

*"I look at Larry Crabb as an advance scout in places I have yet to venture."*

—PHILIP YANCEY

# SHATTERED DREAMS

God's Unexpected  
Path to Joy

LARRY  
CRABB

Eight-Week Workbook Included

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WATERBROOK  
PRESS

SHATTERED DREAMS

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# THOUGHTS FROM TEN YEARS LATER



I wrote this book in 2000. A year earlier, in the church that was my church home at the time, I spent eight consecutive Sunday school hours teaching the book of Ruth to about sixty adults. On a few Sundays, the number swelled to nearly one hundred. Something was happening in that class. The thoughts that were later organized into *Shattered Dreams* came to life in my mind and soul during those eight weeks.

The publishing house that had contracted to print my next book turned down the manuscript. “Too negative,” they said. “Nobody would buy a book titled *Shattered Dreams*. People want to be happy.” I’m grateful to the folks at WaterBrook Press for taking a risk on what many might see as an unnecessarily negative message.

I was in my midfifties when the book first released. The road I’m walking seems narrower now, and strangely more appealing. A deeper, muffled, more subtle dream is in the process of being shattered. And a new kind of happiness is slowly releasing, a kind that the sort of shattered dreams I had in mind when I wrote the book cannot destroy. That seems clearer now.

At the time, I was a two-year cancer survivor, a cancer that came within hours of claiming my life. Now, the cancer is back—a very slow-growing kind, I'm told, and nonmetastasizing. By the time you read this, that assurance may have been proven false or it might be confirming the hope that I won't need surgery until I'm pushing one hundred.

I'd prefer to get a phone call today telling me that the radiologist misread my scan, that the concerning spot is no longer concerning. That preference has been a prayer, one of many not answered according to my preferences. And I have no biblical guarantee that my dream of symptom-free living till I'm one hundred will not be shattered. The cracks are already visible.

The dream of good health is an obvious one; it's visible and measurable, like dreams of a great marriage, fulfilling vocation, or sufficient income. And obvious difficulties call for obvious responses to manage the problem, to make it go away or to keep your sanity if it doesn't. Get a second opinion, find a good counselor, train for a new job. Obvious shattered dreams keep alive the hope that there are ways to manage the crisis and get through without falling apart with something that will help you feel better, at least for a season.

Perhaps this is a dream only those of advancing years have, but in my midsixties I'm aware of a deeper dream than good health, relationships, employment, and finances. I think it's a core dream that's at the center of every human being, subtle, and so imbedded in our makeup that we experience it as an entitlement, a *given* of how things should be. It's a dream we don't believe *might* come true, but one that we think *should* if there really is a God.

It's the dream to be truly happy, to feel excited about life, to wake up every morning full of energy to tackle the adventure and seize the opportu-

nity that lies before us, and ultimately, to encounter God's palpable presence in every dark night.

Since I wrote *Shattered Dreams*, that common human dream has spawned new Christian approaches (I use the term *Christian* loosely here) that are designed to pursue it coming true. Health-and-wealth gospel has devolved into a gospel of wish-fulfillment. The true gospel that repairs brokenness and heals wounds has morphed into a pop spirituality that offers feel-good transcendent experiences in any circumstance of life. Morning quiet times have developed into turnkey disciplines for more deeply "sensing" God. And kingdom theology has forgotten the promise of future glory in heaven for the here-and-right-now kingdom we can bring fast through social and political activism.

As I see it, one unintended effect of all this is the de-emphasizing and even denial of the ongoing battle against sin that self-aware believers face. As a result, our ability to wait is weakened, our self-discipline is reduced, and our longing for the coming world is all but destroyed. And the loss of our longing is especially damaging.

Paul made it crystal clear that Christians who won't wait for the satisfaction they want are worthy of pity: "And if our hope in Christ is only for this life, we are more to be pitied than anyone in the world" (1 Corinthians 15:19, NLT). When Jesus' followers dream of feeling here and now what no one will completely or enduringly feel until heaven, the result can be heresy and addiction. Whatever seems to provide spiritual fulfillment in this life seems both right (risk of heresy) and necessary (risk of addiction).

And what I'm seeing more clearly now than when I wrote this book is that *the mother of all shattered dreams is the pursuit of shatterproof hope in the here and now*. Listen to Paul again, speaking to the Colossian Christians.



“For we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and your love for all of God’s people, *which come from your confident hope of what God has reserved for you in heaven*” (Colossians 1:5, NLT).

