found myself asking the questions I was supposed to have the answers to – questions I had never allowed myself to ask, questions like, “Does God really exist? If He does exist, why haven’t I experienced His presence and power? And what about all those other religions? How do I know that the God of Christianity is the one true God?”

I had spent the past ten years committed to God and doing everything I knew to please Him. Then, within ten months I was ready to walk away from God and the whole Christian faith. I was confused and frustrated. And I wanted out.

So I got out. I quit my job and moved out of town, never wanting to see those people again. I was bitter and ashamed. And in my heart, I left God behind, too.

Act Two: Life Without God (Age 26-45)

In 1983 I moved to Fort Wayne, Indiana to start a new life – a life without God. I was determined to “un-brainwash” myself

from all those years of theological study and ministerial training.

And that's what I did – for the next 20 years, I lived a life consciously ignoring God. No Bible, no prayer, no church. I avoided Christians like the plague, and initially felt free as a bird. I could do what I wanted, whenever I wanted. Nobody could tell me what to do. I felt like I was on my own for the first time in my life.

I remember the day I took all my theology books to Fort Wayne Bible College. They took a few and the rest I threw in the dumpster. I was starting to enjoy this life of ungodly defiance!

And over the years, I quietly convinced myself there was no God. I became an atheist and inwardly laughed at people of all religions, accusing them of being weak and spineless.

During these 20 years I also became a humanist, which I found to be a perfect complement to atheism. There is no God but Man, and I am a Man, so I am my own God, and I can do whatever I want to do with my life. I thrived in this philosophy of atheistic humanism and became filled with pride in myself and my abilities.

Media mogul Ted Turner pretty much expressed my attitude toward life:

“Almost every religion talks about a savior coming. When you look in the mirror in the morning, when you're putting on your lipstick or shaving, you're looking at your savior. Nobody else is going to save you but yourself.”

I became my own God, my own Savior. And I did what most middle-class American males do, pursuing happiness

through family and career success. And I attained that success – I met and married a wonderful woman, we started raising a family, I found a new career in accounting that was both challenging and rewarding – I had the world by the tail and all was well.

Or so I thought.

For all this outward success, toward the end of this 20 year period of Life Without God, I began to experience a sense of internal despair that is difficult to describe. I didn't talk to anyone about it, but it was there. And now I sat in a hotel room in Wilmington, Delaware at 5:30 in the morning reading a Bible story about a Syrian leper named Naaman who was healed by washing himself in the Jordan seven times over 2,000 years ago.

How does a practical atheist end up reading the Bible at 5:30 in the morning?

Because I had reached the point where I was ready to admit that my Life Without God wasn't working. By the world's standards, I had a good life. But in my own mind, I was miserable and it was time to reconsider all my beliefs and presuppositions.

Try as I did to “un-brainwash” myself from years of Christian theology, there were certain Biblical concepts that remained buried in my consciousness . . . these stand out:

Meaningless! Meaningless! Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless. (Ecclesiastes 1:2)

These words were written by King Solomon, described by God as the wisest man who ever lived. This dramatic proclamation about the futility of human existence without

God is the theme of the book of Ecclesiastes, the 21st book of the Bible, and the way I began to feel about my life.

No matter how much money I made, no matter how much pleasure I found in raising a family, it wasn't enough. It was time to admit that something was missing. I thought I had life all figured out - but why was I so unhappy deep down inside?

Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him. (Proverbs 26:12)

After studying the Bible all those years, it became increasingly difficult for me to ignore statements like these. They came back to haunt me . . . especially this one:

The fool says in his heart, "There is no God." (Psalm 14:1)

For 20 years I had tried to find happiness by ignoring God, and now I felt like a fool. It was time to admit my foolishness and acknowledge the need for God in my life. I was headed in the wrong direction. It was time to change course.

Act Three: Life With God Again (Age 46 - ?)

I returned home from that Delaware trip knowing that my search for a meaningful life would somehow soon be over. I still wasn't sure exactly what I should do, but I knew I had to return to God at some level.

I had come a long way in the past couple months. For years I was so sure that God did not exist; now His existence seemed so obvious. I cannot really explain how I came to accept God's existence. It just became self-evident to me. I looked around at the beauty of nature -- the leaves of spring were budding, the flowers were starting to bloom in the garden -- and I

couldn't help but think, "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands" (Psalm 19:1).

I couldn't remember the last time I prayed. And now I found myself trying to communicate with the Creator of the universe. I was very tentative at first, and didn't know where to begin, it had been so long . . .

Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. (Matthew 7:8)

After 20 years of unbelief, it felt awkward to pray. I would start to pray, then the doubts would return. "What am I doing? Who am I talking to? God, are you really there? There's nobody here but me, is there?"

So I started by asking God to help me sort all this out. I kept at it, telling God how I really felt, how I wanted to believe He was there, but sometimes I just wasn't sure.

"I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24)

I had a small kernel of faith and I asked God to take that kernel and make it grow. Slowly but surely, it did. I had enough faith to ask God to give me more faith. I believed that He would somehow take me from where I was and move me to where He wanted me to be, wherever that might be and however long that would take.

For many days, this was all I could say to God: "God, are you there? If you are, I know you don't want me to live without you any longer. Please help me, God. Please help me to believe in you. Please help me to live a life of faith. I can't do it on my own. Please give me more faith."

And He answered that prayer, because over the next few weeks, things started to happen. I had enough faith to believe that God would reward my search for Him, and I knew that He would do His part if I did mine.

To continue my search, I did what I often do -- I read a book.

