



**ADVENTURES IN SAYING**

# **YES**

**A JOURNEY FROM FEAR TO FAITH**



**CARL MEDEARIS**

**WITH CHRIS MEDEARIS**



**BETHANY HOUSE PUBLISHERS**

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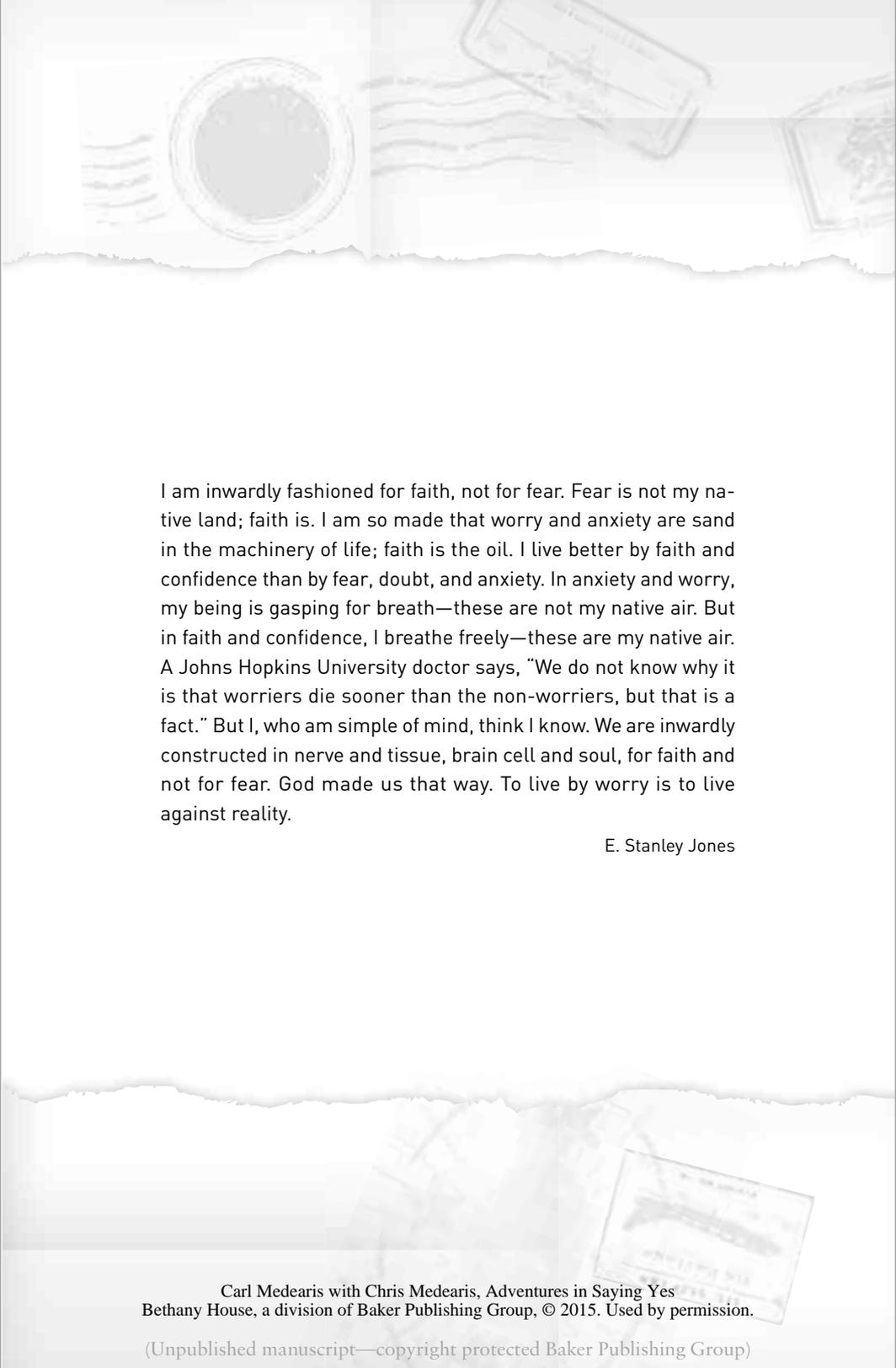
This one is for my family.

Not really even “for” them, as it’s their story as much as mine. They lived this book and even helped write it. It’s for and to and with them! The best and most wonderful wife and kids a man could ever dream of. I’m truly blessed.