Our job as spiritually forming Christians is to believe God when He promises to work both everything that happens in our lives and everything that happens in our souls for the good of people who love God and who surrender to however He wants to use them in this life (see Romans 8:28). That’s *faith*. Spiritually forming Christians neither use other people to make them feel better nor isolate themselves from people who might hurt them, but instead give whatever is alive and good within them for the sake of the other’s blessing, even when the personal cost is high. That’s *love*.

Faith and love, Paul tells us, come from hope, and that hope is not for full satisfaction now but rather for what God promises to provide when we get home. Until what’s coming sustains us in what’s currently going on—death, disease, starvation, all kinds of discouragement and evil—we will cling to the false hope that the happiness we were created to enjoy is available here and now. And that hope can become a demand, a narcissistic, obsessive quest for the spiritual fulfillment we assume we’re entitled to. We will deny the truth that our deepest desires remain unsatisfied every day, and that our greatest dream of fully felt union with God lies shattered and unfulfilled every moment of this life.

Yet when the hope of what God has reserved for us in heaven sustains us, our dream of energetic passion and complete satisfaction in life shifts from a demand to a surrendered, patient longing. And our confidence in God’s promise of what lies ahead frees us to share in the kind of happiness Jesus knew while He lived in this difficult world, the kind that comes from serving God’s purposes in any circumstance, that kept Him anchored in His calling and passionate for God’s vision, even during Gethsemane and on Golgotha.

Jesus believed God with absolute trust in His Father's goodness. Jesus loved God (and us) at any cost to Himself. His *faith* and *love* were sustained by His *hope* in what He knew lay ahead. The happiness that anchors our soul and keeps alive our passion for God's vision comes from the faith and love that spring from *that* hope. And this is why in Jesus, spiritual fruit was always ripe—"love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Galatians 5:22–23).

Imagine yourself

- *loving* a rejecting spouse, a prodigal child, a critical or pushy friend.
- radiating *joy* in a cancer ward, as a patient.
- knowing *peace* during a financial catastrophe.
- exhibiting *patience* in the most trying circumstance at work.
- being *kind* to a needy neighbor when you'd rather do anything but.
- releasing the *goodness* of God's nature when your nature is screaming for someone to be good to you.
- *faithfully* following your call to serve when your only results are more weeds.
- *gently* responding to someone who undermines or demeans you.
- exercising *self-control* by not succumbing to a temptation after a severely disappointing day.

When the dream of experiencing now what is reserved for us in heaven is decisively shattered and when the shattering is embraced and not fought, either we'll sink into despair or we will hope in God, and wait as faith becomes a firmer foundation and godly love a way of life.

The shattering of our deepest dream of fulfillment in the present becomes the unexpected pathway to the happiness Jesus knew during His life on earth: the happiness of trusting God, serving others, and confidently waiting for complete happiness in being reunited with God in paradise forever.

That's some fresh thought from this midsixties Christian living with an assortment of terrific blessings and uncertain challenges. It all leaves me feeling pretty good a lot of the time, though I'm often weary and sometimes unmotivated to do much of anything. But I want truth to move me through my ups and downs on the pathway to life. I want the truth of hope, sometimes unfelt, to keep me faithful and loving.

And as these thoughts slowly mature into convictions through time in the Bible, in prayer, in worship and community, I think I'll have a better chance of finishing well and not letting weariness paralyze me or futility overwhelm me. I'll have a better shot at agreeing with Paul that "everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (Philippians 3:8, NLT), of knowing Him as my Savior from sin, as the model of my vision for helping people and our culture for good, and as my strength as I walk the narrow road of faith and love that comes from the hope of heaven.

And that happiness, that joy, is available now. And it's enough to last me till then.

DR. LARRY CRABB, founder and director of NewWay Ministries  
August 2010

# A NEW WAY



Three ideas fill my mind as I write this book. The first is this: *God wants to bless us.*

At a time when every blessing the Jews expected to enjoy was taken from them, God spoke of a coming day when “I will never stop doing good to them.... I will rejoice in doing them good” (Jeremiah 32:40-41).

That day has come. God is now dealing with us in a new way. Our badness is no longer the obstacle to blessing. Nor is our goodness the condition for blessing.

In God’s new way, He blesses us just because He loves—because we’re His beloved children and He wants to reveal Himself through us. That idea fills more than my mind. It fills my heart. Let me put it even more clearly.

