# PRAISE FOR THE GOD OF NEW BEGINNINGS

"The more I'm around the Genesis Project guys, the more impressed I am with how they're applying the love and grace of Christ to salvage messed-up people (the kind whose worried relatives and friends call my daily radio program, *New Life Live!*, every day). I've even made the effort to travel to see this work in action. It ties directly into a heart concern of mine, which is transforming lives through God's truth in redemptive relationships."

—Stephen Arterburn, New Life Ministries founder and chairman

"Raw, gritty, practical, and inspirational, this is essential reading for anyone with a passion to bring the beautiful news to the broken. Highly recommended!"

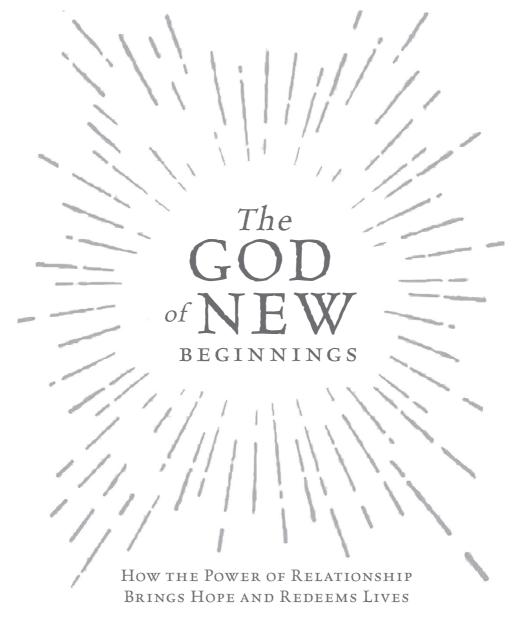
—JEFF LUCAS, INTERNATIONAL AUTHOR,
SPEAKER, BROADCASTER

"The God of New Beginnings is a piercing documentary of desperate people in desperate places who are transformed by Jesus Christ. Nothing is held back. It builds on story after story, truth after truth, faith to faith, and glory to glory. What Rob and Matt show us is raw and real. It took my breath away and challenged me to believe each day for more of God's power in my own life!"

—RICHARD FOTH, SPEAKER AND AUTHOR, KNOWN



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# ROB COWLES AND MATT ROBERTS WITH DEAN MERRILL



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# "Anybody Wanna Buy a Strip Club?"

If you follow the various best-places-to-live-in-America rankings, you would not imagine that a city as classy, beautiful, and educated as Fort Collins, Colorado, would even have a strip club. Nestled up against the majestic Rocky Mountains, with world-class ski slopes less than two hours away, its 160,000 residents enjoy more than 300 days of sunshine a year. Biking trails are everywhere, much to the delight of the 33,000 students at Colorado State University, the city's intellectual anchor.

My family and I have enjoyed the Fort Collins culture ever since 2005, when I (Rob) became executive pastor of Timberline Church, the city's largest, with more than five thousand attenders and a beautiful, expansive campus. I loved the opportunity to speak in the midweek services (as well as some weekends) while also managing a staff of a hundred. My wife, Joy, was a devoted mom to our two sons, the younger of whom was still in junior high, coming up through an excellent school system. We hardly noticed the seedy industrial area

on the northeast side of town called the Mulberry Corridor (along Mulberry Street) near Interstate 25.

One day in the spring of 2013, I got a text from our senior pastor, Dary Northrop. He mentioned a guy named Aaron, who had come around saying he had given his life to Jesus and wanted to get out of the strip club business he and his two brothers had inherited from their father. Aaron Bekkela called again and is asking me to come over and at least see the property, Dary wrote. I agreed to meet him there tomorrow afternoon. Want to come with me? I texted back a yes, not really knowing what I was getting myself into. I had never been to a strip club before, and the only time I had even passed by the Hunt Club was when I was dropping off my kids at the curiously placed roller-skating rink next door.

The next day after lunch, the two of us plus another staff pastor made our way to the establishment. There we saw a nondescript, low-slung building with a small parking lot and a dingy sign out front that read

# Hunt Club—GIRLS—GIRLS. Open Daily @ 4:00 pm. Open Friday @ Noon.

Up and down the block were various auto repair shops, a heating and plumbing contractor, and a tattoo parlor; directly behind the club was a trailer park.

Aaron, a fortyish man with red hair and a goatee, was waiting in his standard jeans and T-shirt to meet us. His personal story, I found out later, was no charade; he had been affected years before by a brief conversation one night at the end of a shift when one of his dancers had stopped by his office before leaving. Hanging around the door frame, she said, "Um, my mother asked me to give you a message."

