

I've come to think of Steve Wiens as a poetic hound dog, an author who sniffs out the nuances of ancient biblical words and stories until he's dug up their practical implications for the living of our actual lives. Wiens' book, *Beginnings*, is an eloquent, earthy, and gently urgent call to say yes to the beautiful things the Creator wants to grow in the soil of you and me.

CAROLYN ARENDS

Recording artist and author

Steve Wiens has a rich repertoire of stories that have emerged from the daily concrete reality of life. He uses this fund of narratives to fill out and explicate the seven days of the creation lyric. The result of this interpretive work is that we are permitted to read both ways—from creation to daily life, and from daily life to creation. This “back-and-forth” is immensely generative, thanks to the pastoral heart that is so evident on every page of Wiens' book.

WALTER BRUEGGEMANN

Author of *The Prophetic Imagination*

This isn't a book. It's an invitation to new beginnings, new life. With a fresh perspective on Genesis 1, we are invited into God's process of becoming who we actually are. Telling stories with honesty, vulnerability, and pastoral sensitivity, Steve helps us locate our stories in the grand narrative of God's creation and re-creation story. Read this book and walk into something new.

NATE PYLE

Author of *Man Enough*

*Beginnings* is a fine work of midrash. Steve Wiens knows how Scriptures should work—indeed, how they *do* work—to breathe an expansive breath into our mean and shriveled lungs, creating space for a good universe, the fullness of creation, to come inside. *Beginnings* shows us how to take in the breath, and with the exhale, to let out a great and inspired hallelujah!

STEVE BELL

Singer/songwriter

God majestically spoke creation into being in seven days, creating the teeming world of profundity and promise in which we live. *Beginnings* beckons us to let into our lives God's formational framework, the seven days which created the world and just might change yours.

MARK SAYERS

Pastor of Red Church, Melbourne, Australia, and author of  
*Facing Leviathan*

I really enjoyed reading *Beginnings* and found myself referencing Steve's writing in conversation with friends immediately. This book will both encourage and challenge. Steve doesn't leave us alone with our thoughts and struggles but expertly guides us into our own new beginnings through both the creation story and his own journey. Nice one, Steve!

STU GARRARD

Songwriter/singer, formerly of Delirious

If you love language, stories, and scholarship, Steve Wiens has prepared a feast of all three in *Beginnings*. Steve is a wise guide and wonderful storyteller, trekking deep into the rhythm of the creation and the gorgeous Hebrew language which holds it. There are a few stories in my life which have been tender to the touch and in need of a deeper interpretation than merely my own experience of them. *Beginnings* gave me a way to interpret my life, fresh, and for that I am grateful.

JAN MEYERS PROETT

Author and speaker

I read *Beginnings* during one of those in-between seasons Steve Wiens talks about. I was at the close of one adventure, with no clear sense of when the next would come, and still less certain that I would be up for the challenge when it did. I was exhausted but also restless. Rather than offering a quick escape, *Beginnings* encouraged me to embrace that tension. After all, the seeds of new life are often embedded in the vulnerable place between the “What now?” and the “What’s next?” Wise, hopeful, and beautifully written, this was the right book at the right time for me. What will it coax to life in you?

JOHN PATTISON

Coauthor of *Slow Church*

Steve Wiens is the rare pastoral soul who somehow tells the truth about ourselves and God with both truth and love. He gets it; he gets us. And yet he sees the truth of the gospel and the wonder of resurrection among the most regular moments. In an age of Facebook-self versus real-self, this book of his will help our compartmentalized church move into the prophetic work of wholeness.

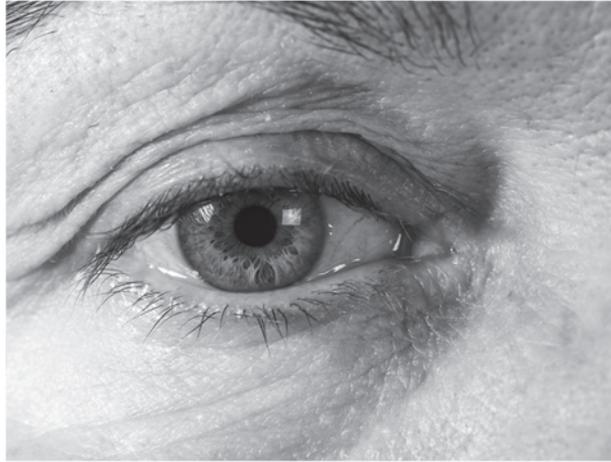
**SARAH BESSEY**

*Author of *Jesus Feminist**

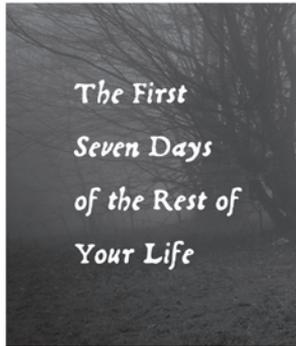
This book will encourage you. Deeply. To be and become the light God created you to be. To stop being something and someone you are not. To begin again—to be the “good” God created you to be. Read it and be blessed.

