

IT'S NEVER TOO LATE TO BECOME
THE PERSON YOU WERE MEANT TO BE

UNFINISHED

FILLING THE HOLE IN OUR GOSPEL



RICHARD STEARNS

PRESIDENT, WORLD VISION U.S. and AUTHOR of *the* NATIONAL BESTSELLER
THE HOLE IN OUR GOSPEL

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RICHARD STEARNS



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TO THE *FINISHERS*—
my thousands of World Vision colleagues
who labor so faithfully every day:

- that the love of Christ may be seen and felt by those with eyes to see, and
- that the truth of the gospel may be heard by all with ears to hear.

And to all those who have given sacrificially, loved unconditionally, and served Christ with humility . . . Those who have “left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields” for Jesus’ sake . . . Those who have gone to the broken places and the ragged edges of our world to seek the lost and to serve “the least of these” . . . Those who long for a day when they will hear the promised words:

“Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.” (Matt. 25: 34–36)

They,

- who have laid down their lives,
 - who have loved what Jesus loves,
 - who have treasured what Jesus treasures, and
 - who have obeyed what Jesus taught.

They are the *Finishers*.

And this gospel of the kingdom will be
preached in the whole world as a testimony to
all nations, and then the end will come.

—MATTHEW 24:14

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few.”

—MATTHEW 9:35–37

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!”

—ROMANS 10:14–15

As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.

—JOHN 20:21

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years I have had the opportunity to meet and speak personally to thousands of people as I have traveled around the globe on behalf of the world's poorest people. Many of them have come up to me to tell me a bit about their own lives and how they have sought to put their faith into action. There is a powerful common thread of longing that I hear from them—a yearning for a deeper sense of purpose and significance in their walks with the Lord. They want to discover that *one thing* that God is calling them to do. They long to feel that they are doing something important for God and that their lives really count for something. Many of them tell me they feel incomplete, as if something about their lives is unfinished. They are young and old, male and female, wealthy and not so wealthy. They are lawyers and real estate agents, homemakers and students, accountants and engineers, receptionists and CEOs. All of them want to experience the satisfaction of really knowing that their lives matter and that they are living in “the zone” of God’s calling and purpose for their lives. They want to feel complete and whole, living lives in which their faith is integral and not just something they do on Sundays.

But if I have learned anything about the purpose, meaning, and

significance of life over the years, I have learned, for a Christian, it is not found in any job, even a job like mine. It is not found in any human relationship, no matter how important. Nor is it found in any accomplishment, no matter how significant. Meaning, purpose, and significance are found only by aligning our lives with God's purposes, in lives committed to following Jesus Christ. That bears repeating: *The meaning, purpose, and significance of our lives are found only by aligning our lives with God's purposes, in lives committed to following Jesus Christ.*

In other words, it is not our work that brings purpose to our lives, nor is it our spouses, families, educations, abilities, money, or accomplishments.

SO WHY IS IT
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IS MISSING.

Rather, it is the *purpose* of our lives that brings meaning to everything else. And we find that purpose only in Christ. Jesus said, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10). So why is it that so many Christians seem to lack that sense of fullness of life? They go to church, read their Bibles, and say their prayers but still feel something is missing.

We all know the familiar expression "He can't see the forest for the trees." It is used to describe a person who is so absorbed in the things right in front of him that he has lost a sense of the bigger picture. I believe this is exactly what has happened to many Christians in the twenty-first century—we have become so absorbed by the "trees" of our everyday lives that we have lost a sense of the bigger story within which our lives take place. We grow up, go to school, begin careers, get married, have kids, and struggle daily with life's challenges. These are the trees of our lives that occupy most of our waking hours.

Our church lives are not all that different. We go to church each week, sing some songs, and listen to a sermon. Maybe we even pray before meals, read our Bibles daily, and participate in small-group Bible studies. But they can become just more trees in a life already cluttered with trees. What

happened to the forest; what happened to the bigger story? Who are we? Why are we here, and where are we headed? How do we fit into God's big story? A hiker who no longer has a sense of the bigger landscape around him becomes lost and confused, often wandering in circles because he is disoriented and no longer knows where he has come from or where he is headed. If we are ever truly going to find purpose and meaning in our lives, we first have to rise above the trees to rediscover the forest—we have to understand what God is doing in the world and how we fit in.

