

# ED UNDERWOOD

*Author of When God Breaks Your Heart*

A Tale about  
Discovering God's Will



THE  
TRAIL



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*The Trail: A Tale about Discovering God's Will*

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*To Dave Burchett, Kevin Butcher, and Don Jacobson,  
honest followers of Jesus who express their love  
by telling me the truth about myself and by  
encouraging me to write a book now and then.*



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## CHAPTER 1

# DOWNHILL RECKONING

*Trust in the LORD with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding. Seek his will in all you do, and he will show you which path to take.*

PROVERBS 3:5-6







*"I REALLY HOPE* we're not driving up a dark mountain to meet some weirdo. Brenda, why did you talk me into this?" Matt rounded a sharp curve. He could hardly believe what he was about to do. "Couldn't we have decided without this guy whether we should move to Pasadena?"

Matt and Brenda had driven all night from Southern California to the Sequoia National Forest, east and north of Bakersfield. Every mile marker twisting along the narrow mountain roads intensified Matt's uneasiness.

It was only last Saturday morning they were sitting with Brian and Lindsey at Walter's Restaurant in their upscale neighborhood in Claremont, discussing a controversial topic—how to discover God's will.

After catching up with their longtime friends over breakfast, Matt had dived in, voicing the question pressing on his mind. “We’re in the middle of a discussion over whether I should take this new position with an accounting firm in Pasadena. It would be quite a promotion and a lot more money, but when we try to talk about how to decide, it usually turns into a bit of a dispute. And you guys always seem so sure of God’s will in your big life decisions.”

Then Brenda had joined in. “It’s just that Matt’s so logical, so careful. His way of finding God’s will leaves God out of it.” She shot him a look. “He reads the Bible, but after that, it’s all about facts, options, and reason. As if God’s will can be found on a Quicken spreadsheet! But there has to be more to a relationship with God than that. If God really wants him to take this position—to uproot our family, move the kids to a different school, find a brand-new church—I know he’ll give us some sort of sign.”

“You sound just like Brian and me about three years ago,” Lindsey said, moving her chair closer to the table. “Remember how we were trying to decide if we should move to a different neighborhood? I thought we should take the commonsense path, but Brian wanted to hear from God.”

Matt had to voice his frustration at that point. “Come on, Brian. We’re not asking God to guide us to the Promised Land, where all of redemptive history will occur. We’re just trying to figure out if I should take this new job offer. If we’re not

breaking any of God's commandments, he wants us to use our own logic to decide."

Brian took a deep breath. "Are you personally satisfied with that view of knowing God's will?"

"No, not at all," Brenda said. "It's as if God isn't even there."

Matt was silent.

"We know a guy who can help," Lindsey said. "Three years ago, we began hearing some stories about a special pastor named Sam. We got in touch, and he asked us to meet him up in the mountains for some kind of retreat. It was too weird for me at first, but Brian insisted. So we did it. And it changed our lives."

Brian put a hand on Matt's shoulder. "You need to meet with him. We'll watch your kids for a couple of days. Just trust us on this."

So Matt and Brenda had spent the last forty-eight hours preparing to follow an old fireman-turned-pastor they had only met on the phone into the wilderness of the High Sierra. The clerk at REI helped them find all the equipment the old man had instructed them to buy: backpacks, sleeping bags, necessities for the trail, and pairs of boots Sam had told them to "break in right."

As he now steered around another hairpin turn, Matt thought out loud. "We know everything about breaking in our boots, but we still don't know anything about this holy man of the mountains. I still can't believe we agreed to this crazy scheme, Brenda."

He could hear the fear in Brenda's voice when they turned right at a sign marked Limestone Campground. "This is really out of the way, Matt. Are you sure we're supposed to turn here? This road doesn't feel like it leads anywhere, and it's so steep."

Matt reached for her hand. "Brenda, we both knew this was going to get bizarre. You saw the sign, and this is where the GPS says to turn. It may be a mistake, but I think we should follow through on our decision. I'm doing my best here—I've never been up a road like this either."

"I'm sorry, Matt. I'm just afraid."

"Me too. The best way you can help me right now is to watch the road and pray."

"O Lord, please let us know if you want us to keep going. If you want us to turn back, give us a sign."

"Come on, Brenda. Please don't bring that up right now. You know I don't trust your 'signs from God.' Could you just pray for protection?"

"Okay. I will admit that safety is our number one priority right now." She began to pray again. "Father, please protect us on this road and from this so-called pastor if he really is a weirdo."

There was silence. They continued driving up the mountain road in the dark.

