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GAZE

chapter one



breathing

We write this book for all who need to breathe. We believe God intends for us to experience this life as an ever-expanding gulp of fresh air. So we write for the desperate: those heaving and gasping for breath. Maybe your breathing has become shallower each day, constricted after years of spiritual asthma. Or perhaps you have recently come to faith in God. You anticipated a promised surge of new life, but languish instead, bereft like a sailboat without wind.

• • • • • A Story from Joni

I started breathing again in my mid-forties. My life with God the decades before resembled walking pneumonia: the breath slowly draining out of me until I clawed for air. A friend and I were hiking the Virginia hills when my lungs began to clear.

Patsy and I see each other only a few times each year. Within minutes of meeting, we whisk past chitchat and dive deep into weighty topics. Yes, we talk about existential questions such as why we exist. We also give equal time to vital issues like coloring or not coloring our hair.

At the top of one climb, God drenched us in a beautiful fall vista. Broad brushstrokes of color dazzled us. Patsy and I spread our arms wide and spun around in the mottled sunlight. We kicked leaves over each other and struck model-esque poses on God's grand stage. A boulder became a viewing stand.

Giddiness stilled as we drank in the view. Our quiet was partly awe. God's creation shimmered in its fall clothes. Yet a strange melancholy leached into the moment. Gazing outward, I wondered aloud: "Why does God seem so large up here? So glorious up here that I am almost blinded? So much about Life with a capital L up here? And why does hiking down this hill inevitably plunge me headlong into less life, small life, suffocating life? Life with a lower case l. A pitiful excuse for life that feels a lot like death most days."

There we sat: two pilgrims expert in capitalizing on the promise of abundant life. Childhoods steeped in Christianity topped off with expensive seminary educations. Two people supposedly guiding other wanderers in their spiritual journeys. We wanted to lay our faces against the coolness of that boulder and never leave. Let the wind rustle through our hair. Revel in the space to breathe.

After a while we peered down into shadows. Darkness eased onto the hills. We reluctantly adjourned to a cabin porch, but our wondering continued late into the night. Patsy and I sketched on napkins stolen from underneath glasses of big, bold red wine. Those napkins captured the seeds of thought that grew into this book.





A church catechism asks, “What is the chief end of humanity?” It answers, “The chief end of humanity is to glorify God and enjoy God forever.” The person of God populates the expanse in which we find our being. God intends to stake out the whole of our lives: every breath we take and every corner of our space, introducing unbounded joy in God’s infinite loveliness.

A fully human life is an existence that reflects the knowledge of God and trust in God through an expansive experience of living. “Expansive” may sound dangerous. It suggests unending movement in many directions, surpassing a singular path from point A to point B. An interstate highway map will not help. This kind of life moves from a center ever outward versus from a boundary ever inward. Engaging the whole of God begs for spaciousness.

**This life is ours for the taking:
an engorgement of air that
regenerates, revives and renews.**

So why does life often feel anything but expansive?

Why are we suffocating?

We write for all who want to encounter anew-or perhaps for the first time-the life-giving breath of the Creator. We invite you to practice breathing with us as we enter into authentic relationship with the person of God. The ideas found here are not novel but ancient. We pray the Spirit of God will use the words on these pages to usher you into delight beyond measure.

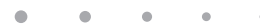
glorifying

Expansive life centers on the eternal God. This statement represents the critical starting point for a fully human existence. God spoke through the prophet Isaiah, revealing the created purpose for humanity: “Bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth-everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.”

This mandate clearly claims God’s preeminence as Creator. Called by God’s name and created for God’s glory, we bring honor and esteem to God as we reflect God’s character. This purpose is not an egotistical move on God’s part. God did not create us out of lack or vacuous need but out of a hospitable outpouring of the divine being.

Our next chapter, “Dirt,” celebrates glory as the sum of God’s perfections. Let us give you a foretaste of the splendor. Listen to scripture speak:

Bless the LORD, O my soul.
O LORD my God, you are very great.
You are clothed with honor and majesty,
wrapped in light as with a garment.





He determines the number of the stars;
he gives to all of them their names.
Great is our Lord, and abundant in power;
his understanding is beyond measure.



