



when you, then God

*7 things God is waiting*

*to do in your life*

FOREWORD BY KYLE IDLEMAN

**RUSTY GEORGE**

WITH MICHAEL DEFAZIO

The last thing this world needs is just another self-improvement book. That's why I'm so excited about *When You, Then God*. Rusty George writes with an urgency to awaken all who are simply coasting through life. If you just want to live an ordinary life, with God as a side dish, then don't pick up this book. In *When You, Then God*, you will be reminded anew of the power and purpose of our great God. It is refreshingly inspirational and challenging at the same time.

**PETE WILSON**

Senior pastor of Cross Point Church, Nashville, Tennessee

Rusty George is a tremendous leader and a powerful voice for what it means to walk in faith in today's complicated world. In this book, Rusty's transparency will move you to experience more of God and his incredible hope in your life.

**JUD WILHITE**

Senior pastor of Central Christian Church, Las Vegas, and author of *Pursued*

This book is a gift to those who find their spiritual life exhausting. For twenty years, I spun plates and juggled oranges like a crazy woman, trying to make God happy. It was only when everything fell that I discovered the profound truth that Rusty outlines in this powerful book: God simply loves being with you—as you are, right now. Together, you might even change the world.

**SHEILA WALSH**

Author of *Five Minutes with Jesus*

One of the most overlooked principles in Scripture is the simple fact that how we respond to God actually matters. The Bible is filled with if/then statements that somehow get turned into blanket promises and empty threats. In *When You, Then God*, Rusty George unpacks many of the most important, most forgotten, and most misunderstood conditional statements in Scripture.

**LARRY OSBORNE**

Author, and pastor of North Coast Church, Vista, California

Rusty George is the real deal, a humble and sincere follower of Jesus. In this book, he vulnerably shares some of his greatest discoveries—not about serving God, but about knowing God and embracing God’s love deeply, personally, and transformationally. It was life changing for Rusty, and it will be for you, too.

**GENE APPEL**

Senior pastor of Eastside Christian Church, Anaheim, California

Rusty is fluent in the language of freedom, and he offers a map to every reader seeking a grace-filled journey toward hope. The pages of this book will lead you into the parts of your head and heart that need to be explored if you are to experience the life that Jesus died to give you. By the end of the book, you’ll find the rest you’ve been looking for.

**JON WEECE**

Author of *Me Too*

Sensible. Encouraging. And, best of all, biblical. Rusty has written an easy-to-read, very practical book that I believe will be helpful to the body of Christ. You’ll be challenged and set free to walk closer to your Savior.

**RON EDMONDSON**

Senior pastor of Immanuel Baptist Church, Lexington, Kentucky

W H E N   Y O U ,   T H E N   G O D



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**RUSTY  
GEORGE**

WITH MICHAEL DEFAZIO



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*When You, Then God: Seven Things God Is Waiting to Do in Your Life*

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Designed by Dean H. Renninger

Published in association with the literary agent Don Gates of The Gates Group,  
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The stories in this book are about real people and real events, but some names have been changed for the privacy of the individuals involved.

#### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Names: George, Rusty, date, author.

Title: When you, then God : seven things God is waiting to do in your life /

Rusty George, with Michael DeFazio.

Description: Carol Stream, IL : Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2016. |

Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015040871 | ISBN 9781496406040 (sc)

Subjects: LCSH: God (Christianity)—Promises. | Obedience—Biblical teaching.

Classification: LCC BT180.P7 G48 2016 | DDC 248.4—dc23 LC record available at <http://lccn.loc.gov/2015040871>

Printed in the United States of America

22 21 20 19 18 17 16  
7 6 5 4 3 2 1



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# foreword

by Kyle Idleman

**T**his may sound strange, but I've always enjoyed the experience of going to a car lot and negotiating for a used car. For most people, haggling with a used-car salesman ranks right up there with going to the dentist for a root canal. But I'm competitive by nature, and getting the best possible price feels like a win to me. I realize that most people aren't wired that way and that we're all a little afraid of being taken advantage of or feeling as if we could've gotten more for our money.

Whether or not you enjoy the negotiation process, it's hard to avoid it in our consumer-based culture. In fact, "everything is negotiable" is one of the great mantras of the Western world.

Negotiations tend to be "when/then" transactions: *When* I give you *this* . . . *then* you will give me *that*. We negotiate these When/Then agreements not only in our economic transactions but also in our relationships. It may be on a subconscious level, but we're afraid of being shortchanged. So

we are careful to look out for ourselves, making sure we aren't giving any more than we have to and that we are getting everything we deserve in return.

