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PART 2

I WILL BE DEVOTED

When trying to pre-decide how you will handle certain situations and make better decisions, your success relies on your foundational basis. In other words, your ultimate priorities determine how you go about deciding. You may say you're devoted to God, but if he is not anchoring every area of your life, then your choices will reveal this discrepancy. By pre-deciding that you will be devoted, you put God first in all areas of your life, eliminating distractions and implementing a lifestyle centered on your relationship with him. Here are the key principles you will learn in part 2:

- We can't be part-time followers of Christ. We must think ahead and pre-decide to be devoted to pursuing Jesus.
- When you understand who God is and what he's done for you, nothing else makes sense but to put him first.
- Devotion is reflected by putting God first in your thoughts, your money, your decisions, your time, and what you care about.
- The devil doesn't need to destroy you if he can divide your mind, discourage your faith, and distract you from what matters most.
- Prioritizing your devotion to Jesus requires minimizing distractions and eliminating things—sometimes good things—from your life.
- To spend undistracted time with Jesus, pre-decide and prioritize an intentional strategy—a rule of life—that includes a time, a place, and a plan.

LESSON 3

WHAT A DEVOTED LIFE LOOKS (AND DOESN'T LOOK) LIKE

If you don't put God first, you'll put something else first, and nothing else can handle the pressure of being the most important thing in your life.⁷

CRAIG GROESCHEL

Parents usually encourage their kids to participate in sports, hoping they will enjoy the camaraderie and benefit from the discipline. Some moms and dads can become a bit obsessive about pushing their sons and daughters to not only participate but to be the best. Most sports parents, though, don't come close to the devotion Richard Williams invested in the tennis careers of his daughters, Venus and Serena.

Williams's intense focus was depicted in the Academy Award-winning film *King Richard*, revealing how his dream determined his family's priorities based on what would best develop the athletic potential of his girls. Despite working nights as a

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security guard, Williams encouraged his young daughters to have fun and do their best on the crumbling tennis courts of Compton, a crime-ridden area of southern Los Angeles, where they lived at the time. Within a few short years, Williams had moved his family to Florida for a couple of reasons—warm weather conducive to playing year-round and some of the finest tennis coaches in the world.⁸

Decades later, the fruits of his relentless drive are more than evident. The names Venus and Serena have become synonymous with their iconic successful careers. Venus set a high standard for success with seven Grand Slam singles titles, five Wimbledon championships, and four Olympic gold medals. Serena managed to exceed that feat with twenty-three Grand Slam singles championships, seven Wimbledon titles, and four Olympic gold medals of her own.

Despite their amazing success, the cost of their father's dream cannot be calculated. "The size and scope of the dream was so huge that it bordered on insanity," observed actor Will Smith, whose portrayal of Williams won an Oscar. "It's sort of where you have to live if you want to do something that's never been done before."⁹

- What's your take on parents like Richard Williams who are so driven in pursuit of fulfilling the dream they have for their children? Can you relate?

- Based on how you spend your time, attention, energy, and money, what are the priorities of your family right now?

- When have you been driven to attain a goal or fulfill a pursuit at virtually any cost? How would you describe the process required for reaching your achievement?
- When you think about devoting your life to a singular focus, what comes to mind? How does this manifest in your life presently?

EXPLORING GOD'S WORD



Whatever you value tends to influence the way you make decisions.

If you're focused on advancing in your career, then your choices—everything from how you dress to what you talk about to where you live—likely reflect your professional aspirations. If looking your best so that others find you attractive takes center stage, then what you eat, how you exercise, and who you follow on social media gets decided based on prioritizing your image. It might be accumulating enough money to retire early or simply paying off old loans and getting out of debt. Based on how much time you spend thinking about it, how much money you spend, and how much your attention revolves around it, your decisions will flow in the same direction.

God wants to be central in your life. He longs for your relationship with him to be what matters most to you. He can guide, direct, and empower you to make decisions that honor him and fulfill you—if you put him first. Jesus emphasized this truth when telling his followers:

¹⁹ “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰ But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy,

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and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

MATTHEW 6:19-21

We tend to think of money as our primary treasure here on earth. But really, anything that consumes your thoughts, time, and attention reflects what you treasure as well. In other words, your earthly treasures are whatever you prize most. When you value heavenly treasures more, however, you invest in a legacy that lasts longer than anything contained in a bank account, spacious home, or jewelry box. Your heart focuses on what you treasure, and what you treasure consumes your heart.

- When have you realized the limitations of focusing on earthly treasures? When have you lost something material that mattered greatly to you?
- What are some things you treasure in this life besides money or wealth? How have these treasures required your attention and determined how you've made certain decisions?
- Think back on what's been most important to you over the past week. What decisions did you make that reflect its importance to you?
- How have you pursued heavenly treasures in the past? How did their value to you influence the decisions you made?

