



*Soul Revolution*  
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## Deep Longings— MY JOURNEY OF FAITH

*All [people] seek happiness. There are no exceptions. . . .  
Yet all [people] complain. . . . A test which has gone on so long,  
without pause or change, really ought to convince us  
that we are incapable of attaining the good by our own efforts.*

BLAISE PASCAL

*Two dates and a dash.*

One hot summer day a few years ago, I stood under the huge oaks shading my father's grave and recalled his last words. He had spoken them after a life that most people would have considered quite successful: "I'd give it all back if I could just have my health and family."

I pondered his last thoughts and looked at the dates on his headstone: 1933 – 1980. The first was the year he was born, with hope for a life of meaning, love, and purpose ahead of him. The second was the year he died. It's strange how life gets summed up with two dates and a dash in between. We get a birthday, we get a death day, and we have little control over either. But we can choose whether the dash in between will mean everything — or nothing.

My childhood memories of Dad came to mind. Once we built a model train set together. It was one of those lifelike electric trains, around which we decided to create an entire elaborate world. We got a 4 x 8 board for the base; we used wire, wood, and papier-mâché for the mountains and rivers, towns and houses; and we bought miniature people and cars. The track made a large oval around the board, through the mountains, over the bridge that crossed the river. We framed it, sculpted it, wired it, and painted it for about a year — it was incredible. Finally the day came to plug it in and watch it go. I couldn't wait.

We celebrated as the train went around the loop, through the town, back

out to the loop. Dad and I high-fived — it looked amazing. But as the weeks went by, I started to lose interest. It didn't take me too long to figure out it was just going around in circles. I could pretend it had some purpose by making up some GI Joe adventure, or I could pretend the little green army man stranded on the tracks needed to be rescued. Eventually it developed into experiments with train wrecks. The problem was — it was just going in circles.

“It wasn't the elaborate train set I loved,” I thought that day by the grave-side. “It was building it together, doing it alongside my dad. Without that relationship — the train got old pretty fast.”

Life is like that. We chase something we think will bring us life. In our fast-paced society we talk fast, drive fast, think fast, eat fast, but have you ever thought about *why* you speed through life — going around in circles on this giant ball of dirt? Most of us spend our lives trying to get what we *think* we want, but often when we get it, we ask, “Now what?” Most of us never slow down long enough to consider what that dash on our headstones will some day represent.

What drives us to strive so hard? What are we really after? What do we long for?

Or let me make it more personal: What do *you* long for? What does *your* heart *really* desire?

All of us have deep longings that are from God. Some of us feel these longings intensely, while others sort of hydroplane across the surface of life. Perhaps deep hurts have even caused some of us to lose touch with our deepest desires.

But you have them. From early in your life you devised a strategy to get those deepest needs met, and even now those deep longings drive your behavior, choices, and goals (or lack of goals).

I've come to believe that our deepest longings only find fulfillment through relationships — with God and with other people. Without those relationships, our pursuits and goals and dreams and achievements are like that train going around in circles — what's the point?

But how do we *do life* in relationship with God?

It starts with a seemingly simple yet powerful virtue: willingness.

## **WILLINGNESS**

I first experienced the power of willingness when I was a new Christ-follower. Only half emerged from my old life, a life of partying and all that entailed, I

lived on a spiritual roller coaster. I'd go from a spiritual high (after each small group where we studied Scripture and discussed life with God) to a spiritual low (each weekend, doing things I knew were not what God intended). But that was my shallow strategy for attaining what I thought was the good life.

Late one Saturday, after a night of overindulgence, I lay down in bed and began to say my nightly prayers. The room spun around my head as I pretended nothing was wrong. Suddenly, it dawned on me — “I'm not fooling you with my inauthentic prayers, am I God?” So, realizing I couldn't put one over on God, I decided to be brutally honest: “I don't *want* to talk to you about my partying because I already know that I want to do it again! I'm afraid if I follow your will, I'll never have fun again. So if you want me to stop, you've got to help me see a better way. I'm willing for you to help me.”

Little did I know then about the power of willingness, but when God met me in that willingness, new attitudes began to replace the old. The change seemed almost effortless. Within months, I was living more in God's will and actually enjoying life more! In time I began to see that God wanted to take my “life's a party” strategy and fulfill me in a more soul-satisfying way: with uninhibited fun and laughter, excitement, spontaneity, and transparency with close friends — and without a crutch. That year I began to see that life with God brings a greater thrill, deeper relationships, and a more heightened experience of life than my shallow strategy of instant gratification ever could.

As I continued to grow spiritually, God showed me other strategies I'd been using to meet my deepest longings, not that they were “wrong” or “sinful,” but just misaligned. For instance, I'd always wanted to be successful. I'd even mapped out my strategy: I'd start my own company, be my own boss, and become financially independent. Then, I assumed, I'd be fulfilled, happy, secure, and living up to what my peers and parents expected.

