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# BORING

FINDING AN EXTRAORDINARY GOD  
IN AN ORDINARY LIFE



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# DEDICATION

To Gary, Eric, and Jeffrey Kelley—Three men who show daily that there is no such thing as an ordinary life when you follow an extraordinary God.



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## BORING: FINDING AN EXTRAORDINARY GOD IN AN ORDINARY LIFE

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## INTRODUCTION

# AN ORDINARY STORY

Once upon a time, there was an ordinary man. Every day, his alarm clock went off. On good days, he would reach over, turn off the alarm, get up, and go to the gym. On the other days, he would hit the snooze button. Upon returning from the YMCA (or waking up after another hour), this man would take a shower and put on a collared shirt and khaki pants.

He would then hear the scurrying of little feet upstairs, and would trace the sound until it eventually made its way down the stairs revealing three young children hungry for breakfast. The man and his wife would go upstairs and get out bowls, milk, and cereal.

The family would eat and then clean up the dishes. Then he would get in his car and begin the commute to work. When he got to work, just when he thought this was going to be an ordinary day in his ordinary life . . .

It was. He spent the next eight hours sitting in front of his computer. Answering e-mails. Taking phone calls. Checking a news website occasionally. Then he got in his car and went home. When he pulled in, sure that he knew exactly what was going to happen when he opened the back door . . .

He was right again. He hugged and played with all the kids. He kissed his wife. They had dinner. They watched TV. They went to bed.

Yawn.

What did you expect? International intrigue? A call from the president? A natural disaster, or a chance to be a hero? Not here. Not in that day. Not in my life.

Probably not in yours either.

This is what most of my days look like. Oh sure, there is the occasional interruption in the routine and some vacations peppered in there, but by and large, it's a fairly regular way to live. A fairly regular way to live for a fairly regular guy.

Most of us are just that—regular. Ordinary. *Boring*. Most of our lives are spent doing regular, ordinary, boring kinds of things. Changing diapers. Going to work. Reading books. Playing with kids. Relating to our spouses. Paying bills.

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I've never met a president. Or saved a child from a burning building. Or climbed Everest. I don't run in powerful circles or tweet nuggets of wisdom adored by millions. My office walls don't have pictures with me and the Queen of England or medals from my wins at the Olympic Games. Perhaps if I were an international man of mystery, I'd look over and see a picture of me standing next to a world leader at that ceremony when I was awarded some token for my bravery. Then I could turn and see another wall full of mementos and trinkets collected from my adventures. Instead I'm looking at four family pictures, a calendar, and a particularly fierce-looking rendering of a black and yellow fire-breathing dragon laying waste to a castle.

Ah, parenthood.

A regular life isn't bad, necessarily. In fact, a certain kind of bliss accompanies the "normal" life. There aren't a lot of surprises, and for a guy who has a to-do list for every day (with the last item on that list being "Make tomorrow's list"), a lack of surprises can be very comforting. What is more, an ordinary life actually affords an opportunity to love things like pictures from an eight-year-old of dragons and castles. In an ordinary life, your existence becomes papered with moments like these.

And yet . . .

And yet there are those days that just feel boring. The routine becomes monotony, and you find yourself

refreshing your e-mail over and over again, waiting for something—anything—to break up the ticking of the clock. You feel something inside of you, something that appreciates the life you have, but at the same time wonders if there's something more. Something that you're missing. I feel that way sometimes.

## Searching for Significance

The truth is that we will all spend 90 percent of our time here on earth just doing life. Just being ordinary. If this were a self-help book, I might follow that realistic, slightly de-motivating statement up with something like: “Break out of the ordinary. Pursue your bliss. Go skydiving. Do something important. *Carpe diem.*” The same motivation, in Christian terms, might read: “God’s will is that you have a life of adventure. Get out there and make an eternal difference. Do something big for God.”

