

AFTER COLLEGE

ERICA
YOUNG
REITZ

REVISED EDITION

NAVIGATING TRANSITIONS,
RELATIONSHIPS, AND FAITH



InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Taken from *After College* by Erica Young Reitz

Copyright © 2025 by Erica Young Reitz

Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL

www.ivpress.com

CONTENTS

Author's Note	1
Why This Book?	3
PART I. REAL FAITH: FAITHFUL TO CHRIST	
1 "Go to an Unknown Land"	9
2 In Transition	25
3 Stronger than You Think	42
4 From Fear and Indecision to Freedom	56
PART II. REAL LIFE: FAITHFUL TO COMMUNITY	
5 Beyond the Quad	75
6 No Perfect Church	94
7 The Discipleship of Diversity	112
8 Family Matters	127
9 Twentysomething Relationships	145
PART III. REAL WORLD: FAITHFUL TO OUR CALLING	
10 On Purpose	169
11 A Faith That Works	188
12 Financial Faithfulness	204
Conclusion: "The Land Is Good"	221
Acknowledgments	227
Notes	231



“GO TO AN UNKNOWN LAND”

TRUSTING A FAMILIAR GOD FOR UNFAMILIAR TIMES

I dwell in possibility.

EMILY DICKINSON

In the cold November of her first year out of college, Natalia sat by the fireplace in her parents’ home, weeping. Bone-tired, overworked, and lonely, she thought, *This is not what life is supposed to be like*. Working over seventy hours a week just to stay afloat in a demanding marketing job, she had no time to make new friends. She also longed to be in a dating relationship—something she assumed would have happened in college. Her stomach hurt every Sunday evening at the thought of facing another week with her impossible boss, catty coworkers, and overflowing inbox.

Natalia felt desperate for just one of the luxuries she had enjoyed while she was a student: an hour to sit in a coffee shop with a friend or to play the piano alone. Leaving college felt like the “world had been ripped out” from under her. Nothing felt settled. Natalia confessed, “I felt inadequate and incapable of making life work.” Desperate for something familiar, Natalia made frequent trips to her parents’ home on the weekends. She longed for something known amid so much upheaval and uncertainty.

As we step into the great unknown of life after college, it's important to know we are not alone. We journey forward in the footsteps of a long line of leavers—an ancient history of God's people who have abandoned the familiar to follow a call into uncharted territory.

ABRAHAM'S JOURNEY

Consider Abraham (known as *Abram* before God changed his name in Genesis 17:5). God called him to leave his country, his people, and his father's household in Harran for a new dream. When Abraham reached the ripe age of seventy-five, God said, "Go." Give up everything:

Go from your country, your people and your father's
household to the land I will show you.

I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;

I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.

I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;

and all peoples on earth

will be blessed through you. (Genesis 12:1-3)

When we understand the cultural context, this ask is *huge*. God calls Abraham to let go of all he has ever known and everyone who knows him. He must say goodbye forever to his kinship group—his entire network of relationships and social support. There's no technology that will connect him to his people or hometown ever again. If he says yes to God, he says yes to a five-hundred-mile separation from all he's ever known—a one-month journey by caravan.¹ He will never again walk the dusty paths his feet have traveled, smell the salty air after a hard rain, see his aging father's smile, or hear the roar of

laughter as he and his friends throw their heads back in the glow of a night fire. It is goodbye for good.

As the male heir, Abraham is slated to inherit everything from his father, securing his place in society and in the family line.² This too he must give up to follow God. Will he choose to forsake everything to heed God’s call? Will he cut ties with the land, his family, his inheritance, and his people—a bond built over seven and a half decades? Leave his entire life behind to embrace God’s promise?

Scripture says that Abraham goes (Genesis 12:4). He chooses to trust God—to take him at his word. Abraham has faith that God will provide anew everything he asked Abraham to give up.³

As we step into life after college, we too are called to forsake the familiar to embrace something new. As exciting as this time may be, it’s also marked by great uncertainty.⁴ We trade a familiar place and our familiar purpose within it for a new reality. Leaving college may mean we have to redefine relationships, embrace new roles, and let go of certain ways of doing things. As we enter the unknown, we can look to Abraham and be encouraged by his faith in an uncertain time, and by God’s faithfulness to him.

We can also take comfort from Abraham’s example when our expectations don’t match our reality. Abraham steps out in faith only to find his path littered with trials. He encounters plague, persecution, detour, and doubt long before reaching the fulfillment of God’s plan. At one point, he must reroute to Egypt because the land God has told him he’ll possess is brittle with drought. Not to mention that the wife with whom he is supposed to build a family is still barren at age sixty-five. The fruition of God’s plan is not looking so good.

