

This book will challenge all believers to conform to the image of Christ in their devotional life.

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We all have a place in the Body of Christ, and John Jackson's book *Finding Your Place in God's Plan* will help you find it. It is clear and easy to understand and a fantastic tool for an individual or for churches.

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Finding Your Place In God's Plan

WELCOME TO THE ADVENTURE!

God designed your spiritual life to be an adventure. Carefully, he fashioned a role for you within his great plan, a crucial place only you can fill, a special place where you alone perfectly fit. In fact, on a scale of 1 to 10, God created you to be a perfect 10 in his adventure.

When you discover where you perfectly fit, you'll also discover purpose, profound purpose—and your life will honor God. No longer will days be a series of disconnected activities that lack meaning and a primary focus. Instead, you'll live and breathe each moment aware of the *call* of God and the *plan* of God for you.

Every Christian has received a specific calling of God to ministry. So, do you know your place in God's plan? Most likely, your source of income is from a secular vocational setting. That means your primary call to ministry, your place, is within that secular setting. Your secondary call to ministry, then, is within a local church. You can view your job today—selling cars at the local dealership, processing loans at the bank, leading fitness classes at the gym—through the

lens of God's call for you. This concept will bring freedom to those who view their job as a *curse* when, in reality, it is a *calling*.

Perhaps like me, your primary call is in a full-time ministry setting. If so, you and I have a secondary call to the marketplace to influence our world for Christ—as we price cars at the dealership, as we transact business at the bank, as we exercise at the local gym. It's time we stop thinking that pastors get to serve God full-time, but those in a secular job can serve God only a few hours a week. *We all serve God full-time*. Whether we work in a marketplace assignment or in a local church assignment, both are calls to ministry.

First Steps Toward Adventure

This book is written to help you discover the specific gifts with which God has fitted you for service, the unique place God has for you in his exciting plan, and the practical resources God has provided for your use on this exciting journey. Galatians 5:13 lays the foundation for our first steps in this spiritual adventure: “You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love.” Called to be free. Do not use freedom to indulge the flesh. Use freedom to serve one another. But what exactly does freedom mean?

What if somehow you had complete financial freedom, beginning tomorrow morning? You might imagine taking it easy, just sauntering around in your pajamas. Maybe around ten o'clock you get dressed to go shop or play a round of golf. Then perhaps you eat out and see a movie. And when you get up the next morning, you do it all over again. You might think, *If I had total financial freedom, I would have the freedom every single day to do nothing at all.*

Sounds like freedom, right? There are, in fact, studies of people who've done exactly that. They reached retirement—finished an active, working career—and had a goal of doing nothing. Within

a few years, however, many of these people died because they felt lost in the freedom of days without structure. They misunderstood the ultimate purpose of freedom: to serve, to do good things, right things, rather than doing nothing.

On the other hand, those who reach retirement and live a vital, healthy, growing, dynamic life until their last breath are the ones who say, “OK, now that I no longer have to go to that job, I get to structure my life doing things that make a difference, things that give my life purpose and meaning—whether that involves traveling or spending time with grandchildren or volunteering in my community.”

I believe the freedom to do the right thing is a gift of God—and *the right thing is to serve God for his glory*. In right relationship with him, find your place of service. Come take part in a spiritual adventure that has the power to change your life. Let’s begin with a process of spiritual discovery, which involves several components.

Inquire of God

A primary component of spiritual discovery is your own individual search. As you read this book and experience the devotional materials, and as you spend time alone with God as well as in a group (see Discussion Guide at the end of this book), ask God some hard questions: “God, why did you make me the way I am? Why is it that I have these likes and dislikes? Why am I wired this way?”

Inquire of Others

A second component of spiritual discovery is your shared experiences with others. Friends can help you see that a gift you might desire is not the one you were given.

