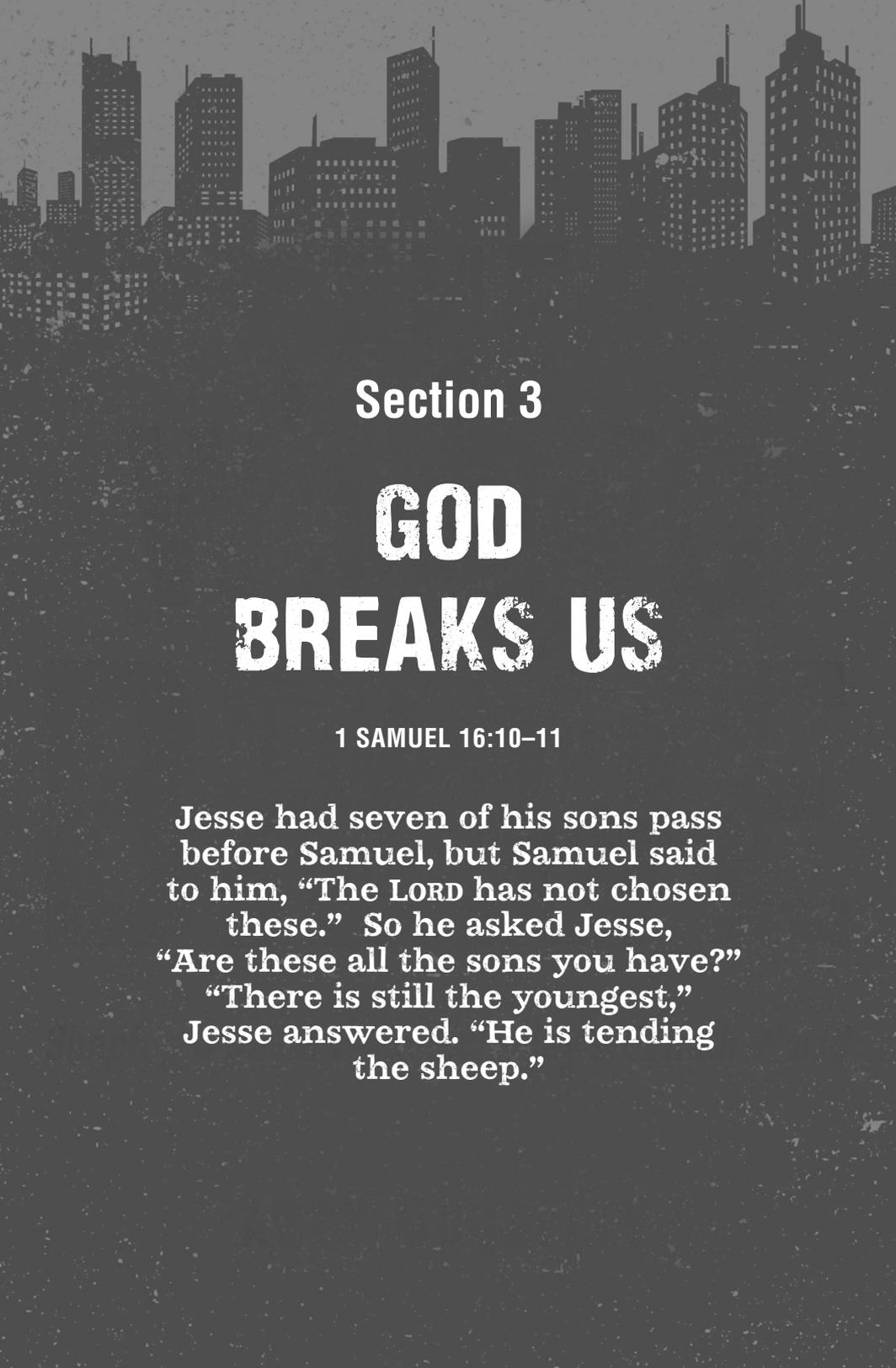


# THE WAY TO BRAVE

*Shaping a David Faith for Today's Goliath World*

**ANDY MCQUITTY**

FOREWORD BY SCOT MCKNIGHT



## Section 3

# GOD BREAKS US

1 SAMUEL 16:10-11

Jesse had seven of his sons pass before Samuel, but Samuel said to him, “The LORD has not chosen these.” So he asked Jesse, “Are these all the sons you have?”  
“There is still the youngest,” Jesse answered. “He is tending the sheep.”

**A TRADITIONAL JEWISH HISTORY** teaches that David was an illegitimate son of Jesse and therefore a reminder of shame and carrier of scorn.<sup>1</sup> Is this why David's famous Psalm 51 prayer of repentance notes that "in sin did my mother conceive me" (KJV)? Is this why David, like Cinderella, was less loved by his parent than his half-siblings and left behind to ignominious tasks while they got to experience an exciting field trip to hang with the handsome prince and his crew? I think so. And I believe all this pain was God's blessing in disguise to David because it broke his pride early and compelled him to put his faith in God.

So David's pride was broken early, and his resulting humble desire that God get all glory gave him confidence that, even though he had to face Goliath, it was really just him facing Goliath on God's behalf. Knowing he was weak but God was strong made David brave. And it will also make Christians and churches brave as we simultaneously embrace our brokenness and pursue God's glory.

## *Chapter 5*

# **CRUCIBLE AND CHARACTER**

It is doubtful whether God can bless a man greatly  
until He has hurt him deeply. —A. W. TOZER

Behold, I have refined thee, but not with silver; I have chosen  
thee in the furnace of affliction. —Isaiah 48:10 KJV

David's upbringing as the youngest of six sons is the consummate Old Testament Cinderella story. A fundamental but often overlooked element of this beloved tale is the part about the "cinders." We love to pour scorn on the favoritism of self-centered parents and the cruel self-absorption of arrogant siblings. We love to root for the courageous "Cinderella" herself and to celebrate her come-uppance. Yet we don't love to recognize the difficult, character-shaping season of cinders as a good and necessary element in Cinderella's progression toward donning the glass slipper.

But we should, because the character shaped in the crucible of cinders is the basis for later greatness. Without pain, suffering, and brokenness melting away the dross of self-sufficiency and pride in our lives, we see no real need for the power of God to work through our lives. The result is diminished Christian courage because as unbroken and completely self-reliant people, we talk

ourselves into believing that our own limited, individual strength is sufficient though knowing all the while that it is not. Eugene Peterson refutes this dangerous self-deception: “Individualism is the growth-stunting, maturity-inhibiting habit of understanding growth as an isolated self-project. Individualism is self-ism with a swagger. The individualist is the person who is convinced that he or she can serve God without dealing with God.”<sup>1</sup> All who yearn for a David faith in a Goliath world must be disabused of that misunderstanding. Want to serve God courageously? Then you must deal with God, and that means God dealing with your pride.

### **The Problem of Pride**

Yes, pride really is our problem, and a very big problem indeed. According to the apostle Peter, it sets the Almighty against us. “God opposes the proud” (1 Peter 5:5). Not to belabor the obvious—but the very last Person in the universe we want to make our adversary is God! But history shows that’s precisely the fruit of human pride. Pride first showed up in the Bible in the garden of Eden when Satan, embodied as a snake, told Eve, “When you eat this fruit, your eyes will be opened, and you’ll be like God” (see Gen. 3:5). The snake appealed to Eve’s pride, and it worked. “I’ll be master of my own universe. I won’t have to submit to anybody else’s rules. I can just be my own God.” Here is the central problem with pride. It is not just that it “makes it all about me,” but that it leaves God right out of the picture.

Pride makes us fancy ourselves—not God, the source of all good things—capable of all great things. That’s why “arrogance” is a good synonym for pride. Its root is in the verb “arrogate,” which is to claim for ourselves that which is not rightly ours. Arrogant

people position themselves squarely in the center of their own universe as they revel in an unholy preoccupation with themselves. The prevalence of human pride led one astute observer to point out, “The biggest difference between you and God is God doesn’t think he’s you.”

Psychologists call this prideful assumption of limitless personal capability “illusory superiority.” (It’s also called the “Lake Wobegon Effect,” from Garrison Keillor’s fictional Minnesota town where “all the children are above average.”) Studies show that we humans tend to inflate

our positive qualities in comparison to others. Christian psychologist Mark McMinn summarized the data: “It’s the great contradiction: the average person believes he is a better person than the average person.” He contends that the “Lake Wobegon Effect” is nothing more than human pride. “One of the clearest conclusions of social science research is that we are proud. We think better of ourselves than we really are, we see our faults in faint black and white rather than in vivid color, and we assume the worst in others while assuming the best in ourselves.”<sup>2</sup> And that’s not all. Dr. Sukhvinder Obhi, a neuroscientist at McMaster University in Ontario, recently put the heads of a number of powerful people under a transcranial-magnetic-stimulation machine. He found that the acquisition of power with its sidekick pride actually impairs a specific neural process called “mirroring,” which is the cornerstone of empathy. Obhi describes it “as a sort of tumor that ends by killing the victim’s sympathies.”<sup>3</sup>

No wonder God is not a fan of our prideful human mindset. He made His reasons for opposing it abundantly clear to the Israelites

**Pride transforms our lives into monuments of self-reliance, tiny, personal universes from which God has been squeezed out.**

in the Old Testament. Having finally completed their wearying laps around the wilderness, they peer over the border at the cushy Canaanite homes and manicured lawns that will soon be theirs. But before they enter, Moses warns them of a lurking danger.

The LORD your God is bringing you into a good land . . . a land where bread will not be scarce and you will lack nothing . . . When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the LORD your God for the good land he has given you. Be careful that you do not forget the LORD your God. . . . Otherwise . . . your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God. . . . You may say to yourself, “My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.” But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth. . . . If you ever forget the LORD your God . . . I testify against you today that you will surely be destroyed. (Deut. 8:7–19)

Israel is facing a danger more destructive than starvation, heat stroke, or scorpion bite. The enemy? A spiritual disease called pride. Pride is amnesia of the soul. It is forgetting God. It is self-regarding self-sufficiency. Pride transforms our lives into monuments of self-reliance, tiny, personal universes from which God has been squeezed out. Sure, we believe in Him. But actively rely on Him? Nah. Pride is acting—whether we openly deny Him or merely ignore Him—as though we have no need of God. It is not merely an inflated ego; it is an inflated soul.

God doesn't like that, not even a little bit. In fact, He actively opposes it! *The Winner's Curse* is the name of a book by economist Richard Thaler, who studied gamblers in Las Vegas and found their greatest losses usually followed their greatest wins. Believing

they were gambling geniuses, they unwisely bet huge stakes only to lose everything. Thaler concluded that our greatest successes can produce in us selfish pride that serves as a prelude to our worst failures. As ancient wisdom predicts, “Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall” (Prov. 16:18). Make no mistake, God is the author of that inevitable sequence. What social scientists call “the winner’s curse” is God’s resistance to human illusory superiority. And that’s why pride is such a huge impediment to the way of brave. It cuts us off from the source of true courage.

