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*The Unexpected Adventure*

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Strobel, Lee, 1952-

The unexpected adventure : taking everyday risks to talk with people about  
Jesus / Lee Strobel and Mark Mittelberg.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p. 287).

ISBN 978-0-310-28392-8 (softcover)

1. Evangelistic work. I. Mittelberg, Mark. II. Title.

BV3790.S887 2009

248'.5—dc22

2008051817

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*Interior design by Beth Shagene*

*Printed in the United States of America*

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# WHEN ETERNITY HOLDS ITS BREATH

LEE STROBEL

**It was a hectic day** at the newspaper where I worked as an editor. Several major stories erupted before deadline. Reporters were scurrying around as they frantically tried to finish their articles. With emotions frayed, just about everyone lost their tempers.

On many days, the stress of journalism caused me to lose my composure too. But as a fairly new Christian, I asked God for his help as soon as the day looked like it was going to spiral out of control. Thanks to him, I managed to stay uncharacteristically calm amidst the chaos.

After the last story was edited, I looked up and was surprised to see one of my bosses standing over my desk. *Uh-oh!* That wasn't a good sign. But it turned out that he wasn't there to upbraid me about some mistake or oversight. Instead, he took me off guard by asking with genuine curiosity, "Strobel, how did you get through the day without blowing your top?"

Then, apparently suspecting a link between my behavior and the fact that I went to church on Sundays, he added the words that sent a chill down my spine: "What's this Christianity thing to you?"

*Whoa!* For a moment I froze. Nobody had ever asked me anything like that before. In fact, I had never shared my faith with anyone. The only way my boss even knew I attended church was because I once told him I couldn't go on an outing with him on a Sunday morning. And now, out of the blue, I was being put on the spot.

I didn't know what to say or how to say it. I was afraid I would utter the wrong words. I didn't want to embarrass myself or have him make fun of me. I fretted about what would happen to my career if I gushed about my faith and became known as the newsroom's "holy roller." There was a lot at stake.

**My mind raced.** Maybe I could dismiss the whole thing with a joke: *Christianity? Hey, what happens in church stays in church.* Maybe I could simply pretend I didn't hear him over the din of the newsroom: *Yeah, it was a crazy day. Man, look at the time! I've gotta get home or Leslie's gonna kill me!*

That's when the uninvited words of the apostle Paul coursed through my mind: "I am not ashamed of the gospel" (Romans 1:16). *Great, I thought. Just what I needed — a biblical guilt trip.*

I made a scary split-second decision: I resolved to take a spiritual risk.

Though it seemed as if minutes were ticking by, all of this occurred in a flash. Finally, even as I was opening my mouth to reply, I made a scary split-second decision: I resolved to take a spiritual risk.

I looked up at my boss. "You really want to know? Let's go into your office."

Behind closed doors, we talked for forty-five minutes. Well, to be honest, I did most of the talking. I was really nervous. Never having been trained in how to engage with others about my faith, I fumbled around and wasn't nearly as clear as I could have been. Still, in my own sincere but admittedly inept way, I tried to de-

scribe how I met Jesus and the difference he had made in my life.

**An amazing thing happened.** He didn't laugh. He didn't make fun of me. He didn't nervously try to change the topic or make excuses so he could leave the room. Instead, he listened intently. By the end, he was hanging on every word.

At the same time, I felt like I was going to burst on the inside. It instantly became clear to me that nothing was as urgent or exciting as what I was doing in this seemingly serendipitous conversation. It felt as if time were standing still, as if eternity were holding its breath.

I'm not sure how God used that conversation in my boss's life, but I do know this: he undeniably used it in mine. When I emerged from that office, I was thoroughly invigorated. It felt like the air was carbonated! There are no words to adequately describe the thrill I felt in having been used by God to communicate his message of hope to someone far from him. It was as if my entire life up to that point had been a movie shot in very grainy black-and-white 16 mm film with scratchy sound — but those forty-five minutes were in vivid Technicolor with rich Dolby stereo.

**I wanted more of that action!** At that moment I knew I could never go back to my humdrum Christian experience, drifting aimlessly through my spiritual life on a tranquil sailboat atop waters unperturbed by wind and waves. For the first time, I understood that these unscripted adventures on the high seas of personal evangelism are what give excitement, fulfillment, and ultimate purpose to a life of faith. After all, what's more important than being a messenger for the Creator of the universe to someone whose eternity is hanging in the balance?