But right in the middle of my sophomore year in college I got sick. I was bedridden for a week. With nothing to do but lie there, I thought, “Why am I working so hard, killing myself to ‘succeed’?”

It was the first time in my life that I'd asked myself “Why?” I didn't know the answer. I'm now convinced the “why” came from a belief that “success,” as I defined it, would meet my deepest longings to be highly valued, loved, fulfilled, happy! But the “why” was so buried in my psyche, I couldn't see it.

Then another question popped into my head: “God, how do *you* define success?” My father defined it as starting his own company, attaining financial

security, never depending on anyone — and he achieved incredible success by those standards. Now I was following in his footsteps.

Again, my father's last words dug deep into my conscience, "I'd give it all back . . ." "If I achieve success like my dad's," I wondered, "will it be enough? What's life really about if all our worldly achievements get stripped away in a moment? God . . . what is success to you?"

Reading the Bible that week, I happened across Hebrews 11, a chapter that celebrates people who were successful in God's eyes. I read it and reread it. They all had one thing in common — great faith! This verse stuck in my mind: "Without faith it is impossible to please God" (Hebrews 11:6).

So I had my answer: God defines success in terms of faith, not just professed belief in him, but active, daily, risk-taking trust like that of the great people of Hebrews 11. Trust and faithfulness form the foundation of every relationship.

That week I began to question my success strategy, and I prayed a second honest prayer of willingness: "God, I'm scared to trust you with my success. I'm afraid you'll make me unsuccessful if I follow your will — that's the honest truth. But I also know my fear is unfounded — if that's what you want, you don't really need my permission to take away my success, do you? So I'm willing to seek success on your terms — help me be a man of faith. Help me succeed in your eyes."

I began to keep a journal that year. Even though I wasn't really the journaling type, I started writing as a way to track this journey of faith. I wanted to see if God would really guide an imperfect, struggling person like me, if only I remained willing to trust, to take faith risks. I chronicled my prayers, decisions, and risks. Looking back after a couple of years, I was blown away to see God's many answers, as well as his direct, tangible involvement in my life. The more willing and radically responsive I became, the more I realized the immeasurable personal benefit that comes from following God daily.

I've chronicled this journey of faith for more than twenty years now. Whenever I reread my journals, I'm astounded! While working in the business world during those first few years, I experienced that God was truly interested in me and every little aspect of my life. I adopted the mantra "If you're too scared to trust, you'll never know." I experienced guidance in my job decisions, relational decisions, and daily work decisions, and looking back, I can see so many God-coincidences, literally hundreds of tangible examples of God interacting with me as I trusted.

Journaling this adventure has helped me see patterns not only of how God

leads, but also of how he is relational and creative and can't be put in a box. Over the years, I've learned that to benefit from God's plan, I have to be willing to let go of my own. This is scary at times.

For instance, I worried that no woman I'd want to marry would want to marry me if I were really to follow God's leading. Ironically, it was *because* of his leading that I met and married the most beautiful person I've ever known! God takes our willingness and leads us mysteriously down the path where our deepest longings will finally be met in relationship with him and others.

Relationship is what it's all about.



Over the years, I've heard many stories from imperfect people like myself. Some of these people weren't even sure God exists, but at least they were showing the first signs of willingness. Others were new to faith. Still others had been grasping at faith for years. One thing I've seen, however, is that God could care less about how messed up you are, how far you've fallen, or how "good" you've been. What he wants to know is, "How willing are you right now — in this moment?"

In the stories that follow you'll see how God takes imperfect but willing people and leads them into life's greatest adventure — the relational journey toward their hearts' greatest desire.

## **CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW?**

Unfortunately, many who profess to follow Christ have never really experienced this adventure. Jesus often said, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear" and "Whoever has eyes to see, let them see."<sup>1</sup> I'm pretty sure most all the people Jesus addressed had two ears and two eyes. What was he talking about? He was referring to a realm of spiritual listening, seeing, and understanding. He said, "This people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them" (Matthew 13:15). Who was Jesus talking about? By and large, he was speaking of the devoutly religious people as the ones who couldn't hear or see or understand.

Pollster George Barna has reported, "Of more than 70 moral behaviors we study, when we compare Christians to non-Christians we rarely find substantial

differences.”<sup>22</sup> And if you ask non-Christians for one word that comes to mind when they hear the word *Christian*, the most common answer is “judgmental,” even though Jesus said he came into the world not to judge it, but to save it.

Something’s terribly wrong. What is it? I’m convinced we’ve lost the ability to see and hear and understand how to truly follow the way of Christ moment by moment.

In this book, I hope to take you on a journey to discover how we learn to listen and see and experience this journey of faith that begins to meet the deepest longings of your soul.

