

Welcome, Hero!

There are no ordinary people.

C.S. Lewis

You don't mind me calling you Hero, do you? Indulge me. I'm a writer. I don't always think about heroes as people in capes, sports jerseys, or glittery gowns, except as characters in a movie. They might sport Olympic medals or Nobel laureates. They could be first responders, teachers, or astronauts. But another way to think about heroes is the literary tradition: the main character of a story. Capes optional. Literary Heroes are often unlikely, imperfect people, but they can make a difference in public or private life.

So, for the purposes of this book, I address you as Hero. You are the main character in your story, a Hero on a Hero's Journey.

You might think you don't deserve the title. You may feel ordinary, a small-h hero living a hum-drum life, or the sidekick in someone else's story. Tell that to Jesus. There is nothing ordinary about following him.

God created something beautiful on Planet Earth: human beings with agency and free will. We're born, we live, we die—Heroes in our own stories. In between, we love and laugh, suffer headaches and heartaches, agonize over weighty choices and making stupendous mistakes. We may die a tragic hero, but each life comes with the invitation to live in God's story and become a living portrait of his glory.

What story do *you* live in?

In stories as in life, there's drama, opposition, and challenges. In a classic story, a knight rides off to rescue a fair lady captured by a fire-breathing dragon. Your dragon could be a life-threatening disease you're battling, a relationship you're trying to resurrect, or a creative project you're struggling to complete. Maybe it's all or none of the above.

Or maybe you're restless. Life is stagnant, and work is sucking the life out of you. But rent has skyrocketed and you dare not quit. Your wife is pregnant and the car just died. Or you feel stuck in a loveless marriage after the death of your only son. A grief journey is a deeply internal one that is often traveled alone. All trials are both internal and external—our inner responses to outer circumstances.

We all face battles in this life and moments of doubt and fear. When we recast our battles in literary terms, we become knights in spiritual armor, slaying the dragon's temptations. Or couples on the brink of divorce who fight for their marriage. Or outstanding workers who earn an unexpected bonus that pays for car repairs and some diapers. Our circumstances begin to make sense, and we find a way through the tar pits.

We also have opportunities to explore. Even when unwelcome, with the odds against us, we need adventures to get unstuck.

Eventually, our stories conclude.

Have you ever noticed this life pattern? What life adventure are you currently on? Let's look at how stories work and then how your story is or is not working.

Patterns in Storytelling and in Life

All stories follow a pattern, with some basic building blocks:

- A Hero is born into an ordinary world.
- Life happens.
- Life includes jokes, campfires, and wondrous chocolate.
- Life also includes a dragon and other monsters.
- The Hero must survive the dragon to enjoy the chocolate.

This is how stories work, literally and metaphorically. This is also how Life works. We're born, we live, tell jokes, fight monsters, and (everyone hopes) learn from our mistakes. The pattern repeats in our lives. When we face difficulties, we either slay our demons or grab wonderful but forbidden fruit. Failure is no fun, but failure produces some of our most compelling stories.

Across cultures and centuries, the pattern appears in ancient myths, fiction, film, and the Bible. The pattern's enduring power lies in its ability to deliver satisfying, inspiring, meaningful stories.

Joseph Campbell, an author, professor, and mythologist, noticed this recurring pattern and called it The Hero's Journey. It became a foundation for storytelling—a literary device, a structure to help writers craft epic page-turners. Campbell inspired Disney story consultant Christopher Vogler, who wrote a book narrowing the Hero's Journey into twelve steps (the model I use). The book went viral. If you've seen films such as *Star Wars*, *The Hobbit*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *The Lion King* (or almost any Disney movie), you'll recognize the pattern. I hope as you read this book that you'll find the pattern in your story.

Here's another nugget from Hollywood: Stories pivot on the Hero's transformation—or resistance to change.

Let's look at Vogler's model, which we'll use for this book: (Insert graphics; list and graphs)

1. **ORDINARY WORLD** introduces a story Hero in his natural environment. We observe him on a typical day, and assess his quirks, charms, and a character flaw or two. This piques our curiosity. Who is this Hero? Do we like him? Whatever the Hero's status quo, it will soon change. This stage connects us emotionally to the Hero, through whom we will vicariously experience the story. Ordinary World also establishes the stakes—what the Hero stands to lose if he accepts the Call to Adventure.
2. **CALL TO ADVENTURE** interrupts and disrupts the status quo. Whether an external event or an internal restlessness, it calls the Hero into an unexpected adventure—welcome or unwelcome.
3. **REFUSAL OF THE CALL** is the Hero's resistance to the call. He hesitates. Scared, insecure, or bound by duty, he weighs the risks. The dangers are real. Are they worth the risk? The Hero needs a nudge.
4. **MEETING THE MENTOR** is the nudge—a wise figure who appears offering advice, instruction, and gifts to the Hero—or a kick in the pants to move her to action. Alternatively, the Hero reaches within for a source of inspiration (for example, Simba in *The Lion King*). The Mentor motivates the Hero to accept the call.
5. **CROSSING THE FIRST THRESHOLD** represents the Hero's transition from resistance to commitment. He takes his first step across a threshold (physical or internal) from Ordinary World into the adventure's Special World. Thresholds are boundaries, a point of no return (for example, a geographical border, the marriage altar, or a commitment to forgive). Threshold Guardians lurk to block the Hero, who must outwit or disarm them to proceed.
6. **TESTS, ALLIES, ENEMIES** calls the Hero to confront new challenges. In the Special World, the language, culture, and rules change. Her identity morphs into “stranger.” She enters a series of tests and must quickly discern who's who—friend or foe?
7. **APPROACH TO THE INMOST CAVE** brings the Hero to a place symbolized as a cave, which holds the treasure he seeks. Remote and heavily fortified, the cave represents the Hero's greatest fear, deepest desire, and deadliest threat. He pauses to consider and

prepare for this challenge, which will require radical sacrifice, maybe even his life. Resistance rises again as the Hero weighs his options.

8. The **ORDEAL** is a story's central crisis—the heart of the journey, a life-or-death passage. The Hero must risk everything to obtain the treasure she seeks. To succeed, she must engage the deepest, most hidden fears and desires of her heart.
9. **SEIZING THE SWORD** is the moment the Hero identifies the object of his quest and sacrifices everything to seize it. If he succeeds, the Ordeal ends, the dragon is vanquished, and the Hero claims his reward. If he fails, he leaves empty-handed.
10. **THE ROAD BACK** opens with another life-and-death threat as the Hero, having seized her sword, bolts for the exit. But dragons do not easily relinquish their treasure. This stage builds to a climax and concludes in the next stage.
11. **RESURRECTION** climaxes the story. The Hero, forged in the Ordeal, faces a final test to prove he has changed enough to slay the dragon. In a cathartic moment, the Hero seizes the sword he gained in stage nine and deals a decisive blow. He appears to die in the effort, but when the dust settles, the dragon is dead. The Hero resurrects: transformed, purged of his old self, and holding high the treasure.
12. **RETURN WITH THE ELIXIR** completes the adventure. The Hero returns to her Ordinary World bearing the treasure, transmuted into an elixir with the power to heal the community.

