

THE DREAM CENTERED LIFE

DISCOVERING WHAT
DRIVES YOU

LUKE
BARNETT

SENIOR PASTOR OF DREAM CITY CHURCH



Praise for
The Dream-Centered Life

“We all aspire to do great things, but sometimes we lack the passion to make them happen. *The Dream-Centered Life* gives us a blueprint to help us discover our motives and overcome barriers that can derail our dreams. I encourage you to read this book and find your dream.”

—JOHN C. MAXWELL, author, speaker, and founder
of the John Maxwell Company

“Discouragement can peek around every corner and extinguish passions and dreams. Bask in the refreshing light of encouragement from Luke Barnett as he navigates the amazing plans God has for every dreamer.”

—ROMA DOWNY, actress, producer, and president
of LightWorkers Media

“In *The Dream-Centered Life*, Luke Barnett reveals the secret to making your dreams come true: drawing closer to God and depending on him each step of the way. Luke inspires us to take our God-given dreams seriously and then shows us how to bring them to life with God’s help.”

—CHRIS HODGES, senior pastor of Church of the Highlands
and author of *Fresh Air*

“*The Dream-Centered Life* is a must-read for anyone who wants to see their calling fulfilled. Luke Barnett challenges you to stand up, wipe off the dirt, and climb out of the predictable to find your dream.”

—JOHN BEVERE, author and minister at Messenger International

“Luke Barnett believes we can create our future and it starts with a dream. He then inspires us to dream bigger. His practical and spiritual way empowers us to believe we can dream and see it come to pass. If you want to see great things, read *The Dream-Centered Life*.”

—CASEY TREAT, senior pastor of Christian Faith Center
and coauthor of *Renewing the Mind 2.0*

“Dreams are the substance of all great achievement. I’m thrilled that my friend Luke Barnett has written such a practical book on the importance of dreaming and the process through which our dreams become reality. Luke has lived what is taught within these pages!”

—BISHOP DALE C. BRONNER, DMIN, senior pastor of Word of Faith Family Worship Cathedral

“Everything of value starts with a dream—a God-given vision of our greater purpose. This book will teach you how to dream again and how to take the steps needed to make those dreams a reality.”

—TODD MULLINS, senior pastor of Christ Fellowship Church

“The only dream that is fulfilling and worth pursuing is a God-given dream. Luke Barnett lives out his God-given dream daily, and in this book he clearly explains how you, too, can get your dream back.”

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

“This book challenges readers to live a life with purpose. Luke lays out simple steps we all can take to allow God to restore our dreams.”

—JENTEZEN FRANKLIN, senior pastor of Free Chapel
and *New York Times* best-selling author

“My brother, Luke Barnett, is a perfect example of how to dream big! *The Dream-Centered Life* offers great examples and instruction on how to believe for big, God-based dreams for your life.”

—MATTHEW BARNETT, cofounder of the Dream Center and
New York Times best-selling author of *The Cause Within You*

“God-given dreams are possible and should be sought wholeheartedly. Life’s challenges can derail our aspirations. Luke Barnett helps readers get back on track to living out God’s amazing plan for their lives.”

—MARK BATTERSON, *New York Times* best-selling author of *The Circle Maker* and lead pastor of National Community Church

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THE DREAM-CENTERED LIFE

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To my family

My wife, Angel, you have stuck with me from the beginning of this journey and kept an incredible inspirational attitude through the ups and downs. You have been a tremendous source of life and encouragement to me for the last twenty-three years.

My daughters, Aubrey and Annalee, you are so full of life and bring such joy to your mother and me. Annalee, I love your inner drive and persistence. When you set your mind to do something, you do it! Aubrey, I love your creativity and how you bring life and energy to a party just by walking into the room.

Mom, you're an overcomer and a fighter. You taught me to never give up and to always keep looking forward to the future.

Dad, you're the one who taught me that anything is possible when you partner with God in dreaming. I've watched you live your life to its fullest, enjoying every single moment of each day. Your love for life, especially in your later years, has motivated me to want to pattern my life after you and someday be the man you are.

