

Q&A with
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author of *Man Alive*

As CEO and Chairman of Man in the Mirror Ministries, you have 40 years of experience working with men and men’s ministries, so what did you observe that sparked the idea for the book?

I’d estimate that as many as 90 percent of Christian men lead lukewarm, stagnant, often defeated lives. They’re mired in spiritual mediocrity—and they hate it.

Despite their good intentions, after they “walk the aisle” and “pray the sinner’s prayer,” most men return to their seats and resume their former lives. They don’t take the next steps. Almost imperceptibly, one disappointment at a time, the world sucks out their newfound joy and passion for life in Christ.

Men lose heart, go silent, and anesthetize their pain. Then they give up, burn out, drop out, or just slowly drift away. It’s not just getting older; it’s an assassination of the soul.

When men try to put into words what keeps them from feeling fully alive, they invariably describe one or more of these seven symptoms:

- I just feel like I am in this thing all alone.
- I didn’t feel like God cares about me *personally*—not really.
- I don’t feel like my life has a purpose. It seems random.
- I have a lot of destructive behaviors that keep dragging me down.
- My soul feels dry.
- My most important relationships are not working.
- I don’t feel like I’m doing anything that will make a difference and leave the world a better place.

These inner aches and pains—these yearnings—correspond to the seven primal, instinctive needs we explore in *MAN ALIVE*.

You write about the collateral damage that is done to women and children when men lead mediocre lives that don’t show any signs of transformation. Why is “the man problem” so much bigger than just men?

No man fails on purpose. None of us wakes up in the morning and thinks, *I wonder what I can do today to irritate my wife, neglect my kids, work too much, and have a moral failure*. But many of us will.

The collateral damage is staggering. Tonight, one-third of America’s seventy-two million children will go to bed in a home without their biological dad. But perhaps the greatest cost to the *physical*

absence of fathers is the *practical* absence of mothers. Essentially, one person must now do the work of two. As a young woman who grew up without a dad said, “When my mom and dad divorced, I didn’t just lose my dad. I also lost my mom, because she had to work long hours to support us.”

A man leaves. A woman weeps herself to sleep. A little girl prays, “God, why is my daddy always so angry with me?” The men problem has made Dr. Phil a very rich man. There has to be a better way.

The book *Man Alive* asks the question, “What do men who lead powerful, transformed lives do *differently* than their lukewarm counterparts?” Can you give us a quick overview of what you discovered?

We all know a handful of Christian men we admire more than others. What makes the difference? To ask, “What do men who lead powerful, transformed lives do?” would be misleading. Why? Because lukewarm men are just as likely to do a lot of those same things: attend church, serve on a committee, and send kids to youth group.

The right question to ask is, “What do men who lead powerful, transformed lives do *differently* than their lukewarm counterparts?” In business we call these the differentiated success factors.

To imitate what *most* professing Christian men do wouldn’t be helpful. What we want to know is, What are the guys who really have it together doing that the guys who live in spiritual mediocrity don’t do? What differentiates strong men from those guys who always seem to be looking in from the outside? What do successful Christian men do that unsuccessful Christian men fail to do?

AN EXAMPLE: One day my younger brother, Pete, said, “My favorite day of the week was Tuesday. That’s the day the new movie rental releases come out. My life had been so aimless that I was organizing my life around my favorite television shows and the new movie releases.”

As a Christian, Pete didn’t want to live like that. He had not been “running a good race.” He was filled with self-loathing. But he felt powerless to do anything about it. Ten years earlier he had professed faith in Jesus, but not much had changed since. He had no one to help him. In fact, he rejected help. The first decade of his spiritual life was a spiritual roller-coaster ride. But recently Pete has changed. God has been knocking off the sharp edges. And he is starting to produce some spiritual fruit.

I asked my brother, “What’s going on with you?” That’s when he told me about Tuesday formerly being his favorite day. He explained that he had never read the Bible until a few years ago. That’s when he was invited to be part of a weekly men’s Bible study.

As he plunged into God’s Word under the guidance of his leader and a group that accepted him, a transformation—a metamorphosis—started. It didn’t happen overnight. After all, he had copied the behavior and customs of the world for a long time. But slowly the old Pete was dying. A different Pete was emerging—a truly different man, not merely a better version of the old Pete.

How does heart transformation happen in practice? If we were to ask Pete, what would he say? He would tell us that his heart was transformed when he stopped trying to go it alone and dug into God's Word with a group of guys who accepted him "as is." He would tell us that he didn't really *do* anything. He simply presented himself to God as a flawed vessel, looking intently into God's Word in the company of a few men who cared about each other, and God changed the way he thinks.

