

# Finding God's LIFE for my Will



HIS PRESENCE IS THE PLAN

# MIKE DONEHEY

OF TENTH AVENUE NORTH

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PEEK**



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# Finding God's LIFE for my Will

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## FINDING GOD'S LIFE FOR MY WILL

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Trade Paperback ISBN 978-0-525-65281-6

eBook ISBN 978-0-525-65282-3

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Cover design by Kristopher K. Orr; cover image by Jeremy Cowart

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Published in the United States by WaterBrook, an imprint of Random House, a division of Penguin Random House LLC

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The Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file with the Library of Congress.

Printed in the United States of America

2019—First Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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*To Kelly,  
I love you more.  
Giant Squid.*

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# If This Book Were to Have an Introduction, This Would Be It

**T**he prophet Isaiah says, “Your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, ‘This is the way, walk in it,’ when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left” (30:21).

That’s nice, but could it really be so simple? To hear the voice of God and to follow where it leads? Isn’t that what we’re all after? Who wouldn’t turn if they heard God’s voice over their shoulder? Imagine the Almighty echoing down the halls of your mind like a high school loudspeaker. If we heard God talking, of course we’d respond. The problem is we seldom know whose voice it is we’re hearing. It doesn’t seem like there’s ever just one, does it? Our hearts speak. Our minds speak. Regret screams. Old shame shouts. Our bodies groan. The Spirit whispers. The Devil plays our strings. In the midst of all the noise, how can we possibly know if it’s the voice of the Divine we’re following or just our own desires?

The New Living Translation renders this verse in Isaiah as “You will hear a voice *right* behind you.” This helps immensely. I love the image. What if rather than trying to send calls on a long-range radio, God is hailing us on a walkie-talkie? What if He is

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perfectly content with the static when we wander too far from His side? What if we were never meant to know the whole plan? Would we be able to take the one step in front of us while trusting He'll speak to the present silence for the next? What if God doesn't want to give us answers because He wants to give us His presence?

I want to be done with overcomplicating things. I want to live this life with more than a ten-year plan. I've tried those and they never work. At least not the way I drew them up. It seems like most of the plans I've made are really just attempts to avoid having to listen and wait for God to come through. I want to be done with that.

I heard a story once of a man who traveled to India to have Mother Teresa pray that he would discover God's plan for his life. She said no. He insisted. She responded flatly, "No, I will not do that. . . . I will pray that you trust God."<sup>1</sup>

I love Mother Teresa's response, and I guess I hate it at the same time. As much as I want to say I trust God, I'd rather feel sure and competent about my future. But that's just it. No one knows the future. And if faith and trust are God's true goals for our lives, then it would make sense He'd have to keep us in the dark on some things in order to cultivate other things inside us.

You have to have some fear before you can take courage. Uncertainty precedes faith, and doubt must take hold before we can exude trust. Trust is what grows in our hearts when we give our doubts over to the love of God. I guess you could call trust the ability to hear God singing Cyndi Lauper's "Time After Time" over your life:

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If you fall, I will catch you, I'll be waiting  
Time after time<sup>2</sup>

Trust is believing your future is wrapped in the love of God, and if that's the case, then we can trust-fall into wherever God leads. I want to hear His melody over me so loud that all other voices learn their proper harmony to His song. But that takes practice. It takes leaning in every second of every day. Each time we feel He's speaking and we willingly turn away, His voice grows a little fainter against the volume of our well-composed plans. I want to grow in my ability to hear His voice, and I want you to hear Him too. And not just a voice that's always guiding you but a voice that's always changing you. I'm done with anything less.

So this is my story. I'll share how I gave up begging to know God's will and began to ask His life to come and change my will. This is my journey of trying to stop blackmailing God into giving me His secret plan and instead start letting Him change my secret plans. I've come to believe God is much less interested in what we do with our lives and much more concerned with how and why we live our lives. Or perhaps I should say, He's more interested in why we live His life through us.

This is the ever-unfolding journey of finding God's life for my will. Yes, you read that right. I didn't say His will for my life. He's made that perfectly clear:

- His will for my life is joy.
- His will for my life is rest.
- His will for my life is forgiveness, gratitude, and purity of heart.

