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CHAPTER 1

You Must Get WRECKED

“Something’s missing, and I don’t know what it is.”

— JOHN MAYER

Everyone in this world is searching. Each of us is searching for something to give meaning to life. To bring purpose to our work. We all know this; we’re familiar with this emptiness, this longing for *more*.

We’re looking for a story to make sense of, a role to play. Despite our best efforts, activities and adventures barely touch the tip of the iceberg. We sense we were made for a great purpose, some cause to make the world a better place. Maybe it’s as simple as the realization that our lives aren’t a total waste, or maybe it’s something more. Whatever the case, most of us despair of ever finding it. It feels so distant, so unattainable.

We begin life with a simple understanding—that our lives are tales worth telling and we have an important part to play. Children

understand this: what it means to live and love without condition, to be delighted in. Their lives are full of reckless abandon, and no one has to tell them so. They don't need to be reminded of their crucial roles; they know intuitively. Without prompting, kids know how to dream up adventures and slay dragons. To embark on epic voyages and live out idyllic scenes. To spend hours in the backyard with nothing but their imaginations.

Fixed in my memory is a scene from a day I spent at my grandparents' twenty years ago. I am seven years old, maybe, in the front yard of that old, yellow home, playing on a mild summer day. I am running up and down the stairs, hopping on and off the old, rusty porch swing painted white. In my right hand is a stick, substituting as an imaginary sword, and surrounding me are orcs and goblins and other villainous things. Suddenly, in the heat of battle, I hear a voice: "What are you doing?" It's the neighbor's child—a boy, about the same age as me. I tell him, and he wrinkles his brow, obviously confused. He was an only child, and his parents were practical people. As a result, he missed one of the greatest gifts childhood has to offer. For the rest of the afternoon, I teach the boy how to play, and at the end of the afternoon, he says something that doesn't quite register: "You have a great imagination." I have never considered this, which is the whole point.

As children, most of us needed no prompting to play, to engage in the grand experience of life.

But as adults, many of us do. Somewhere along the journey we lose our way. We get caught up in the pursuit of trivial things. For some, it's money; for others, sex or fame. Some get stuck in the cruel cycle of moralism, endlessly striving to be "good enough." Whatever our fixation, we obsess over it. We give our lives to this pursuit of a promise that eludes us. And we wind up years down the road wondering what happened and why we feel so empty.

This happens at age twenty, forty, or even sixty. Emptiness knows no boundaries.

We would do well to remember that this is strictly an adult problem. Children do not wait all year for two weeks of vacation. They don't spend their lives doing things they hate so they can earn the right to do what they really want. They live life to the full, children do, and somehow we have to regain that innocence.

Something *is* missing. Something important. Something necessary to making a difference in the world. And most of us are afraid to find out what it is. Because we *know*. It's the secret we're afraid to admit: this will cost us our lives.

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE WRECKED

Several years ago, I started helping missionaries tell their stories. It began when I was hired as a staff writer for an organization called Adventures in Missions to teach missionaries how to blog. I assumed this job would be much like my experience as a writing tutor. In college, I met with students every day to go over their papers—to help them learn basic grammar and how to write a thesis. I thought this experience would be similar. What I never expected was how it would change me, how it would affect everything I did, from going to the grocery store to walking down the street.

As I heard these missionaries recount their tales, I realized something: all these people were telling the same story. No matter where they were or what they were doing, the outcome was the same. Whether immersed in aboriginal cultures along the Amazon or surrounded by drug dealers in downtown Philadelphia, whether in the company of dying mothers in central Asia or AIDS-infected babies in Africa, they all sang a similar song: wherever there is pain without explanation, hope amidst despair, redemption in spite of tragedy, that's where they wanted to be. Walking away from each

experience, people would tell me how they felt, and they all used the same interesting word: *wrecked*.

