

RHYTHMS OF A WELL FOUGHT LIFE

# REST & WAR.



BEN STUART

# PRAISE FOR *REST & WAR*

“We’ve all felt battle-weary and discouraged at times in our lives as Christians. Ben Stuart knows what this feels like and teaches readers to know the right time to rest and the right time to war, with Jesus by our side. In *Rest & War*, you’ll find the companion you’ve been waiting for as you look to honor God with the way you spend your days and mental energy. Life may not always be easy, but this book will help you learn to live your one life well!”

**LYSA TERKEURST**, BESTSELLING AUTHOR AND  
PRESIDENT OF PROVERBS 31 MINISTRIES

“Profound yet practical. Ben has made a habit of examining Scripture to mine the truth from the text, and this book is proof of that pursuit. In *Rest & War*, he’s stepped into a cultural crisis and held up a beacon of light and hope through the person and way of Jesus. From the earliest chapters in Genesis, we see our God creating structure in a way that brings about life and flourishing, and that is what Ben is offering in this book: strategic structure that doesn’t just change your schedule but changes your heart as well.”

**LOUIE GIGLIO**, BESTSELLING AUTHOR, PASTOR OF PASSION  
CITY CHURCH, AND FOUNDER OF PASSION CONFERENCES

“There is a war for our faith, and *Rest & War* will give you the tools and courage to fight.”

**JENNIE ALLEN**, BESTSELLING AUTHOR AND  
FOUNDER OF IF:GATHERING

“*Rest & War* is a breath of fresh air for our generation. Ben’s practical and encouraging words help us all learn how to better cultivate true intimacy with Jesus as we navigate the complexities of our daily lives.”

**SADIE ROBERTSON HUFF**, BESTSELLING AUTHOR,  
SPEAKER, AND FOUNDER OF LIVE ORIGINAL

“One of the most common answers I hear when I ask someone ‘How are you?’ is, ‘I’m tired.’ It reveals how the pace of our world is often at war with the steadfast way of living Jesus invites us to. *Rest & War* is a book that

intentionally examines and practically equips you to live out the rhythms of Jesus in our modern-day world.”

**KYLE IDLEMAN**, BESTSELLING AUTHOR AND PASTOR OF  
LOUISVILLE'S SOUTHEAST CHRISTIAN CHURCH

*“Rest & War* offers the ingredients needed not just to face the chaos of life, but to come out stronger on the other side. Ben clearly communicates the ways to struggle well in a world that does not know rest. This resource will help you navigate this beautiful tension in your spiritual life and set in place disciplines that will help you flourish.”

**LEVI LUSKO**, BESTSELLING AUTHOR AND  
PASTOR OF FRESH LIFE CHURCH

“Ben Stuart is a needed voice in the chaotic world we face today! I am so thankful he has put pen to paper in order to help us navigate the spiritual life and flourish. Life is hard, but God is good. Thank you, Ben, for this resource!”

**CROWDER**, CHRISTIAN MUSIC SINGER, SONGWRITER,  
AND THREE-TIME GRAMMY NOMINEE

*“Rest & War* is a game-changing, difference-making, paradigm-shifting book. It’s a guide and encouragement to live out the fullness of faith and to deflect the deception of empty lies. Ben masterfully weaves wit and wisdom to set a clear path for our journey. Read this book with your heart and put it to action in your steps as you fulfill God’s purpose for your life.”

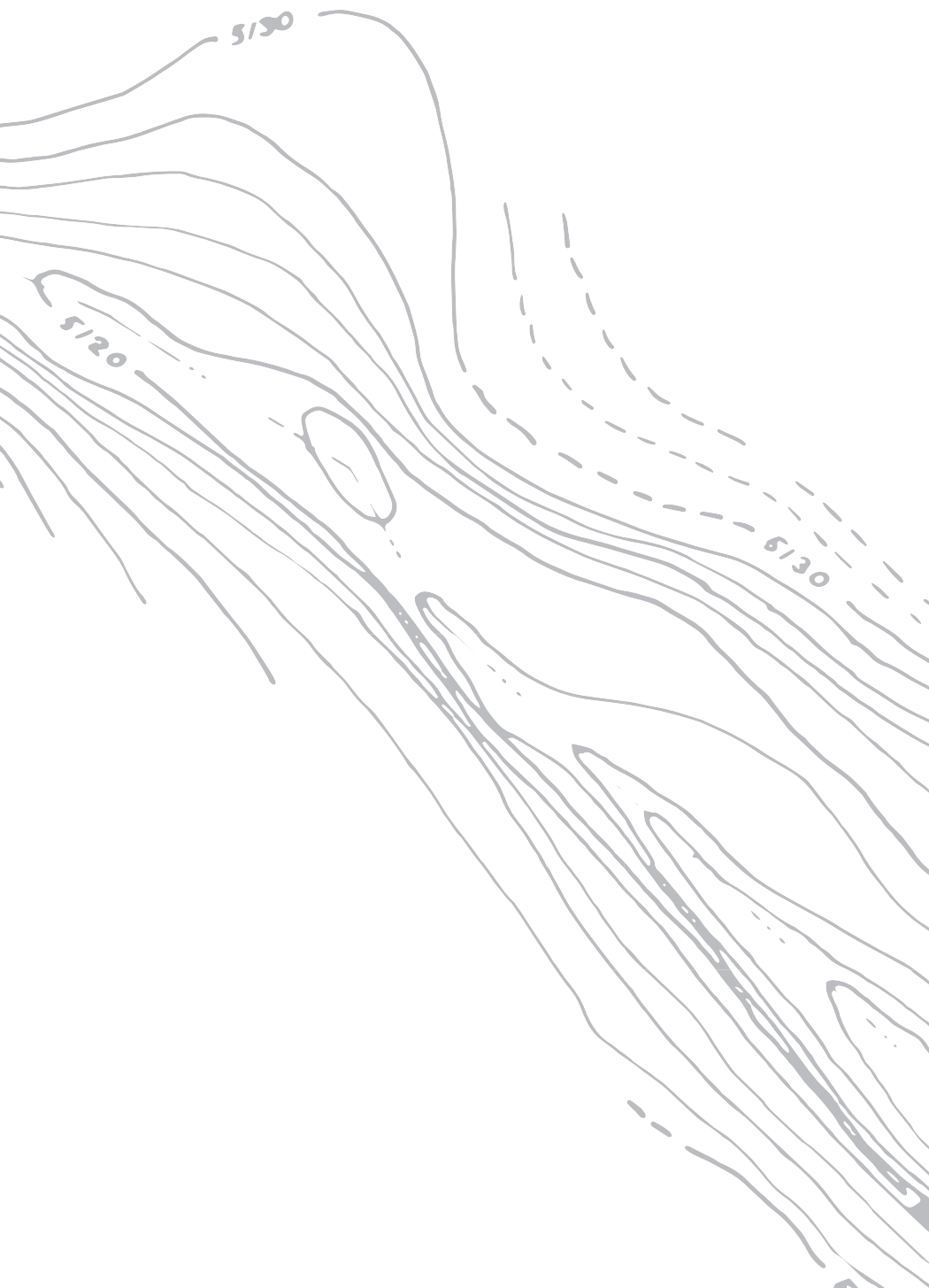
**GREGG MATTE**, AUTHOR AND PASTOR OF  
HOUSTON'S FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH

“I truly believe that Ben Stuart is one of the most effective communicators of God’s Word in this generation. Whether the word is preached, written, or spoken in a conversation, I always walk away saying, “I get it!” In *Rest & War*, Ben gives us a simple, sound, and strategic game plan on finding our rest in the Lord while engaging in life’s unrelenting battles. Thank you, brother. *God’s . . . perfect . . . timing!*”

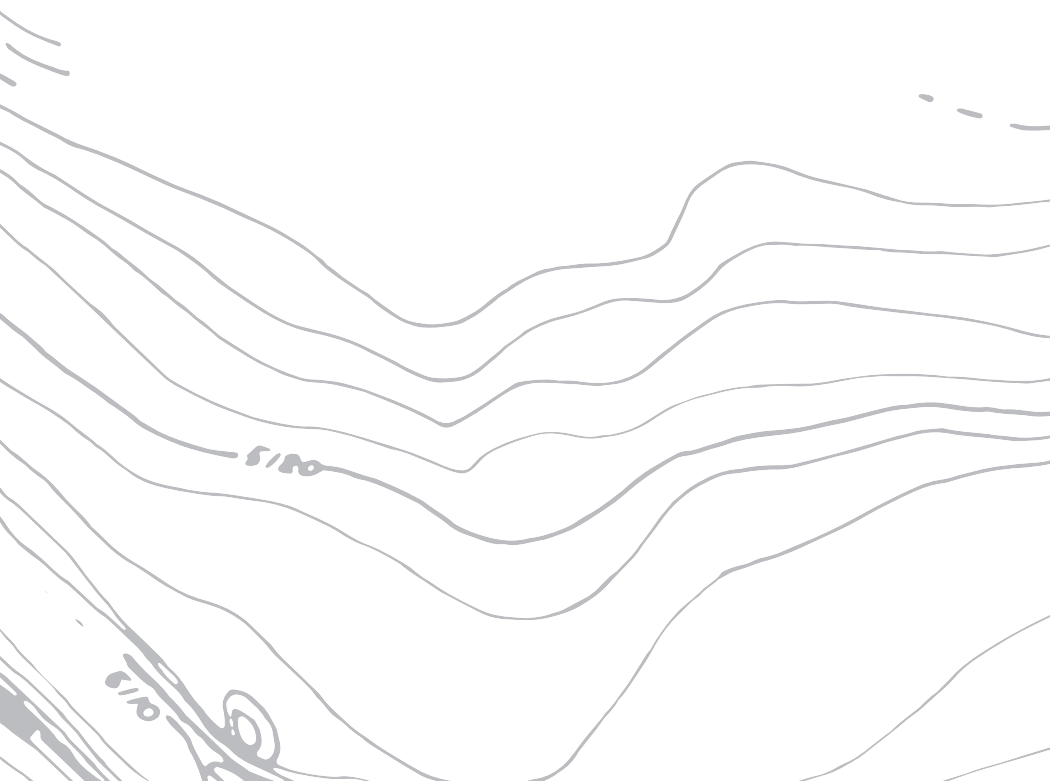
**MIKADO HINSON**, DIRECTOR OF FOOTBALL  
PLAYER DEVELOPMENT FOR TEXAS A&M

**WE GO TO WAR THAT WE  
MAY HAVE PEACE.**

—AUGUSTINE



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BEN STUART



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 passionpublishing



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*To Hannah, Sparrow, and Owen*  
*Your daddy delights in you.*



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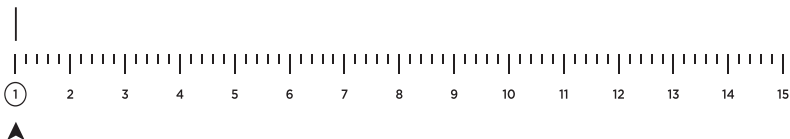
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## PART 1



# A STRUGGLE, A SAVIOR, AND A STRATEGY





## CHAPTER 1

# THE SURVIVAL GUIDE

*Oh God, we are so stupid.*

These were the first words of my friend Ben's prayer. I don't remember his next few lines. I wasn't really paying attention. My eyes kept scanning the snow-covered mountains under our perch high atop Longs Peak. As we sat there near the highest point in Rocky Mountain National Park, entirely depleted physically, I wondered, *How long until our friends down below file a missing person's report? Can a rescue helicopter reach this altitude?* The only thing I knew for certain was that I could not conceive of a way to get down that mountain using only my internal resources. How did I let myself end up here?

It had started out so well. I had joined a team of college students from around the country in a summer-long internship with a ministry in Denver, Colorado. Early in our trip my new friend, Ben, asked if I wanted to climb this massive fourteen-thousand-foot mountain with him. I said sure, and we immediately began to train. We resolved to summit Longs Peak one month later.



When the day arrived, our ascent began well. We bounded up the trail, passing lesser hikers, making great time. We leapt through the boulder field and arrived ahead of schedule at the critical transition point, known as the Keyhole. The name came from the rock formation's shape—erosion had created a rock archway that, from a distance, resembled a keyhole. But this alone did not account for the title.

This waypoint on the trail also represented a critical juncture in the journey, when the path began winding around the back side of the mountain, a part previously not visible from the trail. The trail narrowed to a sliver of a path a few feet above a precipitous cliff. One false move there, and you'd disappear over a blind edge, careening into a distant valley below.

