

“This volume is a real accomplishment—
ultimately an apologetic for the Christian life.”

Timothy J. Keller

D I S C O V E R I N G

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The Surprising Riches Available in Christ

T I M S A V A G E

“Tim Savage’s *Discovering the Good Life* is a real accomplishment. It begins with one of the most universal of questions: *What is the good life?* Then it answers it by taking us through the Bible, summarizing its whole story through the intercanonical theme of three trees—the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the tree of life, and the great branch, the shoot from the stump of Jesse—Jesus himself—who took our curse by dying on a tree. This volume is ultimately an apologetic for the Christian life in response to a culture dedicated to seeking personal fulfillment but finding that very thing more and more elusive.”

Timothy Keller, Founding Pastor, Redeemer Presbyterian Church,
New York City

“With one foot planted firmly in Scripture and the other in culture, Tim Savage unpacks the fullness of life that can be ours right now. If you have ever wondered what ‘abundant life’ should look like, here is the answer! *Discovering the Good Life* is poetic theology that teaches, refreshes, and, yes, surprises us with all that is available in Christ.”

Alistair Begg, Senior Pastor, Parkside Church, Chagrin Falls, Ohio

“So often in our search for satisfaction, we’re like treasure hunters wandering without a map. We know what we want—joy, peace, goodness—but we seem to be searching in all the wrong places. In *Discovering the Good Life*, Tim Savage wisely explains the story of Scripture using three trees as guideposts. If you want to experience abundant life, this book faithfully leads you to the treasure of all treasures and the giver of all goodness: Jesus.”

Melissa Kruger, Director of Women’s Content, The Gospel
Coalition; author, *In All Things*

“In *Discovering the Good Life*, Tim Savage addresses the enduring question, *How do we find fullness of life in a world full of trouble?* The answer—as he shows through Scripture, stories, and practical examples—is that Christians who faithfully embrace Jesus Christ will find unbelievable fulfillment by reflecting Christ’s indwelling love in all they do. Savage’s message will inspire Christians wherever they are in their faith journey.”

Jon Kyl, former United States senator (Arizona); former Senate
Minority Whip

“*Discovering the Good Life* is an extraordinary book by Tim Savage on how good life can be when Christ is the center of it. Savage always has an eloquent way of teaching the Bible and showing how full our lives can be in Christ. Christian or unbeliever, this book will illustrate how you can be transformed by the unconditional love of Christ.”

Carson Palmer, all-pro NFL quarterback; Heisman Trophy winner (2002); first overall pick in the NFL draft (2003)

Discovering the Good Life

Discovering the Good Life

The Surprising Riches Available in Christ

Tim Savage

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Matt and Jon

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Prologue

This is a book about life.

Life is more than a beating heart and inhaling lungs. It is also an adventure—a search for meaning and satisfaction.

Unfortunately for many people, life can be disheartening, falling somewhere between the merely tolerable and the profoundly disappointing.

But it doesn't have to be that way.

Life can be good, very good. That was certainly the intent of the Creator. When God created life, he meant it to be fulfilling.

How do we find fullness of life in a world full of trouble?

No one ever radiated more life than Jesus Christ. It is the burden of my heart, in the pages that follow, to explore his understanding of life.

First, I want to thank two young men whose lives sprang, many would say, from their mother and me. Yet we know a deeper reality: Matt and Jon are gifts from above. Consistently and by God's grace, they have modeled, and have uplifted our hearts by, the surprising riches of life in Christ.

Life, Cynics, and Three Trees

O the glory of that endless life,
that can at once extend to all Eternity.¹

Thomas Traherne

What is so good about life?

Our hearts long for a winning answer.

Especially at this electrifying moment of history, when the promise of satisfaction resides at our fingertips, when a single tap of a smartphone can update a wardrobe or tweak a portfolio—especially now, we want to believe that life can be good, really good.

But *is* life good?

