

EXCHANGE A MILD AND MUNDANE FAITH
FOR LIFE WITH AN UNCONTAINABLE GOD

ENTER WILD

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CARLOS WHITTAKER

BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF *KILL THE SPIDER*



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To Sohaila.
Your wild faith and utter dependence on
Holy Spirit is the stuff movies are made of.
Your healing is coming. And I've got my
popcorn ready to watch it unfold.
Love, Dad

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Introduction

Back in 1983 there was no such thing as *VeggieTales*. The children's department at the local church didn't have moving lights or a fog-machine haze or Xboxes lined up like airline kiosks at the airport. No.

My generation grew up with much more simplistic entertainment at church. I couldn't wait for Sunday school each and every week. Mrs. Sullivan would place all of us eight-year-olds in a semicircle. Everyone would sit cross-legged except me. I'm not sure what happened to my ligaments when the good Lord made me, but I'm certain He forgot to stretch them out appropriately. Even as a young lad, I could not for the life of me sit cross-legged. I always had to sit in a chair while the rest of my classmates sat on the ground. So with this scene in mind—eight eight-year-olds sitting cross-legged in a semicircle and one eight-year-old sitting in a chair—follow me into our Sunday school lesson.

As soon as we all sat down, Mrs. Sullivan would reach behind her chair and grab the flannel board and a small zebra-printed bag. I LOVED THIS PART! Now, if you grew up in the eighties, this was *your* Sunday school entertainment jam. It was nothing more than a three-by-three-foot piece of cardboard or poster board covered in soft material. Flannel to be exact. And what was in that zebra-printed bag? It contained paper cutout

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characters that would magically stick to the flannel board as Mrs. Sullivan told the story.

Before she unzipped the bag, she spoke. “Okay, boys and girls. Today we are going to talk once again about Jesus and His disciples. Remember last week we learned about how they fed the five thousand?”

And I thought, *Of course, I remember that. It’s all I’ve been thinking about all week!*

It was true. Ever since Mrs. Sullivan told us that story, I couldn’t stop thinking about it. I mean, how crazy would that have been! I actually went home after hearing the story, grabbed a few fish sticks out of the freezer, and secretly prayed that God would turn two fish sticks into four. I sat them on my Transformers plate and clenched my eyes shut.

“Dear Jesus, DO IT!” I prayed aloud. When I opened my eyes, you will *never* believe what I saw! Two fish sticks. Ugh. It hadn’t worked. Every single day of that week, I prayed for a miracle to happen. For something *absolutely wild* to happen. But nothing happened. I kept praying for crazy stuff like that to happen, but I went to bed disappointed every night.

“Mrs. Sullivan?” I asked her that morning in Sunday school.

“Yes, Carlos?” she replied.

“I tried to pray for a miracle like the fish one all week,” I said. “But nothing ever happened. Am I not praying hard enough?”

All my friends, the flexible ones on the floor around me, started giggling. I remember feeling embarrassed and annoyed. Didn’t they think this whole thing was crazy like I did? Didn’t they want to figure out how to do all the wild stuff Jesus and the disciples did? Mrs. Sullivan saved my spiraling mind.

“Carlos, maybe this story will help you,” she said.

Mrs. Sullivan placed the cutouts of Jesus’s disciples on the flannel board and began to tell us a story about how sad they were after Jesus was crucified. “They were obviously sad,” she said. “Their best friend on the planet had just been killed. They didn’t know what to do.”

Then she placed a cutout of a woman on the other end of the board. “This is Mary Magdalene. She was the very first person who saw Jesus after He rose again.” Then she placed the cutout of Jesus on the board next to Mary. I hadn’t seen this version of Jesus on the board before. He appeared almost . . . *shiny*.

She went on to tell us the Bible story for that day—about Jesus’s appearing to His disciples after the worst day of their lives. Mrs. Sullivan was right; this story was about to change everything for me. Imagine the flannel board as I share this story from Mark 16.

