

JOHN STICKL

FOLLOW
THE
CLOUD

HEARING GOD'S VOICE
ONE NEXT STEP AT A TIME

Praise for
Follow the Cloud

“In a time where ‘how to’ manuals abound, it is a refreshing book you hold in your hands. John Stickl, as a young and successful megachurch pastor, chooses to engage us not with selling a model but rather inviting us to a timeless principle of hearing God’s voice and taking next steps with boldness. I’ve been privileged to see him and the Valley Creek Church family practice what they preach. Framed within the conviction of God’s acceptance, godly community, and God’s purpose for your life, you will be deeply inspired! Read it and live it!”

—ALAN PLATT, leader, Doxa Deo and City Changers
Movement, global

“If you are a follower of Jesus, your journey with him is an adventure about taking next steps. John hits the mark in *Follow the Cloud* with encouraging God’s sons and daughters to continue to advance his kingdom by feeling secure in their identity, relationship, and purpose in his son, Jesus. I highly recommend this book for anyone who wants the confidence that they can hear God’s voice so they have the faith to take their next step.”

—CHAD HENNINGS, three-time Super Bowl champion,
author of *Forces of Character* and *Rules of Engagement*

“Pastor John is one of the brightest young leaders in the American church, and I am grateful he has written this book! His voice is much needed right now, and I believe your faith will be strengthened and increased as you turn each page.”

—BRADY BOYD, senior pastor, New Life Church,
Colorado Springs, and author of *Addicted to Busy*

“I love John Stickl’s heart and mind for leadership. His approach is fresh, nuanced, and challenging. Regardless of the size of church you lead, John is a thought-leader for next generation ministry.”

—CAREY NIEUWHOF, author and founding pastor,
Connexus Church

“God desires to have an intimate relationship with us, and it’s his voice that draws us closer to the very heart of God. In *Follow the Cloud*, my friend John Stickl explains how hearing the still small voice of God and obeying his call will lead us into a deeper, more passionate relationship with him.”

—ROBERT MORRIS, founding senior pastor, Gateway Church, Dallas/Fort Worth, and best-selling author of *The Blessed Life*, *The God I Never Knew*, *Truly Free*, and *Frequency*

“A playbook to life’s greatest lessons filled my mind while reading *Follow the Cloud*. If we want to experience all that God has to offer, then we must be still and trust that ‘The Good Shepherd leads you through the valley you don’t want to go through to get you to green pastures you need.’ This book is a must-read for all mighty men and women of God. I thank God for the power, courage, faith, strength, love, and guidance of the life that is John Stickl. He literally breathes life into others through his words.”

—DONALD DRIVER, Super Bowl champion and *New York Times* best-selling author

“John Stickl reminds us that so much of being a leader, and so much of following Jesus, is taking the next step. One foot in front of the other. Pushing forward. Discovering and stepping into the new and unknown. And true influence is as much about following as leading. *Follow the Cloud* will encourage and inspire you on the journey!”

—BRAD LOMENICK, founder of BLINC, author of *H3 Leadership* and *The Catalyst Leader*,
BradLomenick.com, @bradlomenick

“John Stickl’s writing in *Follow the Cloud* is clean and clear, kind-hearted and thought-provoking. *Follow the Cloud* is valuable for everyone who places too much weight on what they do over who they are, which means most everybody needs to read this book.”

—RICK BEZET, lead pastor, New Life Church of Arkansas, and author of *Real Love in an Angry World*



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Trade Paperback ISBN 978-1-60142-925-4

eBook ISBN 978-1-60142-926-1

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Cover design by Kristopher Orr

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Published in the United States by Multnomah, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Stickl, John, author.

Title: Follow the cloud : hearing God's voice one next step at a time / John Stickl.

Description: First Edition. | Colorado Springs, Colorado : Multnomah, 2017.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017014027 | ISBN 9781601429254 (pbk.) | ISBN 9781601429261 (electronic)

Subjects: LCSH: Providence and government of God—Christianity. | Listening—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Spirituality—Christianity.

Classification: LCC BT135 .S825 2017 | DDC 248.4—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2017014027>

Printed in the United States of America

2017—First Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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*To Colleen, there is no one else I would
rather go on this adventure with. Oh,
the places we will go . . . together.*

*To Trey and Emma Joy, may you
always have the courage to follow
the cloud because God is good,
Jesus has forgiven you, you are
loved, and everything is possible.*

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INTRODUCTION

It *is* about you.