No, I didn't start reading the Bible. Don't get me wrong – the Bible is powerful and even in all my years of unbelief, I maintained a measure of respect for the uniqueness of this book. It claims to be the very words of God, and as I look back, perhaps I would have made progress faster had I just gone right to the Source.

It had been so long since I opened it. I was intimidated by the prospect of reading it and being so directly confronted. For some reason I felt led to read a book that could help people like me who were just starting out on their spiritual journey, which is where I was – I was starting over, and I needed something written for a spiritual infant. Milk, not meat.

My faith was small. I knew I had to feed that kernel of faith. So I went into the attic and started looking for my old theology books. Something inside told me I hadn't thrown all of them in the dumpster back in 1983. I was looking for a particular book that I remember giving to people who were first exploring the possibility of living for God.

And I found it, buried in the bottom of a box of books that I hadn't looked at for many years: Mere Christianity, by C.S. Lewis.

Perhaps you've heard of C.S. Lewis. He is best known for a series of delightful children's books called The Chronicles of Narnia. He was also a brilliant scholar, a prolific author, and a former atheist turned committed Christian.

I didn't just read *Mere Christianity*, I devoured it. The first part lays out a logical, philosophical argument for the existence of spiritual reality. It was just what I needed to hear, and confirmed my baby faith in the existence of God.

But until now, my faith in God was faith in a very general sense of the word. At this point, my faith in God was not necessarily in the God of any particular religion. It was just faith in the concept of God, and I had not yet really made a commitment to any particular God. It could have been the God of Judaism, the God of Christianity, the God of Islam, or the God of Hinduism -- or any other religion that acknowledges the existence of a supreme being.

I hadn't given much thought to which God I was praying to and trying to connect with. Sure, back in Act One, I believed in the God of Christianity, the Trinity of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. But as Act Three got underway, I hadn't made a commitment to the God of any particular religion. It was just a commitment to the concept of God as a supreme being. I could accept monotheism, but not organized religion.

In *Mere Christianity*, Lewis discusses at length the very issues I had been wrestling with for the past several months: the existence of God, the atheistic viewpoint, the existence of good and evil, and the other classic questions that philosophers and theologians (and regular people like me and you) have been debating for centuries. But Lewis is not a philosopher or a theologian. He is a committed Christian, but a layman. He writes succinctly and plainly.

For me, the climax of Lewis' book begins on page 40, where he explains the essence of Christianity: this man named Jesus. Let me now quote directly from *Mere Christianity*.

"There suddenly turns up a man who goes about talking as if He was God. He claims to forgive sins. He says He has always existed. He says He is coming to judge the world at the end of time."

The four sentences in that paragraph hit me like a ton of bricks.

Lewis is summarizing what theologians call "The Claims of Christ." Who did Jesus claim to be? Who did He say He was? And having memorized many New Testament verses decades ago, I couldn't erase from my brain these incredible claims. Jesus was many things to many people – a great teacher, a dynamic preacher, a miracle worker and healer beyond compare. And when it came to what Jesus said about Himself, I could not deny this: this man named Jesus claimed to be God.

Back to Lewis:

"And when you have grasped that (the claim of Jesus to be God), you will see that what this man said was, quite simply, the most shocking thing that has ever been uttered by human lips."

Now I want you to think about that for just a moment, because when I read Lewis' book and saw those words on the page, I couldn't stop thinking about it – a man claims to be God. I could not disagree with Lewis' point – that has to be the craziest thing anyone has ever said.

If you are a committed Christian, the deity of Christ is probably "old news" to you. Maybe you even take it for granted. Perhaps you are thinking, "Yea, so what? Jesus said He was God. Big deal. Tell me something I don't know."

And back in Act One, I had heard this claim thousands of times and thought I believed it. But now at the beginning of Act Three, it was like I was hearing it for the first time. And I was mesmerized by its profound simplicity – a man claiming to be God in a human body.

Still with me?

Back to Lewis, as he continues to discuss the significance of Christ's claim to be God.

"No part of the claim tends to slip past us unnoticed because we have heard it so often that we no longer see what it amounts to. I mean the claim to forgive sins: any sins. Now unless the speaker is God, this is really so preposterous as to be comic.

We can all understand how a man forgives offences against himself. You tread on my toe and I forgive you, you steal my money and I forgive you.

But what should I make of a man, himself unrobbed and untrodden on, who announced that he forgave you for treading on other men's toes and stealing other men's money? Asinine fatuity is the kindest description we should give of his conduct.

Yet this is what Jesus did. He told people that their sins were forgiven, and never waited to consult all the other people whom their sins had undoubtedly injured. He unhesitatingly behaved as if He was the party chiefly concerned, the person chiefly offended in all offences. This makes sense only if He really was the God whose laws are broken and whose love is wounded in every sin.

In the mouth of any speaker who is not God, these words would imply what I can only regard as a silliness and conceit unrivalled by any other character in history."

Are you following his logic here? I sure was.

And then came the main point of the whole book:

"I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God.' That is the one thing we must not say.

A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic - on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg - or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice.

Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill him as demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to."

I was spellbound by the logic of this presentation. In my mind, it was irrefutable. I knew what I had to do. I knew what God was saying to me as plain as the clear blue sky: "You must make your choice." I knew I had to answer this question for myself: Who is Jesus? Is He who He said He was? Is He God? Is He a lunatic? Or is He the biggest fraud who ever walked the planet?

