PRAISE FOR KNOW YOUR WHY

“Ken Costa is one of the most dynamic and inspiring Christian influencers in our country today. His passion to see young people grow strong in their faith—particularly in the workplace—has been a constant stimulus throughout his life. As one of the most senior bankers in the City of London, his commitment, drive, and vision to see the church in the UK become a force once again in our nation has contributed to the growth of Leadership College London, Alpha, and numerous other initiatives which have revitalized the church. Know Your Why is about calling, and there are few people more qualified to address that subject than Ken Costa.”

—NICKY GUMBEL, VICAR, HOLY TRINITY BROMPTON

“There are few people on this planet whom I find more fascinating than Ken Costa. His capacity for business is only outweighed by his affection for the local church; and he has beautifully modeled to a generation what it means to live out your calling and build the kingdom—even when they are seemingly in competition with one another. Ken’s life experiences and heart for people to flourish in their faith make him an expert on this topic, and I know that his forward-thinking, straight-shooting, and humorous ways will enlighten and encourage you.”

—BRIAN HOUSTON, GLOBAL FOUNDER AND SENIOR PASTOR, HILLSONG CHURCH

“Ken Costa’s new book Know Your Why is such a powerful description of the beautiful call that God has placed on each person’s life. In this noisy world it is so easy to feel lost in your calling and true passion. Ken does a wonderful job explaining how to find your ‘why’ in life and how it aligns to God’s plan for you all along. I am honored to call Ken a friend, and I recommend everyone read this book!”

—JENTEZEN FRANKLIN, SENIOR PASTOR, FREE CHAPEL, AND NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

“God gives everyone a calling, but how can you know for sure what it is? In Ken Costa’s new book Know Your Why: Finding and Fulfilling Your Calling in Life he adapts forty years of research into a practical, day-to-day guide that explains how you can hear God’s call in the midst of a noisy and distracting world. I believe this book has the potential to transform your life as you begin to walk in the God-given calling only you can fulfill.”

—ROBERT MORRIS, FOUNDRING SENIOR PASTOR, GATEWAY CHURCH, AND BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE BLESSED LIFE, TRULY FREE, AND FREQUENCY
“No matter your age or stage of life, *Know Your Why: Finding and Fulfilling Your Calling in Life* will illuminate the path between where you are and where you want to be. With practical wisdom and timeless truth from Scripture, Ken Costa draws on his renowned international career in the corporate, academic, and ministry arenas to show you the way. *Know Your Why* is an instant classic, a guidebook for living authentically, one to which you will return again and again.”

—Chris Hodges, Senior Pastor, Church of the Highlands, and Author of *Fresh Air* and *Four Cups*

“It’s amazing how much more you can accomplish or endure when you understand the ‘why’ behind what you are doing. That’s why Ken Costa’s new book *Know Your Why* is so important. If you’ve ever wondered why you’re here and what your purpose is, pick up this book. Ken will guide you step by step to prayerfully discover your calling so you can live every day on purpose.”

—Craig Groeschel, Pastor, Life.Church, and Author of #Struggles: Following Jesus in a Selfie-Centered World

“I can’t think of a more pressing or significant conversation than the one you will have in this book as Ken Costa helps you discover the reason you are on earth and how God wants to fulfill his calling for your life. Almost every person I talk to wants clarity concerning his or her purpose. People want to know that they are maximizing their brief time on planet Earth by doing well the things that God has uniquely wired them to do. Among the crush and the rush of life, there’s no better guide in the pursuit of getting it right than my friend Ken Costa. Not only is he an all-star guru with a stellar track record in the highest ranks of corporate banking and finance, Ken loves Jesus and lives with extraordinary purpose so the world can come to know him. I highly recommend *Know Your Why: Finding and Fulfilling Your Calling In Life* and am confident you will see more clearly and live more purposefully after absorbing the wisdom in its pages.”

—Louie Giglio, Pastor, Passion City Church, Passion Conferences
“This is an important and timely book. In a world of seemingly endless options, discerning the voice of God can be an increasingly difficult task. Ken draws on decades of experience to help Christians cut through the confusion and distractions and live lives in tune with God.”

—Andy Stanley, Senior Pastor, North Point Ministries

“Life, at least as I know it, so often rolls out like a complex and curious process of circumstance and collision—questions begging more questions, answers often more complicated and incomplete as the curiosity that sought them out.

“In my own journey Ken has been a constant voice and ear of encouragement when it comes to navigating the madness of it all. His wisdom and humility, and his rare balance of sage experience (not to be confused with age) and youthful optimism, have helped peel back the layers of construct, opinion, and pretense in a way that has immensely helped refine my own worldview and calling. That Ken has written this book is a cause for celebration for those like me who have benefitted from the ‘rooftop conversations.’ This book won’t answer all of your questions, but that is not what Ken does—it is more profoundly a wealth of wisdom and encouragement in how to tackle life and all its curious complexities and find clarity and joy in the process.”

—Joel Houston, Lead Pastor Hillsong NYC, and Songwriter

“Transformed people transform their surroundings. We often get this backward, as people try to fix things in their churches or communities that are not yet repaired in their own hearts. Know Your Why is a wonderful book, filled with wisdom and insight, enabling the reader to truly become free. Each chapter steps through a key area of breakthrough that every believer needs to have in order to experience the full transformation and freedom of living in the kingdom of God. As these freedoms become a reality in us, they become a reality around us. In Know Your Why, author Ken Costa has given us an invitation to intentionally say yes to this divine process. In doing so, we will learn to partner with this work of the Holy Spirit for the journey of a lifetime.”

—Bill Johnson, Senior Leader of Bethel Church, Redding, CA, and Author of The Supernatural Power of a Transformed Mind and Hosting the Presence
"To be effective, to make a difference, and to change the lives of others, it is vital to be sure of your life calling. No easy task. That’s why Know Your Why is such an inspiring read. I have known Ken for many years, and he writes as he is: in a lively and incisive manner, biblical and practical. It will be an invaluable help for many who are trying to navigate the complexities of modern life. I was particularly pleased that Ken stresses the fact that calling is not pietistic—only for those wanting to hear God’s voice for their personal needs—but powerful to those who wish to follow God’s healing ways in a broken world."

—Christine Caine, Founder, The A21 Campaign

“We have known Ken Costa for almost forty years, and he has been an inspiration in many ways: provocative, imaginative, always challenging us to think better and live more Christianly, even when one disagrees with him. This book has all of Ken at his best. It is rooted in Scripture, candid in acknowledging his own developments and weaknesses, passionate about how people find their way in obedience to Christ amidst the great practical decisions of life, and compassionate for those struggling. Written from his own experience, it speaks to the concerns of young professional people everywhere.”

—Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby, and Caroline Welby

“One of Britain’s most influential and respected leaders, Ken Costa, has spoken wisdom more precious than gold in his latest book, Know Your Why: Finding and Fulfilling Your Calling in Life. This book is compelling reading, especially for young people who struggle with knowing what is their calling and purpose in life. Ken’s love for God and his Word flow through every page. His spirit is contagious; this book will change your life by setting you free to serve God in the secular world as well as in the church.”

