



*"This is a book worth reading. To make sense of your life.  
To discover the role God is giving you in His story...  
A wonderful book!"*

**John Eldredge,**  
best-selling author of *Wild at Heart* and *Epic*

# to be told

God Invites You  
to Coauthor Your Future

Dan B. Allender, PhD

**Praise for**  
***To Be Told***

“This is a book worth reading. Because this is a journey worth taking. To know who you are. To make sense of your life. To discover the role God is giving you in his story. That is a life worth living. Thank you, Dan, for a wonderful book!”

—JOHN ELDREDGE, best-selling author of *Wild at Heart* and *Epic: The Story God Is Telling and the Role That Is Yours to Play*

“Dan Allender’s books brim and sizzle with stories—many poignant, many hilarious, and many both. This book takes us to the deepest stories of all—our own stories, the ones that haunt when they are kept secret and liberate when they are told and known. *To Be Told* is a treasure to be read slowly and with your closest friends.”

—BRIAN MCLAREN, pastor and author of *A Generous Orthodoxy* and *A New Kind of Christian*

“The concepts in this book have helped define my life in magnificent ways. By further exploring my own story, I discovered God’s story. And it is a beautiful picture of clarity, purpose, knowledge, and celebration. Thank you, God, for giving us Dan Allender.”

—KATHY TROCCOLI, singer, speaker, and author

“When Dan Allender tells stories, prepare for three things: laughter, tears, and piercing insight. Allender is a great storyteller because he knows that stories are for redeeming, not just for passing the time. This book, about story and full of stories, will help you find your own place in the greatest story ever told.”

—DANIEL TAYLOR, author of *Tell Me a Story: The Life-Shaping Power of Our Stories*

“Dan Allender confronts us with the truth that we are storied people, that each of us is a story, and that we are in fact writing our own stories. With humor and grace, Dan invites us not only to write our stories metaphorically but literally to begin to write our stories. He promises that in so doing we might just possibly find God, with whom we are coauthoring our stories, and we might actually connect in vital and healing ways with ourselves and with each other.”

—STANLEY J. GRENZ, author of *Rediscovering the Triune God*  
and *A Primer on Postmodernism*

“In *To Be Told*, Dan Allender creates an intimate, safe place where we feel free to join in the discussion and dive, with a sort of careless courage, head-first into our own stories. I wept as I rediscovered the sacred and divine in my own story, and began to find the connections between my own story threads, an understanding of my long-aching need to be heard, and the glimmers of a holy redemption.”

—RENEE ALTSON, author of *Stumbling Toward Faith*

“Dan Allender calls us to recognize that our lives, which often seem random, have a brilliant, divine coherence. Under his expert tutelage we discover how to discern God’s hand on our lives and how to tell the story to ourselves and others.”

—TREMPER LONGMAN III, author of *How to Read the Psalms*  
and coauthor of *The Cry of the Soul* and *Bold Love*

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KNOW YOUR STORY • SHAPE YOUR FUTURE

Dan B. Allender, PhD



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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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*To:*  
*Jo Ann Bope Allender*

V

*Being of My Beginning*  
*Life Giving*  
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*Mother*

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Becky: All ways. Always love in love, above all others, never the same. Always more than I can imagine, always more than I can fathom or desire. There is no story outside of you, no reason beyond your Creator. I praise the One who made you and who created me to be inextricably bound to the glory of your story.

# what's your story?

If I asked you to tell me your story, what would you say? Would you mention the pressures you're facing at work? Would you talk about where you went to college? Would you tell me it's none of my business?

Everyone has a story. Put another way, everyone's life *is* a story. But most people don't know how to read their life in a way that reveals their story. They miss the deeper meaning in their life, and they have little sense of how God has written their story to reveal himself and his own story.

If you don't think such things are important, consider a conversation I had recently with a friend who was weighing a career move. He showed me a list of pros and cons. There were an equal number of problems and benefits no matter what he decided—whether he changed jobs or stayed where he was. “If the list is weighted according to my values and dreams,” he observed, “it's a dead heat. I might as well flip a coin.”

But my friend was overlooking his own story, the one thing that would give him direction in making this decision. He hadn't considered God's

authorship of his life. He was aware of God's authority but not of God's ongoing creative work in his life—and in all our lives.

“Which choice allows you to live your life most consistently with how God has been writing your life story?” I asked.