Aaron had braced himself. Hearing from a dancer's mother could never go well, he assumed. But to his great surprise, the dancer had meekly said, "She just said to tell you, she and her friends [who happened to be Timberline women] are praying for you." This was a seed that would germinate in Aaron's life for years.

More recently, a random flyer had shown up in his mailbox promoting a Christian conference. He decided to go and ended up making a commitment to Jesus at that conference. His new life as a Christ follower prodded him to try to convince his two brothers that they should sell. He was tired of living with the tension of doing a men's Bible study in the morning and opening the club at night. He had approached several northern Colorado churches to step up and repurpose the property. He was desperate to extricate himself from this wretched livelihood. Maybe this building could even be redeemed for something positive.

One after another, the various pastors had replied, "That's an intriguing idea, and I commend you for living out your new faith in this way. But I have no idea what my church would do with a strip club!"

When he felt like there was nowhere else to turn, Aaron and his brothers tried to sell the business to another club in Denver, an hour away. In fact, they had landed a contract, but just before closing the deal, the buyer backed out with no explanation.

Now he had come knocking on Timberline's door once again.

### The Perfume of Brokenness

We followed Aaron into the dimly lit building, which was entirely quiet at that hour of the day. Immediately I noticed how utterly dirty it was. No broom, vacuum cleaner, or dustcloth had been used there

in a long, long time. Just inside the front door was a small office, and then a bar stretching along one wall. A vending machine on the left offered an array of candy bars, soda, cigarettes—and panties!

A coatrack with old, dirty housecoat-style robes caught by eye. What were those for? I found out later that when the scantily clad girls would go outside in the winter for a smoke, they'd just throw on one of those robes to keep from freezing.

Down three steps to the right was the main area, with three large floodlit stages, perhaps ten feet by twenty feet. Each had a stripper pole in the middle, and customer chairs all around. Against the back wall was a deejay booth for playing the necessary music. There was also a VIP area with its own stage and pole, where guys could pay more to have nicer furniture and their own private bathroom.

Then to the left were the alcoves, where private, one-on-one lap dances would happen, for an additional charge.

Dary, our colleague, and I were silent, trying to take everything in as Aaron gave the tour. Soon he led us back behind the deejay booth through a doorway and down a hall. Along one side were the well-stocked and locked storage cabinets filled with whiskey, gin, and other alcoholic beverages.

When we passed through a second doorway, we entered the locker room. Again, it was a dirty, nasty place with only a concrete floor. In the middle was an oversized vanity setup—a mirror some six feet long with bulb lights all around—where the dancers did their makeup before going onstage. Surrounding on all sides were rows and rows of metal lockers.

I was stunned as I stared at several with pictures of children taped onto the metal doors. Who were the boys and girls in these photographs? In another moment it hit me: these were the kids these women were trying to feed and clothe by working in this place.

A knot began to tighten in my throat. Here, behind the scenery of what men viewed as a sensuous house of glamour, was the total opposite. A lot of these women came here night after night trying to hold their lives together.

The room reeked of a certain overused perfume. (To this day,

if I pick up that scent from any woman wearing that brand, it puts a tear in my eye.) I learned later that in the winter, the room wasn't adequately heated, so the dancers would shiver until they could get out onto the stages. In the summer the air-conditioning (actually, just a "swamp cooler") didn't work.

Nearby was another smaller locker room for the girls with the most seniority, where they had their own private bathroom. And finally, there was the manager's office. A knot began to tighten in my throat. Here, behind the scenery of what men viewed as a sensuous house of glamour, was the total opposite.

## **A Crazy Notion**

We were speechless as we followed Aaron back through the main room and toward the entrance. Again, I stared at the stages, the poles, the lounge chairs. I shuddered at the thought of men my age sitting around drinking and ogling *somebody's daughter*, *sister*, *granddaughter*, *wife*, *mom*dIt just wrecked me on the inside.

"Well, Aaron, we will think and pray about this," Dary finally said, shaking his hand. At least I think that's what he said; my brain was churning. We then turned toward our car and got inside. As

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Dary started the engine, he looked at me and noticed tears in my eyes. I looked at him and uttered one sentence, my voice cracking as I spoke:

"Dary . . . we have to do this, and I want to put my name in the hat to lead it."

