

RICK LAWRENCE

SPIRITUAL GRIT

A JOURNEY INTO
ENDURANCE
CHARACTER
CONFIDENCE
HOPE

JESUS-CENTERED



WHAT OTHERS ARE SAYING ABOUT SPIRITUAL GRIT

“God calls us to a risky and sacrificial faith. And yet even Christians give into fear-mongering and the pitfall of ‘playing it safe.’ Where in the Bible does it say, ‘Don’t take risks for your faith’? Which of Jesus’ disciples avoided danger in witnessing to the risen Christ? *Spiritual Grit* is an excellent exploration of the mettle necessary for following Jesus, who literally loved us to death and who invites us on an often-reckless adventure to change the world for him.”

—Richard Stearns

President of World Vision U.S. and author of
The Hole in Our Gospel and *Unfinished*

“In their 2010 remake of the 1969 John Wayne classic *True Grit*, the Coen brothers chose as the movie’s theme song the camp-meeting hymn ‘Leaning on the Everlasting Arms.’ Rick Lawrence’s scintillating study of what it means to live in the grip of ‘spiritual grit’ is a handbook in ‘learning to lean’ on those ‘everlasting arms.’ *Spiritual Grit* is a theological counterpoint to Nassim Nicholas Taleb’s excellent *Antifragile* (2014), but is more fun and illuminating to read.”

—Leonard Sweet

Best-selling author, professor, and founder of
and chief contributor to preachthestory.com

“We’ve seen an explosion of literature on the importance of character traits like resilience, endurance, and grit. Yet as I’ve read the books on the topic, something was missing. Actually, *someone*. How does grit relate to God? In *Spiritual Grit*, Rick Lawrence makes this vital connection, demonstrating how a ‘desperate dependence on Jesus’ helps build this cardinal virtue in our lives. Lawrence is a master storyteller. His powerful anecdotes and insights will equip and inspire you to take the hard, uphill path that ultimately leads to life.”

—Drew Dyck

Senior editor at *Christianity Today*’s online
magazine CTPastors.com, author of *Generation*
Ex-Christian, *Yawning at Tigers*, and the
forthcoming book *Taming Dragons*

“Like never before, our culture is in desperate need of Christ-followers who will do things that others won’t do, love in a way that doesn’t seem possible, and live with a courage that is divinely inspired. Our world hungers for people with spiritual grit. Rick has written a book that both encourages and challenges us to become the sort of Christ-followers that we know we’re called to be, the sort of Christ-followers that embody true grit. I can promise you that this book will fuel your passion for Jesus as it has mine.”

—Dr. Lina Abujamra

Host of the Living With Power podcast and the
radio program *Today’s Single Christian*, author of
Thrive, *Stripped*, and *Resolved*

“When it comes to growing into the mature men and women God is calling us to be, we too often look for the easiest path. We want quick results. We look for low-cost solutions. We look for ease. But what we really need is spiritual grit. That’s a core message of Lawrence’s book, and he drives it right to the heart with a beautiful combination of grace and honesty. All true growth is by nature uncomfortable, and Lawrence not only does a great job demonstrating how developing spiritual grit is essential to following the real Jesus, but also shows us how to do it, starting today.”

—**Michael D. Warden**

Author of *The Transformed Heart*, *Leading Wide Awake*, and *The Pearlsong Refounding* trilogy

“Our culture sets twin idols on pedestals in our hearts: the gods of Comfort and Convenience. Sometimes it seems we would follow them anywhere: eating things that are no good for us and shortchanging those we love by shirking opportunities to serve. Through deep study of Jesus in the Gospels and lots of examples from his own life and the lives of others, Rick Lawrence shows us how and why it’s better to stick with Jesus our shepherd, following him through the valley of the shadow of death, rather than to hang with the god of this age on the shortcut, business-class, direct flight to Easy Street.”

—**Conrad Gempf**

Lecturer in New Testament at the London School of Theology and author of *Jesus Asked* and *How to Like Paul Again*

“From one over-functioning parent to another, this is the book you wish you’d read before you knocked yourself out on that dinosaur diorama. *Spiritual Grit* is awash in stories of grace and resilience, reminding us that discipleship requires durability—and we’re not raising kids who have it. With a journalist’s laser-sharp observation and a storyteller’s spellbinding charm, Rick Lawrence encourages us to love young people better by protecting them less and challenging them more. If we needed permission to let youth actually grow up, *Spiritual Grit* is the place to start.”

—**Kenda Creasy Dean**

Mary D. Synnott professor of youth, church and culture, Princeton Theological Seminary, and author of *Almost Christian* and *The Godbearing Life*

“Rick has taken my favorite book (the Bible) and combined it with my favorite movie (*True Grit*). In *Spiritual Grit*, he helps us learn how to shed the religiosity of Christianity and find a deeper understanding of what being yoked with Christ can truly look like. This is not just another Christian book; it’s a field guide to a deeper understanding of what abiding in Christ is all about. Rick doesn’t write books, he lives them out in his life and then empties his heart and soul into them. This is one of those books you want everyone to read so they can experience the same beauty as you have.”

—**Tommy Woodard**

Co-founder of The Skit Guys, filmmaker,
and associate pastor of teaching and creativity
at Newchurch in Oklahoma City

“This book tackles a tough subject—but, blessedly, with a gritty grand mentor, Rick Lawrence. Rick not only teaches that Hard = Good (and is the Jesus way) but he guides and equips you to raise your grit game. Rick shares grit encouragement from many fields—academia, sports, military—but my favorite were examples from his own life journey. If you want to grow your soul, read this practicum on grit. You’ll be inspired, encouraged, and nourished.”

—**Andrea Syverson**

Author of *Alter Girl* and *Brand About*

“I have known Rick for many years as his pastor and his friend. His case for the necessity and impact of grit comes straight from the life he and I have shared. Rick writes clearly and powerfully of the redemptive and formative power of leaning into our difficulties with the courage Jesus provides. If you are looking for the easy path in our quick-fix society, this book is definitely not for you.”

—**Tom Melton**

Executive director of Catalyst Leadership
Forum and founding pastor of Greenwood
Community Church in Denver

“What Rick Lawrence writes, I read. His stories make me smile. His thoughts make me think. And at times he makes me mad enough to mend my ways. This is a welcome and timely look at a surprising ingredient to facing the challenges and chaos of life.”

—**Phil Callaway**

Author of *Tricks My Dog Taught Me: About Life,
Love, and God*, and host of Laugh Again Radio

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ENDURANCE.
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CONFIDENCE.
HOPE.

RICK LAWRENCE

Spiritual Grit

A Journey Into Endurance. Character. Confidence. Hope.

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INTRODUCTION

A couple of mornings every week, I walk my middle-school daughter and my cabin-fever dog to the bus stop on the corner before I head off to work. We live in Denver, and during the winter months it's as cold as you think it's supposed to be in the Mountain time zone. When the bus is late, the kids are shivering—especially the boys, who insist on wearing basketball shorts no matter what the weatherman says.

The recipe for misery, if you're a teenager shuffling your feet and pleading for the bus driver to hurry up, is the prospect of a long, marginless day of school preceded by icicles forming at the corners of your mouth. It's a purgatory these kids can't escape. So most of them turn to their screens, hovering over them as if they were tiny campfires. They're doing their best to cope with a hardship they can't escape. But not all of them cope alone...

On one of these frosty mornings I see a mom, then two moms, then three moms drive up in their battleship SUVs and line the curb opposite where I'm standing. All of them are wearing their early-morning uniform: a sweatshirt and a ball cap that shadows their makeup-free faces. At first I don't understand what they're doing there, idling and staring straight ahead like mannequins. But soon I hear the squeal of air brakes as the bus pulls up to the corner, and the back doors of these SUVs burst open in unison, spitting a backpack-toting boy out of each. They hustle their way into line and scramble onto the bus. I watch and wave as it pulls away in a cloud of black smoke, and then the armada of mom-ships pulls away from the curb and drives the block or two back home.

For weeks I witnessed "The Dance of the SUVs" play out until something finally boiled over inside of me. I turned to my daughter as we walked toward the corner and told her that these moms were, of course, well-meaning, but what they were doing was *not* a gift to their sons. She looked at me, incredulous. "What's wrong with it?" she asked. "I wish one of them would invite *me* to sit in their SUV."

Well, I told her, it's obvious that these parents feel bad for their boys, forced to stand on the corner for seven-ish minutes in the frosty air. But protecting them from a minor hardship is like siphoning water from the reservoir of their resolve. I mean, they're unwittingly undermining the strength their sons will need to face and overcome hard things in their lives.

She didn't say it, but her look did: *Dad, you are so...weird.*

Like most parents, these bus-stop moms feel empathy for their kids and are determined to do whatever they can to reduce hardship in

their lives. Because I'm a fellow-traveler parent, I know that extracting difficulty from our kids' lives *feels* like love, because we typically treat *hard* things as *bad* things. But, in truth, it's just that *edge of hardship* that hones our kids' ability to persevere through the challenges they're sure to face in life. And when we mistake *rescue* for *love*, we're harming them more than the "threat" we've helped them avoid. Sometimes our rescue strategies deny our kids a great treasure.

It's called *grit*.

WHAT IS GRIT?

