

JONATHAN PARNELL

NEVER
SETTLE
FOR
NORMAL

THE PROVEN PATH TO
SIGNIFICANCE AND HAPPINESS

Praise for
Never Settle for Normal

“*Never Settle for Normal* may be the key to help you doubt your doubting of God, because the god you are doubting might not be the real God. And if you lose reality while turning from the imaginary, you lose everything. You long for happiness and significance. Jonathan Parnell makes a compelling case that the whole history of the world exists to show you where this is found. This book is a journey from eternity to eternity. You may find what you are longing for not in a collection of ideas organized around themes but in a kind of earthy itinerary from creation to the end of the world. I hope so.”

—JOHN PIPER, founder and teacher at desiringGod.org and
chancellor of Bethlehem College and Seminary, Minneapolis

“Jonathan Parnell shares astounding truth, making what it means to be a Christian understandable for any reader—from the wanderer to the veteran in the faith. *Never Settle for Normal* is a helpful primer and tool for anyone exploring Christianity.”

—TRILLIA NEWBELL, author of *Enjoy, Fear and Faith*,
and United

“Jonathan Parnell has written an engaging book about our relentless quest for satisfaction that takes us down thousands of culs-de-sac and dead-end streets—until we follow Jesus. It’s refreshing to read about God as a happy, loving Father in a book that doesn’t minimize his wrath against sin. *Never Settle for Normal* shows sin for what it is and does, exalts Christ, and powerfully portrays his violent rescue of his people.”

—RANDY ALCORN, author of *Heaven*, *Happiness*, *Truth*,
The Treasure Principle, and other books

“In moments of true awareness we look around at one another and this world and we *know*. Deep in our soul we know there is more than what we can see with our eyes. Proverbs tells us to get wisdom and insight; there is no quest as noble as this. The stakes are high and we need real help for the journey. Parnell’s book is a trustworthy guide for all who are seeking God or any who are unsure where to begin.”

—GLORIA FURMAN, author of *Glimpses of Grace*
and *Alive in Him*

“Most people I meet have a gap between the life they live currently and the life they believe they were born to live. The frustration that comes from wanting to live a life that matters, while seemingly never getting there, can be maddening. The way to bridge that gap is through *the way, truth, and life*—Jesus. Jonathan Parnell has written a captivating book to help show this reality. Read it, embrace it, and share it with someone you know who is searching for more.”

—ALVIN L. REID, senior professor of Evangelism and
Student Ministry and Bailey Smith Chair of Evangelism
at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

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Trade Paperback ISBN 978-1-60142-906-3

eBook ISBN 978-1-60142-907-0

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Cover design by Kristopher K. Orr

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Published in the United States by Multnomah, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

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The Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file with the Library of Congress.

Printed in the United States of America

2017—First Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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To David Cooper

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Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory.

—1 Peter 1:8

The Stupid Normal

And I don't want a never ending life
I just want to be alive while I'm here.

—“Spirits,” The Strumbellas

There is nothing necessarily wrong with normal. It all depends on how you’re using the word.

A lot of times normal is good for you, like that garbage bag that needs to be taken out—the one with the little hole in the bottom that leaks a trail of some unidentified substance from the kitchen to the front door and demands an extra five minutes to retrace your steps on hands and knees with a paper towel.

Normal like that is an everyday sacrament meant to train humble hearts and level heads. That’s why it’s good for us to put on our socks one at a time, scrub the frying pan with a sponge, and stand in line for an hour just to buy a sheet of stamps so we can mail out our Christmas cards. This book is not about turning your nose up at menial things.

We need menial things.

Instead, this book is about not settling for the normal that has become our cultural mind-set. I’m talking about the kind of normal that

pretends God doesn't exist, that casts a vision of life devoid of ultimate reality and then acts like we're better off that way.

I'm not talking about your nine-to-five job that feels boring. God bless your boring job—and I think most books that would tell you anything different are a sham. So I want to be clear from the start.

You're not going to find in these pages a message that runs with the whole "find your inner champion" glibness. You don't have an inner champion. You have an inner brokenness that desperately needs to be healed by Jesus. All of us, including me, are sinners who have bought into the lies around us, at least at some level. And if we're really honest, we've likely fallen for them hook, line, and sinker. That's because the lies are so many and so common that we don't recognize them as lies. They've become too normal. It's what I like to call "the stupid normal."

LIFE IS LIKE [A CUP OF HOT] CHOCOLATE

I first heard my daughter Hannah use this phrase when she was four. It was a cold Minnesota night as we were getting ready to leave our local YMCA. Hannah was standing beside her brother and sister as they waited patiently for our van to warm up in the parking lot, which is the sort of thing you do in Minnesota. The kids had been so compliant the whole evening that I promised them each a cup of hot chocolate when we got home. Hannah, however, was not impressed by my reward, so she tried to sweeten the deal.