—Dr. R.T. Kendall, Author and Former Senior Minister of Westminster Chapel, London, England

“An excellent book . . . easy to read and very practical . . . Ken Costa throughout shows the relevance of his faith to the personal challenges of everyday life but always relates it to the person of Jesus and his kingdom.”

—Lord Griffiths of Fforestfach
“In a world awash with books on purpose and fulfillment, *Know Your Why* stands out because of who Ken Costa is and where he has been in the world of high-altitude finance. Few can match the seasoned richness of his experience and his wisdom.”

— Os Guinness, Author of *The Call*

“*Know Your Why* will become a life-defining book for many, as Ken Costa addresses the issue of vocation, sharing hard-won insights garnered from the coal face of business and ministry over many years. If you are looking for direction and purpose, this book will help you move beyond the mundane ‘what’ and ‘where’ questions to discover the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of a truly fulfilled life.”

— Pete Greig, Leader, Emmaus Rd and Founder, 24–7 Prayer

“I’m really grateful that I’ve had the opportunity to get to know Ken Costa over the past few years. His financial and business success has run parallel to his commitment to a deep faith. I turn to him for advice, encouragement, and sometimes, just to hear his soothing British accent. For the first time, he’s releasing a book in the United States, and I’m eager for leaders in my generation to consider with him how to find a worthy ‘why’ to drive our pursuit of success.”

— Steven Furtick, Pastor, Elevation Church, and New York Times Bestselling Author

“There is probably no area that gives us more frustration than questioning God’s will, but one of the problems is that we often focus more on ‘what’ than on ‘why.’ My friend Ken Costa teaches us to remember our identities so we can live out our destinies rooted in who we are and why we’re here. You are anointed and appointed—God has called you, and it’s time to take your place, fulfilling your calling and changing the world.”

— Levi Lusko, Pastor, Fresh Life Church, and Author of *Through the Eyes of a Lion*

“Ken Costa is a leader among leaders with decades of insightful wisdom that comes only from faithfully living a life of integrity. He brilliantly conveys the path to purpose in his book *Know Your Why: Finding and Filling Your Calling in Life.* Ken has been an example in my life of what it means to prioritize a life of prayer. You will be encouraged and inspired to seek the voice of God in the midst of a world full of distractions.”

— Rich Wilkerson Jr., Senior Pastor, Vous Church
“Ken speaks not only out of theological reflection but also from a life of practical application. I believe this will be a helpful book to many young adults who seek to make godly choices in a multichoice world. I commend it to you.”

—MIKE PILAVACHI, FOUNDER, SOUL SURVIVOR

“With a prophetic edge, sharp mind, and huge heart, Ken has always encouraged, challenged, and inspired me. I believe this book will do the same for you. This is an invaluable read for anyone longing to discern their calling and unique God-shaped purpose in life.”

—TIM HUGHES, SONGWRITER, AND FOUNDER, WORSHIP CENTRAL

“Ken Costa is an amazing leader and pastor. **Know Your Why: Finding and Fulfiling Your Calling in Life** is written from the personal experiences Ken has had in discovering his calling, as well as the many years of helping people find their own. This book is not just a spiritual reflection, but practical advice in discovering God’s direction for your life. The heart of Ken is to help people find their callings so they can live a more fulfilled life, and in turn help others. I am sure that this book will provide the vision, inspiration, and guidance in helping you discover God’s purpose for your life.”

—CHAD VEECH, SENIOR PASTOR, ZOE CHURCH

“The very best communicators announce the eternal themes of God, and at the same time address the everyday circumstances of our lives. Ken Costa is brilliant at this. He gives us the big picture of a God who invites us to follow him—and then helps us figure out what it might look like to take hold of that calling in the here and now. **Know Your Why** is an inspiring, practical, and dynamic book that will help so many people connect with their purposes in life.”

—MATT REDMAN, SONGWRITER

“I have rarely come across a man with more passion and purpose in his life than Ken Costa, and in this book he opens up to us from the Bible and his own experience the Source of his passion and of all our various callings.”

—THE RIGHT REVEREND AND RIGHT HONORABLE
RICHARD CHARTRES, BISHOP OF LONDON
“The content of this very important book is one of the most crucial subjects I am asked about in ministry! There is not a person on the planet who has not at one time stopped to ask, ‘Why?’ Acts 13:36 tells us that ‘David served the purposes of God in his generation,’ and it is to that end that Ken writes this book. Do you know your why? Do you have your reason to live, breathe, work, and play? Do you know God’s purpose for your life?

“I know Ken. I’ve always admired his singularity of purpose and passionate pursuit of God’s call. I know that as you read this book, you won’t just get information, but also catch the heart of a man who is inviting you to engage in purpose. He can write it only because he is living it. Enjoy the read, embrace the challenge, hear the call, and walk the walk!”

—Glyn Barrett, Senior Pastor, Audacious Church

“Ken Costa is one of those people who has lived and lives his life on purpose and with purpose, alongside a genuine sense of calling in all he does.”

—Gary Clarke, Senior Pastor, Hillsong London

“If anyone is eminently qualified to write about this topic, Ken is. It is really his life story. Many years ago on a trip to Namibia, which he arranged at a very difficult time in my life, we tried to answer this question while sitting on sand dunes and observing the sunset. He was coming to crossroads in his career, I was dealing with the loss of a dear wife—circumstances that brought that question ‘Why am I here?’ to the fore of our hearts. That day, while not fully answering the question, we settled on the truth of a loving God who has plans and purposes for all his children and reveals them in and through the circumstances of our lives.

“This book’s attraction is its simplicity. It is not a theological reflection but is a practical guide, drawing on real life examples, to finding and following our callings in an often-confusing world. Ken’s penchant to get straight to the heart of the matter is refreshing. In demystifying the subject, he demonstrates clearly how we can make the most of our lives, enjoying each day to the full while affecting other lives positively. It makes a very compelling read.”

—Agu Irukwu, Senior Pastor, Jesus House for all the nations
KNOW YOUR WHY
FINDING AND FULFILLING YOUR CALLING IN LIFE

KEN COSTA
I dedicate this book to my wife, Fi. This book would have been impossible without her constant love and support. We journey together to find our life-callings.

And to Georgina, Nick, Charles, Henry, Jenny, and Claudia, who never hesitate to challenge and always encourage me.

And to my late mother, Martha Faith, who prayed.
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It is estimated the average person will spend 150,000 hours at work in his or her lifetime. That translates to roughly 40 percent of our lives being spent at work. That’s a lot. As a result, our work, our jobs, and how we spend the majority of our time are very important to God. And, as it turns out, throughout the Bible God has a lot to say about our work. Yet many of the people I meet are either dissatisfied with their work or don’t feel like they are in the right jobs. They are unsure whether they have been specifically called by God. This is an important issue, one that deserves time exploring.

That’s why I can’t think of anyone more qualified to write about the significance of knowing your purpose than my friend Ken Costa. I first met Ken in Davos, Switzerland, at the World Economic Forum, where we were both speakers. Ken’s forty years of high-level experience as an investment banker in international finance make him a voice worth listening to when it comes to the global economy. And, as the long-time chairman of Alpha Ministries, Ken also has proven his heart for God and his people. Ken’s life is a beautiful example of what can happen when we embrace God’s purpose in the workplace. That is why I was very happy to endorse his first book, God at Work.

