

Foreword by Richard Stearns



# fulfilled

joey lankford

The Refreshing Alternative to the Half-Empty Life



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PUBLISHING GROUP

NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

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Printed in the United States of America

978-1-4336-8153-0

Published by B&H Publishing Group  
Nashville, Tennessee

Dewey Decimal Classification: 248.4  
Subject Heading: GOD—WILL \ PROVIDENCE AND  
GOVERNMENT OF GOD \ CHRISTIAN LIFE

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## Chapter 1

# Call Me Crazy

**W**e were somewhere along I-40 in East Tennessee when the call came in, middle of the day, driving home from a weekend trip to my little brother's wedding. I didn't recognize the number when it popped up on my phone display. All I could tell was that it didn't originate from anywhere around here. Weird-looking number. Should I take it? *Yeah, take it.*

I took it.

And no wonder the number looked funny. It was Jacques, our landlord, calling from France, the guy who owned our rental house in Kommetjie (don't try to sound it out; it's COM-uh-key)—a suburb of Cape Town, out along the western coast of South Africa.

"What's up?" I asked him.

"Joey, I need to tell you something. I've gotten a cash offer on the house. An international buyer is willing to

give me my asking price.” He was talking about the house we lived in, the house where all our stuff was currently located while we were home in the States on furlough—the house we’d been led to believe we could occupy for as long as we wanted to stay there. “And I’m trying to figure out what to do,” he said.

“Well . . .” I thought, realizing it wasn’t exactly my call to make, “I guess you ought to sell it. You’ve got a cash offer. There aren’t a lot of buyers coming along, not in this economy, so . . . I understand. I’m a businessman. If it was me, that’s what I’d do. Sounds like an offer you can’t refuse.” I knew he hadn’t gotten so much as a nibble from six months of trying to sell it previously. And the last I’d heard, he was letting the contract with his realtor expire.

“Yes, I know, Joey, but . . .”

Oh. There was more.

“. . . they want you out immediately.”

Okay, that *does* make it different. The 298-mile marker we were sailing past on the interstate at that particular moment was more than *eight thousand* miles away from the house he was referring to. So we were obviously in no position to begin moving our belongings out of it—and *wouldn’t* be for at least another couple of weeks. Maybe more. Maybe a *lot* more, depending on how quickly we could find another place to stay. All I knew was, when we signed up on mission, when we sold everything and moved our whole family to South Africa on the subtext of following God’s will, this out-of-the-blue, out-immediately plan wasn’t the one we’d bargained for.

*Think fast, Joey.*

“I don’t know what to tell you, Jacques. I mean, I’m in America right now, so I can’t really do anything about it. If that’s the way it needs to be, I guess they can buy all my furniture, and my Land Rover, and do something with Rimshot, my dog.”

“I know, Joey,” he said, apologetically. “I understand it’s a real problem, I do. And of course, by contract, I don’t even need to ask you. I can just go ahead and finalize the sale, but”—this is the part that floored me, changed the whole way I was feeling—“Nellie and I have been following you and your family, reading about you on your website, and I must say, you people have truly crept into our hearts. That’s why we’re having such a hard time making a decision about this—especially on these terms.”

I don’t know what shocked me more—a nowhere-near Christian couple in Europe that I should never have met in my lifetime sensing the love of God through a redneck country boy like me, or the words my wife was about to speak a few minutes later when I finally hung up the phone.

I had done the best I could do to buy us some time. Jacques said he’d try to get us ninety days before we’d need to vacate and find new arrangements. But when I glanced over and gave that look to Courtney—the one person in our family who’s the epitome of planning and control, of calendars and organization, the one most likely to *freak* at the way this unexpected change was sure to unsettle us—she instead let out a short little sigh, which

curled into one of her cute little smiles, and said, “Well, I guess since God has allowed this to happen . . . can you imagine the blessing He’s got waiting for us?”

Ordinarily, just being honest with you: No. *But when you put it that way, Court—*

Then yes.

Yes, I can.

Because, hey, I was looking at His blessing already! My wife and I would *never* have been unflappable enough to take this kind of news lying down, not even while I was back making six figures every year and could more easily afford the distraction. Back when we didn’t think twice about putting our next unnecessary purchase on a credit card. Back when spending \$500 apiece on our kids’ presents at Christmas was nothing. Back when the next big decision on our plate was whether or not to build out our basement, and how big to do it.

