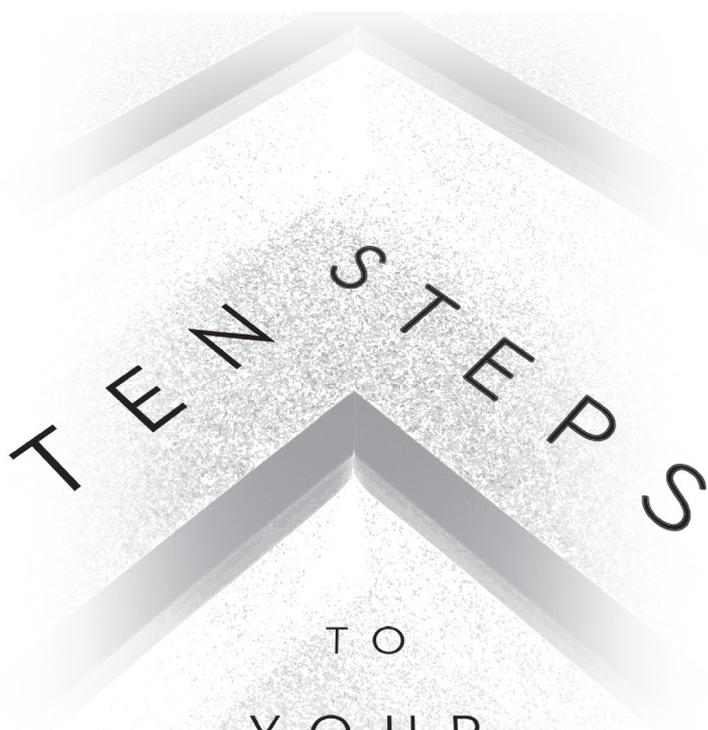


TEN STEPS

CONNECTING  
THE NEW NORMAL  
TO THE  
ANCIENT WISDOM  
OF JESUS

TO  
YOUR  
BEST LIFE

BRENT CROWE



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BRENT CROWE

**BH**  
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*For Gabe, Charis, Za'Riah, Mercy, Zi'Yon, and Ary-girl*

You are everyday proof that Jesus is able “to do above and  
beyond all that we ask or think.”

Being your dad is the beautiful joy of my life.



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## Introduction

# Blue Tarps

I live in central Florida. We are no stranger to hurricanes and storms. I remember one particular hurricane season some years back when we experienced four very significant storms in just a six-week period. Living in the state's center provides us protection from the full force of storms that coastal cities experience. But it also means that if a storm hits anywhere near us, we experience the outer bands of winds, flash flooding, and all the destruction left in their wake.

After the first storm, which caused some roof damage and temporary power outages, people cleaned up their yards by cutting up fallen trees and limbs and putting them on the curbs in front of their houses. Then, another storm hit, turning logs and limbs into projectiles that wreaked havoc on whatever structure stood in its way. Fast-forward two more storms and a month or so, and Orlando and the surrounding cities were hurting. In my neighborhood, there were more roofs with blue tarps than intact roofs.

For at least the next year, every time I flew home, I knew I was getting close when I would start observing the sea of blue tarps as far as the eye could see. A blue tarp is essentially a

Band-Aid on your roof to keep it from leaking until someone can repair it. It was rather sad to look out at the sea of Band-Aids week after week, month after month.

The pandemic of 2020–21 felt like waves of one storm after another pounding against the shores of our souls. And with each storm, stuff got stirred up and thrown around, hurting whoever was in its path. By “stuff,” I mean all the painful realities of enduring a once-every-hundred-years event that turns lives upside down and shakes us relentlessly. It was a season that took immeasurably more than it gave.

At first, it seemed as if the pandemic stripped society down to only the bare essentials for living. Theme parks, concerts, sporting events, and even graduation ceremonies were canceled. But then, it started impacting people we knew. The virus was “out there” in the world, and we began to realize that we might have to come in contact with someone who tested positive. Contact tracing, masking up, and social distancing became part of the rhythm of living. Hospitals were at capacity, and ICU beds became the rarest of commodities. Some hospitals even converted their parking garages into a sanitized and patchwork field infirmary. Frontline workers were, and still are, the brave and unyielding unsung heroes who didn’t have the word *quit* in their vocabulary.

The longer the pandemic continued, the more we realized our silver linings were made of tinfoil. People consumed exponentially more alcohol, with liquor sales skyrocketing. Domestic violence increased, as well as a myriad of other abuses. There was a profound impact on the mental health of many in the storm. By June 2020, just a few months after we had even learned the word *COVID-19*, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported 40 percent of

adults were struggling with mental health and an increase in substance use.<sup>1</sup> All in all, there was an increase in anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and suicidal thoughts. It was an unprecedented time that caused medical, social, and economic mayhem across the globe.

And as the vaccine emerged on the scene, there was a feeling that the pandemic would come to an end. The sunlight began to break through the storm-filled clouds. We hoped for finality. The chapter needed to end, the page needed to turn, and the story needed to move in a more hopeful direction.