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I am inwardly fashioned for faith, not for fear. Fear is not my native land; faith is. I am so made that worry and anxiety are sand in the machinery of life; faith is the oil. I live better by faith and confidence than by fear, doubt, and anxiety. In anxiety and worry, my being is gasping for breath—these are not my native air. But in faith and confidence, I breathe freely—these are my native air. A Johns Hopkins University doctor says, “We do not know why it is that worriers die sooner than the non-worriers, but that is a fact.” But I, who am simple of mind, think I know. We are inwardly constructed in nerve and tissue, brain cell and soul, for faith and not for fear. God made us that way. To live by worry is to live against reality.

E. Stanley Jones

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# Introduction

This is a book about the journey of a family. It's about war and danger and a rocky marriage and poor parenting. It's about God's grace and the Middle East and the United States and what it means to follow Jesus anywhere anytime for any reason—to jump first and ask questions later, saying yes to Jesus.

Our family is an average American family. By “average” I mean, we grew up in Beirut. There are five of us: my wife, Chris, and our three children, Anna, Marie, and Jon. Jon was born in Damascus because there was no U.S. embassy in Beirut to give him a birth certificate. Imagine—just twenty years ago it was safer in Syria than in Lebanon.

We moved to Beirut in 1992 as Christian missionaries sent out by our church and a mission organization—both great groups of people with wonderful hearts for Jesus. Our girls were babies in a double-wide stroller. Jon was born two years later. We spoke no Arabic and didn't know a single soul. Chris and I were both thirty years old and full of zeal—and a good deal of stupidity, especially me. (Patience; we'll get to that.)

You'll hear from Chris and all three of our kids, who are now young adults. We started this journey many years ago and are still living the adventure today.

That's what this book is about, a journey. With plenty of fear and a little faith.



We all know that frogs hang out near water. They sort of float, head barely out of the water, the rest of their body submerged as if they're about to sink. But sometimes they do my favorite thing ever—they sit on lily pads. I don't know why I like that so much. Maybe it reminds me of some childhood book or a memory in my backyard. I'm really not sure. But I just like the thought of frogs on lily pads.

They sit there for hours. I know because I've watched for hours. I'm not sure if this is good science, but I wonder if they are afraid to jump off. Maybe they feel safe on their little green island. They can see their surroundings. Watch for the animal whose mouth is even bigger than theirs—the bass, whose main goal each day is to swallow as many frogs whole as possible.

I don't think I can prove that frogs deal with fear. I've never met a frog psychologist, but if frogs were afraid, then staying on the lily pad might be a good strategy. They blend in. They can see in all directions because they're above the water. They can catch insects without exerting much energy (a flick of the tongue, and the fly is lunch). And they can stay warm in the sun. But mostly (I'm admittedly guessing here), a lily pad provides security.

Remember Maslow's hierarchy of needs? Just above our basic need for food and water and such—foundational to all life—is safety. We need to be safe. Frogs. Humans.

We have our lily pads too. Our home is our castle. My wife prefers the King Soopers grocery store down the road to the left of our house; I prefer the one to the right. They are both exactly a half mile from our house in either direction, but I like the one, and she prefers the other. Who knows why? Maybe it's the security of familiar surroundings. In "mine," I know exactly where the cookies-and-cream ice cream is.

Feeling safe and secure is a good thing—until you don't. Stop for a moment and think of all the things that your need for security might actually stop you from doing. I can think of several. It would have stopped us from moving to Beirut, Lebanon, with two baby girls and no money, months after American hostages had been released at the end of a bloody civil war that killed 150,000 and displaced most of a nation. That thought doesn't conjure up the feeling of a snugly warm security blanket.

Here's an easier one. Have you ever felt the urge to invite all your neighbors over for a backyard barbecue—but didn't? Why not? Maybe you realized that such a move could threaten your sense of safety and security. After all, your home is *your* castle—not theirs. What if they do weird things or ask awkward questions? Or they won't leave? Maybe they'd just all say no to your invitation, which would make you feel like you're a loser. So you don't invite them.

Or maybe your need to feel safe and secure (generally a good thing) keeps you from dreaming. You dreamt once, but it didn't work out. You even tried pursuing some big, fun exciting things another time or two, but one dream ended up costing way too much money, and the other, well, let's just say it didn't pan out. So you're done with that dreaming thing. Anyway, dreams are for dreamers. You're far too practical. You have a Larry the Cable Guy "git-r-done" mentality.

