

# AFTER COLLEGE

NAVIGATING TRANSITIONS,  
RELATIONSHIPS AND FAITH



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ONE

# “GO TO AN UNKNOWN LAND”

TRUSTING A FAMILIAR GOD  
FOR UNFAMILIAR TIMES



*I dwell in possibility.*

EMILY DICKINSON

IN THE COLD NOVEMBER of her first year out of college, Natalia sat by the fireplace in her parents' home, weeping. Bone-tired, overworked and lonely, she thought, *This is not what life is supposed to be like*. She was working seventy to eighty hours a week just to stay afloat in a demanding marketing job, she had no time to make new friends and she longed to be in a dating relationship—something she assumed would have happened in college. Her stomach hurt every Sunday evening when she thought about facing another week with her impossible boss, catty coworkers and overflowing inbox. Stuck on a treadmill, Natalia felt desperate for just one of the luxuries she had enjoyed while she was a student: an hour to sit in a coffee shop with a friend



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or to play the piano alone. She said leaving college felt like the “world had been ripped out from under me.” Nothing felt settled or familiar. Natalia confessed, “I felt inadequate and incapable of making life work.” Desperate for something familiar, Natalia made frequent trips to her parents’ home on the weekends. She longed for something known in the midst of so much upheaval and uncertainty.

As we step into the great unknown of life after college, it’s important to know we are not alone. We journey forward in the footsteps of a long line of leavers—an ancient history of God’s people who have abandoned all that is familiar to follow a call into uncharted territory.

Consider Abraham—a man called by God to leave his country, his people and his father’s household in Harran for a new dream.<sup>1</sup> At the ripe age of seventy-five, he hears God say, “Go.” Give up everything.

The LORD had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you.

“I will make you into a great nation,  
and I will bless you;  
I will make your name great,  
and you will be a blessing.  
I will bless those who bless you,  
and whoever curses you I will curse;  
and all peoples on earth  
will be blessed through you.” (Genesis 12:1-3)

When we understand the cultural context, this ask is *huge*. God calls Abraham to abandon all he has ever known and everyone who knows him. He must say goodbye forever to his kinship group—his entire network of relationships and social support.<sup>2</sup> There’s no technology that will connect him to his people or hometown ever again. Instead, if he says yes to God he will be separated from all he’s ever known by approximately five hundred miles—that’s a one *month*



journey by caravan (at a twenty-mile-per-day clip).<sup>3</sup> He will never again walk the dusty paths his feet have travelled every day, smell the salty air after a hard rain, see his aging father's smile or hear the roar of laughter as he and his friends throw their heads back in the glow of a night fire. It is goodbye for good.

As the male heir, Abraham is slated to inherit everything from his father, securing his place in society and in the family line.<sup>4</sup> This too he must give up in order to follow God. Will he choose to forsake everything in order to heed God's call? Will he cut ties with the land, his family, his inheritance and his people—a bond built over seven decades? Leave his whole life behind to embrace God's promise?

The Scripture says, "Abram went" (Genesis 12:4). He decides to trust God—to take him at his word. Abraham has faith that God will provide anew everything that he has asked Abraham to give up.<sup>5</sup> As we step into life after college, we too are called to forsake the familiar to embrace something new. As exciting as this time may be, it's also marked by great uncertainty.<sup>6</sup> We trade a familiar place and our familiar purpose within it for a new reality. Leaving college may mean we have to let go of certain ways of doing things, embrace new roles, redefine relationships and say goodbye to people we care about. As we enter the unknown, we can look to Abraham and be encouraged by his faith in an uncertain time as well as by God's faithfulness to him.

We can also take comfort from Abraham's example when our expectations don't match our reality. Abraham steps out in faith only to find his path littered with trial. He encounters plagues, persecution, detours and doubts long before reaching the fulfillment of God's plan. At one point he has to reroute to Egypt because the very land God has told him he'll possess is brittle with drought. Not to mention that the wife who is supposed to bear him a child is still barren at age sixty-five. The fruition of God's plan is not looking so good.

The oppression and struggles cause Abraham to disbelieve God and question his character. Can God really be trusted to deliver on his

word? Abraham wonders, “O Sovereign LORD, how can I be sure that I will actually possess [the land you promised]?” (Genesis 15:8 NLT). Perhaps you too may question whether the God you followed during college can be trusted in this time of transition. Maybe you find yourself throwing your hands up, wondering, *How can I be sure you really have a plan, God?* In Abraham’s fears and frustration, God is gracious and patient. He reminds him of his character and promise:

Do not be afraid, Abram.  
I am your shield,  
your very great reward. . . .

