

father's dream



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preface



I wrote this little book not because I wanted to, but more because I felt like I had to.

Although there are many things in life which are better left unsaid, occasionally we happen upon certain truths that are just too weighty, too important, to leave unspoken. It seems like we've been discovering this kind of truth more and more lately.

You see, some friends of mine and I are on a journey. It's a journey that's both exciting and at the same time frustrating. Exciting because it involves some of the most profound and important issues of life; frustrating because it's growing increasingly difficult to try to summarize in a few words something that's so vast, so deep, and has been unfolding for us over the course of many years.

I think this is why Jesus Christ chose to be a storyteller. Some realities can't just be broken down into systematic logic. The truth transcends the structure; it is too great to be constrained by man-made systems of reason, so it can only be clearly seen in—of all things—a story.

This little book is a simple story about the beginning of a journey. A handful of friends and I have been “back to school,” learning all over again a little bit about why we’re here and what’s most important in life.

This won’t be the most scholarly book you’ll read, but it does come from the heart. Please receive it as it’s intended: Not as an authoritative treatise on high theological principles, but a simple, fresh reevaluation of what really matters most to us and to God.

May he grant us eyes to see and ears to hear.

— Lance





the beginning



“What you know you can't explain, but you feel it. You've felt it your entire life, that there's something wrong with the world. You don't know what it is, but it's there, *like a splinter in your mind*, driving you mad.”

- Morpheus, The Matrix

• some guys I know •

billy

Billy was forever running around telling people, “You have to be devoted to God!”

I always nodded in agreement, maybe even said amen, but never paid it much more attention than that. Then one September while vacationing in Florida, as I sat taking in the sunrise, I read this passage in one of Billy's books:

“A life of total dedication to Jesus Christ is the only door to true fulfillment, meaning, excitement, adventure, purpose, joy and happiness, lasting peace and a life that counts for God and eternity.”¹

It finally dawned on me—“You have to be devoted to God!” You really do.

For the first time, I saw it: Life just doesn’t work properly unless you’re devoted to God. I’m pretty sure He designed it that way. It had finally gotten through to my lightning-fast mind that the key to everything in life is a strong relationship with God. In other words, if I could only do one thing well, I should aim for knowing God. In still yet other words, if anything in my life were going to fail, it had better not be my relationship with Him.

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God.

He’s our best hope of doing anything worthwhile. He alone knows what’s best for us, our lives, and the people we love. To know God and be in close relationship with him is not just the first thing we should do—it’s really the *only* thing we must do. If we’re close to him, he’ll be sure we’re on the right track.



I began to realize this: If I know God well and am in a solid relationship with Him—even though I may encounter failure or hardship—I’ll be ok. But the flipside of that idea is what scares me. If I “succeed” at everything I do and am healthy, wealthy and well-thought-of—if I’m not right with God—it’s all a big waste. True happiness, meaning and significance can only be found through a right relationship with God.

¹ Billy Godwin. *Total Dedication*, Mighty In Spirit Training Inst. Manual

So I resolved that whatever else I do, I *will* be devoted to God. I made a conscious decision to radically unseat all my other priorities and begin a lifelong quest to know God first.

james

James and I were attending a bible study together, and had often talked about going harder after God. So when I returned from Florida, I called him up and spilled about what I'd committed to do. After kicking it around a bit, we decided to start meeting together in the early mornings to begin this journey.

If I had known then what a huge life-change this decision would mean for me, I probably would have faced it with a bit more trepidation. But I didn't, so we just began to meet.

Five-thirty every weekday, I would pick up James and we'd head for the deserted choir room at church. Bleary-eyed and barely there, we'd just show up. This, by the way, is truly half the battle. Just showing up—not setting any records for alertness, earnestness or piety—can get you a long way with God.

And we came with no agenda except this: to be devoted to God. So we didn't have enough sense (or religiosity) to sing, read the bible or even say long prayers. We just showed up and began to ask God questions.

That may sound a bit weird, but that's what we did; we asked him questions. Some might not call this praying, but we do, and I think God does, too. We asked him, "How can we be devoted to you? What does that mean? What would our day look like if we lived that way? How can we

get there from here? What are the ingredients of a ‘sold-out’ life?”

But of all the questions we asked, I think Father has a favorite. It’s one that we never tire of asking, and I believe it’s one He never tires of hearing:

“What do you want?”

True love
begins when
we look to
another and
ask, “What is it
you want?”



Those simple words could easily be the greatest symphony in heaven. Why would we think such a thing? Because the greatest command ever given by God is that we should love Him with all our heart, mind, soul and strength. And true love begins when we lift up our eyes from our own clamoring world of personal wants and needs, and look to another and ask, “What is it *you* want?”

In fact, one morning while asking this question, Father’s answer took me by surprise. Very abruptly, yet in his still small voice, He said something that has haunted my thoughts constantly.

“Nobody asks me that anymore.”

He didn’t seem hurt or offended, but really kind of sad. Let that sink in a minute—it’ll get to you.

So we began to do this as part of our morning routine; we called it “Reporting In.” We’d just show up (physically, anyway) and say to God, “Father, we’re here for you. Whatever you want to do this morning, we’re here for that.”

We spent a great deal of time just asking that question, then listening to hear what God wanted to do that day. Many days we'd get out a pencil and paper and sit waiting on the Lord. Sometimes he'd put a verse from the bible on our hearts which would lead us to read and look into that passage. Other times he'd just speak to us about situations or people in our lives that needed our attention.

I'll never forget one morning in particular. James and I had both been running pretty hard with work, school and family obligations. As we met and reported in, I thought I heard the Lord say, "You need more rest; go back home and go to bed."

Being the spiritual giant that I am, I didn't have the guts to share what I just heard, so I asked James, "What's He saying to you?"

I could tell by the look on his face that James was hearing what I was hearing. He said, "I'm not really sure."

So I said, "I know this sounds strange, but I think he wants us to quit praying and go home and go back to bed."

"I wasn't gonna say that!" James yelled. "I knew that's what he was saying, but I wasn't about to say *that*!" So we had a good laugh and went back home to get some rest.

Because it's what Father wanted.

Little did I know that this simple question—"What do you want?"—would form the basis for all that God was going to teach us about life, love, his dream and the meaning of our existence.

mark

Mark's my prayer partner, and has been for some time. He's like a bloodhound when it comes to finding things spiritually hot. Mark has this uncanny ability to zero in on people and things that smell like God. Let me illustrate.

A few years back I worked with some young men from our church in the area of discipleship. It was a pretty hardcore group of guys, and our curriculum was not for sissies.

Before starting this group, I had been counseled by some well-meaning advisors, "You should be careful and go easy on the bible study; these kids bore quickly. Be sure to give them plenty of social activities, but don't be too challenging." Well, telling me that is like saying "sick 'em" to a dog.

On our first night I quoted Jesus from Luke 14 and told them, "Please don't follow Jesus. If you love your life, you can't be his disciple. If you don't give up everything, turn back now. Please don't even pretend to be a follower of his, if you don't surrender all." I hit them hard, right between the eyes—and they loved it! The group doubled in size the next week.

So this was the kind of bare-knuckles group for young men we were doing, and one day Mark just showed up unannounced. He said, "I hear you've got some good teaching here on discipleship—can I sit in?"

The guy was 55 years old, asking to sit in on a discipleship group for teenage boys. Well, sit in he did, and he stayed with that group for several more years. Mark doesn't care

who's doing the teaching, who it's being taught to, or where it's being taught—if it's good stuff, he just wants in on it. He's currently sitting in on a "Divorce Care" series down at the local Baptist church, and also goes to a class on parenting at another community church—even though he's never been divorced and his kids are over thirty!

So Mark's my prayer partner. Once he got wind that James and I were meeting in the mornings he found me and said, "I hear you guys are meeting in the mornings—can I sit in?" He's been here the last couple years and shows no signs of slowing.

We've had a host of other assorted cast members from time to time, all adding their own special flavor to the mix... a bold German brother with a prophetic bent, a young evangelist from the Ivory Coast who's now gone off to bible college, a Latino church-planter from the Bronx, and a small swarm of other hungry folks.

In these early morning sessions, Father began to uncover his vision, and to form something in us that has permanently altered the way we think and live.

It's like a splinter in our minds.

• how can I be sold out? •

In the beginning, as we set out to address the question of being devoted to God, we quite naturally came at it from a fairly religious perspective. We thought of it as being ‘sold out to God.’ But Father soon began to show us that this was just religious lingo for something Jesus called “The Greatest Commandment.”

