

Contents

Foreword	13
Acknowledgments	17
Introduction: Living the Life I Never Dreamed	21
1. That Defining Moment	27
2. Loving and Serving from a Healed Heart	43
3. Creating White Space, Crafting Purpose	53
4. Heaven over My Shoulder	71
5. A Story Worth Telling	83
6. All the World	101
7. Wrestling to Give	121
8. Welcoming the Vulnerable Ones	141
9. Family Matters	165
10. The Work You're Meant to Do	179
11. On Earth as in Heaven	195
Conclusion: A Daily God	215
Notes	221

That Defining Moment

Growing up I knew exactly what I wanted in life. I wanted to get married and live in the small Northern California town I was being raised in. I wanted kids. I wanted to be a teacher so I could be home in the afternoon, enjoy regular family dinners around the table, and spend summers splashing in snow-fed Lake Siskiyou.

Back then, I'd float on my back on hot summer days, kicking softly as I gazed at the wide, blue sky, and dream about my future husband, future kids, and future students. I believed my life's purpose was to be a dedicated wife and mom, to raise well-behaved children, and to be an inspiring teacher. I had a dream and purpose in mind, but things didn't turn out like I'd expected.

When I was seventeen and a high school senior, I discovered I was pregnant—again. The first time I'd had an abortion, and I felt enormous guilt, regret, and shame as a result.¹ I knew abortion wasn't the answer and decided to keep my baby this time. I dropped out of school because I couldn't hide what I'd done, and because I didn't

want to see my baby's father with his new girlfriend. I walked away from cheerleading and my friends. I sank into depression and slept most days. I didn't want to think about the future. I didn't want to picture my life as a single mom. Deep down I had no hope.

I had pretty much given up on myself. But there were a few women who loved me and refused to give up on me. These women, who were in my mother's and grandmother's Bible study, prayed for me and invited me to study the Bible with them. They even gave me a baby shower. I felt unworthy of their love and smiles, but their love and warmth were a soothing balm to my soul.

One day, when I was six months along, I woke up in my usual miserable state, but I didn't stay that way. Instead of thinking about how I'd messed up my life, I started thinking about those women and their love for me. *If they love me despite what I've done, maybe God does too*, I thought. I dared to hope that He did.

I grew up in church, and I believed in God, but in my teen years I did my own thing. I didn't want to think too hard about Him or how I was living. I had a huge hole in my heart, and I sought love in all the wrong places. But the boys I gave myself to hurt me again and again, and soon I built a wall of bricks around my heart, guarding my bruised and tender emotions from further hurt. The love of those women opened a small crack in that wall, one just wide enough for a single shaft of light to flood my heart. The love of ordinary women opened me up to the love of a not-so-ordinary God.

That morning I wrapped my arms around my pregnant body and prayed, *God, I screwed up this time. If You can do anything with my life, please do.* (Yes, it was a very eloquent prayer.) At that moment God's light filled my heart, and love poured in. I was

different—alive and hopeful—and I dedicated myself to living for God. I'd tried traveling down my own path—seeking to gratify my body and heart—and it had brought me pain and heartache. Now, I was ready to discover God's purpose for me. I wanted to do things His way. My new dream was to live as God wanted me to: as a good and faithful daughter.

From that moment of humility, desperation, and need, I trusted God with my future. His hopes and dreams for me were surely better than the life I'd been living! I started praying for a husband, and two weeks after my son Cory was born, God brought me John, an amazing man who loved me, and loved my son, but mostly loved the Lord. We married and a few years later, John and I had two more kids. I was thankful for the new life God had given me, and that the hurting, downcast woman I used to be was a thing of the past.

God had transformed my life, and I focused on doing all I could to serve Him. I was determined to be the perfect wife and mom and that we would be the perfect Christian family. We attended church services on Sundays and midweek. We joined a small group and surrounded ourselves with Christian friends. I volunteered as a children's Sunday school teacher and attended Bible studies. If such a thing as a Christian Service Award existed, I would have been at the top of the list of nominees.

But in time I became aware of an emptiness inside me. If my purpose was to be a good and faithful child of God, why did I feel a spiritual void? I was doing all the right things, but I still felt woefully unfulfilled. I was working so hard to be good, but I never felt good enough.

God, isn't there more to the Christian life than this? I prayed.

MISSING THE MARK

Maybe you're like me. Maybe you thank God for all He has rescued you from (mainly yourself and your destructive choices), and you want to do everything you can to serve Him. But maybe, also like me, it just doesn't seem to be enough.

"I know I'm doing what God has called me to do, but I feel like I'm missing the intimacy of my relationship with Him," my friend Kimberly confessed. "I feel like I'm so busy doing what is right, that I'm missing a deeper connection."