**RUTH HALEY BARTON**

*Author of *Sacred Rhythms**



# BEGINNINGS



STEVE WIENS



NAVPRESS 

A NavPress resource published in alliance  
with Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.



NavPress is the publishing ministry of The Navigators, an international Christian organization and leader in personal spiritual development. NavPress is committed to helping people grow spiritually and enjoy lives of meaning and hope through personal and group resources that are biblically rooted, culturally relevant, and highly practical.

**For more information, visit [www.NavPress.com](http://www.NavPress.com).**

*Beginnings: The First Seven Days of the Rest of Your Life*

Copyright © 2015 by Stephen Wiens. All rights reserved.

A NavPress resource published in alliance with Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

NAV PRESS and the NAV PRESS logo are registered trademarks of NavPress, The Navigators, Colorado Springs, CO. TYNDALE is a registered trademark of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc. Absence of ® in connection with marks of NavPress or other parties does not indicate an absence of registration of those marks.

Cover design by Ron Kaufmann

Cover photographs are the property of their respective copyright holders, and all rights are reserved. Eye copyright © Deyan Georgiev/Dollar Photo Club. Cliff jumping copyright © Lukasz Zakrzewski/Dollar Photo Club. Canyon copyright © helgidinson/Dollar Photo Club. Sunset copyright © Allen Enriquez/Stocksy.com. Man in fog copyright © Cosma Andrei/Stocksy.com. Hand removing seeds copyright © Liam Grant/Stocksy.com.

Author photo taken by Lydia and Emilie Photography, copyright © 2013. All rights reserved.

The Team:

Don Pape, Publisher

David Zimmerman, Development Editor

The author is represented by Christopher Ferebee, Attorney and Literary Agent, [www.christopherferebee.com](http://www.christopherferebee.com).

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from *THE MESSAGE* by Eugene H. Peterson, copyright © 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002. Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked ESV are taken from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®)*, copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked *The Voice* are taken from *The Voice,™* copyright © 2008 by Ecclesia Bible Society. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NIV are taken from the *Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®* Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Scripture quotations marked KJV are taken from the *Holy Bible, King James Version*.

Some of the anecdotal illustrations in this book are true to life and are included with the permission of the persons involved. All other illustrations are composites of real situations, and any resemblance to people living or dead is coincidental.

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Wiens, Steve.

*Beginnings : the first seven days of the rest of your life* / Steve Wiens.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-63146-400-3

1. Self-actualization (Psychology)—Religious aspects—Christianity. 2. Creation. 3. Genesis. I— Criticism, interpretation, etc. I. Title.

BV4598.2.W56 2016

248.4—dc23

2015021879

Printed in the United States of America

21	20	19	18	17	16	15
7	6	5	4	3	2	1

*To Isaac, Elijah, and Benjamin, my brave and beautiful boys. I love you up to God's heart and back.*

*And to the incredible people of Genesis Covenant Church in St. Louis Park: Your boundless courage gives me hope that new beginnings are possible, even when I'm lost in inky blackness. In it together!*



# Contents

Introduction: Tov *xi*

DAY ONE: Light *I*

DAY TWO: Expanse *27*

DAY THREE: Seeds *47*

DAY FOUR: Seasons *79*

DAY FIVE: Monsters *III*

DAY SIX: Us *135*

DAY SEVEN: Stop *165*

EPILOGUE: Day Eight *193*

Acknowledgments *207*

Notes *2II*



INTRODUCTION

TOV

**THE ACHE HAD** probably been creeping up on me, but I didn't notice it until that night, sitting on the deck behind my suburban house looking out onto my suburban life. Isaac was two, and the twins were six months old. I was a pastor at a large church, I had been married for fourteen years, and my twenty-year high school reunion had come and gone.

I didn't go to that reunion. I didn't have the energy for the awkwardness, the sizing up, and the plastic cups of stale beer to chase down our stale memories.

But the ache that had been whispering through my body rattled to a clumsy stop on that night, in those suburbs, on that deck.

I had been looking at pictures of my friends who went to the reunion: my old girlfriend, the guys I used to go all-night skiing with on those blisteringly cold nights in Minnesota, my soccer team. And I remembered all the beginnings.

## BEGINNINGS

I remembered moving from Southern California to Belgium the summer before seventh grade. I remembered the sour, un-American body odor of the team of men who moved our old furniture into our new house. That smell was the baptism of our new life in Europe.

I remembered my friend Colin who lived across the street in Waterloo in a two-story white brick house with black shutters, like they all were. I remembered the inground trampoline in his backyard, on which we spent hours and hours, jumping our way into adolescence. I remembered how his mother's unbearably loud voice boomed around their house like a grenade and made us run for cover.

