

FOREWORD BY SHEILA WALSH

JACK GRAHAM

REIGNITE

*FRESH FOCUS
FOR AN
ENDURING FAITH*

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FOR AN
ENDURING FAITH

JACK GRAHAM



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To my “in-loves”—

Toby Graham, Kaytie Graham, and Jason Flores—
the three people who blessed our family in marriage
and continue the legacy of our faith each day
with our children and grandchildren.

I am so very grateful to be your father-in-love!

The generation of the upright will be blessed.

Psalm 112:2

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Foreword

I'm going to begin with a disclaimer: Dr. Jack Graham is my pastor and my friend. I have had the joy and privilege of sitting under his ministry for many years and have watched the way he has navigated tough seasons and also seasons of great joy and celebration. There are few people on this planet for whom I have such deep respect as I do for Pastor Graham.

When I was offered the opportunity to share a few words, I was honored to do so, but what I didn't realize until I read the final words of *Reignite* is just how deeply this book would impact my own life and faith. In a world where the temptation exists to present only our best selves, Pastor Graham is disarmingly transparent. When Paul wrote to the church in Thessalonica, he left a template for ministry that not many are comfortable with: "*We loved you so much that we shared with you not only God's Good News but our own lives, too*" (1 Thessalonians 2:8 NLT).

In this book, Pastor Graham gives us that costly gift. You will read about one of the greatest challenges any human being can face, presented in a profoundly unvarnished, vulnerable way. Because he is willing to share the personal pain and struggle he has walked through, his call to each one of us to stand up, to look up, to press on is soaked in integrity.

As I was navigating one of the hardest seasons in my own life, my pastor was there as a compassionate, wise counselor who acknowledged the pain of life and yet pointed me toward Christ, the One who was wounded and scarred for us. I will be eternally grateful.

If 2020 has left you discouraged and weary, this book will truly reignite your faith. Not only that, but it will provide the road map you need to get all the way home. If you are struggling to know how to navigate the world we now live in, you will find a wise friend in these pages to cheer you on.

Dr. Graham reminds us of

- why we believe what we believe,
- how to trade damaging thought patterns for life-giving grace, and
- the joy that awaits every one of us who chooses to keep their eyes fixed on Christ.

There are many things in our world that are deeply troubling, but our God is still on the throne, and the greatest battle has already been won. Let's walk into this new season with a reignited faith in Christ that will bring hope to those who still walk in darkness. I believe this book will be life changing.

Sheila Walsh, author of *Praying Women*

Author's Note

Dark Days Begging for Light

Bringing this book into the world was anything but a breezy affair. There was a medical pandemic, and then a cultural one roared in, and as the days turned to weeks, and the weeks gave way to months, I found myself increasingly disoriented and dismayed: What did all of these changes mean for us as a society in the future?

This book will always live in my memory as my “COVID-19 book,” an assembly of thoughts and ideas and convictions that made their way into our collective consciousness during what has arguably been the most unprecedented, unpredictable, and unwelcome era in modern history. And yet I’ve seen firsthand that despite the darkness that descends on us, envelops us, and leaves us perplexed and shaking our heads, shafts of light still doggedly break in.

Ten years ago, as I navigated (if poorly) an unexpected bout with severe anxiety and depression, the rope that I eventually used to climb out of the pit I’d fallen into was made of the very raw materials you’ll encounter in the pages that follow—time spent with God’s Word, time with God himself, and consistency in making the choices that compelled me to live beyond myself. And what I

Author's Note

can tell you, having made it to the other side of that harrowing experience, is that regardless of the brokenness you have known or the pain points that remain tender still today, there is One who is perfectly and predictably suited to pick you up, to see you through, to make you whole. If you are downcast and depleted, or like me, disoriented and dismayed, may these chapters remind you that your faith can be reignited and your hope can be restored.

God longs to do this work in us.

We need only ask him to.

Jack Graham

November 2020

PART ONE

Fundamentals of Our Faith

Truth That Never Turns

Like a finely tuned engine, our brains are designed for only one fuel—Truth. The Truth that comes from God. The Truth that pervades His creation. The Truth found in His perfect character and infallible Word.

Robert Morgan, *Reclaiming the Lost Art of Biblical Meditation*

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

2 Timothy 3:14–17

Clearly, I had underestimated what the process would involve. It was 2009—and springtime, no less, the quintessential season of newness and hope. And yet there I stood, on the edge of a dark chasm, the ground crumbling beneath my feet.

My longtime doctor, Dr. Kenneth Cooper, founder of the Cooper Aerobics Center in Dallas, had been watching my PSA numbers for quite some time—the better part of four years, in fact—and was growing increasingly concerned. In healthy males, prostate-specific antigens are supposed to remain relatively few in quantity. Mine didn't register as "few."

"It's your prostate," Dr. Cooper had told me, early in the game. "Something's off . . . but let me do a biopsy before we get ahead of ourselves."

We did the biopsy in 2009. Dr. Cooper processed the results. And then I got the phone call nobody wants to get. "I'd like you to come in again, Jack," the good doctor said, which told me everything I needed to know. A doc doesn't need to see a patient to deliver favorable news. The diagnosis I received during that in-person visit was a sobering one: "Prostate cancer." And this for a guy who rarely catches a cold.

Back to that "process" I mentioned. Once I had the diagnosis, I asked about a treatment plan. Evidently, surgery would be required—the equivalent of a hysterectomy, I was told—but I was fine with that. We'd cut out the offending agent, in this case my prostate gland, I'd hang out at home for a bit, and then I'd get back to the people I loved serving, the congregation of Prestonwood Church.