But now—right then—rolling down the highway, apparently and suddenly homeless, with our four kids in the back (one of them a little girl we’d recently adopted from Ethiopia), our immediate, gut response was a grin and a laugh and a, “Well, here goes! Can’t wait to see where He takes us from *here*.”

I know. It’s crazy. Isn’t it? And I swear, if the old Joey—the one who’d been peeping out of these same eyeballs the first thirty years of my life—could’ve somehow leaned his head in between us in the front seat, looked quizzically at me, then at Courtney, then back at me



again, he'd have said, "You guys are nuts!" And maybe we were. Maybe we are.

But for me, I'll take this crazy life over anybody else's. I'll even take it over the one I'd been trying to orchestrate all on my own before—because this one, this life God has chosen to lead us on, is making us about ten thousand times happier than we've ever been in our lives. I've never loved my wife as much as I love her now (and I'm pretty sure she'd say the same about me . . . on most days, I think). Our kids have never had less, and yet I can promise you they've never been more achieving and content. Our life is so full of adventure and meaning and everyday purpose—of people and relationships and opportunities for ministry—I really don't even know how to start writing about it.

I just know it's real. I just know it can happen. I just know it fires me up.

I've seen it on I-40.

And now I see it twenty-four hours a day.

## Calling All Trailblazers

God called me away from a lucrative job, complete with stock options and a secure future, with a 4,500-square-foot house on seven acres in the most beautiful spot on earth (or so I thought). And yet today, by His grace and perhaps ironic sense of humor after leading us to walk away from it all, I wake up every morning with the breeze of the Atlantic Ocean misting through the open windows

in our bedroom, with whales often pounding their huge bodies in the distant surf, with the rise of towering mountains clearly visible behind me. And sometimes when I look out on the mind-blowing geography here on this amazingly colorful tip of the African continent, I can almost hear God saying, “You know how for thirty years you tried to box Me in, Joey? You know how you limited what you thought I could do? Well, check this out, son.”

Some sacrifice.

No, we’re not living in the lap of luxury. We’re not vacationing here. We do without a lot of things we once enjoyed, most important, the people we used to enjoy them with. My car only runs about three days a week, and there’s no college football on television Saturday afternoons. We have no air, no heat, a tiny refrigerator that only holds enough food for a couple of days, and baboons that break into our house three or four times a year—real ones—rummaging through our cabinets, slinging stuff all over the place, stealing everything down to our chewing gum.

But for the first time in my life, I’ve got everything. Not a problem-free existence, and not a perfect display of Christian lifestyle, but the complete, absolute confidence of being dead-on in the will of God and a hundred percent sure He’s taking care of me and my family. No doubt. Serving Him isn’t something I feel forced to try tacking on at the end of the week anymore, like I’m doing Him some big favor. Watching Him work and knowing He’s real isn’t something that takes a lot of effort for us now. It’s just

what we do. It's how we live. We need Him. We can't get by without Him.

Why did we think we were better off not knowing that? Not doing that?

My life before launching out on this new journey with God looked pretty perfect from the outside. There were times of day, in fact, when it even felt perfect on the inside. But in reality—tell me if you can't relate to this—my “perfect” life was a lot like the dog trails that ran around the side of our house in College Grove, Tennessee, going *somewhere* but mainly going *nowhere*.

Everybody who owns an outdoor dog has a dog trail in the yard. Dogs go the same way every time. They get up, then they go over there. Do that, then come back over here. They beat the same path to the same bowl to the same dry dog food every day, and that's just what they do. And they don't care. Because they're dogs.

But how is that pattern of life so much different from the one I'd been running? Get up, go to work, do my thing, bust my can, make it to Friday night, see who's coming over, get up on Saturday, cut the grass, piddle around, go to a birthday party or something, come in late, maybe get to church in time for Sunday school the next morning, maybe not, hit the worship service at least, go out to eat together afterwards—and that's the drill. Everybody does it. And everybody wonders why it keeps circling back to the same old bowl every time.

Because that's what ruts do. They always lead you back to the same place. I see it even in Africa, people walking

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every day on those beaten-down trails. Eyes fixed. Single file. Not stepping off to the right or the left, just going ahead, then coming back. Same thing tomorrow. Same thing the next day.

