

# A PURSUIT WORTH YOUR LIFE

Photo courtesy of Milk and Honey Ranch (milkandhoneyranch.com)

## BRENT PHILLIPS

### ► FINDING A PATH

**A**s a church frequenting young Christian, it always seemed to me that the greatest calling for any believer was to become a missionary or pastor. So, for most of my life, I was tormented by this guilt feeling that I was not doing enough for the Kingdom because I wasn't pursuing either of these with passion. We had little means when growing up in South Africa, but God often answered our prayers for provision. The experience taught me how faithful God is, and that we are limited only by the strength of our faith, not circumstances or the decisions of others.

I have always been in love with technology. My first encounter with a computer was at the age of four when my

family purchased a Commodore 64. I couldn't read yet, but I would copy the examples provided in the accompanying programming book by assiduously matching the symbols on the keyboard. I was fascinated by that early experience, which set the course for the rest of my professional life.

Throughout school, I battled chronic asthma, which adversely impacted my grades and forced me to miss many classes. By the time I reached high school, when I would finally be able to take computer science classes, my teacher declined my request, telling me I was not up to the task. She might be right because I was barely passing mathematics. But recalling the powerful words my mom taught us from the Bible, "You have the mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:16), I pleaded with my teacher to give me a chance to prove myself. She agreed. By the end of the semester, I had proudly achieved an A plus. I also went on to set the school record in

the 1500m in athletics. These experiences reinforced my belief that "Nothing is impossible with God" (Luke 1:37), something that would define the decisions I made and the risks I took throughout my life.

At the age of eighteen, while at a church camp, I was at a point when I was struggling with my identity and my relationship with God. Some friends and I had agreed that we would settle differences in a "Gangs of New York" type brawl against several of the pastor's children. On my way out to the battleground after the Friday night worship service, a camp leader grabbed my arm and pulled me aside, looked into my eyes, and said that God indeed had plans to do something special with my life. Besides my mother, no one had said anything positive about my life. The words that swam around in my head were my father and the school headmaster both telling me my life would amount to nothing. Those words spoken through the leader penetrated my hardened heart. I felt overwhelmed by God's presence. I fell on my knees. When I got up off the floor an hour later, I was a changed person.

I truly believed that I was meant to do something significant in the world, but I did not know what it would be. I began to serve in any ministerial capacity that I could find, from running children's ministry to attending Bible studies and events. I pursued my interest in technology with passion, not knowing what God has in store for me. Looking back, I can see how each challenge that I encountered in life was really just a stepping stone that gave me the necessary tools and confidence to be able to face the next. Before David faced Goliath, he had a testimony of facing a lion and a bear. It was so for me as well.

## ► GOD HAD A PLAN

The only university in South Africa offering software engineering as a college-level course was taught in Afrikaans, a second language I struggled with in school. Now, it seemed that I would have to face both my nemeses together: mathematics and a language I hardly understood. Yet, I took on this challenge. I was confident enough to believe that God would be by my side and help me as needed. Moments like this helped me realize now that if I had allowed fear or my perceived limitations to guide my decisions instead of my faith, I would not be anywhere close to where I am today. Faith in God gave me the courage to at least try.

After university, I landed a job that worked on projects for

banks and other large organizations, including developing the system for the South African census. Programming the computer made sense of all my passions and quirks. I could sit for days, working tirelessly, enamored by the possibility of creating solutions. Like Eric Liddell said in the movie "Chariots of Fire," "God made me fast, and when I run, I feel His pleasure." That's exactly how I felt whenever I was coding. I would talk to God about how to solve problems as if I was talking to someone sitting next to me. In response He would pop algorithms and source codes into my head.

In my twenties, my brother moved to Aspen, Colorado, to play rugby for the Aspen Gentlemen. All that my family knew about Aspen at that time was from the movie "Dumb and Dumber." But my brother had heard that they favored South Africans for their team, so he took a leap of faith and went. When my mom and I came to visit a year later, we were spellbound. In South Africa, we don't have snow, so experiencing Christmas in the snow was magical. Soon after I decided to take a year off and headed to Aspen, leaving behind my girlfriend, job, and church, and arrived with \$2,400 in my pocket and two suitcases.

