Have you ever had the thought, “If only I could do this one thing, my life would be a breeze”? Or, “If only I could get this one thing right, everything else would fall into place”?

Everyone has thoughts like these from time to time, but dwelling upon them tempts us toward a common trap. If only I could afford a bigger house... If only I could meet the right man... If only I could get that promotion... If only my children behaved better... All of these “if onlys” and more can tempt us into believing that the goal of life is to finally reach Destination Comfort. Destination Stability. We assume that once we achieve our “if only” goals, the rest of life will be smooth sailing. Of course, it doesn’t take long for us to learn that a comfortable life is hard to maintain.

In Don’t Settle for Safe, Sarah Jakes Roberts reminds us that “A life of constant comfort and stability—without any fears or insecurity—simply does not exist.” Unforeseen circumstances interrupt our quiet days, or tragedies disturb our plans. Trials come toward us like waves, one after another—and the truest strength is found not amid a quiet sea, but in being able to handle every wave. Accepting the volatile nature of life helps us refashion our goals toward strength and resilience rather than toward the status quo; and the dangerous journey may prove much more exciting than the path toward predictability. Why dream for safety when God can give us so much more?

Together, let’s embrace the surprises of life by examining the ways in which we settle for safe every day. We may not be able to tame the waters, but with God’s help, we can build a stronger ship. The life he has in store for us is much more thrilling than anything we could’ve dreamed up ourselves.

1. Lowering Our Expectations

Life’s waves have a way of buffeting our hopes and dreams. We get jaded when plans don’t succeed, and our failures diminish the confidence we once had in ourselves. Maybe we’re physically or emotionally exhausted from falling short of our goals, and as a result, we’ve lowered our expectations to avoid the disappointment we’ve come to expect. Instead of taking risks that could reap big rewards, we do what it takes to dodge the sting of failure.

Resist the urge to compromise your heart’s desire, for it could be God’s desire too! He has instilled unique desires in every human heart. The pain and failure we encounter along the way are part and parcel of our growth. Don’t let excuses and low expectations build a fortress around your comfort zone. Instead, make a new plan and forge ahead. You’ve already come so far, and God is with you through every step.

2. Playing Defense

It is a natural instinct for us to defend ourselves. It’s self-preservation, right? But self-preservation reaches a dangerous extreme when we become stubborn, defensive people. Perhaps you’ve been through something that has hardened your heart, or you find comfort in constantly being right. Or perhaps you enjoy the view from a “higher moral ground.” Whatever the case, defensive people—rather than facing the challenges of life—prefer to safeguard their bubble. And along the way, they unwittingly defend themselves from new ideas, people, and relationships. After all, who wants to befriend someone who is “always right”? (Answer: no one.)

Cultivating an open heart and an open mind is not easy, but it leads to remarkable breakthroughs. Vulnerable people can love and learn in incredible ways that defensive people cannot. Change or growth will not happen when we are holding onto something for dear life.
Instead, let’s embrace the battles before us with the mindset that, with God’s help, we will win. Life has much to teach us, and we have so much more to gain than we have to lose.

3. Give in To Our Pattern

Have you ever thought to yourself, “Wow, I am in a rut”? What a terrible feeling! It’s easy to get stuck in a routine, but it’s even easier to slip into a silent, unnamed pattern that directs our actions and decisions. If we fail to self-reflect, we may become (or already be!) victims of patterns that we don’t even know we have.

For example: Do you automatically choose to surround yourself with difficult, toxic people? Or do you unthinkingly avoid certain situations or places—just because it seems easier to do so? Do you tend to downplay yourself at every opportunity? Or do you ignore the desires of your heart because you fear failure or disappointment?

Take some time to examine your own life and habits. If you reflect upon yourself and your problems, the hidden, ugly patterns may make themselves known to you. Ask God to help you see your tendencies clearly. Perhaps you already know what your patterns are, but you’ve refused to admit them or give them a name. Whatever the case, don’t presume that your patterns have control over you. If you can call them out, you have the power to change them.

4. Limit Ourselves to Our Environment

People do not get to decide where they are born, which family raises them, or the kind of genetic material they inherit. These things are beyond our control! Every person is born into a unique situation, some of which are healthier than others. To an extent, we are all products of our environments; and as we grow up, we can better make sense of “why we are the way we are.”

Even so, we settle for safe when we assume we are bound by our past (or current!) circumstances. We make excuses for our bad behavior, saying, “I can’t help it. It’s how I was raised,” or, “I’ve always acted this way.” Such excuses relieve us of the hard work of self-improvement. Sure, some of us have bigger obstacles to overcome—but we are capable of great transformation if we believe in God’s power to help us overcome. Instead of presuming that you are enslaved to your past environment, take steps toward changing the environment you live in today. Surround yourself with healthy people. Find a church that encourages you to grow. You have more control over your future than you think.

5. Hold On To Toxic Friends

Are there people in your life who—if you are honest with yourself—make your life harder than easier? Maybe you have some friends who are entertaining but who don’t know how to live a drama-free day. Maybe you have manipulative friends who take from your relationship but don’t reciprocate. We tend to pick up friends throughout life for all sorts of reasons, and sometimes those reasons aren’t healthy.

Take stock of your friendships. Some friends are “safe” for all the right reasons: they are there for you when you need them; they understand you when no one else does; or they encourage you when you need a kind word. But not all types of encouragement are good. You may have a “safe” friend who encourages your worst habits, so you feel free to be your worst self in front of this them. Are you keeping people like this around because it’s easier than making new friends?

