WHAT IF
GOD
WROTE YOUR
BUCKET
LIST?

JAY PAYLEITNER
To Paul Gossard,
who knows the way
Acknowledgments

For 25 years, I’ve been given specific assignments and deadlines to seek truth, know truth, present truth, and draw individuals to the truth. In every media imaginable. Print, radio, television, social media, direct mail, video walls, books, periodicals, and public speaking. Even T-shirts, posters, and distributing literature on street corners in Moscow. That’s what happens when you establish yourself as a freelance writer/producer/speaker in the Christian marketplace.

Let me share a few career highlights. Writing the first print ad for Jerry Jenkins and Tim LaHaye’s megaselling Left Behind series. Recording Josh McDowell speaking with a guard in a Soviet-era prison. Being a guest on Focus on the Family. Producing broadcasts featuring Bill Bright, Zig Ziglar, Chuck Colson, Dennis Rainey, Luis Palau, TobyMac, and many other respected Christian communicators. Speaking on behalf of Iron Sharpens Iron, AWANA, MOPS, the National Center for Fathering, and scores of local churches and regional ministries.

I am humbly grateful to the leadership and media teams of all those ministries and many others. Your integrity, passion, and commitment to truth and excellence have forever impacted my life and most assuredly can be found in the pages of this book.

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To my growing family—Rita, Alec, Lindsay, Randall, Rachel, Max, Megan, Isaac, Kaitlin, Rae Anne, Judah, Jackson, and Emerson—you inspire and motivate me. I love you all.

And to my Savior, Jesus, who went to the cross for each and every one of us. Without your perfect love, none of this makes any sense.
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Foreword
by Josh D. McDowell

Our Creator is in the business of creating order out of chaos. God uses lists to help us order our lives and learn more about him. He used a seven-day plan to create the universe. He gave Moses a list on Mount Sinai—the Ten Commandments. Jesus provided a wonderfully useful list of eternal values, the Beatitudes, as a code of ethics for those who would follow him. The nine fruit of the Spirit are listed in Galatians as virtues God develops in every believer. God doesn’t want us to obsess about making lists or panic about checking off dozens of specific tasks before we die, but lists can be very handy.

My list-making goes way back. During my first year in college, I drafted a multi-point strategic plan for the next 25 years of my life. It wasn’t called a bucket list back then, but my goals were dead serious. I mapped out 50 six-month periods with clear objectives and concrete plans for the next quarter century. My strategic plan ended with me being elected governor of Michigan.

The first step was running for and being elected freshman class president. Check. In the next few months, I tackled a few more objectives. Check, check, and check. The next major item of my strategic plan was a required yearlong research project. I knew it had to be a controversial
topic with significant historical, cultural, and legal implications, and I had to knock it out of the park. I also knew that if I was going to invest a year of my life, it would need to be a topic for which I had a personal passion and something to prove.

Those who have heard my testimony won’t be surprised to hear the topic I chose for that term paper. At the time, I was still struggling with my mother’s death and my father’s alcoholism. Looking for answers, I had turned briefly to religion but found it shallow, phony, and foolish. That’s when I told my English professor I was going to do a serious historical study that would—once and for all—refute Christianity as nothing but meaningless fables.

My months of research uncovered a list of 119 separate events and situations I would have to explain away before I could honestly and intellectually reject Jesus Christ. As I studied, my carefully constructed strategic plan started to derail, and the research led me to the place we all need to be—at the foot of the cross, acknowledging our sin and asking God to forgive us and clean up our lives.

Since then, my strategic plan has been dedicated to answering God’s call. You might think the plan would be quite complex. But it really isn’t. You might even call it my “three-point bucket list.” In more than 50 years, I’ve given thousands of talks and written thousands of pages, and it all comes down to these three points: “Get to heaven. Take as many people with me as possible. Enjoy every moment.”

