

☰ Praise for *Meant for More* ☰

As a youth, John Nunes committed his life to improving others' existence. In his book *Meant for More*, he has succeeded in providing readers with an opportunity to enrich their lives by engaging the divine through the ordinary—through the homeless woman who unnerves, the nameless man at the bus stop, or our own colleagues and family members. Employing the words and thoughts of Luther and Augustine, among other theologians, Nunes provides a view of the world as it could be even though it is not. As the author states, the volume is not the definitive word, but a summons to “something more”; his book is such a charming invitation that any reader serious about the Christian journey dare not miss it.

Dr. Nancy Blattner, president, Fontbonne University

Those who know John Nunes already know the electricity of his way with words. Here, it is sparked by one four-letter word. *More*. Sending us on a breathtaking trek from Africa to Iowa, from our everyday routines to the most significant parts of our lives, this book does not leave us wanting more, but seeing more: more of God at work in the world and alive in the beating rhythms of our own hearts.

*Rev. Dr. Travis Scholl, managing editor of seminary publications,
Concordia Seminary, St. Louis*

John Nunes's candid and intimately perceptive grasp of the depth, beauty, and promise of the seemingly ordinary and mundane will lift us to live deeply and with purpose. Engaging and readable, *Meant for More* is best savored in short reads, permitting space for Nunes's mastery of vivid prose to inspire, challenge, and convict.

Ezer Kang, PhD, associate professor of psychology, Howard University

Dr. John Nunes's keen insights, hope, and Christ-centered message shine through in his writings. During these trying times of uncertainty, isolation, and swift transitions, it is wonderful to have this contribution for guidance and recalibration. As a Gen X pastor's wife and mother of five African American sons (three in college) during this physical and social pandemic, [I find] Dr. Nunes's book a welcome counsel. I eagerly anticipate learning how I, through the power of God, can be more in every aspect of my life.

Mrs. Shikina Bodley, woman of God, wife, and mother

To those dissatisfied souls plagued by social isolation in this digital age and those searching for purpose, this book is for you. Nunes shows that only Jesus can quench our thirst for satisfaction and give us meaning in life—found only in, with, and under His cross and blood-bought promises. Nunes brings a timely message and encouragement that exudes the sweetness of the Gospel accompanied by Lutheran theology and social ethics. Nunes shows God is calling us to be difference-makers, to speak up against injustice, to advocate for the minority, and to strive for “we” instead of “I.”

Nokukhanya “Noks” Shabalala, MA, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

In this graceful and uplifting book, John Nunes draws on his experience as a pastor, leader, and educator to deliver profound insights about how best to live completely and serve others. His deep faith and powerful observations combine to produce a work that will serve as a guidebook for those seeking inspiration, especially during these challenging times.