*There’s never a moment in all our lives, from the day we trusted Christ till the day we see Him, when God is not longing to bless us. At every moment, in every circumstance, God is doing us good. He never stops. It gives Him too much pleasure. God is not waiting to bless us after our troubles end. He is blessing us right now, in and through those troubles. At this exact moment, He is giving us what He thinks is good.*

There, of course, is the rub. He gives us what *He* thinks is good, what He *knows* is good. *We* don't always agree.

We have our own ideas about what a good God should do in the middle of our circumstances, ideas that stretch all the way from opening a space in a crowded parking lot near the mall's entrance to funding our ministry dreams to straightening out our kids to giving us a negative biopsy report.

It's those ideas that get in the way of our realizing what goodness really is. Like children, we believe a loving parent would give us ice cream without first making us eat spinach. Goodness is ice cream. It certainly isn't spinach.

But our problem is worse than that. Not only do we want what immediately feels good and often dislike what in fact is good for us, but we're also out of touch with what would bring us the most pleasure if it were given to us. There *is* a heavenly ice cream with the nutritional value of spinach. And it's available now, in this life.

That introduces the second idea that drives me as I write:

*The highest dream we could ever dream, the wish that if granted would make us happier than any other blessing, is to know God, to actually experience Him. The problem is that we don't believe this idea is true. We assent to it in our heads. But we don't feel it in our hearts.*

We can't stop wanting to be happy. And that urge should prompt no apology. We were created for happiness. Our souls therefore long for whatever we think will provide the greatest possible pleasure. We just aren't yet aware that an intimate relationship with God is that greatest pleasure.

Without knowing it, we yearn for an encounter with God that creates an experience far more intimate than any bride and groom have ever enjoyed on their wedding night, an experience with more satisfying depth than the happiest couple in history has celebrated on their fiftieth anniver-

sary. But in our foolishness we look for that experience in all the wrong places. To use biblical language, we dig broken cisterns to satisfy our thirst and walk right by the fresh spring of water that is God.

## FEEL THE EMBRACE

*God wants to bless us.* That's the first idea. Because He can't resist giving us the highest good, He's determined to give us an encounter with Himself. It's the greatest blessing He can think of. It's the highest dream the self-aware human soul envisions.

But we're not self-aware. We're out of touch with the central longing of our hearts. *An encounter with Him is what we want, but we don't know it.* That's the second idea. Let me develop it a little further.

We dream lower dreams and think there are none higher. We dream of good marriages, talented kids, enough health and money to enjoy life, rewarding work, and an opportunity to make a difference in the world.

All good things. Of course we want them. But we think they're the *best* things. That's what God means when He calls us foolish.

In the old way, when God was remote and inaccessible, it would have been difficult to imagine anything better than the blessings of life, than all those lower dreams that are legitimate goods.

But in the new way (what theologians call the New Covenant), God is present and available. He is here and now. When Jesus cried, "It is finished," the unapproachable God of intimidating holiness opened His arms and invited us to feel His embrace.

The greatest blessing is no longer the blessing of a good life. It never was. It is now the blessing of an encounter with God. It always has been. But now, in the new way, the greatest dream is available.

But we don't view things that way. So God goes to work to help us see more clearly. One way He works is to allow our lower dreams to shatter. He lets us hurt and doesn't make it better. We suffer and He stands by and does nothing to help, at least nothing that we're aware we want Him to do.

In fact, what He's doing while we suffer is leading us into the depths of our being, into the center of our soul where we feel our strongest passions.

It's there that we discover our desire for God. We begin to feel a desire to know Him that not only survives all our pain, but actually thrives in it until that desire becomes more intense than our desire for all the good things we still want. Through the pain of shattered lower dreams, we wake up to the realization that we want an encounter with God more than we want the blessings of life. And that begins a revolution in our lives.

That's the third idea. Let me express it this way:

*Our shattered dreams are never random. They are always a piece in a larger puzzle, a chapter in a larger story.*

Pain is a tragedy. But it's never only a tragedy. For the Christian, it's always a necessary mile on the long journey to joy.

The suffering caused by shattered dreams must not be thought of as something to relieve if we can or endure if we must. It's an opportunity to be embraced, a chance to discover our desire for the highest blessing God wants to give us, an encounter with Himself.

This book is an invitation to taste and see that the Lord is good even when the bottom falls out of your life. Let me repeat those three ideas that this invitation builds on:

1. *God wants to bless you.* He gets a kick out of making His children happy. He feels much the same way parents feel on Christmas morning as they anticipate watching their kids unwrap presents amid squeals of delight.