His new book, Know Your Why: Finding and Fulfilling Your Calling in Life, is absolutely foundational to living a purpose driven
Foreword

life. Calling is the pivot of a fulfilled Christian life. You see, God has decided that we should all engage in work. It’s not a bad thing or something we should dread. Most of us work in order to meet our basic needs; we have a responsibility toward our families, and we have bills to pay. And the Bible supports this. From beginning to end, the Bible addresses how men and women should and should not approach work.

Yet God has also placed in each of us a longing for meaning. We know there is more to life, and so we search for fulfillment and work that seems worthwhile. Which leads us to a larger discussion about calling and gifts and talents. How can we use the talents we have to help others and glorify God? This is particularly true of those in their twenties and thirties, who have grown up in a multichoice world, which, for all its freedom, has created real uncertainty in people’s life callings.

Ken understands that Jesus cares deeply about our daily work. Not only that, but Jesus has uniquely gifted each one of us to make a distinct contribution. No two people are alike, and we all need each other to function. The same is true of our callings at work; each person brings something uniquely different to the task at hand.

Then why do so many people struggle to find their places in life? Many people cannot see past a difficult boss or unemployment or a stagnant job. And when it comes to incorporating faith at work and deriving some sort of calling out of it, there can be an even larger disconnect. If you have wrestled with these questions, I invite you to closely read the pages that follow. In them, Ken Costa unwraps some of the basic ways we can begin this journey of discovery. It’s practical and life shaping, distilled from forty years of wrestling with these issues in the workplace.

Ken asserts—and I agree—that God first wants us to know that he loves us, that we are known to him, and that, yes, he has called us. This basic reassurance—the idea of being loved, known, and called—is found throughout the Bible and is just as vital today as it
was back then. Ken unpacks each of these ideas in Know Your Why. Knowing that the Lord begins by approaching his people with tremendous love adds a real layer of comfort to Ken’s teaching.

This is not what the world tells us, however. The world’s system will encourage us to strive on our own and become the masters of our own fates. Yet what I have seen over and over again is that you can be the most talented person, have the best connections with influential people, have plenty of money at your disposal, and still not be effective or fulfilled. Why is that?

Well, Jesus told us plainly in John’s gospel when he said, “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5 niv). The longer I live, the more I have found that statement to be true. When we allow God to be the source of our decisions in life, we have found the basis of our callings.

If you’re looking for a self-help book to help you become famous and make a lot of money, this is not the book for you. On the other hand, if you are serious about seeking your calling in work and in life, I wholeheartedly suggest you listen to what Ken Costa has to say. Searching after your why will require a good amount of faith and risk. It may even be uncomfortable for a while. However, if you trust the One who is calling, he will be sure to help you on your journey.

One other thing before I let you go: Ken has one of the best British accents I’ve ever heard. So as you read, I sincerely hope you hear these words as if spoken by a classically trained British actor. It makes the journey that much more enjoyable.

—Pastor Rick Warren
This is a book about a question. It’s a question I’ve asked myself a thousand times in a thousand different ways. A question that has kept me motivated during the workday and often kept me awake during sleepless nights. It’s the question most frequently asked of me by those seasoned in their faith, but also by those just beginning their Christian walks, and I’ve no doubt it’s a question that you have asked just as frequently. It’s a hopeful question and a searching question. A question that goes right to the heart of our sense of being and belonging in the world.

Why am I here?

And not just here on earth. Why am I here in this city? Why am I here in this job, this church, this club, this group? Why am I here?

Wrapped up in this question are so many others—Where should I be going? What should I be doing? How should I be living my life?—all of them fundamentally linked to the search for purpose and direction that has characterized much of my adult life. As a teenager, growing up in apartheid South Africa; as a student at Cambridge University; as a young man starting out in the City of London and later as an experienced financial advisor; as the chairman of various charities and church initiatives, but also as a husband and father and friend—so much of my life has been a response to that question.

This isn’t an existential question, cried out to the empty air
with no hope of reply. Instead, it’s a directed question, one I’ve asked in expectation of an answer.

It’s a question I’ve been asking and continue to ask of God.

You see, at the heart of the Christian faith is a big, fat \textit{why}. And that \textit{why} takes the shape of a calling. A calling for us to be \textit{here}, in this place and at this time. A calling for us to live out our faith and values in the rough-and-tumble of our everyday existence. A calling to engage with the world around us in the power and the light of Christ.

The content of that calling—of that \textit{why}—is set out in the Bible. It’s the Great Commandment of Christ, to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind” and to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27). It’s the Great Commission, to “go and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19). Or the great call to compassion that the book of Micah describes so beautifully: “What does the \textsc{Lord} require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8).

The difficulty is working out how to follow that call. This common calling that applies to every Christian in every age and in every walk of life—to make known the good news of Christ to every generation—is unchanged by circumstance or culture. So what does that look like practically, for each of us as individuals, in our own unique situations? What does the Great Commission have to say specifically to you and me at seven forty-five on a Monday morning, in a traffic jam or crammed into a commuter train, on the way back to work? What does it mean for someone to act justly and love mercy while serving coffee to strangers all day? One of the great struggles of modern faith, I believe, is trying to work out what our common calling looks like in the here and now.

For many years now, I’ve had the great privilege of mentoring men and women, often in their twenties and thirties. And these questions have confronted me more than any other: \textit{What does that}
Christian calling look like for me? How can I even begin to understand it or put it into practice? How could I ever play a part in God’s great story?

How can I come to know my why?

It can be difficult to imagine that God wants to call us individually, with all our frailties and brokenness, to be his hands and feet in this needy world. The world seems so big, the problems so vast, and we can feel so insignificant. But I believe that this process of seeing the plans and purposes to which God might put us, is the great adventure of faith. As Paul put it in his letter to the Ephesians, “we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Ephesians 2:10).

This book is the fruit of countless conversations and reflections through which I have tried to work out—for myself and for others—what it might look like to follow Christ’s calling in the here and now. What it might look like in practice to live out a life of everyday engagement with this everyday God. As you read, it is my hope that you will allow God to draw out your passions and hopes, your dreams and desires; that you will nurture them, grow them, build on them, and then use them to shape your life and the lives of those around you in ways you never thought possible. Be assured of this: whoever you are and wherever you are, God has great plans for you. That is part of what makes the Christian life so compelling, so hopeful, and so exciting.

Our callings matter. I am passionate about helping others find true, fulfilling causes to live for. We will only be able to do this by believing that we are called with a purpose, both individually and as a community. We must believe that God has a plan, and this plan involves us. Jesus taught that we are not on earth by accident but by a clear intention of God, for lives to be lived well and in tune with God’s desires.

To even begin that journey, we need to be convinced that these callings can be lived out in a practical way. This is not some personal
pietistic enclosure of the righteous but the wider call to engagement in the community around us.

Yet understanding what our callings might look like is even harder for this generation than for any previous one. We live in a multichoice world. We all face questions about where our talents and passions might be best put to use. The pressures are enormous precisely because the choices are so wide-open and often confusing. The speed of change is frightening, and yet the opportunity to be challenged and stimulated has never been greater.