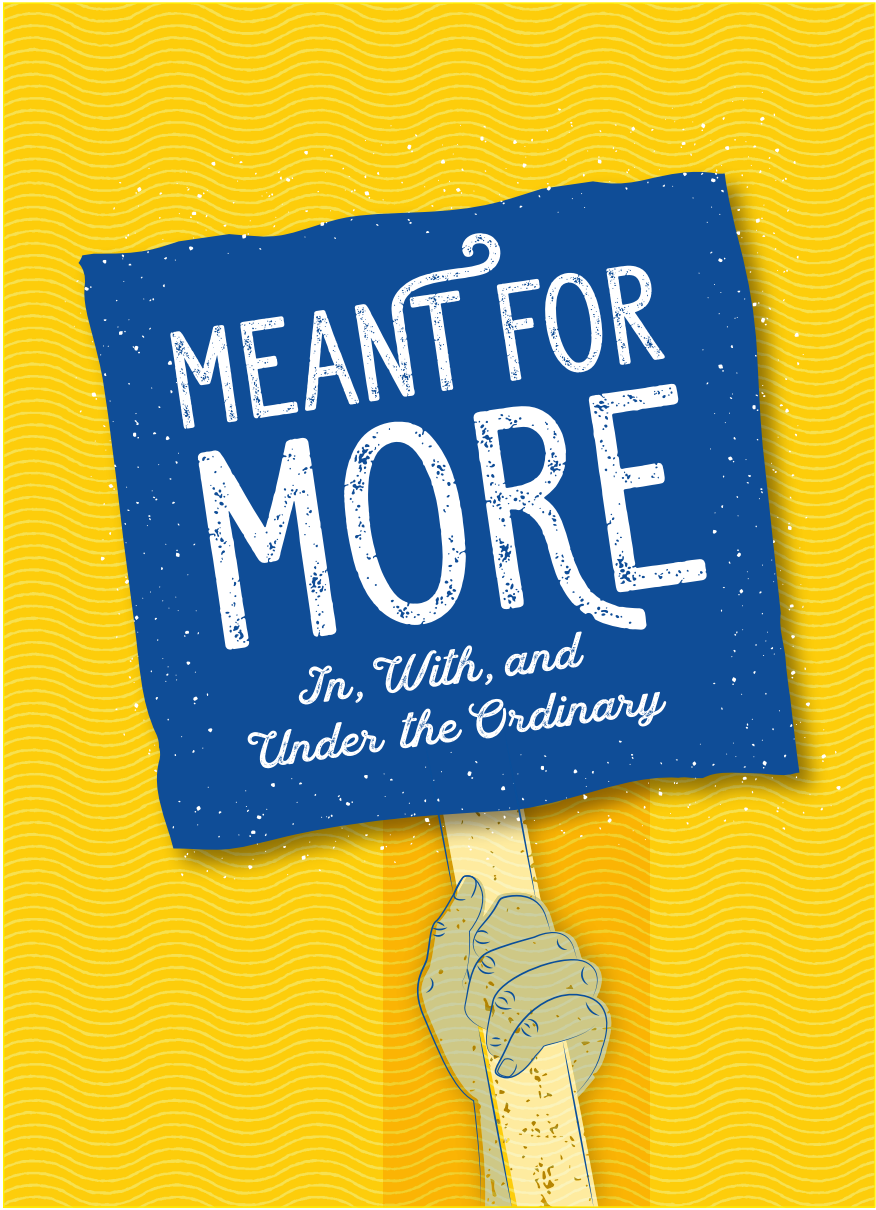
Dr. Freeman A. Hrabowski III, president, University of Baltimore, Maryland County

I love the voice of John Nunes. I have been blessed to hear it in coffee shops, conference rooms, and churches over the years. I am grateful that many others can now hear his voice in the pages of this new book. With immediate relevance for our cultural moment and the beauty of a well-written word, *Meant for More* explores what it might look like for Christians to choose a different, more ancient path of engagement with the world. John is a faithful guide down that path, marshaling the weight of Church history, the insights of the Lutheran tradition, and the heart-quickenning Word of God to support his call to push into the unrest of our present age and bear witness to the age to come as it is already breaking in, with, and under the world we inhabit. I heartily commend this book.

*Rev. Eric Landry, senior pastor, Redeemer Presbyterian Church,
Austin, TX, and editorial director, White Horse Inn*

In *Meant for More*, Dr. Nunes helps us put a Gospel finger on what’s missing in our lives. By pointing us to Christ and Christlike living, he shows us how we can find true meaning and escape the nagging, aching sense of emptiness that often consumes us. Thoughtful, funny, and accessible, *Meant for More* offers not only a diagnosis of the condition that we all experience but also the solution: finding our identity not in ourselves, but in Jesus Christ.

Rev. Hans Fiene, creator of Lutheran Satire



JOHN ARTHUR NUNES

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Dedication

HE TAUGHT ME HOW TO TIE MY SHOES,
SAY MY PRAYERS, DO GOOD,
FIGHT FOR TRUTH,
BE MESMERIZED BY BEAUTY,
LAUGH OUT LOUD,
NOT FOLLOW THE CROWD,
AND ABOVE ALL THINGS, TRUST GOD.
MY FIRST AND BEST HERO,

NEVILLE LEWISTON NUNES
(1931–2016)

THE SENSE THAT
THERE IS SOMETHING MORE
PRESSES IN. . . . OUR AGE IS
VERY FAR FROM SETTLING IN TO A
COMFORTABLE UNBELIEF. . . .
THE UNREST CONTINUES
TO SURFACE.