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EMBRACING THE TRUTH

Whatever we're devoted to pursuing usually fills up our lives. Whether it's advancing in our career, raising a healthy family, moving to a nicer home, or running a marathon, we hone in on things that contribute to attaining this goal and let go of other things. We make more room in our lives for our devotion to these goals, sacrificing whatever—and often whoever—doesn't help us advance. Depending on what we're moving toward, however, we may lose our sense of direction.

When we devote ourselves to knowing, loving, and serving God, we discover the cost. We may not advance at work because we're not willing to idolize a promotion. We may discover that our family can be healthy without it looking the way we thought it had to look. We may need to stay where we are and trust God for when or if we move to another home. We may have to extend our training and go more slowly in preparing for a marathon as we put running in balance with other priorities. Otherwise, we allow something other than God to control our lives and make our decisions.

Jesus addressed this problem in a parable he told his followers:

¹⁶ “The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. ¹⁷ He thought to himself, ‘What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.’

¹⁸ “Then he said, ‘This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. ¹⁹ And I'll say to myself, ‘You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.’”

²⁰ “But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’

²¹ “This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God.”

LUKE 12:16-21

- What word or phrase jumps out at you? Why do you suppose it resonates?

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- When have you pursued bigger barns to accommodate your priority rather than focused on God as the center of your life?
- What are you most tempted to store up or accumulate in your life? Money, possessions, status symbols—or awards, achievements, attention?
- When have you realized you were putting something in your life ahead of God? What did you have to surrender in order to restore your devotion to him?



CHOOSING HOW YOU CHOOSE

You may be struggling to admit that you put anything before God. In completing this study, however, you're indicating a desire to grow closer to him and to base your decisions on what pleases him. Therefore, before you go any further in considering what influences the way you make decisions, you need to come clean.

If you want to be a full-time follower of Jesus, then recognizing that you're currently part-time is the place to start. Even if you're following him all the time every day, you probably have areas in your life that are harder to surrender than others. Which is why you want help thinking ahead and making better decisions—to align what you believe with how you live your life.

In order to make God your top priority, it also helps to remain vigilant about the things that tend to encroach on your life. Perennial busyness affects virtually everyone, but as you've likely realized by now, you spend your precious commodity of time on what you care most about. If not, then you're wasting your most limited resource in this life. Similarly with your finances and material resources. It may disrupt you to admit it, but your lifestyle—right now at this moment—reveals a good deal of what you value most. If you're serious about being devoted

to God, and using your divine devotion as a chisel for how you carve out your life, then it's worth taking another look at your inventory of priorities.

Toward this goal, review your responses to the exercises at the end of part 2 in *Think Ahead*, particularly the ones related to the five signs indicating your devotion to God. Based on your responses, take this opportunity to dive deeper and consider how to shift all five in alignment with your heart's deepest devotion.

THOUGHTS

- Considering all you juggle on a typical day, what topics, problems, issues, struggles, and relationships occupy the most real estate in your mind? List them below, and be as specific as possible.

Topics (about work, home, school, church, community):
Problems (related to work, money, family, your responsibilities, or others):
Issues (personal struggles and secrets, job concerns, worries about others):
Struggles (conflicts with yourself and with others, with making changes):
Relationships (with spouse, children, parents, coworkers, neighbors):

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- What else usually occupies your thoughts?

FINANCES

- Knowing your heart's concerns are reflected in where your money goes, what do you see when you review your budget, your bank statements, your credit card usage, your savings, and, of course, what you give to God?
- What surprises you most about where your money is going right now? Why?
- What keeps you from using your money to show your devotion to God? How can you realign this imbalance?

DECISIONS

- What are the biggest decisions with which you're currently wrestling? How have you pursued God's will in making these decisions?

- What decisions have you been postponing for too long? What have you been waiting on?

- How often do you pray about making these decisions, or decisions in general, before choosing a direction and taking action?

TIME

- If you review your schedule or calendar for the past week, what does it appear you value most?

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- What time-consumers can be reduced or eliminated in order for you to spend more time with God?
- Ideally, how would you spend your time on an average day? How would this allocation reflect your devotion to God?

HEARTBREAK

- What issues, individuals, and struggles stir your heart most often? What have you sensed God calling you to do regarding these areas?
- When have you been able to reflect your devotion to God in helping another person deal with their loss, struggle, or heartbreak?
- How often do you compartmentalize your feelings so that they do not interfere with your daily functions? What might you discover if you allow yourself to own and express them?

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DETERMINING YOUR DECISIONS

You may feel like you have little control over certain aspects of these five key areas, but you probably have more power to change than you usually exercise. It's easy to do what others expect us to do to avoid upsetting them or rocking the boat. But sometimes you have to risk making changes in the way you live in order to grow closer to God—and make better decisions.