Grit is the nuclear reactor at our core that drives perseverance and profound impact in life. It's the steely determination to keep going when it would be easy to give up. It's the will to keep going when persistence isn't enough. And when I see these boys racing from the warmth of their SUVs to the warmth of the bus, I'm imagining them 20 years from now, when most of them will be in the thick of their careers and marriages, and some will be parents themselves. And I can see what they can't possibly see right now—that they will need a strength and determination beyond their capacity to persevere when their marriages seem impossible, their jobs seem like a marathon, and their kids push their buttons. On these cold mornings at the bus stop, their empathetic parents are just trying to help, but love cares as much about the future as it does the present. And love always adds to our strength; it never saps it from us.

*Love cares as much about the
future as it does the present.*

WHEN HELPING HURTS

In "The Lesson of the Butterfly," writer Paulo Coelho offers his own spin on a well-known parable: "A man spent hours watching a butterfly struggling to emerge from its cocoon. It managed to make a small hole, but its body was too large to get through it. After a long struggle, it appeared to be exhausted and remained absolutely still. The man decided to help the butterfly, and with a pair of scissors, he cut open the cocoon, thus releasing the butterfly. However, the butterfly's body was very small and wrinkled, and its wings were all crumpled.

"The man continued to watch, hoping that, at any moment, the butterfly would open its wings and fly away. Nothing happened; in fact, the butterfly spent the rest of its brief life dragging around its shrunken body and shriveled wings, incapable of flight. What the man—out

of kindness and his eagerness to help—had failed to understand was that the tight cocoon and the efforts that the butterfly had to make in order to squeeze out of that tiny hole were Nature’s way of training the butterfly and of strengthening its wings.”¹

The message of the parable is clear: Sometimes a gift of empathy does more harm than good; it can be a kind of Trojan horse that sneaks past our defenses to rob our strength. And we must have strength to stay the course when things get difficult or when we must seize an opportunity and make the most of it. Empathy stops being a gift when it eats away at our ability to do what the Apostle Paul says we must do: *To stand our ground, and after we’ve done everything, to stand* (Ephesians 6:13, NIV).

Standing our ground is an everyday necessity. It’s very often the difference between...

- faithfulness and betrayal in marriage...
- respect and abuse in the workplace...
- fitness and the status quo in the gym...
- a good report and a bad report in the doctor’s office...
- justice and capitulation in a conflict...
- responsibility and entitlement in parenting...
- success and failure in the classroom or on the field...
- beauty and ugliness in the arts, and...
- maturity and immaturity in our relationship with God.

It’s not easy to gauge the long-term impact of standing our ground, because it’s so challenging to compare what *could have been* to what *is*. How can we account for the “butterfly effect”² of our tenacity when a small act of grit sets in motion a chain reaction that leads to something great? Or when a subtle capitulation—a nearly unobservable act of cowardice—steamrolls into disaster?

THE TIPPING POINTS OF GRIT

When I tried out for my high school football team, I was a gangly, uncoordinated quarterback trying to make it on a squad that was just one year removed from a state championship. The team was stacked with all-state players, and I had no shot. But it was a no-cut sport, so

the coach moved me to running back, a functional death sentence for a slow-footed rail of a kid. I came home that day and told my dad it was obvious the coach was trying to cut me without really cutting me. I thought I should take the hint and quit. My dad listened and then did something small that later turned out to be huge in my life. He told me I had every reason to quit, but to consider first how I'd reflect on the decision five years later.

After a restless night, I showed up the next day at practice. And every day after that I came home bruised and battered. Slow, uncoordinated running backs might as well be tackling dummies. During football season, I remember my mom wiping away tears when she saw my bruised forearms. But I stuck it out for four years as a terminal backup who rarely got to play, and in my senior year, I lettered as a football player.

That letter jacket still hangs from a rafter in our basement. I can't bear to pack it away because it reminds me of a gritty choice that's still paying dividends in my life 40 years later. It's not a symbol of success; it's a kind of *cairn* that reminds me I'm the sort of guy who sticks to his commitments even when it's brutally hard.

Twelve years ago my wife was diagnosed with a chronic lung disease. The standard treatment requires lifelong doses of powerful steroids. These drugs would sap her strength and produce cataracts, high blood sugar, psychological instability, weight gain, and an increased risk of infections. The disease can kill you, and the cure can wreck you.

In the wake of her diagnosis, Bev was desperate to find alternatives to what seemed like a hopeless path. So she made a bargain with God to pursue any new option he brought her way, no matter how far-fetched it seemed. At the time, we'd created and were leading a 10-week class called *In Pursuit of Jesus* for adults in our church. After one session, Bev shared her diagnosis with the group, and a man we didn't know well approached us to recommend a miracle-working immunologist who'd produced incredible results for his son. His story seemed too good to be true, but Bev remembered the deal she'd made with God, so we made an appointment.

After a long conversation with the doctor and a massive regimen of sophisticated bloodwork, Bev was told she'd be a good candidate for a treatment that had rarely, if ever, been tried with someone with her disease. The therapy requires transfusions of human immunoglobulin and has no harmful side effects. We trusted this doctor because he'd poured his energies into research to advance his strategy and he was passionately committed to his patients. But we first had to overcome a huge hurdle. Because the treatment was experimental and expensive, we were warned we'd have to do battle with the insurance company.

I told Bev we were partners in this adventure and I would take on the insurance blowback so she could concentrate on improving her health.

At the time, I had no idea what I was signing up for.

Over the course of this journey, my company has changed insurance providers four times, and in the last year we made the decision to move Bev to private insurance. That's five transitions in a little more than a decade, and every time we start over with a new insurer we face a long and exhausting approval process. It means countless hours on the phone, long slogs into confusing appeals processes, meticulous record-keeping, mountains of paperwork, and many, many blunt conversations. Twice we've faced short gaps in her treatment. The process seems specifically designed to weed out those who lack resolve. It's a calculated and colossal test of grit for those who are already facing daunting health challenges. But today, Bev is healthy and thriving. Her treatments have not only stopped the advance of her disease, but they've also slightly improved her lung condition. Her doctor plans to submit her case to medical journals because it's a breakthrough that could be a game-changer for millions, ultimately reducing its price. And none of this would have happened if Bev hadn't had the grit to pursue other options, and if I hadn't had the grit to stay in the ring and keep punching as one insurance goliath after another climbed through the ropes.

Grit matters.

Sometimes, it's the difference between life and death.

A GRIT BEYOND OUR OWN

Though we're often desperate for the strength we need to persevere through our challenges, our supply is sorely limited. We can't sustain our gritty determination for very long, or very deeply, on our own. All too often, circumstances push us to the end of ourselves. Like Sisyphus, the mythological Greek king condemned to roll a boulder up a hill for eternity, our everyday boulders test the limits of our endurance...

- Your travel schedule at work heats up, taking you away from home for long stretches just after you get the news that your mom has been diagnosed with terminal cancer.
- You're nine months into an international adoption process when the child's host country changes the rules, requiring adoptive parents to establish 90 days of residency before finalizing the paperwork.
- You've been single well into your 30s when you (finally!) meet "the one," but on a dinner date that looks like it might end with a proposal, he breaks up with you instead.

- You get a phone call at 3 a.m. from your son who's been out drinking with friends and has gotten into an altercation with a transit cop—he's calling from jail, asking if you can bail him out.

Our “impulse grit” will get us past the first few hurdles, but what happens when a hardship spreads like an infection through our soul, sapping the determination we need to push through? Ultimately, we need a source of strength *outside of ourselves* to help us face and overcome the challenges that demand more than we have to give. We need something more than mere grit.

We need *spiritual* grit...

Ultimately, we need a source of strength outside of ourselves to help us face and overcome the challenges that demand more than we have to give.

In the Sinai wilderness, a shepherd named Moses is minding his own business when an odd sight stops him in his tracks. Flames are engulfing a bush, but the bush doesn't appear to burn (Exodus 3). And he mutters, “This is amazing...Why isn't that bush burning up? I must go see it.” As he draws near, a voice tells him to stop and take his sandals off because he's in the holy presence of God. Cowering, Moses buries his face in his hands as Yahweh lays out his massive and improbable plan to free millions of enslaved Israelites from captivity in Egypt. The strategy, Moses discovers, will require *him* to spearhead this boondoggle. The bush-Voice describes the most daunting “special forces” mission in history as if it were a quick trip to the grocery store: “Now go, for I am sending you to Pharaoh. You must lead my people Israel out of Egypt.” And Moses, just as you and I would likely do, reacts to this impossible request with despair: “Who am I to appear before Pharaoh? Who am I to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt?”

“Who am I?” is shorthand for *Are you kidding me? I don't have what it takes to do what you're asking me to do. You've got the wrong guy, because this is way over my head.*

And God's pragmatic response to this protest is ridiculously blunt: **“I will be with you.”**

No, Moses does not have the grit to persevere and succeed in this impossible mission...alone. But yes, he will succeed anyway, because God will give him what he needs most—his own determined strength to keep pushing, against all odds. My friend Scotty Priest, a pastor and church-planter, reveals what's really going on in this burning-bush encounter, and in our own impossible challenges: “Ever have someone

tell you that God will never give you more than you can handle? Well, that's not true. God *will* give you more than you can handle. But not more than you can handle *together*."