Did any of this sound familiar? Did any story Heroes come to mind, such as Harry Potter, Bilbo Baggins, or Luke Skywalker? Did a memory surface in your story? Or a nudge you're resisting? Did you recognize the Hero's Journey pattern?

Here's the secret: the Hero's Journey doesn't stay on the page or in the film. It's unfolding in your life, including your spiritual life.

The Hero's Journey of Faith

When I first discovered the Hero's Journey, my imagination ignited. I'd recently emerged from one of the worst ordeals of my life (you'll hear more about it in later stages). The Hero's Journey described it with more flair and accuracy than anything I'd encountered in Christianity. Story language called it an adventure. Cute.

The Bible describes faith as a way, a walk, and a pilgrimage, suggesting physical, dynamic, purposeful movement in a certain direction. Suffering and sacrifice are motifs. Paul compares it to a race, an athletic competition, which require effort, discipline, and a finish line. I'd hardly call my ordeal an adventure. It felt like a painful crawl through labyrinth of dead ends, blind alleys, and confusing plot twists. Unsavory characters lurked in the shadows. Twelve years in, I spotted a greeting card in a bookshop. Its cover read: "Everything will be okay in the end. If it's not okay, it's not the end." I had to smile. Even knowing my ordeal might not end well, the card encouraged me to keep going.

Your faith may feel as random as mine did in those days. You may not think of your faith in literary terms. You may not even have faith, but you will make some kind of journey through this life. Might as well make it fun. A Hero's Journey is unfolding. Jesus is the divine storyteller, and he knows how to tell a good story. He has meticulously crafted your story with structure, themes, and universal elements, all mixed up in a plot as unique as you.

As the author and finisher of your faith, he chose the exact time and place of your birth. As the Beginning and the End, he knows the day it will end. As David wrote: "All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be" (Psalm 139:16). And Jesus completes what he starts (Philippians 1:6).

I'm not saying God pre-programs our lives. Our divine author invites us to collaborate in writing the story of our lives—literally listening to the direction we feel inclined to take. That could spell disaster, but God specializes in disaster relief. He could redirect you, or let you learn how to make better choices, because he installed that risky feature into us: free will (more on that in stage 1).

Jesus is also the foundation on which we build our faith. When we switch from religious language to story language, we see faith through a new lens: The Hero's Journey. Its building blocks:

- A literary framework to support spiritual growth, like a trellis for a vine.
- Flexibility to adapt to our unique circumstances.
- Precise, imaginative language to replace clichés, pop psychology, and social media theology.
- Emotional honesty, without neglecting the intellect.
- Moral clarity when the plot thickens and congeals.
- Balance for the tension between revelation and mystery.

Throughout this book, we'll dive deep into each stage and what it means in storytelling and in faith. As we go, try to connect the dots to your story—any story, maybe especially one that

baffles you. Try to identify the Hero's Journey pattern. Whatever circumstances you find yourself in, identify the stage. Ask God what task he requires of you. Focus on completing that task.

This powerful tool can bring clarity, perspective, and hope to our journeys. For example:

- In your Ordinary World, you randomly faint at work one day. You wake up in the emergency room, attached to monitors. As you regain your wits, you recognize a Call to Adventure.
- You hate your job and can't make ends meet no matter how you budget. In stage 6, you start job hunting, with no prospects. You remind yourself to persevere—stage 7 will eventually arrive.
- In stage 7, you land an interview for your dream job, but it requires a move to another state. Your partner, in her dream job, refuses to move. How will you agree?
- In stage 8, you're offered the position and must respond in a week. A tough decision turns blows up into an Ordeal when you're partner refuses to budge. Will you sacrifice your dream job or your marriage?
- Maybe you're exhausted in stage 10. After a difficult delivery, your twins are thriving. But you're not sleeping. The dragon attempts to seize your joy and commitment but you stare ahead to Stage 11—Resurrection. You reclaim your joy by remembering the joy of the Lord will be your strength. And God reminds you that you're not rocking two infants to sleep—again—you're nurturing the roots of a family.

The Hero's Journey may be the kick in the pants you need to keep going. It reminds us as we start hard seasons that we are building families and creating sanctuaries.

Entering God's Story

Our stories unfold in a broken world, ravaged by war, evil, and human corruption—our macro stories. But we also navigate micro stories: planning for our wedding day or planning a funeral. Managing financial and health crises. Or enduring a difficult marriage. These micro stories nest within our macro stories, which nest within God's story, the metanarrative. ~~our macro story—~~

When we answer Christ's call to follow him, we enter the greatest story ever told. We revel in earthly joys, redemptive moments, and longings fulfilled. Endless micro stories weave in and out of our lives—overlapping, colliding, and intersecting. We live in multiple Hero's Journeys at once. I mentioned some above: a baby is born and the car breaks down. A pipe bursts in our home while we're away on vacation. A health crisis often triggers a financial crisis. And we can't forget to take the dog to the vet. It's a wonder any of us stay afloat.

What do you stand to lose if you accept the Call to Adventure? What might you gain?

We can bend our brains trying to think about all these levels at once. Why are we born into such chaos? We'll find out in stage one, Ordinary World. But may it help to know you didn't manufacture the mess. You may have contributed to it, but a bigger story is underway—God's metanarrative. Until it ends, you are tasked with living in several stories at once. I suggest a focus on one story at a time while monitoring the others. Pick one story you want to travel with through this book, stage by stage. And be aware of the contest it nests in: the ongoing unseen battle. May it relieve the loneliness or any pressure on you to perform better.

Happy endings exist. Adversity also exists, but Jesus calls you into his story not as a passive victim, listlessly enduring adversity. He calls you to an active, engaged faith (remember that free will). His call includes self-sacrifice and self-mastery. Hardship doesn't necessarily mean something is wrong; it often means growing pains. Adversity is a call to change.

How you respond has a direct impact on the outcome of your Hero's Journey. Remember, stories pivot on the Hero's transformation or failure to do so. Though you pray for a situation to change, God asks *you* to change, to master yourself, and rise above circumstances. You can survive by pinpointing what stage you're in and finding a way to move to the next stage.

As we follow Jesus, these ongoing journeys foster our spiritual growth by degrees. We begin to understand spiritual transformation as a developmental process that unfolds over a lifetime. And Jesus shepherds us through the hot mess.

As we move through each journey's stages, God shapes us. His desire is to forge us into Christ's image, a Hero of faith as he defines it. Such a Hero, of whom the world is not worthy, lives a worthy life. He or she pleases God "in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God" (Hebrews 11:38; Colossians 1:10). Hebrews 12:7 tells us to consider hardship as discipline. In return, Jesus rewards us with the strength and discernment to persevere.

However ordinary you feel, you didn't initiate your story—God did. You're not perfect. You're a work in progress, sustaining a lifelong commitment to Jesus. Believe Jesus when he says nothing is impossible for the one who keeps faith with him.

