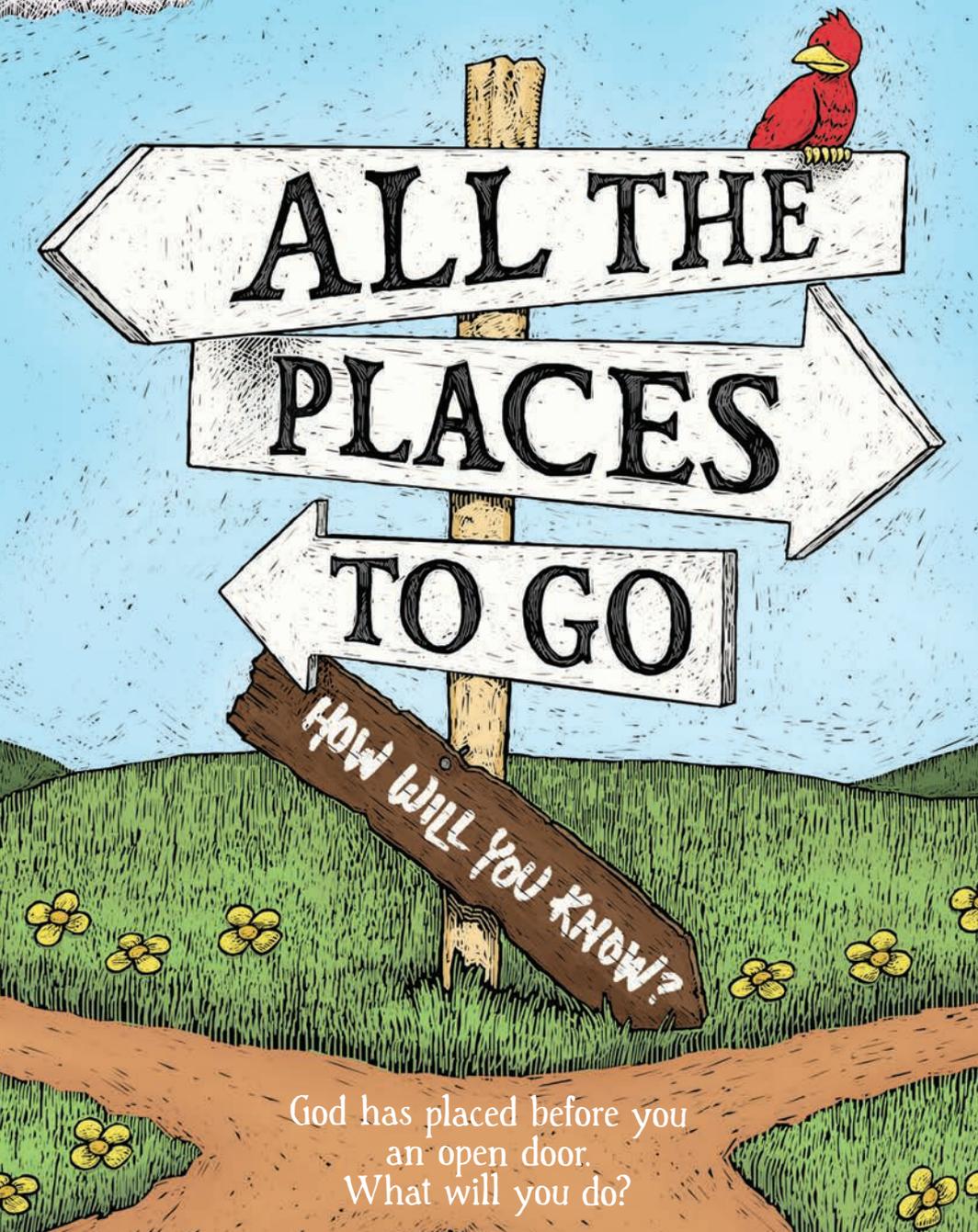


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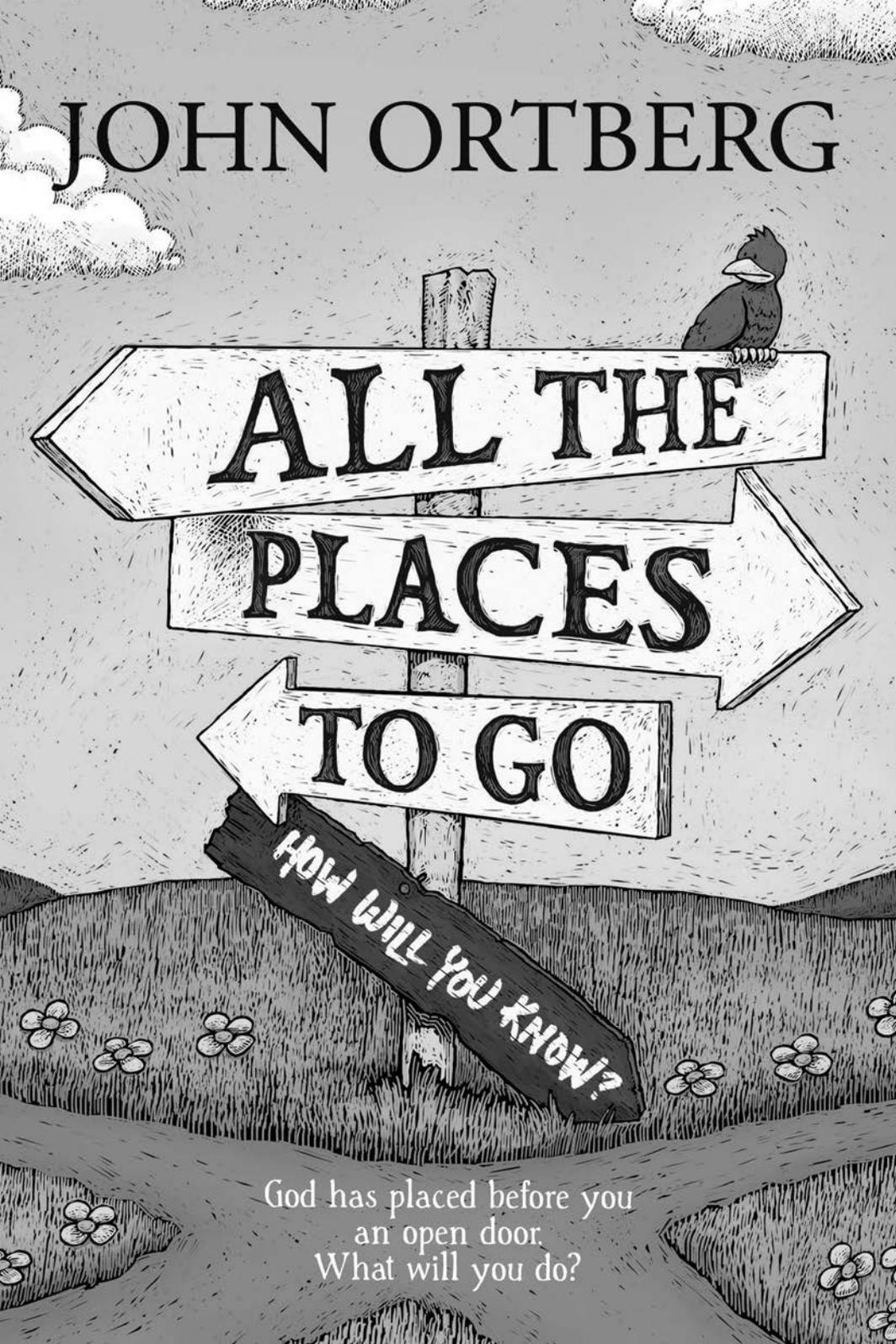
God has placed before you
an open door.
What will you do?

All the Places to Go . . .
How Will You Know?



Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.
Carol Stream, Illinois

JOHN ORTBERG



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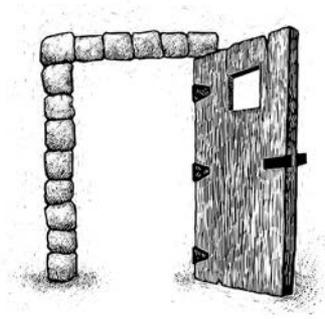
*To Barbara Lynn (Ortberg) Harrison and Barton David
Ortberg, with whom I snuck through the secret gates and
open doors of childhood, and who courageously walk through
them still, this book is most gratefully dedicated.*

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CHAPTER I

ALL THE PLACES TO GO . . .
HOW WILL YOU KNOW?