God's "I will be with you" means much more than an arm around the shoulder and a pat on the back. It's a promise to infuse his bottomless supply of grit into our best efforts. When God is with us, and we are with God, we get what he has. *That's spiritual grit.*

I have 13 versions of this book sitting in a digital folder on my computer right now. If you're an author who's written dozens of books, that's about 12 versions too many, actually. Writing a book is like an expedition to the summit of Everest. When you're finally standing on the wind-whipped mountaintop, you raise your hands high, take a quick photo, then beat a path back to base camp before you collapse. Then you leave that summit behind you. But a week after I delivered *Spiritual Grit* to my editor, Candace McMahan, she summoned the courage to give me the bad news: The book needed a major rework. Worse, it was quickly apparent I would have to take it "back down to the studs" and start over. The problems she found didn't require tweaks—more like decapitations. Like Moses cowering before the bush that wouldn't burn, the shocking reality overwhelmed me: *I don't have what it takes to do what you're asking me to do.*

It's a hopeless irony when you're forced to admit you don't have the grit to finish your book about grit. Well, contrary to the "take a break first" counsel of my friends and my editor and my wife, I gave myself one night of toss-and-turn sleep, then got up early and tried to climb that mountain again. I felt empty and desperate and alone—propelled toward a dependence on God's strength not as a spiritual practice, but as a down-and-dirty necessity. Some days I thought I might go crazy; other days I inched my way forward. But the same God who promised Moses "I will be with you" pushed and pulled and dragged me up the mountain. Six weeks later, and 12 versions after that rejected first draft, the book you're now holding emerged from the smoke and chaos of my own exodus from Egypt. If I did not have access to God's reinforcing grit, I could not have completed this work. I'm sure that one day he and I will have a good laugh about all of this...but not quite yet. I'm picking my way back down the mountain to base camp, one last time, filled with grateful joy for his mercy and his strength.

The Apostle Paul describes the mechanics of spiritual grit in his letter to the Roman followers of Jesus: "We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation. And this hope will not lead to disappointment. For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has

given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love" (Romans 5:3-5).

A heart that is filled up with the "dear" love of God endures when endurance seems humanly impossible. When Jesus advises his disciples that "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God" they respond with despair: "Then who in the world can be saved?" Well, Jesus tells them, "Humanly speaking, it is impossible. But with God everything is possible" (Matthew 19:24-26). With the Holy Spirit "filling our hearts with his love," our impossible problems and trials are the on-ramp to a life marked by endurance, character, confidence, and hope.

We stick with things, no matter what.

We tackle the tough stuff, with no excuses.

And we find ourselves rejoicing in the middle of it all, because nothing is more deeply satisfying than overcoming hard things in the close company of a God whose greatest gift to us is his intimate presence.

At the beginning of this journey, it might be helpful for you to take the Spiritual Grit Self-Assessment toward the end of this book. This will add to your self-awareness as you interact with the challenges ahead.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Paulo Coelho, "The Lesson of the Butterfly," www.paulocoelhoblog.com (December 10, 2007).
- 2 The "butterfly effect" is a central aspect of chaos theory, and describes how a small change in a nonlinear system can result in a large difference later on. The term was first used by American mathematician Edward Lorenz to explain how a developing tornado can result from the tiny alterations in the atmosphere caused by the earlier flapping of a butterfly's wings (*MIT Technology Review*, technologyreview.com).



CHAPTER I

THE GRIT WE NEED, AND WHERE IT COMES FROM

THE JOURNEY INTO SPIRITUAL GRIT

When our path in life leads us into tough terrain, we often need more than our own limited supply of determination. In this chapter you'll discover exactly what spiritual grit is—and how a growing passion for Jesus gives you the strength at your core to face and overcome challenges.

"The future bears down upon each one of us with all the hazards of the Unknown..."

—Plutarch, quoting Solon, Greek statesman and poet

"Never, never, never give up."

These words, first uttered by Britain's wartime leader Winston Churchill, are burned into a piece of barn wood that I've mounted above our kitchen sink. It's a necessary reminder for our whole family because the gravitational force of everyday life continuously drags us back from our resolve. We start things, but we don't always finish things. We vow we won't give up, but we do anyway. We just as easily talk ourselves *out* of our resolve as we talk ourselves *into* it. We know perseverance is the fuel our forward momentum needs, but it often feels like we're running on fumes.

It helps to remember that Churchill delivered his iconic challenge to a roomful of British schoolchildren while the fate of the world, and the survival of England, was in great peril.

After the Blitz, when London was systematically reduced to rubble by wave after wave of German bombers, Churchill showed up at Harrow, his old boarding school, to speak to the students in a special assembly. Pearl Harbor was still more than a month away, and the United States had stayed cautiously on the sidelines of what would soon become World War II. Like a drowning swimmer, the British were caught in the undertow of their despair, and their prime minister understood what was at stake. So in his closing remarks at Harrow, Churchill lowered his bulldog gaze and declared: "Surely from this period of 10 months, this is the lesson: Never give in. Never give in. Never, never, never, never—in nothing, great or small, large or petty—never give in, except to convictions of honor and good sense. Never yield to force. Never yield to the apparently overwhelming might of the enemy."¹

Churchill's coldblooded resolve gave his beleaguered country a place to stand as the war dragged on. Without it, who knows what our reality would be today? Boris Johnson, the former mayor of London who left that office to become Britain's foreign secretary, says, "We dimly believe that the Second World War was won with Russian blood and American money; and though that is in some ways true, it is also true that, without Winston Churchill, Hitler would almost certainly have won." Johnson points to a tipping point in 1940, when the British

parliament was locked in a debate over a proposal to negotiate a “cut our losses” peace with a German state that had already gobbled up the rest of Europe. In a hastily organized gathering of his cabinet ministers, Churchill delivered a Shakespearean speech that brought the divided body to its feet and ensured England would persevere to the bitter end in the fight against a consuming evil. He sealed his case with this: “I am convinced that every one of you would rise up and tear me down from my place if I were for one moment to contemplate parley or surrender. If this long island story of ours is to end at last, let it end only when each one of us lies choking in his own blood upon the ground.”²

The force of Churchill’s grit in the face of monumental pressure persists over the decades, inviting me to recalibrate my own courage while I’m washing the dishes or helping my kids with their homework or packing my computer bag before I head to work. “Never, never, never give up” reminds me to keep moving through my everyday cataclysms, the humdrum “hazards of the unknown,”³ as the Greek poet Solon called them. And sometimes, when I’m dreading failure or negotiating with my own interior enemies to throw in the towel, I’ll glance at that barn-wood plaque and repeat Churchill’s declaration out loud. The effect is like dipping a bucket into a well, hoping to find the spiritual grit I need somewhere in the depths of my soul.

But how do I know if I’ll find water in that well, and what is its source?

“Never, never, never give up” reminds me to keep moving through my everyday cataclysms, the humdrum “hazards of the unknown.”

THE SOURCE OF OUR STRENGTH

Before the Apostle Paul implores us to stand our ground, he tells us what we must do first. We’ll find the resolve we need, he says, when we “draw our strength from [Jesus] and are empowered through our union with him” (Ephesians 6:10, amplified rendering from the AMP version). The steely determination strengthening us in the midst of fear and confusion and pain is fed by a deeper well. *And we discover that deeper well in the heart of Jesus.*

It was spiritual grit that drove Jesus to the Cross, and it was spiritual grit that kept him there until he declared, “It is finished.” The Cross, Paul says, “is foolishness to those who are perishing...but to us who are

being saved it is the power of God” (1 Corinthians 1:18, AMP). Grit on top of grit on top of grit is “the power of God.” It is Jesus’ resolve in the face of torture and death and—chief of agonies—separation from his Father that has freed us from our captivity to sin and joined us to God’s family as adopted sons and daughters. Like a garden hose tapping into an oil pipeline, we gain access to this same resolve when we embrace his imperative: “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5, NIV).

When we attach ourselves to Jesus in an intimate relationship, our lives become tributaries fed by the torrent of his spiritual grit. We can do nothing apart from him, but we can endure and overcome anything when we are “in him” and he is “in us.”

When we attach ourselves to Jesus in an intimate relationship, our lives become tributaries fed by the torrent of his spiritual grit.

It’s helpful to remember that enduring and overcoming are not innate abilities that some are born with and some are not. Spiritual grit is not a birthright; it’s a core strength that must be developed in us. King Solomon observes: “The fastest runner doesn’t always win the race, and the strongest warrior doesn’t always win the battle. The wise sometimes go hungry, and the skillful are not necessarily wealthy. And those who are educated don’t always lead successful lives” (Ecclesiastes 9:11).

RESEARCHING GRIT

After Angela Lee Duckworth left a prestigious Manhattan consulting job to teach math to seventh-graders in a New York public school, she noticed that her best students weren’t necessarily the smartest. The kids who excelled were scrappy, determined to succeed. Meanwhile, some of her naturally gifted students under-shot their potential. “What if,” Duckworth asked, “doing well in school and in life depends on much more than your ability to learn quickly and easily?”⁴

Fascinated by the dogged determination she observed in some of her students, Duckworth left teaching to earn a graduate degree in psychology. Her goal was to understand why some push through challenging circumstances while others don’t. Her research led her to West Point cadets who managed to persevere through the “Beast Barracks” portion of basic training, to contestants in the National

Spelling Bee who advanced the furthest, and to rookie teachers working in tough neighborhoods who stuck it out in the face of overwhelming odds.⁵ “One characteristic emerged as a significant predictor of success,” says Duckworth, “and it wasn’t social intelligence, it wasn’t good looks or physical health, and it wasn’t IQ. It was grit. Grit is passion and perseverance for very long-term goals. Grit is stamina. Grit is sticking with your future day in and day out, not just for the week, not just for the month, but for years. And working really hard to make that future a reality. Grit is living life like it’s a marathon, not a sprint.”⁶

People who live with a marathon mentality, Duckworth discovered, have developed a passion for something higher than themselves. “Grit is not just having resilience in the face of failure,” she says, “but also having deep commitments that you remain loyal to over many years.”⁷ The line separating follow-through from failure transcends our limited capacity to persevere in our own strength.

