

\* HOW TO PREVENT  
YOUR PAST FROM  
PILING UP AND  
FIND HOPE FOR  
YOUR FUTURE

**TO BE**

CONTINUED...  
**CLAUDED**

**MIKE ASHCRAFT**

WITH T.L. HEYER

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**MIKE ASHCRAFT**

WITH T.L. HEYER

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To my parents, Eddie and Margaret Ashcraft: I have inherited an incredible foundation upon which to build and learn of God's faithfulness.

To my in-laws, Owings and Brenda Austin: I have witnessed firsthand the beauty of steadfast faith. The final chapter of this book is about a beautiful faith and my tribute to Mr. Austin (1937–2019). We miss you!



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*I'VE HEARD IT* said that some books write themselves . . . this one DID NOT.

It was extracted word by word like teeth! The process has been incredibly rich and I am incredibly thankful . . . here are a few people who I am indebted to and a few reasons why.

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## INTRODUCTION

# THE NETFLIX LIFESTYLE

*To Be Continued . . .*

*I REMEMBER THE* first time I binge-watched a television series on Netflix. I didn't intend to. . . . It just happened.

You might be surprised to learn that my first binge was only about two years ago. I was late to the Netflix game, but it didn't take long for me to see the appeal.

Everybody everywhere seemed to be talking about *Parenthood*, a family-tree drama series about the Bravermans. My wife Julie and I logged on and settled in on the couch. We scrolled through the menu, found the show, and hit play: Season 1, Episode 1. The run time was forty-seven minutes, which felt perfect. I'm not much of a TV-watching guy anymore, but I could commit to forty-seven minutes with no commercials. Let's go.

Sure enough, the Braverman family swept me right into the layered dynamics of their story. They made me laugh;

they made me think—I could see what everyone was talking about.

And then something happened that changed the way I viewed television.

When that first episode ended, a small window popped up at the bottom of the screen, offering a teaser paragraph about the next episode. This was not the life-changing part; I am used to that. Those episode previews existed in my 1980s favorites, *Chips*, *The A-Team*, *Family Ties*, and *Saved by the Bell*.

But do you know what was *not* normal? That little countdown clock.

“Your series will continue in 10 . . . 9 . . . 8 . . . 7 . . .”

Wait, what?!

No time to get up off the couch, no time to get an evening snack of cookies and milk, and certainly no time to go to the bathroom. My series was about to continue. All I had to do was sit there and let one episode roll into the next.

Two seasons later and a whole weekend lost, I realized I had left the couch only because I really had to go to the bathroom. I probably couldn't have told you what each episode was about, since they all blurred into a delicious blend of layered drama. My bloodshot eyes, my racing mind, and my depleted vocabulary would probably have vaguely described the experience as “good.”

*Parenthood* was better than good. Each episode was excellent. But they muddled together in my mind as one long

experience rather than a dozen colorful stories with a beginning, middle, and end.

Binge-watching has entered our lives on a number of levels—this habit of consuming as much as we can, as fast as we can, rather than watching the show on the balanced, intentional cadence of regular weekly programming. The term *binge-watching* was even added to the Oxford online dictionary in 2014.<sup>1</sup> It's a word we seem to need for a thing we seem to need to do.

(Listen, I'm not blaming anybody. . . . If binge-watching had been an option in the eighties, I promise you I'd have lost hundreds of consecutive hours hanging out with *The A-Team*.)

Often we live our lives like a binge-watch, in a perpetual mode of “to be continued.” This pattern may be great for Netflix, but a chronic continuation is no way to live. We have lost the rhythms of sabbath and sunrise, of mealtime and bedtime. These ideas have been replaced by phrases like “burn the midnight oil” and “the early bird gets the worm,” and they have planted seeds of perpetual anxiety. The pace keeps accelerating, and there is no built-in commercial break for snacks, no margin to process what just happened.

This is how the past gets dragged into the future: when one episode continues into the next, we don't even notice that the season ended. Without finish lines, we become bystanders in our own lives, without a clear understanding of how to truly live.

Continuation is what happens when there is no conclusion.