IF YOU HAD TO SUMMARIZE your life in six words, what would they be?

Several years ago an online magazine asked that question. It was inspired by a possibly legendary challenge posed to Ernest Hemingway to write a six-word story that resulted in the classic “For sale: baby shoes, never worn.”

The magazine was flooded with so many responses that the site almost crashed, and the responses were eventually

turned into a book. *Not Quite What I Was Planning* is filled with six-word memoirs by writers “famous and obscure.” The memoirs range from funny to ironic to inspiring to heartbreaking:

- “One tooth, one cavity; life’s cruel.”
- “Savior complex makes for many disappointments.”
- “Cursed with cancer. Blessed with friends.” (This one was written not by a wise, old grandmother but by a nine-year-old boy with thyroid cancer.)
- “The psychic said I’d be richer.” (Actually, this author might be richer if she stopped blowing money on psychics.)
- “Tombstone won’t say: ‘Had health insurance.’”
- “Not a good Christian, but trying.”
- “Thought I would have more impact.”¹

The challenge of the six-word limitation is its demand to focus on what matters most, to capture briefly something of significance. Winston Churchill once sent a dessert pudding back to the kitchen because “it lacked a theme.” I don’t want my life to be like Winston’s pudding.

It is striking to think about what the characters of Scripture might write for their six-word memoirs. I think they would revolve around the intersection of the story of that person’s life with God’s story. They would all be inspired by a divine opportunity that God had set before them and the response—the yes or no—that shaped their lives.

- Abraham: “Left Ur. Had baby. Still laughing.”
- Jonah: “No.’ Storm. Overboard. Whale. Regurgitated. ‘Yes.’”
- Moses: “Burning bush. Stone tablets. Charlton Heston.”
- Adam: “Eyes opened, but can’t find home.”
- Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego: “King was hot. Furnace was not.”
- Noah: “Hated the rain, loved the rainbow.”
- Esau: “At least the stew was good.”
- Esther: “Eye candy. Mordecai handy. Israel dandy.”
- Mary: “Manger. Pain. Joy. Cross. Pain. Joy.”
- Prodigal Son: “Bad. Sad. Dad glad. Brother mad.”
- Rich Young Ruler: “Jesus called. Left sad. Still rich.”
- Zacchaeus: “Climbed sycamore tree. Short, poorer, happier.”
- Woman caught in adultery: “Picked up man, put down stones.”
- Good Samaritan: “I came, I saw, I stopped.”
- Paul: “Damascus. Blind. Suffer. Write. Change world.”

“Not quite what I was planning” is the six-word memoir any of them could have written. In none of these cases would these characters have been able to predict where their lives would take them. They were interrupted. They were offered an opportunity or threatened by danger or both. This is how life works. We are neither the authors nor the pawns of our

life stories but rather partners somehow with fate or destiny or circumstance or providence. And the writers of Scripture insist that, at least sometimes, in at least some lives—in any lives where the person is willing—that unseen Partner can be God.

Often in the Bible these opportunities seem to come in unmistakable packages. A burning bush. A wrestling angel. Handwriting on the wall. A fleece. A voice. A dream. A talking donkey like in *Shrek*.

But there is another picture of God-inspired opportunity sprinkled across Scripture that is easier for me to relate to. It is a picture of divine possibility that still comes to every life. It is a picture I have loved since my college professor Jerry Hawthorne introduced it to me:

To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write:
“These are the words of him who is holy and true,
who holds the key of David. What he opens no
one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open.
I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you *an
open door* that no one can shut. I know that you have
little strength, yet you have kept my word and have
not denied my name.” (Revelation 3:7-8, emphasis
mine)

A door, Dr. Hawthorne said, is one of the richest images in literature. It can mean safety (“my door is chained and locked”) or hiddenness (“no one knows what goes on behind

closed doors”). It can mean rejection (“she shut the door in my face”) or rest (young mothers’ favorite room is the bathroom, where they can close the door and be alone).