I remembered falling treacherously in love with Tammi the moment I saw her coming down those stairs in the fall of my ninth grade year. She liked me back, and then she didn't like me. I was devastated. That's when I started listening to The Cure and Depeche Mode, bands that were created for teenagers like me who didn't know how to express the frightening chaos brewing beneath our skin, bubbling and boiling.

I remembered Mr. Tobin, my tenth grade English teacher. Every student should have a Mr. Tobin. He got to know each of us and selected books based on what he thought we'd like. The first book he gave me was *Trinity*, by Leon Uris. I remember staying up late into the night reading about Conor Larkin, the main character, who was everything I wanted to be but feared I wasn't: brave and passionate and rough-edged. Almost thirty years have passed since I met Mr. Tobin, and I credit my deep love for reading to his deep love for teaching.

I remembered kissing Angie under a starry summer night on that dock that jutted out into Lake Como, the thrill of that moment reflecting off the lake and making everything luminous that summer before our senior year. I can still see the picture of us at the homecoming game: She was beautiful, holding my hand under the dark October sky. I had a ridiculous acid-washed denim jacket on, with only the bottom button fastened in the chilly air. There was a grin on my face, and my eyes were sparkling. I was seventeen.

I remembered driving around in Matt's Bronco for hours, finishing off the beer that Carl's older brother bought us. We must have burned hundreds of gallons of gas on those cold winter nights; we were irresponsible, irrepressible, and immortal.

I remembered deciding to go to college in a sleepy little town in southern Minnesota instead of up north, where most of my closest friends from high school had chosen to go. I remembered trying to explain it to them, in the awkward way that high school guys do. I don't remember much of that summer before college. I only remember the familiar sensation that comes with every new beginning: the thrill of reinventing yourself running parallel with the fear of the unknown—the twin tracks that lead to everything else.

But on that night, on that deck, in those suburbs, the continual forward movement seemed to have stopped. The tracks had run out. I used to be in motion, rattling forward toward a destination that kept morphing. But on that stationary deck, I had become solid and stable and stuck.

## BEGINNINGS

There would be no new beginnings.

My life should have felt full and rich, but instead it felt empty and dark. There was only the slow work of playing out the reality of the decisions that had already come and gone. I was a pastor. I was a father. I was a husband. I didn't regret any of those things. I loved my kids and my wife and my job. But the finality of it all was a relentless crashing—wave after wave, under those stars, in those suburbs, on that night. It felt vacant, like staring into nothingness.

It was empty and full at the same time. Empty of beginnings, full of endings.

As I sat there motionless with the emptiness closing in around me, there was something else hovering above me in the darkness, but I couldn't see it.

If I could have seen it, it would have looked like a beginning.

• • •

Can you feel it, buried so deep inside of you that it feels both inaccessible and undeniable at the same time? You're reminded of it whenever those hot, unexpected tears come, or when stifling frustration erupts into anger. It's down there, lying in between the fault lines of your soul, waiting for that tremor that will shake you to the foundation. How does it feel when it stays inside of you? How does it feel when it finally comes out?

The very best work we do is when we help the good stuff come out in ourselves, in each other. And we'll do this again and again and again.

When we allow ourselves to peer into cracks and slivers where honesty can be found, we realize we are lost, even though we haven't left home. When we listen for the melody of our lives, it is drowned out by the endless drumbeat of a forced march, and we feel our exhaustion at a deep soul level.

This is a very good moment, containing a hidden gift. Most of us miss it because we are too afraid to leave the forced march. This moment of exhaustion is a beginning.

This book is about not missing those moments. This book is about leaving the forced march. This book is about finding hidden beginnings and pursuing the endless adventure of becoming.

In order to do that, we must first unpack a lie. Like most lies, it's so ingrained in us that it will feel ridiculous at first, so stay with me. Here's the lie:

The forced march is worth it because the destination is your ideal life, which exists out there as a firm and fixed point, and you can find it if you just keep marching.

When you believe in that particular lie, you are living *as if* instead of *as is*.

As if you will be happy once you finally get there. As if you will be finished once you finally reach it. As if the destination doesn't change. As if the misery of the forced march will be contrasted by the exhilaration of reaching the destination.

## BEGINNINGS

Your life is not firm and fixed. And you cannot find it by submitting to a forced march.

You are not a noun.

You are a verb.

You are endlessly becoming.

This book is about partnering with God in creating and becoming, using every bit of pain and promise that your actual life has included. All of the breakdowns and all of the breakthroughs are ingredients in the dynamic stew of

becoming, which is bubbling within you even as you read these words.

***You are not a noun.***

***You are a verb.***

***You are endlessly becoming.***

Yes, all of the breakdowns, too, because endings have a role to play if we are going to see and embrace beginnings. All those hopes that

stayed secret and died silent, lonely deaths. All the soaring dreams that came true, then crashed down around you, leaving you wounded and buried in the rubble. Breakdowns seem to be the necessary precursors to breakthroughs, though we shudder to admit it.