### **Gratefully Broken**

Counterintuitively, one of the greatest gifts God can give to a Christian individualist is an all-expense-paid stint in the crucible of character. It’s there alone where we stubborn, self-confident individualists can be disabused of our silly, destructive notions of prideful self-sufficiency. As Gordon MacDonald writes, “What will it take to force us into disciplined cultivation of the inner garden of our private worlds? Will it require an experience of severe suffering? That is what history seems to say over and over again: those under pressure seek God, because there is nothing else. Those smothered in ‘blessings’ tend to drift with the current. And that is why I question the word blessing sometimes. Surely something is not a blessing if it seduces us away from inward spiritual cultivation.”<sup>4</sup> Before we can be truly blessed, therefore, we must be deeply broken. Our character must be forged in the crucible of pain, suffering, and brokenness because that’s where God replaces the dross of self-sufficiency and pride in our lives with His own mighty power. Until pride is broken, power cannot flow.

This is Jacob’s story in the Old Testament. He was broken, but not resentfully or bitterly broken. Seeing that God’s blessing

and power flowed from his pain, he was gratefully broken. Jacob was on his way home from his Uncle Laban's house in Haran to Canaan, where finally he had to face the wrath of his wronged brother Esau, whose birthright he had stolen. "That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two female servants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok" (Gen. 32:22).

On this night before their encounter, God brought Jacob to a place of isolation for a confrontation that produced desperation and resulted in transformation! For fourteen years, Jacob had stoked his pride by acquiring what he wanted through deceptive cleverness. But now God was going to put an end to that streak by breaking Jacob's pride in the crucible of pain. Jacob's song was, "I did it my way." God would answer, "Not any more." "After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. . . . The man asked him, 'What is your name?' 'Jacob,' he answered" (Gen. 32:23–24, 27).

Talk about X-Files, this is one strange story! Jacob is camping on the banks of the Jabbok River (literally "Wrestle" River, appropriately enough) when God jumps him. Like Cato on Peter Sellers in the iconic old Pink Panther movies, God appeared in human form and locked Jacob in the Von Eric death grip. The mysterious wrestler here is a theophany, an appearance of God in human form. But Jacob doesn't know who his adversary is, and he's not going to take this lying down! He counters Him with the Hulk Hogan Scissors hold, and an all-night "Wrestlemania" ensues.

When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak."

But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."  
The man asked him, "What is your name?"  
"Jacob," he answered. (32:25–27)

Jacob is exhausted—wouldn't you be if your wrestling opponent were the almighty God?! But he won't quit, so God "lightly touches" him and dislocates Jake's hip, the point of his greatest physical strength. The message is clear: even our greatest strengths are woefully inadequate when pitted against the will of God! When you wrestle with God, you always lose! Jacob suddenly catches on—this is no ordinary mugger. This is God! Incapacitated now and duly humbled, Jacob stops fighting God and implores His blessing. But before blessing Jacob, God insists that Jacob acknowledge who and what he really was—a despicable sinner in need of God's grace. "What is your name?" God asks. Did He not know Jacob? Of course He did. But part of the pain of breaking Jacob's pride was getting Jacob to admit the truth about himself. "Pain plants the flag of reality in the fortress of a rebel heart" (Anonymous). One's name represented one's character, and the meaning of Jacob's name described him to a tee: "Heel-grabber, deceiver, cheater." By this point in his life, Jacob had fully earned his handle! He was the prideful poseur of all poseurs, the prideful pretender of all pretenders, the prideful imposter of all imposters. God already knew this. He just wanted Jacob to acknowledge the sad truth. So he demanded to know, "Jacob, are you (finally!) ready to admit who you really are?" Jacob was. He broke and confessed, "I am Jacob."

Jacob's wrestling match is a spiritual parable of how God works in human hearts. Instead of vaporizing us for our sin, He wrestles with us through the vicissitudes of life, breaking us of our pride so that He can bless us with His power. F. B. Meyer puts

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it this way, "Whatever it is that enables a soul, whom God designs to bless, to stand out against Him, God will touch. It may be the pride of wealth; or of influence; or of affection: but it will not be spared—God will touch it. It may be something as natural as a sinew; but if it robs a man of spiritual blessing, God will touch it."<sup>5</sup>

"God will touch it." Not necessarily the wealth or the influence or the affection, but the *pride* anchored in those things.

That's a kindhearted gesture from a loving heavenly Father, not a threat from a heartless ogre. Jacob needed God's touch, and would later be grateful for it all his life. Same with young David. The way the Bible describes him, David was a sitting duck for the ravages of pride and the inevitable downfall of illusory superiority and the winner's curse. Remember the prophet's physical description of the young David in 1 Samuel 16:12? "He was glowing with health and had a fine appearance and handsome features." Now put David's movie star mug alongside his other known attributes. He was powerfully athletic, a born leader, whip-smart, a practitioner of the poet's art, and played a mean electric guitar (or harp, rather). He was the ancient equivalent of a professional football player, rock star, thespian, and movie star all rolled into one. Talented, good-looking young buck like that, why even think he needed God? Pride goes before a fall (Prov. 16:18), and David had all the inducements to a world-class pride that would have precipitated a catastrophic fall before he ever got started.

That's why God mercifully, lovingly, and graciously broke David's

pride and humbled him as an outcast, possibly illegitimate son relegated by a dismissive father to the sheepfold. God had big plans for David, and didn't want pride to make him fall. David's pride was broken early, and his resulting humble desire that God get all glory later gave him confidence that, even though he had to face Goliath, it was really just him facing Goliath on God's behalf. Knowing he was weak but God was strong made David dauntless. And it will also make Christians and churches brave as we embrace our brokenness and pursue God's glory.

One of my own personal seasons of painful, blessed breaking by "Wrestle River" began on October 7, 1986, with the emergency C-section birth of our third daughter Bonnie (whose due date was December 23!). My wife Alice had gone in for a routine prenatal checkup in which her doctor discovered she'd developed preeclampsia, a deadly condition in expectant mothers that produces dangerously high blood pressure that can only be lowered by the birth of the baby. Her pressure was so extreme that the doctor gently moved her to a prone position and quietly, calmly told her not to move until a nurse could grab a wheelchair and take her immediately to the hospital. He was terrified that she might stroke out and die right there in his office! I'll never forget him calling me at work from that very examination room to say that he needed to do an emergency C-section to save Alice's life. "But the baby," I said. "It's too early, isn't it?" The child (at that point, we didn't even know if our baby was a boy or girl) was due in late December. But I was talking to the doctor on October 7. I did the math. Two and a half months early? Ten weeks premature? "Could our baby even survive that C-section?" I asked. "I truly don't know," the doctor replied. "What I do know is that if we don't take the child right away, we may lose both mother and child before the day is out. What do you want to do?"

Thus began my own personal Jabbok River breaking experience. Just months before, I had graduated with high honors from Dallas Theological Seminary after helping plant a thriving young church during my four years of study. I was full of all kinds of theological vim (I still remembered all my Greek and Hebrew and systematic theology back then!) and vigor (I was a recognized young leader who was about to get my first call as a senior pastor to Irving Bible Church) and “feeling my oats” of success with relish. People looked to me for leadership and sought me out for answers, and that felt good. So good that I’d grown proud. Proud of what I knew and proud of what I could do and proud of where I was headed.

Then, unexpectedly, I’m fielding this most terrible question, this most breaking question I’ve ever been asked in my entire life. If we don’t deliver this child, your wife could die. “What do you want to do?” But if we deliver almost three months early, this child will most likely die. “What do you want to do?” Suddenly, I realized that I knew nothing. I could do nothing. And I didn’t know where to go. “What is your name now, Eric Andrew McQuitty?” whispered the Spirit of God. “Doc, we have to do the section” (this actually was one of those life-of-the-mother versus life-of-the-baby decisions that sometimes, even if rarely, have to be made). While I was hustling in to the hospital, the doctor ordered an ultrasound to see how big the baby was and discovered her gender. When I arrived, Alice and I spent a few tearful moments (while they were prepping her for surgery) coming up with our little girl’s name. Bonnie Caroleen McQuitty. I called our church’s prayer chain with Bonnie’s name and then prepped for the operating theater so I could be at Alice’s side during the surgery. While I scrubbed, I honestly answered the Spirit’s question. “My name is Scared, Weak, Fearful, and Lost.” And then it happened. “If it robs a man

of spiritual blessing, God will touch it.” My pride of achievement and self-sufficiency had me in great danger, and God graciously touched it and broke it for me in that moment.

The Cinderella part of Jacob’s story came after “God touched it” for him. “Then the man said, ‘Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome.’ Jacob said, ‘Please tell me your name.’ But he replied, ‘Why do you ask my name?’ Then he blessed him there. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, ‘It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared’” (Gen. 32:28–30).

When God changed Jacob’s name, it was to reflect a change in Jacob’s character. Jacob was now Israel. The Hebrew text here contains a great play on words. In the older versions, “Israel” is translated as “one who prevails with God,” but literally it means the opposite, “God who prevails with man.” Jacob didn’t struggle with God and win; God struggled with Jacob and won! So what does “Israel” mean? It truly has a double meaning: God brought Jacob to a place of surrender, but in that surrender, Jacob was victorious. In losing, he won! Jacob didn’t ultimately overcome in the crucible by exercising his strength, but by recognizing his weakness. God blessed Jacob not because he was triumphant, but because he became dependent. It wasn’t when Jacob fought God

**Jacob didn’t ultimately overcome in the crucible by exercising his strength, but by recognizing his weakness. God blessed Jacob not because he was triumphant, but because he became dependent. It wasn’t when Jacob fought God that he prevailed, but when he “wept and begged for his favor” (Hos. 12:4).**

that he prevailed, but when he “wept and begged for his favor” (Hos. 12:4). God refuses to yield to our strength, but He longs to be overcome by our repentance! Remember? “God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble. Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time” (1 Peter 5:5–6).

“We too should cross the creek alone and struggle with God over ourselves,” writes Max Lucado. “We too should stand eyeball to eyeball with him and be reminded that left alone we fail.

**Jacob had learned that it is better for us to limp through life leaning on God than to strut through life trusting in ourselves. Those whom God powerfully uses and courageously infuses are those who hobble across the finish line broken but invincible in God’s strength.**

We too should unmask our stained hearts and grimy souls and be honest with the One who knows our most secret sins.”<sup>6</sup> But whether we do or not is a choice that only we can make. Did you notice that, in the wrestling match, the Lord never did pin Jacob? Could He have? Absolutely, but He never did. What does that tell us? God will never make you anything you don’t want to be. He’ll wrestle with you but never pin you. You’re going to have to say “Lord,

I’ll not let you go, except you bless me.” If you do, you will be able to share the story of Jacob’s stint in the crucible of character that ends with a tribute to both the necessity and grace of brokenness. “The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip. Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the tendon attached to the socket of the hip, because the socket of

Jacob's hip was touched near the tendon" (32:31–32).