That really is the story of transformation. It happens from the inside out as we work out our faith with each other. Everything starts with the heart.

Why do so many men feel like they're in it alone? Why is the power of shared story so important?

One of a man's most deeply felt needs is to feel like he is not in this alone—that he doesn't have to tackle life without others who care. Yet because of a man's tendency toward isolation, most men don't have deep, authentic relationships. In one way or another, men tell me all the time, "I just feel like I'm in this thing alone."

As a practical matter, most men live in isolation. That doesn't mean we're hermits. We talk to other men during the day. We have a lot of acquaintances and at least a man or two we consider friends. But our relationships tend to be shallow. If we're not talking about work issues, we usually stick to news, sports, and weather.

It's not hard to see how this happens. From our earliest days, all the caregivers who help us become men—parents, grandparents, teachers, coaches, pastors—teach us that we need to take responsibility for our lives. And that's good, because no one else is going to do your homework, provide for your family, or make your rent or mortgage payment. But few of us are prepared for the "ouch" factor that goes along with becoming a man. Even the happiest childhood includes memories of being teased, bullied, betrayed, and left out. And then we grow up only to discover that the bullies and the other mean people grew up too.

And isolated men are the most vulnerable kind. We all know from the National Geographic Channel that lions don't attack the herd. They go for strays. Every predator knows the strategic value of isolating prey—and we have a predator on our trail. "Stay alert!" warns 1 Peter 5:8. "Watch out for your great enemy, the devil. He prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour." When your gut keeps telling you, "I feel like I'm doing life all alone," that's actually a signal from God—His grace—to alert you to the danger. It's your signal to stop straying and to move toward meaningful relationships. But most men ignore the warning sign until it's too late.

How can men start to know and *believe* that God truly loves them and actually delights in them? What has helped you learn to believe that?

One day recently I was telling my friend Cameron, "By God's grace, I am absolutely convinced that God loves me. But it's more than that. I feel that God actually *delights* in me, that I am *pleasing* to Him, that He genuinely *likes* me!" Cameron looked at me like I was from Mars. He thought for a

moment, then he said, “Well, I believe God loves me, but I could never believe that He likes me. Not after all I’ve done. Love me? Sure. Like me? Not a chance!”

Like Cameron, many men don’t feel worthy of God’s genuine affection and personal concern. They feel, in the words of Sigmund Freud, “morally despicable.” They know too much about themselves and not enough about God’s grace.

During the summer after tenth grade, I had a terrible argument with my father and ran away from home. I rented an upstairs room in a house near downtown Orlando that had been converted into several rental units, three of which were upstairs. Those three rooms shared a single bathroom, a common sink, and a stove in the hall. I found a job scraping dried cement off metal scaffolds, then dipping the frames in a tub of chrome-colored paint to prepare them for rental. I worked outdoors under a scorching sun that bounced all those ultraviolet rays off the chrome paint. Even my eyeballs got sunburned!

The next two weeks were an adventure. I ate grilled cheese sandwiches for dinner every night at the bowling alley across the street. I hitchhiked wherever I went. Frankly, I’m not sure what I had in mind—I certainly didn’t have a plan. By the end of two weeks, though, I was getting bored and restless. That Friday night a friend came over and brought two six-packs of beer. We proceeded to drink our way through them, and then he threw up on my rug. The next morning, head throbbing, beer cans strewn all over, I ached to go home. But I didn’t know what to do. As far as I was concerned, I had severed all ties. I figured, once you left home, that was it—you could never go back.

Later that same morning I heard a knock on the door. When I opened it, there was my dad. I still have no idea how he found me. Hesitantly I invited him in. He stepped inside, looked around at the mess, and didn’t appear to judge a thing. Then he looked at me. “Son,” he said, “your mother and I just wanted you to know how much we love you. We were wondering if you’d be willing to come back home.” Well, he had barely finished speaking before I had everything I owned in a paper bag and we were out of there. All my grievances with him had melted away. Today, I realize that I ran away because I didn’t think my dad really cared about me. So I had started acting out. I was hanging out with the wrong crowd, doing all the wrong-crowd things. My dad tried to help, but we fought. Of course, now that I’ve been a parent, I realize that when a father really loves his son, he must sometimes withhold what his son wants or make him do some things he doesn’t want to do.

Everyone needs to know they have a purpose in life. How does understanding God’s purpose for His followers help men in their quest for transformed lives?