Imagine yourself two years from now. How would you like to be free from the maladies that plague so many in our generation — loneliness, fear, anxiety, anger, bitterness, insecurity, lust, and the keeping-up-with-the-Joneses syndrome? What if you could be free of the need for praise or approval from others? Imagine that worry and stress no longer overpower and push you down under their weight, and in their place you feel calmness every night when you lay your head on your pillow. Who wouldn’t want a life in which joy erupted from your spirit at surprising times? Who wouldn’t want a life in which you can enjoy each moment, thankful and content and relishing the gift of life with the people around you? Imagine feeling so well off that you don’t need more money or more stuff to feel content. You might even find yourself becoming increasingly generous. Who wouldn’t want to be a more loving person year after year, the kind of person that others are grateful to have around because you’re making a lasting difference in their lives? Imagine being able to act lovingly toward even the unlovable people in your life. That would be a soul revolution — wouldn’t it?

Is this really possible? Only if Jesus was telling the truth! He insisted that God intends for you to live a life that fulfills your deepest desires and transforms you into a life-giving person. God says he will produce a life-giving reservoir inside you — but only if you let him. How? That’s what this book is about.

Chapter by chapter, I plan to challenge you with a simple Sixty-Day Experiment in Faith, an experiment to see what happens if you stay connected to God at least every sixty minutes for sixty days. We called it the 60-60 Experiment at our church, and thousands of people have done it with amazing results. Whether you’ve followed Christ for years or aren’t even sure who he is, commit as much of yourself as you understand to as much of God as you understand for sixty days and see what happens. I think you’ll be amazed. Like many people in this book, if you go all out in seeking a radically responsive relationship



with God, I believe you'll discover a way of life you'll want to continue. Because this experiment is about loving God and people, I would encourage you to find a small group or at least one or two trusted friends (I call Spiritual Running Partners) to do this 60-60 Experiment with you.

But first you must decide, "What do I really want? Am I willing to go all out for sixty days to see if God's revolutionary ways lead to the life I desire?"

If you'll take that risk, I believe you'll see that God takes imperfect people, and as we are willing, he helps us become more and more of what he intended us to be — and in the process we find our deepest longings finally being met in relationship with God and others. That's what I've personally experienced, and what I've heard in story after story of willing people, many whom you'll meet in this book.

Are you willing?

## PREPARING FOR THE 60-60 EXPERIMENT

1. Take a sheet of paper and make a list of all the things you long for in life. Don't edit out anything; whether you think it's a good desire or not, just write.
2. Now look at your list and circle the three to five most important things on your list (what you don't want to live without). Why are those things most important to you? What do you hope they will bring you? Is there a deeper spiritual quality you're hoping that desire will bring? Is that spiritual quality a top priority on your list?
3. If it's true that our deepest longings are good and from God, how might God want to meet the deepest longings that your top priorities reveal? Discuss that question with your small group or someone you trust.
4. Do you trust that God wants to meet your deepest longings? What fears do you have in all-out trusting him? What might you gain from fully trusting God for the next sixty days? What might you lose?

## Shallow Strategies

It had been a perfect night out for John and Dalia. Dennis Quaid's annual benefit party had been a blast. A few drinks, great entertainment, lots of laughs. The kids were asleep, and John was in the mood as they undressed for bed.

"John, can I ask you something?" The tone in Dalia's voice revealed a deep hidden fear.

"Sure, honey, . . . what is it?" John took Dalia in his arms and pulled her close so as not to lose the moment.

"Have you been unfaithful to me?"

Dalia's words penetrated John's soul like a dagger. She had asked him this two or three times before, but this time, somehow, the words struck more deeply.

Time seemed to stand still as John's mind raced back across the years. Once, while he was engaged to Dalia, he had gone to a work party one night without her. It had been a hard week; he deserved to unwind and have some fun, he'd told himself. The drinks flowed, and when the cocaine came out, he was up for some heightened pleasure. The woman doing coke with him got flirty. John rationalized: soon he'd be married, no more chances for a thrill like this. Before the night ended, he had cheated on his fiancée.

John recalled another occasion early in their marriage when he'd spent a weekend away with some work associates, most of them single. John knew where a night out with them might lead, but he'd told himself he could "read the menu without buying." Besides, he had thought, what's wrong with having a little fun if it's not hurting anybody? The booze, the drugs, and a willing woman took him

on the same dead-end ride he'd traveled so many times since his junior year in high school when he started "having a little fun." Only this time — he felt something. It was his conscience.

The next morning, guilt and shame had covered him like a wet, smelly blanket. *What have I done? . . . Dalia!* John's friends assured him that if he never told her, the feeling would go away.

"Oh, if only I hadn't lied when she first asked," John thought now. The remorse over his hidden life and the strained intimacy with the woman he loved tickertaped red across his mind. He always swore he'd change — he'd stop drinking and never have another affair. He told himself he wasn't "that bad." He was a Christian, after all. He believed Jesus died for his sins. And he confessed each adulterous affair to God — but then had another and another.

Each time, John would tell himself, "I'm a good person — a successful lawyer, a volunteer at church. I'm not really hurting anyone by having fun." But "fun" always led to too much drinking, drugs if they were available, flirting, and wherever things led from there.

"Have you been unfaithful to me?" The question reverberated in John's head.