This book is, for better or for worse, about selling the farm and setting out on the dangerous and transformational journey of becoming who you actually are in the world (something that usually happens in the middle of getting hopelessly lost, or as a result of being pitted against an enemy who is far too

strong for you). Beginnings are always lurking in the shadows, though we'd prefer them to be printed on billboards.

Beginnings find us and change us, and they take us on journeys over which we have little control. The beginnings that change us contain much more mystery than mastery.

This is not a book about being whatever you want to be. That's an indulgent pursuit, resulting in jockeying for position in a race that isn't yours. There is something deep inside of you so good that you're most likely suppressing it because you can't believe that bringing it to life might help to heal the world.

You need to bring it out—over and over again.

• • •

My friend Alan is a rabbi who gathers with a few of us to study the Scriptures because he believes we have something good in us that needs to come out. I can't describe the life that pulsates through that living room when we study, but I can describe him, this rabbi who has taught me so much about *the* beginning, about all beginnings, and about what is really good.

His bright eyes sparkle with light. He slowly takes time to gaze at each person and then asks one of us to bless our study together. These blessings are short and sweet because he's like a six-year-old on Christmas morning who can't wait to open his presents.

Once the blessing is done, he smiles and says, "Let's go."

Alan's knowledge of the nuances of the Hebrew language is matched only by his love for those who study with him.

## BEGINNINGS

We've talked for hours and hours about Genesis, life in the garden, and particularly this word that is translated as "good." It's used over and over in Genesis, the story of the beginning of all things. At the end of each day of creating, God pauses and notices that what has been made is *good*.

In Hebrew, the word for good is *tov*. Alan has reimagined *tov* to mean

the actualization of the potential for life, embedded in the earth by God, when creation brings it forth, with the seeds of future life in it.

Read that a few times until you can taste it.

Alan gets his description from Genesis 1:11-12:

God spoke: "Earth, green up! Grow all varieties  
of seed-bearing plants,  
Every sort of fruit-bearing tree."  
And there it was.  
Earth produced green seed-bearing plants,  
all varieties,  
And fruit-bearing trees of all sorts.  
God saw that it was good.

God speaks, and the earth responds by producing a kind of life that *contains even more life* inside of it.

What does it mean that God has embedded *even more life* inside of you and me? And how does creation call it forth?

Do you remember when the Boston Marathon was

transformed into a horrific nightmare at the finish line on that bright day? Hundreds of people were injured, and several were killed. Just moments after the explosion, runners came up to that finish line, waves lapping up against a shore that was no longer there. Many of them kept running all the way to the nearest hospital to give blood to those who were injured. In the midst of unspeakable tragedy, seeds of life containing the potential for future life sprout up.

That is *tov*.

My friend Jenny was born with cerebral palsy. She walks with a limp, she has a severe startle reflex, and she tires easily. She is routinely asked what is wrong with her. Jenny is an elementary school librarian who cares about getting great stories into the hands of her kids; she cares even more about helping kids embrace their own stories, especially kids with disabilities. She tells her story to her students; she speaks out loud about the pain and the joy of her actual life. The kids with disabilities all eventually sidle up to her to tell her *their* stories. Because of Jenny, they feel like they have something beautiful to offer the world. Jenny calls it out of them, with every word and with every limp.<sup>1</sup> That is *tov*.

When we have the courage to walk with a limp that is ours, or to keep on running after the race is supposed to be over, we are answering creation's call to bring forth *even more life* into the world. Creation speaks. We respond. And we leave a trail of seeds behind us—most of the time without even knowing it—that will blossom into even more life when we are long gone.

BEGINNINGS

You have seeds of *even more life* embedded within you by God, and they will be left behind when you have the courage to give what only you can give.

But we need a guide that will help us cross through the thresholds of our lives—something that can bring us from here to there. We need some glue that will hold the whole story together. We need a process that will help us understand how our lives are unfolding.

The creation story itself, all seven days, will serve as that guide.

• • •

Was it seven literal days, this story we read in the beginning of our Bibles, or was it a process that unfolded over many years? Is Genesis 1 a scientific document or a beautiful poem?

*You have seeds  
of even more life  
embedded within  
you by God.*

I'm not interested in those arguments. Let other books and other people engage in them.

I am interested in something far more satisfying and mysterious, something that is much more than a moment in time.

When I read the creation story, I taste something rich and velvety, layered with beauty and bursting with life.

I see in the seven days a pattern that will shape the endlessly unfolding creation of *our actual lives*, from birth to death, and all of the messy, sacred, and sinister moments in between. Each day is a stream that connects a broad theme of God and life and me and you, and if we can see them, we can find each new beginning as it winds its way toward us.

On Day One, when it's empty and dark, we assume life has stopped and we are stuck. But there in the chaos, God is hovering over the waters, poised to speak and act. On Day One, God brings the light of hope, coming to rescue us, bringing us out of darkness and into spacious places where we can begin again.