I am convinced that, perhaps without meaning to, we often turn our relationship with God into a similar negotiation. Following Jesus becomes a When/Then agreement where we are careful not to give up more than we are required to and that we get what's coming to us.

What I love about *When You, Then God* is that it helps us understand that the When/Then teachings in Scripture are not transactions to be negotiated but blessings that have been promised by God. God is not a negotiator who is holding out on us until he gets what he wants, where we lose and he wins.

So as you begin this book, can I challenge you to lower your defenses? God isn't trying to take advantage of you. You don't need to wonder whether he's holding out on you or whether you can get a better deal down the road. God already showed all his cards and gave up his negotiating position when he gave his only Son.

In *When You, Then God*, Rusty George holds nothing back. Read this book and learn that God is on your side. He's a giver, and he wants you to experience abundant life in him.

*preface:*

N O T T H A T K I N D O F B O O K



I'll be honest: I don't need another book telling me to take a leap and change the world. I don't know about you, but the shelves in my office are well stocked with books imploring me to take a risk, walk across the room, lend a hand, give a dollar, or just make a decision and change the world. On top of that, the Kindle app on my iPad is loaded with even more books pleading with me to be the difference, make a stand, burn the ships, and refuse to lose. I get the message.

Though all those books make good points, they also make me feel pretty guilty. In fact, just sitting here writing this preface while drinking a hot cup of coffee in the comfort of my own home—complete with running water, indoor plumbing, and a refrigerator full of food—I feel guilty enough. In the time I've taken to write this paragraph, countless needs—*real* needs—have gone unmet around the world. And yet here I sit, sipping Sumatran coffee, when I could be *in* Sumatra changing the world.

If you're like me, your inbox is flooded with news of global epidemics that need your awareness. Every time you scroll through your social media, you see more videos, more Kickstarter campaigns, and more urgent appeals to help save everything from the whales to the rain forest to whales in the rain forest. (That's the worst kind.)

We know the world needs to change. And we've all heard the stories of those who have changed it: the elderly woman who saved all her pennies for eighty years and helped to fund

a library for kids when she died; or the little boy who used the profits from a lemonade stand to furnish microloans for farmers in Kenya. These are the stories that make the news and create great opening vignettes for books about changing the world.

But that's not even the half of it. I also don't need another book about changing my own personal world.

Walk through any bookstore and you'll find entire sections devoted to self-improvement. Everything from how to lose weight to how to make a million dollars to how to be a perfect parent. We Christians are often quick to judge these books as worldly or New Age, but I have plenty of Christian titles on my shelves that promise the same things—except that they assign the work to God. God can cause the pounds to melt away, the millions to come my way, and my kids to never stray. All I need to do is learn a special prayer to pray, a certain way to fast, or a hidden discipline only recently discovered or rediscovered. On top of that are apps to download, verses to memorize, and five steps to success. If I work the plan, God is obligated to give me what I want. I just need to learn the secret of saying “pretty please.”

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that I don't need to change or that changing the world is a bad idea. But without one key component, all those appeals and strategies fall on deaf ears. I've discovered that what I *really* need is to know beyond a shadow of a doubt—to *feel* and *experience* in the depths of my being—the truth that God loves me unconditionally, just as I am, without one plea. When the truth

*not that kind of book*

of God's love seeps into my marrow, then I am set free to love other people, serve them with a full heart, and walk in harmonious partnership with my Creator.

When that happens, no one has to tell me to leap . . . because I'm already in the arms of the Savior.



*chapter one:*  
ready to

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When my daughters were young and we'd go to the pool, we would often play that game where Dad stands about four feet from the side, in chest-deep water, and tries to convince the kids to jump to him. From the father's perspective, there is zero risk to this game, but you wouldn't know it by watching the kids quivering and shivering on the deck.

Like most little kids, my girls would inch forward toward the edge, filled with equal parts excitement and anxiety, and we'd start the familiar exchange.

"Jump," I would say.

"Daddy? Will you catch me?"

"Yes! Just jump."

"Are you sure you'll catch me?"

"Yes! Trust me! Just jump."

"Are you *sure* you'll catch me?"

"Yes. When you jump, then I'll catch you. But I can't prove that I'll catch you until you jump!"

This banter would go on for some time while I waited patiently for one girl or the other to crank up enough courage to fling herself from the side of the pool. All the while, I was moving closer and closer, until finally they could simply fall into my arms and let me ease them into the water.

As grown-ups who can stand up in four feet of water and who know how to swim, we may laugh at the little kids cowering on the pool deck. But let's be honest: *Jumping can be scary business*. Especially when we can't see exactly where

we're going to land, or when we're not entirely certain that Daddy is going to catch us. Let's talk about some of the things we fear when it comes to trusting God.