It would have been hilarious to see Jacob walking into camp the next day with his hair disheveled, his clothes torn, his face dirty, and his lip split. Rachel blurts out, "Jacob, what in the world happened to you?" He grins and replies, "I just got blessed." Perhaps she rejoined, "Looks to me like you just got broken." And Jacob, nodding in agreement, might truly have said, "Same thing!" The New Testament contains this gem. "By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph's sons, and worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff" (Heb. 11:21). Why was he leaning on his staff? Because he'd been crippled at Jabbok. Everywhere he went, he went with a crutch, because God had broken him. And all of his life he worshiped leaning. Jacob had learned that it is better for us to limp through life leaning on God than to strut through life trusting in ourselves. Those who strut will eventually fall. But those whom God powerfully uses and courageously infuses are those who hobble across the finish line broken but invincible in God's strength, humbled but unstoppable in God's power. Such is not just the necessity, but the beauty of brokenness.

So it was with me that afternoon thirty years ago at Medical City Dallas Hospital. My silly pride broken by facing my utter helplessness, I stood by Alice's side in the operating room and watched the doctor lift my little one-pound-twelve-ounce daughter from womb to world. Tears streamed from my eyes and absolutely drenched my surgical mask as I watched a skilled medical team insert a central line into a tiny artery and rush Bonnie to the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit, where they worked around the clock to bring that child back from the brink of death numerous times. Alice made a swift recovery, but Bonnie was not only a tiny baby; she was a very sick baby as well. Every passing day was a new river-wrestling experience for Alice and me as God

broke our pride and prostrated us every morning with desperate prayer to Him for Bonnie's life with Dr. Mitch Voelker, Bonnie's neonatal doc. We also visited Bonnie as a family twice a day, in utter weakness and helplessness, holding older siblings Julie (5) and Liz (3) up to the NICU windows so they could see their little sis all hooked up in the incubator. I was further humbled and blessed as our church rallied around us, cooking meals and doing our laundry (and learning the brand and condition of our underwear and socks!). Daily broken. Daily humbled. Daily blessed. Every day for ten weeks. When Bonnie reached the whopping weight of four pounds, they let us bring our little girl home on her actual due date, two days before Christmas. She's an all-grown-up Cinderella story now, a veritable miracle of God and for years a committed foreign missionary in a very difficult field. And nobody knows better than I that God alone did that. Nobody knows better than I that God (not I) alone gets all the glory for it too (and everything else), all the time. And for the last thirty years of ministry (which began just months after Bonnie came home), I've gratefully experienced the truth of John Eldredge's words. "True strength does not come out of bravado. Until we are broken, our life will be self-centered, self-reliant; our strength will be our own. So long as you think you are really something in and of yourself, what will you need God for? I don't trust a man who hasn't suffered; I don't let a man get close to me who hasn't faced his wound."<sup>7</sup> David was a broken man who faced his wound and killed a giant. Jacob was a broken man who faced his wound and wrestled with God. Both were hurt deeply by God as a prelude to being used greatly by God as eminently courageous servants of God. That's the way to brave. And that's the beauty of brokenness.

## Chapter 6

# THE BEAUTIFUL BROKEN

My God, I have never thanked Thee for my thorns. I have thanked Thee a thousand times for my roses, but not once for my thorns. I have been looking forward to a world where I shall get compensation for my cross: but I have never thought of my cross as itself a present glory.

Teach me the glory of my cross: teach me the value of my thorn.  
Shew me that I have climbed to Thee by the path of pain. Shew me that my tears have made my rainbow. —GEORGE MATHESON

But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. —2 CORINTHIANS 12:9–10

My title for this chapter may strike you as a classic oxymoron if you don’t understand how I’m using the word “broken.” So please allow me to explain! I live in Texas, where ranchers regularly “break” wild, fiercely strong-willed horses. This does not mean those ranchers hurt, wound, or punish their (often *very* valuable) mares and stallions. On the contrary, it means that they place their animals in circumstances that subdue their defiant wills and thus focus their immense power and strength on great achievement. If you’ve ever seen a highly trained Texas cutting horse in action, you’ve seen a magnificent creature whose initial “breaking” was the first step to ultimate flourishing.

David's Cinderella-story upbringing as the youngest of six sons was the "circumstance" that God planned in his life to "break" David's pride early in favor of a humble desire that God

**God only used Moses when broken of his temper, Paul when broken of his arrogance, Peter when broken of his independence, and Jacob when broken of his self-sufficiency.**

get all glory. So it is for us all. Our "breaking" experiences are the result of living in a broken world with people broken with us by sin (our own and others') and circumstances beyond our control.

Without God's higher perspective, I naturally hate these circumstances because they are generally painful, usually unfair, and always highly aggravating. In this way, I am so different from God, and probably so are you. He can make broken things powerfully useful in ways that I'm normally oblivious to until it actually happens. God only used Moses when broken of his temper, Paul when broken of his arrogance, Peter when broken of his independence, and Jacob when broken of his self-sufficiency. Vance Havner confirms God's penchant for the beautiful broken. "God uses broken things. Broken soil to produce a crop, broken clouds to give rain, broken grain to give bread, broken bread to give strength. It is the broken alabaster box that gives forth perfume."<sup>1</sup> And it was the brokenness that God allowed in David's life that gave him poor-in-spirit confidence that, even though it was Goliath in front of him, it was God behind him. This is our compelling hope too—that the courageous fragrance of poor-in-spirit lives broken and poured out will produce three beautiful results in our lives: our hearts will be rehabilitated, our newfound authenticity will empower us, and our humble confidence will prevail.

## The Beauty of a Rehabilitated Heart

In Florence's Academia Museum, you can see four partially finished sculptures by Michelangelo Bounarotti collectively known as the *Captives*. These were figures the great artist intended to use on the tomb of Pope Julius, but midway through the project he decided not to use them and so ceased work on them. There is a hand protruding here, a torso of a man there, a leg, part of a head, all still sunk in stone. Theodore Roder writes of the *Captives*, "When I looked at those partial figures, they stirred up in me a deep longing to be completed—an ache to be set free from that which distorts and disguises, imprisons and inhibits my humanness, my wholeness. But as with those statues, I cannot liberate myself. For that I need the hand of another."<sup>2</sup>

When I saw the *Captives* statues a couple of years ago, I had the same gut-level reaction as Roder. I long for freedom, but freedom only comes from having my stony heart broken and rehabbed by God. What is the "heart" in Scripture? John Eldredge explains the "heart" this way: "The Bible sees the heart as the source of all creativity, courage, and conviction. It is the source of our faith, our hope, and of course, our love. It is the 'wellspring of life' within us (Prov. 4:23), the very essence of our existence, the center of our being, the fount of our life."<sup>3</sup> Sin is a great enemy of our hearts, though. As broken people living in a broken world, our selfishness and pride and lust and hate and greed and bitterness and rage and violence and deceit clog our spiritual arteries. Even as born-again followers of Jesus, we can struggle with spiritual arteriosclerosis. We can grow hard-hearted as if spiritually encased in stone. In a sense, all of our hearts are captive until God sets us free.

But good news: that's exactly what He promised He'd do! "I

will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws” (Ezek. 36:26–27). Heart rehab. That’s what the gospel promises. “A new heart.” The “hand of another,” the Lord Jesus Christ, will chisel off our hearts of stone and help us become all God intended us to be. He wants to set us free from sins that distort and inhibit us. That’s where brokenness comes in. God uses pain to chisel the stone and rehab our hearts.

The problem is, rehabbing our hearts is a painful process that we often, understandably, resist to our heart-health’s detriment. As Alan Nelson says,

What happens when we resist the pruning process, when our difficult circumstances do not result in a yielding of our soul? I call this being broken in the wrong place. People who resist the elements that seek to tenderize their spirits usually end up as the walking wounded. They are all around us in our offices, homes, schools, and even churches. Perhaps the most common walking wounded is the person who is sour and bitter, who has an underground river of anger ready to burst through the surface like a geyser. Some carry the agonizing hurt inflicted by a parent, spouse, pastor, or boss. Others blame God directly for the pain of their broken dreams and lack of fulfillment.<sup>4</sup>

Here’s the challenge that lies before all who seek the way of brave. It passes through brokenness, and each of us as individual pilgrims has the choice to be the broken beautiful or to be the broken bitterful. C. S. Lewis trenchantly describes the stakes of that choice. “Every time you make a choice you are turning the

central part of you, the part of you that chooses, into something a little different from what it was before. And taking your life as a whole, with all your innumerable choices, all your life long you are slowly turning this central thing either into a heavenly creature or into a hellish creature; either into a creature that is in harmony with God, and with other creatures, and with itself, or else into one that is in a state of war and hatred with God, and with its fellow-creatures, and with itself.”<sup>5</sup> When David was broken early in his life, he established the pattern of turning, not away from God in bitter hatred, but toward God in humble trust. One clue to this reality is found in God’s words about David in the New Testament. “After removing Saul, he made David their king. God testified concerning him: ‘I have found David son of Jesse, a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do’” (Acts 13:22–23). God knew David was a man after His own heart because brokenness had humbled his pride. God knew David was a man after His own heart because brokenness had made him obedient. That’s the new heart that the gospel promises. Having broken us, He wants to make us beautiful.

In 1464, the City Council of Florence commissioned a sculptor to carve a giant statue of a biblical character to stand in front of city hall. Agostino di Duccio went to the quarry and marked off a nineteen-foot slab to be cut from the white marble. However, when the block was removed, it fell, leaving a deep fracture down one side. The sculptor declared the stone useless and demanded another, but the council refused. Consequently, the gleaming block of marble lay on its side for thirty-eight years. Then, in 1501, the council asked Michelangelo if he would complete the project. He locked himself inside his workshop to chisel the stone for three years. When the work was finished, it took forty-nine men five days to bring it to city hall. For six hundred years, people have

flocked from around the world to see Michelangelo's fourteen-foot sculpture we know today simply as *David*. Unlike with the *Captives*, the great artist had completed his chiseling and totally freed his masterpiece from stone, just like God had done thirteen centuries before in rehabbing the flesh-and-blood David's heart.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Beauty of an Authentic Soul**

One of the scariest places to live one's life is behind a mask. All is well if the mask stays in place. But just let it slip ever so slightly, and the terror of "unmasking" stalks our soul. Will people discover that I'm not as confident, omni-talented, and impervious to pressure as the "persona" I've so assiduously constructed would lead them to believe? Once more, John Eldredge writes, "We are hiding, every last one of us. Well aware that we, too, are not what we were meant to be, desperately afraid of exposure, terrified of being seen for what we are and are not, we have run off into the bushes. We hide in our office, at the gym, behind the newspaper and mostly behind our personality. Most of what you encounter when you meet a man is a façade, an elaborate fig leaf, a brilliant disguise."<sup>7</sup> So Walter Anderson raises a penetrating question: "Hundreds of times I have looked into the eyes of a successful person and asked, 'When it is dark and you are alone, do you ever say to yourself, What will I do when they find out I'm me?'"<sup>8</sup> That's the fundamental fearfulness all who nervously manage inauthentic souls, and I admit that some form of that question pops into my own mind every time I stand to teach the Scriptures to a group of people. "What will I do when they find out I'm me?" Yep. Whether I like it or not, that question still occasionally percolates at the subconscious level in my pastor brain! But I suspect I am not alone in my tendency to hide. Since the infamous first

fig leaf, covering up our true selves and struggles and pain is the default mode of the human race.

