The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that you might have life and have it to the full.

Jesus of Nazareth

We and the world, my children, will always be at war.
Retreat is impossible.
Arm yourselves.

Leif Enger

“The glory of God,” wrote St. Ireneaus, “is man fully alive.” When I first stumbled across this quote my initial reaction was…You’re kidding me. Really? I mean…is that what you’ve been told? That the purpose of God – the very thing he’s staked his reputation on – is your coming fully alive? Huh. Well that’s a different take on things. It made me wonder, What are God’s intentions towards me? What is it I’ve come to believe about that? Yes, we’ve been told any number of times that we matter to God, and there are some pretty glowing promises given to us in Scripture along those lines. But on the other hand, we have the days of our lives and they have a way of casting a rather long shadow over our hearts, when it comes to God’s intentions toward us in particular. I read the quote again, “The glory of God is man fully alive,” and something began to stir in me. Could it be?

The Offer is Life

I turned to the New Testament to have another look, read for myself what it is Jesus said he offers. “I have come that you might have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10). Hmmm. Sounds like ol’ Iraneaus might be on to something. “I am the bread of life” (John 6:48). “Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will
flow from within him” (John 7:37-38). The more I looked, the more this whole theme of life jumped off the pages. I mean, its everywhere.

Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life. (Proverbs 4:23)
You have made known to me the path of life. (Psalm 16:11)
Just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. (Romans 6:4)
Through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. (Romans 8:2)
He who has the son has the life (1 John 5:12)

I began to get the feeling of a man who’s been robbed. I’m well-aware that its life I need, and its life I’m looking for. But the offer has gotten “interpreted” by well-meaning people to say, “Oh, well. Yes, of course…God intends life for you. But that is eternal life, meaning, because of the death of Jesus Christ you can go to heaven when you die.” And that’s true…in a way. But its like saying getting married means “Because I’ve given you this ring, you will be taken care of in your retirement.” And in the meantime? Isn’t there a whole lot more to marriage in the meantime? (Its in the meantime that we’re living out our days, by the way). What did Jesus mean when promised us life? I go back to the source and what I find is just astounding.

When Jesus steps onto the scene, there’s a whole lot of speculation about the long-awaited Messiah. What will he be like? What will he do for us? Jesus steps forward; they hand him the scroll of Isaiah; a hush falls over the crowd. Could this be the One? He reaches back to a four hundred year old prophesy to tell us in his own words why he’s come:

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners…(61:1)

What is he saying? It has something to do with good news, with healing hearts, with setting someone free. That much is clear from the text. But the meaning of this has been clouded by years of religious language and ceremonial draping. Permit me a translation in plain language:

God has sent me on a mission.
I have come to restore and release something.
And that something is you.
I am here to give you back your heart and set you free.

Jesus could have chosen any one of a thousand other passages to explain his life purpose. There are countless Old Testament prophesies he could have alluded to. But he chose this one; this is the heart of his mission. Everything else he says and does finds its place under this banner: I am here to give you back your heart and set you free. That is why the glory of God is man fully alive: Its what he said he came to do. If it were true, if this could happen, if this really were God’s intentions towards us…wouldn’t that be good news? But of course. The opposite can’t be true. “The glory of God is man shriveling up.” How can it bring God glory for his own image to remain so badly marred, broken, captive?

Hope unbidden rose at the thought that God’s intentions towards me might be better than I’ve come to believe. His happiness and my happiness are tied together? My coming fully alive is what he’s committed to? That’s the offer of Christianity? Wow. I mean, it would make no small difference if we knew – and I mean really knew, that down-deep-in-your-toes kind of knowing that no one and nothing can talk you out of – if we knew that our life and God’s glory were bound together in a single fate. Things would start looking up. It would feel promising, like making friends on the first day of school with the biggest kid in class.

Where is that Life?

So how come life is so dang hard?

You try and lose a little weight, but it never seems to go on. You think of making a shift in your career, or you want to serve God, but never actually get to it. Maybe you do make the jump, but it rarely pans out the way you thought. You try and recover something in your marriage and your spouse looks at you with a glance that says, “nice try” or “isn’t it a little late for that?” and the thing actually blows up into an argument in front of the kids. You find that desire growing in you again to deepen your spiritual life, and though you make a run at it with another go at church or by setting aside a time each morning to read and pray, it too fades away as the months pass on and you’re back where you started only a little more sheepish for having failed.

It’s almost as if there is something set against us.