My friend had no idea what I was getting at. So I asked him if he'd ever studied his life to see what story, what themes, and what plot God was writing his life to reveal. He still looked at me as if I were from outer space.

“Why would I study my life?” he asked. “I was there as everything happened, so what is there to study?”

This is a bright, honest, good man who is sensitive to God. He listens well to his wife's heart, and he is intentional about doing the right thing in countless areas of his life—health, finances, time with his kids, and spirituality. But he saw no value in reading his own story.

Most of us have spent more time studying a map to avoid getting lost on a trip than we have studying our life so we'll know how to proceed into the future. When we're preparing to make significant decisions, why will we study a stock report but fail to look at our own story? Why will we read various op-ed pieces to help clarify our views on a controversial topic but ignore our own past, which helped form our most important views? If we're taking a course, we're willing to study books that bore us to pieces, but we won't take time to review our own life, which holds answers about God and our selves that will thrill us, amaze us, and sober us. We read and study a great variety of sources and spend time researching our options in order to live in the right direction. But seldom do we approach our own life with the mind-set of a student, eager to learn, gain insight, and find direction for the future.

We habitually push aside the one thing that can clarify not only how we got to where we are today but also where God is leading us tomorrow

and beyond. Our own life is the thing that most influences and shapes our outlook, our tendencies, our choices, and our decisions. It is the force that orients us toward the future, and yet we don't give it a second thought, much less a careful examination. It's time to listen to our own story.

## WHAT YOUR LIFE REVEALS

If you stick with me awhile, we'll take a close look at four core issues that are of crucial importance to you—even if you don't yet realize it.

First, God is not merely the Creator of our life. He is also the Author of our life, and he writes each person's life to reveal his divine story. There never has been nor ever will be another life like mine—or like yours. Just as there is only one face and name like mine, so there is only one story like mine. And God writes the story of my life to make something known about himself, the One who wrote me. The same is true of you. Your life and mine not only reveal who we are, but they also help reveal who God is.

Second, neither your life nor mine is a series of random scenes that pile up like shoes in a closet. We don't have to clear out old stories to make room for new ones. Both your story and mine have unique characters, surprising plot twists, central themes, tension and suspense, and deep significance. Each is an intriguing tale, and neither is fiction. Our story is truer than any other reality we know, and each of us must discover the meaning of what God has written as our life story. In our story God shows us what he's up to and what he wants us to be about.

With the third core issue, things start to get exciting. When I study and understand my life story, I can then join God as a coauthor. I don't have to settle for merely being a reader of my life; God calls me to be a *writer of my future*. He asks me to take the only life I will ever be given and shape it

in the direction he outlines for me. I am to keep writing, moving forward into the plot that God has woven into the sinews of my soul.

And fourth, there is the necessity and blessing of telling our story to others. To the degree that we know God and then join him in writing our story, we are honored to join others in the calling of storytelling. God, of course, is the Master Storyteller. His self-revelation is captured in a sweeping narrative and then given to us in the Book that grips our heart and captures our soul. God also creates a story with each person's life—a story that we are meant to tell. And since we are called to tell our story, we are also called to listen to the stories of others. And since we are to tell and to listen, then even more so we are called to encourage others to know and tell and listen to God's story as well as their own.

God is calling us to fully explore, to fully enjoy, and to fully capture the power of the Great Story, the gospel. And we are to invite others to immerse themselves in the Great Story.<sup>1</sup> One way we do this is by listening to our lesser stories and then telling them to others.

## LISTENING TO YOUR STORY

Do you ever feel that you're stuck, just going through the motions, not hearing from God, and not feeling any passion about your life? It's easy to land there if you're not listening to your story.

God writes our story with great passion and desire, and he reveals our own passions and desires as we read and listen to our story. So I was saddened to see my friend about to make a huge life decision without first asking: *Who am I? What about God am I most uniquely suited to reveal to others? And how is that meaning in my life best lived out?* My friend wasn't listening to his own story to gain direction for his decision about the future.

I'm grateful that he accepted the counsel of a self-confessed fool and answered a series of questions that I asked him to consider. You will be asked to answer the same questions as you read this book. To answer these simple questions, you must study your own story. You must listen to the heartache and hope that are etched in the narrative of your life. And you must find the meaning God has written there.