For example, I knew a young man who believed God had called him to be a nationally known country-gospel singer. He carried a guitar and wore a cowboy hat everywhere he went. The only

problem with his dream was that he couldn't sing. He did have a slight twang, but it couldn't cover up the fact that he sang every note flat. Finally, some friends said to him, "We love that you love God. We love that you want to serve him and that you're looking for a way to make an impact with your life. But, we don't think that being a country-gospel singer is God's plan for you." Because they knew him, they were able to redirect him toward goals that better fit his passion and abilities at that time. Good friends can recognize when we're working outside our giftedness.

Friends can also identify gifts within us, divinely given gifts of which we may be unaware. Friends can say to us, "You know, every time I watch you do that activity, I see God at work. Every time I hear you talk about this area, I sense the heartbeat of God in your life." The Discussion Guide at the end of this book provides material for such discussions in a group assembled for a spiritual-discovery adventure.

When we take time for both components—an individual search and a shared discovery—they become powerful mechanisms in our process of spiritual discovery.

Spiritual DNA

In addition to your individual search and shared experiences with others, also consider in this discovery process your "spiritual DNA," that is, the spiritual forces or hardwiring within you that shape your perceptions, feelings, and behaviors. Three dimensions of your spiritual DNA must be clearly identified: your passion, gifts, and style.

Passion

The first dimension of your spiritual DNA is *passion*—your burden, your call, your sense of "for this reason I was made." For instance, what would you feel if I talked to you about a food distribution

program and about hungry people, storage issues, and distribution needs? Could you identify with that need because you know what it's like to be hungry? Would you know what it's like to have that need met by a generous person? Would your heart beat faster? Would you think, *I can do that. I can take my organizational gifts and be involved there. I have a heart for hungry people.*

Or, when you hear about a food program, perhaps you know it's not the passion God has placed in your heart. You might be more attracted to a women's outreach ministry—getting women together to learn about God's love and to care for one another. Or you're drawn to children's ministry because you see the importance of early childhood development. Maybe it's easy for you to organize things, and you feel excited about going into a church office or library or resource center and transforming chaos into order.

God wants you to serve in areas you feel passionate about. If you currently serve in an area that is not your passion, you may be on the road to burnout. You can be in a church, love God, and want to serve him—yet still become spiritually exhausted. And many times, burnout happens because people feel *obligated, responsible*, and sometimes even *guilt-tripped* into serving in areas where they have no giftedness or passion.

We all need to be willing to do things we're not necessarily passionate about. But our primary area of service should be where we feel spiritually energized. Now, just because we serve in our area of passion does not mean we won't get tired or face obstacles and struggles. Not at all. It means we may come home at the end of our ministry experience and say, "I'm tired, I'm thrashed, but God showed up, and I love doing this!"

Gifts

The second dimension of your spiritual DNA is *gifts*. In this book, we expose you to about twenty gifts that are specifically detailed

in the Bible. My own view is that the gifts listed in the Bible are not exhaustive, but illustrative. That is, the gifts that are specifically listed aren't the only spiritual gifts that exist; there may be others as well. But those listed are helpful in presenting categories of gifts so that you can more easily find the type of gifts you've been given. So God gives you not only passion, but also specific gifts in order to serve him in your areas of passion.

Style

The third dimension of your spiritual DNA is personal *style*. This has to do with your unique personality, your distinctive way of thinking, speaking, moving, acting. Take, for example, Billy Graham. His *passion* was to see people come to know Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. God gave Billy Graham the *gift* of evangelism. His *style* of communicating the gospel included speaking in auditoriums and stadiums filled with people. Billy Graham saw amazing things happen when he used his unique style of communicating the good news of Jesus Christ, coupled with his passion for lost people and his gift of evangelism. Whenever he spoke to a crowd and gave an invitation for people to come to know Jesus Christ, hundreds would stream out of the crowd to receive Christ as Savior, usually in the first or second verse of the hymn "Just As I Am."

