

This little book contains a message I long for all people—young and old—to know and experience: that God loves them and has a beautiful plan for their lives. I discovered this truth in my early 20s, and my only regret is that I didn't come to know it sooner. I pray this book will help many young people find joy, delight, and contentment in knowing God.

Brian Brodersen, pastor emeritus of Calvary Chapel, Costa Mesa, California

Jeremy has written the definitive book for redeeming young-adult life and charting a course for lasting influence. You don't have to squander your 20s pursuing a life of meaningless parties, mindlessly playing or making plans that are shallow and self-centered. By prioritizing these seven godly pursuits, you will leave a mark for Christ and his kingdom on your generation that will reach into eternity. *Make It Your Ambition* is a blueprint for succeeding at what matters most.

Chris Brooks, senior pastor of Woodside Bible Church; host of *Equipped*, Moody Radio

Make It Your Ambition covers key discipleship topics for young adults with biblical clarity and spiritual earnestness in a relatable style. In a society that prizes achievement over character, this book refreshingly commends the ambitious pursuit of knowing and reflecting Jesus Christ in all we do. May God grant this goal abundantly to all who read it.

Jonathan K. Dodson, theologian-in-residence at Citizens Church, author of numerous books including *The Unbelievable Gospel* and *Our Good Crisis*, and founder of Gospel-Centered Discipleship

The word “ambition” is usually applied to certain pursuits: Get straight A's. Climb the corporate ladder. Blow up on YouTube.

But this book flips ambition on its head, encouraging you to become like Christ and serve God's kingdom. Jeremy unpacks the Bible's teachings on identity and calling in a way that will not only inspire you to live for God but actually show you how to do it. There are a thousand messages out there clamoring for your attention. This book contains true wisdom. Make it your ambition to follow Jesus and you will live a life that truly matters.

Drew Dyck, author of *Your Future Self Will Thank You* and *Just Show Up*

I wrestled for several years over God's call on my life. As I prayed, I also asked older Christians for advice and book recommendations. I would've greatly benefited from Jeremy Writebol's *Make It Your Ambition*. I'm so glad a new generation will have this resource to help them develop godly ambition to serve the church and fulfill the Great Commission.

Collin Hansen, vice president for content at The Gospel Coalition and host of the *Gospelbound* podcast

Christian young adults today strive to pursue Christ under the relentless downpour of our information age. Jeremy Writebol does a masterful job providing them with practical wisdom. Chock full of creative perspectives and grounded in Christ-centered principles, *Make It Your Ambition* will inspire you and help you refocus your life.

Ronnie Martin, director of leader care and renewal for Harbor Network; pastor-in-residence at Redeemer Community Church in Bloomington, Indiana; author of numerous books; and cohost of the *Heart of Pastoring* podcast

Moving to the mission field in my early 20s was the beginning of the best years of my life. Now, over 25 years into vocational ministry, I can say that I have no regrets and would do it all again.

And again. I'd love nothing more than to see a wave of young people pursue the same. In *Make It Your Ambition*, Jeremy Writebol conveys why it's a good, worthy, truly wonderful way to spend one's life. He demystifies the journey into ministry and offers the needed encouragement of an older sibling or mentor in the faith. Whether you're young and are discerning God's call on your life or older and wondering about making a change, this book holds the wisdom you need, and it will keep you tethered to God's grace, which will carry you through whatever you do.

Jen Oshman, speaker, missionary, women's ministry leader, and author of multiple books including *Cultural Counterfeits* and *Welcome*

Every young adult has an innate desire to find purpose and meaning in the work they do and the life they live. Jeremy Writebol's new book *Make It Your Ambition* is filled with biblically rich wisdom and practical application for young adults seeking to know their purpose and find their calling. It's full of conviction for the apathetic, hope for the disappointed, and new perspective for the successful.

Emma Kruger Tang, recent college graduate, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

Make It Your Ambition

7 Godly Pursuits for
the Next Generation

**Jeremy
Writebol**



Make It Your Ambition: Seven Godly Pursuits for the Next Generation
Copyright © 2025 by Jeremy Writebol

Published by The Gospel Coalition

P.O. Box 1637
Columbia, Missouri 65205

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided for by USA copyright law.

Cover Design: Laura Schembre
Typesetting: Ryan Leichty

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked CSB are taken from The Christian Standard Bible. Copyright © 2017 by Holman Bible Publishers. Used by permission. Christian Standard Bible®, and CSB® are federally registered trademarks of Holman Bible Publishers. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NIV are taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Scripture quotations marked NLT are taken from Holy Bible, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

ISBN:
978-1-956593-15-0 (paperback)
978-1-956593-16-7 (ebook)
978-1-956593-17-4 (kindle)

Printed in the United States of America

For Allison and Ethan
Leave it all on the field, for the glory of God!



Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Foreword | xi |
| Introduction: What Will You Do for the Kingdom of God? | 1 |
| Pursuit 1: Make It Your Ambition to Know and Love God | 9 |
| Pursuit 2: Make It Your Ambition to Model Christ's Character | 27 |
| Pursuit 3: Make It Your Ambition to Discern, Develop, and Deploy Your Gifts | 41 |
| Pursuit 4: Make It Your Ambition to Serve Others with Your Career | 55 |
| Pursuit 5: Make It Your Ambition to Share the Gospel | 69 |
| Pursuit 6: Make It Your Ambition to Endure Hardship | 83 |
| Pursuit 7: Make It Your Ambition to Serve Vocationally in Christian Leadership | 99 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| Making Your Ambitions Reality | 115 |
| Epilogue: For Those Who Don't Desire Vocational Ministry | 127 |
| Acknowledgments | 137 |
| General Index | 141 |
| Scripture Index | 147 |



Foreword

Don't waste your 20s. This is what I tell young people finishing high school and getting ready to head off to college or a trade school, or 20-somethings starting a new job, or young couples talking about marriage, or young men and women discerning a call into some kind of ministry in the church.

At some point in the past 50 years, many in our society began to see the 20s as the season of life where you could just “figure things out” and have as much fun as possible doing so. This mentality pushed back the average age for getting married. The housing crisis and other economic developments solidified a trend toward young adults moving back in with their parents. Surveys revealed a steep decline in churchgoing among young people raised in the Christian faith. The term “extended adolescence” captures this lengthier transition from the teenage years into (maybe) college and beyond.

On the surface and by themselves, none of these developments is bad (aside from the church dropout phenomenon). No one expects you to know exactly what your life will look like in 10 to 15 years, so yes, you'll be

spending time “figuring things out” and enjoying friends and family as you do so. It may be a while before you find a spouse and get married (if the Lord has plans for you to marry at all). It may be the best and wisest stewardship of money to arrange to live at home at some point in the next few years. And if you’re reading this book, you probably intend to stay in your home church or find another church wherever college life or your career takes you, thus bucking the trend of “taking off” from church during your 20s.

Whatever the future holds, I’ll tell you what I tell others: don’t waste your 20s. This decade can be the launching pad for the rest of your life. You’ll encounter opportunities to have an eternal influence, leaving ripple effects for generations to come. What’s more, you’re on mission now. You don’t need a title, a ministry position, or a college degree before you live on mission. Jesus’s commissioning is all you need to love God, love people, and witness to the truth of the gospel.

Your generation is sometimes described as one marked by widespread spiritual apathy. Jeremy Writebol wants to ignite your imagination so you see what a life marked by robust, gospel-fueled, Spirit-filled activity can look like. For those who struggle against apathy, he wants to inspire you with a holy ambition. For those who hold big career ambitions, he wants to ensure your aspirations are big enough—that they reach beyond the successes and goals of this life and reach toward everything God has for you.

This little book is like hopping from mountaintop to mountaintop, scaling the heights of what your life could be in your 20s and beyond. It starts with the orienting

principle of the kingdom of God, what Jesus told us to seek first. Jeremy then presents seven worthy pursuits, the first as a fountain from which the rest flow—a life marked by what we were made for, to know and love God.

- He presents the beauty of the gospel and then brings us face-to-face with Jesus, the One we receive as a gift before we follow him as our example.
- He urges us to take stock of the gifts and talents the Lord has given us so they might be deployed for kingdom purposes.
- He upends the self-centered, self-actualizing mindset we naturally bring to our career by showing us Jesus's call to service through our work.
- He beckons us toward the adventure of evangelism, of sharing and showing Jesus's love in words backed up by deeds.
- And he calls us to persevere when life is tough and the inevitable seasons of suffering descend on us.

Six of the seven pursuits apply to everyone reading this book. The final one will not. But I suspect the seventh ambition Jeremy describes may be the very tool God uses to bring some into vocational ministry in the church, in charities, or in other Christian ministries.

As you turn the page from one chapter to the next in the story of your life, I hope you'll carefully consider the seven ambitions Jeremy puts before you here. These pursuits will affect how your story unfolds.

This isn't a book to read and set aside; it's a guide to live by. As you walk through these pages, don't just admire the wisdom offered—apply it. The seven godly

pursuits Jeremy outlines here aren't just ideals to strive toward; they're divine invitations into a life of meaning and purpose. Whether you feel confident in your calling or uncertain about the future, this book will point you to a bigger, bolder vision than what the world offers. A life anchored in God's kingdom isn't marked by drifting but by deliberate pursuit. Wrestle with these ambitions. Pray over them. Let them shape your outlook, not just for your 20s but for your entire life.