Maybe we're afraid because, deep down, we're convinced that God is angry with us—that he wants to punish us. We know we're not perfect; we know we don't quite measure up to God's perfect standard, and maybe—just maybe—he wants to teach us a lesson by letting us hit the water and go under. If I think God is angry with me, I'm probably going to stay on the side of the pool. Wouldn't you?

Deep down, we're convinced that God is angry with us—that he wants to punish us.

Or maybe we're not afraid of God's anger as much as we're fearful of what we might have to give up if we fully surrender our lives to him. Do I have to quit my job and become a pastor or a missionary?

Do I have to downsize my house or move to the inner city? Do I have to get rid of my Mercedes (or at least put a fish decal on the back)? What about my dreams, my aspirations, and my desire to succeed in life? Doesn't God allow for those things?

Many of our fears surround our occupations. We fear losing some relational advantages at the office if people find out we've become Jesus followers. Or we might be afraid that, by choosing a life of loving God and loving others, we'll lose our killer instinct at work and endanger our livelihood. Perhaps we fear that a transformation of our ethics and values will adversely affect our business.

Sometimes our fears are centered on our reputation. We could lose social status, jeopardize lifelong friendships, or risk rejection by certain clubs or social groups. We might even be perceived as weak, unintelligent, and out of touch or as bigoted, judgmental, and mean.

Maybe our fears are based simply on our desire for pleasure and comfort. If we decide to go all-in on following Jesus, will we have to give up our new car, downsize our home, or change our vacation plans? What will God call us to do if we decide to take that leap? Whatever it is, we're afraid that he'll somehow let us down and that we'll regret our decision to jump.

Or maybe at the heart of it, our fear is exactly the same as the one we have when we're perched on the side of the pool: We're afraid that Daddy isn't going to catch us. Maybe we've already jumped once or twice and it didn't turn out so well—at least according to our expectations. Maybe we're thinking that God hasn't come through for us or that life would be easier if we could go back to the way things used to be. Maybe things would be better if we could ease up on the Jesus stuff and take back control of our lives. That's fear talking. And it's perfectly natural.

But the Bible says that perfect love drives out fear.<sup>1</sup> So how do we get past it? Let's go back to the pool and see what helped my daughters to overcome their fear and trust my ability—and my commitment—to catch them when they jumped.

First of all, when I seemed *really* far away (maybe four

feet, in reality), they were far less inclined to jump. So I started gradually moving toward them. In a sense, this is the same approach God has taken with fearful humanity down through the ages.

Throughout the Bible, we're able to see how, after the Fall, God began to draw steadily closer to humanity again.

After the Fall, God began to draw steadily closer to humanity again.

At first, he was a voice from beyond the clouds. Then he became visible as a pillar of fire and a massive cloud leading the way through the wilderness. Next, he came into the midst of the people in the Tabernacle, and later in the Temple

once the Israelites were permanently established in Jerusalem. When they still didn't quite get it, he came so close that he was human—Jesus! But then he said, "I'll get even closer. I'll move right into your life . . . and I'll unleash the transformative power of my Spirit to change you from the inside out." Imagine that: the very Spirit of God taking up residence inside us.

With every step closer, God proved his love for us. He proved his commitment to us. He is a faithful God who deserves our trust. As we stand on the edge of the pool with our shaky faith, our heavenly Father moves close enough for us to fall into his arms. But we still have to step off the edge. As we contemplate the roiling surface of the water and ask, "Can I trust you?" God stands ever so close and says, "*When* you jump, *then* I'll catch you. But I can't prove it until you jump."

Okay, but how do we know for sure that we can trust God to keep us from drowning? In a word, it comes down to *love*. When my daughters stood shivering on the side of the pool, trying to exercise their faith in me, they already knew that I loved them with all my heart—I'm their daddy. They already knew I would do anything to protect them. They already knew I wouldn't let them sink to the bottom of the pool. Well . . . they were pretty sure about that last one.

It works the same way with God. If we know that he loves us, it's a whole lot easier to trust him with our lives. But what if we don't know? What if our faith is more theoretical than actual—more abstract belief than true knowledge? Trusting someone with our lives, our hopes, and our dreams can seem counterintuitive. It's hard enough to trust the people we live with every day, let alone a God we've never seen. We all know what it's like to pray big prayers yet cross our fingers. And when it comes to trusting that God really loves us with no strings attached, it feels like we're taking a big gamble. I once heard a preacher say, "God has revealed himself enough to inspire trust but hidden himself enough to require faith."<sup>2</sup> As much as I take comfort in that, he could help the trust part with a little more *revealing*.