2. *The deepest pleasure we're capable of experiencing is a direct encounter with God.* In God's new way of dealing with people, He does us the most good by making Himself available to be enjoyed and by seeing to it that we seek an encounter with Him with more energy than we seek anything else.

But we almost always mistake lesser pleasures for this greatest pleasure and live our lives chasing after them. We're not in touch with our appetite for God.

3. So the Holy Spirit awakens that appetite. *He uses the pain of shattered dreams to help us discover our desire for God,* to help us begin dreaming the highest dream. Shattered dreams are not accidents of fate. They are ordained opportunities for the Spirit first to awaken then to satisfy our highest dream.

That's what's on my mind as I write *Shattered Dreams*.

What I say in this book strikes me as a Spirit-arranged and therefore fitting launch of God's call on the rest of my life. I think you'll profit more from this book if you understand the call that it begins to answer.

## MY CALL

God's Spirit has instructed me to focus my life and ministry around three words: *encounter*, *community*, and *transformation*.

I sense God's call to *encounter* Him in a way that fills my soul with more joy than any other experience and to lead others toward a similar encounter. Because I cannot arrange for that encounter to take place, I find myself pleading more these days for sovereign mercy than for well-used competence.



I sense God's call to develop and participate in a *community* where no one remains unknown, unexplored, undiscovered, or untouched; where we discover our true selves; where we realize that we really are passionate followers of Jesus; where people become spiritual friends. I want to help people across the world enjoy that kind of community. Again, in view of the enormity of the task, I am reduced to prayer more than I am prompted to strategize.

I sense God's call to better understand, practice, and teach the art of spiritual direction, which I conceive to be a Spirit-guided dialogue where deep *transformation* of the human personality occurs. I want to do whatever I can to see that no one walks alone, that every hungry person who longs to encounter God and enjoy community can find a spiritual director to guide his or her search. Manageable visions are not worthy of an unmanageable God. This one seems worthy of Him.

As never before, this call on my life has put me in touch with my inadequacy and my dependence on divine enabling. But I also recognize my responsibility to move. Convinced that God has provided us with everything we need to encounter Him, to enjoy community, and to experience personal transformation, I want to see a School of Spiritual Friendship begin that will help people more fully tap the life-giving resources available in small groups. (I use *school* not in an institutional sense but in reference to a guided, collective movement of learning and exploration.) I want to see communities develop where people are known, explored, discovered, and touched so their true selves as followers of Jesus can be released.

And I want to see a School of Spiritual Direction established to equip maturing men and women to wisely and graciously enter the interior worlds of other people in order to trace the Spirit's movement as He works to make them more like Christ. I envision people who have given up hope

of ever becoming whole experiencing a level of transformation that exceeds their wildest dreams and changing in ways that provoke observers to exclaim “Praise God!” rather than “Glad you found a good therapist.”

The first priority—the foundation for community with others and personal transformation—is an encounter with God. The new way makes that possible. It makes a way for us to draw near to God.

However your life is going—whether you’re in a season of blessing or a season of pain—I invite you to join me on this journey to joy, to live beyond shattered dreams. The road will take us through some dark nights, but you need not wait for morning to rejoice. Morning will come, but you can welcome your suffering now as an opportunity to meet God, to encounter Him with a passion that will free you to get close to a few people in authentic community and to experience genuine transformation in your personal life, especially in the way you love others.

May we trust God’s Spirit to draw on the resources of Christ to lead us into the arms of the Father, even if shattered dreams have made it seem impossible to ever dream again. That’s what the new way makes possible.

*Let the revolution begin!*

## THE PARABLE

*“What’s the world’s greatest lie?” the boy asked.*

*“It’s this: that at a certain point in our lives,  
we lose control of what’s happening to us,  
and our lives become controlled by fate.*

*That’s the world’s greatest lie.”*

—PAULO COELHO

The man’s life was pleasant. So too was his worship. The two always go together.

God was not pleased. So He allowed the man’s life to become unpleasant.

The man responded at once with shock. “How can this be? How could this happen in my life?”

Beneath the shock, the man was smug. But he could not see it. He thought it was trust. “This will soon pass. God is faithful. Life will again be pleasant.” His worship remained shallow.

God was not pleased. So He allowed more unpleasant things to happen in the man’s life.

The man tried hard to handle his frustrations well, like someone who trusted God. “I will be patient,” he resolved.

But he didn’t notice that his efforts to be patient grew out of the conviction that a pleasant life was his due. He did not hear his own heart saying, “If I’m patient, God will make things pleasant again. That’s His job.”