This three-point plan still motivates me in all I do. But I can also certainly see how 14 words don’t exactly fill a book. That’s why I’m glad my friend Jay Payleitner has taken on the challenge of hanging meat on that skeleton. Between the easy-to-read stories and observations, Jay delivers the kind of insight that helps give purpose to our time on earth. I believe any reader who opens their heart and mind to these 52 chapters will discover they are right in line with God’s will for their lives. So keep reading. And be ready to experience the abundant life Jesus promises in John 10:10 when he says, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”
Got a Bucket List?

You know the concept, right? Otherwise you wouldn’t have picked up this book.

Briefly defined. A bucket list is quite literally a list—written down or mulled over in your mind—of things you want to do before you kick the bucket.

The term was actually little known until the 2007 movie directed by Rob Reiner and starring Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman. If you haven’t seen *The Bucket List*, I recommend it. The veteran actors portray Edward and Carter, older gentlemen from differing backgrounds sharing a hospital room, undergoing chemo treatments, and revealing regrets of two lives unfulfilled. Diagnosed with terminal cancer—and against their doctor’s advice—they set off on a breathtaking trip around the world to cross off items from a handwritten checklist of things to do before they die. Edward and Carter make some bad choices and some good ones. And they ask spiritual questions we all need to ask.

But this book is not about their bucket list. It’s about yours.

More specifically, it’s about the bucket list you might compose if you were totally in sync with how God wants you to live your life. Now, you might think the all-powerful Creator of the universe would have
some pretty outrageous goals for each one of us. And he does. His goals for us take a lifetime to achieve. But at first glance, God’s bucket list for you may not seem quite as spectacular as a conventional one.

God’s recommendations for your bucket list probably won’t include destinations and extravaganzas that make headlines or wow your friends. But you will find decisions, truths, and insights that are truly transformational.

Instead of moving to a more upscale neighborhood, your new goal may be to love your current neighbor.

Instead of dining with the hottest Hollywood celebrities, your new goal may be to break bread with someone who’s down on their luck and needs a good meal.

Instead of convincing the city council to erect a statue of your likeness in the town square, your new goal might be to establish a home with a solid foundation for your family.

God’s bucket list for your life probably includes fewer things to do and more things to embrace. Things to appreciate. To choose. And sometimes to let go.

Want to know something? If these are on your personal bucket list, I hope you do climb Mount Everest, run with the bulls in Spain, sleep in an igloo, get invited to the White House, or collect Starbucks mugs from all 50 states. Sounds like fun.

But no matter what, don’t miss these 52 things God would probably write on your bucket list. When you finally look back at all you have achieved, don’t be surprised if God’s plan for your life turns out to be a gazillion times more soul satisfying than anything you could possibly dream for yourself.

_In the end, life can’t be about checking off items on a bucket list. It has to be about pouring out your bucket on behalf of neighbors, lovers, strangers, and friends._

_Jay Payleitner_
D\n\n\nigging through some old papers, I ran across a list of personal goals I had written almost two decades ago. Not a bucket list for my life, but goals for a specific calendar year. I will not share the contents of that list here. After all, they were my goals, not yours. But I will confirm that some were very specific. Others were more of an attitude adjustment. Some were one-time events. Some were achieved. Others were not. And some are still ongoing personal projects.

Clearly, I had taken the task seriously. All the goals had long-term relevance and real-life application. I didn’t write, “Score more than 250,000 points in Donkey Kong,” or “Videotape and catalog every episode of Saved by the Bell.” Most of the goals could fall into one of four categories: spiritual growth, personal relationships, financial planning, and career advancement.

None of the goals were as simplistic as “Be happier,” although checking off one of those goals would have provided a satisfying moment. As I recall, I pulled out the list a few times that year but didn’t post it on the wall or make a personal pledge to review it weekly. Actually, this is the first time I’ve told anyone about the list. Now tucked in a file folder, the list still challenges me and perhaps mocks me just a little.