Jesus asked Mary to go and tell the disciples that He was alive! But there was one major problem; they didn’t believe her. Nope. They weren’t having it. Let’s be honest for a second. I don’t know if I would have believed her either. I mean, He had just been crucified! But what I love about this story is that when Jesus showed up to see His friends and disciples again, He let them have it. He laid into them!

I love the way this interaction is set up: “Afterward he appeared to the eleven themselves as they were reclining at table” (Mark 16:14, *ESV*). I can imagine the conversation that was happening around the table, especially because it says they were reclining. The Greek word *anakeimai* means to recline as a corpse or at a meal.¹ Obviously, I didn’t look up the Greek word when I was eight, but I have since learned the meaning, and I now have a new way I want to eat.

So imagine for a second, the eleven disciples totally relaxing around the table. Arguing about whether Mary is crazy or not. It sounds like they were just chillin’. Then Jesus showed up and the very first thing He said to them wasn’t, “Hey, guys, it’s Me! Can you believe it? I pulled it off! I’M ALIVE!” Nope. That’s not how it went down.

The first thing Jesus said to His disciples after He rose again was a little more harsh. The Scriptures say, “He rebuked them for their lack of faith and their stubborn refusal to believe those who had seen him after he had risen” (Mark 16:14). Sounds to me like they got a pretty harsh

tongue-lashing. Almost as if Jesus was trying to say that things were about to get crazy and if they were all in, they'd better buckle up. Because there was going to be no more room for doubt.

Then, after they were probably feeling super guilty, Jesus went on to tell them the thing that my eight-year-old self had been waiting an entire week to hear. I just didn't know it yet.

He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well."

After the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, he was taken up into heaven and he sat at the right hand of God. Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it. (Mark 16:15–20)

After Mrs. Sullivan finished the story, which I'm sure she told with a little less commentary than the way I just told it, she simply looked at me and smiled. I remember my heart was pounding and my mouth was hanging open.

Drive out demons? I thought. *Speak in new languages?* *Have superhuman powers?* *Heal people?* My eight-year-old mind was going wild. I was a disciple of Jesus! That meant this stuff was gonna happen to me! I realized in that moment why Mrs. Sullivan told me that the story would answer my questions. These miracles, these signs and wonders, and this wild faith?

It wasn't meant to be a magic show. It was meant to change people's lives. It was meant to take people from weak . . . to WILD.

As an eight-year-old, I was ready to experience all that Jesus told His disciples they would experience. But then a funny thing happened. I grew up. I got older. My confidence slowly went from looking like the disciples' faith *after* Jesus's pep talk, which is called the Great Commission, to looking like the disciples' faith *before* the pep talk. As an adult, I began to find myself doubting all sorts of things about what Jesus said my life should look like.

Adult life and circumstances had kidnapped my childlike faith. Worry robbed my wonder. Anxiety robbed my amazement. For you, it may have been fear, doubt, or anger. The cause may be different, but the effect is the same. For me, it was unreal levels of anxiety. Before I knew it, I found myself like many of us in the church . . . with a small, boring faith. A mild faith.

But what if I told you that you didn't have to stay here? What if I told you that a mild faith can blow up into a WILD faith? Will it take hard work? Yes. But here's the truth: you *can* wake up every single morning and sprint into a day filled with miracles, signs, and wonders. It's possible. Absolutely. It happened to me.

Let me show you what it's like to ENTER WILD.

PART I

ENTER REST

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Gold Thrones

How abundant are the good things
that you have stored up for those who fear you,
that you bestow in the sight of all,
on those who take refuge in you.

PSALM 31:19

Is there more? Is there really, truly more to this Christian life than we have experienced? John 10:10 says this: “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly” (ESV). This verse, **THIS VERSE**. This verse has confused more people than I can count. Is God’s promise of life to the full real? Is His promise of abundant life an actual thing? Is His presence actually something we can tangibly enjoy on a daily basis? The simple answer is yes. The more complicated answer is also yes.

Look, the offer we have been given by God Himself is this: a life that is filled with heart-pumping, joy-releasing, victory-claiming, beauty-experiencing fullness! Now will all that be opposed? Of course. Opposed by what? Well, Scripture tells us there is an enemy in our midst who is not

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out to borrow, push, or upset. No, the Enemy is out to steal, kill, and destroy. But we have been given all the tools we need to fight and win.