On the day Ben and I were hiking, the Keyhole marked another critical change in our journey: the presence of snow. Fortunately for us, a mountaineer had been there before us. We could see a set of footprints in the deep snow and singular holes in the snowbank on the high side of the mountain, where no doubt a hiking stick had been used. We carefully placed our feet in the footprints and our fingers in the holes as we picked our way across the ledge.

After a few perilous yards along the cliff's edge, the path turned steeply upward, ascending up the snow-covered mountainside. The footprints continued, and we turned to climb them like a ladder, hugging the side of the mountain.

At this moment something suddenly began to shift for Ben and me. My internal energy gauge began to plummet. My lungs struggled for air, and my limbs, in addition to being wet and cold from the snow, began to feel heavy. Each heave of my body upward required an enormous expenditure of energy. At the midway point I glanced up at Ben and watched his head collapse with exhaustion into the snow. He

was feeling it too. But this was not the moment to stop! We heaved ourselves up several feet, finally reaching the thin, rocky path above.

From there, we followed the marked route around a corner, only to find another corner ahead. And another. And another. After what felt like an eternity, we rounded yet another corner—and saw before us a steep incline through the snow. At the sight of it, Ben dropped down to the ground. I halfheartedly tried to spur him on but then crumpled down next to him on the trail. We were exhausted. Depleted. Nauseous. And stuck. After a few moments of listening to the wind whistle through the mountain range below, our prayer acknowledging our stupidity began.

Then it happened. For a split second, while Ben was praying and I was looking around in desperation, I saw a human head pop out from behind a boulder. It was so fast, I wondered if I'd imagined it. *Am I hallucinating? Has it gotten that bad?* Our prayer ended. We sat in silence and watched the world from above. And then, from behind another boulder, the head arrived! Attached to a person!

The mountain man made his way over to us and struck up a conversation. “Hey, guys!” he shouted, his high-volume positivity a stark contrast to our complete despair.

We grunted a response.

Undaunted by our lack of enthusiasm, he continued, “Great day to hike! You guys been to the top yet?” Then, without waiting for an answer, he surveyed us briefly and remarked, “Wait a second, you’re the college guys who came up here without equipment. We heard about you! We are in awe of you guys. You’re crazy!” He then returned to his original question: “You been to the top?”

I responded by telling him we had not and were not planning to. He found this to be unbelievable.

“You have to go. C’mon guys!” At this point I could tell that his

relentlessly upbeat attitude was starting to grate on Ben, so I stood up on my wobbly legs and sidebarred our conversation. I whispered to him, “We are not doing well—we are totally exhausted. There is no way we can go any farther.”

My admission of our frailty changed his demeanor. I remember him staring down at my hands. I had them wrapped in my soaking wet sleeves, trying to get them warm.

“Wait a minute,” he replied, then set down his pack and produced two pairs of mittens—well, mittens is really not quite the right word. They were coverings for your hands, but they extended up to the elbow and had multiple straps that could bind them tightly to your forearm. “Put these on,” he said, handing them to us.

Ben and I eagerly put on the mittens and felt exquisite relief as warmth returned to our fingers.

The mountain man continued to parent us. “First things first, gentlemen. You are breathing wrong.”

This surprised us. Of all our problems on the mountain, knowing how to breathe did not seem to be one of them. I’d always considered breathing to be an involuntary action that did not require conscious management.

He noted our looks of skepticism that implied, *I think we know how to breathe, man*. I will never forget his next words. He told us, “You are in a new environment. The atmosphere has changed. You have to adapt if you want to survive.”

## THE ATMOSPHERE HAS CHANGED

I think about that moment often as I survey the cultural landscape of our world today. Shifts in the atmosphere of society have had a

profound impact on our vibrancy and the way we interact with God, one another, and even ourselves. Because these changes are simply in the atmosphere, we can't always see them. But we can *feel* them. And recent data backs this up: there is something about modern life that does not promote human flourishing.

Anxiety and depression, particularly among young people in the United States, have been consistently on the rise since 2008.<sup>1</sup> Recent data collected for a joint study by the US Census Bureau and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicate this: "During August 2020–February 2021, the percentage of adults with recent symptoms of an anxiety or a depressive disorder increased from 36.4% to 41.5%. . . . Increases were largest among adults aged 18–29 years."<sup>2</sup>

The increased political and philosophical polarization in our society incites fear, uncertainty, and anger. The constant comparison of our lives with others' pristine presentations on social media fills many with discouragement. And the irresistible lure of our screens means we are constantly soaking our minds in this polarization and comparison, which feed our stress and despair.

In the atmosphere of anxiety, the traditional buffers from stress have been removed. One professor of psychology at San Diego State University reported that from 2000 to 2015 the number of high school students who got together daily with their friends dropped by 40 percent.<sup>3</sup>

Cigna, a global health services company, reported that loneliness has "reached epidemic proportions in the United States, as people of all ages and backgrounds struggle to find a sense of belonging."<sup>4</sup> Among their findings: only half of Americans say they have meaningful in-person interactions on a daily basis.

In the atmosphere of relentless restlessness and shallow social

connections, addiction has risen to new heights. Alcohol, drugs, pornography, and incessant scrolling on our screens have all become habits to distract us from stress. However, rather than alleviating our problems, they've created more problems and have only increased the anxiety and isolation we've attempted to escape. When you think about all of that, it's hardly surprising that in 2019 Gallup recorded the lowest levels of happiness in the United States in their seventy-plus years of researching well-being.<sup>5</sup>

We aren't looking so good.

In the relatively safest time for human beings to exist on the planet, we find ourselves disoriented and disturbed. Like Ben and me on that mountainside, we are exhausted, discouraged, and uncertain about how to address our situation. We need to realize that the atmosphere has changed, and we must adapt if we want to survive.

What's the answer? What do we do next?

## THE PATH TOWARD REST FOR THE SOUL

We need a guide to emerge upon the mountain who will equip us, teach us, and show us how to move forward.

Centuries ago the prophet Jeremiah looked out upon a generation that felt unsure of where to turn in the midst of crisis and uncertainty. He declared,

Thus says the LORD:

“Stand by the roads, and look,

and ask for the ancient paths,

where the good way is; and walk in it,

and find rest for your souls.” (Jeremiah 6:16)

Many are standing at a critical crossroads, asking where the good way is. In this book I want to show you the ancient path that leads to rest for our souls.