I was lying on my bed when I read pages 40 and 41 of Lewis' book. I was home alone. When I got to the last section and

was confronted with the haunting words, "You must make your choice," I finished reading and sat up. Then I got out of bed and stood up. I had to do something. I was ready to make that choice. I became overwhelmed with the reality of the claim of Christ to be God, and I knelt down next to my bed and began to cry and pray simultaneously.

I can't really remember how long I stayed in that position. I do remember crying like I've never cried before. And I remember telling God that I was ready to accept the claims of Christ. I acknowledged Jesus as the only God of the universe, the only One who could forgive my sin of 21 years of rebellious defiance. I asked God to take me back and never let me go. I no longer wanted to be my own God. I wanted Jesus to be my Lord and my God.

CHAPTER 6. THE FUNERAL PROCESSION THAT NEVER ENDS

"I would've been here sooner, but somebody died", I said to Julie at our son's soccer game.

"Did Spike die?" she asked, suddenly very concerned. (Spike is the family guinea pig.)

"No, no. Spike is fine. I have no idea who died, but whoever it was made me late for the game."

I was about 10 minutes late, and I wasn't too happy about that. I hate missing any of my children's sporting events, even 10 minutes.

I had just dropped off Courtney at basketball practice and broke several posted speed limits to get to Russell's soccer game on time. But alas, somebody died and I got stuck in a funeral procession. Hence the delay.

Death has a way of getting in the way of life, doesn't it?

* * * * *

After reading Mere Christianity and declaring my faith in the God of Christianity, I was ready to continue my spiritual journey with new vigor. I could sense that God was directing me step by step. Now that I acknowledged Jesus as the God of the universe, my entire life took on a whole new meaning. Everything made more sense; life had purpose. And I was experiencing a sense of peace that is difficult to explain.

All that despair, all that frustration, all that futility – it was all gone. I don't know where it went, I just know I didn't have it anymore.

I had experienced firsthand what Jesus meant when He said, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty" (John 6:35). My spiritual hunger was being fed; my spiritual thirst was being quenched.

And I knew enough to know that I couldn't stop here. This was not the end of a quest, but rather just the beginning of a new life.

I knew that Jesus never intended for His followers to go it alone. I needed to connect with other Christians. Fortunately my wife had been looking for a church for the past few months. For years she had expressed her concern that the

Davies family did not have a church home. And until recently, I wanted nothing to do with organized religion and took the attitude, "Well, if you and the kids want to go to church, fine. But leave me out of it."

Now I was ready to join her in this search for a church home. She had been to one church in particular and really liked it. So I agreed to go with her one Sunday.

I don't really remember much about that first service. What I do remember is that on the way out, a nice lady gave us a little gift bag with a bunch of literature about the church and its programs, along with a cassette tape.

That cassette tape contained a sermon by the pastor called "Life Instead of Death." I listened to the tape in the car on the way to work one day, and just like the day I read Mere

Christianity, I was again confronted with the claims of Jesus Christ.

This sermon was about the raising of a man from the dead from John 11. Yes, the Bible says that Jesus brought a man back to life who had been dead for four days. His name was Lazarus and he had two sisters, Mary and Martha.

Of course, bringing a man back to life after death is no small feat – for a mere man. But this was Jesus, the man who claimed to be God.

As I listened to this sermon, it became clear to me that the preacher was not so concerned about this great miracle as he was what Jesus said right before he performed the miracle.

Martha was understandably quite distraught over her brother's death. When Jesus arrived she said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Jesus replied, "Your brother will rise again."

Then He makes this incredible claim to Martha:

"I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die."

While driving in my car, listening to this sermon, I was overwhelmed by the reality of this claim. I remembered what C.S. Lewis said about Jesus' claim to forgive sins: "In the mouth of any speaker who is not God, these words would imply what I can only regard as a silliness and conceit unrivalled by any other character in history." The same thing could be said about His claim to offer everlasting life to whoever believes in Him.

I kept thinking about this over and over: "Whoever lives and believes in me will never die." We all die. Yet Jesus is saying that those who put their faith in Him will never die.

What does that mean? Since we all die a physical death, He must be talking about the ability to avoid spiritual and eternal death. He is claiming to have the keys to heaven itself, and the way to get to heaven is through faith in Jesus Christ.

Of course, I had heard this message many times before, many years ago: We are all sinners and the ultimate result of that sin is death – physical, spiritual and eternal. But because of Jesus' death on the cross, He paid the penalty for our sin, thereby satisfying the justice of God against a guilty world. By accepting His death as the only way to obtain acceptance before God, by believing in Him for salvation from sin and the eternal damnation we deserve because of that sin, Jesus says the believer will never die.

Initially, my search for spiritual truth was driven by a desperate need to find meaning in this life. I just wanted to be rescued from a life of meaninglessness and unhappiness.

But now I was faced with the fact that I also needed to be rescued from the uncertainty of the next life. And I realized that like most people, I avoided the thought of death. Who wants to think about death? What a morbid topic! Yet it's there, and deep down inside, I'll bet that any honest person is haunted by it. I know I was. What is going to happen to me when I die? I had no answer to that question, and so just ignored it.

And along comes Jesus the God/Man, who claims to have the last word over death. And He proved it by merely speaking

these words to a man who had been in his grave for four days, "Lazarus, come out!"

The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go." John 11:44

Jesus said to Martha, "Whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" (John 11:26)

By the time I finished listening to the sermon, I was a believer in Jesus not only for meaning in this life, but also for the promise of eternal life as well.

CHAPTER 7. A SIBLING RIVALRY LIKE NO OTHER

Do you have children? How do they get along? Pretty good? C'mon, be honest. Sometimes they fight like cats and dogs, don't they? Remember when you were a kid and how you used to "get along" so well with your brothers or sisters?