On Day Two, an expanse is created between the waters above and the waters below. This is where dry land will appear, where air can be breathed, and where human beings will dwell. This expanse is created so that it can be *filled with life*. For any beginning to take shape and go somewhere, we will need to be expanded so we can hold new life. This is often risky and painful, but it's necessary.

On Day Three, we'll discover the seeds that have been embedded in us by God. We'll name them and call them forth, watching them grow and become beautiful right before our eyes. When we think of our favorite teachers, coaches, and mentors, we love them because what they *gave to us* emerged from somewhere *deep inside of them* and caused something deep inside of us to spring to life. Most of us stop short of giving away what's really true about us because we're afraid of something that potent. What if no one sees it as good? What if I'm not the real deal? We need to name and honor what is truest about us—and then give it away.

On Day Four, we'll embrace the different seasons of life—waiting, hope, abundance, and loss—that will anchor us to a story bigger than our own. Without seasons to help us remember who we are, we are set adrift, anchorless at sea. We'll learn the seasons that help us remember who we are,

## BEGINNINGS

practical ways to celebrate those seasons with our loved ones, and how to tell what time it is in our lives.

On Day Five, we'll face our monsters, which threaten to strike down every new beginning that could bring new life. We'll learn to name the armor that we've worn our whole lives, which has been helpful for where we've been—but not for where we're headed. We'll learn to stand into the tension points of our lives, naked and vulnerable, trusting in God's life-saving help as our only hope.

On Day Six, we'll talk about us, this beautiful word that describes who we are and where we're from, because we can't get where we're going unless we know where we're from. And it turns out we're from a generative, expansive, and fertile reality that both pulls us toward the future *and* heals our past. How we see ourselves, and others, will be transformed so we can do the work we were created to do.

Finally, on Day Seven, we'll talk about our need to stop. We'll find rhythms in our lives to shut down productivity, enjoy relationships, and nurture trust, because this is an essential part of becoming who we really are. We'll explore rich, meaningful ways to laugh, eat, and enjoy the life that has been given to us, and to receive what only God can give.

• • •

I need to point out three characteristics about this book that will help you to discover and then embrace the new beginnings of your actual life.

*This is a book of stories.* My hope is that in telling the expansive stories of the Scriptures, the stories of my own life,

and the stories of the lives of others, an intersection will be created where you will be able to find your place within the bigger Story of God. Hidden in between the words and paragraphs of these stories, I hope you will find yourself, I hope you will find God, and I hope you will find the courage to leave your own deck of disappointment. Because it is a book of stories, it will not answer every question that you have. Instead, if it does its work, it will create questions that lead you on journeys of discovery, beauty, and adventure.

The stories you will read about familiar characters in the Scriptures are told less to inform you about what happened and more to help you see things you haven't seen and feel things you haven't felt. You will notice that I take great delight in wondering *what might have happened* between the lines and words of these stories. I do that because I believe the Scriptures are a river, and when we interact with them, we are taken somewhere that we haven't been before. This, I hope you will discover, is a way to *enter* the Scriptures rather than simply be instructed by them. When we only read Scripture as a wooden and inflexible document designed to keep us anchored in one place, we will most likely remain unchanged. A river, on the other hand, is alive and active and surprising, no matter how many times you enter it. And that's the thing of it, isn't it? When you *enter* a river, it's different every time. We need to *enter* the Scriptures. We need to see where they take us, even if it means being thrown overboard from time to time.

*This book is a midwife.* When our first child was born, we hired midwives to help catch his beautiful body into this

*The Scriptures  
are a river, and  
when we interact  
with them, we are  
taken somewhere  
that we haven't  
been before.*

world, and to help us know what to do once he got here. Midwives are more available than doctors (all due respect to the good doctors reading this). They're more like us than doctors are, and they tend to give very practical advice and help. Maybe it's too big of a dream, but I hope this book helps to give birth to what needs to emerge from deep within you. I hope it's accessible and available, and I hope it accompanies you through major thresholds in your life.

*This book offers a process for becoming.*  
The seven days of creation offer a picture of how you can enter and move through

the beginnings that inevitably come into your life, whether they come crashing like waves or wafting in like the cool breeze that refreshes you at the end of a long day. This process is not meant to be linear, however. As you read through the seven days of creation as a process for your own growing and becoming, my hope is that more and more you'll notice the events in your life and say, "Oh! I'm right in the middle of Day Two! I'm being expanded so that I can hold new life." Or, "Wow, this is a Day Seven moment—an opportunity to practice the life-saving discipline of stopping."

My hope is that this book offers a unique way of seeing the process of your own becoming so that you find help in those in between times when you don't know where you are or what you are supposed to do. I offer open-ended questions for you (or a group of you) to wrestle with as you find yourself in the story. I also offer a spiritual practice at the end

of each chapter that I hope will help you to move toward the concepts presented on each day of creation so that you can walk fully into and through each new beginning that comes your way.