Think again about yourself as the Hero in your own story. What kind of Hero do you want to be? Your story may not feel so great, but you're moving through stages and seasons of spiritual

development. Some of them are no fun. We'll deconstruct the stages in the next section into manageable chunks you can chew on while folding the laundry.

By the end of this book,

- You will be familiar with the Hero's Journey language and structure.
- You will reframe your spiritual life through a story lens.
- You will understand spiritual transformation as a developmental process that unfolds during your lifetime through multiple Hero's Journeys.

The goal is to build faith, hope, and endurance, while developing skills to stay afloat while falling apart.

Scripture calls us pilgrims, suggesting a spiritual journey to a sacred destination. Hebrews calls it a "better country—a heavenly one" (Hebrews 11:16). A journey is defined by its end. We are pilgrims on our way to a celestial city— Heroes on a Hero's Journey to God's eternal rest.

Countless stories nestle within God's story, including yours. Within multiple Hero's Journeys, converging or unraveling, Jesus is actively engaged with your story. He is with you every step of every adventure to which he calls you, and he's an author who completes what he starts. He is working to reconcile all things to himself (Colossians 1:19–20). When he left the planet, he gave us the ministry of reconciliation. Passing the torch to his disciples, he said, "Your turn! Go be a hero."

Two thousand years later, he's still calling heroes, including you.

What is Jesus calling you to now? Trust the story, enter the adventure, and stick to the path. Even when it leads you off a cliff, persevere through to stage 12. Watch what God can do.

Imagine the story he wrote about you long before he released it. Can you imagine sloppy writing and structural flaws? Me neither. Would the plot fizzle in the midsection? Unlikely. Can't yet figure out the plot? Keep reading.

Are you ready to begin, Hero? Do you have a story picked out to focus on as you read? I'll meet you in Ordinary World.

The Heroic Challenge

Reflect on the journey you chose to deconstruct while reading this book. From the graphics, identify any story elements you recognize and the stage you think you're currently experiencing.

QR: "What makes a hero?" Link: <https://ed.ted.com/lessons/what-makes-a-hero-matthew-winkler>

Stage 1: Ordinary World

Most stories take the hero out of the ordinary, mundane world and into a Special World . . . to create a vivid contrast with the strange new world he is about to enter.¹

Stage one introduces us to a story's main character in his natural environment. We observe the Hero's routine and status quo and quickly assess him. Who is this hero? No Hero is perfect, but do we like him? What's a hobbit? The opening scenes pique our curiosity. We're drawn into a story when we connect to its Hero. We wonder what will happen to him.

We spot a character flaw—it may be a quirk, comic relief, or key to resolving the Hero's central conflict. Is he aware of it? What would it take for the Hero to change? How will he change in his adventure, or will he?

The story pivots on the Hero's transformation or failure to do so. Put a pin in that.

Within minutes, the stage is set for the story to unfold. All we need is an inciting incident: an external event or an internal restlessness that disrupts the status quo. It will propel the Hero into an unexpected adventure.

Welcome to stage one, Ordinary World, a world which the writer creates. Its main character is an unlikely but relatable Hero. Consider these film examples:

Frodo, the Hero in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, is a hobbit, lover of home and pipe weed. In the film version, we meet him in the Shire, leaning against a tree in a wooded glen. Absorbed in a book, Frodo's serene expression stirs us with a longing for such a retreat, far from weed whackers and chores.

A distant whistling interrupts Frodo. After a long absence, Gandalf the wizard rides into town. Frodo runs to greet him and rides with him to the hobbit hole he shares with his Uncle Bilbo. We sniff trouble—might be nothing, but when Frodo voices concern about Bilbo, why do Gandalf's eyes narrow? Frodo reminds Gandalf of his reputation in the Shire—disturber of the peace, foreshadowing impending change.

In *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, we meet Harry, an orphan, known as "The Boy Who Lived." As an infant, Harry is left on the doorstep of the suburban home of the Dursleys, relatives. They despise him and consign him to a cupboard under the stairs. A scene shift fast-forwards us to Harry at ten, languishing in a lonely, miserable, abusive childhood. We hurt for Harry and wish we could intervene.

Pride and Prejudice introduces us to Elizabeth Bennet at home with her family—a country estate. Her parents argue about marriage prospects for their daughters. Mr. Bennet has no sons. When he dies, the estate will go to a male relative, leaving his wife and daughters in poverty—the social dilemma of the "entail." Mrs. Bennet is in a panic. Mr. Bennet is emotionally detached.

Did you see any hint of a central conflict? Any flaws in the heroes? For example:

Is Gandalf, Disturber of the Peace, about to do so again?

Ten years later, Harry, begins to rebel. In a classic orphan story, he wants to know who he is and why he is not with his parents.

Elizabeth chafes against the social restrictions and her overbearing mother; she rejects the social mores and hopes to marry an equal partner or remain single. Hope comes in the form of Mr. Bingley, a delightful, wealthy, eligible gentleman. He arrives with a Mr. Darcy, an equally

¹ Vogler, *The Writer's Journey*, 15.

eligible but wealthier gentleman. They will all soon meet at the upcoming ball. When they do, Mr. Darcy catches everyone's eye—a brooding, miserable looking gentleman who hates balls.

With these illustrations in mind, let's look at your Ordinary World. If I watched a five-minute clip of your story, what would I see? Zoom in on the externals first. Do you live in a peaceful shire or a row house with a domineering parent or spouse? Does your corporate cubicle feel like a cupboard under the stairs? Describe a typical day. What is your status quo?

Who are you in your Ordinary World? An orphan seeking identity? A 30-something seeking an equal partner and soul mate? You might be a suicidal veteran. Or a nurse, stealing drugs from the hospital pharmacy to fight panic attacks.

Who else is with you?

Some have labeled you, as the Shire labeled Gandalf “disturber of the peace.” Harry was called The Boy Who Lived. Elizabeth detested Mr. Darcy for calling her “tolerable.” How would you label yourself?

Moving inward, describe your inner landscape: calm, lonely, frustrated, or something else? No doubt, like everyone, you nurture hopes, dreams, and longings. Pride and prejudice jostle with fear, anxiety, and shame. What is your character flaw?

Whatever your external circumstances, your internal story reveals your reactions. In the story you picked to explore, where is there tension? Can you identify a central conflict? What would you change in your story, and where is God in it?

On an ordinary day, someone or something disrupted your status quo. What was it? What will it cost you to ignore it? What if you embraced it?

Reflecting on these questions will prepare you to move to the next stages.

In this stage, we'll consider:

- Your story, in which you are the Hero and God's story, the cosmic narrative, in which Jesus is the Hero.
- Ordinary World's narrative of hope and despair; how it differs from God's narrative.
- How to cultivate biblical hope to sustain us for the journey.

Why hope in particular? We could zero in on any facet of Ordinary World, but for a spiritual Hero's Journey, we need hope that we can change, go the distance, and not betray Christ in crunch time. Also, Ordinary World is awash in despair, which is contagious. We withstand its infection in our minds and hearts by understanding hope.