Matt looked at the clock. Fifty minutes until their rendezvous with Sam. He mentally considered the options before them, analyzing every pro and con until he was certain he was

prepared to answer Sam's questions. Should they uproot their lives and move to Pasadena to see what God had in store for them in what he knew was an awesome opportunity? Or should they stay in the only home and school their children knew and the church they all loved? They had to decide—Claremont or Pasadena—and Sam had promised to teach them eight principles for discerning God's will for their lives.

When they arrived at Blackrock Ranger Station, they found an old man sitting on the tailgate of his white Toyota Tacoma 4×4 reading with a flashlight like he was waiting for them on his front porch. They got out of their SUV to stretch, and the man closed his book and walked over to them with a smile. He wore an old pair of Levi's, a khaki shirt over a T-shirt, and a ball cap. Every part of him seemed efficient, though he walked with a noticeable limp. "I'm Sam Lewis. Welcome to the high country."

Matt shook Sam's outstretched hand and got right to his concern. "I'd like to ask a few questions about this, ah, expedition we're on here."

Sam turned his light onto their boots. "Looks like you broke your boots in just like I asked. That's important. You'll never make it up here with blistered feet, and Casa Vieja Meadow is two steep downhill miles from the trailhead." He looked up at the anxious couple. "Sure, what do you need to know?"

Matt spoke as respectfully as he could, but his risk-assessing accountant mind-set kicked in. "For starters, are you sure about

this? I mean, we just met you. Have you ever been here before? We can't even get cell reception. What if something happens, like a twisted ankle or worse?"

A faint swish of some creature came from the dark woods. Brenda moved closer to Matt.

The old man ignored the sound. "Yes, I have been here before—I used to work around here, and I've been walking into the Golden Trout Wilderness for over forty years. That's why I wanted to meet you here. It is remote, but that's part of the deal. I need your full attention if this expedition, as you call it, is going to work. I'd feel better if you thought of it as an adventure."

"Is this where we start hiking?" Brenda asked with a friendliness that surprised Matt. "What were you reading? I can't make out the title."

"It's the New Testament, but in Greek. I've been studying Galatians lately." Sam seemed apologetic for being caught reading the Bible in an ancient language. "The trailhead's about fifteen minutes north. Fill your canteens here and then jump into your rig and follow me."

On the way to the trailhead in their SUV, Brenda voiced her thoughts. "I like him. He's not a weirdo, but he is a little weird. He reads Galatians in Greek but calls a car a rig. How did you know he meant our Nalgens when he said 'canteens'?"

"War movies." Matt concentrated on the road, made visible by the headlights. "That's what they used for carrying water

back in the day. He's old school. This may be a bust, but at least it's going to be interesting."

He couldn't help remembering Lindsey's parting words from that morning at Walter's. *"It felt like a huge risk following Sam into the high country. But I'll never go back to the old way of trying to live without knowing God's will."*



Sam led the couple single file down the trail through the towering trees. With liturgical precision, he'd laced up a pair of scarred, ten-inch leather boots he referred to as his "White's," then shouldered a pack and picked up his weathered hardwood hiking pole. Behind him walked his opposites: husband and wife outfitted in the finest REI had to offer, stepping lightly, obviously in shape, the way a tennis pair walks onto a court. Headlamps on, they chose their footing carefully, following the path in the shadows of the breaking dawn. Sam told them not to worry—it would be much easier to navigate the trail in the full light of day.

Sam stopped abruptly before a bridge in the little meadow where their journey would begin, and Brenda nearly walked into him. He pulled a water bottle from his pack, took a few swallows, and shrugged his shoulders forward to adjust the load. He wiped his mouth on his sleeve, set his canteen on a rock, and bent to fuss with the brace on his right knee. As he straightened up, careful to grab his water on the way, he griped under his breath and then took a few more swallows.

“Brenda, would you mind putting my canteen into that little thing on the back of my pack? Arthritis—just can’t seem to get my hands to work the way they did in my prime,” Sam explained. “So, what do you think? Nice country, isn’t it?”

Matt stepped forward, clearly agitated. “So, Sam!” he said. “Please at least tell us where we’re heading. This is all a little out of the box for us.” The young man stepped closer, forcing himself into Sam’s line of sight. “You haven’t shown us a map; you don’t seem to have a GPS or even a compass. I like mountains as much as the next guy. This may indeed be nice country, but it feels like dangerous country to us. You assured us that this would be a place where we could hear from God!”

A blue grouse exploded from a nearby lady fern, protesting their presence as she gained altitude. Matt jumped, and Brenda yelped. When they’d recovered, Sam said, “Well, now that he has your attention, what do you think God’s telling you?”