But God had another plan.

My surgery took place on May 14, a Thursday, which was three weeks and two days before an important milestone in the life of our church. During our worship services on the weekend of June 6 and 7, we would be celebrating my twentieth anniversary as senior pastor of Prestonwood, and I figured that if I "rested hard" for ten days, I'd be in great shape again, just in time for that glorious event. What I couldn't have foreseen was that not only would I be basically crawling into the pulpit to receive my commendation that first weekend in June, but I also would be spending the next many months disoriented, deflated, and suffering a diagnosis that felt equally grave: anxiety.

Anxiety?

Me?

My reflexive reaction was to wave it off. *But I'm Jack Graham!* I thought, incredulous. Turns out anxiety didn't care who I was.

I experienced panic and fear during that season unlike anything I'd known before. I had prayed prior to my surgery, "Lord, don't let me flinch in the fire," but I had no idea the flames would be that high or that the burn would be that deep. In Proverbs 12:25, we read that "anxiety in a man's heart weighs him down," and that's exactly what happened to me. Anxiety gave way to depression, and suddenly I was in the fight of my life.

Dead Man Walking

In his brilliant book on all sorts of mental illnesses, *Caring for People God's Way*, American Association of Christian Counselors President Tim Clinton, a friend of mine who has more letters behind his name than almost anyone I know, named depression the "common cold of emotional disorders"¹ and wrote that while the potential causes of depression are still debatable—Is it caused by a poor diet? By a lack of exercise? By chemical imbalances in the brain? What role does lack of sleep play in a person's propensity to deal with depression? Can you overwork your way into this state?—what's not debatable are the symptoms that inevitably occur.

"For *Major Depressive Disorder* to be diagnosed," he said, "one or more major depressive episodes must have occurred. This means the depressed person must have experienced at least two weeks of depressed mood (or irritable mood in children or adolescents) or loss of interest or pleasure in almost all activities, together with a minimum of four other symptoms of depression . . . such as: (1) marked weight loss when not dieting, weight gain, or change in appetite; (2) insomnia or excessive sleep; (3) slowed movements or agitation; (4) decreased energy or fatigue; (5) feelings of

worthlessness or inappropriate or excessive guilt; (6) indecisiveness or decreased ability to concentrate; and (7) recurrent thoughts of death or suicide.”²

The way I would characterize my experience was that of a dead man walking—or crawling, as the case may be.

Hopelessness.

Sadness.

Helplessness.

Despair.

Numbness.

Listlessness.

Despondency.

Loss of appetite.

(That last one was most concerning to my family. Man, how I love to eat.)

And then there was the insomnia. The insomnia was the *worst*. I’m the type of person who regularly logs six or seven hours of restful sleep. Sure, maybe it’s not the eight or nine hours I was once able to net, but if you’re from my generation or older, then you understand how aging affects us all. (If you’re younger than I am and can still sleep like that, then you should fall to your knees and thank God right this moment. Things won’t always be this way.)

“For my days pass away like smoke,” the psalmist wrote in Psalm 102:3–9, “and my bones burn like a furnace. My heart is struck down like grass and has withered; I forget to eat my bread. Because of my loud groaning my bones cling to my flesh. I am like a desert owl of the wilderness, like an owl of the waste places; I lie awake; I am like a lonely sparrow on the housetop. All the day my enemies taunt me; those who deride me use my name for a curse. For I eat ashes like bread and mingle tears with my drink.” Were we to title the various entries in the book of Psalms, this one would be called simply “Depressed.”

Because I was not sleeping much during that awful ordeal, I found other ways to occupy my nights. Such as fretting. Slipping

into full-on panic attacks. Inviting in anxiety like it was an old friend and asking it to stay awhile. “We’re not sure we caught it all,” the surgeon had informed me after I’d awakened from the anesthesia. Every night, as I lay in bed wide awake, I pictured the cancer filling my body to overflowing, water in a balloon that one day would burst.

For many months I was exhausted all the time, which made life feel like a weighted slog through a pool of mud—taxing, inefficient, slow. Emotionally, in a slide that this buoyant guy had never once experienced, I also developed a certain disdain for happiness in all its forms. Life was hard. Very hard.

Recently I came across the reflections of a distance runner on a particularly awful marathon he had competed in. The temperature outside was blazing hot, and despite his love for and his vast experience with the activity, that day he just didn’t “have it.”

“At around twenty-three miles I start to hate everything,” he said of the race. “Enough already! My energy has scraped bottom, and I don’t want to run anymore. I feel like I’m driving a car on empty. . . . I’m dying of thirst but lack the strength to even drink water anymore. As these thoughts flit through my mind I gradually start to get angry. Angry at the sheep happily munching grass in an empty lot next to the road, angry at the photographer snapping photos from inside the van. The sound of the shutter grates on my nerves. Who needs this many sheep, anyway? But snapping the shutter is the photographer’s job, just as chewing grass is the sheep’s, so I don’t have any right to complain. Still, the whole thing really bugs me to no end. My skin’s starting to rise up in the little white heat blisters. This is getting ridiculous. What’s *with* this heat, anyway?”³

My equivalent of being irritated by sheep happily munching grass happened when I no longer wanted to be around my four-year-old grandson, Ian. This was a real low point for me, because as my only grandchild at the time, Ian was the light of my life. And yet I distinctly recall being ill-equipped to match his energy,

his optimism, his spark. I've never been one to become upset to the point of tears, but the day I made that realization, I sobbed. Shortly thereafter I placed a call to a Christian counselor whose number I had been given. I was certain that nothing and nobody could help me, but something inside of me at least had to try.