Did you know that Jesus had brothers and sisters? (Technically they would be half-brothers and half-sisters -- same mother but not the same father.)

After preaching in his hometown of Nazareth, the people were shocked at how well their "local boy" had done:

"Where did this man get these things?" they asked. "What's this wisdom that has been given him, that he even does miracles! Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?" (Mark 6:2-3)

So He had four brothers and at least two sisters. I wonder how they got along?

How would you have gotten along with a big brother who was . . . ah . . . perfect? Never made a mistake, never did anything wrong (ever), was always nice to everybody, always said just the right thing at just the right time.

I mean, think about it. Don't people like that just make you sick?

Now imagine that your older brother is not only perfect, but after living quietly at home for his first thirty years, he suddenly leaves home and starts traveling the countryside,

preaching and teaching, doing hundreds of miracles like turning water into wine, raising the dead, making the blind to see, the deaf to hear, the mute to speak, and . . . to top it all off, he claims to be God.

What would you think about your brother?

Here's what Jesus' siblings thought about Him:

Then Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered, so that he and his disciples were not even able to eat. When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, "He is out of his mind." (Mark 3:20-21)

The brothers of Jesus thought He was nuts. But before we get too critical of James,

Joseph, Judas and Simon, put yourself in their shoes. Remember what C.S. Lewis said, "Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse."

Not everyone believes that Jesus is the Son of God. For 21 years I sure didn't. And even his own biological brothers thought he was loony.

Not only did his brothers think Christ was crazy, they rejected His claim to be God:

"For even his own brothers did not believe in him." (John 7:5)

Imagine that. His own brothers did not accept His claim to deity. They just considered him mentally unbalanced.

Now let's fast forward a couple years . . . Jesus finishes his three-year ministry, is crucified, resurrected, and ascends into heaven. After all that teaching, preaching and healing,

what does He have to show for it? Here's the result of His work: about 120 people have committed themselves to His message and are faithfully waiting and praying in Jerusalem for directions on what to do next.

And who is among those early followers of Christ? Well, the eleven Apostles were there (Judas is gone). Anyone else? Yes.

“They all joined together in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.” Acts 1:14

Did you get that? And his brothers . . . his biological brothers were there with the apostles and Mary. What happened? Just a few months ago they were calling him a lunatic. Now they are charter members of the First Church of Jerusalem.

Whoa! Is this significant or what?

What happened to these guys? Why the dramatic turnaround?

Well, I think you can fill in the blanks. They finally got it. They finally figured it out and accepted their biological brother as the only God/Man, the very Son of God, the Creator of the universe and Savior of the world.

They finally believed in Jesus and accepted His claims. It's that simple. And make no mistake about, from a purely human perspective, these claims are unbelievable and incredible, things that a sane person would not say, unless he was God:

I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty. (John 6:35)

I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life. (John 8:12)

I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. (John 11:25-26)

I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. (John 14:6)

There they are, and they are incredible claims – spiritual fulfillment and enlightenment, eternal life, the answer to the dilemma of death, absolute truth. It's all there – everything people have been seeking since the beginning of time – for the one who believes in Jesus.

The word “believe” is used over and over in the New Testament to describe what a person must do in response to the claims of Christ.

But what does it mean to believe in Jesus?

The New Testament sheds much light on this all-important question, and makes it very clear that there are different kinds of belief, different types of faith. There is true saving faith and there is a useless dead faith. Let me explain.

Here's an example of what I mean by “useless dead faith”:

“You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that – and shudder.” James 2:19

The above verse was written by James, one of Jesus' half-brothers, someone who knew first-hand about the meaning of faith. James is saying there is a type of faith that merely acknowledges the existence of God – even demons believe in God to that extent. But is that the kind of faith Jesus was

talking about when he offered eternal life to those who believe in Him? Obviously not.

Biblical saving faith is more than mere intellectual assent to certain facts about Jesus. Yes, it must certainly include that inward conviction that says “I accept as true that Jesus is God in a human body; I accept as true that Jesus died on the cross to pay the penalty for my sins, was raised from the dead three days later, and ascended into heaven.”

But mere intellectual assent to historical and theological facts is not enough. Even the demons believe that!

The Biblical definition of saving faith must also include the concept of total commitment of one’s life to the claims and causes of Jesus Christ.

Yes, Jesus said that the road to heaven is traveled via the walk of faith. And he described that walk as one of self-denial and obedience:

“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?” (Mark 8:34-36)

Self-denial, cross-bearing, and losing your life. Could I have brought up a more politically incorrect topic? I mean, this is not the kind of stuff you hear about much in our “do you own thing” society. But that’s what He said.

And I really struggled with this part of Christ’s message. It’s easy to look at the Gospel from the standpoint of what I get out of it – a purpose in life, inner peace, salvation from sin, eternal life. Benefits galore!

But it's not a one-sided deal. Why should it be? In fact, Jesus said the decision to believe is just like the analysis one does when preparing a business plan:

“For which one of you, when he wants to build a tower, does not first sit down and calculate the cost to see if he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who observe it begin to ridicule him, saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.' . . . In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple.” (Luke 14:28-30, 33)

Whoa! Those are tough words. But words I could easily understand – I'm an accountant; I certainly know what it means to calculate the cost of something. And Jesus is saying that being a Christian requires the same type of careful, deliberate planning that any businessman would undertake when determining the feasibility of his next business venture.