Trevin Wax

*Vice President of Research and Resource Development
North American Mission Board*

Introduction



What Will You Do for the Kingdom of God?

Do you remember thinking about your future when you were younger? All kinds of opportunities and dreams lay ahead. Everything dangled in front of you. You were invited to dream big about being an adult—about the kind of life you’d have and the work you’d do. Parents, teachers, and friends would ask, “What do you want to do when you grow up?” and you’d speculate about being a doctor, teacher, or athlete. You may have dreamed about being a hero: a firefighter, astronaut, nurse, or police officer. Maybe you were extra brave and ambitious and even ventured to dream about being president of the United States.

Years have passed, and here you are—a little closer to that pivotal point in time. The realities of adulthood are on your doorstep. You might be getting ready to go off to college. Or, perhaps, you’re about to finish your

undergraduate degree. Perhaps it's a good time to pause and reconsider that question you were asked as a child: "*What do you want to do when you grow up?*" Some of you will have let go of dreams; others still hold to the same aspirations. You may be on the same career trajectory you imagined when you first started thinking about the future, or you may now be on a different one.

I vividly remember being asked this question when I was in middle school. That conversation altered the course of my life. I was chatting with Ms. Little because I was interested in her daughter, and she wanted to know what kind of guy might be hanging around in the future. I was confident and glad she asked about my ambitions, because I was a responsible eighth grader who had figured a few things out (or so I thought).

As much as I loved sports (baseball in particular), I knew I wasn't gifted with the skills and coordination of a professional athlete—though I could sign an autograph like one. Playing baseball was out. But working in the realm of professional baseball was still possible. In fact, if there was anything I could do, it was talk. As a child, I'd listen to the St. Louis Cardinals and Minnesota Twins games on the radio. Broadcasters like Jack Buck, Mike Shannon, Herb Carneal, and John Gordon painted unfolding pictures of the game in my imagination as I listened and hoped for a hometown victory. I'd sit and play R.B.I. Baseball on my Nintendo Game Boy while broadcasting the play-by-play and analytical color commentary to anyone who'd listen.

So when Ms. Little asked about my goals, I told her outright, "I am going to be a professional baseball broadcaster." It was a firm answer, and I was satisfied with it. I

don't know if that wasn't satisfying to her or if she was thinking about the bigger picture. She asked a follow-up question that disrupted all my best-laid plans and set my life on a completely different course: "What will you do for the kingdom of God?"

As quick as I was with my first answer, I was stymied by her second question. I wasn't thinking in this category. I fumbled out some answer along the lines of "Well, uhh, I, uhhh, I'll be a *Christian* broadcaster!" Surely that'd be enough to get her to trust me and let me hang out with her daughter. Granted, it wasn't a terrible answer. But it wasn't well thought out either. She had, in a single question, introduced a concept I hadn't yet considered—the idea of living for a greater purpose. This was a gentle challenge not to think exclusively about what *I* wanted to do with my life. It was an invitation to consider what *God* wanted me to do.

That moment was the beginning of a journey toward clarity and focus in the more mature calling of my adulthood. Those questions started me along the path that eventually culminated in my vocation as a pastor. I've now been in full-time vocational ministry for more than 20 years, and I have no intention of changing careers or doing anything else. This is what I'm supposed to do, what I was called to do, and what I love to do. But I didn't know that when I was 14. I didn't know it when I was 18. I didn't have complete clarity about this call until my mid-20s. But the trajectory was there. Ms. Little's two questions were the spark that urged me to consider and ultimately commit to full-time Christian ministry.

What about you? I imagine a pastor or a leader in your campus ministry handed you this book and encouraged

you to read it. Perhaps one of your parents or a friend has been talking with you about your future and suggested you spend a little time here with me to think about your future. Excellent!

I want to be a friend, and I do want to talk with you about your future. Specifically, I'm curious about the two questions Ms. Little asked me. Let me ask you the first one: *What do you want to do when you grow up?* What are your career aspirations and dreams? Are you thinking of engineering, education, or a medical profession? How about politics or civil service? Perhaps you've got computer programming or design on your mind. Are you dreaming about being a lawyer, stockbroker, realtor, or dentist? Maybe you'd like to be a writer or a singer? There are multitudes of career opportunities, and I'm sure that by this point in your life, you've narrowed it down. What ideas or options do you have in front of you?