I realize those are not typical words you would expect from a pastor. I mean, when was the last time you heard a sermon series called “It’s All About You”? You probably never have and never will. Those four words make us feel uncomfortable. Honestly, they make me feel uncomfortable. We have been told our entire lives that it’s not about us. We have heard countless messages telling us to always put others first. We have been taught that God *needs* us to do great things for him. And although we have been full of good intentions, maybe we have unintentionally placed unhealthy expectations upon each other. You know the kind: *Try harder. Do better. Change your behavior. Bury your feelings. Fix yourself. It’s not about you anyway, so pull yourself together.* And from experience, I can tell you that is an exhausting way to live.

But what if it *is* about us? What if it is more about us than we have realized? What if our lives are more about what God wants to do *in us* than what he wants to do *through us*? What if the journey that God invites us on is really about discovering who we are, who he is, and what we were created to do?

Maybe God is more interested in setting us free than making us religious.

To be honest, I am afraid to write this book. I know that’s not

a very inspiring way to start, but it's true. My life is full. I am leading a large, fast-growing church. My kids are young and full of energy, which means I am constantly tired. I have very little free time. And I am not sure how to take what is in my heart and put it on paper. But here's the thing: I think this is my next step. I believe that God is inviting me to do this. The very act of writing it is what the heart of this book is all about. *Following the cloud—courageously taking next steps when we see God move.* I am following the cloud because in many ways writing this book is about me. It's about following God to a place I have never been before to discover things I have never seen before. And that is the invitation I believe God is extending to you—to follow the cloud. To go places, do things, discover truths, and find a freedom you have never experienced before.

I mean, let's be realistic: it's not as if God really needs us to accomplish his purposes. I don't know about you, but I have quickly realized that I don't have all that much to offer anyway. God didn't need Noah to build the ark. He didn't need David to kill Goliath. He didn't need the disciples to establish his kingdom. And he doesn't need us to change the world. In fact, if you don't feel very qualified, you are in good company. Yet for some reason, he always chooses us. This sometimes mysterious God has chosen broken, hurting, and confused people to follow him to places they have never been before. Why? Because it is his deepest desire to set us free. "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free" (Galatians 5:1). He longs to break off the limits, labels, and insecurities that fill our hearts and minds. Every next step he asks us to take is an invitation to live in the freedom of his love, a discovery that

without him we will never make. God is a loving Father who wants his children to live beyond the brokenness of this world—the brokenness many of us never seem to get free from.

You see, God knows something we tend to forget: the greatest thing we can do for others is become the healthiest versions of ourselves. I can't love my neighbor if I don't love myself. And the reality is, very few of us have a *healthy* love for self. "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). John, the Apostle of Love, reminds us that we can't give what we have yet to receive. And people in bondage can't lead others to freedom. So if you want to live a life that is not about you, you first have to embrace that following him *is* about you.

But not in the way you think.

It's about you awakening to life. It's about you discovering who God says you are. It's about you and finding freedom from your past. It's about you resting in his love. It's about you receiving the fullness of the finished work of Jesus. It's about you submitting to his

The greatest thing we can do
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ourselves.

Lordship. God is most glorified when your heart is alive and free, and you can become that person only by following the cloud.

So what is the cloud? Well it's a physical picture of a spiritual truth hidden in the ancient story of the Exodus. "By day the LORD went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night" (Exodus 13:21). Can you imagine

what that would have looked like? The entire nation of Israel following a pillar of cloud during the day and a pillar of fire by night. The presence of God leading them from slavery to the Promised Land. Of all the ways God could have led his people, he chose to do it through a personal and ever-present cloud. Because that is who God is: intimately personal and always present. This cloud represented his tangible presence. It defined their identity, surrounded them with his love, and led them into a land of freedom. From within this mighty cloud, he spoke with the gentleness of a whisper: *Follow me, one next step at a time. When I move, you move. When I stop, you stop. Where I go, you go. Keep your eyes on me. Stay in step with the cloud, and I will lead you to discover who you are, who I am, and what you were created to do.*

Following the cloud is how I have learned to live my life and how our leadership team leads our church: listening to God's voice and following his presence by faith wherever he goes. And although I don't always understand what he is doing, I have learned that every time I have the courage to follow, I learn more about who I am, who he is, and what I am created to do. Every time I follow, he awakens more of my heart. With every next step, I see a little bit more of Jesus and become a little bit freer of myself. And that is the same journey I believe he is inviting *you* to take.