• • •

Have you ever seen an artist at work? It is a sacred act to watch something in the process of being created. It is stunning when a piece of art is finished, especially when the artist has poured her energy and heart and soul into the piece. We love gazing at the finished product.

But you aren't finished.

You are partnering in the ongoing creation of your actual life, which is endlessly unfolding, artfully constructed, and filled with hidden beginnings that sometimes flow out of unexpected endings.

In *the* beginning, there was a process that would shape all beginnings that follow.

And that process began with darkness and chaos.

Let's go.

EPILOGUE

## DAY EIGHT

**THE SUN MOCKED HIM** as he stumbled along the road on that desperate morning, warming his broad back but offering him no light. The man who used to see everything with devastating clarity was now a blind fool, clutching a companion's arm, being guided into whatever future awaited him. His head ached and his body shuddered, and for once, he was speechless. His breathing was labored not so much from the journey but from the shock. He shivered as the unfamiliar fog of doubt descended around him. That blind road was leading to a new beginning, and it was starting with darkness and chaos, like new beginnings always do.

His name was Saul, and he loved God. But he hated Jesus.

Saul was *Javert*, the buttoned-up, exacting police inspector in *Les Misérables* who was convinced that *those who falter and those who fall must pay the price*. Like Javert, Saul was

## BEGINNINGS

blisteringly righteous, unbending in moral fiber and unyielding in his devotion to God. He was the rising religious star of his time, and everybody knew it. He was the kind of person you utterly feared but also desperately wanted to please.

Incidentally, the searing truth in *Les Misérables* is that Javert and Valjean are the same person. Both of them knew life in prison, both of them bore a unique strength, and both of them experienced exquisite moments when mercy was offered. One took it, and one didn't.

I am Javert, and I am Valjean. The choice to accept mercy is always the hinge point.

In one grisly story found in Acts 7, Saul approved of the stoning of a young man named Stephen. Stoning involved a mob shoving, trampling, and eventually carrying an accused person out of the city, dropping him in a pit, and then hurling heavy rocks down on him until he was eventually crushed to death. The victim hoped that his head would be struck early, knocking him unconscious, but this did not usually happen; the men throwing the stones relished in prolonging the agony.

Those who dropped those heavy rocks would strip off their outer garments when they stoned someone; it was hot and hard work. On that day, the mob laid down those garments at the feet of this young man named Saul. And at the end of that day, leaning over the small stone basin he used every night to wash his hands and face, while water dripped off of his patchy beard, perhaps that young man paused. As images of the dying man crept past the sentries that guarded his mind, perhaps a grimace escaped from his heart and onto

## DAY EIGHT

his face. If it did, he wiped it off quickly, capturing it before it saw the light of day. With both hands, he clutched the small table as the floor lurched for a moment beneath his feet. Then, folding the towel neatly beside the stone basin, he extinguished his lamp, said his prayers, and retired for the night.

Saul had received signed orders from the high priest in Jerusalem to arrest any followers of Jesus that could be found in Damascus. He set out early before the sun was up, and he saw to the horses himself, patting their flanks as he tightened the saddles, hot breath shooting out of their nostrils on that cold morning. Even the horses wanted to please him. Once he found them, he would drag the apostates back to Jerusalem, binding them with ropes around their wrists and ankles. He would guard them personally as they stumbled along that long road between Damascus and Jerusalem.

Those who falter and those who fall must pay the price.

But it was Saul who faltered and fell on that road, and it was a light and a voice that knocked him down.

When he got to the outskirts of Damascus, he was suddenly dazed by a blinding flash of light. As he fell to the ground, he heard a voice: “Saul, Saul, why are you out to get me?”

ACTS 9:3-4

Suddenly, we are in the middle of an intimate moment. It's so tender that it almost feels voyeuristic. His hard face is covered

## BEGINNINGS

with mud, his proud uniform torn and buttons broken. With both hands, he clutches the ground as if doing so might stop his world from turning over. The man who knows everything about God is suddenly face-to-face with a God he can't see (and has never seen). His proud voice falters, and what comes out is the faintest croak of a whisper. The man with all the answers finally asks a question.

Who are you, Master?

ACTS 9:5

Have you ever been there? Have you ever stumbled as your answers evaporated, transforming themselves into questions?

“I am Jesus, the One you're hunting down. I want you to get up and enter the city. In the city you'll be told what to do next.”

His companions stood there dumbstruck—they could hear the sound, but couldn't see anyone—while Saul, picking himself up off the ground, found himself stone-blind.

ACTS 9:6-8

Darkness, a voice, and light. Welcome to Day One, Saul.

It seems we're all hunting down Jesus in our own way and on our own terms, yet it is he who finds us knocked down on those dead-end roads, no matter how many wrong turns we've taken, no matter how ardently we've run away. Then he invites us to get up and go somewhere else.

