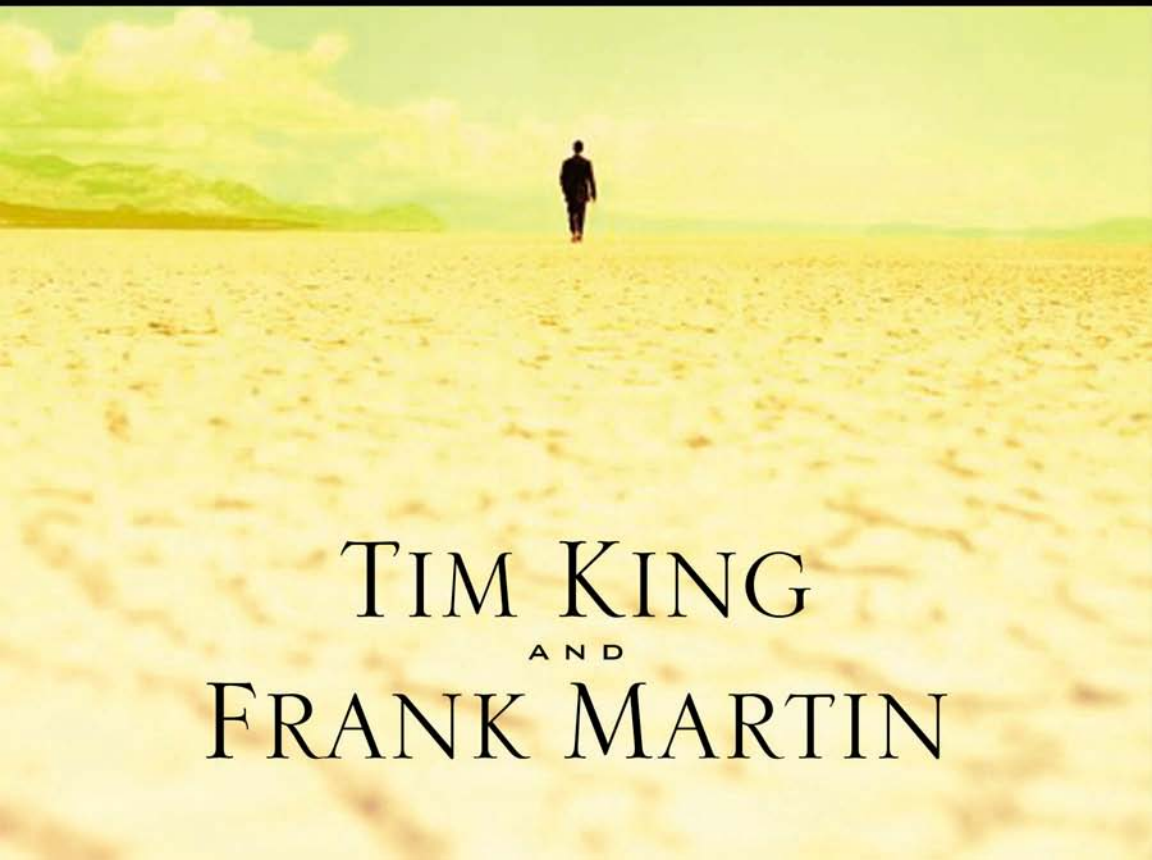




FURIOUS PURSUIT

WHY GOD WILL NEVER LET YOU GO



TIM KING
AND
FRANK MARTIN

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WATERBROOK
P R E S S

FURIOUS PURSUIT

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Details in some anecdotes and stories have been changed to protect the identities of the persons involved.

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Finally, to the Beloved: In the words of the psalmist, “Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory, for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness.”¹

A NOTE BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Here are a few things you should know before you begin. First, even though this book is a collaboration between two authors, we decided to write in the voice of one, using first-person singular. Constantly saying “We think this” or “We believe that” feels cumbersome, so we defaulted to the singular “I.” The exceptions are the times when we tell a uniquely personal story. In those cases, we have indicated who is speaking in parentheses.

The second thing you need to know is that we took the liberty of changing names and certain identifying details wherever necessary. If you think you recognize someone from one of our stories, you’re probably wrong!