I started my ministry career with an unbounded zeal and optimism. I was going to use my gifts to do great things for God! But within the first five years, I watched five men I knew personally drop out of ministry because of moral failures. Then over the next few years, I watched men I had patterned my life after take extended leaves of absence because of emotional burnout, discouragement, or depression. My goal had been to succeed, but I began to realize that a big part of success was figuring out how to *survive*.

As I crossed from my twenties into my thirties, I appeared to have everything together. I had a great marriage. I was leading a large and vibrant ministry on the campus of a major university. I had a steady income, career success, and strong relationships. I was charging up the mountain of life! All this was true. But it was also true that wounds from my parents' divorce, struggles from my past, and my personal insecurities were along for the ride. And the higher I ascended in ministry, the more depleted I felt. External setbacks, discouragements, whispers of comparison, and technological shifts exposed many of my internal weaknesses. The atmosphere had shifted, and I lacked the internal resources to keep moving forward.

So for the past twenty years of my life, I have passionately sought out strategies for surviving and thriving, not only in ministry but in life. To be sure, I've needed encouragement, but more than inspiration, I've needed information. What were the survival skills that would keep me fueled and moving forward?

In the searching, I discovered what many before me have as well: admitting you need help is the first step toward victory. Humility is the doorway to wisdom. As I listened to the voices of mentors,

teachers, friends, and, perhaps most of all, the theologian John Owen, I began to assemble for myself a compendium of the strategies and structures of the spiritual life. Now, I want to share them with you.

## **YOUR PERSONAL GUIDE FOR THE JOURNEY**

When Jesus looked at the crowds in his day, he saw women and men who were “harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matthew 9:36). They were relentlessly bombarded with trouble and lacked the resources to defend themselves. But Jesus did not shake his head or wag a finger at them and scold them. Rather, “he had compassion for them” and taught them many things (v. 36).

Most of us feel distraught by the constant uncertainty and anxiety surrounding us and by the fear, lust, pride, and doubt within us. Often, we don’t know how to manage any of it. We feel helpless.

The good news is, we have a Guide. He looks at us not with eyes of condemnation but with eyes of compassion. And he has many things to teach us if we have ears to listen.

What you will find in the pages ahead is not a scolding for your struggles, nor is it an extended motivational speech to try harder. I want to bring you to the Good Shepherd, who can lead us in a day of trouble. I want to show you the ancient path that leads to rest for our souls. I want to equip you to adapt and advance toward your God-given destiny.

Think of this book more as a field guide than a motivational seminar. When you are hiking through the unknown, yes, you need some inspiration, but what you need even more is good information.

High atop that snow-covered peak, our guide showed us the

rhythms of how to pause and rest, then push to advance. Granted, we had been taking breaks on our way up the mountain, then pushing hard to climb. But we were inefficient. Unskilled. And our exhaustion reflected that.

Our hero taught us how to take productive rest by focusing on our breathing and refueling with water and food, and then attack the next challenge before us with intense purpose. There was a rhythm to it. Pause, then pursue. Rest, then war.

## THE STRUGGLE IS REAL

God wants to equip us to ascend to heights we cannot reach on our own. However, we must realize that there are no shortcuts to a truly spiritual life, no life hacks to avoid the hard parts. There is real struggle involved. There also can be real gains—real ground covered and strength built. But to experience serenity, we must struggle. To find peace, we must train our hands for war.

I imagine that if you picked up a book like this it is because you desire some kind of peace with God. You know that your life is meant for more than just accumulating experiences and accoutrements. You want to know God and be a part of what he is doing in the world. You want to tap into your full potential and use it for the best of all purposes. You want to *live*. Unencumbered. Undistracted. With mental clarity and heartfelt passion.

Yet you do not have to live long in this world before you realize that the pursuit of intimacy with God is not easy. It is hard. It's a fight! A life of spirituality is lived in the context of adversity.

When we try to read the Scriptures, all manner of competing thoughts and rival affections come raging forward. If we do manage



to learn something, worries, fears, and distractions can rise up and choke out these God-given insights before they can produce any real fruit in our lives (Luke 8:4–8). Often we feel as though we live in Romans 7:15: “I do not understand my own actions. . . . I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.”

Many of us honestly do not feel a hunger for God or sense of purpose in life; those feelings are muted by the static of low-grade guilt over our besetting struggles, always humming in the background of our entire story. The wet blanket of constant failure dampens the fire of our affection for the Lord and passion for living.

Some of you reading this find yourself deeply discouraged. You are plagued by desires, impulses, addictions that you want to be free from. You have asked God many times to take them away, and he hasn’t. So maybe you try to rationalize that what you are doing is okay and make some kind of uneasy peace with it. But the guilt remains. You are asking, *Is this just who I am? Is this the best it can be?*

Others of you have come to terms with the fact that life comes with headwinds. You’ve read the New Testament and seen words like *battle*, *war*, *conflict*, and *struggle* peppered throughout the text, describing the life of a Christian. You understand that in this life we will have trouble (John 16:33). You want a guide and a strategy because the methods you have employed so far are not working.

For much of my life, spirituality was built around the camp-high experience. My friends and I would show up at our weeklong summer camp completely dominated by the powerful forces of our insecurities, lusts, and pride. For three to four days we would live crazy. But by the last night of camp, everybody got saved. Exhaustion coupled with malnourishment from eating cafeteria food left us in an emotionally volatile state. Then a protracted worship service would leave us all emotionally worked up. By the end we would all be crying, singing

“friends are friends forever,” and stepping up to the microphone to make big promises about what we’d do for God. Within a week we all would break every promise we’d made and sit alone in our rooms, surrounded by the same old addictions, asking ourselves, *What’s wrong with me?*

I have met many Christians who have spent years on the “spiritual-high roller coaster” and ultimately have seen very little progress. If that is you, then you are in the right place. I am here to acknowledge that we often feel like we are in a war because we *are*! The pursuit of intimacy with God occurs in the context of adversity.

Together we’re going to embrace the fact that life is a struggle, better understand our situation with all its attendant difficulties, and zero in on a strategy to struggle *well*.