God had been working in John's heart since they'd started going to Gateway Church. He knew that authenticity was important for those who followed Christ. He'd heard stories of others who had failed and fallen, yet had truly decided to follow God all out. There was something appealing, even life-inspiring about breaking out of this self-induced prison. But fear always kept him locked up: fear of losing his marriage; fear of facing past failures; fear of feeling like a failure; and, if he was honest, fear of not having any more "fun." Ultimately, it was the fear of losing the only life he'd ever known.

*Some life this has turned out to be!* The thought struck deep and twisted in his soul. The realization of all the pain he had caused welled up in a reservoir of emotion behind the dam of his past lies.

"John, have you?" Dalia persisted.

"Yes."

It happened in a moment. All of the memories, all the truth, all the lies — all collided into one horribly painful moment.

"Yes." John dropped his head as Dalia's tears streamed down her face. All her long-held suspicions were confirmed. John never intended this — to hurt the one he loved. All the "fun" that life had promised only brought death — the death of everything he really wanted, of everything he cherished. It was the most terrifying, honest, freeing word he'd ever spoken.

“Yes.”

For the next six months, John faced the reality of losing everything he loved most — Dalia, his children, the friends he’d lied to, the church friends he’d deceived. The proverb said it well: “There is a way that appears to be right, but in the end it leads to death” (Proverbs 16:25).

Almost three years later, Dalia recalled, “If John hadn’t changed, I would have left him. But God really has changed his heart. He’s a free man, and through rebuilding our marriage, I’ve come to realize how much I love him. It’ll take years, perhaps a lifetime to regain all we lost, but we have a strength in our marriage that wasn’t there before.”

John said, “I had this work-hard-play-hard philosophy that drove me, going way back to high school. Even though I was a straight A student, a good athlete, and in student government, I wanted friends. When I changed schools, the group that reached out to me partied hard, so I partied hard to fit in. That began a life of drinking, drugs, and sex.

“I can’t even imagine all the people I’ve hurt. I’ve prayed for forgiveness. I was just blind. All I desired was to belong and be loved, yet you get so turned in on yourself, so self-centered, that you can’t see that the path you’re on will destroy you and those you love. I had Jesus way up in the clouds, removed from my real life. I felt I could tap into God when I needed him, but there was no daily, regular connection — I didn’t know how to relate to God. Honestly, I knew very little about him. I hadn’t taken time to study the Scriptures to know his character. I hadn’t honestly surrendered my will to follow Christ. I wanted to have my cake and eat it too — but that never works.

“Since then, I’ve developed the art of staying connected to God throughout the day, and God is producing something in me I always wanted — peace, faithfulness, love, self-control. Since I confessed, God has been gently pulling me out of this deep hole I’ve dug, but I find there’s still something in me that wants to keep my foot in the hole, because deep down I feel I may want to crawl back in it. It’s that ‘sin nature’ in me wanting to go back to the only life I’ve known. Yet I’m tasting something I’ve always wanted growing within — something full of life — peaceful, yet exciting at the same time.”

## **FINGER POINTING**

God wants to meet our deepest needs, but early in life we get wired to meet our needs without God. It never works. We think our fulfillment strategies will

bring life, but they usually destroy the life we desire. Our deepest longings are good. But just as thirst points us toward water, our deepest longings point us toward Someone who can actually satisfy our thirsty souls.

A Zen master once said, “A finger is excellent for pointing at the moon, but woe to him who mistakes the finger for the moon.” I believe we must follow our deepest desires with spiritual eyesight so that we can see exactly where they are pointing.

This book is your guide for this journey. In preparation, let’s explore the life your heart and soul craves, which you may just find is the life God intended for you all along. Begin with these questions:

- What do I really desire?
- How will I really get it?

## WHAT’S YOUR STRATEGY?

All of us have strategies — mostly shallow ones — for quenching our deepest thirsts. What’s yours? Identifying your main strategy can be tricky, like trying to see your nose without a mirror. Often our plan to “find life” gets so woven into our psyche that it becomes invisible. Even when we do identify that strategy, it’s terrifying to imagine life without it.

Are you willing to reconsider your strategy? It may not be bad, but it may also be far less than God intends for you. Ask yourself, are you open to growth — to *change*?

One way to begin to uncover your current strategy is to fill in these blanks:

“If only \_\_\_\_\_,  
 or if I just \_\_\_\_\_,  
 then I will have the life I’ve always wanted.”

Write down some phrases in those blanks. Be honest. Don’t edit your thoughts because you feel your desires are wrong — just be rigorously truthful. What are you hoping for? What are you counting on?

Let’s probe some common strategies with spiritual eyes for a minute.

Some people bank on the strategy of finding Mr. or Miss Right, getting married, and having a loving family. That’s all good, but a marriage license doesn’t guarantee love, faithfulness, or security. Let’s say you’ve found “the

one,” got married, have had the statistical average of 2.3 kids, but you don’t have love, contentment, and security — would you be happy? I doubt it since your basic spiritual needs are still unmet. So how do you get spiritual qualities like love, contentment and security?