I asked my friend to join God in writing the next paragraph and then the next page of the story that is his life. I'm asking you to do the same. Allow others to read and edit and critique and join in the glory of the great story God is telling through you. Your story helps reveal the Greatest Story, the story that God is telling about himself. God intends for each of us to live for a greater glory, and a greater story, than our own.

So take seriously the story that God has given you to live. It's time to read your own life, because your story is the one that could set us all ablaze.

## WRITING YOUR STORY

In addition to listening to your story, you need to write your story. At the very minimum, this means you need to name your story. And naming means saying far more than "My parents largely ignored me, and I felt abandoned." Or even "I had a happy childhood. I never knew life could be so hard until I grew up."

In my work as a psychotherapist, I often hear these statements. But when I ask the person to narrate, to tell the stories of life that brought him or her to make these statements, I usually get nothing more than a stare. I might as well ask the person to tell me the meaning of  $E=MC^2$  and to do so in Farsi.

If we can admit the pain and loss and injustice of the past, then why is

it so difficult to tell about the day just prior to each incident that marked our life with shame or anger or emptiness? Why can we not decipher the themes of our life up to that point? And what about the setting—the sounds and words and sights and smells—of each damaging incident?

We know our stories very well. We just don't yet know how well.

Your story has power in your own life, and it has power and meaning to bring to others. I want your story to stir me, draw me to tears, compel me to ask hard questions. I want to enter your heartache and join you in the hope of redemption. But your story can't do these things if you can't tell it. You can't tell your story until you know it. And you can't truly know it without owning your part in writing it. And you won't write a really glorious story until you've wrestled with the Author who has already written long chapters of your life, many of them not to your liking.

We resist telling a story we don't like, and we don't like our own stories. But consider this: if you don't like your story, then you must not like the Author. Or conversely: if you love the Author, then you must love the story he has written in and for your life.

Let's engage the Author of our story so we can enter into the joy he holds before us if we live out our story for the sake of others. If we come to know our story and then give it away, we will discover the deepest meaning in our lives. We will discover the Author who is embedded in our story, and we will know the glory he has designed for each one of us to reveal.

It is toward this good end that we now set out.



part I

your name and **your story**



# the tale to be told

*Reading Your Life as God Has Written It*

I wonder what sort of a tale we've fallen into?

SAM, *The Fellowship of the Ring*

“Yes, that’s so,” said Sam. “And we shouldn’t be here at all, if we’d known more about it before we started. But I suppose it’s often that way. The brave things in the old tales and songs, Mr. Frodo: adventures, as I used to call them. I used to think that they were things the wonderful folk of the stories went out and looked for, because they wanted them, because they were exciting and life was a bit dull, a kind of sport, as you might say. But that’s not the way of it with the tales that really mattered, or the ones that stay in

the mind. Folk seem to have been just landed in them, usually—their paths were laid that way, as you put it.”<sup>1</sup>

That’s an accurate description of life. God is constantly writing our story, but he doesn’t send us the next chapter to read in advance. Instead, we all read backward—finding the meaning in our stories as we read what God has already written. Life is a story that unfolds in such a way that we can’t see very far ahead. We don’t know the final outcome, or even the next plot twist, until we’re there in the middle of it.

As Sam says to Frodo in *The Fellowship of the Ring*: “I wonder what sort of a tale we’ve fallen into?”

“I wonder,” replied Frodo. “But I don’t know. And that’s the way of a real tale. Take any one that you’re fond of. You may know, or guess, what kind of a tale it is, happy-ending or sad-ending, but the people in it don’t know. And you don’t want them to.”<sup>2</sup>

I remember the first time I read those words: I felt a chill, an irrevocable shudder. I’ve never had the patience or wisdom to read J. R. R. Tolkien’s famous trilogy all the way through, but I saw each of the movies twice. Still, those words—even when they’re read out of context—are haunting.

The powerful truth of Frodo’s observation arrived in an e-mail from a dear friend who has suffered with me through the many years it has taken to bring a young graduate school into existence. The years have thrown us both into loss, exhaustion, confusion, betrayal, setbacks, undeserved grace, and the presence of God. If I had known in advance what this journey would require, I never would have signed on. However, I don’t regret for an instant the price it has exacted, when I consider what I have experienced, become, and am led to be.

As Frodo says, the people in the story don’t know what type of tale it is. We can make a guess, but only the Author knows the outcome.