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No. I'm after something different.

His life for my will, and yours, is a never-ending process of submission. His life for my will and yours is the slow, arduous, and oftentimes painful journey of surrender, where He inspects our motivations and not just our behavior. Where He truly understands our mistakes and our successes.

Ask yourself, *Am I letting God use me, or am I trying to use Him? Am I trying to change God or letting Him change me?*

I want His life to change my will.

And hopefully yours too.

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# Jordan River or Red Sea?

Everyone thinks of changing the world,  
but no one thinks of changing himself.

—LEO TOLSTOY

It took me way too long to figure out that I should marry my wife, Kelly. To some, we were still married quite young. I was twenty-seven and she was twenty-six when we finally said “I do.” We dated for three and a half years, though. And looking back, I think we dated precisely three years and three months too long. She was beautiful and funny; she loved God, her friends, puppies, mountains, and the elderly. She was perfect. Yet I just couldn’t bring myself to pop the question. On paper, she was flawless, but what if she was tricking me? I was a theater major in college, so I knew a thing or two about pretending. What if we got a few days

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into the honeymoon and she removed the mask? What if underneath all that kindness and warmth, she was actually a tyrannical mutant? I mean, love knows no boundaries, but there were some things I couldn't live with. Wasn't marriage about finding a perfect person for you? I needed to be absolutely certain. I didn't want an ounce of guesswork when it came to who I would be with for the rest of my life.

At the two-and-a-half-year mark, I sat on my bed and struggled with the song I was writing. It wasn't really a song, I admit. It was more an argument than a composition. But that's always been the way I write songs. I bring my questions, and my guitar brings her six strings, and I let the two of them wrestle it out. That's exactly what I was doing one not-so-ordinary South Florida day.

I brooded on, as a typical afternoon thunderstorm raged outside my window. I was storming on the inside. I scribbled away in my journal, desperately trying to convince my heart to quit freaking out and hoping that God would give me the answer I was looking for. A simple yes or no would have sufficed, but try as I might, my heart was still in upheaval, and the Almighty wasn't talking. "Just tell me what to do!" I screamed between verses. "I don't need to know anything else—just give me this one answer!" It didn't help that I had recently graduated from a private Christian college. It seemed that my friends were all receiving words from the Lord left and right, while all I got was His cold shoulder. "Thanks, Jesus," I said, pouting. "I thought I was Your boy." Even though I knew I loved my girlfriend, I didn't think my love was enough of a reason to jump in. I needed a divine green light from the Maker Himself. Why couldn't He do that? He parted the Red Sea, after

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all. He certainly could part my worry and grant me a little bit of peace. What was He waiting for? My conundrum continued.

I knew I had to make a choice. A few months earlier, we had actually broken up for the fifth and what felt like the final time. Yes, my wife and I broke up five times while we were dating. I'm telling you, it's a miracle we made it. There was a myriad of reasons for our other breakups, but this time the reason was simple. I couldn't commit. The day before I was supposed to get on a plane and ask her father for her hand in marriage, I backed out. Ouch. In my weak defense, I didn't technically back out. I simply told my soon-to-be fiancée that I was scared to death. Shockingly, she didn't like that. I guess a woman doesn't like to hear that her man is unsure the day before he's asking for her hand in marriage. Imagine that. The next day she justifiably got on the plane to Michigan without me, and I, also justifiably, stayed home in my fog of indecision.

Somehow I talked her into dating me again but soon found myself right back where I had started. I was still scrounging for peace to make the move into matrimony. Why couldn't I get it together? I beat my head against the top of my guitar. Was this some sort of artist's unconscious self-sabotage? Was I in love with my doubt more than my faith? Was I making things harder than they needed to be for creativity's sake? Some old David Wilcox lyrics played in my head: "I was mourning the loss of the choices I'd lose."<sup>1</sup> Exactly. Choosing her meant not choosing anyone else. I was terrified. Saying yes to this girl meant saying no to every other girl down the road. What if my future soul mate was about to descend on a white horse from heaven, but I jumped the gun?