CHARLES TAYLOR,
A Secular Age

When I was an eighteen-year-old new immigrant to the US,¹ within me bubbled up an untried, untested confidence that I could change the world. I was under the spell of striving to commit my life to something constructive to improve lives. Yes, for others, but also for myself. No one could tell me I was *not* meant for more—but I hoped to position myself so that this “more” might positively overflow into the lives of others as well. There are few better beliefs to animate the dreams of young people than imagining themselves making a concrete and positive impact. And in the early 1980s, there seemed to me no better home base for an overeager optimist than “the States.” Despite my clumsiness of overconfidence—founded on little more than naivete and faith—I was welcomed into the United States of America by those who took a risk on me, a double immigrant of mixed parentage. It’s important to name names. It’s critical to remember by name in prayers of thanksgiving those who blessed us in life. My depth of gratitude this side of heaven could never be depleted toward several professors at Concordia University, Ann Arbor. Those yet living—such as Mossman, Looker, Kalmes—and those who bask in eternity’s sunrise—such as Heckert, Soovik, and Hackmann. Then there was a hearty band of believers from St. John Lutheran in inner-city Detroit: the Wagners, Bertha and George Steinke, Paul Schmidt, Mary Hillman, Mary Hunter, Wardell Polk, Henry Fann, Caroline Champine, James Robinson, and Helen Ellington.

My employment and academic focus for nearly four decades of adulthood has centered on faith-based, nonprofit, Lutheran-Christian

1 Prior to my becoming a US citizen, it happened more than once that, due to my lack of finances, failure to accurately understand immigration information, or lack of adequate advocacy, my status lapsed, and I would have been considered “undocumented,” a potentially deportable, naturalized Canadian—especially since I was born in Jamaica.

organizations that provide options for life transformation through education, international humanitarianism, urban congregational life, and community development. I'm proud to currently be a resident of the Village of Bronxville in the New York City area, a place that feels like home to me, a region replete with what I consider the best (and some of the worst) that the world has to offer when it comes to diversity, culture, the arts, verve, media, dynamism, big business, and moreover, with missional opportunities galore—exceeding anywhere I've lived. My vocation here resonates with my soul as I breathe a sigh of vocational alignment at Concordia College—New York.

introduction

STRATEGIZING MORE

With God-ward Words

Every writer hoping to prepare words to be digested by others will have an avid appetite for worldly observation. A writer of faith, however, takes up differently “the pen of a skillful writer” (Psalm 45:1 NIV) when working with words. Hungrily observing this world, indeed, but a Christian writer’s creative sphere is that thin slice of life between the world *as it is* and the world *as it ought to be*; the Christian writer’s eyes knife along that narrative spectrum between secularity and spirituality. These writers tell stories of a world with a God at work *in, with, and under* the structures and substances of life; their sensitivities live between being both content with the beauty of this world and devastatingly restless about the ugliness that happens in it (Romans 12:2). Such writers proclaim the faith with deep conviction yet possess an honest palate for the places where faith has gone wrong and the faithful have done wrong. Their faith gives them an instinctive ear for the inflated language of exaggerated promises; in other words, they know the difference between mass-produced misinformation and the transcendent truth of the divine gift, which delivers what it promises, “a foretaste of the feast to come.”² We have a God-ward Word, turning us with hopeful hearts toward our neighbors in love and turning us savingly toward God in faith.