I hadn't thought through the ramifications. I hadn't calculated how much money this would require. I hadn't weighed what it would mean, here at age forty-nine, for my very comfortable (and desirable) career at Timberline, where I enjoyed a great deal of respect as well as flexibility. Good grief, I hadn't even yet talked to my wife about this.

Plus, I'd never planted a church before. My entire ministerial career had been in established congregations. But I knew this had to happen.

Dary stared at me for a moment, his face a puzzlement. The first word out of his mouth was "Really?"

"Yeah," I replied. Thereafter, the car was mostly quiet as we drove back to our well-furnished, handsomely carpeted offices. I walked up to my second-floor office, looked out the expansive windows across the Fort Collins horizon, and then picked up my phone to call my wife. She was two hours south in Colorado Springs, taking care of her father, whose late-stage cancer was worsening by the week.

"Honey, I need to tell you what's been happening here," I began. I described the building, the possibility of starting something entirely new there, and how moved I had been by it all.

She and I had received previous inquiries from other congregations in the past few years to come be their senior pastor, but we had never felt led to follow up. This, however, was very different. In a way it tied in to our early years in youth ministry when I'd led a

weekly Bible study at the local juvenile detention center. A number of kids had gotten saved. Once discharged, these gang members and their friends had started showing up in our youth group meetings at the church, to the point that we had to have a police officer on hand just for safety's sake. (Some of the clean-cut church kids and their mothers were a bit unnerved by all this.)

Now Joy, who had loved this ministry to kids on the edge, replied, "Well, to be honest, what you're talking about sounds terrifying. But God might be in this." We said we would talk more about the possibility as soon as she came back to Fort Collins.

Meanwhile, Dary and I kept talking about my crazy notion. We wrote down Aaron's asking prices: \$720,000 (driven by an earlier appraisal) for this dilapidated 7,300-square-foot building in the Mulberry Corridor, plus another mandatory \$300,000 for the business itself to compensate them for lost revenue.

In a couple of weeks Dary reached out to some key donors at Timberline. We described what we had seen on the tour and talked about how God might redeem this dark place in our city, turning

it into a beacon of light. Their hearts were moved as they began to see the vision of what could be. Their generosity could make it possible to purchase the building and buy out the business.

While we were grateful for this breakthrough, Joy and I knew we still had a long way to go. The renovation costs would be high, and we would need to raise money for start-up and operating costs. But we knew God was calling us to reach broken, hurting people, including those who God was calling us
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including those
who patronized
the Hunt Club as
well as those who
worked there.

patronized the Hunt Club as well as those who worked there. We wouldn't scare them off with the word *church*. Instead, we would call it the Genesis Project—"a place of new beginnings."

Over the spring and summer hundreds of people from Timberline Church gave sacrificially through a giving campaign toward this new endeavor, thanks to the leadership of Dary Northrop. It was clear God was up to something.

# Closing the Deal

My last day at Timberline was September 30, a few weeks after the papers had been signed. The actual closing of the club had been awkward, to say the least. Aaron's brother, who was running the club while Aaron did the bookkeeping, called everyone together at 2:00 a.m. on a Saturday night (actually, early on a Sunday morning), as they were changing clothes and getting ready to leave.

"Hey, everybody, I have something to tell you," he announced. "It's all over. My brothers and I have sold this building, and we're closing—as of right now. You can come back tomorrow afternoon and clean out your lockers."

Whaaat? Dancers, bartenders, and waitstaff were shocked. They had gotten no warning that their income was lurching to a halt. Some of them had been pulling down good money—a lot of it in cash (through tips) and therefore untaxed. Now what would they do?

My heart was broken. We wanted this church to help people, not hurt them. But to them, I was the cause of putting them out on the street. No doubt they hated me and everything I stood for at that moment. They couldn't just go and get hired at another strip club across town; there weren't any. What could they do?

Some of them headed off to clubs in Denver, or Cheyenne, Wyoming, about forty-five minutes north. But others couldn't see their way clear to leave town. My friend Mark Orphan, missions pastor at Timberline (who now serves as executive pastor at the Genesis Project in Fort Collins), found a donor who was willing to give a large sum of money to help former employees with the transition. When our offer was extended, some twenty of them took us up on it, allowing us to help with everything from rent and utilities to groceries, counseling, and even tuition for going back to school.

Aaron told me at one point—with tears—that in earlier years, while his father was still alive, his job had been to recruit good-looking coeds from CSU. "I had the spiel down better than any door-to-door salesman," he said regretfully. "I told them that they could graduate debt-free by working just a few nights a week. Some of them would, but I knew most would end up dropping out of school, sucked into the vacuum of the business, destroying their futures."