But, as with all storms, when the sun shines, the cleanup had only just begun and took some time.

We were a sea of Band-Aids. The storm had subsided, but blue tarps were everywhere to be found. Since the pandemonium of the pandemic had dissipated, there was a desire to recapture what was once lost. Like a gravitational pull for moons orbiting a planet, our souls seemed to draw to the excess and comfort of days gone by. It is human nature to imagine the good old days to be better than they actually were and remember the bad days as darker. As a species, we are prone to exaggeration. The challenge, however, isn't to regain a mythical and fantastical version of the past. Instead, it is to reimagine an abundant vision for the future.

I've written this book for anyone who doesn't want to live under a blue tarp anymore.<sup>2</sup>

## **Your Best Life Defined**

I know this will sound naive or crazy, but there is a life to be discovered in the ashes of the pandemic, and it's better than we could have ever imagined. If you were to be honest, there

is something in your soul that is longing for it. Guess what? Rising from the ashes to a glorious possibility is something that God wants for you. In fact, he specializes in it!

This isn't a book filled with fancy words intended to impress; it is a sacred and straightforward strategy meant to move past the blue-tarp phase of life and discover something new. Truth be told, I think God sometimes looks on and chuckles at our lofty attempts at expressing our spirituality. Much like a parent watching a child recite a speech with big words, he smiles and is patient as we clumsily reach for the top-shelf ideas.

We are like a high school drama club performing Shakespeare with little acting skills and a shoestring budget for production, but God is in the front row beaming with pride as we do our best to remember and deliver the lines with gumption. Let us never forget that God is fatherly. This is why "God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, *Abba, Father!*" (Gal. 4:6). He prefers the high school musical to Broadway. He doesn't need us branded just the right way, saying all the catchphrases or wearing the right clothes. The truth is that most of us are thrift store shoppers trying to pretend we are fashionably sophisticated. It's exhausting. It isn't the life God wants for us.

What if I told you that there was a straightforward, organic approach to living for and loving God that didn't involve trends? That there was a sacred simplicity to this approach that allows us to breathe without fear of judgment or condemnation? A life that sees God as so much more than a life preserver to the drowning? Yes, he rescues us—but that's just the beginning of the story, not the end.

There is a braver and better approach that could and should become us after the storm, if only we will have the guts to follow the process to completion. It has proven to be timeless and has never failed a person or a generation. If you are willing to kick your assumptions to the curb, that Christianity is boring or rule-oriented, or that you are fine just the way you are, then an entirely different life is available. It is a life not driven by fear or worries, comfort or unhealthy cravings, pandemic or opinionated personalities. It is a process that begins, endures, and ends with *a perfect love that drives out fear*. It is a process that is a sacredly holistic prescription for living.

As with any process, the scope and sequence are vitally important. With some books, the reader may skip around, consuming content based on the interest of one chapter's focus versus another. This book is not that. Each chapter serves to build on the next. So, if you want the process to work, then let the process be . . . well . . . a process. In the following pages, I am letting our purpose in Jesus and the method described by Jesus lead to our best life in Jesus.

Purpose = Jesus

Process = Jesus' teachings

Product = Jesus' promise

In other words, our best life is found in the splendor of God's goodness through the pragmatic of daily living. As one of the most influential pastors in 1800 England described it: "Come and learn how to sing to the Lord a new song! Come and find peace, rest, joy, and all your souls can desire. Come and eat what is good and let your soul delight."<sup>3</sup>

## A Warning about Dinosaurs

This is a book about choosing to live. We wake up every day with a choice to live today or lose today. It's fascinating that a failure to live well is a recipe for death. Quite unintentionally, so many of us plan our deaths with our daily routines. We have succumbed to survival, but surviving is just another form of dying, which brings us to a warning about dinosaurs.

To go through life just surviving is to miss the provision of God's enduring and transforming presence through all the ups and downs. It is to simply live like the dinosaurs. Theologian and author Leonard Sweet calls this survival approach to life "a dinosaurian philosophy":

A dinosaurian philosophy of life is a basic brain response to everyday existence: feed on this, fight about that, protect yourself, and pleasure yourself as often as possible. And like the dinosaurs with their four rules of living—feeding, fighting, fleeing, and sex—we bring death and destruction to all around us as we ravage and ruin whatever we touch.<sup>4</sup>

We must fight the destructive desire to just survive. A person often becomes what they tolerate in their lives. For these ten steps to work, we must despise an illness that doesn't show up in blood work or X-rays. It is an ailment of the soul that leads to a despondent existence where faith, hope, and love seem to have gone on permanent holiday. While we have already labeled it as a "survival approach" and "dinosaurian philosophy," it is, quite sadly, the act of settling for mediocrity. What we will discover is a remedy to this illness that floods

the soul with the light of God's goodness, allowing the teachings of Jesus to disinfect the decay of averageness.

## Future Switch

The future is a canvas where God's grace offers you the opportunity to paint a masterpiece. And while many in the coming days may slide back into the slumber of a dinosaurian way of life, under the canvas of a blue tarp, there is an opportunity to switch that narrative around. That's right, you can capture and reimagine your future. "But what will this ten-step process produce?" one may ask.