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Introduction

When I was a kid, if you had told me I would one day stand on the platform of my dad's church in Phoenix, accept the baton representing his ministry, and take leadership of the church I had grown up in, I would have laughed until it was clear how ridiculous your suggestion was. There was no way I was going to be a pastor. A golfer, maybe, if I could continue to improve. Or maybe a businessman, a consultant, or a CEO. But a pastor? In the church my dad built? No way.

Yet there I was in front of thousands accepting essentially my life commission. My mom was there, and Dad, of course. My wife, Angel, stood right beside me. This was as close to a formal ceremony as you were likely to see in our church. Part of me was in awe that God had brought me to a place of actually wanting to follow my father in ministry. Another part of me wondered if I would wake up and realize I was having a kind of tailor-made nightmare.

More than anything, I felt the profound weight of leading the thousands of people who called Phoenix First Assembly their church family. I gripped Angel's hand and with the other I held the golden-colored baton that had been given to my dad by Dr. Bill Bright, one of the great Christian leaders of modern times. It represented five million people trained in ministry, an almost unfathomable number for one man to influence, as my dad had done.

Tommy Barnett, my father, is one of the great innovators and visionaries who led the twentieth-century church. History books will record what he did, but more important to my dad is how he inspired so many people to believe they could achieve their God-given destinies and dreams. Really, there's no one else on the planet like Tommy Barnett. I

knew that even growing up. The effect he has on people is nothing short of supernatural. Just being around him, people believe in themselves and what they can accomplish. So many ministries were birthed in his churches because he simply believed in and loved people.

If I hadn't grown up in his household, I probably would have been more intimidated by my dad's example. For some reason I was always confident enough to believe that he had his gifts and I had mine, though they seemed very different. When people praised my dad, I went along with it and agreed or sometimes rolled my eyes if they got too effusive. Maybe it's because he made ministry look easy, like when you're ten years old and watch your parent drive and think, *I could do that. Just put me behind the wheel.*

At that moment as I held the baton, I was behind the wheel, and the road ahead looked a lot different than it did when Dad was driving. As I received that baton of ministry and prepared to steer the congregation Dad had built, I felt something new: an almost crushing weight of expectation. The service ended, I shook hundreds of hands, and when I woke up the next morning, it was as if someone had flipped a switch on my emotions. I fell into what I can best describe as a sudden depression. I was forty-three years old, had been in ministry twenty years, and now feared I didn't have what it would take to lead where God had placed me. I was a man without a dream, a leader without a vision. A little voice told me over and over, "You're dead in the water. You'll never live up to this legacy. You don't have what it takes to lead this organization."

My personal inventory of talents suddenly seemed small. I had some natural teaching and administrative gifts and was good at relating to people personally. Those strengths had served me well in smaller settings. But I had never come close to leading a world-class ministry like this one, built by one of the great visionaries of our day. So I did what every good leader does at some point: I began to panic.

Over the next few months, God taught me more about leadership—and life—than I had learned in the previous twenty years. In my desperation, I suddenly saw exactly what I needed—and what every person needs: *a God-given dream.*

Everything of any value starts with a dream.

Everything.

Every business, every relationship, every invention, every story, every journey, every worthwhile day of our lives begins with a dream. By *dream* I mean a revelation of what we should be doing, a vision of our greater purpose. Having a dream is the difference between life and death, thriving or existing, leading or faking it.

To be honest, I didn't realize I had been moving through life without a dream. It's easy to convince ourselves that we're doing everything correctly, living at the highest level possible, achieving and enjoying all life has to offer. But I'm here to tell you there is another level that you may not have experienced yet. I didn't experience it until I was in my forties. It surprised me when I discovered it. It also radically changed my life and allowed me to succeed in the almost overwhelming task I have been given. Before hitting that crisis and discovering the dream, I wasn't one-tenth of the leader I came to be in the next short years.