Since my faith came alive over forty years ago, I have lived out this calling of Christ as best I can. Sometimes I’ve taken a wrong turn. Sometimes I’ve faced difficult choices of my own. And sometimes I’ve felt clearly the voice of Christ at my elbow, pushing me to take a certain route.

Of course, when that voice does break through, it is life-transforming. One of the most significant moments in my Christian life occurred when, as a young man, I took some time to be alone, to pray, and to seek the Lord. I was walking along the river Thames in London, not long after I had started working in the City—the name given to London’s financial district. I was feeling deeply despondent, and that question—Why am I here?—was in the forefront of my mind. I felt a lack of purpose and direction, and I couldn’t see how my work could possibly fit into God’s plans. Surely full-time ministry would be closer to God’s purposes for me. The cutthroat competition of the market-driven economy seemed so far removed from the values of the kingdom.

But then, as clearly and as suddenly as a dolphin breaking through the surface of the sea, Luke 24:49 burst into my head. “Stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.” It came from nowhere, and I knew instantly it was a word from God. It was an answer from Scripture—used in a different context, but powerful in its resonance of truth. So I stayed in the City. And through my staying God has opened up incredible opportunities for me to
shine something of his light in that place. When God shows us his purposes for our lives, he also gives us the power through his Spirit to fulfill these purposes.

The point is that God comes alongside us in our callings. He works with us in relationship. Clearly God sometimes breaks into our lives in a big way, just as he did to mine while I walked along the Thames. But other times it is much gentler—a beckoning and a whispering. Sometimes God places roadblocks if we are going in the wrong direction. And sometimes it may well be up to us to decide the way ahead. Whatever the circumstances, we have a God who walks beside us, helping us keep a sure footing when the path ahead seems uncertain.

Your calling is the deep inner conviction of the Holy Spirit that the whole of your life matters to God—both where you have come from and where you are going. If you take nothing else from this book, know that God loves you more than you can imagine. He knows you better than you know yourself. And out of that place of love and knowledge, he has called you into the world to change the world with his marvelous light. You are uniquely loved, known, and called by God. This is the bedrock of your security in the world.

“You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last” (John 15:16). So it was with the first disciples, and so it is with us. It is Jesus who chooses us; we do not choose him. He gives us a clear purpose—that we might bear fruit. No life-calling from Jesus is barren. This fruit-bearing is not a one-off spiritual high, not a temporary fix, but the development of a fruit that will last. It produces the sustainable fruit of the Spirit that matures each day throughout our lives.

Remember that you will never again have these days, these relationships, these circumstances, these God-given opportunities. Making the most of life and enjoying it to the full are the challenges and promises of Jesus.
I want to finish with two Bible passages that persuaded me to write this book.

The first was a word that came to me in a moment of real darkness, at a time when I felt hopelessly lost. All of us can go through such times of intense difficulty when our spiritual lives are hard and a kind of “dark night of the soul” comes upon us. Joy becomes forced rather than flowing naturally. Turbulence, rather than peace, is the reigning emotion. It can seem as if little will help.

In this moment of darkness, a verse from Luke leapt out at me: “Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift all of you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers” (Luke 22:31–32).

This was an obscure passage, and I struggled at first to understand its significance. But as I read it through again, I was drawn to that last sentence: “When you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.”

As Christians, we inevitably go through times when we feel lost, as if we are drifting along without any real purpose. We experience times of doubt, times of “sifting,” when we struggle to trust that God really is in control or that he has a plan for our lives. Since that moment I have longed to strengthen those who try to make the very best of their lives. Like me, they have been sifted and spiritually assaulted, but Christ intercedes on our behalf, praying that our faith holds true. And as we come through that sifting, it is Christ who becomes the cornerstone on which lives are rebuilt, careers changed, hopes fulfilled, and new depths of maturity discovered.

The second passage of Scripture that motivated me to write this book was one I found while praying aloud at a retreat for young leaders, in the shadow of Windsor Castle. In a moment of quiet reflection, I found myself quoting the words of Psalm 71: “Even when I am old and gray, do not forsake me, my God, till I declare your power to the next generation, your mighty acts to all who are to come” (v. 18).
Over the years, that verse has come to signify the heart of what I feel God has called me to. It has fueled within me the desire not only to strengthen my generation to find in Christ their cornerstone, but to remind the next generation of the mighty acts of God. For many years, that has been my great passion—a central aspect of my calling and my purpose.

May I challenge you, then, to think about your passions and your purposes as you read through this book. Don’t give in to the lie that you are too insignificant for God to have a plan for your life, but listen for his “gentle whisper” (1 Kings 19:12). God has called you by name. He makes straight the roads and makes clear the paths, if only you let him.

Purpose matters. I hope this book will help you find yours.
“What do you want?”
These are the first words Jesus spoke in John’s gospel (John 1:38).

What are you really looking for? What lifts you to a new level? What makes you want to get out of bed on a winter’s day, grab hold of the day, and make the most of every moment? What is it that gives meaning to your life? What enables you to navigate the confusion of a world that changes every nanosecond? Which values make every day worth living in a world that seems hostile to the good news of Jesus?

These are all questions that can be answered if we grasp the driving importance of Jesus’ first question: What do you really want? And this question is addressed to all of us.

But I hear echoing back at me, Surely this can’t be right. It sounds selfish. What I want surely doesn’t matter. It’s what Jesus wants that’s important. And anyway, isn’t this a superficial question? The answers that immediately spring to mind certainly seem to be: a pay raise, a new car, a nice vacation, the latest gadgets.

No. The question Jesus asked is profound. It goes beyond the material wish list. It confronts us and forces us to think seriously about our true longings and objectives. Perhaps that is why these are the first spoken words of Jesus that John recorded in his gospel.
Know Your Why

Mark’s gospel recorded another instance, when blind Bartimaeus called out to Jesus, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” (Mark 10:48). And again, Jesus asked him, “What do you want me to do for you?” (v. 51). Jesus knew exactly what this blind man wanted, but he asked the question so that Bartimaeus himself would articulate directly to Jesus exactly what he was longing for: “Rabbi, I want to see” (v. 51). It matters to Jesus what the desires of our hearts are.

And that is why Jesus’ question is so powerful. It forces us to search deeply into our motives for what really drives us to live every day with purpose.

The disciples were not dissimilar from us: they were seekers, trying to make sense of their purposes. And that first encounter with Jesus, recorded in John’s gospel, is riveting.

Here were two disciples who had been in the desert with John the Baptist, who was preaching a gospel of repentance in expectation of the Messiah. John was a celebrity, a life coach, a guru. His message was one of self-help and self-improvement—a message of repentance from sin that could not yet rely on the power of the Spirit to be sustained. People from Jerusalem and the surrounding towns flocked to hear him. They wanted answers about how to live with a real and defined purpose, answers not only for themselves but also for the nation of Israel as a whole. But there was something unfulfilled in their lives that could not be satisfied by John’s teaching, radical and appealing as it was. They were going to John for a self-help fix, but nobody realized better than John that self-help could only go so far. Then the disciples saw Jesus:

When [John] saw Jesus passing by, he said, “Look, the Lamb of God!”