Maybe your strategy is: “If I can just reach a certain financial level, reach my career and lifestyle goals, then I’ll have life!” Material success — not a bad thing in itself, but is it really enough? Is it *all* you want? (Maybe you’re thinking, “All I want is a chance to *prove* that lots of money and success is not enough!”)

Consider this: imagine you have all the money, status, and toys you ever dreamed of, but you aren’t content, don’t experience joy, and don’t feel your life matters — is it enough? Or do you want real contentment, personal confidence, lasting purpose, and maybe even a generous heart too? Do these spiritual qualities really come from attaining more stuff? What are your heart’s deepest desires?

Maybe you’ve been deeply wounded in the past. As a result, your strategy may center on becoming self-sufficient and independently strong. You don’t need anyone. But can inner strength or lasting security be found in isolation? Where do you find the spiritual strength and security to displace all your fear despite living in a dangerous world?

For many in our generation, the strategy of choice is to live for the next extreme rush — instant-gratification purchases, quick-dry thrills to fill the cracks in your soul, endorphin-rushed romances and sexual highs, chemically dependent and uninhibited fun — all because it’s the closest you come to feeling alive. But ultimately these strategies destroy the life you seek. Thrills get boring, highs leave you low, romance wilts as fast as it blooms, sex becomes a series of morning-afters. So where do you go to find lasting spiritual qualities, like excitement with peace, adventure with security, and lasting intimacy with sexual contentment?

As C. S. Lewis realized, the problem is usually not that we want too much; it’s that we *settle* for too little. Deep down we deceive ourselves. We believe two things: “My strategy will work,” and “God will get in the way of what I really want.” But both are lies! Ultimately, God wants to meet our *deepest* desires.

## **SPRINGS OF LIVING WATER**

As you read the Bible, it doesn’t take long to encounter imperfect people. From Adam and Eve to the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11, God’s faithful made huge moral blunders. So there’s hope for you and me! How can God possibly work

with imperfect people? Because they are *willing*. In one of my favorite stories, Jesus encounters a very imperfect woman, and through their interaction, he shows us the way God will gently uncover our broken strategies in order to quench our deepest thirst.

While traveling with his disciples through Samaria, Jesus came to a well called Jacob's Well. After he sent his disciples into the city to buy food, a woman came to draw water from the well. Usually, the women of the town would draw their daily supply of water in the cool of the morning. Conversation around the well would be the equivalent of our office water-cooler conversations.

Significantly, when this woman came to the well alone, it was around noon, the hottest part of the day, no doubt because she was avoiding the water-cooler group. Her past had been anything but perfect. She'd been married and divorced five times — a track record that would earn her several laps around the gossip circle — but the fact that she was now unmarried and shacking up with a sixth man was scandalous.

*Jesus said to her, "Please give me a drink." . . .*

*The woman was surprised, for Jews refuse to have anything to do with Samaritans. She said to Jesus, "You are a Jew, and I am a Samaritan woman. Why are you asking me for a drink?"*

*Jesus replied, "If you only knew the gift God has for you and who you are speaking to, you would ask me, and I would give you living water." (John 4:7–10 NLT)*

Jesus said, "If you knew *the gift* God has for you . . . If you knew *who I am* . . . you would ask me for the water I can give you." What was he talking about? Jesus was parabolic and chose the parable over the pragmatic.

Like a mystery novelist, he longs to draw our whole being into his plot. Like a master songwriter, he's not just interested in getting his point across; he engages heart, mind, and soul with his song. And I find he does the same with you and me as he did with this woman. Patiently and in mysterious ways, he engages us at the level of our desires, prodding us to reconsider what our hearts really long for and how we will really get it.

This woman knew that the prophets had foretold of a Messiah who would come "and explain everything to us" about God. Jesus later revealed that he himself was the long-awaited Messiah of God. But because she didn't really know who God is, she didn't ask for what he had to give.

Jesus said, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but those

who drink the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:13 – 14).

She didn’t get it at first, and neither do we, most of the time. That’s our main problem — we don’t really know *who God is*, not just in name, but in character, so we don’t make it a top priority to seek the living water he wants to give us to satisfy our thirsty souls. We keep trying to get our deep spiritual thirst quenched in shallow ways, which end up leaving us even thirstier.

## IMAGES OF GOD

Many of us have an inadequate image of God. Our parents, other authority figures, our religious upbringing (or lack of it) can often paint an unappealing picture of God in our imaginations.

When Paula came to our church, she believed in a Higher Power, but to imagine God as “Father” was repugnant to her. She struggled with authority figures — a struggle rooted in deep pain, which drove her to drink excessively. After her drinking destroyed her marriage and contributed to her losing custody of her children, she found herself in recovery. While there, she came to terms with the abuse she had experienced as a child. Her father, a distinguished physics professor who traveled the world giving lectures, was an atheist and an alcoholic. Starting at age thirteen, Paula found favor with her dad by becoming his drinking buddy, but once he got her drunk, he would sometimes fondle her sexually. That became the primary image she had of a father’s intimacy. No wonder “God as Father” made her gag.

