

## Preface

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I MADE THE decision to go to college almost by accident. What else was I supposed to do after high school? I was a fairly good student, but I lacked the maturity to make that really huge decision in a constructive, sensible manner. Frankly, my college years could have been better. Today, I look back on my younger self in college and wish I could have a cup of coffee with him. I wish I could give him some hard-earned advice.

That's why I'm writing this book. I can't take my younger self out to coffee. There's no time machine for that. But as a college professor today, I have the chance to observe students and how they live their lives. I'm amazed at how many of them remind me of my former self. This book is, in essence, an attempt at taking you out to Starbucks and telling you what I've learned about the college years—and, most important, telling you how to make your college season the best years of your life (so far). I cannot tell you how much I wish someone had told me these things when I was in college.

Our culture has a definite perspective on what college

should involve. If you follow it, you'll throw your best years away, chasing experience after experience, mastering video games, hanging out at the mall, watching movies, and generally delaying responsibility. They'll tell you that college is about having fun, living it up. And they'll say that avoiding true adulthood doesn't need to end at graduation. Last year four out of five graduates moved back in with Mom and Dad. Seven in ten did not have a job lined up when they walked the stage on their big day, having just spent \$100,000 and 20 percent of their lives. True, some of these factors were influenced by a weak economy. But the fact remains that our culture promotes the idea of prolonged adolescence.

Did you recently graduate from high school? Not sure what you'll do next? You are not alone. I've been there. It's one of the biggest decisions you'll ever make. But high-school graduation is also a milestone toward something else. It's a step toward functional independence from Mom and Dad—a big step. If your parents love you, they established rules in your household. But at almost any college you can name, I guarantee you that nobody will tell you when to go to sleep, when to wake up, when to do your homework, when to turn off your PlayStation, and when to say no to another late-night donut or movie.

What do you want to be when you graduate? I'm not asking what you want to *do*, but what you want to *be*. A typical twenty-two-year-old in our day is unstable, uncertain, and unrealistic. I was, too, and not that long ago. College students tend to have a million ideas for what they want to

do and no idea how to get there or if they're even good at it. Our society tends to make people feel so "affirmed" all their lives that they lose the proper, objective basis for affirmation: a gift, a talent, a skill, as demonstrated by some accomplishment. Instead, everyone gets a trophy in Little League for showing up. When people are regularly reminded how special and talented they are, they're shocked when they're shuffled off the stage of their latest obsession, like another failed *American Idol* contestant.

It doesn't have to be that way. You don't have to fritter away your college experience, going from parties to cramming sessions week in and week out without any overarching purpose. You don't have to experience "failure to launch." You can be a productive, fruitful, godly adult at an early age. You can avoid "think[ing] of [yourself] more highly than [you] ought" and instead think of yourself "with sober [realistic] judgment" (Romans 12:3). And if you are a Christian, a life of fruitful obedience—a life devoted to good works—is the only appropriate response to what God has done for you (Titus 3:8). Let's look at a pair of examples.

In 1924, a young boy named John moved with his family to Martinsville, Indiana, just when he was starting high school. John was strongly influenced by his father, who raised him to work hard at school and on the farm and gave him mottoes like these: *Don't whine, don't complain, and don't make excuses*. When the chores and homework were done (and only then), John found time for basketball—and for leading his team to the state championship finals for three consecutive years.

But John's father wasn't very interested in basketball. He was far more interested in his son's character. He wanted his son to never stop striving to develop his full, God-given potential and to give maximum effort in the classroom, on the farm, and on the court. By example he taught long-suffering and faithfulness. At one point Dad lost the family's farm because of some freak illness that spread among the animals, killing them. Dad never complained or whined, not even to the banker who took the property. How different from the entitlement mentality of our day.

John worked his way through college at Purdue University. While he studied English, a field in which he later taught, he also played basketball and helped his team win a national championship in 1932. Later that year, with the events of the Great Depression, John lost his life's savings less than a week before he was supposed to marry Nell, his high-school sweetheart. Like his dad, John never whined, complained, or made excuses. A friend of the family heard about his loss and gave him a small loan. The day after his wedding, John left town for a weeklong job. He had to start paying the bills and paying back that loan.

John's age in 1932? Twenty-two years old. John was more mature, hardworking, and responsible at twenty-two than most young men today are at thirty-two.