Do we awaken each morning with unbridled optimism? Do we greet each day with enthusiasm? Do we revel in the blessing of simply being alive?

To be able to celebrate life without reservation and without regret—that is our greatest desire.

However, most of our celebrating takes place in spite of life, to drown out life's disappointments and to distract from life's demands. The thrill of a fourth-quarter comeback, the anticipation of a beach getaway, the excitement of a cinematic blockbuster—these are the things we celebrate, but usually as diversions from life.

Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, the former Soviet dissident, understood this well. In a commencement address to students at Harvard University in 1978, he chided his youthful audience for their “prescribed smiles and raised glasses” and asked quizzically, “What is all the joy about?”² Surely not about life in the late-modern world, where people are restless and mired in discontent.

To the graduates in their mortarboards the Russian sounded unnecessarily glum. They were the starry-eyed Baby Boomers, radical to the bone, overbrimming with confidence, marching for social change with megaphones in hand, and rallying to the cry of a better life. When the rock sextet Rare Earth belted out its lyric, “I just want to celebrate another day of living!” the Boomers cheered wildly, twisted and shouted, and christened the song the anthem of the decade.³

Life *must* be celebrated.

But forty years on, we are not so sure.

Searching for Who Knows What

Many now wonder whether Solzhenitsyn, with the corners of his mouth turned downward, had a point. An earlier cynic, the Dutch artist Vincent van Gogh, typifies the uncertainty. His icy relationship with life renders him a modern icon, whose restlessness we applaud. “I’m looking for something all the time.”⁴

To be looking for something—that is the popular obsession.

Exactly what we’re looking for may not be known, but it doesn’t matter. What matters is that we are passionately seek-

ing. In the words of van Gogh, “I am striving. I am seeking. I am in it with all my heart.”⁵

In other words, life is more a quest than a discovery, more a journey than an arrival. The British philosopher Bertrand Russell sums it up well: “The search . . . is my entire life . . . the actual spring of life within me.”⁶

But we might ask, Isn’t a search without a discovery an exercise in futility? Isn’t seeking without finding pointless? Who would blame, say, a martian, a cosmic interloper scoping out humanity, for shaking his head in dismay and declaring, “What a peculiar creature is the human being, searching for who knows what and finding not much!”

As citizens of the rising years of the twenty-first century, we fare little better, and it doesn’t bode well for finding a happy answer to the question, What is so good about life? Perhaps we ought to concede with the balladeer Joni Mitchell, “I really don’t know life at all.”⁷

Yet all is not gloom.

Into a milieu every bit as bewildering as our own, into the brooding uncertainty of the first century AD, stepped a teacher who professed to have a winning answer to the question. According to him, life is good, exceptionally good. Almost alone among the philosophers of his day, he depicted life in vibrant hues.

Like the Greek sages before him, he was known by a single name.

Jesus.

Pathway to Abundance

Unusual for a celebrity, Jesus hailed from a backwater village in a barren corner of the eastern Mediterranean. He possessed

no academic qualifications. He refused to promote himself by force of personality. And with regard to the social markers of his day—pride, pedigree, and power—he offered no boast.

Yet when Jesus spoke, people listened. In fact, the words he uttered bore such weight that both the angels of heaven and the stones of earth fell silent. What emerged from his lips was divine, the thoughts of God compressed into the tonalities of human speech. And the words were articulations of life, fullness of life.

It is important to note that Jesus did not package his ideas in terms of principles, techniques, or instructions. Rather, he spoke in terms of himself. Uniquely, he pointed to himself as the source of life, as the one in whom true life, good life, could be found.

His message was as succinct as it was compelling.

“I am the life” (John 11:25), Jesus announced triumphantly. And he invited people to find their sustenance in him. “I am the bread of life” (John 6:48).

He promised everlasting benefits. “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever” (John 6:51).

He guaranteed maximum satisfaction. “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10).