Our aim is simple, sacred, and a bit mysterious. The process is designed to strip us down to the most organic version of self and then strive for a version of ourselves alive with purpose and possibility. I say it is mysterious because what God seeks to accomplish from one life to the next is completely his prerogative. The end goal is for each of us to discover the person we were meant to be all along—a person who is content with his or her journey. We can enjoy life and all that God offers in and through it, someone redeemed and living their best life in the present tense. And by "best life," I don't mean some self-help, prosperity around every corner, stick your head in the sand and forget the brokenness around you . . . type of life. No, what is meant by "best life" is fulfilling the idea of who God wants you to be. Or, as the Italians say, *la dolce vita*, meaning the sweet life or the good life. In this book, we search for the authentically good and sweet life that can only be experienced in Jesus.

There is a rhythm by which we are meant to live. It got lost long ago, and no algorithm on its best day can rediscover it. To

do so, we must return to the words spoken by that renegade rabbi from Nazareth who taught, preached, and lived in such a magnetic manner for all generations to come. He knew we would be here standing in our front yards, overwhelmed by all that COVID-19 destroyed. He knew how we would feel and all the dark scenarios that would dance through our imaginations about the future. And so, he whispers down through the ages:

“Come to me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke and learn from me, because I am lowly and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” (Matt. 11:28–30)

Here is the incredible thing about this invitation. Jesus isn't waiting for just the right time when you have repaired everything under the blue tarp covering your life. The thing about blue tarps is that there isn't anything impressive about them, and there isn't anything one can do to dress them up. It's a big, giant Band-Aid whose plastic veneer screams, “There is a lot that's broken under here!” Jesus wants you and all the pain, mistakes, regret, unhealthiness, loneliness, and anything else you've been covering up.

The very invitation of Jesus means it's okay to not be okay. . . .

But it also means that we get to keep company with and learn from Jesus.

And with Jesus, we discover the best life a human could ever be graced to experience.

# 1

## God

### *Step 1: Create a Rhythm of Renewal*

#### **Beginnings**

##### ***Beginnings Matter . . . A LOT***

There is something very human about longing for a fresh beginning. I have experienced this on a very personal level. Beginnings are full of hope and possibility. The beginning is devoid of my past, which is littered with mistakes. It doesn't have a picture gallery of bad memories on constant display in my brain, and my emotions haven't devolved to a place of cynicism masked as criticism. Beginnings are pure and untainted. Beginnings provide a fresh canvas just waiting for the masterpiece to be revealed.

The beginning of any journey or process serves as both a starting point and a reference point. The inauguration of anything worth doing will also function as the foundation throughout the process of any endeavor. In our case, we are suggesting that our beginning allows us to start something

new; it affords us the sacred opportunity to adopt a new way of thinking . . . a new way of living. The scope and sequence being put forth in the pages of this book are not subjective or theoretical in any way. This scope and sequence, this practical guide for your best life, has been tried and tested and approved by the highest authority in the universe. It cannot be overstated that this is NOT simply a way of living. Rather, this is THE definitive manner in which we are to conduct ourselves, if we want our best life to be the end result.

### ***Beginnings Are Important***

And so, it is because of this that our discussion begins with God, who after all, begins his story with “In the beginning God” (Gen. 1:1). A purpose-filled scope and sequence of a life worth living must begin with the author of that life. For all humans, the author of human life is God. The psalmist explained it this way: “For it was you who created my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I will praise you because I have been remarkably and wondrously made” (Ps. 139:13–14a). God also explained to the prophet Jeremiah that his future existence was known before he was ever conceived. In other words, God chose and knew Jeremiah before his conception. I mention the psalmist and Jeremiah here to make a very simple point: *our humanity was God’s idea, he knew of us from eternity past, and, thus, our lives are sacred to him.* Since humanity was God’s idea, then life itself is sacred and miraculous. Our beginning is sacred. Knowing our beginning point offers clarity, confidence, and comfort for the process ahead. How often do we know something is wrong or unhealthy or broken but lack the understanding of “how did I end up here”?

What if I told you the place we designate as “beginning” is actually the place that God wants us to put down roots and live. What if *the beginning* was really *the destination*? The greatest of all discoveries is the opportunity to find residence in the place of hope and potential, a beautiful space where fear and shame are irrelevant, a place where the future is as glorious as one can imagine. The place of beginning is God’s best for us in this life. You see, God doesn’t wait to give us his best, but he does wait until we are ready to receive his best. God is patient, wanting us to arrive at the place of beginnings. God’s best is God’s love toward a people who never asked for his love in the first place. Yet in our rebellion, he took the initiative to pursue us. And in his pursuit of us, we see the most loving act.

The most loving act,  
 God’s best for us,  
 the great initiative toward a people who so  
     easily forget,  
 is Jesus on the cross.