South Africa's unemployment rate is astronomical, around 43%. The country has no unemployment benefits, so many are forced to become true entrepreneurs. During peak traffic times, the freeways would turn into flea markets, selling everything from drinks to cell phone chargers. I am grateful for the South African work ethic that I acquired as a child, which emphasizes the importance of always finding a way. This mindset prodded me to apply for the first job I came across in the papers when I arrived in Aspen. A company was looking for wireless internet installers. I know nothing about installing internets, but I did know a lot about networks from setting up all-night LAN game parties at my mother's house when I was a teenager.

The employer informed me that the job had already been taken. Not deterred, I went to the company's offices to convince them otherwise. I was offered the job that very same day. They handed me several wireless antennas, a box of cabling, and a list of customers to call. One of the job requirements was a car to travel to customers' houses and a ladder to climb on their roofs. I looked again in the papers and found a car for sale for \$1,800. Next I bought a ladder, some bungee cords, and a freezer full of hot pockets. And just like that, I was in business.

Over the next year, I outperformed every other employee at the company by a wide margin, mainly because nobody else wanted to work on snowy roofs. But coming from South

Africa, safety was not something that ever really crossed my mind. It was all about getting the job done correctly and on time. I had no safety harness, only a desperate faith that “whatever I put my hand to would prosper” (Deuteronomy 30:9). One day, I received news that the owner was closing the business, and I would be out of a job within days. I started looking for alternative employment. Unlike the previous time, my job search was not productive. Deep into my twenties, I felt like I was back at square one, having to borrow money from my mom to pay for food. It was a very humbling experience.

On a day when I was feeling particularly low, my mom said to me, in reference to what God said to Moses, “What is in your hand (Exodus 4:2)?” All I had was a video camera and a web domain. This was before the days of YouTube and Google. But spurred by my mother’s comment and a desire to serve God through my preconception of “true” ministry, I recorded a video one day going through all the Scriptures about how to receive Christ. I posted the video on my website. For about three months, I sat at the kitchen table, recorded preaching videos, and looked for ministry “job” opportunities. Even though I had no idea if anyone was watching the videos, I was faithful to use “what was in my hand.”

One day out of the blue, I received an invitation to preach in India. I intuitively dismissed it as a scam. Two weeks later, they sent another request. This time I couldn’t get it off my mind. What if it was real? After discussing it with my mom, we decided that, scam or real, we would have a story to tell. It took a long journey to the village, where we were blown away by posters everywhere that read: “Brent Phillips, Pastor from the USA.” The organizers had sent hundreds of invitations to churches and pastors all over. I was, however, the only one that responded. For the next two weeks, my mother and I traveled all over South India, preaching in villages and towns. The countless hours I spent on the videos was what prepared me for this experience. This taught me a valuable lesson: Sometimes in life we may not fully know if an opportunity is from God, but it is worth the risk to find out. “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm

you, plans to give you hope and a future” (Jeremiah 29:11).

## ▶ TESTING OUR FAITH

**R**eturning home to Aspen, doors soon opened for me at the church I had been attending. I began to start preaching as a volunteer. Out of financial desperation, I also decided to start my own computer company: Aspen Computer Solutions. I reached out to all my former antenna customers to let them know that I was now their local solutions and service provider. After some initial challenges, my business really started to flourish. Eventually, I was even able to add staff and grew the business into one of the main computer companies in town. There was never a no to any job, even if I wasn’t quite sure how to do it. My motto was work until you figure it out.

Outside of work, I served at the church or spent time studying online Bible school courses. God gave me a hunger to learn and the ability to quickly understand. My knowledge exploded across both Scripture and technology. By the time I sold my company, I had acquired a deep understanding of

computer architecture, networks, and peripherals. I was also ordained as an elder of the church. By this time I had married my sweetheart from South Africa and become a father

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of two. For a few years, life was truly wonderful, and even my father came to know Jesus before he died after watching one of the videos that I recorded at the kitchen table years earlier.

Then we reached a crossroads: my U.S. visa was to expire around the time I had planned a huge mission trip to South Africa. Our lawyer told us if we left the country at this time, we would never be able to come back. However, my wife and I both felt strongly that we had to put ministry above all else. We packed up our beautiful lives in Aspen, our two-year-old, and three-month-old, and moved back to South Africa to become church planters. The mission trip was a massive success: thousands of people showed up during the days that followed and there were many miraculous healings and salvations. Churches united together to minister to the people. We stayed behind after the rest of the team returned to

America, ready for whatever God had in store for us next.

