

RYAN MILLER

WITH KATIE M. KELLEY

**MEEK
AS A
MUSTANG**

**FIND THE STRENGTH TO SURRENDER
YOUR WILD HEART TO JESUS**

There's a prophetic edge to Ryan Miller's voice for our present age. His words are honest, timely, loving, confronting, and deeply needed.

MEGAN FATE MARSHMAN, author of *Relaxed*, speaker, teaching pastor at Willow Creek Community Church

Our culture trains us to equate strength with self-assertion, but the gospel tells a different story. In *Meek as a Mustang*, Ryan Miller exposes that illusion and offers a far more compelling vision—one where true strength is not something we prove, but something we yield. This is a timely call back to the kind of power that defined the life of Jesus—and the kind that, if embraced, will not just reshape our lives, but radically reorder what we believe strength really is.

COLBY F. MAIER, founder of the Academy of the Bible

Meek as a Mustang is the book I've been waiting for someone to write. Ryan Miller doesn't ask you to shrink. He doesn't ask you to behave. He hands you a mirror and shows you that the fire you've been apologizing for your whole life is the very thing Jesus desires. Meekness isn't weakness; it's a wild heart that has finally found its leader. *Meek as a Mustang* recovers a word the church has fumbled for generations and gives meekness back the muscle Jesus put on it. Read this if you've ever been told your fire was the problem. It's not. It's just been waiting on the right master.

JACOB COYNE, founder of Stay Here, author of *The Secret Life of Christians*

Ryan Miller is a rare voice today. He is tender enough to reach the wounded and bold enough to tell the truth. In *Meek as a Mustang*, he takes a word the church has domesticated into passivity and restores it to its full, dangerous, biblical weight. In a cultural moment when cancel culture has replaced conviction and cutting people off has replaced reconciliation, Ryan's reframe is nothing short of prophetic. He recovers what the church has forgotten: Meekness is not the absence of strength; it is strength on its knees.

GRANT SKELDON, Next Gen Director for THINQ, author of *The Passion Generation*

MEEK AS A MUSTANG



A Tyndale nonfiction imprint

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INTRODUCTION

“KNOCK IT OFF!!”

“HEY!! I said, ‘*Knock it off*, guys!’” Coach bellowed as he strode over to me with purpose. He called out to the assistant coach to take over practice, and I used the distraction to give my teammate one more shove in the chest.

“Miller! Dugout, *now*!” Coach directed me, pointing with an outstretched baseball bat for emphasis. His eyes were narrowed, his jaw set firm. I stormed toward the dugout, still roiling inside from the scuffle with the other boy over—I don’t know, who got to shag fly balls next? Who could spit sunflower shells the farthest? Maybe it was a sarcastic comment about the fact that I *hadn’t* actually made the baseball team and was just there for recreational practice—basically glorified PE class.

Coach marched after me, and when we reached the dugout, I whirled around with defiance plastered all over my face, ready for another fight. I so badly wanted to impress Coach because I so badly wanted to play ball. But right then, I was *hot*.

“He started it!” I shouted. “He—”

“I don’t care *who* started it,” he cut me off. “Ryan, this is unacceptable. This is the third fight I’ve had to break up, and *you*”—he pointed the bat square at my chest—“are at the center

of every one. Out there”—he stretched out the bat toward the field—“you’re part of a team, and I expect you to act like it.”

I hate to admit it, but this was par for the course for me. Yep, I was *that* kid on the baseball diamond, and in life. Impulsive, a hothead, the prankster, one of the “wild ones” teachers were glad to pass through their classes just so they didn’t have to deal with me anymore.

“You’re all passion, Miller,” Coach said, clearly exasperated, looking to the sky as if pleading for help. *Here it comes*, I thought. I knew I was a screwup. I knew Coach was one more person I had finally pushed too far. *Here comes the suspension, the call home. Banished from baseball for good, probably.* But Coach lowered his gaze and took a deep breath, calming both himself and the tension in the air. He put his hand on my shoulder, looked me in the eye, and said something that will stick with me for the rest of my life: “But Ryan, know this: I would rather tame a mustang than inspire a mule.”