All of those statements are true in a sense; all of them can be appropriate. What those statements communicate is that we should be focused on Jesus and expanding His kingdom. That should be our priority. Those statements challenge us to recognize that we only have a limited time here on earth, so we need to make sure we spend our time doing things that matter. However, implicit in an exhortation like “do something big for God” is the notion that we are currently *not*

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doing stuff that matters, and we have to abandon that insignificant stuff to break out of the rut—chase the dream . . . be the man . . . overcome obscurity . . . all that stuff.

Chasing dreams isn't the problem. Neither is maximizing what you have to make a difference in the world for the sake of Christ. The problem is in our definition of significance.

People tend to believe that the pathway to significance is paved with the big, the showy, and the grand. The people who are most often lauded as influential are the ones doing the big, impressive things with their lives. Consequently, those same people cannot involve themselves in these mundane details of life. Indeed, the mundane details are like anchors that weigh a person down from the bigger and the better. So moving toward a life that matters involves moving past the details that don't.

But what if we're wrong? What if "bigness" is not an accurate measure of significance? What if the whole idea of "ordinary" is a myth? And what if a life of great importance isn't found by escaping the details but embracing them? What if God actually doesn't want you to escape from the ordinary, but to find significance and meaning inside of it?

That's what this book is about. This book is for the stay-at-home mom and the office job dad. It's for the regular church member and the ordinary citizen. It's

for the person who has ever looked at the seemingly mundane details of life and wondered if they are really doing anything that's worthwhile. It's for all of us ordinary people who are following an extraordinary God. My hope, as you read the first half of this book, is that you would be awakened to the myth of the ordinary as you see and extraordinary God who is constantly moving and working. Then, as you move into the second half of this book, I pray that you might see the greater purposes in a few specific, but often ordinary, areas of life that we tend to push to the margin. And maybe, when we get to the end, we will have begun to see God, and life, in a whole new way. Perhaps we will have begun to see that there really is no such thing as ordinary when you are following an extraordinary God.

## CHAPTER 1

# CHASING DONKEYS

### The Fear of the Ordinary

I am afraid.

There, I said it, and now it's out there. But I need to clarify the statement. My biggest fear in life is not of sickness, financial hardship, public speaking, heights, or even spiders. My biggest fear is being ordinary. I am deathly afraid of being just another guy who blended into the crowd—someone who never did anything important or significant with his life. I am terrified of “eking” my way through life, so caught up in the rut of the mundane that I pass from this Earth as just another

inconsequential guy who had a job, raised some kids, and tried to get enough fiber in his diet.

Oh, I don't always feel this way. Every once in a while something exciting rolls into the schedule. But most days are pretty much the same. It's on those days, as I stare at the computer screen or pay the bills, as I have the same wrestling match with my kids or eat the same dinner with my wife—those are the days when I find myself wondering if I'm really doing anything that matters. If I'm really doing anything important at all.

And where does God fit into this equation? During those days, the days of the rut and the treadmill, I find myself wondering if He does at all. Surely this couldn't be what God wants for me, this God who says that He put on flesh to come and give regular folks like me not only life, but life in abundance (John 10:10). So where is it? In my Google Calendar? In my morning commute? In the pancakes I flip every Saturday morning?

I want to propose an idea to you. It's one that's so very simple that we can often miss it. It's an idea that can, I believe, dramatically change the way we view life as a whole:

*What if there is no such thing as ordinary?*

What if we are looking so hard for these grandiose experiences of significance that we are missing the opportunities for significance right in front of us? What if there is no such thing as ordinary when you follow an extraordinary God?



But don't just take my word for it. Let me tell you a story—a story that actually involves political intrigue, espionage, and matters of national importance. Be warned though—it's a story that also involves donkeys.

### **The Curious Case of the Missing Donkeys**

“Give us a king like the other nations have!” That was the demand of the elders of Israel in 1 Samuel 8, a demand that had been a long time in the making.

Israel had never had a king. They had leaders, for sure. Moses guided them out of Egypt and through the desert wanderings. Joshua led them into the promised land and through the years of conquest. The judges were empowered by God to deliver the Israelites from the hands of their oppressors. Read through the book of Judges, and you can see why the elders would make their request for a king. This is how that period of time is described: “In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did whatever he wanted” (Judg. 21:25).