2 LSB, Post-Communion Collect.

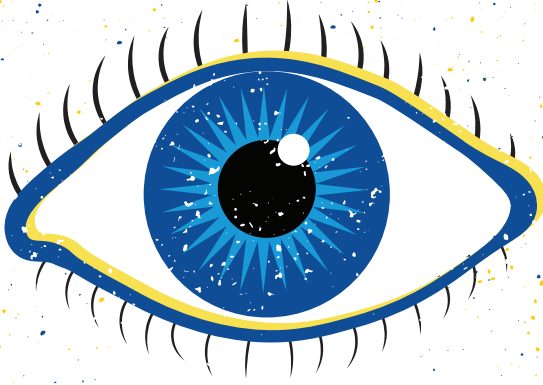
I have worked with words—sermonically, academically, devotionally, and inspirationally—since I was an undergraduate in college. I love the way words work, the way words work stylistically with other words, and the way working keenly with words serves to animate God’s Word. But preparing words for reading and preparing words for hearing are two distinct art forms, one literary and the other rhetorical. Even though I have some forty years of experience at this, frequently I must remind myself that the eye and the ear receive words in vastly different ways. There is overlap, to be sure; however, few traps can ruin, say, a sermon faster than crafting it as if you were writing a theology textbook. Social media posts—at their best, which is rare—represent an emerging hybrid that attempts to merge speaking and writing. Blog posts especially convey this. The op-ed writer is evinced. Most of what you will read here, I have attempted to compose in a commonly accessible style that is written for this merger of the ear and the eye. At times, I play poetically with rhythm, rhyme, assonance, and alliteration. Certain sections might be best read aloud. I use colloquialisms as well as a few rarefied words that invite readers to stretch their vocabulary.

Martin Luther quipped rightly, “They say of writing that ‘it only takes three fingers to do it’; but the whole body and soul work at it too.”³ This book is not intended to be an entire production, but an overture—an opening invitation to something more, perhaps a provocative entry to the more for which we are meant. This more will not come directly from the words contained in this book, but from the words that direct us toward another Word, the good Word, the *bene dictum*, a benediction that calls us into the world, into vocational action. This calling is impelled by the God-Word, you might say, who alone turns us God-ward in faith and praise and turns us world-ward in love and service. One day we will see God face-to-face; this will represent the ultimate culmination of that more for which we are meant. In, with, and under the inscripturated Word (the Bible), we see the incarnate Word (Jesus), the very face of God revealed, in whom we are discovered by grace and ourselves discover our meaningfulness.

This volume’s vignettes and assertions do not intend to prescribe a superior nor a single biblical pattern for relating to the world. There is a

3 LW 46:249.

I MUST REMIND



MYSELF THAT THE EYE AND



THE EAR RECEIVE

WORDS IN DIFFERENT WAYS.

time for everything under the sun, and some may not find themselves in a vocation and location that permits the pattern of engagement I propose. But I write so that possibly the Holy Spirit may stir, spark, provoke, prompt a restlessness that leads to action, that leads to the Lord Jesus, that leads to life everlasting.

In, With, and Under

Once, when traveling for work with Lutheran World Relief (LWR), I heard this plea in a community we'd call (ironically) "backwater"—a metaphorical term referring to areas that have been economically bypassed, where the current of progress has not reached. While working in such a region plagued by drought and famine, we heard their request: "Just help us get water!"

Think of that threshold—"just water." When one of our daughters was a teenager, she had her cell phone privileges suspended for just cause: downloads—very dangerous and, at that time, quite expensive. Her response, at full volume, and I quote: "Arghhh! How I'm gonna live?"

In the remote high hills of Kenya, LWR oversaw the implementation of a water system. We could have just plopped in a well and said, "We did our part and met your water needs. Goodbye!" But Lutherans value working contextually within communities. It's a practical application of the in, with, and under principle: pitching tents in the soil of others, like the God-man of John 1:14, walking together and talking together, sharing our deepest woes, fighting together our spiritual foes—the enemies of human flourishing—accompanying them with reciprocal respect as they accompany us, through the terrifying absurdities, through the dust and sand and soil and ashes in the deepest valleys of despair, building community with them, employing a critical and self-critical process of discovery. This way of working helped LWR arrive together at the mutual conclusion: "just give us water . . . we'll do the work, and God will give the growth."