I’d rather tame a mustang . . .

Something about that comment stuck. It was the first time anyone had ever described my behavior in a positive light. Coach didn’t want me to lose my fire; he wanted me to *use* it in the right way.

I couldn’t stop thinking about it. And it changed everything.

After graduation, I became a youth pastor and focused my efforts on the kids most people saw as the outcasts. When they bucked and kicked, I told them the same thing Coach told me: “I’d rather tame a mustang than inspire a mule.”

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“Mustang” became a new identity for them, a badge of honor. They started to see their passion not as a liability but as a gift, and that made all the difference in the world.

Take Matt, for example. Matt was a good dude who had happened to get into a bit of trouble with the law, and he was trying to turn things around. I was living with a couple other guys, and we had room for one more, so I invited Matt to come live with us. At first, he wasn’t so sure he wanted to move in with a bunch of Christians. But once he discovered that we all had a bit of a wild side—messaging around, getting into trouble, and pranking people—he settled right into the group. And for the first time in his life, Matt didn’t feel like an outsider. He had finally found his tribe.

After a few months of discipleship, Matt fell in love with Jesus. In fact, he was so on fire for God and his gospel of forgiveness and mercy, Matt decided to dedicate his life to telling other people about it and accepted a ministry position in Appalachia.

Matt never made it to his new job. He fell asleep at the wheel of his car while driving out there and hit a tree at seventy miles per hour. He died instantly.

I was devastated. In my mind, Matt was the consummate mustang—fiery and passionate. Rough around the edges. Wild and untamed. The complete opposite of what most people think of when they hear the word *Christian*. And yet he was completely sold out for the Lord. I couldn’t wait to see how God would use a testimony like his.

I struggled in the wake of Matt’s death for months. I

couldn't make sense of his loss. I couldn't see the meaning of it. I had to make a change in my life to try to regain some sense of control. I quit my ministry position and dedicated my life to finding some way of honoring Matt. And the best way I could think to do that was to show the world how much God loves and wants to use the wild ones—the mustangs.

This is a book about my failure—and God's success—in that pursuit. I have had the blessing of knowing many of God's "mustangs" in my life, and I'm honored to share some of their stories in this book. And if there's one thing he's taught me along the way, it's that the single greatest marker of world-changing, table-turning, disruptive wild ones for his Kingdom is *meekness*.

That's right. Meekness. As in, "Blessed are the meek . . ."¹

It's striking to realize that the one time Jesus described what he is like to his disciples in his own words, he said this: "I am meek and lowly in heart."² Not forgiving, not loving, not righteous, wise, holy, sacrificial, or any of the other wonderful ways we know his character.

"I am meek," he said. "Learn from me."

Throughout this book, you'll be challenged to learn from Jesus—to pause, reflect, and act boldly in "Meek Moments" that will draw you closer to him. But meekness is not what you think. The prevailing cultural understanding sees meekness as timid, shy, a quiet disposition, someone who would never "rock the boat." But let's hold that understanding of

INTRODUCTION

meekness up to Jesus: Meek and lowly Jesus fasted for forty days in the desert and withstood direct attacks from Satan, wielding Scripture as his sword.³ Meek Jesus brandished a whip and flipped tables in the Temple.⁴ He is the same Jesus who stood silent before his accusers, able to call down legions of angels, and yet went boldly to the cross.⁵ And you won't find one circumstance where Jesus was afraid to "rock the boat."

Meekness is not a personality trait. It's a character virtue. It is the radically countercultural strength to live with your eyes so fixed on your master, Jesus, that your heart and mind want his desires, not yours.

God used a simple but profound encouragement from my coach to reach me, a wild mustang of a boy, and to validate the fire that he put inside of me. Then, God drew me to himself in seasons of profound loss and began reaching the hardest parts of my heart. He began teaching me about what it truly means to be meek, like him.

And he used mustangs—real thousand-pound, hooves-flying, nostrils-flaring, wild mustangs—to do it.