## WHAT SORT OF AUTHOR DO YOU HAVE?

You are a story. You are not merely the possessor and teller of a number of stories; you are a well-written, intentional story that is authored by the greatest Writer of all time, and even before time and after time. The weight of those words, if you believe them even for brief snippets of time, can change the trajectory of your life. In fact, those words will call you to a level of coauthorship that is staggering in its scope and meaning.

God is my Creator, and I am his creation. When I make this statement, I hardly ever meet with any objections. Adherents of all great monotheistic religions believe God is our Creator. When we consider God to be our Creator, we place ourselves in a position for comparison to other entities. We are part of his creation as are the stars, the sea, centipedes, and squash. Furthermore, we are beings who bear the mark of his being. Those who hold to the authority of Genesis 1 say that humanity is marked with a uniqueness that sets us apart from all of creation, no matter how great or small, odd or glorious. Man and woman are made in the image of God.<sup>3</sup> Humankind is the apex of creation.

God is the Potter, and we are the clay. Even the word *human*—derived from the Latin word *humus*, meaning “dirt”—shouts loudly about our origin. We are dirt. The name Adam (Hebrew, *‘adama*) means “red,” the color of clay. God shaped, molded, and formed us to reveal something about himself. He is a Being who loves to reveal and who invites us to join the process of revelation by calling us to ask, seek, and knock. God always intended for his children to join him in completing creation. We are not inanimate entities that merely reveal glory but living stories that are meant to create glory.

## WHAT SORT OF CHARACTERS POPULATE YOUR STORY?

Perhaps the best way to start getting in touch with your story is to consider the various characters—both major and minor—who make an appearance. I know the power of this statement from personal experience. To be specific, I must acknowledge one of the most important characters in my own life because my story is buried with him. This pivotal character is my biological father.

My story begins when I was nineteen years of age. I was looking through a box of photos stored in my mom's closet, and I found a family portrait. It was a picture of my mom, a young boy (me) of about three, and a man I'd never met. The look of his face haunted me.

There in front of me was my face as a three-year-old right next to a man who possessed my face as it would look when I turned thirty. This discovery was as odd as falling through a hole in the ground and ending up in a kingdom where the Queen of Hearts is shouting, "Off with his head!"

I took the family portrait to my mother, who was working in the kitchen. "I know that is you, and I recognize myself, but who is that man?" I asked. She seemed unfazed, as if I had asked whether she wanted me to take out the trash. She replied, "It is your father."

I felt stupid. Not unintelligent, but dumbfounded. It was like falling off a ladder. To tell someone about falling off a ladder takes time to narrate. But to actually fall off a ladder takes nothing more than a misstep immediately followed by a plunge. The fall takes no time at all. Yet, like any traumatic event, such a fall takes forever. Time slows down, and the thud comes well before the fall is even registered.

Standing in the kitchen with my mother, I fell and hit within a millisecond, but it has taken me three decades to finally name what that means.

I pointed to the man my mother identified as my father. “You mean the man sleeping upstairs?” She said, “No, he is your stepfather. The man in the picture is your biological father.”

I asked many more questions and heard enough to know that I couldn’t bear to hear any more. In an instant my life had become both a farce and a great mystery to me. I had discovered a truth that seemed more bizarre than any lie I had ever told. I was not myself. My name was not my name. My face was not the face of the father who had raised me, but of another father, a man who had been lying dormant in a shoe box. That night I took enough LSD to scatter my mind to the wind, hoping the fragments of my life might blow away like the ashes of my torched name.

That was thirty-one years ago, and it’s only in the last year that I have asked: “Who is my father? What is my name? Why is my story written with such dark and thick strangeness? Do I really believe that God not only wrote my story but that he also loves my story? What might I become if I believed that God is both my Authority and my Author? What does it mean to coauthor my story with God? Is he the Author, and am I the translator to another language?”

Do any of those questions even matter?

I know one thing for certain: I need to meet my father. I need to find out where he is buried and learn if I have any cousins or other relatives still alive. I need to know my story. And there is a reason for this quest. It is a profound and central theological question: Who am I? And what does it matter that I am “me”?

I’m not advocating a return to the sixties’ quest for self-identity and self-fulfillment. This is a search not for fulfillment but for narrative. It is not enough to find a self. Instead it is imperative to search for one’s story. It is not I who must be found. Instead it is God who is to be found. He

waits—quietly, passionately, and winsomely—within my story. All I must do is ask, seek, and knock.