Annastasia was the country program manager in Kenya when water arrived. In New Testament Greek, her name literally means "resurrection" or "to stand again." Annastasia lived out the meaning of her name in actions, working for justice, human dignity, and peace,

and yes, representing US Lutherans, but even more representing that Resurrected One, the One who as God but also as a human being sits, even as you read these words, at the right hand of the divine power (to use the biblical metaphor), the One who is the source and the summit yet holds together all things, His Church and our congregations and our families and our communities and all our organizations that want to do more for the world. Jesus Christ holds together our entire fragile world. Arthur Carl Piepkorn once wrote that this Jesus Christ is the pivotal One whose life, death, resurrection, and promised return makes “ultimate sense of . . . [our] terrifying absurdities”⁴—including not having access to basic, life-giving necessities, such as water.

Annastasia understands her ministry as bringing commonsense solutions. With indomitable faith, she works day after day so that the poorest of the poor, too, can “stand again.” She told me when I visited Nairobi that “development is the story behind the well.” What first appears to be the solution often conceals a deeper story.

In, with, and under it all, God comes to us through ordinary means, ordinary water, ordinary wine, and the ordinary hands of ordinary women and men like you and me and Annastasia in order to do more than we could ask or imagine (Ephesians 3:20). Jesus’ saving words point to Himself for human good: “If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. Whoever believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water’” (John 7:37–38).

A Counterpoint Rather Than a Counterpunch

Because of sin, the relationship between Christians and this world is plagued by a tension that can lead to false absolutes. At the extremes, we can either withdraw from culture or become overinvested in . . . let’s call it the symphony of life. I will be using an extended musical metaphor here. Sometimes, Christians position themselves exclusively as a countercultural movement, a group of believers who instinctively

4 Arthur Carl Piepkorn, “The One Eucharist for the One World,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 43, no. 2 (February 1972): 101, <https://media.ctsfnw.edu/Text/ViewDetails/9236>.

we'd ask you to imagine

(Ephesians 3:20)

and Anastasia in order to do

us: life and

of ordinary women are

of the ordinary hands

of ordinary wife.

means, ordinary

through ordinary

In, with, and under it all, God comes to us

go against the grain of this world whatever the issue, taking on a defensive posture, poised always to counterpunch with those who don't share our beliefs in a perceived cultural boxing match (*Kulturkampf*). Yet, an ancient and contrasting perspective might be for Christians to see ourselves (as well as to hear others) as more in counterbalance. There is a mutual neediness between salt and flavorlessness, between light and darkness, between leaven and a lump of dough. The absence of one helps us to realize the presence of the other; they symbolize a mystical, mutual interdependence.

Think of the idea of *contrapunctus*, or counterpoint, in Western music. This technique suggests musical parts that are harmonically interdependent yet independent in terms of melody and movement. Think of harmony as the vertical dimension of music and melody as the horizontal dimension. We need both. What I propose represents an Augustinian both/and approach, an approach that focuses on being both *in* the world but not *of* the world, a paradoxical engagement. This counterpoint perspective does not eliminate difference, disagreement, and dissonance. Rather, it acknowledges them and aims to engage in conversation, dialogue, even debate for the sake of the redemption—not the destruction—of the other.

Some, however, are wired more aggressively, like the ancient Manicheans. They might suggest that this view represents a compromise or commingling of the truth. Certainly, the same accusations were made of Jesus, of His cavorting with the enemy, of His guilt by associating with “undesirables.” Admittedly, Jesus’ ability to successfully differentiate Himself from sinful influences exceeds ours; we too often fall short. While our connection to the transcendent can’t compare to Jesus’, like Him, we can make an impact only when we are connected with the world. How can we bring beauty to this world’s music if we are disconnected? At the level of our soul, our connectedness finds courage to do more than fit in, to be more than singers of the same old song, but to be the virtuosos we were meant to be, creative voices displaying the most orthodox version of our faith, bringing to the world our unique musicality with instrumental conviction, joining the symphony of life wholeheartedly to the glory of God. “Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might” (Ecclesiastes 9:10)!