In other words, it's not a decision to be taken lightly, and it's not something you can do just to get something out of it. Eternal life is a free gift that God offers to those who believe (Ephesians 2:8-9), and true belief will result in a life of obedience and good works (Ephesians 2:10).

C.S. Lewis put it this way: If you live for the next world, you get this one in the deal; but if you live only for this world, you end up losing them both.

That seemed like a very fair deal to me.

CHAPTER 8. TOUCHING THE HANDS OF GREATNESS

I knocked on the door nervously and waited. Finally a tall young man opened the door and looked at me calmly. He was tired.

"Yes?" he asked, expressionless.

"Is D-D-D-Dave there?" I stammered.

"Sure. Just a minute."

Chris disappeared as quickly as he appeared, leaving the door slightly open. That's a good sign, I thought.

The door opened again and there he stood, Dave Brubeck, one of America's greatest jazz pianists. I couldn't believe it. There I was, face to face with my idol, in a dingy backstage hallway in North Manchester, Indiana.

We just stood there, looking at each other. I was so nervous and excited, I didn't know what to say.

Dave had just finished performing. I've seen him play numerous times, and never get enough. He's come to Indiana four times in the past 15 years, for reasons I'll never understand, and I always manage to find out about it and get a ticket.

As soon as the concert ended, I made a beeline backstage and started knocking on doors. Something inside me said, "I've got to meet him."

Now the moment was here and time was standing still. And my mouth wouldn't work. Darn those marbles!

"W-W-W-ould you s-s-s-ign this?" I finally asked. I handed him an old book of sheet music. It contained some of Dave's greatest songs.

"That's an old one. Where did you get this?" He was impressed.

I started to answer but no words would come out.

Dave saw my struggle and smiled while signing his name. He gave me back the book and pen, then looked at me patiently.

"C-C-Can I see how l-l-l-long your f-f-f-ingers are?" God only knows how I got the words out. As I held up my right hand, Dave instinctively put up his left hand. As expected, his fingers were several inches longer than mine.

"Wow. S-s-s-so that's how you play all those big chords."

We stood there laughing, hands touching.

I didn't want to stay any longer, although I probably could have. I told him how much I loved his music, shook his hand, and left. The whole exchange took less than five minutes. But I remember it like it was yesterday.

My brush with greatness.

* * * * *

I don't have many heroes. There's my father. And Dave Brubeck. And that's about it.

But I've had many influences. People who've touched my life and changed the way I think. People who've had a profound influence on me.

How about you? Who are your heroes? Who would you love to meet, if only for five minutes to shake hands and say "thank you" for the way you've helped me.

You've read this far, and I'm grateful for that. You've heard my story and I'm glad you did. I've told you many things about myself. You now have some idea of what I'm like -- my struggles and my deepest desires.

The one thing that concerns me most is the simple fact that this short book will appear at first glance, to most people, to be all about me. And obviously, from one perspective, it is.

But I hope you realize by now that I'm telling this story because I want you to see beyond the events of my little life. I want you to see way beyond that. I want this story about me to point you toward the Source of all life.

As you think of who has influenced you over the years, I'd like you to stop and consider this simple question: What influence has Jesus Christ had on your life? What is your response to His claims? Have you made a commitment to Him in response to those claims?

Jesus Christ claimed to be God in a human body. When He was on earth for those 30 years, thousands had the unique opportunity to see Him, hear Him, touch Him and be touched by Him.

Can you imagine what it must have been like to be touched by the hand of the God/Man? The Apostle Peter's mother-in-law experienced that touch:

Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told Jesus about her. So he went to her, took her hand and helped her up. The fever left her and she began to wait on them. (Mark 1:30-31)

A leper experienced that touch, which is all the more significant in light of the terrible social stigma of leprosy. People avoided lepers like the plague, and religious leaders would never have gone near this man. But Jesus did:

A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, "If you are willing, you can make me clean." Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured. (Mark 1:40-42)

A 12-year old dead girl experienced that touch, again significant in light of Jewish laws prohibiting the touching of a dead person:

He took her by the hand and said to her, "Little girl, I say to you, get up!" Immediately the girl stood up and walked around (she was twelve years old). (Mark 5:41-42)

And a man both deaf and dumb experienced that touch:

There some people brought to him a man who was deaf and could hardly talk, and they begged him to place his hand on the man. After he took him aside, away from the crowd, Jesus put his fingers into the man's ears. Then he spit and touched the man's tongue. He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, "Be opened!" At this, the man's ears were opened, his tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly. (Mark 7:33-35)

Two thousands years later, the God/Man is still reaching out and touching people. He touched me in a way I could never have even imagined. And He can touch you, too. I invite you to reach out and receive His touch.

How do you do that?

"Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved"
(Acts 16:31).

"Unless you repent, you too will all perish" (Luke 13:1).

"The time has come . . . Repent and believe the gospel"
(Mark 1:15).

"Submit yourselves, then, to God.

Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

Come near to God and he will come near to you.

Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

Grieve, mourn and wail.

Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom.

Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up"
(James 4:7-10).

CHAPTER 9. THE ULTIMATE QUESTION

Jesus Christ was the Ultimate Communicator. He spoke with countless people from all walks of life about the deepest issues of life.

For example, in Mark 10 we read a fascinating conversation between Jesus and a wealthy young man who asked the question of the ages: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Could a person ask Jesus a more appropriate question?

People are still asking this question today, aren't they? One of my best friends asked me this question. Here's how it happened.

I answered the phone and immediately recognized the voice. “Hey Wayne, can I ask you a question?” It was my friend Jim.

“Sure,” I replied. “Fire away.”