As I set out to make some meaning of Matt's death—really, of his *life*—I started looking into this idea of taming mustangs. As usual, much like that day on the baseball field, I really didn't have a plan. I was charging forward, full of passion, with no idea what I was doing and absolutely no clue how much God would change my life in the process.

That's when I met Grant.

CHAPTER 1

IT'S YOUR RELATIONSHIP

One thing have I asked of the LORD, that I will seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple.

PSALM 27:4, ESV

We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you.

2 CHRONICLES 20:12, ESV

I met Grant about ten years ago, as I was researching and reading everything I could find about horses. I had the idea to create a rehabilitation program that could change wild lives—while actually taming wild mustangs. In a reaction to my own angst, I wanted to show that those whom the world—and to be honest, Christianity—had written off as “too much” or “too far gone” could actually become the most bold and fearless men and women of God.

I dove into researching wild mustangs, learning everything I could and reaching out to horse trainers all over the country, telling them about my idea and asking for help—even when they had absolutely no idea who I was. I sent

hundreds of emails, relentless in my efforts to get this project off the ground. After Grant, a world-renowned mustang trainer, received my email about the idea I had to start the rehabilitation program, he called me and, through a shaky voice, said, “That’s my story. I’d love to be part of this.” He invited me to his ranch in Oklahoma, where he would show me firsthand what it was like to be in a round pen with a mustang.

Grant is the doppelgänger of Woody from *Toy Story*, with a hardened edge like the Marlboro Man, a connoisseur of one-liners. As we walked up to the round pens on his property, Grant hummed a country song with a slight grin on his face. I hadn’t a clue what I was getting myself into.

“I can already feel it,” said Grant in a soft but sure voice. “It’s like stepping into a sacred space with something wild and unpredictable.”

I would learn eventually that Grant said things like this all the time—phrases that made whoever was listening stop and wonder what he really meant. But at the time, I didn’t know what he was talking about. From the stories he had been sharing and the countenance on his face, I got the sense that he thought this was about to be a profound spiritual experience for me. I wasn’t quite buying it—what he said seemed a little hippieish, especially coming from a cowboy. I understood the weight of what we were doing, of course. A wild mustang can weigh up to one thousand pounds, and at any second it could stomp the yard on me. I had read about how many trainers have been badly injured or even killed by

horses, most with a swift kick to the dome. I wasn't overly concerned, though, until we made our way to the outer edge of the metal pen where a mustang paced. My heart started racing as I got up close. The horse looked much bigger than he did from the truck.

"This here is Amarillo," Grant said, pointing to the massive sandy-coated hunk of muscle nervously huffing and stomping back and forth in the pen. "What do you want to do with him?"

Uhh, I don't know, man—you're the mustang trainer, I thought to myself. I couldn't take my eyes off this beautiful, golden, wild mustang, heavily breathing what looked like plumes of smoke in the cold Oklahoma morning. I was silent, so Grant asked again, "What do you want to do with him?"

"I have no idea," I said with a nervous laugh. "Is he safe?"

"Of course *he* isn't safe. He's a wild mustang! But don't worry. I won't let you get hurt."

I saw my buddy standing outside the pen with his camera filming, since we were thinking of making a movie documenting the program and time on the ranch, and I had the thought, *If I make this horse get real wild in the pen, we could get some good footage out of it.* So that's what I decided to do. "I think I want to make him go crazy!" I told Grant.

"Well, go out there and make him go crazy, then."

"Is that okay?" I asked.

"It's your relationship," Grant responded.

I jumped down from the side of the pen and confidently

walked into the ring. As I started making my way toward the mustang, adrenaline mixed with fear washed through my body. Amarillo pawed his foot aggressively into the ground, like a bull with a matador in front of him.

"He's not gonna kill me, is he?" I asked in my steadiest sounding voice.

"I won't let you get hurt," Grant said again, with that slight grin on his face, still making me feel like I was going to make a fool of myself.