*People who live with a marathon mentality
have developed a passion for something
higher than themselves.*

As Paul explains, and Duckworth’s research suggests, we need a source of grit that is higher than ourselves. Of course, we rarely give in to our challenges at the first sign of resistance, and many of us know very well how to muscle through hardships and make the most of what we have. But it’s only a matter of time before we reach the shallow bottom of our own well—when we recognize “hang in there” and “keep fighting” as the frustrating platitudes they are.

In the week before I graduated from high school, my friends filled my yearbook with the usual clichés, but one attempted to say something deeper and more honoring to me: “Rick, you’re the hardest try-er I’ve ever known.” For years I looked back on that scrawl in my yearbook with pride. I secretly believed my capacity for trying harder could overcome anything life threw at me. That is, until I quit my first real job after a year because my conniving, hypocritical boss made my workplace feel like a torture chamber. Or the time I asked my girlfriend to marry me and she accepted but then broke off the engagement after three months. That happened twice, by the way—with the same woman (who’s now my wife). Or the time I was a camp counselor responsible for a cabin full of urban teenagers who had gang ties, and I narrowly thwarted their plan to murder me. Or the time... Well, you get the picture.

When we’re tested beyond our capacity, we naturally look for help outside of that capacity. This is why it’s so important to embrace the

implications of Duckworth's research by paying better attention to what Paul is revealing to us—that we are empowered by our union with Jesus when our intimate attachment to him releases his core strength to flow into and through us.

A POWERFUL WHY

Award-winning *New York Times* columnist David Brooks pounced on this “passion for something higher” dynamic in Duckworth's research, insisting that it deserves more attention: “I don't know about you, but I'm really bad at being self-disciplined about things I don't care about. For me, and I suspect for many, hard work and resilience can only happen when there is a strong desire. Grit is thus downstream from longing. People need a powerful *why* if they are going to be able to endure any *how*.”⁸

This vital insight—the call to find and develop our *powerful why* in life—elevates grit from a personality characteristic to an orientation toward the Divine. If a passion for something higher than ourselves is what fuels our ability to persevere through great challenges, then we find it only in a Source that is beyond our human potential. The higher the focus of our passion, the deeper the well of our spiritual grit. And we desperately need a well with deeper resources than our “try harder to get better” determination—an ultimately shallow source of grit that is nevertheless the focus of many sermons, “Christian living” books, and a church culture that is addicted to self-help schemes.

The higher the focus of our passion, the deeper the well of our spiritual grit.

It's not the Christian principles we follow or the Christian character qualities we strive for that fuel our spiritual grit; it's the way we are captured and romanced by the heart of Jesus. Relational intimacy with God generates the powerful passion that spiritual grit requires.

Psychologist and spiritual director David Benner writes, “After decades of Bible reading, I realized that my relationship with God was based more on what I believed than on what I experienced. I had lots of information about God but longed to deepen my personal knowing. Getting to know Jesus better seemed like the right place to start. It was.”⁹ Benner's journey from mere belief to “personal knowing” highlights a universal truth: Spiritual grit is fed by our *experience* of Jesus' heart, not the *information* we've collected about him.

Relational intimacy with God generates the powerful passion that spiritual grit requires.

THE HEART IS THE POINT

I lead a small group for young adults in our home every week, and the focal point of our gathering is this: Pursuing the Heart of Jesus, Not His Recipes. When a guest joins the group, I always ask one of the “lifers” to explain the meaning behind our unusual battle cry. And they never disappoint, because they’ve experienced firsthand the passion that grows out of a focus on the heart of Jesus, rather than a fixation on how his principles—his “recipes for life”—will improve their lives. When our goal is to pursue the heart of Jesus, rather than morph everything he says and does into life applications, we find the “something higher” that fuels our passion and grows in us a greater capacity for spiritual grit.

Author, C.S. Lewis expert, and Boston College professor Peter Kreeft describes Jesus as a *shocking wonder*. “I think Jesus is the only man in history who never bored anyone,” he says. “I think this is an empirical fact, not just a truth of faith...Not everyone who meets Jesus is pleased, and not everyone is happy. But everyone is shocked.”¹⁰ This is relational language, not academic data. Kreeft is a respected scholar, but he understands that passion is more about the heart than the head. Paul’s great hope, he tells his friends in Ephesus, is that all of us would somehow comprehend “the breadth and length and height and depth” of Jesus’ love, “to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge” (Ephesians 3:18–19, NASB).

The most damaging outcome of our overly empathetic choices as parents is that we sap our kids’ strength, and the most damaging outcome of a “formulas and recipes” approach to our spiritual lives is that we siphon passion away from our relationship with Jesus. When we treat him as if he’s a bullet-point vending machine for self-help ideas, or a “try harder to get better” guru à la Tony Robbins, we miss (or consciously avoid) his invitation to abide in him. What does Jesus really want? We know the answer because he made it plain in a public prayer, just before going to the Cross: “As you are in me, Father, and I am in you...may they be in us” (John 17:21). He is describing what happens on a wedding night, not during a wedding ceremony. He wants intimacy.

St. Clare of Assisi says, “We become what we love and who we love shapes what we become. If we love things, we become a thing. If we love nothing, we become nothing. Imitation is not a literal mimicking of Christ; rather, it means becoming the image of the beloved, an image disclosed through transformation.”¹¹ When Paul, who was schooled

by the leading rabbi of his time and was himself one of the smartest men in the ancient world, declares, “I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2, ASV), he is describing the *relational* force that has transformed his life. He has become what he *loves*, not what he *reasons*.

“*We become what we love and who we love shapes what we become.*”

There is a vast chasm between a heart that has an *affinity* for Christianity and a heart that has been *conquered and captured* by the person of Jesus. The first does not always bridge to the second. And since passions are developed, not inherited, our journey into spiritual grit will require that we “taste and see” Jesus as he really is, in all his shocking wonder. Tepid versions of him naturally produce a tepid relationship. In contrast, our passion for him grows when we slow down and pay ridiculous attention to him. That means...

1. We prioritize “Why?” questions about the things he says and does, not “What?” questions.
2. We open ourselves to *experience* him, not just study him.

WHY BEFORE WHAT

For more than a decade, I’ve been helping thousands of people discover and practice a simple, subtle, and powerful habit that cracks open the door to Jesus’ heart. To move toward intimacy with him, I emphasize “Why?” questions about the things he says and does, because “Why?” targets his motivations and his value system. Instead of “*What* would Jesus do?” I ask “*Why* did Jesus do it?” And then we consider our initial answers and ask “Why?” one or two more times to drill down into territory we rarely explore: Jesus’ core motivations. “Why?” is a heat-seeking-missile sort of question, and the “heat” is the heart of Jesus.

Here’s a simple example of how this works. In Matthew 15, an “unclean” Canaanite woman is following Jesus and his disciples as they travel from Galilee to Tyre in the north. As they go, she is groveling and pleading with Jesus to heal her daughter of demon possession. At first Jesus ignores her; then he treats her with apparent scorn: “It isn’t right to take food from the children and throw it to the dogs.”

In the awkward silence that follows, the woman’s spiritual grit rises to the surface: “That’s true, Lord, but even dogs are allowed to eat the scraps that fall beneath their masters’ table.”

Jesus is astonished and thrilled by this response, and replies, “Dear woman, your faith is great. Your request is granted.” (We’ll explore this story in greater depth in Chapter 2.)

A conventional understanding of this story might focus on *what* Jesus said and did in this encounter: *He told a woman he wouldn’t help her, called her a dog, then changed his mind—that’s Jesus for you.* Left unresolved is *why* he would behave this way. We don’t learn anything about his heart by focusing on *what*. If instead we slow down and focus on *why* Jesus said and did these things, we launch ourselves into the rich mystery of his passionate core.

I asked the young adults in our Pursuing the Heart, Not the Recipes group to come up with all the possible reasons Jesus would interact with this desperate woman in such a disturbing way. They launched into a vigorous conversation fueled by follow-up “Why?” questions intended to drill down past their initial answers. (*Yes, he appears to be purposely making it hard for this woman to get what she wants, but why? Yes, he seems to quickly change his attitude toward her, but why?*) And then, their verdict...

Jesus takes great risks with people to surface their courage. He’s passionate about setting people free from their captivity, so he purposely treats this woman with the scorn everyone (including her) expects, to bait her into the courageous response he’s hoping for. When she responds with “great faith,” he delights in celebrating her sassy determination and treats her with admiration and respect. The heart of Jesus is motivated by courage.¹²

When we use “Why?” questions as a way to “taste and see” the heart of Jesus in everything he says and does, we discover he is greater and better than we ever imagined. He really is a shocking wonder. And when we encounter Jesus in this way, our passion for him grows organically. The distance that separates us from him, created by our headfirst approach to his story in Scripture, evaporates. Our desire for union with him grows as our longing intensifies.