*I am the LORD*, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it. (Genesis 15:1, 7)

The same God who led him in Ur is also the God of Abraham’s transition. Likewise, the God of your college years—the God of Abraham—is the same God who leads you in the joy and challenge of the transition into the next phase. He doesn’t change his tune when our circumstances change. His character and promises are constant, even in dynamic times. Everything may be shifting around you, but God, our rock, remains the sure and solid place we find our footing. He is the God who pursues, promises and provides—even after college.

### PREPARING TO ENTER THE UNKNOWN

Looking to God and his character is a crucial part of preparing for any transitional time. So are the practices and perspective we choose in the everyday. Though there are many things we cannot predict as we enter the unknown, we can manage our expectations, choose intentional actions and adopt healthy heart attitudes.

Before we address these, it’s important to realize that our day-to-day actions, attitudes and expectations are always connected to a bigger picture: our core beliefs, our worldview. Whether we’re aware of it or not, we all believe in something, value something, worship

something. Every day we direct our affection and desires toward something, and often we do it without even knowing it.<sup>7</sup> We may be chasing money, power, influence, comfort, pleasure, fame, good looks or smarts. Why? Because of our deepest beliefs. We may claim we love God or have a Christian worldview, but we must examine our lives to see what our behaviors say about what we really believe.

If we don't know what we believe or if our claims don't carry into our everyday actions, then we'll likely adopt the worldview of those around us or fill in the blanks with something insufficient. If we're going to thrive beyond college, we need a robust worldview that makes sense of our deepest pain, greatest dreams and everything in between.<sup>8</sup> It is our Christian worldview—shaped by the biblical story of creation, fall, redemption and restoration—that fully prepares us to expect difficult life experiences without losing hope in the midst of them.

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*Not sure what you believe or what it means to have a Christian worldview? Check out Christian Worldview: A Student's Guide by Philip Graham Ryken.*

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***Accurate expectations.*** "The first year out was one of the hardest years of my life," reports Curt. He moved to inner-city Baltimore for a job with Teach for America, a position that stretched him in ways his college classes and student teaching stint did not. Curt also left campus at the height of his social game with a strong support network. President of his Christian fellowship group, he had countless friends, an active community life and college ministers who invested in him. Then he moved to a city where he knew no one. In addition to the adjustment to an unknown place, he faced significant challenges in his family life that year. Everything seemed to hit him at once.

Another alum, Kate, describes her first year this way: "It's much rougher than I thought. . . . I thought things would just play out, and they didn't. I



don't have friends, I don't have a job and I hang out with my parents every night!" Upon graduation Kate could not find a job, so she chose to move back home with her parents. She struggled to find friends with similar values, to connect to a vibrant church, to make ends meet financially and to keep proper perspective.

My own experiences as a graduate validate what Curt and Kate say about their first few months out of school. I moved to a small town called State College in what felt like the middle of nowhere, Pennsylvania. Though referred to by locals as the "Happy Valley," it felt more valley than happy. I struggled to find my place and purpose in a new location; there were dismal days that made me feel anxious, lonely and depressed (the often gray sky didn't help). On my worst days I used to get up and go through the motions of a morning routine only to find myself paralyzed by feelings of despair. *Is this what life after college is like? Did I make a mistake in moving here?*

I share these stories because they represent a narrative I encounter again and again: life after college comes with challenges. If your transition is easier than you expected, give thanks. But if it's not, you're not alone! Sometimes it's hard because we're not prepared, but it's also hard because we're going through a major transition.

Perhaps you cannot imagine any hitches in your first strides out of school. For many alumni that initial stretch offers a welcome change to the confines of college. Making money, living on your own, doing work in a field you love—it feels like the best of times. But even so, you will inevitably hit a bump in the road—a heartbreak, rejection from a job or promotion you want, financial struggle, relational conflict. Life after college is a sweet time, but not necessarily because it lacks obstacles. Thriving in the next phase is not so much about avoiding challenges as about learning how to navigate them. And it's about managing our expectations within them.