When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus. Turning around, Jesus saw them following and asked, “What do you want?” (John 1:36–38)
Called to Passion

The action started with Jesus. He broke into *their* world as he passed by them. It was not they who had to seek him out. All they had to do was be ready and waiting when he came—ready to take the risk and follow where he led. The disciples knew something was missing, and they saw in this encounter with Jesus something of what they had hoped for. The rest was up to Jesus. And he did not disappoint—as he never disappoints those who genuinely want to hear his call.

And so the disciples turned to follow Jesus. They said nothing. They must have been bursting with questions. Shouldn't the disciples have asked him the burning question that their search for truth with John the Baptist had been all about: “Are you the one who is to be revealed as Savior of oppressed Israel?” But they didn’t. They just followed him. There was something about him that drew them in. Something intangible and inexplicable. They saw in Jesus something more than repentance. They saw the missing piece of their lives—a relationship with God himself.

And then Jesus turned to face them.

I cannot get the image of Jesus turning around out of my mind. It is so much part of my life. How many times have I faced the big issues—choosing a career, proposing to my wife, changing jobs, dealing with conflict at work and in relationships—and chosen to follow his guidance? Yet, how often have I done so and not quite believed he would notice I was following? In my mind, a follower is the one who looks mostly at the leader’s back. But Jesus turns toward his followers. In the culture of the time, this was a profound sign of acknowledgment and recognition. He noticed them. Their anonymity disappeared.

He doesn’t merely stride on purposefully as some leaders might do, expecting their followers to tag along behind. In the simple act of turning he shows his regard for every one of us seeking our callings. Attention is God’s greatest gift to us. He reaches out to us, and he responds as if we were the only ones marked for special attention.
Know Your Why

Such is his love for us. A well-known saying observes, “Don’t walk in front of me; I may not follow. Don’t walk behind me; I may not lead. Just walk beside me and be my friend.” And likewise, Jesus said to his disciples, “I have called you friends” (John 15:15).

Jesus’ question to the disciples goes more than skin deep. The word we translate as “want” is the Greek word zeteo, which means “to seek.” So the question “What do you want?” is not a dismissive “What are you after?” It’s not a confused “Why are you following me?” Rather, Jesus is asking the deeper question of “What are you seeking?”

The drift of Jesus’ question is clear. What is the principal desire in your life? What are your passions? What dreams do you long to see fulfilled? What makes your life worth living? In effect, what is the main driver of your life, your calling?

Finding Your Passion

All of this talk about your passions, your dreams, your desires might seem selfish and confusing. I first met Rick Warren when we were both speaking at the World Economic Forum in Switzerland. Looking around at the titans of industry and politics, I remember him saying, “We must always be mindful that it’s not about you.” This then became the opening sentence and most quoted remark of his book The Purpose Driven Life. In many ways this is a life-transforming truism, a huge challenge to the self-driven life. It’s a reminder that to be a follower of Christ is to live for others; that your purpose cannot be fulfilled outside of the community of God’s people. That’s why church, the gathering of the local people of God, is so vital in helping you find your true calling.

But on another level, what you want is so important. Your passions and dreams are the fuels that feed the fire of God’s calling. God really is interested in you. He really is interested in what it is that makes you tick. He really does call you, just as you are.
Very often when people talk about calling, they try to remove human autonomy from the equation. They imagine that our desires, our concerns, our passions and talents are irrelevant. But the fact that our loving Father has called us should not negate the freedom we have to make choices. There is nothing in Christian faith to encourage the resigned acceptance of fate. *Que sera, sera*—“whatever will be, will be”—might be an old favorite song, but it is not the basis of our callings. Something much more liberating, exciting, and fulfilling lies ahead when we seriously seek the call of God in our lives.

Following his call isn’t about blind obedience. It’s more like leaving a house with a friend to go on a journey. You both have a shared destination in mind and a map to get you there, but there are many routes you could take along the way. And so you work out your route in conversation and relationship. Sometimes your friend might suggest very strongly that you both take a certain path. Perhaps she knows something about the way ahead that you don’t. Sometimes you might insist on taking a wrong turn, away from the destination, and have to allow your friend to show you the right direction. But you work it out together. That is what I believe it means to follow your calling with Christ. *Your* opinions, *your* passions, *your* desires really do matter to him.

This is something we see very clearly in the Bible—particularly in the journeys of Saint Paul. The letters of Paul paint a picture of a man who was constantly probing at different doors, trying to work out in dialogue with God where his next steps might go. There’s no sense that his path was laid out clearly before him. Sometimes his attempts to take a certain road were blocked by forces outside of his control, and sometimes he was responding to a very specific message of the Holy Spirit. But very often, Paul simply followed his nose, listening to his own heart while keeping himself open to the promptings of the Spirit of God.

The point is, we are not called to be robots. God does not
dictate our paths but gives us wide room to maneuver. So often I hear people say that if they make a wrong choice they have missed their call. But often it is not the presenting decision but the purposeful direction that matters. After all, it was God who gave us our unique humanity—who put those passions and talents within us, for us to use.

Crucial to understanding our callings, then, is understanding ourselves. Seeing the passions and desires that God has placed within us—the talents and dreams that await realization in him.

The truth is that God gives us passions for a reason. He will not call us into something that makes us miserable or that is a waste of our talents. Frederick Buechner, the American theologian, once wrote, “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” The fact that we are passionate about something is often a sign that this is where God is calling us to be.

Of course, some needs are more conspicuous than others, and some passions can strike us as more obviously worthy than others. When I was growing up in South Africa under the brutal apartheid regime, my fellow students and I deeply desired to see that iniquitous system broken once and for all. We had a cause that was clear-cut, single-minded, and driven by a commitment to justice—an unequivocal calling. We believed in it. Many were prepared to die for it, and some of my fellow students did just that. We never doubted that in the end our case for justice would prevail. And so the student movement at the time committed itself to undermining the regime as best we could.

It can seem more difficult to find a cause worth fighting for, let alone dying for, in this modern, noncommittal world where anything seems to go. Yet we can see many remaining injustices, if we take the time to look. The trafficking of people as sex slaves, the destruction of parts of the planet, the scourge of extreme poverty, and the growth of inequality at our own back doors are but a few
pressing examples of injustices crying out for the transforming hope of the gospel. As I write this book, millions of refugees are fleeing battle-scarred countries such as Syria and Libya, hoping to start new lives in Europe.

But it’s also important to remember that the world’s deep hunger for Jesus is not confined to deprived communities and instances of injustice in war-torn areas of the world. Anyone who has ever worked on a bank trading floor knows the spiritual emptiness that can accompany the cutthroat competition and false bravado on show there. That is a place of deep hunger, and that same hunger exists throughout the working world. The world is hungry for godly lawyers, godly bankers, godly charity workers, godly shop assistants, and godly teachers! The great and humbling truth of Christianity is that God in his wisdom chooses to work through us and with us. He calls us out to be his hands and feet in the world, each with a special role to play in the expansion of his kingdom.