Think about the word ‘devotion.’ It’s another phrase that’s been turned into mush by overuse and misuse. In fact, it’s a lot like the word “love.” People say, “I love you,” “I love God” and “I love pizza” with all the same emphasis and intended meaning. The word “devotion” has also suffered the same mistreatment when spoken by well-meaning religious people: “I’m going to have my morning devotions.” On the whole, we’ve forgotten what that word really means.

Devotion is defined as “deep love and commitment.”² It means to be completely focused on someone else and having their best interests at heart. So we stopped asking, “How can I be sold out,” or “How can I be totally devoted,” and started asking, “How can I love God with all my heart, soul, mind and strength?”

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This became our battle cry. Every morning we would show up and ask God, “What are your interests? What makes you happy? How can we love you more? What can we do today to please you? What’s your greatest hope and dream?”

² Encarta Dictionary

Now this is a very significant transition of thought, what modern philosophical gurus might call a “paradigm shift.” We traded a religious notion—adherence to a creed or even to a way of life—for a relational one: Being devoted to a person, namely God. Being devoted to God as a person means that we are intimately concerned with his dreams, his best, or as Oswald Chambers used to say, giving our “utmost for his highest.”

• what are the ingredients? •

We soon learned that to love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength is a challenge to invest everything we have and everything we are in seeking God and his dream. It means we must not only change how we think, but the whole course of our lives must be altered, so that our lives are centered in God and his interests, and no longer in our own. Not just our mindset, but our daily lives must be transformed, rebuilt, to accommodate this newfound devotion.

So we began to ask God, “What would our daily lives look like if we were sold out to your dream? What would be the ‘ingredients’ in a day that was devoted to God and his interests?” In other words, what are the practical things we can do day by day to cause us to love God with all our being? How can we build our lives around loving God and pursuing what he wants? This is the core of what it means to keep The Command.

So we began to pursue the question: “How can we build our daily lives around loving you?” As James and I sat one morning asking this of God, his response stunned us. I was expecting Him to answer with the list in our heads, the list that any good religious person worth his salt would give you: “Read the bible, pray and go to church.” But that’s not what we heard.

For me personally, before God addressed the issue of bible study or even prayer, he seemed to be saying that I should strive to intentionally associate with other people who are spiritually hot—people who want to love God with their whole hearts.

He knew me better than I did, and his prescription has proven to be right on target. We have since realized that our “morning prayer meeting” is really much more than that; it’s a mix of deep fellowship and sharing, prayer and bible talk, interchange between brothers and Father. I think it may be more like the kind of church meeting Jesus had in mind than the kind of “church meetings” we see today.

So starting with that, we began to rearrange our lives, giving priority to those things that caused us to love God more, and removing those things that diminished that love. This may seem a bit elementary, but elementary is what we needed. We went back to school and started over again with the very basics. Loving God is the foundation of everything, yet most of us go through life blind to the fact.

We must
return to
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We must return to loving God with our very lives.

• god's hang-up •

As we continued our pursuit of God and his dream, we kept coming back to a single unavoidable crossroad: Love.

No matter how many ways we approached this notion of being 'sold out to God,' he kept bringing us right across this same message. It's like God's got a real hang-up on this one idea, and he's not willing to turn it loose. So we traded in the idea of being 'sold out' for a better pursuit: to love God, to fulfill his Greatest Commandment.

It's funny how some of God's greatest truths don't really make sense until you try to actually do them. We never really noticed the connection Jesus makes between the first and second greatest commandments. Speaking of the command to love your neighbor as yourself and how it relates to the first command to love God he says, "The second is like it." In other words, the absolute greatest command is very much like its closest runner-up. Why is this so? Here is a crucial transition; don't miss it.

If you set out to love God with everything you have, you will begin to seek how you may please him, what his interests and desires are. And anyone who's ever honestly sought God and what pleases him or what he's interested in, has found out in short order that God has only one real passion: Us. People. His children.

We are his great work, his Magnum Opus—he simply has no other interest. All of biblical history shows God utterly transfixed on the human race. His greatest act was the sacrifice that purchased humankind for himself, and all his effort and thought seem to focus directly on his securing the

wellbeing of his most beloved creation—us. Much of God’s dream remains unfulfilled because many fail to grasp this incredibly important revelation.

We must become convinced that all God’s passion and effort are focused on a single purpose: to love and restore mankind. And if we would love God, look out for his interests and be in cooperation with him, we ourselves must adopt his same passion; we must join him in his work.

All God’s passion and effort are focused on a single purpose: to love and restore mankind.



• love redefined •

“I’m not a smart man; but I know what love is.” – Forrest Gump

As we began to look into this idea of love, there were several scriptures that deeply impacted our thinking.

One day Jesus was asked a loaded question by a self-righteous Pharisee, and Jesus’ famous answer was the story we have come to know as “the Good Samaritan.” Buried down in this story are some often overlooked words that began to ring in our ears as the quintessence of what it means to love one another.

Once we saw—in action—the kindness and love poured out like oil and wine on a needy soul, we heard—in words—the essence of true love. Listen to the Samaritan, as he must leave the wounded traveler to be on his way:

“The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’”³

“Look after him.” These are the instructions of a loving soul. “Look after him. Take care of him. Do whatever is necessary to see that his needs are met. I’ll be back to see about him as soon as I can; in the meanwhile, whatever he needs, please look after him—I’m happy to pay for him.”

To look after someone—what a simple idea. Yet it began to reverberate in our souls that we were staring into the most important concept in the whole universe. To look to the good of another, caring not for ourselves but for someone else, is the very essence of love.

Well, once we got on that wavelength, a flood of other scriptures began to come alive to us. For instance, what is it that God calls “pure religion?” In James’ epistle he says, “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.”⁴

How many times we had overlooked this! It’s not only about being pure—and not even about widowed or orphaned children as a social cause—it’s about ‘looking after’ people! Just like the Samaritan looked after the needs of the traveler, and just as the Samaritan pleaded with the

³ Luke 10:35

⁴ James 1:27

innkeeper to do the same, we see that what God counts as true religion is to look after the needs of others. Love is looking outside our own needs and caring for—looking after—someone else.

Now Paul's words in Philippians take on a whole new meaning: "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others."⁵

Love is looking
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looking after—
someone else.

How about that? Looking not only to our own interests, we should look to the interests of others. Love means looking out for the other guy. What is in *his* best interest, what does *he* need? It's a whole new attitude, one that doesn't come naturally.



We tend to be so myopic when it comes to our own private little universe. Like the philosopher said, "It is well to remember that the entire universe, with one trifling exception, is composed of others."⁶

Later in the same letter to the Philippians, Paul uses a real-life illustration, a role model that all of his readers would be familiar with: Timothy. Listen to what he says about him: "I have no one else like him, who takes a genuine interest in your welfare. For everyone looks out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ."⁷

Timothy was genuinely concerned about the welfare and interests of the people at Philippi. And Paul contrasts Timothy's pure religion with the "religion" of most other

⁵ Phil 2:3-4

⁶ John Andrew Holmes

⁷ Phil 2:20-21

people: Everyone looks out for his own interests! That's the way the whole world works! You don't have to admonish people to look out for themselves; they do that already.

Think about it. This assumption—that people by nature look out only for themselves—is the basis for the Second Greatest Commandment. When God said, “Love your neighbor as you love yourself,” he's assuming you already love yourself (and I believe that's a fair assumption on his part!) In other words, a good operational definition of love would go something like this:

The way you look after yourself, look after others. Whatever you would like someone else to do for you, you should do that for them (sound familiar?). Be as concerned about the next guy as you are for yourself. This is an incredible admonishment for loving others, precisely because it has its basis in the great care and concern we already have for ourselves.

Paul uses the same principle in his letter to the Ephesians. He's explaining the kind of love a husband should have for his wife, and his reasoning is based on our universal tendency to look out for our own interests. Give this a careful read and see what God's idea of love looks like:

“Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church—for we are members of his body.”⁸

⁸ Eph 5:25-31

How should a husband love his wife? First, he says love should be selfless and giving, just like the love Jesus displayed in giving himself up for his church. Next, he says that this love is like the tender loving care a man has for his own body.

Think about that. If I get so much as a tiny hangnail, I immediately do whatever it takes to find some relief. If I get a headache, I claw through the medicine cabinet until I've found an aspirin. Let's be clear about it: we are *very* in touch with the needs of our own bodies. This is the exact level of concern God says we should have for our wives, and by extension, for our neighbor.

To love our neighbor means to do for him whatever is needed, whatever is in his best interest; to care about his situation as much as my own. His needs, his destiny, his dreams—these become as important to me as my own.