## KNOW THE ONE WHO’S FOUGHT FOR YOU

Before Ben and I could receive guidance, we needed to meet our guide and get to know him. The same is true for us as we pursue growth. Before we try to improve our lives, we need to meet the Author of life. Before we attempt to implement guidance, we need to meet the Guide. And it is actually even bigger than that. Before we attempt to fight, we need to know the One who first fought for us.

Indeed, the best fighters are those who know that they have been fought for.

We see this in children. Studies reveal that kids raised in two-parent homes perform better at every measurable test than kids without that support.<sup>6</sup> This doesn’t mean you are doomed if you did not have that; God accomplishes eternal impact with broken instruments. But

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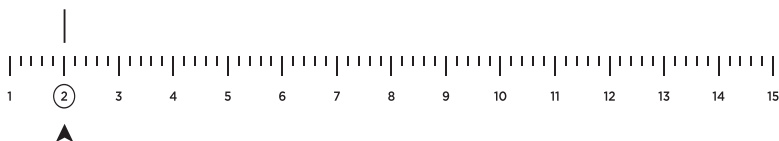


we do well to analyze that truth. Young people who did not witness an adult fight for them, choose them, or endure hardship for them are more likely to quit on themselves. We need someone to choose us. Prefer us. Sacrifice for us. Fight for us. When we see this happen, it not only fills our hearts with love, it invites us to do the same—to enter the same battle of choosing, fighting for, and sacrificing our lives for something greater.

When Goliath shouted his threats at the Israelite armies, they cowered in fear. But when David defeated Goliath in the valley, the Israelites found the confidence to run forward and drive the Philistines out of their land. Before we can drive out the little Philistines that plague us, we must first understand the war we are part of, the one the Son of David, Jesus, has fought in.

I want to call you to battle and to build. I'm not talking about fighting little skirmishes in life for your ego or building flimsy kingdoms that will fall like a house of cards. I want you to expend your maximum energy for the greatest of all causes. I want you to fight the battle of the ages and build a kingdom that will never fade. But in order to do this, you must first understand that the King of kings has fought for you.





## CHAPTER 2

# THE CONQUERING KING

Years ago a small group of my friends got together to watch a video from our Navy SEAL buddy's latest training: HALO jumping. The acronym HALO stands for "high altitude, low opening." It's a parachuting technique that multiple branches of the military are trained to use, and it is *intense*! The trainees spend one day attending briefings in a classroom. By day two they are leaping out of airplanes flying more than four miles above the earth.

The training video consisted of helmet-cam shots the instructors took as they trained the men in the air. At the outset it was obvious these coaches were having a little fun at their students' expense when they created this video. As the first terrified-looking student arrived at the door of the aircraft, the video editor had added some kind of circus music. This poor young man, as soon as he hit the air, remained upright and began to feverishly pump his arms and legs. It looked like he was trying to run in place. We were screaming at the TV, "There's

no traction up there, brother! Lean!” Other trainees fared better, but the video kept a tone of silliness.

Yet with each successive jump, they gained a new skill. They mastered the technique of turning their bodies at exact degrees. They learned how to drop their arms and tack through the air at speeds of over one hundred miles an hour. With each descent they began to look less and less funny and more and more impressive.

As the video neared its conclusion, I noticed none of us were laughing anymore. We watched in silence as these soldiers loaded themselves into the plane one last time. They had sixty pounds of gear strapped to their bodies, including multiple weapons. When the time came to approach the door of the aircraft, they did not look nervous. When the signal was given, they leapt from the plane without hesitation. As they descended they controlled their bodies with exact movements.

It dawned on me why the mood had shifted in the room as we watched. We had all just been reminded what these training exercises were all about. These guys were not just a group of buddies taking skydiving lessons for fun. They were fighters preparing to be inserted behind enemy lines. They’d be ready to jump at high altitudes so the enemy would not hear the plane. They’d open their parachutes low so they could spend the least amount of time in the air as an open target. This wasn’t a joyride. They were warriors with a mission to rescue people in danger and wreak havoc on those who’d oppressed them.

As I watched the final man descend through the night sky I thought, *Now that is just like Jesus.*

Listen to what 1 John 3:8 tells us: “The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil” (NASB). Jesus came to destroy something.

You may object, “Wait. I thought he came to save, to bring peace, to heal. What do you mean *destroy*?”

Think about it:

To save means there was a person or force holding people captive that must be overcome.

To bring peace suggests a prior state where there was no peace.

To heal suggests there was a disease or a sickness that must be cut out.

For Jesus to save, bring peace, and heal, he had to destroy something. *Liberation required destruction.*

## WHAT DID JESUS COME TO DESTROY?

John told us Jesus came to destroy “the works of the devil.” Now, I realize that some may say, “The *devil*? Really? Red jumpsuit, tail, little pointy horns? Isn’t that a bit of an arcane notion? I have a hard time believing all that.”

C. S. Lewis, the beloved author who converted from atheism to Christianity in his thirties, said, “One of the things that surprised me when I first read the New Testament seriously was that it talked so much about a Dark Power in the universe—a mighty evil spirit who was held to be the Power behind death and disease, and sin. . . . Christianity agrees . . . that this universe is at war.”<sup>1</sup>

If you find it difficult to take seriously the idea of a spiritual struggle in the background of our lives, then consider this: if you do not believe it, then you must produce a philosophy that explains how a creation as beautiful as humanity can inflict upon itself so much horror.

How do you account for the hundreds of millions killed by their own governments in the twentieth century? How do you explain the atrocities that appear in the news every day, or the vile way we speak



to one another online? How do you explain the evil lurking in our hearts, our violation of our own personal standards of morality, and our callous indifference to global suffering? The selfishness we see running rampant in our own experience, the pain in our own story, the apathy in our own hearts—it transcends ethnicity, culture, time, and education. It is a human condition. And the Scriptures declare that it is orchestrated. We most certainly have an Enemy working against us.

The Scriptures refer to him as the devil, which simply means “accuser.” In Hebrew he is called Satan, a word that means “opponent” or “adversary.” Jesus called him the “ruler of this world” (John 12:31). Paul called him “the god of this age” and “the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience” (2 Corinthians 4:4 NIV; Ephesians 2:2). John ominously said, “We know that we are from God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one” (1 John 5:19).

Behind it all is a consciousness. And he is waging a war.

## THE WORK OF THE ENEMY

John said, “The one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has been sinning from the beginning” (1 John 3:8 NASB).