To audiences weary of life’s travails, the words of Jesus must have sounded enormously appealing. Perhaps to some they sounded too good to be true. How could Jesus—how could anyone—offer such bountiful life? How could an itinerant teacher tender more life by far than anyone had before him?

Surely the offer must be pure fantasy, to be rejected out of hand.

But what if it were true?

What if Jesus *does* possess abundance of life?

We must be careful not to dismiss Jesus too quickly. To regard his words as fanciful might be to exhibit a fatal inelasticity of mind. It might be to distance ourselves from the one thing we desire most: satisfaction of life.

An Impressive Record

Certainly, Jesus's track record was impressive. Through the ages, many have dipped their buckets into his well and found refreshment beyond expectation. In celebration of Jesus, master artists have created works of unparalleled beauty—paintings, sculptures, symphonies, prose, and poetry—all celebrating the life discovered in him.⁸ In the pages that follow, we will meet many such people, emanating from a variety of times and places, all making the same affirmation: that nothing satisfies such as the life embodied in Jesus.

Why, then, haven't more people tapped into this life? Perhaps even more puzzling, why haven't more Christians tapped into this life, the people who ought to be most receptive?

The answer is simple. Too many people, including too many Christians, labor under the burden of life's disappointments, which invariably distracts from the promises of Jesus. When dreams are dashed and insecurities mount, when relationships implode and illnesses afflict, when failures strike and regrets fester, people can sour on life. Preoccupied by attempts to limit the damage, people neglect the resources available in Jesus.

When even followers of Jesus become sidetracked by disappointment, who remains to venture a good word in celebration of life?

Cast of Cynics

Contemporary social critics do little to uplift our spirits. Specializing in cynicism, authors of literature, pundits in the media, and composers of music—that is to say, the brokers of our modern self-understanding—are prickly interpreters of life.

“We are the hollow men.”⁹

“We are blown husks that are finished.”¹⁰

“We see our world . . . [and] the tears roll down.”¹¹

“Infinite sadness invades our souls.”¹²

“The world is turning very dark.”¹³

“We gotta get out of this place.”¹⁴

“Life is full of empty promises and broken dreams.”¹⁵

“Life is overrated.”¹⁶

“Life is . . . a battle . . . and mankind [is] generally unhappy.”¹⁷

“Is life even worth living?”¹⁸

“The sooner [we] jump out the window, the sooner [we’ll] find peace.”¹⁹

Doleful assessments such as these depress even the most optimistic among us. We may paste on plastic smiles, but we wonder, secretly, what’s the point?

Protest Made and Protest Withdrawn

With every fiber of my being, I want to reject the prevailing skepticism. As I type out these words, I want to protest: “Human life is not inescapably grim. It can be a force for good, for great good.”

But before indignation can crystalize in my mind, I am brought back to earth by a blast of cold reality. As a pastor, I encounter much about life that is not good. Rare is the week that I don’t face wreckages of human existence. The daughter who, sobbing uncontrollably, leaves a voice message describ-

ing the chilling details of her father's suicide; the mother who, decades after aborting her first child, still suffers pangs of guilt and remorse; the CEO who, in the blistering headlines of the morning newspaper, is wrongly accused of mishandling corporate funds; the father who, after months of therapy, realizes that years ago he did sexually abuse his daughter; the college student who, because of an addiction to pornography, fails an important exam and forfeits the dream of postgraduate studies; the parents who, because of a daughter-in-law's insecurity, are denied contact with their only son and endure years of painful separation.

Life is replete with disappointment.

No one is immune.

Every person in the neighborhood, every colleague at work, every player on the team, every classmate at school, every member of church—everyone without exception has or will at some point of his or her life suffer the pangs of loss.

Loss is life's common denominator.

The Beatific Vision

Yet amidst the losses, we still cling to the hope of a life worth celebrating. Many have noted the enduring buoyancy of the human spirit.