Emerging from the Pit

It would take me a full year and a surfeit of resources to get out of the pit I'd unwittingly slid into, and among those resources was *time*.

Time Heals (Some) Wounds

I'm not sure the adage about time healing all wounds has it right, but time does indeed help. The only problem with that reality is that I'm not exactly a patient man. I have about a fifteen-minute-long tolerance before something needs to *move*. I distinctly remember lying in bed on a workday, sequestered there in Deb's and my master bedroom, willing the clock to tick faster, all but begging time to hurry along. During those weeks and months, a whole slew of smart people told me it would take a year for me to recover from my setbacks, but did I believe them?

Uh, *no*.

Still, I tried to be a good patient and even agreed to a two-month sabbatical on the heels of that twentieth-anniversary celebration at the church. If time was what was needed, then I would give this thing plenty of time. Ironically, exactly two weeks before my prostate surgery, I'd released a book I'd been working on for the better part of a year. *Powering Up* it was titled, despite its author now living powered down.

The Life-Giving Power of Touch

Just as important as the resource of time to heal my mind, my heart, my life was the resource of *touch*. As much as I hated to

admit it, I was in a real mess that year. I needed support, encouragement, and care. Plenty of friends and family members called and texted and even stopped by from time to time, but in addition to those generous acts, I took the initiative too. My friend O. S. Hawkins has been like a brother to me since we met as teenagers at Sagamore Hill Baptist Church in east Fort Worth, under the mentorship of Pastor Fred Swank, a true hero of the faith. We were called into ministry at the same time, we served in the same states at the same times—Texas, then Oklahoma, then Florida, then back to Texas—and we remain the closest of friends to this day. Having him close by as I wrestled through that dark season was a balm. “Remember, Jack,” he told me in the heat of my battle, “there has never been a sunset that wasn’t followed by a sunrise. Joy comes in the morning. Just hang on.”

How I needed that simple, straightforward reminder. “Bear one another’s burdens,” Galatians 6:2 says, “and so fulfil the law of Christ.” What a relief it was to have so many lovers of God agree to bear my burden with me. “Weeping may tarry for the night,” Psalm 30:5 says, “but joy comes with the morning.” Yes, the morning would come again.

Giving Thanks to God

And then there was the practice of *thanksgiving*. Each day, even on the days when I could barely string two coherent thoughts together, I would force myself to write down something I was grateful for. My goal was three things, though on some days there would be only one. Still, I held fast to that one thing, being sure to say “thank you” every day. I once heard that a negative attitude is like a flat tire; until you fix it, you’re not going anywhere. I knew that was true for me then.

Study after study has confirmed that the moment you choose to express gratitude, your brain begins to change. Because the brain can only focus on one thing at a time, and because the brain has

a distinct confirmation bias when you ask it to focus on something positive—say, something for which you’re grateful—it goes in search of *more* things to be grateful for and won’t stop until you tell it to. Thanksgiving begets thanksgiving until eventually all this positivity has an incontestable medicinal effect. It is the healthiest of all emotions.

The late Ed Dobson, who pastored in Grand Rapids, Michigan, was diagnosed with ALS—Lou Gehrig’s disease—in 2000 and died fifteen years later from the muscle degeneration caused by the horrific disease. Three years before his death, in his book *Seeing through the Fog*, he noted his current gratitude list as something of a prayer. “Lord, thank you that I can still go to the bathroom by myself,” he wrote. “Lord, thank you that I can still brush my teeth. Lord, thank you that I can still take a shower. Lord, thank you that I can still use a towel to dry myself off.”⁴

There was a time when I would have read a list like that and thought, *Man, I can’t imagine how rough that would be*. Depression changed all that. No wonder some people call it the “black cloud.” All-encompassing darkness is just what it is. And yet slowly but surely my spirits were lifted each time I prayed “with thanksgiving,” as Philippians 4:6 says to do.

Therapy: Yep, You Read That Right

Time, touch, and thanksgiving helped me tremendously, and yet the first time I saw the needle not merely move but *jump* was when I let a therapist into my life.

I grew up in an era that had little use for professional therapy, and even into the first few decades of adulthood there was a determined shoving-things-under-the-rug. Especially at church, when someone asked how you were, the correct answer was “Doing great!” The motivation was probably noble; after all, “If Jesus has achieved the victory, why am I so sad?” as author Stephanie Lobdell says.⁵

Following your insistence that you were “doing great,” you were then expected to provide substantiation of that condition with two or three irrefutable facts: work was going great, or the kids were doing well in school, or little Johnny hit a home run at his baseball game last weekend. It didn’t matter what you said so long as it bore witness to the fact that you were *doing great*. Which is fine when you’re actually doing great. But what about the days when you’re not?

Remnants of this line of thinking permeated my cancer experience, as I’ll detail in chapter 3, and while I’ll admit it’s more than a little difficult to teach this old dog new tricks, the level of despondency I felt as a result of depression had me urgently dialing for help.

Nearly fifteen years ago, my friend Tommy Nelson, who pastors Denton Bible Church a half an hour’s drive northwest of me, stunned his congregation and a wide swath of the Dallas–Fort Worth metroplex that is deeply impacted by his ministry when he admitted that he had been suffering with depression. This great man of God effectively led Prestonwood’s Metro Bible study for young adults for many years, so he is a colleague I deeply respect. He is also a tough, straight-shooting former college quarterback who somehow seemed *above* trials like this. And yet one day, as cliché as it sounds, he simply couldn’t get himself out of bed.