But in this passage a door means none of those things. Rather, it is an *open* door, symbolic of “boundless opportunities. Of unlimited chances to do something worthwhile; of grand openings into new and unknown adventures of significant living; of heretofore unimagined chances to do good, to make our lives count for eternity.”²

An open door is the great adventure of life because it means the possibility of being useful to God. The offer of it, and our response to it, is the subject of this book.

God Can Open a Door for Anybody

When my dad was soon to turn fifty, my mom asked him abruptly in the kitchen one day, “John, is this all we’re going to do for the rest of our lives? Just this same routine of going to work and talking to the same people?” My dad, a very stable CPA who had lived in Rockford, Illinois, his whole life and never thought of living anywhere else, said, “I guess.” But he started wondering if there might be something more.

Often an open door to another room begins with a sense of discontent about the room you’re already in.

Very unexpectedly, through my wife, my dad was offered a job by a church in Southern California. However, it would have been a pretty radical move—two thousand miles away from the only place he’d ever lived, in a job he wasn’t trained for, with people he didn’t know. After checking it out, he told

the church leaders that it just wouldn't work: the salary was too low, the houses were too expensive, the career shift was too big, the pension was too small, he was too old, and the people were too weird.

It was the right decision, he thought. It would have been too big a risk. He breathed a sigh of relief and went home.

But strange things began to happen after he said no. My dad had a dream one night where it seemed God was saying to him, "John, if you stay on this course, you will neither sow nor reap." My dad was from a very nonemotional, non-demonstrative Swedish church where people might talk to God but never expect God to talk to them. They didn't even talk to each other much. So he didn't make much of the dream.

When he woke up, he read in my mom's journal—something else he'd never done—where she had written, "I don't know how to pray for John; I don't think he's doing what God wants him to do."

All this made him not want to go to church, so he stayed home but ended up seeing a TV church service where the preacher said, "If proof is possible, faith is impossible." It struck him that he had wanted proof that if he took this new job, everything would work out okay. But if the preacher was right, such proof would rule out the very thing God wanted most, which was my dad's faith.

So the next week he went back to church. The sermon was on the ABCs of faith: that you must *abandon* your old life, *believe* God's promises are trustworthy, and *commit* to a new journey.

So my dad got on a plane to go back to California, even though the pastor of the California church said they were now looking at other candidates. While on the plane, he opened his Bible and happened to read a passage where God promised people that if they abandoned their idols of gold and silver, the time would come when they would reap and sow.

He more or less took all of this as an open door.

Recently my sister, my brother, and I spent three days together with my parents to celebrate my dad's eightieth birthday. He's retired now, as is my mom, but they moved to that church in California, and both were on staff there for a quarter of a century, and it was the great, risky, thrilling adventure of their lives.

We wrote out eighty cards, eighty memories of life with my dad. It was amazing how many memories came flooding back—my dad's voice when he'd read to us when we were young; the math flash cards he'd use to teach us; the scent of his Aramis cologne I would borrow for dates.

But the most dramatic card in my dad's jar, the decision that divided his life into Before and After, was his choice to go through an open door that he did not initiate, never expected, and felt unprepared for.

"I know that your strength is small," God says to the church at Philadelphia. People in the church may not have been hugely flattered when they read that line. But what a gift to know that open doors are not reserved for the specially talented or the extraordinarily strong. God can open a door for anyone.

God Can Open a Door in Any Circumstance

Viktor Frankl was a brilliant doctor whom the Nazis imprisoned in a concentration camp. They took away his livelihood, confiscated his possessions, mocked his dignity, and killed his family. They locked him in a cell with no way out. A room without an open door is a prison. But he found a door that his guards did not know about: “Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”³

Frankl discovered that doors are not just physical. A door is a choice. He found that when his circumstances had closed every outer door to him, they revealed to him the doors that matter far more—the doors through which a soul can leave fear and enter into courage, leave hatred and enter into forgiveness, leave ignorance and enter into learning. He discovered that his guards were actually far more imprisoned—by cruelty and ignorance and foolish obedience to barbarism—than he was imprisoned by walls and barbed wire.

Some people learn this and become free; some never see it and live as prisoners. There is always a door.

Columbia researcher Sheena Iyengar has found that the average person makes about seventy conscious decisions every day.⁴ That’s 25,550 decisions a year. Over seventy years, that’s 1,788,500 decisions. Albert Camus said, “Life is a sum of all your choices.” You put all those 1,788,500 choices together, and that’s who you are.