On the one hand, every personal trainer or management consultant

Set Goals—but Not in Concrete
in the world extols the virtue of goal setting. Goals help you keep your eyes on the prize. Goals can drag you out of bed in the morning.

On the other hand, your goals for your life are not nearly as important as God’s goals for your life. In other words, please don’t be surprised if all your careful planning and goal setting gets set aside by the master planner himself. The Bible reminds us, “We can make our plans, but the LORD determines our steps” (Proverbs 16:9 nlt). That idea is confirmed again and again in Scripture.

The Tower of Babel was planned as a monument to the people themselves. As a result, God confused their language, and the tower was never completed.

In the parable of the rich fool, Jesus tells the story of a wealthy farmer who planned to build bigger barns to hold his abundant crops. That very night the farmer died in his sleep.

The night Jesus is betrayed by Judas, Peter attacks a soldier, cutting off his ear. Jesus heals the soldier and allows himself to be arrested without further incident, knowing that his bigger purpose was to fulfill God’s plan.

So what’s your plan? What goals do you have for the weekend or the year or your life? Goals are good. Specific goals are even better. Don’t just write down, “Work out more.” Commit to specific times and places. Don’t just write, “Join a Bible study.” Round up some friends and set a weekly agenda. Don’t just say, “Get my degree.” Make an appointment with a college admissions counselor.

But don’t be surprised if on your way to doing something good and admirable, God provides you with a surprising opportunity to do something great and amazing.

Checking the List

As you discern God’s bucket list for your life and set personal goals, be specific. Being wishy-washy is never good. Be bold. Forge ahead. Give yourself deadlines and five-year plans. Take risks.
Challenge authority. Build consensus. Maintain high expectations. But don’t forget also to expect the unexpected. Never stop praying. Never stop pursuing God’s will. You might actually hear direct instructions from heaven, such as “Noah, build a boat,” “Abraham, put down that knife,” “Joseph, marry that pregnant girl,” or “Peter, get out of the boat and walk on the water.” God often uses the unexpected to get your attention, drive home a lesson, and do his best work in you and through you.

✓ Expect the unexpected.
When I was ten, my family took a camping trip from the Chicago suburbs to New Mexico and back. I’m not sure about our exact return route, the miles we traveled each day, or the location of the campgrounds we stayed in, but I do remember this. The first day started beautifully, but as we traveled east, we ended up driving through a fierce thunderstorm. On the other side of the storm, we quickly set up camp on dry ground and cooked a campfire dinner as the sun was setting. Overnight, the rains caught up with us, pounding our six-man tent. We slept little, and in the morning we packed up our gear in the mud.

Over the next four days, we repeated the same pattern. Drive through the storm. Find a campground. Pitch a damp tent. Listen to the thunder and hope the tent doesn’t leak. Pack up in the mud. Hit the road.

My parents were troopers about the whole thing, and that attitude seemed to rub off on us kids. I remember a sense of adventure and inevitability about the events of the coming day.

“There’s the storm line,” my dad would say.

“Should we stop now or try to get ahead of it?” Mom would ask.

Moments later, the windshield wipers would come on, and we’d be surrounded with lightning bolts for the next hour or so.
Oddly enough, surviving that storm—five times—was not the most significant memory of that trip. One of those muddy mornings happened to be a Sunday, and my parents were determined to find a worthwhile church service for us to attend. (Remember, this was before Google Maps and cell phones.) We broke camp, checked our maps, got off the main highway, asked around, and finally made it to what looked like a nice little church…just as the last cars were leaving the parking lot after the last service of the day.

Still, the six of us piled out of the station wagon, and Dad led us into the surprisingly empty chapel. Without saying much, Dad entered a pew, and we joined him in a few quiet moments of reflection and prayer. Reflecting on that scenario, I am sure my parents never knew the magnitude of the lesson they had provided for this ten-year-old boy. We were not in that building out of necessity. No one was taking attendance. We were not there to listen to a pastor or show off our Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes. (After all, what we wore was slightly damp and rumpled.) We were there because God is God. And we need to be intentional about spending time with him.