Another friend, Martha, understands Kimberly's frustration. "I remember asking God how I was supposed to keep up with all the good things I was doing for Him for the many years to come. That was the point I realized He didn't need me to do the things I considered to be good. If I allow my 'well doing' to consume me and forget why I do it or for whom I am working, I am working in vain. God needs my heart more than my deeds."

And then there are those who've done it all and are disoriented and discontent with their new season of life. My friend Emma Mae feels this way. She used to volunteer with me at church and for vacation Bible school. She could be counted on—often the first to be called on to volunteer—but now her health keeps her from doing all she used to do. On top of that, her kids are grown and she is a widow. Emma Mae told me, "I feel useless. Not needed anymore."

Can you relate? Do you think:

- *I'm doing all I know to do for God, but I feel as if I'm missing Him.*

- *I can't keep up this pace. Everything feels empty, meaningless.*
- *I can't do all I used to do. I feel useless, not needed anymore.*

I suspect many of us feel unfulfilled in our Christian walk. We are simply surviving, sensing we are missing out on God's big plan. We have an inkling that He has more for us, but we don't know how to get from where we are to "there." We wonder if we'll ever realize our potential, hoping God has more for us than this.

Because we feel empty and see our efforts as meaningless, we work harder to fill the hole deep inside us. We believe if we do certain things and live a certain way, we'll feel happy and fulfilled as a follower of God. So we join another Bible study or volunteer for one more ministry, hoping it will provide the answer our souls have been longing for. We strive, believing that if we do all the right things we'll eventually get what we want: peace, fulfillment, and a close relationship with God. We take notes during the pastor's sermon, but then wake up Monday morning to the same routine. We read Christian living books and pore over Sunday school lessons to increase our knowledge about God, but that knowledge doesn't translate into actionable steps in our everyday lives.

We do all we know to do, but our hearts still cry out: *You're missing the mark.*

It's the last thing we want to hear, especially if we've been striving and serving. After all, if Christian service doesn't fulfill us, what will?

Here's the thing: working *for* God never gives us the depth of connection we desire, no matter how noble our efforts. Consequently,

we either question God or believe we're doing something wrong (while everyone else is getting it right, of course). So we try even harder. But that never makes things better. If anything it just makes us more tired.

In our day and age, many Western Christians have Bible knowledge, but don't understand how to translate that knowledge into a true connection with Jesus. We go to Bible study and do the homework, yet we feel jealous and a bit cynical when we see God using other people and not us. Many of us are wandering through life, wondering if what we're doing matters.

TIME TO WALK IT OUT

Everything changed in my life when I stopped focusing on my own dreams and purposes, and instead concentrated on walking out God's dreams and purposes for my life. That may sound like an elusive goal. You may wonder how you can even know God's purposes for you in the first place, but they are easier to discover than you might think.

It comes down to this: Rather than trying to determine what study we should join, book we should read, or ministry we should get involved with, we should instead ask God to break our hearts with the things that break His. Rather than just reading God's Word for personal and group study, we should actually *do* what it says—even the really hard things. This is where we find our joy, our purpose. Not by coming up with our own ideas about how we are to live as God's daughters, but by taking faith steps daily, believing that as we seek God's face He'll invite us to join Him in His work. Not by trying to decipher the future He has for us, but instead by trusting

that even though the path doesn't make sense now, we'll look back over the years and realize He's been directing us all along.

These are all lessons I've learned over the last twenty-eight years as a Christian. I've allowed God to break my heart and change my dreams and purposes so they align with the clear directives in His Word. I've learned to have faith that God's Word will not lead me astray. I've learned to be okay with not knowing the big picture and to trust Him with every step of faith.

What God has accomplished through me always amazes people, and they want to know how I do it all. First, I don't do it all. I've just committed to reading God's Word and walking it out. Second, when I take these steps to walk out God's Word, He provides me with all I need to fulfill His call. Whether you realize it or not, God intended for us to do what the Bible says: take the gospel into all the world, care for the vulnerable, help the needy, tend to our most important relationships. These are guideposts that point us down the path of true living and eternal life.

"I used to ask God to help me," said Hudson Taylor, humble missionary and founder of the China Inland Mission. "Then I asked if I might help Him. I ended up by asking Him to do His work through me."² These words resonate with me, because God took me on the same journey from independence to dependence.

THE TURNING POINT

In everyone's story, there comes a defining moment when life takes a turn. I didn't see the twist coming, and looking back it almost seems too ordinary an event to be considered "the moment." But

as I ponder all that has happened since then, I have no doubt that everything changed one quiet, early morning in 1999—the morning I said yes to what I knew God was asking me to do.

Earlier that year I had faced one of the hardest losses of my life. My eighty-three-year-old grandfather had lost his battle with cancer. I had been his caregiver after he and my grandmother moved into our home. I'd see the gates of death, but I'd also witnessed what the Bible means in Psalm 116:15: "Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his faithful servants." I'll share more about this later.