The young man gripped the trekking pole in his right hand tightly and pounded it on the first wooden plank of the bridge. He visibly pulled himself together, then said, “This is just one old wooden bridge in the middle of a meadow in the High Sierras. And that big chicken bird was just startled. It probably does that twenty times a day. I was afraid of this. It’s a bridge on the trail that happened to be where some bird spent the night—nothing more, nothing less.

“Instead of trying to figure out what the flight of a stupid bird means God is telling us, we should be thinking about



what other wildlife might be watching us right now. How will an encounter with a bear or a mountain lion help us decide whether or not to take a job in Pasadena?”

Sam had been looking closely at Brenda’s face while Matt spoke. He saw her eyes drop in disappointment and resignation. In that moment Sam knew two things for sure: first, that this was about a lot more than a new job in Pasadena; and second, that it was not going to be possible to avoid hurting these two in order to help them.

“On the contrary, Matt.” Sam stepped back from the trail, tucked a thumb in his belt, and swept the other hand toward the wilderness below. “I believe that down this trail is your only hope for learning how to make decisions with the confidence that you’re in God’s will. I’m not going to lie to you. I’ve seen both cougar and bear on this plateau. But the meanest critter up here is the old range cow. That’s what we’ll be watching out for.”

Matt looked confused and fearful. “Sam, have you heard anything I’ve said? I’m just looking for some answers here.”

“I can’t force you to do this. If you want to go back, now’s the time to decide. It’s only a thirty-minute climb back to the rigs. Once we dive off from here, we’re committed, and it’s going to take us the rest of the day to get to camp and set things up. The night falls dark and quick.” He pulled a large blue handkerchief from his pocket, wiped his face, and tied it around his neck. “You think you’re uneasy now, try spending the night along the trail without a fire—”

“Sam?” Matt interrupted again.

“Yeah, Matt? What do you want?”

“What do you mean that down this trail is my only hope for learning how to find God’s will? Why just me?”

“Well, Matt, you’re a professional, an accountant who’s used to figuring things out and managing the risks of your options. That’s what you’re trying to do right now—manage your risks by controlling the situation. You felt foolish when that old blue grouse made you jump. You hate feeling out of control, and you manage your life with knowledge. You’re constantly calculating, incessantly trying to understand so that you don’t make a mistake. I can see it in your eyes. This is hard for you because you don’t know anything about this trail, these mountains, hiking, or backpacking.”

Sam looked him in the eye and waited.

Matt took a deep breath, and his shoulders dropped. “I’m not trying to control this. I only want to understand what we’re doing here on this bridge in the wilderness with a man we’ve just met. That’s not control; that’s gathering information. I just want to understand. What does following you down this trail have to do with finding the will of God?”

“I already told you that,” Sam said. “You need to walk this trail in front of us because this place—this wild and beautiful plateau—is where God chose to take you beyond your understanding to trust, beyond control to faith. You live in a world of understanding—your understanding. God’s asking you to

follow him, not me, to a world where he can guide you, a world beyond your understanding, beyond your control. A world where you're out of management options, a world where you trust him or fail. And this is that world. The high country, big country, mean country, you-gotta-trust-in-someone-bigger-than-yourself country."

Sam was stern and motionless. "The high country humbles a man, Matt. And that's what you and I need more than knowledge. Humility."

Matt's face pinched in on itself. "I've always depended on God's Word. If I can't understand why we're here, then I'm not taking another step. I don't care what you say. You're asking for a lot here, Sam."

"The heck with what I say." Sam looked sharply at him. "Is that a Bible in your pocket? Pull it out and turn to Proverbs 3:5-6."

Matt closed his eyes. "That's one of my favorites. I memorized it when I first met Jesus."

"Then quote it for me." Sam pulled his own backpacking Bible from the left pocket of his khaki shirt. "Better than that, let me refresh your memory."

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart," Sam said from memory as he turned to Proverbs. "These aren't my words; they're God's words spoken through the wisest man who ever lived, a man who dedicated his life to understanding the world around him. It took Solomon a lifetime to figure out that even

he was too weak, sinful, and stupid to manage his own life. If you don't believe me, read the book of Ecclesiastes.

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart,” he started again. “Do not depend on your own understanding. Seek his will in all you do, and he will show you which path to take.”

Sam looked off, trying to retrieve a memory from his personal studies and notes.

“That phrase—‘he will show you which path to take,’ or ‘will make your paths straight’ in some translations—is a Hebraism, a figure of speech that shows God setting you on the best path possible, the path he himself has prepared for you. It’s like being on the freeway of God’s direction rather than losing your way trying to read your own map on streets of your own choosing.”

He handed the Bible to Matt. As the young man looked over the passage and Sam’s notes in the margins, Sam said, “What it says in whatever language you want to read it in—Hebrew, Greek, Latin, or plain English—is this: the opposite of faith is control. God doesn’t need your strength to guide you, but you do need to trust his strength to recognize his guidance. It’s your trust, not your strength.