I took two more cautious steps toward the horse and had a sudden awareness of fear, and it wasn't just mine. I could feel the horse's fear too. We were in a standoff, staring at each other, wondering who was going to make the first move. Amarillo held his ground as I inched closer. But then a slight twitch in his massive shoulder sent a jerk through my nervous system. "Grant?" I said in a low voice, not taking my eyes off the horse.

"Yes, Ryan?" he called back.

"I'm not sure what to do . . ."

"It depends on what you want to do. It's your relationship," Grant repeated.

Stop saying that, I thought. Some actual directions would be nice.

As the mustang angled his head toward me, I knew he was anxious. He paced back and forth, not so much as giving a look my way but making it clear that he knew I was there. It was obvious this horse wanted nothing to do with me. And that was a challenge.

"I'm gonna touch him," I said, unable to hide the nervous excitement in my voice.

"Well, then, go right on up there and touch him," Grant said.

I edged closer and closer. Just as I was about to make my move, the mustang lunged forward, cut hard to the right, darted, and hurled his body away from me. Trapped in this pen, Amarillo thrashed and bucked all of his weight in aggressive thrusts, nearly paralyzing me with fear. But I rallied my resolve and started chasing him in a chaotic game of tag in the arena.

My quest to touch Amarillo went on for a few minutes as we both got more and more tired, with neither of us giving up. I refused to let him win, and in his mind, he probably thought I was a predator, so he continued to cut and dart away from me. We were both caught up in the whirl of dust, and our lungs and legs were both fading.

Out of sheer exhaustion, Amarillo made a move toward the edge of the arena. It's almost as if he'd had enough of my taunting and wanted to escape. He was so tired that he crashed into the side, causing the fence to sway against his weight. It cracked and split just enough to cut the mustang's leg. The sound of the crash, coupled with a heavy exhale of pain and the sight of blood dripping from the horse's leg, stunned me. I knew I had gone too far, and I scrambled back toward Grant. The mustang pulled up and maneuvered away from me.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Grant shouted, already hopping down from the rail.

I was shocked. I couldn't believe what I had done. I sheepishly walked to the far side of the pen, praying Amarillo wasn't hurt too badly.

As the mustang regrouped in the space of my retreat, I watched him limp away, and I felt terrible. I fully recognized that this horse had blood dripping down its leg because of me and my lack of patience to do things his way. I closed my eyes and allowed the moment to take hold, standing out of the way while Grant tried to get close enough to Amarillo to see the wound. The blood made the cut look worse than it was, and it would heal up before long, but that didn't matter. I was still the reason this horse was hurt, and it was completely unnecessary.

Grant pulled me aside. There were a few moments of silence as I hung my head and Grant stood next to me with his hand on my shoulder. "You know, man, you walked into this pen with an agenda. It started even before you set foot in here. It was a mindset. A goal. A desire to get your needs met before meeting the needs of the horse. You were gonna touch that horse. Show him who was boss. Like every other predator he's been running from his entire life. And look at him now, more convinced that you are a predator than when you walked in." I glanced across the pen at Amarillo as I took in Grant's words, evidence of my recklessness still fresh on the horse's leg, and nodded.

"This horse picks up on things and feels them more deeply than you and I ever could because he's spent his life running from threats like you. It's why for years, trainers have

done nothing but break mustangs, not tame them. They'll rope them, wrestle them to the ground, and sit on their heads to demoralize them. And the sad part is, it works. Kind of. That horse will become broken. He will comply, but he will never be loyal, because that wild, bold spirit inside of him breaks too. It takes a loving trainer who wants to build a real relationship to truly tame a mustang. Once that relationship is safe enough and that horse can look at you and no longer see a predator, taming that wildness becomes worth something. The problem is, it's a rare person who wants to take the time to get the mustang to realize that the trainer is not a predator, that he's there to gentle this horse so they can accomplish something together."

He stopped and looked at me as tears filled his eyes. I started to get it. Grant was not just talking about wild mustangs.



MEEK MOMENT

God will not force us to obey him. We can stomp and kick and buck, thinking we are really doing a lot in this world, unaware that our hustle to be somebody is focused on things with no eternal value. After a while, nobody is impressed by a wild mustang running around a pen. Nobody "oohs" and "aahs" at the amount of dust we can kick up or the dents we can create.