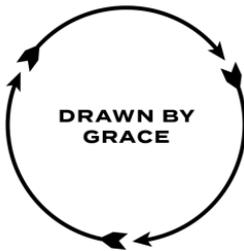
A JOURNEY OF THE HEART

When we read about the Israelites following the cloud from Egypt to the Promised Land, we tend to focus on the physical aspects of their journey: like wandering in the desert, gathering manna from

heaven, and fighting the nations of giants. But what we often fail to realize is that the Exodus was really a journey of the heart. While God was leading the Israelites out of Egypt, through the wilderness, and into new lands, he was actually leading their hearts out of bondage, through their fears, and into new lives of wholeness. The goal wasn't just to get them to a new land; it was to help them learn to live free as beloved children of God. Every physical next step was an invitation toward emotional, relational, and spiritual freedom. The physical journey of the Exodus was the process, but freedom of the heart was the outcome. The same is true for us today. While God is leading us through what often feels like our own Exodus, the goal isn't to find the perfect life; it's to heal and free our hearts. A journey of next steps isn't really about where we go, what we do, or what we accomplish; it's about who we become.

At the church where I serve as a pastor, Valley Creek Church, we have a simple illustration that captures this truth, which we call the three circles—or *life in the Father's heart*. We believe that as we receive his grace, we are drawn to experience his presence and then are empowered to release his kingdom—that as we discover our new identity in Jesus, it will lead us into relationship with him and empower us to live out our purpose. At the center of where these three circles intersect is the Father's heart for us. Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). Jesus is the way, but the Father is the destination. Jesus came not only to show us but also to lead us into the love of the Father. The Father's heart is the Promised Land, and it's where the cloud is always drawing us

one next step at a time. This is the pattern you find all throughout Scripture.



LIFE IN THE FATHER'S HEART



THE CYCLE OF PERFORMANCE

My hope is that like the Israelites, you will start moving toward the freedom of living in the Father's heart one next step at a time. And our movement always starts with receiving his grace.

When we receive his grace, we will experience his presence and release his kingdom. As we receive our new identity, we will run to relationship with him and live out our purpose. When we believe we are beloved sons and daughters, we will desire to be with our Father and will spend our lives building his kingdom. When we know we are forgiven, we will joyfully approach him and live with courage. But the inverse is also true. If we resist his grace, out of fear we will avoid his presence and will strive to earn his approval. If we believe we are spiritual orphans, we will be afraid of the Father and will spend our lives building our own kingdoms, trying to find significance. If we don't know who we are, we won't know how to relate to him and won't know what we were created to do.

We believe that as we receive his grace, we are drawn to experience his presence and then are empowered to release his kingdom.

Sounds simple enough, right?

We are drawn by grace, not driven by expectations. But unfortunately this world is full of expectations. So instead of *life in the Father's heart*, we are often driven through *the cycle of performance* (the three circles in reverse). Starting with circle 3, we spend our lives performing, trying to earn God's approval so that we can become significant. We strive to behave to gain God's acceptance so that we might earn our forgiveness. In *the cycle of performance*, we go against the current of grace: we *do* in order to *become*. And as I already said, that is an exhausting way to live.

Order is everything.

Identity leads to relationship, and relationship releases purpose. This is where the cloud led the Israelites and where it is leading us. This *is* the gospel. The gospel isn't just for salvation; it is for all of life. And it is always drawing us to live free as beloved sons and daughters. If at any point in this book you get stuck, refer back to these three circles and remind yourself that the grace of Jesus is leading you into the freedom of the Father's heart: the ultimate Promised Land.

RESTFUL MOVEMENT

All throughout the Bible, clouds are pictures of promise, presence, protection, and prophetic potential. That is a great description of a Spirit-led life. The first time the word *cloud* is mentioned is when God gave Noah a “rainbow in the clouds” (Genesis 9:13) as a promise of his goodness. “The LORD came down in the cloud” to be with his people (Numbers 11:25). “He spread out a cloud as a covering” (Psalm 105:39) to protect his people in the world. And, finally, Jesus said the nations of the earth “will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory” (Matthew 24:30). The cloud is always revealing the Father's heart to his beloved sons and daughters. We are following the cloud toward him, and he is riding the cloud toward us.

