A SAMPLE CHAPTER

The Left Hand

Vocation, Neighbor, and the Christian Life

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CHAPTER ONE

The Weariness of "God's Will for My Life"

Sarah has changed jobs three times, cities twice, and churches four times. She is thirty-four, exhausted, and beginning to suspect that she has failed at the one thing every Christian is supposed to get right: finding God's will for her life.

She did not start out anxious. She started out eager. In college she read a book that told her God had a "specific plan" for her life — not a general command to love Him and her neighbor, but a blueprint, a hidden itinerary she was meant to discover through prayer, fasting, and the counsel of "godly mentors."[1] She prayed. She fasted. She sought counsel. And every time she made a decision — the job, the city, the church — she felt a brief surge of certainty, followed by a longer season of doubt. Had she heard Him correctly? What if she had missed the turn?

Now she sits in a coffee shop in a city she moved to because a pastor told her "the Lord was opening a door," working a job she took because a friend said she "felt peace about it," and she is not sure she believes in open doors anymore. She is not sure she believes in peace. What she believes in is exhaustion.

She has not said any of this out loud. There is a woman she has known since college who would listen, and Sarah has drafted the message four times and deleted it four times, because every version of it sounds like the same sentence: *I don't think God has been telling me anything.* She knows exactly what she would get back. She would get gentleness. She would get a verse. She would get the suggestion that this is a season, that God sometimes goes quiet to deepen our trust, that the very fact she is troubled shows how much she wants to follow Him. All of it kind. All of it true, probably, somewhere, about someone.

1. The genealogy of the blueprint doctrine — the holiness and higher-life revivals of the nineteenth century: the Wesleyan expectation of a second work of grace, the American holiness movement, and the higher-life conventions of the 1870s, of which the first Keswick Convention, gathered in 1875, became the most durable. For the full genealogy, including the twentieth-century figures who carried it into both the sanctuary and the recovery room, see the author's essay *Let Go and Let God: The Altar Call in the Passive Voice*, available free at larryherzog-jr.com.

And all of it would land as one more thing to do. Trust harder. Wait better. Want it more.

So she says nothing, and orders another coffee, and the silence starts to feel like evidence — because if God really were speaking, surely by now, after all this, she would have heard something.

The problem is not Sarah's faith. The problem is her theology.

HOW THE BLUEPRINT WAS BUILT

Sarah did not invent any of this. She inherited it, and it came to her from people who were trying to take God seriously — which is why it is so hard to put down, and why simply calling it wrong does not help.

So before we take it apart, let us be fair to it.

Where it came from

The idea that God has a detailed, individual, discoverable plan for each Christian's life did not fall out of the sky, and it is not in the Augsburg Confession, and you will not find it in the catechism. It arrived over about a century and a half, in stages, and each stage was reacting to something genuinely wrong.

It begins with a real problem: nominal Christianity. Churches full of people who could recite a creed and whose lives were untouched by it. Faced with that, movement after movement asked the same reasonable question — what would it look like to be *actually* serious? And the answers, over time, converged on a certain shape. A deeper life beyond ordinary faith. A higher surrender available to those willing to make it. A moment of full consecration after which the Christian life would function differently.

Notice that every one of those is aimed at a real target. Complacency *is* a problem. There *is* such a thing as a Christian who has stopped paying attention. Nobody in this chapter is defending a dead faith.

But watch what the shape does over generations. If there is a deeper life available and you do not have it, then you are living in the shallow one. And the deeper life, being invisible, has to be verified somehow — which means a market appears for methods of verification. How do I know I have surrendered enough? How do I know I am in the center of His will?

By the time it reaches Sarah's college dorm room, it has taken a particular late form: God has a specific plan for your life, individually tailored, and your central spiritual task

is to locate it. A career. A spouse. A city. Decisions with capital letters. The stakes are enormous, the information is hidden, and the search is on.

And it lands on a twenty-year-old who is already making the largest decisions of her life with the least data she will ever have, and it tells her that God has already decided and will not simply say so.

How you are supposed to know

Every system of discovery needs a way of telling when you have found the thing. This one has three, and Sarah has used all of them.

Peace. You will feel a settledness about the right choice. This is the most common and the most cited, and it has a certain plausibility; people do sometimes feel calm about good decisions.