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I threw my guitar down and put my running shoes on. Disgusted, I heaved myself out the front door and ran headlong into the storm. The thunder and lightning outside perfectly reflected the tempest raging inside me. I started running in spite of the pouring rain. I've found that sometimes when you're stuck in a spiritual standoff, the best thing to do is to stop waiting for permission and start moving.

So I did.

I didn't even care that I was getting soaked. I didn't think twice about the mixture of tears, rain, and snot streaming down my face. I just kept going. I was still living in West Palm Beach at the time—which, by the way, is one of the greatest places to go for a run—and before I knew it I had covered a couple of miles. Three miles passed, then four. Apparently, panic is a fantastic performance enhancer. I traversed back alleys and a few neighborhoods until I began my ascent of the intercoastal bridge. I was charging up and over the precipice like an angry, bellowing rhinoceros when the rain suddenly stopped. The clouds parted. Sunrays streamed through holes in the clouds and danced down across the water. I slowed my gait to a jog, then a walk. Soon I came to a dead stop at the top of the bridge. My friend Caleb used to say of this oceanic occurrence, "The fish are getting out their sparklers." And they seemed to be. Standing there, soaked from head to toe, I caught my breath and stared out at nature's party unfolding before me.

Then God spoke.

And He completely avoided my question.

*I'll never leave you nor forsake you,* He whispered to my heart.<sup>2</sup>

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“What?” I stammered, sweaty and out of breath.

*I’ll never leave you nor forsake you,* He repeated.

“Cool,” I shot back to the heavens. “But that’s not what I asked!”

*I work all things together for good for those who love Me and have been called according to My purpose.* He was insistent.<sup>3</sup>

“Thanks, God,” I responded with a snort. “Now You’re just messing with me, aren’t You?”

It went on like this for some time. Me standing exhausted on a bridge, annoyingly arguing with the sky, and God flooding my mind with promise after promise. It’s honestly a bit embarrassing to admit. I still don’t know why it took me so long to see what God was doing, but slowly, steadily, surely, as He refused to give me the answer I was looking for, something I hadn’t ever considered became quite clear. *Perhaps,* I thought, *God isn’t giving me the plan because He wants to be the plan.*

Awkward silence.

## Jumping into the Jordan

I married the girl in the end. Ten years in and four daughters later, I couldn’t be happier about it. If you’ve met my wife, then you know I outkicked the coverage. And no, God never told me to marry her. At least, not in the way I thought He would. He never told me no, so I started walking toward yes. I stopped asking for an answer and moved based on what I knew was true. I guess you could say I stopped waiting for Him to part the Red Sea and decided to jump into the Jordan River. My friend Bob calls it “going

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Grand Canyon.” It’s his way of approaching life as if he’s sky-diving. Some big decisions look terrifying until you realize God’s grace is strapped to your back like a parachute. I call it jumping into the Jordan because I had to let the currents of God’s faithfulness wash away my fear that He wouldn’t come through.

In case you’re not familiar with the story, in the book of Exodus, we’re told that God parted the Red Sea before the fleeing Israelites made it to the water’s edge. Pharaoh’s army thundered ominously behind, but God’s chosen people walked across the sea’s expanse on dry land. There wasn’t even a drop on them.<sup>4</sup> In the book of Joshua, God also miraculously parted the Jordan River for the people, but that time it was different. In this story, God didn’t make it quite so easy for His people. This time, some of them were going to have to get their feet wet. The priests carrying the ark of the covenant had to march straight into the unknown waters like Indiana Jones had to leap from the lion’s head. Once they felt the cold reality of the river’s current hit their sandaled feet, that’s when God moved the waters.<sup>5</sup> Marrying Kelly was my jumping-into-the-Jordan moment. I never heard a no from God, so I just kept taking the next step. Before I knew it, the river had receded and I was dancing in the Promised Land. It was scary, uncomfortable, and euphoric. But it’s what God had to demand of me to expose my fears.

Why does God do this? Why does He let me stand and watch some decisions part before me like the Red Sea but then other times force me to follow Him into the Jordan’s unknowns? I don’t have all the answers. But I do know that once I stopped asking God what I was supposed to do with my life and simply started

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asking how and why I was supposed to live my life, the seas of doubt began to part. In other words, I went with what I knew instead of letting what I didn't know paralyze me. This is essential. It's what marks our lives with faith. Instead of sitting stagnant at the water's edge, waiting for the miracle, we get up. We start working with what we do know.

