

*This is a book for the barely brave
who've lived long enough to know
the texture of pain,
the smell of defeat,
the sound of loneliness,
the sight of betrayal,
and the taste of discouragement.
It is a book for broken men
who've come to their senses
and are limping toward home,
refusing to give up no matter the cost.*

Prologue

. . . courage struggling for oxygen.

—Norman Maclean,
Young Men and Fire

I could begin this book by re-creating an epic scene from HBO's *Band of Brothers* or *Gladiator* or *The Lord of the Rings*. I could try to rouse your spirit by trotting out the speech William Wallace gave to those pitchfork-wielding peasants in *Braveheart*. I could pull some thread from *The Matrix* in hopes of causing you to choose the right pill and see how deep the rabbit hole goes. I could do all that and more in the opening pages of this book, but I respect you too much to do so. There is a time and place for those climactic, soul-stirring, swashbuckling moments, but this has to begin in a place we know all too well. We have to start where we are.

You probably remember the two brothers from Frank Capra's classic movie *It's a Wonderful Life*—Harry and George Bailey. In a very real sense these characters represent the two

tracks of a man's life. Young Harry Bailey went off to war and returned to a hero's welcome, winning the Congressional Medal of Honor and the admiration of everyone in town. His big brother, George, however, stayed and fought the battle of Bedford Falls. No mortar fire or foxholes or clearly defined enemies for George, just day after day of the same old Bailey Building and Loan, the same drafty old house, the same wife and kids, the same Uncle Billy, the same Mr. Potter. Then came that desperate moment on the town's bridge, that end-of-the-rope belief that he was worth more dead than alive. Even the angels talked about it.

Clarence: You sent for me, sir?

Franklin: Yes, Clarence. A man down on earth needs our help.

Clarence: Splendid. Is he sick?

Franklin: No, worse. He's discouraged.

Bingo. There it is—a man with no hope. I believe that moment captures the reality of most men today—all alone, exhausted, weary, bone-tired, questioning our worth, feeling much more dead than alive, courage struggling for oxygen.

All right. While that may be the reality, I believe it's unacceptable. I don't want that for you or for me. And I don't believe one bit God desires that for the noble ones he created known as *men*. None of us began with the intention to lose heart. If you recall, George Bailey was going to travel the world. His three favorite sounds were anchor chains, plane motors, and train whistles. At one point in the black and white classic he tells young Mary Hatch:

I'm shakin' the dust of this crummy little town off my feet and I'm gonna see the world. Italy, Greece, the Parthenon, the

Coliseum. Then, I'm comin' back here to go to college and see what they know. And then I'm gonna build things. I'm gonna build airfields, I'm gonna build skyscrapers a hundred stories high, I'm gonna build bridges a mile long.¹

But that never happened for George, or for many of us. Expectations, circumstances, family responsibilities, unexpected crises, sinful choices, and sometimes just the cards we're dealt stood in the way of our hopes to go and see and build. And after the hopes are deferred time after time after time, the heart becomes sick and discouraged, lost. You hear that train whistle blow from a distance and it just about breaks your heart.

Clarence the Angel gave George Bailey the gift of being able to see what life would be like without him. I can't give you that particular gift. But what I can share with you leads to the same truth, that each man's life touches so many others and if you're not around, it leaves an awful hole. Here's the bottom line—your life matters to this world and the people in it, and it matters to God. He has a design for your life that no one else was created to fulfill. And while I believe that truth has applied to all men in all times, there's something about the moments in which we find ourselves right now, something vital, something stirring. I believe these are monumental days—battle lines are being drawn in the epic war of good versus evil. There is a phrase for this war, taken from one of C. S. Lewis's stories—the “Last Battle.” I believe this is really going to happen, and I believe you are needed. You're not expendable or replaceable. Contrary to the famous first line of a wildly successful book—*it is about you*. Sure, it may not be all about you, but it's got to be a little bit about you, or what's the point of you? Or me? Or any of us?

You may not believe that right now. That's fine. But here's the dare—keep reading. The short chapters that follow aren't wrapped in a pretty red bow; they're stained with blood and dust and sin and grace. My prayer is that you see yourself in these pages, the *you* God created and the *you* others desperately need. I realize you're tired and worn out. Guess what? Me too. But Scripture clearly teaches that you—yes, *you*—and I are called to engage in a battle, the fight of our lives, the struggle we were created for. I know that may sound like some blowhard preacher, but I believe it's true and I'm willing to stake my life on it.

Scripture doesn't indicate that thousands upon thousands of men will turn away from the bridge and step back into life with renewed strength and vision. But it does tell of a proud, happy few, a remnant, a band of barely brave men committed to hanging in there no matter the cost. In other words, you won't be alone. If you're willing to say yes to the call, I can guarantee you a few things:

- You will live out the purpose for which you were created;
- You will have an eternity filled with no regrets;
- You will have a cloud of witnesses cheering you on, including our Lord Jesus—our brother and King.

Oh yeah, one more thing—scars. There will be scars, guaranteed. But they'll be scars that mean something, scars you will tell stories about.

Note: Scattered throughout this book are links to videos of Christian brothers telling more about their stories than what you will read here. We invite you to see and experience God's heart through the lens of these sacred stories. All the

video stories and additional materials for you, your small group, or church can be found at www.nomatterthecost.com. You'll also find online groups with whom you can engage in the discussions and questions from the study guide in the back of this book.