Our task is to identify and replace false hopes with biblical hope. Then we are well positioned for a Hero's Journey with Jesus. We'll need when we're stuck in a cupboard or a loveless marriage.

Spiritually Speaking

Now let's look at the Ordinary World of God's metanarrative and how it intersects your story. The cosmic tale opens in Genesis. We meet God creating the earth—its elements and its creatures, including the first humans, Adam and Eve. God had plans for the first couple. Setting them in a garden, he charged them to reproduce, fill the earth, and manage it. Ordinary World was a dwelling place where God, Adam, and Eve would live in an intimate, covenantal relationship, with meaningful work and conversation (Genesis 1:26–28).

One of the distinctives of humans was free will, the ability to choose, make decisions, and act. A hint of conflict comes when God tells Adam not to do something: eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil (Genesis 2:16–17). Would Adam obey?

If I were Adam, the restriction would have aroused my curiosity. We are drawn to forbidden fruit like eyeballs to smart phones.

Enter the serpent.

Maybe Adam forgot to tell Eve about the taboo tree, or maybe she was also curious. The serpent suggested a reasonable lie, and Eve took the bait. She bit. Adam didn't intervene. When she offered him the fruit, he bit too.

The status quo: shattered. Paradise Lost.² A conflict of cosmic proportions erupted.

The act ruptured Adam and Eve's relationship with God, and they hid in shame. When God came to find them, he called to Adam, asked a few questions, and three curses followed: for the serpent, for Eve's childbearing and relationship with Adam, and for the ground, with guaranteed painful toil for life. In other words, shame, marital problems, and soul-sucking work. How many of us can relate?

Ordinary World as God envisioned it ended for Adam and Eve. Expelled from the garden, they entered a barren, cursed world under Satan's control (1 John 5:19).

Enter every other human born. Whatever our Ordinary World, he and his cohorts prowl the neighborhood, sowing anger, division, and affliction.

What hope do we have? We could easily miss it in the curses.

- God didn't scrap humanity but created a way for humans to spiritually live again.
- God promised a child who would crush the serpent and reverse the curse.
- God prevented Adam and Eve from eating from the Tree of Life and gaining immortality in Satan's world—a mercy.
- The promised child arrived millennia later—Jesus, the Hero of God's story. He did the necessary work to reconcile our relationship with God. He neutralized Satan and his agents, restoring our ability to rebuild our Ordinary Worlds (Colossians 2:13–15).

God's story with humans is in motion. And it hasn't ended yet. Though a lethal enemy pursues us, God's on the prowl too. He seeks unlikely heroes to shield and strengthen them for the cosmic war.

Your Hero's Journey includes these two realms, seen and unseen. You live simultaneously in two realities, with two kinds of hope warring within. And you live in two dimensions of time, the *now* and the *not yet*. You may be floundering *now*, but your story is *not yet* finished. Your Hero's Journey will be spent learning to discern between these two realms, realities, and hopes. And function.

If your hope is floundering or MIA, remember the unseen battle. For those fully committed hearts, Jesus shields, protects, and trains for battle.

We can't do much about the realities and time, but we can choose to hope. Let's make sure you have biblical hope, that sturdy virtue, one of only three that will remain. And the only one that will sustain you through a Hero's Journey.

Two Hopes

² "Paradise Lost," an epic poem written by John Milton (1608–1674), describes the biblical story of Adam and Eve.

Defining hope is like defining a person. Where does one begin? Where else but Scripture, where—surprise! Hope has a name: Jesus. The better we understand him, the quicker we’ll recognize counterfeits. Setting aside his divine nature, Jesus as a human still embodied hope, like every other human. Let’s focus on just a few:

- Expectations: of God and others. Are they positive, negative, realistic or unrealistic?
- Desire: which drives a Hero forward in a story.
- Free will: the power of choice.
- Patience: a mindset of active waiting for the fulfillment of God’s promises, now or in the not yet.
- Promise: the hope of being made perfect and receiving an eternal reward.
- Endurance: another word for hope. It shines in Abraham’s story. He waited beyond all human hope for the promised son (Romans 4:18; 1 Thessalonians 1:3).

Did you notice that “wish” isn’t on this list? It’s a passive word, lacking agency. This is one version of Ordinary World’s hope, which pins it on almost any savior but Jesus. A new president, medical treatment, or our own wits will do. A new pill, pop star, or pagan spirituality are distractions, temptations, or lethal opponents. They will fail you.

When we enter God’s kingdom, which of these false hopes do we carry with us?

For example, Ordinary World offers snappy slogans like, “You got this” or “It’s okay not to be okay.” But ordinary heroes, living ordinary lives, crawl out of bed each morning thinking, “I’m not okay.” We don’t “get it,” don’t get God, and feel spiritually exhausted.

Memes on our social media feeds shout, “You are enough” and “You are fierce” and “Everyone else dresses better/travels more/lives a more exciting life than you.” But we don’t feel fierce, and if we’re enough, why are we depressed?

Paradoxically, Ordinary World also warns us, “Don’t get your hopes up. You’ll only be disappointed.” By contrast, biblical hope never disappoints (Romans 5:5; Isaiah 49:23). In other words, do get your hopes up! Hope in Jesus anchors your faith and your Hero’s Journey.

Now let’s unpack those facets of hope.

Expectations

Let’s be honest. Relationships are messy. Hope may not disappoint, but people do. Even Jesus disappointed many. Relationships demand trust, and when trust is broken, relationships falter and may fail.

When God disappoints, faith wobbles. We may enter a full-blown spiritual crisis. Our expectations collide with our experience, sending shock waves of grief, anger, or betrayal through us. If our expectations aren’t aligned with God’s reality, we may hide from him or quietly leave the church. Questions multiply:

- We had a fairy tale wedding—or so I thought. Why am I now divorced?
- Jesus healed others—why not me?
- Where was God when our child died?
- Why didn’t God stop the abuse?
- Does God hear my prayers? Does he care?

Yes, we had expectations—positive, negative, realistic, or unrealistic. Maybe we need to reset them.

In any relationship, including one with God, we honor one another when we withhold judgment, manage our emotions, and keep the lines of communication open.

One question can restore our faith, in God or another person: “I expected _____ but experienced _____. Can you help me close the gap?”³

Often, misunderstandings surface that we can quickly reconcile. Sometimes this requires hard conversations, honest questioning, or lament. Sometimes, mistrust in God may be linked to our experiences with others—something we’ll revisit in a later stage. And of course, reconciliation is not as simple as this question, but it’s a start. We’re still in stage one, right? Committing to the process here, however, and watch how it smoothes your journey.

When a trust gap opens between expectation and experience, one question can help close it. But we can learn to better manage our expectations. We start by remembering the story we’re in—God’s story—and checking to see if our hope and expectations are biblical and realistic.

