

"Beautifully written ... utterly profound." John Eldredge

ODYSSEY

ENCOUNTER THE GOD OF HEAVEN
AND ESCAPE THE SURLY BONDS
OF THIS WORLD

JUSTIN
CAMP



Part of the WiRE Series for Men

ODYSSEY

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AND ESCAPE THE SURLY BONDS
OF THIS WORLD

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CAMP

DAVID  COOK™
transforming lives together

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BEFORE YOU START

Man is made to journey. It's in our bones to feel the call, a yearning to go. For it's *out there* that we get to experience the unpredictable, the inspiring, the indescribable. *Out there*, we mature and change. *Out there*, we become our fullest selves.

Out there, we find home.

But in our present culture, more and more of us are getting stuck. Sometimes it's fear. Often it's confusion—especially because of all those promises our modern culture makes about finding esteem and security and comfort from created things: a job, a title, an accomplishment, a balance in a bank or brokerage account. So, instead of spreading sails wide and striking out for new horizons, we spend decades staring at the same old walls. And when those promises come up empty—and they always come up empty—we don't know where to turn.

Well, I'm going to tell you where to turn.

My friend, it's time to start thinking bigger.



As you read this book, you'll encounter half a dozen nano-histories—short profiles of six astronauts. Six fascinating mortal men. Six fearless and frail spacemen who undertook unthinkable journeys to unimaginable places but lived lives not unlike yours and mine—lives mixed up between the yearning and the going and the stuck.

Each astronaut here hails from NASA's legendary Mercury, Gemini, and Apollo programs—from the midcentury golden days of the space age. These men went higher, farther, and faster than any human before or since. And their journeys to outer space provide fine opportunities to learn about the greatest journey any of us can ever undertake—the most thrilling of all adventures, the most fulfilling of all expeditions: to go *out there* and discover the God of heaven somehow; to begin to develop a personal relationship with him; and to come home changed, ready to begin life on Earth anew.

It's to this great journey that we must now turn. We must, that is, if we're finally ready to live bigger lives. *Lives ignited*. Lives burning with energy and purpose, joy and peace, kinship and community. Lives beyond self-centeredness and self-doubt. Lives beyond bogged or beaten or benumbed. Lives “to the full” (John 10:10).¹

Sometimes great journeys are literal; sometimes they're figurative. They always have a spiritual component but oftentimes physical components too. Noah jumped into a boat. Abraham hit the road. Moses marched into a desert. David and Peter and Paul—they each shared in multiple crazy cool adventures with God.

Hear and trust me. God's inviting *you* into this kind of journey right now—even in the midst of your busy modern life. What is it? What will it look like? Well, that's what this book is all about. What you hold in your hands is a practical field guide. It offers a path to follow. It comes fully equipped to equip you for the road ahead—helping you overcome objections and discover the journey that God's handcrafted just for you.

So gather round, and let your God-given adventurous heart be roused by stories of daring and heroism. And be inspired to undertake an odyssey of your own. If you do—if you go—you too will have stories to tell. And your life will *never* be the same.

I promise.

Justin Camp
San Francisco Peninsula

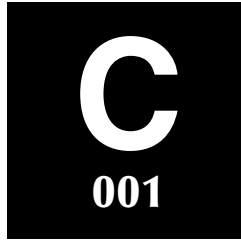
The first astronaut nano-history comes in chapter 2; my story starts things off. And each chapter opens with a short piece of creative nonfiction. Because some details from the lives of these midcentury space travelers have been lost, I reimagined certain scenes, reconstructing them in ways that reflect the essence of actual events and qualities of their character. As you read these pieces, hunt for the themes represented therein. Those themes are what the corresponding chapters are all about. And at the end of each chapter is a section entitled “On Board.” With simple exercises, these sections turn the focus to you. Take your time with them. It’s these sections that will guide you along ancient paths toward freedom and goodness ... and God.

HIGH FLIGHT

Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of Earth
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;
Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth
Of sun-split clouds—and done a hundred things
You have not dreamed of—wheeled and soared and swung
High in the sunlit silence. Hov'ring there,
I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung
My eager craft through footless halls of air ...

Up, up the long, delirious, burning blue
I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace
Where never lark nor ever eagle flew—
And, while with silent lifting mind I've trod
The high untrespassed sanctity of space,
Put out my hand, and touched the face of God.

// John Gillespie Magee Jr., World War II pilot



CARBON AND BLUE SKY AND HOME

A man fits shiny steel into a slot with a sharp click. He fumbles and finds the loose end of the belt and pulls, tightening it around his waist. He relaxes against the armrests and pushes his feet forward, stretching and pressing his sore body into the seat back. He settles into the void—into the *nothing* he needs to do for the next two hours.

He squeezes his hands into fists and opens them; he scans a cut, a scrape over there, and a small puncture from a thorn on his thumb. But his mind is somewhere else.

Before long, twin GE engines crank and begin throwing fourteen thousand pounds of thrust. He turns his head to the brightness of the window. Runway slips past.

As the plane lifts into the air, the man straightens. His eyes survey the seats in front of him—the bulkhead, the overhead bins, the seat belt signs. But his conscious mind registers none of it.

He closes his eyes and feels the increased g-force in his chest. Way more dramatic, though, is the increased gratitude in his heart.

I'm a son.

A close friend sits beside; another across the aisle. But he holds on to his words. It isn't a moment for conversation. He just rests in

fullness. The fullness of a trip home. The kind one experiences returning from a sacred journey—from a place not marked on any map.

Opening his eyes after a few moments, he looks again out the window. He watches rural Montana blur as it gets farther and farther away.

The world seems different somehow. Bigger. More wonder and opportunity. But safer too.

Is this how things were supposed to be all along?

With his gaze still on the land below, the man's attention drifts inward, backward. His mind settles on a few specific moments, a few precious moments, only hours ago on the north face of a low mountain. A volcanic peak among several rising together—the tallest reaching about three thousand feet. A cluster of small islands floating in a great prairie sea.

He summons the smells, the sounds, his view from where he'd taken cover in front of a scrubby tree. He sees the view north across the border into Canada, west across the land of the ancient Blackfoot to the ragged, mystical peaks of Glacier National Park.

The airplane bumps and climbs, but he enjoys a moment of stillness—soaking in love and recalling his experience, hunting for mule deer, in the presence of God.

He and his friends covered a lot of miles on this trip, carbon bows in hand. But there were long hours of silence too—and prayer. And this man isn't much used to that. His friend, though, the one seated next to him, had challenged him to embrace the solitude—to make use of it.

He stifles a chuckle as he thinks about their conversation a couple of weeks back about the solitude this kind of adventure offers. It'd started with the recollection of words from an old hunter long gone: "The best camouflage pattern is called 'Sit down and be quiet.'"

His friend had surprised him then by saying that he takes advantage of his sit-down-and-be-quiet time by praying, hour after hour. It sounded daunting. But it piqued something too. Because God had been awakening something in the man's heart of late, he recognized

it for what it was: an invitation. Into what, he didn't know. But he accepted it and spent the better part of a week hiking, running, crouching, crawling, and talking to his Father God.

They'd hunted in the mornings, starting out before dawn, and in the afternoons, staying out until after dark. And through it all, he did his best to remember to pray—and listen.

Those prayers—mixed with some adventure, the wonder of God's creation, and a respite from the demands of home—worked to put the man in a position that was mostly unfamiliar. It was a position—a spiritual posture—that allowed him to receive *more*. It put him into position to have a fresh encounter with God himself and with God's outrageous love.

And it was undeniable. Over the course of those days and over the trails in those mountains, he'd heard whispers. Whispers from a good, strong Father to a beloved son. He'd felt God's love in the rocks and slopes and trees and skies. In the sound of frost under his boots. In the kiss of afternoon breeze on his face. In the hand signals and knowing looks exchanged by friends in the field and the laughter and meaningful conversations back at the lodge each evening.

And then the man *really* felt his Father's love on that final morning—when it all happened. When he experienced the oddest, most unexpected thing. When he, from beside that scrubby tree, encountered that improbable and magnificent white-tailed buck.

The man knew—before, during, and afterward. He just knew that he knew. After having spent four days close by his Father's side, he just knew it in his heart.

That place and those moments were gifts just for him.

Once the memories and sensations have run their course, the man closes his eyes. Deep within, underneath the sound of the raging turbofans, he does something he's never done before: he considers what he knows for sure, the things he can hold fast to in this crazy world. He counts and considers them. Things he's experienced. Things he's been told by people he trusts. Some things he's read. He turns these truths over and over and around.

There aren't many. And most involve God. Because he follows God and always has, in some way or another. He can't remember a season when he didn't go to church. Even in high school and college and his postcollege years, when the culture of the world directed his steps. Even then, he'd somehow find his way to church. Most of the time, at least, if not always *on* time.

So he's heard lots of sermons—and until now, he thought he knew all the most important things there were to know about God.

But this right now. This is something different. This is new.

And I don't want to lose this.

Exhilaration eclipses peace as it becomes clear that he's going to have to contend with a brand-new truth—one that's very likely to become the most important of all.

The aircraft continues its ascent, pushing toward the ragged clouds above the grasslands becoming foothills becoming mountains—and this brand-new truth descends, pushing down, down from his head, down toward his heart.

Chasing that beautiful deer, back there and below, was amazing. It was one of several dozen great experiences he's had in his forty-plus years. *We weren't even looking for whitetail!* But that isn't it. The truth headed for home is this: this man's God in heaven loves him. *Him*. Not all humans, with him thrown in, as he's always thought. But *him*. And he always has. *A lot*. Way more, in fact, than the man could have ever imagined.