You are reading the words of someone who is relatively fresh off the boat, having come from the land of sin management. The land of life hacks that lead to a “better faith.” The land of self-help in Christendom. The land of learning how to become a Christian simply so we can get to heaven. Although those things are important and true, that’s not all there is. And in the last few years, since I’ve been living in this new land of awe and wonder, I have seen more WILD than I saw in my previous forty. Maybe it’s just because I finally started looking for it. Maybe it’s because I was finally taught that it exists. I don’t know why. But the proof is in the pudding. Things have gotten wild round these parts.

In my previous book, *Kill the Spider*, we went on a journey from death to life, from believing lies to believing truth. A spider is a lie that you have made an agreement with, and once you have broken up with that lie, you begin to step into this new life of abundance. Notice I say “begin.” The truth is we all have many spiders and the process of killing them doesn’t ever end. We will discuss this more in later chapters, but for now we just need to get to the place where we understand what this abundance can look like and that it is real.

How is it possible that John 10:10, a verse meant to give us freedom, has so confused us? It’s not the scripture’s fault. Obviously. Just reading it, taking it at its word, is so life giving. But it’s been taught incorrectly. Much of the pain comes in misunderstanding the meaning of the word *abundance*. That is where so many Christians get tripped up. And I know why. It’s the gold. The shiny, gaudy gold. At least it was for me.

Is the Blessing for Me?

When I was growing up, we often drove past the TBN (Trinity Broadcasting Network) headquarters in Costa Mesa, California, off the 55

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Freeway. My family would drive by in our 1981 Buick Regal, and I would stare in absolute awe and wonder. Five-year-old me was enamored with the gaudiness of it all. If you haven't ever seen it, imagine for a second if you combined Caesars Palace in Las Vegas, the Taj Mahal in India, and Daddy Warbucks's mansion in the 1982 film version of *Annie*. Yep. That's exactly what it looked like. I was constantly looking for Punjab (Annie's rescuer) to be standing on one of the balconies as we drove by.

"Daddy? Who lives in there?" I once asked my dad.

"Oh, Carlitos. Nobody lives there. That's a Christian TV station," he responded.

A Christian TV station? My little mind would spin. We were Christians, but I didn't know any Christians who had digs like that. Maybe Christian movie stars? I mean, isn't that who worked there? Christian celebrities? Probably. And we were not that. My dad was the pastor of Primera Iglesia Bautista de Pico Rivera or First Bilingual Baptist Church in Pico Rivera, California. There was absolutely nothing about our lives that matched that place, at least from what I could see. I'd never seen the inside though. Maybe just the exterior was fancy.

"Dad? What does the inside look like?"

When we got home, he showed me. He turned on TBN. I think it was channel 56. Bill Gaither was singing "The King Is Coming" with a few other men in white suits, and there were lots of old people crying as they sang along. They were singing on gold microphones in front of gold columns and these *massive* red velvet chairs with gold trim. The floor was marble, and there were these two people sitting behind the quartet mouth-ing every single word.

"Who are they, Daddy?" I asked.

"They are like the pastors of the TV station, Carlitos." THEY WERE LIKE MY DAD! I can literally feel the emotion as I type, the hope and desire that began to creep into my chest. Was this sort of lavishness made for us

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too? Maybe we would have this one day. My dad was the pastor. He loved God. This had to be the goal. Right?

I started watching TBN when nobody else was around. The lady pastor, the woman with the big hair and all the makeup . . . she was so pretty and so confident. She would stare into the camera and say stuff that made me feel like God was on my side. Her words made me confident I would have all that Daddy Warbucks stuff too someday. I didn't necessarily know what "sow a seed" meant, but as a child I wanted to do that if it meant my familia would end up with all that swag.