The fourth-century churchman Augustine believed that we all yearn for the *summon bonum* (the supreme good).²⁰ The sixteenth-century playwright William Shakespeare wrote that everyone searches for the “music of the spheres.”²¹ The seventeenth-century poet Traherne assumed that each person pines for “the invisible and eternal.”²² The eighteenth-century German writer and statesman Johann von Goethe declared that everyone wishes to “jubilate up to the heavens.”²³ And the

twentieth-century medievalist C. S. Lewis believed that we all seek “to be reunited with something in the universe from which we now feel cut-off.”²⁴

What does the universal longing for goodness of life suggest except that there must be such a life? According to seventeenth-century philosopher Blaise Pascal, it proves “that there was once in us a true happiness of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace.”²⁵ Rooted in our subconscious is the memory of a life worth celebrating.²⁶

But does the memory coordinate with reality?

Is fullness of life possible today?

Nobel laureate Bertrand Russell thinks not. “The center of me is always and eternally a terrible pain, a searching for something beyond what the world contains, something transfigured and infinite, the beatific vision. I don’t think it is to be found, but the very thought of it is my life.”²⁷

Yet what Russell searches for in vain—the beatific vision—Pascal announces in triumph. “What else do our desires proclaim but that there is within each of us an infinite abyss that can be filled only by an infinite and immutable object; in other words, by God himself.”²⁸

According to Pascal, the desire for fullness of life finds its object in God.

The God of the Bible

Who is God?

Numerous answers fill the book where God’s self-disclosure reaches its most noteworthy expression. The book is the Bible. Throughout its pages, we are struck by the compelling nature of God’s self-revelation, and also by God’s delight in making himself known.

God loves to reveal his glory. For he knows it will redound to our good. He is delighted when we can savor him.²⁹

He wants us to “languish no more” and to “be like a watered garden” (Jer. 31:12). He wants “the young women [to] rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old [to] be merry” (Jer. 31:13).

God is a champion for fullness of life. “I will turn their mourning into joy; I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow. I will feast [their] soul[s] . . . with abundance, and my people shall be satisfied with my goodness” (Jer. 31:13–14).³⁰

This is the message of the Bible.

God wants us to thrive. He made us for exceedingly full life. Unfortunately, too few of us realize it.

As a Christian, I ought to be a specialist in abundance of life. Yet sometimes I become discouraged. I am too easily overcome by life’s disappointments. At times, my soul feels empty, my heart parched, and my mind jaded.

It’s precisely then that I need an injection of life.

Here is an encouraging word. Despite the difficulties of life, we can never descend to a place beyond the reach of God. Even when we are most disheartened, God can track us down and lift us up.

He can turn on the spigots of refreshment and fill us with abundance of life.

Nowhere is God’s pursuit of us more clearly set out than in the biblical story of the three trees. Three very special trees, each of which rewards close examination.

The Three Trees

Trees are symbols of life.

They are nothing if not exquisitely alive.

Trees captivate us by their beauty. From the elegance of a bonsai conifer to the majesty of a coastal redwood, they delight the senses.

Trees also serve us by their utility. They cool us by their shade and warm us by their embers. They supply wood for our homes and pulp for our paper. They cleanse the air we breathe, converting toxins into pure oxygen. They assist us in over five thousand different ways, supplying everything from shoe polish to toothpaste.³¹ Most importantly, they provide a reliable source of food, nourishing us with fruits and nuts, sap and roots, bark and leaves.

Without trees our lives would be a pale reflection of what they are now. Without forests and orchards, our lives might vanish altogether.

Not surprisingly, the relationship between trees and human beings is a central theme of the Bible. In the opening stanzas of the Word of God, trees are linked inextricably to life. No sooner does God breathe life into human beings than he fills their garden with a wealth of trees—“every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food” (Gen. 2:9).

According to the Holy Scriptures, the history of humanity, from its loftiest attainments to its most crushing defeats, can be comprehended in terms of trees, and especially in terms of three distinct trees.