The word “sin” carries the idea of a violation of a standard. There was a mark we were meant to hit, and we didn’t hit it. As human beings there was something great we were meant to be, and we have fallen short of it. The Scriptures affirm what we often feel: we are not what we are meant to be.

Earlier in the passage John explained, “Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness” (1 John 3:4 NASB). This does not suggest that God is like a heavenly Santa checking his list to see if you have been naughty or nice. It is more comprehensive than that.

God’s law is his revealed will for his creation. He created all things to work together in mutually beneficial harmony. He created physical

laws that govern the universe. We see the earth orbiting around the sun, spinning on its axis, giving us seasons, days, and years, and it all makes sense. In the book of Proverbs we are told that “by wisdom” the earth was made (3:19). There is a logic to how it all fits together.

Proverbs also says of wisdom that “all her paths are peace” (3:17). The word we translate “peace” is the Hebrew word *shalom*. This word means much more than the absence of conflict; it also means the presence of flourishing. When all things work as God designed, then all things benefit. Rain falls and waters the earth. That earth brings forth crops. These feed us, and we in turn care for the soil. Everyone wins.<sup>2</sup>

These governing laws of God also apply to relationships. Men were meant to love and value women as coheirs in the grace of life. Women were made to respect and encourage men. Parents were designed to care for their children and help develop the gifts God placed in them. Communities were designed to foster human flourishing at every level as people work together for the common good. Words were meant to be used to speak to one another in kindness. All creation worships God and he satisfies all. This is *shalom*, the way it should be, the way God created the world to run.

But the adversary came to disrupt it all. And John said he’s been doing it since the beginning.

He convinced our first parents that in order to really enjoy life they had to rebel against the Author of life. Today he tries to convince us that if we truly want the best life has to offer we must go our own way; we must determine what is right or wrong. The lawlessness he sells us is that our ideas are better than God’s.

When our first parents believed this, devastation ensued.

They got the experience they wanted. But they got something they did not expect: shame. Immediately after they chose their own way instead of God’s way, the lights went out. Fellowship with God was

broken and fellowship between people was confused. Inner peace fled and hearts went dark. Peace with the earth was confounded. The ground was cursed. Nature would never again work the way it was intended.

All the horrible realities in this world—from crazed men charging into schools with guns to the careless words we say that hurt our friends' feelings—it all flows from this.

And it flows through all of us. We've all been here. We went after an experience we thought would give life, and instead it brought shame. We've felt broken and isolated, and sensed that all is not as it should be. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, a Russian novelist and philosopher, once lamented, "If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being."<sup>3</sup>

Though the traces of God's glorious designs are everywhere we look, nothing works quite right anymore. The virus of sin has corrupted every file of existence. And our greatest problem is precisely what the prophet Isaiah articulated to the Israelites: "Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God" (Isaiah 59:2). We are in serious trouble. And unless someone comes to get us, we will never get out.

## THE POOL OF EVIL

My grandmother used to have a pool in her backyard that had been emptied of water. Emptied of pool water, that is. Over the years it had been filled with rainwater. And sticks, and grass, and tree branches, and frogs, and snakes. And when you were a child with a vivid imagination, it was also filled with all things evil!

Now, what do you suppose a couple of young boys would do when their grandmother had a pool of evil in her backyard? Naturally, my brother and I would play on the edge of it.

One day when I was goofing around on the edge, I slipped and fell in. The surprise at falling quickly gave way to the terror of being trapped in that pool of evil—with all that lay lurking in it.

I got up and moved as fast as my little five-year-old legs could carry me to the shallow end, then attempted to leap up to grab the edge and pull myself out. But whoever had dug out that pool back in the day had been motivated. Even in the shallow end, I couldn't reach the ledge!

In my panic I looked up at my brother for help, but at six years old he had no strength to save me. So I engaged in the only other course of action available to a child: I cried.

I remember looking up through the wooden slats of the fence and seeing my grandmother's neighbor at the moment he heard my cries. I watched this young man, probably in his early twenties, drop the gardening tool he was working with and begin to run toward me. Then, in one single, fluid movement, he leapt over the entire fence. It was the coolest thing I had ever seen in my life. Without hesitation, he jumped down into that pool with me, and he lifted me out. He looked down at me and asked, "Are you alright?" I don't remember answering. But I do remember what I felt: awe. I was struck silent by the one who jumped into the chaos I had fallen into because of my own foolishness and brought me out.

This is exactly what Jesus Christ did for you and for me.

What was God's response in the garden when he saw sin break into the world? Did he demand that humanity clean itself up? No. He came up with a solution.

"The LORD God said to the serpent, . . . 'I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; *he* shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel'" (Genesis 3:14–15).

Early church fathers considered this passage to be the first mention

of the gospel in Scripture. God's answer to sin was that he would send a child to crush the one who deceived us. God's solution was a Savior who would destroy the one who hurt us.

## **HOW DID JESUS DESTROY THE WORK OF THE DEVIL?**

John spoke of two ways that Jesus overcame the devil. The first was simply by his appearance (1 John 3:8). The arrival of Jesus on the planet was a landed invasion.

Do you know how his earthly ministry started? He was baptized by his cousin John in a public ceremony. The heavens opened and God declared, "This is my beloved Son," while the Spirit of God descended on him like a dove (Matthew 3:16–17). Right after that he was taken to the desert and confronted by the devil. As Satan attempted to dissuade Jesus from pursuing his mission, Jesus fended off each temptation with a quote from Deuteronomy. Satan even promised to give Jesus everything in the world if he would abandon God's work. Jesus flatly refused every offer of ease and ungodly power. He would not be deterred from his mission.

Jesus marched back to civilization "in the power of the Spirit" and headed to the synagogue in his hometown (Luke 4:14, 16). There he took up the writings of the prophet Isaiah, turned straight to the sixty-first chapter, and read aloud, "'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives.' . . . Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:17–18, 21).

We know Jesus came to preach good news and care for the poor. But don't miss that third element of his call: to set the captives free!

Then he closed by saying, “This is being fulfilled in your presence right now!”

What did Jesus do next? He stepped out to wreak havoc on the darkness. He took disease away. He removed shame from women whose lives had been devastated sexually and relationally. He brought sanity back to a man who had been ravaged by dark and destructive forces. He brought life back into the home of a man who had driven people away through his ruthless pursuit of money. He mended what was broken in society. He wove peace into the world.