These were days of spiritual anarchy with each one determining what was right and wrong for themselves. Perhaps it was a situation not that far from the culture in which we find ourselves today, when truth is relative to a given situation and there is no accepted universal standard of right and wrong.

But the Lord had a plan.

That plan came to fruition in the life of a young boy named Samuel. Samuel was a true prophet; as it says in 1 Samuel, he heard the voice of the Lord and none of His words fell to the ground. Under the leadership of Samuel, Israel enjoyed a period of relative peace and prosperity.

But when we join Samuel's story in 1 Samuel 8, a problem was brewing. Samuel was getting old. What is more, his sons were wicked and not worthy of national leadership (1 Sam. 8:3). That sets up the crisis of leadership that we find in 1 Samuel 8. And that's the backdrop of the demand of the elders of the land brought before Samuel.

"We're tired of this. Give us a king like the other nations have."

Their request may not seem like a big deal, but at its core it was a wicked demand. By demanding a king, the nation was rejecting God. One of the ways God set the nation of Israel—His chosen people—apart from the other nations was that they were to have no earthly king. They would have leaders, but God was their king. This was one of their marks of distinction. But now they were discontent with their lot. They were tired of other nations having a visible, national ruler. They were jealous of them. They wanted what they were never supposed to have.

We can sympathize with the elders, can't we? We long for good leadership in the workplace, in the family,

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or in the nation. We want to know we can trust those in leadership, trust that they're working for the good of the people or the family. Israel's elders were trying to make a plan for the future. They wanted to make sure the nation was strong for the future, but they knew that if the nation followed its current path, dangers were looming. They also wanted to provide for future generations. Understandable, yes; but just because we understand something doesn't mean it's right.

There was no doubt these were extraordinary times. They were times of national crisis. They were days of cultural definition. They were moments that charted the course of history. But flip the page to 1 Samuel 9, and you don't find the extraordinary. You don't find the political maneuvering or the Oval Office conversations. You know what you do find? A farm-raised country bumpkin, barely five miles away from where Israel's destiny-altering conversation was taking place, whose biggest concern at the moment was some missing donkeys:

There was a Benjamite, a man of standing, whose name was Kish son of Abiel, the son of Zeror, the son of Bekorath, the son of Aphiah of Benjamin. Kish had a son named Saul, as handsome a young man as could be found anywhere in Israel, and he was a head taller than anyone else.

Now the donkeys belonging to Saul's father Kish were lost, and Kish said to his son Saul, "Take one of the servants with you and go and look for the donkeys." So he passed through the hill country of Ephraim and through the area around Shalisha, but they did not find them. They went on into the district of Shaalim, but the donkeys were not there. Then he passed through the territory of Benjamin, but they did not find them.

When they reached the district of Zuph, Saul said to the servant who was with them, "Come, let's go back, or my father will stop thinking about the donkeys and start worrying about us." (1 Sam. 9:1-5 NIV)

Talk about boring. It's hard to think of a more dramatic difference between the two chapters. We go from the heights of political intrigue and national crisis to a search for some lost livestock. While Saul was looking high and low for his animals, we start to get some clues from the text that something extraordinary is going on behind the scenes.

This young man was handsome. As handsome as any other man in the land. And he was tall. Interestingly, this is the only time that the adjective tall is applied to an Israelite. He had a commanding stature fit for a king. Heck, his name *Saul* actually means "asked for"!

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So you've got a tall, good-looking corn-fed stud named "asked for." Sounds a lot like a king to me.

And yet he's not the sharpest knife in the drawer. He, at this point, has no idea that anything beyond his own scope of vision was happening. He was, in his own mind, doing something completely ordinary. Something radically mundane. Something excruciatingly boring. He was chasing donkeys around the countryside. But his chase led him to an area of the land called Zuph, the domain of Samuel. Thus the stage is set for the collision of the ordinary with the extraordinary.