Finally, the viewpoints and opinions in this book reflect beliefs we both share. The one rule we had going in is that no theological perspective or word of advice would find its way into the manuscript unless it was owned by both of us. What you will read in the chapters that follow represents our shared worldview about life and faith.

We hope our approach in this book will result in as much of a life-transforming experience for you as it has been for us.

—Tim and Frank

GOD'S HEART CALLING YOURS

STOP CHASING GOD AND LET HIM PURSUE YOU

Struggle with God is the essence of
relationship with God.

—JAMES EMERY WHITE

Deep calls to deep
in the roar of your waterfalls;
all your waves and breakers
have swept over me....
“Why have you forgotten me?”
—PSALM 42:7,9

Not so long ago I (Frank) was on the phone with Andy, one of my dearest friends. We've known each other since grade school, and there's not an ounce of pretense between us, which is the thing I treasure most about our relationship.

I could tell that Andy was feeling down. He had been struggling through some tough life issues, so I tried to cheer him up by sharing some thoughts from a book I'd been reading about pursuing God with passion. The book talks about seeking God through spiritual disciplines such as prayer, fasting, and meditation. I could tell by Andy's silence that he wasn't buying into it. Finally he sighed and said, "You know what, Frank? I'm sick of chasing after God. I want God to chase me for a while!"

Even though these words came from the most brutally honest friend I have, I wasn't sure what to think. *Should he be saying such things—thinking such thoughts? Is there room in our relationship with God for such candor?*

Part of me wanted to remind Andy that God doesn't answer to us, that his thoughts are higher than ours, that if God feels distant to us there must be a reason for it, that it's not right to question God's ways, and that it's certainly not right to doubt him. But I didn't say any of that. In fact, what I did say surprised me.

"To be honest, Andy, I'm tired of chasing him too."

I still don't know exactly where that came from, but it was the most honest I'd been in a long, *long* time.

THE ZEN OF ZIGGY

There is a weariness that seeps into our spiritual lives. It doesn't come all at once, and thankfully it doesn't always stay long. But we've all tasted it, been

frustrated by it, tried to pretend it doesn't matter. The weariness doesn't define our relationship with God, but it definitely messes with it. It confuses us and sometimes even indicts us.

Actually, *weariness* may not be the best word for what we experience from time to time. Let's call it a nagging sense that all is not right between God and us. We sense that our faith should be stronger, that our resolve should be more resolute, that our lives should be more in tune with God's will. And that we should be closer to God than we so often feel.

We speak of God's merciful love and our complete joy in having found it, yet deep in our souls we sense a strange divorce between our faith and our hearts. We can no longer deny the dark chasm that separates what we say about God from what we so often experience. There seems to be an identity crisis between the God we know and the God we *profess* to know. Like David, we cry out in our darkest hour, "Why, O LORD, do you reject me and hide your face from me?"¹ And still he seems silent and far away.

We follow hard after God, giving him the best we have to offer. And in response we get nothing more than this blasted suspicion that we're the ones doing all the work, that for some strange reason God isn't doing his part.

"I'm sick of chasing after God," Andy told me. Maybe he was speaking for a lot of us. Think about how many miles you've logged in the pursuit of God, often getting nothing back but silence and spiritual loneliness. Could this be the true source of your weariness, the reason your spirit feels drained? Maybe we're all just so dog-tired from chasing after God.

How many times have you sat in church as your minister outlined the steps to developing a deep and meaningful relationship with God? You'd love to have what he's promising, and based on the nods and smiles on every side, you assume it can't be that hard. You wonder if you're the only one in the sanctuary who hasn't quite gotten there, so you commit to try-

ing harder. You promise yourself that you'll pray more, give more, study more, love more, and sin less. You'll chase God with everything you have, hoping it will cause him to draw near. Maybe then you'll know deep in your heart what it means to be a friend of God and not just a follower.

Weeks go by, and so does the busyness of life. Once again you find yourself in the same pew listening to the same words, and you're wearier than ever. You can't remember a time when you've been this confused and tired and apathetic. And the worst part is the feeling deep in your gut—the empty, agonizing feeling that perhaps you're the only one who has this problem. You're the only God chaser who can't seem to find him.

