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## Beginnings

Beginnings are only as significant as their endings. A runner who doesn't win the race finds no consolation in a good start.

Successful endings are often determined by the very ordinary moments in the middle.

Nevertheless, we're obsessed with beginnings—the start of a new project, a new relationship, a new book. Everybody wants to start a revolution; but nobody wants to fight to the last man standing.

We long to be extraordinary, to be remembered long after we're gone, to be part of something greater than ourselves, to leave a legacy; yet we don't want to go to work on Monday morning.

A life of humble beginnings can end with epic significance. One life can make a world of difference. There is a secret to how it occurs. It's not a secret because few people know it; it's a secret because few people *live* as if they know it.

This is a journey to the discovery of that secret.

But this is only the beginning.

## Storing Up Greatness

I had a strange childhood: I grew up in a Christian home. That's strange enough in itself, but what made it interesting is the fact that I grew up as a Christian in Malaysia, where there are lots of different religions, ethnicities, and blended cultures. Christians account for ten to twelve percent of the population, so growing up as a Christian there was a bit out of the ordinary.

From my earliest days, I was surrounded by Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims. When I was young, I had friends who couldn't attend my birthday parties because they had to go with their family to burn incense at their grandfather's grave—an annual tradition for many Buddhists. In high school, I worked part-time as a copywriter for a small ad agency, and my fellow copywriters were Muslims. Conversations with my colleagues occasionally turned to matters of faith, and we talked about our different views of life with very little awkwardness.

My dad was raised in a Hindu family. His father was an official or elder at the local Hindu temple, and during most of his growing-up years, my dad wanted to follow in his father's footsteps.

Then he met my mom. They were both students at the University of Singapore; he was majoring in political science, and she was a social science major. My mom had grown up in the Anglican Church—a contribution of the good Brits who had colonized Malaysia—but her faith was nominal at best.

As my parents' relationship grew more serious, my mom drew a line in the sand. She made it clear that she would only marry a Christian. My father wasted no time in converting to Christianity, a decision that forever changed the way his family interacted with him. From that point on, he and my mom were cut off from all but the most basic, formal communications with his parents and many of his siblings. Changing religions in Malaysia is not something that people do all that often. Rejecting the faith of your family is a slap in the face that blatantly dishonors your parents and ancestors.

### **When I Dreamed of Africa**

Growing up in a Christian home, I got saved about 352 times before my eighth birthday. Every time someone at church talked about heaven and hell, I would think, *I don't want to go to hell. It sounds awful. But what if I've done something recently that has somehow canceled my passport to heaven? I don't want to take the chance. I'm going to say the prayer again.* And before I knew it, my feet were leading me toward that familiar spot at the altar. I think I responded to every altar call they had, and most of my “conversions” were in response to the old line, “If you got hit by a truck today, do you know where you would go?” That one got me every time. Maybe you can relate.

One year, my parents sent me to a church-sponsored children's camp about fifty kilometers from home, high up in the rolling hills of Malaysia. I was there with a few hundred other city kids, all of us getting our first taste of being away from home and out in the wild.

It was there I found my destiny in the eyes of an American lady.

She was a missionary who had come to Malaysia to work with young children. And we were a roomful of young Asian kids. We had finished singing and were starting to get restless as we sat down on rattan mats laid out on the concrete floor. Outside the windows was a sea of rich, green foliage. The sun was setting and the tropical insects were tuning up for the evening. Ceiling fans spun noisily overhead, accomplishing little more than wrapping the thick humid air around us like a giant, damp towel.

The American lady walked to the front, and almost immediately, like a lullaby sung to a baby, her voice settled the room. She had a way of making us listen. Every word was like a gentle tide washing against the shore. Her face was delicately wrinkled, her smile was calm, and there was a gentle magic in her eyes. In my memory, she was a cross between Princess Diana and Mother Teresa, but maybe that's because it was the early 1980s and she was one of the very few Americans I had met. Whatever it was, I listened with rapt attention as she told us a story about the explorer Dr. David Livingstone.

