

*A practical guidebook to help us take God at His word
and live lives of freedom and power. —Jennie Allen*

Nicole Unice



The
Struggle
is
Real.

Getting better at life,
stronger in faith,
and free from the stuff
keeping you stuck

The disconnect between what we believe and how we act—this changes everything. *The Struggle Is Real* is a practical guidebook to help us take God at His word and live lives of freedom and power.

JENNIE ALLEN

Author of *Nothing to Prove*; founder and visionary of the IF:Gathering

Max De Pree used to say that the first task of a leader is to define reality. That is what Nicole Unice has done in *The Struggle Is Real*. But she doesn't just define it, she gives us the hope to cope.

JOHN ORTBERG

Senior pastor of Menlo Church, Menlo Park, California; author of *I'd Like You More If You Were More like Me*

I've known Nicole Unice for nearly a decade, and I can honestly say that if she's anything, Nicole is *real* and she has a *real* passion for others to embrace how *real* God can be in their *real* lives. In *The Struggle Is Real*, Nicole pours out this passion in an accessible read. Turning these pages is like sitting with a safe friend in a sunny spot and coming away with a refreshed perspective on the *real* difference God can make in our lives.

ELISA MORGAN

Speaker; author of *The Beauty of Broken* and *The Prayer Coin*; cohost of *Discover the Word*; president emerita of MOPS International

You're going to love Nicole Unice. She's bright, funny, observant, honest, and fearless about speaking the truth in love. Her advice in *The Struggle Is Real* is practical and doable, full of common sense and uncommon wisdom, and her true-to-life stories give each lesson a solid landing place in our hearts. This isn't a book you simply read; it's a book you *do*, with remarkable results.

LIZ CURTIS HIGGS

Bestselling author of *Bad Girls of the Bible*

Many of us have grown weary of books that offer simplistic steps promising easy transformation. This is not that kind of book. Nicole Unice writes from a deep place of reflection and personal experience about how real is the struggle . . . and how real is the process of true growth and change. I urge you to join her on the journey.

NANCY BEACH

Leadership coach with Slingshot Group; author of *Gifted to Lead: The Art of Leading as a Woman in the Church*

We live in a day when we Instagram our lives to be perceived as more than mundane. We Pinterest our meals and homes to present a perception of the fabulous life. I'm grateful for Nicole's book *The Struggle Is Real* because of the way she uses honesty, humor, and the Word of God to liberate us from the pretense of presenting the perfect life.

DAVID M. BAILEY

Founder and executive director of Arrabon; coauthor of the Race, Class, and the Kingdom of God study series

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The Struggle Is Real: Getting Better at Life, Stronger in Faith, and Free from the Stuff Keeping You Stuck

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The names and identifying details of some of the individuals whose stories appear in this book have been changed to protect their privacy.

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Foreword

There are days when we feel we are close to overcoming those daily struggles and habits that hold us back. There are other days when we feel we'll never get out of our stuck place. And much of the time, no one knows what we are going through.

Nicole Unice understands that most of our struggles will never make the daily news. Nobody knows about our feelings of low self-esteem or our sense of being surrounded by friends but feeling lonely in marriage. Very few people dig deep enough to understand how our childhood experiences have shaped us as adults. Nicole will help you do this and more. *The Struggle Is Real* feels like a crack in the door filled with light. Maybe there is hope for us. Maybe there is a way out.

I have known Nicole for over twenty years. She draws from a deep well of experience and compassion for people. She is a gifted writer and Bible teacher, but most of all, she is a woman of deep faith who loves the Word of God and tells stories that help people feel understood.

THE STRUGGLE IS REAL

In 2 Corinthians 4:17, the apostle Paul writes that “our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.” Nicole Unice gets this. She understands that there is purpose and meaning in our struggles. Through her writing, Nicole not only touches the deepest part of us, she offers us tools to get us out of the stuck place and find life again. As a fellow struggler and a pastor for over thirty years, I found myself both laughing and brought to tears as I read, but most of all, this book has given me hope. I think you will find hope too.

Peace,

Pete Howell

Hope Church

Richmond, Virginia

INTRODUCTION

The “Fine” Line

Before we begin, I need to ask you a question:

How are you?

If you're like me, when asked this at the grocery store or by a friend you haven't seen in a while, your response is usually: “Fine!” After all, we can tick off our big blessings—a roof over our heads, shoes on our feet, dinner on the table. “Fine” almost feels like a required answer, especially for the Christian. After all, since God has done so much for us, shouldn't our leading perspective be gratitude and *shouldn't we be fine?*

Well, yes, but also no.