Fortunately, as Christians we have a way out of this dilemma. If God is the Author of the bigger story within which our own stories take place, if he is the Creator of the forest in which we all walk, then we can find the deepest meaning and purpose of our lives only when we discover the role he uniquely created for us to play in his bigger purpose. Doesn't it make sense that the Author of the bigger story, the Author who created each of the characters in the story, would have a specific role for each of those characters to play?

GOD CREATED YOU
INTENTIONALLY
TO PLAY A VERY
SPECIFIC ROLE IN
HIS UNFOLDING
STORY.

The implication of this is profound. God created you intentionally to play a very specific role in his unfolding story. God didn't create any extras meant to just stand on the sidelines and watch the story unfold; he created players meant to be on center stage. And you will feel fully complete only when you discover the role you were born to play.

So just what is that unfolding story in which we are to play our parts? How do we discover it? Mary and Joseph played their parts. So did Peter, Paul, Luke, and John. But now, two thousand years after the resurrection, we seem to have lost the plot. Where are we now in the bigger narrative, and what is it that we are supposed to be doing?

As the title of this book suggests, there is some unfinished business for followers of Christ in our world:

“And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.” (Matt. 24:14)

This plain statement by Jesus in Matthew 24 lays out a simple premise: once the “gospel of the kingdom” has been satisfactorily taken throughout the world, the end will come. Jesus’ promise that the end would come was not a bad thing. He was dangling a very large carrot in front of his church. He was referring to his grand promise to reconcile all things, to right every wrong, to wipe away every tear, to raise the dead to eternal life, to judge the wicked, to restore his creation, and to establish his wonderful kingdom forever and ever. He was promising to tie up all the loose ends of the big story and bring it to its amazing conclusion. But before all of this happens, Jesus called his followers to complete a crucial assignment he gave to them just before he left.

This assignment Jesus gave to the disciples just before his ascension appears in several key New Testament passages and is generally referred to as the Great Commission. It was revolutionary in its vision. It involved going into all the world to establish and build a different kind of world order—one that Jesus often called the kingdom of God. It was a clarion call to follow him by joining him in his mission to reconcile humankind to God’s purposes. At its essence it was not a call to simply believe the right things; instead, it was a call to action to join God in his intent to form a new kind of kingdom that would become a blessing to all nations—one based not on land, politics, power, and dominion but on God’s truth, love, forgiveness, and compassion—a kingdom within kingdoms. It was not a call to give up on the world, now holding our “tickets to heaven” firmly in our hands and retreating into our churches. It was a call to go into the world to reclaim, reform, and restore it for Christ. It was a call to launch a revolution that involved nothing short of the overthrow of the prevailing world system. And before Jesus left, he commissioned his church to lead this revolution, promising that the very gates of hell would not prevail against it.

It is not an overstatement to say that the sole reason the church exists at all is to carry out this assignment; for once it is completed, the church will be dissolved into God’s eternal kingdom. Once the revolution is won, the revolutionaries are no longer needed. These were the marching orders that Jesus gave to his disciples. It was the single goal he gave them

to accomplish. He told them he would return when the job was finished; and then Jesus left.

Those first disciples were on fire. Nothing could stop them. The gospel had implications they understood. Within three hundred years, the gospel revolution had conquered the Roman Empire and changed the known world. Their radical lifestyles were characterized by a sense of urgency and divine purpose. Nothing was more important, and no price was too high to pay. Many of the first disciples were martyred for the cause, and others rose to pick up the banner and lead the charge. But two thousand years later the Christian movement, especially in the global North, has lost its sense of urgency. We have lost a sense of the plot and the big story—the arc of history. Affluent, comfortable, and distracted, Christians today seem to have lost the fire to change the world. The work of God’s kingdom lies unfinished, and God’s people seem to have lost their sense of purpose in the world.

There is something terribly disturbing in this.

The very Son of God became flesh and lived among us. He died that we might find forgiveness and reconciliation with God. He commissioned us to bring this same good news to the nations of the world, yet we have failed to deliver. What happened to the revolution?