I blessed the Most High,
and praised and honored the one who lives forever.
For his sovereignty is an everlasting sovereignty,
and his kingdom endures from generation to generation.



In the beginning, Lord, you founded the earth,
and the heavens are the work of your hands;
they will perish, but you remain. . . .
You are the same, and your years will never end.



That God-eternal, powerful, creative, sovereign, majestic, unchanging-made us to reflect glory. That God, out of love, created us for relationship with the divine. That *love* calls us to expansive life.

Moses had a unique glimpse of God that helps us understand the relational nature of glory. The story unfolds in Exodus 33. The Israelites shunned God repeatedly, ignoring their redemption from slavery in Egypt and God's ongoing care for their lives. As a result, God refused to go with them into their new

land, saying essentially, "If I went with you, I would have to kill you." The people balked at Moses' leadership, fought among themselves and were generally unruly. Moses desperately sought encouragement as he attempted to lead the exasperating people.

Wandering in the desert with the whining, rebellious Israelites used up all the resources Moses could muster. They sucked the air right out of him. Moses needed a reality larger than the circumstances he saw on the ground. He pleaded to see the fullness of God's glory in order to renew his belief in Life with a capital *L*.

You may know the story: God shielded Moses in the cleft of a rock and then passed by, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished." This portrait revealed the personal God as the definition of love, forgiveness, justice and grace. Moses' reaction proved utterly appropriate. He "made haste to bow low toward the earth and worship."

After Moses came down from the mountain, his face shone with divine light. He literally glowed after a mere glimpse of God. The people shied away in fright, so Moses had to wear a veil over his head!

The God of Moses is the same God who pursues a relationship with us. A relational, personal God who reigns supreme over the universe. A God who defines what it is to be real.



To glorify God, we as human beings must embrace the divine reality greater than ourselves, reaching through and past the facts of our daily lives into an infinitely broader perspective. What does it look like to thrive in a life with God? As with Moses, the answer comes from beyond us.

Worth beyond measure

Being made in the image of God to reflect the person of God defines your worth. There is no other yardstick. The latest promotion or lack thereof, a spouse or lack thereof, or the fact that your pastor of ten years still cannot remember your name does not define your worth. We sin as we chase reputation and value rooted in our own glory. The Most Valuable One calls you into relationship for eternity solely because the image of divine glory shines through you. The world's measures hold no sway with God.

Identity beyond circumstance

You walk above circumstance, knowing that the facts evident to your eyes are not the whole picture. To be identified as a reflection of God means circumstances cannot possess ultimate power *over you or for you*. Your circumstances do not define who you are. This cannot be a pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps gospel, urging you to wrench yourself out of the gutter and make something of yourself. Nor can there be any illusion that choice circumstances come your way because you lassoed luck with sheer star-power. We sin when we succumb to the siren call of circumstance as the

end of all truth. God moves in and among creation, working the divine plan of redemption. You are graciously invited to participate.

Life with God brings love out of grace: unmerited, undeserved favor. You cannot earn the love. God *is* the love. You are the blessed recipient called to graciously pass it along. Too often the world doles out love with strings attached. Your mother expects you for dinner every Sunday as payback for putting you through college. Your boss likes you because you work sixty-hour weeks. Your brother punished you with silence until you loaned him the money for a new car. We sin in loving as though life is a mathematical equation that has to balance. God does not own a calculator.

Only out of God's gracious love do we bask in a glorious relationship with the Holy One who dwells in unapproachable light and, like Moses, live to tell the tale. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came to redeem us out of sin "to present you holy, without blemish, and blameless." Through Christ, there is peace between humanity and God. Our relationship is sealed for eternity. This life is about learning to live in the spaciousness of divine love. The romantic poet William Blake described this well:

*And we are put on earth a little space,
That we may learn to bear the beams of love . . .
For when our souls have learn'd the heat to bear,
The cloud will vanish; we shall hear his voice.*

Love beyond performance



God, who is beyond measure, is the reason for our being. We act like prisms, refracting the beams of love to reflect glory back to our Creator. How do we retreat from that expansive picture of life to a small, constricted existence?

reducing

Our friend Sam will tell you life is good. He lives in Manhattan in a renovated Soho warehouse. His job has unlimited upside potential for creative work. Sam's group of friends volunteers on Saturdays to help maintain the historical district. A girlfriend hovers on the periphery of the picture, providing companionship without much maintenance required.