The key is to continue asking “Why?” questions until we reach the bedrock of Jesus’ heart, because we almost always default to “What?” answers that don’t really take us there. (*Yes, Jesus is comfortable making people uncomfortable, but why?*) “Why?” requires us to explore the heart, rather than the head. When we persist with “Why?” questions, we lower our pursuit 18 inches—from the brain to our core, the seat of passion. In my experience, especially with adults, that’s a challenging 18-inch journey. We’re stuck in a head-rut.

THE MECHANICS OF PASSION

Pursuing “Why?” rather than “What?” is not merely a psychological or emotional exercise, it’s a biological imperative. “Why?” questions help us connect with Jesus at a level that changes us from the inside out.

In a TED Talk that’s been viewed more than 35 million times, marketing consultant Simon Sinek explains: “People don’t buy *what* you do, they buy *why* you do it...It’s all grounded in the tenets of biology. Not psychology, biology...The brain’s neo-cortex is responsible for all of our rational and analytic thought and language...(*This is the “What?” part of our brains.*) Our limbic brain is responsible for all of our feelings, like trust and loyalty. It’s also responsible for all human behavior, all decision-making, and it has no capacity for language...(*This is the “Why?” part of our brains.*) If you don’t know *why* you do what you do, then how will you ever get someone to be loyal and want to be a part of what it is you do?”¹³

Sinek is targeting the mechanics of passion, because passion is what motivates us to pursue hard things, commit to epic causes, and endure great difficulty. And understanding the *why* of Jesus is the catalyst for moving us toward a deeper, more intimate relationship with him. His *why* gives us our *why*. Over the course of the last year, our Pursuing the Heart of Jesus group has tackled dozens of these why-based challenges as we learn how to pay better attention to Jesus, and we’ve uncovered these treasures along the way...

❧ **Question:** Why does a good shepherd leave his whole flock to graze on a hillside to pursue and rescue the one sheep that has lost its way?

Answer: *The heart of Jesus is focused on individuals, not crowds.*

❧ **Question:** Why does Jesus instruct Peter to pay his portion of the Temple tax by throwing a fishing line into the sea and finding a valuable coin in the mouth of the first fish he catches?

Answer: *The heart of Jesus is playful.*

❧ **Question:** Why does Jesus often speak to religious leaders without a filter—casually offending them instead of treating them with deference and respect?

Answer: *The heart of Jesus is disruptive, often “upsetting the apple carts” of others.*

- ❧ **Question:** Why does Jesus so often overlook people's sordid reputations to celebrate something he loves about them?
Answer: The heart of Jesus is determined to morph ugly things into beautiful things.
- ❧ **Question:** Why does Jesus seem to have so little patience for the religious elite?
Answer: The heart of Jesus longs for authenticity, not performance.
- ❧ **Question:** Why does Jesus forgive the soldiers who are executing him?
Answer: The heart of Jesus defines true love by how we treat our enemies.
- ❧ **Question:** Why does Jesus talk so much about the bad things that will happen to those who ignore the truth?
Answer: The heart of Jesus has a sharp edge.
- ❧ **Question:** Why does Jesus delight so much in people who wholeheartedly trust him?
Answer: The heart of Jesus values dependence, not control.
- ❧ **Question:** Why doesn't Jesus just tell people what he wants them to do instead of telling them stories that often don't make immediate sense?
Answer: The heart of Jesus loves story and metaphor and parable.
- ❧ **Question:** Why is Jesus so impressed by over-the-top expressions of faith and love—the woman who weeps on his feet and dries them with her hair, for example?
Answer: The heart of Jesus values extravagant expressions of genuine worship and love.

- ❧ **Question:** Why does Jesus use the ancient equivalent of profanity—“whitewashed tombs” and “snakes” and “hypocrites,” for example—in his interactions with powerful people?

Answer: *The heart of Jesus speaks truth to power.*

- ❧ **Question:** Why does Jesus reiterate to his disciples that they’re going to suffer and die for him?

Answer: *The heart of Jesus spotlights brutal realities.*

- ❧ **Question:** Why is Jesus so willing to lose fans and followers?

Answer: *The heart of Jesus is humble and secure.*

- ❧ **Question:** Why does Jesus stop on his way to meeting an urgent need to free a marginalized woman who has lived in shame?

Answer: *The heart of Jesus is generous and kind to “the least of these.”*

- ❧ **Question:** Why does Jesus tell the parable of the talents?

Answer: *The heart of Jesus expects us to take courageous risks.*

- ❧ **Question:** Why does Jesus insist on praying out loud so his disciples can hear what he says to his Father just before he is arrested, tortured, and crucified?

Answer: *The heart of Jesus longs for us.*

- ❧ **Question:** Why does Jesus cry out on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Answer: *The heart of Jesus is fully abandoned to our redemption.*

- ❧ **Question:** Why does Jesus tell the parable of the prodigal son?

Answer: *The heart of Jesus is quick to forgive, quick to restore, and eager to celebrate.*

- ❏ **Question:** Why does Jesus turn over the tables of the money-changers in the Temple?

Answer: The heart of Jesus is angered by injustice and is not afraid to confront it.

- ❏ **Question:** Why does Jesus tell the thief on the cross who sticks up for him that he will be with him in paradise that day?

Answer: The heart of Jesus is determined to invite.

- ❏ **Question:** Why is Jesus so excited about leaving his disciples behind, promising them it will be better for them once the Spirit comes in his place?

Answer: The heart of Jesus is not stingy, but shares everything he's been given without reservation.

BETTER THAN NICE

Years ago, as part of a research project, I hired camera crews in five major cities around the U.S. to stop young people on the street and record their answers to a simple question: “What one word would you use to describe Jesus?” When I got the raw footage back from all five cities, I was astonished by their singular, universal response: *Jesus is nice*. The truth is, Jesus is always kind but only sporadically nice (you get a taste of that reality from the preceding list). “Nice” is the result of a surface, thumbnail assessment—the expected outcome of a “What?” approach to stories about him, not a “Why?” pursuit of his heart.

*The truth is, Jesus is always kind
but only sporadically nice.*

When we embrace Paul’s proclamation as our own—“*I am determined to know nothing but Jesus Christ, and Him crucified*”—we intentionally move from a benign affinity for the Christian life to a consuming passion for something higher than ourselves. And our “whys” lead the way. David Brooks writes: “[Let’s] say you were designing a school to elevate and intensify longings. Wouldn’t you want to provide examples of people who have intense longings? Wouldn’t you want to encourage students to be obsessive about worthy things? Wouldn’t you discuss which loves are higher than others and practices that habituate them toward those desires?”¹⁴

Our own School of Intensified Longing is like a culinary institute, where the students feast on the heart of Jesus. The psalmist urges us to “taste and see that the Lord is good. Oh, the joys of those who take refuge in him!” (Psalm 34:8). “Taste and see” is metaphoric language for “know by experience,” and “take refuge” is metaphoric language for “go inside” or “immerse yourself in.” Eugene Peterson, in *The Message*, gives this psalm a poetic spin: “Open your mouth and taste, open your eyes and see—how good God is. Blessed are you who run to him.”

“Taste and see” is the same invitation Jesus offers the crowds gathered to see him on a hillside near Capernaum (John 6). When they ask him to give them a “miraculous sign” before they will believe in him, he responds by offering himself as the “true bread from heaven.” He tells them that if they won’t “eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood” they’ll never find the life they’re looking for. To eat Jesus and drink Jesus, we open ourselves to him with abandon. *We embed him inside our identity.*

We develop our great passion for Jesus and begin to abide in him when we invite him from the periphery of our lives into the core of our hearts. And we’re motivated to do that as our “Why?” questions reveal his essence.

Bonus: The School of Intensified Longing

As an extended exploration of Jesus’ heart and as a companion to your journey into spiritual grit, I’ve included a bonus resource toward the end of this book. It’s called The School of Intensified Longing, and it’s designed to unveil the shocking wonder of Jesus’ heart using “Why?” questions. From nine vantage points, you can explore what makes Jesus tick, tasting and seeing him as he really is, not as we’d like him to be. The result of this little appetizer, I hope, will be to increase your hunger for him and to help you find your passion for something higher as you encounter his heart. Enter the School of Intensified Longing on page 179.

EXPERIENCING JESUS, NOT JUST STUDYING HIM

I met Joann Richardson at Simply Jesus, an annual gathering in the Colorado mountains that’s like a family reunion for people who are related to each other only by their love for Jesus. She’s an occupational therapist in Indianapolis who’s done master’s-level research on the resilience of stroke patients. When I first met her, I was collecting stories and insights into grit, so I asked if her work with stroke survivors had revealed anything that might help me.

“These people,” she told me, “became my heroes and teachers, and I have thought of their stories, their resilience, and their integrity often as I face trials in my own life.”

Richardson’s research isolates the factors that help some people persevere through the damage caused by their trauma better than others. She and her team conducted in-depth interviews with a small sampling of survivors who agreed to share their stories, and common strengths emerged. Most of the “intrinsic factors contributing to recovery” they discovered were predictable: a good sense of humor, a strong desire to maintain independence, regular and prolonged exercise, and a positive attitude. But one surprising factor surfaced as well: *More than half of the people Richardson’s team interviewed pointed to a deepening relationship with Jesus as a bedrock of their recovery.*¹⁵

These stroke survivors are fighting against the physical and mental incapacities of their trauma. Recovering some semblance of normal life requires grit. But they’re also fighting to recover their incapacitated identities. When their bodies lose functional ability, their sense of self disintegrates. The “me” they thought they were is no longer the “me” the stroke has left in its wake. Against this assault, they need more than Christian principles and apply-it-to-life recipes; they need to *experience* the power and presence of Jesus actually strengthening their core identities from the inside out. They need to know Jesus, not just know *about* him.

