the GOOD LIFE

Seeking purpose, meaning, and truth in your life

CHARLES COLSON
WITH HAROLD FICKETT

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"Drawing on his own experience and that of others, Chuck Colson makes a compelling case for the good life in a way that will seize the attention of believers, nonbelievers, and readers who don't know what to believe."

Richard John Neuhaus
Author of *Death on a Friday*

the GOOD LIFE

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HAROLD FICKETT

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DEDICATED TO

Wendell

Christian

and

Emily

my three children, who have contributed so much
to making my life a good life.

This book is dedicated with the fervent prayer
that they will continue in relentless pursuit of the truth.

"The supreme function of reason is to
show man that some things are beyond reason."
Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*

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The Good Life

This is a book about the good life—not the good life touted in Budweiser commercials or on *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* or *MTV Cribs,* but the good life that you and I want to live when we reflect about what really matters.

What makes life worth living? Why am I here? What's my purpose? How can my life be meaningful? These are questions on everyone's mind, both at times of crisis and underneath the surface of daily events.

For most of us, life is messy and confusing, filled with paradoxes. We wake up in the night, worrying about our jobs, our kids, or the best laid plans, which suddenly unravel due to the pressures of living in our high-tech, fast-moving world. One day we seem to have things under control; the next day we get steamrollered by events. If you haven't experienced this, please write me; you would be the first person I know to have life all together.

As I was editing the final draft of this manuscript, I had an eye-opening experience that illustrates how this book may help us make sense out of life and cope with its frustrations. My daughter, Emily, and her son, Max, were home with Patty and me for Christmas. Emily is the single mother of a fourteen-year-old autistic son. Autistic kids can be loving and wonderful, but they demand special attention because of the problems they have communicating and cognitively processing information. They especially need order and certainty in their lives. When Max arrives at our house, he immediately checks the closet for his toys, scans the pictures on the wall, and tries the appliances. If anything has changed from

his last visit, he is visibly distressed. Any unusual noises or changes in a day's schedule can provoke the kind of tantrums common to autistic kids. "Meltdowns," as Emily calls them, are serious events to be avoided. At age fourteen, Max's meltdowns can be cyclones.

I've watched Emily help Max through his struggles. One evening, we had an unexpected visitor, and Max began to frown and become agitated. Because autistic kids can process information better if they see it rather than just hear it, Emily often uses her artistic gifts to help Max see events through pictures. As she sensed Max's distress that evening, she immediately sat down with him and began sketching simple line drawings, one after another, each in its separate graphic box—like a comic strip. She was providing Max with an explanation for the changes he had witnessed. This man, the visitor, worked with Grandpa. He was also a friend who occasionally took Grandpa fishing. See the boat? See the sunshine? He just brought by a Christmas gift. See the box in its wrapping and the big bow?

Max calmed down. Emily's words and pictures helped him make sense of what he was seeing and experiencing, in the same way that an instruction manual can make sense of assembling a bike or inserting a graphics card into a computer. The more Max understands, the less prone he is to become confused and distressed.

As I watched Emily, I thought, *Of course. This is what we all need—a manual for how things work when our own cognitive abilities leave us bewildered and our coping skills have reached their limit.* All of us are like Max at times. We can't figure out what's happening to our world, why we're feeling tense and frustrated. So we throw our own kind of tantrum: We gossip or assert our superiority; we get drunk or have an affair; we go on a credit-card shopping spree; we irritate the boss until he's obliged to fire us. We thrash around in the face of a world that we can't understand and can't manage. The many ways people "act out" prove what a challenge life is.

Our difficulty in understanding how the world works and how we fit into it has been aggravated, I believe, by the false expectations our culture breeds. We are like people trying to go up the down escalator. We huff and puff and go nowhere. The problem is, the culture is pushing one way, and we haven't figured out it's the wrong direction. When we ask the basic questions about our purpose and meaning, we receive

false answers. Our attempts to live by these misleading answers inevitably leave us angry and terrified. What we need is to seek the true picture of how the world really works and what we need to live well. I hope this book will help you do that, just as Emily's box-by-box drawings help Max understand his world.