What about you? You might have the passion to see people come to know Christ, and you might have the spiritual gift of evangelism, yet never in your life share Christ in front of a large group of people. You are not Billy Graham. Your passion for lost people and your gift for evangelism will play out through your personal style. You may be a quiet, gentle type, and your ministry of evangelism is praying deep, long prayers for family members and friends and coworkers. Your gentle witness in their lives plants seeds that, over time, God nurtures into a harvest. You may share Billy Graham's passion. You

may share Billy Graham's gift. But because you are unique, your manner of serving God is also unique.

Psalm 37:4

Your passion, your gift, and your personal style are linked together so that God can bring about his plan and purposes in your life. Psalm 37:4–5 tells us to

Take delight in the Lord,
and he will give you the desires of your heart.

Commit your way to the Lord;
trust in him and he will do this.

Take time right now to write two words on a piece of paper. First, write the word *delight*; then draw a line connecting it with the second word, *desires*. Psalm 37:4 says, "Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart." I used to read that verse as saying, "If I delight myself in God, I can get anything I want." Over time as I've studied the words, I've come to believe that it is absolutely true—if I delight myself in God, he will give me the true desires of my heart.

But let me drill a bit further into these words. If I delight myself in God, he will make it so that the desires of my heart are completely fulfilled. If I learn to delight myself in God, *I will want what God wants* for my life. My highest aspiration will not be for my personal success, but instead to successfully fit into God's plan.

Now I ask you to write two other words. Write the word *commit*; then draw a line connecting it to the word *trust*. I believe that your commitment to spiritual growth is essential to fully experience God's plan for your life. For each section of this journey in *Finding Your Place in God's Plan*, an introductory lesson is followed by seven short reflections—landmarks—along the way. You can read one landmark each day to experience a six-week-long journey toward

finding your place in God's plan, or you can read the landmarks over a shorter or longer period—whatever suits your style and schedule. And, gather a group of people to join you in a spiritual-discovery adventure, using the small group materials provided in the back of this book. Together, commit to discover the spiritual gifts God has given and to find a passionate way to serve him.

During this spiritual adventure, I pray that you will encounter God and that God will reveal to you why he made you the way he has. I pray that you encounter relationships with others so they can confirm the gifts God has given you or help you to reorient, if you're on the wrong path. Either way, may God use all these experiences to help you determine your perfect place in his plan.

God wants to create a radical experience in the soil of your soul so you can live celebrating his glory and honor. This spiritual adventure is all about discovering God's place for you in his plan, and I believe the results will revolutionize your world.

LANDMARK 1: Discover Your Unique Place

For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. (Ephesians 2:10)

Once upon a time, there was a square peg who worked in a round hole. He did his job the best he could, but he felt as if he never quite lived up to expectations. Every day, a vague emptiness hung over him, though after a while, he got used to the feeling and didn't notice it much anymore.

Once upon a time, there was a child who moved to the beat of a different drummer. It wasn't that she was rebellious.

Her ears were just tuned to music no one around her could hear. And when that music stirred her soul, she would dance jubilantly, as joy raced through her, from her toes to her outstretched fingertips. Gracious people around her would smile and shake their heads, not knowing what to do with the child. Less gracious people would interrupt the dance with a disapproving glance and a heavy hand on her shoulder. They even turned their music louder so she could hear this “more acceptable” beat—so she could exchange her dance for their ordered march. In time, she learned to step to their cadence, but people often wondered why tears ran down her face as she marched. If anyone had asked, she would have told them: the tears were the music leaking out from her heart, the music she loved and could not—would not—silence.

Once upon a time, there was a bull tromping through a china shop. As you might expect, every way he turned, something broke. He didn’t mean to break things; after all, he had a sensitive heart. He was just so big and so muscular. So much power coursed through his frame that he simply couldn’t keep still. Sometimes he tried to sit calmly and enjoy the beauty of the delicate things around him. But eventually, the energy inside him would build until he could no longer contain it, and he would leap and run and barrel through the store, leaving a wake of broken china behind him.

Once upon a time, you and I . . .