The oppression and struggles cause Abraham to disbelieve God and question his character. Can God really be trusted? Abraham wonders, “O Sovereign LORD, how can I be sure that I will actually possess [the

land you promised]?” (Genesis 15:8 NLT). Perhaps you also question whether the God you followed during college can be trusted in this time of transition. Maybe you find yourself throwing your hands up, wondering, *How can I be sure you really have a plan, God?*

In Abraham’s fear and frustration, God is gracious. He patiently reminds Abraham of his character and promise:

Do not be afraid, Abram.

I am your shield,
your very great reward. . . .

I am the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans
to give you this land to take possession of it.
(Genesis 15:1, 7, emphasis added)

The same God who led him in Ur is also the God of Abraham’s transition. Likewise, the God of your college years—the God of Abraham—is the same God who leads you in the joy and challenge of the transition.

God doesn’t change his tune when our circumstances change. His character and promises endure, even in dynamic times. Everything may be shifting around us, but God, our rock, remains the sure and solid place where we find our footing. He is the God who pursues, promises, and provides—even after college.

PREPARING TO ENTER THE UNKNOWN

Looking to God and his character is a crucial part of preparing for any transitional time. So are the perspectives and practices we choose. Though there are many things we cannot predict as we enter the unknown, we can manage our expectations, choose intentional actions, and adopt healthy heart attitudes.

Before we address these, it’s important to realize that our everyday expectations, actions, and attitudes are always connected to a

bigger picture: our worldview. Like putting on a pair of glasses, our worldview forms the lens through which we view our experiences and make sense of the world in which we live. Our *worldview* is the “sum total of our beliefs about the world.”⁵ It’s our understanding of reality, shaped by our answers to fundamental life questions.⁶

- Does God exist?
- Who am I?
- Why am I here?
- What’s wrong with the world?
- What’s the solution?

Though we may wrestle with life’s big questions until the day we die and some of us may articulate our worldview better than others, all of us have a “set of presuppositions . . . about the basic makeup of our world.”⁷ From how we view money, work, relationships, food, media, sex, and so on, our presuppositions inform everything we do and experience—every decision we make.

The more we root ourselves in the truest truths of the Bible—and grapple with what it means to live them out in our everyday lives—the more prepared we will be to pursue faithfulness after college. What else allows us to keep on keeping on? Dr. Steven Garber, author of *The Fabric of Faithfulness*, dedicated himself to exploring this question.

This wasn’t just a cerebral exercise for Garber. Having journeyed with many students over many years, his curiosity was personal. He needed to know why some of his young friends stayed the course while others struggled. Those who had “deepened and not discarded their beliefs” over the decades had the following qualities in common.

1. They developed a worldview that made sense of truth in a pluralizing, secularizing world.

2. They found a mentor who incarnated the worldview, showing that ideas do have legs.
3. They chose a community over that time that was a flesh-and-blood embodiment of this worldview.⁸

Forming a cohesive worldview—and finding like-minded individuals with whom we can live it out—is foundational for faithfulness. According to Garber, living a congruent life means that we seek to align our beliefs with our behaviors.⁹ This is no small thing. But it is possible.

Life’s trials often tempt and test us, even to the core of our beliefs. If we don’t know what we believe or if our claims don’t carry into the lives that we really live, we may end up adopting the worldview of those around us, borrowing bits and pieces from other worldviews, or filling in the gaps with something insufficient. On the positive side, times of upheaval can also bring clarity, causing us to refine our worldview. Dr. George Barna found “times of personal crisis and pain as periods of vulnerability to [worldview] change.”¹⁰

Not sure what you believe or what it means to have a Christian worldview? Check out this short video, “What Is a Worldview?” or this guide: *Christian Worldview: A Student’s Guide* by Philip Graham Ryken.¹¹

In my first year out of college, I experienced the most significant relational loss up to that point in my life: I had my heart broken. It may sound trivial now, but at the time it was so painful I wanted to puke—like every day for weeks.

In response to the brokenness and anger I felt, I contemplated some unhealthy choices. As tears streamed, I shared my rebellious thoughts with a close friend who sat beside me on the bed in my tiny first apartment. “Screw it,” I said. I was done seeking God’s best, especially for my dating life. I felt like God had screwed me over, so why not do the same to him?

“Besides,” I rationalized, “if I get hurt again, it will be on my terms.” As I confided in my friend, she gently reminded me that our belief system offers a greater hope and higher standard. She went on to comfort me with the truth of the gospel and a better path forward.