In the following pages we will be probing deep questions, examining the experience of living. This is no abstract exercise. How we answer these questions determines how we will live and how we will die and whether our lives will count for something.

Almost thirty years ago, when I was just coming out of prison, I wrote a book entitled *Born Again,* which to my surprise sold millions of copies and was published in forty countries. I've done a lot of living since then. I've ministered to prisoners around the globe, met a host of fascinating people, been awarded prizes and honors, and been schooled by my autistic grandson and many others in what living is all about. In a way, *The Good Life* looks at what I wrote in *Born Again,* but with the benefit of seeing it through the rearview mirror. What have I learned from one tumultuous life?

In one sense this is a thematic memoir—the rest of the story after *Born Again*. It includes reflections on my own life, some joyful, some painful. It recounts some of the crucial moments in my life and the lessons I've learned from them. I hope it also reflects my personal pursuit of what we all want—to live a life that matters, a life of significance.

Please don't think that this book is a grand summing up by a senior statesman who means to impress you with his accumulated wisdom. No. This book is for seekers—seekers of any kind, of any or no religious faith. That may surprise you. Anyone who knows about me knows that I'm a Christian. I have deep and abiding convictions, and I can hardly claim to be a neutral observer. But I am a seeker too. My search led me into Christianity, and since then it has driven me to uncover more fully the truth that we are meant to know and live.

The search I'll be conducting here will be undertaken, as much as I'm able, without relying on any prior assumptions or sectarian convictions. This may unsettle my Christian friends, but I think it makes

sense simply to follow where human reason and the human imagination lead until we can follow them no longer. In the end we'll see whether reason and the imagination demand that their scope be enlarged through faith. Perhaps what we might call merely human truth does not connect with faith, but then again, perhaps it does.

Blaise Pascal, the great French philosopher and mathematician, once said that there are only two kinds of people in the world: seekers and nonseekers. Either we are pilgrims looking for answers in order to make sense of our world, or we are wanderers who have turned off onto byways of distraction or despair, alienating ourselves from *wonder*. If you are reading this book, you probably are a seeker. That's good. To be alive is to seek.

If you think you already have good answers to the great questions, read on anyway. This book will help you understand your convictions in an entirely new way and live them more fully.

The people for whom I feel the greatest compassion are those in Pascal's second category—the nonseekers. To turn away from the great questions and dilemmas of life is a tragedy, for the quest for meaning and truth makes life worth living.

Many people—particularly the young—have been persuaded that such a search is futile. They have been told from their preschool days on that one person's opinion is as good as another's, that each person can pick his or her own truth from a multicultural smorgasbord. If one choice proves unsavory, pick another, and so on, until, in a consumerist fashion, we pick the truth we like best. I think the despair of Generations X, Y, and now E comes from this fundamental notion that there's no such thing as reality or the capital-*T* truth.

Almost every new movie I see these days features a bright, good-looking, talented young man who is so downright sad, he can barely lift his head. I want to scream, "What's wrong with this guy?" Then I feel a profound compassion because his generation has been forbidden the one thing that makes life such a breathtaking challenge: truth.

Many boomers have shied away from their youthful enthusiasm for the search for quite a different reason. They've run up against reality

once too often, discovering the promises of the sixties to be hollow. They have misgivings about the pragmatic accommodations they have reached with life, although they're careful not to acknowledge these compromises in front of their grown children.

Some people put such questions aside as they age, even disparaging any search for truth as the impractical fancy of youth. To me, the big questions are more relevant and pointed now than ever before. Advancing age brings with it the advantage of seeing how the answers to the great questions on which one bases one's life have worked out. As I get older, I find myself assessing my life critically: Have I lived up to my expectations? How well have I done? Have I used my gifts to their full potential? When there's not much time left, you'll be making some assessments too. I promise you.

