

INTRODUCTION

LOCATING YOUR STARTING POINT

What does it benefit you to know how beautiful a creature a human is if you ignore humanity's purpose, which is clearly to worship God in order to live eternally?

—Martin Luther

For everything, absolutely everything, above and below, visible and invisible . . . *everything* got started in [Christ] and finds its purpose in him.

—Colossians 1:16, THE MESSAGE

First there was Saul. And then there was Paul. I like the fact that the apostle Paul went by another name before he began his mission to the Gentiles. That makes it easy to distinguish between the “before” and “after”—not that the two didn't have a lot in common. Both acted with a singular devotion to the God of Israel. Both knew

scripture backward and forward. And both sought purpose in their daily lives.

But Saul the Pharisee persecuted Christ-followers and was present at the stoning of one of Jesus' original disciples. Paul the Apostle, a dynamic communicator, advanced the cause of Christ. What happened? How did Saul become Paul?

The pivot point lies on the road to Damascus from Jerusalem. As Saul travels on it, the startling appearance of light from heaven halts him. Speaking directly to Saul, Jesus makes himself clear: *You need to choose another way.* Talk about an attention getter!

At this moment, the Saul-to-Paul transformation begins. But now comes the hard part. Paul has to figure out which way.

Isn't that the predicament we all face? As Christians, we yearn to live out God's purpose for our lives, but how do we know for certain which way to go?

This book aims to help you understand God's direction for your life. Your guide for this journey will be Paul, the globe-trotting hero of early church history. Along the way you'll gain more than an introductory insight into the background, education, experiences, writing, and theology of this man who changed the world.

Yet more than the *whats* of his life, we'll examine the *whys*. We won't simply look at where he went and what he said. We want to know how Paul got where he did. What determined his direction, and, more importantly, what determined his *changes* in direction? Did Paul have a pipeline to God that average people like you and me don't have? Or does Paul have something to teach us about what it means to discern God's guidance and direction for our lives? This study will answer those questions.

A lot of books about Paul and about the subject of finding purpose flood the market. There's also no end to life coaches, secular psychologists, and social commentators weighing in on this matter. But this book approaches the topic solely from a faith perspective.

That perspective also helps us understand what separated Saul from Paul. Remember that both sought purpose in their lives. But only Paul sought God's purpose as made manifest in Jesus Christ. The difference lay in the direction.

Saul's purpose grew out of intellect and knowledge of scripture, his certainty of what God wanted from him and, above all, of following the letter of religious law. Perhaps he believed his obedience would earn him God's love and acceptance. But let's face it: When you're persecuting people in the name of God, something is amiss. I'd like to think that part of Saul evidenced an openness to trying a different direction by the time Christ appeared.

Once transformed, Paul turned Saul's belief system upside down. Love eclipsed the law. God's acceptance wasn't the goal—it was the starting point! Knowing God's love made manifest in Jesus Christ became the primary motivating force of Paul's life, as it is intended to be for all of us.

Paul not only put his faith in Jesus Christ, but he also believed Christ put his faith in him—again, as Christ does in all of us. This is key: From this reciprocal faith flows the wellspring for doing good, being useful, and achieving a sense of fulfillment. In other words, for purpose.

Paul didn't arrive at this realization in a day, a month, or even a year. In fact, he spent several years discerning this new understanding of faith. (We'll explore the significance of this phase of his life in chapter 1.) When Paul's first call finally came, he set off to serve a growing Christian congregation in Antioch of Syria. If you believe God has a sense of irony, then this story won't let you down: Among the members of this church reside some of the very Christ-followers whom Paul had persecuted in his former life. What could have gone terribly wrong instead turned into an expression of Christ's love that would be seared on Paul's heart. The Christians of Antioch embraced him as a leader, and he experienced the warmth of their fellowship.

Here we evidence the power of community that plays a crucial role in Paul's transformation. Christianity doesn't operate in a vacuum. It flourishes when we share God's love with one another, which ignites further transformation in ourselves and in others.

The transforming power of community is not Paul's story alone. John Wesley, the father of Methodism, shares a similar one.¹ By the time Wesley boarded a ship in 1735 to come to America, he was an up-and-coming preacher steeped in religious study who spread the gospel of personal holiness and righteousness. No doubt he intended to live out God's purpose. Yet an experience on that voyage led him to acknowledge a lack in his own faith.

When a storm raged on the Atlantic one night, Wesley's English companions screamed and cowered; surely Wesley felt fearful himself. But he marveled at a group of German Christians called Moravians who worshiped and calmly sang hymns while the storm raged. What accounted for their composure? One Moravian explained to Wesley that the group was "not afraid to die"—strange words to a man who believed he had to be sanctified, that he had to live a holy life, before God would accept him.²

Like Paul's moment of reckoning on the road to Damascus, the episode began a lengthy period of discernment for Wesley that led him to learn more from the Moravians. Upon his arrival in Georgia, he sought out a Moravian pastor who posed the question: "Do you know Jesus Christ?"

"I paused," Wesley wrote in his journal, recounting the conversation, "and said, 'I know He is the Saviour of the world.' 'True,' replied he, 'but do you know He has saved you?'"

Wesley wrestled with this question even as he struggled to bring people to Christ. Two years later he departed Georgia, depressed and defeated. "I who went to America to convert others," he wrote, "was never myself converted to God."³ Imagine his desperation at this

point. How many times do you think he was driven to his knees to pray, in so many words, Which way, Lord?