Though many recent graduates feel unprepared, there are also those who enter the transition with a robust worldview and realistic



expectations. They prepare for potential obstacles and gain tools necessary for navigating change. They still find that life after college is hard at times. But also very good!

Jackie shares that her transition went more smoothly than she envisioned. She credits her success to her own preparedness as well as her patience with the transition. Without skyscraper expectations for everything to go perfectly, Jackie was able to keep sane and let things unfold in time. Instead of stressing because the field that she'd trained for (occupational therapy) was not what she wanted to do, she chose to trust God, take her time with the questions that surfaced and invite others to help her discern her career path. This process led to a job-shadowing opportunity with a physician assistant. After that, Jackie landed a nursing assistant job that would expose her to a variety of areas within the field and allow her to further clarify her vocation. In Jackie's words, "It's a confusing time, but the biggest thing that kept me calm was realizing I don't have to be rushed as I figure things out."

When we keep a level head and manage our expectations, we position ourselves for a more successful transition. If we assume we may hit a bump, rather than being surprised when we do, we will likely move over it with hope and grace instead of allowing our disappointment to send us into a downward spiral.

***Intentional actions.*** One of the biggest challenges of Christian life is aligning our beliefs with our behaviors. Many of us flounder because we're not sure how to manage unmet expectations or we choose actions (or inactions) that send us down unhealthy paths.<sup>9</sup> We may wake up one day to realize *I don't even know how I got here*. Countless little decisions (or indecisions) add up to a life we never meant to live.

Stephanie admits, "I crashed and burned right after college." She struggled to set boundaries in a social service job with endless client needs; she wasn't sure how to be an effective employee and she didn't know how to ask for help. When she found a church, she failed to plug in beyond Sunday morning. Because there were few people in a similar

life stage and the church was a forty-five-minute drive away, it felt like too much effort to do more, especially in the midst of her exhausting schedule. Stephanie reflects, “So much is handed to you when you’re in college. If you want to be a Christian, you simply show up to a certain hall at certain time. After college, you have to go after everything, and I didn’t know how.”

A challenging first year led to an even worse second. To supplement her income, Stephanie started bartending a block away from home and moved in with a friend from work—someone who was not a healthy influence. Working at the bar made it easy to start drinking— at first to relieve stress, then as a lifestyle. The bar became Stephanie’s primary place of connection. She says, “When I realized I wasn’t making friends and connecting in an adult way, I was desperate and lonely.” Patterns from her past resurfaced as she slipped into drinking and hooking up. After two years of burnout and bad choices, Stephanie realized, “I was soulless and dead inside. . . . This was not the life I intended to live.”

Because she started with a college education and a job offer, Stephanie thought she should “have it all together”—as if having her ducks in a row marked the arrival into adulthood. But there were so many things she wasn’t prepared for, and she didn’t know where to turn. In her words, “I failed because I had this misconception that I should have my life in order, love my job, and have a great community. But when I didn’t have it all figured out, I didn’t know where to ask for help . . . or even that I could.”

Trying to prove to others that we’ve “arrived” is not the goal. These years are about making choices that will help us successfully *emerge into* adulthood. The risk of floundering is real. We can guard against it by preparing for challenges, asking for help and choosing intentional actions. Though the landscape is thick with temptations, a life of flourishing in the next phase is possible. There are many struggle stories, but also many success stories!

Robert, a graduate who successfully transitioned into a new job and location, was both intentional about preparing and thoughtful about his choices. He moved two hundred miles from his entire support network and his fiancée just after getting engaged. Before making the move he researched churches in the area and asked for recommendations. During his first week of work (and still without furniture in his apartment) he took the initiative to check out a small group nearby. While not the right fit, it was a start. Despite out-of-town weekend commitments over the following weeks, Robert settled on a church within the first month. He got plugged in to a small group, which became the start of a new friendship network. Among other healthy decisions, he chose to live on a monthly budget that included giving as well as long-term priorities, including paying off student debt. He also managed his time and finances with his future wife in mind. They approached decisions as a team even though they would not be married or living together for another year.

Though this transitional time was not without challenges, Robert had the perspective and tools to navigate them. He says,

I would not say that my first year after graduation was easy. The tension of being distant from valued relationships has never really gone away. I didn't always know exactly what to do in every circumstance, but I had tools in my toolbox that helped me deal with expected challenges. This gave me peace and confidence in those areas and gave me more time and energy to deal with the unanticipated challenges that always come up.