I had stumbled upon the unexpected adventure of talking with others about Jesus, and I quickly learned that living on this evangelistic edge amplifies every detail of the Christian life:

- It's where our Bible study becomes much more intense, because we're not merely reading Scripture as a devotional or academic exercise, but we're searching for fresh insights and wisdom to use in reaching our spiritually confused neighbors.
- It's where our prayer life becomes ever more focused, because we're pleading for God's help and guidance in bringing the gospel to family members who don't know Christ.
- It's where our worship becomes increasingly heartfelt, because we're praising the God of the second chance, who in his astonishing grace loves our wandering friends even more than we do.
- It's where our dependence on God reaches new heights, because we know that apart from the Holy Spirit there's no way we can bring anyone to the point of putting their trust in Jesus.

**This is the missing ingredient** in so many Christian lives. I've never heard anyone complain by saying, "My spiritual life is so dry right now; it's like I'm living in a desert," and then add, "Oh, by the way, I'm actively trying to reach a friend for Christ."

As I've traveled the world, I've repeatedly found that it's the Christians living out the unexpected adventure who are enjoying the most fulfilling relationships with God. For them, a day might start out average and routine, but it always has the potential to blossom into a life-changing and eternity-altering encounter.

I've seen this happen countless times. For instance, I invited my ministry partner, Mark Mittelberg, and another leader from our church to visit the place where I had covered some of the city's most notorious trials when I was legal editor of the *Chicago Tribune*.

As the elevator door opened on the twenty-first floor in the federal courthouse, I immediately recognized a figure standing in the hallway: he was a competitor of mine from another news organization back in the days when I was a wild-living, hard-drinking atheist. He was one of those tough Chicago reporters, with a big, unlit stogie that he just gnawed all day.

“Strobel!” he snarled when he saw me. “How the [blank] are you? I haven’t seen you in years! Are you still writing for that [blankety-blank] *Chicago Tribune*, that [blankety-blank] piece of [blankety-blankety-blank]?”

“Actually, I’ve had a big change in my life,” I told him. “I’ve become a Christian — and I’m a pastor now.”

His cigar almost fell out of his mouth. In his amazement, all he could mutter was: “I’ll be damned!”

“Well,” I replied, “you don’t *have* to be.” And with that, God gave me an opportunity to talk with him a bit about Jesus!

**I could never have foreseen** that happening. The day had started out mundane and ordinary, but suddenly I was presented with an opportunity to talk about critically important eternal issues with someone I hadn’t seen in almost a decade. *This is the unexpected adventure!*

Look at Jesus: he lived out the unexpected adventure throughout his ministry. People were constantly walking up to him out of nowhere and abruptly raising spiritual questions, such as the rich young ruler who suddenly appeared and asked, “What must I do to be saved?” Admittedly, that was more refined than “I’ll be damned,” but it was unexpected just the same (at least to the disciples).

And how did Jesus handle this overachiever? He enthusiastically entered into the adventure, lovingly challenging him to give up everything keeping him from God so that he could get in on the adventure himself.

Paul did the same thing. As he moved from place to place, he created action — and often controversy — wherever he went. One person summed up Paul’s impact by saying he sparked revivals or riots wherever he would speak. In other words, his life was one big moving adventure.

In fact, Paul summed up the kind of life we can all live by saying we should be ready to communicate God’s message “in season and out of season” (2 Timothy 4:2). In effect, he was saying, “Be ready for the adventure of sharing your faith when it’s expected and when it’s unexpected!” Eugene Peterson put it this way in *Traveling Light*:

The word “Christian” means different things to different people. To one person it means a stiff, upright, inflexible way of life, colorless and unbending. To another, it means a risky, surprise-filled venture, lived tiptoe at the edge of expectation. . . . If we get our information from the biblical material, there is no doubt that the Christian life is a dancing, leaping, daring life.<sup>1</sup>

***At the edge of expectation*** — that’s how we’re meant to live life. When we tell God, “Please surprise me with opportunities to tell others about you,” we can have confidence that he will take us on white-knuckle adventures that will make an eternal impact on others while at the same time giving us the thrills of a lifetime. It’s the difference between a numb life of predictability and an exhilarating series of divine “coincidences.”

What kind of coincidences? Well, one average and routine day I was packing up my briefcase and getting ready to leave the newspaper when I felt a gentle nudging of the Holy Spirit. I sensed God wanted me to go into the business office and invite my friend, who was an atheist, to come to Easter services at my church. Since the impression seemed so strong, I figured some-

thing dramatic was going to happen. And it did — but not in the way I had anticipated.