His worship became a way to convince God to restore his pleasant life.

God was not pleased. So He pulled back His hedge of protection around the man a little farther. The man’s life became miserable.

The man got angry. God seemed unmoved, indifferent, uncaring. Heaven's door slammed shut. The man knew he could not pry it open.

He could think only of better days—not of better days coming, but of better days before, days that no longer were and that showed no signs of returning.

His highest dreams were a return to those days, to the pleasant life he once knew, when he felt what he had called joy.

He could not imagine a higher dream than going backward to what once was. But he knew life never moved backward. Adults never become children again. Old people never recover the energy of their most productive years.

So he lost hope. God had withdrawn His blessing, and there was no indication He would change His mind.

The man fell into depression. His worship stopped.

God was not pleased. So He released the forces of hell into the man's life.

Temptations that formerly were manageable now became irresistible. The pain of living was so great that the pleasure the temptations afforded, relief really, seemed reasonable and necessary. But after the pleasure came a new kind of pain, a kind of pain that covered his soul with a fog that not even the brightest sun could penetrate.

The man could see only his pain. He could not see God. He thought he could, but the god he saw was one whose job it was to relieve pain. He could imagine this god, but he could not find him.

He addressed the only god he knew. He begged for help. Beneath his words of pleading he could almost hear what his heart was saying: "*You owe me help. I will never believe I deserved all this to happen. This pain is not my fault. It's yours.*"

His worship had always taken the form of a demand, but now the demand was so obvious the man could almost recognize it.

God was not pleased. So He let the struggles continue. And God allowed new troubles to come into the man's life.

In the part of the man's heart that dreamed his greatest dreams, he had been certain he would never have to face these new troubles that were now in his life. For years he had said in his heart (without actually hearing it), "*That* could never happen to me. If it did, my life would be over. If *that* happened, I'd have no choice but to conclude that God isn't good. I would have to dismiss God. And no one, not even God, could fault me."

But still the man could not hear his heart speak. What he could hear was a seductive voice that made the worst temptation he had ever faced—to lose hope in God—seem noble, bravely defiant, the only way left for the man to find himself.

The battle waxed hot. But a flicker of hope remained. The man held on to his faith. Even as he did, he could not hear his heart saying, "I have every right to give up on my faith. But I'm choosing the truly noble way. I still believe in You. I still believe You're there and that my highest hopes for joy—whatever hopes are left—lie with you. Does *that* impress you? If not, my God, what does?"

His worship was more desperate than ever. But it was still proud.

God was not pleased. So He allowed the man's trials to continue and his pain to remain unabated. God kept His distance from the man. He provided no comfort, no tangible reason to hope. It was difficult for God not to make everything better in the man's life. It was even more difficult for Him not to appear directly to the man and assure him of His presence.

But He didn't. God had a greater dream for the man than a return to a pleasant life. He wanted the man to find true joy. He longed to restore the man's hope for what mattered most. But still the man did not know what that was.

The fog around the man's soul thickened until he could feel it, like

walls closing in. All that was left was mystery; there was fear certainly, even terror, but more acute was the sense of mystery, the mystery of a bad life and a good God.

Where *was* He? When the man became most aware of his need for God, God disappeared. It made no sense. Was God there or not? If He was, did He care? Or didn't He?

The man could not give up on God. He remembered Jacob. So he began to fight. But he fought in the dark, a darkness so deep that he could no longer see his dreams of a pleasant life.

In deep darkness, you cannot see. But you can hear. He could hear for the first time what his heart was saying.

"Bless me!" he cried. From his deepest soul, he could hear words reflecting a resolve that would not let go of God.

"Bless me! Not because I am good, but because You are good. Bless me! Not because I deserve Your blessing, but because it is Your nature to bless. You really can't help Yourself. I appeal not to who I am. You owe me nothing. I appeal only to who You are."

He still saw his pain. But now he saw God. And the cry for blessing was no longer a demand for a pleasant life. It was a cry for whatever God wanted to do, for whoever He was. The man felt something different. It was the beginning of humility. But the very fact of what it was kept him from seeing what it was.

The man had forgotten himself and discovered his desire for God. He did not find God right away, but he had hope, hope that he might experience what his soul most deeply longed for.

Then he saw it. Fresh water bubbled up from a spring in the desert of his soul, and he saw it. It was a new dream. He could see its contours take shape. It was a dream of actually knowing God and representing Him in an unpleasant world. The dream took on a specific focus; he saw how he

could know God and represent God to others in a way that was *his* way and not someone else's. It felt like coming home.