Each of us comes to critical moments when same ol' same ol' won't cut it. When the regular routine becomes reckless. When we realize we are lacking a key for the door in front of us. That missing key is a dream. Finding God's dream for you can make life worth living.

In the pages that follow, I will help you find your dream, one that will carry you the rest of your life and make you want to get up in the morning and slay every dragon. We will talk about how to make a radical break from the norm, if necessary, to catch the new vision. We will talk about the habits and thought patterns of a dreamer, which I have learned from living around dreamers all my life and much later becoming one

myself. In very practical ways, I will discuss what it takes to dream effectively, no matter your starting point.

These principles work universally. You don't have to be a pastor or minister; you don't even have to belong to a church or share my precise belief system. Like gravity and the laws of nature, the principles of dreaming work across the board. You can road test them. You can watch them work for you.

What I know is this: if I can go from being a moderately successful leader of smaller organizations to a vision-fueled, dream-centered leader of a world-class organization, you can grow in a similar way, whatever circumstance you're in. You may be a businessperson, a consultant, an entrepreneur, a blogger, a mom, a factory worker, a volunteer, a teacher, a scuba diver, or someone in an entirely different role. The invitation to a dream-centered life is for you.

It's time to dream.

PART ONE

JOURNEY TO A DREAM

Dreamless in Disneyland

Everything starts with a dream, and if you don't have a dream of your own, you will live someone else's. I was doing just that as I clung to the cold metal fence that surrounds Disneyland, with friends I probably shouldn't have been hanging out with. My mom and dad's words rang in my mind: *"Luke, you're going to college. Please, don't hang around with fools."*

Oh, well. Blew that one, I thought as I hoisted myself up and over.

It was 2:00 a.m. How had they convinced me to sneak into the "Happiest Place on Earth" in the middle of the night? The idea had seemed crazy when someone first mentioned it, but after a few hours of psyching ourselves up, it felt almost normal. Now I was jumping over the fence and landing on the vegetation on the other side. I was officially in Disneyland. I expected alarms to go off or something—laser beams, bright spotlights, men with dogs. But there was nothing. No security alarms. No electric fencing or bright lights.

Maybe this won't be so bad after all, I thought. *We can walk around a little while, then come out the way we came in. No sweat.*

My buddies and I crept inward toward what appeared to be Frontierland. We hopped over the railroad tracks, carefully staying in the shadows. Strangely, the park was brightly lit by huge industrial lights, but

nobody was there. Everything was awash in a kind of acid-white work light. No rides were running. There was no music. The silence and stillness were ghostly.

Speaking of ghosts, we walked first into the Haunted Mansion. It was no longer dim and spooky. Instead it looked like a hotel lobby at night, even somewhat inviting.

“Hey, let’s see what Pirates looks like,” said a friend. We all followed him toward the Pirates of the Caribbean ride. Sure enough, the inside was all lit up and empty. Gone was the night sky, the dancing fireflies, the southern ambience, the music and rushing water. It was simply a big room, still impressive, but no longer mysterious. I could hardly believe it was the same place.

“This is crazy. There’s nobody here,” a friend said, and as we exited the way we came in, we felt bolder. Instead of hiding in the shadows we walked down the middle of the street toward Adventureland.

That’s when a security guard appeared, riding over the hill on his bicycle. “Guys! What are you doing! Stop!” he yelled.

We screamed, panicked, and scattered. I found myself sprinting toward the Jungle Cruise. There I found a place to hide among the plants. A tiger was staring me in the face, and hippos were coming up out of the river. I could smell the dirt and bleach from the water.

I hope they don’t use security dogs, I thought. I’m a sitting duck.

Within moments, dozens of security people were scouring the park for us. I could see their flashlights and hear their voices. Gone was my sense of excitement and bravery. Now I felt desperate. I fashioned one escape plan after another in my mind as I listened and heard the guards apprehending my buddies. After a while it just didn’t seem worth it anymore. These guys knew the park and knew how to do their jobs. They were going to find me. I preferred to surrender myself peacefully than be caught on the run. Also, my conscience was working on me and I wanted

relief. I stepped out of my hiding place and into the street. Guards came over and took hold of me. We began walking . . . somewhere.