I walked into the business office and looked around. The place appeared empty except for my friend, who was sitting at his desk. *Perfect!* I reminded him that Easter was coming and asked if he would want to come to church with Leslie and me. He turned me down cold. I asked if he was interested at all in spiritual matters, and he emphatically said no. I asked if he had any questions about God, and again he said no. I talked to him about why the resurrection was so important, but he clearly wasn't interested.

With all of my evangelistic overtures being instantly shut down, I was beginning to get a little embarrassed. Why was he so disinterested in talking about spiritual matters if God was indeed prodding me to talk with him? Finally, I stammered, "Well, uh, if you've ever got any questions, um, I guess you know where my desk is," and I walked out.

***What was that all about?*** I couldn't understand why he was so adamantly resistant. In the end, I concluded that maybe I was going to be one link in a very long chain of people and experiences that would eventually lead him to Christ. Still, as far as I know he remains a skeptic to this day.

Fast-forward several years. By this time I was a teaching pastor at Willow Creek Community Church in suburban Chicago. After I spoke one Sunday morning, a middle-aged man came up, shook my hand, and said, "I just want to thank you for the spiritual influence you've had in my life."

"That's very nice," I said, "but who are you?"

"Let me tell you my story," he replied. "A few years ago I lost my job. I didn't have any money, and I was afraid I was going to lose my house. I called a friend of mine who runs a newspaper and said, 'Do you have any work for me?' He asked, 'Can you tile floors?' Well, I had tiled my bathroom once, so I said, 'Sure.' He

told me, ‘We need some tiling done at the newspaper. If you can do that, we can pay you.’

“So one day, not long before Easter, I was on my hands and knees behind a desk in the business office of the newspaper, fixing some tiles, when you walked into the room. I don’t think you even saw me. You started talking about God and Jesus and Easter and the church to some guy, and he wasn’t interested at all. But I was crouching there listening, and my heart was beating fast, and I started thinking, *‘I need God!’* I need to go to church!”

“As soon as you left, I called my wife and said, ‘We’re going to church this Easter.’ She said, ‘You’re kidding!’ I said, ‘No, we are.’ We ended up coming to this church that Easter, and my wife, my teenage son, and I all came to faith in Christ. I just wanted to thank you.”

**I was dumbstruck!** Who could have foreseen that, except the amazing God of grace?

Anyone who has ever read the Bible knows that God wants us to be involved with spreading his good news far and wide. What is mysterious is why he chooses to include *us* in his redemptive mission. Could it be because of the way he uses unexpected adventures to enrich our lives?

Inevitably, our faith is deepened when we sense God leading us into evangelistic encounters, when we see him answer our prayers for spiritually befuddled friends, and when we witness how the gospel continues to revolutionize people who put their trust in Christ.

The truth is that I’ve become a fanatic when it comes to radical life change. Nothing is more fulfilling than seeing ordinary people turned into extraordinary followers of God, imbued with his Spirit and enabled by his power to make incredible differences in the lives of others.

Atheists who become missionaries. Once wayward kids who

are now inspired worship leaders. Hardened inmates who become compassionate pastors. Disengaged dads who turn into the enthusiastic leaders of Christ-centered families. Narcissists who become selfless servants of others. Former drug abusers who rescue the lives — and souls — of addicts. Ordinary folks who thought they had it all until they discovered there's nothing more important than Jesus. *Is there anything better?*

This is what gets me up in the morning: the thought that somehow, in some way, God might take this seemingly routine day and surprise me with an opportunity to tell someone about the good news that has the power to turn their life inside out.

**Don't you want more** of this action in your life? My guess is that you've got old friends from school, colleagues at work, neighbors down the block, and even members of your own family who you fear will stare into a Christless abyss after they close their eyes for the last time in this world. You know that God has the ability to redeem, restore, and redirect them, giving them new values, a fresh purpose, and renewed priorities. After all, he has a history of doing that with the most unlikely characters — including people like you and me.

The reason that Mark Mittelberg and I wrote this book is to help you start engaging in your own evangelistic episodes. For more than twenty years, Mark and I have been friends and ministry partners. Individually and together, we've repeatedly found ourselves embroiled in unexpected adventures. Sometimes we've been scared to death; other times we've been doubled over with laughter. And time after time we've shaken our heads in amazement and gratitude as we've seen God surpass all of our expectations.