God has a shockingly bold goal for your life. In God’s case, it’s a Big *Holy* Audacious Goal—a BHAG. It’s clear. It’s compelling. It’s inspiring. And it’s supremely simple. Once you become a believer, God’s BHAG is for you to become a *disciple*. That is the whole new, higher purpose of your life. To be a disciple of Jesus is the highest honor to which a man can aspire. When Jesus called Peter, James, John, and the others, He called them to become what? Disciples. When Jesus left earth, the marching orders He left behind are to do what? “Go and make disciples” (Matthew 28:19).

Discipleship includes both the moment of *salvation* and the lifelong process of *sanctification*. Here's an easy-to-remember definition. A disciple is:

- *called* to live in Christ
- *equipped* to live like Christ
- *sent* to live for Christ

Recently I polled the 150 or so men who attend the on-site sessions of the Man in the Mirror Bible Study. First, I asked, "How many of you are having work-related problems? If so, raise your hands." About 50 percent of the men raised their hands. Then I said, "Raise your hand if you or someone in your family is having a health problem?" Roughly 30 to 40 percent did so. Next I said, "If you're having money problems, please raise your hand." This time something like 60 percent raised their hands. Next I said, "If you are having some kind of a relationship problem, raise your hand." Again, about 50 percent raised them up. Then I said, "If you don't have any problems, raise your hand." A mere four men hoisted their arms. Finally I asked, "For those who just raised your hands indicating that you don't have any problems right now, how many of you lied?" One of the four men raised his hand, and we all had a good laugh!

God has not left your purpose of becoming a disciple of Jesus to chance. God is not up in heaven wringing His hands about how your life will turn out. Instead, He's working out everything to conform to His will—the crux of which is His Big Holy Audacious Goal for you to become a disciple, to become like Jesus. God's *everything* includes every relationship you have, every task you perform, every person you meet, every book you read, every sport in which you participate, every sermon you hear, every class you sit through, every small group you join, every mission trip you take, every radio program you listen to, every website you visit, every television program you watch, and every other thing. Everything. God doesn't do random.

Can you share about the generational brokenness in your family, starting with your father's abandonment? How did you eventually break free from this destructive pattern of behavior?

In 1926, when my dad was two years old and the youngest of four children, his father abandoned the family. That one fateful decision set forces in motion from which our family has still not fully recovered. My dad never felt the scratch of his father's whiskers, never tossed a ball in the backyard, never heard his father's voice reading him a bedtime story, never smelled his father's work clothes, never wrestled on the ground, never had his hair tousled, and never had a dad to mimic. The driving force in my dad's life when he became a man was to not be like his father. Although I don't remember his ever using these words, he wanted to "break the cycle." My dad needed help. His heart was in the right place, but he had no example of manhood. Help never came.

When the size of our family grew to four young boys, my dad had us join a church. But our church had no vision to help men like my dad become disciples of Jesus. As a result, none of the elders of the church saw this rookie husband and dad, knew what had to be done, or trained him up as a disciple. Instead, he was left to guess at how to be a husband to my mother and a father to my

brothers and me. Mostly, he guessed right about how to be a good husband but wrong about how to be a dad.

For example, I have no childhood memory of feeling loved or hearing my parents say, “We’re proud of you.” I don’t remember being comforted. I don’t remember being held, hugged, encouraged, or told I was loved. As a result, I always felt like I was on my own.

My defense was to reject my parents. I decided that if they didn’t need me, then I wouldn’t need them either. When I was about ten years old, my parents said they were going to attend my Little League game. I begged them not to come until I was in tears, and finally they agreed to stay away. Then I threaded my glove onto the handlebars of my bike and cried all the way to the field because they were not coming.

Of course, I did want them to be there—badly. I wanted my parents at all my games. I wanted them to rescue me from what became a downward slide that ended with my quitting high school. My next younger brother followed in my footsteps. He eventually died of a heroin overdose. My other two brothers have had more than their fair share of struggles.

I grew into an adult who had a hard time believing anyone really cared about me. It’s still a risky thing for me to accept someone’s genuine love. Even then, to be honest, I never expect it to last. I wonder if you can feel what I’m saying.

Thankfully, I didn’t repeat the sins of my parents. But I did bring brokenness into my marriage and family. I was supersensitive, selfish, and easily angered. I had to start from scratch in learning how to trust Patsy when she said she loved me. And I had to learn how to love her back in ways that really spoke to her heart. On my side, it was marriage kindergarten for more years than I care to mention. But she stuck with me, and her faith changed my life.

In Chapter 6 you write, “Contrary to what you might pick up at the movies or from the guys at the ballpark, men are driven by much deeper needs than food, sex, sports, and beer. That’s because you and I have a soul. Our souls are made to long for communion with God.” What’s the key for a man to “satisfy the God-given thirst of his soul for communion with his Maker?”