Though the club had very strict policies against drugs and prostitution, there were still drug sales that happened. A former dealer who sold drugs at the club attends our church now, and former dancers have told me that sometimes dancers would go home with clients.

The three brothers each received \$100,000 from the proceeds of the business. Aaron promptly turned around and donated his slice back to Timberline—even though he and his wife were hardly making ends meet themselves. He had enrolled in a master's degree program at Colorado Christian University to study counseling, while his wife was also in school. They had needed to sell their home and downsize into a place that had no Wi-Fi; they shared a laptop between them. But they were committed to pursuing a new life in Jesus, regardless of the cost.

## Turning On the Light

The building became for us a metaphor of what God might do in people's broken lives. He would take all that was dirty, ugly, and shameful, redeeming it for a great kingdom purpose. The remodeling took all of 2014 and cost around \$650,000, as we pretty much had to gut the building and start over, with all-new electrical, heating, and air-conditioning systems. It would have cost even more than that amount had it not been for wonderful contractors and subcontractors who donated material, or labor, or both. A drywall company owned by a Christian believer did the whole drywall job—then wrote us a check for 100 percent of his profit. I was amazed.

Here in this run-down, beat-up, shadowy place where so many dreams had died, God was getting ready to turn on the light of the good news. I had men coming to me with tears in their eyes saying things like "I'm so thankful for what this place is becoming . . . because I lost my marriage here."

One young man, a student at CSU, had been married just two years when a friend had invited him to a bachelor party at the Hunt

The building became for us a metaphor of what God might do in people's broken lives.

Club. That very first night, he was smitten with one of the dancers. He eventually left his wife to marry the girl. Both of them soon got addicted to methamphetamines. He started selling, got arrested, and wound up in prison for a term. Once he was released, he and the dancer had a child together, but soon thereafter divorced.

Eventually he came to faith in Jesus. He made a point to come and tell me, "This place stole ten years of my life. Now I'm so very grateful it's been redeemed for something good."

## No Pit Too Deep

While all the remodeling was going on, I was busy assembling what I called a "launch team" of people who could help once we moved in. We met for a full year in a coffee shop in Old Town, the trendy strip of boutiques, cafés, antique shops, and confectionaries along both sides of College Avenue just north of the CSU campus.

During that year, I worked hard at persuading well-intentioned "church people" *not* to come along with us. I didn't want the Genesis Project to be viewed simply as "Timberline North" even though Timberline was being very generous to help us with operating costs. This ministry, however, would not be a good fit for people looking for just another branch of a megachurch, with everything functioning well and in order. Our work was going to be unavoidably "messy."

In fact, I kept hammering the point that *all* of us were in some ways messy and broken. This new venture could *not* be a place where nice, respectable, well-organized Christians did their bit for the "less fortunate." There would be no *us* versus *them* at the Genesis Project. We all needed to admit that we stood in equal need of God's grace.

So people came and went during that year. The ones who stayed—some eighty or ninety individuals—truly bought into our values. They believed with all their hearts that God could redeem messed-up lives. They embraced the theology of the famous quote attributed to Betsie ten Boom, who died in a Nazi concentration camp in late 1944, but not before speaking this line to her sister Corrie: "There is no pit so deep that He is not deeper still."

As our intent became more widely known (the local newspaper even did a feature on it), people in need began to drop by the coffee shop gatherings. I found myself struggling at times to express to them the hope that could be found in Jesus while simultaneously prepping my launch team of established Christians. Regardless, a number of visitors came to Jesus during that year. I even baptized some of them in a horse trough!

One young woman was invited by a friend. She had endured a horribly abusive childhood; in fact, her mother was certifiably insane. Nobody in her family went to church; her parents hated church.

She never forgot the day when she was thirteen years old, huddling in her darkened room to muffle the yelling and fighting in the rest of the house. In that moment she heard an audible voice: *Life is going to be hard for you. But when you turn twenty-seven, a man will come into your life, and he will change everything.* 

She assumed that if she could just hang on for fourteen more years, she would get married, and all would be better.

Daily life continued to spiral out of control for her. She was terribly insecure. One bright moment popped up in her senior year of high school, when a popular guy asked her to go to the prom. She was surprised and elated. She came up with a fancy dress. But by the end of the night, he had date-raped her. He never spoke to her again.