The ability to recognize doors—to discover the range of

possibilities that lie before us in every moment and in any circumstance—is a skill that can be learned. It brings the possibility of God’s presence and power into any situation on earth. People who study entrepreneurs say they excel in something called “opportunity alertness.” They look at the same circumstances as everyone else, but they “notice without search opportunities that have hitherto been overlooked.” They are “alert, waiting, continually receptive to something that may turn up.”⁵ Perhaps there is a kind of “divine opportunity alertness” we can cultivate.

Sometimes the opportunity doesn’t involve going to a new place; it means finding a new and previously unrecognized opportunity in the old place. In a sense, this is the surprising story of the nation of Israel. Israel thought it was on a journey to national greatness, with a powerful army and abundant wealth. Instead, it knew exile and oppression. But with the closed door of national greatness came an open door to a kind of spiritual greatness. Israel changed the spiritual and moral life of the world. And while nations like Assyria and Babylon and Persia have come and gone, Israel’s gift to humanity remains.

Open doors in the Bible never exist just for the sake of the people offered them. They involve opportunity, but it’s the opportunity to bless someone else. An open door may be thrilling to me, but it doesn’t exist solely for my benefit.

An open door is not just a picture of something good. It involves a good that we do not yet fully know. An open door does not offer a complete view of the future. An open

door means opportunity, mystery, possibility—but not a guarantee.

God doesn't say, "I've set before you a hammock."

He doesn't say, "I've set before you a detailed set of instructions about exactly what you should do and exactly what will happen as a result."

An open door doesn't mean all will be pleasant and smooth on the other side. One of those six-word memoirs looks like Jesus could have written it: "Savior complex makes for many disappointments." An open door is not a blueprint or a guarantee.

It's an open door. To find out what's on the other side, you'll have to go through.

God Can Open Doors Very Quietly

God often does not tell us which door to choose. This is one of God's most frustrating characteristics.

Many years ago my wife, Nancy, and I stood before an open door. We faced a choice to move across the country—from California, which was Nancy's lifelong home, to a church called Willow Creek near Chicago. It was a very difficult decision between going to that church in Chicago and staying in California. We were driving on the decision-making journey the same day, on the same freeway, that O. J. Simpson made his famous low-speed escape run in his white Bronco.

I leaned toward Chicago because I thought if I didn't go there, I'd always wonder what might have been. (We're marked by the doors we go through and by the ones we

don't.) Nancy leaned toward California because the church in Chicago was in Chicago. We thought and prayed and talked and talked some more. Choosing a door is rarely easy. I was haunted by the fear of getting it wrong. What if God wanted me to choose door #1 but I chose door #2? Why couldn't he have made the choice plainer?

We do not always get to know which door we're supposed to go through. Jesus says to the church in Philadelphia, "I have placed before you an open door" (Revelation 3:8). But he does not specify which door it is. I can only imagine their questions. *How will we know? Are we supposed to vote on it? What if we go through the wrong one?*

This has been an ironic and often painful part of my life. God opens doors but then doesn't seem to tell me which ones I'm supposed to go through.

I come from a long line of preachers, with a long line of stories about how they got their "call." My great-grandfather, Robert Bennett Hall, ran away from an orphanage when he was twelve and ended up working for a shopkeeper and marrying his daughter. One day he was sweeping out the store when he got the call, put down his broom, went home, and told my great-grandmother that he'd been called to be a preacher.

My brother-in-law, Craig, was working at a grocery store when he received what was to him an unmistakable summons to become a pastor. He got his call in the frozen foods section.

I never got a call—at least not one like that. I used to hang out in grocery stores sometimes, but I never got a call. It took me many years to understand that God may have very

good reasons to leave choices up to us rather than sending us e-mails telling us what to do.

When the invitation to go to Chicago came, I faced the same dilemma. If pastors change churches, they're supposed to have a clear call—especially if the new church is bigger than the old one. Pastors will usually say things like “I didn't want to go anywhere, but I got this strange sense of unrest in my spirit, and I had to obey.” Pastors almost never say stuff like “This new church is way bigger than my old church, and I am super excited about that.”