After his death my life had returned to normal, or so I thought. I was twenty-eight years old, married, a mother of three, and had just signed a book contract. In the few years before this point, I had attended a Bible study for women who'd had abortions and faced the pain and shame of my past. Now once a week I was teaching a post-abortion Bible study and seeing women from all walks of life find freedom in Christ. Freedom from regret. Freedom from self-loathing. Freedom from hiding and the feeling that God could never forgive them or use them.

In this window of my life, when I'd just tasted heaven and was walking with a new confidence as a beloved daughter of God, my pastor approached me.

"Tricia, I feel God asking me to help start a crisis pregnancy center in our town, and knowing your heart and story I want to know if you can help," he said.

Gulp.

I told Pastor Daniel I'd pray about it, knowing full well that answer was a delay tactic. I had no intention of doing any such thing. My life was full. I was homeschooling our kids, writing every

morning before the rest of the family woke up, and leading a Bible study. My life had reached a wonderful balance of service to my church, to my community, and to my family. I couldn't envision taking on one more thing.

Yet the next morning as I pulled out my Bible to do my devotions, something stirred in my heart. Looking back, I realize the Holy Spirit was reminding me that I actually needed to *pray* about Pastor Daniel's request. I'm a little embarrassed now but my prayer went something like this: *Dear God, I thank You for what You've done with my life. I told Pastor Daniel that I'd pray about this crisis pregnancy center, but please show me how to tell him that I don't have time for that. I'm homeschooling my kids and teaching them about You. I'm writing articles and now a book, and my words are going around the world, teaching others about You. So this is something I just can't do ...*

Immediately a thought entered my mind that I knew wasn't my own: *What about the young women who feel just like you did—scared and uncertain of where to turn? Don't you remember the women who reached out to share love with you during your darkest time? Where would you be without them? And what are you going to do about the young women who need love and truth right within your own community? How are you going to help them as you were helped?*

Double gulp.

I knew what God was asking me to do. He had a dream and a purpose for me. Both were greater than anything I had ever imagined. And that dream and purpose wasn't just about what He wanted for *me* but also about what He wanted for the *women in my community*.

Immediately two verses came to mind, ones I'd memorized as a child: "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these

things will be given to you as well” (Matt. 6:33). And, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:39).

These are two of the simplest of God’s directives in the Bible, yet at that moment I knew following them would change everything. Deep in my heart I felt God saying that if I sought Him and loved others, He’d handle the details. But to do what He was asking required a huge departure from the status quo.

If I helped start a crisis pregnancy center, I’d be stepping into an unfamiliar ministry and walking into a leadership role when the only job I’d ever held outside the home was as a McDonald’s cashier. I felt completely unqualified and woefully unprepared. It came down to this: Did I believe God’s Word enough to do what it said? Did I trust God to keep His promises?

Ephesians 3:16 says, “I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources he will empower you with inner strength through his Spirit” (NLT). And that was my prayer too. I had to trust that if I did what God was asking, He would provide from His unlimited resources everything I needed, starting with inner strength.

In the days to come I wished I hadn’t agreed to pray about Pastor Daniel’s request, because it became clear that God wanted me to help start the center. The strength of my desire to follow His directives to *seek Him* and *love others* was at .01 percent, but the request was unmistakable.

The moment I chose to obey is the defining moment of my life.

People sometimes ask, “Why would God lead you in a new direction when you haven’t obeyed the requests He’s already given you?” Or as James 1:22 says, “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.” Obedience is always the first

step to walking out God's directives. There is a difference, you see, between knowing what God's Word says and actually doing it. For me that difference came down to calling my pastor and telling him I was in. And then, in the days to come, taking one step after another and doing the work.

God wanted to use me, and the freedom I'd found in Him, to impact others. I was learning an important truth: our faith journey isn't about *our* dreams and ideas for how we can serve God, but about *His* dreams, plans, and desires for us, our community, and our world.

NOT JUST ABOUT US

Sometimes in the busyness of our Christian walk we forget that our ministry is not all about us and what we have to offer God. Many of us think it's up to us to figure out God's purposes for us. So we take personality inventories and spiritual gifts tests to identify our gifts and strengths, and to determine what kind of service matches our natural bent. God may use such things. The problem comes when we learn what we're good at and think that's all God will call us to do. And that's just not the case. Many people in history have shied away from God's call at first. Many biblical people too. Moses didn't think he could approach Pharaoh and request his people's freedom, but God called him to it anyway. Gideon and Deborah also shied away from God's call at first. At least I'm in good company.