Yes, we have our faith. But even there – maybe especially there – it all seems to fall rather short of the promise. There’s talk of freedom, and abundant life, of peace like a
river and joy unspeakable, but we see precious little of it, to be honest. Why is it that, as Tillich said, its only “here and there in the world and now and then in ourselves” we see any evidence of a New Creation – of man fully alive? Here and there, now and then. In other words…not much. When you stand them side by side, the description of the Christian life practically shouted in the New Testament compared with the actual life of most Christians, its…embarrassing. Paul sounds like a madman and we look rather foolish, like children who’ve been held back a grade.

This is the one thing that makes Christianity more difficult to believe than any other objection raised against it, this chasm between the offer and the delivery. It satisfies unbelief in the minds of unbelievers, while adding to the burden already weighing down believers who know quite well its not what they hoped for when they signed on. Jesus said he came to bring us life didn’t he? And he said he wouldn’t scrimp on it. “Good measure, packed down, overflowing.” [** Jen, where is that? What’s the actual quote] Overflowing? Who’s he kidding? Is “overflowing with life” how you’d describe yourself? Overwhelmed, maybe. Overbooked. Overworked. Overweight. But not overflowing with life.

**Misinterpreting our Lives**

Why is it that nearly every good thing , from the annual family vacation to planning a wedding to cultivating a relationship takes so much work? Some dear friends just returned from a three week vacation in France. It had been a dream of theirs for nearly twenty-five years. What could be more romantic than strolling the Champs Elise in the evening, as lovers do? It seemed an ideal way to celebrate their 25th anniversary. They’d both served God faithfully for decades, but over the years a European rendezvous seemed about as reachable as the moon. Then, late last fall, things suddenly came together.

Some friends gave them tickets. Time off was available. They were going to France. They got to Paris. Then it all fell apart. Craig came down with walking pneumonia; Lori wanted to leave the third day. All sorts of issues in their marriage surfaced, but, since they were with friends, the issues mostly played themselves out in their own thoughts, which tended towards divorce. It wasn’t romantic; it was hard. Afterwards, as we talked on the phone about the whole thing, Lori said, “Life never seems to turn out they way you think it will, about 90% of the time.” No kidding. Don’t we all have a story that goes with that?

Just the day before I received another call. This was the morning our middle son Blaine was to have his final cardiologist appointment and I was yearning to hear the news. Now, I know that every parent thinks their child is head and shoulders above the rest, but I’m
telling you - Blaine is a special one. He turned 11 this year, and he’s one of the healthiest, happiest kids I’ve ever known. His heart is so good, so spiritually aware, so keen to the hearts of others. He’s remarkably compassionate for boy his age and he’s also the most courageous one of us all. When it comes to rock climbing, or cliff jumping, or skiing, Blaine is always the first to go for it. He’s a great athlete and a talented artist and a riot when it comes to his humor. He plays the violin; he memorizes cowboy poetry; he blows stuff up; he wants to be a Jedi knight. I love this boy.

And it’s a long story of prayer and hope and worry over Blaine. When he was 9 months old, his pediatrician picked up an anomaly in his heart during a routine checkup. The cardiologist confirmed through an echo** that indeed, Blaine had several holes in his heart. “He’ll need surgery, but not for several years.” We opted to wait until Blaine was older, to give God a chance to intervene. Over the course of those years we spent many nights in prayer that God would heal Blaine’s heart. During one of those times, Stasi had a vision of a light penetrating his heart. At that moment, she felt certain God had healed him. And just this morning, the day for his annual checkup, as I began to pray for Blaine I sensed Jesus say, “I’ve healed him.” My heart rested and I waited for the good report.

“Hi…its me.” A long silence. “Blaine needs surgery…right away.” Hope vanished. I felt that sick-in-the-gut feeling of total free-fall about to happen, that feeling you get on top of a ladder that’s begun to sway under you. All kinds of thoughts and emotions rushed in. What? Oh, no…Not after all this…I...I thought…. My heart was sinking. Despair, betrayal, abandonment by God, failure on our part to pray enough or believe enough. I felt moments away from a total loss of heart. It seemed inevitable. My faith, my life, my walk with God – everything seemed tied to this news. These moments aren’t a rational, calculated progression of thought; they’re more like being tossed out of the raft in a storm. It comes fast and furious, but the pull of the current is always towards a loss of heart. Most of the time we are swept away; we give in, lose heart, and climb out of it sometime later.