I got my first fig leaf in the fourth grade. Our family had moved from West Virginia to a very small town in Alabama just in time for me to start a new school, where I soon felt ostracized and, as a result, worthless. For months. And then spring came, along with outside recesses and slow-pitch softball. On that day the cool kids were choosing sides to play, and naturally I got chosen last and made to wait till last to hit. But when I made it up to bat, a life-changing event occurred. Much to my own amazement, and especially to the surprise of the other kids, I smashed the first pitch I got right out of the place. It went so far, nobody even moved to get it. They just all watched me round the bases with astonishment and gaping mouths. Their response was not lost on me. I *loved* it! I found life in it. I wanted more of it. A lot more of it!

So I began right there and then to construct my façade of omnicompetence, my elaborate fig leaf of athletic prowess, my brilliant disguise of competitive success. Game on! I spent the next twenty years desperately driven to protect my soul from the pain of rejection by graduating high school in the top five as a multi-sport letterman (all-district on my Texas football team) who was also president of the National Honor Society who got a football scholarship to college. No more fourth grade misery for me! I kept the pedal to the metal in college, making the dean's list and graduating with high honors. I went ahead and did basically the same thing through two postgraduate degrees. No more getting chosen last for the team on the playground, just relentless running and careful façade-building for this son of an Irish immigrant. But all the time

**Since the infamous first fig leaf, covering up our true selves and struggles and pain is the default mode of the human race.**

I wondered, “What will I do when they find out I’m me?!” Then I read Brennan Manning and gratefully marveled to know that I was not alone, that my story was his story, too. “When I was eight, the imposter, or false self, was born as a defense against pain. The impostor within whispered, ‘Brennan, don’t ever be your real self anymore because nobody likes you as you are. Invent a new self that everybody will admire and nobody will know.’ So I became a good boy—polite, well-mannered, unobtrusive, and deferential. . . . and was stalked every waking moment by the terror of abandonment and the sense that nobody was there for me.”<sup>9</sup>

All these years later, I’m convinced that God let Brennan and me (and perhaps you, too?) go on this wild goose chase because He knew it’s the only way I’d learn that the courage we create with our imposter selves is a chimera! There is no game you can win,

no award you can receive, no achievement you can attain, no acclaim you can command that permanently grants you reprieve from the question, “What will I do when they find out I’m me?” The only thing that can grant such a reprieve is brokenness, which leads to vulnerability, which leads to beauty.

In a famous TED Talk with over thirty million views to date, Brené Brown spoke these words of wisdom: “whole-hearted people . . . are willing to let go of who they thought they should be in order to be who they

were. . . . They fully embraced vulnerability. They believed that what made them vulnerable made them beautiful. This is what I

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have found: To let ourselves be seen, deeply seen, vulnerably seen . . . is to love with our whole hearts.”<sup>10</sup> Sometimes God knows that it’s too hard for us to do alone what needs to be done. Like Michaelangelo’s *Captives*, we need the help of another to free us, and God does that through breaking us. This painful process of exposing our weakness and need removes the very basis of our imposter’s fear—the fear of being exposed. And so as firefighters neutralize racing wildfires by preemptive, controlled burning, so God neutralizes the paralyzing fear of exposure by preemptive exposure. He lovingly breaks us by poking holes in our façade, plucking our elaborate fig leaves, and revealing our brilliant disguises. With nothing left to be exposed, we also have nothing left to fear. So writes Ann Voskamp. “When you know you’re never alone in the fear, you lose the fear of the fear. Not being afraid of even being afraid—may be the bravest way of all.”<sup>11</sup>

That’s exactly what happened to Ronnie Stanley back in 1961. It had been a tough year for this senior quarterback for the Baylor Bears. He’d lost his starting job to a sophomore underclassman. Ignored by the head coach and banished to the bench, he still hoped for one more chance. It came in the last minute of the last game of Stanley’s football career. The setting was the 1961 Gotham Bowl, an ill-fated promotional attempt in the early 60s to create the Rose Bowl of the east. Played in the creaking old Polo Grounds in New York City, “The Gotham” that year featured unbeaten Utah State against underdog Baylor on a frigid December afternoon. The crowd? A sparse few hundred. The weather? Freezing and bleak. The music? The New York City Department of Sanitation Band. They proudly provided half-time entertainment clad in their occupational “uniforms”—dingy work overalls. The competition? A yawner. Baylor racked up a 24–3 lead by game’s end.

Ronnie Stanley’s opportunity for redemption came in the

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final seconds of this forgettable game. The coach put him in for the last play, albeit at great disadvantage. His arm was cold, but he had instructions to throw deep. As he faded back to pass, an opponent hammered him, breaking Stanley's leg just as he released the football. His "wounded duck" pass was intercepted and returned for hapless Utah's only touchdown. My heart goes out to Ronnie

Stanley. As an old high-school quarterback, I've thrown my share of fluttering interceptions and endured my share of broken bones. It's a sickening feeling to descend so precipitously from the glory status you'd dreamed to the "goat" status you'd dreaded. But in any disappointment contest, I readily surrender to Stanley.

He spent that night alone in a New York hospital room while his teammates celebrated their win at the Peppermint Lounge, a famous Manhattan nightspot. Between pain pills, embarrassing memory flashes of his pitiful pass attempt and the humiliating season that preceded it tortured Ronnie Stanley. Here he was, a former star ignominiously bereft of his starter status, shunned by the coach, playing his last down of football on a dismal day in a dilapidated stadium before a few belligerent fans and a garbage department band. How's that for going out with a bang? He'd entered a meaningless game for a meaningless play and a meaningless injury with the result that his suddenly terminated football career seemed a meaningless waste. Now he would spend Christmas in a cast, away from home, all alone, and literally, broken.

But Ronnie's turned out to be a beautiful broken. Ronnie

Stanley wrote these words to a Dallas sportswriter twenty years after his humiliating demise in the Gotham Bowl:

That fractured tibia was one of the best things that ever happened to me. Placing a cast on our leg is not supposed to help your eyesight, but my vision cleared remarkably with a cast, some pain and some time . . . While recovering from the broken leg, my eyesight now saw a wonderful mother and dad and sisters. It also helped me see the real worth of the girl I was dating. You know, when you engage in football for eight to nine years in a row, it's like heroin. It's difficult to separate yourself from it. You are fearful that there won't be any "me" left, after the athlete has been removed. The broken leg served as a cleavage plane and I broke free, much to my benefit.

I married that girl and I still love her. She's gotten more attractive to me. I have three fine sons and a beautiful daughter . . . I guess we all should be more grateful and thankful for everything in our lives, yes, for the bad, also. Sometimes bad is not bad, it's good. I've been here now since 1970 and my leg carries me for a three mile jog every other day along a sandy road in Hopkins County and I sometimes think of the Polo Grounds, the band with the funny uniforms and the trip I missed to the Peppermint Lounge.<sup>12</sup>

That letter was written on stationary from the Sulphur Springs Medical-Surgical Clinic and signed: "Ronald T. Stanley, M.D." For this broken quarterback, the "bad" was meant for "good" (remember, however, that sometimes bad is still bad, even though God promises to bring good from it), and he became a faithful husband, a loving father, and a beloved physician with a rehabbed heart and an authentic soul . . . what a beautiful thing.

## The Beauty of Quiet Courage

The quiet courage that Ronnie Stanley displayed in moving past his humiliation at the Gotham Bowl is also beautiful. It took gumption for him to overcome, not just the pain of a broken leg, but the end of his dream of becoming a player in the National Football League. The Gotham Bowl had been a *breaking* experience for him, yet Jesus says it was also a *blessed* experience for him. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:3).

Power and position in any kingdom, it would seem, comes as a reward for a job well done, a task successfully finished, a résumé well-burnished with rich accolades. Just watching TV ads teaches this, right? In our worldly kingdom, “blessed are those who fly to luxury vacation spots on tropical islands and lie in chaise lounge chairs, the only people on an enormous white beach, for they shall be satisfied. Blessed are those who have the latest smartphone, for they shall gaze on a screen swirling with color and shall get all the information they need just when they need it, and they shall be satisfied. Blessed are those who have outstanding kids. Verily I say to you, highly blessed are those who have a golden Labrador retriever bounding along on that slow-motion-videod day of playing with the kids in the park, for they shall be the envy of real families everywhere, and they shall be satisfied.”<sup>13</sup>

But no. Jesus says otherwise. The very success and wealth and self-confidence that the world defines as blessing, He says can be a huge spiritual distraction. Jesus said, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!” (Mark 10:23). Those who are rich may not apprehend their true spiritual powerlessness until it’s too late because their money may make them think they can manage their lives apart from God. The great challenge here is

to recognize that poverty of spirit is a continuing reality, not a fixable short-term problem. We are desperate and dependent on God, and we're blessed in our desperation because entrance into Christ's kingdom is counterintuitive.

Hence the gift to faithful Christ followers of living a joyful and fruitful life in God's kingdom comes as a reward for *stopping* already with the fig leaves and façades to live gratefully as those who God made them to be. God did not make Ronnie to be a pro quarterback. God did make Ronnie to be a beloved physician. But it took a broken tibia to push the eventual Dr. Stanley in the right direction.

Blessed then are those with heart-rehabbed, authentic, poor-in-spirit souls! They, like all of us, whether we recognize it or not, have come to the end of their ropes. It's just that they are no longer too proud to admit it. Their refusal to live in denial gives them the power of authenticity and puts the kingdom squarely in their grasp. As Clarence Jordan wrote, "God does not force his kingdom upon anybody but gladly gives it to all who know they're losers without him and humbly seek his help."<sup>14</sup>

Those are the ones who, in coming to the end of their fig-leaf façades, have also come to embrace the true, authentic selves God made them to be. Young David had a lot of stone chiseled away from his soul by the breaking experiences in his life. That painful

**God has a special purpose for all of His children's lives. The way He deals with you in your life is not a duplicate of His dealing with anybody else, anywhere else. That does not mean God is unfair. It means that He has a different purpose for and glory in and about each life.**

process was a great blessing, though, because when the stone façade crumbled, what remained behind fairly melted David's heart with its beauty. "For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well" (Ps. 139:13–14). As David was, you and I are—one-of-a-kind people! God made twenty-five thousand varieties of orchids, but He made billions of varieties of people—each one as a heavenly original.