"Can we get it at Ana's house?" she asked.

Ana was our girls' best friend who lived a couple of doors down. We had sipped hot chocolate with her and her family several times to wrap up afternoons of winter sledding, but on this particular night we just didn't have time.

“No,” I replied smiling, “we’re going to drink it at our house tonight.”

And that’s when she said it, with the unforgettable face of unfiltered disappointment. “But we just have the stupid normal!”

Now, my four-year-old was not a hot chocolate connoisseur. She had no extensive research on which to base her claim that the hot chocolate I made was somehow inferior to others’. In that moment she just knew that the hot chocolate she drank at Ana’s was better than the stuff I made at home. Maybe it was the whole experience itself, maybe the company, maybe some extra marshmallows—I don’t really know. But for whatever reason, my hot chocolate just wasn’t the same. She knew there was something missing. She knew there could be something more. According to her assessment, our house just had the stupid normal.

And too often, that’s what many of us would say about our lives.

If we were to sit back and consider our everyday routines compared to the depths of reality—the depths we’ve at least heard to be true—a lot of us might look as disappointed as my daughter. Even if we know the right things to say, we’re rarely satisfied by how this knowledge contributes to the way we live. The grind of this life can get so monotonous. The labor never pays off the way we imagine it will. The vacations never deliver what we hope for. Even our most anticipated joys fizzle, leaving only fractured memories.

Is this it? Is this all there is? Something has to be missing. Surely there is something more.

We all wonder those things sometimes, even those of us who consider ourselves Christians.

We think about the bigness of this planet: all this life, all this action, all these sunrises. And then we take a look at the stack of trifles we’ve been buying into from this world: the ads that define the essence of joy, the pop

lyrics that determine our value system, the magazine covers that set our standard for beauty. Not to mention the “calculated barrenness” being shoved down our throats.¹ It doesn’t take much reflection to realize that all this air we’ve been breathing is a smog of lies. We’ve been running after something deep, but we’re not even scraping the surface. The psalmist tells us it’s the fool who says there is no God (see Psalm 14:1), and yet that’s the anthem we’ve all learned to sing. It has become normal. That’s why I call it “the stupid normal.”

THIS WORLD IN WHICH WE LIVE

You shouldn’t feel strange if you’ve felt disappointed about these things. Instead, you should feel strange if you have not.

This is the issue at the center of the human experience.

It’s the issue our ancestors dealt with before us, and it’s the issue especially worth dealing with today since we live in such a secular age—an age that has “progressed” beyond the need for genuine faith, or so it seems. We now live in this moment of history in which our everyday existence plays out in what one philosopher has called “the immanent frame.”²

The immanent frame simply means that we live in a day and age when most people believe that what you see is what you get. It’s the kind of thinking that says all the things *here* are the only things *real*.

And this perspective isn’t entirely new.

Poet Walt Whitman, ahead of his time in the nineteenth century, wrote that there’s never anything more “than there is now.”³ Heaven and hell might as well be here, Whitman would say, because *here is as far as we get*. There is nothing higher or deeper or truer than the things we can get our hands on.

Many people would claim to not think this way, but it’s still how a lot of us live. Tim Keller, a longtime pastor in Manhattan, explained,

Individuals could profess to not be secular people, to have religious faith. Yet, at the practical level, the existence of God may have no noticeable impact on their life decisions and conduct. This is because in a secular age even religious people tend to choose lovers and spouses, careers and friendships, and financial options with no higher goal than their own present-time personal happiness.⁴

In other words, it doesn't really matter where you see yourself on the spectrum of religious devotion; the secular age has thinned out the faith of too many. By and large, transcendence just doesn't have a seat at our tables anymore. Instead, if we want the good life, if we want significance and happiness, we're told we'd better find it in the stuff around us. "I don't want a never ending life," as the Strumbellas put it. "I just want to be alive while I'm here."⁵

Everything is *immanent*. That's the point. Everything is within reach and earthly. *What really counts is just this world, and if there is a God, well, he doesn't make much of a difference anyway.*

On a societal level, we have hacked off any true notion of the divine, at least one that is pervasive enough to matter in the nitty-gritty details of our lives. The idea of a distant God is fine and dandy, so long as he stays out of our bedrooms. But as for that brand of transcendence where God cares about what happens under the sheets, that is too divisive and controlling. It's an intrusion upon the Self, which is whom we've hoisted up to take the place of God.

This is called "exclusive humanism."⁶

We've decided it's better to make transcendence something *we* create rather than concede that there is any reality outside ourselves. We have tried to micromanage on the cosmic level and in the most backward, tragic way. This is the way the world is now. This has become the new normal, the stupid normal.

But as much as I disagree with this philosophy, I'm really not writing this book to bad-mouth the world. Enough people have done that and could do it for years to come, so I'm trying to not go there. At the same time, I'm also not writing this book to explain how we can change the world, at least not overtly in some concerted, high-adrenaline kind of way. You certainly can change the world, but it won't come by the clichés we see printed on T-shirts. My goal in this book is to help us live in this world. That's because this world, after all, *is the world in which we live*.

