

The Journey to Freedom

Navigating the Roadblocks
to Abundant Living

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Introduction

Several years ago, I was driving down a road near my home when the Lord gave me a vision. He showed me a picture of a map. I looked at the map, and I could see where I wanted to go, but as much as I tried, I could not tell where I was. The map was essentially useless to me. Then the Lord spoke to me and said, “You cannot find the way to your destination unless you know where you are.”

OK, God. Very deep . . . philosophical . . . but it sounds more like something I would find in a fortune cookie than something I would hear from You. What are You trying to tell me?

He continued. “You cannot know where you are unless you know where you have been.”

Uh, thanks. Are You going anywhere with this, God?

It took me a while to begin to understand what God was saying. I was in a season of struggling with my identity . . . Who am I? Where am I in life and where is God leading me? Is this all there is to life? Is there nothing better? . . . and I felt lost. Not knowing where I was, I began to believe that my dreams—even the call of God on my life—were totally out of reach—I lost hope.

So many Christians would look at someone in my place—so hopeless and depressed—and wonder if they really knew the Lord. Yet I’d been walking with God more than a decade

at that point, and working in full-time ministry for most of it. You can believe in God, you can know His Word and have heard time and time again how He came to set us free—that we might live life to the fullest (John 10:10)—and still you can be (as is much of the Church today) completely lost, unable to see the fulfillment of that freedom and fullness in your life.

Modern Christianity is full of quick-fix, cure-all statements that are often thrown at people who are struggling on their journey: Have you prayed about it? . . . Let go and let God . . . Lay your burden at the feet of Jesus . . . This is just a phase you're going through . . . Just give it time, it will pass . . . And some of this is great advice—certainly prayer and surrender to God are a great start—but if only it were as easy as it sounds.

Oscar Wilde once wrote, “We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars.” Hopefully you picked up this book because you are one of those people who is looking up, who shares with me this deep sense that there is something more to life. “I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly,” Christ said (John 10:10). *There is abundant life to be lived*, but first we have to see where we are going.

Where Are We?

“You cannot find the way to your destination unless you know where you are.”

We have a common enemy, and he knows that the best way to keep us from fulfilling our destiny is to try to make us forget who we are. He knows that we have power and authority from on high, and he knows that if we would learn to use these things, he could not stand against us. So he distracts us with the ever-pursuant lies of doubt, fear, and despair, and

makes us forget who we are in Christ. Slowly we've become no longer a threat to him.

We (as individuals and as the Church) are in the midst of an identity crisis that is keeping us from fulfilling the purposes and plans of God in our lives. We've been disoriented, blinded by the things that face us day to day, and we have forgotten who we are. We forget God's promise over our lives (or at least we stop believing in it), and we lose hope, letting our circumstances convince us that we are slaves to this life—that we cannot overcome—that we are not truly free.

If we're ever to find our way—to find our freedom, that abundant life that God promises us—we need to come to a deeper understanding of who we are and who we were created to be. We need to come to that place, like the prodigal son, where we realize that we are true sons and daughters of the living God. We need to run into His open arms and receive His forgiveness, His healing, and let Him clothe us in righteousness, restoring to us the authority, honor, and glory we inherit as bearers of His family name.

Where Have We Been?

We cannot see where we are, because we are unwilling to face where we've been.

This was one of the hardest lessons for me to learn. What does my past have to do with where I'm going? Yes, I understand that I didn't just appear on the earth this way, but can't I just let "bygones be bygones" and get on with my life? Why do I have to go back to those places in my life that I tried so hard to get away from?

The truth is, we don't know who we are, because we've believed the lies that have assaulted us all of our lives. One by one, the fiery darts of the enemy have come to bring us down, and one by one, we've become numb to their sting, but

this deep desire within us still burns, and the pain that comes from that unfulfilled longing is perhaps the hardest to ignore.

The only way we will ever fulfill that longing is to be free from our past, our pain, and the lies of the enemy, and the only way to be free from our past is to go through it. God, in His wisdom, knew that we would experience pain in our lives, so He gave us ways of survival that shut out overwhelming experiences so we could deal with them later, when we're able to safely and more accurately process through them. So many of us never went through our past the first time around. Now we have to play catch-up, and that's not easy, especially if it involves significant trauma like abuse or abandonment.