It wasn't your average Sunday school lesson—there was no flannel board, no props—but we were captivated. The missionary told us that Dr. Livingstone knew at an early age that he wanted to venture into unknown parts of the world to tell people about Jesus. She talked about how he became a doctor and went to Africa to help the people there. We were mesmerized as she described the impact he had as an explorer and as a missionary. He charted new territory and preached to people who had not heard about Jesus.

The room was as still as a stone—and remember, there were a couple hundred kids there. The sounds of the forest had long since faded into the background. All we heard was the American lady's small, hushed voice, which cracked gently as she told us how Dr. Livingstone had died, and how his body was buried in England but his heart remained in Africa. As I watched her eyes brim up with tears, my own eyes began to overflow. I could not control it.

We started singing again, a quiet song. The American lady was still standing in front, asking us to pray about giving our lives to be used by God, to be part of something extraordinary. For me, there was no decision—it was obvious. How could I do anything less than be involved somehow in changing people's lives? I wanted my life to count toward something far greater than myself. This was what God was asking us to do. This was what David Livingstone and the American lady had given their lives to accomplish. Why would I choose anything different?

### **Expanding My Vision**

Throughout my childhood, my parents fed my love of books. I looked forward to going to the bookstore to see what new delight my weekly allowance would afford. Every Saturday, after a morning swim, we went to the library and spent the afternoon hours reading. Then the whole family would gather over dinner and discuss what we had read. Our dinner conversations were about social issues, faith, the Bible, our friends. My sister and I grew up with a very big picture of the world.

On my tenth birthday, my parents gave me the autobiography of George Mueller, a man who had changed the lives of more than 100,000 children by building orphanages in Bristol, England during the 1800s. I was hooked. From then on, I couldn't get my hands on such books fast enough. I wanted to read about people who had made a significant impact on the world. I read about Charles Finney, John Wesley, and an intercessor named

Rees Howells. I threw in an occasional Hardy Boys mystery, but for the most part, I devoured stories about people worth remembering.

### **“The Lord Has Such Great Things for You”**

My dream of one day doing something significant was further fueled by the people around me as I grew up. At our church, sweet, middle-aged women would come up to me on Sunday mornings and say, “Oh, Glenn, the Lord has such great things for you” or “The Lord wants to do great things in your life” or “The Lord is going to use you in mighty ways.”

As I got older, I discovered that those phrases were simply a Christian version of “Atta boy” or “Go get ’em, Tiger.” Even so, it affected my attitude and expectations. Every word was like fresh blood rushing into my young heart. I knew it was true: I was destined for greatness.

When I got to college, I found that many of my friends had grown up on steady diet of similar lines. The more we talked, the more I realized that we didn’t simply have dreams, we had *destiny*. Never had I been surrounded by so many people with such grand and inevitable futures! Now we were all sitting around waiting for something great to happen to us.

The thing about vision is that sometimes we get a bigger picture than we can handle all at one time. Sometimes, God gives us a glimpse of the possibilities, but it isn’t all for right now. But because of that, we make the mistake of thinking that none of it is for right now. We act as if the mere possession of a dream is the end of our responsibility. We say quietly to ourselves, “All my life people have told me that I’m going to be involved in great things. I’ve been reading and hearing about people who really made a difference with their lives. So, okay, I’m ready for some great things to happen. Here I go. I’m waiting for great things. The Lord is going to do great things in my life, and I’m just going to wait for this dream to become a reality.”

### **Life on TiVo**

As a result of our great expectations, we sort of TiVo’d our lives without really intending to—just hit “pause” and put everything on hold. In effect, each of us was saying, “I know that God wants to use me to accomplish great things. So I’m going to store up all the greatness that’s building in me right now, and then one day I’ll find myself in an arena before thousands and thousands of people, and then—*BAM!*—I’ll release all that greatness on everyone.”

Well, maybe no one would have said it quite that way, but here’s how I knew that some of my peers thought that way. In my theology classes, many of the students were on track to become pastors and leaders in churches across the country or around the world. But they were only *planning* for it. In the meantime, while they were getting all their theology and learning all their ministry techniques, they were not serving in any local church or ministry. For that matter, some weren’t even attending. (Shhhh! Don’t tell the R.A.!) They weren’t a part of any small or local change while they were in school. They were just studying and storing up greatness.