He described the sensation of depression coming upon him as being hijacked, bushwhacked, blindsided by an unseen force. What had begun as a physical ailment—a racing heartbeat and inexplicable full-body aches and pains for weeks on end—had morphed into an emotional plague that left him feeling hopeless, helpless, and forlorn. If there is one person who was less likely to seek out the services of a professional therapist than I was, Tommy was that man. And yet when his wife, Teresa, told him that he needed to go “talk to someone,” despite his weeks-long protest of a plan that included that step, he knew deep down she was right.

One of the elders at Tommy's church had a friend who was a psychiatrist, and upon the elder's explaining Tommy's situation to him, that doctor agreed to see the suffering man. "I should probably mention that he isn't a believer," the elder told Tommy. "In fact, he's a Hindu."

To hear Tommy describe it—which he did in very public ways once he found level footing again—going to this particular therapist made him feel as if he were Saul paying a visit to the witch of Endor.⁶ Do you remember this story? Samuel the prophet had died, and Saul had thrown out all the fortune-tellers from the land. But soon enough, feeling threatened now by the Philistine army that had assembled against him and not being able to get God to reply to his urgent pleas for help, Saul summoned his servants and demanded that they point him to a medium. Surely a witch could help. So Saul disguised himself and went to see the woman "by night," says 1 Samuel 28:8, which, incidentally, is the first sign you're probably doing something you ought not to do. Tommy didn't go so far as to disguise himself, but he wondered if the man could help. He changed his tune in short order, though, once the doctor told him exactly what had happened to his body and what he needed to do to heal.

Of course, I knew of this entire turn of events long before I experienced depression myself. And while the version I went through was far different—and far less chronic—than what Tommy had to endure, therapy helped us both. Just as Tommy had done, I humbled myself before a professional counselor, telling him how I was feeling, what I was afraid of, what I needed, and how he could help. He listened. He cared. He prescribed meds when necessary. And he helped get me back on my feet. Whatever you believe about Christians and medication radically changes when you're staring up from the bottom of the black hole known as depression. In Tommy's words, "You get in that state, and . . . you will take rat dung" if it will help get you out.⁷

I couldn't agree more with my friend. Which is why I tell people I meet who are struggling to get themselves to a professional counselor, who can help right whatever is wrong.

Where All Healing Begins

Real gains were made by each of these interventions I mentioned—by giving myself time to recover, by reaching for community and for professional help, by honing the practice of gratitude—but one resource was so valuable to me, so transformative, that it inspired the book you're now holding in your hands. When nothing else worked for me during the yearlong battle with depression, this singular habit rescued me, dragging me time and again from the depths of the pit, setting my feet once again on solid ground so that I could re-engage with life. That habit was returning to, engaging with, prioritizing the Word of God—the truest truth I know.

There were three beautiful by-products of letting God's Word have its way in my mind and heart, the first of which was that the Scriptures reminded me that regardless of how isolated I felt, I was anything but alone. Countless others had walked the path I found myself on, and in the same way God had ministered to them, he was committed to ministering to me. Second, the Scriptures provided me with the power I so desperately sought while stuck in my powerless state. And third, as I prioritized engaging with God's Word even when I didn't feel like doing so, I felt myself coming back to life. My faith was lighting up again because "faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17).

I was seen. I could be strong. I would survive another day. When life rips the rug out from underneath you and you're lying there flat on your back, possibilities are tough to come by. I heartily welcomed these.

Never Alone

This wasn't always the case, but during at least a portion of most days, I longed to read my Bible. I'd rise at five in the morning, pour myself a cup of hot coffee, reach for my Bible and journal, and head to my chair. Sometimes I'd play worship music in the background and sometimes I'd opt for silence, but always it was during those unhurried times, just God's Word and me, that I would be strengthened for the days ahead.

I remember finding my way to Numbers 11, where Moses, perhaps the greatest leader in all of antiquity, was left oppressed and overwhelmed by the weighty responsibilities of his role. The people Moses was leading were complaining left and right, and he'd had it. Looking skyward, he said to God, "I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me. If this is how you are going to treat me, please go ahead and kill me—if I have found favor in your eyes—and do not let me face my own ruin" (vv. 14–15 NIV).

"Just kill me now!" That was the desire of Moses' heart, and yet thankfully God stayed his hand.

I read of Jonah for the umpteenth time, of how he disobeyed God and wound up in the belly of a fish before surrendering to the purpose God had asked him to pursue. God was offering forgiveness and compassion for the people he had asked Jonah to minister to, and regardless of the punishment Jonah thought those people deserved for disobeying God in the first place, it was *God's* will, not Jonah's, that would prevail. There under a shade tree, which, incidentally, God himself had provided, Jonah realized the futility of his rage. It was God who was in control. It was God who was sovereign. It was God whose ways were unlike any others'. It was God, alone, who was King. "It is better for me to die than to live," Jonah said to his heavenly Father (Jonah 4:8). Again, God stayed his hand.

Or what about David, the man after God's own heart? I reread

his story too. He was a hard worker, a wise leader, a powerful warrior, a passionate worshiper, a prolific writer, and, eventually, even a king. And yet underneath his myriad accolades was a man who dealt with debilitating depression from time to time. This is, by the way, why so many of us who have suffered through depression recount pretty much living in the book of Psalms: David, the writer of nearly half of them, completely understands our plight! “How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?” begins Psalm 13. “How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? Consider and answer me, O LORD my God; light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death, lest my enemy say, ‘I have prevailed over him,’ lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken” (vv. 1–4).