But I had thoughts like that. I knew they weren't my best thoughts, or my only thoughts, but they were in the mix. And I had to struggle with them. I think maybe that's part of why God works through open doors. They help us struggle with our real dreams and motives.

So Nancy and I wrestled with this decision. As we were considering what to do, my friend Jon gave me a book that had recently been written and which I had never read. It was by a man named Dr. Seuss, whom I had never consulted for career guidance. He had written:

You have brains in your head.

You have feet in your shoes.

You can steer yourself any direction you choose. . . .

Oh, the places you'll go! . . .

Except when you don't.

Because, sometimes, you won't.⁶

Oh, the places you'll go. This was the promise that came to all those characters in the Bible. This is the promise of the God of the open door.

I think Dr. Seuss's words resonate so deeply with thousands of graduates every year because what matters is not a guarantee about the outcome. What matters is the adventure of the journey. That's what struck me when I first read the book.

I thought about my parents and the great adventure of their lives in moving from Illinois to California. I thought about how sharp my dad's regret was when he said the safe no and how keen his joy was when he said a risky yes.

We ultimately decided to go to Chicago. We got no divine direction or supernatural indicators as far as we could tell. But we chose it because the adventure of yes seemed more alive than the safety of no.

Very rarely in the Bible does God come to someone and say, "Stay." Almost never does God interrupt someone and ask them to remain in comfort, safety, and familiarity. He opens a door and calls them to come through it.

The staggering truth is that this very moment is alive with opportunity. What could you be doing right this moment that you aren't? You could be learning to speak Chinese. You could be training for a marathon. You could be logging on to eHarmony to search for—and possibly meet—the love of your life. You could be telling a friend a secret you've never told another living soul. You could be sponsoring an impoverished child. You could be watching *The Bachelor*, or buying the world's sharpest knife from an infomercial, or

finally making that therapy appointment your spouse has been encouraging you to make for years.

There's an open door.

But wait! There's more. "Open door" isn't a phrase to describe just any opportunity. An open door is an opportunity provided by God, to act *with* God and *for* God. In that little passage to the church at Philadelphia, the apostle John has a wonderful expression. He writes that what stands before the church is literally an *opened* door. Jewish writers often avoided writing the word *God* directly, out of reverence. So this is John's way of saying that the opportunity being offered did not come out of the blue. God was at work. What lies before us is more than merely human. Not simply open doors, but *opened* doors.

The beginning of the story of God's people comes with the unexpected offer of an opened door. It came to a man named Abram, under the category of not-quite-what-I-was-planning. God began it all by approaching an elderly couple before Israel even existed:

Abram and Sarai, today is the day!

So get your dad, Terah, and get on your way.

You will wander like nomads, and I even think maybe

You might have a nonagenarian baby.

*You'll be marked by your faith, you'll be marked by a
vision,*

You'll be marked by (you might not love this) circumcision.

*Like stars in the sky your descendants will be,
Though you will tell lies indiscriminately.*

*You'll get lost and confused and be badly afraid.
You will wait till quite late and mistakes will be made.*

*You won't know what to say, you won't know what to do,
But all peoples on earth will get blessings through you.*

*With your muddled-up faith you'll do more than you know,
And I promise you this: Oh, the places you'll go!*

And they went. In a sense, the whole story of the Bible hinges on this moment. The writer of Genesis expresses it in two words: *Wayyelech Avram*. "Abram went."

Not quite what I was planning.
Oh, the places you'll *wayyelech*.

God Can Use a "Wrong Door" to Shape a Right Heart

In the New Testament, James says that if any of us lacks wisdom, we should ask God for some. He doesn't say we should ask which door to go through but for the tools to choose wisely.

God's primary will for your life is not the achievements you accrue; it's the person you become. God's primary will for your life is not what job you ought to take; it's not primarily situational or circumstantial. It's not mainly the city where you live or whether you get married or what house you ought to be in. God's primary will for your life is that you become a magnificent person in his image, somebody with

the character of Jesus. That is God's main will for your life. No circumstance can prevent that.