Ziggy sums up our angst in a nutshell. A single-panel cartoon depicted him standing in front of a huge shopping-mall map. The map had a small circle at the bottom left corner that read "You are here." At the top right corner, the farthest edge away, was a larger circle next to the words "Everyone else is over here."²

Can you relate?

You know it's not a question of faith. You love God, and in the deepest recesses of your heart, you know he loves you back. It's just that you don't always *feel* loved by God. And you rarely feel all that close to him. For a God who promised to be with us forever, to live within us and through us, he seems to excel at keeping his distance.

"Come near to God and he will come near to you,"³ the Bible assures us. And we all know that God's Word can be trusted. But you have fought to draw near to God, struggled to find him and get close to him. And you still feel that he is distant and you are alone.

I (Frank) have a good friend named Barry who never seemed to have this problem. We were in a Bible-study group together, and every time we met, he had a quick smile and another exciting revelation from Scripture that he couldn't wait to share. It seemed he was always running across some

stunning truth during his daily times of prayer and Bible reading. His joy seemed endless and fresh and vibrant—and exhausting.

I love Barry, but I couldn't for the life of me relate to him. Nothing about his experiences with God rang true. I was in a completely different circle—a circle of spiritual loneliness that I was sure I had all to myself.

Then one day after a morning golf game, Barry and I were having lunch in a quiet corner booth, and he began to share some of his struggles—intimate struggles he had never shared with anyone. Because of some bad career decisions, Barry found himself in a crushing financial squeeze, and the strain was becoming more than he could bear. He had prayed continually over his situation, pleading with God for help and direction—or at the very least, a little relief—but things never got better. In fact, the harder Barry prayed, the worse things appeared to get.

"I've given my whole life to serving God," Barry told me, "but when I need him most, he's nowhere to be found. It would be so easy for him to help me fix this problem, but he doesn't."

I searched my mind for some words of comfort, but none came. Finally Barry bowed his head, arched his shoulders, and whispered, "You know, Frank. I don't doubt that God is there, and I know he hears me. But sometimes I wonder if he even cares. I'm finding myself wondering if God is really good."

And this from Barry, the most plugged-in, spiritually devoted friend I have! If Barry can't find God, then what hope is there for the rest of us?

"Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls," David cried out in his suffering. "All your waves and breakers have swept over me.... 'Why have you forgotten me?'"⁴

Those words could have come right from Barry's lips, and there are days when they could just as easily come from yours or mine. You've been there, haven't you? You've cried out to God in your darkest hour for just a

hint of help or clarity or comfort—and heard nothing but silence. You've prayed for direction in the wilderness only to find yourself more lost than ever. You've put your faith in an omnipresent God, even proclaimed him to your friends, and then wondered silently where he was when you needed him most.

But in your heart you know you're supposed to chase God—so you do. You continue to pursue him, to search for some kind of real and personal connection with your Creator, yet feeling all the while as if you're running in place. And the faster you run, the more exhausted you become. Eventually your heart grows weary, and you do the only thing you feel you can do: you succumb to spiritual numbness.

Don't you wish you could stop and let God chase you for a while?

GOD'S PASSIONATE PURSUIT

What if I told you that's exactly what God does—that he not only chases you but never takes his eyes off you? What if I could prove that God has never gone a minute without thinking of you, wooing you, whispering in your ear, *I'm right here*? What if I could show you that God not only pursues you day by day, minute by minute, but he actually screams for your attention?

You don't have to chase God. All you have to do is awaken to his voice. He is never silent or out of reach or indifferent to what's going on in your life.

What if I went a step further and showed you that God's pursuit of you has absolutely nothing to do with your level of obedience and righteousness or your dedication to the spiritual disciplines?

Can you entertain the thought that God cannot *not* pursue you, that to leave you alone would run counter to his nature? He longs for an intimate

relationship even more than you do. He is much more devoted to chasing you than you are to chasing him. And he has drawn near to you whether or not you ever choose to draw near to him.

If you could own the truth that God's relentless pursuit is more than just a comforting spiritual concept but is in fact the force that drives him more than any other, what would it mean to you? If you could believe that capturing you is God's all-consuming passion—all he thinks about from Adam to eternity—imagine how it would change your faith, your prayers, your reading of Scripture, and your view of God.