Yes, of course, we can talk to God anytime. He’s everywhere. We don’t have to be in a building with a cross on the steeple and wooden pews. But for several days we had been surrounded by clear reminders of God’s power and presence. Whether they knew it or not, my mom and dad were making a statement to their four children. And thanking God for his ongoing provision.

Minutes later we were on the road and heading into another storm front. But that was a turning point for me. For the rest of my life, I had a radically different perspective on God and how humans need to relate to him. The Creator of the universe surely appreciates well-delivered sermons, worshipful hymns, polished shoes, and a full collection plate. But the item he wants most on our bucket list is a humble acknowledgment that we can’t do life without him. Through sunny days and stormy nights, he is our sole provider, protector, and guide.
Checking the List

Storms are coming. And God allows the rain to fall on everyone—those who choose to follow him and those who don’t. The best place to be in a storm is not on a highway or in a tent. The best place to be is in a house with a firm foundation. Matthew 7:25 confirms, “The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock.”

Amazingly, if you have put your faith and trust in Jesus, you should occasionally choose to drive into the storm. You need not worry. You will be safe. Your life will stand as a witness to those who have mistakenly built their foundation on something other than Jesus the rock.

✓ Build a foundation that withstands the storms.
Our fourth son, Isaac, always had a slightly healthier imagination than the rest of our crew. As a preschooler, he spent a season of his life experimenting with his designated superhero powers. More than once, Isaac was observed tying a pillowcase around his neck, diving off our coffee table, and wondering why “the darn cape didn’t work.” (By our fourth male child, we didn’t spend a lot of time panicking about boys standing on furniture.)

Isaac was not a cartoon junkie. But like his dad, he did appreciate the finer points of how science was allowed to go slightly askew when Wile E. Coyote, Bugs Bunny, and other Warner Brothers characters were involved. For instance, a character squashed by a falling anvil will walk away from the scene looking and sounding like an accordion. That’s simple cartoon physics. Likewise, when stepping off a cliff, gravity doesn’t apply until the individual suspended in space realizes he is no longer on solid ground. Cartoon physics also permits two-dimensional black circular holes to be picked up and moved to alternate locations. And of course, when an individual is propelled with sufficient force through a solid wall, door, or billboard, they leave behind a perfect outline of their body, including ears, whiskers, and anything they were carrying. Animators sometimes call such a character-shaped hole an impact silhouette.
Isaac was at the height of his quest to test the veracity of cartoon physics the summer he turned four years old. He was out helping his mom plant the small plot of land we called our garden, and Rita watched as her curious son’s attention turned to the garden rake they had just used to loosen the soil. He studied the six-foot rake for several seconds, and then before she knew it, Isaac had turned it over—teeth side up—and stepped on it. Of course, the wooden handle sprang up off the ground and clunked him in the forehead. Delighted, Isaac shouted, “It worked! It worked!”

A four-year-old boy steps out in faith (on a garden rake) and responds with joy. That’s something an adult would never do intentionally. That’s because we’re so smart. We already think we have all the answers. But the truth is, we don’t.

Scientists desperately want to know how the universe began. They can’t know, so they speculate. As enlightened adults, our sense of justice compels us to agonize over the question of why illness or tragedy hits one family and not another. And since we can’t describe heaven, many of us choose not to believe at all.

The Bible tells us that at some point in our life, we need to be like a child who takes a step of faith. It’s a basic bucket-list assignment. To be curious. Wide-eyed. Dependent. Trusting. That’s what Jesus meant when he said, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3).