I was just eighteen. I wasn't a bad kid, just young and naive and not really committed to anything. I had come as a freshman to a Christian college in Southern California to play baseball. For a short season I fell into some bad habits and less-than-awesome friendships. Whatever notion I had that my Christian upbringing would rub off on these guys proved the opposite: they rubbed off on me a lot more. I was finding that sin was fun for a while but in the end it always exacted a higher price than I wanted to pay.

Now my friends and I got to see the inside of the security building at Disneyland. It didn't look nearly as fun as the rest of the place. Nobody felt like putting on mouse ears, that's for sure. A police officer soon arrived. She asked us a bunch of questions. Why did we sneak in? What were we trying to do? Was there anyone else in our group? Where had we entered the park?

Finally, she said, "I'm going to write you a citation for trespassing. Don't you ever come back to Disneyland again. Now show me your ID."

I reached in my pocket. Nothing. I tried another pocket. Zilch. I had failed to bring any identification.

"I don't have any on me," I said, gulping my fear down and hoping this was not a major problem.

"That's bad news," she said. "I'm going to have to take you downtown for the night."

With that she slapped handcuffs on me and walked me to her police car. I got in the back.

I've been out of my dad's house for a few weeks, and here I am heading to a jail cell in Anaheim, I thought. I don't even shave yet. My heart stayed down near my shoes for the entire ride. What am I doing? What are Dad and Mom going to think?

When we arrived at the jail, the officer walked me through the women's cellblock first. There were all the prostitutes who had been arrested that night. I had long blond hair and looked about twelve years old because I was such a late bloomer. I weighed 112 pounds and stood five foot five.

"Whoa, baby!" they whooped and jeered at me. I kept my head down and watched my feet carry me across the floor.

"Bring him over here!" some taunted. Others whistled at me as I passed between their cells. They were getting a good laugh out of seeing a kid hauled in.

The officer ushered me to a cell where three men stood around talking: a very large white guy who looked like he'd been dragged out of a dumpster; a stocky African American guy, and a Native American guy. They were in a huddle talking about why they were there. The door clanged behind me.

"Barroom fight," I heard one guy say.

"Domestic violence," said another. Then they turned to me and seemed not to believe their eyes.

"Why are *you* here?" they asked, probably wondering why I wasn't in the juvenile ward.

I wanted to say, "I'm a serial killer," but I told the truth.

"I snuck into Disneyland. They caught me in the Jungle Cruise," I said.

That mystified them more than impressed them. Thankfully, they left me alone. I sat there awake the rest of the night, wondering why I hadn't been carrying any ID, why I had let myself be persuaded to do something so dumb as to trespass. Finally, as day broke, an officer retrieved me from the cell and took me into a court hearing where the judge looked at me and said, "Sneaking into Disneyland wasn't as fun as you thought it would be, was it? Time served." The gavel came down.

Some friends of mine were in the courtroom and drove me back to the college campus. When I arrived, the dean of the college called me into his office, and we had a very serious conversation about why I had come to that college and how I should conduct myself as a student. For reasons I still don't understand, the college didn't punish me and didn't even tell my parents. Life went on as usual.

IN NEED OF A PLAN

But the experience summarized my life in some way. At that point I was directionless and had no real identity, so I was defined by those around me. Like so many in this world, I was wandering around without knowing who I really was, where I was going, or what my dream in life was.

I moved home after that school year to try a different path. In high school I had done well athletically. I'd been selected for the all-conference team in baseball and had helped our golf team win the state championship. But I hadn't been able to compete well at the college level. It was time to seek a new direction.

One evening at dinner back in Phoenix, Dad randomly said, "Luke, I heard about what happened to you over in college."

I blushed to my collar.

"You did?" I said. "How come you never said anything?"

"I hear things," he said.