You and I may not be facing the sort of interior crisis that follows a stroke or other trauma, but all of us are vulnerable to assaults on our identities. We doubt our intrinsic worth, we believe plausible lies about ourselves, and we concoct elaborate façades to prevent others from discovering our real selves. We, too, need more than sound-bite truths about Jesus and the Christian life. We need direct experiences of his power, reshaping and confirming who we really are. The kind of knowing we need requires us to immerse ourselves in Jesus the way two lovers immerse themselves in each other. This immersion—or union—is possible only because we have a Helper who is able to lead us into experiential intimacy with Jesus. That Helper has many names, including Advocate, Counselor, Comforter, Encourager, and Holy Spirit—but I’ve added a new name to the list that targets the Spirit’s primary occupation in our lives: *Invisible Rabbi*.

*We need to know Jesus,
not just know about him.*

THE INVISIBLE RABBI

“Don’t let anyone call you ‘Rabbi,’” Jesus tells his disciples, “for you have only one teacher” (Matthew 23:8). Later, just before he is arrested in the garden of Gethsemane, he promises them a “Friend” he’s nicknamed “the Spirit of the Truth” (John 16:13), whose job description is to “take you by the hand and guide you into all the truth there is” (John 16:13, MSG). He is about to go away, he tells them, and his departure will pave the way for this Friend—this “Paraclete,” this Invisible Rabbi—to make a home in their souls, teaching them from the inside out. The Spirit will “bring me glory by telling you whatever he receives from me,” he says (John 16:14). He reiterates that promise twice, for emphasis. Until now, his influence on their lives has been from the outside in, with marginal results. Soon, the Invisible Rabbi will be teaching them about his heart from a place of intimacy, and they will understand him for the first time.

In the time of Jesus, it was a great honor to be “yoked” to a rabbi—to be under his influence and instruction. Jewish boys started their education in the synagogue at the age of 6, during a season of their childhood called *Bet Sefer* (which means House of the Book). Their teachers were scribes and rabbis, and their challenge was to memorize the first five books of what we now call the Bible. They studied seven days a week, memorizing their way through massive sections of Scripture. The goal was not to think about what they were memorizing or to analyze it in any way.

During the next stage of their education, from the ages of 10 to 14, they entered into a season called *Bet Talmud* (which means House of Learning). Over the course of these five years, they memorized the writings of the prophets. In addition, they were introduced to the art of rhetorical debate and critical thinking, learning to answer questions with even better questions. By each boy’s 14th birthday, his academic potential had been tested and revealed. The brilliant ones continued on to *Bet Midrash* (the House of Study), and the less-than-brilliant ones ended their formal education and joined the family business, whatever that was.

At this point, the boys who were pursuing a *Bet Midrash* trajectory had to find a rabbi they respected and lobby to become that great man’s *talmid*, or disciple. There were very few rabbis to attach themselves to, so the competition for the best-of-the-best was fierce. A rabbi interviewing a potential *talmid* would put the boy through a grueling quiz to test both his knowledge of Scripture and his critical-thinking skills. If the boy made it through this *Survivor*-like competition, the rabbi might invite the *talmid* to “take his yoke upon him.”¹⁶

To hopeful, earnest, young Jewish males, the invitation to take on the yoke of a respected rabbi was their ticket to a bright future. It was also the start of a demolition/reconstruction project that would form their core identity around the *essence* of their teachers. Once the relationship was confirmed, the talmidim were required to leave their parents, synagogues, communities, and family businesses and devote every waking moment to following their rabbis. It was boarding school on steroids. And this was no conventional education; a talmid's goal was to immerse himself in the life of his rabbi—to *experience* the truths embedded in the rabbi's heart, not merely study them in scrolls. The goal was to “taste and see” (or “know by experience”) the heart of the rabbi, then live out his essence by modeling the man's “core operating system”—his walk, talk, mannerisms, personal preferences, values, and affectations. The rabbi's job was to infect his talmid's heart experientially, not just by focusing on the law and the prophets.

The goal was to taste and see the heart of the rabbi, then live out his essence by modeling the man's “core operating system.”

The epic journey of the talmid—a path from obscurity to significance, from childhood to maturity, from ignorance to mastery—is our journey as well. We are all talmidim who've been invited to take on the yoke of the great Rabbi—to live with him, learn from him, and become just like him. If we embrace this invitation, the Invisible Rabbi will make it possible for us to immerse ourselves in his presence, experiencing him in a way that goes far beyond intellectual pursuit. In essence, this is Jesus' rabbinical invitation to us:

I have chosen you as my talmidim, and I'm inviting you into all of the secret places of my heart. I want to walk and talk and play and eat and work and banter and scheme with you—to fully open my interior life to you. And in turn, I invite you to do the same with me.

As we yield ourselves to the forming influence of the Spirit of Jesus who is at home inside us, we slowly adopt the patterns of thought and behavior he has already modeled for us. It's this immersive influence that forms in us a spiritual backbone; we develop spiritual grit because we're yoked to its very Source.

And so, if we hold to the reality that our Invisible Rabbi helps us experience (not just study) Jesus, it's wise to pay attention to the way an ancient talmid related to his rabbi so we can learn to relate more deeply to our own.

First, we must be willing to submit to the Invisible Rabbi's authority. A talmid voluntarily submitted to the authority of his

rabbi—this is the literal meaning of the word *yoked*. A yoke is a curved piece of wood with leather straps that allows drivers to direct a team of oxen as they drag a plow through rough ground. In the ancient world, it was also a symbol of captivity. So when a rabbi invited a talmid to “take my yoke upon you,” he was asking for a kind of willing captivity to his authority.

Likewise, we experience Jesus more intimately by taking his yoke upon us. By submitting ourselves to his guidance and direction, our actions (more than our words) acknowledge his authority in our lives. Easier said than done, of course, because actually submitting to authority runs contrary to our love affair with control.

A friend, posting on a private Facebook page for fans of the podcast I host (“Paying Ridiculous Attention to Jesus”), targets our default resistance to submission: “Why do we run from attachment [to Jesus] and dependence and freedom? For me, it’s because I like to feel in control or at least maintain the illusion of it. Because even after all these years in relationship with Jesus, there are still parts of my life (worth, body image, etc.) that I don’t trust him with and tend to think I can do better myself.”

Submission to Jesus exposes our willingness to trust him. And trust is the key to experiencing him. In a postscript to her own question, my friend goes on to say, “We see control as our safeguard and defense, but really it’s our prison. I’m grateful for the patient and gracious Bridegroom who is willing and able to pursue me no matter how many times I run back to my captivity. That’s his heart.”¹⁷

Submission to Jesus exposes our willingness to trust him. And trust is the key to experiencing him.

How does submission to Jesus—an embraced captivity—free us from our overshadowing captivity as human beings broken by sin? Well, the same way a formal apprenticeship to a skilled mentor helps us transcend the limits of what we think we can do. Isaac Newton submitted himself to the apprenticing authority of the world’s leading scientists, then later wrote, “If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of Giants.”¹⁸ And the incomparable Leonardo da Vinci, born in 1452 to unmarried parents and poverty, would never have escaped the prison of his origins if not for his apprenticeship as a teenager to Andrea del Verrocchio, a master artist in Florence.¹⁹ Submission to a greater presence infects us with that person’s catalyzing habits and values, opening up possibilities and pathways we’d never discover otherwise. And when we submit to the authority of Jesus—pledging ourselves to

cling to his habits, decisions, plans, and priorities—his influence on our lives expands, deepening our intimacy with him.

Practically, our submission looks like this...

- **We make a public commitment to him.** Baptism is often a primary way we do this, but it's also courageous to post something on social media about your "status" as a follower of Jesus, or to go forward for prayer or confession at a gathering, or to "out yourself" as a follower of Jesus in a public setting such as a class or conference or debate, or even to slap commitment-related stickers on your car or laptop. (I'm not kidding; you should see my laptop.) Public acts of commitment, no matter how small, have a powerful impact on our ability to trust Jesus because they require risk, and risk helps us experience his heart. And when we act on the guidance we receive from Jesus, that is just another form of public commitment.

After a recent health scare with my wife, I was driving home from work, contending with Jesus about the dire possibilities ahead of us. My conversation with him was fierce. In response, he said, "Rick, it's going to be okay. I'm sorry this news is so upsetting." When I got home, I had to decide whether to share with Bev what I felt Jesus told me. What if it was just my own wishful thinking? Do I really believe in this response, and will I harm Bev if this is all just my manufactured hope? I decided to tell her, because that would be a risky act of trust. And trust builds intimacy. Walking into her next appointment, a test that would tell us if we were facing a hard and scary road ahead or nothing at all, we both felt the relaxed determination that is the fruit of risk-taking in our relationship with Jesus. Whether the news was bad or good, we stood on the foundation of his good heart toward us, embodied by "It's going to be okay." And it was.

We've heard church leaders urge us to embrace a personal relationship with Jesus, but it's far more important to live out our passion for him in public ways. To his disciples, Jesus says, "Everyone who acknowledges me publicly here on earth, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven" (Matthew 10:32). This is why our family holds hands and prays before a meal, no matter how public the venue. It seems like such a small statement of submission, but every small thing matters.