It's OK if you're like middle-school me and fire off a quick answer. I get it; you're eager to move forward with your life and get after the job of your dreams. As you think about your goals and plans, let me go one step further with the next question Ms. Little asked me: *What will you do for the kingdom of God?*

You may be stumped. Or perhaps you aren't and you're ready to tell me more. If so, that's great. But if you don't have any of it figured out yet, I want to help. Growing up and moving into your adult years won't be easy. Neither will figuring out the answers to big questions: *What is my purpose in life? What vocation (or vocations) should I pursue?*

That's where this book comes in. I want to engage you in thinking about your future life and career. I want

to put an invitation into your heart that could change the trajectory of your life. I hope to get you to consider something you may have never remotely considered before.

Main Goal

Before I get to that invitation, however, I want to help set you up well for adulthood as a follower of Jesus Christ. If your future seems wide open and the possibilities overwhelming, I want to help you establish a trajectory for a life lived well for God's glory—*no matter what career path you follow*.

When I read the Bible and think about what we should and could be doing in life, I see a handful of pursuits for Christians to consider. For instance, Paul said in Romans 15:20 that he made it his ambition “to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest [he build] on someone else's foundation.” In 1 Thessalonians 4:11, he encourages us to “aspire to live quietly, and to mind [our] own affairs, and to work with [our] hands.” These are important goals. But maybe we should start even wider—with an overarching aim that blankets all of life.

Colossians 3:17 encourages us, “Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” This challenge sweeps down into every nook and cranny of our lives—into all our speech and actions, whatever we say or do. Paul's invitation to look to Christ with gratitude gives us solid ground from which we can navigate all our future pursuits. Every moment of our lives now

and every dream we have for tomorrow are to be lived for the sole purpose of honoring King Jesus.

Paul here asks you about your life ambitions. What will you do with your life? Who will you ultimately do it for? What will you do for God's kingdom?

As I mentioned, Paul wrote about certain noble ambitions and worthy pursuits throughout his letters. Some of these are for every Christian to pursue and live out. Others are specific to Paul and his life, but they may still give shape to our own. I believe those ambitions can be organized into seven pursuits that give focus, clarity, and insight into what you may do with your life. They're a way you can take hold of Colossians 3:17 and make it your ambition to "do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus."

Steps Toward Clarity

As you think about what you'll do for your career and how that will serve God's kingdom, I want to show you a series of biblical pursuits you can undertake—pursuits that will show you how your career and your service for God's kingdom aren't separate tracks but one continuous track. If you didn't have an answer for either of my previous questions, these seven pursuits will give you direction and clarity so that regardless of what you do or become, you'll live a life pleasing to the Lord and full of meaningful service for his kingdom.

Perhaps you have a solid sense of what you want to do and which direction you'll go. As you read, consider whether those ambitions align with the seven pursuits I've outlined here. If so, I'm confident you'll flourish as a

follower of Jesus in whatever you do. If your pursuits are fundamentally at odds with the principles that follow, I'm hopeful you'll pause to reevaluate your course.

In the end, maybe you'll discover a new dream for how you can serve God's kingdom—something you never envisioned before. When you do, I pray you will *make it your ambition*.



Make It Your Ambition to Know and Love God

What's the biggest, most significant, single most important thing you could spend your life pursuing? This question is one that philosophers, wisdom seekers, artists, politicians, rulers, teachers, and *everyone* has asked for thousands of years. Apart from the question of the meaning of life, which is similar but different, this question is The Big One for human beings. We all innately need to know that what we do matters—that we each have a significant contribution to make in this world.

Naturally, I asked a robot in our rapidly advancing AI systems to find the answer. Because, you know, robots on the internet would undoubtedly know the answer to life's biggest questions. Here's what AI summarized: "The pursuit of a fulfilling life is a deeply personal journey, and

what constitutes the ‘greatest’ thing to pursue can vary from person to person.”¹

Great! Even the robots don’t know how to answer The Big One for the human race (it’s probably because they know we won’t need them anymore if they tell us, and the human race will have thwarted their plans for world domination).

All joking aside, AI couldn’t give a definitive answer, but it did provide a few suggestions. It highlighted pursuits like happiness, fulfillment, and embracing new opportunities. It posited finding true love as another option for the most significant thing a person could pursue. Social media also works hard to convince us that a life of exploration, adventure, and world travel would be a pinnacle pursuit to give life meaning and purpose.