That's amazing, I thought. *I thought I hid it so well.*

"If you already know, then let me tell you how it really went down," I said and told the whole Disneyland story in detail. My mom and dad and brother, Matthew, listened with great interest, and when I finished, Dad shook his head and laughed for a long time.

"Luke, I had no idea about any of this," he said. "I just said that to see what you would say. You spilled all the beans right there."

I blushed again. I could never snooker my dad.

I think Dad could see how frustrated I was with trying to find my life purpose, because one day he sat me down and said, “Luke, what do you feel energized about doing?”

“I love to play golf,” I said. “I’m pretty good and would love to play on the PGA tour one day.”

“I think you ought to pursue that,” he said. “I’ll support you and pay for it. Just in case that doesn’t pan out, I’m going to send you to Arizona State University and you’re going to get a business administration degree too.”

“It’s a deal,” I said.

I had already told him that I didn’t feel called to ministry, and Dad discouraged his kids from going into ministry unless we really felt like we wanted to. He knew we couldn’t sustain it if the desire didn’t spring from our own hearts.

With a new plan in place, life improved for me. I attended ASU, played a lot of golf, and earned my local professional tour card.

In addition, Dad began taking me all over the world on his ministry trips, and I got to see great sights.

During that time some wealthy Christian businessmen arranged to bring leaders to different world-class resorts for special meetings. Some of these resorts were incredible, sought-after golf destinations such as Pinehurst in North Carolina, Pebble Beach in California, the Broadmoor in Colorado, and Kapalua on the island of Maui. My dad couldn’t go because he was building the Los Angeles Dream Center (more about that later) and traveling almost every week. But he asked me, “They’re footing the bill. Would you like to go and represent our church?”

Of course my answer was yes. I was in my twenties and traveling to amazing resorts, enjoying the finest things life had to offer. But I began to notice a common theme as I traveled from one to another. Couples in

their sixties and seventies would walk around holding hands and saying things like, “Here we are, honey. We finally made it. Forty years of saving and working, and we finally arrived.”

I thought to myself, *These people have worked their entire lives to arrive at this place, and I’m here at age twenty. If this is the best life has to offer—if this is “it” and I’m already experiencing it—I’m in big trouble.*

I was surrounded by luxury, but I began to feel I was dying on the inside. All my friends thought I had it made, but the truth is this season got old really quick. I sensed a slow wasting away in myself. All those perks lost their punch. One day I put my finger on why: I wasn’t living out God’s script for my life. I was just living out a script that Dad and I had written one day. Even though I technically had a set of plans and goals, I felt a sinking, perishing feeling.

I don’t think I can stay fired up about my plans for the next forty or fifty years, I thought. *What am I going to do with the rest of my life?*

A FIRSTHAND REVELATION

I needed a revelation from God. So I did the only thing I knew to do: I got serious with God about it. I began seeking him. I even fasted for the first time in my adult life. I tried tuning my senses to hear God. I woke up every morning, went out by myself with a Bible and a notebook, and for hours just prayed, *Would you speak to me about my future?*

By this time I knew I wasn’t going to be a professional golfer, though I would have liked to be one. I wasn’t doing well enough on the mini tours in Arizona. Without golf and athletics, I didn’t know who I was.

One day back home, Dad gave me a teaching series from Bill Hybels, the leader of a well-known church near Chicago. I began listening to it as I drove around, and for the first time felt excited about ministry work.

Though I was raised in a great church and a great home, I took both for granted a bit. Bill's perspective and his church's innovations excited me as I began to see what could be done in that arena.

Dad noticed I was paying attention to what Bill had to say, and he threw out a possibility: "If you ever get asked to speak in a church, just do it, Luke. Try it out. See if God would use you in that way."

It was a preposterous idea. I had never preached, I was young, and everyone around me knew I had no interest in church ministry. It was a safe promise to make.

"Sure," I said. "If someone calls me and asks me to preach, I will."

That'll never happen, I thought, and I put it out of my mind.