The parents come visit. They like to take the ferry around the Statue of Liberty. Sam buys the tickets, and they act surprised every time. Sam tips cabdrivers generously and steps around instead of on the homeless.

There is no need for God as far as Sam can tell. Things are fine. Sam left God behind in his hometown church when he packed for college. He might duck into a holiday service a few times a year, for old time's sake mostly. If not, no big deal. Holidays happen again next year.

Things are fine. There is no need. Sam presents a sharp contrast from Moses desperately seeking God's face. Do we wish crisis or calamity on Sam so he sees a place for God? So God can be rescuer or welfare agent? No. There has to be Life with a capital *L* that applies to Sam just as it applies to the woman with

breast cancer and three kids under the age of five whose husband died in the war. God must exist for both at the same time.

Unlike Sam, the Israelites in the Old Testament were certainly connected to God. They literally followed God out of Egypt and were hand-fed every meal in forty years of desert wandering. God was their only means of survival. But the people's hearts were fickle. One day they worshipped; the next they blasphemed.

The Old Testament prophets had thankless jobs. They usually arrived on the scene just in time to deliver a message of judgment, doom and destruction. Sometimes they were naked. It was not a job after which people clamored.

God used the prophets to call the people back from the brink of idolatry over and over. Sometimes people listened. Other times they thumbed their noses and ran the other way. Jeremiah, tough as nails, delivered an indictment from God:

Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods?
But my people have changed their glory for something that does not profit. Be appalled, O heavens, at this, be shocked, be utterly desolate, says the LORD, for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water.

Jeremiah 2

For some of us, like God's people of old, our elevated egos attempt to unseat God's glory. There are two steps here: forsaking



God as the fountain of life and changing gods in the belief that we can create something better-career, family, home, money, reputation, church, health-the list goes on. We withdraw from the source of Life and Breath by making ourselves the epicenter of being. We chase pleasure only to be robbed of joy.

Eighteenth-century theologian Jonathan Edwards wrote of the “excellent enlargedness” of the human soul that resulted from the Creator's breath. Tragically, human sin-the love of that which is less than God-reversed the expansive direction of life.

All **this excellent enlargedness of man's soul was gone**; and thenceforward he himself shrank, as it were, into a little space, circumscribed and closely shut up within itself to the exclusion of all things else. . . . God was forsaken, and fellow creatures forsaken, and man retired within himself.

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

Romans 3

No one is exempt from the reductive effects of sin. We all chase lesser loves, even those of us who profess to be children of God. The suffocating clutch of death lurks in the wings, waiting for us to drop our gaze.

Our life with God can be stymied by indifference, as with Sam. Or perhaps we choose blatant rebellion, profaning the character of God. Often times, however, our sin is more subtle. Our gaze shifts from God's glorious grace to ourselves and our human effort. We accept the free gift of salvation, yet we strongly suspect that our own works earn God's ongoing love.

We measure spiritual maturity primarily by how well we avoid what we label as sin. The “narrow way” becomes a list of rules and behaviors for wearing a Christian nametag. Shiny medals awarded for good conduct make us sparkle in our own brilliance. Instead of gulping breaths of life, we systematically box ourselves into the very opposite of abundance. Grace appears almost offensive in its freedom. The space for practicing life with God shrinks and contracts.

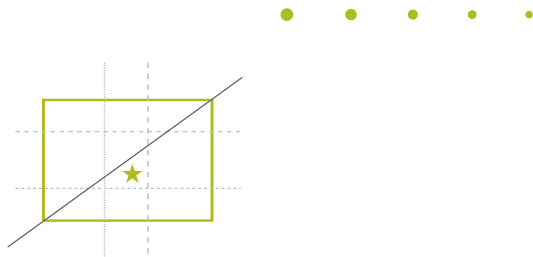
• • • • • **stop a moment**

Imagine that we are in the room with you now. Bob holds a large roll of masking tape. Joni stands next to you and begins to ask you some questions. “What political party do you support? Should Christians run for political office? What is your position on abortion? Should single mothers adopt children? Is poverty due to laziness? Is there just war? Can someone be a conscientious objector?” As you answer each question, Bob pulls off a strip of tape and puts it on the floor. The first four questions build a box with you standing inside. Bob then starts to place lines of tape that crisscross the box.