Some of us feel stuck in a job, in a ministry, in a life that just doesn’t seem to fit us. We are square pegs stuck in a round hole. We’ve been there so long we’ve resigned ourselves to it. We’ve lost all hope that there might actually be a hole, the *right*-shaped hole, where *our* shape fits exactly.

Some of us feel lost in a world that neither understands nor seems to even want the gift we’ve been given. We move to the beat of a different drummer. Or we’d like to, if ever given the chance. In the meantime, we long to express the beauty and energy we feel inside.

Some of us feel the power of the person God made us to be. The reality of it, the energy of it, courses through our veins. But we must not be in the right place to release that power, because every time we try, we are like a bull in a china shop. Things get broken, people get hurt, and we leave pieces of our own heart behind us, strewn in a wake of jagged shards.

Sometimes, we wonder if something—or someone—could free us from this melancholy existence.

One day, the carpenter who made the square peg passed by. He saw the peg, uncomfortably stuck in a round hole. Gently, so not to break the peg, the carpenter tugged and pulled until it came free. The peg was a little scared to leave his familiar confines, but to his surprise, he also felt waves of excitement wash over him. The carpenter carried the square peg to a square hole, one made by the carpenter just for that peg. When the carpenter placed the square peg where he perfectly fit, the peg remembered hope, he discovered joy in his work, and he knew that he belonged.

It came to pass one day, as the child marched through her life, tears streaming down her face, that she met the drummer whose music she heard in her heart. When the drummer took her by the hand and danced with her, her jubilation returned. The drummer taught the girl how to keep her heart tuned to his music, how to dance strong in the midst of misunderstanding, how to dance with such winsome beauty that the scowls turned to smiles when the people heard the music themselves.

It also came to pass one day that a great lion called to the bull, through the china shop door, in a roar the bull could not refuse. The bull burst forth from the china shop and followed the lion, farther and farther, into the wild and open spaces where the bull's power and energy became forces of beauty. There, in the open spaces, he experienced freedom he'd never known. As the lion led the bull into the unexplored country, together they collected the bull's shattered dreams and transformed them into a beacon of light that penetrated the

deepest recesses of others' hearts, encouraging them toward greater achievements.

Though these did not live happily ever after, they did live with richness and joy and fulfillment they had previously only dreamed of. The square peg. The child. The bull.

And you and me, if we choose to.

If you find yourself—or part of yourself—in these stories, then keep reading. You just might meet the carpenter, the drummer, the lion—the one with the power to write an unexpectedly better plot to your story. You will never be the same.

LANDMARK 2: Something to Offer

*For you created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful,
I know that full well. (Psalm 139:13–14)*

I once watched an interview of Meryl Streep. Widely considered among today's best American film actresses, she has remarkable versatility and range and can completely disappear into a role.

During the interview, Streep spoke fondly of playing Marian the librarian, in her high school presentation of *The Music Man*. With some coaxing from the interviewer, Streep agreed to sing a snippet of “Goodnight, My Someone,” one of Marian's solos. What took place when Meryl Streep began to sing was amazing—she literally transformed before my eyes into Marian. It was remarkable to me that someone could instantaneously disappear into a role she had not played for thirty years.

In the world of theater, the world of sports, the world of business, the world of science—in any field—it's fascinating to watch those who excel at their craft. Excellence inspires us, encourages us, and calls us to reach for greater heights in our own lives.

Yes, excellence inspires us, unless that inspiration gets mired in a swamp of self-doubt and paralyzing comparison: *I'll never be that good. Why even try? I have nothing to offer.*

I don't know from whom in your life those voices might come. It could be that your parents planted those seeds in your psyche early on. Perhaps teachers or coaches or employers repeated those sentiments often enough that they echo unbidden through your mind. It might be that the enemy of your soul whispers discouragement to your heart in unguarded moments. Or maybe you've convinced yourself of your own inferiority, even in the face of encouragement from others.