But a word of caution: The search for truth and meaning is a lifelong process, and if you ever think you have all the answers, you can become insufferable and dangerous. That is why I still consider myself a seeker. I have passionate convictions, as I've said, but I'm still on a pilgrimage. I'm learning new things every day, as expressed in these great lines from T. S. Eliot:

> Old men ought to be explorers
> Here and there does not matter
> We must be still and still moving
> Into another intensity
> For a further union, a deeper communion[1]

So let me invite you to join a conversation about what makes life worth living. Together we'll look to find "another intensity" and "a deeper communion" with life—a way of living that makes life truly good.

In the first half of the book, we'll look at the lives of people searching for the good life. What drives them to the life choices they make? And do those choices work? In the second half of the book, we'll look more closely at the search for truth. Is truth knowable? What difference does it make for our daily lives? As we do this, keep in mind the little parable of Emily and Max. What she does for Max, drawing pictures that help him make sense of his world, is what I hope to do for you: draw word pictures that show the truth of how the world works and how we fit in.

In the end, however, even after the best explanations, we're faced with an additional challenge: Are we capable of living the good life? Where can we find the strength and courage we need? In the final chapters I'll provide the only answer I know to those questions, the only answer that has experiential proof to back it up.

The method for examining these crucial ideas will be stories—some from my own life, some from the lives of people we all know, others from movies, still others from people who have shaped history. Taken together, I hope this mosaic of stories—some colorful, some shadowy—will help you see your own story and the beliefs that drive your search for meaning, purpose, and truth.

The reason this book devotes so much attention to life stories is not merely because they provide entertaining reading but because human experiences help us engage life and grapple as closely as possible with life as it is lived. I'm not telling stories merely as illustrations of ideas; they are part and parcel of the grappling. Thinking and living are bound together: We think in order to know how to live, and we learn what's true through living. The good life demands a union of the two, an integrity of life and thought, the poet's "deeper communion."

Thinking and living are bound together: We think in order to know how to live, and we learn what's true through living.

Writing this book with my longtime and gifted colleague Harold Fickett turned into a real adventure, one in which I grasped ideas and reached conclusions I could never have imagined or arrived at otherwise. What I've found is exciting. See for yourself. It's the path to living the truly good life.

SEARCHING
for the
GOOD LIFE

Chapter 1

The Unavoidable Question

An old man walks down a wide path through a colonnade of evergreens. He has a full head of gray hair, combed from a wavy peak to one side. His eyebrows spike with a grandfatherly flourish toward his temples. He wears a light blue Windbreaker over a golf shirt with a horizontal stripe, Sansabelt slacks, and the crepe-soled shoes his doctor recommended. His gait is quick but stiff—stiff like someone who has just gotten himself up. He marches forward with great intent and purpose, as if he's hunting out something or someone.

Behind him trail his family. His wife is closest, his son and daughter-in-law a step or two farther behind, bracketing their children.

The man's eyes show that for the moment he's not thinking of his family, although he seems to be dragging them in his wake. His eyes are at once wide-open yet fixed, poached by what can only be dread. His mouth works in a way that shows his stomach is in his throat. Off to the left his family can see the curve of a long shore, hear the soughing of the waves, and nearly breathe in the scent of the brine. But the man looks neither to his right nor to his left. He keeps stumbling forward, his body tense yet determined.

When he finally turns to his right, he steps onto a vast lawn striped with thousands of white crosses that extend toward the horizon. Here and there a Jewish star adds to the procession of markers that contrast starkly against the green sward. The old man's pace speeds as he makes his way through this vast cemetery. His family struggles to keep up.

James Ryan's determined march finally halts in front of a particular

cross. The rims of his eyes show red. He wipes at them with a shaking hand, sniffs hard, tries again to breathe. Here it is, his captain's cross, the name, the date: Captain John W. Miller, June 13, 1944.