That's how G. K. Chesterton navigated the waters of pessimism and optimism about the world in his day. He simply called himself a "cosmic patriot."⁷ He tried to be more loyal than critical. His example teaches us that whether we celebrate this world or gripe about it, it is inescapably *our* world; therefore, it deserves our commitment. We might despise it for what it's become and we might be weary of what it's made normal, but that doesn't mean we just keep complaining about it—and it certainly doesn't mean we settle for it.

But if we *don't* settle for it, what do we do? How do we lead our lives with significance and happiness when everything around us says there's nothing beyond the stuff we see?

BE SOMETHING AND BE HAPPY

Truth is, the reason so many of us think there must be more to this life is because, well, *there is more to this life*. Something *is* missing. We crave something we've tasted before. And the taste we miss, the deepest craving of the human heart, is rooted in the beginnings of time. It's a taste of glory. It's a longing for significance.

Ignacio knew all about it.

Ignacio is the main character in the hilarious comedy *Nacho Libre*. He plays a Mexican cook working for a Catholic orphanage while also

moonlighting as a pro wrestler named Nacho (and nobody in the world could have played him better than Jack Black with a mustache). Midway through the movie, in Nacho's attempt to recruit a new tag-team partner, he asks a question that resonates with all of us: "Aren't you tired of getting dirt kicked in your face? Don't you want a little taste of the glory? See what it tastes like?"

Yeah, Nacho, we do. We all do.

Dirt in our face is actually a fitting metaphor for what the world offers us, and it doesn't come close to satisfying our souls. What the world gives doesn't add up with who we are. We have greatness in our bones. We've tasted glory before, and we want it back.

It's about more than glory though. Beneath and in and around our craving for significance is a craving to be happy. Blaise Pascal, the seventeenth-century theologian-philosopher-ninja, once put it like this: "All men are in search of happiness. There is no exception to this, whatever different methods are employed. They all aim for this goal."⁸ And before Pascal, Saint Augustine, in the fourth century, shared the same conviction: "Every man, whatsoever his condition, desires to be happy. There is no man who does not desire this, and each one desires it with such earnestness that he prefers it to all other things; whoever, in fact, desires other things, desires them for this end alone."⁹

So the desire for glory, the ancients would say, is really about happiness. And I think that's right; the two are actually intertwined. We find happiness in our significance and significance in our happiness. The truest gladness requires meaning, and meaning is found in our capacity to be glad. The two go hand in hand. Our happiness bleached of our meaning feels arbitrary. Our meaning bleached of our happiness feels too abstract to understand.

Jonathan Haidt, author of *The Happiness Hypothesis*, gets at this same point. Haidt is a leader in a new positive-psychology movement that

attempts to help people find happiness and meaning.¹⁰ *The question of all questions—he calls it the “Holy Question”—is “What is the meaning of life?” Everyone should want to find an answer, he argues, and the hope, he says, is that all of us will discover something enlightening about who we are and what we’re doing in this world.*¹¹

Each of us, in one way or another, is searching for the secret sauce, the silver bullet, whatever that thing is that will quench our thirst for significance and pleasure. We all want a “good, *happy*, fulfilling, and *meaningful* life.”¹²

But we’re not going to find that in the mainstream culture.

There is, however, another path, one different from the one most commonly traveled in this secular age. And that path is found in the Christian story.

BIG BRUSH, BRIGHT COLORS

Dorothy Sayers once wrote, “The Christian faith is the most exciting drama that ever staggered the imagination of man—and the dogma is the drama.”¹³ Sayers understood that the essential pieces of Christian dogma, or doctrine, are inherently dramatic.¹⁴ She saw that the basic tenets of Christian theology are actually scenes within a greater narrative, and this greater narrative isn’t exactly a bedtime story. It’s a narrative full of brokenness and beauty, despair and hope, darkness and light. It’s a story we all live in, which means, one way or the other, we’re all journeying somewhere. *We’re living in this story, and we’re going somewhere.* And our lives at some point, in whatever age we might exist, will come to a clearing. There is a path we should know about. It’s not an easy path, but many have walked it before us, and it’s the only path that has the answers to our souls’ deepest longings.

So that’s what this book is about.

Over the next ten chapters, I will introduce to you the central parts of the Christian story, but not in the form of bland bullet points. I want you to encounter each doctrine as a milestone along a journey, leading us to the significance and happiness for which we were made.

Though originally shared in a language we don't speak and told from the perspective of a culture and age different from our own, the truths you're about to encounter speak to our greatest need. They form a path that resonates with our souls. These truths show us what's missing, where to find it, and how we might experience something truer and better in this life—something much truer and better than the stupid normal.