You can almost see the depression dripping off him, can’t you? The despondency. The sorrow. The dim eyes. And yet something in him knew that God hadn’t given up on him. Which meant he could make it through one more day. “But I have trusted in your steadfast love,” that psalm concludes; “my heart shall rejoice in your salvation” (v. 5).

Even the apostle Paul, known as the greatest Christian ever to live, remarked in one of his letters to the believers at Corinth that he didn’t want them to “be unaware . . . of the affliction” Paul and his ministry partners endured while serving in Asia (2 Corinthians 1:8). He then said this: “For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself” (v. 8).

Paul? The apostle Paul? Despairing of life itself?

Certainly, it’s possible that the despair Paul felt was episodic and ephemeral, a whisper of a moment that was gone as quickly as it arrived. Either way, he plumbed the depths in some significant way, which during the depth of my own ordeal was oddly heartening to me.

Of course, the one whose story was most instructive to me was that of the great prophet Elijah, mighty man of God.

Elijah served God during a trying time in the life of the people of Israel, because an evil king, Ahab, was on the throne, and he was married to a wicked queen. There's a reason sane people don't name their newborn baby girls Jezebel; you don't want a Jezebel under your roof.

Rather than crumbling to the immorality and idolatry that ran rampant in the land, Elijah stood firm against it, declaring God's truth in the face of lies. He called for national repentance. He called for widespread revival. And then he did something quite remarkable when he challenged the worshipers of idols to a duel.

Elijah had established quite a reputation for calling a spade a spade with Ahab, which is perhaps why he received this greeting, upon approaching the king one day: "Is it you, you troubler of Israel?" (1 Kings 18:17).

In fact, it was Ahab who had troubled Israel, angering Jehovah God and leading his people astray. And Elijah planned to do something about that injustice. He planned to show his beloved God as strong. "I have not troubled Israel," Elijah said to the king, "but you have, and your father's house, because you have abandoned the commandments of the LORD and followed the Baals. Now therefore send and gather all Israel to me at Mount Carmel, and the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table" (vv. 18–19).

And thus the contest was on.

Two bulls would be given to the men. The animals would be cut into pieces and laid on the wood of a makeshift altar, but no fire would be put to them just yet. Then Ahab would call upon the name of his god—Baal—and Elijah would call upon the name of Jehovah God. Whichever deity rained down fire on the offering would be considered the more powerful god.

Ahab went first. He prayed to Baal. He pleaded with Baal. He screamed at the top of his lungs for Baal to respond to his

demands. The text says that the people under Ahab's command even "cut themselves after their custom with swords and lances, until the blood gushed out upon them" (v. 28). And still, "No one answered; no one paid attention" to them (v. 29).

Next was Elijah's turn. Elijah called the people to himself. He repaired the altar, which had been thrown down by Ahab and his cronies. He quietly took twelve stones, representing the twelve sons of Jacob, and built an altar in the name of the Lord. After preparing the altar, he said to God, "O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your word. Answer me, O LORD, answer me, that this people may know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back" (vv. 36–37).

The fire that fell from heaven was great enough to consume not only the entirety of the burnt offering but also the wood, stones, and dirt surrounding it. When the people saw what Jehovah God had done, they "fell on their faces and said, 'The LORD, he is God; the LORD, he is God'" (v. 39). And while this victory for Elijah was decisive, his story most certainly did not end there.

Following a humiliating loss to Elijah, Ahab ran home to Jezebel to tell her everything that had happened. In response, Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah with a vicious word for him: "May the gods strike me and even kill me if by this time tomorrow I have not killed you just as you killed them" (1 Kings 19:2 NLT). In other words: There is a contract on your life, Elijah. Tomorrow you will be dead.

Now, given Elijah's track record, you might expect him to rise against the wicked Jezebel and show her a thing or two. But our mighty man had had enough. Instead of fighting, he fled. Then, as if taking a page from Jonah's story, he situated himself in the shade of a tree and begged God to take his life.

We never learn of the motivation behind Elijah's request. Initially, the text says that he was running in fear, yet he had faced down fear before. Maybe after all he had been through, this threat

of death was just too much. Whatever the cause, the lethal combination of fear and fatigue in this man's life would all but take him down.

What happened next is truly a story for the ages. In response to Elijah's crying out to God, God not only came near to the weary one and spoke to him but he also let his divine presence be seen. In 1 Kings 19:11, God said to his weary warrior, "Go out and stand before me on the mountain" (NLT). And as Elijah stood there, God passed by, not as a terrifying earthquake, not as a consuming fire, but as a gentle whisper. Just what Elijah needed.

I have to tell you, as I reread that passage I'd come across scores of times before, I felt for a moment like the black cloud had parted, letting fragments of sunlight in. This is the magnificent message of these timeless stories of Scripture, the assurance that we're never alone. Frankly, I'm relieved that God included real-life stories of people's battles with anxious thoughts. I don't like talking about my own battle with anxiety, but if he can use others' stories of victory over anxiety and depression in my life, then maybe he can use my story in yours.

Plugging Back In

There was a second reason I relished the Scriptures with newfound appreciation during my trial by fire, which is that it provided a much-needed energy source.