What is impressive is when a mustang becomes a warhorse, running fearlessly into battle. A true, loyal

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warhorse is formed not by hustle and punishment but by respect and patience. It has the humility to continually align its love with the loving gaze of its master.

To embrace meekness, we have to stop and see a God who is patiently waiting for us to receive his love—the perfect love displayed for us in Jesus’ death on the cross. And when we do, we begin to trust his character and his promises. It’s when we trust him with our whole lives that he can take us outside the pen for a journey that is more than we could ask or imagine.¹

After my talk with Grant, I took a beat for a minute and found a seat on the tailgate of his truck, gazing off into the distance. I occasionally glanced at the round pen to see Amarillo staring back at me, blood now drying on his pale coat. I wanted to walk over and tell him how sorry I was, but I stopped myself and turned to look off into the sunset over the flat Oklahoma horizon.

Grant eventually found me again and hopped up on the tailgate, clearly recognizing the processing going on in my mind. “Wanna know how you tame a mustang?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I told him, lifting my head a bit.

“Well, it begins with love. These horses will tell you quite a lot about yourself, and this horse just told you some things, didn’t he?” Grant said, leaning in with a grin.

I gave a slight exhale and chuckle, my posture humble.

“It all starts with a look. That’s it. That’s really all there is to it,” Grant added. I looked at him, a bit confused.

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“If that horse can stop running like mad around that pen for just a second to look at you, and if the only thing on your mind is loving that horse and giving him what he needs first, before meeting your own needs, well, you’ve tamed your mustang.”

He let his words sit with me for a second. Then he went on.

“It’s all about acknowledgment. When you walk into that round pen, you apply pressure by walking toward the horse, getting it to move around. Sooner or later, it’s gonna get a little curious and turn its head and look at you. At that moment, you back off and give the horse the space it needs. As you pursue that mustang over and over and allow him to acknowledge—every time he looks at you—that you are there for his benefit, he’s gonna start to follow you. Eventually, he’s gonna trust you enough to let you touch him. And when he receives that touch, he’s gonna heal.” Grant paused for a moment, then added with a slight break in his voice, “And you’re gonna heal in ways you could never imagine. But it starts with a look. And then, the one thing this mustang was scared of most will change his world.”

RADICAL LOVE

That day, Grant showed the gospel to me in a way I had never experienced. It was deeper than words. And it made me think about all the relational round pens I had walked into in my life. I saw a picture of how I had treated people around me—pursuing my own agenda in ministry, daily life, and even in my marriage. I began to understand in a new

MEEK AS A MUSTANG

way how God pursues wild people and how wild people can choose meekness. It's his kindness that leads to repentance, not forcing us into a corner to shame us into better behavior.² The image of God's patient, loving gaze on me felt like a drink of cold water on a hot day.

I could see my sin and the grace and love of God at the same time.

God is after us. Not to harm us, force us into submission, or get something from us—but to love us into relationship with him. Followers of Jesus are motivated to live out of the freedom of that love, not the fear of punishment. Jesus will continue pursuing us even if we run, buck, and kick away from him. But intimacy with the one we were created to live for begins when we stop, even just for a second, to truly acknowledge who he is.



MEEK MOMENT

Close your eyes to envision what God's face looks like when he gazes at you. What do you see? If you see a judge with his finger pointed, or anyone other than a loving Father, you might still be running around the pen. God wants us to know he has no agenda other than transforming our hearts through his love. Becoming meek doesn't mean changing your nature—it's turning your gaze toward the God who cares for you.

I understand this more now as a father. I want to do everything I can to let my son know that I want the

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world for him. I want him to experience a glimpse of my love, even if that means making silly faces and acting a fool to get him to smile. I'll do anything to pass my joy to him, but he has to see it in my face.