Years later a friend invited her to our coffee shop gathering. On her second Sunday I preached something about the love of God. (I honestly don't remember the sermon, but she can tell you the exact Scripture verse.) She remembers, "All of a sudden, it made sense to me. I prayed that day to give my life to Jesus."

She was twenty-seven years old.

"I had no idea," she told me later, "that the 'man' who would come into my life would be Jesus!"

Today she works as a county probation officer and is married to a wonderful man.

This kind of transformation has kept happening ever since.

We moved into the building and started services (double services) on February 8, 2015. My good friend and coauthor of this book, Matt Roberts, came over from Utah to speak that day. A year later the two services became three.

Meanwhile, ministry throughout the week has blossomed in and around our building. For example, we do a thing called "Kids' Café" so that low-income children from the adjacent trailer park and elsewhere who qualify for reduced- or no-cost lunches during the school year can come our way throughout the summer for a midday meal. They freely laugh and play in that same parking lot where crimes once went down.

During the school year, these same kids are dropped off at our building after classes to get homework help (and a snack) until Mom or Dad returns from work. It's a partnership we've set up with another nonprofit in the city called the Matthews House. I have to tell you, I honestly love this ministry, even when I'm driving back to our building in the midafternoon and get stuck behind that school bus!

When I talk about the work these days, I sometimes get frustrated when I choke up. But I've never been happier in my life, and neither has Joy. I told her long ago, "I simply have to be a part of something that makes me cry when I talk about it."

There's a scripture that absolutely nails it for me, where the apostle Paul wrote, "I am *obligated* [the old King James Version puts it even more bluntly, "I am *debtor*"] both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish." Yes, some people do foolish things with their lives. They make foolish choices. They should have known better. But I believe I'm *obligated* to them. I *owe* them something. Like Paul went on to explain, I owe them

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"the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes."

Whether people shoot themselves in the foot repeatedly or only seldom, they all—we all—can find hope and new life in Jesus. He is, indeed, the doorway to new beginnings.



# IMMERSED IN A MESSY WORLD

Can any of us imagine what it must have been like for the pure, holy, righteous, immaculate Son of God to leave heaven and come down to a disgusting, messed-up, unfair, diseased, broken world?

And not just for a weekend speaking tour. Jesus came here to *live* and, eventually, to die. One popular paraphrase of John 1:14 puts it this way: "The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood."

Couldn't he at least have hovered overhead at a safe distance? Surely the God of the universe could have chosen a more sterile route to save his fallen, rebellious, broken creation.

No. He settled in. He grew up, day upon day, year after year, in a dusty corner of the oppressive Roman Empire. He saw from an early age all that was wrong, so wrong, about society. He watched people ruining both their own lives and the lives of others. He heard the cries of pain, despair, and anger.

### PART ONE: A GOD FOR MESSY PEOPLE

Then came the day when, as a young adult, he chose to go public in his hometown synagogue. He stood up and declared his manifesto, his reason for even being on this planet, by reading from the prophet Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor.<sup>2</sup>

So *that's* what the incarnation was about: declaring good news to the poor, binding up the brokenhearted, proclaiming freedom to captives (fill in here whatever entrapment or addiction you want), and releasing prisoners out of darkness.

He did it time and again. When people criticized him for having dinner at the house of a tax collector, he said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." When he showed up in Jericho to the applause of adoring crowds, he didn't seem to be waving and smiling; instead, he was scanning the tree branches for the short little rip-off artist whom everyone despised. On the spot, he invited himself to Zacchaeus's house for a meal, explaining at the end, "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

He told a story about a fancy banquet to which a number of nice, respectable people were invited. Several of them, however, just couldn't manage to clear their busy calendars and show up. The frustrated host got so ticked off that he ordered, "Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame. . . . so that my house will be full."5

### Out of the Christian Cul-de-Sac

Let's get honest and admit that many of us who were raised in churches—well-organized, nicely equipped, growing churches—don't do *messy* very well. We've been conditioned to want a safe environment that keeps evil out—what Gary Haugen, the Harvard-trained attorney who now leads International Justice Mission, calls "the Christian culde-sac." This is where "we tend to imagine most people live like us. We know life has struggles, but we figure most go about their days like we do, keeping our kids healthy and safe, advancing in our jobs, tidying up our yards, enjoying the holidays, hanging out with friends."

Cul-de-sacs were designed by suburban planners to create safety for kids. If there were no through traffic, they reasoned, children would be better served. But after decades of experience, the statistics

show that more children are hit by cars backing out of driveways than by cars going forward on the street. Some cities are now prohibiting cul-de-sacs in their new developments because they've been proven, in fact, to be dangerous.