He realized immediately that his power to speak on behalf of God to others in the midst of their unpleasant lives depended on his speaking from the midst of his own unpleasantness. He had never before felt grateful for his troubles.

His suffering became to him a doorway into God's heart. He shared God's pain in His great project of redemption. Suffering together for a single cause made him feel closer to God.

A new thought occurred to him. "I will join with whatever forces are opposed to the root of this unpleasantness. I will ally with goodness against evil. I will not wait to see more clearly; what my hand finds to do, I will do. But I will stay close to the spring. My soul is thirsty. A pleasant life is not water for my soul; whatever comes from God—whoever God is—this is the only true water. And it is enough."

The man worshiped God, and God was pleased. So God kept the water bubbling up out of the spring in the man's soul. When the man didn't drink every morning from that spring or return every evening to drink again, his thirst became intolerable.

Some things in his life got better. Some things stayed the same. Some things got worse.

But the man was dreaming new dreams, greater dreams than a pleasant life. And he found the courage to pursue them. He was now a man with hope, and his hope brought joy.

God was very pleased. So was the man.

# MY PROBLEM WITH GOD



I am one of the fortunate few. I have real friends. I can quickly name a half-dozen people with whom I would say I have a really good relationship. To be certain I'm not kidding myself, I just wrote six names on the outside of the manila folder where I'm filing the early scribblings for this book.

Now, between sips of my single-shot latte at Angel's Coffee Shop, I'm looking at the names I wrote. One impression strikes me at once with near gale force. *The friends who made the list are all friends who do something for me.* It's not what I do for them that got them on the list; it's what they do for me.

My first impulse is to feel selfish.

I can think of several people, a considerable number actually, who would speak warmly of what I do or have done for them. But they're not on the list. It's true that the six people whose names I wrote down would each say that I mean a great deal to them, but that's not why their names are on the list. I thought of them because they mean a great deal to me.



Jesus told us that it is more blessed to give than to receive. If I really believed that, maybe the names on my list would be different. Apparently, the people I'm most happy to be in relationship with are folks who give something to me, not the ones who offer me the chance to give.

The people on my list respond to my concerns. They use their resources on my behalf. When I have a need, they meet it if they can. I like that about them.

Rachael's name is at the top of my list. She knows how tired and frustrated I've felt these past few months. She scheduled me with a special kind of doctor who analyzes blood under a high-powered microscope and has helped lots of people feel better. She also found a week for us to get away and made all the arrangements. I can't imagine her withholding anything I wanted that was within her power to grant.

The same with the other five names. It's an old phrase but true: These people would do anything for me. That's why they're on my list.

## LIKE A LITTLE CHILD

So I'm left with an obvious fact. The people I most cherish in all the world are the people I can count on to do for me what I most want. I suspect if you wrote down the names of the six people whose friendship you most value, that same fact might be obvious to you.

As we ponder that fact, our immediate impulse—especially if we're Christians—is to guiltily conclude that we're therefore hopelessly mired in disgusting self-centeredness. It seems that what we most value in friendship reflects our corruption, our depraved natures.

That would be my conclusion about myself if it were not for the words

of Jesus. He told his disciples, “Anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it” (Luke 18:17).

Now the most noticeable characteristic of little children (the word Jesus used refers to very little children, to infants) is that they are takers, and often unattractive ones at that. Cornelius Plantinga Jr. points out that when Jesus uttered those words, He was *not* being sentimental. He was not saying, “Look at the little darlings. They’re so cute! Here, let me hold each one.”

No, when He rebuked His disciples for telling a crowd of parents to stop bothering Jesus with all those sick little kids, He was saying something very different. If we were there, I think we would have understood Him to mean something like this: “Nobody is more needy and has less to give than an infant. Babies never intentionally give anything of value to anyone. Sure, they can be fun to cuddle and fascinating to look at, but never because they want to be. They never look for ways to bless. They’re takers through and through, not only because they’re *selfish* (though they are) but because they’re *helpless*. Be like that! You *are* helpless, so admit it. Learn to receive what you cannot provide for yourself.” He was recommending brokenness, something we live to avoid.

Frederick Buechner wrote, “It’s not only more blessed to give than to receive, it’s also a whole lot easier.” I think I know what he means. I find it much easier to counsel than to be counseled, to reach out to a friend in my small group who is feeling insecure than to reveal my own insecurity. The truth is we don’t much like being dependent. We don’t enjoy admitting how desperately we long for someone’s kindness and involvement. It’s so humbling.