At least for most of us, even the *thought* of facing our past can be overwhelming and terrifying. If it's not, consider yourself blessed and highly favored. But facing our past, and replacing the lies we've believed with God's truth, is an essential part of the journey. God is a timeless God and can go back to those places of hurt in our lives and bring healing to them, even decades later, removing each and every one of those fiery darts and setting us free to live the life He's destined for us.

It is through the healing of our past that we will come to understand our identity in the present. It is by finally walking out the parts of our lives that were left incomplete that we can find wholeness today and that we can truly know where we are in God's great story. And only by knowing where (and who) we are can we step into that great destiny that God has prepared for us in the future.

The journey to freedom is just that—it's a journey. It doesn't happen overnight. It's certainly not easy, and it's not always comfortable or pleasant. Sure, there are times when the road is open and the wind is at your back, but there are

mountains to climb, valleys to cross, detours from what may seem like the easiest route, and oftentimes construction.

Through these pages, I want to share with you a little about my own journey and what I've learned along the way. It is a journey that has healed me from where I've been, helped me to discover who I am, and opened a world of possibility to who I will become. I pray it will be a healing aid to you along your own path to freedom, and I pray that you will find hope, deliverance, and the manifest power of God in your life through the lessons we'll soon share together.

*Hold fast to dreams, for if dreams die
Life is a broken-winged bird that cannot fly.
Hold fast to dreams, for when dreams go
Life is a barren field, frozen with snow.*
(Langston Hughes, "Dreams")

*The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy;
I have come that they may have life,
and have it to the full.*
(John 10:10)

*The only fatal error is to pretend
that we have found the life we prize . . .
to settle for the same old thing.*
(John Eldredge, *The Journey of Desire*)

*I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me
will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things
than these, because I am going to the Father.*
(John 14:12)

*He is still looking for one:
for you, for me, for anyone
to come into agreement
with His purpose.*
(Robert Stearns, *The Cry of Mordecai*)

CHAPTER 1

Remembering God's Promise

Every good journey starts with a destination. Even when one goes exploring (without a clear idea of where they will end up), they follow after a destination—a goal—a life and a purpose worth seeking. And so before we begin our journey, we must look at the map of our lives and see where we want to go.

In Habakkuk, chapter 2, the Lord said to “write the vision and make it plain . . . that he may run who reads it” (verse 2). Our vision will drive us, propel us, and lead us through the discovery of where we’ve been and where we are, and it will be the guiding point to keep us on the right path. And so before we can take a single step down this journey to freedom, we have to see our destination—we have to see that life and purpose worth seeking—we have to dream.

Dream

When I was little, I used to dream big. I mean, I didn’t hold back anything as impossible. I remember the time every year when my family would drive across the country to visit my grandparents in the Appalachian Mountains.

As we would drive through the countryside, I would stare out the window of our Dodge Caravan and dream that the mountains were full of toys, filling shelf after shelf in their hollow peaks, all the way up to the top, and that only I knew the secret way to get in.

Just like any young boy, I would dream of fighting in great battles, waving around my imaginary sword, or swinging my arms and legs wildly in the back yard, pretending to fight like Bruce Lee. Battle after glorious battle, I would single-handedly defeat my enemies, saving the world from grave danger.

I remember dreaming (and I still do) about owning a pet lion. I would name him and take care of him and play with him. And of course he was the most gentle thing to me, but he would protect me and scare away all my enemies.

And from the earliest I can remember, I wanted to be a pilot—and not just any pilot, but a space shuttle pilot for NASA. And boy did everybody know it, too. It came out in the games I would play, the things I would build with my Legos, the projects I worked the hardest on in school. I wasn't afraid to tell anybody about my dream, confident and sure that I was going to be an astronaut when I grew up.

But as life went on, my dreams changed with it. I was fifteen when I recognized Jesus as my Lord and Savior, and my life took a dramatic turn. All my dreams and desires, my passions and plans, paled in comparison to this new-found love, and I found myself dreaming of something completely different. Oh, it still involved mountaintop experiences, saving the world, and an open universe of possibility, but this dream was different. I knew that this dream was deeper than the rest, and that I was made to see it come true.

Joining a ministry only a year later, my dream solidified, and I knew that I would someday be a writer, speaker, and worship leader, impacting countless lives and helping others to discover the freedom that I had found in Jesus Christ.

Where Did Our Dreams Die?