• the second is like the first •

So, this is love. And if loving people involves meeting their needs and looking after their best interests, how then shall we love God? Does he have needs? Isn't he all-powerful, all-sufficient? What does he need that I can give? The answer to this question is crucial to understanding what it means to really love God.

Think of it this way. I don't need for you to come to my table and spoon-feed my lunch to me. I am capable of feeding myself, so we could say that—in the feeding department—I personally have no needs. My one-year-old

daughter, however, needs someone to prepare her food and feed it to her.

Can you see it? Even though I am fully sufficient and do not have any needs in the area of feeding myself, I have a child who has needs. Therefore, since she has needs, I have needs. I have a need for someone to feed her, to take care of her. In fact, I would consider that if you choose to take care of her, you are taking care of me. Whatever you do for the smallest of my children, you are doing that for me (I wish I had said that).

And even though God may not technically “need” anything from us, he does have some very distinct interests. If you watch God throughout history, you can see that. He’s definitely about something. He’s been watching... planning...working toward something. The scriptures are replete with stories of God working for the good of his creation, and he’s always at it with a passion.

So what is it God really wants? What are his highest interests, his fondest dreams? What makes his heart beat faster? These were the questions we were asking, and we began to get some real answers.

Now this is important: If you want to see what we saw, you’ll need to take a few minutes and read the bible. And I don’t mean just skim over the Word, taking note of the general subjects, but really reading and digesting the Word of God.

I have to confess, sometimes in books when the author is quoting a scripture, I’ll just skim through the passage and think, “OK, I see where he’s going with that,” and never actually read (or reread) the scriptures. My tendency is to think deeply about the author’s words, but only briefly

acknowledge the scripture at hand, because it's something I regard as familiar. (Am I the only one who does that?)

But in order to grasp the revelation at hand, I believe we're going to have to let the word of God wash over us. These are some of the main scriptures that were given to us over an extended period of time, and we meditated much on each of them.

So if you have time and are truly in "listening mode," I recommend you get into a quiet place and let God use these words to paint a whole new picture for you. Remember, we're asking of God, "What do you want? What are your interests? What's important to you? What is your dream?"

Ask him that—honestly. Then listen—carefully, slowly. This is some of the most important reading you may ever do; you might even want to read it aloud. May God grant us grace to comprehend these most important ideas from his Word.

Hear now the Word of the Lord:

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and **to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.** ⁹

⁹ Titus 2:11-14

¹⁰ Romans 8:28-29

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined **to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.** ¹⁰

My eyes will watch over them for their good, and I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up and not tear them down; I will plant them and not uproot them. I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the LORD. **They will be my people, and I will be their God,** for they will return to me with all their heart. ¹¹

For **we are God's workmanship**, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. ¹²

For he chose us in him before the creation of the world **to be holy and blameless in his sight.** In love he predestined **us to be adopted as his sons** through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will- to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding. And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment-**to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.** ¹³

¹¹ Jeremiah 24:6-7

¹² Ephesians 2:10

¹³ Ephesians 1:4-10

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, **so that the body of Christ may be built up** until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, **attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.**

Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. **From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.** ¹⁴

• what does all this mean? •

Let's walk through some of these scriptures and see what God has been showing us about his dream.

In the passage from Titus, we get a special, personal glimpse into God's great purpose and plan—all from his point of view. The Bible plainly tells us that the ultimate work of God was accomplished in Jesus at the cross, and that everything worthwhile springs from that. So what was the purpose of the cross? Why all the suffering and effort

¹⁴ Ephesians 4:11-16

on God's part, and what was the "joy set before" Jesus that caused him to endure such agony? We're staring at it right here.

God wanted a people—for himself. You can hear his personal interest in this. He wants his own people, redeemed (bought back) from wickedness, purified to be his own special possession, a people eager to do good to others—this is what he's after.

Make no mistake: God wants people. He's not in this for power, glory or even praise. (He made that clear when he declared that as far as praise was concerned, we could easily be replaced by rocks!) He's in it because he wants a people for himself.

We would do well to remember that all Father really cares about is people. Think about it: When this world is destroyed, and the heavens and earth are done away with, and the elements melt in the heat, what will survive that day? There's only one thing coming off of this rock alive, and that's us—people. We are the reason Father toils like he does.

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"I will be their God, and they will be my people." He must have said that a few dozen times in the bible.

People who have a dream usually find themselves talking about it all the time. God has a dream, and he's forever going on about it.



We are his workmanship, his work. We are his project, his focus, the dream he works to fulfill. But he doesn't want

just “a people,” as if any people will do. No, he has something startlingly great in mind.

Look at the passage from Romans. God doesn’t just want a people, he wants a family. And he doesn’t just want a family of ordinary people. Father’s dream is to have a whole family of children who are just like Jesus! That’s what it means to be conformed to the likeness of his Son. Jesus is to be the model, the firstborn, the prototype for all of God’s children.

How spectacular is that? I admit it would be really great if God had a family of children, redeemed from wickedness and purified to be his very own people. It would be even greater if each person were nice, kind and loving. But there’s more! God, help us get our minds around this concept, this amazing dream!

Let’s think about it like this: How wonderful would it be if Jesus were standing right here in person? What a difference he would make, what beauty, goodness and peace he would bring to everyone around. How wonderful to have Jesus in all his radiant goodness to be present in the flesh among us!

But now try to imagine this (buckle your theological seatbelts!): What if there were not only one Jesus, but there was *another* person, identical to him in beauty, power and glory, standing there with him! Or what if there were two or three or a hundred?

Before you throw your stones, just come with me one more step and try to get your mind around this picture... a whole nation, a vast people, each of them conformed to the exact image of Jesus: everywhere you look and everywhere you go, people with the beauty, power, love, virtue of Jesus—this would be heaven!

Isn't that what Father is teaching us here in the eighth chapter of Romans? Father's dream is not just to have Jesus be the Glory of Heaven. And his dream doesn't stop at making one person like Jesus. He has decided, and made it our destiny, that each of us—you, me and all those who believe—will be transformed into, and conformed to, the exact likeness of Jesus. It's so wonderful, so mind-blowingly awesome, that it's hard to even imagine. Father dreams so big, sometimes we don't have the capacity to grasp how incredible it all is.

Jesus is the centerpiece of the universe, and God is daily working to bring that universe to appreciate and conform to Him. He's adopted us as sons and is bringing us (and everything in the universe) into conformity with his Firstborn. He's establishing the Head and forming the Body.

Father is the master Builder and Dreamer. And this dream of his, this incredible destiny he's chosen to make us part of, is greater than anything we've known before.

These few scriptures begin to tell us the story, and God is still unfolding the mystery of all he's doing to fulfill his dream. And as each day passes, we become more aware of this one thing: He *will* fulfill his dream. He *will* have the desire of his heart.

And we are each invited to be a part of it.





the four paradigms



So the big picture finally began to show, and honestly, it seemed like way too much for us to take in. We felt like we were on the business end of a fire hose, and God was showing no signs of shutting off the valve.

Over the course of a few days, Father began to open our eyes to see his dream more clearly. As we tried to sort through all he was showing us, Father began to speak to us in one of his favorite ways: through stories.

We asked him the question, “How can we love you?” and his answer was given to us through four biblical word-pictures that changed our lives forever. They are: The Kingdom of God, The Family of God, The Body of Christ, and The Bride of Christ. God took these four stories, well-known to even the most novice bible student, and used them together to paint the big picture he wanted us to see.

Sometimes the best way to get about something is to just dive right in. So let’s cut to the short version of how he told us these stories, beginning with “The Kingdom of God.”

May God grant us eyes to see his big picture.

• the kingdom •

Suppose a man came to his king and said, “I want to love you, to look after your interests. What is your great interest, your dream?”

The king replied, “If you want to love me, love my people. My desire is for my subjects, my kingdom—they are my only interest.”

So the subject asked the king, “How can we help take care of your kingdom, to look after your subjects?”

If you want
to love me,
love my
people.

The king replied, “The single greatest thing we can do for any country, city or an individual is to get them within my kingdom. Until they have been conquered, until they have been granted citizenship and are under my rule, there truly is no help for those who remain outside. As you know, all who remain enemies of my rule, all who are outlaws, all who have chosen to rebel against my authority are doomed to a terrible fate. My heart breaks for those who remain outside my kingdom. I have granted them full pardon for their crimes—amnesty, no questions asked—if they will only surrender and agree to abide lawfully in my kingdom. So the first step to helping people is to get them to surrender their futile, treasonous efforts and settle them safely as citizens in my kingdom.”