Open doors. Circumstances will align. The opportunity will appear, the obstacle will fall away, and the alignment is read as guidance.

Counsel. Godly people will confirm it. And this one is the most respectable of the three, because seeking wisdom from others is genuinely commended in Scripture.

Take each of them seriously for a moment. They are not absurd. Peace, circumstance, and counsel are all real things and none of them is worthless.

The trouble is what they are being asked to do. They are being asked to function as *revelation* — to tell Sarah something God has not said in words, about a plan He has not disclosed, with the reliability she would need to bet a decade on it. And they cannot. Peace is a feeling and feelings track sleep and hormones and how the conversation went yesterday. Doors open and close for a thousand reasons including that somebody else quit. And godly counsel, in Sarah's actual experience, has come back split about half the time, which is what happens when you ask several thoughtful people a question none of them can answer.

She has been using a barometer to read a text.

It is worth watching this fail once, in detail, because in the abstract it sounds more workable than it is.

The Denver job. Sarah had eleven days to decide. She did what she had been taught: she prayed about it, she waited on peace, and she sought counsel from two people she trusts.

The first, a woman from her old congregation who has walked with her for years, said she had a real sense that this was God opening something, that the timing was too clean to be coincidence, and that Sarah should go.

The second, a man who had been in her Bible study and whose judgment she rates as highly as anyone's, said he had been praying about it and felt a caution — that Sarah has a pattern of moving when things get uncomfortable, and that he wondered whether God was asking her to stay put and be faithful where she was.

Both of them prayed first. Both of them love her. Both of them reported an impression from God, and the impressions contradicted.

So now Sarah has a new problem, and it is not the job. It is that she has to adjudicate between two people's accounts of what God is saying, using nothing but her own sense of which one resonates — which is to say, she is back to the peace test, which is the instrument that sent her looking for counsel in the first place.

She went. It has been fine. And she has never been able to shake the possibility that she overruled a warning, because the framework does not let her rule that out and never will.

The trap

Now the observation that makes sense of Sarah's twelve years, and it is the hinge of this chapter.

The system cannot fail a test, because it does not permit one.

Watch it work. Sarah takes the job and it goes well: she found the plan, the doctrine is confirmed. Sarah takes the job and it goes badly: she missed the turn somewhere, or God is using this to teach her something, or the plan was always for her to be here briefly. There is no outcome — none — that counts as evidence against the framework.

And because there is no disconfirming outcome, there is no exit. Sarah cannot reason her way out, because every piece of evidence she might use has already been assigned a meaning by the system that produced it.

Which explains the one thing about her that is otherwise inexplicable: **twelve years of effort has produced no relief.** Normally, working hard at something produces progress or produces a clear failure, and either one is information. Sarah has gotten neither. She has gotten twelve years of surges and doubts, and the reason is that effort is the only thing this system can absorb infinitely without ever being satisfied by it.

She keeps trying harder because trying harder is the only move available, and it is the one move that cannot work.

A WORD HE ACTUALLY SPOKE

So let us start over, from a different place.

There are things God has not told you

Begin with an unpopular sentence: God has not told you what to do with your life, and He is not going to.

Not because He is withholding. Because there are two entirely different things going on when we talk about "God's will," and this tradition has collapsed them, and separating them again is most of the cure.

There is what God is *doing* — the vast movement of His governance over everything that happens, including things you will never understand and things that will happen to you next year. Scripture is clear that He governs it and equally clear that you do not have access to the file. That is hidden, and it is hidden on purpose, and every attempt to pry it open ends badly. It is not a locked drawer with your name on it. It is not addressed to you at all.

And there is what God has *said* — which is public, written down, preached at you weekly, and not hidden in any respect.

The blueprint doctrine takes the first category and treats it as though it belonged to the second. It assumes God's governing purposes are a message He is trying to get to Sarah, and that her spiritual life consists of decoding it.

They are not a message. They are His business.

An illustration, because this distinction does more work than it looks like.

Suppose Sarah's mother becomes ill next spring. Is that God's will?

In the first sense — is it inside His governance, does He hold it, is it under His hand rather than loose in a random universe — yes, and Christians have always confessed as much, and it is a comfort at three in the morning that nothing has escaped Him.

In the second sense — is it a communication addressed to Sarah, containing instructions or a lesson she is meant to extract — the honest answer is that we have not been told and have no way of finding out.