But I might as well confess this up front: we've also made every outreach mistake in the book and then some. Yet despite our occasional ineptitude, even with our hesitations and failings, we've seen God energize our efforts and bring many friends

and strangers several steps forward in their spiritual journeys — sometimes even all the way to the point of repentance and faith.

**As you can imagine**, we've learned a lot of lessons along the way, and we'll be passing them along in the following pages as we tell stories from our own adventures. Our unabashed goal is to paint a real-life picture of personal evangelism that's so compelling, so desirable, so irresistible, and so darn do-able that you will be anxious to take the next step yourself — whatever that is — in engaging in your own adventures. Maybe that step is merely to meet someone new; perhaps it's to get into a spiritual conversation; or it could be to explain the gospel and pray with someone to receive Christ.

You don't need to have all the answers to every theological question. You don't have to master a polished gospel presentation that you mechanically recite whether people want to hear it or not. You don't have to pretend you're the next Billy Graham. All you have to do is authentically follow Christ in your own life and ask him to ambush you with opportunities, then trust

that he's going to use you in spite of (and sometimes even *because* of) your shortcomings, foibles, and quirks.

Our role is this: to be ready and willing — because God is always able.

Simply put, our role is this: *to be ready and willing — because God is always able*. After all, *he* is the great

evangelist; we're merely the tools that he uses to fulfill his mission of redeeming the world, one individual at a time.

So go ahead, read an episode a day over the next six weeks. Ask God to ignite or intensify your fire for reaching people with his message of forgiveness and eternal life. And don't forget to get a pad of paper ready. You're going to want to start compiling your own list of stories as God inevitably takes you on a series of unforgettable and unexpected adventures.

# ENROLLING IN THE ADVENTURE

MARK MITTELBERG

## **“So, Mark, are you a Christian?”**

Terry’s seemingly simple question was actually quite intimidating in that era of my life. We had been friends ever since we attended middle school together. I’d always appreciated his direct personality — at least until that particular moment, when he was challenging me about the inconsistencies in my life.

“Sure, I’m a Christian, Terry. What about it?” I replied somewhat defensively while trying not to raise my voice too much. I didn’t want my coworkers to overhear our conversation, fearing it would ruin my reputation and spoil some of the fun I had partying with them.

I was nineteen years old and living large — or at least I thought I was. I worked in an electronics store that sold high-end stereo equipment as well as round vinyl objects called “records,” which looked like oversized CDs and played music on devices called “turntables.” (If you’re under thirty, you’ll probably need to look up these things on the Internet or in a history book, where you’ll find details and maybe a few pictures to help you understand what I’m talking about.)

Suffice it to say, we sold really good sound equipment and played great music on it — *loud!* It was an exciting place for a young guy like me to work. I enjoyed the environment, the money, the friends, and the freedom that this season of my life brought. Thoughts of God, church, and religion were low on my list of concerns.

**Then on that fateful day**, Terry walked into the store, eager to make a point. For whatever reason, he felt compelled to challenge my spiritual complacency.

In Columbo-like fashion, Terry responded to my claim of faith with another question: “How can you call yourself a Christian and yet do so many things that Christians don’t do?”

“Well,” I said flippantly, “I guess I’m just a *cool* Christian.” Rarely have stupider words been spoken, but it was the best I could come up with at the time.

My remark didn’t go over well with Terry. Without batting an eye, he shot back, “Oh, really? Don’t you know there’s a word for ‘cool Christians’?”

I shook my head, though he wasn’t really waiting for a reply.

“They’re called *hypocrites!*” Terry spat out.

*Ouch!*

Not knowing quite how to handle his verbal missile, I did what came naturally — I returned fire: “Oh, yeah? So what about *your* life, Terry? Are you telling me you’ve got it all together?”

“No,” he replied, a bit more gently. “But at least I’m honest about it.”

Even after Terry left, his words lingered. I felt angry. *Who does he think he is, coming in here and talking to me like that?* It wasn’t until a day or two later, after I’d cooled down, that I finally realized why his challenge bothered me so much: I knew he was right.

As I kept replaying that conversation in my mind, I felt a

gradual softening in my attitude. My initial anger was replaced with reflection — and within a few days that reflection turned into repentance.

