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The Me I Want to Be

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Chapter 1

Learn Why God Made You

One evening my wife, Nancy, pulled me into our bedroom and said she wanted to talk. She closed the door so that none of the kids could hear, and she took out a list.

I was not happy to see a list. She claims it was an index card, not a list. But it had words written on it, so to me that's a list.

"You know," she said, "when our marriage is at its best, I feel we share responsibilities. We divide our work well and our kids see us do that and I feel valued, and I think that's important for our family. But for some time, because you feel so many demands on your life, this value has been slipping.

"When our marriage is working well, I also feel like we both know each other's lives. You know details about my life and I know details about yours. And I feel like that's been slipping too. Lately I know what's going on with you, but you don't ask me much about what's going on with me." She went on.

"When our marriage is at its best, you also bring a kind of lightness and joy to it." Then she reminded me of a story.

We were on our second date, in the lobby of the Disneyland Hotel waiting to get something to eat, and she had to use the restroom. When she came out, there were scores of people in the lobby, and I was in a goofy mood, so I said loudly enough for them all to hear, “Woman, I can’t believe you kept me waiting for *two hours*.”

Her immediate response was, “Well, I wouldn’t have to if you didn’t insist on having your mother live with us so I have to wait on her hand and foot every day.” She yelled that, right across the lobby, on only our *second* date, and my first thought was, *I like this woman*.

Nancy told me that story and said, “You know, when our marriage is at its best, you can listen and laugh and be spontaneous. You haven’t been doing that for a while. I love that guy and I miss that guy.”

I knew what she was talking about.

“I miss that guy too,” I told her. “I’d love to feel free like that. But I feel like I’m carrying so many burdens. I have personnel issues and financial challenges at work. I have writing projects and travel commitments. I feel like I’m carrying this weight all the time. I get what you’re saying, but I need you to know, I’m doing the best I can.”

“No, you’re not,” she responded immediately.

That was not the response I had anticipated. Everybody is supposed to nod their head sympathetically when you say, “I’m doing the best I can.” But Nancy loves truth (and me) too much to do that. So she rang my bell.

“No, you’re *not*. You’ve talked about how it would be good to see a counselor, or an executive coach, or maybe a spiritual director. You’ve talked about building friendships, but I haven’t seen you take steps toward any of that. No, you’re not.”

As soon as she said that I knew she was right.

But I didn’t say that to her immediately because my spiritual gift is pouting, which I exercised beautifully over the next few days. As I did, a question emerged in my mind: *What is it that you really want?*

I began to realize that what I really want isn’t any particular outcome on any particular project. Those are all just means to an end. What I really want is to be fully alive inside. What I really want is the inner freedom to live in love and joy.

I want to be that man she described.

I’m a grown man, I thought. *I do not know how many years of life are before me. I cannot wait anymore.* When I was going to school, I was preoccupied with good grades or getting cute girls to like me. As the years went by, I became preoccupied with work and my circumstances

because I thought they would make me feel alive. *I can't wait anymore to be that man*, I thought.

I realized this then, and I know it now: I want that life more than I want anything else. Not because I think I'm supposed to, not because it says somewhere that you should. I want it.

There is a me I want to be.

Life is not about any particular achievement or experience. The most important task of your life is not what you do, but who you become.

There is a me you want to be.

Ironically, becoming this person will never happen if my primary focus is on me, just as no one becomes happy if their main goal is to be happy. God made you to flourish, but flourishing never happens by looking out for “number one.” It is tied to a grander and nobler vision. The world badly needs wise and flourishing human beings, and we are called to bring God's wisdom and glory to the world. The truth is, those who flourish always bring blessing to others—and they can do so in the most unexpected and humble circumstances.

»» One Flourishing Life

Not long ago I boarded an airport shuttle bus to get to the rental car lot. Driving a shuttle bus is usually a thankless job, for the driver is often regarded as the low man on the totem pole. People on the bus are often grumpy from travel and in a hurry to get to their car. No one says much except the name of their rental car company. But not on this bus.

The man who drove the bus was an absolute delight. He was scanning the curbside, looking for anybody who needed a ride. “You know,” he told us, “I'm always looking because sometimes people are running late. You can tell it in their eyes. I'm always looking because I never want to miss one. Hey, here's another one! . . .”

The driver pulled over to pick up a latecomer, and he was so excited about what he was doing that *we* got excited. We were actually cheering him on when he was picking people up. It was like watching Jesus drive a shuttle bus. The man would grab people's luggage before they could lift it, then he would jump back on the bus and say, “Well we're off. I know you're all eager to get there as quickly as possible, so I'm going to get you there as soon as I can.”

Jaded commuters put down their papers. He created such a little community of joy on that bus that people wanted to ride around in the terminal

a second time just to hang out with the guy. We would say to people who got on after us, “Watch this guy!” He wasn’t just our shuttle bus driver—he was our leader; he was our friend. And for a few moments, community flourished. On a shuttle bus for a rental car company—and one person moved toward the best version of himself.