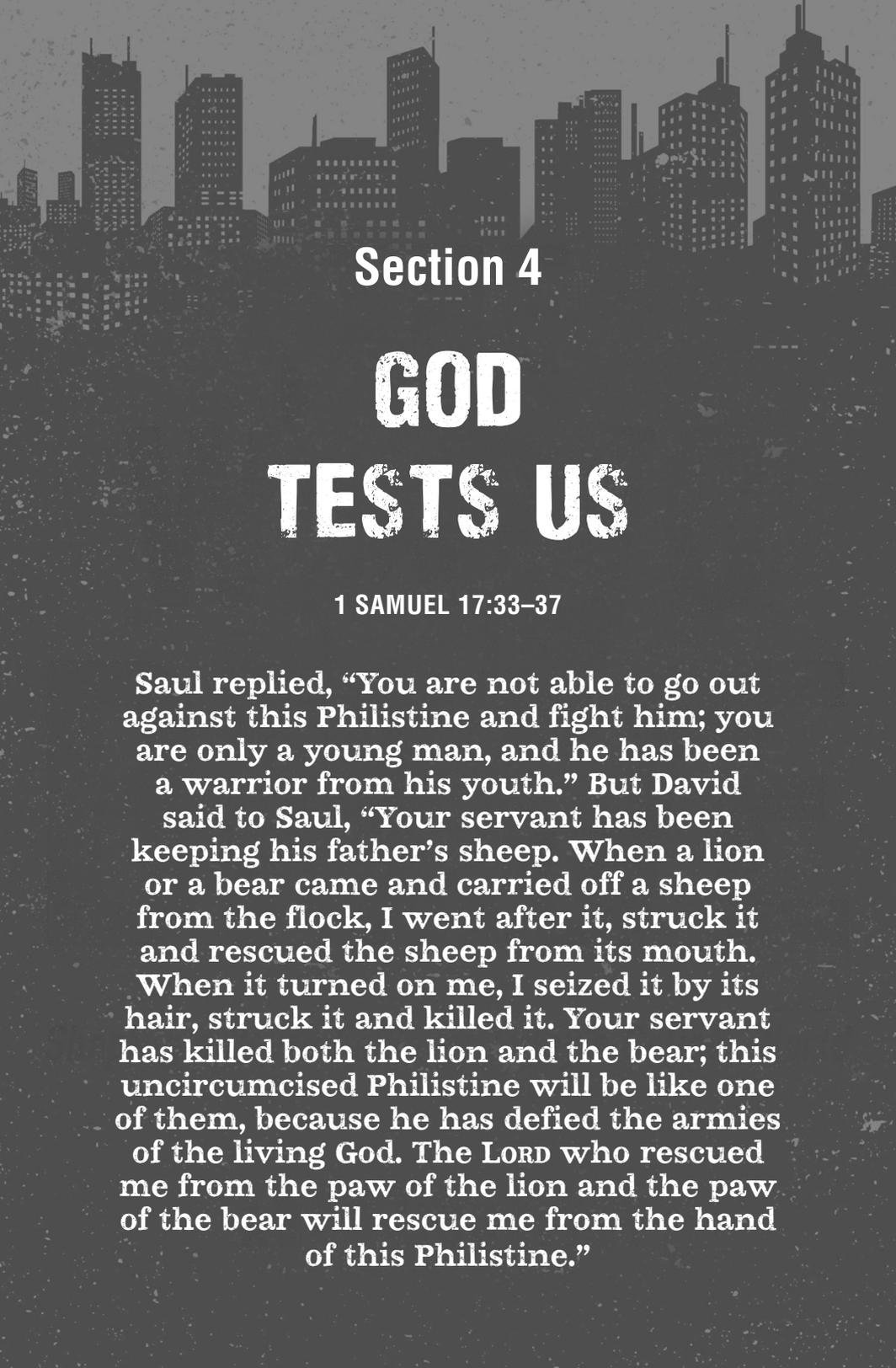
But also as David was, you and I are—one-of-a-kind persons handcrafted for a divine purpose. "Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be" (v. 16). God has a special purpose for all of His children's lives. The way He deals with you in your life is not a duplicate of His dealing with anybody else, anywhere else. Some people have a relatively smooth life; others suffer greatly. Some people seem to get all the breaks; others encounter one heartache after another. That does not mean God is unfair. It means that He has a different purpose for and glory in and about each life. Our response to God's unique purpose and plan for each of us should be to make a declaration of independence from the expectations of the world and start performing for an audience of one—the Lord Himself. This is true maturity: the ability to do what God has called and gifted me to do and not care what people think!

This also is the way to brave. Those who are poor in spirit through being broken have lost the fear of exposure by embracing the person God made them to be. The power of authenticity flows from losing the fear of the fear. Gordon MacDonald points out how this happened in Moses's life.

Moses encountered failure when he impulsively killed an Egyptian. He paid for his mistake over a 40 year stretch in the desert . . . the man who emerges at the other end of the 40 years is different. Still a bit defiant at times? Sure. But nevertheless, he's now a listener. He can stand his ground in tough moments. He hungers for God's glory, demonstrates obedience (usually), and seems to truly grasp God's purposes for his people. The prefailure Moses would never have had the right stuff to lead those people through the wilderness. I wonder if Moses would ever have learned to do things God's way if it had not been for his earlier failure and its consequences?<sup>15</sup>

No need to wonder; the answer based on unbroken human nature is a resounding no! It was God's breaking of Moses during those forty years that humbled his heart and put him on the way to brave. As Ann Voskamp stated, "Not being afraid of even being afraid—may be the bravest way of all."<sup>16</sup>

Knowing that failures help us learn to do things God's way means that we never have to fear being afraid in the first place. Moses learned that, and we can as well. So let's embrace being the beautiful broken.



## Section 4

# GOD TESTS US

1 SAMUEL 17:33-37

Saul replied, “You are not able to go out against this Philistine and fight him; you are only a young man, and he has been a warrior from his youth.” But David said to Saul, “Your servant has been keeping his father’s sheep. When a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock, I went after it, struck it and rescued the sheep from its mouth. When it turned on me, I seized it by its hair, struck it and killed it. Your servant has killed both the lion and the bear; this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, because he has defied the armies of the living God. The LORD who rescued me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will rescue me from the hand of this Philistine.”

**ONLY A TESTED FAITH** is a courageous faith. David's courage in volunteering to fight the giant was not a leap of bravado, but a considered decision.

God had stair-stepped David's faith to Goliath heights through the testing of lion and bear. Each new victory supplemented David's confidence-quotient to such a degree that when the ultimate test menaced, David's faith answered.

Knowing that his was a tested and proven faith made David brave. And it will make us and our families brave too if we do not resist, but welcome God's testing of our faith as well. As James writes, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything" (1:2-4). Indeed, let it finish its work.

## Chapter 7

# LIONS AND TIGERS AND BEARS (AND GIANTS), OH MY!

A great part of courage is the courage of having done the thing before.

—RALPH WALDO EMERSON

A day may come when the courage of men fails, when we forsake our friends and break all bonds of fellowship, but it is not this day. An hour of wolves and shattered shields, when the age of men comes crashing down, but it is not this day. This day we fight! By all that you hold dear on this good Earth, I bid you stand, Men of the West! —ARAGORN IN *LORD OF THE RINGS: THE RETURN OF THE KING*

I have to think it was a royal pain for David to shepherd sheep in lion and bear country. Not only did these predators pose a constant threat to his sheep, they posed a constant threat to David's very life. Their presence meant that watching over the sheep was a matter of life and death. No half-asleep sidelong glances while sipping piña coladas and catching up on the *Jerusalem Post* sports page. David had to be fixated on a threat that he dreaded ever materializing. Who wants to wage single combat in the dead (pun intended) of night with lions and bears, oh my (sorry, no tigers

in Israel), especially when they're armed with powerful agility and razor claws and your only weapon is a string and a rock? Manifestly an undesirable situation.

Yet, it came to David, again and again, with unmitigated constancy and increasing ferocity. "Your servant has been keeping his father's sheep. When a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock, I went after it, struck it and rescued the sheep from its mouth. When it turned on me, I seized it by

its hair, struck it and killed it" (1 Sam. 17:34–35). When

I was sixteen, I liked to play basketball and watch movies.

But David's adolescence was spent matching brawn and wits with wild animals that wanted to kill him and eat his sheep. I had a far tamer time

of it for sure, but just as certain is that the untamed tests of David's youth fitted him

far more than me for extraordinary courage that would

show up on a distant day in a deep valley against a fearsome giant.

Economist Nassim Taleb "coined the phrase 'anti-fragile' to encapsulate a quality of resilience and security that can be built into economic systems so they can withstand unforeseeable disruptive events."<sup>1</sup> The way to brave lies through times of testing and trials that make us "anti-fragile." David's courage against Goliath was a product of his testing by the lion and the bear. "Your servant has killed both the lion and the bear; this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, because he has defied the armies of the living

**God had tested David with lions and bears, not to harm him physically or incapacitate him spiritually, but to strengthen his faith and fortify his confidence. Only shepherds who've killed lions and bears even think of stepping into the ring with giants.**

God. The LORD who rescued me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will rescue me from the hand of this Philistine” (1 Sam. 17:36–37).

God had tested David with lions and bears, not to harm him physically or incapacitate him spiritually, but to strengthen his faith and fortify his confidence. Only shepherds who’ve killed lions and bears even think of stepping into the ring with giants. Each new victory supplemented David’s confidence-quotient to such a degree that when the ultimate test menaced, David’s faith answered. In this way God shaped a David faith for a Goliath world. And in this way God will shape our faith as well. It’s just how He does it. As James writes, “Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything” (James 1:2–4). Testing, then, is an essential experience on our way to brave because God uses it to mature and complete our faith by *broadening*, *deepening*, and *focusing* our faith.

### **Testing Broadens Faith**

One of my heroes growing up was the late great Charles Schultz’s cartoon creation Charlie Brown. For Charlie Brown, nothing in life ever went just right. He couldn’t get the Little Red-Haired Girl’s attention. Lucy always pulled the football away when he tried to kick it. His own dog Snoopy always outsmarted him. And his ball team never won (ever). In one of my favorite strips, even the simple pleasure of flying a kite eluded Charlie Brown when he got his caught in a tree. So when he hears his friend Peppermint Patty say, “I need to talk to someone who knows what it’s like to feel like

a fool . . . someone who knows what it's like to be humiliated . . . someone who's been disgraced, beaten and degraded . . . someone who's been there," Charlie Brown just throws up his arms as if to say, "I'm your man." I've been your man too, Peppermint Patty.

My natural response when trials come my way is the same as a guy who was waiting at a crowded New York subway stop at the front of the line. The train stopped, and the doors opened to reveal a very pale-looking man standing there. This man had been fighting motion sickness, but just as the door opened he lost the battle. He upchucked all over the guy in line, after which the doors closed and the train pulled out. The guy turned to the crowd, threw his hands in the air and cried, "Why me?!" That is the operative question in every human heart when trials come. James answers that question concisely. "Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance" (James 1:2-3).

But what happens when the joy and contentment that James speaks about doesn't happen immediately in our trials? Sometimes the angst and lament we feel as we cry out "Why me?!" lingers for a while. Sometimes that pain sticks around, despite our knowledge that God is in control and trials are for a purpose. Oftentimes the weight of heartache and sorrow over a trial far outweigh the knowledge that when my faith is tested I'm learning perseverance. It's okay to cry "Why me?!" Jesus identifies with us in our pain and trials. We should grieve the pain of this fallen world, but we can also embrace God's promises in faith and trust in His sovereignty. It's not either/or, but it is both/and.