Ultimate Pursuit

Thankfully, God’s Word also keys in on this question. Tucked in the middle of the Bible is a wild book of Hebrew wisdom poetry called Ecclesiastes, authored by “the Preacher,” who identifies himself as the son of David, king in Jerusalem (Eccl. 1:1). At the outset, he has a gloomy outlook on the meaning and pursuits of life. He’s a melancholy guy, saying that everything in life is “vanity,” or empty and meaningless. “Everything is meaningless,” he declares (v. 2, NIV). When the Preacher tries to tackle the question of life’s greatest pursuit, his answer doesn’t seem much better than AI’s attempt. However,

1. Response to “What is the greatest thing I could spend my life pursuing?” Microsoft Copilot, March 1, 2024, edited for style and accuracy.

this king (likely Solomon) has unlimited resources and can try a handful of paths. He tries to gain philosophical wisdom and concludes, “He who increases in knowledge increases sorrow” (v. 18). He makes a run at gaining as much pleasure as possible. He also acquires great wealth and prominence: “Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them” (2:10). Those pursuits ended up being empty and meaningless as well. He pivoted to hard work, building great monuments and gardens and parks, thinking that creating an impressive legacy would be a life worth living. This attempt, too, turned out depressing because he realized he’d spend his whole life working and striving only for someone else to enjoy the reward of it all (vv. 18–19).

His conclusion after these experiments was this: “I perceived that there is nothing better for [people] than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God’s gift to man” (3:12–13). Wow. That’s it? Eat a great steak with a glass of fine wine and have a job you enjoy. *That’s* the Bible’s answer to the question about the greatest pursuit a human being can have in his life? If this is all the Bible says about our greatest pursuits, then this book should be very short.

At this point, AI is saying, “I have no clue, but I hope you enjoy life,” and the Preacher is recommending, “Eat good food, drink good drinks, and enjoy your job.” Maybe we should lower our expectations for our life pursuits and just try to have a good time. Frankly, some have already done that. But our inquiries here have left a third person out of the conversation. Because if the robots and

the ancient king who has the most can't give clear answers to the greatest pursuit of life, who can?

The point of the Preacher's entire work is that everything "under the sun" (everything this world offers apart from God) is empty and meaningless. In the grand picture, what pursuits are worthwhile without God? A good meal? Pleasure? Your job? Yet, as the Preacher contends, a person who remembers "[his] Creator in the days of [his] youth" (12:1) or a person who fears God and "keeps his commandments" (v. 13) is a person living with a greater trajectory in his life. These two statements are a way of saying that the single most important thing you could spend your life pursuing is God.

I'd like to say it like this: *The greatest ambition you can have for your life is to know and love God.* While other ambitions may be good and worthwhile, every other pursuit is subordinate to this ultimate undertaking.

In case you don't want to take my word for it—or the Preacher's word, for that matter—let me show you a few other places in the Bible where this is highlighted as the prime ambition for the life of every believer.

Toward the end of Jesus's ministry, before his death on the cross, several religious groups in Israel were trying to find a reason to discredit Jesus and his teachings. One sect in particular, the Sadducees, thought they could find fault with him by bringing an expert lawyer to test Jesus on matters of Jewish law. So the lawyer asked Jesus, "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" (Matt. 22:36). Now, Jesus not only had to sift through the Ten Commandments to find one to rank highest but also had to navigate through more than 600 additional

commandments found in the Old Testament writings. How would he pick the winner out of all those?

Jesus didn't need time to think. His answer was both brilliant and clarifying: "He said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment'" (vv. 37-38). There it is. The highest or greatest and most important thing a human being should do is love God.

In an earlier sermon (Jesus was a preacher, after all), he'd talked about the things that make us anxious or keep us awake at night: concerns about our next meal, what we'll wear, and the troubles that tomorrow could potentially bring. As he identified those anxieties, he dared to tell us not to be anxious about these things. He said, "For the Gentiles [i.e., people who live apart from God] seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all" (6:32). Jesus is reassuring us that God knows we need the food and clothes that make up our day-to-day existence. And he's promising to take care of us.

Clarifying the Goal

Instead of staying preoccupied with these worries, we're called by Jesus to aim at a higher pursuit: "But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you" (v. 33). Jesus here tells us to have the highest and greatest priority built around seeking God's kingdom and his righteousness. When I talk about God's kingdom, I'm referring the ever-expanding realm here on earth where God's rule and reign is honored

and upheld. God's kingdom isn't a place on earth today, but God's rule is made known by the community of people who know and love God. Therefore, Jesus is saying the greatest pursuit we should have is to know and love God, to seek more and more to know and love him well.

Another person who affirms this pursuit is the apostle Paul. If you know his story, you know he was a pretty ambitious guy. He wanted to be the top of his class, the best in his field. Furthermore, he was zealous to ensure he stood head and shoulders above everyone else in life. But then a stunning thing happened. In an undeniable way, he was confronted with the reality that Jesus Christ died for our sins, was raised to life again on the third day, and is Lord and Savior. Paul's ambition completely changed.