That road. That rut. The same Ol' Roy in the same old bowl.

Yeah, we can pretty it up all we want. Put it in a high-rise office building. Drive it to work in a \$50,000 car. Feed it a nice lunch. Give it a sharp business card. Grow it into a good, healthy return and a fine personal reputation. Sit it down in church on Sunday and shake everybody's hand with it on your way out.

But it's still a rut.

And it still doesn't satisfy.

It's empty. And keeps getting emptier.

For a long time in my life, I'd been developing routines that weren't taking me anywhere. Only in circles. Oh, sometimes I'd come around the corner with a new toy or a new piece of gear in hand—a new bone to chew on for a day or two. But eventually I recognized that no matter how much junk I dragged home at the end of the day, the week, the month, I was never getting off this thing—this rut—not unless I did something drastic, something radical, not unless I somehow found a way to jump this comfortable little dog trail that felt so normal and offered so little.

I'm not knocking hard work, obviously. I work as hard now as I ever did. Harder. Nor am I trying to minimize faithful, consistent effort or to act like being steady and

responsible is a problem to be avoided, like it's almost wrong to be so loyal and dependable. No, I'm just asking you the same kind of questions I ultimately asked myself: What's the goal here? Where are you going? And when you get there—five years from now, twenty years from now, forty years from now—is it going to be worth it?

Will you look back and say, "What—was I *crazy*? To think this was going to do it for me?"

One November recently, eight young to middle-age businessmen—CEOs, some of them—came over to South Africa for a weeklong visit. "How did you do it?" they wanted to know. "How did you make this move?" I could see it in their eyes, just like I've seen it in others, just like I've seen it in my own. They want to be free. Not from responsibility, but from the rut. They want their faith to be relevant somehow, not just a relish tray, not just a little something extra for them on the side. They want to know they're putting their eggs in the right basket. And if so, they're all-in.

I've given my testimony numerous times at churches and other places back home. Men invariably come up to me afterward, "Can we meet sometime, Joey? I want to hear more about what you're doing. I really felt something come alive inside while you were speaking, something that's been stirring in me for a long time." They sense the gap between where they are and where they want to be. They want the abundant life they haven't been able to locate in the places they've been looking for it. Nothing's really wrong with them or with their lives. And yet

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*everything's* wrong. Their wives know something's wrong. Their kids suspect something's wrong. Most of all, *they* know something's wrong. They're slapping shoe leather every day, and yet their gauge is slapping empty when they're finished. Almost every time.

They're not faithless. They're not trying to run from porn addictions or looking to get out of their marriages. They're not bad people without a clue of what they're doing. They just want to feel alive again. Their hearts want to embrace a calling rather than just a career. They want the rush of being out there where trusting God is raw and real and ripe with opportunity.

Most of them have so much stuff around them, they don't even *need* God. From the look of things, they've got their lives kind of covered. Or at least it feels like it. And honestly, there's a big part of them that wishes they could just go along like this, without being bothered by His little guilt trips, without feeling pulled in His direction, away from what they want and when they want it.

But in their gut, they know. They *do* need Him. They *must* have Him! Their insides are crying out for Him. There's got to be more. More than this. More than what they're seeing. More than where this is all going.

Yes, there is.

And I don't care who you are or where you're from. I don't care how much trouble you've given God in the past or how much time you've wasted and frittered away leading up to this point. Your life can start taking a turn in the direction of fulfillment this afternoon or by tonight.

Don't plan on quitting your job in the morning or anything, but I'll tell you what—you can sure begin making pullout plans from your little rut by then. You do not have to stay there. Even if you don't change where you live or where you work, you can pivot yourself in a new direction that'll begin steering you toward a much more satisfying place and lifestyle than your dog trails ever can.

And if you think this freed-up person couldn't possibly be you . . .

If you're skeptical about how the difference it might make could possibly offset the lack of security and control it would entail . . .

If you don't know how you'd explain yourself to people who notice you're not acting the way you always did before . . .

If your mind is racing already, lobbing up excuses, telling you to settle down, keep your composure, don't get carried away with this guy's craziness . . . then, man, you don't know what God is able to do. Because if He can create a turnaround in somebody like me, if He can do what He's done to break this maverick spirit and harness it for something that even vaguely resembles His glory, I guarantee you He can do it in anybody.