I believe there is a direct connection between the unfinished work of God’s kingdom and our sense of feeling incomplete in our Christian faith because there is a connection between our story and God’s story. If we are not personally engaged in God’s great mission in the world, then we have missed the very thing he created us to do. We are like birds meant to fly but living in a cage, fish meant to swim but floundering on the beach. It makes sense when you think about it. If the Author of the universe created us to play a key role in his unfolding drama, but we have failed to find our place in that story, then of course we would feel incomplete.

But it doesn’t have to be this way.

God created each of us uniquely, and he created us for a purpose. This

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book is an invitation to discover the life that God created you to live. It's not about failure and guilt but more about opportunities and joy because God doesn't coerce us—he invites us. He offers meaning, fulfillment, and significance in our lives but always gives us the option to decline, and sadly, many do.

Simply stated, the message of this book is that:

- God has invited you to join him in changing the world.
- God has a dream for this world that Jesus called the kingdom of God.
- God created you to play an important role in his kingdom vision.
- You will never find your deepest purpose in life until you find your place in building God's kingdom.

Listen carefully to these next few statements: You don't have to go to the Congo or to Uzbekistan to change the world. You don't have to be brilliant to change the world—or wealthy or influential or a spiritual giant. But you do have to say yes to the invitation. You do have to be available and willing to be used, and you may have to pay the price that comes with following Jesus because changing the world and following Jesus isn't easy, and it doesn't come cheap. There will be some sacrifice involved—there always is.

Our Christian faith is not just a way to find forgiveness for sin in order to enter eternal life, yet it is that. It is not just a system of right beliefs about ultimate truth and the order of things, though it is that. Nor is it just a way to find God's comfort in times of trouble or a helpful code of conduct for how to live a good and productive life, though it is those things too. Fundamentally, the Christian faith is a call to leave everything else behind, follow our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and join in the great mission of Christ in our world. It is a call to forsake all else and follow him. Only then will we become completed people—people living according to God's deepest purpose for our lives.

In the chapters that follow I will ask you to come with me on a journey to rediscover God's vision for our world and his call upon your life. I will ask

you to follow me through life's most basic questions: Why are we here, what is our purpose, and what is God doing in the world? Then we will look at the pivotal significance of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ within the expansive arc of God's big story, from Genesis to Revelation. We will try to understand just why Jesus seemed obsessed by the coming of the kingdom of God and attempt to answer the perplexing question of why Jesus left so suddenly, just fifty days after his resurrection. We will then explore the implications of the remarkable mission he imparted to those he left behind. And all along the way we will seek to discover what all of this means for us today, the followers of Christ in the twenty-first century. Where do we fit into this big story of God, how can we discover the role God created us to play, and what are the implications of this for our lives, our worldviews, our careers, and our families? I invite you to revisit the breathtaking truth, the urgent mission, and the profound personal significance of our Christian faith as we seek to follow the One who died that we might have life and have it to the full.

We can rediscover this great calling upon our lives and reignite the revolution. The twenty-first-century church has everything required—the resources, the knowledge, the scale, the mandate, and the power of God's Holy Spirit. All we lack is the will. It is time to finish the job.

—Richard Stearns
Bellevue, Washington
June 2012

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THE MEANING OF LIFE AND OTHER IMPORTANT THINGS

At the deepest level, every human culture is religious—
defined by what its inhabitants believe about some ultimate
reality, and what they think that reality demands of them.¹

—ROSS DOUTHAT

I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

—JOHN 10:10

On Christ the solid Rock I stand;
all other ground is sinking sand.

—EDWARD MOTE

A few years ago a new word came into our lexicon that characterizes our human preference to bend the truth to accommodate our desires. In 2006, Merriam-Webster selected the word *truthiness* as its Word of the Year. The word was coined by Stephen Colbert on his late-night political satire show

in order to describe how politicians could bend the truth to support their actions. Here is the Webster definition:

truthiness, n. the quality of preferring concepts or facts one wishes to be true, rather than concepts or facts known to be true²

When announcing that *truthiness* had been selected, beating out candidates such as *google* and *terrorism*, Merriam-Webster president John Morse commented, “We’re at a point where what constitutes truth is a question on a lot of people’s minds, and truth has become up for grabs. ‘Truthiness’ is a playful way for us to think about a very important issue.”³ Important indeed.

WHAT IS TRUTH?