As he sits there in seat 8D, exhilaration gives way to true joy as his heart grasps the fact that God had been dreaming about this very day for eons, that he handcrafted the details of it in breathless anticipation, that he delivered each instant with precision and delight. And that he did it all with the pure and singular purpose of giving his boy a sense—just a sense—of how much he's loved. This small, undeserving son of God.

The man sits still, comfortable in the uncomfortable seat, and revels in outrageous love.

I never want to lose this.

The jet bounces and lurches and breaks through the thin layer of clouds into bright sky above. Sun glints off the fuselage; contrails stream from the tail. And this new truth sinks deep into the dark reaches of the man's heart, brightening things there.

He's starting to see God as his very own Papa.

He's beginning to see himself as Papa's beloved son.

And he knows somehow that this is the beginning of something big.



That was me. Awestruck, heart aflame, but at peace too. And at home—though still a thousand miles from my physical home in Northern California.

Have you been there? Does this story resonate? Do you know God with this kind of longing and satisfaction?

I confess, until recently I couldn't relate. And I know most churchgoing men in our modern world won't connect with these words either. We'll nod our heads about God's love *generally* or *theoretically*. But we don't know much about the scale of God's love for each of us *specifically*, *personally*.

Something isn't connecting.

Maybe you're the exception. Maybe you've grown to know God as "good, good Father," as the great song goes.¹ Maybe you've grown to know him as someone who loves you so much, he can't turn his adoring gaze away, no matter what you've done. As someone whose fierce love will never change, no matter what mistakes you've made, no matter what sins you've committed.

But most of us today don't know him like that.

Because that would require a journey we've not yet made.



God is Elohim—Creator of heaven and the earth. He is El Shaddai, El Elyon, and El Olam—God Almighty, Most High God, and Everlasting God. He is the Alpha and the Omega—the first and the last, the beginning and the end. These ancient names of power, drawn from the original languages of the Bible, are as true today as they have ever been.

But, just as much, he is Immanuel—God with us (all the time); and he is Abba—Dad, Papa (all the time). And we *must* get to know him in these intimate ways too. We must.

I will show you how.



Sunday mornings in my leafy hometown in Silicon Valley usually meant my family was at church. My mother, a Midwesterner, was tall and thin with ash-blond hair. A former teacher, she had a sharp mind and a soft heart. But most of all, my mom loved God. It was she who encouraged our church attendance—and gently enforced it.

Our church was medium sized, Presbyterian, and perched on a hill. I wouldn't say it was thriving, but it had a certain momentum—young families, a fine pastor, picnics, vacation Bible schools, pancake breakfasts, and Christmas Eve services lit by flickering candles.

Our Sunday routine was simple. My parents would drop us at our classrooms, walk down the hill to the sanctuary, then return an hour or so later.

I was two years old when we arrived in California from Colorado and began this pattern. My sister was five. As we got older, my sister and I and other kids would start in the sanctuary, stay for part of the service, then head upstairs for the remainder of the hour. But in middle school, my parents offered us a choice: we could continue going to Sunday school or stay in the sanctuary for the entire service. We never went to Sunday school again, but we missed few sermons. Mom saw to that.

Later, when I moved to Los Angeles for college, I continued going to church—sometimes with friends, mostly by myself. Then I met a girl. Her name is Jennifer. (We still go to church together, if you know what I mean.)

After we graduated, we got married. And we attended church together most Sundays too—first in Center City, Philadelphia, then in Morningside Heights, Manhattan, then in Menlo Park, California.

During those years, sermons were my connection to God. They were my window into who he is—and who I was. And those sermons offered a ton of truth. I learned to look to the Bible as my authoritative guide, inspired by God himself. I learned that God exists as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I learned that Jesus died sinless and rose again—offering himself as a sacrifice, saving us from sin and death.

These are good truths. They went in deep, and for them I am supremely grateful. But not everything I learned was so great. Somehow those decades of well-meaning preaching also taught me—sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly, but always in ways I understood—that God often didn't approve of me or really understand what I was going through. Those sermons gave me the nagging feeling deep down that he was disappointed—sometimes even disgusted—with what I was. With who I was.

They implied in no uncertain terms that he wanted me to do better at following the rules. (*I will; I promise.*) They taught me that I needed to be a better person. (*This time I'm going to be.*) They taught me that I just needed to man up. (*I will try my best.*)

And with it all, something else became clear—that I wasn't going to be able to deliver on any of my promises, not perfectly. Instead, a deep realization came, so quietly I couldn't sense it was a lie.

I've got to get better at hiding the less-than-perfect parts of me. If I don't, I'll never belong. Not to God. Not in this world. Not in my own skin.

And I wanted to belong. I wanted to be home.



I never doubted I was a beloved son—my mom’s. When I got into trouble in middle school and high school (and I did plenty), she stood with me. Her love never wavered. But it wasn’t like that with God. His love and acceptance always seemed to vary according to how I acted or failed to act. So, growing up and far into adulthood, rather than a beloved son of God, I felt more like an orphan.

Just so you know, God has taught me since that his is the only unconditional love there is—and that it was his love, actually, that was flowing through my mom. But I sure didn’t understand that at the time. Because while I’d heard a thousand stories of him, I can’t remember many from that season that revealed what his heart is *really* like.

So, for much of my life, I had a warped view of God—and myself. I didn’t know of his attraction and attentiveness toward me, uniquely, in every moment.

I didn’t know. And the omission stunted my maturity in every way. I became a striving man hiding nearly constant and medium-level sadness and anger and cynicism.

Because here’s the thing: without an inkling of how much God loves us, even in our darkest moments, the good news of the gospel isn’t so good, is it? I mean, if God is disapproving and disappointed, sometimes disgusted, that’s actually bad news, right? It sure seemed that way to me.

Yes, I thought, Jesus died for me. Yes, I’m going to heaven. But do I really want to? Do I want to spend all that time with someone like that? To go to a place run by a guy who doesn’t even like me—who maybe even considers me repugnant?

And *repugnant* was an easy jump. Because when I was twelve, a doctor told my mother she had leukemia. And with that pronouncement (and the “everything’s now out of control” feeling that came with it), I grabbed the stick. I grabbed the yoke.

I began trying to control everything in my life. And I did it in the ways my young mind could come up with: by dulling pain and fear with food and friendships and by breaking rules and questioning

authority. And when I got a bit older, it was with achievement in school and my careers—but with food still and then pornography too.

God wasn't the only one who sometimes thought I was repugnant.

So here's what I told him: "I believe in you. But I'm going to *live* for something else. The world, quite frankly, offers news that's better than yours. I hear culture telling me if I work hard, if I don't screw up too badly, then I can find all the security and comfort, peace and happiness I'll ever need. Praise and respect too. If I'm lucky—maybe lots."

And I told God, mostly with my actions, "If you won't stand with me when I struggle, if you won't have my back when I mess up—as any good father should—then I'll father myself. I'll protect and take care of myself." And I did. I tried, at least. And then in my twenties, I told him, "I'll protect and take care of my family too."

It's up to me. My strategies. My solutions. Because I'm alone.

But then, around my forty-third birthday, my Father in heaven apparently decided it was time to do something about my beliefs (which, by that time, had become worn) and with my vows (which, by then, had become overworked).

And what he did—honestly but figuratively—left a big, smoking hole in the ground.



A few months prior to that trip to Montana, I'd asked a question that had seemed fairly ordinary. In prayer one Tuesday evening, I asked God whether there were any lies I was believing about him or about myself. And in the silence that followed, my mind settled on a specific conclusion I had reached in the weeks and months after my mom's long-ago diagnosis. In prayer I pictured myself back then, alone in my bedroom just after my parents had relayed the doctor's news, my young mind landing here: *God must love me less.*

As an adult in my forties, I'd learned enough to know—on an intellectual level, at least—that my youthful conclusion was inaccurate. But it still somehow stuck, and it still *felt* true, even years later,

as I sat in that chair with my eyes shut, my imagination surrendered in prayer.

So, in that moment, having had enough of those old feelings, I decided to renounce my long-ago conclusion. I told God, simply, I didn't want to believe it anymore—not about him, not about me.

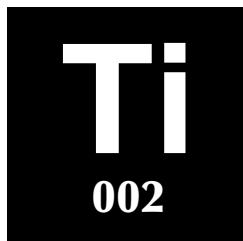
And I said "Amen." And promptly forgot about it all.

But God didn't.

Looking back, I can see it now. That prayer was the first step in a grand expedition—a pilgrimage into God's heart. It marked the start of a great journey, one that included a hunting trip but would become so much more. It was the beginning of the kind of odyssey we all must undertake if we want to experience true intimacy with God.

An Odyssey—like the one in that old Greek tale about a legendary adventurer. His was a journey for the ages—gods and monsters. But you know what?

All he really wanted was to find his way home.



TITANIUM AND BRIGHT STARS AND WONDER

The capsule is tiny. Almost *too* tiny.

Now, the rocket that carried the capsule up here and on which it sat until moments ago—that’s what you’d expect. A giant ballistic missile named Atlas—the titan from Greek mythology. A behemoth with a belly full of rocket fuel and liquid oxygen, spitting 360,000 pounds of fire and fury straight down.

But that giant’s gone now—falling, spent, doing slow cartwheels back over there somewhere. And this thing here? This thing is a tin can. A titanium, beryllium, chromium, molybdenum can, actually. But a can nonetheless. A tiny metal can.

It’s barely big enough for a man to fit in. And if a guy’s taller than five feet eleven, he ain’t going to. The capsule is so small, in fact, that the few men who’ve been inside have been known to crack wise that “you don’t get in it, you put it on.”¹

And a man did put it on today. And he and the capsule are all alone now, hurtling through space at more than seventeen thousand miles per hour. Outside the walls of the can is death—by speed, by cold, by void, by radiation.