Fine is a terrible little word. It's neither good nor bad. It doesn't convey excitement or despair. You might as well sigh it out, “I'm fiiiiinnne.” *Fine* is a tired, shouldn't-this-be-different kind of word. *Fine* is a good word to use when you are kind of frustrated, kind of bored, kind of okay, kind of stuck. *Fine* is what you say when you wonder if things are supposed to feel as hard as they do even in your so-called “good life.”

It's funny how it's the little struggles that often reveal the most about what's really underneath the surface of all this "fine" we claim to be. The other day I was avoiding folding my laundry by finding important things to do, and by "important," I mean scrolling through my Instagram feed like it held the secret to life. Between the puppy pics and the coffee/Bible/#blessed Christian "reality," I came across this:

I dropped a sock from my laundry, and then leaned over to pick up the sock and somehow dropped all my laundry on the floor, and if that's not a picture of my life, I don't know what is. #thestruggleisreal

Clever lines like these have become cultural signs of our era, giving a glimpse behind the shiny veneer of people's everyday lives. Many are followed by the tagline #thestruggleisreal. Search this hashtag and you'll find the struggle runs over three million posts deep, from complaints about the traffic to grievances at the workplace, from annoying habits to annoying people, from struggles with midterms to mishaps with pets. Here are a few others I found while avoiding household chores:

- My tolerance for idiots is extremely low today. I used to have some immunity built up, but obviously there's a new strain out there.
- I spend a lot of time holding the refrigerator door open looking for answers.

INTRODUCTION

- No, I don't really rise and shine. Most days, I just caffeinate and hope for the best.
- I want buns of steel, but I also want buns of cinnamon.

These are the funny ones—because they are clever and true. But I think if we were to reveal the deeper stuff we struggle with, items with that hashtag might overwhelm the Internet.

Recently, I was rushing to pick up my youngest at school. Multitasking as usual, I was having a heart-to-heart conversation with a friend about a recent conflict he faced while also shoehorning my car into the traffic jam that is the elementary school car-pool line. As I waited my turn, I continued to wax on to my younger leader friend about the importance of assuming the best in people, turning the other cheek, and seeking forgiveness. I was on a roll.

All of a sudden, the woman running the car-pool line gestured violently at me, ordering me to roll down my window. (Disclaimer: It felt like a violent gesture to me. *At the time.*) I ended the call, dropped my phone in my lap and smiled out the window as I chirped, "I'm here to pick up my little guy!" I used my best doting, loving, baby-book scrapbooking mom voice.

She looked down at me, closing her fist around her very professional lanyard name tag. "You don't have a pass, *ma'am*. You can't be in the car-pool line. You need to park and walk in."

Okay—she was looking down at me because I was in a sedan and she was standing, but in my heart I knew what was really going on. I knew she was also *looking down* at me,

judging me for my phone calls and distraction and disrespect of car-pool protocol like I was a bad mom, *the one who should never have had kids if I was going to act like mothering was a side hustle to real life.*

Given the intense level of conflict I felt between this lady and me in the 1.8 seconds we interacted, you can understand why I glared back at her, told her that I had sent in a note that morning, and rolled my eyes. *And how dare you “ma’am” me, ma’am!* I thought as I drove away. Once I’d parked the car, I slammed the door and stomped inside to grab my kid. I’m not proud to admit that, once back in the car, I drove slowly by the car-pool line so my son could identify the staff member by name and position. I had devised an elaborate plan to expose her as a condescending and judgmental shrew to the entire elementary school community.

Just for the record:

Yes, this really happened.

No, I am not proud of this moment.

Yes, I realize the irony of counseling my friend on the wisdom of grace and forgiveness while simultaneously deconstructing the entire moral fabric of the poor elementary schoolteacher trying to do her job.

Yes, I realize how spiritually bankrupt I was to involve my son, who may or may not have tried to find her name on the school’s website when we came home.

Yes, that was the point when I realized what an abject failure I had been as mother that day.

And if you are still wondering, do I think I’m “fine”? Well, no. I am not fine.

When we use the phrase “the struggle is real,” we are acknowledging the chasm that often exists between what we *think* and how we really *feel*. Our minds tell us that life will inevitably be difficult and confusing, at least sometimes. But when we experience the difficult and confusing, we *feel* as if something must be terribly wrong. It doesn’t matter that those difficult and confusing moments feel minor in the grand scheme of life—because those little struggles dig into a deeper place in our souls. Those little struggles lead us to wonder if we really have what it takes to make it in our lives, or if maybe we missed an important class somewhere about how to actually be a joyful and free human being.

Wow, you might be thinking, all of this is behind what happened to you in the car-pool line? I think whatever struggle your car-pool line is, it is just a scene in the larger story of your life. The struggle inside of you, the struggle around you, the struggle between you and others—all of it is a symbol of a much deeper longing that won’t be satisfied by a “fine” life.

Yep, the struggle is definitely real. The three million posts for #thestruggleisreal certainly hit the gap between real life and the good life, but to make it much more real, here are a few we’ll cover together:

- Life is way harder than I thought it would be, but I feel bad saying that because someone always has it worse than I do.
- There are some things about the way I think and act that I don’t think could ever change.

- I spend most of the time somewhere between kind of resentful and downright bitter, with occasional moments of grudging acceptance sprinkled in.
- I really don't know if God is interested in my life, and even if He is, I don't know how to hear from Him.
- My family is so dysfunctional—and I fit right in.
- If you think Lord Voldemort is harsh, you should meet my inner critic.
- I don't know when it's time to move on, so I just stay stuck.

We laugh at the humor and the heart of the first set of #thestruggleisreal quotes, and perhaps cringe at the honesty of the second. But this is reality! In the midst of the hard, heavy, and confusing, however, we have a God who has addressed this reality and has provided a way for us to not only understand life, but to grow stronger and smarter through it all.

God's Word is clear that when we choose to follow Him, we should expect to be changed—not a little, but *entirely transformed*. God's kind of change doesn't make our lives perfect—but it does make them expansive. He offers us lives of freedom and space rather than confinement and striving. He who can calm the storm, raise the dead, and mystify the wisdom of the world still chooses to enter into individual lives with such humility that we often don't know it's happened until we look back and realize He's been there for a long time. If your experiences are leading to *anything less* than full transformation in your heart, in your relationships, and in the story of your past and your future, then I can't wait to do this work together.

INTRODUCTION

We begin this journey in that gap between our “just fine” lives and the truly good lives we are seeking. I like to imagine us having this conversation on a great hike together when we come upon a break in the trail—a deep and muddy ditch in the middle of the path. I jump right into the ditch and am calling to you from the bottom. You are standing above, wondering why in the world anyone would jump in. It’s muddy and dirty and probably a little smelly, too, and it looks like it’s going to take a lot of work to get to the other side.

But I’m calling you down because I know it’s the only way back up. Christ is here ahead of us, and He promises to lead us out. You can stand at the edge of the ditch for as long as you’d like. You can try to find a way around. You can try to jump over. You can try to turn back. But at the end of the day, the only way forward is the way down. You see, I’ve come to such a ravine more than once on my own journey. I’ve learned that the ditches are important. I’ve also learned that the struggles those ditches represent are not just real, they are also *good*. I’ve learned those hindrances and annoyances and circumstances aren’t obstacles keeping us *from* freedom, but they are the very substances God uses to form our character and move us *toward* freedom. The struggles in our lives that leave us feeling stuck, restless, or confused become the trenches where we work out the important stuff of life—where we learn how to overcome everyday frustrations, messy relationships, and our lack of joy and purpose—to become people of honesty, depth, and strength.

So here’s the truth: If you are looking for a book that helps you escape reality, this probably isn’t the one for you.

But if you are looking for practical, real-life help for the stuff that bothers you—the stuff you wish didn't feel so hard but actually does—well then, welcome to the party. Some parts may be tough, but the beauty is that the struggle is real for all of us. Together, we can walk forward shoulder to shoulder, supporting one another when we need it and giving a karate kick in the rear when it's deserved. Along the way, I hope you'll feel understood and celebrated for your whole story—especially in the struggles. I hope we can laugh together about the crazy ways we live and act and view the world. Most of all, I hope we will resolve to believe that the struggle is real and the struggle is *good*.

Nicole

PS: Getting to the roots of our struggles is easier when we let friends walk alongside us. In fact, the Bible commands us to “carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2). With that in mind, I hope you'll consider gathering some friends and going through the book together. There's also a companion study and video series that we've put together to guide you. (See page 257 for more details.)

PART

1

**The
Struggle
between
the
Stories**

I believe that God has written a story line for each one of us that integrates all of the random and frustrating and confusing struggles—both little and big—into a life of wholeness and purpose. I believe in the power of God to change our lives and to untangle the confused plotlines in the deepest parts of us. I know it because I'm watching Him do this in my own life. I know it because God promises to change us in ways that are much deeper than simply acknowledging our need of a Savior while continuing to remain trapped in the same old patterns.

I've met men and women in every phase of faith who are new to the idea of transformation, who are still caught up in their old stories and whose actions and choices reflect their old way of thinking. I've met people who love the *idea* of God's love but haven't actually known Jesus in their lives. Without even being aware of it, all of these people are stuck, faking transformation instead of actually experiencing it. But the real God is far too big, too loving, and too powerful to remain confined by our predetermined boundaries. And it's in the very places where the struggle is real in your life—the striving, the worry, the restlessness, the discouragement—that you can discover the truth of who He is and the story He wants to write in your life.

The challenge, of course, is transitioning from our old stories, which are full of questions, hurt, and shame, into new stories of joy, meaning, and contentment. In part 1, we'll consider what the "good life"—the one God created us to enjoy—looks like. We will also face a difficult truth: that we've all been hit with soul-sucking pain that doesn't resolve itself nearly as fast or as neatly as an hour-long reality TV show. There is good news here, too, however. God has given us more volition than we realize, and He is infinitely more powerful, loving, and wise than we can fathom.

That is why, as we do the difficult soul work of uncovering and carrying our sin-sick stories to God, we can wait expectantly. Even while on the run from the murder-minded King Saul, David wrote, "I sought the LORD, and he answered me; he delivered me from all my fears. Those who look to him are radiant; their faces are never covered with shame. . . . Taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him" (Psalm 34:4-5, 8).

May such confidence be yours and mine as we begin the journey between our old and new stories.

1

The Promise

Real Living

You can tell a lot about a person by the way they handle three things: a rainy day, lost luggage, and tangled Christmas lights.

MAYA ANGELOU

The sunlight filtered through the window with a gentle grace, and I woke up with a smile. I knew I had a lot to be grateful for that morning—I was visiting a friend while taking a study leave from work, which meant that I was temporarily not in charge of the groceries, the car pools, the lunches, or the dogs. This kind of break was a rare gift, and with the quiet awakening, the beautiful day, the smell of coffee brewing, and the promise of a couple of meetings that I was looking forward to later that morning, I whispered a quick hallelujah of praise. It was a day full of potential, and I had a particular sense that God was up to something important.

But then I actually got out of bed.

By noon, I felt deflated. I had been caught off guard by the discussion in one meeting, and I'd felt unheard and unseen in the other. My writing—the reason I was away from home in the first place—remained untouched. The sunshine didn't seem so bright as I walked back toward my friend's house that afternoon.

I tried to get in touch with how I was feeling. I remembered taking a college yoga class that taught relaxation techniques. The instructor had us lie down on our backs, palms to the ceiling, and take a “mental scan” of our bodies, from head to toe, looking for places of stress. Trying to help myself, I employed the same yoga-lady technique, but with a focus on a “mental scan” of my soul, looking for why the day had started so well and now I could barely put one foot in front of the other. That only led to some incriminating self-talk. I huffed a sigh of frustration as I thought: *I can't believe I even felt stressed in college. Life is so much more confusing and complicated now that I am a real adult with real problems.*

Since I was feeling worse than ever, I tried to be kinder to myself. I took on the tone of a nonjudgmental counselor. *Mmmm, how did that meeting make you feel?* That got me nowhere, so I went with the boot camp instructor approach: *All right, Nicole, get it together. You are in California, for goodness' sake! It's beautiful here! The sun is shining! What the heck is wrong with you?* (Scolding myself, by the way, never works.)

This is the gap between real life and the good life. I was claiming in my mind that I was now a mature adult walking in paradise while also berating myself in my soul for being so bad at merely existing. I sometimes think my brain and my

heart are like a cranky old married couple, always bickering about why the dog is barking and what they should do about it. Brain told me that disappointing meetings were no big deal and I had no reason to be so upset, while Heart whined back to Brain that a whole day had been wasted, and it really was a big deal, and why would God have it be like this? Brain felt judgy and mean. Heart felt slighted and disappointed. The arguing in my head wore me out, and when I made it back to my friend's house, I headed straight to the guest bedroom, kicked off my shoes, got into bed, and pulled the covers over my head.

As I hid under the covers and closed my eyes, I sighed out a whispered *help me* prayer. "Help" prayers aren't just about God showing us the way forward with decisions. Often my help prayers are more about grounding and direction:

Help me understand me.

Help me understand why this feels the way it does.

Help me understand what this struggle is really about.

Somehow in the space of a few hours, I had gone from praising God to practically cursing Him. Oh yes, I know what it feels like to struggle over small things, to tug on a weed of frustration or insecurity or doubt, only to realize that you are actually pulling on a deep, wiry root embedded in your soul, one that goes much deeper than whatever your seemingly insignificant struggle might be.

When I woke up from that nap, an important truth was clarified, one that I wish I didn't need to keep learning. I am

tempted—over and over again—to believe that a state of happiness is a direct result of God’s favor. I am all about the hallelujahs when I’m happy. But because the day didn’t turn out the way I planned, because I experienced the state of anything-but-happiness (regret, frustration, despair), I figured that must be a direct result of God’s distance (*He doesn’t care about me*) or disfavor (*He doesn’t like me*). Then I wondered, *Why do such minor disappointments, such small bumps in the road, cause me such inner turmoil?* I realized my struggles that morning in California had not been one isolated event but were connected to a series of frustrations that relate to something bigger in my soul.

As I thought and prayed about this discouraging morning in the weeks that followed, I was reminded again that the little struggles are often related to something much more important: Let’s call that the Struggle. The Struggle is about something much deeper than the everyday challenges. It’s about the disconnect between what I believe and how I act, how I understand the promises of God and my actual experience with God. The Struggle is the frustrating place between who I want to be and who I actually am.

The Struggle Solution

The good news about the Struggle deep inside each one of us is that we don’t need to resolve it on our own. In fact, as I discovered in my rounds of self-talk, that only makes things worse. Instead, we need to look outside ourselves, both for a new way to understand where we’ve come from and a clear

way to move toward the good life we are desperately seeking. Rather than hiding or scolding or “fixing” ourselves, we need a new way to understand both the little struggles and the Struggle, and we need direction on what this good life actually looks like and the steps we can take to get there.

The book of James says, “If you don’t know what you’re doing, pray to the Father. He loves to help. You’ll get his help, and won’t be condescended to when you ask for it” (James 1:5, MSG). What I love about this promise is how certain and complete it is. It’s a promise to all people, it’s a promise related to everything that requires direction, and it’s a promise that God will give the answer without any stipulations or requirements. God isn’t going to judge you or find fault with you. He’s going to give His help generously and freely and completely. That’s a true and reliable promise. It means that when I have a day that goes from good to bad, when a conversation goes sideways, or when I find myself disappointed or discouraged or confused, God promises to provide what I need most—the spiritual smarts to understand what’s going on and the spiritual conviction on how to move forward.

But here’s the thing—God does give one requirement in the second half of the passage below. God offers to give to us freely and completely, but He also asks something of us that sounds pretty radical.

If you don’t know what you’re doing, pray to the Father. He loves to help. You’ll get his help, and won’t be condescended to when you ask for it. Ask

boldly, believingly, without a second thought. *People who “worry their prayers” are like wind-whipped waves. Don’t think you’re going to get anything from the Master that way, adrift at sea, keeping all your options open.*

JAMES 1:5-8, MSG (EMPHASIS ADDED)

In the second half of the passage, God asks us to surrender something that we like to hold on to very tightly—our right to doubt. We are a cynical bunch, we humans. We reserve the right to decide whether or not we want to believe in all kinds of things. We are constantly second-guessing what’s worth believing in. A recent article said that more than half of Americans believe in at least one conspiracy theory—from JFK’s assassination to what really happened on 9/11 to the idea that the world is flat.¹ That may seem preposterous to you, but conspiracy theories stem from the human condition of *reserving the right to not believe what we hear*. In some ways, I think we are all conspiracy theorists when it comes to God. We find ourselves doubting His intentions when the story lines don’t make sense. When it comes to deciphering the world, our culture relies on logic and emotion, not on tradition or authority. Perhaps the most radical thing God could require of us is to *believe what He says*.

In the midst of our confusion, God lays down the rules of the game. He’s going to give you the whole of Himself and help you figure out your true story, but you have to put something on the table too. You have to suspend your right to doubt and actually take Him at His Word.

True Reality

Dave and I have a child who practically came out of the womb screaming “*Don’t believe the hype!*” I have never met a human being who finds such joy in punching holes in any plot or argument in which the reasoning doesn’t make sense. He has spent the better half of his fifteen long years on an endless quest to debunk anything that is less than fully logical. Recently we began watching a TV series called *Revolution* together. The show’s premise is that some nefarious force was able to extinguish all electricity from the earth. *The entire series* is built on that concept and doesn’t make sense if you don’t go with it.

Yet within ten minutes of the first episode of the first season, my son was plotting out all the ways the characters should have been able to harness electricity. I told him that the source of ultimate truth, Wikipedia, calls this show a “post-apocalyptic science fiction television series.” I repeated multiple times: “It’s fiction, honey. *Fiction.*” But he just couldn’t suspend his own logic. The other morning over breakfast, he told me that he wasn’t sure he could keep watching the show because the characters didn’t try to use a windmill to generate power. I looked at him with a slightly crazy eye (it was early and I hadn’t had coffee and I wasn’t ready to *debate wind power*). I said, “Son [that’s what I say when I’m about to lay down some parental wisdom and don’t want anyone to talk back], you are going to need to suspend your reality if you plan to enjoy that TV show.”

While the far-fetched plot of a TV program may not drive

you as crazy as it does my son, I bet there are parts of your own story that have you puzzled. We are always going to seek to understand the Struggle—it's our human nature to do so. But if the way you are doing life is just getting you to "fine," it's time for a new way. If you want to get a different result out of life than you are currently getting, you are going to have to suspend *your own understanding of reality* for a time. You've been operating with certain assumptions for a while—deep-seated beliefs about who you are and how life works. This is a normal and grown-up thing to do, but to tap into the transforming power of Christ, you must first "change and become like a child" (Matthew 18:3, CEV). In other words, this new way of life requires you to take all your assumptions about how the world works and put them aside, and to engage in a mind-shift, a heart-shift, and a will-shift toward the reality of God rather than the reality you are currently experiencing.

As you seek this understanding from God, you are not making a onetime transactional relationship with Him, in which you ask only about the areas in which you want help and receive only the answers you are looking for. It's not about dialing in the right formula so that He can dispense just the right amount of advice. God is not like a Dear Abby column. To actually seek His direction—fully, the way James describes here—will take a much more intentional approach. It will require more than just your desire and your faith—it will require your willful choice and action.

So how do we get this good life? We find it when we know what really matters in life. We find the good when we handle the four most important relationships on earth—our

relationship with God, our relationship with ourselves, our relationship with others, and our relationship with the world at large—in the right way. To enter into God’s way is to be willing to see all four relationships from God’s perspective. It means suspending our own reality and willingly choosing to see things God’s way.

In my life, much of God’s view of the world stands outside of my own logic or reason. God’s wisdom is like the master key that opens me up to understand all the rest of it—what matters in my life, in my choices, and in my relationships. This kind of wisdom is freeing, not confining.

Good living is the side effect of a transformed relationship with Christ. Dallas Willard says that a heart transformed by God creates people who live “in such a way that doing the words and deeds of Christ is not the focus but is a natural outcome.”² God does the transforming, but we have an important part to play. We have power in the relationship—the power to choose. We have to want what God offers if we are going to enter into the work it takes to get there.

A Baseline Test

So is choosing to seek God’s perspective on your struggles and your story worth it? I believe with all of my heart that it is. But I know that the idea of intentional action toward this vague “good life” might not be at the top of your to-do list. You might be looking for relief from a specific problem, not a general promise that God can help you through some as-yet-unnamed struggle.

So let's enter in together with the baseline test that follows—a way to find out where we are so we know if it's worth the trip to where we are going. There are ten statements that describe a person who lives the good life—using God's definition. God is quite practical about what it looks like to live as a mature and “whole” person. Every one of these statements is directly related to the way God describes the good life in His Word. I invite you to consider each statement from a completely honest place. How many describe you? There is no growth without honesty, so engage with this exercise with all the transparency you can muster.

The Good Life Inventory

Put a check by the statements that currently describe you.

- _____ 1. I am totally committed to knowing the truth about myself. I am not afraid to ask others around me to help me see blind spots or trouble areas in my life.
- _____ 2. I have a peaceful and nonanxious presence, both inside and out.
- _____ 3. Generally I feel that my soul is untroubled and undisturbed. I have nothing to hide.
- _____ 4. I regularly and sincerely ask for forgiveness from my family, friends, and coworkers.
- _____ 5. I respect my own heart, body, and soul as something to be cherished.

THE PROMISE

- ___ 6. I treat conflicting patterns of thinking and behaving in myself with gentleness.
- ___ 7. I have a clear sense of purpose in my life.
- ___ 8. I have experienced deep compassion for someone who has hurt me.
- ___ 9. I feel total freedom from my past hurts and regrets.
- ___ 10. I experience joy on a daily basis.

How'd it go for you . . . and how do you feel now? Even completing an inventory like this may bring up all kinds of struggles. You may feel bad about yourself. You may immediately punch holes in the logic of this questionnaire, thinking that no one is that black and white, and that life can't be reduced to a series of yes/no statements. You may think that this is all kind of dumb and trite and just another form of cheesy Christianity. I don't even need you to admit those reactions—I know them because I'm the chief cynic of us all. As much as I hate to acknowledge it, my son comes by his annoying habit of not believing the hype pretty naturally.

If you answered this inventory with honesty and humility, you likely discovered that you have a healthy perspective in some areas and work to do in others. When I posted this inventory on Facebook, I discovered that most people answer yes to between two and six statements. Regardless of your number, I bet we'd agree that the people who answer yes to all ten statements would probably be pretty great

people to be around (unless they're lying or completely unaware of themselves, in which case they would be terrible to be around).

People with a peaceful presence and perspective are likely free and joyful people. Maybe you know a person like that. I hope you, like me, would also like to be that person. Knowing where we are heading begins with knowing where we are. When it comes to the good life, developing a peaceful presence begins with the self-awareness that comes from taking an honest look at how we are really doing. I love this quote from a personality theorist: "Once we understand the nature of our personality's mechanisms, we begin to have a choice about identifying with them or not. If we are not aware of them, clearly no choice is possible."³

The beginning of all growth is awareness. The first step is acknowledging that we may have to suspend our own understanding of reality and find a different starting point—not our own logic or emotion, but an umbrella statement of truth that will change how we view our lives.

Where We Begin

Proverbs 9:10 says that "the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom." If wisdom points to the good life we're looking for, then it comes in a surprising place—the fear of the Lord! The Bible repeatedly uses the phrase "fear of the LORD." People are to learn to fear God (Deuteronomy 31:12; Psalm 34) and to know His power (Joshua 4:24). Leaders were told to work "in the fear of the LORD" in order

to pursue justice (2 Chronicles 19:9). Through his deep suffering, Job discovered that “fear of the Lord—that is wisdom” (Job 28:28). The fear of the Lord leads to a full life, and is life itself (Proverbs 10:27; 14:27; 19:23). The church is strengthened and prospered when in the fear of the Lord (Acts 9:31). This phrase, which sounds foreign to our modern sensibilities, is somehow the key that moves us toward the good life. How can God be both loving and someone to be feared? Aren’t those things opposed to one another? Can God fully love us and also scare us?

I once took a drive that illustrated for me what “fear of the Lord” really means. I was heading to a retreat when my navigational system directed me to make a sharp turn onto a narrow neighborhood road. I was both surprised and annoyed when Siri told me in her deep Australian accent, “For seventeen miles, continue on this route.” Those seventeen miles were going to take at least an hour, and the road only got narrower and steeper as it climbed sharply up what now felt like the Alps. Never one for scenic drives, especially when I have to be somewhere, I pressed hard onto the gas pedal and leaned forward in my seat, willing my little sedan up an almost continual climb for the next few miles. Multiple thoughts demanded my attention—directions, logistics, some insecurities about how this retreat would go, my family, what was happening the following week. My mind was as busy as a six-lane highway at rush hour.

But then . . . I rounded a bend and actually gasped. As I barreled around this mountain, I got a glimpse of one of the most beautiful vistas I have ever seen. Trees stretched

in every direction. The sky was piercingly blue. The ocean, hugged into a crescent by the mountains around it, lay in the distance. The city stretched out before me. *Breathtaking* is the word to describe it—as it actually took my breath away. This moment was so pure and beautiful that I could keep describing it for pages—and still not convey how striking and beautiful it was. My car kept charging forward even though I had basically vacated my job as driver, craning my neck and stretching forward in the hopes that I would catch the view again. As the road continued to climb, I caught flash after flash of this incredible view. I had places to go and a time line to keep, but the landscape demanded my attention. Suddenly nothing was as important to me as seeing that view again. At one point, I stopped my car in the middle of the road to take it in because I couldn't move on from this beauty. Its magnitude and brilliance took priority in my soul. I forgot about all the other things that had seemed important in the presence of such splendor.

When I think of the love of God and the fear of the Lord, I think of that view. My thoughts were so small when interpreted through its grandeur. The mountain's greatness commanded my attention. The fear of the Lord is natural when we acknowledge who He is and catch even a glimpse of His power and might. When I looked out at that view, all the things that people have built and created appeared tiny, eclipsed by the majesty of what God has created. Out of His great love He created great beauty:

THE PROMISE

The unfailing love of the LORD fills the earth.
The LORD merely spoke,
and the heavens were created.
He breathed the word,
and all the stars were born.
He assigned the sea its boundaries
and locked the oceans in vast reservoirs.

PSALM 33:5-7, NLT

My best description of the fear of the Lord, then, is our recognition of this combination of beautiful love and majestic power.

The fear of the Lord is the acknowledgement that *God is greatest*. Things can be great—but *God is greatest*. Things can be hard—but *God is greatest*. When we interpret our challenges through that view, we get a new perspective on our struggles and desires.