In a letter to a church he'd planted, Paul tells the believers to look out for false teachers and those who want to depend on their own righteous deeds as valid sources of salvation. They're entirely wrong, he says, and he can prove it by his own life.

If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of *the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord*. (Phil. 3:4–8, emphasis added)

According to Paul, nothing in life matches up to or has greater value than knowing Christ. You can feel it as he

tells the Philippians what his life is aimed at: “[To] gain Christ and be found in him . . . that *I may know him* and the power of his resurrection” (vv. 8–10, emphasis added). Knowing Christ is a matter of greatest value and highest worth.

When I listen to the collective wisdom of Jesus, Paul, and others in the Bible, it becomes evident that knowing and loving God is the greatest ambition a person can have for his or her life. One of the most monumental educational writings about the Christian faith, the Westminster Shorter Catechism, begins by asking, “What is the chief end of man?” The answer? “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and enjoy him forever.”² Our spiritual ancestors affirm that living to know and love God is the best pursuit of a person’s life. J. I. Packer, whose book *Knowing God* had a tremendous influence on my life, says, “Disregard [knowing] God, and you sentence yourself to stumble and blunder through life blindfolded, as it were, with no sense of direction and no understanding of what surrounds you. This way you can waste your life and lose your soul.”³

The greatest ambition you can have is to know and love God.

What Does It Mean to Know and Love God?

But what does knowing and loving God mean in everyday life? It’s a big aspiration, but how can we truly know

2. R. C. Sproul, ed., “The Westminster Shorter Catechism,” in *The Reformation Study Bible: English Standard Version* (Reformation Trust, 2015), 2471–77.
3. J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (IVP, 2023), 19.

God, let alone love him with all our heart, soul, mind, and body? It may seem overly simplistic on my part, but here's the truth: You know and love God by relating to him as you would to another person, through the skills of building a relationship and friendship.

Think about what it means to cultivate a friendship with another person. You get to know things about him: his favorite hobbies and meals, what he's afraid of, what his ideal vacation is, and other details of his everyday life. But knowing someone involves knowing more than what he does or doesn't like. Many today talk about being known as "being seen." In a way, knowing and loving God is all about seeing, discerning, and relating to who he is.

To know God involves more than knowing theological propositions, such as the fact that God is holy. It requires comprehending and seeing how his holiness is expressed in the world. Someone who lives to know God considers how God's holiness intersects and gives shape to her own life. In a way, knowing another person is dancing with him or her. You must be aware of the directions and steps of movement the other person will take with you as you sway and move to the music. The best dancers get close, eyes locked on each other. They can discern the body language, postures, and movements that produce a beautiful and enjoyable expression of art set to music. When the dancers don't know one another or the steps of the dance, they can end up stepping on and tripping over each other, to their embarrassment.

The way these dancers get good is through time and intentional practice with each other. The same is true for us in knowing God. The practices, or habits,

of spiritual growth with God are time-tested means by which we can seek to know him better. Let me share a few of these vital habits. First, daily reading and intake of the Bible will help you know God's character, his will, his ways, and his work in the world and in your life. The Bible is where God has chosen to reveal himself, so you can't know anything about him objectively apart from immersing yourself in the Scriptures. Along with Bible reading, regular prayer helps you commune and speak with God regarding the issues of your heart and life and of the world. Jesus encourages us to regularly pray, to seek our Father in heaven and express our dependence on and need of him for all of life (Matt. 6:5-15). A third vital habit is worshiping God with a local church. By weekly participating in worship services where the Bible is taught, the ordinances (or sacraments) are observed, and the church sings to God, we grow as a community in knowing God together. Spiritual leaders instruct and encourage us in areas of our lives we might never evaluate if left to ourselves. We find the ability to express generosity, care, and love toward one another and those outside the faith. These spiritual habits are essential practices to help us learn the dance of knowing and loving God well.

Knowing and loving God means we understand his character (who he is) and his activity in the universe (what he's doing). But it also means having an affection or desire for God. To know and love God means an inclination in your heart increasingly grows in approval, happiness, joy, eagerness, and pleasure in God. You could describe this as *enjoying God*, which is why, I believe, the authors of the previously mentioned Westminster

Shorter Catechism included both knowing and enjoying as the chief goal of our lives.