PURSUED BY LOVE

In M. Night Shyamalan's film *The Village* is a chilling scene in which Ivy Walker decides to travel through an unfamiliar forest to retrieve medicine for her ailing fiancé. Ivy is blind and the woods are thought to be inhabited by beasts—monsters referred to in the film only as “those we don't speak of.”

Her father, Edward Walker, explains to the village elders why he would allow his blind daughter to go on such a perilous journey. They are angry with him because they know what dangers lurk in the woods.

“How could you have sent her?” asks one of the women elders. “She is blind.”

Ivy's father bows his head and answers, “She is more capable than most in this village. And she is led by love. The world moves for love. It kneels before it in awe.”⁵

Ivy Walker, though blind, is led by love.

Is there any more potent force than love? Is there anything in life that brings greater motivation, higher expectations, deeper introspections,

better clarity? Is there an emotion that elicits more passion or brings out more fury?

“The world moves for love,” says Edward Walker. “It kneels before it in awe.”

When you are led by love, nothing is powerful enough to stop you. Nothing can discourage you from your quest.

And God is led by love.

More than that, God *is* love. It is his nature, his primary focus, his driving force. He is moved by love, provoked by love to press forward, to stay the course, to relentlessly pursue his beloved. Although he is grieved when we stray from him, he remains unfazed by our waywardness, undistracted by our inability to remain faithful. You and I are pursued by *Love*.

And the world moves for him. It kneels before him in awe.

This book is written for those who want desperately to believe that truth. It is for those who long to feel loved and wanted by God. It is for those who want to believe in the furious faithfulness of God yet struggle to see it. It is for those who want to trust deeply in the character of God.

This book is *not* for those who have it all together, who never question God or stumble as they try to follow him. If you don't struggle with sin, shame, grief, or loneliness, then by all means read something else. This book is for those of us who struggle with little else.

During that same scene in *The Village*, one of the town elders sums up his thoughts about the blind but persistent Ivy Walker journeying through the woods on her own. “Ivy is running toward hope,” he says. “Let her run.”⁶

We share Ivy's helplessness as she struggles through the wild and frightening woodlands, her hands stretching into the darkness as she feels her way through the thicket of trees and brush, fighting to make her way back home. She is stumbling, crawling, scratching her way forward.

This book is for those who feel like blind, helpless children stumbling through a dark and dangerous forest, falling, getting up, then falling again. Those who are fighting to make their way through the forest of faith, through the vast woodland of fear and doubt and confusion.

For all of us who have found ourselves running toward hope, welcome to a better Story of a much bigger God.

PART I

A ROMANCE TO BE EMBRACED

THE PASSION THAT DREW YOU

*Isn't that the message of the Bible? The relentless
pursuit of God. God on the hunt. God in search.*

—MAX LUCADO

*For I will forgive their wickedness
and will remember their sins no more.*

—HEBREWS 8:12

The most damaging lies we encounter in life tend to be the lies we tell ourselves about ourselves. And the damage is multiplied because these lies almost always go unchallenged.

Take the woman who has had more sex partners than friends, who has two children but no husband, and who wants more than anything to know God's love. The only thing that holds her back is a lie: she can't imagine that he would accept her. *I'm worthless*, she tells herself. *Why would God want someone like me?*

Or the man who once served as a church deacon until the bottle got the best of him—and lust got the rest of him. Now he can't meet the gaze of his friends, much less his former parishioners. *I had my chance with God, and I blew it.*

Or the pastor who speaks eloquently of God's love every week from the pulpit yet has never fully experienced it in his heart. He proclaims God's love while continually condemning himself with a lie: *I'm just a fake, and someday God is sure to expose me.*

These thoughts go completely unchallenged by what God tells us is true—and what he wants us to understand about his nature. And the hard truth is that transformation can't begin until we start to challenge these lies with a more complete understanding of God. Until we contrast what we tell ourselves to be true with what God says is true.

"Life is hard and then you die," we may tell ourselves. But God tells us, "Everything has *meaning*—everything you experience in life is either a product or by-product of my great pursuit."¹

"My faith is so weak," we say. But God says, "It's not about your faith; it's about my faithfulness."²

"I'm just an unworthy sinner," we say. But God says, "You are not defined by what you do; you are defined by who pursues you."³

Whether or not we realize it, and whether or not we ever choose to accept it, you and I are caught up in the greatest and grandest Love Story of all time. It's the Story of a King who stepped down from his throne in order to win the heart of a fair maiden. It's beyond question "the greatest Story ever told," and it's a romance unlike anything you and I could ever imagine.