Expect communication gaps and setbacks in your Hero’s Journey. Hold your questions, thoughts, and feelings about God or others when communications collapse or trust is strained. Focus on Jesus, not the world’s distractions. Learn from him—invite his Spirit to teach and illuminate hope for you. He unmask hope counterfeits and inspires you to remove your masks and recover hope where it has been lost, stolen, or MIA.

Desire

Each journey will ask the same questions:

- What do you earnestly desire?
- What price are you willing to pay for it?

Desire will drive you to donate a kidney because you want your sister to live. It will drive you to your knees in prayer for a prodigal son. Desire drove me to find healing from spinal trauma injuries. It cost me twelve years, a few friends, and a bank account. What will your desire cost?

Some call a Hero’s Journey one of desire. A Hero’s Journey clarifies your desires. Some will compel you to act. Others remain hidden in your heart. And some form your bucket list.

Free Will and Agency

These two words mark a subtle difference: free will is the power to choose. Agency refers to the ability to act on that choice. For example, Harry Potter would have left the Dursleys’ home, but as a child, he didn’t have the power—agency to do so. In his teen years, however, he acted: walking off with a stranger to a place called Hogwarts.

Stories pivot on the Hero’s transformation, which depends on free will choices.

In our Hero’s Journey with Christ, we have some measure of free will and agency. We can choose to control the flesh, manage thoughts and emotions, and worship God. If we lose agency, we can pray to regain it. In any environment, even despicable ones, we can choose our internal reaction. Free will

- enables us to live a life of service and sacrifice. We exert control over our flesh, finances, environment, social norms, and cultural expectations.

³ “Trust vs. Suspicion,” Northpoint Community Church, Northpoint Resources, DVD series, <https://store.irresistible.church/search?q=Trust+vs.+Suspicion&options%5Bprefix%5D=last>.

- empowers us to resist Satan, our relentless stalker (Luke 10:19; 1 John 4:4). We can refer him to God and move on.
- Enables us to trust a relationship again, even with God.
- allows us to choose to abstain from things that violate our covenant with God.

The bad news is: our free will and agency corrupted in the fall. We became slaves to sin. Until Jesus restores us and our wills, we have limited capacity or agency on a planet that Satan controls.

The good news is: we still have choice and agency, however corrupted. And Jesus can restore them. He sends us on Hero's Journeys to forge them. Our part is to cooperate. External circumstances will challenge our wills and internal alarm bells will clang in our ears. A Hero's Journey might call us to persevere, forgive, or grieve. Or learn that failure is not the final word.

We must learn like children to regulate our minds, wills, and emotions. We need to discipline to limit ourselves to one cupcake a day, not two. When we do, our wills strengthen. With a healthy functional will, exercised with wisdom and care, we make healthy choices.

Free will is a risky feature. God risked giving it to us. He longs for a relationship of love, intimacy, and faithfulness. For such a relationship to flourish, each partner must be free to choose the other. Within the limits of a fallen world, we get to choose him and covenant with him to remain faithful. God won't force relationship. Everyone is invited, but each one will have to choose. Free will has implications. Covenants carry consequences and moral responsibility.⁴ Do we risk binding ourselves to him?

In the cosmic war, tension is a way of life. Spiritual warfare is an unending internal battle of choosing good over evil, resisting God or submitting to him. Throughout your journey, temptations will come to compromise, to bend to another's will or your own, with its lusts and appetites. To choose eternal life in God's world or remain in Satan's world, which leads to death.

The cosmic war you entered? You get to choose whose side you're on.

God-lovers harness their wills and learn the power of a will submitted to God. He calls people everywhere into Hero's Journeys to restore, heal, and strengthen their wills to make transformational choices. Each stage offers more choices to side with Jesus. Each choice carries eternal consequences.

Victory depends on how you mobilize your free will.

A will bent to God's is unstoppable.

Patience and Endurance

Do you have no patience for long lines, slow drivers, or reading tech documents to troubleshoot your new computer? Do you feel hopeless trying to control yourself? May I suggest you keep at it? Check your hope but set your mind on things above—we have bigger fish to fry. The earthly realms can be as exasperating as mosquito swarms, but in the heavenly realms, you're facing a different species of pest, symbolically portrayed in the Bible as the dragon, scorpions, and hordes of locusts. You need a superior kind of patience.

Biblical patience relates to endurance. You won't master your mind, will, and emotions by swatting at mosquitoes. Or by skipping stages of the Hero's Journey. Mastery develops over

⁴ Genesis 2:16–17; Deuteronomy 30:19; Joshua 24:14–15.

many journeys. “This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness,” Jesus said via John (Revelation 13:10).

Check the context: a cosmic war against the saints, with the beast overcoming. For most of my faith walk, I thought *we* were the overcomers. Aren’t we more than conquerors? Silly hobbit.

A deep dive into Revelation corrected me: Sometimes the enemy will prevail. I wouldn’t always overcome, physically or otherwise. But I could still choose to remain faithful to the one with whom I am in covenant.

Patience is an active choice to wait expectantly for God to move. Whether through a mentor, a flash of insight, or a change in circumstances, he will provide a catalytic next step.

Paul compared spiritual growth to human development (1 Corinthians 13:11) and taught that suffering produces perseverance, character, and hope (Romans 5:3–4).

Patience waits as long as it takes. Not when you’re stuck behind a lumbering truck. But for Jesus to give you rest from your enemies.

Promise

This facet of hope is our why. Promises awaken desire, don’t they? We experience this the first time tells us in childhood that we’ll get ice cream if we clean our rooms. Jesus promises us something better than ice cream. Can we trust him? If we know him, yes. If our expectations are aligned, yes. If we’ve built our relationship with him, and can “Promises, made, promises kept,” we’re ready to die for him.

Start collecting those small, personal promises Jesus gives you. They usually come with a verse attached. Those verses become anchors to hold you as you proceed in your journey. I’ve kept a small list of some life verses. They arrived at critical junctures in my journey and then reappeared regularly. Especially when I’m dangling by my fingernails over an abyss of despair. While Satan hisses, “Did God really say . . .” the Spirit replies, “Did I not say . . .” And hope flies again.

Some of my favorite promises are in Revelation. They talk about our ultimate destination—a city where God will dwell with us again. Home to Jesus. We have a future and a hope.

Moving Forward

Ordinary World represents limited perception or self-awareness. The Hero must be “awakened”—what Jesus called opening our spiritual eyes. The awakening begins in stage 2, the Call to Adventure. The announcement of the call will wake us up to a reality, a desire, and a fear—are we up for the call? Hope is immediately tested. If Jesus calls, will he equip us to fulfill the task? We may have no choice.

Cultivating hope, rooted in relationship with Jesus, is essential work to complete our Hero’s Journeys. This isn’t a casual friendship. Incredibly, Jesus invites us into a covenantal relationship with him, symbolized by marriage—for better or worse, even in a cosmic conflict. This is an epic romance—a divine bridegroom seeking a bride. While conflict rages, our divine partner ensures the safest possible passage through the war zone.