The man inside is too well trained, though, to be focusing on the horrors that would rush in if those walls somehow failed. No, he's in the groove, busy working. Marking checklists, reading instruments, pressing buttons, turning dials, and communicating with his team back on the ground. But in the few and brief moments between those duties—and there are a few—he takes time to delight in the wonder of this strange place and this singular moment that Atlas bore him up here to experience.

For this man's heart hungers for wonder. And right now, as he and the capsule pass from night into day—his heart thrills to the brilliance of the first of three sunrises he'll see today from the vantage of Earth orbit. But he's about to see something else. Something beyond what he or anyone else expected for this flight. Something he'll never quite be able to explain.

[Transcript of MA-6 Air-Ground Flight Communications]

Astronaut: *"This is Friendship Seven.... The sun is coming up behind me in the periscope, a brilliant, brilliant red. Over."*

Mission Control: *"Roger."*

Astronaut: *"It's blinding through the scope on clear.... I'm going to the dark filter to watch it come on up."*

Mission Control: *"Roger."*

[And here it comes, the surprise ...]

Astronaut: *"I'll try to describe what I'm in here. I am in a big mass of some very small particles that are brilliantly lit up like they're luminescent. I never saw anything like it. They round a little; they're coming by the capsule, and they look like little stars. A whole shower of them coming by."*

They swirl around the capsule and go in front of the window, and they're all brilliantly lighted. They probably average maybe 7 or 8 feet apart, but I can see them all down below me, also."

Mission Control: “Roger, Friendship Seven. Can you hear any impact with the capsule? Over.”

Astronaut: “Negative, negative. They’re very slow; they’re not going away from me more than maybe 3 or 4 miles per hour. They’re going at the same speed I am approximately. They’re only very slightly under my speed. Over.

“They do, they do have a different motion, though, from me because they swirl around the capsule and then depart back the way I am looking.

“Are you receiving? Over.

“There are literally thousands of them.

“This is Friendship Seven. Am I in contact with anyone? Over.”²

The man in the capsule, grasping for words, is John Glenn.



The mood of the country was tense in those days. After the second of two horrible wars finally ended, a new threat had emerged. Just after World War II wound down, the Cold War began, and our Soviet allies turned quickly into our prime adversaries. Their hostility, sometimes brazen, sometimes sly, caused deep national anxiety about the spread of communism and the prospect of all-out nuclear war.

Four years, four months, and sixteen days before Glenn’s 1962 flight, the Soviet Union launched *Sputnik*—Earth’s first artificial satellite. It was about the size of a disco ball, orbited Earth every 96.2 minutes, and went *beep-beep-beep*.

Lyndon Johnson, then Senate majority leader, always unvarnished, expressed the concern of our nation: “Soon, they will be dropping bombs on us from space like kids dropping rocks onto cars from freeway overpasses.”³

President Dwight Eisenhower responded by establishing NASA—the National Aeronautics and Space Administration: “To provide for research into problems of flight within and outside the earth’s atmosphere.”⁴

Eisenhower wanted to beat the Russians. He didn't want just to get a *thing* into space; he wanted to get one of *us* there. So one of NASA's first programs was commissioned to do just that. Project Mercury's goal was to launch a man into Earth orbit and recover him safely.

John Glenn would be that man. He was made for it, after all.

Glenn was born in the hills of eastern Ohio, as all-American as they come. "As a boy," the editors of *Time* magazine wrote, "Glenn swam in Crooked Creek, hunted rabbits, played football and basketball, read Buck Rogers, was a great admirer of the big-band musician Glenn Miller and blew a blaring trumpet in the town band."⁵ At a small local college, Glenn studied chemistry, played football, and flew small airplanes in a civilian pilot training program.

When Japan dropped bombs on Pearl Harbor, though, he left college and went to fly for the Marine Corps. He would complete fifty-nine combat missions in the Pacific theater of World War II—another ninety in the Korean War. After that, he became a test pilot. He took his piloting skills to Patuxent River, Maryland, and began pushing the envelope of what man and machine could do in the wild blue. He tested navy and marine jet fighters—planes with names like FJ-3 Fury, F7U Cutlass, and F8U Crusader.

And when the United States needed to make up ground in the space race, Glenn was a clear choice to help. Out of 508 qualified candidates, he was among seven men chosen by NASA for the Mercury program. And he stood out even among that vaunted group: "He had the hottest record as a pilot," wrote Tom Wolfe.⁶

Glenn was accomplished and confident, both in himself and in his preparation. He had faith in science and engineering. He trusted them so much, in fact, he was willing to face the prospect of death at supersonic speed. But he had faith in something else too—something beyond physics, bigger than human ambition, larger even than the possibility of atomic annihilation.

John Glenn had faith in God.

The faith of his Scotch-Irish family and forebearers had grown strong in him. A few months after his famous Mercury-Atlas 6 flight,

evangelical magazine *Christianity Today* called his faith “rugged and unshakable.”⁷

For decades after, though, he was forced to live out that faith not in space but on the ground. Mercury-Atlas 6 had rejuvenated American confidence and made Glenn a hero. President John F. Kennedy awarded him the NASA Distinguished Service Medal—and promptly grounded him. He’d become “so valuable to the nation,” said NASA administrator Charles Bolden, Kennedy wouldn’t “risk putting him ... in space again.”⁸

So Glenn used his Earth-bound hero status to speak about his flight—and about his faith. But Glenn didn’t stay grounded permanently. At age 77, in 1998, near the end of a long career as a US senator from Ohio, he joined the STS-95 mission crew on space shuttle *Discovery*. And once more, the world got to see his heart for wonder. During a news conference from orbit, Glenn radioed back, “To look out at this kind of creation out here and not believe in God is, to me, impossible.”⁹



QUESTION:

“IS THERE MORE GOING ON HERE?”

*You may have asked ... Isn't heaven a place we go when we die? Isn't being a Christian just about doing good; going to church; reading the Bible a bit; and, most of all, believing in Jesus—so we make darn sure heaven **is** where we go?*

You may have asked ... This life's about what we can see, hear, and touch, isn't it?

These are great questions, and the truth will blow your mind.

Think bigger.



As the scientific revolution (1500s and 1600s) rolled into the industrial revolution (1700s and 1800s), then into the information age (1900s and 2000s), crazy breakthroughs in science and technology turned our collective gaze toward the natural world and away from the supernatural realm.

Little by little, discovery by discovery.

Men like Isaac Newton, Charles Darwin, Albert Einstein, Enrico Fermi, Francis Crick, and James Watson pioneered breathtaking theories that enabled us to understand and explain the mechanics of our physical world—and of the larger cosmos. These revelations, along with some cascading social currents, resulted in a new cultural mind-set—one in which God and heaven and worship and prayer gradually began to seem somehow less immediate, less relevant, less essential. The idea that there might be something beyond the observable, something more basic than space and time and matter, began to strike many people as improbable. The idea that there might exist a spiritual reality beyond, above, beneath, and intermingled with our physical world became sort of quaint.

Speaking at the Seattle World's Fair just months after Glenn's Mercury flight, Episcopal priest and Manhattan Project physicist William Pollard, a man *Time* magazine dubbed the Atomic Deacon, explained the shift this way: "It is an inevitable property of the people who live in any golden age to be so passionately devoted to the spirit of their age that all other aspects of reality extraneous to it are excluded."¹⁰

That exclusion is what most of us have done, each in our own way. The naturalists and humanists among us went ahead and rejected everything spiritual. They refuse to recognize the supernatural. They've just decided that none of it is reality at all. They've decided that, given our abilities to discover, God and heaven and the rest have become "unnecessary."¹¹ They've asked, "What role is there for God?"¹²

A philosophical naturalist considers us physical beings and nothing more. He or she believes the natural world, the physical cosmos, is all there is. A philosophical humanist believes that humans are capable, in and of themselves, of discovering truth and devising ways—using the scientific method and reason—to meet all human needs, to answer all human questions, and to solve all human problems. They, like naturalists, reject the idea that there is anything beyond the physical world.

The atheistic beliefs underlying naturalism and humanism originated in the ancient world but began to have wide cultural influence in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Then they morphed and matured and increased their impact in the nineteenth century. And in our time, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, these beliefs have come to dominate many of the cultures of our world.

What's *real*, our world has decided, is whatever we can see and hear and touch—and anything transcendent to our physical reality is simply less real (or not real at all). We've raised this belief to the level of pseudolaw or pseudoreligion. It's become an "everyone knows that" kind of thing.

We Christians are neither naturalists nor humanists, at least not in the philosophical sense. But we live in (and work in and raise our families in) a culture that's influenced heavily by naturalistic and humanistic ideas and ideals. And it's easy for us to get distracted and forget and begin acting like functional atheists.

Most of us have, indeed, just like naturalists and humanists, adopted an intense bias toward the physical world. We may *believe* in a spiritual realm. We may *believe* in God and heaven and worship and prayer. But we believe *more* in the here and now.

Much more.



“Our trouble is that we have established bad thought habits.”¹³ And things have just gotten more unbalanced since 1948, when the great gospeler A. W. Tozer wrote those words. We go to church on Sundays—maybe—but we put virtually all our energy and time and worry toward the physical world. Work. Money. Pastimes and entertainments. The spiritual realm gets what's left, if there is anything.

Because the here and now is greedy and relentless. Demands and deadlines at work. Requests and responsibilities at home. Pressures to keep up and get ahead. These things are in our faces. We see them—email inboxes overflowing, to-do list items calling for attention. We hear them—mobile phones ringing, meetings at work never ending. And we feel them—texts and reminders and notifications buzzing, stress building.