Though Paula was initially freaked out by the Bible and any mention of Jesus, I showed her how the Higher Power she had come to trust experientially through recovery *is* the God Jesus revealed — a God who forgives wrongs and helps those who are willing to surrender their lives to follow his will. Paula recalls, “When I realized that Jesus revealed the Higher Power who had helped me, I gave my life to him and got baptized. Learning that Jesus said, ‘Whoever has seen me has seen the Father,’ opened up for me a way to redefine what ‘father’ was supposed to be. As I’ve studied the way Jesus treated people, I found healing from the distorted view of the Father my earthly father gave me.”

As a result of our distorted images of God, his character seems less than appealing, and the gift we think he wants to give us pales in comparison to



the life we imagine for ourselves. But that's because we have not fully used our imaginations.

## IMAGINE

Imagine what God is really like. Unless we believe God is, above all, loving and good and *for* us, we won't be willing to seek him. The Bible says, "God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 4:8–10).

Do you see what this says? God *is* love. Is God a just judge? Yes — God will one day make right all the wrongs — but is he primarily a judge? No! Jesus came to show us that first and foremost, God is Love, and God loves us so much that there is nothing he won't do to deliver us from our broken ways and bring us into a shared life with him. Jesus even gave his own life so that "we might live through him" — starting now and forever more.

What if our deepest longing, sewn into the fabric of our souls, is to express and experience the love of the greatest, most beautiful, knowledgeable, caring Being in the universe? What if all our desires are fingers pointing toward God — the One who loves you more than any other and wants to provide good things for you, just as a good father does? What if God, who is aware of all the things we *think* we want, knows this would actually distract us from himself — the *only One* who can meet our deepest desires? That would explain why a loving God does *not* give us everything we want.

If God is love, and if we love him because he first loved us, what does that mean about all the love you've ever experienced? Think of all the love you've given or received — where did it come from?

It's borrowed!

It's borrowed from God.

You've never experienced a love whose source did *not* originate in God's love for you. It's true, whether you realize it or not.

## BORROWED LOVE

This concept of borrowed love hit me years ago when my kids were little. I would lie in bed with them at night, praying for them as they fell asleep. As I

lay there, thanking God for them, I felt an overflowing sense of love that was so great, it felt like my soul would burst!

I had never been a touchy-feely kind of guy. I'd grown up somewhat emotionally closed, but God had been changing me. One night, as I thanked God for this overwhelming love I felt for my children, I had a strange thought: "I love you more," God seemed to be saying to me.

It took me off guard. I'd never considered it before. All the love I experienced *was* from God — because God *is* love. My love for my wife and children was only a borrowed measure of God's love for me and them!\* "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

The apostle Paul prays for his friends to grasp this truth experientially:

*I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources he will empower you with inner strength through his Spirit. Then Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust in him. Your roots will grow down into God's love and keep you strong. And may you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is. May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God. (Ephesians 3:16 – 19 NLT, emphasis added)*

Most people don't seek God as the source of their deepest fulfillment because they don't understand who he is or what he wants to give them. We must first try to understand and *experience* the love of Christ that Paul talks about with spiritual eyes and ears and understanding.

Try this exercise to experience this for yourself. Think about a time when you felt the most loved as a child, the most validated, the most believed in. Who has loved you most in this world? Now picture being with that person, and recall that feeling you had in their presence.

Now listen with spiritual ears ... can you hear the truth? God's voice ... "That love came from me ... and I love you even more!"

Stop reading at this point, and close your eyes to ponder this.

Now picture the person or people you love more than any other. Think

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\* Technically God's love is freely given, as opposed to being "borrowed" in the sense of owing it back (though rejection of God leads to an eternity devoid of his love, so some do "give it back" I suppose). But the powerful concept that hit me is not merely that God's love has been given freely, but that I'm expressing and experiencing *his* love. I have it to experience because God gave it to me to use, so I experience a measure of his great love for me in my love for others.

about how you feel toward them — the good things you want for them. Now, connect this love to its Source — follow where the finger points with new eyes. Where does your love come from?

You see, it's all borrowed love. Listen with new ears for God's truth . . . "This love you feel . . . comes from me . . . through you . . . to them. I love you even more than you love them. I want good things for you, even more than you want good things for them."

This, Scripture declares, is the truth about your Creator. What if you experienced God as the one who loves you more than any other and wants to give you good things? Paul said, "Everything God created is good" (1 Timothy 4:4). There are no evil things, only evil uses of the good things God has given. And even our evil uses are often misdirected attempts to attain the good God wants to give. Jesus said, "If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!" (Matthew 7:11). Jesus says, "If you knew who I am, and the gift God wants to give . . . you'd ask!"