Wherever those voices come from in your life, maybe it's time to listen to a new voice—to replace lying voices with the true one. What would it take for you to hear the truth loud and clear, while the lies fade to a whisper? What would it take for you to ditch the tendency to compare yourself with others who seem “better,” to instead embrace the chance to prepare for the unique opportunities God created *just for you*?

What would it be like to experience the change from “I have nothing to offer—I'm a bundle of blunders,” to “God created my inmost being; God knit me together in my mother's womb”?

What would it be like for “Why even try? I can't do it as well as they can” to transform into “I praise God because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; God's works are wonderful—including *me*.”

May you hear God's voice affirming your value, and may you believe him when he says you have something vitally important to offer the world. When God says he designed you to be a perfect 10 in his plan for your life, may you know it, as Psalm 139 says, “full well.”

LANDMARK 3: Passion Quest

What are you passionate about? Chocolate ice cream? The San Francisco Giants? The environment? Children's literacy? Movies?

Specifically, what are you passionate about in ministry? Think: enthusiasm. What lights up your eyes? What stirs your gut? What fans the fire of excitement in your soul? I'll bet something does. Finding that something is your job—no one can do it for you.

Maybe you don't think of yourself as passionate; maybe you're more the stable or calm type. Just because you don't jump for joy when excited, or fly off the handle when angry, doesn't mean you're not passionate—it just means you express your enthusiasm in a quiet way.

Maybe you've never stopped to consider what you might be passionate about in ministry. That doesn't mean you're without a passion—it just means you might need to dig for it.

Maybe passion scares you; you're afraid that if you express passion for something, you might open the door for a bigger disappointment.

Stop for a moment to reflect on the stories of Scripture. God called people and shaped their ministries based on their passion. Moses had a passion to free the oppressed. Paul had a passion to reach the Gentiles for Christ. Tabitha had a passion to help the poor (Acts 9:36). Epaphras had a passion for prayer (Colossians 4:12).

Discover your passion. Acknowledge it. Release your passion. In doing so, you may find your ministry—the place God has for you.

To get started in finding your passion, ask yourself some questions.

What Burdens Me?

Different situations and struggles affect each of us differently, in part because of our history and in part because of the unique burdens God grants to us.

For example, you might be burdened for families who've lost a child to miscarriage or death because you've also experienced such a loss. Or you may be burdened for those families simply because God laid it on your heart. Either way, that burden might indicate one passion of yours: coming alongside those suffering that kind of grief and loving them in Jesus' name.

What Do I Dream About?

"Someday, when I take early retirement from my job, it would be so wonderful to _____." How would you fill in that blank? If money were no object, what job would you do, even if you were never paid a salary? "If I had an extra day off each week, it would be so fun to _____."

How would you inspire, help, and love people? How would you serve? What difference would you make? Analyzing what you dream about will help you uncover the passions lurking in the deep crevices of your heart.

What Do I Feel Called to Do?

A calling to a particular profession, position, or opportunity is usually a blend of passion, gifts, and style, along with a concrete and clear sense from God's Spirit that this is what he has for you. Write on a piece of paper what you think God is calling you to do. It might be exactly what you're doing now and therefore wouldn't involve a significant job change or relocation. It might be something you've always felt was right, but you just never did it. Whatever it is, talk with a trusted Christian friend about your sense of calling and confirm it within an authentic biblical community. Then pursue it!

Your calling will probably fall strongly in line with your passions, whether you are aware of them or not.

Don't let your passion frighten you. God has shaped your heart to feel strongly and deeply about certain things, certain situations, and certain opportunities. Listen to your burdens, your dreams, and your calling; then move forward prayerfully.

LANDMARK 4: Who Am I, Really?

When was the last time you stopped to marvel at the variety God poured into the animal kingdom—not just the diversity of appearances but also the differences in behaviors? Elephants and buffalo roam in herds; the eagle soars alone. The cheetah races like the wind; the turtle plots its every step. Lions roar; nightingales sing. Ants work in structured diligence; dolphins leap in spontaneous bursts of joy.