*Called, Gathered, Enlightened,
Sent, and Confident*

HOLY SPIRIT,
YOU HAVE CALLED US TO BE YOUR POETS OF THE POSSIBLE
IN SPITE OF THE TIMES WHEN LIFE FEELS ABSURDLY IMPOSSIBLE.

GATHERED BY YOU, WE IMAGINE A FUTURE OF PEACE
IN YOUR PERFECT EMPIRE;

UNTIL THEN, WE ARE ENLIGHTENED BY YOU
TO RESIST THE DIVISIVE TRIBAL TRUTHS OF OUR IMPERFECT WORLD,
INFECTED AS IT IS BY SIN, DEATH, AND THE DEVIL;

SENT BY YOU AS CARETAKERS OF THIS BROKEN WORLD,
WE REASSEMBLE THE FRAGMENTS OF YOUR FRACTURED CREATION.

BLESS US AS WE WORK IN, WITH, AND UNDER
THE WORLD JUST AS IT IS,
CONFIDENT THAT YOU ARE ALWAYS AT WORK
IN THE MIDDLE OF ALL THAT IS ORDINARY;
CONFIDENT THAT THROUGH OUR STRUGGLING,
YOU ARE TEACHING US ALL THINGS;
CONFIDENT THAT WE ALL ARE MEANT FOR MORE.

IN THE NAME OF THE ONE FROM WHOM YOU COME,
JESUS CHRIST, OUR LORD,
WE COURAGEOUSLY GO FORTH IN FAITH.
AMEN.



BLESS
US

as

WE
WORK

IN
WITH

and

UNDER

WORLD
the

RECOMBOBULATING MORE

We live in a discombobulating world. What do we do in the face of unexpected disasters, unpredictable societal chaos, incontrovertible political divisiveness, inexplicable tragedies, unforeseen heartbreaks, unforeseeable breakups, hope-canceling disappointments, and grief that escapes words? The tough stuff dents our smooth plans, scrapes our confidence, and breaks our dreams. “Hope deferred makes the heart sick,” the sage tells us in Proverbs 13:12.

It can feel like the life is sucked out of us, yet deep within us, we are haunted by the sense that these things are not a part of the plan for us, that we are meant for more. In some deep-down place of the soul, we are right.

At Milwaukee’s Mitchell International Airport, there is a place you go *after* you endure the screening process. After disheveling oneself by removing pieces of clothing and forgotten metallic items, perhaps taking two or three trips through the TSA line, one can feel discombobulated. Fortunately, in this airport, there is an area on the other side that they call the Recombobulation Area.

That is my experience of the church—it’s a place to get oneself recombobulated. God’s grace, working through the Word, the Sacraments, and the community of faith, calls us and places us irrevocably within the orbit of the universal community of faith. The church constitutes the only place on earth I know committed to gathering the hopes and the dreams of those carrying life’s heartsick deferrals (Proverbs 13:12)

and uniting those deepest prayers with the timeless praise of all saints and every rank of angel. Think of the time-transcending enormity of that promise, especially when the earthly and heavenly choruses join one another in the Holy Eucharist. And because of what the church promises in Jesus Christ, put your glasses on, because God's got a future for you. "Surely there is a future, and your hope will not be cut off" (Proverbs 23:18). That's a recombobulating thought! Your future address will be the city that "has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb" (Revelation 21:23). You are meant for more.

Enduring More

I want to believe in God. Sometimes this leads to desperation. Oftentimes, this is humanly challenging, especially when bad things seem triumphant. Why does disaster strike? Why are there shootings of children at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newton, Connecticut, and in Parkland, Florida, and of people at prayer in Charleston, South Carolina, or Sutherland Springs, Texas, or Christchurch, New Zealand? When these things happen, some people try to connect the dots, like Job's friends in the Old Testament,⁵ trying to make sense, to make meaning: "It must be something you've done, something in your past." I prefer an approach that has two steps: First, we recognize that life isn't always good, beautiful, or fair—not since the fatal fall from Eden's initial paradise. Second, we recognize that coming face-to-face with the consequences of life's crookedness provides us with teachable moments, chances to grow in grace. On the other hand, attempting to force sense out of tragedies can be as difficult as it is dangerous. Pronouncements that connect the dots of cause and effect don't help. Judging can lead to blind alleys of blaming victims or of falsely blaming victimizers or of misreading the context. There's always more than meets the eye.