Is this a metaphor for many of our Christian congregations? Are we perhaps at risk of spiritual atrophy because we've shielded ourselves from people not like us?

Tim Keller, award-winning author

Let's get honest and admit that many of us who were raised in churches—well-organized, nicely equipped, growing churches—don't do messy very well.

and New York City pastor, has given a YouTube talk in which he says succinctly that many of us are not, as Jesus said in his opening sentence of the Sermon on the Mount, "poor in spirit." We're more "middle-class in spirit." That's just the way we perceive and define ourselves. We believe we bring something to the table, as though Jesus didn't have to work as hard to rescue us as he does for some of those *other* people. We naturally like feeling successful and being around other successful people.

But when we recognize our own spiritual bankruptcy, it changes how we view other people. *None* of us can pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. It took the same sacrifice at Calvary to rescue you and me as it took to rescue the lowest drug addict.

Many of us face a constant temptation to make the American dream synonymous with the mission of God's kingdom. It's hard to lay aside our cultural baggage and take Jesus (the renegade) at face value. Be honest: Would you want to associate with the group of believers in Corinth, of whom Paul said, "Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. . . . God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him." 10

Moving into messy places is not natural. It's against everything we've been taught to do. It certainly wasn't what I (Matt) and my lovely bride had in mind coming up through ministerial training in the late 1990s. We had both grown up in stable Christian families that took us to solid churches every week. Now we were being educated in how to make a church grow. It seemed like all of us ambitious Bible college students were laser-focused on getting our diplomas and landing positions at the biggest churches that would have us, so we could work our way up to be lead pastors of the largest

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churches possible. I honestly remember one guidance counselor telling me, "You don't want to start out at a small, struggling church because that's just going to stifle the trajectory of your career in the ministry."

Sure enough, as graduation neared, Candice and I were flown out to my home church in Colorado to interview for the youth pastor position. So far, so good. The offer was extended, and we readily said yes. This would be the first stepping-stone toward our future.

We had already made a U-Haul reservation when the phone rang. "I'm so sorry," said the senior pastor, "but something has changed here. I've decided to resign my position at this

None of us can pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps.

It took the same sacrifice at Calvary to rescue you and me as it took to rescue the lowest drug addict.

church, and so I need to rescind the offer for you to join our staff. That's a decision that should be left to the next senior pastor."

Oh. Now what? We hadn't sent out any other résumés. All our eggs were in this one basket.

In the course of time my uncle, the pastor of an inner-city church in Portland, Oregon, reached out to us (took pity on us!) and invited us to come do youth ministry there. "This is a 'building' situation," he explained diplomatically, "and we're just trying to make a difference in this community." The congregation wasn't exactly flourishing, I knew, and Portland was the cultural opposite of the Bible Belt, for sure. But with excitement and a little bit of fear, we accepted.

We rolled into town and rented a row house just off busy Southeast Eighty-Second Avenue, a very mixed neighborhood. One

day Candice walked down to the nearby grocery store to pick up some things. On her way back a homeless man began following her and talking to her. The faster she walked, the more aggressive his remarks became. He followed her right up the front steps and into our living room! Fortunately I was home that day. He was high on some drug, but I didn't know that at the time.

Our evening form of entertainment became looking out the front window as the police's paddy wagon rolled up and parked each night, sending out a young female officer dressed seductively to elicit customers. Within minutes the other cops would start snagging johns and filling up the vehicle. When they had arrested six or seven—a van full—they'd drive off to the nearby precinct station to book them on solicitation charges. The next night they'd be back again.

This neighborhood obviously had its brokenness.

### **A Tentative Start**

For my church responsibilities, I had arrived with a series of youth messages all set to deliver at the Wednesday night meetings. The only trouble was, there weren't any teenagers! We'd get set up for a seven o'clock start, and it would be just the two of us, plus maybe a couple of young twentysomethings who came to "encourage us." Across the street from the church was a group home for the developmentally disabled, and some of them would come. Not exactly the crowd that would draw high school students to attend.

Desperate to make contacts, I decided to volunteer at the high school three blocks away. This school was not exactly the cream of the city's roster, so they were glad to have somebody willing to coach

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freshman wrestling for free. Candice and I started to meet kids, show them love, and bring them lots of pizza.