When was the last time you marveled at the variety God poured into the human race—the diversity of appearances as well as differences in behaviors and personalities? Marvel. Don't shake your head in bewilderment. Don't complain. Don't wonder why everyone else isn't like you—or why you're not like everyone else.

Marvel. “I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well” (Psalm 139:14). You are fearfully and wonderfully made—body, soul, mind, and spirit. And personality, and temperament. What's more, who you are makes a difference! God made camels for the desert, whales for the ocean, falcons for the sky, and you for—well, what did he make you for? What is your natural habitat?

When considering a job offer, it's natural to compare the potential workplace with your temperament: Can I work well in a

place where the phone rings constantly? Can I function well in an environment so quiet you can hear a pin drop? Would I be happy in a workplace where people constantly talk or ask me questions? Would I curl up and die in a workplace where I see only two or three people all day?

With ministry, the personality factor is no different. Think about your personality and temperament. What types of activities give you energy? What types drain you dry? There are all kinds of resources available to investigate your particular personality type. But, let's just whet your appetite; look for "you" in the following pairs of traits.

People Oriented or Task Oriented

Those of us who are *people focused* tend to enjoy connections with other people. We're stimulated by discussions with others and by their energy. A steady stream of people and people-related issues keeps us interested and intrigued.

Those of us who are *task focused* tend to enjoy projects, with few interruptions by people. We view conversations more as tasks to accomplish something (friendship, decisions, research) rather than as a fun release. Completing tasks and reaching goals stimulate us.

Which trait best describes you? Try not to think exclusively, because people-oriented folks can be very productive, and task-oriented folks can have excellent people skills. But which area describes you most of the time?

Unstructured or Structured

Those of us who are more *unstructured* tend to enjoy spontaneity and freedom. Daily life is free flowing rather than regimented, and we prefer working on projects in whatever order appeals to us at the moment. We rarely spend time looking at a calendar. In fact, when

used, calendars are viewed as constricting and annoying necessities for living in today's world.

Those of us who are more *structured* tend to enjoy planning and are comfortable with a clearly laid out schedule. Daily routines are usually planned before they occur, borne out of efficiency and productivity goals. Entertainment and fun take place, but they are typically scheduled as any other slot of time. Calendars are critical tools, looked at several times a week—or day, or hour.

Which of the above traits best describes you? Try not to polarize the two traits: structured people can be very fun loving, and unstructured people can be on time for every appointment. But which more closely describes you? What insight does this knowledge give you into what types of ministry might fit you best?

Your God-given personality is a factor in finding a ministry that glorifies him. Don't ignore your personality when considering ways to serve God! He knitted you together, and he loves you! You are valuable.

Even if your personality traits do not reflect those typically respected in the culture around you, remember that you are a treasure—valued by the God who made you. Your fruitfulness will exponentially increase when you minister to others in a niche that fits your personality and temperament.

All of us have weak areas of our personalities we wish were stronger. Rather than focusing on those areas and working endlessly on them, focus on your areas of strength. Develop a team of people around you; include members with strengths in your areas of weakness.

Whether you are unstructured and people oriented, structured and task oriented, or some other combination, God made you and he loves you. Find out more about your unique temperament, and select serving opportunities that suit you well.

LANDMARK 5: The Experience Factor

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.
(Romans 8:28)

Jazz band. High school drama. Debate team. College newspaper staff. Part-time job at an ice cream store. Paper route. Law firm internship. Cheerleading squad. Wood shop. College degree. Summers as a ranch hand. Peace Corps. The Navy. Preschool teacher. Travel. Accounting class. Auto mechanic.

When you take a look at your past, the temptation may be to see a hodgepodge of unrelated, seemingly innocuous experiences. Look harder. Look for patterns. Look for skills. Look for experiences that, when woven together, have uniquely shaped you into the person you are today. Look for the way your life experiences have uniquely prepared you to influence your world.

Foot surgery. Violence. Getting fired. Heart attack. Cancer. Mom's sudden death. Violation. Bankruptcy. Storm damage. Libel. Betrayal. Car accident. Flunking out of school. Harassment.