This is one Tale, one timeless Story, one eternal Romance that you don't want to miss.

GOD'S RELENTLESS PURSUIT

WHY HE CAN'T RESIST YOU

What comes into our minds when we think about
God is the most important thing about us.

—A.W. TOZER

If we are faithless,
he will remain faithful,
for he cannot disown himself.

—2 TIMOTHY 2:13

Can you remember a time when God was all you wanted or needed? Can you recall the last time your love for him was pure and uninhibited, undefiled by doubt?

Maybe it was when you first came to faith. Your heart longed to believe that there was more to life than living, loving, hurting, and then dying. And when you found God, you finally discovered the real meaning of life. The truth of the Cross brought you to your knees and you surrendered, giving yourself to a Lover and a Love Story unlike any you'd ever thought possible. You loved God with abandon, worshiped him from the depths of your spirit, honored him with your life and words. You couldn't imagine spending a moment outside his presence.

Or perhaps it was God's grace that captured your heart. You'd already accepted his salvation, yet it always felt conditional. And finally you were introduced to a forgiveness that is not only absolute but irrevocable. You'd been dancing *for* God, but then you found yourself dancing *with* him, and you never wanted the music to stop.

Most of us can recall a season when we were drawn inescapably into God's love—a time when our faith bordered on fanaticism. But then something happened. Life happened. Your love grew dim, and a slow deadness began to settle into your spirit. The struggles of living weighed you down, and God didn't always show up to help. So your faith gave way to doubt, trust turned to confusion, intimacy was replaced by abandonment. The music slowed, your feet grew weary, your Lover no longer looked so lovely.

I (Tim) have a vivid memory of sitting on a church pew at the age of twelve. A visiting missionary from Greece held me spellbound with tales of spiritual conquest and adventure on the mission field. He told of a great awakening of faith taking place overseas, and with all my heart I wanted to

go back with him. I couldn't imagine anything better than spending my life leading people to Jesus, devoting every waking moment to his service. Even at a young age, I longed to do great things for God, to grow in wisdom, to give myself completely over to his will. I began praying incessantly for his guidance, his hand of blessing to make the deep desire of my heart a reality.

But somewhere between the puzzlement of puberty and the labor of life, I lost it. Not my faith, just the fire. I still loved God, but following him into an unknown land took a backseat to other interests. Theology, for one, proved more intriguing. So the flame that burned so hot and high at the age of twelve now gave off little more than a tepid glow.

WHEN FLAMES FIZZLE

Few people have a relationship with God that is free of this ebb and flow between all-consuming passion and apathy, between longing and suspicion. In fact, any encounter of the heart will eventually lead to apprehension and pain. But somehow we hope it will be different with God. We believe that he can be trusted, that he is completely loving and reliable. Yet at the moment of our deepest need, he is often nowhere to be found. When we most need him to be good, we imagine him to be indifferent or, at best, inconsistent. So we begin to pull away from him.

“We give ourselves to God,” wrote James White, “and then struggle profoundly with the relationship. We are drawn inexorably in, and then find ourselves wanting to flee in fear... We find that living with God is not easy.”¹

“Living with God is not easy”? That may well be the greatest understatement of all time. The truth is, living with God can be the most difficult thing many of us will ever do.

At the age of seventeen, I (Frank) found myself in a season of deep communion with God. I felt closer to him than I ever imagined a person could feel with another being, especially a divine one. It seemed that every waking moment was filled with thoughts of God's love, visions of his presence, and longings for an even deeper encounter with him.

One day I discovered a vacant storage room beneath a stairwell in our church. I began stopping there every day after school to pray. Soon I was setting my alarm clock to ring earlier in the morning so I could commune with God before school as well. My father had a key to the church, so I had the entire place to myself. Hour upon hour I whiled away my adolescence sitting in that small, dark room, praying, worshiping, meditating, seeking to draw nearer to God, and weeping at the power of his presence. My passion for God seemed endless and unshakable.