Has God abandoned us? Did we not pray enough? Is this just something we accept as “part of life,” suck it up even though it breaks our hearts? After awhile, the accumulation of event after event which we do not understand erodes our confidence that we are part of something grand and good, and reduces us to a survival mindset. I know, I know – we’ve been told that we matter to God. And part of us partly believes it. But life has a way of chipping away at that conviction, eroding our settled belief that he means us well. I mean, if that’s true, then how come he didn’t….? Fill in the blank. Heal your mom. Save your marriage. Get you married. Help you out more.
Even though we may hang onto the conviction that *eventually* God means us well, in the meantime the message gets confused. Either a) we’re blowing it, or b) God is holding out on us. Or some combination of both, which is where most people land. Think about it – isn’t this where *you* land, with all the things that haven’t gone the way you’d hoped and wanted? Isn’t it some version of “I’m blowing it,” in that you could have done better, you could have been braver or wiser or more beautiful? Or, “God is holding out on me,” in that you know he *could* come through but he hasn’t come through and what are you to make of that?

I felt so badly that Paris wasn’t what my friends hoped it would be, but I wasn’t sure what to say. Like most Christians in that situation I simply asked her how I could pray for them. “That we would have eyes to see what’s going on.” My heart leapt. Brilliant. Perfect. That is *exactly* what we need! Eyes to see. That’s what Jesus offered – recovery of sight for the blind (Luke 4:18). That’s what Paul prayed for us – that the eyes of our hearts would be opened (Eph 1:18). Life is brutal. It hammers us to the point that we lose sight of what the real offer of God actually is anymore, and we haven’t the foggiest idea why the things that are happening to us are happening to us.

When Spillane treats injured seamen offshore, one of the first things he evaluates is their degree of consciousness. The highest level, known as “alert and oriented times four,” describes almost everyone in an everyday situation. They know who they are, where they are, what time it is, and what’s just happened. If someone suffers a blow to the head, the first thing they lose is recent events – “alert and oriented times three” – and the last thing they lose is their identity. A person who has lost all levels of consciousness, right down to their identity, is said to be “alert and oriented times zero.” When John Spillane wakes up in the water, he is alert and oriented times zero. His understanding of the world is reduced to the fact that he exists, nothing more. Almost simultaneously, he understands that he is in excruciating pain. For a long time, that is all he knows. *(The Perfect Storm)*

John Spillane is a Para rescue jumper sent into the worst storm of the twentieth century, the Perfect Storm, as the book and film called it, to rescue **. His helicopter goes down, he is forced to jump into pitch blackness from an unknown height, and when he hits the water he’s going so fast its like hitting the pavement from 80 feet above. He is dazed and confused, just as we are when it comes to the story of our lives from God’s point of view. It’s the perfect analogy. We have no real idea who we are, why we are here, what’s happened to us or why. We are alert and oriented times zero.

We need clarity and we need it bad.
We Are At War

So I’m just going to come right out and say it: There is something set against us. We are at war. You are not always blowing it and God is never holding out on you. You and all those you know are under siege. I don’t like that fact anymore than you do, but the sooner you come to terms with it the better hope you have of making it through to the life you do want. This is not Eden. You probably figured that out. This is not Mayberry. This is not Beverly Hills 90***. The world in which we live is a combat zone, a violent clash of kingdoms, a bitter struggle unto the death. I am sorry if I’m the one to first break this news to you: You were born into a world at war, and you will live all your days in the midst of a great battle, The Greatest of all Battles, involving all the forces of heaven and hell and played out here on earth.

Where did you think all this opposition was coming from?

Earlier in the Story, back in the beginning of our time on earth, a great glory was bestowed upon us. We all – men and women – were created in the image of God. Fearfully and wonderfully made, fashioned as living icons of the bravest, wisest, most stunning Person that ever lived. Those who have ever seen him fall to their knees without even thinking about it, as you find yourself breathless before the most beautiful, powerful things in nature. That glory was shared with us; we were, in Chesterton’s phrase, “statues of God walking about in a Garden,” endowed with a strength and beauty all our own. All that you ever wished you could be you were, and more. We were fully alive.