“I'm making a list of all the things you must do to get to heaven. Can you help me? I don't want to miss anything. For example, how about giving to the poor? Do you think that should be on the list?”

I was surprised and didn't know what to say. My mind started racing as I quickly shifted into thinking mode.

It was a Thursday morning. Just a week ago Jim had double bypass heart surgery. The past year had been one of tremendous spiritual growth for Jim. He was earnestly seeking the answers to life's most important questions. Prior to the procedure, we had spent six months meeting every

week to study the Bible. We discussed salvation, eternal life and what Christianity was all about. We studied the book of James verse by verse.

I had explained the gospel many times. Sometimes he seemed to understand, sometimes he didn't. Like the farmer in Mark 4, I knew my job was to plant the seed and let God do the rest. But I still wasn't sure what kind of soil was present in his heart.

Even though I was caught off guard, once I heard Jim's question, I knew that today could be a breakthrough day, a day when the light would finally dawn on his spiritual journey.

So I responded by asking Jim if he remembered the conversation we had two days prior to the surgery. On Tuesday of that week we met for lunch. We had talked about the surgery on a superficial level before, but now it was time to probe deeper. So I asked Jim, "What did the doctor say were the prospects for full recovery?" He said they were good. He also said the doctor was upfront with him regarding the possibility of death. He could die right there on the operating table.

"Are you ready to die, Jim?"

"I think so. I hope I'm good enough to make it."

My heart sank. He still didn't get it. So I explained the gospel to him again. "Salvation is not about being good enough. Nobody is good enough. It doesn't matter how good you are or how bad you are -- God does not give eternal life to people based on whether they are good enough. Salvation is given freely to those who do not trust in their own goodness; God only gives salvation to those who rely on the death of Jesus

Christ to pay the penalty for sin that we deserve to pay. Salvation is received by grace, through faith. It cannot be earned now matter how many good things you do.”

Jim nodded in agreement. Once again, he seemed to understand. I asked him again, “Are you ready to die?” He said he was.

Later that day I sent Jim an email to follow up on our lunch conversation. In this email I explained God’s way of salvation again, and referred him to one of the Bible’s clearest passages on the subject: Ephesians 2:8-10. We had studied this passage in our Thursday meetings, and I figured it was time to expose him again to the direct teaching of Scripture.

“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”

Because this is such a straightforward explanation of how to obtain salvation, it warrants a careful analysis.

This passage states the following truths:

1. Salvation is something a person can possess today because of something that happened in the past.

The Apostle Paul is writing to the church at Ephesus. He tells these people in no uncertain terms, “you have been saved.” We will address the meaning of the word “saved” in a moment. Regardless of what “saved” means, please note that they have already been saved. It’s a done deal. It happened in the past.

The word “saved” simply means to be rescued or delivered. It implies the presence of a threatening condition -- a dangerous, desperate, or deadly condition from which we need to be rescued. And so this begs the question, “Saved from what?”

John MacArthur explains the answer to this question in his short-but-oh-so-profound article, “Saved? From What?” You can access it now at:

<http://www.gty.org/resources/articles/A242/Saved-From-What>

What are we saved from? A bad marriage? A dead-end job? A boring life?

For centuries the Christian message has been based on this essential claim: Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world. What, exactly, does the world need to be saved from?

The answer is found in Scripture. The angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “She (Mary) will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” (Matthew 1:21)

Jesus can save your marriage. He can help you find a better job and a more meaningful life. But in order to do any of that, He must save you from the consequences of your sins, namely guilt, the wrath of God and eternal punishment in hell.

Because of our sins, our relationship with God is fatally flawed. Every person stands before God as a guilty sinner, deserving of eternal damnation in hell. This is the Number One problem faced by every person on this planet. We need

to be saved from the eternal consequences of our sins, and Jesus is the only one who can provide that salvation.

By dying on the cross, He paid the penalty for our sins – this is what theologians refer to as “the substitutionary death of Christ” – and because He died, God is offering salvation from sin to the human race. Through Jesus, God is giving you and me the opportunity to be saved from the guilt of our sin.

Paul took this message of salvation to Ephesus and many accepted it. (The events surrounding the beginning of the church in Ephesus are recorded in Acts 19.)

Paul kept in touch with the churches he started by writing letters to his converts, and that is why he wrote this letter to the Ephesian believers. He says they “have been saved” from their sins, and the brevity of this simple three-word phrase does not do justice to its profound significance. Make no mistake about it: every person needs to be saved; every person can be saved; and like these Ephesian Christians, for those who come to the Savior to be rescued from their sin, salvation should be viewed as a present reality because of a past event.

This truth is present throughout the Bible. When the Apostles Peter and John were imprisoned for proclaiming the gospel in Jerusalem, Peter declared to the Jewish religious leaders, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:12). What name is that? “The name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth” (Acts 4:10).

Peter and Paul proclaimed the exclusivity of Jesus Christ without apology, for Jesus Himself claimed to be the one and only source of salvation: “I am the way and the truth and the

life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6)

2. Salvation is received “by grace through faith.”

Now that we know "the what" of salvation (i.e. what it means to “have been saved”), Paul also reminds the Ephesians of "the how" of salvation.

Paul uses two prepositional phrases to explain how a person is saved: by grace and through faith. Let’s examine both of these closely.

a. Salvation is received by grace. “Grace” is such a commonly used word among Christians, I fear it has lost its significance. And it should be used often – in the New Testament it is found over 100 times. But when I hear someone say before a meal, “Let’s say grace,” I get concerned because this word means something quite different than a short prayer of thanksgiving for food.