We don't need continuations. We need conclusions.

Many seasons have clearly defined conclusions, like New Year's Eve or high school graduation. There are times when everyone knows when it's over.

But other endings are vague—like the transition from mullets (are these *really* back?) and flattop haircuts, the finish line from winter to spring, or the long journey to healing from grief, disappointment, and loss.

Sometimes the conclusion is so subtle we don't notice it, and sometimes we discover the conclusion far too late, when we're left holding only regret or hindsight.

**CONTINUATION IS WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THERE IS NO CONCLUSION. WE DON'T NEED CONTINUATIONS. WE NEED CONCLUSIONS.**

Sometimes we have to move into the next thing without knowing what is next.

Uncertainty can hold us captive and make us second-guess everything, or it can be a catalyst for a process.

Conclusions aren't just about the outcome; they're about the process.

Sometimes the point of the journey is the journey.

The word *conclusion* has multiple meanings: it means "to bring something to an end," but it also means "to arrive at a

judgment.” Either way, a conclusion requires our attention and intention.

Conclusions create the intentional rhythms that allow us to experience the life God has made available to us—whether we have just blasted through the ribbon at the finish line of a race or we have quietly come to the end of our rope. Endings get our attention.

In fact, this is not a new idea. A really smart guy already wrote about the importance of endings, and he said they could be even better than beginnings.

The wisest man who ever lived, King Solomon, wrote this in his journal: “Better is the end of a thing than its beginning” (Eccles. 7:8 ESV).

I think we can nod and agree, at least at first. But why?

Of course the end is better than the beginning if the season is hard. We are relieved because it’s over, obviously.

But what if a season has been good? Why should it end? How is that ending better than its beginning?

The end is better than the beginning not because it was good or bad but because it happened at all—not because the season is over but because the season *matters*.

God is a masterful storyteller. He is doing something in every moment, and when we learn to create conclusions between seasons, episodes, moments, and happenings, we can see our lives as a story he is telling.

Conclusions are intentional points in time that we create to gain perspective. There is a discipline in this, and it

requires a stopping point. An end. A finish line—even a finish line in the messy middle. It doesn't mean the journey is over or has come to an organic finish; it means we must create a point in time to stop and see. We need to create a disruption to the continuation that allows the past to drive our future.

I am a future guy, a visionary. I am always tinkering with ideas, always longing to move forward, to explore, and to see what is possible and available. While that tendency is built into my personality and my work, I have learned that life happens in the present.

God's purposes aren't defined by my plans, my intentions, or my big ideas. He's not hiding in the future, waiting for me in the next episode. He is here now, in this moment, and his plans are fulfilled as my life becomes a part of his story.

His story is not a story of accomplishment but one of redemption, bringing moments to a conclusion with a purpose.

When we learn the power of conclusion, we begin to see how our lives become useful for God's purpose and fulfillment according to his promise. ✱

## *PART ONE*

# **HOPE COMES IN THE BEGINNING**

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Hope often couples with excitement, and these emotions swell at the start of something new. But they are a fragile pair, easily choked out, often strangled by the pace and pressure of the process.

Excitement fades to dread and cynicism. Hope loses the battle against futility. We must hold on to hope with both hands. Don't let it slip away.

Hope held is hope renewed, the fuel for endurance on the journey ahead.



## CHAPTER 1

# **“LET’S GO!”**

### *The Hope of Beginnings*

#### **“LET’S GO!”**

This rally cry means we’re off. We’re on a new adventure, stepping into a new moment. “Let’s go” is our invitation to begin. We love beginnings.

Beginnings have allure. They beckon us forward, they call us ahead, and they draw us from where we are. Beginnings are fun and enticing, a call for celebration. When you’re just getting started, anything seems possible. That’s the simple beauty of the beginning.

Let’s think about this.

When you start a new job, you go out and celebrate with friends. When you have a great first date, you go home with a smile on your face, and your mind races with the possibility of what lies ahead.