Two thousand years before Stephen Colbert, Pontius Pilate asked Jesus perhaps the ultimate question: “What is truth?” Jesus had been brought to Pilate because, as the Roman governor, only he had the authority to order Jesus’ execution. Pilate didn’t know what to do with this political hot potato. He ended up having a conversation with Jesus and asked him just what kind of king Jesus was claiming to be. After all, it was dangerous, and perhaps a little bit loony, for someone to call himself a king under the nose of Caesar, especially a man standing in shackles in front of a Roman governor. Jesus said to Pilate: “You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.”

This prompted Pilate, perhaps a cynical politician, to reply with his timeless question, “What is truth?”⁴

“IS THERE ANY SUCH THING AS TRUTH?” People today are still asking that same question. Many more seem to be asking the question that comes before that question, “Is there any such thing as truth?” This is not a book on philosophy, so I won’t endeavor to make the lengthy philosophical argument required to fully answer this

question. Rather, I will just appeal to your common sense. Of course there is truth. How can you make the statement “There is no such thing as truth” and then assert that your statement is true? It is virtually impossible to live our lives at all unless we make some assumptions about what is true and what is false, what is right and what is wrong. Most of us live our lives based on our understanding that some things are true and good and other things are false and wrong.

Why is this matter of foundational truth so important? Because truth has implications. For example, if you believe human life to be of little value, you might become a murderer. Why not? But if you believe that human life is precious, you might instead choose to become a doctor. Every choice you make will be based on the foundational truths you have embraced. Everything in this book and, in fact, everything in almost every book that has ever been written, deals in some way with the ultimate question of truth and the meaning of life. Writers either speak directly to life’s meaning, or they base their writing on some underlying assumption of meaning. Certainly every religious leader in the world represents his or her understanding of the true meaning of life to his or her followers. But the meaning of life is not a question only for religious leaders. Every talk show host, political commentator, journalist, schoolteacher, comedian, celebrity, politician, mother, father, and bartender in the world bears witness to some definition—their definition—of the ultimate meaning of our lives. In fact, as I will try to demonstrate, every person who has ever lived has been confronted with the question “What does it all mean?” and has answered it one way or the other.

We all build our lives on some foundational assumptions about truth and reality, and those assumptions matter a great deal. If we build on a weak foundation, then what we build won’t stand firm. Jesus warned of this very thing in Matthew 7:

“Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house;

yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.” (Matt. 7:24–27)

Building our lives on the wrong foundations has consequences, disastrous ones. That is why this first chapter is so important. It will become the foundation for understanding where we fit in God’s overall plan. So before we jump into a more specific discussion of the Christian worldview and its relevance in our world today, we need to have a first-things-first conversation about this meaning-of-life question that every person grapples with.

We believe that things like freedom, kindness, love, justice, and the dignity of human life are good and right. Don’t we even value honesty and truth-telling itself in a person’s character? We form friendships with other people because we believe friendship is good. We work to earn a living because we judge that it is wrong to steal. We sacrifice for our children because it is the right thing to do. Our entire legal system is based on the notion that some things are true and right and others are false and wrong. How many tortured prime-time crime dramas spend their full sixty minutes painstakingly seeking to determine the truth that will decide a person’s guilt or innocence?

People who say there is no truth are phonies; they actually live their lives based on things they believe to be true. And let’s dispense with the notion that something might be true for you but not for me. That may be accurate when describing why we prefer different foods or different music but not for ultimate issues. The law of gravity is not true just for me but not for you. And when it comes to God you can’t have it both ways. God either exists for both of us or God doesn’t exist at all. Both can’t be true.

The really annoying problem with the truth, though, is that it is true. And things that are true put boundaries around us in ways we don’t always like. Truth is stubborn. Truth has implications. The law of gravity dictates

that we can't jump off buildings without consequence. Moral truths require us to control our behavior. Who wants that? Human beings don't seem to like anything that acts to impose restrictions on our behavior. Wasn't that Adam and Eve's problem with the apple?

Pontius Pilate nailed the key question: "What is truth?" Truth was up for grabs two thousand years ago, and it is up for grabs today. And, yes, it is a very important issue.