- Which of the five areas are you reluctant to adjust or change because of how others might react? Or how they might view you?

- When have you recently avoided telling the truth in love to someone and allowed them to command more of you and your resources than is healthy?

Overlooked distractions can often be eliminated as well, though you may be uncomfortable getting rid of them at first. Sometimes we keep busy to avoid doing hard things or taking personal risks. Scrolling and browsing online becomes a habit to fill our time rather than a limited, intentional activity. Or maybe your default is binge-watching Netflix, going to the gym, gaming, or following sports. Not bad activities until you're allowing them to consume time unintentionally.

- Which default habits and time-wasters need to be dialed down or eliminated from your life?

LESSON 4

CONNECTION, DISTRACTION, AND A GAME PLAN

*Full devotion to God will never happen by accident.
That's why we have to pre-decide: I am going to seek God first.¹⁰*

CRAIG GROESCHEL

US Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy recently launched a major initiative to address our country's "epidemic of loneliness and isolation."¹¹ This campaign draws from similar ones in other countries, particularly Japan and the United Kingdom, which respectively include a government position known as the Minister of Loneliness. These leaders were strategizing how to overcome the serious health effects years before the COVID pandemic, which only increased the isolation and social separation due to the necessity of quarantines.¹²

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Dr. Murthy, along with the British Minister of Loneliness, Baroness Diana Barran, have cited direct links between loneliness and many life-threatening diseases and illnesses, including heart disease, stroke, diabetes, dementia, anxiety and depression, and suicide. In the United States, estimates of those suffering run as high as nearly half the population, or more than 150 million people. Global experts stress that the primary remedy is forming strong connections and ongoing relationships within a supportive community. In a press conference Dr. Murthy stated, "Social connection is as essential to humanity as food, water or shelter."¹³

One obvious irony in acknowledging the damage done by social isolation and loneliness stems from the connectivity afforded by technology. Thanks to the internet and social media, one person can literally communicate with millions of other individuals around the world. Unfortunately, that same ability to connect online seems to have contributed to the global epidemic of loneliness. The impact of loneliness certainly isn't caused by our ability to relate online, but most experts agree it has been a factor.

Communicating and connecting online is simply not an adequate substitute for in-person conversations, affectionate touch, and shared experiences. Government leaders and medical experts agree that overcoming loneliness requires being intentional about making and sustaining relationships. It requires being aware of the problem and making a strategic plan for lifesaving connection.

- How aware are you of the impact of loneliness and isolation on people around the world currently? How have you witnessed its impact in your community?
- Does the direct link between loneliness and serious health risks surprise you? Why do you suppose isolation and loneliness compound factors leading to disease and mental illness?

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- How often do you battle feeling lonely and isolated in your life? What impact has this had on your health?
- What do you suppose is the impact of loneliness and isolation on one's relationship with God? Why?

EXPLORING GOD'S WORD



The global loneliness epidemic reminds us that quality of relationships ultimately matters more than quantity. Perhaps this is why individuals can have hundreds or thousands of social media friends and followers while being isolated from the benefits of in-person relationships. In order for a relationship to have a positive impact, the connection requires ongoing attention. Too often, it's easy to get so caught up in our busy lives that we overlook our own emotional need for connection as well as that of others.

The same is true for your relationship with God. Unless you pre-decide to be intentional about your devotion to knowing him, you can remain a part-time follower. You can remain busy and pulled in numerous directions by relentless responsibilities and urgent demands. You can say a prayer at mealtime or on the fly. You can go to church once a week or when you can fit it in. Growing deeper in your faith and closer to God will never happen this way, though.

Similar to human relationships, our devoted relationship with God requires establishing connection, eliminating distractions, and following an intentional strategy. We see this in Jesus' visit with his friends Mary and Martha. While these sisters hosted Jesus in their home, each seemed to have a different priority. Read what Jesus had to say about their choices and answer the questions that follow:

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³⁸ As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. ³⁹ She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. ⁴⁰ But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

⁴¹ "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, ⁴² but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

LUKE 10:38-42

- Based on what Jesus said, how should Martha have regarded all the preparations that had to be made? Can you relate to Martha's dilemma in this situation?
- What stirs inside you when hearing Jesus speak these words directly to you: "You are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one"?
- Out of the "many things" that cause you to be worried and upset, which are the "few things" needed? What is your "only one"?
- How well have you balanced Martha's concern about preparations with Mary's focus on Jesus? What is your takeaway from their encounter with the Lord?

EMBRACING THE TRUTH

When you pre-decide to devote yourself to God, you are also choosing to eliminate distractions and to make a game plan. Jesus said, “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money” (Matthew 6:24). Based on God’s desire to be first in your life, it’s clear you cannot serve both God and anything else. Our Creator knows that we are made in his image and designed for spiritual intimacy with him.