Following the cloud is simply a life of restful movement. We rest *in* Jesus and yet never stop moving forward *with* him. Like the first-century Christians, we are the “followers of the Way” (Acts 9:2, NLT). We have nothing to achieve, prove, or earn. We

have everything to receive, discover, and explore. We restfully move in step with him. That is the *way* of Jesus.

So here is my question and challenge for you: What if you had the courage to follow the cloud—to listen to God’s voice and respond to his presence, to move when he moves and stop when he stops? You might not fully understand it, and it might not always make sense, but you can trust that he is always leading you toward your Promised Land. In fact, your next step is often in the direction of your greatest fear. He leads you toward your fears so that you can become fearless in his love!

The cloud is moving in your life right now, leading you toward his freedom one next step at a time. Maybe he is inviting you to follow him into a new job, a new career, a new relationship, or a new school. Maybe he is inviting you to let go of something old or pick up something new. Maybe he is inviting you to extend forgiveness, release generosity, share your story, or give up your addiction. Maybe he is inviting you to break out of the rut and routine you’ve been stuck in for years. I don’t know what your next step is, but I know he wants you to get to your Promised Land even more than you do.

And your Promised Land isn’t a destination; it’s a revelation of who you are, who he is, and what you were created to do. It’s life in the Father’s heart. And although you may not even be aware of it, he is there. Calling. Drawing. Inviting you to follow. Inviting you home.

One.

Next step.

At a time.

Section 1

AWAKEN TO LIFE



THE FATHER WANTS YOU TO BE FREE

A CLOUD APPEARS

By day the LORD went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night.

—Exodus 13:21

We want to offer you the job!” Those were the words I longed to hear. Finally, a little bit of hope appeared in the midst of my pain—or so I thought. I had just come out of an incredibly hard season. For more than six months, it felt as though my world was falling apart. I had recently graduated from college. I was full of dreams. I knew where I wanted to go, what I wanted to do, and what my life was going to be like. I had great plans. And naively, I thought the world would embrace those plans. That is, until my life was swept away by the crashing waves of brokenness.

In six short months, my life was completely flipped upside

down. My heart was broken by an unexpected breakup. I watched a woman crash her car and held her in my arms as she took her last breath. I was in a crazy accident that totaled two brand-new Jet Skis and put my best friend in the hospital. While working on a construction site, I was shot with a nail gun. I probably should admit that I was the one who accidentally pulled the trigger. Talk about embarrassing. I ended up in the emergency room so many times that they knew me by name. I was caught in a riptide of chaos and couldn't figure out which way was up. Full of anger, frustration, and pain, I wondered where God was.

So when the call came from the police department offering me a job, I was filled with hope because I finally saw a way out. It had always been my dream to become a police officer. And not just a police officer, but a SWAT team member or FBI agent. I wanted a job full of action and adrenaline. I had trained, studied, and prepared, and finally all *my* hard work was going to pay off. My dream could begin and I could move on with my life. But as soon as I hung up the phone, I had an experience that I'd never had before. I heard this small voice inside me whisper, *You know this isn't what I have for you.* "Wait, what was that? I must have had some seriously bad pizza last night. That was weird."

But again I heard, *You know this isn't what I have for you.* I had no idea what was happening.

And then a third time, *You know this isn't what I have for you. The door is open and you can take it if you want, but I have so much more for you.* I thought, "You have got to be kidding me! For the first time in my life I'm hearing God's voice and he is taking away my dream. Doesn't he realize how much pain I have just

experienced? Doesn't he understand how desperate I am for a new beginning? Doesn't he know this is what I have been working toward?" His words just kept echoing in my heart: *This isn't what I have for you.*

Have you ever had a moment like that? When you felt like God was completely interrupting your life? When your longing to hear him speak was quickly replaced by your desire for him to be quiet?

So I asked out loud, "Then what do you have for me?" And you know what I heard? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. The sound of crickets.

It is always interesting how silent God can be when we ask him about the details of our future. Rarely does he give us the full picture. More often than not, he gives us one simple next step. A step that often makes no sense. A step that feels like it's in the wrong direction. To say it another way, God speaks in sentences not paragraphs because you can only obey one sentence at a time. And although it may be frustrating that he doesn't give us all the details, it's actually his love at work. God knows that if he gave us all the details, we would be so overwhelmed that we wouldn't follow. If we knew everything he had in store for us, the whole story, we would turn and run in the opposite direction. "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Corinthians 2:9, NLT). God's invitations are always bigger than our imaginations. And this invitation was way beyond my imagination.