When I first met Stephanie, I wasn't sure if we'd be friends, let alone husband and wife. I was in a season of significant transition and had gone to visit my elderly grandparents for a week to help them pack and move from their farmhouse to a smaller, more manageable residence closer to town. Within the first hour after I arrived, my grandmother told me about a woman in her Sunday school class at church who she was sure was "the one" for me. I resisted my grandmother's attempts to play matchmaker right from the start. Eventually, her persistence (and meddling) won out. I ended up meeting Stephanie and taking her out on a date. Except she didn't know it was a date. My grandmother had asked her to hang out with me so I wouldn't have to be around "old people" the entire time I was visiting. As our "date" was wrapping up, I boldly asked Stephanie what she thought about a long-distance relationship. (After all, I was planning to live in a different state.) In response, she chuckled and replied, "I don't." Looking back, she was pretty clear, but I'm not the quickest to pick up signals. So I asked her later that week to have dinner again ("date" number two). As we talked, I brought long-distance dating up again, and once again she laughed. It seemed our relationship would amount to nothing more than being acquaintances.

Yet we continued to spend time together and get to know each other. Knowing things about each other turned into knowing and seeing the other person. We discovered shared affinities and shared longings for our lives, and the dance of our lives together soon found a

rhythm and cadence of mutual delight. I enjoyed being with her. She enjoyed being with me. After a while, we couldn't envision our lives without one other. We came to love each other. Twenty-plus years later, we've cultivated a much deeper, more intimate, and more profound relationship. We know each other so much better, have greater and more intense affection for each other, and enjoy our life together. We often take up a borrowed line from Wendell Berry when we write notes to each other, saying, "Let's live right on."⁴ I still can't envision her not being part of my life.

Could you say that same thing or begin to envision that kind of relational life with God? Do you know him, enjoy him, or even desire him to be your life's greatest, highest, and best relationship? If you're going to live with your sights set on the most significant and biggest ambition in the universe, you must pursue knowing and loving God. You must build a relationship of friendship and intimacy with him.

Why Should I Live to Know and Love God?

Here's where you might ask another big question: "Why?" When we evaluate all that we chase and pursue in our lives, does knowing and loving God really need to be the greatest passion? Let me answer this question with four reasons that have motivated me to make this my ambition. These reasons stem from the deeper reality that God has loved me first (1 John 4:10, 19). When you and I realize we deserve nothing good but only God's

4. Wendell Berry, *Hannah Coulter* (Shoemaker & Hoard, 2005), 141.

wrath for our sin, and then we see that God loved us in the greatest way and gave his Son for us to forgive us (Gal. 1:3–5), we're made alive to love him. Our seeking to know and love God is never rightly an attempt to earn God's love. He's already shown his love for us in Christ. We respond to his love with love ourselves.

The first reason is found in understanding God's purposes for creating the entire universe. In one powerful statement in Romans 11, Paul summarizes the scope of God's purpose for creating everything, including human beings: "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever" (v. 36). The entire arc of our existence is summed up in the prepositions. We were created by or *from* God. We live and have our very existence *through* God. Our aim or highest purpose is *to* God, and the result is "to him be glory forever." The best way we can live to glorify God is to know and love him with our lives. That's the very purpose for which we were created.

Second, knowing and loving God has continuous eternal value. Remember our friend the Preacher and his wisdom in Ecclesiastes? He reflects that God has "set eternity in the human heart" (3:11, NIV). By that, he means we were made for eternity and God has put eternal desires and pursuits into our hearts. The problem is that nothing this world offers us is eternally valuable and lasting. We won't take any possessions with us when we die. The things we spend our careers building end up obsolete or torn down. We all grow old and die. But if we live to know and love God, we'll live for something beyond death. A glorious and satisfying future awaits those who know and love God.

Third, and this is closely related to the last reason, we can never fully exhaust knowing or loving God, and those who make it their ambition to know and love him will never get bored in this pursuit. Consider this: All we can possibly know about God *at this moment* is given in the pages of Scripture. Yet there's a vast and wide "unsearchableness" to God; we'll have forever to pursue him. David declares, "Great is the Lord and most worthy of praise; his greatness no one can fathom" (Ps. 145:3, NIV). A fathom is an old style of measurement mainly used to describe the ocean's depths. The idea here is that you can't measure out how great God is. Yet Paul prays in Ephesians 3:18–19 that we might have "strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that [we] may be filled with all the fullness of God." If we make this our great ambition, you and I will have *forever* to know and love someone who will take *forever* to comprehend.