“Think about your life, Matt. When do you feel closest to God? Is it when you understand everything? Is it when you’re in control? Or is it when you know that if he doesn’t show up, you’re sunk? Is it when you feel personally strong or when you realize how strong he is?”

Matt nodded, relaxing his stance. “I remember meeting

Brenda on campus the day I told God I was going to end a long relationship that wasn't honoring to him. I opened the door for a group of ladies, and there she was. I feel closer to God when I'm relying on him."

Sam looked intently at Matt. "That's what he's asking you to do right now, right here, on this bridge. Rely on him, regardless of what your controlling heart may be screaming. If you want to experience God's guidance, you must go beyond understanding to trust."

Brenda mouthed the words *beyond understanding to trust*. A look of hope had come into her face when Matt spoke about the moment they'd first met.

"You're not in management, Matt," Sam said. "You can't control this. If you want to discover God's will up here or down in the flatland, it's going to take faith. Because—and I'm going to say it again—*it's your trust, not your strength*." Sam hiked his right shoulder and rolled it forward. "Old army injury," he explained. "Talk about not being in control, try jumping out of a perfectly running airplane. Now that's a picture of the faith God's asking you for: the faith a jumper has in his parachute. If the parachute fails, you're toast. And still, all you have to do is land wrong one time, and there you go. Gimpy shoulder for the rest of your life."

Matt handed Sam his Bible and looked at Brenda.

Brenda stared at the place in the trees where the grouse had disappeared. Her eyes squinted in the brightness of the

sun breaking through a stand of cedar. Thoughtfully, she said, “God’s telling us that we have to cross this bridge if we’re ever going to know what he wants us to do. It’s a sign, a test.”

“A reckoning, maybe?” Sam shifted his weight, turned, and looked at the young couple to see if they had heard him. He pushed his hat up and back to make eye contact. “Next stop, Casa Vieja Meadow.”

Under the bridge, the creek cut through the rushes, sedges, and grasses, running cold in its golden-hued bed. To the east, the trail ran parallel to it, a steep ribbon of powder-white decomposed granite through the tangled manzanita and towering red fir, ponderosa, and Jeffrey pine. From camouflaged pulpits high above the trail, blue jays blared and tree squirrels chirped the general alarm, alerting every creature of the wilderness to the presence of newcomers.

Sam stood on the bridge for a moment, lost in reverence—for the mountains of his youth, for these semitrusting fellow hikers, and for his God. As always, a quiet fell on the trail here, a quiet heavy with tales and memories of lost hikers, lightning storms, forest fires, bear sightings, timber rattlers, and spooked horses. Just past the clearing ahead, the timber closed in on the trail, diving into the beauty of the Kern Plateau.

Golden trout darted from the shadow of the bridge as Sam’s White’s clumped heavily on planks worn smooth by those who had gone before. “No fresh tracks,” he said, studying the clearing on the other side. “We may have Casa Vieja Meadow all to

ourselves when we get there tonight. I wonder if the cowboys have brought their stock in to graze yet.”

Brenda and Matt followed him, Brenda stopping briefly to snap a picture of the view behind them. “Is that where the mean cows and bulls come from?” Brenda asked. “How does a cow get up here, anyway? And are they all mean?”

Sam stepped carefully across a rotten plank in the bridge. “Watch yourself here.” He turned to ensure they didn’t fall through. “No, most of them just don’t want to be bothered. If you meet a mean one, you’ll know it.”

“Maybe you ought to point them out to us,” Matt said from the rear. The young accountant’s interest in what Sam had to say had evidently increased. As they walked along, he said, “You promised to teach us eight surefire principles for discovering God’s will. When are we going to start writing in the brand-new Mead journals you insisted we bring with us?”

“Class is already in session,” Sam responded. “First lesson comes from Proverbs 3:5-6. As soon as we reach the campsite, you’ll want to initiate that journal. You tell me what the first principle is.”

“I’m not in management.” Matt repeated Sam’s words, a smile in his voice. *“God doesn’t need your strength to guide you, but you do need to trust his strength to recognize his guidance.”*

The filtered light of the rising sun glowed bright on yellow and purple wildflowers to the left and right of the path before them. An eagle screeched, and a coyote moaned in protest after

an unproductive night of hunting. The pine boughs high in the timber whished in the morning breeze.

In that moment before they walked off the bridge, only Sam heard the still, small voice of God in the sounds of the wilderness. He stepped forward and squinted into the sunlight on the plateau. “I have a feeling we’re all going to need God’s strength before this is over.”