Which is precisely why Jesus said what He did. He wants us to humble ourselves, to let someone know when we could really use a hug or some

quality time, to let the Spirit know we need Him to change our hearts, to confess to our community of close friends the weaknesses we should have resolved by now.

I hear Jesus telling us to stop negotiating with Him, to stop offering something we think we have in exchange for His blessings. “What do you have that I need?” our Lord is saying. “Look, your diapers are full. You’ve been a colicky nuisance since the day you were born. And you’re clumsy to boot. Every time you toddle around the house you break something. All you can do is receive what you need from someone who has what you don’t. When you admit your emptiness, I’ll see to it you’re filled.”

When I hear Jesus tell me to be like an infant, I become more aware of how needy I am than of how selfish I am. And then, immediately, I realize how proud I am. I can’t get away from the fact of my depravity, and I can see it as my arrogant refusal to trust. I will not let anyone see my true neediness. Oh, I’ll grumble about how people treat me and whine about all the pressures I face and how lonely I feel, but I won’t simply say, “I really hurt. Would you spend time with me? Would you listen to me as I share my heart?” Suppose no one responds?

Facing that fear helps me realize that selfishness, at its root, is self-protectiveness. Our primary commitment is to make certain no one can hurt us. The best way to do that is never to be fully vulnerable.

That’s the first commandment of fallen thinking: *Trust no one and you shall live.* The second is like it: *To make life work, trust only yourself and what you can control.*

The difference between an infant and an adult is this: An infant communicates helplessness without choosing to. Her helplessness is obvious. As adults, we can hide how desperate we are for someone to care. Others will not clearly see our deepest needs unless we choose to make them

known. The seed of self-protection is in the infant; in adults, it's a full-grown weed.

My granddaughter was born with a life-threatening infection. Her needs were plain for all to see. Without proper care, she would have died. In the middle of the crisis, there was no evidence she felt even the faintest impulse to relieve her terrified parents with a smile or a wink of her tired little eye. It simply wasn't in her to care how anyone else was feeling. Her tears were always for herself, for *her* pain, never for her mother's or dad's.

But as I watched her receive the care she needed, both from good medical personnel and wonderful new parents, I saw beauty—not just in those giving the care but in the helpless infant receiving it. I wasn't offended by her neediness. Like the sun rising above the plains, it fits the order of things for a puppy with a broken leg to be carried by a child. Both giving and receiving are beautiful.

It is more blessed to give than to receive—that's true. But for needy adults, who in this respect are like sick infants, something of value must be received before anything of value can be given. Receiving always precedes giving. And that never changes. We never outgrow our need to receive. It's a beautiful thing to witness a humility that receives.

Maybe I'm humble. The six people on my list are folks who each give me some of what I need. I'm not wrong for receiving from them or for appreciating them for what I receive. If, however, I do not give out of the abundance I've received, I am wrong. And if I *demand* that I receive, rather than embrace my neediness and plead only mercy, I am wrong. Then I am not humble.

But I'm not wrong for having my most valued friends list consist of people I can count on to give me, if it's in their power to do so, what I legitimately want and need.

## GOOD DREAMS

Which brings me to my problem with God. We evangelicals speak about having a personal relationship with Jesus. We hold out the possibility of having a really good relationship with Him. If that relationship hits a snag or develops tension, we know it's always our doing. Since I was a child, I've heard the saying, "If you're not feeling close to God, guess who moved?" The message was clear: Every difficulty in our relationship with God is always our fault. It's never His.

But especially in the years since I turned fifty, that message has not always seemed so obvious. I've gone through some pretty tough times and, in the middle of them, I've positioned myself as a little child (at least I think I have). But on many occasions, including a few really big trials, God didn't do what I thought a good friend would do, especially a friend with the resources to do a lot.

Several friends of mine feel the same way.

Carl told me just this morning that he had begged God for years to make his desire for holiness stronger than his lust for pornography. It hasn't happened. He fights temptation every day. He loses a lot.

Suzanne privately wishes she had stayed with her promising career in marketing. She is fifty-two years old; her husband, Joe, is a workaholic, emotionally numb and rarely there; her three children, on balance, are more a disappointment than a joy. She knows God could have arranged for her never to meet Joe. She would have stayed with the firm that is now doing so well. God could have arranged things differently. He didn't.