Joni's questions shift a bit. “Do you go to church? How often? Should women be deacons? Does depression show a lack of faith? Does illness come from hidden sin? What about infertility? Do you believe the gift of



tongues still exists? What about healing? Do you have an accountability partner? Are you tithing ten percent of your income? Before taxes? Is the Eucharist the real body of Christ or is it symbolic? Should the American flag be in your sanctuary?” Bob lays down more lines. The box becomes smaller and smaller. The space is getting crowded. You try to balance on your tiptoes.



We construct our life with God by drawing lines of expected and acceptable opinions and behaviors. Fearing spiritual formation might be willy-nilly without sufficient control, we build a box to manage the process. With each sermon, each Bible study, each retreat, each small-group meeting, we add another line inside the box. Another position to be spiritual: Patriotism equals godliness. Another activity: Volunteer in Kids Clubs on Wednesday nights at church. Another rule: Journaling is mandatory. Another behavior: Achieve fifteen minutes of quiet time on your knees in your closet with the door closed before the sun rises.

Instead of loving God, we come to love our own construction of what we deem worthy of our attention. A list of rules replaces abundant life. We call out to passersby, “Here! Come

be with me! Look at the fabulous life I have with God. Put on your toe shoes and tiptoe over here! Careful not to step on the lines. I put a lot of work into those.”

Here is a crazy example of boxy thinking we heard recently. If you own a Subaru four-wheel drive car, then you must be an environmental activist. If you are an environmental activist, then you must be a Democrat. Since all Democrats are liberals who do not believe in God, obviously you are not a Christian. How about that box!

We asked teenagers in our church youth group how their peers at school know they are Christians. That was easy: no parties, no drugs, no alcohol, no sex, no cursing, no cheating, no *R*-rated movies. These young people have the box down pat. You could hear the masking tape ripping off the roll.

What a bizarre way to fabricate a life. Someone like Sam, watching us place lines on the floor, might wonder why we choose to live in these boxes of our own making. There are a myriad of reasons, really. We think we control the lines, and we crave control. We choose perceived safety over freedom. We impose capricious rules on one another, inevitably neglecting the law of love. Like the picture above, we each become a star in our own box.

Our box declares that our chief end is to be good
... and hope God is watching.

Here is a hard truth. After the initial flurry of taping, we move into a maintenance mode. We become line monitors, going



over and over the lines to keep them straight and neat, growling at people who dare step on them. We take shallow breaths to conserve oxygen in the small space. We push against others who try to put us in *their* boxes. Growth and delight disappear in the process. Life becomes stale. No wonder this box building drains life's breath out of us-it can be an exhausting, fulltime job!

We presume upon God's patience. This presumption treads in dangerous territory. Isaiah delivered a warning to the Israelites: "I am the LORD, that is My name; I will not give My glory to another." God is Lord over all and will not tolerate worship of lesser loves. We are to reflect God's image, not ours.

The heavens are telling of the glory of God;
and their expanse is declaring the work of His hands.

Psalm 19

• • • • • A Story from Bob

For many years, I glanced over my shoulder continuously. I wanted to be sure God was watching me. I could have been the groundskeeper on a baseball field laying very precise, straight lines. Call me Mr. Discipline. Me inside the lines. Sin outside the lines. If I walked with the Spirit, I avoided sin and earned God's pleasure. If I sinned, God's face would turn away from me.

I participated in an organization in college that made the spiritual life feel like a competition. Each week we met to report such successes as our cumulative minutes of quiet time and the results of our evangelism efforts. Actual conversions to

Christianity won extra points. scripture memory was like a poetry slam. When I quoted a verse, the next person would quote a chapter. The crowning achievement was the woman who quoted Psalm 119. We were all in awe!