Back in London Wesley accepted an invitation one evening from the Moravians to attend a religious meeting. It was there, while listening to Martin Luther's preface to Romans, that Wesley felt his heart "strangely warmed."⁴ *God touched his heart!* I'd call that another attention getter.

Wesley realized he didn't have to *earn* God's acceptance. He'd found the starting point to a new, God-inspired direction. His purpose grew from God's love, and he lived out that purpose by taking the message of this boundless love to his parishioners. Eventually, Wesleyan theology would spread throughout the world.

I find it hard to believe that either the apostle Paul or John Wesley would have found his purpose without the influence of strong faith communities, which makes their stories my story too.

I grew up in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, and was baptized as an infant in a Methodist church. My mother, a registered nurse, often drew Sunday shifts so my family grew out of the habit of attending church by the time I got to elementary school.

Fifth grade was a tough year for me. My teacher assigned me to a desk between two troublemakers, and she unfairly lumped us all together in her mind. My confidence disappeared. My grades took a nosedive. I felt lost. My parents kept asking me what was wrong, but my answers all sounded like excuses.

Then in sixth grade, my family moved to another neighborhood, and I changed schools. Suddenly, I realized I'd been given a new chance to figure out who I was and who I wanted to be. A neighbor invited me to a Boy Scout meeting that met in the basement of a Methodist church. Since most of the scouts were active in the church, I soon followed. This was my first real exposure to the gospel—in the midst of a church community that made me feel like family.

But don't think I was now on the fast track to becoming a preacher. No way. I wanted to be a lawyer. I'd made a pact with my best friend to be partners in our own firm one day. My Plan B was to be a basketball star.

In ninth grade, I took a career test that supposedly identified occupations that lined up with my strengths. I can't remember my top option, but I'll never forget what I saw at the very bottom: minister. I certainly agreed with that, though I was disappointed by the occupation ranked second to last: attorney. But truth be told, I was just fourteen and in no great hurry to figure out what to do with the rest of my life.

Around the same time, I started working on my God and Country Award in scouting. One requirement involved shadowing my pastor. I went with him on visits to hospitals and calling on members in their homes. I remember how energized I felt when I finished those visits. Yet that feeling didn't come close to comparing to the one I got from another assignment: speaking in church!

All I had to do was read scripture one Sunday morning. I felt so nervous I had to take medication. Yet when I stood to speak, all fear disappeared. I read with ease. When I sat down, my friend, he paid me the highest compliment, "Hey, you didn't stink."

The scripture reading led to many more experiences of leading and speaking in church. By now my family had joined me in worship, and I remember our next-door neighbor saying to my mother as we walked out of church, "That son of yours is going to make a preacher someday."

Overhearing the remark, all I could think was, *Yeah . . . don't bet on it.*

But I couldn't deny that something had been lodged inside of me. Over time, I would come to understand this lodging as God's call. Many more experiences confirmed this direction: youth leadership roles, teaching opportunities, leadership in weekend spiritual

retreats. Where did I find the confidence to pursue these opportunities? I know without a doubt it came from my growing understanding of the concept that sits at the foundation of faith: God loves me. How powerful to realize that you have worth in God's eyes!

I talked with my pastor to gain an understanding of what was happening to me and what I was feeling. He counseled me about what it means to be called and offered this magnificent advice: "If you pursue your call," he said, "the feeling will either grow stronger or weaker, and that is how you will know. If you can't do anything besides ordained ministry and be happy, then for God's sake, do it!"

Sitting on a pew in the empty sanctuary, we prayed that night, and I began a journey I still travel today. This call continues to take me down paths I could have never predicted. I've wished some moments could last forever as I've seen people come to faith, be renewed in faith, and experience transformation and hope. But not every step is one I've wanted to take. At times I've resented this sense of call that places its demands on me. Still I journey on, regularly asking, "God, am I on the right path? Am I going the way you want? Please, Lord, lead me."

Yes, I still struggle to know if everything I'm doing aligns with God's purpose for me. But I feel certain that God's love never fails to guide me. I also carry with me a gratitude for the Methodist church that embraced that teenage boy. Without this community, I don't know how I would have found my purpose.

I'm sharing my story so you can see how it has shaped my understanding of what it means to live with purpose. But let me state the obvious: You don't have to be a minister to have a God-given purpose! Far from it. The God I love has provided us with bountiful ways to express that divine love. God has offered us the gift of fellowship to help us in our quest for fulfillment.

What's your story, and where will it take you?

I hope this book will help you, whatever your stage in life, to discern God's leading and learn how to follow. I also hope you will use this book as part of a small-group fellowship that can encourage you along the way. A group experience also provides the opportunity to watch this study's videos, which will transport you to the actual places where Paul lived out his call.

In the chapters ahead you will explore your gifts, develop your ability to discern God's signals, respond to times when you can't live out your purpose the way you want, learn how to endure hardships and doubts, and find ways to persevere with hope and faith. Each chapter closes with a Servant Spotlight, personal testimony from an individual who—despite detours, adversity, and doubt—had the tenacity and faith to follow the guidance of a loving God.

As we begin, I invite you to pray this prayer:

Lord, help me remember that my life is a gift from you. One day I will give it back. Between now and then I want my living to matter and my days to have meaning. I believe you want me to have purpose and fulfillment, and I am open to the ways you can provide it. Show me the way, Lord. Amen.

God's love, unearned and unbound, is your starting point. Now let the journey begin.