Something that I have found helpful in painful times is to recognize that it's not just you and me that have our faith tested. It's *everyone*. Trials are inevitable for all: "*whenever* [not if] you face trials of many kinds." M. Scott Peck acknowledges that fact

in the first line of his old bestseller *The Road Less Travelled*: “Life is difficult.” Yes, life is difficult, but James assures us that for us as believers, it’s difficult *for a purpose*. We may not feel the truth of that statement in the moment, but God sends trials to broaden our faith in Him, to deepen our dependence on Him, to remind us that He is God.

Following the Winter Olympic Games a few years ago, Ameritrade aired an ad that I still love. It began by showing the US Olympic snowboarder Louie Vito standing hand-on-heart on the gold medal podium while the American National Anthem played. Then the ad takes us backwards on the timeline of Vito’s life. We see a clip of him as a young man performing advanced tricks (and falling hard) with the assistance of a long metal railing. The next clip shows the 2002 Louie as a teenager “catching air” on the slopes (and wiping out often). In other clips he’s a child practicing flips on a trampoline, unwrapping a snowboard on Christmas morning, and blowing out two candles on his birthday cake. The last scene shows Vito, who looks barely old enough to stand, snowboarding down a sloping front yard and then getting scooped up by an adult as these words appear on the screen: “Behind every big moment, there are lots of small ones.” That’s the encouragement that James offers to us on the way to brave. Lots of small moments (“trials of many kinds”) fit us out to succeed in the big moments when a mature and complete faith is so essential for success.

That’s the very reason the apostle Peter has such a glowing attitude toward trials. “In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is

revealed” (1 Peter 1:6–7). Peter probably wrote these words from Rome shortly before he was put to death under the brutal persecution of Emperor Nero in the mid-60s AD. A reign of terror had begun in the capital city when Christians were falsely blamed by him for a major fire in Rome. The brutality that followed was ruthless. It is to such horrors that Peter refers as suffering grief “in all kinds of trials . . . so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.” He holds that God does not allow his people to go through “all kinds of trials” (literally, “multicolored”) so that their faith fails, but rather so that their faith is refined. Hardships do not divert them *from* Christ; trials drive them *to* Christ so that their faith becomes broader and stronger and more beautiful for His glory.

A young man wanted to be a peach grower and invested everything he had in an orchard. Finally it blossomed, but a frost came and killed his peach crop. He told his pastor, “I’m done with God. Do you think I want to worship a God who cares for me so little that He will let a frost kill all of my peaches?” The old minister was silent for a few moments, then kindly said, “God loves you more than your peaches. He knows that while peaches do better without frost, it is impossible to grow the best men without frost. His object is to grow men, not peaches.”<sup>2</sup>

Here’s what a Christian knows that makes him have a peculiar response to trials: “God isn’t at work producing the circumstances *you* want. God is at work in bad circumstances to produce the *you* He wants.”<sup>3</sup> That’s good with me because the me my Living Savior wants is way better than any me I could ever hope to be. As the great George Whitefield wrote, “I have put my soul, as a blank, into the hands of Jesus Christ my Redeemer, and desired him to

write upon it what he pleases. I know it will be his own image.”<sup>4</sup>

In 1982, two Russian cosmonauts touched down after 211 days in the space station Salyut 7. At zero gravity, their muscles had atrophied due to complete lack of resistance. For a week they were unable to walk, and “after 30 days, they were still undergoing therapy for atrophied muscles and weakened hearts. . . . To counteract this, the Soviets. . . . invented the ‘penguin suit,’ a running suit laced with elastic bands” that “resisted every move the cosmonauts made, forcing them to exert extra strength.” In 1987, another “Soviet cosmonaut returned to the earth after 326 days in orbit,” but unlike those before him, this guy was in top shape the moment he got home. The penguin suit had helped the cosmonaut stay strong by adding resistance to his movements.<sup>5</sup> Sounds like *beneficial* trials to me!

So my friends, get ready for trials on the way to brave. And not just one. A steady stream. A constant exercise. A cascade of lions and tigers and bears and giants (oh my!) is God’s gift (albeit sometimes you might rather reject the gift because it causes too much pain) to broaden your faith from a narrow band of coverage to complete coverage of what may come. Trials mature your faith so that it can courageously interact with anything this world can throw at you! Think of it this way: God strengthens our character qualities by resisting them

**God strengthens our character qualities by resisting them with their opposites. We learn true peace in the midst of chaos. We learn to love by being around unlovely people. We learn true joy in the midst of tragedy, patience in the midst of waiting, and kindness in the face of cruelty.**

with their opposites. We learn true peace in the midst of chaos. We learn to love by being around unlovely people. We learn true joy in the midst of tragedy, patience in the midst of waiting, and kindness in the face of cruelty. As Ben Jonson says: “He knows not his own strength that hath not met adversity. Heaven prepares good men with crosses.”<sup>6</sup> So my friends, gladly don the penguin suit! It will keep you strong. Gladly welcome trials! They will broaden and complete your faith.

### **Testing Deepens Faith**

James continues to explain the lions and tigers and bears that God sends into our lives. “If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do” (James 1:5–8).

Not only does God send trials to broaden our faith, but to deepen it as well. Our faith grows deeper as we acquire wisdom—the ability to see life from God’s point of view. We can only gain such wisdom by getting close to God: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding” (Prov. 9:10).

So how do we get close to God? You guessed it! Trials. Trials rattle us out of complacency and cause us to truly seek and depend on Him. As J. I. Packer observed,

When we walk along a clear road feeling fine, and someone takes our arm to help us, likely we would impatiently shake him off; but when we are caught in rough country in the dark, with a storm brewing and our strength spent, and someone takes our arm to help us, we would thankfully lean on him. And God wants us to feel that our way through life is rough and perplexing, so that we may learn to lean on him thankfully. Therefore he takes steps to drive us out of self-confidence to trust in himself, to—in the classic scriptural phrase for the secret of the godly man’s life—“wait on the Lord.”<sup>7</sup>

This is why God allows troubles and perplexities of one sort and another into our lives. He wants us to learn how to hold on to Him. The reason the Bible spends so much time reiterating that God is a strong rock, a firm defense, and a sure refuge for the weak is that alone, we are weak, both mentally and morally, and dare not trust ourselves to find or follow the right road by our own devices. We desperately need His guidance. We deeply long for His wisdom. The good news is that when we’re confused and hurting and need the Lord, He promises to give us needed perspective, essential wisdom—without making us feel stupid or foolish, as He did in answer to this soldier’s Civil War prayer.

I asked God for strength that I might achieve. I was made weak that I might learn humbly to obey. I asked God for health that I might do greater things. I was given infirmity that I might do better things. I asked for riches that I might be happy. I was given poverty that I might be wise. I asked for power that I might have the praise of men. I was given weakness that I might feel the need of God. I asked for all things that I might enjoy life. I was given life that I might enjoy all

things. I got nothing that I asked for—but everything I had hoped for. Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered. I am among all men most richly blessed.<sup>8</sup>

But notice from James the requirement for receiving faith-deepening wisdom: asking without doubting. The word “doubt” (*diakrino*) literally means “a divided calling or judgment.” What is it, especially in times of trouble, that James says we have to make up our mind about? In context, the goodness of God about whom James has just asserted “He gives to all men generously and without reproach.” If that’s true, then God is a good, loving God who wants what’s best for us. To doubt the goodness of God in times of trial while seeking God’s help, James says, is to be a double-minded person, literally a “two-souled” man. Such a person has a fundamental internal conflict, approaching God for help in trials while secretly blaming and resenting God, asking for God’s deliverance while cursing God’s testing. How would you like it if your kid came to you and said, “Dad (or Mom), I think you’re a foolish old kook. By the way, can I have the car keys for tonight?” It’s likely that child will be walking. In the same way, those who come to God without having settled their opinion of Him are unstable, double-minded, and “should not expect to receive anything from the Lord.” To get wisdom from your trials, then, you have to make the call about the character of God. Andrew Murray demonstrates how it’s done:

In time of trouble, say, First, He brought me here. It is by His will I am in this strait place; in that I will rest. Next, He will keep me here in his love, and give me grace in this trial to behave as his child. Then say, He will make the trial a blessing, teaching me lessons he intends me to learn, and working in

me the grace he means to bestow. And last, say, in his good time he can bring me out again. How and when, he knows. Therefore, say, I am here (1) by God's appointment, (2) in His keeping, (3) under His training, (4) for His time."<sup>9</sup>

### **Testing Focuses Faith**

Finally, James gives us an eternal perspective on the tests and trials that God graciously sends into our lives. "Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him" (James 1:12). Why has God sent lions and tigers and bears (and giants) into all of our lives? Two reasons: to learn God's wisdom for temporal priorities in this world, and to focus our faith on eternal priorities in the world to come.

In regard to that first reason, just days before death the late great British journalist and Christian Malcolm Muggeridge observed that trials that seem in themselves to have no purpose are, in the end, indispensable: "As an old man . . . looking back on one's life it's one of the things that strikes you most forcibly—that the only thing that's taught one anything is suffering. Not success, not happiness, not anything like that. The only thing that really teaches one what life's about . . . is suffering, affliction."<sup>10</sup>

If life's about a good and loving God orchestrating all the events of our lives over time into a thing of beauty, then we can relax when the chips are down. We know that whatever the problem, it's not the end of the story. That sets us free to make the best of it. Things seem to turn out best for those who make the best of the way things turn out. And making the best of things is a choice that you and I must make. It's a choice Job made. He concentrated on God's plan for him. But it's important to point out that, even while

**Life's about a good and loving God orchestrating all the events of our lives over time into a thing of beauty. We know that whatever the problem, it's not the end of the story.**

Job remained faithful in the end, there were several chapters in the middle of Job when he grieved, lamented, mourned, and questioned God. He even said God's ways seemed cruel to him! "You have turned cruel to me; with the might of your hand you persecute me" (Job 30:21 ESV).<sup>11</sup> Yet, against the urging of his wife to curse God and die, he steadfastly kept his attention not on what was happening to him, but on how he could respond faithfully to it. That's job one for us as well—to respond faithfully and trust in Him no matter what trials come our way!

But, let me reiterate that while we may know this in our heads, when rubber meets the road and difficult trials come our way, getting to a place of trust and joy and contentment isn't easy or straightforward. In fact, more often than not, it proves very difficult. It's hard to trust in Him, it's easy to be bitter, and it's natural to lament and grieve. We have to come to a place of repentance and contentment through trials nevertheless, but that often is not a clean-cut or quick process—it may be filled with blood, sweat, and tears, laments and doubts, that test the genuineness of our faith and refine us.