In order to experience this intimacy for which you’re made, you must make knowing and experiencing God your priority. While you may have considered what this commitment required when you first became a follower of Jesus, you also have to continue counting the cost and paying the price throughout your life. Basically, this decision requires agreeing to pay the price regardless of how you feel or how your circumstances change. Jesus illustrated this process with two comparisons:

²⁸ “Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won’t you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it?

²⁹ For if you lay the foundation and are not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule you, ³⁰ saying, ‘This person began to build and wasn’t able to finish.’

³¹ “Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Won’t he first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? ³² If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace. ³³ In the same way, those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples.”

LUKE 14:28-33

- When you became a believer, what did it mean for you to count the cost of following Jesus? What changes did you make in how you lived your life?

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- What specifically have you given up in order to make Christ your top priority? What are you still in the process of giving up?
- Which of these two illustrations, building a tower or going to war, resonates with you most? Why?
- Which relationships and unexpected events have seemed to increase the cost of your commitment to God? How have they made it harder for you to prioritize your relationship with Jesus?

CHOOSING HOW YOU CHOOSE

There's no doubt about it: God asks a lot of you—*everything*, in fact. When you're pre-deciding to be devoted to him and your relationship with him, you might feel a little ambivalent or even resentful at times. You start focusing on what you're giving up and what you apparently aren't allowed to enjoy in order to obey God and follow Christ's example. In the midst of painful circumstances and devastating losses, you may lose sight of God's promises, stop trusting in his Word, and start to doubt your devotion.

Those valleys are to be expected on your journey of faith. Which is why it's important to pre-decide that your commitment to God is about more than just your mountaintop experiences. It's about remembering how much he loves you and all he has done for you. God asks you to put him first because he has already put you first: "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

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Even before you were born, God loved you and had pre-decided to make the ultimate sacrifice—the death of his Son, Jesus, on the cross—so you could experience his love: “Even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes. God decided in advance to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. This is what he wanted to do, and it gave him great pleasure” (Ephesians 1:4–5 NLT).

That’s how much you matter to God.

That’s how much he loves you.

Your response to such unconditional, limitless love requires holding nothing back and letting nothing come between you and God. Toward this goal, you will likely find it helpful to develop a “rule of life,” a kind of mission statement for your faith and how you live it out. After reviewing chapter 2.5 in *Think Ahead*, write out a rule of life reflecting your pre-decision to remain devoted to God. Think of this rule of life as a draft, a work in progress that you can revise as you grow in your faith. Using the prompts below, include two key components, an overall statement of your devotion to God along with some smaller rules to support your rule of life.

MY RULE OF LIFE

I am devoted to God because _____ and
 want to show my devotion by being more focused on _____
 _____ and less
 focused on _____

 _____.

To help me remain focused on God as my life’s priority, I will use the following rules and practices:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

DETERMINING YOUR DECISIONS

When something is important to you, you plan it out ahead of time. When someone is important to you, you plan to make spending time together a priority. At first it might seem like you enjoy being with them so much that you don't need a plan. But over time, as your life gets busy and other demands vie for your attention, you realize that in order to grow in your relationship, you need to plan ahead.

For example, you might plan a weekly date night with your spouse or have a regular time to meet your best friend for coffee at a specific café. You might take your kids to the climbing wall every Saturday to ensure your time together. You've learned that if you don't have a plan—one that includes a place, a time, and an activity or shared experience—then something else always interferes and prevents you from connecting consistently.

When you pre-decide to be devoted to God, you honor your commitment by making a plan for when, where, and how you will spend quality time together. Rather than just squeezing in a prayer when you think of him or skimming a devotional over breakfast, you make a plan to slow down and focus on the relationship that means the most to you. Sure, you will need to be flexible and include variety and spontaneity, just as you would for any relationship. But practicing your devotion means pre-deciding that there must be a plan.

Use the following questions to help you think about how you usually spend time with God and how you would like to plan moving forward.

- On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being inconsistent and 10 being perfectly consistent, how would you rate your current plan for spending time with God? Why?

- What's usually been the problem in spending quality time with the Lord—finding and making the time, choosing a place without interruptions, or knowing what to do? Something else?

- What's worked well for you in the past when spending time with God? Where do you enjoy focusing on him the most?

- What kinds of activities facilitate your ability to connect with and experience God? Check all that apply:

- Devotionals (List a favorite here: _____)
- Bible study (What method of study do you prefer?)
- Praise and worship music (Your go-to playlist includes: _____)
- Prayer time (What categories do you usually use when praying?)
- Serving others (What acts of service draw you closer to God?)
- Creative expression (What do you like to draw, write, make?)

- Based on your response, what plan do you want to make moving forward?

Time:
Place:
Activity/experience: