

HOW TO STRENGTHEN  
YOUR HEART, SOUL,  
AND MIND FOR THE  
ONLY CHALLENGE THAT MATTERS

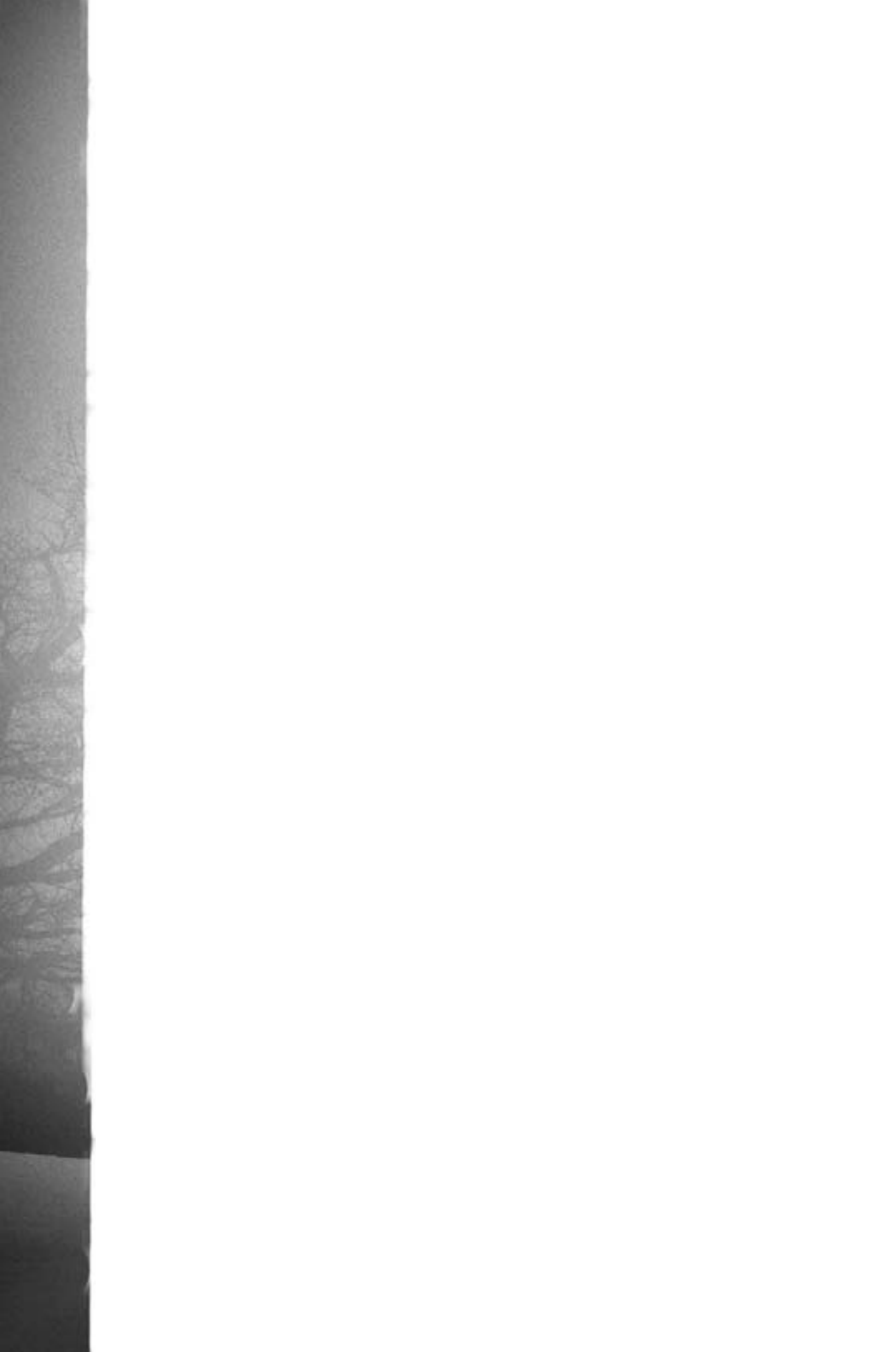
# MUSCULAR FAITH

BEN PATTERSON



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JAMES STEWART EVANS**



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# INTRODUCTION

## A FAITH WORTH FIGHTING FOR

**Christianity, if false, is of no importance, and, if true, is of infinite importance. The one thing it cannot be is moderately important.**

**C. S. LEWIS, "CHRISTIAN APOLOGETICS"**

**You take over. I'm about to die, my life an offering on God's altar. This is the only race worth running. I've run hard right to the finish, believed all the way. All that's left now is the shouting—God's applause! Depend on it, he's an honest judge. He'll do right not only by me, but by everyone eager for his coming.**

**2 TIMOTHY 4:6-8, *THE MESSAGE***

FOR THE PAST fifteen years or so, I've been a campus pastor, so I've watched hundreds of first-year students arrive on campus fresh faced and bright eyed for fall orientation weekend. These young men and women are nervously hopeful; they are eager to grow and make friends, get a college degree, discover a vocation and a calling in life, and maybe even find a spouse. I watch them and pray for them with a fatherly longing in my heart.

As they step out on their own, imperceptible trajectories are being set and adjusted. The differences in direction seem so tiny and insignificant in the moment, but years in the future they will be gigantic, the way a ship leaving San Francisco harbor for Honolulu, slightly off course, may end up in Shanghai instead. But seaports have no eternal consequence; the direction of a life does.

I'm aware, in ways they can't yet be, that some of the decisions these young people are making now will set the course for their lives. That's largely because I'm much closer to the finish line than they are. I feel about my age like Lou Holtz felt when he coached football at the University of Arkansas. He said of that Southern state, "It's not the end of the world, but you can see it from here."

I live with a great deal of curiosity about how I'm going to turn out in the end. It's because of a very unscientific theory I have about old age. I believe that when life has whittled us down, when joints have failed and skin has wrinkled and capillaries have clogged and hardened, what is left of us will be what we were becoming all along, in our essence.

Exhibit A is a distant relative of mine. For the sake of family pride, I'll give him an alias—Ray. All his life he did nothing but find new ways to get rich. A few of his schemes succeeded, and he became a moderately wealthy man. He spent his senescence very comfortably, drooling and babbling constantly about all the money he had made. I remember watching when I was a child and even then being dumbstruck that he had wasted his whole life getting something that was useless to him as he approached eternity. It was worse than useless—it was an impediment. When life whittled him down to his essence, all that was left was raw greed. That was the man Ray had cultivated in a thousand little ways over a lifetime. He was a living illustration of the adage "The reason men and rivers are crooked is that both take the line of least resistance."

Exhibit B is my wife's grandmother. No need to protect family pride with her. Her name was Edna. When she died in her mid-eighties, she had already been senile for several years. What did this lady talk about? The best example I can think of was what happened when we asked her to pray before dinner. She would reach out and hold the hands of those sitting beside her; a broad beatific smile would spread across her face; her dim eyes would fill up with tears as she looked up to heaven; and her chin would quaver as she poured out her love for Jesus. That was Edna in a nutshell. She loved Jesus, and she loved people. She couldn't remember our names, but she couldn't keep her hands from patting us lovingly whenever we got near her. When life whittled her down to her essence, all that was left was love. That was the woman Edna had cultivated over years by thousands of little acts of love. Her life wasn't easy; she had to fight for love and joy amid some great and terrible disappointments. But she fought—and made a strong finish.<sup>1</sup>

## THE NOBLE WARRIOR

The apostle Paul also finished well. Near the end of his life he wrote something I dearly want to be able to say at my end. Tradition says he was beheaded in Rome, not long after he wrote these words:

*As for me, my life has already been poured out as an offering to God. The time of my death is near. I have*

*fought the good fight, I have finished the race, and I have remained faithful. And now the prize awaits me—the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give me on the day of his return. And the prize is not just for me but for all who eagerly look forward to his appearing.* (2 Timothy 4:6-8)

Not that it matters, but I am sure he looked exactly the way the apocryphal *Acts of Paul* described him about a hundred years after his death:

[He was] a little man with a big, bold head. His legs were crooked, but his bearing was noble. His eyebrows grew close together and he had a big nose. A man who breathed friendliness.<sup>2</sup>

I love this man. I mean, there he was in a Roman prison, aching and old but still running and fighting. Moses, speaking of the great mass of humanity, said we “[end] our years with a groan” (Psalm 90:9). Not Paul, that old warhorse. The man with the big nose ended his years with a snort and a kick, breathing friendliness.

Paul’s faith vocabulary was robust and energetic. From the day of his conversion on, he lived in conflict and struggle. But Paul cheerfully thought of the Christian life as being “poured out,” as fighting a good fight, finishing a race, and winning a prize—just like his Lord did. He got his vocabulary from Jesus, who said the same thing, using

the same word for fighting and fight. Jesus declared that one must enter the Kingdom of God the way a wrestler wrestles, a warrior wages war, and a runner runs a race. The Greek word was *agon*, from which we get our English word *agony*.

Paul and Edna had a muscular faith. The arenas they fought in were different, but their faith was the same. Muscular faith is not a specialized kind of faith, suited only to certain personalities and temperaments. Muscular faith is simply biblical faith, which by definition is vigorous and demanding, for it requires that you stake your whole existence on God and trust in him as your only hope. And this is critical: Muscular faith is not what God demands of you in order to be accepted into his Kingdom; it is the kind of life you live in his Kingdom. To shirk a vigorous faith is to refuse the kind of life Christ calls you to and teaches you how to live. Jesus invited the weary and overburdened to come into his fellowship and learn from him. The life he promised he described as a kind of yoke that would fit his followers. He even called it “light.” But he never said it would be passive.

**Muscular faith is not what God demands of you in order to be accepted into his Kingdom; it is the kind of life you live in his Kingdom.**

## **WALKING THE RAZOR EDGE**

Because I work with college students, I have a foot in two worlds. They are in their teens and twenties, and I am in my

sixties. I'm thinking about my ending, while they're trying to figure out their beginning. But the differences are superficial. We both want to commit our lives to something of supreme worth. And we are both very interested in the future—where we are headed, or should be headed, and how we are going to turn out. So much is riding on where we end, on where our life's trajectory takes us! C. S. Lewis lays out the two possible outcomes:

[For] in some sense, as dark to the intellect as it is unendurable to the feelings, we can be both banished from the presence of Him who is present everywhere and erased from the knowledge of Him who knows all. We can be left utterly and absolutely *outside*—repelled, exiled, estranged, finally and unspeakably ignored. On the other hand, we can be called in, welcomed, received, acknowledged. We walk every day on the razor edge between these two incredible possibilities.<sup>3</sup>

This book is about what it means to live “on the razor edge between these two incredible possibilities.” It assumes that our faith is not something to which we casually assent but something for which we must fight. In our relatively peaceful and prosperous part of the globe, the idea of “muscular faith” may sound a bit overblown. But why then did Jesus speak so urgently about finding the narrow path and being willing to lay down our lives? As I've walked my own

sixty-odd years of faith, I've learned a bit and thought a lot about the obstacles to faith all of us face and, I'm happy to report, the unseen yet strength-giving essentials God provides to all those who commit to following Jesus.

One of the first men to model strength and protection in that way was my scoutmaster. As I got ready to go to Boy Scout camp for the first time, I was excited to learn there was a pool in the mountains where we would swim every day.

What a welcome change that would be from my experience at the one public pool in my neighborhood in South Central Los Angeles. As I recall, it was called the Compton Municipal Plunge. But one rarely plunged into the Plunge, it was so packed with the bodies of kids.

My buddies and I would practice "swimming" there. Even if we had actually known how to swim, it would not have been possible because the pool was so crowded. But we did our best to imitate what we had seen the real swimmers do, mostly Johnny Weissmuller in Tarzan movies. I would kick and stroke in the three or four feet of space I had, and it kind of felt like I was swimming. Yes, it truly did feel like I must be swimming. My buddies would do the same thing and get the same sensation. After a summer of this, we congratulated ourselves on our skill as swimmers. Deep in our minds we knew we really couldn't swim, but if anyone asked us, we would declare that we could. I remember coming home one day and announcing to my family that I had learned to swim. They were delighted. I must have been ten or eleven years old.

How wonderful it would be to share the pool at camp with just a dozen or so of my fellow Scouts. The first morning of camp, my scoutmaster asked me if I could swim.

“Yes,” I lied.

He said, “Good. Then you’ll have no problem passing the swim test.”

“What swim test?” I asked.

“Just swim the length of the pool—should be easy for a swimmer,” he answered.

But I wasn’t a swimmer. And now I would be found out as the fraud I knew myself to be, while I drowned in the swim test! I cried as I confessed my lie to my scoutmaster. I cried even more as I contemplated a week at camp watching all the other boys swim while I sat hot and dirty outside the fence around the pool.

My scoutmaster was a good man. He smiled and said, “Why don’t you try?”

“But I can’t,” I sobbed.

“Just try it,” he said.

“But I’ll sink and drown,” I moaned.

“Tell you what I’ll do,” he said. “I’ll make sure you swim in the outside lane, and I’ll walk alongside you on the deck. If you start to sink, I’ll reach down and pull you out. All you have to do is jump in and try.”

I had to think about that. I wasn’t sure what would be worse—drowning or being rescued in front of all the other Scouts. But I decided to trust his plan.

Later that afternoon I stood with ten other little boys at

the deep end of the pool. The deep end! We'd have to start there and swim the twenty-five yards to the shallow end. Why couldn't we start in the shallow end? I wore big green boxer-style swim trunks that were a size too large. The bow on the white drawstring protruded over the top of my trunks. I remember shivering in the hot sun and noticing for the first time in my young life that my legs were skinny and exceptionally white—like the drawstring.

My scoutmaster was watching me with a steady gaze and smiling. At the signal, I jumped in and sank to the bottom of the pool. All the way to the bottom. I had no idea that a human being could sink so deep in water. From the shadowy depths, I looked up at the light from the sun shimmering on the pool's surface, way, way up there, and could see the form of my scoutmaster to my right. Slowly, slowly I rose to the surface and gasped for air. With one big gulp of precious oxygen in my lungs, I started thrashing out strokes in the water. I couldn't seem to get my nose far enough out of the water to breathe again, so I held my breath and labored and lunged forward. I looked over at my scoutmaster and saw that he was still there. This was the hardest thing I had ever done. But I was moving forward, and though it seemed to take forever, I finished the test! And there was my scoutmaster at the end, helping me out of the water. Boy Scout campout saved! Little Boy Scout's confidence restored! Good scoutmaster!

Life has gotten so much more complicated and difficult since then. But it has never felt harder than it did that day to that scared little boy. So my world was small, but it was my

world and it was all I knew. Even as it seemed to be falling apart and I was sinking, someone came along and called me to do a very hard thing, something that would require all I had. My all would not be enough, but if he went with me, it would. No muscle was needed outside the pool. It took no muscle to jump in. But once the plunge was made, life in the pool would take muscle—muscular faith—trust in the good scoutmaster.

It will be a fight—savage at times—to finish life well; for our enemies are legion and our strength is small. Great courage and determination are required, more than any of us have. But God’s grace is abundant—all we will ever need—and the reward far outweighs the cost.