Afterward, once you have secured your citizenship in heaven, you can begin to ask those tougher questions. When you ask about the universe, God will reveal his majesty in the stars—stars he hung in place. When illness and tragedy strike and you look for justice, he will give you comfort in his promise, “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Revelation 21:4). If you wonder what heaven is like, he will give you a glimpse of glory when you are in fellowship with other believers or loved by your friends or family. Again,
God's clear answers to life’s greatest puzzles may sound like nonsense to those who don’t believe in God. On the other hand, mature believers will ask, hear, and understand.

When Bible scholars consider the issue of childlike faith, they agree. It’s not being childish or ignorant or naïve. Childlike faith means you finally see God as a trustworthy heavenly Father.

When new believers begin to mature in Christ, 1 Corinthians 13:11 applies: “When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me.”

But once in a while—when you’re tired or beaten up, or when doubt creeps in—don’t hesitate to come back to your heavenly Father and say, “Let me rest in you.”

**Checking the List**

It’s soul-satisfying to know that we can call on God the Father anytime. And because we know him and he loves us, his communication will be clear. Even if we don’t get all the nuances. “Because we are his children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, prompting us to call out, ‘Abba, Father’” (Galatians 4:6).

✓ **See God as a loving Father.**
When I was in college, I made this declaration more than once: “I will never live in a house with a white picket fence.”

That was my way of taking a stand against a life of meaningless existence. Sure, I knew I’d probably get married and have one or two kids. But a house in suburbia? With a picket fence? And a minivan? Not a chance. I was better than that. I was going to do great things. Mowing a lawn or cleaning gutters would just get in the way.

For the record, I have never owned or erected a white picket fence. However, at the second house we owned, I came home from work one day to an image that could have rocked my world. My neighbor had installed a lovely and sturdy white picket fence—which meant the entire north side of my property now stood in mocking defiance of the personal pledge I had made ten years earlier.

But you know what? It was not a big deal. I looked at that fence and laughed. By that time, I had three kids and had surrendered to the conformity and wonder of suburban life. (Including owning a minivan.)

Seeing that fence helped me realize who I was and what my life had become. I had not sold out. I had not turned my back on a freethinking, rebellious, countercultural lifestyle. Instead, I had found something better.
The desire to do great things was still there. But when I looked at my family, I realized that my dedication to serving them was as great as any human endeavor could be.

In one of the most amusing scenes in the Bible, all 12 disciples are walking along behind Jesus, arguing about which of them is the greatest. As recorded in Mark 9, while the group of men travel from Galilee to Capernaum, Jesus shares some pretty amazing stuff, even describing his inevitable betrayal, death, and resurrection. But the disciples are barely listening. They don’t get it. Instead, each of them has been staking claim to the head of the line when it comes to Jesus’s sidekicks.

Even though he knows their every thought, Jesus asks, “What were you arguing about on the road?” They get real quiet. Then Jesus delivers this stunner: “Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.” The 12 disciples have been acting like children, and Jesus has just pointed it out. To emphasize the point, he picks up a little kid who happens to be hanging around, and he adds, “Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me” (Mark 9:37). Once again, Jesus turns conventional wisdom upside down.

Want to do great things? Me too. Let’s start with serving our families—including our kids, spouse, parents, siblings, nieces, and nephews. Then we can move on to serving our neighbors and the rest of the planet.

Live as a servant to all, and you’ll not only feel great, you’ll be great.

Checking the List

To be great in the eyes of the world pretty much involves being first. First to reach the mountaintop. First at the box office. First in rushing yards or home runs. First in line at the bank. First place in whatever race you’re running.

But true greatness comes when you let others go ahead of you. Yes, we should absolutely strive for excellence. God wants us to use our
gifts and give our best efforts in all we do. But when glory comes, give it away, and you can check one more item off that bucket list. Put others ahead of yourself. Actually, put everyone ahead of yourself. Which makes you last. But that’s okay, because in God’s economy, “The last will be first, and the first will be last” (Matthew 20:16).

✓ Put others ahead of yourself.