## THE STRONGER ONE IS HERE

One of my favorite moments in Jesus’ life is when he was asked to explain his ministry. He said, “When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own house, his possessions are secure. But when someone stronger than he attacks him and overpowers him, that man takes away his armor on which he had relied and distributes his plunder” (Luke 11:21–22 NASB).

Have you ever described Jesus in this way? As a strong guy who beats up another guy and steals his things? Yeah, well, that’s how Jesus described himself.

Now, what does Jesus’ story mean exactly? The armored man is the devil. The treasure is us. We were the possession of the strong one, right up until the Stronger One arrived to beat him up and set us free.

*But isn’t he the Prince of Peace?*

You bet he is. And he’s bringing peace through superior firepower.

Have you ever wondered why demons often ran off screaming when Jesus arrived on the scene? Jesus just gave you the answer. *The Stronger One is here.* His presence on the earth caused the world to

go into a spiritual upheaval! Jesus walked into rooms, even places of worship, and people who had been tormented by the Enemy for years suddenly found themselves screaming in terror. The tyranny was at an end.

Let me stop right here and say this to you: I'm not sure what struggle or addiction or failure you're caught up in that's stealing your confidence and joy, but I'm going to tell you some good news. The Stronger One is here.

One of my favorite Jesus miracles was with the group of demons who, in the midst of their panic, asked, "Have you come here to torture us before the appointed time?" (Matthew 8:29 NIV). It's like they knew a whoopin' was coming; they just thought he was early!

As Jesus' career reached the climax, we see the Evil One make another move to disrupt his purposes. It was when Jesus divulged to his disciples that he had to march to Jerusalem to face rejection and death, and Peter strenuously objected. He rebuked Jesus for suggesting that he must go to the cross. Jesus did not respond directly to Peter, but rather to the source of the suggestion, saying, "Get behind me, Satan!" (Matthew 16:23). Jesus understood that the devil did not want him to get to that cross. Yet our Hero set his face "like a flint" toward Jerusalem, rode in as a king, and picked a fight with all the right people to get himself in serious trouble (Isaiah 50:7).

## DESTROYING THE WORK OF SIN

Upon arrival in Jerusalem, Jesus declared to his disciples, "Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out" (John 12:31). On the night he was betrayed, he said, "The ruler of this world is judged" (16:11). Then Jesus stepped out to destroy the

devil, not by perpetrating an act of violence, but by taking violence upon himself.

The writer of Hebrews said it this way: “Since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, so that through death He might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives” (2:14–15 NASB).

He destroyed the work of sin by taking all its consequences upon himself. He took the thorns produced by the curse on the ground, the pain, sweat, and toil of work, the relational alienation from loved ones, and the brutal severing of fellowship with God.

Paul told Corinthian believers that “the sting of death is sin” (1 Corinthians 15:56). What makes death so poisonous is that we die guilty of transgressing God. He also said that “the power of sin is the law” (v. 56). What makes death so terrifying to us is that the law proves we are sinners and are guilty. But this is not where the story ends, Paul said: “Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 57).

The greatest weapon the Enemy had against us was the truthful accusation that we are guilty and deserve judgment. So he “who knew no sin” knocked that weapon out of the Enemy’s hands by becoming sin, so we could be right with God (2 Corinthians 5:21).

“He was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5). The cross was his place of triumph over our Enemy. He took on our judgment and paid for it in full.

Colossians 2:13–15 says it this way:

When you were dead in your wrongdoings and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having



forgiven us all our wrongdoings, having canceled the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him. (NASB)

In the first century a triumph was an event, similar to a modern parade. When a king conquered an enemy in battle, the residents of the capital city organized a celebration. The king would ride into town on a white horse, met by the cheers of his grateful people. Behind him in the procession would be the vanquished enemy king. He was often stripped and shackled, put on display to show the people that they need not be afraid of him anymore. The final participants in the procession were the hostages who had been set free, marching triumphantly through the streets in white linen and swinging censers of burning incense. Those liberated by their victorious king filled the city with the sweet aroma of liberty.

Paul used this imagery to describe our lives in Christ: “Thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere” (2 Corinthians 2:14).

Notice the word *us*. This is the second way Jesus destroys the devil’s work.

## HIS APPEARING IN US

Another way Jesus destroys the work of the devil is by coming to reign in the individual human soul. First John 3:9 says, “No one

born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him; and he cannot keep on sinning, because he has been born of God." Sin is conquered—the work of the devil is destroyed—when a person is born of God. We move from lost to found. From orphaned to children of God. From the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of the beloved Son.<sup>4</sup>

We become something new. And when that change of identity takes place, a change in activity will follow. John described this with the imagery of God's seed being in us. We are born again, and now we look like our Father.

Now, he wasn't saying we'd reach sinless perfection on earth. After all, he wrote in an earlier chapter, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. . . . If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us" (1:8, 10). But the children of God do not revel in what their King gave his life to destroy; they're not content to live in ongoing, unrepentant sin.

When we are born of God there is a radical reorientation of our interactions with sin. The condemning power of sin is forever broken in our lives. We are no longer slaves! Our failures and shortcomings of the past no longer have the power to determine our future. Jesus has wiped away sin's penalty and will one day wipe out its very presence. This confidence in our new identity and secure destiny gives us the power to overcome the internal pull of our depravity.

Take a moment and step back in wonder at what our Conquering Warrior has accomplished. He came here on a mission to fight for us, and he succeeded.

We have truly been set free.

But we have not been set free from the fight. We have been set free *for* the fight.

## FREE TO FIGHT

In the film *Master and Commander*, the captain of England's HMS *Surprise* engages the most dreaded frigate in Napoleon's navy in battle on the open sea. After disabling the ship's sails, the captain leads an assault team onto the bridge of the enemy vessel. They hack their way to the hold of the ship, where several sailors from other English ships are held in cages. In a pivotal scene, the captain breaks the chains and opens the prison door, and a soldier stands ready to hand each exiting man a sword.

The men are free . . . to step into a raging battle. Before, they were simply captives; now they have the chance to be conquerors.

This is our story.