“That’s the first and most important thing we can do for anyone. But establishing their citizenship here is really only the beginning. Once people become my subjects, I want them to grow and thrive here; to be assimilated. They must become good citizens and adopt the values and priorities of my kingdom. Individually, I want each subject to become an ideal citizen: to love the kingdom just as I do. To have a

kingdom full of loyal subjects who care about the very things I care most about—this is my dream. So the second greatest thing we can do for people is to help them grow and mature, becoming good citizens of the kingdom.”

“Next, I want people to live and work together in harmony; they should enjoy a sense of community. Relationships are very important to me. It’s not enough that each individual is excellent in their own right. I want them to live together: loving, helping and enjoying one another. This is the kind of kingdom I am building. I dream of a community where subjects care about one another, and thoroughly enjoy living and working together.”

“And finally, once my subjects are safely at home in the kingdom, once they are growing and becoming better citizens and once they are living in community, I want them to settle in and get to work. I want them to join me in my work, to join me in my dream. I want them to love me, love each other and love my dream as much as I do. I want each of them to be busy! They should be busy doing all kinds of good things...anything that will help build up the kingdom. I want my subjects to be fruitful, productive partners working together with me to see my kingdom built and my dream fulfilled.”

“But above all, you must remember this one thing: My word is law. My kingdom, my domain, is actually *defined by* my rule. In other words, my kingdom is where my will is being done. In my kingdom, things are in a certain order, and I am the governing authority who has established that order. This is your primary directive, and it overarches all the other things you may be trying to accomplish. So in your efforts to do my work—conquering new peoples, training them in citizenship, promoting community among them and employing them in productive work—you must always abide by my commands. Be concerned not only

about the *work* you are doing, but also about the *way* you are doing it!”

To sum up this story and the concepts represented in it:

In order to love a KING, we must understand that his KINGDOM is the object of his great concern and desire—his SUBJECTS are most precious to him. So if we would love the king, we must do good to his subjects by ensuring their complete CONQUEST (that they have surrendered and are assimilated into the new kingdom, being saved from the punishment for their rebellion), by training them in CITIZENSHIP (helping them understand and live according to the laws of their new society), by promoting COMMUNITY among them (getting them into relationships, making them a people) and finally, developing their PRODUCTIVITY (getting the entire community involved in purposeful work). And the overarching principle that must guide our work is that we must do all these things according to the ORDER that the king has established, according to his GOVERNMENT.

Notice the capitalized words above. These are the main concepts in the story which represent a biblical truth. This is important, because going forward we will see how God used these concepts to paint the overall picture of his dream.

Look at the concepts represented in this story:

God is represented by:
The King

His **people** are represented by:
Subjects

His **overarching principle** or **primary directive** is
represented by:
Government/Order

The four **goals** or **deliverables** regarding God's wishes for
his people are:

1. CONQUEST
2. CITIZENSHIP
3. COMMUNITY
4. PRODUCTIVITY

Since the final picture we're developing will be comprised of
all the stories kind of "stacked together," here's a tabular
version that we'll be using later. Give it a good look:

Paradigm	The Kingdom
God	The King
People	Subjects
Primary Directive	Government / Order
4 Deliverables	Conquest
	Citizenship
	Community
	Productivity

• the family •

Suppose a child asked his father, “Dad, as a father, what’s your great interest in life? What is your dream, and how can we help you with it?”

The father replied, “You are my great interest—my family! And as a father, I have a dream of how I want it to be for my family. If you truly want to know how to love me, then devote yourself to helping my children...my family.”

So the child asked him, “OK, Dad; what can we do for your children?”

As a father, I
have a
dream of
how I want it
to be for my
family.

A good father would reply, “I want you to hear my heart, son. First of all, I want a big family. The essence of Fatherhood begins here—with having children! The most joyous moments in my house are when a new little baby is brought into our family. Whether born or adopted, each child’s entrance to our house is cause for great celebration. My heart aches for any of my children who belong here, but aren’t...the ones waiting to be adopted, those not yet born, and those who have, for whatever reason, left the house and refused to return. I want all my children around my table—that’s the first and most important thing to me. If you want to help my family, make sure all the kids are home safe under my roof.”



“Next, I want all my children to grow up to be good people—like me! They already look like me physically, and I want them to be like me on the inside...to grow up and adopt the same values and priorities as the rest of the family. I want to see them carefully nurtured and trained so they

can grow up to be fully mature, able to live a life that I and the whole family are proud of.”

“I want my family to enjoy deep relationships. After all, isn’t that what being in a family is all about? The whole reason we had children was to be able to know them, to watch them grow up, to enjoy each other. I want our family to be close-knit, loyal and caring. If you want to help me and my family, do whatever you can to nurture close relationships between all the brothers and sisters.”

“Finally, I want them to help out in the family business. Each child should become productive, helping our business thrive. I want each family member to become intimately familiar with the business, so they can run it just like I would. Each child will find great fulfillment and reward in employing their particular talents and skills to make our business successful.”

“Just remember this one imperative: ‘As long as you’re under my roof, you’ll abide by my rules.’ I am the Father, and what I say, goes. I want our family to work together, play together and enjoy all our days. And like the old saying goes, ‘Father knows best.’ If you do things the way I have chosen—the way of the Family—then I’ll be happy.”

So to sum up this story and the concepts represented in it...

To love a FATHER, we must understand that his FAMILY is the object of his great concern and desire—his SONS are most precious to him. So if we would love a father, we must see that his family is made up of many sons through REPRODUCTION (children added naturally, through adoption, and by the restoration of estranged sons), by training them so they reach MATURITY (growing up to

be just like Dad), by promoting BROTHERHOOD among them (nurturing strong familial relationships) and finally, developing their role in the FAMILY BUSINESS (getting the entire family involved in purposeful work). And the overarching principle that must guide our work is that we must do all these things according to the father's WILL and WAYS.

Again, notice the capitalized words above. Look at the concepts represented in this story:

God is represented by:

The Father

His **people** are represented by:

Sons

His **overarching principle** or **primary directive** is represented by:

Father's Will / Ways

The four **goals** or **deliverables** regarding God's wishes for his people are:

1. REPRODUCTION
2. MATURITY
3. BROTHERHOOD
4. FAMILY BUSINESS

And here’s the table:

Paradigm	The Family
God	The Father
People	Sons
Primary Directive	Father’s Will / Ways
4 Deliverables	Reproduction
	Maturity
	Brotherhood
	Family Business

So we’re starting to see the pattern here. Now let’s take a quick look at the next story, “The Body of Christ.”

• the body •

Imagine a conversation here between a body part and the head (I know it's a bit of a stretch; just work with me here for a minute). Suppose that within a human body, some particular body part were to say to the head, "What is it that you're interested in? What can we do to help you?"

The head would say, "Why, my primary concern is the rest of the body. If the body and all its members are healthy and functioning properly, then I am happy."

If the body part asked, "So what can we do to help you with the rest of your body?"

"First of all, the body needs all its parts. If any part is missing or damaged, the first order of business is to regenerate each part so that the body is whole. New cells are constantly being generated so that the body may be complete. A body that isn't constantly growing and producing new cells is actually dying. So a primary work here is the process of generating new cells and tissue so that proper growth may occur."

"Next, those cells and tissues need to be assimilated and healthy. Each one must be properly placed and fed nutrients so that it may grow and mature. If any part of the body fails to grow and be healthy, the whole body will suffer. The healthy growth of each individual body part is foundational to the overall health of the body."

If any part of the body fails to grow and be healthy, the whole body will suffer.



“Also, the parts must coexist in harmony. Each part must do its work, so that the whole body is healthy and coordinated. If the bodily systems don’t work well together, we get all sorts of bad things: from a simple lack of physical grace and motor coordination, to cells actually fighting each other—a condition known as cancer. All the parts of the body must be in harmony and function together, contributing to the health of the body.”

“Above all, this function and cooperation must be coordinated by the head. Without direction from the head, the body will just collapse and cease to function. No matter what function is being carried out within the body, the head calls the shots. Think about it: the whole reason the body exists is to provide expression for the head. The head can imagine a most beautiful dance, but without the members of the body carry it out, it remains only a beautiful thought. All the creative thought, direction and coordination come from the head, and a healthy, responsive body can carry it out perfectly.”

Here’s the summary:

To love the HEAD, we must understand that its BODY is the object of its greatest concern—the MEMBERS are most precious. So if we would help the head, we must ensure bodily GROWTH (cells regenerated, members healed), promote the overall HEALTH of the members (growing strong and healthy), facilitate COORDINATION among the members (each one listening to the head) and finally, making sure each member is productively involved in their particular FUNCTION (performing the critical tasks each member was created to do). And the overarching principle that must guide our work is that we must do all these things according at the DIRECTION and for the EXPRESSION of the Head.