“The world of sense intrudes upon our attention day and night for the whole of our lifetime,” continued Tozer. “It is clamorous, insistent and self-demonstrating ... assaulting our five senses, demanding to be accepted as real and final.”¹⁴

Compared with this barrage, and with the busyness and hustle we muster to meet the barrage and survive as best we can, the spiritual realm can seem as if it's a million miles away. It can become, in

our minds, simply something we'll (hopefully) experience someday. When we die. When we finally leave this physical, in-your-face world behind. *But not now.*



In my teenage years, God offered me a few hints that there might be something beyond this workaday world. He did so through my mom. She told me stories of a deeper, unseen reality. She spoke of praying with men and women with serious mental disorders like schizophrenia. She talked about a trip to Argentina, where she saw schools and companies and prisons transformed by truth and love and prayer. She told me about hearing gentle whispers of God in moments of stillness and silence. And, of course, she told me about praying for healing from her leukemia.

(I prayed for that too, desperately.)

When she spoke about this stuff, she talked with quiet passion. She'd seen things, been part of things—things that were beyond any here-and-now explanation. She'd experienced mystery and beauty and glory. And it changed her. It was obvious.

But, by the time she died, during my freshman year in college, I'd pretty much forgotten about all that. By then, I too had developed one of those intense biases toward the physical world—toward classes and grades, grad school and future career opportunities. By that time, for me too, the spiritual realm seemed but a distant twinkle.



“It’s a rare day I don’t think about it, relive it in my mind,” Glenn said many years after his three orbits around Earth.¹⁵

He loved being in space. He loved discovery. He loved using science and engineering to go faster and farther and higher, to discover

ever more about the physical world. But he also loved discovering things deeper and unseen.



JOHN GLENN USES A PHOTOMETER TO VIEW THE SUN
DURING SUNSET ON THE MERCURY-ATLAS 6 SPACEFLIGHT

Glenn's heart was open to the whole of reality, not just part of it. He didn't let cynicism or street smarts or book smarts close off his heart. He didn't let the cultures of combat in the Marine Corps or of flight test at Naval Air Station Patuxent River or of the halls of the US Congress harden his heart.

Even when he looked at the physical world, he often tried to peer *through* it. He wanted to see the brilliance of the supernatural, even in small things:

All my life I have remembered particularly beautiful sunrises or sunsets.... I've mentally collected them, as an art collector remembers visits to a gallery full of Picassos, Michelangelos, or Rembrandts.

Wonderful as man-made art may be, it cannot compare in my mind to sunsets and sunrises, God's masterpieces.¹⁶

His most treasured of these, no doubt, were the sunrises he saw from outer space.

And then there were those crazy "fireflies." Glenn saw them on all three swings around the planet in 1962. He said the experience was "like walking backwards through a pasture where someone had waved a wand and made all the fireflies stop right where they were and glow steadily."¹⁷

He didn't see them on his 1998 shuttle flight, though. And other astronauts became convinced they were frost crystals that had accumulated on the exterior of his capsule.¹⁸ A NASA astronomer surmised they were dust particles, and a physics professor said it was probably dust or loose paint.¹⁹ And they probably were—one of those things, at least.

But Glenn was never so sure. Joining a few of his Mercury brethren for a panel discussion at the National Museum of Naval Aviation in 2002—forty years after his original flight—he talked again about those fireflies. He said, for him, "their glowing luminescence remains a mystery."²⁰

As C. S. Lewis wrote, "You cannot go on 'explaining away' for ever: you will find that you have explained explanation itself away. You cannot go on 'seeing through' things for ever. The whole point of seeing through something is to see something through it."²¹

Glenn surveyed and studied our physical world. And through it, he glimpsed the mystical.



In a village named Bethany, not far from Jerusalem, Jesus had three good friends—two sisters, Mary and Martha, and their brother, Lazarus. It's

possible Jesus had known the family for a long time and might have stayed with them when visiting Jerusalem for religious feasts.

One time, when Jesus was across the Jordan, the sisters sent a runner with an urgent message. Lazarus was in grave physical danger. “Master, the one you love so very much is sick” (John 11:3).²²

Jesus did love Lazarus—and Mary and Martha too. But he didn’t leave for Bethany right away. He “stayed on where he was for two more days” (v. 6).

I think Jesus delayed because he saw things from a larger perspective. Mary’s and Martha’s focus, understandably, was on the natural world—on the potential physical death of their beloved brother. Jesus, though, saw and sensed the whole of reality. He could appreciate his friend’s physical peril, of course. But he also knew that everything on Earth happens within an even larger reality, one more elemental even than space, time, matter . . . and death.

And Jesus wanted to give Mary and Martha and his followers sight of it. He used their circumstances to show them (and us)—in an unforgettable manner—the presence, the goodness, and the glorious power of this deeper, unseen reality.

“It will become an occasion to show God’s glory,” he said (v. 4).

When Jesus finally did reach Bethany, he found Mary and Martha grieving. They wept because Lazarus, by that time, had died.

Jesus wept with them and asked, “Where did you put him?” (v. 34).

“Master, come and see” (v. 34). “It was a simple cave in the hillside with a slab of stone laid against it” (v. 38).

Jesus then surprised them: “Remove the stone” (v. 39).

“Master, by this time there’s a stench,” warned Martha, focusing again on the physical reality. “He’s been dead four days!” (v. 39).

“Go ahead, take away the stone” (v. 41).

They did. And Jesus prayed to his Father. Then he shouted, “Lazarus, come out!” (v. 43).

And Lazarus did come out, “wrapped from head to toe” in graveclothes—but alive (v. 44).



The Bible we claim to believe in—and to base our lives on—describes, quite clearly, a deeper, unseen reality. It describes a reality that somehow preexisted the space-time continuum. It describes a deeper, unseen reality that never began, actually, and will never end. “The things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal” (2 Cor. 4:18).

The Bible describes a deeper, unseen reality to which time and space and matter owe their very existence. It’s this that our everyday physical reality is dependent on. Time and space and matter were “called into existence by God’s word, what we see created by what we don’t see” (Heb. 11:3).²³

This deeper, unseen reality is more vast, more wild and wonderful than the physical world. It is distinguished by majesty and mystery, goodness and love—“glory beyond all comparison” (2 Cor. 4:17). It’s a reality where anything can happen. Even the impossible. In it, even death itself can be undone.

And it’s not just out there somewhere, out in the beyond. It is there, but it’s here too. Right here. Right now. “The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed,” explained Jesus, but it is already in our midst (Luke 17:20–21).²⁴ This deeper, unseen reality is interwoven with everything in the physical world. It “holds everything together” (Heb. 1:3).²⁵

And we can discover it. This reality. We can explore it. Experience it. Take part in it.



“There are other dimensions involved than just time and space,” wrote Wernher von Braun, the man who developed the Redstone rockets that launched the first two manned Mercury missions.²⁶ “Our life does not have materialistic and intellectual aspects alone,” he declared.²⁷

While we may have grown more comfortable with (and confident in) the physical world, that doesn't mean we don't have spiritual aspects too. We do. For "God is spirit" (John 4:24). And he made us "in his own image" (Gen. 1:27).

God formed Adam, the first man, from the natural world—from "dust from the ground" (Gen. 2:7). But he breathed himself into Adam—he "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature" (v. 7). He created us as physical beings. But he created us as spiritual beings too—*just like him*.

And our spiritual nature is our essence. It's what distinguishes us from the rest of creation: that we can access and experience and participate in this great reality that lies beyond our everyday reality. We're made for it; we're made to be sustained by it.

We're made to be sustained by the natural world, of course—by air and water and food and all the rest. But we are made to be sustained by the supernatural world too. Jesus taught us about "living water" and "the bread of life" (John 4:10; 6:35)—deeper kinds of sustenance that come from his deeper, unseen reality.

"Anyone who drinks the water I give will never thirst—not ever. The water I give will be an artesian spring within, gushing fountains of endless life" (John 4:14).²⁸

"Anyone who eats this Bread will live—and forever!" (John 6:51).²⁹
But we don't believe it. Not really.

Modern men and women, argued Pollard, have "lost all effective contact with the supernatural."³⁰ Long unused, our abilities to access the spiritual realm have atrophied. We've tried to opt out of the whole of reality. But we're made for life "to the full" (John 10:10).³¹ And "full" requires that we experience *all of it*.

Just as our physical bodies wouldn't survive or thrive without air or water or food from the physical world, our hearts can't thrive without spiritual, supernatural sustenance either. We need mystery and wonder and beauty and glory and love overflowing.

Without them, our hearts break. And so do our lives. No wonder we're anxious, depressed, addicted, and overmedicated. No wonder we're full of doubt and cynicism, materialism and desperation.

Open the news; look at the state of the world. *Look at the state of us.*

When we believe there's nothing bigger, better going on here, we lose heart. We become mercenary, trying to pull more and more from the physical world—money, status, connectedness, whatever.

But that doesn't work either, not well enough. Nowhere near well enough.



“There's far more here than meets the eye,” confirmed the apostle Paul (2 Cor. 4:18).³² Like the luminescence of those mysterious particles, the brilliance of this deeper, unseen reality is shining all around us—every day, in every moment, just waiting to be discovered. And it “will come alive to us,” wrote Tozer, “the moment we begin to reckon upon its reality.”³³

We don't have to wait until we die. God is inviting us to come and see it for ourselves. He's inviting us to come and discover and explore. *Now.*

He's inviting us to come and encounter *him*.