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:27)

When I look at the night sky and see the work of your fingers – the moon and the stars you have set in place – what are mortals that you should think of us, mere humans that you should care for us? For you made us only a little lower than God, and you crowned us with glory and honor. (Psalm 8:3-5 NLT)

I daresay we’ve heard a bit about original sin, but not nearly enough about original glory, which comes before sin and is deeper to our nature. We were crowned with glory and honor. Why does a woman long to be beautiful? Why does a man hope to be found brave? Because we remember, if only faintly, that we were once more than we are now. The reason you doubt there could be a glory to your life is because that glory has been the object of a long and brutal war.
Lurking in that garden was an Enemy. This mighty angel had once been glorious as well, the Captain of the Lord’s Hosts, beautiful and powerful beyond compare. But he rebelled against his Creator, led a great battle against the forces of heaven, and was cast down. Banished from his heavenly home, but not destroyed, he waited for an opportunity to wreak his revenge. You must understand: Satan hates the glory of God…wherever it exists. Unable to overthrow the Mighty One, he turned his sights on those who bore his image. He lied to us about where true life was to be found, and we believed him. We fell, and “our glory faded,” as Milton said, “faded so soon.” Or as David lamented, “You have turned my glory into shame” (Psalm 4:2).

But God did not abandon us, not by a long shot. I think even a quick read of the Old Testament would be enough to convince you that war is a central theme of God’s activity. There is the Exodus, where God fights to set his captive people free. Moses battles directly with Pharaoh’s magicians, miracle for miracle. Plague after plague descends like a boxer’s one-two punch, like the blows of some great sword. Pharaoh releases his grip, but only for a moment. Then God destroys the entire Egyptian army in the Red Sea, after which the ransomed Jews, standing in shock and joy on the opposite shore, proclaim “The Lord is a warrior!” (Ex 15:3).

Then its war to get to the Promised Land. Moses and company have to do battle against the Amalekites; again God comes through, and Moses shouts “The Lord will be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation” (17:16). The Lord will be at war. Indeed. Then its war to get into the Promised Land – Joshua and the battle of Jericho, and all that. After the Jews gain the Promised Land, its war after war to keep it. Israel battles the Canaanites, the Philistines, the Midianites – on and on it goes. Deborah goes to war; Gideon goes to war; King David goes to war. Elijah wars against the prophets of Bael; Jehoshaphat battles the Edomites. Are you getting the picture?

Many people think the theme of war ends with the Old Testament. Not at all. Jesus says, “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword” (**). In fact, his birth involved another great battle in heaven:

The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that he might devour her child the moment it was born. She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule the nations with an iron scepter…And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back…then the dragon was enraged at the woman, and went off to make war against the rest of her offspring – those who obey God’s commands and hold to the testimony of Jesus. (Rev 12:4-5, 7, 17)
The birth of Christ was an act of war, an *invasion*. The Enemy knew it, and tried to kill him (Matt 2:13). No pale-faced alter boy, the whole life of Christ is one marked by battle and confrontation. He kicks out demons with a stern command. He rebukes a fever and it leaves Peters mother-in-law. He rebukes a storm and it subsides. He confronts the Pharisees time and again, to set God’s people free from legalism. In a loud voice he wakes Lazarus from the dead. He descends into hell, wrestles the keys of hell and death from Satan, and leads a train of captives free (**). And when he returns, I might point out, Jesus will be mounted on a steed of war, with his robe dipped in blood, ready for battle (Rev 19:***). The life of Christ begins in war, and ends in war. And what is he fighting for? Our freedom and restoration. The glory of God is man fully alive.

In the meantime, Paul says, *arm yourselves*, and the first piece of equipment he urges is the belt of truth Eph 6:10-18). We arm ourselves by getting a good solid grip on our situation, by getting some clarity on the battle over our lives, by knowing God’s intentions towards us and seeing more clearly that those intentions are opposed.

In *Mere Christianity*, in the chapter he so rightly entitled “The Invasion,” C.S. Lewis tried to clarify our situation:

> One of the things that surprised me when I first read the New Testament seriously was that it talked so much about a Dark Power in the universe – a mighty evil spirit who was held to be the Power behind death, disease, and sin. The difference is that Christianity thinks this Dark Power was created by God, and was good when he was created, and went wrong. Christianity agrees…this is a universe at war. But it does not think that this is a war between independent powers. It thinks it is a civil war, a rebellion, and that we are living in a part of the universe occupied by the rebel. Enemy-occupied territory – that is what this world is. Christianity is the story of how the rightful king has landed, you might say landed in disguise, and is calling us all to take part in a campaign of sabotage.