Ruined. Devastated. Undone. Their lives were forever changed, and there was no returning to how life used to be. Their paradigms had shifted. Their worldview was infected with a contagion that was spreading to every facet of their life. More than one person told me, “I can’t go back to who I was.”

TO BE WRECKED
IS TO BE
DISABUSED OF
THE STATUS QUO.

Take my friend Stephen Proctor, for example. Gifted at using media and video to communicate, Stephen moved to Nashville to pursue a career in the music business. A few years ago, he had the chance to go on an overseas mission trip. He and his business partner,

Nate, had just launched their new media company, so this trip made absolutely no sense. He should have been building the business and acquiring new clients. But he felt called to leave. After praying and talking to several friends, he knew he needed to go.

Stephen spent five weeks living in Papua New Guinea. No technology, no access to the outside world—just him and the natives. The experience humbled him. “Life was so simple,” he recalled. “Everything was stripped away. God’s whisper grew louder to my ears.”

When Stephen returned, the trip didn’t leave him. It affected every facet of his life, from how he treated strangers on the street to how he conducted business. He wasn’t one of those people who goes overseas and turns into a lifelong missionary, but he knew there was a purpose to this experience. He just needed to find it. “I wanted to embrace my passions even more,” he said, “and direct them toward a greater purpose.” Stephen and his partner, Nate, decided to call their company Grateful Inconvenience, and they live up to that moniker.

Today Stephen travels all over the world producing media and video presentations for some of the world's most popular music acts. Every year he takes off several months to go to China or Africa or the Middle East. It's become part of his life to intentionally disorient himself so that his heart stays sensitive to the needs of the world. He has found his life by "losing" it, all because of an initial uncomfortable experience. Although he's a self-reliant businessman, he still disciplines himself to take time off and serve. He doesn't allow his heart to grow cold. What once wrecked him continues to disorient him because he chooses to let it.

There is something important about a life lived like this—full of moments that tear us apart and break our hearts and help us understand our purpose. Moments that inconvenience us. Moments for which we should be eternally grateful.

When I first encountered this idea of being wrecked, I was surprised to find that missionaries were not the only ones experiencing this attitude of feeling ruined and undone. It came from a variety sources. I heard it from graduate students serving in the public school system. I heard it from friends who worked at summer camps. I even heard it from suburbanites who had experienced a brush with the poor. So I started asking more people, "What wrecks you?" And I was surprised by what I found. Entrepreneurs and homemakers and physical therapists all told me the same thing. They were devastated by the possibility of a better world. They had seen things they couldn't unsee. They were introduced to a way of life that didn't revolve around them, one that intentionally made room for others. And they loved it. They were addicted. After listening to enough stories, so was I.

It was an awakening of sorts for these friends, strangers, and me. We were all coming to grips with the fact that the promises of the American Dream were a disappointment. Like Tyler Durden

in *Fight Club*,¹ we were beginning to deconstruct the worldview we had inherited. We were beginning to see the lies we had believed. Was it really enough to strive and pine away for the sake of a paycheck when we had to mortgage our passion? We weren't so sure anymore.

This is what I mean by being “wrecked.” To be wrecked is to be disabused of the status quo.

It means to have a transformation that goes beyond mere words—to be introduced to another way of life, to follow in the footsteps of a teacher who is calling you through the eye of a needle. Often it involves being catalyzed by an encounter with pain. The process is horrible and ugly and completely gut-wrenching—and at the same time, beautiful. It is real and hard and true. Most of all, it is necessary.

BEAUTIFULLY BROKEN

Years ago, I was on the streets of Mexico with the same group of missionaries whose stories I was helping tell. But this time I was living the story.

There were four of us in a group: Ryan, Talia, Jenny, and me. We were in Chiapas, the southernmost state in Mexico, and it had been raining for five days straight. After sitting inside for a week, we grew restless and set out to do some good. This was a mission trip, after all, and what did we have to show for it? Nothing. So we went in search of a story, with our own mixed motives, as people often do.