- **We ask Jesus for guidance before saying things, doing things, or praying things.** When his disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, he responded with "This is how you should pray..." (Luke 11:2). This rhythm—submitting to his guidance first, then acting on what we receive from him—helps us experience him. The Invisible Rabbi is also called Counselor. A counselor's job is to listen well, then give

feedback and guidance. But a listener requires a talker, so we must talk if we want feedback. We don't have because we don't ask (James 4:2), and we don't hear from Jesus because we don't pursue his guidance.

Here's how this works when we pray, for example. Before we pray we stop, quiet our own voice, and take authority over the voice of the enemy of God. Then we ask the Spirit of Jesus to show us how to pray. We wait in silence for direction before we continue. Once we sense a word or a phrase or a picture or a Scripture reference or even a strong feeling, we accept it wholeheartedly and pray using that guidance. We are most often overly concerned about "getting it right" when it comes to seeking guidance from God, but this kind of exacting mentality quashes the kind of playful risks that a relationship with Jesus thrives on. If we don't take ourselves too seriously, "getting it wrong" won't matter so much. This pattern has radically changed the intimacy I experience in my relationship with Jesus, and it has charged my prayers for others with supernatural impact.

Yesterday I prayed with a friend who is facing a life-shattering reality in her marriage. I asked Jesus for guidance, and before I opened my mouth to pray, I "saw" a hand pulling a weed from the ground, with clods of earth falling off the roots. And then I "saw" that hand take a trowel and dig up the ground where the weed had been, in preparation for planting new seeds. I asked Jesus what all this meant and then prayed this way: "Jesus wants you to know that he is replacing something ugly in your life with something beautiful—the pulling-up is going to be painful, but right now he's planting flowers where weeds once grew." When we pray this way, our posture is defined by humility, because we give Jesus the "first word," rather than assume we already know what's best to say or do.

- **We submit our treasure to Jesus, to use as he sees fit.** I'm not talking just about money. Time, talents, and expertise are also treasures. Jesus already has all the resources he needs, but what he doesn't have is our whole heart. "Wherever your treasure is," he reminds us, "there the desires of your heart will also be" (Matthew 6:21). Simply, our treasure is tethered to our heart. When he reveals to his disciples that "it is very hard for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of Heaven" (Matthew 19:23), he's making the point that the rich have more to submit, and therefore have more of their heart on the line. So when we loosen our grip on the riches of our finances, our time, our talents, and our unique abilities, offering them to strengthen and encourage others, here is the trade-off: We get to experience the heart of Jesus when we consider him more valuable than what we're giving up.

What do you love to do, and what are you good at? If you love making money and you're good at it, then give money. If you love

cooking and baking and you're good at it, volunteer to make and serve a meal for people who need it. My daughter Lucy invited her friends to do this as an alternative to a birthday party. They gave a home-cooked Italian meal to the stressed and exhausted parents of seriously ill children living at a Ronald McDonald House. We all know that when we give from our good treasure, we always gain more than we give. That's because the gift of our treasure wins us an even greater treasure: a taste of the heart of Jesus and a feeling of congruence with his purposes in our lives.

Second, we develop a passion for wrestling with God's Word in a conversational community. As the talmid immerses himself in his rabbi's revelation of truth, he learns to flesh out that truth in a *Yeshiva*, a closely knit community of fellow talmidim. Marked by intense dialogue and deep, enjoyable conversation, the Yeshiva is an incubator for living out the stories of Scripture in everyday life. In this gathering of talmidim, the focus is not so much on what Scripture says (they've already been memorizing that since they were small children), but on how it's influencing the way they live. The primary focus in a Yeshiva is the heart behind the truths the talmidim are learning, and how that might inform the decisions they make about every aspect of their lives. In our lives, this might mean...

- **We join a formal Bible study, book club, discussion group, or recovery ministry that gives us a window into how others live out their relationships with Jesus in everyday ways.** Of course, most churches offer something like this, but they're not always built on a foundation of conversation. We need interaction-rich environments that focus on our relationship with Jesus, not lectures on Scripture or biblical principles. To sniff out this sort of "seeking community," look for one that has a conversational structure and a leader who values many voices, not just one. If this proves too difficult to find, it may be time to start your own Yeshiva. (You could use the "Questions for Small-Group Discussion or Individual Contemplation" at the end of each chapter as your launching pad.)
- **In the context of informal conversation, we ask questions that help us understand the habits, values, and everyday choices of those who are maturing in their relationship with Jesus.** I'm suggesting that we treat the stories of others with the curiosity they deserve. These sorts of questions will help:
 - "What do you do every day to stay connected to Jesus?"
 - "How did you discern between those two choices?"
 - "What do you do when you're tempted by something?"
 - "How have you managed to maintain that habit in your life?"

“When Jesus said/did _____, what do you think he meant?”
 “What are you doing to show others ‘the real you?’”

Of course, these are just sample questions; the goal is to ask more questions whenever we’re talking to another Jesus-follower, to immerse ourselves in the unique expressions of the Spirit within them.

Third, we commit to asking our Invisible Rabbi real questions, in real circumstances, about real issues, all the time. Rabbis encouraged their talmidim to ask them lots of questions. Questions are like backhoes—their purpose is to dig and dig and dig until we uncover buried treasure. So for example, all talmidim knew that God had commanded his people to observe a Sabbath day, a rest from work that reminded everyone that God, not their own efforts, was the ultimate source of sustenance and life. But they pursued their rabbi to understand better what a “rest from work” really implied. Jesus did this very thing with his disciples when he responded to some religious leaders who were upset that he’d healed a man on the Sabbath: “If you had a sheep that fell into a well on the Sabbath, wouldn’t you work to pull it out? Of course you would. And how much more valuable is a person than a sheep! Yes, the law permits a person to do good on the Sabbath” (Matthew 12:11-12).

Our Invisible Rabbi expects us to ask real questions about real challenges we’re facing—to reason together as we face situations that aren’t directly addressed in the Bible. We face dilemmas that have little to do with sheep falling into wells on the Sabbath. But we do need help discerning how much social media is too much, whether to buy a conventional carbon-emitting car or a hybrid, or how to confront a friend who is headed down a destructive path. We experience Jesus more deeply when we view no situation as too small or insignificant or “unspiritual” to exclude from the dialogue. For example:

- A friend seems suddenly distant and cold. *Ask the Spirit what to do; then “keep knocking” until you sense a way forward.*
- A man with a cardboard sign is asking for money at a busy intersection. *Ask the Spirit what to do; then keep knocking until you sense a way forward.*
- A distant relative is facing a medical struggle. *Ask the Spirit what to do; then keep knocking until you sense a way forward.*
- You’re forced to choose between a family commitment and a work commitment. *Ask the Spirit what to do; then keep knocking until you sense a way forward.*
- You wonder if you should pay for something your kids want or tell

them they'll need to earn the money themselves. *Ask the Spirit what to do; then keep knocking until you sense a way forward.*

When we embrace a spirit of dependence, we make it a habit to ask the Spirit of Jesus more questions, attaching ourselves to him again and again. The more questions we ask, the more deeply and normally we experience him. And the more we get used to his influence in the everyday rhythms of our lives. Yes, this is not an exact science—it's not even an *inexact* science. It's playful in the way art is playful. Ask like a child, receive like a child, and don't let silence or confusion discourage you from continuing to ask.

Fourth, we desire to emulate every aspect of the Rabbi's life. Talmidim were not *required* to mirror their rabbis' personal mannerisms, habits, and eccentricities, but this immersive way of living inevitably led to it.

I co-authored my first book with Ben Freudenburg, a pioneering pastor who innovated an approach to church ministry that prioritizes the family as the primary faith incubator. The book is called *The Family-Friendly Church*, and I was first approached by the publisher to help Ben, who was not an experienced writer, produce a sort of manifesto for the church. I had no desire to write a book with someone and no practical experience in Ben's area of expertise. I should've said no. But I knew that I deeply respected how Ben lived his life, and I decided that writing a book with him would saturate me in his presence so much that it might change me. And I was right. Working closely with Ben over the course of a year—living in each other's homes for weeks at a time—*infected* me with his innate likes and dislikes. I learned to think the way he thinks and value the things he values. The experience helped form who I am today. We can experience Jesus this way when we...

- **Pay close attention to the things Jesus does and doesn't like.**

Whenever we experience something Jesus says or does—in the Bible or spotlighted in a book or a film or a conversation—we slow down to focus on both his preferences and the things that drive him crazy. What does Jesus like and not like?

We do the same with the people we love. For example, I know my wife loves to have coffee waiting for her when she wakes up, she's addicted to cute puppy videos, she processes her thoughts by journaling, and for some reason it drives her crazy when I forget to fold the top of our sheet over our comforter when we get into bed. When we bring this same level of *behavioral saturation* to our pursuit of Jesus, his heart infects us. We pay attention to the nuances in his behavior the way we do when we first fall in love with someone—every little detail matters. In his message to the church at

Ephesus, recorded in Revelation 2, Jesus honors his friends for their perseverance and their dogged adherence to the truth, but laments that they have “lost their first love.” A first-love relationship with Jesus pays ridiculous attention to every little distinction in his words and deeds.

- **Pay close attention to the passions of others in the body of Christ.** Whenever we’re in the company of other friends of Jesus, we notice what they appreciate and what they don’t. We’re called the body of Christ because, together, others get a taste of him when they get a taste of us. Consider our passions as the fruits of our Invisible Rabbi’s presence in us.