Last, making it our ambition to know and love God in this life provides the greatest hope for us amid the world's deep brokenness and fallenness. Let's be honest: Things aren't exactly wonderful at this stage of human history. The world around us is fractured and eroding. Life in a broken world can make us feel the same despair as the Preacher, who looked at life "under the sun" apart from God and rightly said, "Everything is meaningless" (Eccl. 1:2, NIV). But if we live to know and love God, who's working to make all things new, we have a greater purpose and story to live within. We can make sense of our suffering and trials as well as have peace and hope for the future. As Packer said, "Once you become

aware that the main business that you are here for is to know God, most of life's problems fall into place of their own accord.”⁵

Living with the highest ambition to know and love God gives us trajectory, perspective, purpose, and hope for our lives right here and now. Whether we live to be 100 years old or don't even make it to 50, life will be complete if we know and love God.

How Is a Growing Relationship with God Possible?

How can we orient our lives around this incredible ambition and purpose? If you remember my encouragement about how to build relationships with people, then you'll see glimpses of the pattern I'm laying out. You must build a relationship of friendship and intimacy with God.

Yet even that statement contains a massive problem. We're natively enemies with God. The Bible describes all human beings as estranged from God, lost, and dead in our trespasses and sins (Ps. 58:3; Luke 19:10; Eph. 2:1). We're enemies of his and “by nature children of wrath” (Eph. 2:3). So purposing to grow in a friendship with God seems entirely off the table unless there is some kind of reconciliation and restoration. To make matters worse, we're incapable of reconciling and restoring the relationship ourselves. What could a spiritually dead, corrupt-at-the-core, hostile-to-God person do to make it all right?

Nothing.

5. Packer, *Knowing God*, 34.

Yep, you read that correctly. There's not a thing we can do to reconcile ourselves with God.

But don't let that bother you, because the really good news is that God has done *everything* to reconcile us to himself. He's identified the problem of our hearts: our sin (Rom. 3:23). He's weighed out the penalty of our rebellion: death (6:23). He's considered that to reconcile us justly to himself, his eternal justice must be satisfied and humanity's penalty must be paid (3:25–26). The eternal son of God, Jesus Christ, was made human. He is the God-man (Phil. 2:5–8). Jesus came and lived without sin in order to fulfill the required righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21). And Jesus stood as a substitute sacrifice for us and died on the cross to pay our penalty of sin (Isa. 53:4–6). Furthermore, on the third day, he arose from the dead—defeating sin, giving righteousness to everyone who believes, and securing a reconciled relationship with him forever (Rom. 1:3–4; 5:19; Eph. 2:5–7).

The relationship of friendship and intimacy with God begins when we acknowledge our sins and then turn in faith to Jesus and place our trust in him as the only One who rescues and reconciles us through his perfect life, atoning death, and bodily resurrection. As Tim Keller says, “The gospel is this: We are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe, yet at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope.”⁶

6. Timothy Keller and Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God*, 1st ed. (Dutton, 2011), 48.

It's on the basis of this good news that our lives really begin; they are really made new. From what Jesus did for us, a reconciled relationship with God allows us to get to know him better, love him more, discern his will, enjoy his presence, and experience every good and perfect gift he has waiting for his people. From this starting point, we should make it the ambition of our lives to know and love God forever.

There's a profound invitation in C. S. Lewis's last volume in the *Chronicles of Narnia* series, *The Last Battle*. Children from the earlier volumes—Peter, Lucy, Edmund, Eustace, Jill, Digory, and Polly—enter into a new world that stuns their senses. They cannot pinpoint why the new world feels so familiar yet staggeringly distinct. That is, until the unicorn Jewel has the insight that they are, in fact, in the real Narnia. They've left the "Shadowlands" behind and are in for an eternity of discovery and delight. With the exciting revelation of this new land, with all its beauty and endless discoveries to be made, Jewel repeatedly gives the invitation to go "further up and further in" as they make endless beautiful discoveries.⁷

This is the invitation to a life aimed at knowing and loving God. Further up and further in, there's more of God to know. Further up and further in, there's more of God to love. Further up and further in, you were made to know him. Further up and further in, endless beauty and glory await. Further up and further in, you'll forever be satisfied. Christ invites us to an inexhaustible universe of discovery of his glory and grace. Let's start our lives

7. C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle*, 1st Harper Trophy ed., *The Chronicles of Narnia*, bk. 7 (HarperTrophy, 2000), 196ff.

today with the ambition of knowing and loving God. Further up and further in!

Discussion Questions

1. What would you say is the most significant thing a human being could spend his or her life pursuing?
2. How does the statement “The greatest ambition you can have for your life is to know and love God” agree or disagree with your perspective of life?
3. Is knowing and loving God something you’re practically pursuing? What means or habits of spiritual growth do you need to pick up to know God?
4. How does what Christ did in his life, death, and resurrection make knowing and loving God possible?
5. What would your life look like if you made this first pursuit your greatest ambition?