We rounded a corner and there she was, begging in front of a bank: the woman we had passed the other day. We had all seen her and ignored her. We had kept walking. We hadn't time for a crazy beggar lady. But this time was different. Despite the discomfort, we marched right up to her and started talking.

We introduced ourselves and asked her name. She thought for a moment and said she couldn't remember. As she spoke, the Nameless Woman covered her mouth with a blanket; she said it was because of "shame." One moment she would say something lucid, and the next she would get lost in incoherent ramblings.

She was blind in her right eye, which lazily dragged behind when she turned her head to look from one person to the next. As we talked to her, Ryan ran to get some bread and water for her. She would not eat in front of us. The woman complained of pains on her face, but she also talked about having a mustache. It was hard to understand what was real and what was imagined.

After giving her the food, we prayed for the Nameless Woman. She thanked us and said she felt peace. But we walked away feeling terrible. We had prayed, tried to feed this woman without a name, and we felt no satisfaction. This was nothing like what we expected. For all that we could tell, nothing had changed. The Nameless Woman was still hungry, still hurting, and still lonely. And still, we left her.

Talia walked away with an especially heavy burden. Moments later, she burst into tears. "I just feel so helpless," she said. We all felt that way: paralyzed by our inability to help, to heal. It was unnerving. Yet somehow, we knew it was good; maybe not right, but good nonetheless. We didn't understand that our hearts were being changed. This is how it often feels when you're doing the right thing.

We want to explain and understand messy moments like this one. At church or the mall or over dinner, we'll say to our friends that a seed was planted. They'll nod in mock recognition, offering some cliché about how you never know what good was probably done. For me, this has always been unsettling. It feels like patting myself on the back for my own apathy. It's a way to anesthetize

the pain, to dull the discomfort of not doing enough. So often we want to move quickly past these moments. We want resolution; we want to justify ourselves. But these are the experiences we need. Our brokenheartedness at the injustices we witness is what gives us compassion. So when we rush past these messy and uncomfortable moments, we take away the experiences that teach us mercy.

Although I didn't realize it that day, the lack of resolution we experienced was a gift. The fact that we walked away from the Nameless Woman unable to help was an epiphany. The world is broken and remains that way, in spite of our efforts to help it. This is beautiful, in a way, because it breaks us of our self-dependency. In a world that refuses to be healed, we must face the fact that we are not the heroes of our stories. It teaches us to rely on something bigger than ourselves and teaches the source of true compassion.

THE KEY TO LIFE'S PURPOSE

Finding your identity and place in the world is not a seven-step program. It is not a tapestry, neatly woven. It is not easy or simple or tidy. In fact, it feels more like a sweater unwinding thread by thread. You are wrecked. It is not something you do. It happens to you. You cannot control it.

To be wrecked begins with an experience that pulls you out of your comfort zone and self-centeredness, whether you want it to or not. Your old narcissistic dreams begin to fade in light of something bigger, something better. The process leaves you battered and broken after the "real world" has slammed up against your ideals a couple dozen times. What's left standing is a new paradigm. It's hard, but it's good. It's incredible and indelible. It's tough, but only in the way that all things worth fighting for are tough. Being wrecked means everything you believe—everything

you know about yourself, your world, and your destiny—is now in question. Because you’ve seen something bigger. And you can’t go back. At first the process is disorienting. It calls out the greatest parts of you, the parts you might be afraid of. It tests your courage, the very fibers of your being. This may very well be why we avoid conflict. It calls into question that which we are most afraid of—ourselves. And in the end, you’re not who you were before. You’re different. You’re changed. Your old life begins to make less and less sense in light of your new priorities. Everything that used to matter now feels arbitrary. And it seems futile to try rebuilding the old way of doing life. As confusing or as difficult as that may be, it’s good.

This is how my friend Jimmy felt. A Canadian from Ontario who grew up in a good Dutch Reformed family, he’s never lacked a theological explanation for anything. The church has quickly resolved any philosophical dilemma he’s ever had.