Robert took intentional action because he was equipped, but also because he desired to align his beliefs with his behaviors. We can make wise choices when we're prepared with practical life skills—not just in terms of *what* to do, but also in the *whys* and *hows*. When we know deep down *why* something (like finding a church or managing money) matters (belief) as well as *how* we actually put one foot in front of the other to go after it (behavior), we can pursue faithfulness.



**Healthy heart attitudes.** As we start that first job, move into a new neighborhood or begin a grad school program, we will inevitably meet people who do not share our vision and values. Our world is filled with competing worldviews and value systems (nihilism, atheism, individualism, consumerism and so on) that we'll encounter every day. As our beliefs bump up against others', we may find it hard to share hope while still holding on to our own. We may be tempted toward attitudes of selfishness, cynicism or despair.

In a baccalaureate address to a group of Stanford graduates, Jim Wallis, CEO of Sojourners, stated, "The big struggle of our times . . . is the fundamental choice between cynicism and hope. . . . Hope is not a feeling; it is a decision."<sup>10</sup> Though there are many things we cannot control about transitional times, we can choose our attitude. On most days we will have a decision to make about the perspective we adopt: cynicism or hope? Apathy or anticipation? Fear or trust?

We can enter the postgraduate years with a mindset that will wreck us or we can adopt the opposite. We can choose to believe that a life of flourishing is possible, even if the first few months or years out are bumpy. *Despite* our circumstances, hope believes that the story is not over—good can and will prevail. Stronger than mere optimism, hope allows us to recognize that things are not at their best while trusting in a greater reality—that God is at work, reconciling *all* things to himself, making *all* things right. Someday life on earth will be like it is in heaven. *That's* perspective!

One of the most encouraging things I can share about all of these alumni stories and my own is that we each (eventually) turned to Jesus and chose hope in a time of transition. Or, perhaps better put, Jesus chose and chased after us, and we surrendered to his love. Though we had moments of despair and days of doubt, we continued to cling to the character and promises of God. Beyond just believing *in* God, we decided to believe God—that he is who he says he is and his promises are true.<sup>11</sup> There were definitely days I disbelieved and many mornings

when I prayed that God would give me the faith to even have faith. There were days of desperation, frustration and heartache, but never a day without a decision to make: cynicism or hope? Apathy or anticipation? Fear or trust?

Robert, who desired to choose hope, shares a bit about how his worldview affected his attitude after college:

There is one obstacle that I do not recall needing to deal with very much: fear. I understood the gravity of what I was taking on all at once, and truthfully I did feel overwhelmed at times. But I also felt prepared and capable of dealing with it. I had doubts that making so many big transitions was the right decision. But because I know that God is sovereign over every square inch of my life, I had peace that he had prepared the way for me.

My hope is that you take some time to prepare for the road ahead. I also hope that you “dwell in possibility.” This Emily Dickinson line is hope in phrase form—a great mantra for life after college. This attitude welcomes and expects good things. It anticipates that something wonderful is around that next corner. If we experience confusion, exhaustion or frustration for a time, it indicates that we are on the brink of discovery. In fact, perhaps the more frustrated we are the closer we are to that revelation. When we dwell in possibility, the world is a fascinating place where we get to participate in the work of a God who delights to unfurl his goodness before our eyes. He longs to lead us into a life of flourishing.

**ENTER THE UNKNOWN WITH  
A KNOWN GOD (WHO KNOWS YOU)**

Just as Abraham stepped out in faith, not knowing where he was going except that he was to leave Harran, we too must trust God to reveal his plan and purpose. As you go, God will “show you” (Genesis 12:1).



But it's not the kind of revelation where you get the entire roadmap up front. The Hebrew word for "show" in this verse literally means "*as you are going*, I will show you." Borrowing from Doctorow, Anne Lamott says that life is like driving a car at night: you can only see as far as your headlights. She says, "You don't have to see where you are going, you don't have to see your destination or everything you will pass along the way. You just have to see two or three feet ahead of you."<sup>12</sup> If we saw our whole life plan mapped out before us, we'd anticipate all the hard parts—the steep climbs and dark valleys—and we'd likely try to run or find an alternate route, missing exactly what God plans or allows for our good and his glory. We may not have a blueprint, but we do have a guide who will light each step of our way (Psalm 119:105).