When you rent your first apartment or purchase your first home, you might sense an overwhelming feeling of

satisfaction that you are on your own. You have independence. You can hang pictures where you want—or don't if you'd rather not. You can put a bicycle in the living room or a new TV. (I hung surfboards in my living room for about five years.)

After all, it's your beginning, in your new place.

If you're a runner, you know that the beginning of a marathon starts with the fanfare of cheering and a starter pistol, of crowds and momentum and excitement. The party at the starting line of a race is exhilarating. At the start, everything is in front of you, and everything seems possible.

### What Is Uniquely Available in the Beginning?

At the starting line, that emotion we feel is actually hope. We don't initially recognize it by that name because it looks and feels like excitement, the jitters, or the butterflies. But deep down, what we feel is something of much greater consequence.

Deep down, there is a desire and a longing. In this beginning, where everything is in front of us, there is a powerful, available hope. At its essence, hope is a desire that what we start will turn out well.

We hope the first date will lead to a great relationship. We hope this race will provide a sense of conquest or accomplishment. We hope buying the house will prove to be a good investment and a place filled with incredible memories. We

hope our jobs will be satisfying and our careers will be successful. A beginning is a blank slate for a beautiful, hopeful future.

## Beyond Beginning to an Encounter

I live by the ocean. It is a tough life, but someone has to do it.

I try never to take this gift for granted. To keep my appreciation fresh, I often drive down to the beach just to put my feet in the sand. Having grown up in Atlanta, I was landlocked for twenty-one years. The only way to watch the waves was to save our vacation money and drive seven hours to the ocean once a year. Now that it's only a ten-minute drive, I take full advantage of it.

One of my favorite things to do is watch the sunrise. Although, if you think about it, the sun isn't really rising. What is actually happening is even more spectacular. I'm not simply standing still, waiting for the sun to come up. I'm balancing on a rotating rock as it flings through space at about sixty-seven thousand mph, spinning around at a thousand mph. I am waiting to spin far enough to catch the first glimpse of a humongous ball of fire nearly ninety-three million miles away.

Astounding.

We casually call it a sunrise, but I'd say it is a *beautiful* miracle. It's a fresh start, designed and executed by the Maker of the universe, and it happens every single day.

And most mornings we sleep right through it.

Let's clarify: not all beginnings are miraculous, and not everything begins because you wanted it to. Sometimes a beginning starts because you were in the right place at the right time, and sometimes it starts because you are at the wrong place at that time. Sometimes it begins with a peek at something that will become your new reality.

Maybe you didn't plan to start a new season in your life, but you have suddenly found yourself at a new beginning. I call these "encounters," these moments when your life collides with a new reality you had not considered, one you perhaps did not know existed.

I had one of these encounters in the fourth grade. Before that point, my life consisted of an imaginary world of dinosaurs, spaceships, and an occasional visit from Godzilla. At recess my friends Jon, Scotty, and I escaped the demands of the school day to enter our make-believe world and elaborate on the latest time-warp feature on our spaceships. We were invincible, naïve, and absorbed in our own ideas.

Then something *happened*.

After a productive recess, I arrived at my desk to collide with a reality I did not know existed. A note lay on my desk, and I unfolded it to read this:

To: Mike

Dear Mike,

I like you.

Do you like me?

Yes or No

Signed, Jennifer

Here was a question I'd never considered. As far as I recall, the thought of liking a girl had never occurred to me, and now I couldn't get that discovery out of my head.

I tried to ignore it, but it wouldn't go away. Everything in me just wanted to pretend that I hadn't read those words, but it was too late. I'd already collided with this new reality.

No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't get the question out of my mind. I couldn't pretend that I didn't see it. Every time I saw Jennifer, I owed her an answer. The uncertainty of what was happening made we want to avoid her and just retreat to spaceships and dinosaurs.

That is the nature of such an encounter. You didn't plan it or even desire it, but it happened. Most encounters don't arrive as easily as a handwritten note inviting you to circle Yes or No, but there are things that happen that demand our attention and, more importantly, our response.

You have collided with reality. Escape is not an option.

The older we get, the more complicated things become—especially beginnings. You have patterns you've established

and people that depend on you. You can't just stop what you're doing to start a new beginning. And yet you can't ignore the encounter.