### **An Extraordinary Series of Coincidences**

What follows is a crazy series of events. Saul wanted to go home, but his servant happened to know about a man of God who lived around there and knew about stuff like lost donkeys. The servant also happened to have a quarter of a shekel to pay the man of God for information.

Now this man of God traveled a lot, but he happened to be in residence as Saul and the servant went walking up the road. And some women happened to be walking out of the town at the same time Saul and his servant were walking up. They happened to know that this man of God was not only in town, but was only a little ways ahead of them on that very road.

Keep in mind, though, that Saul had no idea who Samuel was—or perhaps who the Lord was, for that matter. But the work of God is not dependent on the knowledge or awareness of man. Just the day before, God had whispered to His servant Samuel that the man He would appoint as the leader over Israel was going to show up at just the right time:

Now the day before Saul's arrival, the LORD had informed Samuel, "At this time tomorrow I will send you a man from the land of Benjamin. Anoint him ruler over My people Israel. He will save them from the hand of the Philistines because I have seen the affliction of My people, for their cry has come to Me." When Samuel saw Saul, the LORD told him, "Here is the man I told you about; he will rule over My people." (1 Sam. 9:15-17)

Pretty amazing series of coincidences, isn't it? It's a lot of things happening in just the right order at just the right time. It almost makes you believe that there actually is no such thing as coincidence at all. If that was true in Saul's life, then maybe it's true in your and mine too. Can you entertain the notion that right now, the same God who whispered in the ear of Samuel is still working in ways you aren't aware of? Maybe even right in the middle of something that seems extremely ordinary? If you can accept that as a possibility, then it

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can change your perspective on virtually any circumstance in your life.

If we stop to think about it, we can trace most anything in our lives back to seemingly coincidental circumstances. I met my wonderful wife, Jana, in 1997, when we were entering college. Up until a month earlier, I had planned to go to Texas Tech, but then I decided at the last minute to go to a different school. Some years before that, I had met Jana's sisters and brothers-in-law through our church. They, some years before that, decided to go to the same school where they had both met their spouses. Then they all got jobs and decided to stay in the town where they went to school instead of moving away.

You can do the same thing with something as simple as this book you're holding. Did you happen to just be reading this book right now? You might say yes. But if you believe in the sovereignty of God, you can start to trace a line of decisions and circumstances back and back and back and begin to see the remarkable events that came together for this very moment. Right now. Think about it. It will make your head spin.

Did you order the book online? If so, did someone tell you the title? Who was that person? How did you know them? What's your history with them? Did you walk into a bookstore? What was it about this book that caught your eye? Did the cover intrigue you? Perhaps because it struck a chord with something in your past? See how it works?

The work of God wasn't dependent on Saul's awareness of that work. Neither is God's work dependent on ours. But if we do begin to reflect and look deeper into our circumstances, dusting for the divine fingerprints present in any given situation, it will reveal two important things to us about the nature of God's work and presence in our lives. These truths set the stage for us to understand that there is, in fact, no such thing as "ordinary."

### **The Scope of God's Work**

First of all, we see the great scope of God's work. The day before Saul would encounter Samuel on that road, God whispered in Samuel's ear. Look again at what God said to His prophet about this forthcoming encounter:

"At this time tomorrow I will send you a man from the land of Benjamin. Anoint him ruler over My people Israel. He will save them from the hand of the Philistines because I have seen the affliction of My people, for their cry has come to Me." (1 Sam. 9:16)

Do you see it? God didn't say, "A good-looking, albeit oblivious young man will come into town tomorrow." No, He claimed divine orchestration of this moment: "I will send you a man . . ."



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This encounter wasn't by chance; it wasn't an accident by any stretch of the imagination. God had been involved in Saul's life for days and weeks and months and years, though Saul had no idea. Consider the amazing scope of the work of God to engineer this encounter. Evidently, God was so intricately involved in Saul's life and circumstances that He knew the exact right moment for some careless servant in Kish's house to leave the donkey pen unlatched. Even further, He knew how to direct the steps of those wandering donkeys to make sure that Saul and his servant followed them, without finding them, to the base of the hill in Zuph.