Surely we will encounter bumps in the road. Maybe we already have. In vulnerable moments, our reaction and actions often reveal the bare bones of our belief. In my conversations with alumni a consistent theme stands out: unknown times and postcollege trials become the proving ground for faith, forcing us to wrestle through until we hopefully emerge with deeper belief than before. When trials come, our loss, pain or uncertainty may bring us to a crossroads. Will we believe that God knows us—that he sees exactly what we are going through and holds us close? Or will we sink into the sea of our own struggle, disbelieving his presence and sovereignty in our lives?

In my first year out of college, I experienced the most significant loss up to that point in my life: I had my heart broken. It may sound trivial now, but at the time it was so painful I wanted to throw up every day for weeks. This postcollege trial became a defining faith moment as I had to choose between shaking my fist at God or clinging to Christ for dear life. Feeling hurt and broken, I told a close friend from college that I was ready to say "screw it" when it came to seeking God's best, especially for my dating life. I felt like God had screwed me over, so why not do the same to him? "Besides," I rationalized, "if I get hurt

again, at least it will be on my terms." As I confided in my friend she reminded me that we had a belief system that offered a greater hope and higher standard. Her faith sustained my own, pushing me in the path of God rather than self.

As I look back on that time, I see a tender, caring God who knows me. He knew I needed that friend at that moment to steer me toward Jesus. He also provided a friend in my new community who was going through nearly the exact same thing. God spoke to me in ways I could connect to, such as through the Psalms or the Rilke poem "Autumn," which arrived in a random book from my father the week I was hurting the most. God poured out so much good in the months and years that followed. Not to mention all of the good that came from removing that relationship at that time. A gaping space opened in my life, and though I was tempted to fill it in unhealthy ways, God gave me himself. He also gave me friends and mentors who helped me through deep inner healing. I met with our prayer team at church, and I experienced God more intimately than ever before. God knows us. He knows what we need better than we do. And he is a known God—a God whose tried and true character can be trusted for good in our lives.

As God continues to fulfill the promise he made to Abraham, it leads to generations of God's people trusting him and recalling his character. For example, the book of Joshua recounts the faith of the Israelites as God parts the Jordan River during flood season for them to cross. While God holds back the waters, he commands Joshua to enlist his leaders to build a memorial. Each leader must remove a stone from the middle of the dry ground and carry it to the other side. There they build a monument that will forever mark the moment of God's miracle and provision (Joshua 4:1-7). God invites us to recall his faithfulness—to remember that his hand carries us, especially in the middle of our own raging rivers. Each time we recall God's faithfulness in a former situation, we stack a metaphorical rock, creating a monument on which to fix our eyes in times of distress and doubt. As

we remember his goodness, God re-members us, putting our fragmented, broken selves back together.<sup>13</sup>

Not only is God's goodness the same yesterday, today and forever, but also he is the one who promises to bless us, keep us and fulfill his good purposes through us. The same man, Abraham, who was called to an unknown place received a promise that carried through generations. A promise that is as true today as it was centuries ago: God is building his kingdom through broken people, blessing those who choose him and making them great in him. This promise radically changed Abraham. It will change us too if we choose to cling to a familiar, *good* God in these unfamiliar times.

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### GOING DEEPER

1. What are your greatest hopes and concerns right now?
2. In what ways are you entering or already in the unknown? What feels most uncertain or unfamiliar? Why?
3. What comfort or lesson can you take from Abraham's story?
4. Preparing for a life of faithfulness involves accurate expectations, intentional actions and healthy heart attitudes. What is one thing you can do to better prepare?
5. Can you recall a time when God demonstrated his faithfulness to you? What metaphorical rocks can you stack as a reminder of God's character?
6. What broken or hurting part of your life do you need God to remember? How can you invite him or others in?

**Scripture study:** Genesis 12–25, especially 12:1–4; 15:1, 7–8; Joshua 4:1–9

**Recommended reading:**

Byron Berger, ed., *Serious Dreams: Bold Ideas for the Rest of Your Life* (Square Halo Books, 2015).



Steven Garber, *The Fabric of Faithfulness: Weaving Together Belief and Behavior*, expanded ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007).

Meg Jay, *The Defining Decade: Why Your Twenties Matter—and How to Make the Most of Them Now* (New York: Twelve/Hachette Book Group, 2012).

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