But for Jimmy, that wasn’t enough. He didn’t want pat answers; he wanted to experience truth.

Last year, Jimmy left on a six-month stint to Latin America. He wasn’t exactly sure at the time what he believed about church or God. All he knew was this: life had grown dull. Despite growing up in a polite, middle-class family, his life was missing something. He knew it wasn’t actually in the southern hemisphere, but maybe, he hoped, he would find something in the going, in the falling apart. Maybe his heart would break enough that he’d be able to see clearly, to actually feel something.

I spoke with Jimmy the other week. I wanted to know why, at a time when plenty of his friends are buying houses and having babies, he refuses to settle down. His answer was simple: he travels to remember that he’s not done yet. The uncertainty of moving around reminds him of the fickleness

of life and what's really important.

“When I travel,” he told me on a Skype call from Peru, “my problems slide into the context of the rest of the world. Things that were building up at home with work or relationships or whatever become contextual, and it helps me to understand the meaning of those struggles and maybe how to better respond to them. Traveling helps me realize what my preferences are, who my true friends and family are, and where my home is. It gives me a clearer understanding of the need to have an anchor in this uncertain, unsteady life.” For Jimmy, the leaving reminds him of the importance of staying.

DYING TO LIVE

I've known a few “cutters”—people who cut themselves with a razor blade or pair of scissors. Unfortunately, this form of self-mutilating is a dangerously growing trend among young adults. However, there is an important lesson to be learned here. I always thought people cut themselves because they were suicidal, that they wanted to die. But in fact the exact opposite is true. Most cutters I know cut themselves not because they want to die, but because they want to live. The world of comfort has slowly crept around them, intoxicating them with a dullness of life that makes everything feel cloudy and confusing. Cutting, in their minds, is the only way to feel alive again.

Although terribly misguided, there is truth in this understanding of pain and life. Coming back to grips with life as it was meant to be lived will hurt. It will bring discomfort. You will have to bear the burdens of others and carry those whose legs can no longer take them where they need to go. You will have to suffer, to endure, to persevere—not just for yourself, but for others. And it will be painful.

We've believed a lie. We've been told life is about us. That if we work hard enough, save enough money, and buy enough stuff, we will eventually be happy. Many of us have done just that, and we are anything but happy. Now, like my friend Jimmy, we are left wondering what to believe. We know something is missing; we just don't know what it is.

Culture taunts us with clues. Through half-truths and false hopes, we stumble upon glimpses of a deeper reality. Movies and music provide evasive hints along the way, but nothing substantial. As a result, our longing grows. We catch a peek once in a while of something that would satisfy, but that is all we get—a glimpse. There one moment and gone the next. All the while, we grow hungry and restless.

This is not hyperbole. We are, in fact, starving. And the only food that will save us is a bitter pill we don't want to swallow.

WHEN DOING GOOD FEELS BAD

I'm a word nerd. In sixth grade, I won the school spelling bee with "acquiescence." Ever since then, I've been pretty fascinated with language. So indulge me the following insight.

The word *compassion* is interesting when you break it down. In English, we tend to relegate it to special acts of service or philanthropy equivalent to the idea of sympathy, of feeling something for someone else. But at its root, compassion means literally "to suffer with."

I'm no Latin student, but I understand the prefix *com* means "with" and *passion* means "suffering" (as in *The Passion of the Christ*. I have Mel Gibson to thank for that revelation). When you put it into those terms, the word carries with it an altogether different connotation. It means more than simply feeling bad for someone else. Could it be that to live truly compassionate lives,

we must be willing to suffer ourselves? This is why we struggle to find our way. We live in a world of pain, but few of us have actually engaged it. We are only passing through the pain, without allowing it to leave its mark on us. Emotionally, we are unmoved, and not surprisingly, this is why we stand still. We are paralyzed by news reports and sad stories. Where do we begin? It all feels like too much to take in.