Again, notice the capitalized words above. Look at the concepts represented in this story:

God is represented by:

The Head

His **people** are represented by:

Bodily Members

The **overarching principle** or **primary directive** is represented by:

Direction/Expression

The four **goals** or **deliverables** regarding God's wishes for his people are:

1. GROWTH
2. HEALTH
3. COORDINATION
4. BODILY FUNCTION

Here's the table:

Paradigm	The Body
God	The Head
People	Bodily Members
Primary Directive	Direction / Expression
4 Deliverables	Growth
	Health
	Coordination
	Body Function

• the bride •

We're almost done with the stories. Hang in there and tap into the great revelation this last story offers. The story of the Bride, which originally gave me the most trouble, has become the pinnacle for me of understanding what God really wants. Take a look:

A friend of the groom would asked him, "What are you interested in? What do you want? What is your dream?"

"*She is!*" the groom shouted. "I can't think about anything else but her. The Big Day is almost here, and I can't wait to see my Bride!"

So the friend asked, "OK, so what can I do for you?"

"Whatever you can do for my Bride—that's all I want. Anything you can do to help her get ready for our Big Day...that would make me happy."

"So what can I do for her?"

"The most important thing is for her to be ready. I want that day to be perfect...and I want *her* to be perfect. Nothing should be missing. If she's missing anything for the wedding, I want you to get it for her; that's first. Make sure my Bride is complete and is there in her full glory; this will be true perfection."

I want that
day to be
perfect...and
I want *her* to
be perfect.



"Then make sure there are no spots or wrinkles. She should be radiant! So in addition to making sure she is fully dressed and is "all there," help her get herself ready. I want you to aid her in finding and smoothing out any wrinkles,

getting out any stains... removing from her everything that isn't fitting for this Day of days. I want to see her in spotless perfection; this will be true purity."

"And once everything is there, and all the spots and wrinkles are taken care of, make sure to arrange everything for her, cosmetically speaking. Each piece of her wedding garment should fit together perfectly with the others, complementing each other and setting off the whole; this will be true beauty."

"Don't forget: Her only desire, is to be what I desire. In all your hard work and preparation, remember that she is my desire... and knowing what I want will direct you in how you go about the work. What the groom wants—this is to be your guiding principle."

Here's the summary:

To love a GROOM, we must understand that his BRIDE is the object of his great concern and desire—his bride is most precious to him. So if we would love the groom, we must help his bride by ensuring her readiness, her COMPLETION (everything must be there, with nothing missing for the big Day), by helping her attain PERFECTION (getting rid of every stain and wrinkle), by promoting her BEAUTY (making sure all the pieces fit together in HARMONY) and finally, assisting in the PREPARATION (getting ready for the big Day). And the overarching principle that must guide our work is that we must do all these things according to the groom's DESIRE; his wishes are supreme.

The concepts represented in this story:

God is represented by:
The Groom

His **people** are represented by:
His Bride

His **overarching principle** or **primary directive** is
represented by:
His Desire

The four **goals** or **deliverables** regarding God’s wishes for
his people are:

1. COMPLETION
2. PERFECTION
3. HARMONY/BEAUTY
4. PREPARATION

Since the final picture we’re developing will be comprised of
all the stories kind of “stacked together,” here’s a tabular
version that we’ll be using next. Give it a good look:

Paradigm	The Bride
God	The Groom
People	His Bride
Primary Directive	His Desire
4 Deliverables	Completion
	Perfection
	Harmony / Beauty
	Preparation

Pretty powerful on their own, each of these stories is actually only a part of the bigger picture God was trying to show us.

So let's take a deep breath and try to put them all together and take a closer look at what Father is saying.

The chart on the next page has revolutionized our lives.

The 4 Deliverables			
The Kingdom	The Family	The Body	The Bride
God	The King	The Father	The Groom
People	Subjects	Sons	His Bride
Primary Directive	Government / Order	Father's Will / Ways	His Desire
Evangelism	Conquest	Reproduction	Completion
Discipleship	Citizenship	Maturity	Perfection (without spot or wrinkle)
Relationship	Community	Brotherhood	Harmony / Beauty
Loving Service	Productivity	Family Business	Preparation

THE 4 DELIVERABLES

• the big 'ol chart •

Now that's a big chart. And it could be scary.

But what it did for us was this: After seeing it built one block at a time, it actually *simplified* the whole story of God and his epic work of restoring mankind. May God guide us to think about it simply:

God loves and treasures us...like a King prizes his Kingdom, like a Father adores his Family, like a Head is concerned for its Body, like a Groom desires his Bride. You could easily say that we are not only his primary concern, but his *only* concern; his all-consuming passion.

Let's camp right there for just a minute. Think about it this way: Just as we are defined by who he is, he defines himself by us. How can this be?

He calls himself a Father. Doesn't a father derive his identity from being "head of a family" just as much as a family is known as the "offspring of a father?" What is a king without a kingdom, a head without a body or a groom without a bride? We are inseparable!

We are his desire, and we are part of him— how wonderful! He has chosen to identify himself as being part of the picture with us. Since he loves us and relates to us in this way, he is committed to our best, to our full and highest destiny.

Look at the Four Deliverables, one at a time. First, we see that his primary concern is for our safety, that we ourselves are not lost; the religious world would call this our need for "Evangelism."

In our simple story-language, we'd say it's like a king who wants everyone to be safely settled as a citizen in his kingdom instead of remaining an enemy in danger of destruction. It's like a father who wants many children in his house, and none of them to remain rebellious strangers, outside the protection, safety and benefit offered within. It's like a head that wants all the body members to be fully generated and in good repair, so that all are healthy and assimilated. And it's like a groom who desires his bride to be full and complete, with nothing lacking.

Is God interested in numbers? I'd say he is. He doesn't want any to be missing on that day, and he's pulling for all of us to be there. He wants a large, happy family, full and complete. He's looking for the entire kingdom/family/body/bride to be there as a whole, and yet he cares about people individually and hates to see anyone miss their destiny and face destruction. His dream is this: "No empty seats at my table."

But is that all God wants? He just wants us "there," and that's the end of it? We can easily see that being there isn't the end, but only the very beginning!

Next, God is interested in our individual growth. This is what religious folk know as "Discipleship." In story-speak, we'd say it's just that a king wants not only to conquer people, but that he wants his subjects to become good citizens. A father is interested not only in producing biological offspring, but he wants true sons, mature heirs who are more and more like himself every day. It's not enough that cells are generated, but they must develop into the fully-functioning and healthy body parts that they are genetically pre-programmed to become.

Think about it: If a groom could choose for his wedding night a skanky-looking woman who's just barely thrown her-

self together, or a gorgeous bride who's lovingly prepared herself to meet his every desire, which do you think he would choose?

God is passionately concerned with individuals, not only for their imminent safety, but that their full potential is reached and that they become everything he's destined them to be. This is Discipleship.

Now, once the individuals are on their way to becoming mature and complete, what's next? Is God's concern limited to the individual level? What of God's people as a whole?

Father wants us in strong relationships: Like a king desires a healthy sense of community and goodwill among his subjects...like a father wants not just to have a bunch of sons, but he wants a *family*...like the head needs the parts of the body to function together in cooperation and coordination...like the groom wants his bride to be beautiful, all the different aspects arranged harmoniously to be cosmetically pleasing. (The words "cosmos" and "cosmetology" imply the same meaning: things that are *ordered*, often beautiful.)

A father
wants not just
to have a
bunch of
sons, but he
wants a
family.

So while God is interested in individuals, he's also very passionate about us as a group. After all, it's only among people that we can prove ourselves to be his true sons. Jesus said that people are able to recognize his followers by how they love one another. So strong relationships, binding us together, is also an important part of God's desire for us.



And finally, we need not only to be safely in relationship with God, to be developing into our final destiny and to be relating well to one another—we need to join God in his

We need to
join God in
his wonderful
work.



wonderful work. This is his passionate desire for all of us. And what is his work? Well, what is it that God is doing? He's loving people! He's busy getting them rescued from their imminent destruction, growing them up as mature sons and daughters and nurturing relationships among them. He's in the process of restoring souls, and he wants us to join him!

This is what we call “acts of loving service.” It's anything we can do to help a person along in their process of rescue and restoration.

Take another look at that big ol' chart.