If we’re going to thrive beyond college, we need a robust worldview that makes sense of our deepest pain, greatest dreams, and everything in between.¹² It is our Christian worldview—shaped by the biblical story of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration—that fully prepares us to expect difficult life experiences without losing hope in the midst of them.

GO WITH ACCURATE EXPECTATIONS

“The first year out was one of the hardest years of my life,” reports Curt. He moved to inner-city Baltimore for a job with Teach for America, a position that stretched him in ways his college classes and student teaching stint did not. Curt also left campus at the height of his social game with a strong support network. President of his Christian fellowship group, he had countless friends, an active community life, and college ministers who invested in him. Then he moved to a city where he knew no one. In addition to the adjustment to an unknown place, he faced significant challenges in his family life that year. Everything hit him at once.

Another alum, Kate, described her first year this way: “It was much rougher than I thought. . . . I thought things would just play out, and they didn’t. I didn’t have friends, I didn’t have a job, and I hung out with my parents every night!” Upon graduation Kate did not land the job she had envisioned, so she chose to move back home with her parents. She struggled to find friends with similar values, connect to a vibrant church, make ends meet financially, and keep proper perspective.

My own experience as a graduate validates what Curt and Kate said about their first few months out of school: it's hard. I moved to a small town called State College, in what felt like the middle of nowhere Pennsylvania. Though referred to by locals as the "Happy Valley," it felt more valley than happy. I struggled to find my place and purpose in a new location; there were dismal days that made me feel anxious, lonely, and depressed (the often-gray sky didn't help). On my worst days I would get up and go through the motions of a morning routine only to find myself paralyzed by feelings of despair. *Is this what life after college is like? Did I make a mistake in moving here?*

I share these stories because they represent a common narrative: life after college comes with challenges. If your transition is easier than you expected, give thanks. But if it's not, *you're not alone*. Sometimes it's hard because we're not prepared—but it's also hard because we're going through a major transition.

Perhaps you cannot imagine any hitches in your first strides out of school. For many alumni, that initial stretch offers a welcome change to the confines of college: making money, living on their own, doing work in a field they love—it feels like the best of times. But even so, all of us will inevitably hit a bump in the road—a heartbreak, rejection from a job or promotion we want, financial struggle, relational conflict. Life after college is a sweet time, but not necessarily because it lacks obstacles. Thriving in the next phase is not so much about avoiding challenges as about learning how to navigate them. And it's about managing our expectations within them.

Though many recent graduates feel unprepared, there are also those who enter the transition with a robust worldview and realistic expectations. They prepare for potential obstacles and gain tools necessary for navigating change. They still find that life after college is hard at times but also very good.

Recent graduate Jackie shares that her transition went more smoothly than she envisioned. She credits her success to her own preparedness as well as her patience with the transition. Without skyscraper expectations for everything to go perfectly, Jackie kept sane and let things unfold in time. Instead of stressing because the field that she’d trained for (occupational therapy) was not what she wanted to do, she chose to trust God, take her time, and invite others to help her discern her career path.

This process led to a job-shadowing opportunity with a physician assistant. After that, Jackie landed a nursing assistant job that exposed her to a variety of areas within the field and allowed her to further clarify her vocation. In Jackie’s words, “It’s a confusing time, but the biggest thing that kept me calm was realizing I don’t have to be rushed as I figure things out.”

When we keep a level head and manage our expectations, we position ourselves for a more successful transition. If we assume we may hit a bump, rather than being surprised when we do, we will likely move over it with hope and grace instead of allowing our disappointment to send us into a downward spiral.

GO WITH INTENTIONAL ACTIONS

Many of us flounder because we’re not sure how to manage unmet expectations or we choose actions (or inactions) that send us down unhealthy paths.¹³ We may wake up one day to realize *I don’t even know how I got here*. Countless little decisions (or indecisions) add up to a life we never meant to live.

Stephanie admits, “I crashed and burned right after college.” She struggled to set boundaries in a social service job with endless client needs, and she didn’t know how to ask for help. She also lacked a life-giving community. Because the church she found required a

forty-five-minute commute and contained few people in a similar life stage, it felt like too much effort to plug in beyond Sunday morning, especially with her exhausting schedule. Stephanie reflects, “So much is handed to you when you’re in college. If you want to be a Christian, you simply show up to a certain hall at a certain time. After college, you have to go after everything, and I didn’t know how.”

A challenging first year led to an even worse second. To supplement her income, Stephanie started bartending a block away from home and moved in with a friend from work—someone she would say was not a healthy influence. Working at the bar made it easy to start drinking, at first to relieve stress, then as a lifestyle. The bar became Stephanie’s primary place of connection. She says, “When I wasn’t making friends and connecting in an adult way, I was desperate and lonely.” Patterns from her past resurfaced as she slipped into drinking and hooking up. After two years of burnout and bad choices, Stephanie realized, “I was soulless and dead inside. . . . This was not the life I intended to live.”