I am convinced that if he would have shared with me all the details of my future that day, I would have said no. Actually I would have said, "No way!" But he didn't. He simply invited me to trust

him just enough to take one small step. And so after days of wrestling, and against all reason, I called the department back and declined the offer. I hung up the phone and said out loud, “Okay, God, now what?” And so began my journey of following the cloud.

THE BEGINNING OF FREEDOM

I don’t know if you have ever noticed this, but the Old Testament can often seem completely irrelevant to our lives. I mean, what does killing giants, sacrificing animals, or following a cloud have to do with us today? There are some really random passages in the pages of our Bibles. But although those ancient verses may seem unimportant, they offer us more than we often realize. The Old Testament is full of physical pictures that reveal spiritual truths—stories that give us deep spiritual insight into the reality of our lives. A great example of this is the story of the Israelites.

The physical story of the Israelites is in many ways our spiritual story. Although that is not the most flattering comparison, it is probably an accurate one. A people enslaved by the world, stuck in a way of life they have no hope of escaping, confused about who they are and disillusioned about the hidden God of their forefathers. Most of us know what that feels like. To feel unnoticed and insignificant. To be hopeless and afraid. Wondering where God is. Thinking we have been forgotten.

Yet God never forgets. He always remembers and he always moves. After four hundred years of the Israelites being slaves in Egypt, God said, “I have indeed seen the misery of my people. . . .

I have heard them crying out . . . and I am concerned about their suffering” (Exodus 3:7).

And so he moved, because the heart of God is drawn to the cries of man.

God remembered his people and did the unexpected. He raised up a deliverer named Moses and set them free. Through some of the most profound miracles in all of history, God had a showdown with Pharaoh. The most powerful man on the face of the earth and his empire were defeated in a matter of a few days through the ten plagues. This is a great reminder that “if God is for us, who can be against us?” (Romans 8:31). Even the most powerful enemy is no match for God. And just like that, more than a million slaves were turned loose into the desert.

Now, just stop and think about that for a minute. What do you do after four hundred years of slavery? Where do you go? How do you live without someone telling you what to do every minute of every day? What many of us see as the pinnacle moment of the Israelites’ lives was actually a terrifying event. We often forget that is how salvation feels for many people today. They are afraid of the very freedom that Jesus offers.

As soon as the Israelites were released, they were faced with a choice. It’s the same choice I was faced with the day I heard God speak.

Option one for them was to go back to slavery—back to a life they knew, a life that in many ways was *comfortable*. Hear me out here, okay? Being a slave was predictable. They had homes, food, and jobs. Life was *safe* within the rhythm of their routine. In

Egypt, they knew how to live. Not only had slavery become a comfortable way of life, it had become their identity. Unfortunately, that often describes the typical American life. We have become so defined by the bondage of our dead-end jobs, bills we can't pay, miserable routines, the shame of our past, and relationships that are falling apart that we actually find comfort in our brokenness. We feel safe when we know what to expect, even if what we expect is the full force of a taskmaster's whip. Sometimes we prefer the security of slavery to the unknown of freedom.

Option two was to follow God—a God they were still unsure about, a God who was inviting them to step into the unknown by faith. All they knew was that this God had promised to take them to a land flowing with milk and honey: a Promised Land. It was a

Sometimes we prefer the security of slavery to the unknown of freedom.

choice that wasn't as easy as we might think. Could they really follow a God they didn't know? Could they trust

him to take them to a place they had never been before? Were they willing to give up whatever control they had left? It's a choice many of us struggle with today.

Reluctantly, they chose to follow because the gravitational pull of God's grace was stronger than the resistance of their fear.

BY CLOUD, BY FIRE

But how do you lead more than a million people into a new way of life? How do you mobilize a sea of humanity to start moving

toward their destiny? You give them a cloud and lead them one next step at a time. “By day the LORD went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people” (Exodus 13:21–22).

From the moment the Israelites stepped foot out of Egypt, God invited them to follow the cloud. God knew they would need his supernatural grace to move forward, so he provided a cloud for them to follow. The cloud was his tangible presence. By day it was a pillar of cloud, by night a pillar of fire. God provided exactly what they needed: a promise, his presence, and a next step. He gave them a living cloud so that in every moment of their journey, they could simply lift their eyes and see his presence. He wasn't just *in* the cloud; he *was* the cloud.