Why? John thought that doing his very best at everything was *just the normal thing to do*. He later coached at the college level and taught his players nuggets of gold:

- “Don’t try to be better than someone else. But never stop trying to be the best you can be.”
- “When you blame others, you are trying to excuse yourself.”
- “No one is an overachiever. How can you rise above your level of competency? No, we’re all underachievers to different degrees. . . . Don’t measure yourself by what you’ve accomplished, but rather by what you should have accomplished with your abilities.”
- “Failing to prepare is preparing to fail.”

Not surprisingly, this man went on to become the most successful, most accomplished basketball coach in the history of the sport, winning ten national championships in his last twelve years at UCLA. His name was John Robert Wooden, and he died in the summer of 2010, just a couple of months shy of his one-hundredth birthday.

But basketball wasn’t John’s life, and winning wasn’t everything to him. John told others, “There is only one kind of life that truly wins, and that is the one that places faith in the hands of the Savior.”<sup>1</sup> He was a deeply humble man, often avoiding the spotlight and living far below his income potential, even until his last days. John had character and principle and even as a young man was wise beyond his years. He forfeited championship opportunities in the 1940s because African American players weren’t allowed to compete for the national title (and his team was racially integrated, even in that day). You see, by every indication John was a Christian

above all else. Christianity gave him the grounding, and the perspective, to live a life of incredible fruitfulness and productivity and to embrace adulthood without going through a lengthy period of irresponsible living.

John isn't just some throwback. No, there are John Woodens in our own day. Meet Nick Vujicic, a young man born inexplicably without arms or legs, just one foot to help him motor around. Think you've got it bad? You can only imagine how he got mercilessly teased and bullied in school. Nick began to struggle with suicidal thoughts at the age of eight. Yet he ultimately found hope in the gospel of Jesus Christ, in knowing that Christ provides amazing freedom from both sin and despair and gives amazing hope both in heaven and on earth. Nick took comfort from passages like John 9, which speaks of a man being born blind so that God's glory might be displayed in his life.

Nick learned to see that God had a plan for him, and that through faith in Christ he could triumph in the midst of any adversity. At age seventeen, Nick began sharing his testimony at Bible studies. He received one invitation, then another, and then another, as many lives were deeply impacted by his story. At the age of twenty-three he founded a charitable organization called Life Without Limbs, having already earned a double bachelor's degree in accounting and financial planning from Griffith University in Logan, Australia.

Today, Nick is twenty-eight years old, and he travels all over the world seeking to motivate others and share Christ. He's also been able to live on his own, a long-time dream of

his. He's developed creative, ingenious ways for turning on the lights, combing his hair, and brushing his teeth. He even puts his college degrees to work, investing in real estate and other industries.

How about you? What's your dream? How do you hope to make a difference? Most of you know, instinctively, that a life of goofing around and hanging out is unfulfilling. I hope you also know that self-centered, workaholic professionalism can't satisfy you, either. Chasing money and prestige is a fool's errand. Its pleasure is fleeting, leaving you with an empty, gnawing hunger for more.

No, you want to be a part of something great. College is about finding your place in God's world—not fitting God into your plans, but finding your place in his—so that you can be a blessing to others. That's what this book is about: *thriving at college*. It's about how to get there, how to avoid getting distracted along the way, how to launch in an awesome way, how to live with maximal impact, and how to change the world in whatever little corner you find yourself. This book is about making your college years the best you've ever had and a launching pad for all that goes with responsible Christian adulthood.

Perhaps you already have a few years of college under your belt. Your college experience has been good, but you want it to be great. You want to make the most out of the semesters left before graduation. You want to launch out of college in a way that really honors God and everyone who's

helped you get there. If that's you, stay tuned. I pray this book will spark a new beginning.

I'll talk about what makes college different from high school, about the importance of developing your mind and your character, and about the importance of your relationships with different types of people, including your peers, your professors, your pastors, and your mentors. I'll talk about the value of forming the right kinds of friendships, both with the same sex and the opposite sex. And I'll talk about relating to your parents in this in-between stage when you're out on your own but still under their dime.

It is my prayer for you, the Christian student, that you won't just survive college but thrive in college. That you will not just keep the faith, but dig deeper than you thought was ever possible. That you will not just choose an academic pursuit, but discover your calling. That you will not just have fun with friends, but cultivate lifelong relationships of substance with those who most provoke you to trust and love God, to put away childishness, to make wise choices, and as missionary William Carey once said, to "expect great things from God and attempt great things for God."<sup>2</sup>

Mostly I pray that you will not just memorize facts and figures, but increasingly love God with all your heart and mind, seeing the connections between assorted truths in the academic world and the God of truth, and seeing the entire world as the theater of God's glory.

You ready? Let's get after it.