So here's my definition of fear—which is what this book is about: Fear is anything that potentially threatens your sense of safety and security.

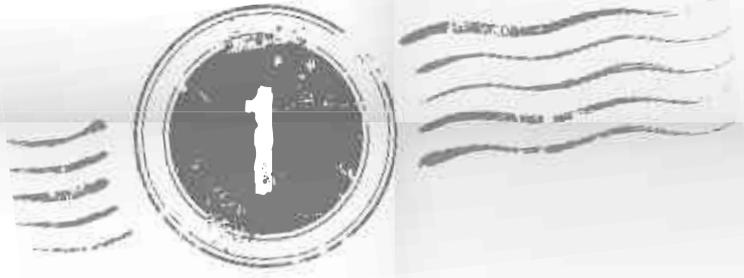
Notice this: Fear can be based on reality, and at certain times it is a very helpful and, I'd say, God-given response. If your kitchen oven explodes in a ball of flames when you're baking your favorite blueberry pie and then immediately engulfs the rest of the room in a raging fire, it's normal to feel the slightest twinge of fear—and *run!* That's a healthy response. That kind of fear is good.

But let's be honest. How many of us have had that sort of thing happen? Most of our fears are “potential fears.” What ifs. Yeah, buts. Maybes, and then whats. They're not real. They *could* be real, but they're not.

Those sorts of fears are dream squashers. They're not fun. They rob your joy. They set you back and make you grumpy.

That kind of fear keeps you from selling everything and moving to Lebanon with your young family. It keeps you firmly in the grip of words like *responsible* and the often-used *wise*. But Mr. Wisely Responsible never had much fun. He doesn't go on Hobbit-like adventures. He might save money. And he might raise three very responsible and wise children who are very well behaved. But he doesn't dream, never lives outside the box. He doesn't even know he's in a box. To him, life appears quite normal.

But I say, Leap! Dream. Say yes! Set out on an adventure—a risky journey with an uncertain outcome. Be done with being normal.



# Fear Is Scary!

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It is not the critic who counts. . . . The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena; whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly . . . who knows the great enthusiasms . . . and spends himself in a worthy cause; who at best knows the triumph of high achievement; and who at worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat.

Theodore Roosevelt

I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.

The apostle Paul to the Philippians

A few months ago, I got a slightly mysterious message from someone in Egypt who was supposedly the ambassador to Palestine from the Arab League. I had never heard of him and couldn't find out any information about him. Then I started getting messages from his assistant saying the Iraqi government wanted to pay for my attendance at the annual Arab League meeting on the Palestinian-Israeli issue—in Baghdad.

The way I decide such things is simple—I talk to my wife, pray, and talk to my leadership team. If no one raises any red flags, I just say yes! And that’s what I did for this meeting.

That began a long back-and-forth email string about the meeting’s purpose and what I would be doing. Would I be speaking? Why had they invited me? The obvious questions. But no answers. Finally, someone from Iraq’s foreign ministry department said I should “submit a paper.” “What kind of paper and on what topic?” I asked. No answer.

So I decided to write a paper that I’d want to present to several hundred key Arab leaders—something on Jesus (obviously). It developed into a three-page paper called “The Answer to Injustice According to Jesus of Nazareth.” Basically, I wrote that the way forward depended on both divine and human forgiveness. Very controversial in such a setting, but somehow they okayed my paper.

Then I asked if I could bring some friends. “Sure,” they said. I asked if my friends would get their way paid as well. “No problem,” was the immediate reply. So I invited three guys crazy enough to go with me.

Three days before we were supposed to leave, the plane tickets came. Oh, and the visas had arrived the day before. We headed out—an adventure in saying yes if there ever was one.

On the way, I got a text message asking if I would “chair” one of the meetings. I had no idea what that meant—I still didn’t even know what we were doing—but I said yes. We got there, and then the ambassador asked if I’d be the chairperson for two of the six main meetings. I said . . . (I think you get the idea).

It was a meeting full of Arab politicians, Palestinians, Western activists, and an interesting mix of journalists, foreign ambassadors, and even heads of state. I was put in charge of

leading and moderating two of the meetings. Tell me God doesn't have a keen sense of humor. (During one of them, I wore my slippers because my feet were hurting.)