Collapse those two and you get the thing that happens in hospital corridors, which Chapter 9 will handle at length: a woman standing next to a bed, trying to decode her mother's pancreas.

Keep them distinct and you get something a person can actually live in. God holds it. It is not a message. And what she owes her mother is not interpretation — it is the Fourth Commandment, which was already published, and which tells her exactly what to do without requiring her to work out why this is happening.

The word He did speak is disappointingly plain

Now the other half, and this is where people get quietly annoyed.

God has said what He wants from you. He has said it plainly, publicly, at length, and in language a child can hold. He wants you to fear and love Him. He wants you not to lie, not to steal, not to sleep with someone else's spouse, not to covet the neighbor's things. He wants you to honor your parents, to help your neighbor in his need, to speak well of him, to put the best construction on what he does.

That is not obscure. It is on a page in the back of a small book most of us were handed at twelve.[2]

And here is the awkward part. **Sarah knows all of that and does not experience it as an answer.**

Ask her whether God has revealed His will for her life and she will say no. Point out that He has published a list of what He wants from her and she will say — correctly — that it does not tell her whether to take the job in Denver.

That is exactly right, and it is worth sitting with rather than rushing past.

The commandments do not tell you whether to take the job. They tell you how to be, in whichever job you take. And that is not a smaller answer than the one Sarah wanted; it is an answer to a different question, and the reason it feels like a non-answer is that it does not make her special.

Because that is what the hidden plan was really offering. Not information — *significance*. A hidden individual itinerary means God has something particular in mind for you, uniquely, that He has not said to anyone else. A published list of commandments

2. The commandments as God's published and public will — Small Catechism, the Ten Commandments with their explanations; Fourth Commandment explanation as it bears on care for a parent, with Large Catechism I.105-110.

means He wants roughly the same things from you that He wants from the retired man three pews back.

A dull word from God is harder to accept than a hidden one, because a hidden one lets you keep feeling chosen while you search for it.

You are not in a hallway

Which brings us to the sentence this whole book is built on, arriving here for the first time.

Vocation is not discovered. It is received.

Luther, working through Genesis, keeps noticing something the text does not make a fuss about: that God's ordering of human life is *already in place*.

He points out that God puts the man in the garden and gives him a twofold charge — to work it and to guard it — and that this is before anything has gone wrong. Man was not created for idleness, Luther says, but for labor — and not even in the state of innocence was it otherwise. The work was not a punishment and it was not chosen. It was assigned, to a man who had not applied for it.

And then a line that ought to be better known than it is: on those same verses Luther observes that here we have the institution of the church *before* there was any household and before there was any civil government. God's orderings come first — church, then home, then state — and the human being arrives into an arrangement already made.[3]

There is a household. There is work. There is a civil order. These are not achievements or discoveries; they are the arrangement into which people are born, and they were God's idea before anyone consulted anyone.

Which means that when Sarah asks where God wants her, the question has a defect in it. It assumes she is currently nowhere — in a hallway, waiting for a door to be identified — and that the Christian life begins once she is correctly positioned.

She is not in a hallway. She has an apartment, a job, a mother in another state, a woman she has known since college, coworkers whose names she knows, and a congregation she is at least nominally part of. Every one of those is a person she is already

3. Vocation as received rather than discovered; God's placing of man in the garden with a twofold charge; man not created to idleness but to labor even before the fall; the institution of the church prior to household and civil government — Luther, *Lectures on Genesis*, on Gen. 2:15-17 (Lenker ed., 1904).

obligated to. Nobody assigned them by revelation. They accumulated, the way a life accumulates, and they are hers.

That is her vocation. Not a future one. That one.

And if she moves to Denver, she will have a different set, and that set will be her vocation too, and God will be no more and no less present in it — because His presence was never contingent on her having selected the correct city.

And this is not a new requirement

One guard before we go on, because a book like this can easily hand back with one hand what it took with the other.

Everything above is Law in the strict sense: it describes what God requires and where He has placed you. And Sarah has been drowning in requirement for twelve years. If the effect of this chapter is that she now feels obligated to love the neighbors she already has, correctly, with the right attitude, we will have swapped one exhaustion for another and called it freedom.