Psalm 67:1 says, "May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine on us." The line "make his face shine on us" can be pictured as a father doing everything he can to get his baby to smile.³ It's a prayer that the hearer would truly know the presence of a loving father. This goofy, fun-loving nature may not be how you see God. The idea of God as a dad being silly with a baby is so far from how we often think about God that it is easy to miss out on this mind-blowing understanding of his true opinion of us. He loves us! He wants joy for us. And he wants to take us on an adventure with him outside the pen.

The day after my encounter with Amarillo, we went back to the round pen, and Grant walked me through the steps of getting acknowledgment from the mustang. Grant had me start to walk toward the horse. Taking just two steps made Amarillo panic and run like crazy around the pen. But no matter how skittish this horse was, I was instructed by Grant to continue pursuing and to wait for the mustang to slightly turn his head to look at me.

I made a few attempts at getting this look from Amarillo, but acknowledgment was slow going. Finally, as I was walking

to the other side of the pen with my back to the horse, I heard Grant shout to look at what Amarillo was doing. I carefully turned my head, and there he was.

“No way!” I shouted, giddy with excitement yet trying to play it cool, to not lose this thread of trust we had built. This same wild mustang I had traumatized the day before, the one who had thrashed and kicked and tried desperately to get as far away from me as possible, was slowly yet confidently following me around the pen.

“You see, Ryan, when this horse begins to acknowledge your goodness, he’ll start to follow you. And once he’s made that decision to follow, you have the honor of giving him the very thing he’s longed for his whole life yet didn’t know how to get: a relationship. You’ve taken this horse that’s been passed over for years for being ‘too far gone’ and made him a partner.”

Tears welled up in my eyes. I was *experiencing* the gospel, and it was healing something in me that I didn’t even realize I longed for. As that horse began to see my heart for him, I began to see God’s heart for me.

Something changes in your soul when someone acknowledges you even though you don’t think you are worthy of acknowledgment. The idea that God would come for the most gnarly and mangled among us is incredible, but it’s true. God wants the throwaways, the people branded with condemnation for all to see, those who stubbornly keep running from the one who just wants a turn of the head.

The apostle Peter makes the shocking statement that

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God has adopted us into his family and made us into a royal priesthood—taking us from rags to riches, orphan to son or daughter, wild mustang to warhorse in the King's army.⁴ Only when we acknowledge this radical love can the wild and reckless nature inside of us be crafted into an instrument in the hands of a master. This is the beginning of meekness: an acknowledgment of God's goodness that leads us to surrender to an ultimate, loving authority. A perfect, trustworthy one.

If you're like me, you may have experienced a church leader, pastor, or Christian who focused more on rules than on Jesus. You may think of God as being more concerned with behavior modification than heart transformation through love. It happens so often: Leaders, not knowing how to reconcile wildness with some of the unspoken rules of tidied-up church culture, try to move people toward a safe, streamlined version of following Jesus. As Christians, we are often more comfortable with rules and checked boxes, like perfect church attendance and generous tithing, than someone so in love with Jesus that they would do anything for him or go anywhere he asked.

But over the years, this is what God has taught me: Meekness can look like bold obedience to the Lord. As someone who has felt judged for the majority of my life, it's healing to realize that Jesus wants me and can use me for his purposes, in the middle of my wildness.

It's human nature to want to change something that looks wild. The Pharisees saw Jesus' ministry and were so offended by how radically outside the parameters of traditional Judaism

he went to win hearts that they could think of nothing other than stopping his work, stopping the man they saw as too wild.⁵

This tendency is in all of us. It was certainly my posture toward Amarillo. With the knowledge of God's perfection, and with our deep understanding of the untamed parts of our souls, it seems to make sense that we would need to fix the wildness in us before a perfect God could see value in us. But our shortcomings are never the disqualifiers. In God's economy, our weakness is made perfect in his strength.⁶ God never uses a humiliating training tactic when he tames you into who he made you to be. Instead, he draws you to him with the patient look of a loving trainer, inviting you into the safest relationship you'll ever know.

So what will you do? There is a world of adventure out there, battles to fight alongside a loving God who gives us hope and a future for eternity. But it begins with a look. Do you see it?

It's your relationship.