5 Job's problematic friends Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar insist that Job's suffering is the result of divine punishment. They reason correctly that God is just, but conclude erroneously that Job's suffering, therefore, must be the result of an unjust action he has done and for which he must repent. Those who are suffering would do better to avoid these sorts of friends, regardless of their intention.

Of course, more academic types among us might see suffering as an occasion for conjecturing about large questions of theodicy, like the reasons for good and evil or the characteristics of God’s all-goodness versus God’s all-powerfulness. Rather, I strive to see suffering as a chance for Christians to respond, to hear cries of suffering as calls to action. We can endure more when we are actively engaged as part of the solution, as partners in action, as participants in the more for which we are meant.

A friend, Dean Wenthe, recently put it in a way that captured my imagination (and honestly made me shout in spontaneous joy): “God’s grace outruns what we can behold.” Think of yourself in a panic, running from a problem, out of breath, searching the horizon for help. God’s grace has already been where you are, and it will never let you down. Once we accept that God’s grace outruns the limits of human vision and knowledge, we can conclude the following: First, the problems that dominate our minds have already been worked out for our good by the unseen grace of a timeless God (Romans 8:28). Second, while we’re fretting unnecessarily about the problems we see daily—unconcerned with those problems not yet in our view—the same grace of God has already run on ahead of us for the sake of our salvation to seize future problems and to use them to mold our character, way in advance of our awareness.

Flourishing More

That we are meant for more means more than just filling your life with more matter—more material goods, more stuff. It means filling our lives with more of what matters. Invest in what matters, in what promises permanence and transcendence, not transience and temporariness. “And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever” (1 John 2:17).

That’s the Christian counterbalance for these dispiriting times. The key to full human flourishing is not to fill your life with more pleasure, leisure, and treasures. Getting more, gaining more, acquiring more, earning more, hoarding more, feeling more pleasurable sensations does not result, in itself, in the more for which we are meant.

Meaning and significance are discovered by focusing on those things that are eternal and using our gifts to invest in redeeming pursuits in the present age. The more for which we're meant must be more than the mere pursuit of our desires. Throughout history, wise observers have described these earthly acquisitional and transactional pursuits as ephemeral, unsatisfying, and ultimately unattainable. Rather, we are discovered by our more as we pay more attention to the prepositions *in*, *with*, and *under*. By this I mean not that we find our more, but that the more intended for us finds us as we give ourselves away following an *in*, *with*, and *under* model: *in*—investing in others, being genuinely interested in their lives; *with*—standing with others for a cause, accompanying them, walking alongside them on their roads to Emmaus (Luke 24); and *under*—undergirding those who invite or need our support, advocating for them, struggling to understand their situation. These prepositions are used theologically to describe, in a way that exceeds rationality, the relationship between the presence of Jesus and the ordinary water, bread, and wine of the Sacraments.

This approach to life is decidedly sacramental, meaning that God's promise is discoverable *in*, *with*, and *under* ordinary means, including the ordinary language through which the Spirit spoke the inspired Word of God. This presence extends also to God's hidden work in the world (Isaiah 45:15), in which we are God's co-workers, often hidden, humble, and unnoticed, but always meant for more. This idea of presence suggests that *in*, *with*, and *under* the ordinary, the extraordinary weaves through with transcendent wonder. The divine is, indeed, in the details. Holiness is threaded through our seemingly mundane duties and everyday responsibilities. Every so-called run-of-the-mill vocation is a location of eternal significance, a sign of grace.

Not for Lutherans Only | PART 1

The life of the reformer Martin Luther illustrates a rhythm of varied engagement with a world of problems. There's a time for *dialogue*—as Luther sparked in Wittenberg, posting his point of view in order to start a public conversation about how individuals are saved by God. In this time to talk, there's discussion, asking questions and inviting