Finally, after a combination of divinely orchestrated influences over the previous few weeks — including the prayers of my visiting grandmother Effa, the encouragement of my mom, some sobering conversations with my dad, the godly example of my siblings, the challenges of several sermons from a couple of gifted teachers, the influence of some new friends at a Bible study I had visited, and now the rebuke by Terry — I finally decided on the evening of November 8, 1976, to give up the fight and yield my life to Christ. I asked for his full and free forgiveness, and I told him I wanted to follow him from that day forward, all the way into eternity.

**I've never been the same** since that day. I immediately became aware of God's presence and leadership in my life, and I felt a new sense of mission. I realized that I was put on the planet not just to know God personally but also to spread his love and truth to the people around me.

I didn't quit my job, rush off to seminary, or join a ministry somewhere. Instead I looked for ways to be used right where I was. God opened the doors and began guiding me into spiritual conversations with friends, coworkers, and occasionally even customers — some of whom ended up trusting in Christ.

God also gave me opportunities to impact lives through teaching high school classes at my church, through helping lead the Bible study I had begun attending, and through efforts with some friends to bring contemporary Christian music groups to our town to play outreach-oriented concerts.

I didn't quit my job, rush off to seminary, or join a ministry somewhere. Instead I looked for ways to be used right where I was.

Two words describe all that I began experiencing. The first is *unexpected*. If you had told me just a week or two before that conversation with Terry that I would soon become impassioned about talking to people about faith, I would have laughed out loud. That's because I hadn't been walking with God or known the exhilaration of being used by him to touch the lives of others.

You can probably guess the second word: *adventure*. I hadn't anticipated that knowing Christ, seeking to follow his will each day, taking risks to raise spiritual topics of conversation, answering people's questions, making the gospel message clear, and seeing lives changed by God's Spirit working through me would all be so thrilling. It exceeded by a long shot any kind of excitement I'd ever experienced before. As Lee puts it, it offered "thrills that fulfill."

The kind of thrills, I might add, that every one of us is made to experience and enjoy.

### ➤ Action Principle

You may not have realized it before, but as a Christian you too are called into the unexpected adventure of spreading the faith to others. How do I know? Because a "Christian," by definition, is a follower of Jesus Christ, the one who came "to seek and to save what was lost" (Luke 19:10) and who then commissioned us to follow his example and "go and make disciples" (Matthew 28:19). We were redeemed, in part, for the purpose of reaching others for Christ. Therefore, we'll never be complete in our experience with God until we allow him to use us to spread his message to others.

### ➤ Stepping into the Adventure

I knew from childhood that I should follow Christ, and I had taken stabs at doing so along the way—but in later years I had

resisted it. Why? In part, ironically, because I was afraid that God was going to take away my fun and sense of adventure. I had convinced myself that Christianity, though correct in its teachings, was a lifestyle for people who couldn't do much else. It certainly did not evoke in me thoughts of risk-taking or excitement.

Can you relate to that? Part of the problem, I guess, is a response to some of the religious people around us. They're nice people, but risk and adventure seem to have left their lives somewhere in the last millennium — if they were ever there in the first place. It's not surprising if we react to their examples with a yawn. Churches can be pretty sleepy places, and we need to change that.

You can begin to transform the culture of your church by first seeking God's revival in your own soul, reinstating in your own heart his vision for reaching this lost and dying world. Cultivate passion and excitement for the unexpected adventure, and you'll be amazed at how you — regardless of your age, gender, background, or experience — can stir up your church to become a more spiritually dynamic and contagious place.

Another reason we might have misconceptions of the Christian life is because we underestimate God's character and misunderstand his desires for us. We think, strangely, that his goal is to curtail our freedom and stifle our spirit so that he can somehow better contain and control us. But this is a woefully mistaken perception of the all-powerful and all-wise God, who created beauty, nature, color, emotion, art, and life itself — not to mention ingrained in us the desire for adventure and excitement.

No, our God is the God of creativity and imagination. He's an unpredictable being of perfection as well as spontaneity. He cares for the people he created with a strong and undying love, and he

Begin to transform the culture of your church by first seeking God's revival in your own soul.

wants to use each of us in surprising ways to reach others with his life-changing gospel as part of his amazing redemptive plan for the entire world.

Now *that's* adventure, and it involves *you*.

### ➤ Inspiration for the Journey

*God, who got you started in this spiritual adventure, shares with us the life of his Son and our Master Jesus. He will never give up on you. Never forget that.*

1 Corinthians 1:8–9, *The Message*