I’d describe the primal need of a man’s soul like this: Every man has a deep need in his soul to experience transcendence and awe, for satisfying personal encounters with God. A man can dodge this need, and his soul may lay dormant for years. But sooner or later, he will long to satisfy the God-given thirst of his soul for communion with his Maker.

That’s because the main business of God is soul making. How does that happen? How does a normal, average guy end up with a soul that is fully awake and alive to God?

One night Robert and his girlfriend were lying on a blanket next to a pond. They were looking up into a clear, star-studded sky. Robert recalled, “Suddenly I was awestruck. An awareness of

transcendence and eternal power crept over me. My heart raced. Nothing was said, but a slumbering soul was awakened inside me that night. Within a few minutes, I resumed my secular way of thinking and living, but the fuse had been lit. From then on a curiosity to know the truth about God was planted in my soul.”

Every man has had, or will have, similar experiences—both before and after salvation. The God Instinct is like a sleeper cell in your soul with a secret activation code known only to God. When it’s your time, deep calls to deep. God draws you in.

Which of these situations bring back a memory of a God encounter for you?

- looking across the vastness of the Grand Canyon
- hearing a sermon when your adrenaline kicked in and you thought, *The preacher is talking directly to me!*
- listening to a special song
- staring at a work of art, such as Michelangelo’s *David* or a ceramic handprint made by your child
- standing in the middle of a mountain stream with waders and a fly rod
- meditating in a holy place, whether it’s Westminster Abbey or a country church
- gazing at the blazing beauty of a sunrise
- pondering the wonder of Hubble Space Telescope pictures
- studying the laws of physics or microbiology
- surviving a near-death experience
- experiencing life-altering events, like the birth of a child or the death of a parent
- being confronted by devastation in the wake of your sins
- looking intently into the Word of God

In these God moments, we palpably sense that He is touching our souls. Men describe it in different ways: a feeling of awe, an experience of transcendence, something wholly other, a sense of majesty, a feeling of gravity, an overpowering might, an awareness of something indescribably pure and holy, or the sensation of being immersed in the warmth of God’s loving presence.

You tell men, “God has a specific plan for your life as unique as your fingerprint—what I call a “program of service” especially for you. It’s your personal mission.” What are some steps men can take to find their personal mission?

No inner need has a stronger pull for men than our need for a life that matters. It starts out like a tropical storm when we’re young, and by midlife it intensifies into a category 5 hurricane. And it *never* goes away.

One of the primary determiners of a man’s happiness is how and whether he satisfies this craving. Not happy here, not happy anywhere. If a man has a difficult marriage, he can compartmentalize it. But if a man doesn’t think his life is making any difference, his misery will spill over and affect everything.

God gives all of us two kinds of tasks that will make a difference in the world and leave a legacy for eternity. The first are tasks that build Christ's kingdom and fulfill the Great Commission. The second are tasks that take care of creation—that is, the natural world, including everything and everyone in it. When we tend to these tasks, we fulfill what's often called the Creation mandate.

I'll give you an example. Tim is a high school math teacher who is doing what he always wanted to do—teach math. But not long after he started his career in education, he noticed two problems. “First, my students were coming to class with problems that math can't solve,” he told me. “Second, the Christian teachers in my school didn't know each other. God has given me a vision to address these two issues.” And then he said something I'll never forget. “I'm an ordained math teacher.”

Yes! That's it exactly. Whatever you do, you are ordained to do it. If you drive a delivery truck, you're an ordained deliveryman, helping to lubricate the wheels of commerce to bring essential supplies to your customers. If you are a farmer, you're an ordained farmer, growing crops that parents need to feed their children. If you are a landscape worker, you're an ordained landscape worker, creating and maintaining beauty that soothes weary souls at the end of a long workday. If you are...well, you get the idea.

Here's another example. Jeff helped the Sony Corporation develop its webcasting technology. He traveled around the country webcasting Foo Fighters concerts and the Easter egg hunt on the White House lawn. He definitely felt like he was making a difference horizontally in the temporal world. But he also saw lots of vertical potential for the eternal world, so he began praying, “God, how can we use this technology to help build Your kingdom?”

One day in 2000, Jeff approached me and said, “What would you think if I started webcasting the Friday morning Bible studies?” “Sure, sounds great!” I said. “What's webcasting?” (Remember, YouTube didn't come along until 2005.) Today those webcasts go out weekly to all fifty states and dozens of countries around the world—all because Jeff wanted to make a difference for God.