The goal of the Hero's Journey is to ignite authentic hope, the fuel required to leave the Ordinary World. Now you may feel hopeless, unable to feed your own fish, let alone the world's hungers. Maybe not yet, Jesus promises, but in time, you can feed the world unshakeable hope.

Ordinary World. If it's not biblical hope, it's misleading, exposing us to a lethal enemy. We may refuse or abandon a call to adventure.

To endure the spiritual battle within and around us, we need more than Ordinary World's memes, tropes, and slogans—we need biblical hope. Otherwise, our faith flounders, and we risk spreading empty or false hope to others. With biblical hope, we can clearly identify and discard its counterfeits. Our imaginations will envision a brighter future for ourselves and Ordinary World.

That five-minute clip of your story? It depicts a work in progress. Our divine author creator knows the creative process and works to perfect his works of art, of which you are one. He always trusts, always hopes, and always perseveres (1 Corinthians 13:7). He will never leave you. He has so much hope for you.

Thomas Aquinas called hope an emergency passion. He added a vivid image: “A man who has been shipwrecked will cling to a piece of driftwood for hours because he hopes to be rescued.”⁵

So hang on, Hero!

When we cling to biblical hope, we abandon Ordinary World's despair and run out the door on a journey of hope. In case of emergency, call on Jesus.

In the meantime, may you know “the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe” (Ephesians 1:18–19).

The Heroic Challenge

Collect scriptures about hope that resonate with you. Sow them into your spirit and cultivate hope during your Hero's Journey. Keep a journal, create a collage, or capture notes on your phone. Document what you learn as you read through this book. For more ideas, see “Cultivating Hope” at <https://www.mythicmonastery.org/soulcare>. (QR code)

⁵ Walter Farrell, OP, STM, and Martin J. Healy, STD, *My Way of Life* (Confraternity of the Precious Blood, 1952), 209.

Stage 2: Call to Adventure

*Come, follow me.
Matthew 4:19*

God called Moses from a burning bush, identifying himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He told Moses to confront Pharaoh and lead the Hebrews out of Egypt. Moses's days as a fugitive shepherd ended.⁶

An angel with a message appeared to a virgin: "You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus."⁷ Mary's life changed forever.

Walking by the Sea of Galilee, Jesus called two fishermen: "Follow me."⁸ Peter and Andrew dropped their nets, ending life as they knew it.

In each of these stories, God called biblical heroes in their Ordinary Worlds while shepherding, fishing, or doing domestic chores. Similarly, calls come to us in our ordinary lives. As stage one demonstrated, they disrupt the status quo. They launch us into unexpected adventures.

The Hero may grapple with fear, doubt, and questions such as "Why me?" Or she's elated—her sweetheart proposed marriage! If she accepts, her identity shifts: from single to married. Identity reveals who you are and to whom you belong. Calls will challenge that identity and your sense of self.

We often imagine a Call to Adventure as thrilling, with magical experiences in exotic locales. But the Call can also mean "a bold and risky undertaking, hazardous action of uncertain outcome."⁹

For example:

- You found the perfect home. Your bid was accepted, and you signed the contract to become a first-time homeowner.
- Your child is deployed to a war zone.
- A stranger joins the church and flirts with your husband.
- A toothache sends you to the dentist, who refers you to an oral surgeon, who finds cancer.

These are inciting incidents that launch us into unexpected adventures. They rattle our cages and alter our identities. They disrupted the biblical heroes mentioned above. Can you relate? What inciting incident recently rocked your world? Who delivered it? You likely didn't see a burning bush or angelic visitor, but a realtor, military commander, or dentist might bear news that becomes a call to action. How did you respond? What emotions erupted in you?

God constantly calls ordinary people—teenagers, retirees, Uber drivers, and us. He assigns outlandish tasks but promises his power to complete them and his presence. It works, but the process takes time. It's a Hero's Journey, but how does it begin?

In this stage, we'll examine call and identity in your Hero's Journey. As with the biblical heroes above, calls interrupt our ordinary routines. Welcome or unwelcome, they alter our lives

⁶ Exodus 3:1–10.

⁷ Luke 1:31.

⁸ Matthew 4:19.

⁹ The definition of "adventure," Dictionary.com, accessed July 13, 2025, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/adventure>.

and identities. Our task is to prepare to be blindsided. Let's start preparing, first by finding our "why."

Spiritually Speaking

When Jesus says, "Follow me," the call sounds simple. But high-stakes choices confront us. Jesus called disciples who would become apostles, prophets, teachers, pastors, and evangelists. Yet he rarely explained the how or when. Questions flood us, but Jesus has already disappeared around a bend. Trust gaps may open.

After conversion, calls continue to cascade through our lives—calls within calls, as Mother Teresa described them. We're as likely to perceive these calls in the shower, during our morning commute, or while buttering our toast. They catch us off guard or even blindside us. Our defenses go up as we sense danger to our comfort zone. We're right: every call asks for sacrifice. What happens to our expectations then?

God seeks hearts devoted to him and then tests them. He reveals our hearts' willingness, flexibility, and trust. What if Jesus calls you to walk on water? Would you attempt it? Peter did and later declared he would die for Jesus. But when the Romans came with their swords, he denied Christ.

How often, after conversion, do we declare with passion, "I'll do anything for Jesus!"

Um, except . . . that. We weren't expecting *that*.

Jesus didn't sugarcoat the requirements of following him. For many, it would mean persecution, cancellation, imprisonment, even death. After the apostle Paul's call, he was struck blind for three days. During his ministry years, he was mobbed, beaten with rods, pelted with stones, and shipwrecked three times. A lethal snake bit him. Imprisoned, he despaired of life itself.

As Teresa of Avila famously complained, "If this is how you treat your friends, no wonder you have so few!"

An ad attributed to Sir Ernest Shackleton captures a more accurate picture of Jesus's call:

"Men Wanted for hazardous journey, small wages, bitter cold, long months of complete darkness, constant danger. Safe return doubtful, honor and recognition in event of success."¹⁰

Do you remember when Jesus called you? Did it sound like this ad? Would you have answered the call? Neither Shackleton nor Jesus held back. But notice the motivating "why" phrase that concluded Shackleton's ad: "Honor and recognition in event of success."

Jesus often seemed to rebuff people who wanted to follow him. But he too embedded a "why" in his universal call: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it" (Matthew 16:24–25).

Do you want to follow Jesus into each call he announces? Ask yourself if you want to find your life.

When I first encountered Christ's call, I thought he had a wonderful plan for my life. I found it easy to say yes. But when Jesus highlighted Matthew 16:24–25 for me, I stumbled. Pick up a cross? No thanks. Persecution? Not feeling it. Fire-breathing dragon? Hard pass. I found it hard to deny myself a cookie, but a cross? Um . . . I stalled for time. The verse nagged me for years, until the Spirit put it to me differently: "Do you want to find the life I want to give you?"

¹⁰ Joshua Horn, "Men Wanted for Hazardous Journey," *Discerning History*, May 15, 2013, <https://discerninghistory.com/2013/05/shackletons-ad-men-wanted-for-hazardous-journey/>.