By day, the cloud covered, protected, and surrounded them in a harsh desert. By night, it brought them warmth, light, and comfort in the midst of the darkness. When the cloud moved, they moved. When the cloud stopped, they stopped. Where the cloud went and how it moved didn't always make sense. Sometimes it seemed to move too quickly. Other times, not fast enough. Sometimes it would go the long way around and then take a sudden shortcut that seemed dangerous. But even though they didn't understand this cloud, it was their life. It was the love of God on display. And it was going to lead them to discover who they were, who he was, and what they were created to do. It was a journey that was going to be about them. One that would expose, reveal, heal, and restore.

Remember, God wasn't just leading them *out of* Egypt; he was leading them *into* the Promised Land. He wasn't just leading them *out of their* slavery; he was leading them *into his* freedom. And he led them with his presence. He led them with his love. Following the cloud was a risk, but not following the cloud was an even greater risk.

Courageously taking next steps when God moves—following the cloud—is a physical picture of a spiritual truth. It's a revelation of what this journey with Jesus is all about. When we have the courage to follow his presence and respond to his voice, he leads us *out of our* bondage and *into his* freedom one next step at a time. And remember, God never leads you *out of* something without leading you *into* something better.

The Israelites followed an actual cloud, the disciples followed Jesus on earth, and today we follow the Holy Spirit. The Old Testament cloud is a picture of the Spirit-led life. “Since we are living

God never leads you *out of* something without leading you *into* something better.

by the Spirit, let us follow the Spirit's leading in every part of our lives” (Galatians 5:25, NLT). Today the cloud

isn't above us; it's within us. The Spirit of the living God is leading us toward Jesus's promise of abundant life (see John 10:10). We aren't always sure where it is going. We don't always understand it. But we can be confident that he is leading us to life. And like the Israelites, all we really need is a promise, his presence, and a next step.

UNEXPECTED INVITATION

After I declined the job offer, it was, let's just say, a *really* long week. I must have asked God a hundred times what was next. I prayed. I read the Bible. I journaled. I listened. I asked people if I was going crazy. Some of them told me I was. I was looking for anything. But as in any relationship, you can't make God speak. All I knew was he had something else for me. But what was it?

Finally, after days of waiting, I heard his voice again: *I want you to be a pastor.* "Dear Lord, you have got to be kidding me! That is the worst idea I have ever heard. You have the wrong guy. I don't know how to be a pastor. I just heard your voice for the first time last week. I don't like church. I don't even go to church. I don't want to be a pastor. Christians are boring, and they always look miserable. I'm going to call back the police department and take that job."

I want you to be a pastor. Ugh! It was my next step and I knew it. It was an unexpected invitation—an invitation I never wanted. I wonder if that is how Peter felt when the cloud first appeared in his life?

Peter had to have been blindsided by Jesus's invitation to be a disciple. He was a no-name fisherman with a simple plan to build a fishing business, raise a family, and live a quiet life. It's not as though Peter had a great résumé. He is most often remembered for his failures. Peter wasn't on anybody's draft board. He was just living his life and doing his thing. But that all changed when the cloud started to move.

I sometimes wonder what that first day would have been like for Peter. His life was full of nights of failed fishing. Day after day. Week after week. Month after month. Year after year. Trying to fill his boat with fish. Trying to make a living and build a life for his family. But no matter how hard he tried, he never seemed to get ahead. The Gospels paint a picture of a guy who didn't really know how to catch any fish, which is really bad news if you are a fisherman. His big dream of being a successful fisherman was far from becoming a reality. And what he did have was far from inspiring.

I think we can resonate with Peter's story. We spend our lives working hard, but we never seem to catch anything. We strive. We perform. We achieve. We try to build things our way. We try

At the heart of every next step God asks us to take is a revelation of more of Jesus.

to find significance. We chase a dream that we ourselves aren't even inspired by. Sure, we may have acquired some pos-

sessions, accomplished some things, and won some awards. But we know we still haven't really caught anything. We haven't found what we are looking for because, honestly, we aren't even sure what we are looking for. But all of that was about to change for Peter. And it can change for you.

One morning, after another night of failure, the cloud appeared in his life. Jesus came walking down the shore and said, "Come, follow me, . . . and I will make you fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19). *Follow me and I will make you. Peter, let go of your boat and I will make your life.* The cloud was on the move and

promised to calm the storms that raged in Peter's heart if he would have the faith to follow.