## DAY EIGHT

“Leave your country, your family, and your father’s home for a land that I will show you” (Genesis 12:1). This, you will remember, was the invitation Abram received, and he went.

It’s also the story of Moses, which began with the burning bush after forty invisible years as a shepherd. “It’s time for you to go back: I’m sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the People of Israel, out of Egypt” (Exodus 3:10).

It’s also the expansive story of Joseph, who left his father’s house in order to *see to the shalom of his brothers*.

At some point or another on our road toward the rest of our lives, we are invited to get up and go somewhere else. This seems to be the nature of new beginnings whenever God is part of them. These moments *expand* you if you allow yourself to walk all the way into them. These moments are Day Two moments.

*There you are! It’s time to go.*

And so the blind fool follows the voice into the city, where he sits, eating and drinking nothing for *three days*, unable to see he’s just entered the tomb where his own resurrection will occur.

(Here’s a freebie: Anytime you see “three days” written in the Scriptures, resurrection will occur. Jonah in the belly, Jesus in the tomb, and Paul turning stone-cold blind. There are many more.)

A man named Ananias meets Saul there, though he is dubious about the whole affair. After greeting Saul with knocking knees and a quavering voice, he lays his trembling hands on Saul, who had watched triumphantly as

## BEGINNINGS

Stephen was stoned. One of the things that keeps me reading Scripture is how honestly it portrays the faltering hesitations of its heroes. God tells Ananias to go find Saul, and though he is terrified, he goes.

“Brother Saul, the Master sent me, the same Jesus you saw on your way here. He sent me so you could see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” No sooner were the words out of his mouth than something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes—he could see again! He got to his feet, was baptized, and sat down with them to a hearty meal.

ACTS 9:17-19

And so there he was, the waters of baptism dripping off his beard and pooling around his feet, indistinguishable from the hot tears that always accompany moments like these. For the first time in three days, his eyes took in their surroundings. And then they fell like stars as he put both hands out and clutched Ananias by the shoulders; his own were shaking uncontrollably, an earthquake of emotion rattling all the way through him. Whatever road he was on, he had abandoned it forever, and a new road lay before him, one he could not yet see. A moment later, or it may have been hours for all he knew, he found himself at the table, eating with the men he had come to Damascus to capture.

I wonder if Brother Saul knew, as he ate that meal, that he was at the beginning of his own Day Three?

At some point in his journey, Saul’s name changed to

## DAY EIGHT

Paul, after which we hear nothing more from Saul. Most Christians assume that Jesus changed Saul's name on the road to Damascus that day, but that isn't the way it happened. Suddenly, in the middle of Acts 13, he is simply referred to as Paul, who would go on to become the most prolific writer and church planter this world has ever known. The seeds of life that were embedded in him by God had been called out on that road to Damascus, and the fruit of his life has seeded countless other futures, an arc that keeps shooting forward. Other than Jesus, it's difficult to imagine a person with a greater impact on the world than Paul.

*Paul*, ironically, means "little."

This story, in many ways, is absurd. How does someone who has breathed murderous threats against you and your family become a *brother*? How does someone finally see what they have been blind to for a lifetime? Is it too late for *Javert*? Is it too late for me?

Paul wrote these words in response to all the Javerts and all the Valjeans, to you and to me and to all of us, everywhere:

The first thing I did was place before you what was placed so emphatically before me: that the Messiah died for our sins, exactly as Scripture tells it; that he was buried; that he was raised from death on the third day, again exactly as Scripture says; that he presented himself alive to Peter, then to his closest followers, and later to more than five hundred of his followers all at the same time, most of them still

## BEGINNINGS

around (although a few have since died); that he then spent time with James and the rest of those he commissioned to represent him; and that he finally presented himself alive to me. It was fitting that I bring up the rear. I don't deserve to be included in that inner circle, as you well know, having spent all those early years trying my best to stamp God's church right out of existence.

But because God was so gracious, so very generous, here I am. And I'm not about to let his grace go to waste.

I CORINTHIANS 15:3-10

*But because God was so gracious, so very generous, here I am.* All of our stories are absurd, held together only by grace and generosity.

Jesus died and was buried on Friday, a seed of life embedded in the earth by God, and then was called forth again on Sunday, appearing to his followers and friends, and finally to Saul. When Jesus was raised, it was the inauguration of a new creation. In fact, the early church fathers referred to every Sunday as "the eighth day." Creation was completed in six days, and God rested on the seventh. But at the Resurrection, God began something *new*. When that stone was rolled away, God didn't merely raise a dead man to life. The Resurrection marks the beginning of an era initiated by the God who is *making all things new* (Revelation 21:5, ESV).<sup>1</sup>

Resurrection, it turns out, can also be described as *the actualization of the potential for life, embedded in the earth by*

DAY EIGHT

*God, when creation brings it forth, with the seeds of future life in it.*

In the resurrection, we see the *tov* of Jesus, a seed buried in the earth by God, which then bursts out of the ground, containing seeds of future life within him. Whatever else it means when that irrepressible man burst out of the tomb on that unforgettable third day, it means that new beginnings can burst out of any ground, no matter how deeply they are buried or how hard that ground is.