The first night, I closed with a little talk (five minutes) on prayer. I simply suggested that we needed to pray for the people of the region. You would have thought I had called for the end of the world or something. The Muslim Arabs were all elated, but the majority of the Westerners were furious. I mean, spit-coming-out-of-their-mouths angry! One woman told me, "I'm an atheist, and I can't believe you brought God into this conversation." I couldn't resist saying two things to that. First, I didn't bring God into it—he was already there and everywhere. Second, if she was an atheist, I guess she didn't need to worry, since there's no God anyway!

The next day, something similar happened when I closed by sharing my thoughts on Jesus' way—the way of forgiveness. I spoke softly and sensitively but very clearly about Jesus. I was told that had never happened before at an Arab League meeting. "Why not?" I asked. They weren't sure.

One group of Europeans actually got up and walked out. Three mothers from Gaza came up in tears. Two had lost their children, killed by Israeli shelling. They grabbed my hand and wouldn't let go. "Thank you, thank you, thank you," they repeated over and over. "Finally, someone acknowledges there is a God." The ironies here are many and profound.

The rest of the conference was full of discussions with leaders about Jesus and why I brought him into the conversation and what it meant for them now. Some incredible conversations. Too many to tell—and they continue!

It's hard to measure the success of such an endeavor. It was emotionally and physically exhausting, to be sure. I didn't give an altar call. No one "signed up" to follow Jesus. But many

heard the good news that God loves and cares for them, and that Jesus' way is the way open for all. They just need to say yes.

This is pretty much how our family operates. We say yes to God and then work out the details later. Is that a smart, rational way to approach life? Maybe not. But maybe there's no such thing as a rational way to approach life. After all, a whole lot of people make decisions based on fear, and most fear is irrational.

If someone has a gun to your head and says they are going to pull the trigger—well, okay, go ahead, be afraid. That's normal. God gives us the emotion called fear to protect us. But when does normal, healthy fear turn into worry?

Worry is when we think something might happen. It is possible that if I travel to the Middle East I'll be kidnapped—so I'm not going. (And, of course, it is possible.) It is possible that if I sell everything, I'll be poor and miserable. (And that is also possible. On the other hand, you can be rich and miserable just as easily.) In other words, worry is based on worst-case scenarios. We think about how awful it would be if everything that could go wrong happened. But more often than not, the worst case doesn't happen.

I stood up to preach in a mosque packed with Shi'ite Muslims in South Lebanon and . . .

Okay, so a little context might be helpful. I'll tell you the first part of the story at the end of this book, but to jump into the middle . . . I'd been speaking about Jesus in a tent for four nights in South Lebanon—in the Hezbollah-controlled Shi'ite part. Some figured it was an amazing thing God was doing, others thought it was stupid, and I, well, I was just taking it one step at a time. We were invited back. I said yes.

We had been so well received the first time that I decided to bring my wife and two young girls down with us (Jonathan wasn't born yet).

We set up the tent and lined the ground inside with rows of white plastic chairs, a hundred in all. Before the service, about ten of us were sitting outside in a little circle, having a prayer meeting. You know the kind. Serious, but sort of perfunctory. Prayers that start with "Dear heavenly Father" and end appropriately with "in Jesus' name, amen." King James English, folded hands, bowed heads, eyes closed. You know—praying.

Suddenly two black Mercedes-Benz cars spun around the corner and nearly slid into the tent. Tinted windshields barely revealed a bunch of men in each car. It seemed like fifty guys piled out, but it might have been six. All of a sudden my mind wasn't working well, and my senses were overwhelmed with a sense of, well, something was up, and it didn't seem good.

The guys had guns. AK-47s or some other kind of Kalashnikov rifle. One man, evidently the leader, had a pistol shoved in his jeans under his belt. He was the one who yelled, "Where's the American?"

There were several nationalities in our little band of brothers, but the only Americans were my family and I—and I doubt our visitors were asking for Chris or our girls. Anyway, as I remembered it, everyone pointed to me!

I stood up, and in a second the man with the pistol was six inches from my nose, yelling, "You have to leave now, or else." When he said "or else," he made a slicing motion with his finger across his neck. I think that's a fairly universal sign—I got it. He went on to say that his sheikh (the main imam from a rival mosque in town) wasn't happy we were there, and we had to leave or something very bad would happen.

I have no idea what came over me, but I responded, “Does your imam obey God?”

Mr. Pistol in the Pants Man didn’t like that question. I still remember the veins bulging from his neck as he screamed, “Of course he obeys God; he’s an imam!”