Again, I can't know my story unless I know the characters who have shaped my character. I need to know who shares the stage with me. The cast is sometimes obvious—our parents, siblings, spouse, mentors, abusers, and friends. But sometimes an important role is played by a grandparent we barely knew or a person, a family secret, who stands in the shadows offstage.

We are defined by the people in our life. The characters enter the stage, speak their lines, and then either stay or depart. We are not the most important character in our own story, but we are almost always on the stage. And we will not truly know the Author of our story, the meaning or the plot of our story, until we know all of the primary and peripheral players on our stage.<sup>4</sup>

## **WHAT SORT OF PLOT DOES YOUR STORY HAVE?**

Aristotle defined story as having a beginning, a middle, and an end. Some other pundits have reminded us that it may not necessarily follow in that order. Still, Aristotle's simple structure defines the nature of any story.<sup>5</sup> It has a first line, an opening chapter, a first act, and this beginning seldom coincides with our birth. Our story begins with the characters who gave us birth, including their past relationships with their parents and issues such as success and shame; power and abuse; love, loss, and addiction; heartache and secrets; and family myths. Our birth is a beginning, but we owe our existence to the generations that came before us. Our beginning, which took place before we were born, signals some of the themes that will play out in our life.

I was born after my mother had nine miscarriages. I didn't learn this

until after I discovered that the father who raised me was not my biological father. I was a wanted child. I was, indeed, most wanted. And I was an only child. There was simply no more room in my mother's womb—or heart—to risk the exhaustion and despair of another embryo. I was it.

Even if no other dimension of my beginning were named, this one would tell a great deal about the dynamic that was played out between my mother and me. She is a warrior. She is a tough, resilient survivor. But when I was growing up, she depended on me and looked to me as her reason to exist. I was more important than her marriage and even her life. This is a portion of my life's plot.

Both your plot and mine are formed in the circle of relationships into which we were born. Our plot includes the age or unique situation at the time of our birth. It also involves the tension of the tragedy that is our lot inherited from the Fall. A plot is a thematic merry-go-round that circles in and out and around the curse of creation and makes movement from the beginning to the end a ride on a roller coaster. Remember, the narrative unfolding of beginning, middle, and end does not always march in sequence.

In many ways, the plot of our life is the story of humankind. It is about how we came to be who we are (Creation), how we lost ourselves (the Fall), what it means to discover the name God has written for us (redemption), and how the ending of our story reflects the great consummation of God's story (his coming). Our plot is an encounter with the heartache and dreams and desires related to our personal tragedies—the events of our life that occur between fall and redemption and, ultimately, glorification.

### *Tragedy and Tension*

Every life is under the curse, a consequence of Adam and Eve's turning from God to embrace the delectable lie of evil. The most dramatic moment



in the history of humanity, other than the Second Adam's faithful surrender to the Cross, thrust humanity into the course of sorrow, loss, and harm. Every woman will labor with loneliness; every man will struggle with futility. It is written into the plot of the earth.

As a result of Adam and Eve's folly, we all have been cast east of Eden. We live as aliens who know we are not at home and whose plot always involves efforts to rise above the tragedy of our condition. We seek a way to return to an Eden that will bring resolution and peace. We are looking for our Eden and the intimacy we would have known with our heavenly Parent had we not disobeyed. At the same time, we are trying to make sense of the earthly parents we have been given. And we are simultaneously trying to understand our time, face, and name.

In other words, we are trying to make sense of our story.

One wise person said anonymously, "Adversity introduces us to ourselves." And adversity comes in too many forms to number. It is the diagnosis of cancer that throws us face to face with mortality. Seeing the real possibility of death creates a newness and drama and calls most people to rewrite the story they previously had assumed was the dominant plot of their life. The introduction to ourselves can also come in the upheaval of unwanted change—tragedy that disrupts the status quo and compels attention, focus, engagement, and choice. This change drives us to write what we really want to say, because we have only a few blank pages left and little ink in our pen.

Even when tragedy has nothing to do with physical death, it still involves a form of death in the shattering of *shalom*, or harmony. A divorce is a death. Sexual abuse is a death. Betrayal in a relationship, the loss of a job, conflict in a marriage, an auto accident, an illness, loss of meaning or hope or joy—all are forms of death. In the Bible God makes it clear that

rebellion results in death. Death lies at the heart of all tragedy and at the core of every personal narrative.