This continues to make incredible sense as we follow the trajectory of God’s story. If we look at the Bible as one big story, then it can be understood in four parts: creation, fall, redemption, and restoration. In short, God creates everything, including human beings as the crown of his creation, and places them in the garden. The garden is the original beginning. It was a place where everything was as it should be. If all of *the beginning* could be described in one word, that word would be *harmony*. Adam and Eve lived in harmony with each other, creation, and God himself. The beginning had no tainted past, no conflict, no fear, and no shame.

The beginning place was soon destroyed when the world's first couple listened to God's enemy. The enemy whispered a lie. Adam and Eve listened to the lie and allowed it to take root in their hearts and thoughts. In doing so, they rebelled against God and everything the garden represented. Their rebellion destroyed the harmony of this beautiful beginning place that had been created for them. In a moment, everything changed. NOTHING was as it should be.

In *The Jesus Storybook Bible*, Sally Lloyd-Jones summarized what happened next. In a few short sentences she captured the very heart of God's story from the fall to redemption, through the finished work of Jesus on the cross, to all things being restored and made new again:

Before they left the garden, God made clothes for his children, to cover them. He gently clothed them and then sent them away on a long journey—out of the garden, out of their home. Well, in another story, it would all be over and that would have been . . . THE END. But not in this Story. God loved his children too much to let the story end there. Even though he knew he would suffer, God had a plan—a magnificent dream. One day, he would get his children back. One day, he would make the world their perfect home again. And one day, he would wipe every tear from their eyes.<sup>1</sup>

God's plan, from eternity past, was Jesus. God refused to allow rebellion to end with the rebellious. This is why every part of God's story really does whisper the name of Jesus. Jesus

is God's way of getting us back to the beginning place. You see, the end of God's story brings us back to the beginning: grace.

The beauty of grace is that we are privileged to live in the place of beginnings. Sure, we age; our hair falls out or turns gray, or does a little of both. We wrinkle, our joints ache, and we become forgetful. Technology becomes a thing for "a younger generation," and we like our old gadgets just the way they are. The world spins on faster and faster as we begin to move a little slower. Seasons come and go, and with them we begin to lose loved ones. Little by little, life as we know it seems to take more than it gives. And yet, for those who have decided to live in the beginning place, even loss echoes hope. For loss is only an indication that we are getting closer to another part of this story. Living in the place of beginnings means . . .

I experience God's best every day in a new and fresh way,

his presence is as real and relevant as the day I crossed the line of faith,

and even the sun bursts forth on the horizon, piercing the dark each day, as God's way of saying that his love is steadfast and his mercies are new every morning.

Since this is the case, then even the struggles of this life point me to the place where all things are forever made new. Our very decay points to a restored day, a day when all will be as it once was long ago in a garden . . . forevermore.

## How to Live in the Beginning Place: Creating a Rhythm of Renewal

We must now ask ourselves a very important question: *How do we live in this place of beginnings, which has been made possible through the person and work of Jesus?* The beginning is where God desires us to live. It is a place, a life that doesn't take temporary reservations; there are no tourists, nor time-shares. Let's be clear: responsibility rests on the shoulders of every follower of Jesus to be accountable for the life we live.

A sad and often repeated story is that we are given freedom from sin and made new creations in Christ Jesus, but then we spend far too much energy wasting that freedom. Could you imagine an individual wasting away in a prison for some horrendous crime? There is no hope of parole or time reduced. This person's atrocities were so heinous that they will never breathe free air again. Now imagine that person being granted a complete pardon. And not only that, but a benefactor has offered them an incredible way to begin a new life through employment opportunities and housing, all in a city unfamiliar with the person's past crimes. This person has every opportunity, through no merit of their own, to experience and live freedom every single day. But what if that person wasted the freedom by chasing their former life and, eventually, found themselves committing another crime that would compromise their freedom. It's as if they rebelled against the very opportunity given. The choice was to live free, or choose to live inconsistently with the gift of freedom and suffer the consequences.

We, all of us, got ourselves kicked out of the garden. The creation narrative is the story of us. And yet, God made a way for us to begin again, to live in that beautiful place of

beginnings, and all he asks of us is that we receive and pursue this newfound freedom. I believe there are four steps to establish a sense of rhythm renewal.

### 1. Choose God's Love

Each person has to make the decision for themselves to choose Jesus. At the beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry, following his baptism, he went into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After fasting for forty days and nights, he then endured a series of temptations all centered around Jesus' authority and worship. In the final portion of their discourse Jesus told him, "Go away, Satan! For it is written: Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him" (Matt. 4:10).

It's not surprising at all that this temptation occurred immediately following Jesus' baptism. How often do people receive the gift of salvation and get baptized, only to have significant temptation immediately thrown their way? We are all invited to the place of beginnings, but there will also be many invitations for us to leave. Therefore, there must be a consistent emphasis on choosing to worship the Lord our God. The gift of choice is a blessing that should never be underestimated or overlooked. Our response to God's love is to then choose to love God in return, and that means we are choosing to worship him. The gift of our salvation is that forever responding with adoration and obedience is a choice—a choice that only makes sense "in view of the mercies of God" (Rom. 12:1).