The second reason God sends lions and tigers and bears into each of our lives is to focus our faith on eternal priorities in the world to come. During a particularly difficult season of trial and testing, the great evangelist John Wesley wrote: "I am a creature of a day, passing through life as an arrow through the air. I am a spirit, coming from God, and returning to God; just hovering over the great gulf; a few months hence I am no more seen; I drop

into an unchangeable eternity! I want to know one thing—the way to heaven.” God has trials to lead us all to the same faith-focusing conclusion: heaven, not earth, is our ultimate destination and therefore should be our earthly priority. Suffering is the motivation God provides us to take our eyes off temporal things so that we can see eternal realities.

The great apostle Paul’s perspective on trials, like John Wesley’s, is spiritually buoyant. “I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ” (Phil. 3:8 KJV). And like Paul and John Wesley, so Steven Curtis Chapman. Steven has five Grammys, dozens of Dove Awards, and over 11 million records sold. Early in 2017, he published a memoir, *Between Heaven and Earth*, in which he opens up about marital difficulties and the death of his five-year-old daughter. Bottom line. Those times of severe testing and heartache actually fueled his music by focusing his faith on eternal things. Steven said, “But Jesus tells us, ‘In this world you will have trouble.’ But then he says, ‘But take heart. I have overcome the world.’ He’s saying there’s another story being told, and if I didn’t believe that I would be an extremely bitter and angry man. Maria’s death underlined and solidified what I knew and believed, and made it more real. When there was nothing else to hold on to, I heard myself say, ‘God, I’m going to trust you and worship you, and that’s not because there’s an audience watching. I’m going to bless your name whether you give or take away.’”<sup>12</sup>

God wants to broaden and deepen and focus your faith through trials into a thing of magnificence that He can reward for all eternity. When trials come then, understand that God is readying you for glory. So cheer up, Charlie Brown, and “consider it all

joy . . . when you encounter various trials” (James 1:2 NASB)! Mark Batterson explains why.

God is in the résumé-building business. He is always using past experiences to prepare us for future opportunities. But those God-given opportunities often come disguised as man-eating lions. And how we react when we encounter those lions will determine our destiny. We can cower in fear and run away from our greatest challenges. Or we can chase our God-ordained destiny by seizing the God-ordained opportunity.

As I look back on my own life, I recognize this simple truth: The greatest opportunities were the scariest lions. Part of me has wanted to play it safe, but I’ve learned that taking no risks is the greatest risk of all.<sup>13</sup>

When the young shepherd David took his stand against Goliath in the Valley of Elah, I wonder if he breathed a prayer of thanks to God for the scary lions and bears of his not-too-distant past. They truly had been David’s greatest opportunity, for in defeating them he had gained a faith broad and deep and focused enough to courageously face the giant. These trials had shaped David’s faith for a Goliath world because he did not resist them as intruders but welcomed them as friends on the way to brave. It’s time for us to do the same!

## Chapter 8

# FAITH STANDS UP

The opposite for courage is not cowardice, it is conformity.  
Even a dead fish can go with the flow. —JIM HIGHTOWER

Courage is contagious. When a brave man takes a stand,  
the spines of others are often stiffened. —BILLY GRAHAM

The testing of our faith is God’s strategy for the deepening of our faith. Though often difficult and even painful, it is a gift from God because it moves us ahead on the way to brave. Some, however, willingly deceive themselves by rejecting out of hand “lions and tigers and bears (oh my!)” as unnecessary aggravations in what they consider our utopian postmodern age. Mark Sayers identifies the damage this mindset has done:

Millennials were privileged to be born during this post–Cold War period. Many came of age during an economic boom that lasted until the global financial crisis in 2008. This was also a period when education was permeated with the self-esteem ethos that emphasized feelings, and downplayed the possibility of disappointments and difficulties that strengthen us.

All this, coupled with the rise of social media, has given them inflated life expectations . . . because their teachers, parents, and leaders have encouraged them to live out a faulty life script.<sup>1</sup>

The greatest casualty of that “faulty life script” is a faith that stands up. Distrustful Christians without a tested faith cannot comprise a courageous church. We Christians in America need to regain a strong appreciation of the role of testing in the building of our faith. We need to thank God for the crucible, not vilify Him for it. It is a tested faith that runs deep, and a deep faith that stands strong in painful times and intimidating times and even dangerous times. Such deep-running, tested faith is a David faith, as exemplified on that day when the young shepherd approached an Elah Valley ringing with the painful taunts (matched by fearful sighs of the Israelite soldiers) of a blatantly intimidating and overtly dangerous giant named Goliath. David didn’t back down in fear. Rather, his faith moved him to stand up. If ours is a tested faith, it will move us to stand up too.

### **Faith Stands Up in Painful Times**

In the winter of 1984, my friend Dave Burchett and his wife Joni were not prepared for the shock of what they had anticipated would be a joyous occasion—the birth of their daughter Katie. Dave was with Joni in the delivery room when the doctor spoke the crushing words, “Your daughter has a birth defect.” Little Katie had anencephaly—the failure of the brain to develop—a rare terminal condition that occurs once every twenty thousand births. David and Joni’s little girl would never sit up, see, walk, or say their names. She would have constant seizures. And she would die in months.

In those days, I was a newly ordained associate pastor in David and Joni’s church, and their painful family trauma was my first challenge as a spiritual shepherd trying to minister to a hurting family. And Katie’s funeral was my very first funeral service

as a pastor. So you'll understand my personal struggle with this family's pain as the question rattled constantly in my brain, "Why would God let such a thing happen?" That's what many of you would like to know in the big fat middle of very painful times. Maybe your lions and tigers and bears have shown up as tragedies and sorrows. Your family split, your health failed, misfortune struck your business, an accident has plunged you into chronic physical pain, or you've borne the heartbreak of watching a loved one die. Maybe you just want to know: How is faith possible when hard things happen? How can my faith stand up in painful times?

Thousands of years ago, an afflicted saint named Job spent time in the furnace of suffering. In his affliction, he persevered because of a conviction he held about God: "He knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold" (Job 23:10). J. R. R. Tolkien called such testings "eucatastrophes"—literally, "good catastrophe"—because as Job declared, a powerful and loving God uses them to make greater good come from great evil. Hence the eucatastrophic song from Job's heart, which, having been broken by inexplicably losing his family and health, yet sounds forth as gold. The eucatastrophic song is a burning bush calling a stuttering fugitive named Moses to redeem his people. It echoes from Joseph, who came out of enslavement to redeem his people, and from Jonah, who emerged from the belly of the great fish with truth that saved a city, from a dozen impetuous disciples and from a Roman cross and from an empty tomb and from Paul, whose imprisonment in Rome opened not only the way to brave but a worldwide way for the gospel. It echoes from the fall of Jerusalem, which spread the flame of the gospel throughout the Roman Empire. It echoes from the martyrdom of the early Christians, whose blood became the seed of the church, from the fall of Rome, after which the victorious barbarian tribes were in turn vanquished by the

gospel, carrying its message across Europe. And it echoes even from the too-short life of a precious anacephalic child named Katie who never sat up or said “Mamma.”

When Katie Burchett died, I officiated her funeral and read these amazing words from her father Dave:

Katie . . . why did you live? Maybe to help give me new inspiration to make my life count. To not let little obstacles and weaknesses keep me from reaching my God-given potential. Katie, I’ll dedicate to you all the abilities that I possess. I never will tolerate myself or others wasting those precious gifts that you lacked. The ability to learn, to love, to live. I know that I have an empathy for others that I could not have possessed without your life and death. I feel more fully alive having experienced the ultimate joy of your birth and the sadness of your affliction. . . I will never be the same. You’ve given us hope for tomorrow. That someday we can see you whole and complete and you can meet the mommy and daddy and brothers that loved you just as you were. . . You’ll always be beautiful in my mind, just like you were as a baby. Just like your mommy. But I promise you one thing, Katie. Mommy and I aren’t sorry you came. We wouldn’t change a thing. You see, you’ve done more in your short life than some people accomplish in a lifetime. Your mommy and I think that Katie is a wonderful name for an angel, because that’s what you’ll always be to us. God rest your soul, Katie, and know that your life counted.<sup>2</sup>

### **Faith Stands Up in Intimidating Times**

In his own inimitable way, Dave Barry defines some common intimidating situations many of us frequently face: “All of us are

born with a set of instinctive fears—of falling, of the dark, of lobsters, of falling on lobsters in the dark, or speaking before a Rotary Club, and of the words ‘Some Assembly Required.’”<sup>3</sup> But every so often, like David hearing Goliath’s vile verbal onslaught at Elah, we must endure dreadful giants that are many times more fearful than just falling in the dark. Some of these are societal/cultural giants that we face as the church in our modern-day American context, from the increasing secularization of our society to the outright, fearless hostility toward Christian beliefs. Others are more personal giants that we face as individuals—job loss, sickness, death of a loved one, family strain, and financial crises.

From the outset of this book, my goal has been to show you that courage and bravery through the Spirit are needed for facing both the cultural and personal giants. The way to brave is about fighting both types of giants with courage. In order to do that, we need a David faith that stands up, an intrepid faith that bears up. That adjective “intrepid” means resolutely fearless and dauntless, as in “an intrepid explorer”—brave, courageous, and bold. You can see why the British Navy christened no less than eight of their battleships with this name, “HMS Intrepid,” beginning in 1747. They were launching ships that would be steady and strong through whatever deadly intimidation that storms and tsunamis and enemy ships threw at them. That’s what Christ wants for all of us, His people—that the testing of our faith will enable us to sail forward through our lives, not paralyzed but boldly active, not imprisoned by dreadful intimidation but confident in good cheer, not frumpy but fun, not fearless but intrepid.

Such will be the reality if we allow the testing of our faith to build into our hearts the two habits of highly intrepid people like David. The first of these we see in David’s life, not only when his faith stood up in the Valley of Elah, but much later when, as the

king, he faced the intimidation of a coup attempt by his own son Absalom, who had “stole[n] the hearts of the people of Israel” (2 Sam. 15:6). In that desperate time, David wrote the third psalm, which begins with these words:

LORD, how many are my foes! How many rise up against me! Many are saying of me, “God will not deliver him.” But you, LORD, are a shield around me, my glory, the One who lifts my head high. I call out to the LORD, and he answers me from his holy mountain. I lie down and sleep; I wake again, because the LORD sustains me. I will not fear though tens of thousands assail me on every side. (Ps. 3:1–6)

Do you see the first habit of a highly intrepid person? They immediately focus on the presence of God when fighting their fear, thus enabling their faith to stand up. That’s the very first thing you and I should do in intimidating circumstances on the way to brave, and perhaps a great strategy for starters is recalling and reciting to ourselves verses like these:

“Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.” (Deut. 31:6)

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. (Ps. 23:4 *ESV*)

God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters

roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging.  
(Ps. 46:1–3)

When we frail human beings fail to focus on God's presence with us in the midst of intimidating times, we pray without faith, worship without awe, serve without joy, and suffer without hope. The result is a life of stagnation and fear, a loss of vision, an inability to persevere through intimidation. But when we realize that God has promised to be our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble, our faith stands up like Martin Luther's at the Diet of Worms in 1521. The Holy Roman Emperor Charles V put the great reformer on trial in an effort to make him repudiate all his books and commit himself to silence about the gospel questions on which he had been challenging the Roman Catholic Church. Charles essentially wanted to intimidate Martin into silence. But keenly aware of God's presence and help in that pressure-packed moment, he nevertheless famously responded to the Emperor with words that got him excommunicated and further endangered his life: "Unless you prove to me by Scripture and plain reason that I am wrong, I cannot and will not recant. My conscience is captive to the Word of God. To go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand; there is nothing else I can do. God help me, amen."