The next time you're standing terrified on the shores of indecision, ask yourself what you know you should be doing. It could be as simple as giving thanks. It could be as demanding as selling off some possessions and giving the proceeds to the poor. It could be as impossible as forgiving someone before they even apologize. I don't know where you need to start, but I suggest starting with what you know. It's amazing the domino effect small acts of love can put into motion.

When it came to marrying my wife, I realized I needed to stop worrying if Kelly was the one and start worrying about how I would treat her if she were. I quickly surmised that dragging her along while I weighed all my other options was hardly the most loving thing I could do. Running across the bridge that day, I came to the hard realization that I would have to take the first steps of faithfulness toward her if I wanted to find out if she'd be faithful to me. Choosing her was not only something I had to do that day; it's something I've had to commit to doing every day since. I desperately wish more couples understood this. Love is action. It's a perpetual yes. After all, I know a lot of guys who begged God for an answer about who they should marry, and then it seems they stopped asking Him how they should love that girl every day since they received the answer they were looking for.

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So what kind of moment are you in? If you're reading this book, there's a good chance you're currently swimming in some kind of indecision. Should you wait for the Red Sea to part or jump into the Jordan? Which is it gonna be? Sadly, I won't play God for you. I'm quite sure only the Holy Spirit can tell you what to do in the end. But consider this: God loves it when we move in faith. He loves when we don't have all the answers but we act as though we trust that He does. So whether you're waiting or wading forward, take heart. He has more plans for you than you have for yourself. And even better, He's the only one who tells the waters which way to run.

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## 42 Trips to the Principal's Office

Times are bad. Children no longer obey their parents, and everyone is writing a book.

—MARCUS TULLIUS CICERO

As a kid, I wasn't interested in answers. I was interested in rebellion. I didn't take well to following rules, nutrition labels, No Trespassing signs—they all seemed more like suggestions to me. Put simply, I was a child rebel. I made my own rules. I trespassed. I destroyed toys. I goofed around in class. Once, at my uncle Danny's suggestion, I willingly ate an entire bowl of dog food . . . and liked it. I guess you could say I had a gift for distorting reality to fit my personal desires. My poor mother amassed quite a few chronicles documenting my unruly antics,

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including but not limited to getting lost at the Lincoln Memorial at the age of three, jumping off ten-foot diving boards before I knew how to swim, and—perhaps the most illustrious of all—what has come to be known as “The Disney World Incident.” At the age of four, I was restrained by a plastic leash as my family enjoyed a leisurely exploration of the park. Obviously, I had an aversion to such parameters, so, as my mother recalls, I broke free. She remembers being surprised to see a child matching my exact description walking freely past her in the opposite direction. A few moments passed before she realized I had taken the leash off and successfully latched it onto some other random unsuspecting child. Were it not for the understanding parents of the aforementioned abductee and the gracious handling of the entire affair by the governing Disney World authorities, my mom might have been removed from the park and thrown in jail on kidnapping charges.

Much of my adolescence passed in this way. I grew up in the great Commonwealth of Virginia, in the small downtown of Fredericksburg, which is widely regarded as the site of the most overwhelming victory for the Southern armies in the Civil War. Fittingly, my friends and I made war on that town every day of our prepubescent lives. I would say we felt we had successfully conquered and ruled over every square inch of our city by the tender age of nine—all on single-gear bicycles, I might add.