We patiently waited. However, the more we tried to open doors, the more snapped shut they appeared. Even though I was well educated, I could not find any work, even vocational ministries. My wife and I never really discussed our finances, but at one point, I became so desperate that I called her up and told her we only had R1200 (about \$100) left in our account. "I just spent R800 at the store!" she blurted out in response. That night we knelt by our bed and asked God to save us. We needed a miracle.

About this time, my niece suffered a stroke at three days old. Even in affluent Aspen, no one knew what caused it and what to do next. After countless phone calls and months of waiting, my brother and his wife finally were able to get an appointment with a specialist in another state. They flew out to meet the doctor, only to be told they needed to see another specialist. It was this traumatic ordeal that spawned the idea that forever changed our lives.

On a day when things had gotten so bad that I did not know how I was going to put food on the table, I received a phone call from my brother. He suggested a business idea. He had raised some money and needed to start building the technology right away. He transferred \$5,000 to me that same day. Even though this was a gift from heaven, I felt guilty about pursuing this secular opportunity instead of trying to plant churches. My brother answered my concern this way: "If this works, you will help far more people than you can with what you are doing now." He was right.

The idea we had was to build a company that allows ordinary people to connect with the top medical specialists through a browser. At that time, the only way to see a specialist was to wait months for an appointment and meet them in person, just as my brother had experienced. We were going to change that. From the comfort of your own home, you would be able to speak to a specialist in just a few days. The technologies to support this didn't exist yet, nor did the laws and access to specialists needed to make this possible. Nevertheless I felt my whole life had prepared me to take on this challenge. I believed God would again make a way.

## BUSINESS AS MINISTRY

**T**he same week, my mom met a lawyer who found a way for us to return to the U.S. through my wife's German citizenship. I returned to the States and began building the

software. Six months of non-stop work finally readied the first version of the software. We excitedly took it live, but we couldn't find a single paying customer. People loved the concept; they just didn't want to pay for it. For the next three years, we burnt through our initial investment rapidly.

While the software was exhausting work, I remained deeply committed to ministry. I had found a new church in Texas, where I was teaching 2-4 classes each Sunday, as well as a Bible study on Wednesdays in a house. Surveying the results, it appeared that there were more "blessings" in ministry than in my tech work. The church leadership was constantly offering me a job. Eventually, the financial pressure and sleep deprivation got the better of me, and I accepted the job. Handing off my work at the company to my replacement, I headed off to finally live fully for God in "real" ministry.

For the next year, I did what I thought was "fully living" for God - teaching, counseling, and visiting the sick. At the same time, the company that I had founded with my brother was increasingly struggling. About a year after I had left, my brother reached out and asked if I could come and assess the tech department and the issues they were facing. I did. What I discovered was that the tech team had been lying about their work and using mockups to show their progress. Nothing real was actually built. My brother needed me.

I rejoined the company and started to clean up. In one year, the tech team had managed to destroy what had taken me three years to build. Also, two contracts for custom work had to be honored by the company within only a few months. As the reality of the sheer magnitude of this disaster was settling in, I slid down the wall in the corner of the room, covered my face, and cried. I had never felt so overwhelmed and helpless before. I prayed and asked God to give me the ability to do what needed to be done. That night I told my wife that I would not be coming home anymore during the week. For several months, I worked through the night, every night except weekends, living on energy shots.

Slowly but painfully, the technology was back on track. Unfortunately, we still could not secure any paying customers. It seemed like the company was fighting to survive on a weekly basis. But miraculously God always would give us more grace with a new investor whenever we thought it had reached the end. One day, one of our investors had the idea for a different model. If people loved the idea but were hesitant to pay for it, what if their employer instead provides it as a benefit? This simple yet brilliant idea saved the compa-



ny. For the first time we finally managed to acquire paying customers.