If depression takes one thing from you, it's your power. Your energy. Your zest for life. It's not just that you cease experiencing positive emotions such as delight, satisfaction, and joy; it's that you cease feeling *any* emotion—good or bad. You're bottomed out. You're empty. You're flatlined. You're blank. You're existing in quicksand where "the harder you struggle, the deeper you sink."⁸ You're unplugged from the you-ness of you.

What God was eager to show me was that *he* was still plugged into life and that his Word was my extension cord. After the apostle

Paul pleaded with the Lord three times to remove the thorn in the flesh he was dealing with, God said to him, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9). “Therefore,” Paul said, “I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (vv. 9–10).

If Paul’s situation could be extrapolated to my own, then God must have experienced a *serious* surge of strength each time he looked upon the hamstrung life of Jack Graham. Now, if only he’d pass some to me.

As I came to the Scriptures each day—some days grudgingly—I began to sense an uplift in my spirit. The passage that came to mind nearly every time I cracked open my Bible is from Hebrews 4. “For the word of God is living and active,” it reads, “sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account” (vv. 12–13).

Those words were a promise to me, a gift. They represented motion when life felt still, energy when life felt flat, decisiveness when life felt vague, recognition when life felt bleak. *I see you*, God’s Word seemed to be whispering to me. *I can help you. My precepts will help bring you back to life. . . .*

The same God who spoke the world into existence quite literally spoke his Word into being. Yes, more than forty human authors on three different continents were tapped across 1,500 years to pen in three different languages the sentences and paragraphs that make up its sixty-six books, but it was God himself who was speaking, God who was literally *inspiring*—breathing—the Word. Further,

this Word of God is active, which means it still speaks to us today. Bible translator J. B. Phillips is said to have remarked that during a season when he was working on a translation of the New Testament, he felt as if he were “rewiring an old house with the electricity still on.”⁹

The Bible is alive. It’s dynamic. It’s filled with explosive *power*. The power to convert; the power to cleanse; the power to correct; the power to comfort. Whatever power you’re in need of, the Bible is your ultimate source.

And the Bible is *accurate*, Hebrews 4 tells us, penetrating the deepest recesses of our hearts and souls. The writer of Hebrews describes it as “sharper than any two-edged sword,” which speaks not of a long bayonet, but rather of a slight, double-bladed, eighteen-inch *makhaira*—a weapon of proximity, a weapon of precision, a weapon to be prized.

Even in my lackluster state, I could feel the power. The strength. The miraculous impact in my life. Waves of fresh awareness would often wash over me regarding the Bible’s importance to those of us trying to sort out life on planet Earth. Truly, what other book can boast of the Bible’s historical prominence in the world? “The grass withers, the flower fades,” Isaiah 40:8 says, “but the word of our God will stand forever.”

And indeed it has. What other book has been burned and banned and outlawed as often as the Bible? What other book has withstood such vicious attacks?

What other book has been translated into more than 600 languages? (Did you know that 600 languages even existed?) Include dialects of those languages and the figure skyrockets to 2,500.

What other book has had such widespread appeal? (Current statistics point to lifetime Bible sales of more than five billion copies. Even J. K. Rowling can’t compete with that.)

What other book has influenced history, the nations’ governments, the curricula of universities, and classical literature more than the Bible has?

What other book has been the source of *other* books as much as the Bible has?

No other book boasts this list of accolades. The Word of God, with its history and its prophecy, its poetry and its drama, its stories of love and its stories of war,¹⁰ its unmatched delivery of truth—this book stands alone.

Coming Back to Life

The third benefit I realized as I let God’s Word guide my thoughts, my attitudes, my actions, and my desires was that despite my fear that I’d feel emotionally dead forever, I started coming back to life. In 2 Timothy 3, the apostle Paul calls this process “continu[ing] in what you have learned and have firmly believed” (v. 14). “But as for you,” the full passage reads, “continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (vv. 14–15).

Paul then helps us to understand what it looks like to “continue in” what we have learned and believed by describing the effects we ought to see unfold in our lives as we allow Scripture to guide our lives. Verses 16 and 17 read: “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.”

I have loved the Bible since I was a child. I loved reading it. I loved memorizing it. I loved thinking about what I’d learned. But according to this passage in 2 Timothy, that love for the Bible was only the first step in a four-step progression. Yes, it was wonderful that I enjoyed the *intake* of Scripture, but was I similarly prioritizing its *outtake*?

Staying with verse 17 above, we realize that God intends for his Word not only to teach us what is his will and what are his ways

but also to equip us for taking that education to a world in need of his forgiveness, his compassion, his grace. This is accomplished, according to that same passage, by God showing us where we have gone astray—that’s the “reproof” part; by God helping us correct our ways and bring our will into alignment with his once more; and by God inviting us to work with him to restore this world according to his original intent. To truly “love God’s Word,” then, means loving not just the part where we learn what it says but also loving the transformation it effects in our lives.

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom,” wrote the apostle Paul in Colossians 3:16, “singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.” As it turns out, the more I exposed myself to the truth of God’s Word, even if deep under the surface of what anxiety and depression would allow me to discern, the more this promising progression you and I looked at had its desired effect.

Life Comes for Us All

Dr. Tim Clinton has reported that up to 20 percent of the population will at some point in their lives “suffer from major depressive and dysthymic disorders.”¹¹ (Incidentally, he also acknowledges that women are twice as likely as men to deal with depression, which is why until my diagnosis I never gave the disease a second thought.) This figure means that one out of every five people walking the planet will at some point be walking under that black cloud. I don’t know if you have been one of those five, or if you are one of those five right now, but I do know that eventually life comes for us all. Perhaps (and hopefully!) not with the force of a knockout punch, but in some form or fashion we all will struggle from time to time.