It is the last part of Jesus' statement to the devil that is most helpful. He says, *serve only him*. By choosing Jesus, we eliminate all other options to worship anything else. We are saying with our lives that there is only one true God, and we seek to worship him and him alone. When all other options

for worship are eliminated in our lives, it affords us the ability to simply focus on our original purpose—the place of beginnings. By loving Jesus, we say, “Go away!” to any form of service divorced from honoring Jesus. Only the person confident in the grace of Jesus does not fall prey to worship false gods. After all, when we awaken to the person and work of Christ, we realize that there are no other gods that can be worshiped. In this sense, we could say that there are no false gods, just deceived people.

## ***2. Recognize and Respond to God’s Everyday Morning***

### ***Reminder***

My favorite time to be outside are those few minutes before a rainstorm builds. Living in central Florida gives me ample opportunity to enjoy those moments when the temperature drops, the wind begins to blow, and the sun seems to take a break. I will stop whatever I am doing and just go stand outside. It’s as if nature itself is breathing in possibility. The air feels so fresh and clean against my face. Hope is on the move as the rain begins to fall. Spanish moss dances on the winds as they blow through the old oaks. The palm trees sway and those little ripples appear on the pond out front. If our little corner of cow country outside of Orlando, Florida, had a soundtrack, I would put the moments before a storm on repeat.

I love how God uses nature to whisper his purposes and presence. Each morning, the sun parades across the horizon and illuminates everything in its path. It awakens the world to a new day, one that has never been experienced before nor will it ever be experienced again. The prophet Jeremiah demonstrates this type of new beginning in the book of

Lamentations. Jeremiah had experienced more pain and disappointment in one life than others would in ten lifetimes. It is a book written by a brokenhearted man who spent many years sharing the message God had given him, only to have no one respond. That's right, zero response to God's message through his prophet Jeremiah. Furthermore, the city that he loved, Jerusalem, was being brutally overthrown. So the prophet put his laments, his sorrows, his pain, down on paper. It is such an emotional book that it caught the attention of one of history's most renowned artists, Rembrandt, who sought to depict it in his painting: *Jeremiah Lamenting the Destruction of Jerusalem*.

While reading the book, a section seems to burst forth from Jeremiah's soul, testifying to the character and goodness of God:

Because of the LORD's faithful love  
we do not perish,  
for his mercies never end.  
They are new every morning;  
great is your faithfulness! (Lam. 3:22–23)

Jeremiah learned the secret of living in the beginning place, even when his entire life seemed littered with heartache and heartbreak. It was something to see about God in the dawning of each day. With every sunrise, just as the light covers the earth, we are covered in mercies of God. And guess what, it happens again and again without fail every morning. The lovingkindness of God is new every day. God puts on the most glorious light show every morning to remind us to reside in his faithfulness and experience his mercy.

God is inviting us to live in a place brimming with hope and breathing in possibility. That place that feels like the

moments just before a storm, that space when the light pierces the darkness each morning, a place where we are new creations that will never grow old. The life you and I were meant to live revels in the beauty of grace, renewing our awe of God every day. For without awe and reverence for the Lord your God whose “mercies never end,” life would be senseless, lacking any understanding or meaning.

Sure, there is pain, loss, and suffering in the beginning place. After all, we are redeemed but not yet restored. We are new creations here on the earth stumbling our way to heaven. But we are redeemed, we are new. Something has been granted to us that was lost in the garden. Therefore, God’s enduring, unwavering, never-failing presence is our everyday, sustaining, keeping-us-new provision.

### ***3. Plan for Daily Renewal***

Once we have responded to God’s love and awakened to the everyday reminder of grace, the foundation has been laid to create a plan. The need for a functioning plan in our lives cannot be overstressed. For our purposes, we want a plan that helps us to live in the beginning place, a plan that contributes to a rhythm of renewal. Redemption is something God accomplishes; renewal is something God gives us grace to pursue. We are all prone to entertain invitations that detract from and derail the life God wants for us. Thus, we need a plan that keeps us focused on seeking after the One who sought us first. A plan that includes:

**Principles to Follow**  
*What specific beliefs will guide to a  
rhythm of renewal?*

**A Personalized Approach That Is  
Functional**

*How can a plan be customized to your  
season of life?*

**A Process That Facilitates**

*How will you measure goals, progress, and  
health needed for renewal?*

**A Purpose to Fulfill**

*What does the renewed life look like?*

The “principles” are those guiding ideas that we follow. The “personalized approach” is customizing the plan to your uniqueness. The “process” is the practical manner that facilitates execution, and the “purpose” is the finished goal we seek to fulfill.