So: the Formula of Concord is careful to distinguish Law and Gospel precisely so that this does not happen. The Law tells you what to do and accuses you when you do not. The Gospel tells you what has been done and gives it to you. They are not two stages of the same instruction.[4]

Sarah's neighbors are her vocation. She will serve them imperfectly, resentfully on some days, and not at all on others. **That is not the part that determines whether she is God's.** We will come back to this at the end of the chapter and again in every chapter after it, because it is the thing that has to be said more than once.

THEN WHAT DO I ACTUALLY DO ON MONDAY?

Fair question, and a book that dismantled the blueprint without answering it would deserve the complaint.

About the decision in front of you

You probably have one. A job, a move, a school, a relationship, a house.

Here is the counsel, and it is going to sound anticlimactic, which is a feature.

4. The distinction between Law and Gospel, guarding this chapter's relief against becoming a fresh requirement — Formula of Concord, Epitome V; see especially the affirmative thesis that the Gospel is properly a preaching of consolation.

Use your head. God governs the left-hand kingdom — the ordinary world of work, family, and civil order — by reason. That is Chapter 3's argument, and it applies to your own life as much as to a magistrate's. You are permitted to think. Make a list. Ask what the money is, what the commute does to your family, whether you would be good at it, what you would be giving up. That is not a lesser, worldly method that you are settling for because the spiritual one failed. It is the method.

Check it against what He did say. Would taking this require you to lie, to abandon someone who depends on you, to do work that preys on your neighbor? Then no, and you did not need a feeling to tell you. That is what the commandments are for, and they answer a smaller number of questions than Sarah wants and they answer those with authority.

Ask people, and understand what you are asking them. Counsel is genuinely valuable — as counsel. Ask a wise friend what she thinks, and receive it as her judgment, which is what it is. What you must not do is treat her impression as a message routed through her, because that is a burden she cannot carry and you will end up resenting her for a decision that was yours.

Then decide, and stop auditing it. This is the hardest part for anyone formed as Sarah was, because the audit *is* the spiritual life as she has understood it. There is no verdict coming. If Denver goes badly, it will not be because you disobeyed a hidden instruction; it will be because jobs sometimes go badly, and there will be neighbors in Denver either way.

Then what is prayer for?

A fair question, and the one that usually comes next, because Sarah has been praying about decisions for twelve years and this chapter has just told her that the thing she was praying for is not sent.

So what is she doing when she prays about Denver?

Not extracting a decision. That is the practice being dismantled, and it should be said plainly rather than left implied: praying in order to receive an answer that will then function as instructions is a method that does not work, and its not working is not a reflection on her.

But asking is entirely right, and it is commanded. She is told to ask God for daily bread — for the ordinary provision of an ordinary life, which certainly includes a job and a place to live. So she may ask for the job. She may ask that it go well. She may ask

that the move not damage anything. That is not manipulation and it is not superstition; it is a creature asking her Father for things, which is what the Lord's Prayer is made of.

The distinction is small and does all the work. *Lord, give me what I need in this* is prayer. *Lord, tell me which one* is an attempt to open a file that is not addressed to her.

And then there is what prayer mostly is, which people forget in the middle of a decision: praise, thanks, confession, and asking for things on behalf of other people. Sarah has spent twelve years using prayer almost exclusively as a decision instrument, and the effect has been that her prayer life is entirely about her own future. That is a narrow diet, and part of her exhaustion is nutritional.

A word about wisdom, since somebody will raise it. Scripture does say that if you lack wisdom you should ask, and that it will be given.[5] Notice what is promised: wisdom. Not information. Wisdom is the capacity to think well about a matter — which is exactly the faculty Chapter 3 will say God governs the left hand by, and exactly what she should be using on a spreadsheet about Denver. That prayer is answered in the ordinary way such prayers are answered: she thinks more clearly, considers what she had been avoiding, and notices something she had missed.

If afterward she is still uncertain, she has not been refused. Uncertainty is the normal condition of a person deciding something in advance of knowing how it turns out, and no amount of praying converts a decision into a disclosure.

About the choice you think you already got wrong

Some readers are not facing a decision. They made one, years ago, and have spent the time since believing they stepped off the path.

The man who did not take the ministry position. The woman who married the wrong person, or did not marry the right one. The one who moved and should not have.