But time proved it to be neither. Within a few short years, I was running from the God I once adored, wondering what I had ever seen in him. I wrestled with deep feelings of abandonment and betrayal that went beyond apathy into the realm of contempt.

At twenty-two I wanted nothing to do with God. I wasn't sure I even believed that he existed. My spiritual journey didn't just come to a crossroads; it ended altogether. What began as a beautiful love affair ended in a bitter divorce. I resigned myself to a life of spiritual separation from God.

I lived, I worked, I chased girls. I remained morally upright, but only out of habit. In front of my friends and family, my religious facade was convincing, but my feelings toward God were dead. Nothing but memories remained between us. And the worst part of it was that God didn't seem to care too much either. He appeared to be as apathetic about the loss as I was. It was as if he'd never known my name.

The pain of our estrangement came to a head one night, almost out of

nowhere. I was lying in bed in my small apartment, trying to slip my mind into neutral for a good night's sleep, but I couldn't do it. I couldn't put my thoughts at ease. I tossed and turned through the night, all the while wondering what was keeping me awake.

I was angry that I couldn't get to sleep. I had a big day ahead of me, work that had to be done, and I needed to be fresh. *Why can't I just go to sleep?*

And there in the quiet darkness of my own prison of isolation, I thought I heard God whisper. It was subtle yet real. I heard it in the depths of my spirit. *Why won't you talk to me?* he asked. *I've been waiting so long.*

My first instinct was to resist, to chalk it up to fatigue and anxiety. For a few short minutes it worked, until the voice came again. *What are you running from? Do you know how much I love you?*

Suddenly a well of sorrow and remorse burst from within my spirit. I wept harder than I thought possible. From the deepest part of my soul, the part I had ignored since separating from God, I cried out in pain and confusion, "God, I miss you so much. I'm so alone! I'm so tired of running."

With my head buried in my pillow, I cried through the night to the first glimpse of light, all the while pleading with God to take me back, to forgive me for straying so far from him, to help me rebuild the bridge that I had so callously burned, to make things between us the way they once had been.

God answered that prayer in the most powerful way. Not all at once, but little by little, day by day. He began rebuilding our relationship, restoring the trust, and renewing my shaken faith.

At the time it didn't occur to me what had really happened. God hadn't just *accepted* me back; he *wooed* me back. He initiated the romance, not me. All this time I was sure I'd had something to do with it.

THE LOVE OF A WILLING HEART

Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard once wrote about a king who loved a fair maiden. They were engaged to be married, but the king couldn't get over his uneasy feelings.

Would she be happy in the life at his side? Would she be able to summon confidence enough never to remember...that he was king and she had been a humble maiden? For if this memory were to waken in her soul, and like a favored lover sometimes steal her thoughts away from the king, luring her reflections into the seclusion of a secret grief; or if this memory sometimes passed through her soul like the shadow of death over the grave: where would then be the glory of their love?²

The king longed to believe that the maiden could love him and that her love would be true and undefiled, but how could he know for sure? Should he bring her to the palace and cover her with silk and jewels? Or would this gain nothing more than a purchased heart?

Maybe he could go to her cottage and show her his glory and power, casting his huge shadow over her humble surroundings. *No*, he thought, *that would gain an overpowered heart.*

In the end the king knew that the only way he could truly win the maiden's love would be to descend to her level. So he decided to become a humble servant in order to gain the maiden's *willing* heart.

God could have decided to buy our love with the gift of a pain-free life and the promise of answering every prayer exactly as we desire. But he doesn't want our *purchased* hearts. He could conquer our stubborn will by

displaying his might and supremacy and scaring us into submission. But that would gain him nothing more than our *overpowered* hearts.

God wants our *willing* hearts, so he chose to become a humble servant, to draw us into his love instead of buying us off or forcing us to love him.

Wouldn't you rather be drawn into a relationship than be pushed into one? Wouldn't you rather glide down the center aisle of your free will than stare down the barrel of a shotgun? Wouldn't you rather give your heart than have your heart taken?

God has wired us with the desire to be drawn into relationship. He created us to love us, but he gave us complete freedom to spurn his love. He created us as independent beings who control what we do with our hearts. And when we rejected his overtures toward us, he set in motion a plan to win us back—a plan that involved his becoming a humble servant.