SCIENCE FICTION

One of my guilty pleasures is collecting comic books from the 1950s and 1960s. I sometimes troll around eBay, seeking to reacquire that special comic I once owned fifty years back, long ago discarded by my well-meaning mother. Little did she know that if she only had saved them, I could have put my children through college by selling the comics for tens of thousands of dollars. The ones I liked best were in the science fiction and superhero genres. They had titles like *Journey into Mystery*, *Tales to Astonish*, and *Mystery in Space*. The most imaginative ones transported readers beyond their comfortable surroundings to perceive reality in some new way that often involved aliens or time travel or the supernatural.

I'd like to combine comic books and theology for a moment in order to invite you to take a little journey of the imagination with me, one that I hope will cause you to see your life from a different perspective. I want you to imagine for just a moment how strange it would be if you went to bed tonight in your own home but woke up tomorrow morning on a different planet in a different part of the universe without any idea how you got there. I really want you to mentally put yourself there and begin to feel your emotions and hear your mind racing. Imagine that you find yourself in a closed room with just one window. Outside the window is a foreign landscape with strange features, bizarre architecture, and a race of nonhumans moving to and fro. There is a certain orderliness to the scene and to the purposeful movement of the inhabitants, but who they are and where you now find yourself are baffling mysteries. Your pulse

quickness, panic rises, and your mind races desperately to make sense out of this astonishing mystery. Where am I, how did I get here, and what's going to happen to me now? Can you imagine just how utterly shocked and perplexed you would feel? If this actually happened to you or to me, we would totally freak out. A thousand questions would rush through our minds as we tried to puzzle it all out. In fact, at that moment, figuring out the baffling mystery would be the single most important priority of your life.

Are you finding this hypothetical situation hard to imagine? Well, I have news for you: that exact thing actually did happen to you . . . and to every person who has ever lived. Sometime in the past one hundred years, you were born on the third planet from the sun in a solar system within the Milky Way galaxy, in a universe that is incomprehensibly vast. Think about it: all of us just woke up one day on Planet Earth with absolutely no idea how we got here. We woke up in a particular culture at a particular time among a group of people who were there before we arrived. We awakened in the middle of an ongoing story that started long before we showed up and will continue long after we are gone. Of course, because we come into the world as infants, our situation is not nearly as shocking or abrupt as if we suddenly appeared on earth as adults. Nevertheless, the mystery is just as profound, and every person must come to terms with it in one way or another, trying to make sense of it all.

And this mystery, our mystery, raises some pretty fundamental questions. Where did we come from? How did we get here? Why are we here? Who created all of this—the universe, the earth, the beauty and complexity we see in the world all around us? How did it all come into being? Who gave us the ability to think and reason? How is it that we have the ability to produce art and music, laughter and love, skyscrapers and iPads? What does it all mean anyway? What is truth? These are the deep questions of our very existence.

I want to suggest to you that our lives are part of a much bigger story—one that began in eternity and one that will continue indefinitely into the future. And unless we understand how our story fits into this bigger story,

we will live our lives with little sense of real purpose or significance, drifting through life like a ship without a rudder.

These foundational questions—about Why and How and Who—are common to all people from all ages. Every human being who has ever been born woke up into the same mystery. It doesn't matter if we are referring to Pontius Pilate, Albert Einstein, Martin Luther King Jr., or Lady Gaga; every one of them also landed here in the middle of this mystery, and just like you or me, they had to struggle to make sense of it all.

So then, just how can we make sense of life's greatest mystery? Essentially, there are only three choices people can make. Here they are:

UNLESS WE
UNDERSTAND HOW
OUR STORY FITS
INTO THIS BIGGER
STORY, WE WILL
LIVE OUR LIVES
WITH LITTLE SENSE
OF REAL PURPOSE
OR SIGNIFICANCE.

Choice #1: Believe There Is No Story

In the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, "Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation." (2 Peter 3:3–4)

We can choose to believe that there simply is no story or mystery to figure out and that everything we see and experience is totally random and without meaning. There is no truth. We are just a meaningless species on a meaningless planet in a meaningless universe. There is, therefore, no God and no real defining purpose to our lives.

When I was in college, there was a popular bumper sticker that summed this up succinctly—"Life sucks, and then you die"—quite a noble motto to live by.

But I think the best summary of this worldview that I have ever read came from an advice columnist named "Coquette," who writes for the online newspaper *The Daily*. A reader wrote in to ask a question about the significance of her life. Here's how Coquette answered:

Dear Coquette:

How do I accept that I won't ever be great or outstanding? I always thought I had talent, and maybe I'm not bad, but a great many people are far better. I can't stop thinking this and it's causing me great anxiety.