The question isn't whether or not God is present and active; the question is just how aware we are of that presence and activity. Just because we consider the ordinary details of life to be small and insignificant, devoid of any real meaning, doesn't mean that they are. And it certainly doesn't mean that God is uninvolved. In all those dirty diapers, bill payments, e-mails, and daily commutes, God is there. He is intimately involved in the small, seemingly insignificant areas of our lives. This leads us to the second point.

### **God's Work through the Ordinary**

God operates through, not in spite of, these seemingly ordinary circumstances. Unlike Saul, we have the benefit of knowing what's happening behind the scenes.

And isn't there part of you that wants to grab him by his big tall shoulders and shake him out of his stupor? "Would you forget about the stupid donkeys already? Don't you see that there is something bigger going on here?" Likewise, we might look at this story and see ourselves in Saul. We are living our lives chasing donkeys. Paying bills, going to work, parenting, going to church week after week—donkeys, donkeys, donkeys. So maybe what we need to do is break out of the monotony. Broaden our focus. Quit chasing the donkeys of life and realize there's something bigger going on around us.

Right?

Wrong.

In this story, the donkeys aren't a distraction from the work of God; the donkeys are the mechanism that God used to awaken Saul to something deeper. Something he wasn't previously aware of. Something more than ordinary. Let me put it another way.

What if the pathway to significance isn't around the donkeys we find ourselves chasing day in and day out? What if it's *through* them? What if those ordinary details of life are actually the mechanism by which we get to see and experience God and His redemptive plan in a living and vibrant way?

## **The Illusion of Ordinary**

Unfortunately, most of us have bought into the illusion of the ordinary. We long for an escape from our

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regular lives—something to change our lives from what they currently are into lives with more excitement, adventure, and meaning. Millions of people every day go to great lengths to actualize this kind of dream.

Sometimes it turns out good. When people decide to move from spiritual mediocrity and into radical obedience, that's a good thing. They might sell all their stuff and move across the ocean. Or they might take on the challenge of fostering a houseful of children. Or they might decide to start a nonprofit. That's all good.

Sadly, though, that's not always the story. For every person who moves in good ways away from the ordinary, there are ten stories of those who move in the opposite direction. They are so terrified of the normal and ordinary in their work, marriages, finances, and parenting, that they flee into something—*anything*—that holds the promise of importance. Of significance. Of excitement. The result is an affair. Or an addiction to porn. Or a gambling debt. Or an abandonment of family. All because so many of us suffer from the same, crippling fear that I do—the fear of the ordinary.

*But there is no such thing as ordinary when you are following an extraordinary God. "Ordinary" is a myth. The only reason we think of something as ordinary is because we fail to look for and then grasp the massive depth of the work and presence of God in our lives. In fact, as we look through Scripture, we find God not removing people from the ordinary, but instead*

transforming that ordinary into something wholly different. All of a sudden His people wake up to His presence and purpose that have been there all the time.

It's true, we also find the miraculous, but more times than not, the miraculous is couched in a situation that to the people involved in it, would have been considered just a part of another day. Very boring. Boring, that is, until they began to more fully grasp the scope, power, and wisdom of God.

If indeed that's true—that there is no such thing as ordinary—then we need to rethink the way we are approaching our everyday lives. We need to reconsider what the pathway to significance looks like. And we need to rediscover a God who doesn't call us out of the ordinary, but transforms the ordinary by His very presence. It will change the way we pay our bills, go to work, parent our children, and have ordinary conversations.

Everything will start to have meaning. *Everything.*

So again I ask: What if a life of significance isn't found apart from the donkeys, but right in the middle of them? What if there is a way to live a normal, ordinary life in an extraordinary way? What if there is a way to keep one eye on the donkeys and one eye on the God who opened the pen?

I think there is.