In any planning process, it is always good to begin with the end goal of the plan. What is it that the plan seeks to accomplish? The answer to that question allows us to plan with the end in mind and stay focused on the end goal throughout all steps of the plan. We move forward when we clearly know the finish line. In other words, our best life now (the present) is determined by our best life then (the end goal of the plan). So, to answer that question, let’s now turn to one of the most practical statements Jesus made concerning how we live: “But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be provided for you” (Matt. 6:33). This is one of those sentences that gets extracted in isolation and ends up getting printed on everything from coffee mugs to scented candles. Now, I’m not throwing shade on merchandising,

but the strength of this rule for living is found in taking a little deeper look than just the oft-tweeted portion. So, light a candle and grab your coffee mug because there is so much to be gleaned in this short declaration.

First, the *seek first* verse comes in the second portion of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, his most extensive sermon recorded by any of the gospel writers. This amazing verse is not an island, but part of the mainland of spiritual principles guiding Christians in true righteousness. Preaching to a Jewish audience, Jesus is positioned as "the new Moses,"<sup>2</sup> sharing God's message to an audience who felt intimately connected to the audience who would have looked to Moses for leadership. The parallel between Moses and Jesus shows the length to which God will go to enlighten. God wanted the Jewish people to see and understand; he, likewise, wants us to understand true righteousness.

Let us also understand that, just as the sun rises each day illuminating the earth, so we rise each day seeking to be enlightened all the more in righteousness. Not to get too sophisticated, but the verb *seek* is written in the present imperative tense in the Greek language, meaning whatever is said is a command in the present and future. Followers of Jesus should be the most curious people on the planet because they rise with the seekers' desire to know Jesus all the more. We are to seek—and to go on seeking—all that it means to live new in the grace of Jesus every day. As one scholar put it: "Grace kindles the desire and keeps it ever active in this life."<sup>3</sup>

Finally, while I love that the *seek first* verse appears in the larger context of the Sermon on the Mount, it becomes even more practical that it appears in a section dealing with worry and anxiety. The key to a worry-free life is a singular focus.

The words of Jesus atop a mountain overlooking the Sea of Galilee echo down through the ages, bidding us to give up our pursuit for survival. Survival is a dangerous game we were never intended to play. And yet, it is a trap we so easily fall into. And more years only makes it more complicated. It's almost like the more birthday candles we have to blow out, the more fires we are trying to put out in our lives. The more we have that concerns us, the more concerned we become. "How am I going to get a job, pay the bills, find a spouse, keep my marriage healthy, choose a college, pay off college debt, and send my kids to college!?" On and on it goes, and the whole time, Jesus is saying, "Consider the birds of the sky: They don't sow or reap or gather into barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Aren't you worth more than they?" (Matt. 6:26).

Since you are more valuable than a bird, take heart that the God who created you has made a commitment to you. You are free to be curious and keep on seeking Jesus. God has taken care of the hard part; we don't have to worry. Just create a plan—a plan guided by the principles of Scripture, personalized to who you are, with a clear process, that enables you to fulfill the purpose of living in the beginning place. God redeems and will give grace to those who plan on renewal.

#### ***4. Practice Achieving God's Present Wants***

God doesn't always get his way in the here and now. I know that may seem like an off-the-wall crazy statement at first glance, but consider this: we live in a broken world where redemption is possible, but we are awaiting that universe-shaking moment when God will restore and make all things new. Even while living in a fallen world where we are redeemed but not yet restored, God has desires for his

people. The season of redemption offers us so many incredible opportunities, many of which hinge on our obedience.

Therefore, the last step in a life that enjoys a rhythm of renewal is seeking out those opportunities to fulfill God's desires in the here and now. A life seeking happiness and contentment based on *What would my life look like if I received everything I desire?* will only lead to disappointment. On the other hand, the person who dares to let their life be a response to *What would it look like if God's desires were met through my life's journey?* will live renewed because they are pleasing God. A life given away to the service of God is never wasted.

In the coming chapters we are going to look at the very practical necessary steps for engaging God and others well. Yet, all that will be discussed only works when we have made the decision to live renewed. In other words, this rhythm of renewal affords us the opportunity to live the best possible version of our lives in the here and now. Before moving on, we need an image in our heads of how Jesus' love and his patience guide us to the beginning place.

## Rocking Chair

When I think of God's patient pursuit of his people, I often think of a rocking chair. I know that may seem like a strange image, but let me explain. Jesus spent a lot of time telling stories all about God's love and how he takes initiative to love his people. One of my favorites—okay, maybe my all-time favorite—is the story that has been historically referred to as “the prodigal son” or “the lost son.” You can read about it in Luke 15:11–32, but I like to imagine it unfolded like this:

There once was a very beautiful family. The father worked hard but was very kind to his employees. He was the type of man who only knew one speed. He was an all-or-nothing kind of leader, and it paid off for him over the years. His business was a family farm that seemed to thrive with the coming and going of each season. Though many factors, both social and economic, contributed to the Jewish custom of marriage at that time in history, his marriage to his wife was one blessed with love.