When I started teaching at seminary, I focused on laying down yet another set of lines. Truth inside. Untruth outside. Defending the faith became the primary thrust. On that battlefield, grace found scarce room to breathe. I was convinced that my box remained quite a bit larger than many of my colleagues'. I told students, "The world is not black and white. There are shades of gray." I felt sophisticated saying that.

As I look back over the years, I feel a sadness. The sadness comes from opportunities lost. I had extensive knowledge of theology and expended enormous effort maintaining my box. Scant energy remained for the most important tasks: loving God and loving others well. I encouraged my students as nimble scholars, but I did not appreciate God's concern for the affections of their hearts. I was far too easily satisfied with smallness. God is now graciously showing me that shades of gray pale in comparison to life in technicolor.



Whether it is Sam with a fine life that has no place for God or the rebellious people who know God but are harlots with their love or the earnest builders of boxes, all are staring at their own navels in self-love. Humanity's purpose for being, ordained by God, reduces to a shadow as the gaze takes a hard turn inward.



There is so much more, and we have no idea what we are missing.

But hope reigns.

expanding

They feast on the abundance of your house,
and you give them drink from the river of your delights.
For with you is the fountain of life;
in your light we see light.

Psalm 36

As our lives reclaim the excellent enlargedness of our created purpose, God intends delight. In the process of writing this book, we took a group of editors out to the Powers' family place in West Texas. Some of us knew each other prior to the trip. Others were strangers. We spent several days sharpening the manuscript between bookends of breathtaking sunrises and sunsets.

The last morning we scrambled up a pink granite mountain behind the ranch house. A panoramic view rewarded our effort. The wind snapped at our coats and gave us crazy hairdos. Bob was looking for a herd of wild mountain sheep known to bed down on the summit. We saw signs of them, but our sheep calls went unanswered.

We found a flat rock overlooking the southern exposure. Joni opened her backpack and laid out the elements of communion.

A cloth from Kenya with golden threads set the table. Rocks anchored the corners. An antique china plate and cup from a great aunt held the bread and wine. We read the Word of God as the pages of the Bible fluttered in the wind.

“This is my body . . . my blood . . . do this . . . in remembrance of me.” Each person—Sandi, Reg, Laurie, Sara, Miriam and both of us—looked around the circle. Sisters and brothers in Christ with knees touching on top of a blustery peak. Strangers no more. Tied together through the blood of Christ for eternity. Experiencing God's reality beyond the mountain, the rock, the sky, the cloth, the china, the bread, the wine. Beyond us. The air curled and twirled and the Holy Spirit moved. Embodied, expansive life happened.

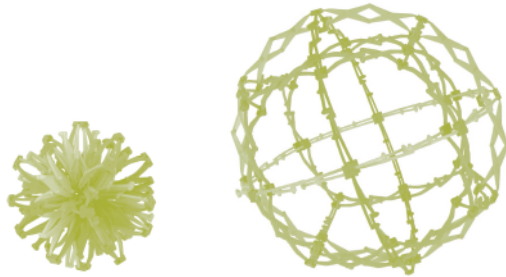
God had a final missive of delight. The herd of sheep waited until we were off the mountain and then bounded up the side of the hill in full view of our cameras. We laughed at their leaping and jumping over the very boulders we had just climbed. God graciously brought us joy.

Through the reconciling work of Christ, God provides the means for great intakes of life's breath. There is space to truly live expansively. Expanding joy. Expanding love. Expanding knowledge. Expanding faith. We draw outward from the center as we delight in the whole of God. The image is not one of tape on the floor but one of an ever-expanding sphere.

Have you seen a toy called the Hoberman Sphere®? It starts out as a closed ball. As you pull its sides, the sphere expands in all directions with space inside and out. The manufacturer makes these large enough to accommodate a person inside.



The big spheres have a mind of their own. Watch out when one starts to unfold on you!



The closed sphere represents the incurvature of self-love. We live with hard edges, withholding forgiveness and hoarding our time and resources for selfish gain. As the Holy Spirit transforms our affection for God, the sphere begins to expand. We open up to allow God's character of love to shine through us like light shining through the openings of the sphere. The edges begin to soften.