There are some things you can't unsee. You can't ignore it or shrug it off, even if you try. Once you've seen it, it has invaded your scope of awareness, and you know it's going to make things different. It exists now, and it has your attention.

Fear makes you want it to go away, but hope breathes a different emotion.

Sometimes you can look back and recall the exact moment something began, the second you encountered something new that changed you. These small, unexpected moments can serve as a catalyst for something deeply profound.

Whether it is good news or bad news, this encounter is a collision. You have run into something you can't escape.

Something that changes and shapes you and your future.

Something new has begun, and you must decide how to respond.

You can try to ignore it or wish it away, but it's there now. And it's calling you to make a decision. You have to create a

point in time to intentionally deal with the new reality, and this brings you to the conclusion of what has been.

**FEAR MAKES YOU  
WANT IT TO GO AWAY,  
BUT HOPE BREATHES A  
DIFFERENT EMOTION.**

## A Burning Encounter

Moses experienced an encounter he didn't ask for, one that called him to a brand-new beginning. This is recorded for us in the second book of the Bible, called Exodus. As an Israelite baby, he had been adopted by the Pharaoh's daughter and had grown up in Pharaoh's household with all the royal privileges and amenities of the most powerful family in the world. But the freedom he enjoyed was built on the backs of Israelite slaves, the people of his own flesh and blood. Overcome with rage over how the Egyptian slave masters treated the Israelite slaves, he took justice into his own hands and killed a violent Egyptian soldier.

Afraid that Pharaoh would find out what he had done, Moses ran for his life into the wilderness. He lived in the desert and tended sheep for a long time. He found a wife, together they had children, and he established an anonymous life as a shepherd.

I imagine Moses was familiar with his routines and maybe even comfortably content with his quiet life. He was likely not planning on a new challenge. But when Moses was eighty years old, after forty years as a shepherd in the desert, God suddenly appeared to him in a burning bush. In that moment Moses encountered God, who charged him to go back to Egypt to lead the Israelite slaves to freedom.

I imagine there were moments when Moses wished he had never noticed that fire in the desert. He probably wished he had taken a different route with his sheep that

afternoon, and he probably longed to bypass that whole situation. He even asked God to please send someone else. But it was too late; he had seen the bush, and he was now aware of a new reality.

God met Moses in the middle of an ordinary day, and he called him to a new beginning.

This encounter required Moses to close the circle around the life he knew. He couldn't tend sheep and lead the people out of Egypt at the same time. If he had kept the routines of the life he knew, he would have missed God's calling on his life, and he would have missed knowing God as the Father who cares for and redeems his people.

As the sun rose on Moses' new beginning, the sun set on the old reality he had known.

Like Moses, you might wish to look the other way. You might long to ignore what you have encountered, and you might wish to pretend you don't know what you know. But this moment matters. You have collided with something new. A new beginning calls for an ending, and conclusions can be difficult when they call us to embrace the end of the way things were.

If you don't conclude the moments that have come before, you could miss knowing God in the moments to come.

## God Does Not Write Fairy Tales

The fairy tales we love most open in a classic voice: "Once upon a time."

Those words signal the start of a story. They jump-start a journey into the deepest parts of what we want. We keep spinning stories and weaving tales, and we step in as witnesses to the action and the drama, the fairy-tale ball, the beautiful dress, the slain dragons, the defeated villains, and the triumph of all that is good. We get to feel the tension, and we get to celebrate the resolve.

Here's the thing about fairy tales, though: we can't contribute.

While we can feel emotionally involved, while we cheer for the heroes and boo at the villains, we aren't actually living the story. We're spectators. Even if we're as close as the front row, we're still only watching the story. We aren't in the story.

That's where God's story is different. God does not write fairy tales.

His story has all the common elements of a fairy tale (or rather, fairy tales commonly reflect elements of God's story), with this one wonderful difference: his story is true, and we are invited to participate in it.

"Once upon a time" introduces us to what has already happened to someone else. The story of God opens differently. The Bible opens with the words, "In the beginning."