Is this it? Is this what Jesus was talking about in John 10:10? This bougie life I saw on TBN? And if John 10:10 is for real, then why is life so freaking *hard*? You pray for that promotion, someone else gets it. You pour your blood, sweat, and tears into a dream, and it fails to turn out. You try counseling to fix your marriage, and your spouse doesn't want it as bad as you do. You are believing for physical healing; your symptoms get worse. And let's get to the crux of this book. You lean into your faith like you never have before, reading the Bible, praying every morning, going to church every week, listening only to Christian music—you are *doing it all right*—but it all seems to fall short of the promise. You hear sermons talking about freedom and abundant life, of peace that passes all understanding, but this stuff never seems to materialize for you. It seems like an unattainable goal, and life is just so unrelenting. How can we live the truth of God's promise while on this side of heaven? It seems impossible.

5.4 Percent Abundance

My daughter Sohaila has struggled with eczema her entire life. And it's not the type of eczema that you rub some steroid cream on and it gets better. No, it's brutal. She can't sweat or it feels like her skin is on fire. This means she can't run, jump, dance, or even worship in church with abandon. She wants to jump and spin while she sings praises to God, but *it hurts*. It's

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been brutal to watch her suffer with it. We have tried everything. Allergy tests. Diet restrictions. All the creams. Different doctors. Eastern medicine. All of it. We have prayed until we were out of words and fasted for her healing, breaking agreements she may have made with sickness. We have done it all.

At one point in her journey, I felt like God told me Sohaila was going to be healed in 2016. I actually wrote it in my prayer journal. I thought God specifically said that her healing was coming that year. So I leaned into the hope I felt and started praying for her healing with more vigor than I had in the past. This was her year of freedom! Well, you can probably guess the end of this story. New Year's Eve 2016 came, and I began arguing with God. *Why hasn't it happened yet? Maybe when the clock strikes midnight, she will suddenly stop itching.* Well, not only did the itching not stop. That first week of the new year, she was more miserable than she had been in months.

My heart was destroyed. Did I not pray hard enough? Did I not hear God correctly? I was gutted. It felt almost like a death. Sure, it was the death of a dream, but it was a death nonetheless. *Has God abandoned us? Do I just need to accept it?*

Friends. Time after time, in event after event, we are being hard pressed. These months and years of trauma begin to take their toll on our belief in the second half of John 10:10. We find it easier to believe in the part that says, "I came that they may have life." But maybe Jesus was talking only about eternal life, saying that things will get better when we get to heaven. Because surely He wasn't talking about right here, right now. I mean, life gets SO HARD. And we just ignore those last words about abundance and fullness as our confidence in them begins to erode.

Either we are not living this Christian life correctly, or God's promises are for someone else, not us. These are the agreements we end up making. But every time I open my Bible, I see these promises. It seems clear that Jesus actually, truly believes we can live a life *fully alive*.

Then Jesus declared, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” (John 6:35)

Whoever believes in me . . . rivers of living water will flow from within them.” (John 7:38)

Above all else, guard your heart,
for everything you do flows from it.” (Proverbs 4:23)

Again, people have taken this word *life* and reduced it to eternal life, meaning we will get all this abundance and blessing when we die and go to heaven. It’s as if they’re saying, “Abundance is coming! You may catch a glimpse of it here and there. But you are gonna have to wait until you get to heaven to actually, truly experience life to the full.”

And that teaching makes sense to most of us because that is just how life has turned out. We catch glimpses of abundant life—but only glimpses. Take, for example, a typical family vacation to Disneyland, the “happiest place on earth.” The day normally goes like this.

You wake up the kids and anticipation is through the roof. They have been looking forward to this day for weeks, and it’s finally here. So you pile into the car and drive to the park. You have to wait thirty minutes to park because it seems like every other human being on the planet decided to come to Disneyland on the exact same day. After hearing, “When are we going to park?” from the kids twenty times, you finally find a spot in Parking Lot Pluto 2. But you’re still not at the park. You’re still A MILLION MILES from the park, and you now have to wait thirty more minutes with the masses to squeeze into a special tram that finally takes you into the park. It’s okay. The anticipation is still winning. The music they are pumping over the loudspeakers is soothing your soul. The Disney magic is still feeling like magic.