The demise of a friendship can be sad, but consider that it could be for the best. Instead, devote time and energy to people who encourage your best self. Find friends who are good examples for you. Making new friends can be scary, but the payoff is huge!
6. We Withhold Forgiveness.

If you’ve ever been in the position to forgive, you know it is a hard process! Many of us wrap ourselves in the blanket of unforgiveness, refusing to do the hard work of letting go. Sometimes it is easier to dwell in the pain than to move beyond it.

Forgiveness is especially difficult when someone doesn’t deserve or even desire our forgiveness. We wait around hoping for an apology, or for the perpetrator to become “worthy” of our forgiveness—which may never happen at all. Meanwhile, as we stew in our own bitter juices and wait for justice to be done, we discover we’re the only ones getting cooked.

As you’ve probably discovered, we try to protect ourselves by refusing to let go of old habits—and nothing sticks around quite like a grudge. The truth is, letting go of wrongs done to us frees up our hearts in ways we never would’ve thought possible. Sure, we may be surrendering the high ground we’ve garnered as the victim, but the exchange is worth it. Don’t wait around for others to change. Forgive them, move on, and grow.

7. Deny God’s Desire To Save

When hard times come, do you find yourself closer to or further from God? Unlike any human relationship, the one between God and his children is at once the simplest and the most complicated relationship there is. It is simple in that God loves us unconditionally. It is complicated in that one party—God—is mysterious to us beyond measure.

Your heart may be near God today, or maybe you have struggled to feel near to him in the past. It’s possible that you have a hard time believing in his unconditional love, or you doubt that you deserve his free gift of grace. For some, his promise is so great that they fear disappointment if it turns out to be untrue. We are all prone to wander away from God, for more reasons than can be named.

This is where an act of faith comes in. You cannot believe in a good God while constantly doubting his willingness to forgive you. That kind of relationship makes no sense! Instead of protecting yourself from a disappointment that will never come, decide to embrace God’s promise. Throw your heart wholly into the ring. He wants to celebrate every one of us, no matter what we have done—and again, the payoff of belief will be great indeed. As Sarah says, “The commitment to protecting your connection with God is what gives you the faith to walk on water.”

8. Deny Our Purpose

Remember when we were talking about ruts and routines? Sometimes we catch ourselves in a moment and think, “Wow. This is not what I was born to do.” As you shuffle papers around on a desk, you feel an emptiness and a longing for something bigger. In that moment, God may be calling you away from where you are and toward your purpose.

Purpose is not about wealth or success but about your particular gift of service to the world. There is a reason why we weren’t all born the same—and it’s because God intends for us to give back to the world in unique ways. If you examine your heart, you may already feel you understand your purpose, while others of us aren’t so sure. No matter where you are, know that God has given you life for a reason.

We settle for safe when we refuse to confront the challenges that come from pursuing our purpose. Living into our purpose will almost always be challenging and will likely involve some sacrifice. Perhaps we fear that living into our purpose will involve changes that make us uncomfortable. Even so, fight the fear of the unknown. God’s power is bigger than our wildest dreams, if only we will take him up on his invitation.
9. Push Good People Away

There is little more satisfying than an intimate relationship. Intimacy has come to mean sex to some people, but that is not what we are talking about here. There is a kind of intimacy that goes farther and higher than a sexual relationship between two people. Instead, the most intimate relationships are built upon open hearts, vulnerable postures, and selflessness in love.

We may be afraid of intimacy because it requires vulnerability—and vulnerability opens us up to pain. There is always a risk involved in openhearted love, but the deepest relationship can never be achieved if we are in a constant state of defense. Some of us go our whole lives in fear of being hurt by those we love—and as a result, we refuse to let people in.

God demonstrated for us that the greatest love comes at great cost. When Christ died for us, no one guaranteed to him that we would be grateful for his sacrifice. No one promised that we would love him in return, but he deemed the sacrifice worth it anyway. The pain he endured didn’t end on the cross, since people deny and rebut him every day. But Christ died for the love of us and for the love he would receive in return. In short, we are worth it to him.

When we are lucky enough to find people who want to live out sacrificial love for us, let us not be inhibited by fear. May we be willing to risk the pain for the great joy of an intimate relationship.

10. Worry About Being Like Others

It takes awhile for some of us to feel comfortable in our skin. We spend our teenage years trying to fit in or just fly under the radar, and sometimes that carries over into adulthood. Standing out is never easier than blending in, even if we wonder if we are denying our true selves. Self-actualization is hard to do when we only want to look or act like other people.

Successfully conforming to others’ expectations may result in short-term comfort, but it will never lead to long-term joy. God did not make us unique for the purpose of finding the long road to conformity. No, he made us unique so that our lives could contribute to humanity in special ways. Have you considered that the thing that makes you stand out is the thing that makes you most useful to God?

Instead of wasting time comparing yourselves to others, ask God to make you confident in the things that make you unique. Make some plans that don’t take into consideration what other people will think. You may have a quiet existence hiding behind the curtain, but God wants you to take the stage. Pray for his guidance as you search out the path he has carved out for you alone.

As you move boldly forward in faith, seek God’s strength. Even when he feels far away, he is your guide, giver, and friend. Don’t be held back by fears or insecurities. With God on your side, you can accomplish anything within his will!