## GOD VERSUS GOD

This is the message God conveyed through Moses, the prophets, and finally through Jesus: No human being or material thing can satisfy our deepest longings because God has hardwired us for himself first. Just as birds are hardwired to fly south for winter, we were hardwired to seek God. We will never find the life we long for apart from him because he is the Source of all we love.

If we put other things, no matter how good, in the center of our lives, they become rival gods that lead us to destruction — the loss of the life our thirsty souls crave. But when a new vision of God's goodness motivates us to seek him with all we have, everything else comes alive. All our pursuits for relationship, success, security, and purpose get rightly ordered and become life-giving in new ways.

Jesus tries to help the woman at the well see this:

*Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life."*

*The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water."*

*He told her, “Go, call your husband and come back.”*

*“I have no husband,” she replied.*

*Jesus said to her, “You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.” (John 4:13 – 18)*

If we want our deepest desires satisfied, we must face the truth about ourselves. This is not easy, so Jesus finds creative, parabolic ways to get us to “see and hear.” Though this woman’s past was littered with broken ways of relating, Jesus didn’t condemn her. He simply led her to face her broken strategy of filling her deepest longings in shallow ways. He asked her to face this truth about herself: that she continued to try to meet a thirst for love and security apart from God, and it wasn’t working.

We must be willing to take a hard look at the shallow strategies that become rival gods in our lives, good things or destructive patterns that we count on to give us life. This is the first step toward drinking from the wellspring that truly satisfies. If you knew what God wants to give you ... you’d ask ... you’d seek ... you’d find. And you’ll see, God still meets imperfect people today when they’re willing.

Consider Brian’s story.

## **LOOKING UP FROM THE BOTTOM**

“The night was a blur as I sped home. Flashes of drinks, flirting, more drinks. The drinks made it easier to be funny in front of her. I love this part — speeding up the big hill.” In the back of his mind, Brian knew he shouldn’t be driving, much less speeding, but ego ruled this night.

“I’m gonna ask her out,” Brian boldly decided as he flew past the other cars. “Wimps — can’t keep up.” He crested the top of the hill and looked back to see the headlights vanishing behind him. Then he saw it — flashing lights. Now the sound of sirens. Brian’s third DWI. “Number three’s a felony.” The thought hit Brian so hard that it almost sobered him.

After a night in jail, an alcohol assessment, and a meeting with lawyers, Brian heard the news: “It’s not good, Brian,” the assessment counselor began. “Three DWIs, a public intox, drinking five or more drinks on an average night out, a high blood-alcohol level, and family history of alcoholism. This is serious. You seem like an intelligent guy, you have a degree, you own an architecture firm — but you really abuse this stuff.”

As the counselor rattled off all the hoops Brian would have to jump through — alcohol awareness classes, MADD forums, and community service — one little abbreviation reverberated in Brian’s head: AA. Sure enough, the counselor concluded with, “During all this you’ll be required to attend twenty-eight AA meetings.”

“What? Twenty-eight AA meetings? I’m not an alcoholic,” Brian told himself. “What’ll they make me do — explore these events more? Will it become obvious I have a problem, because I don’t! . . . Do I? I mean, I can’t have a problem. I’m Brian, the good kid from Iowa, the nice guy, the successful guy. . . . I’m not an alcoholic.”

At his first meeting, Brian admitted to himself he was afraid — afraid to find out what was behind all those shame-ridden feelings. “Why do I feel so guilty? Why do I feel so . . . alone?” Brian sat in a cold metal chair, waiting awkwardly as the room filled up. He read the first few items on the poster on the wall to pass the time.

#### **THE 12 STEPS:**

We:

1. Admitted we were powerless over alcohol — that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God . . .

“Hold on,” Brian thought as he read that third step, “I’m here to get through this stuff. I don’t have a problem, and I’m certainly *not* going to turn my life over to God. Spiritual awakening — ha! Are these people for real? My counselor didn’t tell me she was committing me to church!”

Since age sixteen, Brian had given himself over to the pursuit of pleasure. As far as he was concerned, religion was just a means to control the masses. He often joked that he had sold his soul for eternal youth, holding an atheistic view of life in which his only purpose was his own amusement. By his own admission, it had led him to become a workaholic, an abuser of alcohol, sexually obsessed, and ultimately a lonely, bored, empty person.

Brian survived his first meeting without having to share in the group. Once home, he plopped down on the couch and opened up AA’s *Big Book*. A participant had handed it to him after the meeting and said, “You only hit rock bottom when bad things happen faster than you can lower your standards.” Brian had laughed when the guy said it, but now it started to haunt him.

“How many times did I justify my behavior, feeling it was okay — only based on a new lower standard.” He cracked open the *Big Book* and began to read the story of Bill W., AA’s founder. One particular statement in Bill’s story caught Brian’s attention: “I was to know happiness, peace, and usefulness in a way of life that is incredibly more wonderful as time passes.”

“Happiness and peace are foreign to me,” Brian admitted to himself. “My days are monotonous, boring, and aggravating. I always feel like I need something crazy or exciting just to get a temporary happy buzz. I can’t just be happy.” With that thought, Brian resolved to try to keep an open mind. He read on . . .