In all things, God works for the good of those who love him. He wants to waste nothing—not innocuous things, not ordinary things, and certainly not extraordinarily painful things. When you look at the past, the temptation may be to see a desolate field pockmarked with craters and littered with shrapnel from the physical and emotional bombs that have gone off in your life. Look harder. Don't ignore or diminish the pain of the past; instead, acknowledge the God who longs to redeem it. God is in the resurrection business, and he can resurrect something golden out of life's dull grey, no matter how painful the past. The Spirit who raised Jesus from

the dead lives in you (Romans 8:11). Those brave enough to allow God to heal the wounds of their soul may find themselves uniquely equipped for effective ministry to others in pain: “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God” (2 Corinthians 1:3–4).

God can create something wonderful from your past experiences, even if they seem haphazard or unplanned. An old college degree you never used. An internship in your high school days. A hobby. A summer job. You never know how God might use your past experiences and skills training to affect his kingdom here on earth.

What you have done—and what has been done to you—can play significant roles in how you choose to serve God in the present. Begin praying now about how God might use your educational experiences, your painful experiences, your ministry experiences, and your spiritual experiences to influence the lives of others for the glory of God.

LANDMARK 6: The Desire Dilemma

*Trust in the Lord and do good;
dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture.
Take delight in the Lord,
and he will give you the desires of your heart.*

*Commit your way to the Lord;
trust in him and he will do this:*

*He will make your righteous reward shine like the dawn,
your vindication like the noonday sun. (Psalm 37:3–6)*

Below is a fictional conversation between God and a person struggling with the desires of the heart. The responses I think God might give this person are in italics. I hope this conversation helps you understand a biblical view of your life.

Lord Jesus,

I struggle believing that you will give me the desires of my heart, for two reasons: I don't trust my heart, and I don't trust yours.

Wow. That's hard to see in black and white. But it's true, and you know my heart anyway. So is it OK if we talk about it a bit?

My first question is this: Why would you give me the desires of my heart? My heart is a mess—evil, hopelessly fallen, tainted by sin on every level. How could any desire that comes from my heart be honorable or honored by you? You are perfect!

Have you forgotten that I'm redeeming your heart?

I guess I have. Sometimes I believe the enemy's lie that I'm still the person I used to be, that I'm thoroughly bad, that I'm beyond fixing—that my heart is irreparable. Even though you are alive in me, I still want things I shouldn't want, do things I shouldn't do, think things I shouldn't think. There are still wrong desires lurking in me that were planted in my heart by my own sin and by the Devil's deceit. When I imagine my heart, it sometimes seems so dark. I wish you could show me that some of the desires I have come from you. I wish you could give me a better picture.

The artichoke.

Really? The artichoke? Well, I guess that could work. Peel away the surface desires—the ones that only partly satisfy, the ones that, for all the work involved, yield only a tiny taste. Peel them all away, and get to the truest heart.

Is that it? If we could peel away the sin, the distractions, the surface wants of my heart—if we could peel all those away, would we come to the core? The part of my heart that, when redeemed, reflects what you created me to be? The part that holds the desires planted there by you—desires with pure motives that lead to your glory, others' good, and my fulfillment?

Yes.

But I assume you're the one who will be doing the peeling, right?

Right. I began a good work in you, and I intend to complete it. Remember Philippians 1:6?

But that leads to the second problem: I don't always trust your heart either. Sometimes I think your heart isn't good, that you don't really want what's best for me.

I know.

I'm sorry.

We'll peel those beliefs away, too, in time. I am faithful; I am true; I am trustworthy. I died to demonstrate how much I love you—how much I want what's best for you. You know that in your mind; over time, more and more of that knowledge will trickle into the broken places of your heart. Haven't you noticed that your heart isn't nearly as messy as it used to be?