If we truly believe that loving God is the most important thing, we quite naturally become deeply interested in what he wants. We begin to look at him closely, to see what he wants, what he's interested in, what's important to him—what is his dream. It doesn't take long to see that he's really only about one thing: Us.

He's all-consumed with building a kingdom, fathering a family, growing a body, preparing a bride. We are his passion, his fondest dream. And if we as individuals would throw in with God, to lovingly participate and co-labor with him, we will soon find ourselves dedicated to helping people reach their destiny in God.

We begin to resemble our Father.





the four deliverables

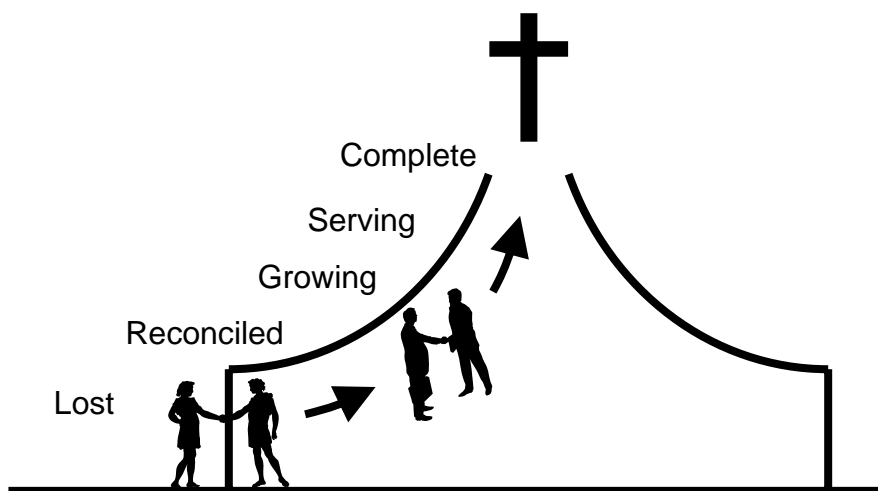


• what god is actually doing •

So when you boil it down, net it out, look at the bottom line (and any other hip business lingo you want to use), the work of God can be seen in these four things: Evangelism, Maturity, Relationships and Service. Doing these four things—in the way that God wants them done—truly is all there is to the Christian way of life.

How do we know that? Because once you get serious about loving God, you begin to seek out what his interests are. Then you find out that he's keenly interested in us, in having sons and daughters who are like him. To love God means to love people, and to love people means meeting their true needs—to look to their highest and best.

Look at this diagram God gave us one morning:



Once we realized God's dream is for each of us to become like Jesus, we saw that this is his pattern for our lives. It goes like this: God is in the business of taking lost and sinful men, reconciling them to himself and one another through the sacrifice of Jesus, growing them up in this new way of life, bonding them with other believers, and getting them plugged into his own work. This is the pathway to God's ultimate destiny for us: "that He might be the Firstborn among many brothers." That means that my goal should be every day, with everyone I meet, to help them along the path of becoming like Jesus.

Suppose a guy has no clue about Jesus and is as lost as a goose in a snowstorm. My first duty to God and men is to help this man be reconciled to God. Suppose I know a woman who's already in relationship with God, but remains immature. My job is to help her along by encouragement, fellowship, correction and edification.

Simply put, whenever we encounter a person, wherever they are on their personal journey to become like Jesus, my job is to care about them and try to help them “up a notch.”

That’s a simple way of thinking about it, but it really does sum up all Christian ministry. Getting every man, woman and child further on their God-given destiny, further on their way to being the full-grown sons and daughters of God—this is what Father has called us to. This is all the work of God; he has no other interest, no other goal, no other dream.

This is all the work of God; he has no other interest, no other goal, no other dream.



In his book “Experiencing God,” Henry Blackaby suggests that the best thing we can do is to find out what God is doing and join Him. And we began to see that God isn’t really doing many different things, but really only a few things—or you might even say only one thing. Sure, he may be doing things differently in different places, but the core of what he’s doing has never changed. Everything he does revolves around a central purpose: his dream.

And we began to see that this dream is for the greatest good of every human being individually, and the greatest good of all men corporately. In other words, God’s “big picture” goal of having many sons and an entire people who are his very own is really built on his “little picture” goal of having each one to be a full-grown son or daughter of God.

This is really what it’s all about.



don't forget: the way



The overarching principle, before looking at any of the four deliverables, is that God wants things done his way. Why is that? Because Father knows best. We must clarify our thinking on this one point: What God wants in any given situation, and what's best in that situation—these two are completely synonymous.

If you ask people the question, “How do we find out what God wants?” you’ll get varying answers, depending on their religious backgrounds. One Christian might say, “Just read the Bible; it’s all in there.” Other believers might say, “Just pray; God’s spirit will lead you.” So which is it?

I think it’s both. Think of the parables the Father gave us. In a kingdom, there are laws clearly spelled out, yet on a daily basis, the king wants things done in a specific way. There is a “general will” and a “specific will.” The same goes for the father of a household (rules of the house vs. “what Dad wants done today”), the head of the body (functional principles in the body vs. executing a specific action) and the husband of the bride (his general set of desires vs. what he’s wanting right now).

There's a ditch on either side of the road, and we shouldn't overcomplicate this. Some Christians believe that "God used to speak through prophets and signs, but now he wrote a book and lost his voice." The Pharisees were that way. They studied the Book more than anybody, for hours and days on end. Yet when they were staring face to face with God himself, they didn't even recognize him.

That's why Jesus said to them, "You have your heads in your Bibles constantly because you think you'll find eternal life there. But you miss the forest for the trees. These Scriptures are all about me! And here I am, standing right before you, and you aren't willing to receive from me the life you say you want."¹⁵

To me this is one of the scariest passages in the bible. This isn't a relationship with Jesus, it's just a religion based on a book. Jesus was saying, "The book is supposed to get you to me. Yes, the scripture is important; read it. But it's important because it brings you to me and I give you the life." Jesus was clarifying something for them. The life isn't in the book; it's in the Author. The book is important because it draws us to him, leads us to know him, and reveals him to our hearts. But if we only try to "relate to" the book and not the Author, we find death just as the Pharisees did. Remember: It is possible to know the bible inside and out, and never know its Author.

On the other side, there are people who flatly ignore what's written in the book, and try to "hear God" for every detail of their lives. These are the people who, when the guy at the drive-thru asks them if they want fries with that, say, "Wait a minute..." and bow their heads to get some spiritual direction!

¹⁵ John 5:39-40, The Message

I have a good relationship with my wife, but that doesn't mean I constantly ask her every little thing. Many things I already know about her in general, so when I need to make a specific choice, I have a good idea of what she wants. (In fact, one of the most romantic things I can do for my wife is to know her, anticipate what she wants, and do that before she even has to ask. If you don't believe this is true, just ask any woman!)

That's one of the invaluable things the bible does for us. It shows us the history of God and his dealings with man, what he likes and doesn't like, what he really wants. To really know God well, we must know the Word well.

But it doesn't stop there. We must not only seek to know his general will, but also what he wants moment by moment. This is called a "relationship," an interchange between two people. You can't have a relationship with a book, and were never meant to. Jesus said the book is important because it brings you to him.

So as we embark on this journey of fulfilling Father's dream, we have to keep this one thing solidly in focus: In order to do what God wants, we have to actually do what he wants. (Quote me on that if you need to.) We call this a "primary directive."

In a cheesy 80's sci-fi movie called "Robocop," the robot has three primary directives, one of which is that he must do anything he's told by the guy who built him. This is kind of the same thing. If we stay close to God, constantly in touch with his desires (what he really wants) and his ways (how he likes things done), we will be less likely to miss the path.

In order to do
what God
wants, we
have to
actually *do*
what he wants.



I remember one day as I was driving home, I said to God, “If you just show me what you want me to do, I’ll do it.” I was just praying as I often do—speaking without really listening in return—and God very surprisingly answered me. And what He said shocked me:

“No!”

I had to pull the car over. Immediately, not with audible words but with a very clear impression on my heart, Father began to explain it to me.

“If I show you what to do, you’ll just go off and do it.”

I had to chew on that awhile.

“I don’t want you to ‘go off and do’ anything! I want us to do stuff together. Sure I have things in mind for you to do, but I know you...if I tell you about it now, you’ll just run off and try to do it without any more input from me.”

“I want us to work together, Father and son, hand in hand, in close cooperation. I’ll say, ‘Turn left,’ and you’ll go that way. I’ll say, ‘Try it this way instead,’ and you’ll avoid serious pitfalls. I want to teach you the Family Business.”