Because she had a college degree and gainful employment, Stephanie thought she should “have it all together”—as if having her ducks in a row marked the arrival into adulthood. But there were many things she wasn’t prepared for, and she didn’t know where to turn. In her words, “I failed because I had this misconception that I should have my life in order, love my job, and have a great community. But when I didn’t have it all figured out, I didn’t know where to ask for help . . . or even that I could.”

Trying to prove to others that we’ve “arrived” is not the goal. These years are about making choices that will help us successfully *emerge into* adulthood. The risk of floundering is real. We can guard against it by preparing for challenges, asking for help, and choosing

intentional actions. Though the landscape is thick with temptations, a life of flourishing in the next phase is more than possible.

Robert, a graduate who successfully transitioned into a new job and location, was both intentional about preparing and thoughtful about his choices. He moved two hundred miles from his entire support network and his fiancée just after getting engaged. Before making the move, he researched churches in the area and asked for recommendations. During his first week of work (and still without furniture in his apartment), he took the initiative to check out a small group Bible study nearby. While not the right fit, it was a start.

Despite out-of-town weekend commitments over the following weeks, Robert settled on a church within the first month. He got plugged into a small group, which became the start of a new friendship network. Among other healthy habits, he also managed his time and finances with his future wife in mind. They approached decisions as a team even though they would not be married or living together for another year.

Though this transitional time was not without challenges, Robert had the perspective and tools to navigate them. He says,

I would not say that my first year after graduation was easy. The tension of being distant from valued relationships has never really gone away. I didn't always know exactly what to do in every circumstance, but I had tools in my toolbox that helped me deal with expected challenges. This gave me peace and confidence in those areas and gave me more time and energy to deal with the unanticipated challenges that always come up.

Robert was able to take intentional action because he had both the desire to live faithfully (to align his beliefs with his behaviors) as well as the resources that equipped him to put one foot in front of

the other on the journey. We can make wise choices when we're prepared with practical life skills—not just in terms of what to do but also in the whys and hows. When we know deep down *why* something matters (belief)—like finding a church or managing money—and *how* to go after it (behavior), we can pursue faithfulness.

GO WITH HEALTHY HEART ATTITUDES

Our deepest beliefs impact our attitudes. Whether on the job, in our neighborhood, or through our social media feed, we will inevitably encounter competing worldviews and value systems. As we do, we may find it hard to share hope while still holding on to our own. We may be tempted toward attitudes of selfishness, cynicism, or despair.

In a baccalaureate address, Jim Wallis, CEO of Sojourners, stated, “The big struggle of our times . . . is the fundamental choice between cynicism and hope. . . . Hope is not a feeling; it is a decision.”¹⁴ Though there are factors we cannot control about transitional times, we can choose our attitude. On most days we will have a decision to make about the outlook we adopt: Cynicism or hope? Apathy or anticipation? Fear or trust?

We can enter the postgraduate years with a mindset that will wreck us, or we can embrace the opposite. We can choose to believe that a life of flourishing is possible, even if the first few months or years out feel bumpy. *Despite* our circumstances, hope believes that

Students who thrive in the senior year are those who stay curious, embrace uncertainty, and adopt a “growth mindset”; those who deliberately face fears and willingly allow themselves to experience discomfort.¹⁵

the story is not over—good can and will prevail. Stronger than mere optimism, hope allows us to recognize when things are not at their best while trusting in a greater reality—that God is at work,

reconciling all things to himself, making all things right. Someday life on earth will be like it is in heaven. *That’s* perspective!

One of most encouraging things I can share about all of these alumni—Natalia, Curt, Kate, Stephanie, and myself—is that we each (eventually) turned to Jesus and chose hope in a time of transition. Or, perhaps better put, Jesus chose and chased after us, and we surrendered to his love. Though we had moments of despair and days of doubt, we continued to cling to the character and promises of God. Beyond just believing *in* God, we decided to believe God—that he is who he says he is, and his promises are true.¹⁶ There were definitely days I disbelieved and mornings when I prayed that God would give me the faith to even have faith. There were days of desperation, frustration, and heartache, but never a day without a decision to make: Cynicism or hope? Apathy or anticipation? Fear or trust?