The question was irresistible. For the first time, I saw possibilities. What kind of life would I find? The abundant life Jesus promised? I said yes to this question. If I could deny myself one cookie at a time, maybe I could also control one thought, one flaw, one hiccup at a time.

Later in my journey, Jesus taught me the difference between life in the flesh and life in the Spirit. They are in constant conflict.¹¹ I learned to distinguish between the flesh (a false self), and the true self, “created in Christ Jesus to do good works.”¹² Easier said than done, right? But possibility dangled before me. I mulled it over a cup of coffee and a cookie.

What is God currently calling you to do or be? In your considerations, ask yourself if you want to find life. It’s your mantra—the “why” to remember throughout your journey.

When God calls us, he often places a huge obstacle in our way. We wonder how or even if we will answer the call. Some part of us is whispering, “What’s in it for me?” Can we overcome this obstacle?

Calls ask us to reach for our desires, however unlikely or impossible they seem. Do we believe God will fulfill it? What if he asks us to relinquish it? Do we risk disappointment?

Though we read of great exploits in the Bible, we may not have experienced any. So God helps us with baby steps: general calls for all followers. For example,

- We are called to one hope (Ephesians 4:4)—our future horizon.
- To be holy, set apart for God (1 Peter 1:15–16)—our moral standard.
- To fellowship (*koinonia*)—with the Father, Son, and Spirit, and each other. Beyond social activities, we are legal, spiritual partners with a common mission in Christ (1 Corinthians 9).
- To freedom (Galatians 5:13)—to serve others.
- To renew our minds (Romans 12:2)—constantly.

This is quite enough work for several lifetimes, so remember baby steps. Pick one of the above and start practicing. Move to another when it feels right, and another. Soon you’ll be juggling all five and refining them as you persevere. Watch and learn as your spiritual muscles strengthen.

General calls help us pursue our internal transformation without neglecting communal responsibilities. They apply to all believers and extend into the community. They prepare us for specific calls: to deny a sweet tooth, curb our speech, or resist a sexual temptation. Or to lead a community for fasting and prayer, as Esther summoned the Jews of Susa before she approached the king (Esther 6:16). Daniel enlisted his friends to pray for him as he sought God’s revelation on the king’s dream (Daniel 2:17–18).

One Hero’s Journeys continue, and we grow in faith, hope, and willpower, stage by stage. When fears and anxieties rise, we urge one another to refuse them a foothold. We help one another to endure a traumatic injury, overcome an addiction, or enter a cancer journey.

More questions arise, but so do hope, discipline, and knowledge of God. We have lift off, but, as Jim Lovell famously warned NASA during Apollo 13’s mission, “Houston, we have a problem.”

The Conundrum

¹¹ Romans 8:5–9; Galatians 5:16–25; 1 Corinthians 2:14–15; Colossians 3:1–10.

¹² Ephesians 2:10.

I mentioned the constant conflict between the flesh and the spirit—the false self and the true. When you answered Christ’s call, both accompanied you, warring through every Hero’s Journey you make. It’s a conundrum.

Paul has some interesting things to say about these siblings: “If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” (2 Corinthians 5:17). Really? If the old is gone, why does it cling to my ankles like a screaming toddler?

Paul admits, “I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. I want to do what is right, but I can’t. I want to do what is good, but I don’t. I don’t want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway. But if I do what I don’t want to do, I am not really the one doing wrong; it is sin living in me that does it” (Romans 7:18–20 NLT). Thank you, Paul.

Paul despairs, as we do, in hope’s tension of the now and the not yet. Now, our old creatures are crucified with Christ, but we’ve not yet mastered anger (for example). Now, we are in Christ, but we’ve not yet abandoned porn. The compulsion to check Instagram is more compelling than checking Scripture. Like Job, we sit in misery with friends who tell us it’s okay not to be okay.

Paul is more honest than Job’s friends. We’re not okay— yet. But, as Paul rejoices, “Thank God! The answer is in Jesus.”

As a Christian youngster, caught in Paul’s conundrum, I repeatedly asked God to stop me from sinning. I thought it was his job, until he pushed back.

“No, that’s on you,” he enlightened me. “I’m here to help, but you must master sin.”

God was quoting himself in Genesis 4, when he instructed Cain: “Why are you angry? . . . If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it” (Genesis 4:6–7).

God didn’t condemn Cain (or me); he approached Cain (and me) conversationally, asking questions and warning us both to master anger. Cain ignored him—a fatal mistake. I would not. I studied Cain’s story, short as it is, and again saw possibilities.

- God was more concerned about the heart than the sacrifice.
- God honored Cain’s free will but expected him to control his anger.
- Cain refused; his anger escalated to murder.
- When we refuse God’s counsel, consequences, sometimes fatal, fall on us and others.

For the first time, I no longer felt a victim of sin, Satan, or my emotions. With Jesus’s help, I could master my emotions and appetites. I could resist Satan and his temptations. This felt like a liberation— putting to death my false self seemed doable. Hope sparked, and I hammered some stakes in the ground:

13. Own my junk.
14. Take charge of my thought life, replacing wrong thoughts with God’s thoughts.
15. Solicit God’s help to resist temptations and remove myself from their sources.
16. Know the process of temptation and practice interrupting it (James 1:13–15).
17. Reset expectations: I would no longer expect God to keep me from sinning but seek his power to restrain myself.

I learned more later in my Hero’s Journey, but at this stage, the astonishing truth that I could master the riot of thoughts and emotions in my head kept me quite occupied. I called it Level One Spiritual Warfare.

Saying yes to Jesus's calls, however simple or hard, leads us to cooperate with him in our spiritual transformation. We align with Jesus when he says, "The flesh counts for nothing" (John 6:63). We deny ourselves, pick up the cross he assigns us, and lose our lives for his sake. Then, with perseverance and faithfulness, we find our lives.

Can we ignore a call? Not easily. Jesus is persistent. We'll tackle that subject in stage three. And I'm not sure I'll ever give up cookies, but I can master my consumption.

Identity

Names matter. They connect us to our identity. But names may change. Embracing new calls might mean embracing a new identity, as Daniel and his friends did. Taken captive to the king's palace in Babylon, they were renamed after Babylon's gods, an affront to their Jewish identities (Daniel 1:6–7). God may give you a new name, as he did with Abram and Sarai. Jacob became Israel, Simon became Peter, and Mordecai renamed Esther to protect her Jewish identity.

Harry Potter was as delighted to receive a letter as his Uncle Vernon was horrified. Someone "out there" knew his name and where he lived. He snatched the letter to himself and fought off his uncle and cousin—unsuccessfully. But the impact of seeing his name and address on the envelope consumed Harry. One desire outweighed all others— connection. He was no longer alone in the world. Someone knew him and where he lived. Who?

When Harry's unknown ally came for him and called him a wizard, Harry left everything he knew to leave with a stranger.