Do you see how far the King was willing to go, how low he was willing to bend just to win your love and to woo your *willing* heart? Isn't this the God you long to embrace, the God you want desperately to trust in and to share a relationship with?

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JERRY MAGUIRE

I (Frank) have almost no ability to recall details from movies, but one scene from long ago has stuck with me. In *Jerry Maguire*, Tom Cruise's character is standing in front of his angry, estranged wife, trying to express his feelings for her and win back her heart. From his blank expression, it's obvious he's at a total loss for words. The two stand face to face as he racks his brain, searching for the one thing he could say to alleviate her anger and show her how much he needs her. Finally, almost as a last-ditch effort, he says softly, awkwardly, "You complete me."³

Cue music. Wife's face softens and her eyes well with tears. She melts in his arms.

It is one of the corniest scenes ever put on film, yet many have a hard time watching it without breaking into tears. In fact, this on-screen moment provided the working definition of true love for a generation of movie fans. And is it any wonder? Don't we all want to hear someone say, "I need you," "I'm not whole without you," "Part of me is missing when you're not around"? Don't we all want to think that we complete the one who loves us most?

But Tom Cruise's character got it wrong. And so many of us got it wrong right along with him. Many have bought into a vision of love that is destined to fail, certain to crush any romantic relationship that is built on its shaky foundation.

What we've held up as the model for relational ecstasy is nothing less than a dysfunctional, codependent relationship on a collision course with disaster. It's a marriage destined to end in divorce. It is two incomplete people expecting the other to fill the void each of them feel inside. Any marriage counselor worth his salt will tell you how sad and damaging and unstable that kind of union is.

No relationship built on need can survive. It may start out with all the signs of true love and the highs and lows of a happy courtship. It may even look and sound like a perfect affair, but it can't last. Two incomplete beings can't combine to create a complete one.

Just ask any woman who feels trapped in a relationship. She may have thought she married for love, but somewhere along the way, she realized she married out of need. Now there are kids to raise, pets to feed, a mortgage to pay, and facades to maintain, but the love has long since faded from memory. She's stuck in a marriage she no longer wants. Her husband

refuses to change, and she can't summon the energy to try anymore. But where else is she going to go? She needs someone in her life who needs her, and her need to be completed has trapped her in a loveless marriage.

A healthy marriage is based not on need but on two whole people deciding to form a meaningful relationship. Two people who are complete within themselves need nothing more than they already have. They choose to spend time with each other not because they need each other but because they long to be together. They come to the relationship not with *purchased* hearts or *overpowered* hearts but with *willing* hearts.

CREATED FOR DESIRE

I (Frank) was a senior in high school before I met my first self-declared atheist. Alan was a Canadian, and he and I worked together at a small bakery in Texas during the summer.

Alan said he was an atheist, but he was really an agnostic. He told me a number of times that he was willing to believe in God if God would just prove himself. "If he's real, why doesn't he show me?" Alan asked, though not always in a smug way.

I got the feeling that Alan wanted to believe, but he had no reason to. So I made it my personal goal to convince him of God's existence.

Alan and I worked side by side at the bakery eight hours a day, six days a week for nearly three months. It was the most agonizing summer of my life. Every discussion seemed to turn into a debate about the existence of God. I used every argument I could think of, but nothing would convince Alan. And his arguments would always end at the same place: "If God exists, why doesn't he just show himself? If he's as powerful as you say, then how hard could that be for him?" I never had an answer for him.

My prayers took on a different tone that summer. I found myself getting angry with God, asking him, "Why won't you show yourself to Alan? Just send an angel one night to talk to him, to wake him from his sleep and shake some sense into him. Prove to him you're there!"

All summer I pleaded with God to help me get through to Alan. But God never once came to his own defense. Soon summer was over and Alan went back to Canada, even more skeptical than before. His agnostic resolve had grown even stronger over the summer, and my faith had grown weaker.

"Someday you're going to see how wrong you are," I told Alan on his last day of work.

"All God has to do is prove it!" he said.

And Alan had a point. All God had to do was show himself. Just once! Why wouldn't he do that?