I began to realize that Father was perfectly able to do all this by himself; it’s just that he doesn’t want to.

Suppose one day, after retuning from the hardware store with materials and a set of plans to build a birdhouse, I told my children that we were going to do a project together. So we gather all the necessary tools and get down to work. After several days of effort, instruction, frustration and sweat, we would have in our possession a thing that vaguely resembled a “birdhouse.”

Allow me to say that, without any help from my children, I am perfectly capable of building a birdhouse on my own. In fact, I believe I could easily do it faster, more efficiently and have a better end product if I just built it myself. Why, I could even pay a professional to do it, and have one serious top-of-the-line birdhouse.

But I didn't want to do it that way.; that wasn't what I had in mind. In fact, I didn't have the birdhouse in mind at all, but only my children. The whole point of this exercise was not so that we could "get the work done" and get on to something else—it was so that I could enjoy personally training my children, giving them skills and helping them to grow into capable, mature adults. I did it that way so we could spend some time together, working in cooperation and fellowship, engaging in meaningful conversation and teamwork. My purpose was so much more than just building a birdhouse!

Father is the same way. Never forget that he could so easily do everything without our help. He could just evangelize the whole world in a day by writing it in the sky. Or he could hire the "professionals," sending angels to the corners of the earth to help his people.

But that's not what he wants. He doesn't do things that way simply because he doesn't want to. Father wants to work with us, to enjoy our company as we grow and are conformed to the likeness of his first Son. He really enjoyed working with Jesus while he was on the earth, and he longs to work with us in just the same way.





the application



So what are we to do with this revelation? What changes must we make in order to pursue Father's Dream? I believe there are three levels of change we can make in response to this revelation of what God really wants.

• philosophize •

By philosophize I mean that we must change our mindset, to acknowledge Father's dream and commit to look after his interests in our everyday lives. This is the first and most fundamental step toward seeing dynamic change. It is responding to his great love for us with equal passion for him and his interests.

Some might say that if we never get past philosophizing and on to action, that this new way of thinking does us no good. However, I must admit that I'm not too concerned that people might see Father's dream and do nothing about it. I believe that would prove very difficult. Let me explain.

While preaching in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, as I prayed for direction and power, I said, “Father, I want to make them hungry for your dream, for eternal things. Help me create a hunger in them.”

Almost before I finished asking, I felt him saying, “If you make it clear, they’ll want it. Your job is to tell them clearly. When they see it, how can they not be hungry for it?”

I love that. God is utterly confident in the beauty of his dream. He knows that if we can only see it clearly, it’ll kindle that desire in us and make it impossible for our idle feet to remain at rest. It’s so wonderful, so life-changing, we simply cannot go on with business as usual—it’s like a splinter in the mind.

A few years ago my office was located right next door to an industrial bakery. Some days the smell of the garlic bread wafted in so strong and sweet, it was almost maddening. Do you think the bakery workers had to try to convince my co-workers about the goodness of garlic bread? Not at all. It took all our energy just to keep from running next door and demanding a loaf!

So our first step is in the philosophy. While that isn’t an end in itself, *it is the beginning*, without which all other action is stalled. What happens if you run to the action without being clear on the purpose of it all? What happens is a flurry of off-purpose activity that drains us of time, energy and money, while Father’s dream remains unfulfilled.

And without fail, when a local church isn’t extremely clear about what it’s actually trying to accomplish, it always settles into a single line of philosophy: to promote itself. We’ve seen that this is a huge pitfall, not just in America but in churches around the world. And sadly, a great many church leaders have bought into this insidious idea, that promotion

of their local congregation actually passes for valid kingdom work.

I think God wants us to settle this issue once and for all: Does promoting your local congregation, over and above others in your area, have anything at all to do with seeking Father's dream? For instance, if someone from another church were to visit yours and say, "Hey, I like this place much better!," have you actually accomplished anything at all? I say no. Yet how many hours and dollars are spent to accomplish just that? I think it makes Father sad.

When I returned from Kenya this year, I had a real dose of reality concerning the American church. While in Nairobi, I visited a slum that housed 1.5 million people who live in tin shanties with dirt floors. After much planning, we found that we could arrange housing for up to 50 homeless orphans in a safe environment by building a temporary shelter at one of the orphan schools. The cost was about \$1,000.

As I got back to the States and began to raise funds to build the shelters, I was also asked to contribute to a fund for replacing some carpet in a church sanctuary at a cost of \$6,000.

I don't know...I just couldn't do the math that way any more. Before God, where should we focus our efforts? If I were to invest \$1,000 here, I could be a fractional part of replacing perfectly decent carpet, which might entice some visitor to stop attending at their building and come to ours. Or, I could be the sole contributor in providing crucial shelter for helpless orphans.

I just
couldn't do
the math
that way
any more.



Idealistic or not, I began to feel the weight of personal responsibility: God is interested in some things, and frankly, isn't very interested in others. And we must soon give an account of how we spend our time, energy and resources. We began to see the need to focus ourselves on those things that count most toward realizing Father's dream; call it spiritual "bang for the buck."

So the first level of change is in our thinking, our philosophy. Our values have to change. We must care about what he cares about, love what he loves, hate what he hates. We must begin to see Father's priorities in our every day lives.

We must care
about what
he cares
about, love
what he
loves, hate
what he
hates.



Once we are clear on God's true purpose and desire, we can begin changing our actions to accomplish those things. That's called "optimizing."

• optimize •

Optimization can be defined as "to make something function at its best or most effective, or to use something to its best advantage."¹⁶ It means taking inventory of our current activities and making each of them more effective toward accomplishing Father's dream.

¹⁶ Encarta Dictionary

While this is not the deepest level of change available to us, it can be a powerful next step. Optimizing means looking at our current activities, evaluating them to see how effective they are in achieving what we've set out to do, and then looking for ways to improve their effectiveness. Basically it's evaluating what we do by asking this telling question: "How does this accomplish Father's four primary deliverables?" Let's do a sample inventory to see how this would work in practice.

First, suppose you were a leader in a local church. So let's choose an activity that your local church is committed to, say, the Sunday Morning Service. Now we run down the list of four deliverables, asking the question, "How effective is this activity in accomplishing Father's goal of Evangelism? Discipleship? Relationship? Service?" Try ranking it on a scale of 1 to 10.

First, let's do Evangelism. At our church for example, we have a pretty typical Sunday service, and although our services are not particularly geared toward evangelism, we generally do give an altar call and get a few responses. So let's give it, say, a 4 out of 10 for effectiveness in evangelism.

Next, how effective is the service in maturing the believers? Well, while it may not be as effective as other means of hands-on discipleship, there is some practical teaching in there, so we'll give it a 6.

Now look at Relationships. How well does our Sunday Morning Service facilitate the building of relationships? Honestly, it doesn't do it very well at all. If our service is typical, most of the time is spent sitting and listening to a single person talk. Any relationship-building has to be "jammed in" during breaks before and after. (That's why people stand around in the parking lot trying to squeeze in a little meaningful conversation while their spouse is in the car

blowing the horn!) So as far as the service actually promoting relationships, we'll give it maybe a 2.

Next, Service. How well does this particular activity promote getting people involved in acts of loving service to the needy? Well, there may be a few who serve as ushers, singers, etc., but these things are actually doing what we would call "serving the Service." Let me clarify.

Remember the story about the Good Samaritan? The priest and the Levite had likely been to Jerusalem performing their ritual acts of service in the temple. Yet as they passed a man in dire need of their help, neither of them possessed the necessary compassion to stop and help a fatally wounded fellowman. But the Samaritan, banished by the Jews from serving in or even entering the temple, stopped and compassionately ministered healing and life to a desperate soul.

It's not a bad thing to perform your duty at the temple. But it seems here that God is looking for something else. Jesus said we should go and learn what this means: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." Do we really know what that means?

Does it mean that God wants us to have mercy on him? Surely not. It means that more important than rituals, services, meetings and other religious activities (represented by the sacrifice), is mercy—compassion, help and service to those around us in need. God would rather us love and care for those around us than to be exceedingly religious.

While we never want to minimize any act of service, is it possible that the acts of service described in the story of the good Samaritan or those kind acts for the needy in the parable of the Sheep and Goats may not be weighted the same as our modern "acts of service," like directing traffic at the Saturday morning men's breakfast? In other words, can

we honestly say that operating the sound board for some large event is fundamentally the same as offering a cup of cold water to the thirsty in Jesus' name?

So in our evaluation of the Sunday Morning service... outside those things that just "serve the Service," there really isn't much loving service to the needy going on in that meeting. So, for Acts of Loving Service, we also get a 2.