Just as the sphere enlarges and expands, our life starts to reflect a joy bounded only by our boundless God, transcending circumstances. We live Life with a capital *L* in a reality beyond ourselves. The enlarging sphere invites a radical and liberating change in our gaze. A gaze curved inward in self-love shifts to look up and out to the loveliness of the person of God and onward through God toward our fellow human beings.

When we use a large sphere as a visual aid in teaching, typically the participants' eyes widen as it opens outward. They unconsciously take a deep breath that follows the expansion. When we collapse the sphere, you see distress and disappointment on their faces. Breathing was such a treat while it lasted!

One pastor had an almost allergic reaction. "Without a box, how do I control my people?" Living out of God's gracious love can be a scary place. It requires faith in God's purposes and methods and the humility to admit addiction to the perceived safety of masking tape. The terrifying embrace of grace grips you as air rushes into your lungs.

Sin is the suicidal abandonment of joy.

John Piper

Choosing self-love, in whatever form it takes, ignores the very source of our delight. It is a choice for death over life. That is why John Piper, a pastor and theologian passionate about the delight of God's glory, calls sin "the suicidal abandonment of joy." When the gaze shifts away from us and our efforts to the person of God, obedience becomes rightly seated in the commandments to love God and to love others with reckless abandon.

Our lives move toward an excellent enlargedness once again through the transforming power of the Spirit of God. (Our fifth chapter, "Shift," describes this process.) We begin to turn away from self-centeredness. We put away the masking tape. We quell our rebellion. We engage in a relationship with the divine that spills out onto the people around us. The Spirit enables us to delight first and foremost in the One truly worthy of our adoration: God. From that expansive center, we move to what God loves and how God loves.

Remarkably, this process will never end. As finite creatures of an infinite God, we will never know the depth of God's mysteries. Our delight cannot exhaust the breadth of loveliness.



Throughout eternity, we will enjoy new illuminations of God. The sphere will ever expand!

• • • • • **stop a moment**

The sphere is a metaphor that we will use throughout the book. You need one of your own. Get one wherever cool toys are sold. Play with the sphere. Watch it expand. Think about life with God as expanding like the sphere. Do you use lines to draw a box around your life with God? What are they? Are you indifferent to God? How did you come to that place? Practice breathing deeply each time you pull the sphere open. How does it feel to watch the sphere close? Imagine life as an expanding sphere that has no end!



expanding

In this chapter, we introduce the idea of expansive life. We begin to reclaim the space to practice life with God. Hopefully you have found yourself in these pages already.

The following chapters begin with the glory of God at the center of the sphere and expand the topics from there. We visit such issues as why being fully human is our greatest calling,

how the incarnation of Jesus Christ matters in the present, and what is a realistic view of the Holy Spirit.

Next we explore the oft-misunderstood and much-ignored law of love. We talk about the complexion of our joy in God; the community of humans as God's agents for change; God's love demonstrated in grace, forgiveness and sacrifice; and our peculiar standing as a people of hope.

Remember to breathe as you work through the concepts. New perspectives will come fast and hard. Stay with it. The topics build upon each other and circle into each other. We constantly loop back to show you how it all fits together.

You will not find five easy steps to spiritual maturity or six disciplines leading to nirvana. We want to think well together in order that we may love well together. Neither objective is simple. Putting this material into a flat dimension such as a book is both a great privilege and an ongoing frustration. We wish we could sit beside you and hear your stories in a live, embodied conversation. We hope someday we will have the blessing of doing just that. Until then, we pray over your reading.

Use the white space in this book to jot notes, pose questions or doodle as you ponder the ideas we present. The space gives you breathing room. You will not be penalized for marking in the book. It will not self-destruct.

May the Holy Spirit illuminate your path. May our words bring only good to you. May our humble effort be used by the Spirit to lead you to deeply satisfying gulps of fresh air.



I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the Father of glory,
may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation
as you come to know him,
so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened,
you may know what is the hope
to which he has called you,
what are the riches of his glorious inheritance
among the saints,
and what is the immeasurable greatness
of his power for us who believe,
according to the working of his great power.

Ephesians 1