It is death that evokes tension, an essential element of any narrative worth telling. A plot without tension is flat line, a life with no rises, no dips, no anima. Life, by definition, involves tension. Even the couch potato, the average adult who watches 4.2 hours of television every day, is drawn to tragedy and tension in the stories of others. This attraction is the reason we are so bound to sitcoms, pulp fiction, reality TV, and water-cooler gossip. We would die without the thrill, uncertainty, and passion of tragedy and tension.

Tension is living in the gap between certainty and uncertainty. We always begin with what we know and are irresistibly drawn to what we don't know. We are inveterately curious. We are wired to grow, and all growth stretches us beyond our comfort level. Comfort is the absence of tension; growth requires a swim in murky, dangerous waters. We want adventure, but not without assurances that we will suffer no harm when we take risks. We want danger and excitement, but only as long as they come with a money-back guarantee that everything will work out before the game is finished.

But life isn't like that. There are no safe risks. There is no growth that comes with a guarantee of success. Tension is the medium in which we breathe every day.

### *The Tragedy of Your Story*

No matter how predictable you perceive your life to be, the possibility for tragedy is always there. A child may be pedaling his bicycle to the safely enclosed community swimming pool when he is struck down by a drunk driver. Tragedy will inevitably deliver its goods to our door. It's life.

Tragedy gives movement to our story as we attempt to change or give meaning to our taste of death. Yet we are always much more than our tragedies. Each one of us is unique. We have a different name, face, and body from any other person who might be grappling with the same tragedy. Two young girls might have lost their fathers in a drowning accident. Both face tragedy, but do they share the same kind of tragedy? And will both of their lives be marked by that violent intrusion? The answer to both questions is yes.

But what if one girl had been sexually abused by her father while the other girl had a sweet and gracious father? Our story is always marked by the unique plot we have been given. As we engage the inevitable suffering of life, we develop patterns of response that eventually become themes not only of how we relate to our world but of how the world relates to us.

A pattern for the sexually abused girl who loses her father might be to cut herself off from others and live a fantasy of a new and better life. Due to her past abuse, she is relieved that her father is gone, yet she is utterly alone because he was the only person who pursued her. In her ambivalence and flight from harsh reality, she might turn to books to find relief, meaning, and hope. As she wrestles with her tragedy, she will develop certain patterns of response—such as isolation, inward reflection, habits of reading or writing—that mark her life.

This girl will not grow up and find her husband at a monster-truck rally. It is also unlikely that she will gravitate to a degree in engineering. Patterns set up themes that begin to define who we are, and that definition often creates new experiences that validate who we are.

To understand our story, we need to know our tragedies, and as we learn them, we will catch a glimpse of how we currently manage tension. Repetitive patterns have become themes in our lives over time, themes that

impose structure on us even when a surface evaluation would tell us that these themes are nothing more than personal preference or desire. We are not wholly our own, nor are we exclusively the result of what has happened to us. No wonder reading the plot of our lives is so difficult.

Yet it is in the plot where we will find meaning. It also is the only part of our story we can rewrite if the trajectory of our life is not as we desire. I can't change my tragedies, nor can I really eliminate (fully) the characters in my story, but I can write a new plot. To do so requires reengaging the tragedies of my life with new patterns, thereby developing new or additional themes that mark who I am both as a coauthor of my life and an editor of my future. Doing this marks me as a character in a larger story, a player who furthers the plot development while living in the real world of tension and tragedy. To know our plot is the first step in changing it.

### **WHAT SORT OF ENDING ARE YOU WRITING?**

An ending can be either good or bad. There are excellent novels that held my attention and moved me for hundreds of pages only to end in a way that made me regret reading the story. Sadly, the same can be said of many "good" lives. It is not enough to live well and serve humanity, care for your family, and lead an honest life. A good ending involves much more than making a moral point or teaching a lesson. And a good ending is more than the resolution of the tragedy and tension of an exciting plot.

A good ending doesn't have to be safe or nice. It only has to bring the story to fullness. It is not much different from dessert. An excellent meal, wonderfully prepared and served, is often followed by the least necessary part—dessert. Dessert is often highly caloric and nutritionally bereft. Dessert

is the finish, the final indulgence—as is any good ending to a life. Endings are meant to be a sensual, wild fullness of all that came before. And, as you think of endings, it's important to understand that they have little to do with one's actual death.