Selfishness — self centeredness. That we think is the root of our troubles . . . we could not reduce our self-centeredness on our own power. We had to have God’s help. This is the how and why of it. First of all, we had to quit playing God. It didn’t work. Next, we decided that hereafter in the drama of life, God was going to be our Director. He is the Principle, we are his agents. He is the Father, we are his children. . . . When we sincerely took such a position, all sorts of remarkable things followed. We had a new Employer. Being all powerful, He provided what we need, if we kept close to Him and performed His work well. Established on such a footing, we became less and less interested in ourselves, our little plans and designs. More and more we became interested in seeing what we could contribute to life. As we felt new power flow in, as we enjoyed peace of mind, as we discovered we could face life successfully, as we became conscious of His presence, we began to lose our fear of today, tomorrow, and the hereafter. We were reborn.<sup>1</sup>

One night several weeks later, Brian lay in bed reviewing the day’s events: a lot of work, lunch, more work, a drive to the gym. That made him mad. Technically his work permit was for home, office, grocery store, and church — but it didn’t cover his trip to the gym. “How come I can go to church to maintain my ‘spiritual health’ if I want, but not the gym to maintain my physical health? It’s not fair.” But he realized he couldn’t let himself spiral down. He had to learn to appreciate the little things. He had to be grateful; that’s what he was learning. And as he lay there alone, something happened.

“God, I don’t know if you’re there. I don’t even know if you exist . . . but thank you. Thank you for letting me drive to the gym tonight and not get caught.” It was simple and felt dumb, but it was honest.

For the next few months, every night Brian would lay in bed, thanking God for the positive things he experienced in his life that day. “I felt like I started to

receive little gifts from God every day,” Brian recalls. “In my state at that time, little things like a smile and a good conversation at the coffee shop made my list of thanks. Every night I continued to thank a God I wasn’t sure was there. But something was happening inside me.”

Then came the trial. Brian recalls, “I was found guilty. I was facing jail time of up to a year, fines that amounted to more money than I had, a year of probation, which also costs money, and hours and hours of community service.” For reasons that still shock Brian, after a miraculous plea bargain, he was given no jail time, and no fines. No explanation was given.

“It was amazing, and I gave God my biggest ‘thank you’ yet.” Brian explained, “Only this time, I believed he was there. I truly believe this was given to me to reward the changes I’d made and to inspire me to continue seeking God. A few months later, a woman I knew invited me to Gateway after I shared my God story with her. I found the church inspiring on many levels. After a few months, Gateway held a sixty-day ‘experiment’ to connect every hour with God. I never made it every hour, but my once-a-day nightly connection turned into multiple connections every day. This transformed my new faith into a deeper pursuit of God and a Christian way of life. I began to see God at work in my life throughout the day.”

A few months ago, Brian and I were talking about what God has done over the past two years since the DWI. I watched tears of gratitude well up in his eyes as he told me about his renewed outlook and energy, his new friends, and his renewed sense of purpose. He shared stories of the many ways God has tangibly worked in his life since staying willing and connected daily. He told me, “The little things that used to be problematic for me have just disappeared without any effort or sacrifice on my part. It’s not that my life is perfect or trouble-free, but for the first time I know happiness and peace as a way of life, and I never feel alone anymore.”

## **LIFE WITH GOD**

As Brian discovered, God leads us to a soul-quenching experience of life better than any buzz, conquest, or thrill. Jesus said, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:10 – 11). Jesus explained that someone out there wants to destroy your life and rob you of joy — but that someone is not God. The whole reason Jesus

came was to lead us into life in all its fullness. That's what motivated him to lay down his life for you — so that you would trust him and follow him into a more fulfilling, life-giving experience than you can even imagine. When you truly start to believe this, it changes your experience of everything. Every moment can go from black and white into a high-definition, Technicolor experience of life with God.

Like the woman at the well, we keep thinking that someone or something here on earth can quench our deepest thirst, but earth has nothing that will truly satisfy it apart from God. God desires to give you a life that flows from within like living water. You can't grasp it, gain it, or attain it from anything "out there." It comes from God's Spirit within. But to experience the life we desire, we must be willing to lose the life we think we want, and that fear of losing life is what keeps most of us from ever finding it.

## MORE PREPARATION FOR THE 60-60 EXPERIMENT

1. Write your answers to the questions: "What do I desire?" "How am I trying to get it?" Can you think of a time that you got something you really desired, that you really thought would be fulfilling, but it fell short of your expectations? Why was that?
2. When you imagine God, what characteristics come to mind? Write them down.
3. Now write down the characteristics of your father and mother. How many overlap with your image of God? What's distorted about your image of God? What's missing?
4. If you did not do so, do the exercise on page 27 – 28 connecting the love you've experienced and the good things you've been given to the Source of all love and goodness.
5. Where do you struggle to trust God's love or goodness? Why is this? Discuss this with a trusted friend or others in your small group.