If we know that God loves us, it's a whole lot easier to trust him with our lives.

When someone tells us to trust God, it's easy to assume that it's all our responsibility. We picture God as some kind of talent scout, looking for prospective stars—as if he's watching

from afar, waiting to see whether we're worth his time. In my case, viewing God this way caused me to doubt that he was trustworthy.

## **Love Deficit**

I'll never forget the day I realized that I didn't believe God really loved me. And that I didn't love him either.

Even though by that point I had been a Christian for more than twenty-five years and a pastor for more than ten, most of my life had been built on rules and regulations—performance-based measures—and it had finally caught up with me.

My family was about a year into a new ministry in California; and with the logistics of moving across the country, the challenge of leading a young church, and the excitement of living on the West Coast, I hadn't paid much attention to the condition of my soul. Not long after I started the new job, I knew I was in trouble. I felt dead inside. I was doing all the right things as far as I knew—reading my Bible, praying, working hard at teaching and leading—but it felt like I was swimming in peanut butter.

In hindsight, I knew I had been feeling this way for a long time—I just hadn't wanted to admit it. Though I *talked* about God as a loving Father, I honestly had a hard time accepting his love for myself. No matter what I did, I felt there was so much more I could and should be doing.

Some years earlier, I had spent a day at a monastery in the hills of Kentucky, several hours from our home at the time. I'd

heard stories about the monks and their devotion to God, and I thought, *Why not drive out there and spend some time with the monks?* Maybe they'd know something that would help me. I owned a pair of Birkenstocks, and maybe that was all it would take: walking the hillsides for a few hours in some hip sandals and soaking in the atmosphere. Sure enough, after a time of reading and praying and walking, I felt closer to God. But as I drove home, the familiar pressure returned, and any sense I'd had of God's pleasure in me vanished. And I was even still wearing my Birkenstocks!

In more recent years, I remembered some great days of ministry when I thought our weekend service really hit it out of the park. We served people, we led them to Jesus, and we exalted his name. In the afterglow, I sensed that my heavenly Father was smiling at me. But when Monday morning dawned, I was back to square one again. How could I duplicate or build upon what had just happened? If I'm honest, the thought that kept running through my head was this: *What would I do next to impress God?* As it had been throughout my life, my mind-set was one of trying to *change the world for God*. Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, I felt as if it were all up to me.

On a hot, windy day in the middle of March, I hopped on a plane at the Burbank airport and flew to Las Vegas to spend the day with an old friend and fellow pastor. Shane was pastoring a growing church that had strong similarities to my own. I wish I could tell you that I went to see him because I thought he could help me in my relationship with

God, but truthfully, I went to see whether he could help me get better at my job. Deep down, I still believed that if I did my job better and tried to be a better person, then God would be happy with me. I had no idea how much this mind-set affected every decision I made.

As I made my way through the Las Vegas airport, I saw Shane waiting for me. He gave me a huge hug, told me he was glad to see me, and suggested we get some lunch. It had been five years since I had seen him, and his hair was grayer and thinner than I remembered. But I guess mine was, too. Shane and I had grown up in the same church in Wichita, and we had taken very similar paths into ministry. We'd attended the same Bible college in order to become pastors—though he was four years ahead of me—and now we both were serving at churches in places way out of our comfort zones.

Because Shane's church was about a year ahead of mine in seemingly every aspect, I thought, *Who better to teach me how to lead a growing church than a close friend who knows where I'm coming from?* I went expecting to get a tour of his new building and pick up a few good tips about how to succeed in church growth and strategic planning. Surely Shane could help me become more successful so that I'd *feel* more successful.

At a quaint Italian restaurant in the heart of Las Vegas—who knew that a restaurant on the Strip could actually be quaint?—we reminisced about our youth-group days in Wichita, shared stories of friends past and present, and caught up with news of each other's family. Even though it

had been years since I'd seen Shane, we picked up where we had left off. Shane had always been like a big brother to me, a mentor in life and ministry; and the years and distance had not diminished his ability to influence my life. As the meal concluded, we sat back with cups of hot coffee and began to get into church matters. It wasn't long before Shane began to unpack some church-growth secrets his church had found successful. We talked about sermon prep, calendar planning, and strategic processes.