Resurrection is *good*.

It means that an infertile couple will finally name their son Laughter.

It means that a hated brother will see to the shalom of those who hate him.

It means that an impulsive denial will be followed by breakfast on the beach and a second chance.

It means that Grace, empty of children but full of inconsolable grief, will one day bear a seed for the people.

It means that the young ones, future kings and little girls in yellow raincoats, will face and defeat their monsters, wearing nothing more than vulnerability and courage.

And it means that the one whose name means “flight” will finally find a home in the God who sees her and knows her.

The God who created us and calls us good in the beginning also redeems us and calls us beautiful in the end—even when we do not know and cannot see. When we’re too far gone, when we’ve lost it all, there is God, making us new. When we grasp and control and cannot let go, there is God,

helping us let go. And if the Cross teaches us anything, it is this: When we cannot hang on, there is God, battered and bruised, hanging on for us.

*The God who  
created us and  
calls us good in  
the beginning  
also redeems  
us and calls us  
beautiful in  
the end.*

Paul would write many letters from prison cells, hands shaking from cold, back bent and body wracked with pain from constant torture. These words were written near the end of his life:

We look at this Son and see the God who cannot be seen. We look at this Son and see God's original purpose in everything created. For everything, absolutely everything, above and below, visible and invisible, rank after rank after rank of angels—*everything* got started in him and finds its purpose in him. He was there before any of it came into existence and holds it all together right up to this moment. And when it comes to the church, he organizes and holds it together, like a head does a body.

He was supreme in the beginning and—leading the resurrection parade—he is supreme in the end. From beginning to end he's there, towering far above everything, everyone. So spacious is he, so roomy, that everything of God finds its proper place in him without crowding. Not only that, but all the broken and dislocated pieces of the universe—people and things, animals and atoms—get properly fixed and

## DAY EIGHT

fit together in vibrant harmonies, all because of his death, his blood that poured down from the cross.

COLOSSIANS 1:15-20

*All the broken and dislocated pieces of the universe—people and things, animals and atoms—get properly fixed and fit together in vibrant harmonies, all because of him. This is not a laundry list of things you must believe in. This is a song bursting with reality and promise and new beginnings.*

This is hope.

And when hope arrives, we realize we don't create beginnings. When hope arrives, we realize we can't even muster up the strength to inhabit those beginnings in the first place. When hope arrives, we realize we don't heal the wounds of the past. When hope arrives, we smile and realize that we don't fabricate a bright future.

It's the One who first spoke light into darkness who keeps creating, keeps arriving, and keeps healing, over and over and over again.

That One, it turns out, is surrounding you, upholding you, and sustaining you, though you may not know it and may not even feel it. A battle is being fought and won, and you are why it's being fought, and you are what's being won.

And it means that there is a rest coming, far beyond any rest you've ever known, waiting for you at the end of your tragic and beautiful life, and it will taste like strawberries.

It's been five years since I sat on that deck on that dark night, disappointed, empty, and unsure where my life was

## BEGINNINGS

headed. I still live in that tan house in the suburbs, and I still sit on that deck sometimes, gazing into the starry chaos. I still sometimes buckle under the weight of my life, and in those fragile moments, I collapse. I still wear scars from the losses that have marked my life, and I suppose like Frodo's wound at Weathertop, they will accompany me through every new beginning for the rest of my life.

But there is a different quality to those nights now. My life has not rattled to a stop. I am not stuck. I am *becoming* something as I move through space and time, even now. I am not the same person that I was on that deck on that night five years ago. I am not the same person that I was when I woke up this morning.

And neither are you.

I hope this book has helped you to find your place in the bigger Story that winds its way through sacred time, and that you have felt God's invitation to inhabit your place within it. I hope that you have named some new beginnings and walked all the way into them.

Maybe you have located the stories of your life within the seven days of creation, and if you have, at least in some ways, you've left the forced march. I hope that you have been able to see new beginnings in apparent endings, even if you have done so quaking with fear. I hope the questions for reflection and discussion, along with the practices, have helped you to name where you actually are and to go where you need to go.

I hope you have discovered creation deep within you and all around you. I hope you have felt the delightful kiss of God, the Generative One who is joyfully for you and

DAY EIGHT

faithfully with you every step of the long road of your actual life. I hope you are no longer stuck on the deck of what *used to be*. I hope you are hiking straight up the face of a new beginning.

I am a preacher, and so this book needs to end with a benediction, one that can accompany you throughout the creation of the rest of your life.

May you come to know and name the seeds of life that God has embedded deep within you. May you nurture them as they find their way up and out of the ground as they are called forth. May you watch with joy as your new beginnings create other new beginnings.

And may you know, my brothers and sisters, that you are very good.

Let's go.