Because that's what all this is *really* about. Glenn once wrote, “Although we can't weigh and measure God in scientific terms, we can feel and know Him.”³⁴ Accessing, experiencing, participating in the supernatural realm is really about encountering and experiencing and knowing nothing less than God himself.

So that's what we're going to jump into in the next chapter—knowing the God of heaven *personally*.

Do you want to? Are you curious? Then, keep reading.



— ON BOARD —
“OTHERWORLDLY”
002

You're built to experience life physically *and* spiritually. To experience the fuller life God means for you, you must begin embracing both realms. You must begin experiencing and partaking in *all* of reality—no longer just part.

You are, therefore, invited into a season of encounter. Of practical experience in the spiritual realm. If you'll accept it—or are even just curious—then jump on the questions below. They'll be your first step toward *more*.

Consider these questions and jot down your responses.

002.1 How skeptical are you, right now, about the spiritual realm and your ability to come into contact with it? Pull out a pen or pencil and circle a number below:

<< PRETTY DOUBTFUL ----- NOT DOUBTFUL AT ALL >>
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

If you *are* skeptical, what's the source of that doubt? Can you identify a particular experience or influence? Write a few sentences, if you can, that trace the source.

Also, consider this: Would you be willing to put skepticism aside while reading the rest of this book? Just to see what might happen if you do?

002.2 Spend a few moments considering your life so far. What spiritual experiences come to mind? Have

you experienced anything you can't quite explain? Something you suspect was an answer to prayer or an encounter with God. Have you ever glimpsed or sensed this deeper, unseen reality?

Use that pen or pencil (or your phone) to write down whatever comes to mind. Don't filter. And if nothing comes, that's perfectly okay. Just keep moving. Keep reading.

002.3 Think about an average day. What percentage of your energy and time and worry is devoted to physical endeavors and particulars (i.e., nonspiritual things)?

<< VERY LITTLE ----- VERY MUCH >>
10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

002.4 What pressures and demands characterize your life right now? What, specifically, keeps you busy? What commands your attention?

Make a complete bulleted list.

002.5 How do you feel about this invitation to experience more of the spiritual world, more of the supernatural realm? Are you feeling eager, excited, optimistic? Are you feeling relieved, reassured? Or anxious, confused, overwhelmed, unsettled, unsure, skeptical? Are you feeling challenged, intimidated, inadequate, offended?

Describe your feelings. Capture them on paper—and you have full permission to be honest.

Pray right now:

God, help me see your brilliance. Teach me to slow down. Help me put skepticism and cynicism aside. Teach me to notice and appreciate. Give me a new perspective on my life and my environment. Change my heart. Help me see and hear and feel with my heart, even in the midst of the busyness and clutter of my physical world. Come into my heart and make space. Space for wonder. Space for beauty. Space for stillness. Space for life.

Amen.

Experiment with listening prayer.* Find a place where you can sit still comfortably for twenty to thirty minutes. The quieter the better. Somewhere outside would be good, but any place will do. Invite the Holy Spirit to direct your thoughts. Pray against distraction, against fatigue, against confusion. Now, remain quiet for a length of time—whatever feels right. Just breathe and relax. Enjoy the moments of solitude. Then, when you're ready, take a full five minutes to look at your surroundings. Consider whatever is in front of you right now. *Whatever* it is. What do you see? What do you notice? Take it in. Describe it in one or two sentences. Jot them in a journal or in a note on your phone.

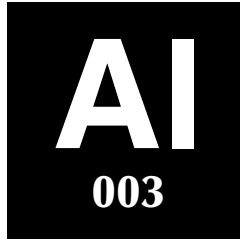
When you're done observing, do it again. Take another five to ten minutes to look again. To look harder. Consider what's underneath whatever you see. What's going on beneath? Above? Beyond? What's the deeper truth? Don't rush it. And again, in one or two sentences, describe what comes to mind.

* For a full explanation and discussion of listening prayer, please refer to chapter 3 in the first book in the WiRE Series for Men, *Invention: Break Free from the Culture Hell-Bent on Holding You Back*.

Now, do it one more time. Spend another five to ten minutes looking again. Looking even harder. Deeper. Further. It'll be uncomfortable. You might feel like *I've done this already*. But push through. Stay with it, and ask, *What is God trying to show me here? What's he trying to give me now? What's he trying to teach me today? How is he trying to guide me? To love me?* And whenever you're done, again, in a few sentences, describe what came to mind.

Now, take a few more minutes to sit quietly. Then, whenever you're completely done, test what you've written against Scripture—invite a mature believer to comment, if you think it would be helpful. Ask, does what I've written, especially during the second and third rounds of observation, align with biblical principles? Do these deeper truths align with God's teaching in the Bible? If so, tuck them into your heart. Return to them over the course of the next few days. Consider them. Then reconsider them.

Make sure to keep good notes. As you work through these “On Board” sections, make sure to collect and preserve your answers, thoughts, and the things you think you might have heard from God. This is precious data.



ALUMINUM AND BLACK SMOKE AND LOVE

W e're finally doin' it!" the boy says, delighted.

He's twelve—and the parachute harness is way too big.

A voice crackles in his headset. "You ready, son?"

"Yes, sir." You bet he's ready. He'd be flying airplanes off carriers right now if he were only a few years older. It's 1942, and the war in the Pacific is raging.

"Okay. Here we go. *Contact!*"

grrrrunk ... grrrrunk ... grunk ... grunagrunagrunagrana ...

Six hundred horses begin racing. It's loud, and the boy loves it. Black smoke blasts from the exhaust stacks. It makes him feel grown up—even though about all he can see is the interior of the cockpit and a massive engine beyond, now rumbling at the sky.

They taxi out to the far end of the runway, and the man turns the airplane. The boy revels in this invitation—this initiation—into his dad's world.

"All right, Edward. Here we go." From the rear cockpit, he eases the throttle forward—and the AT-6 begins to roll.

The airplane picks up more and more speed. A nice, satisfying growl (*mmmmmmrrrrrowwwrrrr ...*) becomes a wonderful,

terrifying howl (*mmmMMMMRRRRROWWWRRRRRR* ...) as the Pratt & Whitney engine really starts to crank and the Hamilton propeller goes supersonic.

The boy has watched planes take off and land his whole life—but this is nuts. The roar permeates his body. And it's not just the noise. It's the jolting too. And it's not being able to see out of the plane's greenhouse-style canopy. All of a sudden, he feels a lot more like a kid than the full-grown man his pilot's seat is designed for.

It all feels totally out of control.

But it isn't. Because his dad is here. And he is a lieutenant colonel in the US Army Air Forces—he's got a full set of controls in the copilot's seat, and he can fly *anything*.

When the plane reaches eighty-five miles per hour, enough lift builds under the wings, and the plane begins to want to rise. It bounces on its wheels. *Like a basketball*, the boy thinks.

And then they're up. The boy's first flight.

The AT-6 Texan is a trainer. A two-seat, single-engine, low-wing monoplane built with lots of aluminum to save weight and increase performance. Sturdy and rugged, it's known as the Pilot Maker. It's a workhorse that's launched the careers of many great fighter pilots.

And it's doing its thing again *right now*.

Father and son and craft climb to 4,500 feet and level out. And the ride gets smooth. And the boy can see out! He can see everything—the sky, the clouds, the ground, way out ahead.

The man eases the throttle back.

Then, after a moment, in his headset ... “Son, take the controls.”

“Really?”

“Yup. Go ahead. Like we talked about.”

The boy settles his feet on the left and right pedals. He reaches for the stick and puts his left hand on the throttle. He puts a bit of pressure on the pedals and the stick, not enough yet to change the direction of the airplane—just enough to feel his control.

“Go ahead. Ease into a turn. Just how I told you.”

The boy moves the stick and presses a pedal, and the aircraft banks to the right. As it does, the boy slides the throttle forward a bit.

“That’s good ... good. Okay, now straighten ’er out. Good job maintaining altitude.”

The boy’s nerves are gone. And he doesn’t feel so small in the cockpit anymore either. He feels comfortable. His father gives him pointers, but he makes each movement, each adjustment himself. And his actions are small and smooth.

Pilots say when you get used to the AT-6, the plane can read your mind. And the boy seems almost used to it already as these two climb and turn and dip over the Central Lowland of southwestern Ohio.

The man in the back is delighted to be this boy’s father. He would write these words many years later, cherishing the memory of this first flight with his beloved son: “He seemed to know, instinctively, that a good pilot doesn’t strap himself into a plane; he straps the plane onto himself. He really flew it.”¹



By 1963, after six successful manned Mercury spaceflights—*Shepard//Grissom//Glenn//Carpenter//Schirra//Cooper*—the United States turned its attention to Project Gemini. NASA sandwiched Gemini between Mercury and Apollo, and its aim was to build on prior accomplishments and pave the way forward by developing and demonstrating certain capabilities necessary to embark on NASA’s most audacious goal: the mission of Apollo—to land a man on the moon and return him safely to Earth.

The capabilities needing mastering were these: astronauts needed to be able to spend longer periods in space (long enough for the trip to the moon and back); they needed to be able to dock two orbiting spacecrafts; and they would eventually need to be able to exit one of them (to conduct experiments and collect samples on the moon).

NASA hit its stride during Gemini. It averaged one manned mission every four months during Mercury. During Gemini, things accelerated to one every two. And as a result, it was during that period the US overtook the Soviets in the space race.

Gemini is a Latin word meaning “twins.” The folks at NASA chose the name because the new project would use two-man spacecraft and two-astronaut crews. To handle the larger, heavier Gemini capsules, NASA also employed a new launch vehicle. The Titan II rocket was fifteen feet taller than Atlas, and it delivered seventy thousand pounds more thrust.