The fear of the Lord makes the fact that *God is greatest* the central and starting point of every other thought we will ever have. But *God is greatest* doesn't fully capture it. If God is only greatest, He could still be a distant God. Holy and powerful—but uninvolved and unconcerned with our everyday struggles.

A fuller way of understanding His nature means we need to add to the phrase. God isn't just greatest—*He also knows best*. This is the connection between God's magnitude and His sacrificial care and wisdom. God's greatness doesn't exist in a vacuum with no effect on the smaller details of living. When we live with a dug-down-deep understanding that

God is greatest, and He knows best, we become more open to receive His direction and follow His ways. It's a natural result of believing in the fear of the Lord. Rewriting our understanding of life begins with this one phrase.

God is greatest, and He knows best.

Opening Your Heart Is a Choice

What's even more astounding about God is that He gives us freedom in how we respond to this truth. We have to make the choice to believe that God is greatest and knows best. We have to align our willpower, our logic, and our emotion behind this statement.

To continue the metaphor of my mountain drive, I didn't *have* to stop to take in this breathtaking view. I didn't even have to look at it. I could have kept my eyes on the yellow line in the center of the road and continued in the busyness of my own thoughts. In fact, my guess is that if I drove that road every day, this unbelievable view would become commonplace and easier to ignore. I would likely become blind to the wonder of it all. The view didn't make me stop and pay attention. I had to choose to do so. This is where I began to understand how easily I slip into forgetting about the greatness of God.

The greatest challenge in life will be the challenge of choice. The fact that we have the ability to make choices speaks to the freedom that God has given us to embark on a life that requires our engagement.

We not only have intentional choices to make that will directly impact our future for good, but we also have choices to make about how we react to the decisions made by others that have impacted us for evil. God can use even bitter things to create good in our lives, but all of our decisions require our intentional engagement. The way you choose to think, feel, act, and relate will have a profound effect on your story.

A Story of Choice

There's a history lesson in the Bible about the Hebrew people using their freedom to make a choice about their lives. Despite the fact that God had clearly revealed Himself to the Israelites and performed miracle after miracle to show His love and faithfulness to them, the Israelites had a tough time believing He was greatest and He knew best.

The wilderness is a harsh place. When we are in the “in-between”—between being led into freedom and actually living in that freedom—we are doubtful, fearful creatures. But this middle space is where we spend almost all of our days. And I know I'm like an Israelite when I'm in the in-between wilderness of life. Despite knowing that God is good and seeing His glory and grandeur in places like that mountain view, I forget. I struggle to remember when I'm in the wilderness, whether that looks like an unknown future or the effort to leave something difficult in my past behind.

Maybe that's why Moses had choice last words for his people before he died. After all of those years of leading them through the wilderness, encouraging and admonishing them to trust God, he had strong and important things to say. Just

before they were to enter this new and free land that God had promised to them, Moses said: “This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the LORD is your life” (Deuteronomy 30:19-20).

Even though this tribe of people were living and breathing and alive, Moses reminded them that they still had *life and death* choices to make. To choose life was to choose to believe *God is greatest, and He knows best*. To choose death was to choose *I am greatest, and I know best*. It was the choice they had to make then, and it’s the choice we must make now. Choosing this is not a one-and-done choice, but a continual, intentional setting of our hearts and souls to believe that life is found in God, who reveals that life through His wisdom and ultimately through Jesus Christ.

Choosing to engage with God in our real story—all of our story—is the first step in experiencing life in a whole new way.

We have the incredible privilege and responsibility to be active participants in our own life stories—especially in the hard, heavy, and confusing parts—in both the daily little annoyances and the big struggles related to

purpose, meaning, and peace. Choosing to engage with God in our real story—*all of our story*—is the first step in experiencing life in a whole new way.

This book, then, is an invitation to your own life. It’s an invitation to *choose* life in your ordinary days, to be

openhearted as you seek God's truth and refreshment in the most unlikely of places—the Struggle. The Struggle is, in fact, real. But if we can use it to lead us to God's wisdom, then our struggles—and the underlying Struggle—can be used for good.

Keeping It Real

At the end of each chapter, I offer a question, prayer, or comment for you to consider. This is an invitation to a conversation with God about the content of the chapter.

Take a look back at the Good Life Inventory and pray this simple prayer:

Jesus, I give You all that I am—the good and the bad, the wise and the foolish, the peaceful and the anxious. I pray that You would give me courage to face who I really am and faith to accept who You really are for me. Amen.