I lived a few blocks away from my two best friends, Nate and Will. We cruised our Huffy bicycles up and down the city streets all day every day. I’m not kidding—all day, every day. We would hang out with the homeless at the train station while watching the

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trains flatten nickels on the tracks. We'd cruise the canal path to Carl's, the legendary local ice-cream purveyor, and buy jumbo ice-cream cones. We'd loiter ominously outside William Street Market, singing bits from *West Side Story* while sipping Dr Pepper from glass bottles until dinnertime. Whatever trouble you could think up, we'd already think it and were already getting into it. We fell off roofs. We tumbled down hills. We got stitches . . . *so many stitches.*

I'll never forget helping Nate build the most absurdly steep bike ramp at the bottom of his absurdly steep street. Mind you, this was only a few weeks after I crashed my own bike into my four-year-old sister and knocked her two front teeth out. She didn't have front teeth for five years. Five years! You would have thought the incident would have slowed me down. Nope. Fourteen days later we were going bigger and better. As if it wasn't enough that the intersection at the bottom of Nate's street didn't have stop signs to halt cross traffic as we flew through, we decided to tempt fate further by sliding several plywood boards precariously atop a couple of two-foot-high logs. When Nate hit our makeshift Evel Knievel stunt track, going what my nine-year-old mind perceived as Mach 3, I remember thinking, *Wow. I've never seen someone airborne that long.* When he hit the pavement and his front wheel immediately bent in half like a taco, I remember exclaiming, "I've never seen someone skid across pavement that long." Nate's crash slowed him down for a week or two, but it didn't even put a dent in our love for tomfoolery. We remained ready for mischief. If there was trouble, we were undoubtedly in the midst of it.

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In middle school, I continued on the same trajectory. During my seventh-grade year, I was sent to the principal's office forty-two times, which I presume must be the school record. Yes, *forty-two times*. I talked out of turn. I lit things on fire. I hopped up on my desk "O Captain! My Captain!" style<sup>1</sup> any time a teacher stepped out of the room. Were it not for the indelible wisdom of Randy Brunk, the presiding principal of my private Christian school, I might still be there, serving a life sentence in detention. Each time I was thrown out of class and into the chair outside his door, he would make me sit there for about twenty minutes before bringing me in. When he would finally call for me, he always started the same way: "Well, Michael, what brings you into my office today?"

Mr. Brunk was the first adult in my life, other than my parents, who spoke to me as an equal. He never talked down to me. When he spoke to me, he not only let me reply but also listened. I walked out of his office with plenty of demerits, but I also walked out each time feeling a little taller. Mind you, I'm well aware my behavior did not merit such courtesy, and I think that's precisely why it's worth mentioning. To this day, I still point to my talks with Randy as a marker of a rudimentary but profound shift in my life. It was the first time I can recall that an academic superior didn't seem hung up on my behavior issues but really wanted to focus on why I felt the need to act so stupidly. After all, it's easier to firmly hand down punishment on rule breaking than it is to gently guide a wild thirteen-year-old to psychoanalyze himself. Not many have the patience for that sort of thing. But Randy did.

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The most striking example would have to be the time he caught me stealing from the school vending machine. I was down on the floor of the snack room in the gym, arm monkeyed up the candy-dispensing zone, desperately swinging my fingers at a package of Starbursts nestled perfectly within reach on the bottom row. That's exactly how Mr. Brunk found me as he turned the corner. Now, what did he have to say about my act of petty larceny? "Hmm . . . Michael. You're trying to tell me that your integrity is only worth fifty cents? Interesting. I always thought it was worth more than that." And with those few words, he turned around and left me alone. No detention. No community service. No time behind bars.

Granted, consequences have their place, but wisdom knows when to apply them and where those places are. He left me alone to silently examine my own heart. Years later, I realized he had perfectly embodied the quote, "Treat a man as he is, and he will remain as he is. Treat a man as he could be, and he will become what he should be." There's argument as to whether it was Goethe or Ralph Waldo Emerson who originally said that, but I can tell you, Randy was the first person in my life who applied it. He was the first teacher to use grace as discipline. Even though it would be another three years before I would read *Les Misérables* during my sophomore year of high school, Randy handed me my first real life "bishop and the candlesticks" kind of a moment. I was Jean Valjean, caught red-handed. Randy was the priest who threw in the silverware too. And it worked. I haven't stolen a single thing since.

I regularly thank God for Randy and for every other person

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like him who has shown me a different way. Come to think of it, *Les Misérables* has even become my favorite book. I guess I relate to people who need a little mercy. And I equate people like Randy to those who are ready to wield grace as a teaching tool because they know only grace can truly melt a heart of stone.