**God is at War to Restore Our Glory**

You may not like this explanation of the world we have. In fact that sigh you just experienced – *oh, does it have to be this way? I’m not sure I want to really want to deal with this* – that is a sign of the battle right there. The last thing the Enemy wants you to do is up and fight for your life. If you come alive, why…that would bring glory to God. But if you would live by the truth, this is the one the Scriptures offer you.
Until we come to terms with this as our reality we will not understand life. We will misinterpret 90% of what is happening around us and to us. It will be very hard to believe that God’s intentions toward us are life abundant; it will be even harder not to feel that somehow we are just blowing it. Worse, we will begin to accept some really awful things about God. That four year old little girl being molested by her daddy – that is “God’s will?” That ugly divorce that tore your family apart – that, too, was God’s will? All of the evils and all the atrocities that break our hearts – they are God’s will? No – we are at war.

Most people get stuck at some point because God appears to have abandoned us. He is not coming through. Speaking about her life with a mixture of disappointment and cynicism, a young woman recently said to me, “God is rather silent right now.” Yes, it’s been awful. I don’t discount that for a moment. She in unloved; she in unemployed; she is under a lot. But her attitude strikes me as deeply naive, on the level of someone caught in a cross-fire who asks, rather shocked and with a sense of having been betrayed, “God, why won’t you make them stop firing at me?” I’m sorry, but that’s not where we are right now. Its not where we are in the story. That day is coming, when the lion shall lie down with the lamb and we’ll beat swords into plowshares. For now, its bloody battle.

By all means, God intends life for you. His original plan was for us all to live in a Garden of beauty, intimacy and adventure, to spend our days swimming in Life. The tree in the center of that Garden was called the Tree of Life. We lost that life a long time ago and things have gone rather badly ever since. However, the rightful king has landed – “the Prince of life,” as he’s called in Acts 3:15 – and he wasn’t lying when he promised us life again. Nor did he place that life totally in the future. But right now that life is opposed. It doesn’t just roll in on a tray. How we have missed this I do not understand. Look again at John 10:10:

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy;
I have come that you may have life and have it to the full.

Jesus married the two statements for a reason. He says them in one breath. He offers life. Notice as well that the life is opposed: There is a thief and he comes to steal, kill and destroy. Why won’t we face this? I know so few people who will face this. The offer is life but you’re going to have to fight for it, because there’s a thief with a different agenda.

Its sure explains a whole heckuva lot.

Most of us spend our days in survival mode, simply “trying to get by,” in that twilight world of intention. We intend at some point to love better, to lose weight, to go back to
school, to finish that novel, to change careers, to move to the country, to serve God, to read the Bible, to be more serious about prayer. Most people never do. Its almost as if their lives are subject to forces beyond their understanding and beyond their power to control. They are like leaves swept down some great river, to an end they do not want but which they cannot seem to escape. What we need to be doing is fighting back. Joining our Captain in a campaign of sabotage.

You won’t understand your life, what has happened to you or how to live forward from here unless you see it as a battle for your heart, for the image of God in you, for you life. And you are going to need your whole heart for what’s coming next. I don’t mean what’s coming next in the story I’m telling. I mean what’s coming next in the life you’re living.

There are a few things I know and one thing I do know is this: We don’t see things as clearly as we ought to. As we need to. We don’t understand what’s happening around us or to us or to those we love, and we are practically clueless when it comes to the weight of our own life and the glory that’s being…held back. I know you have that heart beating in you for a reason and that its going to get worse before it gets better and you’ll want to have every ounce of courage that heart can muster.

To be mistaken about how much gas you thought you had in your tank is one thing; to be mistaken about the balance in your checking account is a bit more serious, but a mistake that probably won’t bring you to ruin. To be mistaken about the reality in which you live…now that is a serious mistake indeed. The captain of the Titanic thought the waters before him were free and clear and so he gave the infamous command full steam ahead. Come to think of it, most of those souls in hell right now were probably shocked to discover that there was such a place after all, and even more surprised to find they had a reservation. There are some things you don’t want to be mistaken about, and of all those things, you don’t want to be mistaken about the reality in which you now live. Picture yourself stepping off the landing craft on Omaha Beach, June 6, 1944 carrying a lawn chair and a book to read. You don’t want to be that unprepared to live your life. Its just not something you want to do.

You don’t see it yet. That’s alright – we have a whole book ahead of us. If its true that there is a great and fierce battle unfolding all around us – and against us – how come the enemy isn’t more visible? Why doesn’t the church teach us much more about it? And if there is a glory to my life, well then, how come I don’t see that? How come I struggle so much and where is that life God offers?

We don’t see clearly because we don’t see with the eyes of our heart.