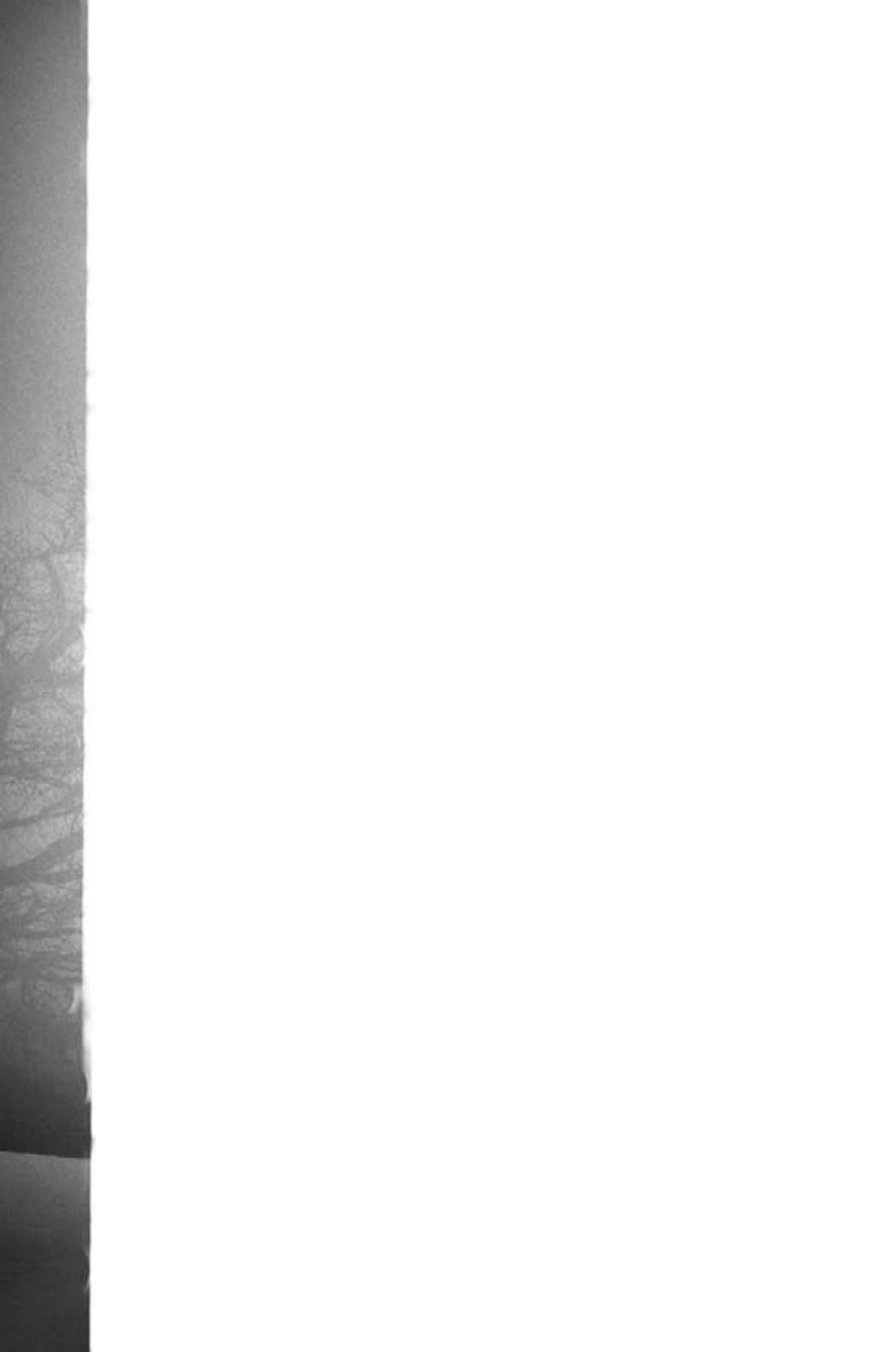
“The command of Jesus is hard, unutterably hard, for those who try to resist it,” wrote Dietrich Bonhoeffer. “But for those who willingly submit, the yoke is easy, and the burden is light. . . . Jesus asks nothing of us without giving us the strength to perform it.”<sup>4</sup>



PART 1

# THE CALL TO A VIGOROUS FAITH

TO FIGHT THE GOOD FIGHT  
AND FINISH THE RACE



CHAPTER 1

# THE CALL

## THE GOOD HARD

**I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, and I have remained faithful.**

2 TIMOTHY 4:7

**Grace is opposed to merit, but it is not opposed to effort.**

BRADLEY NASSIF

THE SEEDS FOR this book were planted when I was five years old.

There was a bully in my neighborhood, a really big kid, maybe seven or eight years old, who could ride a two-wheel bicycle. None of my friends or I could do this, so we held him in awe, and he knew it. Whenever my buddies and I would play a game on the sidewalk, he'd get on his two-wheeler bicycle and ride as fast as he could, right down the middle of the sidewalk in our direction, screaming for us to *move!* He was terrifying on that big two-wheeler, and we scrambled frantically to get out of his way.