My hope is that you take some time to prepare for the road ahead. I also pray that you “dwell in possibility”; this Emily Dickinson line is *hope* wrapped in a phrase—a mantra for life after college. This attitude welcomes and expects good things. It anticipates that something wonderful is around that next corner. If we experience confusion, exhaustion, or frustration for a time, it indicates that we are on the brink of discovery. In fact, perhaps the more frustrated we are, the closer we are to that revelation. When we dwell in possibility, the world unfolds as a fascinating place where we get to participate in the work of a God who delights to unfurl his goodness before our eyes. He longs to lead us into a life of flourishing.

ENTER THE UNKNOWN WITH A KNOWN GOD (WHO KNOWS YOU)

Just as Abraham stepped out in faith, not knowing where he was going, we too must trust God to reveal his plan. As you go, God will “show

you” (Genesis 12:1). But it’s not the kind of revelation where you get the entire road map or Google directions up front. The Hebrew word for *show* can be taken to mean “as you are going, I will show you.”

It’s like driving a car a night, author Anne Lamott says. Borrowing from novelist E. L. Doctorow, she writes, “You don’t have to see where you are going, you don’t have to see your destination or everything you will pass along the way. You just have to see two or three feet ahead of you.”¹⁷ If we saw our whole life mapped out before us, we’d anticipate all the hard parts—the steep climbs and dark valleys—and we’d likely try to run or reroute, missing exactly what God allows for our good and his glory. We may not have a blueprint, but we do have a guide who will light each step of our way (Psalm 119:105).

Sure, we will encounter bumps in the road. Maybe we already have. In my conversations with alumni, a consistent theme stands out: unknown times and postcollege trials become the proving ground for faith, forcing us to wrestle through the mess until we emerge on the other side—hopefully with deeper belief than before. When trials come, our loss, pain, or uncertainty may bring us to a crossroads. Will we believe that God knows us—that he sees exactly what we are going through and holds us close? Or will we sink into the sea of our own struggle, disbelieving his presence and sovereignty in our lives?

When I look back on the painful time of my postcollege heartbreak, I see a defining faith moment—I had to choose between shaking my fist at God or clinging to Christ for dear life. I also see a tender, caring God who knows me. He knew I needed that friend in my lowest low to steer me toward Jesus. He also provided a friend in my new community who was going through nearly the exact same struggle.

God spoke to me in ways I could connect to, such as through the psalms of lament or the Rilke poem “Autumn.” God poured out so

much good in the months and years that followed. Not to mention all of the good that came from removing that relationship at that time. A gaping space opened in my life, and though I was tempted to fill it in unhealthy ways, God gave me himself. He also gave me mentors who helped me through deep inner healing. I met with our prayer team at church, and I experienced God more intimately than ever before.

God knows us. He knows what we need better than we do. And he is a known God—a God whose tried and true character can be trusted for good in our lives.

As God continued to fulfill the promise he made to Abraham, it led to generations of God’s people trusting him and recalling his character. For example, the book of Joshua recounts the faith of the Israelites as God parted the Jordan River during flood season for them to cross. While God held back the waters, he commanded Joshua to enlist his leaders to build a memorial. Each leader removed a stone from the middle of the dry ground and carried it to the other side. There they built a monument to forever mark the moment of God’s miracle and provision (Joshua 4:1-7).

God invites us to recall his faithfulness—to remember that his hand carries us, especially in the middle of our own raging rivers. Each time we recall God’s faithfulness in a former situation, we stack a metaphorical rock, creating a monument on which to fix our eyes in times of distress and doubt. As we remember his goodness, God re-members us, putting our fragmented, broken selves back together.¹⁸

Not only is God’s goodness the same yesterday, today, and forever, but he is also the one who promises to bless us, keep us, and fulfill his good purposes through us. The same man, Abraham, who was called to an unknown place, received a promise that carried through generations. A promise that is as true today as it was centuries ago: God is building his kingdom through broken people, blessing those

who choose him, and making them great in him. This promise radically changed Abraham. It will change us too if we choose to cling to a familiar, *good* God in these unfamiliar times.

GOING DEEPER

1. What are your greatest hopes and concerns right now? What are you most excited about, and what are you most nervous about?
2. In what ways are you entering or already in the unknown? What feels most uncertain or unfamiliar? Why?
3. What comfort can you take from Abraham's story?
4. Preparing for a life of faithfulness involves accurate expectations, intentional actions, and healthy heart attitudes—all guided by our worldview. What is one thing you can do to better prepare?
5. Can you recall a time when God demonstrated his faithfulness to you? What metaphorical rocks can you stack as a reminder of God's character?
6. What broken or hurting part of your life do you need God to re-member? How can you invite him or others in?

SCRIPTURE STUDY

Genesis 12–25, especially 12:1-4; 15:1, 7-8; Joshua 4:1-9

BUY THE BOOK!

ivpress.com/after-college