### *Death Is Not the Ending*

We all believe we can't die because we simply have too much left to do. We have children to raise and goals to achieve and appointments in our PDA for next week. There is obviously a natural resistance to considering one's own death, but what I am saying is far more than “I don't want to face the fact that life will not last.” The harder question by far is, “Does my life really have meaning?”

No matter how I try to escape the reality of death, I know I will die. But do I really know what meaning my life is meant to have? It turns out that Christians are the most difficult people to interact with regarding these questions. They know that heaven is ahead and that their life is significant. They are so sure of this that they seldom allow themselves to doubt or question the precise meaning of their own life. The result is an unexamined life.

Their assumption is simple: if I live a good life, love my kids, do my best at work, support the PTA and the church and my kids' sports, then my life will have been good. But is this a good ending as God views endings? It's not a bad ending, but it misses what any truly good ending requires—the ardor and the sacrifice, the passion and the blood.

We each are responsible for writing our story, including our ending. The difference between living well versus writing well is that writing requires me to face the fact that my first draft is a mess, needs significant

editing, and requires much more honesty, depth, and passion. Yet for most people, living well means simply doing our best according to the standards of our culture. Am I really willing to move toward the kind of meaning that far exceeds being a “good” person? Am I ready to embrace the true meaning of my life and head to a wildly full ending?

### *The Meaning of a Good Ending*

I have met a legion of people who are remarkable and glorious, but when asked if their life has mattered beyond their family and friends, they scoff at the thought. And when they are pressed further as to whether their life has been a glorious story moving toward a fantastic ending, the scoffing grows into wide-eyed, contemptuous incredulity. They have lived less in light of the story of God and more by the inevitabilities of life’s demands. In other words, they allow circumstances to write their story. The Author is somehow absent from the process.

A good but unexamined life will be high on duty and not likely to celebrate the odd paradoxes, the ironic coincidences, and the humor of being dirt. Remember, we are clay. Adam wasn’t named Red by accident.

So why don’t we see our life as a great story and its ending as compelling and life-changing? My life is a play, a drama, and it will have a final line that sums up and completes all that has come before it. I write my own completion in the way I choose to spend my life.

We are called to coauthor the ending according to the themes that the primary Author has penned for us. We are called to take up our pen and follow him. It is the enormous humility of the sovereign Author to give us a voice in the dialogue. And not only does he want us to write, but he cheers us on. He writes, allows us to coauthor, and then is mesmerized by

what we write with him. This amazing arrangement ought not to be, but it is. No wonder coauthoring takes faith.

The ending of my story is how I lived my life toward an aim, a finish that is worth both dying for and living for. If I live my life for me alone, then my story is as dull as my self-absorption, even if I have survived untold adventures. But if I live my life for Someone more important than myself and I have sacrificed, nobly risked, been humbled, learned, grown, and given, then my life is headed toward a glorious ending.

What makes my life a glorious bestseller is that my plot reveals not a mere moral or lesson but the very person and being of God. A merely good life reveals little beyond the fact that goodness exists. But a life that knows its plot, characters, setting, dialogue, and themes will possess a clear and abiding passion that reveals something unique about the Author. A life that is familiar with its story reveals much about the character of God.

I don't believe God is so concerned that we build ministries—or companies, families, or any other human legacy—to his glory. His glory is grown when we simply live out the calling he has given us. We give him much greater glory when we are aware of our calling, live intentionally, and live with passion. That's how we coauthor our own story.

But how in the world do we know our calling? I've seen that our calling always seems associated with the name that God gives each one of us. And how do we discover our name? We study the contours of our story and the embedded characters, tragedies, and plot to discover our name and calling. As we read our story, we learn what God has in store for our life and our ending.

To learn how to read our story, we must take responsibility to be the coauthor, with God, of our story. We must also learn to read what already

has been written to know what needs to happen in the next chapter. We need to know what type of story we are in, its setting and characters, and our unique role or name in the narrative. Basically, my tale calls me to know what sort of name God has given me.

### **Telling Your Story**

At the end of each chapter, you will find questions designed to help you think more specifically about your own story. These questions are taken from the companion to this book, *To Be Told Workbook*. (For more questions like these, and to take a guided journey in telling and writing your story, see *To Be Told Workbook*.)

Think about your life with this idea in mind: your life is made up of stories, each one possessing a beginning, a middle, and eventually an end. “Ending are meant to be a sensual, wild fullness of all that came before.” How do you celebrate when there is a satisfying close to one of your stories?

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