There was no path in the sense you mean. There was no single correct route from which you have deviated and onto which you must now find your way back. That framework is what has been hurting you, and it was never true, and the years since were not a detour — they were your life, containing actual neighbors, in which God was present at exactly the density He is present anywhere.

If the decision was a *sin* — if you left someone you should not have left, or took something that was not yours — that is a different matter and it has a different remedy, which

5. "If anyone is deficient in wisdom, he should ask God" — James 1:5.

is not "you didn't really miss the plan" but confession and absolution, and it is available today.

But most of what people call missing God's will is not sin at all. It is a choice that turned out mediocre, filed under a doctrine that made mediocre feel like disobedience.

"But God really did lead me"

Now the objection, and it is a serious one, and a chapter that steamrolled it would deserve to lose the reader who is raising it.

Some of you have a story. A thing happened that you cannot explain — a conviction that would not leave, a stranger who said the exact thing, a door that closed so cleanly it felt like a hand. And you did not manufacture it, and you are not credulous, and you have quietly resented every book that treated your experience as a category error.

This chapter is not calling you a liar, and I want to be careful here rather than clever.

Two things.

First, God governs everything, and He is not prevented from arranging your circumstances however He likes. Nothing in this chapter says He cannot bring a person across your path or press something on your mind. The argument is not that God does not act. It is that His acting is not a *message system* you are responsible for operating.

Second — and this is the part that matters — notice that your story is told in the past tense.

That is not a small observation. Looking back over a life and seeing God's hand in it is one of the oldest and most legitimate things a Christian does; the Psalms are full of it. What Sarah has been attempting is entirely different. She has been trying to read providence *forward*, in advance, as a source of instructions about a decision that has not been made yet.

Backward, you are recognizing. Forward, you are predicting. The first is faith. The second is a technique, and it does not work, and the people selling it usually illustrate it with backward stories.

So keep your story. Tell it. And do not build a method out of it, because the method will not survive contact with the next decision, and the failure will not be God's.

About the waiting

And for the person who is not deciding and not regretting but *stalled* — who has been waiting for clarity before acting, in some cases for years:

The clarity is not coming, because the thing you are waiting for is not a thing God sends. Meanwhile there are people in front of you today, and the waiting has become its own way of not serving them.

You are allowed to act on the best judgment you have. That is not presumption. It is what a grown person does, and it is what God has equipped you for, and He is not standing behind you with a clipboard.

THERE WAS NO *IT* TO MISS

Sarah is going to finish her coffee and go back to a job she is not sure about, in a city she is not sure about, and nothing about her circumstances has changed in the course of this chapter.

Here is what has, if anything has.

She did not miss it. There was no *it* to miss. The hidden itinerary she has been hunting since she was twenty-two does not exist — not because God has no purposes, but because His purposes were never a set of instructions issued to her and then withheld. She has spent twelve years searching for a message that was never sent, and concluding from the silence that she was a poor listener.

She is not a poor listener. There was nothing to hear.

What He did say, He said out loud. In a book, in a sermon she heard three Sundays ago, in the words a man says over her when she confesses. It is public, it is unimpressive, and it is enough.

She is not behind. Twelve years of searching produced no career, no husband, and no clarity, and she has read that as twelve years lost. They were not lost. She worked at things, was known by people, sat with a friend through a bad winter, taught a class of nine-year-olds for two years in the second city and was good at it. None of that was preparation for a life that had not started. It was the life.

And she has neighbors right now. A woman she has known since college who would take the message if she sent it. Coworkers. A mother in another state. Whoever ends up next to her this week. Not a future assignment contingent on getting the geography right. Those people, this week.

But if the chapter stopped there it would have handed Sarah a better task list, and a better task list is not what she needs. So the last word is not about her at all.

Christ did not consult her navigation record.

He came for her before she had made a single one of those decisions — before Denver, before the four churches, before the surges and the doubts. He did not evaluate whether she had positioned herself correctly to receive Him. He was not waiting for her to find the center of His will so He could meet her there.

He came to where she actually was, which is what He has always done, and what He did at the incarnation, and what He does every Sunday in a building full of people who mostly did not follow a plan and mostly cannot account for how they got there.

Sarah has been trying to get to God's will.

She is standing in it. She was standing in it in the second city and the third job and all four churches, and the only thing that was ever wrong was a map that told her she was lost.

This is where the sample ends. The rest of The Left Hand is the invitation it opens onto.

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