Coquette:

Kill your ego, because nothing you do will ever matter. That's OK, though. It's not just you. It's all of us. It's taken 100,000 years for our species to hump and grunt its way into momentary dominance on this pale blue dot, but nothing we've accomplished is all that outstanding when you consider that a Mall of America-sized asteroid is all it would take to turn humanity into the next thin layer of fossil fuels.

Greatness is nothing but the surface tension on the spit bubble of human endeavor. On a geological time scale, our measurable effect on the planet is a greasy burp. We are 7 billion tiny flecks of talking meat stuck to an unremarkable mud ball hurtling through space in an unimaginably vast universe for no particular reason. There is no difference between kings and cripples, my friend. We're all the same hodgepodge of primordial goo, and the pursuit of greatness is a fool's errand.

Pursue happiness instead. Find peace in your insignificance, and just let your anxiety go. Learn to savor the likely truth that the sum total of human achievement won't even register in the grand scheme, so you might as well just enjoy whatever talents you have. Use them to *make yourself and others happy*, and set aside any desire to be great or outstanding.

—Coquette (emphasis mine)⁵

What an inspiring philosophy to live by—we are just “7 billion tiny flecks of talking meat stuck to an unremarkable mud ball hurtling through space in an unimaginably vast universe for no particular reason.” Now, that makes me want to jump out of bed each morning to greet the day! People who believe Choice #1, that there is no story, often just ramble through life doing whatever feels good until the clock runs out. They have a mentality of “eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die.”

But because we don't live in isolation, there are implications to Choice #1. A person's view of truth always has consequences. What happens when your actions and decisions come into conflict with mine? Since we are both just "tiny flecks of talking meat" spinning in the "same hodgepodge of primordial goo," there is really no such thing as right or wrong, so the only mechanism to resolve our disputes is force or power; survival of the fittest. If you really believe that human beings are no more than flecks of meat, then taking a human life has no more significance than picking a mushroom or squashing an ant. One "fleck of meat" could form alliances with others to achieve their aims by overpowering another group of "meat flecks" with different goals. The group with the most power wins; right and wrong don't even enter into the discussion. Choice #1 leads to a world without truth, and a world without truth leads to chaos. So what are the consequences of all of this? One just needs to look at the bloody and brutal course of world history to see the answer.

Coquette's worldview is essentially the worldview of someone who is an atheist—life is pretty much meaningless and there is no higher purpose to our lives. Most atheists wouldn't confess this philosophy as bluntly as Coquette does because it is almost too shocking to state out loud, and most reasonable people would think them mad. Frankly, I don't think most atheists ever live their lives according to the inevitable conclusions of their own belief system.

One can't really live a life faithful to a worldview of "meaninglessness" without substituting some makeshift assumptions about meaning that do allow a person to function. Note that even Coquette recommends pursuing happiness and the happiness of others (in italics above) as a solution. She is essentially creating her own meaning because she believes there is no meaning, which takes us to the next option for dealing with the great mystery of our existence.

Choice #2: Make Up Your Own Story

For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine.
Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great

number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. (2 Tim. 4:3–4)

True atheists, those who believe that there is no story at all, are actually quite rare. Far more common are people who make up their own stories and then live accordingly. They create views of reality that make sense to them; they develop value systems consistent with their views and then live out their own homemade realities. They decide not to think about the bigger mystery much at all, and they often don't really care exactly how they got here or why they are here. They make up their own stories about what's important and what brings meaning.

Donald Miller, in his book *Blue Like Jazz*, said that he realized one day as a young man just how self-centered he had become; that his life was like a movie in which he was the main star of every scene, and everyone else was just a character in his movie.

Life was a story about me because I was in every scene. In fact, I was the only one in every scene. I was everywhere I went. If someone walked into my scene, it would frustrate me because they were disrupting the general theme of the play, namely my comfort or glory.⁶

God used this revelation to lead Miller on a humble path of understanding that “dying to self” meant putting the needs of others ahead of his own.