Between my desire to serving God in the only way that I believed really counted, i.e., in the church, and the aversion to repeating the mistake of leaving the business to someone else, I decided to plant our own church. The church building would be a storefront, but the real ministry took place in our home. No paid staff, and all involved would keep full time jobs. To help manage and build the church, to help connect the community and enable our missionaries to safely communicate within their home countries which might be hostile to the gospel, we needed a truly secure communication platform. There was nothing in the market that would satisfy our needs. So I decided to develop our own, and Squirrel (the communication platform) was born.

For the next several years, I was a Chief Technology Officer by day and a pastor by night. Desperately desiring to offer more of myself to God, I embarked on a 40-day water fast. I kept a journal of every day of the fast. Near the end of the fast, I felt that God was telling me it was time to hand the church over. After sharing it with my wife I kept the thought.

Both the company and the church thrived. It took seven years until the company turned a profit. Three years later we sold the company for \$460 million to a public company. I was finally in a position to fully dedicate my life to serving God. Then Covid showed up. Until Covid, our house had been constantly used for counseling sessions, often requiring advanced scheduling due to too many visitors. The COVID lockdown suddenly returned silence and tranquility to the house.

For the first time in a long time, I was at home with just my family, and I loved it. I

suddenly realized how much I had prioritized people in the church over my own family, thinking it was somehow more worthy. Now I wondered if this had been a mistake. Was much of the min-

istry I did merely out of a sense of obligation? I also noticed how churches struggled with their communication during the pandemic, and the app I built for our church worked exceptionally well when people could not be together.

Like many others, Covid allowed me to redefine who I wanted to be. For the first time in a decade, I had to be still and listen to God. During this time, God gave an understand-

ing that I would never before dare to believe and reminded me of what He told me during my fast. He wanted me to let go of my limited view of "ministry" and embrace something greater. What God wanted for me was something I had in my life all along: my love and passion for technology. It took me all this time to realize that this wasn't any less of a ministry than serving in the church.

For the first time, I could fully dedicate my skills to God as a whole ministry instead of being a means to support the "real ministry." I realized that others could pastor the church, but only I could be a father to my children. Others could counsel, but only I could be the husband my wife deserved. Others could build churches and be missionaries, but I was one of a handful who could build a digital platform that would keep communication safe while empowering the community like never before. God has equipped me to build the scaffolding from which others could build the dreams God put in their hearts.

## ► A NEW AWAKENING

And so I handed over the church and took the foundation of what was Squirrel and started Luep. Luep (<https://luep.app/>) is a highly secure and powerful community engagement platform. Even before formalizing the organization, an investor approached me, and helped me raise \$1.2 million by the end of that first week. I stood ready to create something that would one day stand toe-to-toe with the Goliaths of the tech world.

As Luep was being launched, we experienced the historic freeze that shut down Texas for several days. My family was left without water and power, unable to even get food. For the longest time, I had been comfortable in never being an outdoors

person or knowing how to fix anything except a computer. There was always a handyman I could count on. Feeling so helpless shook something in my heart. As a family, we decided that we needed to be more than just city dwellers whose wellbeing is totally dependent on the infrastructure and markets around us. We resolved to learn to be more indepen-

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dent. We agreed to buy a ranch and engage in weekend farming. However, I quickly realized that if we were truly going to change, it could not be just a weekend undertaking. It had to become our way of life. I shared this news with my family in excitement, but it was met with instant rejection and tears. When persuasion failed over the next two months, I made a unilateral decision for the family.

It was a run-down ranch in very poor condition that filled me with excitement and vision. Milk & Honey Resort Ranch, the property we bought and named, was to be rebuilt to include enclosures for the live-

stock, as well as multiple houses for extended family. Multiple subcontractors worked on the farm in order to minimize the disruption to our lives. Amidst constant grumbles from the family, we persevered through challenges such as record-setting rain and supply shortages, eventually managed to build in one year four houses, a hotel, a gym, a pool, a tennis court, an outdoor kitchen, a commercial kitchen, a new barn, a lake, a dirt bike track, besides housing for over four hundred animals. At Thanksgiving, as we sat down to eat food that we had raised ourselves, the gratitude for the new life on the ranch was unanimous. We realized also that we wanted to share this transformational experience with more than just our friends. We decided to open it up to guests through Airbnb. To our surprise, it started booking up quickly. Soon we became a highly rated 5-star getaway on Airbnb, VRBO, and Google. We were now in the hospitality business, which expanded to include a restaurant and a wedding venue soon after.