Grace means “the unmerited favor of God toward man.” Grace means that God loves us and cares for us even though we don’t deserve it and we certainly didn’t do anything to earn it. We deserve to be punished for our sins. But because Jesus died for us, God offers salvation instead of damnation. So we don’t get what we really deserve because God is a merciful God and does not want anyone to go to hell -- “He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish” (1 Peter 3:9). Our God is truly “full of compassion and mercy.” (James 5:11)

b. Salvation is received through faith. God’s grace makes salvation possible. God’s grace results in His offer of salvation to anyone and everyone. But for salvation to be received, a human response is required. In the New Testament, the most commonly used words to describe what

a person must do to appropriate God's salvation are "faith" (the noun) and "believe" (the verb form of "faith").

This is the plain teaching of Scripture: faith in Jesus Christ is the only means by which a person can be saved and receive eternal life instead of eternal damnation. Beginning with the Bible's most well known verse, we find Jesus Himself telling Nicodemus what it takes to be saved:

"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. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son." (John 3:16-18)

I'm always grateful when God presents a truth by repeating a key word – repetition is a great teacher, isn't it? In those three verses the word "believe" appears four times. Obviously, Jesus was trying to get the point across that faith is the human response that God requires for salvation to take effect.

I encourage you to do a word study on "faith" and "believe". Get a concordance and look up every verse in the New Testament that contains either of those words. You'll be amazed at how often it appears.

For example, the following list contains all the verses in Acts 1-19 that describe a conversion experience of new Christians. While "believe" isn't the only word used to describe what a person did to become a Christian, it is by far the most commonly used word. Check it out for yourself:

Acts 2:41, 4:4, 5:14, 6:7, 8:12, 8:13, 9:35, 9:42, 11:18, 11:21, 13:12, 13:48, 14:1, 16:34, 17:12, 17:34, 18:8, 19:18

It's important that we take a close look at the meaning of "believe". This is another word that we take for granted, and I'm afraid that many people who think they have faith may not, just as there are people who have faith and don't realize it.

For the former, the eternal consequences will be tragic – imagine thinking you have the faith necessary to enter heaven, only to find out you were mistaken! And if you are worried that you don't really have faith (or enough faith) when you really do, you are missing out on one of God's intended purposes of faith – a sense of assurance in this life that your eternal destiny is secure.

I encourage you to learn more about biblical faith. Don't you owe it to yourself to make sure you understand it correctly. Here's an excellent sermon by John MacArthur called "True Belief":

<http://www.gty.org/resources/sermons/80-56/true-belief>

MacArthur describes faith as having both objective and subjective characteristics:

"Objectively, faith can be described in terms of its concrete, observable character. As such, faith is the conviction that Jesus is the one and only Son of God, the only true God/Man, and that He actually died on the cross to pay the penalty for my sins, was buried, was resurrected, and then ascended into heaven. It is the conviction that since He is indeed Lord of Lords and King of Kings, I willingly submit my life to His Lordship, His authority, His rule. Faith is the attitude of humility that says, "I cannot save myself; only Jesus can save

me. Nothing I can do will ever save me; that's why I need Him to do what I cannot do for myself. Even though I don't deserve it, and there is nothing I can do to earn it, He offers salvation to me and I receive it as a free gift."

Based on Romans 10:9-10, MacArthur explains the meaning of "faith in Christ for salvation" as follows:

"You are saying on the one-hand, "I believe in the Resurrection," which means, "I believe that Christ accomplished my salvation, because I couldn't do it myself," so you reject your own inabilities, and your own abilities. You reject "works-righteousness." When you confess, "Jesus as Lord," you are thereby saying, "I'm not in charge of my life, I humble myself to His authority." In both cases, humility stands out as the virtue. And that is precisely why Jesus said, in Matthew 18:3, "unless you are converted and become like children, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven" (NASB).

The only kind of attitude the Lord responds to is one of humility. And humility says, "I can't save myself, I trust Christ." Humility says, "I'm not in charge, He is." That is humility. And it is very objective in that sense, because it affirms the work of Christ as historic and valid, and it affirms the Lordship of Christ as historic and valid. But the "bottom-line" in this believing is humility.

It is not saying, "Oh, I believe in Jesus, and I'm sure He's real happy to get me." Not that attitude. "Oh yes, I believe in Jesus, but I'm also working my own salvation. I'm trying to be a good person. I'm trying to do right on my own, I want God to like me." Now there is none of that, it's just the opposite, "I have no good thing in me, I cannot save myself, there is nothing in me worthy of salvation, I cast myself totally on the

mercy of Christ, as provided in the cross, and verified through the Resurrection."

The one who does not trust in his own works, but in the work of Christ; the one who does not lead his own life, but gives the authority to Christ, that is the one who demonstrates the humility of true belief."

Now that we understand how we are saved (salvation is received by grace and through faith), Paul goes continues by reminding us how we are not saved.

3. Salvation does not come from ourselves or from anything we do; it is all God's doing. It cannot be earned by doing "good works"; rather, it is received as a gift, the result of God's work through Christ.

Back to Ephesians 2:8-9:

"And this not from yourselves". What is the "this" that is not from yourselves? Our salvation is not from ourselves. We had nothing to do with achieving it. It is not a human accomplishment. It is something only God can do.

"Not by works, so that no one can boast."

I love the logic of this passage. If salvation is by grace and through faith, it is therefore impossible for us to earn it by our good works. Grace and works are mutually exclusive. It has to be one or the other; and since Paul has already told us that salvation is God's doing (via His grace), then it cannot be the result of man's doing (via his works).