News reports of suffering halfway around the globe weigh on our hearts.

A child rebels.
A marriage falls apart.
A beloved spouse dies.
You lose your job.
Your health feels frail.

Chronic pain won't let up, no matter how many specialists you see.

"In the last days there will come times of difficulty," Paul wrote to his protégé, Timothy—and, by extension, to us (2 Timothy 3:1). *Difficult* doesn't even begin to describe our experience down here, wouldn't you agree? "Pain is the hallmark of mortality," wrote coauthors Dr. Paul Brand and Philip Yancey in their marvelous book *Fearfully and Wonderfully*.¹²

We are not merely spiritual beings; we are spiritual beings having a physical existence, and that added phrase makes all the difference in the world. These bodies of ours—our brains, our backs, our blood, our skin—so much of how we fare in this regard is simply out of our control. Ditto for our emotions. And yet sadly—in the context of the local church, anyway—we have been trained from the youngest of ages to shade the truth when asked how these selves of ours are doing. As author Marc Brackett says in his book *Permission to Feel*, "There are hundreds of words we could use to describe our feelings, but most of us use one or two: 'fine' or 'busy.'"¹³

This phenomenon showed up in my refusal to let my church know of my prostate surgery until after it was clear to me that my recovery was going to take longer than I expected. In true therapy-averse fashion, I distinctly remember telling plenty of people during that twentieth-anniversary celebration at Prestonwood that I was "doing great!" despite my barely being able to walk. The first time I preached on depression—and fessed up regarding my personal struggles—people approached me in droves to tell me of the similar battles they'd faced. How long had they felt locked up by the church's unwillingness to address the issues pervading

our congregation—not to mention our world at large? Now that I knew better, I vowed to do better. I vowed to welcome them from their hiding spots. I vowed to come out from my own.

As it relates to you, please carefully read what I'm about to write: If you are struggling—with depression or with any other debilitating challenge—know that you're not alone. I get it. I care about your story. You are known. You are loved. You can be healed. You don't have to be afraid of the cloud, as menacing as it looks. You don't have to stay bound up in darkness. You don't have to hide your struggle, your pain.

You can find your way out of the pit you've landed in. God's Word will be your rope.

During the twelve months it took for me to make my climb toward daylight again, by his grace God brought to mind a steady stream of Bible passages, many of which I'd written on my heart as a boy. Those passages will show up as the epigraphs to each chapter in this book, such as the passage from 2 Timothy 3 that kicked off this chapter. In the same way that these anointed words encouraged me, I hope they will encourage you, regardless of where you are on your journey of faith. You may be a new believer who is trying to sort out this thing called Christianity. In that case, the balance of this book will feel like something of a spiritual primer that explains the foundations of our faith, explores the primary pitfalls believers often find themselves in, and expresses the central tasks we are to be about as we walk through our earthly life.

You may be spiritually unconvinced, someone who isn't altogether sure how you wound up reading a book by a late-aged Baptist preacher from the South. If that is you, *welcome*. I pray you experience a deep-seated peace as you take in the concepts to come.

But it's also true that you may be a veteran believer, someone who has long walked with Jesus, someone who has "been there and done that" and taken home the T-shirt as proof. I'll show

my cards early here: *You are the one I'm writing to*. This is why I titled the book *Reignite* instead of *Ignite*. It is my firm belief that I am far from the only person out there who required a life-leveling experience to reignite my faith in what I say I believe. I love the Lord, I love the Scriptures, I love walking with God. And yet even I concede that it is far too easy to get a little sloppy in our spiritual lives. It's far too easy to coast on yesterday's convictions instead of seeking out truth for today.

And so, this book. I've included the Scripture passages to minister to your possibly weak and world-weary soul, but I also hope you will be reunited with the God of your salvation, allowing him to lead you to a few "anchor texts" of your own. If you're game, then you can begin the practice of prioritizing God's Word even now. Let's look at the four aspects that served me well and see if they resonate with you.

The Only Reliable Rescue Rope

I was on my phone the other day when a little notification popped up, telling me that my weekly report was ready for viewing. I clicked on it, and that is when I learned that my screen time was a full 7 percent lower that week than it had been the week before. I'm not going to tell you what either week's total was, because I have no interest in indicting myself. What I will say is this: When you or I complain about not having fifteen minutes a day to sit down in a quiet spot, crack open our Bibles, and read the blessed Word, we are telling a bald-faced lie. Read your Bible, my friend. I challenge you to shut off your screen and open God's Word. That is step number one.

Read God's Word

It's easy to read the Bible every day. Think of it: You either own a copy of the Book or else you can access it for free online. A full

hundred-plus versions of the Bible are now in print, which means we can read God’s Word in a style that is effortless to consume. And we no longer live in an age when we have to spend 80 percent of our waking lives tilling soil, growing food, harvesting food, or cooking food. A tap on the DoorDash app and we’re done. We have access. And we have time. What more do we need?

The irony, of course, is that what makes it easy to read the Bible every day is also what makes it hard. Anything in abundance loses its value, and other stuff is constantly competing for our time. And so we miss a day and think, *Eh, I’ll do it tomorrow*. Then tomorrow comes, and we miss that day too. Soon an entire week has flown by, then a year, two years, without the Good Book getting read.