That seemed a little odd to me, because God’s not going to say, when you graduate from college, “Oh, wow! You finished your bachelor’s or your master’s in theology.

Fantastic! Here's a traveling ministry to thousands of people every weekend. Or here's a church that you're going to grow to national prominence."

The problem with storing up greatness is . . . well, it's impossible. We can't bottle up our passion, energy, and dreams of action until we're on the right stage. If we try, we will get there only to find that all the greatness has leaked out. If we try to save our vision for the perfect day, we'll lose it. We'll get to the place where we think that we're ready and find that we have nothing left to give.

If we live each phase of life as if it's a stepping-stone to greatness, we will find ourselves living each moment at half-speed. God wants us to take what's stirring in our hearts *today* and act on it here and now. Instead of waiting for great things to happen, we should be asking God, "What do I do about this idea *now*? I know that someday there may be a greater fulfillment of the dream—maybe there's a piece that won't unfold until twenty years from now—but what do I do here and now?" Everything that God has put inside us must be expressed and acted on here and now—or it will never multiply and grow. No matter how small and seemingly insignificant it might be, we can do *something* today; we can get started with *something*.

### **The One Big Thing**

I work with college-age students at our church, and many of them have big dreams in their hearts, but they feel as if they're in a holding pattern, and they're kind of embarrassed about their situation in life. It isn't so much that they're trying to store up greatness; they just haven't yet figured out where to start.

I heard a comedian once talk about the difference between university students and students at a community college. He said if you ever ask somebody what school they go to and it's a university, the answer is really easy. "I go to the University of Colorado," or "I go to USC" or "NYU" or whatever it is. Short and sweet. But if you ask a community college student the same question, the answer is always quite a bit longer.

"Oh, well, I'm just trying to . . . see, they messed up my transcript and I'm just working on getting some financial aid right now. . . . Eventually I'm going to transfer to . . ." and it just goes on and on, because they're embarrassed about not feeling as if they're "on track," whatever that means.

I find the same situation with a lot of people who are out of school but haven't yet found "the one big thing" to devote their lives to. They say, "Yeah, I'm doing this now. . . . I work at Starbucks now, but eventually I'll work for a Christian publisher, or a big church, or I'll go on the mission field, or eventually I'll get to the place where I'm doing great things for God."

As I've thought this through and talked to many different young people, and even wrestled with this tension in my own life, I've come to realize that there isn't some point where all of a sudden we reach greatness or we get to do great things. I think we have the possibility of being a part of great things *every day* and maybe not even know it. As the biblical character Jacob discovered when he encamped at Bethel and encountered the "stairway to heaven" in a dream, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I wasn't even aware of it!"<sup>1</sup> Just as surely, God is working through our lives right where we are today—in those conversations at the water fountain, or over lunch, or whatever situation we're in. Surely God is in those places, even if we don't realize it. The "greatness" isn't always obvious. It is often so sublime that we simply miss it.

We all too easily *assume* that the place of significance is someplace else. Overseas. On the mission field. Just around the next bend. When we turn forty. When we make our first million. Wherever. And we don't even consider that lasting change begins right where we are. We don't consider the possibility that God can use us right here and now. We don't seriously consider that God has us right where we are for a very good reason. He can use us here. If God can use us anywhere, why do we assume that where he wants to use us is someplace other than where we are right now? Think about it. What are the things that are right in front of you, right now, that you're overlooking because you've set your sights elsewhere? Who are the people you've ignored because they're not the remote tribe you've set your heart on reaching? Why not start by looking for a small, local opportunity to serve and to do some good? Open your eyes. Listen more closely to others. Take that initial small step, that simple act of obedience, and see what comes of it.