NASA also needed a fresh crop of astronauts to accomplish its ambitious new goals. So, in the fall of 1962, the agency announced the New Nine.

Among these young men was a pilot named Ed White—the boy who flew that AT-6 with his dad two decades prior.

White’s father, Edward H. White Sr., was a career military man. He would retire as a major general. Young Ed grew up, therefore, moving from base to base. And he learned about hard work and self-discipline, honor and patriotism—but fun and laughter too. His dad was that kind of dad.

For college, White went to West Point and afterward enlisted in the US Air Force. He spent three and a half years at Bitburg Air Base in Germany, flying fighter jets—the F-86 Sabre and the F-100 Super Sabre. And it was while he was in Europe that he read about NASA’s astronaut program; it was there that he decided he wanted to go for it.

Lacking the requisite engineering degree and experience as a test pilot, he got busy. He returned stateside, earned a graduate degree from Michigan, and enrolled in the test pilot school at Edwards Air Force Base—the epicenter of the flight test world.

So, by the time NASA went looking for nine new astronauts, White had all the right stuff. “When he became an astronaut in 1962,” *Life* magazine wrote, the “old hands from Project Mercury picked him as ‘the guy to watch.’”²

White's specialty would become "the design and development of spacecraft flight control systems."³ He described it as involving "the pilot's own touch—the human connection with the spacecraft and the way he maneuvers it."⁴ It was exactly what he'd proved he had a knack for, years before, during that first flight with his father.

White's first NASA flight was Gemini IV, the first American multiday spaceflight. On June 3, 1965, he and James McDivitt blasted off from Cape Kennedy in Florida.

Beaming with love and pride, White's father chatted with reporters on the ground about his son and about the young man's prowess as a pilot. "A lot better one than I was," confirmed the retired two-star general—a man who himself was "rated to fly everything from bombers to balloons."⁵

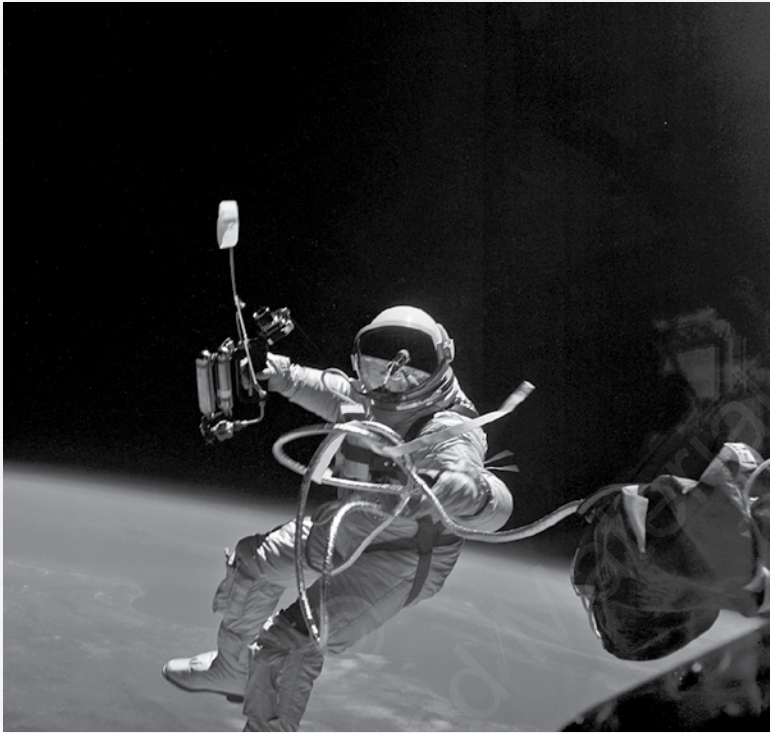
Then, on their third orbit, one hundred miles up over Hawaii, White and McDivitt did something really kind of unimaginable. They grasped the handle of the capsule's hatch and pulled. And popped it open. Because this flight would also mark the first time an American would attempt to leave the confines (and safety) of an orbiting spacecraft.

With space suit on, White stood up and peeked out. Then he went ahead and slipped out of the capsule, out into space—tethered only by a twenty-five-foot golden cord, which supplied oxygen and a communications link.

White: *"Okay. I'm out."*

McDivitt: *"Okay. He's out. He's floating free."*⁶

Though traveling some 17,500 miles per hour at this point, White felt neither the sensation of speed nor the sensation of falling. He felt no wind—because there's no air. What he did feel, though, was the exhilaration of being the first American to walk in space.



ED WHITE PERFORMS THE FIRST AMERICAN
SPACE WALK ON JUNE 3, 1965

And, it turns out, he felt something else too. His friend the Reverend Jackson Downey of First Methodist Church in Cocoa Beach, Florida, recounted that White also sensed “the presence of God.”⁷

White: *“This is the greatest experience I’ve ... it’s just tremendous! Right now I’m standing on my head, and I’m looking right down, and it looks like we’re coming up on the coast of California.”*⁸

White’s sojourn was scheduled to last twelve minutes. After more than fifteen minutes, amid all the excitement, McDivitt remembered to check back in with flight control:

McDivitt: *“Gus, this is Jim. Got any message for us?”*

Mission Control: *“Gemini IV, get back in!”*

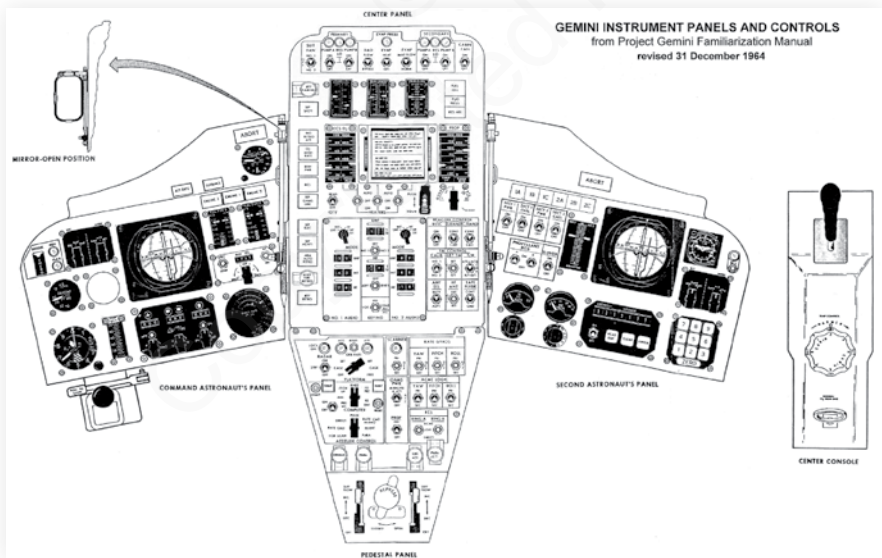
McDivitt: *“Okay... They want you to come back in now.”*

White: *“Okay. This is the saddest moment of my life.”*⁹

After twenty-one minutes, White was finally back inside the spacecraft.

The two men would complete sixty-six orbits and cover 1,609,710 miles before reentering Earth’s atmosphere and splashing down in the Atlantic Ocean.

“I’m proud of my boy,” said Edward White Sr. “You could tell by his voice that he was having the time of his life out there—rolling and tossing and having a great time.”¹⁰



GEMINI INSTRUMENT PANELS AND CONTROLS

QUESTION:

“IS RELATIONSHIP EVEN POSSIBLE?”

You may have asked ... How could it be that God wants a personal relationship with me? With billions of other humans here on planet Earth? And how would it work? Isn't he busy elsewhere, working on things more consequential?

You may have asked ... Does God even know (or care) I'm here?

These are great questions, and the truth will blow your mind.

Think bigger.



We are living in a golden age of science, technology, and discovery. In the last hundred years, we split the atom and mapped the human genome. We invented TVs, PCs, GPS, Wi-Fi, and AI; microwave ovens and mobile phones; rockets and robots. We detected gravitational waves and inferred the existence of dark matter. We sent twenty-four men to the moon—and spacecraft to the far reaches of our solar system. We even sent two NASA probes—*Voyager 1* and *Voyager 2*—beyond the confines of our solar system; they are, right now, speeding through interstellar space.

We've gotten good at this stuff, and we're only getting better. And it's made us a bit arrogant.

Our “universe is a machine governed by principles or laws,” declared Stephen Hawking, acclaimed cosmologist of Cambridge—and those laws “can be understood by the human mind.”¹¹ Somewhere back there, way before this golden age even got going, we humans started believing that, by exploring and observing and experimenting and by engaging our brains and thinking rationally, there's nothing we can't grasp, nothing we can't accomplish, given enough time.

But there's a problem. None of this *figure-it-out-ability* works if what we're trying to grasp is God. You see, while he *is* present in this physical world—he *is* in the here and now—he also exists outside it, beyond it, above and below it.

“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says our Father God, “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty” (Rev. 1:8). His greatness, his riches, his understanding, and his judgments are “unsearchable”; his ways are “inscrutable” (Ps. 145:3; Isa. 40:28; Rom. 11:33; Eph. 3:8). His love “surpasses knowledge” (Eph. 3:19). The “skies—the entire cosmos!—can't begin to contain him” (2 Chron. 2:6).¹²

God will *never* fit into Hawking's machine.

How could he? How could the Creator of our mind-bogglingly massive and ever-expanding universe be so small? He is infinite, eternal. He had no beginning; he will have no end.

And so, for us, God will always be a mystery. A wonderful, gigantic, *sacred* mystery.

And *that* kind of mystery is different from a run-of-the-mill mystery. A sacred mystery, taught Richard Rohr, that cheery contrarian Franciscan, is not that which is “unknowable” but rather that which is “inexhaustible.”¹³ He meant that the more we discover of God, the more there *will be* to discover—*forever*.