People in this category are not necessarily selfish or egotistical. They can be quite pleasant and even admirable and inspiring. At their core they are quite practical: “I’m here. I have a life to live, so I am going to make some basic decisions about what I believe, how I will live, and what values will best guide me as I walk through life.” These are the “what’s right for you may not be right for me” people. They essentially invent their own truth but don’t require or expect that others will necessarily live by it. They often begin sentences with “I think that . . .” or “I believe that . . .” They fill in the blanks with their own home brew. Here are a few of the manufactured “truisms” that might undergird the worldviews of these folks:

- You should be able to do whatever you want as long as it doesn't hurt other people.
- The one who dies with the most toys wins.
- Winning isn't everything; it's the only thing.
- We can all find God in our inner self.
- It's a dog-eat-dog world, and only the strong survive.
- I think that all religions are just different roads to the same truth.
- Everyone should have an equal opportunity to pursue his or her dreams.

Note that some of these truisms are quite appealing while others are quite awful. The thing that they have in common is that they are all made up and arbitrary. They may or may not be true. They are made to create meaning for people who don't really believe there is such a thing as absolute truth. Here is where our 2006 Word of the Year, *truthiness*, comes in handy.

truthiness, n.: the quality of preferring concepts or facts one wishes to be true, rather than concepts or facts known to be true⁷

To solve the great mystery of their lives, people who have chosen to make up their own stories do so to create the meaning and purpose that their lives lack. I believe this may also speak to something innate within us that compels us to seek truth and meaning. The fact that we long for it so universally suggests to me that there must be such a thing as a truth and meaning that satisfies that longing, just as there is such a thing as food that satisfies our experience of hunger.

So who are these people who have chosen to make up their own stories about truth? Actually, this “make up your own story” approach to life's great mystery can produce both monsters and saints. They could be drug dealers or human traffickers as easily as they could be homemakers or schoolteachers. They might be NBA all-stars or *Fortune* 500 CEOs. Usually they share the fairly universal human goal—happiness. It's just that some pursue it

through violence and crime and others through hard work and education. Some even find it in helping their fellow man and being generous.

People can live an entire lifetime pursuing happiness and fulfillment without really worrying about whether there is some deeper truth or bigger story that they might be a part of. They are the stars of their own movies, writing their own stories and making their own rules. For seventy or eighty years they move from one event to the next, like balls in a pinball machine, bouncing off bumpers with lights flashing and bells ringing all the way. They are busy racking up points and bonuses until the ball finally goes down the drain, the noises stop, and the lights go out. Game Over!

Then there's the third option.

Choice #3: Become Part of God's Story

Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God. (John 1:12)

If you read a mystery novel, there is one thing you know for sure: someone wrote it; there was an author. The author creates the setting (the place where everything happens), the plot, and all of the characters in the story. The author gives each character unique traits and personalities and a role to play in the bigger story. And, perhaps the most significant aspect of this metaphor, every character is designed to play a key role. Let me underscore this one more time. If God is the Author of the big story and you are a character in that story, then it follows that the Author created you to play a key

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role in his story. This is the theme I will develop more fully in later chapters.

You have probably seen The Lord of the Rings movie trilogy, and I hope you have read the books too. J. R. R. Tolkien, the author of those books, created an astonishing world called Middle Earth. It was a remarkable place filled with adventure and dragons and orcs and hobbits. It was a story of good versus evil, of kings and sorcerers, wizards and magic. And the

characters in the book—Frodo, Arwen, Gandalf, Sam, and many others—were placed in the midst of a big story unfolding around them that went back into time for thousands of years. Tolkien had created each of them to play some role in his sprawling epic story. And as we read about them, we realize that each of them struggled to make sense of the story and to understand just what his or her role should be. They couldn't see the whole of the big story from the author's point of view; they could only see the part that was in front of them with occasional glimpses of the broader narrative. But each of them had to puzzle out the role he or she was meant to play, based on the information that character had.

Well, doesn't it make sense that our story has an author too—one who created the world and the universe we were born into, one who cast the vision for the expansive plot and story narrative that has unfolded over eons of time, one who began the story and also will bring it to its conclusion? Doesn't it also follow that this same Author/Creator gave life to each and every character in his story—to you and to me—and that he created each one of us with unique gifts, talents, and personalities; and that he placed us within his story in both space and time?