What we quickly came to realize was that these weren't "bad" kids; they were simply reflections of the broken families and the broken world in which they lived. I was both amazed and appalled to learn that some of these kids—as young as fourteen—were basically living at home alone. They had no reason to be interested in church. But they responded to us as people. We didn't have to be cool. We just showed them we cared. And when we told them about our Wednesday night thing, they said, "Sure, why not?"

Whenever I spoke, I kept repeating the point that "Jesus *loves* you! When nobody else out there cares about you, guess what: You *do* have a Father in heaven. He's always on your side, watching over you and taking care of you."

Some of them would wander into the church as early as 3:45 in the afternoon, as soon as school was out. They'd do homework or just hang out until the evening meeting—after which I'd need to give them a ride home in the church's

sixteen-passenger van. Their parents were obviously not going to come pick them up.

One night still sticks in my memory. It was late—past ten o'clock—when we got to Tara's place. Tara was around fifteen years old. As soon as we rounded the corner, we saw police lights flashing. They had set up a barricade around her house because her stepdad was holding a gun to her mom's head, threatening to kill her and then himself.

An officer came out to talk to Tara.

They had no reason to be interested in church. But they responded to us as people. We didn't have to be cool.

We just showed them we cared.

He assured her that her two younger sisters had been extracted from the house and were safe in a squad car. Now they were trying to get the stepdad to drop the weapon.

My first instinct was, Oh, this is so terrible! I've got to console this poor girl.

She looked blankly at me with an attitude of, *Eh... it happens all the time. Here we go again. He won't actually kill her. He never does.* 

The police officer said to Tara, "Can you take your little sisters with you?"

"Yeah," she replied in a deadpan tone. "I'll take them."

As the officer turned away, I couldn't help asking, "Where are you going to go?"

"I don't know," she murmured. "I'll figure something out."

"Why don't you guys come with me?" I said. "We'll help you." And so we ended up with three young girls on couches in the church's youth room that night.

Today, I'm glad to report, Tara is an incredible young woman who loves Jesus. In fact, she's married to my cousin.

### "You Gotta Hear This!"

Candice and I had become immersed in this world of chaos and need. Four of my young wrestlers started coming to Wednesday night meetings. Pretty much the first time I gave an altar call, all four of them promptly got up and came forward, almost like a pack. Soon they were crying and praying at the front.

From that point onward, they would grab their friends at school and say, "Hey, you're coming to church with us. You gotta come hear this!" They didn't even give the kid a choice in the matter. Before we

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knew it, the auditorium was filling up . . . a hundred kids, then two hundred, then three hundred. It was crazy.

One time they brought the roughest, toughest guy in school, the captain of the football team. And when I got to the climax of my message and called for response, the four wrestlers said to him, "All right—come on. You're going up there!" The next thing I knew, this big hulk of a kid was bawling his eyes out, giving himself to Jesus, while his nose was leaking like a sieve.

It got to the point that kids would say to me, "Hey, I want to preach next week." Really? Sure enough, they would get up and try to explain the gospel to their peers. It wasn't polished, but kids would respond just the same.

In 2001, we chose to do a See You at the Pole event in early September, when kids would gather for prayer around the school flagpole before classes started. Four hundred kids showed up.

The very next week brought the shock of September 11. On the West Coast (three hours behind New York and Washington), we awoke to the awful news reports. At first, I thought it might be an elaborate hoax, but I learned it was all too real as the morning crawled on. We were sitting together as a small church staff, huddled around a TV, taking in every bit of news, when my phone rang. It was the assistant principal at the high school.

"Pastor Matt," he said in a troubled voice, "will you come over and speak to our students?"

I took a deep breath, trying to think of how to respond. In the back of my mind, I knew how secular the Portland public schools were, how wary of anything religious. Finally I said, "Actually—I don't know how to do that. Given the restrictions, I have nothing to say. I can't."

He wouldn't accept that. "You come," he insisted. "I need you here." So I headed for the school, where I found the entire student

body gathered on the bleachers in the gym. Kids were staring into space, of course, wondering what had just happened to their world. The room was much quieter than normal.

The assistant principal went to the microphone. "Okay, everyone," he said, "listen up. All teachers will be dismissed now to go to [room such-and-such]; we're going to have a staff meeting. While we're away, I have asked Matt Roberts to be here today and share a few words with our students."

I honestly cannot remember what I said that day. Something about hope—where does it come from on a day like this? I think I eventually got around to saying, "This is your opportunity to find ways to make a difference in our messed-up world. In fact, God created you for a larger purpose." And then I prayed that God would calm our fears and help our ravaged country.