“As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa. 55:9).

But some of us have a hard time with those facts. In our drive to gain understanding (and certainty and control), we as a species have lost some of our willingness to accept and appreciate mystery. Mystery offends our pride a bit because it runs counter to our faith in ourselves.

So, instead of accepting and appreciating (and reveling in) the sacred mysteries of God, many of us choose a different approach: we try to reduce God to something we can cram into Hawking's machine.

The naturalists and humanists among us, those who demand to be able to understand a thing—empirically, intellectually, fully—before they'll consider it real, simply dismiss him (or try to). They

cannot comprehend God's presence in our physical world, so they try to reduce him to nothing.

We Christians don't take things quite that far. We believe there's a spiritual realm. But we too hold a strong bias toward the physical world. Because we cannot see or hear or touch him with our physical senses, we struggle to grasp that God really is here, in every situation, in every moment, in our very beings; that he really is supremely interested in each of us; and that he really is outrageously loving.

And because of that struggle, many of us try to reduce God by relegating him to the spiritual realm. We try to reduce him by turning him into a theoretical god. A million-miles-away god. An only-in-heaven god. (I've done that.)

Philosophers and theologians use a watchmaker or clockmaker analogy to explain this idea. God, the thinking goes, long ago spoke this astonishing and intricate universe into being, put it into motion (wound it up like a vintage watch), and promptly set it down. Leaving the cosmos to operate on its own, according to laws, not love.

This watchmaker idea of God, in all its nuanced versions, is common. It's why so many men in the church today believe God to be unknowable, indifferent, engrossed in more important things. We accept that he exists, that he is somehow essential to our lives (or to life in general), but we just don't believe that a personal relationship with him is possible—certainly not one that's *deep*, *real*, *heartfelt*, and *conversational*.

The data shows it. Eighty percent of Americans say they believe in God or a higher power.¹⁴ But only 15 percent of American men say they believe that their God is both loving and interested in their daily lives.¹⁵

So we do what anyone would do who believed such things. It's impossible to have an authentic relationship with a theoretical god, so we turn our faith into *vitamin* faith. We shrink faith to a set of practices we should definitely try to remember to engage in—because they're good for us. We narrow our faith lives to a set of things we

should for sure put on our to-do lists: go to church ... attend a men's group ... get some quiet time in the mornings.

Scripture says, "Listen for GOD's voice in everything you do, everywhere you go" (Prov. 3:6).¹⁶ But we don't. We don't look for him in our everyday lives—we see only physical people and physical things. We don't listen for him—we hear only the roar of culture. We don't try to sense his Spirit within us, and we have a hard time seeing him in others—we connect instead with our drivenness and self-contempt, our envy and cynicism and judgment.

N. T. Wright, with insight and punch, wrote this: "It is our blindness, our arrogant refusal to admit of any reality that won't go into a test-tube, that prevents us from opening ourselves to God's dimensions of reality."¹⁷ It's our refusal to accept and appreciate and revel in sacred mystery that prevents us from building personal relationships with him.

But the God who said, "Come to me" (Matt. 11:28) and "Seek my face" (Ps. 27:8), is still saying that—but to us now. He's saying that to *you*.

And the God who said, "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you" (Matt. 7:7), meant it as encouragement to *you*.

And the God who said, "I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me" (Rev. 3:20)—he's making that offer to *you* right now.

God is the same as he's always been. He hasn't changed because we made some great strides in understanding our world. He holds the very "same position in our modern world that He held before we began probing His creation with telescope and cyclotron," wrote von Braun.¹⁸

God has always wanted us to explore and appreciate and unravel. "It is the glory of God to conceal things, but the glory of kings is to search things out" (Prov. 25:2).

But what God wants *most*?

What he wants most is personal relationships with us. *With you*.



After Ed White's triumphant space walk, NASA assigned him to the very first of the Apollo missions—along with Virgil “Gus” Grissom and Roger Chaffee. But tragically, one month before their February 21, 1967, scheduled launch, during a practice run through count-down procedures, faulty wiring ignited a fire. Before the astronauts could escape, an inferno engulfed the pure-oxygen-filled Apollo 1 capsule.

All three men were killed.

White's father was devastated. In the weeks following the accident, his tender heart moved him to compose a letter to his grandson—to White's fourteen-year-old boy, Eddie.

Dear Eddie: This is one of those evenings when I've been thinking a lot about you. These past weeks have been hard for all of us; it takes a lot of love and courage to get through a time like this. I know you and your mother and your sister have plenty of both. But I think it helps if all of us keep in close touch, exchanging thoughts and feelings and memories. I know it helps me.

Earlier, your grandmother and I were looking at a scrapbook of clippings about your father's career...

As I leafed through that scrapbook, your father's characteristics seemed to jump at me from every page.

The older man went on to detail, with pride, what he knew about the son he loved so much. He wrote about his confidence. He wrote about their time in that AT-6 trainer so many years before. He wrote about his determination, his integrity, his sense of duty, his

love for his country, and his optimism. And he wrote about his son's faith in God.

Guideposts magazine published the letter. Olin Teague, member of the US House of Representatives and chairman of the Manned Space Flight Subcommittee, called it “a masterpiece.”¹⁹ Teague was so affected, in fact, he put it into the *Congressional Record*. He wanted this raw and rare snapshot of a father's love to inspire others.



The kind of relationship God invites us into is the father-son kind. God made us his sons. His *actual* sons.

“Long, long ago he decided to adopt us into his family” (Eph. 1:5).²⁰ “Just look at it—we're called children of God! That's who we really are” (1 John 3:1).

You are his beloved son. I am too. We have all the rights, privileges, and authority of true sons. And he loves each of us “in the same way” that he loves his begotten Son, Jesus (John 17:23).

The very reason God made us, actually, was to have someone—lots of someones—to love. He made us in his likeness. He wired us like him—down in the deepest, the basal places of us, down in our machine language, down in our DNA.

“You and I are in little (our sins excepted) what God is in large,” wrote A. W. Tozer.²¹ And because we're like him, “we have within us the capacity to know Him.”²² God made us a kind after his kind so we would be able to come together with our kind and with him—to *be* together, to *love* one another.

That's what's real. *That's* your Father's heart. You are chosen. You belong. God is your Father. You're his beloved son. And he wants a relationship with you—deep, real, heartfelt, conversational.



Nearly eight billion people live right now on planet Earth. And God's deepest emotions toward each of us are the same. Each of us is vitally important. He loves all of us outrageously. He knows the number of hairs on each of our heads (Matt. 10:30).

Jesus used a first-century example to give us a sense of his Father's heart:

What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost." (Luke 15:4–7)

One sheep among ninety-nine is, statistically, "not very interesting," remarked Henri Nouwen, a man who wrote much and well about God's love. One person among 7.7 billion is much, much less so. "But for God," Nouwen noted, "numbers never seem to matter."²³ What matters to God is humans. Individual humans. Individual hearts. *Yours and mine.*

Like the shepherd in Jesus' parable—and like Ed White's father—there's nothing God wants more than to be with you. To love you. And there's no loving thing he won't do to make that happen—to bring us into relationship with him.



A few months after that Montana hunting trip, I was with some friends at a retreat at a ranch in the mountains of Colorado. One of them, Joel, is a musician. During some downtime, we were talking and hanging out, and he pulled out his guitar. He sat on a couch and sang a song he'd written and would soon release.

The song is called “Sons and Daughters.” It’s written in the voice of God—and five lines in, it goes like this:

I sing and dance when I’m thinking of you
And I’m always thinking of you.²⁴

In that moment, Joel’s voice and lyrics and God’s grace pierced my doubter’s heart.

Sitting there, looking out across the Colorado River, north toward the peaks of the Arapaho and Routt National Forests, I began to believe it ... *for me*. In that moment I just knew that I knew. Not just intellectually. Not theoretically. And I accepted those words—and the sentiment behind them—into even the somber and shadowy places of my heart.

God’s love isn’t some theoretical, million-miles-away kind of love. It’s up in our business. It’s raw and fierce and tender and full of joy. “His desire for you and me can best be described as a *furious longing*,” wrote that warmhearted, clear-sighted Franciscan Brennan Manning.²⁵

God’s love burns bright and hot and true. It will never dim. Not ever. Not even a little. If you were to plot his love on a graph, the line would be high and flat. It wouldn’t fluctuate over time; it would never swing in response to our actions, even our worst.

You couldn’t plot his love, of course. No one could draw a y-axis that high or an x-axis that long. No page, no screen could ever come close to depicting his love. It’s massive and relentless.

In the seventh century BC, the prophet Zephaniah told the people of Jerusalem about God’s nature—about his love for those who seek him. Zephaniah wrote that God “will rejoice over [us] with gladness,” that “he will exult over [us] with loud singing” (3:17). And the word *exult* is a translation of a Hebrew word that means “to spin round (under the influence of any violent emotion).”²⁶ My friend Joel was right. God is so crazy in love that he sings over us. Dances because of us.

He's consumed; he can't take his eyes off us (Ps. 34:15). He thinks about us all the time. Not for a second has he ever forgotten even one of us (Isa. 49:16). There are so many thoughts about each of us in his head they can't be counted (Ps. 40:5). His love for you, for me, is so great that it's literally immeasurable and unfathomable by our human minds (Eph. 3:17–19).

Did you know that?

Do you *feel* that?



In aerospace engineering there's a concept called the “flight envelope.” A flight envelope defines the limits of an aircraft's (or spacecraft's) performance capabilities—speed, altitude, and maneuverability. Test pilots, like John Glenn at Patuxent River or Ed White at Wright-Patterson, force their crafts to their breaking points—or, hopefully, just shy. They probe the outer limits of engineering and physics. They call it “pushing the outside of the envelope.”