What happened to that shuttle bus driver can happen in you. Sometimes it does. Every once in a while you do something that surprises you and catch a glimpse of the person you were made to be. You say something inspirational at a meeting. You help a homeless man no one else notices. You are patient with a rambunctious three-year-old. You lose yourself in a piece of music. You fall in love. You express compassion. You stand up to a bully. You freely make a sacrificial gift. You fix an engine. You forgive an old hurt. You say something you would normally never say, or you keep from saying something you would normally blurt out.

As you do, you glimpse for a moment why God made you. Only God knows your full potential, and he is guiding you toward that best version of yourself all the time. He has many tools and is never in a hurry. That can be frustrating for us, but even in our frustration, God is at work to produce patience in us. He never gets discouraged by how long it takes, and he delights every time you grow. Only God can see the “best version of you,” and he is more concerned with you reaching your full potential than you are.

For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

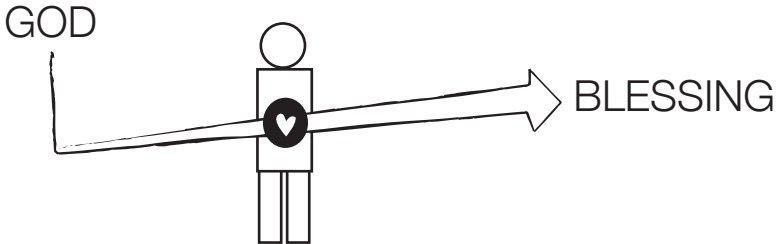
You are not *your* handiwork; your life is not your project. Your life is *God’s* project. God thought you up, and he knows what you were intended to be. He has many good works for you to do, but they are not the kind of “to do” lists we give spouses or employees. They are signposts to your true self.

Your “spiritual life” is not limited to certain devotional activities that you engage in. It is receiving power from the Spirit of God to become the person God had in mind when he created you—his handiwork.

» Where Growth Leads

God made you to flourish—to receive life from outside yourself, creating vitality within yourself and producing blessing beyond yourself. Flourishing is God’s gift and plan, and when you flourish you are in

harmony with God, other people, creation, and yourself. Flourishing is not measured by outward signs such as income, possessions, or attractiveness. It means becoming the person *he* had in mind in creating you.



Flourishing means moving toward God’s best version of you.

“The righteous will flourish like a palm tree. . . . they will flourish in the courts of our God.” (Psalm 92:12–13)

As God helps you grow, you will change, but you will always be you. An acorn can grow into an oak tree, but it cannot become a rose bush. It can be a healthy oak or it can be a stunted oak—but it won’t be a shrub. You will always be you—a growing, healthy you or a languishing you—but God did not create you to be anybody else. He pre-wired your temperament. He determined your natural gifts and talents. He made you to feel certain passions and desires. He planned your body and mind. Your uniqueness is God-designed.

Some people think that if they seek to grow spiritually they will have to become someone else. But God won’t discard your raw material. He redirects it. Before Paul met Jesus, he was a brilliant, passionate zealot who persecuted people. Afterward, he was a brilliant, passionate zealot who sacrificed himself for people.

Some friends of ours had a daughter named Shauna who was a classic strong-willed child. When she was four years old, she kept trying to go AWOL on her tricycle. Her mom could not rein her in and finally said, “Look, Shauna, there’s a tree right here, and there’s a driveway right there. You can ride your tricycle on the sidewalk in between the driveway and the tree, but you can’t go past that. If you go past that, you will get a spanking. I have to be inside; I’ve got stuff to do. But I’m going to be

watching you. Don't go past either one of those boundaries, or you're going to get a spanking."

Shauna backed up to her mom, pointed to her spanking zone, and said, "Well, you might as well spank me now, because I got places to go."

Would it surprise you to learn that when Shauna grew up, she had formidable leadership capacities and an indomitable drive? She always will have them.

God doesn't make anything and then decide to throw it away. He creates, and then, if there is a problem, he rescues. Redemption always involves the redemption of creation. The psalmist says, "Know that the LORD Himself is God. It is He who made us, and not we ourselves."

Here is the good news: When you flourish, you become more you. You become more that person God had in mind when he thought you up. You don't just become holier. You become you-ier. You will change; God wants you to become a "new creation." But "new" doesn't mean completely different; instead, it's like an old piece of furniture that gets restored to its intended beauty.

I used to have a chair my grandfather helped build seventy years ago. I loved it, but its arms were broken, the wood was chipped, and the upholstery was worn through. I finally gave up on it and sold it for fifty cents at a garage sale. The person who bought it knew about restoration, and a few months later I received a picture of it—repaired, refinished,

revarnished, and reupholstered. I wish this was one of those stories where the restorer surprises the clueless owner by giving him



Redemption always involves the redemption of creation.

back his now-glorious chair. But all I have is this alluring picture. Still, I keep the picture taped inside my desk drawer to remind me that "if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come. The old is gone! The new is here!"

God wants to redeem you, not exchange you. If you're a bookish, contemplative type, waiting for God to change you into the kind of person who wears lampshades on your head at parties, good luck on that. Maybe you are a raging extrovert, tired of putting your foot in your mouth all the time. Don't you wish you could become more like those of us who are introverted: wise, calm, and restrained? It's never going to happen.

Too bad—we all wish it could.