And I do mean *anybody*.

## How Crazy Do You Think I Am?

When my parents pulled up stakes during my ninth-grade year to move our family into the next county over,

into a whole different neighborhood and environment, one reason they did it was because of me. Not to get me into a better school district, but to keep me out of trouble. Hopefully.

It mostly didn't work.

I'm the oldest of five—two boys on each end, one girl in the middle. And I was able to prove to everybody that reckless behavior doesn't typically recognize the county line. Oh, I wasn't doing anything really bad, just a lot of mischievousness and rank immaturity. Always trying to be the life of the party, the cutup, the cheap entertainment, even if it meant being a real jerk to do it.

Funny, I was a Christian through it all. Saved when I was eight. Baptized by my grandfather. (I've still got the picture in my Bible to prove it.) My own parents, too, were the living model for how you do that job right—steady, loving, godly, aware, firm, patient, consistent. I didn't have anybody to blame except myself if I was bent on misbehaving.

But like a lot of people, I got good at playing both sides of the religion game. I could be the good little church boy when the situation called for it, and I could be the renegade hellion when nobody else was the wiser. And by the time I'd met the girl that I'd decided I wanted to marry, I followed her all the way to a small Christian college in Texas—not to study, not to quit my antics, but just to get engaged.

And we did. It was great. For a while. But not being too motivated to hit the books, I did a lot more hitting



the town instead. And as my girlfriend started to look at me through the eyes of marriage material rather than just the misty glow of teenage hormones, she decided—understandably, level-headedly—she might be about to make a big mistake. With me.

Level heads might have prevailed, I'm sure, but mine just went into free fall. As soon as she broke our relationship off—engagement and everything—I went wilder than ever. I was already thirteen hours away from home, clear of everybody's radar screen, and I decided at that time I'd just make the most of a paid-up tuition and live it up for the rest of the semester. I'd party like a madman, fail every class, and then finally go home to tell my dad I needed to start over someplace else. That's just the way I was thinking back then.

Those two years of college (if you can call it that) were all I ever completed. No diploma at the end. And no real desire for one. The only thing I really had going for me when I got back to Tennessee was my dad's offer to drive a truck for his medical supply company, taking hospital beds and oxygen tanks and wheelchairs and stuff out to people's homes, setting them up, breaking them down. It was blue-color work at hourly pay, but it was better than nothing. My parents sure weren't putting me back in school right away, not with my four other siblings following right up behind me.

But oddly enough, I found myself getting interested in how my father's business worked. I'd been raised around it, of course, and I was distantly familiar with it,

but I'd never really thought much about the whole process. Running a company. Managing a budget. Evaluating growth strategies. Negotiating purchasing agreements with vendors. Now that I was hanging around as an employee, I found this corporate aspect to be kind of exciting. Challenging. I wanted more of it. And I hoped my dad would give me a chance to grow into it.

So after a few years—after proving I could keep myself steady, after being given some step-up promotions with gradually increasing responsibilities—I eventually became the guy who managed all the day-to-day operations, overseeing eighty-five employees and professionals providing contract services, as well as a \$100,000 payroll every two weeks. Running the show. Life was good.

Life with Courtney made it even better. We had met (actually gotten reacquainted) after I came back from college, then married in April 2000, and the kids started coming soon thereafter—Briley, Braxton, and Barron—filling out our home with all the required elements for the American Dream. Beautiful wife. Beautiful children. Beautiful piece of property in the country, away from the city lights but not inconveniently far away from good shopping, good restaurants, and lots of fun things to do. I had the horse barn. The man cave. The hunting gear. The new vehicles. The rollicking four-wheeler.

We were set up. Supposedly for life. Secure. Solid family. Everybody on both sides—parents, siblings, in-laws, cousins—all within little more than a fifteen-mile radius,

the promise of anytime babysitting and all-the-time support and connectedness.

Let's just put it this way: none of this story of mine adds up to missions work. For starters, who'd be crazy enough to see potential in me? No college degree. No theological training. A lot more stupidity than spiritual growth in my track record.

And on top of that, what thirty-year-old would be crazy enough to bail from what appeared to be the beginnings of big-time success? Early wealth and accomplishment. A comfortable, affluent lifestyle. Loving, caring, well-heeled people and friends all around me.

You're right. It'd be crazy.

Unless you mean crazy good.