A key aspect of any airplane's flight envelope is its altitude ceiling. That is the maximum altitude at which it can maintain level flight. It's the altitude at which the engines are just barely able to generate enough thrust (and lift under the wings) to keep the plane level in the thin air. At that altitude, pilot and craft can climb no farther, for the engines are, by definition, maxed out and have nothing more to give.



Everyone needs a dad. Just as White needed his dad that day in the AT-6. Sons need to be around their dads. They need to know them. They need to be initiated into their dads' worlds—to work and play there. They need to walk next to them—to talk with and rely on them. Sons need to live in the provision and under the protection of their dads' love.

Sadly, it doesn't always work like that—but it's how things are *meant* to work.

And it's the same with God.

We often think what we need is a rescue, a way out, our prayers answered, our circumstances changed—but what we *really* need is something infinitely bigger. What we *really* need is our heavenly Dad himself.

Getting to know him, coming to experience him in our everyday lives, beginning to accept his furious love—it's the most important thing in our lives. It's the ball game. But it's also probably *the* thing most neglected by modern Christians.

It's the *altitude ceiling* through which few of us break.



When asked about our primary function as human beings, Jesus responded, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (Matt. 22:37).

But here's the thing—we can't give what we haven't yet received. We can't love before we've *been* loved. Like those big Titan II rockets, we need to be filled with the rocket fuel of God's love before we can love the way we're meant to. Or like an airplane that'll never fly above its altitude ceiling without some new way to create thrust, we'll never live the lives we're meant to live without being fueled, first, by God's outrageous love.

Receiving love. Being loved. It's the beginning of everything. It's the beginning of life. It's the beginning of *us*. To belong, to be cherished, it's what we need most—even the smartest, even the toughest of men. And only God can address the totality of our needs. Only *he* can fill us with enough love.

So, clearly, we aren't wired for some vague kind of spirituality. We aren't wired for mere rules and lists and sermons. A cold, mechanistic, intellectual faith will never do. Only relationship, conversation, listening and speaking, knowing and following the God of

heaven—our head-over-heels, up-in-our-business Father God—can ever fill us with the rocket fuel we need.

By getting in close, by allowing ourselves to be loved up close—that’s how we change, grow, mature. By getting to know God, enjoying his presence, trusting him, following him—that’s how we become the men we are meant to become. That’s how we break through these ceilings that are holding us back. That’s how we push the outer edges of the envelopes of our lives.

Here’s the truth: in his love we don’t stand a chance. His grace and power are simply too powerful. When we move in close, we can’t help but change and grow and mature. When we come into his presence, his grace and power permeate every part of our lives.

And then, finally, we’re able to begin to discover wholeness and confidence—fearlessness even. We learn how to stop hurting people so much—and hurting ourselves. We begin to discover the joy and peace and purpose and significance and connection we long for—and have tended to look for everywhere else.

When we accept God’s love, we get up in the mornings with more enthusiasm and energy and joy. We walk through our days with more confidence and well-being, with a sense of being cared for and provided for, with a sense of belonging and purpose. And we go to bed with more contentment and peace. We’re able to relax, finally. And finally, in his love, we’re able to begin feeling good about ourselves.

Knowing God and accepting his love strengthens us, lessens fear, gives us energy and focus. It makes us better equipped to deal with hardship and struggle and failure. It makes us more robust, more durable men—able to take on what we never could have in our fragile, depleted, didn’t-know-we-were-loved states.

And God’s love starts to pour out of us, just as it did from those earliest followers of Jesus. “They turned the world upside down because their hearts had been turned right side up,” wrote Billy Graham, that space-age megapastor.²⁷



We can't stop God from loving us. He does. It's true. It's a thing. And it's always been his plan. He *is* a good, good Father—perfect and loving. And in that love, he created us *to be loved*. As his own precious sons.

You might be asking ... But what about those things I've done? Those things I *do*?

What about my sin?

That's a really important question. And one we've got to get sorted if we want to go any further. So that's what we are going to do in chapter 4.

(Spoiler alert: You're about to hear some *very* good news.) So work through the exercises below and keep reading.



— ON BOARD —
“BELOVED”
003

God has so much for you. There’s so much he wants to share with you. But to receive it, you’re going to have to open your heart. You need to let him in.

His love is more than we could ever imagine—and so much more than we could hope to ever enjoy in a human lifetime. But *we* control how much we receive. And if we hope to ever break through these altitude ceilings that keep us stuck, mired in less-than-we’d-like lives, we’ve got to learn how to receive more.

Consider these questions and capture your responses.

003.1 How do you know God? Is his personality hard or soft? Is he full time or part time? Does he know you? Does he know you *well* or just a little? Is he proud of you or sometimes disappointed? Does he love you easily, or does he tolerate you? Does he *like* you?

Is he a disciplinarian? A judge? Are his expectations of you high or low? Is he here with you now and always? Or is he busy elsewhere? What’s he most interested in? Your morality, your performance, your obedience, your sacrifice? Or is he mostly and simply interested in *you*—your heart, your fears, *you*—in just being with *you*?

Pull out a pen or pencil or your phone. Write a few sentences that honestly describe how you view God.

003.2 Circle a number below to indicate how much you believe God loves you:

<< NOT SO MUCH ----- So MUCH >>
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

And pick a number to indicate how much you believe God is interested in you:

<< NOT VERY ----- VERY INTERESTED >>
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

003.3 Brennan Manning, in his book *The Furious Longing of God*, asked his readers whether their relationships with God are characterized by “simplicity, childlike candor, boundless trust, and easy familiarity.”²⁸ I ask you the same question now: Is your relationship characterized by those things? Or is it characterized by complexity, grown-up cynicism, “prove it” distrust, and an easier-to-just-avoid-him attitude?

Or is it somewhere in between?

Write a few sentences accurately describing your relationship with God.

003.4 Are you optimistic about the possibility of establishing a personal relationship with him? About being able to figure out how this relationship stuff works?

Circle a number below to indicate your (honest) level of confidence:

<< NOT OPTIMISTIC AT ALL ----- PRETTY OPTIMISTIC >>
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

003.5 Spend a few minutes considering your past. Can you bring to mind an occasion or two (or more) when God *was* a father to you? When you felt as if he heard you, saw you, answered your prayers? Describe any times when you experienced peace or joy or help from him—either directly or through other people, events, or circumstances. And if you struggle, ask the Holy Spirit to help you remember.

Surrender to thankfulness as you record these moments of his goodness and fathering—as you dwell on what he’s done in your life.

Pray right now:

*God, I want to know you. The **real** you. And I want to know myself too—especially who I am to you. I want to understand, as much as I can, just how much you love me. And I want to love you back, more than I do. I want a relationship with you. One that’s personal—deep, real, heartfelt, and conversational—even in the midst of this hectic life.*

But I’m not sure I know how to do or discover any of this, so please come. Help me. Guide me. Teach me. Father me.

I need you.

Amen.

Experiment with Lectio Divina. *Lectio Divina* is a Latin phrase meaning “holy reading.”²⁹ It refers to a spiritual practice that traces to third-century Christian methods of connecting with God (and his wisdom) through reading and meditating on verses from the Bible. These methods evolved and improved over the centuries in

the monasteries of Europe, and they solidified into a form many Christians use today. When we practice *Lectio Divina*, we engage Scripture in order to enter into a personal conversation with God.

So find a place where you won't be interrupted for thirty minutes. Start by simply enjoying a few minutes of peace and quiet. And whenever you're ready, read John 13:1–5 (below). Read slowly. Slower than usual, more carefully.

Before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him, Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

Now, after a couple of moments of silence, read the passage a second time. But this time, engage your imagination. Put yourself into the scene. Imagine you're one of the disciples present at the supper. Imagine what Jesus looks like. Imagine the sounds, the physical sensations, the emotions. Try to *feel* what a disciple might have felt.

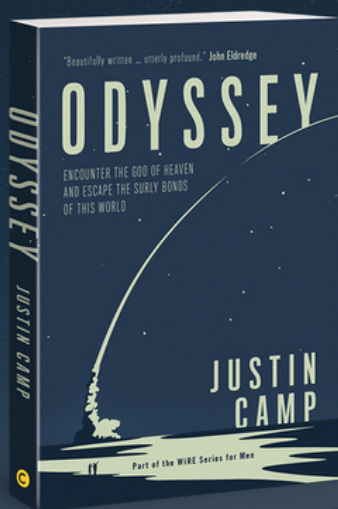
After a couple more moments of silence, read the passage for a third and final time. This time, as you read, look for words or phrases that catch your attention. When something strikes you, stop reading and focus in. Consider just the words or phrases that stood out. Examine them. Linger over them. Repeat them to yourself. Consider their meanings, the sentiments behind them. Take five minutes for this, at least.

Now, take another five to ten minutes to consider what God might be up to with you, through these feelings or perceptions, these words or phrases. What could he be trying to teach you? How might he be trying to love you through his Spirit? How is he speaking to your heart?

And then, when you're ready, simply respond. Pray. Answer his questions, if you sensed any. Or tell him how you feel or what you think about what you sensed. Or tell him what you think of *him*. Or just say "Thank you." Or ask him questions. Or for his interpretation. Or for guidance. Or forgiveness. Just get honest.

And when you're done praying, don't do anything. Don't move. Don't talk. Don't pray about anything else. Just sit in silence in the presence of the Holy Spirit. Just embrace the closeness of God—enjoy it. Relax and appreciate a few moments of doing nothing except being with your heavenly Dad.

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