Two weeks later Eugene Heiskell, pastor of a small church in Goodyear, Arizona, called me out of the blue. I had never heard of the man.

"Luke," he said, "I don't even know you, but I feel very impressed to ask you to speak in my church on Sunday night."

"Did my dad put you up to this?" I blurted.

"No, I've never met your dad," he assured me.

"But I'm not a preacher," I said. "Why would you want me?"

"I just feel impressed to ask you," he said.

I got off the phone without committing and walked into Dad's office.

"You set me up," I said. "You put Eugene Heiskell up to this."

"What are you talking about?" Dad said. "I don't know who that is. Did he ask you to preach?"

"Yes," I said grudgingly.

"Well, you said if someone called, you would go."

I was stuck. I accepted the invitation, memorized one of Dad's sermons, and preached it to myself in the car as I drove out to Goodyear. It didn't even sound good coming back at me from the windshield. I had no

idea how to preach. I felt certain I would go down in flames. *At least it's a small church*, I thought. *Fewer to witness the crime of the century as I murder this poor message.*

There were indeed just a couple dozen people there that night. As expected, I gave the worst sermon in the history of sermons. There was no flow to it, no sense of power, and my own enthusiasm ebbed as I felt myself failing and faltering through it. It was a train wreck, and I was the conductor. Everybody sat there watching it happen.

I can't wait to get home and go to bed, I thought.

I fumbled my way to the end and began to offer an invitation for people to meet Jesus. At that moment a strange shift happened. Suddenly I felt comfortable. My words came easily. There was a power there that hadn't been present the rest of the time. Somehow I knew what I was doing, what I should say, how to say it. I basked in the confidence of the moment and even lengthened it a bit.

One person stood up, an African American woman. She bravely walked down the aisle to signify her conversion to Christ, and in that moment things became crystal clear. I sensed God responding to all the prayers I had prayed in previous months. An assurance and excitement rose up in me that I could do this again and again without getting tired of it. Introducing people to Jesus seemed part of my life purpose.

As I drove home, I felt in a small way like Abraham in the Old Testament. He chose to take an unknown path based on faith, and that decision redirected his whole life.

The next week I walked into my dad's office.

"I'm done," I stated. "I'm giving up on the plan you and I came up with a few years ago. No more professional golf. No more pursuing a business degree at college. I have to follow the path I believe God has shown me."

Dad stood up, walked around his desk, and wrapped his arms around me. “Oh, Son,” he said. “That’s all I’ve ever wanted for your life—a firsthand revelation, and you’ve got it. I support you all the way. Go for it.”

I never looked back. I still didn’t know how to preach, how to lead people well, what to say. If I had known the battles that were right around the corner, I probably would have given up immediately. But one thing I knew: I felt alive, more than I did at those luxurious resorts or anywhere else. I had a purpose.

I was a long way from becoming a dreamer, but it was my first significant step as a leader.

POWER TO PREACH

Of course, I grew up in a type of leadership factory. Dad naturally inspired thousands of people to connect with their life callings, to see themselves as leaders and dreamers. Our church was like a leadership laboratory, and people came from all over the world to learn and be inspired.

Faiz Rahman, a professor at my dad’s Bible school in Phoenix, had a dream to go back to India and start a Dream Center, a dynamic urban ministry first pioneered by my father and brother. Today thirty-one Dream Centers established by him provide food, clothing, medical care, and education to three thousand kids each month in India.

Sharon Henning is known to some as the Mother Teresa of Phoenix. She discovered her dream when Dad asked her to start a special-needs ministry at our church. At first, Sharon wasn’t that interested. She didn’t have a heart for special-needs people. But she prayed and asked God to expand her capacity to love. That led to twenty-six years of ministry to special-needs people in our community, with wheelchair buses helping to fill the front of our auditorium every week. Each summer

Sharon hosts a special-needs camp in Flagstaff with more than 150 people attending.