We all know how easy it would be for God to prove himself, not just to Alan but to every skeptic on the planet. He could eliminate all doubt in one fell swoop, do away with any hint of skepticism, if he would just open up the skies and reveal himself.

And he could do more than just convince us all to believe; he could force us to obey him and to give him the honor he deserves. He could make us fall on our knees and worship him. And yet he doesn't do any of those things. God doesn't force us to believe in him. He created us to *desire* him. He seeks the response of a *willing* heart.

THE BEAUTY OF DESIRE

On my desk is a photograph of my (Frank's) family. The four of us are standing in a foot of snow in our front yard. Every time I glance at the photo, I'm taken aback by the sight of my son, David. He's sixteen now, a

strapping young man. *When did he get so big? What happened to the little boy who used to climb on my shoulders?* I'm as proud as a father could possibly be, yet something in me longs for days gone by.

He was here in my office less than five minutes ago inviting me to go to Starbucks later this afternoon. Of course I said yes, though I should keep working.

David is an amazing kid. He's in love with life and crazy in love with Jesus, and today he's more than a son to me; he's my best buddy. There's nothing we'd rather do than spend time together. Yet there's a truth about our relationship that is hard for me to accept: David doesn't have to include me in his life. He has a car, he just got his first job, and he excels at school without even trying. He's incredibly bright, independent, and creative, and, yes, he's much better off with me in his life. But when you get right down to it, he really doesn't *need* me. He doesn't have to engage in a relationship with me. He's a complete person in his own right.

And yet he wants me to go to Starbucks with him! He desires to spend time with me. He longs for relationship with his father. And that thrills me beyond words.

Is there anything more beautiful, more exciting, more powerfully satisfying than when a completely whole and independent person chooses to be with you? When that already complete being loves you deeply just for who you are, with no ulterior motive, just a pure desire to spend time with you?

It is the greatest joy that life has to offer. And there is something very right, very satisfying, very *divine* about it.

CHOOSING THE HEART YOU GIVE

What would happen if you woke up tomorrow morning and flipped on the news only to learn that God had just announced that everyone on earth

was saved? Or what if you went to church next Sunday, and God showed up to tell everyone that he had just done away with hell? Imagine that, from here on out, there was no longer any cause to worry about eternal judgment.

If you knew for certain that no one would end up in hell, would you still tell people about Jesus? Would you still have a compelling message to share? Would you have any motivation to try to reach those who don't know God?

If everyone on earth were saved, what could you say about God that might still appeal to people? Would you have enough of a relationship with God to talk passionately about his love and mercy? If you couldn't spare people the torments of hell, would you still want to make sure they knew how to enjoy a relationship with God?

How you answer those questions says everything about the nature of your relationship with God. So many of us were introduced to God through gripping tales of the terrible fate that awaits us in the afterlife unless we accept Jesus as our Savior. So we accepted Jesus as our Savior, and that truth came to define our relationship with God. What we call a "relationship with God" is little more than an eternal reprieve of the consequences of sin. We were confronted with the fires of hell and were told about God's power to keep us safe, so we came to God with an overpowered heart. And we stay with him out of fear of what might happen if we leave.

Or maybe that doesn't describe your experience. Perhaps you came to God through the door of love, through complete awe and wonder at the depth of his goodness. Your fascination with him was endless, your heart completely overwhelmed by his love and mercy.

But somewhere along the way, something happened. Someone told the fair maiden that her Bridegroom was no humble servant but a King, and

she couldn't help but wonder just how rich and generous he was. So she started asking for presents and blessings and special privileges. She tested the breadth of his love with longer and longer wish lists.

It's a trap that's easy to fall into—and many have dived in headfirst. Entire religious movements are built around the premise of seeing how many good things God can do for you. And make no mistake: God can and does do very good things for you, but that's no basis for a real relationship. In fact, it's not a relationship; it's an arrangement. It's nothing more than a *purchased* heart. It's love with strings and conditions attached. And it's a far cry from the Story that God wants us to live in.

God's Story is the story of a King who came as a humble servant in search of a *willing* heart. It's the Story of a Creator who sets out in tireless pursuit of his creation. The Story of a Lover who went to war with all the forces of darkness in order to rescue his fair maiden and bring her home. God's Story is the Story of a Romance. A Romance to be embraced.