The second habit of highly intrepid people in intimidating times is not only to focus on the presence of God, but to depend on

**When we frail human beings fail to focus on God's presence with us in the midst of intimidating times, we pray without faith, worship without awe, serve without joy, and suffer without hope.**

the help of God. Like five-year-old Johnny who was in the kitchen with his mom as she made supper. She asked him to go into the pantry and get her a can of tomato soup, but he didn't want to go alone. "It's dark in there and I'm scared." She said, "It's okay. Jesus will help you." Johnny walked hesitantly to the door and slowly opened it. He peeked inside, saw it was dark, and said, "Jesus, if You're in there, would You please hand me a can of tomato soup?" That's essentially David's prayer in the intimidating time when he fled Absalom's coup. "Arise, LORD! Deliver me, my God! Strike all my enemies on the jaw; break the teeth of the wicked. From the LORD comes deliverance. May your blessing be on your people" (Ps. 3:7-8). David is basically saying, "Lord, would you please hand me a can of tomato soup?"

David had settled beyond any shadow of a doubt that God was with him, "a shield around me, my glory, the One who lifts my head high." Now he was trusting the God who was with him to "catch" him, to help him by taking hold of his hand as per Isaiah, "For I am the LORD your God who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear; I will help you" (Isa. 41:13). So must we trust God in intimidating times to help us by taking our hands, catching us, as in Henri Nouwen's beautiful quotation of a trapeze artist.

"As a flyer, I must have complete trust in my catcher. The public might think that I am the great star of the trapeze, but the real star is Joe, my catcher. He has to be there for me with split-second precision and grab me out of the air as I come to him in the long jump." "How does it work?" I asked. "The secret," he said, "is that the flyer does nothing and the catcher does everything. When I fly to Joe, I have simply to stretch out my arms and hands and wait for him to catch me and pull

me safely over the apron behind the catch bar.” “You do nothing!” I said, surprised. “Nothing,” he answered. “The worst thing a flyer can do is try to catch the catcher. I am not supposed to catch Joe. It’s Joe’s task to catch me. If I grabbed Joe’s wrists, I might break them, or he might break mine, and that would be the end for both of us. A flyer must fly, and a catcher must catch, and the flyer must trust, with outstretched arms, that his catcher will be there for him.”<sup>4</sup>

That’s what thirty-nine-year-old Pastor Evan Mawarire did one day last year when he made a four-minute video critical of Robert Mugabe—one of the world’s most corrupt and oppressive dictators in history—with the flag of desperately poor and looted (by Mugabe) Zimbabwe wrapped around his neck. Evan pointed out that the colors of that flag have meaning. “For example, red is supposed to stand for the blood that patriots shed in the liberation effort. But what would those patriots say about Zimbabwe now? What had they died for? That’s the kind of thing Mawarire asked in his video. At the end of it, he asked Zimbabweans to stand up: for themselves, for their flag, and for their country.” The next morning, the video had gone viral. Striking a nerve among Zimbabweans, it led to a democracy movement fueled by twenty-five more videos that travel under a hashtag, #ThisFlag.

Later there was a mass protest in Zimbabwe and, six days afterwards, Evan Mawarire was arrested for “incitement to violence.” The courthouse for Mawarire’s hearing was packed with people singing worship songs, along with thousands outside. “Mawarire could hear it from his prison cell. . . . While in the dock, Mawarire got a rude, frightening surprise: The charge against him had been changed to what amounted to treason. He looked at his wife and mouthed, ‘I’m sorry.’ . . . There was a break

in the hearing. Night had fallen. Outside the courthouse, people were lighting candles, and singing. They were also buying food for one another. Again, the guards marveled, telling the prisoner in his cell about the scene. Back in the courtroom, the magistrate had good news: The prisoner was to be released on a technicality. . . . Mawarire fell into the arms of the waiting, weeping crowd. ‘Zimbabwean flags were everywhere,’ he says. From his wife, he learned some grim news: While he was in prison, thugs had tried to rape her. (She was seven months pregnant, incidentally.) They had also tried to kidnap the two kids.”

Since then, Evan has been in and out of Zimbabwe and in and out of jail at the hands of Mugabe, who constantly warns Mawarire to stick to religion and not meddle in politics. Evan knows “the role of pastors in the American civil-rights movement” and so is “well aware that the foremost of those pastors, Martin Luther King, was martyred.” His common response is a verse from the 27th Psalm: “I remain confident of this: I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, a flyer must fly, and a catcher must catch, and Evan is trusting, with outstretched arms, that his catcher will be there for him. That’s why his faith can stand up even in highly intimidating circumstances.

### **Faith Stands Up in Dangerous Times**

A tested faith is a fearless faith that stands up in painful times and intimidating times, and yes, in dangerous times too. The star exemplar of the last category is, of course, David at Elah. When King Saul tried to talk David out of fighting Goliath by accentuating the obvious physical danger David faced of sudden, violent death at the hands of a seasoned killer, the kid gave his definitive and unanswerable reply: “‘The LORD who rescued me from the paw of

the lion and the paw of the bear will rescue me from the hand of this Philistine.' Saul said to David, 'Go, and the LORD be with you'" (1 Sam. 17:37). Lions and tigers and bears, oh my? No, for David it was, lions and giants and bears, okay! His faith had been tested by lion tooth and bear paw and was thereby strengthened to face the Philistine giant. That's what gave David the calm confidence to make the following giggle-producing prediction to Goliath's face: "This very day I will give the carcasses of the Philistine army to the birds and the wild animals, and *the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel*. All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the LORD saves; for the battle is the LORD's, and he will give all of you into our hands" (1 Sam. 17:46–47). What happened next after David's faith stood up is the stuff of legend.

With etiquette thus observed, David got on with it sans hesitation. He ran at Goliath, scooping a stone into his sling and letting it fly in one smooth motion (like on December 28, 1975, when Roger Staubach threw his famous Hail Mary pass to Drew Pearson with only thirty-two seconds left in the game to beat the Minnesota Vikings in a divisional playoff game, but I digress). At thirty-four feet per second, David's projectile effectively flat-footed the giant, who could only wonder at his approaching demise. Bullseye! Goliath's last thought, unfortunately, was an incomplete sentence. "What's that crazy adolescent think he's doi—?" Hence did Goliath get stoned out of his mind, the saying "the bigger they are the harder they fall" get born, and the shepherd boy, against all the Las Vegas bookmakers' odds, get famous for slam-dunking a giant. So, an archaeologist found a sarcophagus containing a mummy in the Negev Desert and called the curator of a prestigious museum. "I've got the three-thousand-year-old mummy of a man who died of heart failure!" he exclaimed.

The curator replied, “Bring him in. We’ll check it out.” A week later, the amazed curator called the archaeologist. “You were right about the mummy’s cause of death. How did you know?” The archaeologist replied, “Easy. There was a piece of paper in his hand that read, ‘10,000 shekels on Goliath.’” (Just kidding, but not about the long-shot nature of David’s prediction to the giant . . .)

David ran to the prone Hulkster, borrowed his sword, thanks very much, and removed his head with due flourish. And all

**The beautiful thing  
about a tested faith on  
display is the effect on  
others who might still be  
sidelined by their fear.**

this before lunch! Not a bad day’s work, all things considered. David’s besting of Goliath in Elah did not go unobserved, and its ramifications were immediate. Having witnessed the steel backbone of a shepherd lad in defeating the giant, each of

the formerly timid Israelite soldiers acquired one of their own. With David’s beheading of Goliath as the starter’s gun, God’s army pursued and decisively defeated the pagan army. That’s how the fledgling Israelite nation was saved. And that’s how a skinny kid’s courage in facing down the terrorizer of his nation became a legendary metaphor for intrepid faith, unlikely heroism, and undaunted courage. If the USA’s gold medal victory over the Soviets in the 1980 Olympic Games is rightfully called “The Miracle on Ice,” then surely David’s victory over the Philistine giant circa 800 BC could rightfully be called “The Miracle in Elah.” The son of Jesse’s undisputed heroism became immediately legendary, and the words “David and Goliath” an instantly recognizable phrase to this day, symbolizing unmitigated courage.<sup>6</sup>

The beautiful thing about a tested faith on display is the effect on others who might still be sidelined by their fear. I love the end

of the story about David's faith standing up in a time of great danger. Having slain Goliath in full view of an utterly amazed Israelite army, the victorious David had a powerful effect on the other soldiers: "Then the men of Israel and Judah surged forward with a shout and pursued the Philistines . . . [and] plundered their camp" (1 Sam. 17:52–53). Israel found courage to enter the Valley of Elah *after* their champion won victory in the Valley of Elah! They didn't fight *for* victory that day, but *from* victory. They didn't gin up their own courage, but walked in the courage of their champion, who also didn't gin up his own courage. Rather, David focused on God's presence and relied on God's help as he had during previous times of danger populated with lions and bears.

That's precisely what German theologian and churchman Dietrich Bonhoeffer did early on the morning of April 9, 1945, as he was executed in Flossenbürg concentration camp for his part in a conspiracy to assassinate Adolph Hitler. The camp doctor described the scene: "Pastor Bonhoeffer, before taking off his prison garb, knelt on the floor praying fervently to his God. I was most deeply moved by the way this lovable man prayed, so devout and so certain that God heard his prayer. At the place of execution he again said a short prayer and then climbed up the steps of the gallows, brave and composed . . . I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God."

As remarkable a scene as that was, even more remarkable was that Bonhoeffer easily could have avoided it. In November of 1938, the infamous Kristallnacht (Night of Broken Glass) was organized by Nazis against Germany's Jews. Seeing the danger, Bonhoeffer sailed to the United States in June of 1939 with thoughts of emigration. But escaping to safety when his countrymen faced danger did not sit well with him. On July 8, 1939, Bonhoeffer sailed straight back into the hell that Germany had

become, back into danger and possible death. His own words tell us where he found courage to return: “Daring to do what is right, not what fancy may tell you, valiantly grasping occasions, not cravenly doubting—freedom comes only through deeds, not through thoughts taking wing. Faint not nor fear, but go out to the storm and the action, trusting in God whose commandment you faithfully follow; freedom, exultant, will welcome your spirit with joy.”<sup>7</sup>

Yes, it will, for the fruit of prevailing in the storm is a steadfast confidence in facing battles small and large. So lions and tigers and bears (and giants), okay! Because faith stood up, it has exultant freedom to stand up. On your way to brave, may this be your story too.