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percent of the value we received. I woke up in the wee morning hours to check the stock and felt like a car had just hit me. I stumbled out of the house and collapsed on the ground. Hopelessness and panic totally consumed me. Not only did I lack enough resources to complete the farm projects, but I also couldn't afford to sustain the ranch or Luep. Realizing I was on the verge of losing everything I had worked so hard

for, I could only mutter "God, please forgive me. Please have mercy on me."

God reminded me that I couldn't leave my family in such a vulnerable position. I got up from the ground and

summoned every ounce of faith I had. There was no miracle, but God provided opportunities and a determination. I took on three jobs to make ends meet. People expressed interest in investing in Luep out of the blue. A year later, not only had we survived, but we had even built another hotel on the very spot where I lay in the dirt, along with a beach club and three more houses. We were also able to upgrade Luep's capabilities.

Through both Luep and Milk & Honey Ranch, God has given me numerous opportunities to do good and spread the gospel, far more than I ever did as a pastor. Both Luep and the ranch have become sanctuaries for many. Luep has been utilized by organizations to rescue hundreds from Afghanistan, plant churches in India and Pakistan, coordinate efforts to protect liberty in America, and deepen relationships with parents in a school. On the ranch, people have come to encounter God, find healing, restore family bonds, raise funds for non-profits, and even hear about God for the very first time.

## ▶ TOMORROW'S OWN WORRY

Our finances were largely tied up in the equity of the company that acquired our startup. We had planned everything according to the worth of these papers. In one year, the stock had declined by 50 percent, but it was still enough to cover the costs of refurbishing the farm. Just before my wife's 40th birthday, the market reacted very negatively to the latest earnings call. On her birthday, the stock lost 90

## ▶ LIFE'S LESSONS

A story that has inspired me to be resilient after setbacks and failures is that of Soichiro Honda, the founder of Honda Motor Co. He faced numerous challenges throughout his life. He struggled in school and was rejected by Toyota for not meeting their engineering standards. However, he fought his way to eventually put up a factory, which was bombed twice during the war. After it was rebuilt, an earthquake de-

molished it later. Honda persevered and wrote 18,000 personal letters to bicycle shops, seeking investment in his invention. At the end he caught a break.

What is a pursuit that is worth our lives? Every believer desires to hear the words, "Well done, my good and faithful servant" (Matthew 25:11). However, we often harbor misconceptions about what we must achieve and do to deserve those words. A pursuit that is worth our lives is one in which we use everything God has given us to glorify Him. There is divine partnership with God in our life journeys, where our talents and affections converge to shape our future dreams. This convergence serves as both a beacon of hope and a reminder of our utter reliance on God to bring those dreams to fruition. It is through embracing our passions that we find the ability to excel. It is in stepping out in faith and entrusting ourselves to God that we discover the means to glorify Him in what we do.

In the end, God is glorified when we live out the deep passion for what He has called us to do, using the skills and talents He has bestowed upon us. Whatever God has called you to do will inevitably require courage and perseverance. Like Honda, I have had many opportunities to give up, but God has always provided just enough hope to lift me up and allow me to try again. God values character more than success, and we are shaped by the moments of pain and struggle. One cannot truly savor the sweetness until they have tasted something sour. God is faithful to the end. Our responsibility is to live courageously for His glory. It is what we are created to do.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



South African born and raised **BRENT PHILLIPS** has always had a passion for tech, business and the gospel. After earning his masters degree in information technology, Brent launched his first US-based company in Aspen, Colorado. Brent engineered one of the first versions of the "cloud" while simultaneously becoming an ordained pastor. Later after moving to Houston, Brent planted Sandbox Church and co-founded 2nd.MD, which revolutionized telemedicine through technology. 2nd.MD was purchased by Accolade in 2021 for \$460 million. After the sale of 2nd.MD, Brent handed over the church and moved his family out to an abandoned horse ranch where he has built a multi-family, self-sustainable farm resort with over 400 animals, 60 different fruit varieties and aquaponic farming. Brent's latest venture is Luep, a highly secure communication and community platform for businesses, churches, schools and organizations that is becoming a player on the world stage.