Finding our passions—answering the question “What do you want?”—is therefore crucial to finding our callings. Rarely is that question easily answered. For most, determining what we truly want is a profound psychological process: a journey of discovery that takes time to travel and that can lead us in different directions at different points in our lives. What I most wanted as a graduate entering the job market was different from what I wanted when I first got married. I faced my deepest longings in different ways at different times. That is why the pursuit of our callings is something that permeates every moment of our lives.

So it was for the disciples. They didn’t know what they wanted—only that they were searching for something. When Jesus asked them, “What do you want?” they didn’t know how to answer. Instead they sidestepped it with a question of their own: “Where are you staying?” (John 1:38).

The inference from the disciples’ question is clear: We don’t know the answer to your question. We’re not sure what we’re seeking.
know your why

We don’t know where we’re going. But we do know that we want to spend time with you, to abide with you, to learn more about you. Because if you truly are who John says you are, then maybe you will be able to show us what we are truly seeking.

In this simple exchange we have a most powerful link to our generation. Confronted with so many options and possibilities at our fingertips with unlimited knowledge just a Google search away, how many of us struggle to work out what we truly want? How many of us recognize that there is something missing, without understanding what it could be? But Jesus knows the longings of this generation so well. He isn’t critical of our failure to answer the question that he poses, just as he wasn’t critical of the disciples. Instead, he responds to us as he did to the disciples: “Come and you will see” (v. 39).

Jesus’ simple response to the disciples also acknowledged their unspoken questions. The words, “Come and see where I am staying,” meant, “Come and find out the plans that I have for you; the callings and the passions that I will give you.” And that is exactly what the disciples did. They entered the house seeking—but they left sought. For Jesus sought them out and called them. They gave up their searches for truth and took up new callings and new identities, not because they had all the answers, but because they found the one who does. They found not a new religious project, not a new program, but a person. They became known to him, and that recognition changed their lives.

Andrew lost no time. He knew that this was the Messiah, and he responded, grabbing hold of his brother Simon and introducing him to Jesus. Jesus recognized Simon immediately and renamed him—he was to be called the rock: “Jesus looked at him and said, ‘You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephas’ (which, when translated, is Peter [rock])” (v. 42).

This is breathtaking authority. Can you imagine interviewing someone for a job and the first thing you do is change her name?
“You were known as Philippa in your previous job, but in this place you will be known as Jane.”

It is interesting to note that, in the Gospels, Simon (Peter) was anything but a rock; he was impulsive and unstable. But in Acts, he was the pillar of the early church. Jesus named him not for what he was but for what, by God’s grace, he was to become. Jesus knew Simon’s future as well as his past.

And so it is with us as we struggle to find our true callings. Jesus reaches toward us. He does the calling, seeing us not as we have been pigeonholed by our own and others’ definitions, but by what he, through his indwelling Holy Spirit in our lives, is shaping us to be. Our lives are meaningful, not because we fulfill the projections of others but because we follow the promises of God for our future well-beings.

In the next few verses of John’s account, we see the calling of the first disciples.

From one encounter, Philip joined up. Nathaniel had sneered at the name of Nazareth and had asked whether any good could come from it, and yet he joined up immediately, once Jesus had revealed that he knew where Nathaniel had been even before Philip called him. The attraction of Jesus and the power of his personality went viral. In these few verses, we see a first-century social network.

When truth takes hold of an individual, it does so with such overwhelming conviction that others need to be told.

In my experience, when I take hold of the words of Jesus, his words take hold of me. Jesus’ words, “You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am” (John 13:13), transformed my life when I first read them as a student, and they continue to transform me now. Jesus calls with all the commanding firmness of the Lord who is accustomed to being followed, and yet with the gentle compassion of the teacher who is longing to draw alongside his pupil. Jesus’ words are powerful to change our lives. That is why the fact that he asks, “What do you want?” is of vital, immediate,
compelling importance. It’s not that the answer to the question becomes clear, but that the source of that answer is revealed. His question is not simply an inquiry but an offer. Jesus offers us the chance to join in a relationship with him through which we will find out what he is calling us to.

I know how long it took me to understand—and I do so only partially even now—that Jesus asks this question directly to each one of us, today, in whatever our situations may be. But we cannot answer him from the pressure and stress of the working environment any more than the disciples could answer from the heat of the desert. A response requires time with Jesus. The disciples went off to hang out with him away from the feverish world of the crowds. We need to do the same, never more so than in our 24/7, “always on” world.

I recall sitting with my immediate boss in a lunchroom overlooking London Bridge. I was working for one of the leading global financial institutions as the deal maker for new transactions. It was that time of the year so many of us love and hate: the end-of-year performance review.

I looked across the City of London, imagining the centuries of trade and commercial activity that had taken place in what is still the greatest financial center in the world. I remembered that the coat of arms of the City—Domine dirige nos (“Lord guide us”)—tells the story of a history of dependence on God. The merchants and bankers, the coffee traders and gold dealers, the insurance companies and guilds of the past all had sought God’s guidance.

My boss asked me what my objectives were, what I was expecting to achieve, and what I wanted out of life and my job. I said that what I really wanted to do with my life was to make Jesus Christ known to our generation. Ultimately that was what motivated me: to seek his guidance on all aspects of my day-to-day banking work, just as the City fathers, dealers, and merchants had over the centuries. My boss could not have looked more confused and stuck for words,
partly because we were doing a compensation review and the idea of mixing God and money unsettled him. He wanted to deal with my past performance, the bank’s current objectives, and my prospects for the next year. Of course, I was also ready for that discussion and was well versed in the arguments for why my achievements of the last year should be properly rewarded. But I couldn’t help but respond authentically to his question, “What do you want?”

Very often, when Jesus asks that question, we have no idea what the exact answer is. But our immediate response should nevertheless be, *I want to hang out with you. I want to find out more about you.* *I want to be regarded as part of the family that meets in your home, in exactly the same way as the invitation was extended to those two disciples. Because I know that in hanging out with you and getting to know you, what I truly want for my life will become clear.*

John used the word *meno* thirty-three times in his gospel. You can see why this word was so important to him when you understand its meaning: the English translation is “abiding with,” “staying connected,” and “resting in.” Indeed, the key to making the best of your life, the key to discovering your calling, is *to be with* Jesus. As you stay with Jesus, you find out more about what he has in store for you. He knows your passions, your fears, and the deepest desires of your heart. As with Peter, Jesus knows your name. As with Nathaniel, he knows your nature. As with Philip, he knows your uncertainty.

Jesus knows who we are. But he also knows who we are becoming. He has a vested interest in seeing us flourish in the future. One of the great joys of reading through the New Testament is seeing how these flawed, fallible, and lost disciples grew into their callings, transforming from wandering fishermen into the founders of the early church through the empowering presence of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. And it all started with that first question, that first encounter: “What do you want?”

The disciples didn’t have an answer. They grew to know that
answer over many years, as they discovered more about themselves, more about their hearts, and more about the amazing plans God had in store for them. As they discovered more about what it meant to build this new, revolutionary kingdom of God, they came to understand more about where God was calling them.