This story isn't only about what has happened but what is *happening*.

The story that unfolds in the Bible isn't about another time and another place. This story reveals the heart of God inviting us into his work and his purpose. He has created us to participate with him in what he is creating.

We read, "In the beginning," and the sentence continues: "God created."

This line sweeps everything into the voice of the Creator, inviting us to bring everything we have received into his epic story. Our voice, our choices, our decisions, and our lives contribute to the saga of a glorious God through his glorious creation.

When God initiated all of creation, forming everything that surrounds us, he did not simply get the ball rolling and

then wait to see where it went.

Even at the beginning, we were part of what he started, and he wanted us in the story with him. "In the beginning" isn't an invitation to watch from the sidelines. It's a call to contribute, to participate, to join in, to live the story.

**OUR VOICE, OUR  
CHOICES, OUR DECISIONS,  
AND OUR LIVES  
CONTRIBUTE TO THE  
SAGA OF A GLORIOUS  
GOD THROUGH HIS  
GLORIOUS CREATION.**

Every choice we make contributes to our character development and to the arc of our story, and because we know the Author, we can trust that every stroke of the story

is infused with hope. Hope is the thing that compels us to risk the unknown and to endure on the path, even when we cannot see the way forward. Beginnings draw hope into the light, long middles cause hope to fade, and uncertain endings make hope seem dark; but in God's story, hope is always there. When God launches beginnings, he has the end in mind, both for the sake of what comes after and for the hope of every moment in between.

A beginning must have a conclusion, and even a short story must have an ending—that's what makes it a story. In this story God is writing, we live between the epic beginning and the epic end. God pours forth his speech one day at a time, and our story unfolds the same way, under the same promise of hope. There is a day when faith will give way to sight, and hope will no longer be needed because every desire will be fully and finally fulfilled. Every tear will be wiped away and every fear vanished in the thrill of the final redemption of all things.

Beginnings might be easy, but the conclusion is where you'll see what you're longing for.

This season, this day, this moment as you read this page—this is your small start. You've picked up this book and started a journey. Maybe you're not even normally a reader, so I'd like to congratulate you on what you've already done by reading these few pages.

Now, if you are like me, you may get about one-third of the way through the book and start to feel the pressure to

# “TO BE CONTINUED...”

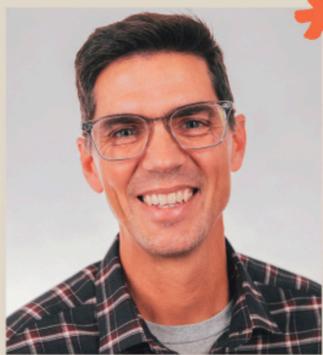
The words build anticipation for what’s coming . . . which is great for a Netflix binge, but not a healthy pattern for our lives. In real life, constant continuation causes our lives to pile up, episode upon episode, with no space for reflection or rest, contentment or closure.

This book is for the too-busy, driven person who’s moving on to the next win, without ever processing how one season of life affects the next. It’s for the person stuck and held back because she’s never done the hard work of getting real closure on a season. When we fail to finish well, we live with a pile of unfinished beginnings. But finished things become usable things because they are a part of the story of God’s grace and faithfulness.

## IN THESE PAGES, YOU’LL DISCOVER:

- how **beginnings are important** because they give birth to hope
- how we can **hold on to hope** when the journey is hard and the future is uncertain
- how to **conclude moments, days, and seasons** and find God’s grace to be enough
- how hope sustains us as we **learn to live in this moment** and discover the beauty of redemption

The pressure of our piled up past needs to be brought to an end. Instead of vague story lines that stretch “to be continued,” learn to start with the end in mind: *To Be Concluded*.



\* **MIKE ASHCRAFT** serves as the senior pastor at Port City Community Church which he helped start in 1999. He married Julie, his high school sweetheart, in 1992. They grew up in Atlanta and relocated near the beach in southeastern North Carolina. He enjoys family time with his two daughters and one son-in-law. The beach is his happy place and surfing is the only hobby he needs.

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