So, for our total effectiveness, we might rank Sunday Morning Service with a 4 in Evangelism, a 6 in Discipleship, a 2 in Relationships and a 2 in Service. Our overall effectiveness comes out to be about 3.5, or 35% effective. That is to say, the activity where many churches put most of their time, effort and money really isn't paying off as well as it should.

The activity where many churches put most of their time, effort and money really isn't not paying off as well as it should.

I've heard pastors say that they try to spend 95% of their effort and focus on "making the Sunday Morning Service excellent." What does this mean? It means that unless we

can change some things about that service to make it more effective in accomplishing Father's dream, we have the primary leader of the local church spending 95% of his time and effort on something that's only about 35% effective toward accomplishing our stated goals. That's like the head coach of a sports team saying, "I'm going to focus all my attention on the uniforms!"



Once we've seen and understood Father's Dream, we start looking for ways to accomplish his Four Deliverables. Optimization means looking at our current activities and

optimizing them toward achieving our desired outcomes. It's asking the questions, "How can we make this particular activity more effective in soul-winning? What can we do to enhance this activity in terms of Discipleship? What can we change about the way we do this activity in order to nurture deeper Relationships? How can we alter our method of doing this activity to increase the level of loving Service among the participants?"

Without "meddling" with which activities we actually choose to do (that process will be covered next with "Revolutionizing"), what can be done to enhance our current activities to make them more effective in achieving the Four Deliverables? This is Optimization. We not only change our philosophy, but we change the nature of our actions. We can optimize what we're currently doing by evaluating their effectiveness in achieving God's Four Deliverables, and then altering how we do those activities to increase their impact.

One of the great strengths of this type of change is that it causes less disruption. However, there is a corresponding weakness: You can't change things, unless you actually change things. Or as my friend Billy always says, "If you want results you've never had before, you have to do things you've never done before. If you do what you've always done, you're going to get what you always got."

So if we really want to see radical change, we must be willing not only to change the *way* we do things, but to change *which things* we will choose to do. This is called Revolutionizing.

• revolutionize •

To revolutionize means to surrender all activities to God and have him “rewrite your schedule” around those things that count most toward his dream. This is the Big Kahuna. If we really love Father’s dream and want to see it fulfilled to the uttermost, we must reach this level of change.

Revolutionizing means completely submitting all agendas, plans and activities to the superior agenda of accomplishing Father’s Dream. It means that our daily activity is dictated only by Father and his desires. We must give full preeminence to loving God and achieving his Four Deliverables. What it really means is that all of our previously conceived notions of what ministry should be like have to go “bye-bye.”

Think about it. What if all our activities were suddenly canceled? Pretend for a moment that all your meetings, budgets and activities were disregarded, and your calendar was completely cleared. Once you get over the initial euphoria (breathe deep; ahh, isn’t that nice?), think about what you will do. If you clear your head of all the worries and busyness of whatever you’re currently involved in, if you could forget for a moment about all the plates you are trying to keep spinning, and had the luxury of just asking God, “What should we really be doing?”—how do you think your activities would differ from what you’re doing right now?

Let's take it another step by posing some "What if?" questions.

What if you were surrounded by a small team of good friends who understood Father's Dream, his Primary Directive and his Four Deliverables? And what if you were able to meet with each other and God on a regular basis to determine how you should spend the available time, energy and money in order to see the Dream fulfilled? What if you could trade in your current political atmosphere (can you say, "yuck?") for that of a small group of close friends trying to help each other find God's best for their lives?

What if it weren't just the "leadership team" at a church that met and asked these questions, but if there were many small groups meeting at different times asking, "What can we do to win souls? How can we better train up our children in the Way? What are we going to do together to strengthen our relationships? What are some kind things we can do for each other, our neighborhood, our community?"

We're sometimes haunted by a disturbing idea: What do you suppose would happen if a small group of, say, five families began to meet and share along these lines? If each member of that group—children included—understood Father's Dream and the four simple results he's looking to accomplish, what would happen? I can't help but think that this little group of folks could get a whole lot done!

Is it unreasonable to imagine, that at the end of any given month, five simple families could, through focused effort and teamwork, win more souls than are won by an average church through its current activity? Is it too far-fetched to suppose that more actual "kingdom work" could get done

by a small, focused group of friends than by the whole church machine with its budgets, committees, organization and planning? I don't think so.

Think about the change this kind of revolution could bring. Instead of endless meetings by professional clergy to plot how we should promote one church over another (getting more “nickels and noses” through our own doors), good friends are gathering in small groups to talk about how we can practically fulfill the Great Commandments.

Paul told Titus, “Our people must learn to devote themselves to doing what is good, in order that they may... not live unproductive lives.”¹⁷ To gather together and focus on fulfilling Father's Dream, his desires and interests—this is really what it means to love God; to be devoted to his highest and best. Could it be that this is what Jesus had in mind when he spoke of the “church” he would build?

A report said that last year in America alone, over 25 million people quit attending churches. People know that religion at large isn't getting the job done; and they're looking for more.

There is a revolution coming. Not a treasonous revolt or bloody uprising, but a sweeping renewal, a rekindling of love for God and his interests. And it will change the way many people will live.

Some will hear this message and it will mean nothing to them. Others will understand it, see the vision and their philosophy will change. Some will actually begin to change the way they do things in order to more effectively accomplish what God desires. And then there are the revolutionaries.

¹⁷ Titus 3:14

There will be people who see and understand, who choose to radically change whatever they must to pursue Father's Dream. There will be businessmen who begin to gather others in a small group to pray and plan how to achieve the Four Deliverables. There will be fathers who pray and talk with their families about their own unique opportunities to Evangelize, Disciple, build Relationships and Serve as a family in their community. Pastors and church leaders will choose to put aside "business as usual" and begin to rally small groups around God's purposes and help them find their place in doing his work.

And that's just the beginning. Once people begin to abandon other off-purpose activities and seek to partner with God in fulfilling his dream, the possibilities are endless. Once we are set apart to do what he wants done, Father will begin to unfold more and better strategies and creative ideas—concealing them from the wise and learned and revealing them to little children.

Can you see it? Small groups of friends, meeting everywhere, discarding all other agendas and political motivations just to talk about how to love God more and how to help people who need it most. Friends gathering just to humbly ask their Father, "What can we do for you?" And God (who has been so widely accused of remaining distant) interacting with, leading, teaching and loving on us in return. Remember, "Come near to God and he will come near to you."¹⁸

No doubt God is looking for those who will change their philosophy to match his own. He's happy to have optimizers who will change a thing or two about the way they do what they do. But what he's really searching for are people willing to discard all other pursuits and love him

¹⁸ James 4:8

with their whole heart and soul, individuals and communities who are sold out to God and his dream alone.

He's looking for Revolutionaries.



where do we go from here?



Heck if I know.

We don't have it all figured out. And I have a strong suspicion that God wants it that way. I think he's calling us to get together in small groups and seek him to know his desires and discover his plans for fulfilling them. That's where we're at in our own journey.

I don't have "Three Easy Steps to the Twelve Keys to the Nine Surefire Principles of Success." Shoot, I don't even really know where to begin.

But begin we must. Our journey has brought us to this point: We see that what we're doing isn't working, and that something must be done differently. We're getting a better idea of what God really wants and we're trying to build our lives around things that bring us closer to that.

And I'm confident of this: God doesn't give us a great dream to tease us. He's serious about his dream, and I know he'll show us what to do next. We're just thrilled to be in on it.





afterword



My friend Billy crossed on over to be with Jesus a couple years back, but just the other day I found a printout of an email conversation we'd had a few months before he left. What I read there took me by surprise.

Billy and I were in the habit of asking each other questions, prodding each other on to do great things for God and just stirring each other up in general. This email was a good sampling of such exchanges, but the last question he asked, and my response to that question, was deeply meaningful to me as I write this. Here's what it said:

Billy: "What would be the greatest, unique contribution you could imagine yourself giving to your generation?"

Lance: "An 'overview,' a re-focusing, a summary, a guiding idea of what God really wants, what's really important, and how to plan our lives to be in harmony with that. One that's simple and straightforward, and helps people to understand quickly the important things of God, and how to remain focused on the things that really count."

When I read this, I said, “Wow.” Out loud. Alone in an empty house.

I was shocked at how, even though I still don’t remember writing or thinking these things—even during the whole time I was writing this little booklet—God hadn’t forgotten those words. And he seems stubbornly unwilling to let this particular vision die.

This booklet is only a first step. It’s just a means to disturb us, to remind us again of that splinter in our minds.