We do not need to answer Jesus immediately, but we do need to draw close to him. For as he shows us more about ourselves, we learn more about the powerful calling he has on our lives, callings that equip us to see a future where the best is yet to come.

So often the world expects you to behave in a certain way. Perhaps your parents wanted you to join the family business or teachers encouraged you to study one subject or another. But often what the world has planned for you and what God has planned for you are very different.

One of my favorite worship songs, written by Will Reagan of United Pursuit, is called “Help Me Find My Own Flame.” The central theme is that we cannot simply rely on the passions of others; instead we need to find our own flames. It captures perfectly the idea that we have unique identities, and that we should not compete with or compare ourselves to one another.

We cannot make the most of life and live well if we are trying to be someone else. God is not interested in calling clones. He invests in you and me as individuals. We each have a unique mold, customized in Christ for perfection. He wants us to be passionate, sold out to do the specific tasks that he has prepared for us. He enlarges our often-narrow visions of what we can achieve in our lives. He gives us space to dream.

But individual encouragement can be meaningless if we don’t know what it is that drives us. When we’ve been shaped by the world, it can be so difficult to understand what our God-given passions actually are.

And so, before we can even come to the question of understanding our callings, we first have to understand our identities. We have
to tackle the most ancient of all philosophical questions: Who am I? What defines me? What is my identity?

Identity Before Destiny

Each of us has a history, a personal story that gives meaning to our lives—and also to our fears. Often those main storylines are colored not by strong and encouraging narratives but by anxious thoughts of uncertainty, bad experiences with home and family, traumatic events at school, and demoralizing words from our elders and peers.

Woven into my own life are childhood memories of the apartheid system in South Africa. I grew up in a rural area of the country firmly in the grip of those who believed in the separation of races. I never embraced those prejudices even though I attended, as required by law, an all-white school and eventually university. Like it or not—and I do not—the very system I loathed so much also provided the privileges of education denied to the vast majority of black people. In small ways I tried to stand against the system—leading our student union in protest against the government of the day—but I have always been troubled by the fact that I could have done more. There were many times when I was afraid to put the call of justice above my own interest, for fear that my own life and livelihood would be put in danger. And even now, many years later, I cannot but think of those occasions when the oppressed cried out for a response, but I simply did not have the courage to break the laws of segregation and face the draconian consequences of prison.

In 2014’s Oscar-winning film Birdman, Michael Keaton plays a washed-out actor trying to start his life again after a series of failed roles. But his efforts are haunted by the voice of the “Birdman,” the superhero role that made him famous in his youth. This voice in his head tells him a story about his life—a story of failure and missed chances. It taunts him with memories of what he was and could
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have been, but now isn’t. The continuing question running through the film is simple: Will he listen to that voice of failure, or will he dare to believe that he can flourish again?

How often do we hear similar voices that taunt us about our past mistakes, our failures, our missed opportunities? It can be so tempting to listen to them, to allow them to define us.

But we are new creations in Christ: “The old has gone, the new is here!” (2 Corinthians 5:17). The old, negative history has been reformed; the story of our lives has been retold. Those discouraging, dominant thoughts seem to determine our futures, but God can, in his abundant grace and love, reshape them.

That God’s love reaches out to us is a defining characteristic of our Christian lives. He calls to us from the depths of his love for us. We are powerless without the energy of his love, which has been poured into our hearts by the Spirit who has been given to us (Romans 5:5). The Holy Spirit is the source of our confidence in the world.

Ultimately I have a choice. Which narrative of my life do I believe? Is it the negative or the positive? It is easy to say the latter. But how do I deal with the former, which seems integral to my identity and, if unchecked, determines my response to my calling? I need to take responsibility for living this renewed life to the full as Christ promised. To do so, I see my story in the light of his journeying with me through every season. In this way, the apparently dominant negative theme becomes a subsidiary motif and loses its power to shape my decisions for the future.

There is a moment in Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony when a dramatic battle takes place between two keys—F major and A major. This battle reflects the psychological struggle in Beethoven’s own life. In the symphony, written after he had been deaf for many years, the F-major key represents the depression, frustration, and despair that he so often felt at being alienated from the world and from his own work. The despondency and downward spiral of
depression start out as the dominant mode, but out of its depths, Beethoven introduced the A-major key, which represents life and love and beauty and hope. With the orchestra in full throttle, he determined to show the A-major theme of joy and love drowning out the F-major theme of despondency, thus establishing a sound of such boldness and confidence in life and the future as to be unforgettable. Even in the depths of his anguish, Beethoven chose to follow the positive, life-affirming narrative rather than slip into the resigned acceptance of his own weakness.

As my wife and I heard this symphony at the annual music festival in Verbier, Switzerland, set against the grandeur of the Swiss Alps, I realized again that, as Beethoven did, I have a choice: to follow the narrative that leads to life, or to succumb to the presenting turmoil that would rob me of my calling.

You may well have a distorted view of life or very low self-esteem. Perhaps you struggle to face the real you and want to live another’s story. This is a huge danger; it is one of the great pressures put on you through social media. The temptation to post stories and images that enhance your personal standing is rife.

Recent polls showed that online users are creating false memories and identities, and they can no longer distinguish fact from fiction. The poll found that the fear of being boring and the envy of other people’s lives caused two-thirds of users to lie about what they had been doing. One-fifth of those in their early twenties admitted that their online identities bore no resemblance to real life, and one in three personal posts were fabricated—a vacation that appeared so much more exciting than it was, a cool nightclub scene the poster didn’t attend.³

It is so easy to create an avatar that represents a better self. And a growing number of young people admit that they feel shame about their untruths and cannot live up to their online images. So often what we imagine about ourselves crowds out the genuine voices that make us who we are.
True identity cannot be self-motivated; it is given by God. Our tasks are to live out our true callings as uniquely shaped by God.

I once sat down with a well-known Christian leader. I remember my shock when he told me that he really hated himself. Unsure of his own identity, he felt alienated and alone: a spirit trapped in a person he loathed. He had to pursue his calling in spite of persistent self-questioning. It was so difficult to know what to say. Outwardly, his life was successful and his ministry anointed. Inwardly, he was struggling.

John the Baptist attracted attention at the start of his ministry, and the leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him “who he was” (John 1:19). He knew exactly who he was and who he was not, saying clearly, “I am not the Messiah” (v. 20).

He was pressed three times for his identity. He denied being Elijah the prophet. It was a kind of guessing game. So often when we meet people, we ask questions about their families, where they live, who they know. We try to find a box to put them in.

Finally John was asked, “What do you say about yourself?” (v. 22). John answered, “I baptize with water” and added that there was “one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie” (vv. 26–27).

We learn a good lesson, vital to understanding our calling, from this interchange: identity comes before destiny. We need to understand the person God created before we can begin to understand the person God created us to be.

Who I am, before why I am. So often we try to skip the first to end up with the second. We talk about our jobs in a functionally defining way, as if to say, This is my destiny and my identity rolled into one. But that is a mistake. I think of a friend whose identity was so tied up in his work as an accountant that he had a near breakdown when he left his job. After he left the office, he began the painful process of asking, “Who am I?”

We often talk about someone having an “identity crisis.” In
reality, very few people go through life without facing real questions about their identities.