He takes another sniff against his watering eyes, bites his lip. He's almost choking as he struggles to breathe in the heavy air. His knees give way, and he kneels before the cross, his shoulders heaving. His wife is suddenly at one shoulder, his son at the other. He's glad they are there, but they cannot help with what needs to be done.

He mumbles that he's all right, and they retreat several steps, leaving him to the thoughts that press so hard he can't bear the weight.

Not until this moment does he realize that what he has been looking forward to yet dreading is a transaction. An exchange of some kind. For him this visit to the Normandy American Cemetery is no sightseeing tour. It's a profound action. Even now he cannot say why he believes this to be the case. The emotion that's seized him declares it to be so, however.

Whatever must happen involves the question that's dogged him his whole life. The unspoken question that's brought him here. He feels its presence in every memory, and not only the good ones.

Now that he's looking at his captain's grave, Ryan has to ask the question.

Decades earlier, on June 6, 1944, Captain Miller and his men had landed at Omaha Beach, a horror James Ryan had been spared as part of the 101st Airborne. His unit had been dropped into Normandy the night before the sea assault. He later learned from the tales of his buddies and from seeing newsreel footage what D-day had been like. Although Germany had not been expecting the assault at the place Eisenhower chose, the air assault hadn't softened their positions one whit, and when the armored front of the Higgins boats opened onto the beach, the men were ducks on a pond to the enemy's machine guns. Many of those sitting forward in the landing craft never had a chance to move from their seats as the Germans opened fire. Those who jumped over the craft's sides to swim and crawl ashore could only cling to the Belgian gates and iron hedgehogs—the jack-shaped defensive works

strewn in rows all along the shingle that prevented tanks from making the initial assault.

The army rangers humped forward in waves, men falling to the right and left every few feet. They were getting hit not only by machine-gun fire but by artillery as well. Bodies flew with the explosions. The wounded picked up their severed arms and stumbled a few more feet to their deaths. The waves washing onto the beaches ran red with blood, lapping at the dead, who lay scattered and senseless.

Captain Miller and a few of his company made it to the seawall. Although 50 percent of the men in the first waves to hit Omaha Beach were killed in action, the others broke the first line of German defenses.

Soon after the hell of D-Day, Captain Miller and a squad of seven men were assigned to find paratrooper James Ryan and bring him home—alive. The army's chief of staff, General George C. Marshall, had personally issued the order for Private James Ryan to be taken out of the war. Ryan's two older brothers had died in the great assault, and a third brother had been killed in action in New Guinea. Marshall thought that three sons were enough for any mother to contribute to the war.

Captain Miller and his squad found Ryan with remnants of the 506, Baker Company, which had orders to secure a bridge on the far side of a river. The company had been ordered to hold the bridge at all costs—or, as a final defense, to blow it up. When Captain Miller and his squad arrived to take Ryan home, Ryan refused to leave. Miller asked him what he was supposed to say to Ryan's mother when she got another folded American flag. Ryan replied, "You can tell her that when you found me, I was with the only brothers I had left. And that there was no way I was deserting them. I think she'd understand that."[1]

Captain Miller and his squad told Ryan angrily that they had already lost two men in the search to find him. Miller finally decided that they'd make Ryan's battle their own as well and save him in the process.

The Germans soon came at them—nearly a full company of men, two Panzer tanks, two Tigers. The Americans lured the Panzers down the village's main street, where they staged an effective ambush. The only thing Ryan had been allowed to do was pitch mortar shells like hand grenades. Captain Miller never let Ryan leave his side, protecting the private every step of the way.

Still, one tank blew their sharpshooter to eternity. Another soldier died in hand-to-hand combat with a knife to his heart. No matter their ingenuity, the squad couldn't hold off such an overpowering force, and the men made a strategic retreat to the other side of the bridge. In the retreat one of the sergeants was hit and collapsed.