You finally get to the park; now you have to get the tickets. After taking out a second mortgage and selling your spouse's kidney and your soul, you have the tickets! Time to get in line to enter the park. Once you get in, you head straight toward everyone's favorite ride, the Jungle Cruise! You loved this ride as a kid and nostalgia tells you that your kids are going to love it too. The line for this ride is sixty-five minutes. Sixty-five minutes? Wow. But it's okay. You are at Disneyland! So you tough it out and finally make it onto the boat. The ride lasts five minutes. Halfway through the ride your eleven-year-old looks at you and says, "I'm bored." Talk about soul-crushing words.

"Well, what ride do you want to go on, Johnny boy?" you ask.

"I want to go on a roller coaster!" he shouts, so you head toward Space Mountain.

But your five-year-old is too little to ride so you and your spouse split up and she heads toward a more age-appropriate ride. Walking up to Space Mountain with your eleven-year-old, you see that the wait time is 120 minutes. The line is TWO HOURS LONG? After you plead with your kid for several minutes to forget it, he still wants to wait in line, so you accept your fate. And you wait. Your phone battery is now at 15 percent, and you can't scroll Instagram enough times to make it interesting anymore. Two hours later you finally get on the ride. It's over in three minutes. Three minutes! But your eleven-year-old had a blast, so worth it! You exit the ride and meet up with your wife and exhausted kindergartener.

"Lunch?" she asks.

So you head over to the closest restaurant where you spend a hundred dollars on four hamburgers and fries. Really bad hamburgers at that. It's now two o'clock in the afternoon, and it's time for a parade! So you and the fam hurry over to Main Street, U.S.A. to watch the parade. There is zero shade and it's ninety degrees outside. Your five-year-old can't see, so you put her on your shoulders. The dad behind you starts cussing because now his kid can't see. But when Cinderella walks by, everything is worth

it because your kid is shouting, “I see Sliperella! I see Sliperella!” And you don’t correct her because it still warms your heart so much when she mispronounces Cinderella.

It’s now three thirty, and you head to Pirates of the Caribbean because it’s all inside and oh, my, you are about to have heatstroke. Seventy-five minutes later you exit that ride carrying your sleeping five-year-old and asking your eleven-year-old to please stop complaining about how his feet hurt because EVERYONE’S FEET HURT. You give your spouse the look. The look that says, *I know the park is open for about seven more hours, but can it be done? Can this please end?*” To which she looks back with eyes that say *yes and amen*.

And with that . . . you exit the happiest place on earth, and while sitting on the tram, post a picture of you and the family in front of the Sleeping Beauty Castle with the hashtag #DisneyDreams.

There it is. The Dream Life. With 5.4 percent abundance. Exactly what we expect. The dream of what Disneyland could be for your family versus the reality of what Disneyland is. We get glimpses of glory in the midst of a rough day, so we chalk it up to “that’s life” and go to sleep thanking God that we get to experience 5.4 percent abundance again tomorrow.

A Different Vision of Abundance

But what if it’s not God’s plan that we only catch glimpses of the best? What if you could go to Disneyland and have it turn out like my family’s trip to Universal Studios last summer? Stay with me here.

We told the kids that when they all finished reading the Harry Potter books we would take them to Universal Studios in Florida to experience the Wizarding World of Harry Potter. The time had come. The road trip down to Orlando was exactly what I described in that Disney Nightmare montage. Long drive but HIGH EXPECTATIONS. There are two different

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Harry Potter experiences at Universal Studios, based in two different parks. So if you want the full experience of Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade you literally have to pay admission to both parks. And if you do pay both admission fees, you get to ride in the Hogwarts Express train from land to land. It's actually an incredible experience but, alas, one that we couldn't afford. From the start, we told the kids they could choose only one of the lands. Look at us. Already cutting their abundance in half before we even got there. The day before we planned to go to the park, I texted a pastor friend of mine named Josh in Orlando to see if we could meet for coffee. He asked why I was in town, and I told him we were going to the Wizarding World of Harry Potter at Universal Orlando.