Like Randy, my parents have always showered me with more unmerited favor than I could understand. Without their belief, compassion, and humor, I don't know where I'd be. Seriously, the fact that my mother never pulled out all her hair or had a mental breakdown is a tribute to the grace of God—as is the writing of this book. If you had told my mom thirty years ago this same son of hers—the one who was constantly falling from trees and running away from her any chance he could, the one who was sent to the principal's office forty-two times—would go on to advocate the beauty of surrendering his will, she might have just laughed in your face.

The following year, I changed. I don't exactly know what happened that summer, but over the course of my eighth-grade year, I wasn't sent to the principal even once. That's forty-two to zero for those of you keeping track. How could that be? Did my teachers throw in the towel and decide to let me go ahead and overthrow the teaching staff? Did puberty finally kick in and change my neurological wiring? Perhaps. But I think the real change was in my head. I started to believe what Mr. Brunk had been telling me every one of those times I visited his office the year before: "Your mistakes do not define you, Michael." Now, I don't know if he used those exact words or not, but I know those are the words that to this day are still burned into my soul. Though everyone else

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gave me the label of “troublemaker” in seventh grade, he gave me a different label to believe in. It was something like “child of God.”

It would be another fifteen years before I would scribble down the chorus to a song called “You Are More” in my journal, but it was during the forty-two trips to the principal’s office at age thirteen when those words began to take shape in my heart.

You are more than the choices that you’ve made  
 You are more than the sum of your past mistakes  
 You are more than the problems you create  
 You’ve been remade.<sup>2</sup>

The apostle Paul said it this way in 2 Corinthians 5:17: “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” I don’t know what mistakes you see when you look in the mirror. But whoever you believe is looking back at you, rest assured that is who you will act like. Labels are powerful things. Maybe you never learned to look past the labels you were given at thirteen. Maybe you agreed with the mistakes you made, and that’s who you’ve been ever since. Maybe you dreamed of having a principal like mine, because yours only told you who you would never be. Maybe you’re hoping this time you’ll finally get your act together. Maybe this will be the time you pick yourself up by your bootstraps and make yourself new. Maybe. Well, before you try to do that, I want to remind you what I learned as a middle school delinquent. Behavior follows the label, not the other way around. And the best part? You are a new creation right now, right where you stand, if you would simply

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believe it. You don't deserve it. In fact, none of us can deserve it. We only receive it. And when we receive the new name grace gives us, we begin to act like who we were made to be.

Now I have four daughters . . . pray for me. Having four girls in the house is great. It just means someone's crying and it's usually me. And no, I'm not praying for a boy. I've found the Lord gives girls to a family that already has a man. Hey O! But now that I'm a father, I'm intensely aware of how early we begin to believe our labels. Just a few days ago, after several willful displays of abject disobedience, my four-year-old groaned, "I always do everything wrong."

Hearing those words come out of her little mouth sent knives right through me. I knelt down and held her face gently in my hands. "No, baby," I countered firmly yet tenderly. "You made some bad choices today, but that is not who you are. You are a child of light, and tomorrow we get a new chance to act like it. Mercy is new every morning."

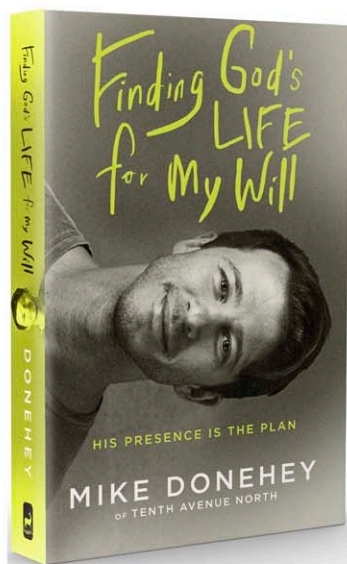
"Every morning?" she said, raising her sorrowful eyes to mine, endless pools of blue and possibility.

"Every morning, sweet girl. I know because I need it every morning too."

We hugged and I cried way more than she did. If I have any job on this earth, it is first and foremost to tell my sweet daughters every day who they get to be. After forty-two trips to Randy's office, I believe we all end up becoming who we believe we are. Or maybe I should say, *whose* we believe we are.

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