Now, let's apply this verse to Jim's question, "What should be on the list of what it takes to get to heaven?" Jim was asking for a list of "works" (good deeds) that would guarantee

eternal life to the doer of those good deeds. Based on this passage, there are no good works that enable a person to earn salvation. Since salvation is the result of God's unmerited favor, there is nothing a person can do to merit His favor. Even if you've done a million and one good works, you are still a sinner, and even if you've only committed one sin (and haven't believed in Jesus as the only person who can save you from the penalty of that sin), that one sin is enough to keep you out of heaven forever.

And that's why Paul says that salvation is a gift from God to man. It is freely given to the one who receives it by faith.

Paul says in verse 9 that salvation is "not by works, so that no one can boast." If a person could work his way into heaven, just think what an accomplishment that would be! If doing a million and one good deeds was the price it took to earn eternal life, you'd have something to brag about, wouldn't you? You'd be something special. But salvation is about God's greatness, not ours. Salvation is nothing to boast about, because we didn't do the work to obtain it – Jesus did all the work; he is the only one entitled to brag about it.

4. Good works are the result, but not the cause, of our salvation.

Good works are definitely a part of our salvation experience, however. We are not saved by our good works, but we are saved in order to do good works. This is a critical concept – doing good works can never save us, but because we "have been saved," God now intends for us to engage in righteous living – this is one of the reasons he saved us!

The profound truth of Ephesians 2:10 speaks for itself:

“For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” (Ephesians 2:10)

Yes, we are saved from something (hell, sin, judgment, the wrath of God). We are also saved for something (good works, a life of righteous living).

The Bible is filled with instruction regarding holy living; we are commanded over and over to love and serve others, to give to the poor, to serve God by serving our fellow man. Does God want us to do good works? Absolutely.

But this is one of the most fundamental yet misunderstood of all Biblical truths: God wants us to do good works as a result of our salvation, not in order to earn our salvation.

Did you get that? In other words, God is telling us to live a holy life because we “have been saved” (Ephesians 2:8), not in order to get saved.

And this concept is one that many in Christendom have completely missed. If you’ve been taught that you should attend church, read your Bible, pray, give to the poor, etc, etc, in order to earn enough “Brownie points” to gain entrance to heaven, you’ve been misled. And the consequences of this type of false teaching will be tragic indeed.

Even in many so-called Christian churches, I know that countless churchgoers have not been taught this distinction between salvation by works and salvation by faith resulting in works. It is a subtle distinction, to be sure, and with so much in the Bible about good works, the purpose of good works is easily misunderstood. Certainly Satan understands the difference and loves having the truth distorted in the name of religion.

But we must study the Scriptures diligently and be always on guard against false teachers and their false doctrines. Truly, the doctrine of salvation by works must be confronted head-on and identified for the falsehood it is. The eternal destiny of many hangs in the balance.

The doctrine of salvation by grace through faith permeates the Bible, both Old and New Testaments. Read the books of Romans and Galatians and you'll find Paul's teaching on justification by faith (not works) to be a major theme. And he relies on Old Testament examples to prove that only faith can save. "What does the Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness'" (Romans 4:3). The Scripture Paul quotes is Genesis 15:6 – the first book of the Bible!

This topic of salvation is so important. I'm sharing these truths with you because I believe them with all my heart. I spent so many years ignoring God and His Word. Now His truth is precious to me!

If you'd like to dig deeper into the teachings of Scripture on salvation, I've written a Bible study entitled: "**Jesus: Who He Is, What He Did and Why It Matters.**" It is available on Amazon in both Kindle and paperback formats. You can get it here:

<http://www.amazon.com/dp/B00Y1UXWMS/>

CHAPTER 10. WANTED: FEEDBACK

Thank you reading my book. I welcome your feedback! I'd like to know what you thought of this book. What impact did it have on you?

And I'd love to have a dialogue with you about your own spiritual journey. Have you experienced any of the things I've talked about here? Feel free to send me an email with any questions or comments. Tell me where you're at on your journey. I'm here to help you any way I can.

You can reach me by email at GodWroteTheBook@gmail.com

CHAPTER 11. RESOURCES

Here some of the resources that played a key role in my spiritual journey.

The Book:

Mere Christianity, by C.S. Lewis

Available at bookstores, Amazon.com, or your local public library.

The Meaning of Biblical Faith:

Without a doubt, the best resource I've ever read on this topic is the book:

The Gospel According To Jesus, by John F. MacArthur, Jr.

Available at bookstores, Amazon.com, or your local public library.

You can also access the following sermons by John F. MacArthur, Jr. which contain much of the material in the above-mentioned book. These sermons are available free via these links:

The Lordship of Christ

<http://www.gty.org/resources/sermons/90-20/the-lordship-of-christ-introduction>

The Nature of Saving Faith

<http://www.gty.org/resources/sermons/90-21/the-nature-of-saving-faith>

The Call to Repentance

<http://www.gty.org/resources/sermons/90-22/the-call-to-repentance>

The Cost of Discipleship

<http://www.gty.org/resources/sermons/90-23/the-cost-of-discipleship>

The Sovereignty of God in Salvation

<http://www.gty.org/resources/sermons/80-46>

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Looking for Bible reading tips? For a free copy of Wayne's Resource Guide, "Top 5 Free Online Bible Study Tools", visit www.GodWroteTheBook.com

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You are welcome to contact Wayne directly with your comments or questions at GodWroteTheBook@gmail.com

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