There was never a time when my wife and I looked at each other and said we had changed—but we had. The needs of that community became ours. We stayed there for four and a half years, during which time our first two sons were born. We were entirely swept up in connecting with needy teenagers and their messed-up families.

When church members would occasionally complain to me about stains on the sanctuary carpet or cigarette butts in the parking lot, I would just smile and say, "Yes—I know! Isn't it awesome?"

# Finding Our Place

The point when Candice and I *did* notice our change of perspective was when we moved from Portland to Denver for seminary and I took an associate pastor position at a suburban church. It wasn't a

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bad church by any measure. But one of my jobs was to call on first-time visitors. They would quiz me with things like, "Well, what do you have for \_\_\_\_\_\_?" and "What kind of programs are you running for \_\_\_\_\_\_?" They were basically church shopping, and I felt like a salesman trying to coax them back to our door.

I would literally go home and cry to my wife, "We messed up! I hate doing this!" Those two years are still mostly a blur in my memory. Both of us could hardly wait to get back in touch with needy people.

In 2006, through an unusual series of events, we landed in Ogden, Utah, a city of some eighty thousand people on Interstate 15, up north from Salt Lake City. This became the seedbed for planting a new kind of ministry—"a church for people who don't do church," we said. We're still there today. Some people have wondered if clean-cut, decent Utah, with its well-ordered Mormon majority, even has broken people in need. Ogden is the early home of such notables as J. Willard Marriott, of hotel fame, and also Donny and Marie Osmond. But the truth is, *every* community across the nation, no matter how prestigious, has a soft underbelly of dysfunction and pain—as the stories throughout the rest of this book will illustrate.

We didn't bother digging out old how-to-plant-a-church books and lecture notes. We just started loving the people whom nobody else wanted to love. And we found that when we immersed ourselves in the world of those who were desperate and hurting, they spread the word. We didn't have to advertise. We didn't have to buy bill-boards or TV commercials. We didn't have to think up clever ways to invite people to church. We just represented the face of Jesus to those who were a hot mess.

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In so doing, we joined with what Jesus said about his mission that day in the Nazareth synagogue. If he had kept reading further in Isaiah 61, he would have come to these words:

To comfort all who mourn,
and provide for those who grieve in Zion—
to bestow on them a crown of beauty
instead of ashes,
the oil of joy
instead of mourning,
and a garment of praise
instead of a spirit of despair.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
a planting of the LORD
for the display of his splendor.

They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations.<sup>11</sup>

Broken people today, beneath their drugs and rap sheets and alcoholism and conflicted relationships, are in mourning. Their lives are a pile of ashes. In many cases they have been long "devastated for generations."

Jesus comes into their reality to bring "a crown of beauty . . . the oil of joy . . . a garment of praise." He is (to use a title to which we church folks have become almost numb) the *Redeemer*. He takes back what has been scuffed up and makes it shine again.

# Close Enough to Touch

One of the most over-the-top scenes in the ministry of Jesus was when a leper approached him for healing. His highly contagious disease made him isolated in the ancient world; no one dared to get near him. But Scripture says, "Jesus reached out his hand and *touched* the man." He didn't just speak to him from ten yards away. He made himself ceremonially unclean by actually putting his fingers on rotting, oozing flesh.

This man had not known the sensation of human touch for years. Now, in a moment, Someone came close to him with healing, cleansing power. His life was revolutionized that day.

Sometimes a curious child will ask you or me, "Where is Jesus right now?" The answer, of course, is that he's everywhere (the theological term is *omnipresent*). Well, then, what's the implication for those of us who call ourselves Christ followers? He spelled it out clearly when he said, "Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be."<sup>13</sup>

Into the messiness of broken people's lives? Yes.

We do not go alone, of course. We go with divine empowerment. Paul Borthwick in his book *Great Commission*, *Great Compassion* makes an enlightening comment about Acts 1:8, in which Jesus said the Holy Spirit would propel the disciples to "be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Borthwick defines "Samaria" in the following way:

Those who are geographically near but culturally distant, including those we have been taught to fear or even hate. Who are our Samaritans? For some it's undocumented immigrants. For

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others it could be prisoners or former prisoners. Some fear or hate people from other religions—especially those who we might assume are "radical" or extremists. And for many it's the LGBT community.<sup>14</sup>

In other words, people who are nearby but not exactly like us. People whom Jesus came to reach and change. People whom Jesus loves. His power is more than up to the task. We get the privilege of plunging into the world's muck along with him and making an eternal difference.