“Well, I’m sort of like an imam,” I said, “and I thought God had told us to come here and share Jesus with your people. But now I’m confused because your imam says not to. So, if you wouldn’t mind asking him what I should do—obey God, or him?”

Honestly, I promise you, I have no idea where that came from. I wasn’t feeling brave and courageous. I didn’t think it through. There was no strategy to it. I had never said words like that before. Probably wasn’t very smart, and I’m not sure I’d do it again. But that’s what came out.

The Pistol Man looked like I’d just insulted his mother. He was furious. Without speaking (well, he did grunt), he whirled around and they all got back in their Mercedes cars and sped off.

I looked back at our neat little prayer team and everyone looked exactly like Pistol Man had—in shock. Meanwhile, our two little girls were still twirling around the tent poles inside, about thirty feet away, oblivious to all the drama. My heart suddenly exploded inside my chest as I realized that I’d just called out the local imam.

Let me just say, the prayer meeting changed tone. No more proper English well-thought-out prayers. More crying out. Our prayers were suddenly desperate—real and unscripted. Funny how that changes when you think you might die later that day.

Our little band of now-fierce prayer warriors discussed our options. It seemed that the wise and logical thing was to pack up and head home to Beirut. As we were discussing how we

should do that, I leaned over and grabbed my Bible from the stool next to me. Now hear me carefully—Bible bingo doesn't usually work. When you *try* to get a verse for your situation by opening the pages randomly and reading, you'll probably turn to "And Judas hung himself," or something like that. But I was just grabbing my Bible. I wasn't thinking anything—which you'll see might be a sub-theme of this book—and my Bible opened to Isaiah 8. My eyes fell on these words in verses 11–13:

This is what the Lord says to me with his strong hand  
upon me, warning me not to follow the way of  
this people:

“Do not call conspiracy  
everything this people calls a conspiracy;  
do not fear what they fear,  
and do not dread it.

The Lord Almighty is the one you are to regard  
as holy,  
he is the one you are to fear.”

Did I mention that while we were praying the loudspeakers from the local mosque were blaring to the whole city: “Do not go to the tent tonight; something bad will happen. They are people who are in conspiracy with Israel. They are spies. And they drink blood.” (Not sure where that last one came from—maybe because of Communion?)

Now back up a bit, and read those verses from Isaiah again.

You wanna know my immediate reaction? Honestly? I didn't want to read those verses out loud. I mean—look at them! *Do not follow the way of these people. Do not call conspiracy what they do. Do not fear what they fear. Only fear God!* Wow! I just hit the jackpot with Bible bingo—or maybe a death sentence.

I read the verses out loud to the whole group.

More tears.

A little confusion and more prayer.

We decided to stay. Actually, Chris and the kids went home, and a few of us guys stayed. I don't remember exactly why, but I think we wanted our little darlings out of harm's way.

The tent was packed later that night. I think the people wanted to see us drink blood. I have no idea why, but it was standing room only. I spoke from the Gospels again about God's great love for us in Christ.

At the end of the meeting, guess who showed up? Yep, Mr. Pistol in the Pants Man. He had a silly smile on his face as he shook my hand and said, "The imam liked your question, and he wants to meet you tomorrow."

*What?*

Sure enough, the next morning around ten o'clock, we met at the tent. The imam came with his entourage. I came with mine. He wouldn't shake my hand, which was uncharacteristic for an imam. And then he lectured me for an hour and got up to leave. As he spun around for an odd rapid exit, I asked, "Wait, sir. Can I tell you why we're here in your town? Do you even know? Do you care?"

Clearly annoyed, he said, "Hurry up. Tell me whatever you want to say."

I explained that I was from Colorado. I asked if he'd ever heard of the Rocky Mountains. He had. "Well, that's where I'm from—me and my wife and two little girls. We moved from there—sold everything—and came here. We moved to Beirut, where we live now, and then heard that some in your city wanted to know more about Jesus—how great he is and his love for your people. So we've come here. Just for that—to

remind you of what I'm sure you already know: that God loves you very much and that he sent Jesus just for you."

He sat down.

We talked for another hour about Jesus. This time when he stood to leave, he extended his hand toward mine. With a firm grip, he announced, "Mr. Carl, I like you and your people. You are welcome in my city any time."

And we stayed.

This is the adventure of saying yes to Jesus!