Pete never knew his dad. When he came to Christ at age twenty-two, he discovered his longing for a close relationship with an older man. He expected to find one in his new circle of Christian friends. He hasn't.

Peggy is thirty-eight and single. Her job is decent, she likes her dog, and she keeps herself busy. Whenever she watches a movie where a man pursues a woman, she cries. A deep part of her heart remains untouched. She wonders why God doesn't either bring along a good man who would want her or help her to feel more fulfilled in Christ. He's done neither.

Mark always wanted to be a professor. When his dad died, he dropped out of college to support his mother and four younger siblings. He got into sales and made a lot of money. Now, at fifty-seven, he enjoys a good marriage, both his kids are happily married and well off, and Mark is positioned to retire early. His heart still aches when he dreams of a classroom in a small college. His dream will never be. When the pastor preached last Sunday on "The Courage to Dream," he told his wife he wasn't feeling well and left.

It's hard enough to develop a personal relationship with an *invisible* God, one whose voice I never hear the way I hear a friend's voice over the phone; it's even harder to feel close to an *unresponsive* God.

About a year ago I mentioned to my son who lives in Denver that my messy garage was really bugging me every time I drove into it, and I didn't have time to clean it. I asked if he might help. He spent the better part of the next day making my garage look better than it had in years. He's on the list of my six most valued friends. Both my sons are. They respond to my needs.

My wife spent all of last Sunday in her chair in our family room. She had

pulled a muscle in her back so badly that any movement generated excruciating pain. When I saw her wince and heard her cry out as she repositioned her blanket, I knelt by her chair and asked God to take away her pain. He didn't do it. He could have, but He didn't. If either of my sons had the power to end her suffering, they would have used it. So would I.

Sometimes God seems like the least responsive friend I have. It never occurred to me to put Him on my list. The name *Jesus* did not appear on the manila folder.

My problem with God extends far beyond a muscular back pain from which I expected my wife to recover in the course of time. (And she did, without any obvious help from heaven.) My real problem with God becomes apparent when long-held and deeply cherished dreams are shattered and He does nothing. And these are *good* dreams, not dreams of riches and fame, but dreams of decent health for those I love and for good relationships among family and friends.

Many of your dreams are good dreams too. You want to enjoy family life. You long for a job you really like, one that gives you opportunity to do what is important to you and to be appreciated for it. You aren't asking for great health or lots of money. But an accident the day after your car insurance lapsed, then your wife coming down with chronic fatigue syndrome—it's just too much. You want to serve God as a missionary, but you can't raise the support you need to get to the field. Your dreams are good. And you're trusting God as best you know how. But nothing is happening.

Depending on an unresponsive God in the middle of crumbling dreams can be tough on faith. Relating personally with a God who is less responsive than friends with far fewer resources is difficult.

Exactly what is God doing with all His power? At some point in your Christian life you'll be forced to admit that Jesus didn't make it on your list of responsive, valued friends. Live long enough, and dreams important to

you will shatter. Some will remain shattered. God will not glue together the pieces of every Humpty Dumpty who takes a great fall in your life.

The divorce will go through, the cancer will claim a loved one's life, the Alzheimer's will not be arrested (let alone reversed) by the latest drug. The broken friendship will not be restored despite your best efforts to reconcile. Your marriage will not be satisfying no matter how many counselors you consult or seminars you attend. Your singleness will be an intolerable burden. The budding ministry will never materialize. The lost income will not be replaced by money pouring out of heaven's windows.

You'll feel low for a long time; the dark tunnel will lengthen with no light visible at its end. Your sense of adventure will yield to dutiful drudgery. You will be miserable. Your dream of feeling alive, captivated by beauty and passionately free, will die.

And God won't do a thing. For a long time. Maybe till heaven.

That's my problem with Him. Yet He tells us He is our most responsive friend. He insists that, after giving us His Son, He would never withhold any good thing.

Then why doesn't He cure my mother's Alzheimer's? Why didn't he relieve my wife's back pain? Why doesn't He straighten out your shiftless kid and give him some direction? Wouldn't those be good things for us? Why didn't He arrange for you to get the education you wanted or steer you in a direction you'd really enjoy?

When we see things rightly, we'll write His name in capital letters at the top of our list of friends and, with the angels, bow low before Him in adoration and awe. And hope. I believe that.

But it takes some doing to see things rightly. How can we write His name at the top of our list as the most wonderful, most sensitive, and most responsive friend we've ever had when our fondest dreams shatter and He does nothing? That's the question I'll try to answer in this book.