### **Out of the Ordinary . . .**

One of my favorite stories in the Bible is the story of Nehemiah. I'm drawn to Nehemiah because, like many characters in the Bible, he made a significant impact on history. But unlike our other biblical heroes who are kings or prophets or priests—or the Son of God himself—Nehemiah was just an ordinary man who ended up making an extraordinary difference. He was not one of the twelve disciples. As far as we know, not one miracle happened through Nehemiah's life. He didn't utter a single prophetic word, heal anyone, or win a decisive battle. He was a cupbearer, and became most famous for his role as a contractor. Not your average Bible action hero. Still, he stands apart in my mind precisely because of his averageness. I love Nehemiah's story because, despite his humble beginnings, he finds himself in the middle of a moment that changes history.

Born a Jew in a foreign country, Nehemiah was a child of what was known as the Dispersion. More than a century earlier, his Jewish ancestors had been taken captive by the Babylonians as punishment for disobeying God. When the Persians later overran the Babylonians, many of the Jews were moved on to Persia. That's where Nehemiah had been born, and he knew no other home than Susa, the capital city. Yet he was never quite at home there.

He had heard the stories of how God had promised to make Abraham a great nation and gave him a son in his old age; of how God sent Moses to deliver Abraham's descendents when they were large in number and enslaved by the mighty Egyptians; how an entire generation died in the desert of Sinai because of their lack of faith; how Joshua had led a new generation in victory over army after army as they took the land; how God gave Israel the great king David, and how every king thereafter was measured against him. He had heard about the prophecies that foretold the exile, and also the promise of a return to Judah, when God would bring the people back to the land as proof of his unending faithfulness. Now, in Nehemiah's lifetime, the promised return was beginning to occur.

Certainly, Nehemiah's situation incited questions about his identity, about his heritage, and about his true home. He'd grown up in a culture that questioned God's sovereignty and justice. He'd grown up in a culture of doubt, where uncertainty was the only thing that made sense. It was not so different from our own culture in that regard. Yet somehow Nehemiah clung to the stories of home. He grew up longing for a land he'd never seen, and hoping for a city he'd only heard about. He grew up believing in

redemption and trusting in a God who seemed distant. Somehow, amid all the confusion and questioning, Nehemiah found a spark of faith and fanned it into a burning flame.

It's hard to say whether Nehemiah had a sense of the world-changing importance of what he was about to do, but I suspect he didn't. When his moment came, he didn't set out to change the world; he was just doing the necessary thing, the one thing he could do that needed to be done. But regardless of whether Nehemiah had a sense of what he would accomplish, I think we can glean from his story some life-changing principles that will influence our own stories.

In the opening scene of the book of Nehemiah, we find that one of Nehemiah's brothers, Hanani, has returned from a visit to Judah. Apparently, the Persians had allowed some of the Jews to return from captivity to their native land, and Hanani was among a group that had come back to Susa to give a report. When Nehemiah asked how things were going in Judah, Hanani replied, "It's bad, Nehemiah. Bad. The walls are burned. The stones are . . . it's just rubble. It's all in a pile . . . it's ground zero, man. It's just a mess."<sup>2</sup>

The few Jews who had returned to Jerusalem were living in dire circumstances. The walls of the city lay in ruins, open to every kind of danger. The gates had been burned beyond repair. The desolation left the city exposed to the elements, overgrown, and looted. The city of God was a dead locust of a town, a crushed shell.

When Nehemiah heard the news, he sat down and wept. Though he had never been to his homeland, he knew that Jerusalem was the pride of the nation. It was the capital city, and it was destroyed. He was so overwhelmed with grief that he fasted and prayed for several days, confessing his own sins, the sins of his family and of his people, the Jews. As he prayed, he reminded God of some earlier promises made to the people of Israel:

Please remember what you told your servant Moses: "If you are unfaithful to me, I will scatter you among the nations. But if you return to me and obey my commands and live by them, then even if you are exiled to the ends of the earth, I will bring you back to the place I have chosen for my name to be honored."<sup>3</sup>

Nehemiah decided that he must go to Jerusalem and do something about the condition of the city. He prayed that God would grant him favor with the Persian king, and that the king would grant his request. Nehemiah's love for Jerusalem would not let him stand by and simply wait for something great to happen.