Those are inspiring stories, but when I decided to embark on a life of leadership, I was still in pretty rough shape. One night a bunch of us were playing basketball in our church gym as part of organized church activities. A kid showed up looking like a gangster. He was purposely knocking other kids into the bleachers when they went for layups. I got fed up and said, “Hey, pick on somebody your own size.” From that point on, he went after me, fouling me and mocking me. The tension between us got so bad that the kids started to realize that the pastor’s son was about to get into a fight with a neighborhood kid. The activities director wisely stopped the game.

“Everybody come over,” she said. “Let’s circle up and pray.”

Twenty-five of us held hands and closed our eyes. I was trying to repent and get my heart right when I looked up and saw the guy standing across the circle from me blowing kisses at me in a mocking way. I got so furious I walked over right during the prayer and punched him in the face. I had never done anything like that before, but I have to say it felt good.

Of course, I had to apologize and make it right. That may have been one reason Dad suggested I go away for the summer to preach every week in small churches. I had a lot of maturing to do, and our family knew that the way to get better at preaching (or anything) is to do it over and over again.

When Dad’s mom, Joy Barnett, heard about our plan, she said, “Why don’t you send Luke to Kansas City? I’ll set him up in churches here, and he can stay with me all summer and preach Sundays and Wednesdays.”

I loved the idea. My grandparents had pastored for fifty-eight years in Kansas City and knew everybody there. My grandmother filled my preaching schedule, though I had preached only two times by then.

Dad's mom was a phenomenal woman—so very smart and encouraging. She always dressed well, and her skin looked like that of a thirty-year-old woman. She analyzed handwriting for the FBI and helped them track down criminals. She used that same skill as an icebreaker when counseling married couples. She could get them laughing by telling them things she could discern about them based on their handwriting. I called her a fortune-teller, but she was anything but. She was a motivator par excellence, always encouraging those around her to dream big. If anyone wonders where my dad got his visionary qualities, it was from her.

I stayed in the basement of her house—with its orange carpet and an assortment of wooden elephants and other gifts from missionaries who had stayed at the home. I knew only two sermons when I arrived and needed a few more if I was going to preach revivals Monday through Wednesday at some churches. I found it nerve racking trying to figure out what to say and spent most of my time in the basement studying for my next message. The aromas of breakfast and dinner would draw me upstairs where Grandmother made biscuits and gravy with country sausage for breakfast and, for dinner, tacos in homemade pan-fried corn tortillas with homemade apple pie for dessert.

Preaching at little churches of thirty and forty people gave me experience, but it also revealed one of my great weaknesses: I stuttered. As Grandmother drove me from church to church, I dreaded the thought of stuttering in front of the congregation. Some nights felt absolutely devastating.

One night while riding home with Grandmother, I broke down crying. I had struggled so much to get the message out that night.

"I just can't do this," I said in the midst of tears. "I'm not gifted. I'm slow of speech. I can't get my words out. I can't do it."

"Oh, you can do anything God calls you to, with his help," she said.

It was exactly what she always said, but this problem felt deeper, like something that could derail my entire ministry before it even began.

“I have an awful time getting through my messages,” I continued. “My whole family can preach, but for me there’s no flow or rhythm. I can’t be called to do this. I’m not qualified for it.”

For a few more minutes, I let the tears run down my face and voiced all my doubts. But as we approached the house, something rose up in me. I can’t say it was my grandmother’s encouragement, because it seemed to come from a different place. Suddenly I began to speak to myself, and my tears dried up: “That’s not the right attitude,” I said. “I don’t care if it kills me. I’m going to study, work, pray, depend on God, and be God’s messenger. I will lean on God and ask him to help me with this thorn in my flesh.”

Grandmother looked at me deeply. She told me later that she knew she had witnessed a turning point in my life—the moment when I grabbed myself by the back of the neck and decided I wouldn’t take no for an answer.