This is a familiar verse, but in a lot of ways we have missed the depth of it. We often believe that Jesus was inviting Peter to follow and that he is inviting us to follow because *he needs us to do things for him*. We think we have to follow him so we can behave better, become more religious, earn his approval, or maybe just so he won't be mad at us. You

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know, the whole "God *needs us* to change so we can change the world" thinking. But the truth is that Jesus invites us to follow him for our good, not his. He invites us to follow so we can see him more clearly. At the heart of every next step God asks us to take is a revelation of more of Jesus. He *makes* our lives by showing us himself.

Following the cloud allows us to see who he really is. In Egypt, the Israelites knew about God, but only in following the cloud did they get to *see* God. On the shore, Peter had heard about Jesus, but only in walking away from his boat did he get to *see* Jesus. We have an idea of who Jesus is, but it's only in following that we actually get to *see* him. Every next step allows us to see a part of him we have never seen before. And the more clearly you see Jesus, the more clearly you see everything else.

What felt like an interruption that day was really an invitation. Life's interruptions are more like divine invitations. Jesus loves to get our attention by disrupting our routine so he can personally hand us an invitation to live. We have to remember that

Jesus isn't a recruiter; he is an inviter. He isn't out there desperately recruiting us to be part of his army, sales team, cleanup crew, or church-nursery force. No. Instead, he is walking down the shore of our often-uninspiring, dreamless lives, inviting us to freedom. Inviting us to leave behind our way of life to come and see more of him. We follow. He makes. And his ability to make is always greater than our willingness to follow.

Jesus didn't call Peter because he needed Peter to do great things for him. Jesus called Peter because he wanted to do great things *for Peter*. He is always inviting the least-deserving, least-expecting people to come follow him. To leave it all behind and follow the cloud. *When I move, you move. When I stop, you stop. Where I go, you go. Follow me and I will make you. Together we will get there one next step at a time.* And so with an outstretched hand, Jesus removed Peter's fear with love and extended an unexpected invitation.

Jesus wasn't asking Peter to let go of his boat so he could take something away from him. He was asking him to let go of his boat so he could give everything to him. However, to be positioned to receive, one has to first be willing to let go. God can give to only those whose hands are open and ready to receive.

I certainly didn't understand what God was inviting me to when I first experienced the cloud moving. It felt as if he were asking me to do some ridiculous things that seemed crazy to everyone around me. But by his grace, I found the courage to follow—to say yes. One little next step after another ultimately led me to decline the police job, go to graduate school, serve as a pastoral

intern, meet my wife, move to Texas, join a church-staff team, have kids, become a lead pastor, and write this book. With every next step I have taken, my heart has seen a little bit more of God. I have watched him do miracles I never would have dreamed of seeing. I have seen parts of his kingdom I never knew existed. One step changed the direction of my entire life. Proverbs 16:9 says, “In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps.” I have learned that God’s steps are always better than my plans.

I am convinced that if God would have showed me that night all he’d had in store for me, I would have taken the police job. There is no way this kid from Buffalo, NY, could have handled the thought of moving to Texas, let alone being a pastor! But God didn’t show me his whole plan. He just shined his light on the next step.

Jesus is the narrow gate that leads to a wide life. Following him doesn’t constrict our lives; it actually expands them. I now believe that Jesus wasn’t asking me to let go of my dream so he could take something away from me. He was asking me to let go so he could give everything to me. He was inviting me to receive. He was inviting me to be free.

The same is true for you. He has seen your misery, he has heard your cry, and he is concerned about your suffering. And so he has come. Jesus comes to you with an invitation to take a simple next step out of the old and into the new. He doesn’t want you to do great things for him; he wants to do great things for you. He isn’t trying to take anything away from you; he is trying to give

everything to you. He is inviting your feet and your heart to leave the shore behind.

Come, follow me and I will make you!

“Where are we going?” *You’ll see.*

“How long will it take to get there?” *Awhile.*

“Will it be easy?” *No, but I will be with you.*

“What will it be like when we get there?” *Better than you can even imagine!*

Follow the Cloud—Live Free

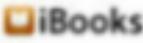
Consider viewing life's interruptions as divine invitations. What is currently interrupting your life? And what do you think God might be inviting you to do?

If pressed to say what step God is asking you to take right now toward freedom, what would you say? It may be a huge, risky step, or it might be something incredibly simple.

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