I want to be frank in stating that all of this requires a significant leap of faith. Philosophers have been debating the existence of God for millennia, and I will not bring an end to that debate here. But again, I want to appeal to your common sense—something philosophers don't always have in abundance. Doesn't it make more sense to believe that our story has an Author than to believe that everything we see and experience is meaningless and without purpose?

In college I majored in neurobiology and animal behavior. I had the thrill of studying both the intricacies of the human brain and the amazing variety and diversity in the animal and plant kingdoms. At that time in my life I was an atheist . . . maybe an agnostic. I didn't believe in God, and I didn't think one could prove the existence of God, so I made Choice #2. I decided to make up my own rules. But what kept nagging at me was that the natural world I was studying was filled with such beauty, complexity, and wonder that I could not help but speculate just how something so marvelous could

have come into being. Did it really make any sense to think that all of this just showed up by accident, that the most beautiful painting I had ever seen didn't have a painter? I could have described to you the detailed steps in the life cycle of the monarch butterfly and the amazing fact that more than 100 million monarchs mysteriously migrate thousands of miles each year and find their way to the same pine forests in Michoacán, Mexico.⁸ They weigh a fraction of an ounce, but they can navigate and fly several thousand miles to the same small patch of land every year. I could describe all of this, but I was at a loss to explain why and how there was such a thing as a butterfly to begin with. If you have ever watched TV shows such as *Planet Earth* or *The Frozen Planet* from the BBC Natural History Unit, you cannot come away without being in awe and wonder of the incredible artistry and magic in our world. Does it make sense that the millions of plants and animals we see today; the remarkable music and art of human beings; the incredible civilizations of Egypt, Rome, Western Europe, China, and Japan; the technologies that created television, cell phones, computers, and spaceships; and incredible cities like New York, Paris, Rio de Janeiro, and Tokyo just *happened*? And even if you can swallow all of that, how can you possibly believe that the incomprehensibly vast universe with its billions of galaxies, in which we float like a speck of dust, just appeared out of nothing?

I know that my little argument won't convince the academics who are battling this out in universities all over the world, but it usually makes sense to ordinary people who also can look at our amazing universe and reach a similar conclusion—there has to be a painter; there has to be an Author.

What may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. (Rom. 1:19–20)

It takes a lot more faith to believe what Coquette believes—that there was no Creator and that we are carbon chemistry swirling around a

meaningless universe—than it does to simply believe that “in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1).

We are told in the Bible that the crowning achievements of God’s creation, the lead characters in his story, are men and women—human beings. In fact, the Bible tells us that God created human beings in his own likeness with the ability to think and reason, to create music and art and beauty, and with a spiritual nature that makes them different from everything else in creation (Gen. 1:27). We are, in a real sense, God’s children.

We started this chapter with Pilate’s provocative question: What is truth? Now it’s time to listen again to the amazing statement by Jesus that provoked Pilate’s question: “The reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.” The big story of God came to a climax in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. He is the truth; he is the story. “I am the way and the truth and the life,” Jesus stated. “No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).

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TRUTH MATTERS

The tragedy of modern man is not that he knows less and less about the meaning of his own life but that it bothers him less and less⁹.—Vaclav Havel

As Jesus said, we all have the choice to build on sand or to build on the rock of God’s truth. But Jesus doesn’t state that simply believing the right things provides the foundation of rock. He states that we have to believe *his words* and put them into practice.

“Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine *and puts them into practice* is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that

house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock.”
(Matt. 7:24–25, emphasis mine)

Truth ignored is no better foundation for our lives than no truth at all. Jesus was proclaiming that truth has implications for conduct. Truth becomes the foundation for our worldview, and worldview becomes the basis for our actions and behavior. We had better stand on a foundation of rock because we live in a world where the rain beats down, the waters are rising, and the winds will blow and beat against us. It is a world that unrelentingly assaults our senses and confronts our values. It is a world filled with temptations—money, sex, power, fame, and pleasure. It is a world characterized by crime, violence, racism, poverty, injustice, inequality, and deceit. We live in a world that constantly challenges our understanding of truth and demands that we make choices. And those choices matter.

This is the world into which every one of us woke up. This is the world in which each of us is seeking meaning and purpose. This is the world we, as Christians, were commanded to win in Christ’s name, armed with Christ’s truth, and motivated by Christ’s love.