After lunch, I was anxious to see their new building. At Real Life Church, we were in the process of planning our first construction project, and I thought I'd get some great ideas. It never hurts to ask the question, *What would you do differently?*

We arrived at the beautiful campus of Shane's church, which has a panoramic view of the desert and the Las Vegas skyline off in the distance. The church is strategically located in the suburbs where much of Vegas's workforce lives and raises kids. We walked the campus, and he showed me the offices, which were well laid out with room to grow. He showed me through the children's-ministry space, perfectly situated near the auditorium and with outdoor play areas for each room. And then we entered the auditorium, a fantastic space that not only held hundreds of people every Sunday but also could be reconfigured for events during the week. I officially had church building envy.

I was ready to pepper Shane with more questions, but I was not prepared for what happened next. He led me toward the back of the auditorium and into a decision room designed

for people who want to pray or talk with someone after a service. When Shane suggested that we sit and talk some more, I grabbed a seat on one of the comfortable couches, and he sat down across from me in an oversize armchair. Before I could say another word, he started asking me some questions that, quite honestly, made me a bit uncomfortable.

“How’s your relationship with God?” he asked.

“Good, I guess,” I replied. That might have been an exaggeration.

“Define *good*.”

“Well, you know . . . I miss my quiet time once in a while, but I’m studying for messages.”

We laughed at my answer. We both knew the issue was bigger than that.

Shane continued his inquiry. “What are you afraid of?”

Part of me wanted to check my watch to see whether it was time to leave for the airport yet. But part of me was glad that someone had finally asked me the question.

What *was* I afraid of? Shane was digging right into my fear of failure, my insecurities about leading a church, and the overwhelming inadequacies I faced every day.

After a few moments of uncomfortable silence, during which I thought of every possible way to change the subject and move to a more comfortable topic of conversation, I decided to answer Shane’s penetrating question.

Even though I’d been at the church in California for a little more than a year, I knew I was in way over my head. I had a church staff who looked to me for leadership and

vision; I had a congregation who looked to me for spiritual depth and understanding; and I had a young family at home who looked to me for security and provision every single day. This was way more than I had learned about in Bible college, and I was feeling overwhelmed. I had trouble sleeping. I spent many nights wondering whether God was just quiet or whether I'd made him mad and chased him away. I still believed that God had led me to California to pastor this church, but I was beginning to wonder whether he had come with me. The more I tried to do all the right things, the more pressure I felt and the more it seemed I wasn't measuring up. Nothing seemed to help.

Shane was sympathetic. He leaned back in his seat, kicked up his feet onto the coffee table between us, and began to unpack a short and simple passage of Scripture for me. I had heard it before, but never quite this way.

"We love because he first loved us," Shane said, quoting 1 John 4:19.<sup>3</sup> "But if we love God because he first loved us . . . and we don't believe that he loves us . . . then we can't love him back, can we?"

That's when it hit me: *I didn't believe that God loved me.* I knew he put up with me and wanted to use me to advance his Kingdom. And I believed that he had gifted me and called me to teach and lead his church. But deep down in my soul, I wasn't convinced that he *loved* me. In fact, I was pretty sure he didn't like me much at all. He was definitely not impressed with anything I'd done—because I had not

done enough to change the world for him. So why would I ever expect him to do anything to change *my* world?

If I couldn't accept that God loved me, how could I ever love him in return? I feared him; I wanted to impress him and make him happy; I wanted others to love him—but I didn't love him myself. And now I knew that I *couldn't*.

If I couldn't accept that God loved me, how could I ever love him in return?

I don't remember anything else from the rest of the conversation—or the rest of the trip, for that matter. Shane took me back to the airport, and I flew home with a lot to process. What Shane had said explained so much of the frustration I had felt off and on for years. Because I didn't really believe that God loved me, it was difficult for me to trust him. And because I didn't trust him, I was left to my own devices, trapped in a performance-based religious faith.

Maybe that's why something inside me cringed whenever I told someone about the depths of God's love. I believed he loved other people, but that belief didn't extend to *me*—not if I was honest with myself. I told people that God could forgive them. But I wasn't entirely certain it applied to me. Maybe that's why, when I stood on the stage at Real Life Church and told the thousands of people in the congregation about God's passionate pursuit of them, I felt as if I should cross my fingers behind my back.

For the ten years of ministry before that point, I had been

preaching about God's love. But I hadn't really accepted it for myself.

If you had pressed me, I would have said that I believed I was going to heaven, but I wasn't sure how much hell I'd have to go through before I got there. After all, trying to impress God seemed an impossible feat in my mind.

Maybe you've felt the same way at some point in your life. Maybe you're feeling that way right now.

Our inability to believe that God loves us is often rooted in two flawed approaches to faith that I call the Thou Shalts and the Never Minds. Before I tell you about my own journey to discovering the truth about God's love for me, let's take a closer look at the devastating results of trying to operate our relationship with God through either of these two faulty systems.