Early in their love story, she would serve the business by fulfilling a multiplicity of roles. This meant, at times, caring for the finances, while other times, it meant helping feed the household and its workers. Her favorite task was that of planning the annual banquet to celebrate another blessed year of success on the farm from harvest to healthy flocks. It really was an elaborate event that brought everyone who contributed to the business together. It was a party that lasted for days. There was amazing meat, wine, music, and dancing. The household was filled with joy, laughter, and gratitude. It was a time when the husband and wife celebrated with all the workers. For those few days each year, everyone was celebrated and the amount of happiness one experienced wasn't based on their role or station on the farm. Each man and woman danced and feasted as friends who had accomplished something special together.

As time passed, this couple entered a new season of life. Their firstborn son was everything they could have hoped for in a child. As he grew, so did his interest in all things with the family business. One day, he would be with the shepherders asking questions and pretending to be older than he actually was. Another day, he would be found in the fields harvesting

wheat. He felt that the vast farmland his family owned was a world to itself. Being mesmerized by possibility, his potential for taking his father's place took shape. Without any official announcement, he simply became his father's apprentice. It was a blessed season indeed.

Harvests came and went and then another blessing came to this already happy household in the form of another son. Born healthy, this second son was born with an innate sense of adventure. While the first son thought the family farm was the world, the second was always looking beyond their borders to another world. When he became a teenager, he looked for any reason to travel. He would fulfill the assignments and tasks his father assigned, but the family business never became his passion. So much so, that he began to look at the annual banquets and everything in between with a skepticism that eventually turned to disdain. Nevertheless, seasons would come and go, and the second son felt trapped.

Through it all, his mother demonstrated a calm patience. She possessed that special gift of steadfast maternal love, a force more powerful than almost anything else in the universe. Her love kept the second son grounded. And when the storms raged inside of him, only she had the ability to calm the crashing waves. Her heart was in tune with his pain, and her presence somehow lightened the weight of his struggles and baggage.

There are days when our words are inadequate to convey the description of our emotions. These are moments in life with only our tears accompany us through the seconds, minutes, and hours ahead. Such was the day when the husband lost the love of his life, and two sons had to say goodbye to their mother. An unwelcomed sickness caused her body to

deteriorate quickly. With family by her side, even the parting words seemed too rushed.

A dark cloud seemed to settle over the family farm. To her mourning husband, every inch of the business they had built together seemed to echo memories. Days turned into weeks, weeks into seasons, and with the passing of time the once joyful farm now endured rather than enjoyed the days. There were no more annual festivals, causing the work to feel all the more laborious. Things eventually did begin to improve. But no matter how much life progressed, the festivals never returned. The father attempted to demonstrate his appreciation in other ways. He gave more to his employees, and the gentle word of encouragement for a long day's work was now the new normal.

Though his heart would never completely mend, the father was on the road to a new normal. And then, another bombshell arrived. There are some days that leave a lasting imprint on our minds, and no matter how hard we try, the memory can never be erased. Such was the day when the father's youngest son brought to him a heartbreaking request. The son wanted to receive his inheritance now rather than waiting for his father's death. It was a rock-bottom moment. First his beloved wife, now his second-born son.

The father always knew the farm was of little incentive to his son, but he never would have imagined a day such as this. To the casual onlooker, it appeared that the son had such a longing for life beyond the farm, that he was willing to go to any lengths to experience it. Even wishing his father was dead. Maybe it was because so much had already been lost, maybe he was just too broken. Nevertheless, the father acquiesced the

unholy request and off the youngest went, chasing a life he had only imagined.

Shortly thereafter, the father officially passed the baton of leadership to his firstborn son, and retired. But instead of enjoying the fruit of his life's work, he chose a different path. He chose to honor God who had so richly blessed his farm, he chose to honor his wife who had relentlessly loved him, and he chose to fight for the soul of a wayward son. He didn't know where his son had gone, so he chose to fight the only way he could. Each day he sat on his front porch in a rocking chair. And each day, he said a simple prayer as he stared down the one road leading off his property:

Father above,  
please hear this father's care,  
my son is lost to himself and only you know  
where.  
Bring him home as soon as you can,  
bring him home that I may hold him again.

Some days he whispered the prayer over and again as he stared off into the distance. Other times he would pray it once and spend the rest of the day rocking and reflecting on all the good memories. Months of rocking turned into years. The father's health began to deteriorate, and some days, he needed assistance getting in and out of his rocking chair. At times, his firstborn son tried to distract him. To the firstborn, his father was wasting away, hoping for a day that would never come.

It was a normal day deep in that season of the year when the rains rarely fall. Every time the wind would blow, little dust tornadoes would dance across the landscape. The various

herds could be seen across the rolling hills and the barns were full with grain from last season's harvest. One of the farmhands helped the patriarch to his usual perch, promising to return soon to check on him.

Once the father was alone, he began to slowly rock while looking down the road ahead. As he had prayed thousands of times before, he began to utter those oft repeated but never routine words: "Father above, please hear this father's care, my son—" In that moment, he interrupted himself. A figure had appeared on the dusty horizon. The father's failing mind refused, at first, to believe its familiarity. *Maybe it is a wounded sojourner who has lost his way?* he thought. The figure seemed to limp along rather than walk, and his head hung low like someone defeated by the harshness of life. He dismissed the thought as soon as it formulated in his brain.