Captain Miller took a shot beneath his ribs as he struggled to fix the wiring on a detonation device. Then an artillery blast knocked him nearly unconscious. All hope lost, Captain Miller began shooting at a tank coming straight at him.

Suddenly, Tankbuster aircraft shrieked down on them, blowing the enemy's tanks to smithereens and routing their foot soldiers. The Allies' own armored reinforcements rolled up minutes later.

Of the squad that had come to save Ryan, only two men escaped relatively unscathed. The others were dead or dying.

Captain Miller lay close by where he had been hit, his back slumped against the bridge's wall. Ryan, in anguish, was alone with his rescuer in the final moments before Miller died. Ryan watched as the captain struggled in his last moments, shot clean through one lung. The captain wouldn't take another breath, except to grunt, "James. Earn this . . . earn it."

Were these dying words a final order or charge?

Private Ryan has always taken it that way.

These memories rivet the aged James Ryan, who now finds himself staring at the grave marker and mumbling to his dead commander. He tells Captain Miller that his family is with him. He confesses that he wasn't sure how he would feel about coming to the cemetery today. He wants Captain Miller to know that every day of his life he's thought of their conversation at the bridge, of Miller's dying words. Ryan has tried to live a good life, and he hopes he has. At least in the captain's eyes, he hopes he's "earned it," that his life has been worthy of the sacrifice Captain Miller and the other men made of giving their lives for his.

As Ryan mutters these thoughts, he cannot help wondering how any life, however well lived, could be worthy of his friends' sacrifice.

The old man stands up, but he doesn't feel released. The question remains unanswered.

His wife comes to his side again. He looks at her and pleads, "Tell me I've led a good life."

Confused by his request, she responds with a question: "What?"

He has to know the answer. He tries to articulate it again: "Tell me I'm a good man."

The request flusters her, but his earnestness makes her think better of putting it off. With great dignity, she says, "You *are."*

His wife turns back to the other family members, whose stirring says they are ready to leave.

Before James Ryan joins them, he comes to attention and salutes his fallen comrade. What a gallant old soldier he is.

Who of us can see this scene from Steven Spielberg's magnificent film *Saving Private Ryan* and not ask ourselves the same question: Have I lived a good life?

Does there exist an exact way of calculating the answer to this question? How do we define living a good life? What makes the good we do good *enough?* Is our life worthy of the sacrifice of others? The unavoidable question of whether we have lived a good life searches our hearts.

Not everyone experiences what Ryan did in such a dramatic way. Yet this question of the good life—and others like it—haunt every human being from the earliest years of our consciousness. Something stirs us at the very core of our being, demanding answers to so many questions: Is there some purpose in life? Are we alone in this universe, or does some force—call it fate, destiny, or providence—guide our lives?

These questions don't often occur to us so neatly of course. Usually the hardest questions hit us at the hardest times. In the midst of tragedy or serious illness, when confronting violence and injustice, or after seeing our personal hopes shattered, we cry out, "Why is the world such a mess? Is there anything I can do about it?"

There's a mystery at work in these perennial questions of human existence. I doubt anyone who has ever seen *Saving Private Ryan* or read great works of literature like Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* or

Camus's *The Plague* has ever doubted the relevance of such questions. Neither does anyone who has ever marveled at the beauty of the Milky Way or sat weeping at the bedside of a dying loved one.

What distinguishes humans from all other creatures is our self-consciousness: We know we are alive and that we will die, and we cannot keep from asking ourselves questions about why life is the way it is and what it all means.

And isn't it odd that we all understand immediately why Private Ryan would feel compelled to live an honorable life? Does he believe that in doing so he can make his comrades' sacrifice worthwhile? Evidently, he does, and we sense the rightness of this. But why does he feel in their debt? Why does he feel that their actions have to be recompensed by his own, as if blind justice with a sword in one hand and balancing scales in the other really existed? And why should goodness be the means of repaying this debt? Why not revenge? Why should he not set about killing as many former Nazis as possible? Somehow that does not satisfy, though. If sacrifice can be repaid at all, it can be done only by sacrifice, not by slaughter. We *know* this. But *why* do we know this?