"Have you guys bought tickets yet?" He asked nonchalantly.

"No. Do you know of a place that has a sweet deal? Because, man, it's expensive just to go to one park!" I replied.

"I can do a little better than that." He continued, "The VP of Universal Park goes to my church. He has this thing called the gold pass that allows six people free entrance into all the parks and passage to the front of every line. So no waiting and no paying."

Cue all the tears and excitement. *Thank You, Jesus.*

I didn't tell the kids. They woke up ready to experience only half of what they wanted to experience but excited and grateful for the opportunity. Sounds a lot like us, huh? We know the Bible tells us we get life to the full, but what we really believe is that we'll experience only a little bit of that.

But what did our kids get instead?

They got to go to both worlds, ride the train between them, and ride every single ride in both Universal Studios Hollywood and Universal's Islands of Adventure without waiting in line. They got to experience both parks with 100 percent abundance! Now did that create a perfect day? Was everything perfect? No! We still had to pay for the overpriced food. It was still super hot. We still had to walk for miles and miles. We were still in the

park with thousands of people; we were just playing with a different set of rules. And it made dealing with the bad stuff so much easier.

Listen. I'm not building my doctoral dissertation with this analogy, but you get the point. You are with me. I know you are. We can live in this world and not be of it. We can exist in the chaos of our lives while simultaneously taking advantage of the incredible GOLD PASS God has given us. With Him, we have direct access to the front of the line. We don't have to wait. We get to have an incredible existence in this broken world, an experience that so many people are missing out on.

You. Don't. Have. To. Stop. Halfway. To. Abundance.

You don't have to settle.

In John 10:10 the Greek word for this life filled with abundance or life to the full is *zōé*. *Zōé* simply means "life," but here it is used to mean something special: a new, special kind of life. The abundant life of the Spirit. It is a spiritual power, sustenance, strength, energy, force.² It is literally the radiant life of God given to us! And here's the thing. The reason you need it is because you are going to go through a great deal of trials and hardships in this life. You *need* *zōé*, that powerful force that comes from having the life of Jesus *in you*, because of all the other stuff this life brings. Because of the thief mentioned in the beginning of John 10! That thief who is here to steal, kill, and destroy. That guy? That guy can't touch your soul because of the *zōé*, the abundant life, the "life to the full" that is growing inside you.

You need the indistinguishable full life inside you because this world is *brutal*.

But, friends, we have mistakenly defined *zōé* or abundant life to mean a better job, more money, a fixed marriage, that house you've been dreaming about. No. Although those are great and fantastic things that God may give to us, those are *not* what John 10:10 is referring to. We have to switch our definition to mean abundance *no matter your job*. Abundance *no matter how much money you have*. Abundance *no matter your marital status*. Abundance *no matter your living conditions*.

UNCORRECTED PROOF

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What does Jesus mean when He speaks of abundant life? It's clearly not a nice little life.

Abundance has nothing to do with accumulating things and everything to do with accessing the King. When you start seeing John 10:10 through that lens, you realize that abundant life—life to the full—is available even in our darkest hours. Even when the test results come back positive. Even when you are two months into being unemployed. Even when your spouse has an affair and you don't think you can ever trust again.

How do we get there?

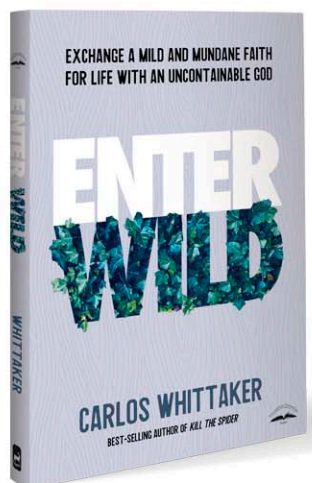
It's closer than you think. Let's dive in.

REFLECT AND PRACTICE

1. When you hear the phrase *abundant life* in a religious context, what sorts of lies does it produce about your life?
2. In what parts of your life would you love to experience life "to the full" or "life abundantly"?
3. In what parts of your life do you currently see evidence of this abundance?

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