Jesus has not only liberated us but also invited us to join the fight. C. S. Lewis explained, "Enemy-occupied territory—that is what the world is. Christianity is the story of how the rightful king has landed, you might say landed in disguise, and is calling us all to take part in his great campaign of sabotage."<sup>5</sup> We can feel like we are in a war because *we are in one*. Yet it is a war in which our King has won the decisive victory. Because he has been victorious, we can be too.

As I say this, I know many people who are so discouraged by their continuous fumbles and failures that they've begun to doubt that God has changed their lives. Maybe you feel like that. But what if I told you that your struggles, rather than being a sign of something wrong with you, are actually a sign of something right?

Picture a battlefield in the midst of the heat of a firefight. My mind goes to the gruesome scene on the beaches of Normandy during the D-Day landing of World War II. Amid the chaos of bombs detonating and bullets flying, there are two kinds of people on the field: The first type of person looks calm and still, unaffected by the destruction

**WE HAVE NOT  
BEEN SET FREE  
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WE HAVE BEEN  
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surrounding them. The second type appears agitated. They're fighting a war within—battling fear, doubt, anxiety, terror—as the war wages without. What makes these two soldiers so different? The first person appears peaceful because he is dead. The deceased do not flinch when bullets strike the dirt. They don't duck as bombs erupt. The second person is aware of the battle because they are alive. It is the same spiritually.

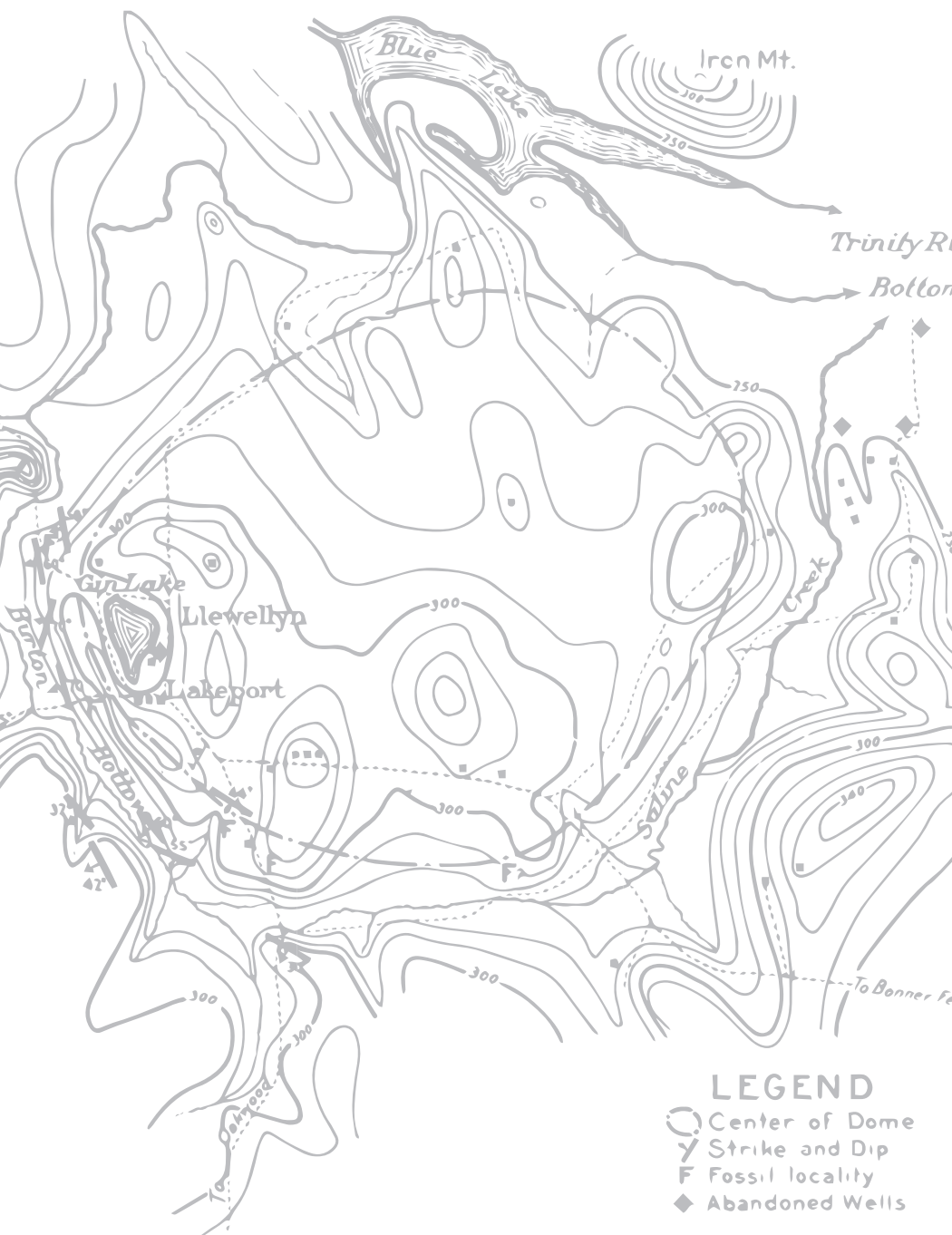
The spiritually dead do not struggle with sin. Your struggles, far from being a sign of your spiritual death, are in fact just the opposite. Your struggle may be one of your greatest assurances that you are alive.

You are like those sailors in *Master and Commander* stepping off the enemy's boat, holding a sword. You have not been freed from your struggle against sin; you have been freed to struggle. Now you must learn how to struggle well.

One day not only sin's power but its very presence will be banished. We are not there yet, and until we get there we have a purifying work to do. We have a fight on our hands. And we are not left alone or unequipped! Jesus, our King, not only rescues us but also trains our hands for war.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ben Stuart is the pastor of Passion City Church, Washington, DC. He previously served as the executive director of Breakaway Ministries, a weekly Bible study attended by thousands of college students on the campus of Texas A&M, for eleven years. Ben earned a master's degree in historical theology from Dallas Theological Seminary and is the author of the bestselling *Single, Dating, Engaged, Married: Navigating Life and Love in the Modern Age* and the Bible study *This Changes Everything*. He and his wife, Donna, live to inspire and equip people to walk with God for a lifetime. They reside in the Washington, DC, area with their three kids, Hannah, Sparrow, and Owen.



## LEGEND

-  Center of Dome
-  Strike and Dip
-  Fossil locality
-  Abandoned Wells