Hope began to spring up inside him like never before. And almost involuntarily, he stood to his feet and began to run. Heart pounding, scarcely enough energy to breathe, he ran as fast as his aging legs would allow. With each stride, his belief was renewed with an even deeper sense of astonishment and love.

He was "filled with compassion. He ran, threw his arms around his neck, and kissed him."

The son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight. I'm no longer worthy to be called your son."

But the father told his servants, "Quick! Bring out the best robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.

Then bring the fattened calf and slaughter it, and let's celebrate with a feast, because this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" So, they began to celebrate. (Luke 15:20–24)

It had been years since the smells, sights, and sounds of the festivals had permeated the family's home at the center of the farm. The father's capacity to celebrate life had been so diminished by the loss of his wife. And now, in a moment's time, a prayer had been answered. There was reason to celebrate because life had returned in the most glorious fashion. It was like the frigid chill of winter was suddenly lifted and the springtime burst forth from the home. The son was home and, with him, all the possibilities of what once was.

Many times, I have read the story and seen myself in it. The lost son chased a life he was never intended to experience, only to discover his home was where he was loved. But the more I read the story of the lost son, and maybe the older I get, the more I think it is a story of a father waiting, longing, loving from a distance, and refusing to give up. I think that is how God is with us. He is waiting, wanting, and steadfastly loving us. In fact, God doesn't wait to give us his best. He offers us the very road to forgiveness.

The story of the lost son is dramatic, but not for the reasons I formerly thought. Sure, if it were a Rated R movie, it would be for the son's rebellious activity to spend all his money on fleshly desires. But the true drama, the part that would bring tears to your eyes, is that of a father in a rocking chair uttering a heartfelt prayer day after day. And when the son appears on the horizon, tears would stream down our faces just

as they do the father's. In other words, we would resonate most with the father's love.

The desire for "something else" is as old as time. We see it in the garden with Adam and Eve. We see it in Luke's Gospel with the story of the lost son. But in every case, God gives us his best in the beginning, and in so doing, invites us to reside in the beginning place. We are prone to wander in all the wrong directions, but when we decide to wander home, we find that love has been waiting on us the entire time. We discover that we didn't need to leave the beginning place to go on a journey or find a more fulfilling experience. The beginning place is where we reside in life's journey, and it has everything we could ever need and more. Since God gives us his best in the beginning by placing us *in Christ*, then there is nothing better beyond. So, the decision to reside and create a rhythm in the beginning place is a choice that brings focus to all other choices. And an old-fashioned rocking chair just might be an image that helps us remember home is with Jesus, and for some of us . . . Jesus is waiting.

The love of Jesus will guide you to the beginning place, and his grace is sufficient enough to keep all of us there. But while his grace is sufficient, it also serves as the greatest of motivations for us to do our part. We are prone to drift, so we have to win the battle in our lives every day to listen to the right voice. It's the voice of our heavenly Father who whispers his love for us on every page of the Scriptures, and in each painted sky or glorious starlit night. As the late Rev. Ralph Spaulding Cushman once penned:

I never climb my hilltop  
But I find that God is there,

Nor watch the windblown clouds,  
but that  
His voice is in the air.

I know I cannot see His face  
Nor touch a warming hand,  
But God is on my hilltop,  
And there's glory in the land.<sup>4</sup>

In this chapter, I have attempted to paint a picture that shows how God offers his best to us, Jesus, in the beginning. And because he offers his best right out of the gate, we are then invited to live our lives in that beginning place. It is not a place divorced from pain or problems, but it is a place filled with the presence of our Savior. This is why we can confidently cling to the idea that *God's provision for our lives is God's presence in our lives*. The preceding thoughts have sought to convey the spirit in which we should live our lives. The entire idea of “the beginning place” mirrors the narrative that is the Bible, particularly focusing on the creation narrative and redemption. The late J. I. Packer, who impacted millions through his writing ministry with such classics as *Knowing God*, penned it this way:

Creation and covenant together give God a double claim on our obedience. The claim springs, you might say, from both paternity (fatherhood in the sense of creatorship) and matrimony (the covenant relationship).<sup>5</sup>

THERE  
USED TO BE  
A TIME WE  
CALLED  
NORMAL.

In the years leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic, we led distracted lives in a chaotic world. Though things seemed in control, we were lacking the joy of accomplishment, the courage from pushing through the unknown into the beautiful, and the wonder of walking down an untraveled road to a new destination. We sought refuge in the safe confines of what we knew, what was familiar.

**Then, everything changed.**

Things will never go back to *normal*. This may seem pessimistic, but author Brent Crowe shows us there is a time-tested, pandemic-tested approach to a more fulfilling kind of life. There is a new normal that can, and should, emerge from the ashes of 2020. The ancient wisdom of Jesus gives us just that.

**Ten Steps to Your Best Life** extracts ten clear steps that Jesus taught for living in and through the most difficult times of transition. Discover how to emerge from the shadows with a clear vision for living well in a post-pandemic world.

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