A broad answer lies in our humanity. Because we are human, we ask questions about meaning and purpose. We have an innate sense of justice and our own need to meet the demands of justice. Moral attitudes differ from culture to culture, but take people from a Stone Age culture in a remote village in Papua New Guinea, sit them down in front of *Saving Private Ryan,* and they will immediately understand the issues involved. They will understand Ryan's questions and his sense of gratitude.

The word *should* in the questions that arise from Private Ryan's life immediately grounds us in ethical considerations. It implies there must be a variety of answers to these questions. It suggests that some answers are better than others—some are right while others are wrong. So, where does this *should* come from? What does it mean that we possess an innate sense of these things?

At the very least it points to the notion that we all live in a moral universe, which is one of the reasons human beings, regardless of background or economics or place of birth, are irresistibly religious. If nothing else, we know there is someone or something to which we owe a debt for our existence.

Our questions also presume that we can choose our answers to these questions and act on these choices. The freedom of the human will, even if circumscribed, is built into the way the human mind works.

Commenting on life's questions, U.S. Supreme Court Justice Anthony M. Kennedy, in the case *Planned Parenthood v. Casey,* said, "At the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life."[2] Kennedy asserted that beliefs about these matters define the attributes of personhood. We are who we are, we are the type of creatures we are, because we are obliged to come to our own conclusions about the great questions. Although I disagree profoundly with the legal conclusion Justice Kennedy drew from this observation, I must admit his summary captures what makes us human.[3]

I can remember when I first began asking questions early in life. I have particularly vivid memories of the Sunday morning in December 1941 when our family was riveted to the radio, listening with growing anxiety to the reports of the Japanese attacks on Pearl Harbor. I was certain we'd be fighting Japanese soldiers or German SS officers in the streets of our sleepy Boston suburb. I remember asking my father, "Why does there have to be war and bloodshed and death?" He replied—mistakenly, as I now think—that it was all part of the natural process, like famines and plagues that prevented overpopulation.

During the war, I organized fund-raising campaigns in my school, even auctioned off my treasured model airplane collection to raise funds for the war effort. Instinctively I knew I was meant to do my part to protect our freedoms. I wanted my life—even at age twelve—to matter.

I also remember standing in our yard many nights, the world around me in darkness, blackout shades covering every window in the neighborhood, protecting us against the expected air raids. I would stare into the dazzling array of stars above me and wonder where the universe began, where it ended, and what I was doing here. As a student, I struggled to grasp the concept of infinity—what was beyond those stars.

I've continued to ask these kinds of questions, especially during times of stress. I've asked them in my life as a government official, as a husband and father, as a convicted felon, and then as a Christian leader. Many times in the inner recesses of my conscience I've asked Ryan's

questions: *Have I been a good man? Have I lived a good life?* Sometimes I've been unsure; other times I've been sure that I have failed. But where do we go to answer these questions? Whom do we ask? Who can tell us the truth about the value of our lives?

While the quest to find answers to such questions can be arduous at times, even heartbreaking, the search for the truth about life is the one thing that makes life worthwhile, exhilarating. The ability to pursue such a search makes us human. Emmanuel Mounier, the founder of the French "personalist" philosophical movement, writes that human life is characterized by a "divine restlessness." The lack of peace within our hearts spurs us on a quest for the meaning of life—a command imprinted on "unextinguished souls."[4] Pope John Paul II sums up the matter elegantly: "One may define the human being, therefore, as *the one who seeks the truth.*"[5]

What will be the truth of our lives and our destinies? Most people want to arrive at Captain Miller's cemetery cross—or whatever judgment seat they envision—with some confidence that they have lived a good life.

But what is a good life? How does such a life incorporate answers to the great questions? How can such a life be lived?

Have I lived one?

Have you?