I know a young woman who held a senior position in an advertising firm but took time away from work to bring up her two small children. She struggled for years to rediscover her true identity, as her days were filled with mundane chores and she could no longer rely on her position at work to define her. And yet she knew that for that season of her life, her primary calling was to her family. She took on some part-time work to break the routine of the day and gradually grew to enjoy her decision to be at home. And then her calling changed as the circumstances changed. The children grew up and she could go back to full-time work. But she had learned a great lesson: she knew that she did not need to have her identity defined by her job. She was freer and happier in her own skin for being the person God wanted her to be. Through all the changes, God’s love was the constant.

Then there was Sam, who had decided to leave the armed forces after serving for ten years. He experienced a long period of grave self-reflection, as his identity had been tied up in the military; he had to begin again to discover who he was in Christ. His discovery, too, was profound. He did not need to rely on his rank to know that he was valued by God.

The question is not only, “Who am I?” but, “Who am I in Christ?” I am defined in relationship with someone else. I am no longer the arbiter of success in my life. I am loved by someone else. The focus shifts to another person. In the words of Saint Paul, “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21). I am moving away from myself as the center and going toward Christ as the center. This is a hugely significant shift. This realization that life is best savored when lived for Christ is the key to living well. It moves the center of gravity from me to him, and, in that shift, is the very basis of finding my real calling.

Our destinies are what he calls us to, but they are never a
substitute for our identities—knowing who we are, knowing that we are uniquely and passionately loved by God. And for a good reason: in a fast-paced digital world, and in a world in which job changes are frequent, it is hard to find the constant thread that will keep us centered throughout our lives. If we come to the end of a phase at work, then we are tempted to think of ourselves as having no further value. But if we are secure in our identities, we know that the end of an era is not the end of our destinies. There is always more to come.

The world tells us that when we have become successful and have created names for ourselves, then we have identities. But with Christ this is flipped on its head. Our identities are secure through all the shifting sands of time. We are his beloved, his children. It is from that place of a secure identity that we can step into our callings, and not the other way around.

**Christ-Style Living**

You need to have a clear, God-shaped view of your true identity. No matter what others say about you—whether you are unemployed or employed, whether you have a history of failures behind you or a catalogue of success—you are infinitely worthy, chosen, valued. No matter whether you are a charity worker, a managing director of an investment bank, a teacher, or a postman, you are loved and have eternal significance. It is only once you grasp this that you can step into your calling, because it is only easy and natural to serve and live for others when you first know how loved you are: “We love because [God] first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

It is a simple truth that we cannot give what we haven’t got. It is only once our love tanks have been so filled to overflowing by our heavenly Father that we can then give to others out of the overflow. This overflow of our hearts is manifest in Christ-style living.

Christ-style living is distinctive and should be instantly recognizable. It tries to make the most of every moment, emitting
a “pleasing aroma” (2 Corinthians 2:15) in our workplaces, our relationships, our homes, our vacations, and even our sweaty gyms. Those who live this way do so because they know why they are living. They live for others, not themselves.

So my accountant friend who had the identity crisis when his job ended need not have feared, nor Sam when he left the army. Their identities were secure in Christ, who shifts our attitudes, activities, perspectives, and motivations away from ourselves and toward others, whom we regard as more important than ourselves. This is revolutionary in the workplace. Understanding that we are known by God as unique individuals created by him—loved by him—produces an antidote to the daily fear, anxiety, and corrosive inhumanity of living solely for personal gain. Being loved, known, and called by God is the trinity forming the basis of our confidence in the world.

This truth was illustrated to me vividly by a woman working behind a coffee kiosk at the airport in Austin, Texas. Her whole day consisted of serving coffee to harassed and time-constrained commuters. I was due to catch an early flight, and, feeling groggy and out of sorts, I went to buy a cup of coffee at the stand. The lady was cheerfulness itself at a time when I was anything but. She inquired how I took my coffee with what appeared to be a genuine interest. She detected through my accent that I was not from Texas, assuming that coffee was as strange a beverage to me as my accent was to her. “Tea,” she announced, “does not do it for me.” She asked me if I would like to try an additional flavoring, telling me that cinnamon was her favorite. She urged me to cheer up my day by ordering something different. All the while she was encouraging others in their orders.

Curiosity, or the cinnamon, got the better of me, and I asked why she seemed to take such an interest in her job. “Oh,” she replied, with a smile that still pops up in my mind years later, “I want all my customers to have the best day possible. I try to give them a little
piece of happiness to send them on their way. You know, I really love my job. I’m so grateful to have it. It gets me out of bed early. It’s my tiny contribution to life.”

Although this woman was up at the crack of dawn and on her feet all day, her orientation was outward, to others, away from herself. I scurried off, leaving her to spice up others’ coffees along with their lives.

She had a simple job, but it was one that she was determined to use to its maximum. She saw beyond the mundane nature of her work to the difference she could make to others.

You need to start in the right place. If you view God as someone out to get you, to cramp your life and impede your pleasures, then you will see life in much the same way.

However, if you see him for who he is—an amazing, loving, gracious God who is out to find the best for you and is prepared to guide and help you through the tough times—then in Christ, your life will be full to overflowing. Your image of him, and his in you, projects and shapes your life.

You can only build an effective Christian life when you have a “settled core”: an inner self “hidden with Christ” (Colossians 3:3). When you go to the gym or a Pilates class, your instructor might encourage you to build core strength, as it is vital for balance and keeping the body frame strong. So it is with the Christian life. You need to take the basics seriously and, from a secure identity, develop core relational strength. This is particularly important when you have to withstand the attacks of the enemy, whose sole task is to knock you off balance. To know your identity in Christ and to be strengthened in your basic relationship with him is a virtuous cycle of paramount importance to following your calling in the world.

God stretches our faith in order to prepare us to receive his promises. That often requires painful rewiring. We need updating, just as an old house may need rewiring. The old electrical wires might be out of date and dangerous, so change is necessary. No one
likes going through this process of spiritual reorientation, but that is how we grow. I know of no one who has wanted to find a true identity in Christ and build a growing trust in the Lord who has not gone through a painful readjustment, perhaps many times, so motives, actions, ambitions, desires, and aspirations are radically pointed and repointed to Jesus. There must be radical abandonment of confidence in ourselves and an equally progressive growth in dependence on Christ.

So often, in the rough-and-tumble of the world, we drift away from intimacy with Christ. We act out of anger, resentment, or frustration. We assimilate too closely to the world. He needs to bring us back to our core identity in him so that we can hear his voice as he moves us on. Only when we have the comfort of our relationship with God can we confidently confront the callings that God has placed on our lives.

Orientating ourselves to hear God is the best thing we can do. We put ourselves in that place when we are obedient, open, and willing to learn. That is our part of preparing for his calling. It is proximity that matters. Our whole object of living is to take up his promise: “Draw near to [me], and [I] will draw near to you” (James 4:8 esv). The rest is up to him. But we need to take those steps that lead us to stand under his grace, ready to receive his promises, his calling.

There is a penetrating question in Jeremiah 30:21: “Who is he who will devote himself to be close to me?”

I hope as you continue to read, you will answer, “I am.”