Becoming a freelance author and a homeschooling mom came naturally to me because I write well and have a teacher's heart. They fit my bent. So did leading Bible studies. But the role of pregnancy

center director did not play to my strengths. When I started the center, I felt far out of my comfort zone. I did things I had never done before: set agendas for meetings, recruited volunteers, and created and oversaw a budget. I planned training sessions and communicated with national organizations. I sat face-to-face with young moms in crisis and offered advice and hope in the midst of their fears. These tasks in no way lined up with what I felt were my spiritual gifts. Yet God had called me to do them. He knew there were women in my community who needed answers, help, and hope.

Most days in this role I felt unprepared and unsure. So, I sought advice from people I respected and trusted. I also prayed a lot. In the areas I felt weak, God strengthened me. In the areas I needed guidance and wisdom, He brought godly people who offered both. As I faced overwhelming challenges, God strengthened my skills and increased my faith. I wasn't a pregnancy center director because I'd dreamed about it and prepared for it, but because God needed me in that role for that season. God grew me through the ministry, and He grew the ministry through me.

After a few years, God brought another woman to take my place, and I was able to hand over a healthy, thriving organization and step down into the less-demanding volunteer role of teen mom support group coordinator.

Have you fallen into the trap, as so many other Christ-followers have, of believing God only calls us to do things that naturally match our personalities and spiritual gifts? Sometimes the things God asks us to do will seem like an easy fit, but other times they'll seem the opposite of what is most comfortable for us to do. And that's okay, because maybe the call has just as much to do with growing you into

the person God wants you to be as it does about the specific work He wants you to accomplish.

Have you ever hesitated to step out and follow God in a certain area because it didn't seem like a perfect fit? When was the last time you read God's Word and promised yourself, "I'm going to do exactly what it says, no matter the cost"—and then followed through?

It seems to me that God does His best work through ill-fitted yet determined servants who willingly follow His directives. He used twelve men from humble, unexpected backgrounds to launch a movement that changed the world. He selected David, a shepherd boy, to become a king. He chose an unwed teenager to birth a Savior. And because each of those ordinary followers dared to trust God, God accomplished extraordinary things through them.

As God's children we can choose to follow Him or not. We are free to stay still, stay comfortable, and stay put. But our "freedom" may be our biggest weight, holding us back. "It is absolutely clear that God has called you to a free life," we read in Galatians 5:13–15. "Just make sure that you don't use this freedom as an excuse to do whatever you want to do and destroy your freedom. Rather, use your freedom to serve one another in love; that's how freedom grows. For everything we know about God's Word is summed up in a single sentence: Love others as you love yourself. That's an act of true freedom" (THE MESSAGE).

I could have refused to follow God's directive and gone on to live a simple, happy life. Yet what would it have cost me in my relationship with Jesus? A lot. And what would it have cost my community? I'm glad I don't have to find out. One step of obedience changed everything, including me.

WHEN WE SAY YES

When God asks us to step out in obedience, He doesn't ask us to journey alone. We are just a small part of His plan. He has been preparing the hearts of others too. When I stepped out, I discovered dozens of other men and women who wanted to make a difference in our community but didn't know how. Sometimes God just needs us to take the first step to get the ball rolling. And that's exactly how He used me.

Because I said yes, I experienced God growing Hope Pregnancy Center into a viable community resource that has helped and transformed lives. After seeing what God accomplished with my feeble efforts, it became easier to say yes the next time I felt His call. And the next. And the next.

Along the way, I discovered a new dream and purpose—to simply read God's Word, do what it says, and follow Jesus to places He was already at work in the world. Purpose, I've discovered, isn't something we need to figure out ahead of time. Instead it is something we often recognize in hindsight, as we follow Jesus one step at a time.

Now when I head to a lake on summer days and float on my back (which I still like to do) my mind doesn't wander and wonder what God has in store for me. Instead, I marvel at what God's already done. And I find joy in realizing His purposes for my future will be revealed as I take the next step.

FOR REFLECTION

1. When you were growing up, what were your dreams for your future? How would you have described your purpose in life? When in your life did it seem as if those dreams and purposes weren't going to come true?
2. Have you ever been disillusioned when it came to your dreams and purposes for your Christian walk? When have you felt as though you were doing everything for God but really missed connection with Him?
3. In what ways have you stepped out and followed God in obedience in the past? How did He show up as you did those things?
4. How do you think your life would change if you asked God to break your heart and change your dreams and purposes to encompass His clear directives in His Word?

ACTION STEPS

1. Write one thing you've felt God calling you to do but you've been afraid or unwilling to do because it's out of your comfort zone. What is God saying to you about it, even now?

2. Think about your story and how you discovered Christ's saving grace. Who in your community would be encouraged to hear that story? Set a time when you can share it with that person or group.

3. Think back and marvel over areas where God has shown up in your life. Thank Him for the purposes He still has ahead for you as He leads you in your next steps.

4. Pray and ask God to show you how to use your freedom in Him to impact another person or a group.