You're right. Hope breaks through now and then—more often than it used to. I see you at work in

people's lives, in my life, and I think, "Yes! Yes, it can happen—my heart is redeemed and you have planted good desires in my heart!"

Lord Jesus, keep peeling away the desires that are neither worthy of me nor of you. Redeem my desires for your purposes. Redeem my heart so that it beats to the rhythm of yours. Teach me to trust and delight in you. I look forward to seeing you fulfill the truest desires of my heart.

Amen.

LANDMARK 7: What If?

Finding your place in life and ministry is an exciting prospect. But sometimes the excitement comes to a halt by some persistent internal barrier. Sometimes you have to hurdle formidable mental and emotional obstacles to embrace your place in life and ministry with any measure of enthusiasm.

So, before we go any further, let's look at four barriers that might be standing in your path. Examine all of them to determine if any are present in your mind or heart. With God's help, resolve to jettison any barrier you find and press on toward your calling.

The People Barrier

People are messy. Even at church, people are messy. They have issues. People can be territorial or immature or posers (honoring God with their lips but not their hearts). So, what happens when you *find your place* to serve and, instead of the balloons and confetti you

were hoping for, instead of a crowd celebrating you fulfilling God's purpose in your life, you get no credit and grow discouraged?

It's sad, but true: sometimes things go horribly wrong. You are burned by those you serve, by co-laborers, by church leaders or pastors. So you're tempted to quit. Or you do quit, and you're now reluctant to try again.

Think about this for a minute. Yes, you have been hurt. But have you ever considered that quitting because of your hurt is a subtle form of revenge? No, you're not inflicting something harsh on the people who hurt you, but you are withholding something good from those people and even from others who just happen to be part of the same organization. So, whom are you trying to punish?

What if you actually punish yourself by holding back—keeping yourself from what you were made to do? What if you actually punish the people who would respond and grow because of your gifts? What if the best way to fight the evil and sin of the world is not by running from it, but by continuing to do good in the face of it (Romans 12:17–21)?

The Knowledge Barrier

Maybe you would love to find your place in life and ministry, but you just don't know how. You may even fear in your heart of hearts that you are too dense to learn. Perhaps it feels as if all this spiritual stuff is written in a language you've never studied.

Don't worry. God has a habit of choosing all kinds of people—even people who have a lot to learn—to accomplish his purposes in the world (1 Corinthians 1:26–31). What if your lack of knowledge is more of a barrier for you than for God? What if God stands ready to give you the wisdom you need, if only you will ask him for it (James 1:5)?

Go ahead. Ask him. And keep reading. Keep learning. Then see what happens.

The Schedule Barrier

This barrier is for all who believe that finding their place in life and ministry is just another item on an already-too-long to-do list. "Find my place in life and ministry!" you say. "Ha! I'd be happy just to find my living room floor." (Or the surface of my desk, the water bill, the time for lunch. You fill in the blank.)

No doubt about it. Life in our time and culture is crammed full-to-bursting with activity. And if finding your place in life and ministry sounds like yet another activity, it's likely to also sound oppressive and unappealing. You might internally argue with verses such as the one where Jesus said, "My yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:30).

Take a moment to think about this: What if finding your place in life and ministry doesn't mean adding one more thing to your schedule? What if it means streamlining it, peeling away things that don't match up with your heart and calling? What if it means infusing your schedule with purpose and meaning that energize rather than deplete you? What if . . . ?

Would you be willing to open a little space in your heart and your schedule to explore these "What ifs?"

The Desire Barrier

If you listen to all the hoopla about finding your place in life and ministry, perhaps it just doesn't sound like something you want to do. You see others around you getting excited, but your heart remains unstirred by the prospect.

So many things can dampen desire: fatigue, sin, disappointment. All the barriers we've talked about can work over time to deaden your heart to its core longings for God and for the work he has prepared for you.

But what if the God who specializes in resurrections could conquer the deadness in your heart and raise that desire to life again

in you? What if he would “give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you”? What if he would “remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh” (Ezekiel 36:26)?

Would you let him?