But with each humiliation my resentment grew. I didn't know what the word *injustice* meant, but I was learning what it felt like. It wasn't right that he had his fun by bullying us. So one day I decided not to move when he bore down on us

at top speed. I stood up, planted my feet, and faced him, tall and righteous and proud. He ran over me. Two things stand out in my memory of the collision. One was the surprise I felt at how much it hurt to get run over. The other was that he got hurt too, even more than I did. The impact had also sent him crashing to the pavement. I remember lying on the sidewalk, my breath knocked out of me, gasping for air, unable even to cry. That was bad; it was the most pain I had ever experienced in my young life. But I heard him *wailing* in pain and rage! And when I looked, I saw him lying a few feet away, his knees skinned up and his forehead bleeding. That was good! And it got even better when I saw his mother, who had witnessed the whole incident, run over and scold him for what he had done.

### **LIFE IS TOUGHER IF YOU'RE STUPID**

I limped home in triumph, with the germ of an idea in my mind that I've reflected on ever since. What I did was hard to do, so hard that I'd think twice before I did it again. But what I had been suffering at the hands of that little terrorist was hard too, harder actually. The choice had not been whether to do a hard thing, but which hard thing—the good hard or the bad hard. That brings to mind an old World War II movie in which a Marine Corps drill instructor tells a lazy recruit, “Life is tough, son. But it's a lot tougher if you're stupid.” Better to sweat and strain in basic training than to end up dead in combat.

Life is hard. The question is not whether it will be hard but in what way. My friend has a poster of Dan Gable—perhaps the greatest Olympic wrestler of all time—in his basement. The poster shows him straining and sweating as he lifts weights. His face is etched with pain; the veins on his neck and arms are bulging. The caption reads, “There are two kinds of pain: the pain of discipline or the pain of regret.” There is good hardiness and bad hardiness, the pain of living wisely and the greater pain of living foolishly. We can choose which one it will be. Good hard is often hard at the beginning but easier in the end. Bad hard usually begins easy but is hard in the end—sometimes hellish, literally hellish.

**The question is not whether life will be hard but in what way.**

For this reason Jesus urged people to choose good hardiness. He was once asked, “Lord, will only a few be saved?” (Luke 13:23).

He answered the question the way he answered most questions—by not answering it. Apparently Jesus didn’t think much of the questions people asked. He knew the power of questions to determine answers (like the old comic line, “When are you going to stop beating your wife?”). The question was a bad question because it begged the real question, which was not “How many will be saved?” but rather “How does *anyone* get saved?” It probably also revealed a smug complacency in the person who asked it, an attitude that was really asking, “How many do you think will be with me in heaven?”

## AGON

So Jesus redefined the terms of the discussion and answered, “Work hard to enter the narrow door to God’s Kingdom, for many will try to enter but will fail” (Luke 13:24).

The Greek verb translated “work hard” is a dynamically forceful and demanding word. Other translations render it “strive” (ESV, NASB) or “make every effort” (NIV). Actually, the root of the verb is a noun, *agon*, which first referred to “a place of assembly” and then morphed into “a place of conflict,” as in the stadium where athletic contests took place, especially contact sports like boxing and wrestling.<sup>1</sup> But over time, the place where people went to see the fights, the *agon*, became the name for the fighting that went on there.

*Agon* is the word for the gritty, sweaty struggle athletes throw themselves into when they square off and fight; it embodies the grunts and fierce earnestness they bring to the boxing ring, the wrestling mat, the football field. *Agon* is a word one can almost hear and smell. It is a word for the good hard, the good fight of combat on the athletic field or battlefield, and it is a metaphor Jesus used to describe what is required for entry into his Kingdom.

Is salvation a free gift, or is it hard work? Sometimes the Bible seems to contradict itself. Depending upon how one thinks about these things, the writers of the Bible—in this case, Paul and Jesus—seem to disagree. How does each answer the critical, all-important question: Is salvation a gift or an achievement, an award for merit or an act of mercy?