I've been talking a lot about dreams lately—I've been stuck on the topic for the past year, at least—and it always excites me to hear people share their dreams with me. As I've asked people to tell me about their own childhood dreams and fantasies—the “what they wanted to be when they grew up” sort of dreams—almost everyone had to take a moment to remember, but when it hit them their faces lit up. As each person would share their dreams, I could see such fire, such youth, such joy in their eyes—dreams to be a princess, dreams to be a naval commander, or a police officer, or an artist, or a dancer, or a rock star

So many dreams and plans and ambitions, and yet practically none of them had come true. What happened? Where did all these dreams die? Where did my own dreams die?

That's a really tough question to ask one's self—trust me, I've been pondering it a lot lately. Most everyone I've talked to has no idea where their dreams died, and most don't want to think about it. There's often a lot of pain and unhealed memories to be found in the answer, but one way or another, the circumstances of life have worn away our dreams until they're barely (if at all) bigger than ourselves.

For some people, their dreams died simply because no one ever told them they have what it takes. Others died because they were told flat out that they couldn't do it. Perhaps you had physical limitations that kept you from your dreams (I grew too tall to be an astronaut), or your grades weren't good enough in school, or maybe people didn't come through for you—maybe even *God* didn't come through for you like you expected. Perhaps you tried and failed, or perhaps you didn't try at all. Sometimes even the pressure of someone else's dreams can keep you from fulfilling your own (particularly the dreams of someone you love or look up to).

Whatever caused it, our dreams have died or weakened to the point that they are barely larger than our reality. We've gone from God-sized dreams to me-sized dreams in order to arrange success for ourselves, and we're running ourselves ragged trying to fulfill our own longings instead of trusting in God to "finish the good work He started in us" (Philippians 1:6).

The Bigger Picture

I have to give the devil some credit here. I mean, he made a really stupid decision to turn from God, but he really is no idiot. Remember, he was the most glorious of angels once, and they are in grave danger who would underestimate him.

We are in a great battle, and yes, we know who wins in the end, but until the end comes, we must continue to fight to establish God's Kingdom here on earth. Nowhere in history do we see the resignation of any great leader of our faith, but all have "pressed on toward the goal" (Philippians 3:14), and so we must also press on, and we must know the strengths and weaknesses and the battle tactics of our enemy. After all, he knows us quite well indeed. He is the master of manipulation and has thousands upon thousands of years of experience in enticing man toward his own destruction.

The devil will stay on the offensive as long as he can, too, because he knows his end, and he is terrified by the thought of us walking in the power and authority of God. He cannot stand against that authority, and he knows that a man or woman walking in the realized promise and identity of God will not only be immune to his tactics, but will also be the destruction of his own kingdom.

You see, we're in a much bigger story here than we realize. This is not how God intended the world. Now I know there's a lot of discussion out there about destiny and God's sovereignty and the idea that "nothing happens outside of God's

will." And yes, God is indeed sovereign, and therefore nothing happens that is not at least permitted by God to happen. But is it God's will that the young girl was raped by her father, or that the husband of twenty years would just turn and walk out on his family, or that three thousand people would go to work one morning and not come home because of a terrorist attack? If so, then what kind of God do we serve?

Jesus taught us to pray, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth . . ." Why would He teach us to pray for such a thing if it already existed? By this alone, we can understand that while God is sovereign, His will is not yet accomplished. He has so much more that He wants for His children. This was not the life we were meant to live.

God created for us a paradise. Think about that for a minute. What pictures come to mind when you think of paradise? If you've done a lot of traveling (or if you're blessed to live in such a place), it may be of a tropical rainforest, snow-capped mountain peaks, an African desert sunset, a secluded beach, or a private island. If you don't fall in that category, perhaps it's the park down the street, or the art museum, or it's when you finally get the kids off to school or in bed and you can just breathe for a minute, or maybe it's just a picture you've seen (or the screensaver on your computer). Whatever it is, it is merely a reflection of the paradise that God created for us, a mere reflection of the enjoyment and prosperity and beauty that He intended for us. And just to walk with Him in paradise, to "be fruitful and increase in number" (Genesis 1:28), to enjoy His creation—that's how we were supposed to live!

Jesus said that He came to give us life, and life more abundantly (John 10:10). Yet from the fall of man, Satan has tried to convince us that God is holding out on us—that there is more that God is not giving us, and by listening to him, how quickly we've turned from "walking with God" to fighting amongst ourselves, from "being fruitful" to striving