The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

A Shoot from the Stump of Jesse.

The Tree of Life with Its Twelve Kinds of Fruit.

A Riveting Narrative

The storyline of the three trees is filled with tension. It portrays the gift of life as magnificent beyond compare and yet prone

to corruption. It depicts human beings as hoisted by dreams of glory and yet humbled by nightmares of despair.

If we want to discover the great blessing of simply being alive, we must unravel this arboreal paradox. We must become students of the three trees.

The narrative of the three trees follows a trajectory that is consistently upward. As we transition from one tree to the next, we move from rags to riches. The first tree reminds us how quickly life can go wrong. The second and the third trees present a pathway to restoration.

The progression from tree to tree resembles the plot of a novel, in which the reader is made to sink in mire at the outset and bathe in glory at the end.

But this is no novel.

The story is not fictional, but true. It traces a path along which each one of us walks. Yet—and here is a sobering word—not everyone is assured of a happy arrival. Not all make it to the third and final tree. The storyline consistently teeters on the brink of ruin. And yet, a steadying Hand is present, directing the script, nudging the narrative to an uplifting conclusion.

Suffice it to say that it is to our advantage to become enmeshed in the storyline of the three trees.

Surprisingly, it is a narrative that escapes the notice of many. It is probably because few think to group the three trees together. We tend to look at the trees individually. We view the first tree—the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil—as a contemptible tree, although we probably ought to venerate it. We look at the second tree—a Shoot from the Stump of Jesse—as an honorable tree, although we probably ought to despise it. And the third tree—the Tree of Life with Its Twelve Kinds of Fruit—well, we hardly know what to do with that one at all.

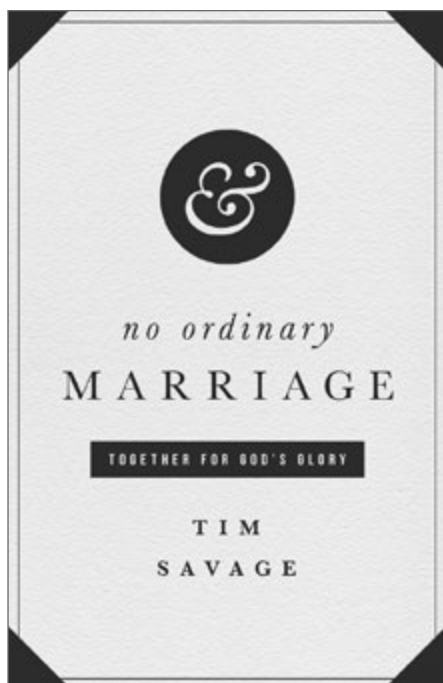
We must dispel the misconceptions of the three trees. When we comprehend the trees in combination with each other, we shall discover a forest more beautiful than any we have ever entered before, more inspiring than ageless sequoias, more soothing than gentle aspens, more tranquil than island palms.

The three trees—these three only and these three together—restore hope to humanity. They turn valleys into vistas, transform sin into salvation, and instill joy at the simple thought of being alive. They put the word *fullness* back into life.

Here is an invitation you can't resist. Let's venture into the forest together and discover, perhaps for the very first time, just how good life can be.

A word of guidance: each tree must be approached in its appointed order. We must enter the forest at the portal, with the first tree, which is the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

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WE'RE ALL SEARCHING FOR "THE GOOD LIFE."

Too often, however, we encounter discouragement, failure, broken relationships, guilt, and dashed dreams, all of which leave us yearning for more.

In this book, Tim Savage presents a renewed vision of life by examining the fullest life ever lived: the life of Jesus Christ. Savage invites us to tap into that life—and experience the riches of the joy, satisfaction, and purpose offered to us in Christ.

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"This book faithfully leads you
to the treasure of all treasures."

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"*Discovering the Good Life* is an
extraordinary book."

CARSON PALMER

all-pro NFL quarterback

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