So Christ knows where we are and sends us clues. When he calls us by name, he assigns us new roles and identities: mothers, fathers, sons, and daughters. Chosen, selected, beloved. Friends, sheep, disciples. Pastors, evangelists, teachers. We leave our former way of life and join a community. Now we are a royal priesthood, part of the bride of Christ.

If you had difficulty embracing Hero as an identity, how do you feel about royal?

Ordinary World labels us well before we hear God call our name: artist, baker, coach, farmer, scholar, plumber—the list is endless. Some of these speak more to roles we inhabit than to who we are in God's kingdom. We may be only mildly satisfied with our labels, leaving existential questions niggling: who am I? What is my purpose? Does anyone really know me?

There is one: Yahweh, who loves to answer these questions.

God introduced himself to Moses as "I AM" —Yahweh. When Pharaoh needed a name, Moses had one: Yahweh, the supreme high God, above all the gods Pharaoh knew.

Names and identities are elusive, especially during transitions. We talk about losing ourselves when we become teenagers, parents, or foreigners. Adding to the confusion, family, friends, and neighbors don't always relate well to the new self we become in Christ.

I peeled off false identity labels and rebranded myself according to how Jesus identified me. I cultivated the new creation I became in Christ, exploring new calls and owning my identity, power, and authority.

The work paid off. God rewards those who diligently seek him. For those who listen to him, his counsel is enlightening, empowering, and hopeful. On the road to mastering my flesh, I graduated from one incompetent baby step to another. As I did my part, Jesus did his. Each victory solidified one belief for me: with God, nothing is impossible (Luke 1:37).

How has God identified you and what roles has he placed you in? Hold fast to that identity when the mental fog and clouds roll in. Hear his whisper in the storm, “I have called you by name; you are mine” (Isaiah 43:1 NLT).

Imagine coming into God’s kingdom and absorbing an invisible but profound new identity—the one Jesus gave you. It will face constant challenges throughout your Hero’s Journey. Satan attempts to steal it. He resurrects old labels, plants false ones, and clouds your mind with confusion about who you are.

“If you’re even in Christ,” he sneers. “You’re a whiner and complainer, scared of your shadow.”

The name above all names is Jesus, who has given us his name to operate in his authority (John 14:13–14; Luke 10:17–19). Speak his name and watch the demons scatter.

Jesus also authorizes you as an ambassador to represent him. You gain the privilege of approaching the Father for mercy, to plead for others, to rout the enemy, and to regain a lost or stolen identity. To remember who and whose you are. And Jesus promises new names to overcomers in the Philadelphian church (Revelation 3:12–13).

No earthly role or identity is complete until Yahweh tells us who we are and what our purpose is. When he does, we are as giddy as Harry Potter.

Cultivating the True Self

One general call mentioned above targets our mind: to renew it and thus be transformed. We need to think like Jesus. How do we do that? For trekkie fans, I could say, “Vulcan mind meld” and move to my next point. For non-trekkies, consider this: we have the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:16). To be transformed by the renewing of our minds calls us to begin our collaboration with Christ in the process. We do this by reading his Word, listening for his insights, and aligning ourselves with what we learn. Day by day, we begin to transform.

The process is like gardening. Renewing our minds includes pulling “weeds”—our self-talk, Ordinary World ideas, or lies planted by the enemy. If we don’t yank them out of our thinking, they can choke out God’s Word. We will have trouble hearing God or discerning his voice from ours or other voices. We can convince ourselves that we’re unloved, inadequate, and unworthy.

When we weed our minds, we pull out such thoughts and seek God’s mind. He tells us who we are and beautifies our mental gardens—the “lovely” that Paul describes in Philippians 4:8

We renew our minds when we internalize verses such as, “You are precious and honored in my sight . . . I love you” (Isaiah 43:4). Jesus heard the Father’s blessing at his baptism: “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:17).

Wouldn’t you love to hear such affirmations as you embark on a Hero’s Journey?

Here are a few cultivation tips:

- Reading, meditating, and memorizing God’s Word sow seeds into our minds. They burrow into our hearts and spirits and seep into every cell of our being. As we continue, our spirits flourish. Nourished and fortified, we are ready for our adventures.
- Collect verses on call and identity. Plant them like seeds in your heart. From them, create an identity statement or collage. Keep it handy.
- Trim, water, and fertilize your key verses with bible study, spiritual friendships and mentors. Ask them for “gardening” advice.
- Ask God for an understanding of your call and identity.

- Seek opportunities to exercise your call, especially those that align with it. Say no to whatever pollutes, distorts, or distracts you from them. (But stay flexible. Sometimes God calls us to work in our weakness.)

Whether you're practiced at these disciplines or a novice, we all have goals and work to do as we think about our calls and identity.¹³ Weed and pest control demand a lifelong commitment to maintain a garden or a mind.

The Psalms and prophets describe tasting and eating God's words.¹⁴ The Hebrews tied Scriptures on their foreheads.¹⁵ We stick Post-it notes on our computers and inscribe them on wood plaques for our homes. We might fill a journal or a vision board with these affirmations. Skip the self-help mantras. Stick to scriptural affirmations.

A beautiful thought from Ephesians 2:10 tells us we are God's workmanship; the Greek word is *poemia*, from which comes our word "poetry." In effect, the verse says we are God's poems.

Add that to your identity statement!

Moving Forward

Inciting incidents, unexpected calls, shifting identities. Do you hear Jesus whistling in your spirit like Gandalf in the Shire? What is he calling you to now?

Be prepared for Jesus to mess with your expectations, solicit your desires, and test your free will. When challenged, stir up your hope. Remember who you are and who called you. Study the Word and practice the general calls.

If you've cultivated hope and relationship with Jesus, a Call to Adventure will require a sustained, disciplined lifestyle. As we learn to control our minds, will, and emotions, we'll begin to overcome sin and the flesh. The Spirit will lead, but we commit to follow, not wander off to shady websites.

When Jesus calls, we discover who we are and what we were born to do. As you experience calls within calls, you discover identities within identities. Each new call highlights a new facet of your identity in Christ. Our core identity remains—in Christ, his image bearers. But God chisels new facets through new assignments and roles. He equips and motivates us to assume increasing responsibility. We carry the crosses he lowers onto our shoulders and discover more of who we are in him.

When Jesus calls you to a Hero's Journey, you have an inner navigation system leading you forward: purpose and identity. Your hope reorients to Jesus, knowing he completes what he starts. He has made epic promises. Will he fulfill them? You won't know until you share a few adventures together.

Who are you now, and who do you hope to be?

Trust what you discover about yourself—it will bring you to unexpected places, internally and externally. Trust the process of becoming who you are in Christ.

What kind of life might you find?

The Heroic Challenge

¹³ 1 Corinthians 2:16; Philippians 4:1–3; 6–7; 8–9.

¹⁴ Psalm 34:8; Jeremiah 15:16; Ezekiel 3:1–3.

¹⁵ Deuteronomy 6:8.

Drawing inspiration from the Shackleton ad, write a similar one to describe a call to Christ as you experienced it. How did you respond then? And now? How does this stage illuminate call and identity for you?