Does God give us eternal life because of the good things we have done or in spite of the bad things we have done? Depending on where one reads in the New Testament, it can seem to be either one or the other. For instance, in one place, Paul wrote, “God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can’t take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it” (Ephesians 2:8-9).

The apostle Paul’s answer is easy to like. What’s not to like about salvation being a gift? The Lord’s answer is something else; it seems to cast the whole question of salvation by grace in grave doubt. How are we to reconcile Paul’s assertion that salvation is a gift with Jesus’ words? “Work hard to enter the narrow door to God’s Kingdom, for many will try to enter but will fail.” In another place Jesus said, “You can enter God’s Kingdom only through the narrow gate. The highway to hell is broad, and its gate is wide for the many who choose that way. But the gateway to life is very narrow and the road is difficult, and only a few ever find it” (Matthew 7:13-14).

### **GOD’S GOOD HARD WORK, HARD AT WORK**

Who can do this? Who can walk the hard and narrow way and fight the good fight? I can’t. I’ve failed too many times to think I can. Is Paul saying one thing and Jesus another? No, taken together, both are saying the same thing: that we are not saved by *our* hard work, but by *God’s* hard work, hard at work within us. For although grace rules out human merit,

it stimulates great, even heroic human effort.<sup>2</sup> In fact, Paul himself provides the Bible's most succinct and epigrammatic statement of this principle in his letter to the Philippians, where he tells us to work out what God works into us:

*Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.*  
(Philippians 2:12-13, NIV)

What does God work in us? First he works our salvation: Christ died for our sins. When we were powerless to help ourselves, Christ died for the ungodly, the just for the unjust. God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting our sins against us (see Romans 5:6-8; 2 Corinthians 5:19). All of this was done entirely on his initiative. But it didn't stop there; he not only worked to save us, he works in us,

**Christ not only worked to save us, he works in us, by his Spirit, to make us want to be saved.**

by his Spirit, to make us want to be saved. That's how bad off we are without his illuminating and enlivening Spirit—we are dead in sins and trespasses. The dead don't know anything because part

of what it means to be dead is not to know you are dead! We would not even want him, who is our life, if he didn't stir us in our spiritual graves (see Ephesians 2:1-10).

And as if all that were not enough, he continues to work in us to bring our salvation to completion: “God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns” (Philippians 1:6). Our salvation has a past, present, and future, and in every tense it is the gift of the God “who always was, who is, and who is still to come” (Revelation 4:8).

## **ONLY TWO RELIGIONS**

When Dr. Harry Ironside finished preaching the gospel to a university audience in California, he was approached by a student who asked, “Dr. Ironside, there are literally thousands of religions in the world. How can we know which one of these is true?” Ironside replied:

Well, before we can get into the question of which one is true, we need to clarify something. There are not thousands of religions. There are not even hundreds of religions. There are only two: one which tells you that salvation comes as a reward for what you have done, and one which tells you that salvation comes by what somebody else does for you. That’s Christianity. All the rest fit under the other. And if you think you can get your salvation by your own efforts, then Christianity has nothing to say to you. But if you know you need to be saved, then you are a candidate.<sup>3</sup>

There has never been anything *we* can do to be saved, we *can* do to be saved, or we can *do* to be saved. Salvation comes only by God's grace through faith in Christ. Yet the apostle Paul, Mr. Grace himself, says to "work out your salvation with fear and trembling" (NIV). The Greek word for "work out" carries the idea of bringing to completion, or as the New Living Translation renders the meaning of this line, we are to "work hard to show the *results* of [our] salvation, obeying God with deep reverence and fear. For God is working in [us], giving [us] the desire and the power to do what pleases him" (Philippians 2:12-13, italics mine).

Paul says to work hard because God is giving us both the desire to work hard and the power to do so. By implication, not to work hard would be to work against the very grace that saves us. Our salvation is both a gift from God, a completed act—and a process in which we are strenuously involved. Sometimes Paul's strenuous involvement, his *agon*, was so consuming that his words almost trip over each other when he tries to explain it: "But whatever I am now, it is all because God poured out his special favor on me—and not without results. For I have worked harder than any of the other apostles; yet it was not I but God who was working through me by his grace" (1 Corinthians 15:10).