My advice to you and me both is this: Systematize your reading so that it’s part of your usual flow. Find a spot, declare a time, and open the Bible—it doesn’t have to be more complicated than that. If you don’t know where to begin, may I suggest the book of John, the fourth book in the New Testament, just after Matthew, Mark, and Luke? You may want to grab a journal and a pen so you can write down what you’re thinking as you read. I know this sounds elementary, but the best practices often are. Like me, you probably can look back on your life and see seasons when God’s Word just oozed from your pores. You read the Scriptures with such devotion that they quite literally shaped your thoughts. I’m inviting you to return to that love, to return to the priority you once held.

To go one step further, heed the advice of the brilliant Bible teacher Kay Arthur, who popularized the “inductive” approach to Scripture reading. For starters, she says to read and then reread the passage or book you’re focusing on. Next, identify the type of literature with which you are dealing. Is it poetry? Allegory? A letter to a specific people group? Third, answer objective questions of the text—the who, what, when, where, why, and how involved. Fourth, identify the facts about any people and events mentioned. Fifth, read and reread the text until you discover the words and

phrases that are repeated, then mark those in distinctive ways. And finally, identify the main theme at hand.¹⁴

This type of approach obviously necessitates more than a quick flyby for the purpose of checking “Bible reading” off your list. But anything worth doing is worth doing well, yes? “A book that requires nothing from you might offer the same diversion as that of a television sitcom, but it is unlikely to provide intellectual, aesthetic, or spiritual rewards long after the cover is closed,”¹⁵ writes Karen Swallow Prior. Every minute I have dedicated to reading God’s Word has been returned to me in quality of life a hundredfold.

Meditate on God’s Word

Read God’s Word, then *meditate* on what you’ve read. Through the years, I’ve made it my practice to meditate on the Scriptures for the purpose of memorizing them, because once they are written on your mind, on your heart, you can call them up at a moment’s notice, no flipping of pages or swiping of screens required. You may recall that when Jesus was made to square off against Satan in the desert, each time Satan offered a temptation, Jesus responded with truth from God’s Word. He didn’t have to say, “Hang on a sec. I know there’s a verse about this somewhere. . . .” No, he had God’s truth at the ready, right there when he needed it. I’m always amused by people who claim to treasure the “sword of the Spirit,” as the Bible is called in Ephesians 6, but who then leave that sword in the sheath nearly every moment of every day. Success happens when preparation meets opportunity. And so, sit with God’s Word.

Ponder God’s Word.

Meditate on God’s Word, not just “*reading* Scripture or *studying* Scripture or even thinking *about* Scripture,” writes Robert Morgan, but rather “*thinking* Scripture.”¹⁶

Yes! Turn God’s Word over in your mind time and again, until his precepts are knitted to you. For my part, I’d camp out in the Psalms day after day, reading and rereading, chewing and

mulling, considering and applying, poking at each concept from every side. “Intermeddle with all knowledge,” the great British preacher Charles Spurgeon once said in a lecture to his seminary students, “but above all things meditate day and night in the law of the Lord.”¹⁷ May we be like John Bunyan, writer of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, about whom Spurgeon wrote, “Prick him anywhere—the blood is Bibline, the very essence of the Bible flows from him.”

Nothing will energize you like the Word of God flowing through your life.

Pray Over God’s Word

We’re about to spend the entirety of chapter 2 on the profitability of prayer, so I will be brief here and simply acknowledge that after you read and meditate on God’s Word, the most beneficial next step you can choose to take is to speak his Word right back to him in prayer. I often turn my daily walk into a prayer walk, using the Scriptures I just encountered to fuel dialogue with God.

Just as you’d likely take immense delight in hearing one of your children read aloud a heartfelt letter you’d written to him or her, I imagine God leans forward and tunes in each time you or I recount for him the parts of his Word that are proving most meaningful to us.

Proclaim God’s Word

Finally, *proclaim* the Word of God. The most agonizing aspect of the early days of my bout with depression was being sidelined from preaching the Scriptures to the congregation I adore. But guess what I learned during that season? I don’t have to be standing on a stage in a massive auditorium to accomplish the proclamation of God’s holy Word. As I began to emerge from the cocoon of despair I’d been in, I found that verses from the Bible were flowing naturally again from my lips. Sometimes I was the only person listening! And yet even then I was being ministered to.

God's Word is too good to keep to ourselves, which is why this fourth step is so vital. As we point people to truth—whether ourselves or others we meet—we stimulate spiritual growth. “Revive me, O LORD, according to Your word,” the psalmist wrote in Psalm 119:107 (NKJV), which reminds us that revival indeed comes by way of God's Word. Souls are heartened and lives saved when we impart even a glimmer of the gospel to a pair of listening ears. “So faith comes from hearing,” Romans 10:17 testifies, “and hearing through the Word of Christ.”

I will tell you that I have seen addicts break their addiction, all from absorbing the Word of the Lord.

I have seen prisoners accept forgiveness and experience a sort of internal freedom, all from absorbing the Word of the Lord.

I have seen broken marriages restored—I'm talking divorced couples choosing to *come back together again*—all from absorbing the Word of the Lord.

I have seen the physically infirm take back healthfulness, all from absorbing the Word of the Lord.

I have seen a man suffering from severe insomnia, listlessness, hopelessness, depression—there in the mirror, I saw him—and find his stride again, all from absorbing the Word of the Lord.

When we speak out the truth that we have internalized, lives can't help but be changed. I ask you to test me in this and see if it isn't true: As you prioritize engagement with the Scriptures—reading them, meditating on them and memorizing them, praying them back to God, proclaiming them multiple times each day—what you will begin to enjoy is a certain *completeness* in life, which is God's Word having its way in you.