For example, I have several friends who are committed to CrossFit, the grueling approach to fitness that has rapidly spread across the U.S. My friends know it’s important to stay fit, but what they really love about CrossFit is its emphasis on community. And they’re passionate about community because the Spirit in them is passionate about it. If we slow down and explore the passions of other believers, we get infected with the passions of Jesus. Our collective passions loosely describe the passions at the heart of Jesus, so paying better attention to the individual passions of other Christ-followers helps us broaden our experience of Jesus.

- **Ask, “What *did* Jesus do?” not “What *would* Jesus do?”** The path to becoming more like Jesus is less about WWJD and more about WDJD. The first approach is hampered by false beliefs about Jesus and a surface understanding of his heart; the second is focused on the hard facts of what he actually said and did. When we fix our attention on the shocking ways Jesus interacted with people, we experience the height and breadth and depth of his heart. Our guesses about what we think he might do in any given situation are wholly dependent on our assumptions, which are tied to how well we actually know him. So WDJD rivets our focus on what is knowable about him, not what we assume about him. Because Jesus is the Truth, not just a prophet pointing to the truth, assume everything he says and does is deeply good; then dig until you discover *why* it’s good.

Instead of defining what we think is good first, then attempting to understand how the sometimes-baffling behavior of Jesus fits our definitions, we let *him* define good for us. The Victorian journalist and Christian apologist G.K. Chesterton says it best: “If you meet the Jesus of the Gospels, you must redefine what love is, or you won’t be able to stand him.”²⁰

Finally, we are determined to live out our personal beliefs rather than just talk about them. To a talmid living in the first century, the

word *believe* was an action, not a mental assent. The true standard for belief was the way you lived your life, not the way you espoused your convictions. If you believed something, that meant you were living that belief in everyday circumstances. Actions fuel our experience of Jesus far more than our words do. For example:

- **If we say we believe Jesus has a special place in his heart for the poor and marginalized but ignore their needs, we don't really believe.** Actually helping and serving the poor helps us experience the depth of Jesus' heart because we learn to appreciate what drives him when we do the things he loves. My wife has a passion for people who have been marginalized, people who have been counted out by others. Why? Because she grew up feeling unseen and unappreciated, and she feels driven to help those who are experiencing the pain she knows all too well. When I enter into her passion with her, I see her heart from the inside out.
- **If we say we believe that Jesus lives sacrificially but serve ourselves before we serve others, we don't really believe.** Over the years, my wife's trust in me has grown because of what I do, not what I talk about. It's my lifestyle of sacrifice for her and my family that reveals my heart—a heart that reflects my experience of Jesus' values and priorities.
- **If we say we believe Jesus loves his enemies but hold on to our hatred for our own enemies and dream about our revenge, we don't really believe.** On an episode of the show *What Would You Do?* a hidden camera records the reactions of unsuspecting bystanders when they encounter an actor playing the role of a thief stealing gas from another person's pump. Most respond by confronting the thief and "outing" her to the victim (another actor), but one person does something extraordinary: He approaches the enemy thief and boldly asks if she needs money for gas, then gives her some cash.²¹ After watching this, my daughter Emma pointed out that this man's surprising act of selfless generosity reflected the heart of Jesus toward an enemy, and she was right.

Our response to our enemies reveals the level of our belief in Jesus' standard for love.

RESISTANCE TRAINING

Because the Invisible Rabbi helps us experience Jesus from the inside out, we not only have fuel for the spiritual grit we need to live a life of perseverance and impact, but we also have an ongoing way to develop

that spiritual grit. What we often lack is a bucket of possibilities, or real-world modeling, for living in a grit-growing way. To do that, we need to see the value of hardship when it comes our way—and maybe even seek it out when it doesn't come our way—with a determination that comes from a passion for something higher than ourselves. And we also need to help others grow in their spiritual grit because it's the most loving thing we can do. We don't get in the way of a hardship that promises to produce good fruit in them, and sometimes, when love requires it, we *introduce* hardship into their lives. We do these things because we're immersed in the heart of Jesus, trusting the Invisible Rabbi to lead us into an abiding relationship with him that feeds our growth and the growth of others.

We need to see the value of hardship when it comes our way, with a determination that comes from a passion for something higher than ourselves.

Researchers' interest in the importance of grit and perseverance has mostly focused on *what it is* and *how it works*. They generally admit they don't have much direction to give on how people actually grow it in themselves and in others. Angela Duckworth says, "To me, the most shocking thing about grit is how little we know about building it. Every day parents and teachers ask me, 'How do I build grit in kids?' The honest answer is, I don't know."²²

To go further than the researchers can take us means we do things that invite transformation in ourselves and others. And this is holy ground. Risky stuff. We'd better take off our shoes if we're going to cross this border, because redemption stories are always sacred.

No wonder the research community is mute on this aspect of grit—it's not their job to lead us into transformation.

And while we may struggle to understand how to help ourselves and others grow in our capacity for spiritual grit, Jesus does not. In fact, he's intentionally testing the limits of perseverance in every single person he interacts with, even those who come to him with great needs...

- In the John 9 story of the man born blind, Jesus smears a mixture of dirt and spit on the man's eyes, then tells him to go to the pool of Siloam outside of town to find his sight. Would you force this marginalized, needy man to undergo such a seemingly unnecessary gauntlet of shame and uncertainty?
- In the John 5 story of the crippled man who has languished by the pool of Bethesda for 38 years, waiting night and day for an angel to touch the pool and restore him, Jesus asks a question that

seems either silly or lacking in compassion: “Would you like to get well?” When the man ignores the offense of the question and says yes, Jesus tells him, “Stand up, pick up your mat, and walk!”

Jesus is a master grit-grower, and he’s inviting us to learn from him.

I go to a class at our health club called CXWORX, where the trainer’s job is to build our core strength through resistance exercises. Most of them involve some form of “planking,” forcing the muscles in our torsos to stay in tension until they collapse. Resistance builds core strength by taking us to the end of our capacity so we can stretch its boundaries. Likewise, Jesus uses resistance to strengthen our core identity so that the challenges we face produce hope in us, not resignation or despair.

In the pages that follow, we’ll slow down and pay ridiculous attention to the ways he grows spiritual grit in people, embrace the beauty of what he’s trying to do, then explore everyday ways to live into what we’re learning. This is resistance training with a highly engaged Personal Trainer; it’s not about following formulas or principles to produce an expected outcome.

And we need Jesus’ resistance training because we so often crave more strength than we have—every day we face tough challenges that push us to give up or give in. We must develop ways of thinking and living that strengthen our determination, not undermine it. And as parents and friends and spouses and leaders, we need better ways to help the people we care about grow in their core strength.

As we pay better attention to the heart of Jesus and open ourselves to experience—not just study—him, we discover a consuming passion for something higher than ourselves. And we find a source of strength that supersedes our “just try harder” mentality. It’s the living water Jesus promised the Samaritan woman at the well—a life-water that quenches our deepest thirst and produces four precious fruits: endurance, character, confidence, and hope (Romans 5:3-5).

Because Jesus is a resistance trainer, his love language is spiritual grit. He will do whatever it takes to help us grow because he loves us and wants us to experience “abundant joy” (John 16:24). When we draw our strength from the well of his passionate heart and learn to rely on the Helper—the Invisible Rabbi—to empower us, we are reminded again of one of his blunt and beautiful truths: “What is impossible for people is possible with God.”

QUESTIONS FOR SMALL-GROUP DISCUSSION OR INDIVIDUAL CONTEMPLATION

1. Do you consider yourself to be a gritty person? Why or why not?

2. In general, do you face challenges with a sense of confident strength, or do you face them well-aware of how weak you feel? Explain.

3. When in your life have you felt the need for a source of strength that's beyond your own capacity, and why?

4. What are the benefits of pursuing the heart of Jesus more than focusing on the "life principles" embedded in his teaching?

5. In what ways do you resonate with the idea that simply believing in Jesus is different from experiencing him?

6. Tell a story about your relationship with Jesus that relates to one of the five ways a talmid is influenced by his rabbi: (1) submitting to his authority, (2) wrestling with Scripture, (3) asking him real questions, (4) imitating him, and (5) living—not just talking about—your beliefs.

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WHY DO SOME PEOPLE THRIVE IN THE MIDST OF GREAT CHALLENGES AND OTHERS DON'T?

The answer is grit: the strength that fuels a scrappy response to threats, fear, confusion, and pain.

But grit is more than a personal success tool. Without a passion for Jesus and practical ways to develop grit, it's doomed to disappoint.

Spiritual Grit seeks a better outcome by delving into why Jesus sometimes chooses to inject hardship into our lives rather than remove it. The book also includes:

- Ways to access the strength needed to live a resilient life, through a dependent relationship with Jesus.
- Biblical stories of those who grew a “grit backbone” through their interactions with Jesus.
- An extensive menu of life habits that fertilize grit, plus a method for identifying habits that undermine it.
- A way for readers to assess their own spiritual grit.

Without Jesus, grit is little more than a gimmick. With Jesus, grit can infuse the world—and our lives—with hope.



RICK LAWRENCE is the general editor of the best-selling *Jesus-Centered Bible* and the author, co-author, or editor of 38 books, including *The Jesus-Centered Life*, *Skin in the Game*, *Shrewd*, and *Sifted*.

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