## **GOD'S MASTERPIECE**

Paul worked hard because God had worked hard on him. He didn't obey in order to be saved; he obeyed because he was

saved. Obedience is the purpose and the goal of salvation. Or as Paul puts it in his classic text on salvation by grace alone through faith alone, “Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it. *For we are God’s masterpiece.* He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago” (Ephesians 2:9-10, italics mine).

God has “created us anew”—given us new birth “so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago.” Again, we don’t do good things in order to be saved; we do good things because we are saved. We are not born again *by* good works; we are born again *for* good works. Paul says the intent of all this grace is to make us “God’s masterpiece.” Since we are God’s masterpiece, we not only should act like a masterpiece, we now *may* act in the power of the God who is making us so.

**We are not born again *by* good works; we are born again *for* good works.**

The great Renaissance artist Leonardo da Vinci was hard at work on a canvas he had been toiling over for weeks. The painting was nearly finished and looked magnificent. The subject had been carefully chosen, and it had da Vinci’s unique perspective and distinctive choice of colors. Suddenly he stopped, called a student over, handed him the paintbrush, and said, “Here, you finish it.” The student protested that he was not worthy or able to complete so beautiful a painting.

Said da Vinci, “Will not what I have done inspire you to do your best?”

That is a little bit like the thing God's grace does in us, except God does much more than give us an inspiring model; he gives us his Spirit to live in us, as he promised through the prophet Ezekiel: "And I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender, responsive heart. And I will put my Spirit in you so that you will follow my decrees and be careful to obey my regulations" (Ezekiel 36:26-27).

The gospel of God's grace implacably opposes any notion of human merit for salvation, but it embraces and commands vigorous effort, good hard work for the saved. We are to strenuously work out what God has graciously worked in. This is why Christ came. When St. Athanasius wrote, "God became human that humans might become divine," he was echoing the apostle John, who wrote, "Dear friends, we are already God's children, but he has not yet shown us what we will be like when Christ appears. But we do know that we will be like him, for we will see him as he really is" (1 John 3:2). And so St. Augustine prayed, "My God, set me on fire! . . . Give what you command, and then command whatever you will."<sup>4</sup>

## **SPIRITUAL DNA**

I have an athletic fantasy that I occasionally roll over in my mind during football season. In it, I am the last player in the NFL to go "both ways," to play defense and offense. On defense I am a middle linebacker, a perennial all-pro who

averages fifteen unassisted tackles a game. On offense I am a tailback, also a perennial all-pro at that position, averaging 150 yards rushing a game. That's it; that's the fantasy. Don't judge me—just think of whatever silly, delusional fantasies you entertain. Of course I was nothing like that as a player. The joke was, “Ben isn't very big, but he's slow.” I had the heart of a great athlete, in desire, dedication, and discipline; but I had the body of a pretty average athlete. I was an over-achiever; my passion for the sport could take me right up to what my genetic endowment, my DNA, would allow, but no further.

But what if I was given a new DNA, new and extraordinary capacities by God? What if I experienced a kind of second birth athletically and was made fully capable of becoming all I have fantasized? Would that miracle make me lazy? Would knowing what I had the ability to become make me complacent? Of course not—I would strive with everything in me to work out what God had worked in. It would still be hard to be a champion, but it would be a good hard.

The Bible says God has given us everything we need to live a godly life, including such “great and precious promises” that we may actually “share his divine nature.” The strenuous life of good works, in fact, is part of our new spiritual DNA. How then should we live? “In view of all this,” we should “*make every effort* to respond to God's promises” (2 Peter 1:3-5, italics mine). It is the glory and joy of all believers to “travail” as in the pains of childbirth until Christ is fully developed in their lives.<sup>5</sup>

*And O, that He fulfilled may see  
The travail of His soul in me,  
And with His work contented be,  
As I with my dear Savior!*

“I AM NOT SKILLED TO UNDERSTAND” BY  
DORA GREENWELL (1821-1882)