The stuttering problem didn’t go away; in fact, I still struggle with it to this day. But I took great solace in Paul’s description of the thorn in his flesh that God would not take away. For whatever reason, that thorn taught Paul about God’s power and grace the way nothing else could. In the same way, even now I lean into God’s grace every single time I stand before a church. I tell him, *God, I’ve studied and prayed, but without you I can’t do it.* I know that deep down inside me is that stuttering problem, and it rises up from time to time. Every time I stand in that pulpit, I feel God saying, *My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in your weakness.*

Having determined to lean on God and continue preaching, I was about to receive a major confidence booster. After the summer in Kansas

City, I was invited to speak to a regional gathering of youth groups in Pismo Beach, a coastal community in central California. I didn't know until I arrived that Pismo Beach is a wild place. Surfers and beach bums give it a Star Wars cantina feel. I came expecting to speak to mostly Christian kids in smaller venues and didn't realize the kids were holding public services with music and skits at the pier, drawing thousands of onlookers. I was surprised when the pastor leading the outreach came up to me and said, "In a little while, I want you to close the service. You'll have six minutes in front of this motley crew of people to share the gospel." I looked out at the two or three thousand people standing shoulder to shoulder on the pier and thought, *This is unlike any audience I have spoken to before, and there are so many of them. What am I going to say?*

I had just enough time to run back to my hotel room and fall on my knees.

God, unless you do something through me, this is going to be the biggest flop ever, I prayed. This crowd is nothing like I've experienced before. And I've got nothing to say to them.

I didn't get an answer. Heading back to the pier, I clung to the hope that God would intervene somehow—maybe send a sudden rainstorm or make the crowd smaller. From a distance I saw that the crowd was still huge. The great majority seemed to be nonreligious. Chills of fear ran through me. *What in the world am I going to say to these people that will be meaningful?* I asked myself. *Chances are they'll walk away laughing, and I'll ruin everything.*

The moment came. The pastor put the microphone in my hand. I don't recall formulating my thoughts, but somehow the gospel message began to flow out of my mouth. It felt effortless. Words filled my mind, and I felt their power as people listened intently. For those few minutes I felt like an instrument in the hand of almighty God, like a pen used to

write his perfect message for those people. When I gave the invitation to receive Jesus, at least a thousand people—more than half the crowd—raised their hands. I felt inspired to say, “If you mean this, if it’s a real commitment of your heart, I’m going to meet you down here tomorrow at 9:00 a.m. I’d love to baptize you in the ocean.”

I handed the microphone back to the pastor. People were praying with the new converts. It was easily the most powerful moment I had experienced in my short ministry. I went back to my hotel room that night and got on my knees again. *God, that wasn’t me*, I prayed. *I don’t have the talent or inspiration to pull something like that off.*

Nothing I had ever experienced matched the feeling of partnering with God. Somehow he had used a stuttering, hotheaded sinner like me to share his heavenly message. I was stunned.

The real miracle happened the next day when more than two hundred people returned to be baptized. That’s a huge number to come back the next day to be immersed in the chilly Pacific Ocean, and it showed us their conversions were real. A lot of public speakers can influence people through guilt or enthusiasm to raise a hand, but when people wake up the next morning and come back to affirm their change of heart, their confessions are not simply cosmetic.

One woman who looked like she had lived a rough life came into the water with a multicolored parrot on her shoulder.

“Would you baptize my parrot too?” she asked me. I paused a moment, then thought, *What’s the harm?* I gave the bird a courtesy dunk, and he came up flapping and flopping as if to say, “What did you do to me?” These people were clearly not stuffy or, for the most part, familiar with church culture. They had come to salvation from all different directions. It was incredibly refreshing.

The feeling on the beach that day was so real. People were hugging

and celebrating their decision to follow Jesus. I felt that I had gone out on a limb for God and depended on him for a miracle—and he had delivered, big-time.

A friend once told me, “Luke, you have the gift of evangelism. Some people can speak for hours with little effect, but in about three minutes, you are able to make such a compelling case for giving your life to Christ that people really want to do it.” He was right. A gift is something given to you, not something you earn, and I was learning what my gifts were.

And every gift I possessed was about to be tested in Ohio in a crucible that I never saw coming.

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