We all understand that, especially parents. If you're a parent, would you want the kind of kids you have to tell their whole lives, "Wear these clothes. Take these classes. Go to that school. Apply for this job. Marry that person. Purchase this house," and you always have them do exactly what you tell them as long as they live? ("No" is the correct answer here. No, you wouldn't want that.)

Why? Because your main goal is not for them to be little robots that carry out instructions; your goal is that they become people of great character and judgment. The only way for them to do that is to make lots and lots of decisions. Of course, that means they'll make a lot of the wrong decisions. That becomes a primary way they learn.

Very often God's will for you will be "I want you to decide," because decision making is an indispensable part of character formation. God is primarily in the character-forming business, not the circumstance-shaping business.

And God is in the open-door business. This means a new way of looking at God. He prefers yes to no. He loves adventure and opportunity.

This means a new way of looking at life. I do not have to be afraid of failure. I do not have to live in fear over circumstance. Each moment is an opportunity to look for a door that opens up into God and his presence.

This means a new way of looking at myself. I am no longer limited by my smallness and weakness. The God who opens

the door to me is also the God who knows how small and weak I am.

This means a new way of choosing. I no longer have to live under the tyranny of the perfect choice. God can use even what looks like the “wrong door” if I go through it with the right heart.

Our lives are filled with doors.

Perhaps you are facing graduation. According to one recent survey, more than anything else, young adults want to work at a job that inspires them and that offers autonomy.⁷ You want to follow your bliss, but maybe your bliss hasn't shown up yet.

Maybe you are in transition. People are changing jobs, companies, and whole careers more often than ever before. How do you choose wisely?

Maybe you are in a rut. Your life is safe but not fulfilling. You have a desire to do more or be more.

Maybe you're facing an empty nest. You suddenly have freedom and time and possibilities that haven't been available in a few decades. What is the best way to spend them?

Maybe you're retiring. But you know the word *retire* isn't in the Bible, and you're not ready for death or shuffleboard. What might God have next for you?

Maybe you're facing rapid change. Career specialist Andy Chan notes that young adults will face, on average, twenty-nine jobs over the course of their lives. Oxford researchers predict that over the next two decades about half the jobs that exist today will be replaced by technology.⁸ How do you adapt to a changing environment?

Maybe you have a passion. You have traveled overseas and seen a great need, or you have studied a problem and want to make a difference. What's your next step?

Perhaps you're a student trying to decide what school to attend or what major to choose. What if you choose a major that isn't in line with your ultimate career? (By the way, everyone chooses a major that isn't in line with their career. Tell your parents not to worry.)

Perhaps you're on the brink of an exciting relationship or thinking about marriage. How do you know if this person is "the one"? What if you choose wrong?

Or perhaps you have been frustrated by a lost opportunity in your past. Does God still have another for you?

Many people get confused about decision making and "God's will for my life." As we will see, learning to recognize and go through open doors is a learned skill. Most often we learn best by starting with small doors—a word of kindness or an act of service or a risk of confrontation or a prayer of trust.

Every morning is an open door; every moment can become one. Some of us see the doors and seize them, and so life becomes a divine adventure. Some of us shrink back or fail to see. A room with no door is a prison. To fail to embrace the open door is to miss the work God has made for us to do. If we want to experience more of the Spirit of God in our lives, we need to train ourselves to look for and respond to moments of divine opportunity.

Every door you take means leaving something and arriving somewhere. How will it change your life? What will it cost?

Every journey—yours, too—will be filled with uncertainty and mystery and adventure and frustration and surprise.

From the beginning, God's open doors meet people's closed hearts. Abram said,

Where are these places you want me to go?

When will I get there? How will I know?

Will I need a design? Will I need a degree?

Will I need other things that you're hiding from me?

Where is the map of your plan for my life?

I must know all this stuff. I must talk to my wife.

I'm old. I'm not bold. And you're leaving things out.

There are bales of details you must tell me about!

And lo! The Lord didn't tell him. The Lord is notoriously fuzzy about details like that. Knowing too many details would take all the excitement out of the adventure. God wanted Abram to be his friend, and friends trust each other, and you can't learn to trust someone without a little risk and uncertainty and vulnerability.

God told Abram, "Go to the place I will show you."

Oh, the places you'll go!

That's where the open door leads. To the place where God guides.

God opened a door. Abram went. And the rest is history. Where will your doors lead?