## Fill 'Er Up

If God hadn't done what He did for me, if He hadn't finally given me the sense to realize He was right—about everything—I don't know where I'd be today.

Just guessing, I'd say I'd still be making good money, cutting new deals, always trying to one-up the competition, driving an even newer truck than the one I'd been driving before. I'd be reaching certain goals and benchmarks I'd set for myself, and I wouldn't be letting anything stop me from getting anything I wanted at Bass Pro Shop. People would wish they could be like Joey Lankford, to have what he has.

But not if they really knew. Because nothing else in my life would've been growing at the same speed as my wallet. My spiritual life wouldn't be progressing. Hardly at all. I wouldn't be any more loving or content or trusting or prayerful, except in emergencies. I wouldn't know what it meant to be happy. Not really. I wouldn't be ready for trouble when it came. I'd carry inside myself the illusion—and would present it this way to others—that I was big and strong and untouchable and resilient. But I'd crumble if life got too hard. I know I would. I'd run. I'd bolt. My threshold for what I'd tolerate in riding out difficulties would be pretty low.

My idea of life with God, on a daily, practical level, would be whatever I thought He could do for me. Sure, I'd put some sizable checks in the collection plate on occasion. I'd score some noticeable points on the Joe Christian scale. But I wouldn't know what God was really capable of. And so I wouldn't know all the things He was capable of accomplishing, not just *for* me, but *in* me and *through* me.

I'd be full, yes—like *stuffed* full after a big, heavy meal. Belt open. Belching. Groggy from gorging myself.

And I'd be empty at the same time.

Because I'd know I'd just get hungry again.

That's really all we can expect from the average American life—even the good life. And yet somehow, thanks in large part to the Deceiver of our souls, we're fool enough to think it'll somehow prove different for us. That new house with the extra space really will make up

for what we've been lacking. That new customer or client, if we can land him, will finally put us where we always wanted to be in business. That new baby will settle us down. That new job will change everything.

No it won't.

It *can't*.

We'll burn through it all, we'll run it at high speeds, we'll put everything we've got into it, and—mark my words—we'll be toast at the end. Worse than the way we felt when we started. Burned out. Disappointed. Still screaming for something to be more and better than what this always turns out to be.

We're just crazy that way.

I don't know if that's where you are or not. I'm pretty sure that's where I'd be. Because that's where I was headed.

But there's hope for us, y'all. There's a fuller life out there. One that's full of God. Full of faith. Full of leaps and bounds in your growth and character. Full of peace. Full of passion.

A life full of transformation. Full of deep, authentic friendships. Full of vibrant excitement on a daily basis. Full of new marital strength and intimacy and a new level of relationship with your kids.

A life full of feel-good, give-it-away generosity. Full of a good day's work. Full of God's miraculous, on-time provision. Full of everything you've always wanted, full of everything you feel is missing when you look up and realize you've been tricked into thinking you had enough.

Abundant life is not just a Bible verse.

It's supposed to be a modern-day reality for God's people.

I don't know everything about it yet. But I know I've never experienced it like I'm experiencing it today.

Now listen, I still struggle with some of the same issues, habits, and bad attitudes that cropped up on me at the farm. Courtney and I still don't get it right a lot of times. Sometimes *all* the time, seems like. We still get frustrated with ourselves and with the obstacles of life as they come along. We're still very much on a journey, and we're not expecting to land at a destination anytime soon. We're a long, long way from perfect. We're living proof that God uses damaged, fallen people to accomplish His everyday wonders.

The difference now is that the big break we were always looking for—the one we always thought would settle and satisfy us—has come simply (and only) from being broken before the Lord. Just completely splayed out, flat on the ground, holding on together to keep from being blown away by the new challenges we face.

But what blows us away instead is where He's taking us in our relationship with Him, where He's taking our family, where He's taking our marriage, where He's taking the other people He allows us to touch and help and teach and listen to.

We thought we were so full.

But we had no idea what full was.

No, we're still not the people we want to be. Life's still hard. It still asks a lot of us. And it still leaves us with a lot of questions.

But we're sure not in a rut anymore. We're not empty. And it's not because of South Africa. It's because of something else. Something that's right where *you* live too, wherever you are—ready to be awakened, to put you on a whole new path, to take you to fullness.

There's only one thing to do.

Surrender . . .