Several winters ago, my friend Paul and I collected some blankets to give away to a community of homeless people in downtown Nashville. When I invited another friend to join us, he scoffed. "You're just doing that because it makes you feel better," he said. That bugged me. Even though I knew it wasn't true, I couldn't shake his comment for some reason.

The following day, Paul and I went downtown. While we distributed blankets and clothes, I took a mental inventory of how I felt. At first I felt pretty good. It was November, and people were appreciative of the blankets. When we left, though, I felt bad. My heart sank when I glanced back to see a group of men and women huddled around a small fire. This group was full of people ranging from ages twenty to fifty. They were scantily clad and shivering. I wanted to do more than provide a few scraps to keep them warm. I knew what we had done was nowhere near enough.

That's when it hit me: this is the beginning of compassion. Not feeling better, but feeling worse. Because you can always do more. You can always give something extra, always meet another need. If your heart doesn't break each time you go to places of poverty and need, then you're probably doing something wrong.

The reality is that anyone who has done work like this will tell you that when you expose yourself to deep need and pain, it feels anything but good. Compassion is messy. It *hurts*. No one ever says this. You never read it on a billboard or one of those

red Salvation Army buckets outside the grocery store during Christmastime. But it's true. Doing good feels bad. There's no other way to say it. If you want to get into work that involves helping needy people because you think it will make you feel better, then you had better change career paths. The last thing you will feel is good.

The real road to meaning is dirty and full of jagged rocks. The path is full of pieces of broken glass and cigarette butts. It's long and difficult and not what you would expect. It's not what we would prefer, but it's the only way. Jesus called it the "narrow road." John Bunyan depicted it as a violent struggle to enter paradise.² Emily Dickinson wrote in a poem: "Success is counted sweetest / By those who ne'er succeed / To comprehend a nectar / Requires sorest need."³ Sorest need—ouch. We who are rich with respect to the rest of the world must come to grips with our own poverty if we are going to make a difference. We must allow our hearts to be broken so we can make things whole once again. We must fall apart before we can build up. Anything else is not compassion. It may raise money or impress the neighbors, but it won't satisfy.

THE WAY HOME

If there were another way, I would tell you. I do not like pain. I wish I could bypass this part. But this is what love really looks like. And we know it. "Love hurts," Nazareth sang in an anthem that still makes its way into romantic dramas from time to time.⁴ "But sometimes it's a good hurt," Incubus continued years later, "and it feels like I'm alive."⁵

This pain, this discomfort is the key, the answer to our longing. Not for the sake of suffering itself, of course. This is not masochism; it's redemption, making all things new. We are remade in the same way all things are remade. We go back to

the place where we began, the place that broke with the universe when we set out to serve ourselves. We return to a garden that was once beautiful and is now filled with briars and thistles. We plead for mercy. And we find ourselves in good company. Because there in the garden lies a man from Nazareth who sweats blood, already pleading on our behalf.

If we are to follow the Jesus who suffered with us and bled for us, we too must suffer. We must hold the dying in our arms. We must shed tears for hungry stomachs, trafficked children, and wandering souls. This is what He wants for us. It's the reason we are called to lay down our nets and take up our crosses to pursue the Suffering Servant. And it's the one thing we will avoid at all costs.

It is not enough to feel bad. Religion to me, has always been the routine of feeling guilty for all the things we should do but don't. We must act. This is where life happens, where we begin to participate in our stories. This is when we awaken. Not on the sidelines; not on the outside looking in. Life is lived right in the midst of all this mess. Incidentally, that's where mercy and the miraculous are found. That's where flowers begin to grow again.

THE BIG QUESTIONS

I do a lot of work with young people—high school and college students and young adults. All of them understand two important truths: 1) “My life has purpose” and 2) “Life is messy.” You don't have to convince them that they were made for a purpose or that there is more to life than a nine-to-five job or big fat paycheck. They get it. But where to go from there is a mystery.

If you attempt to provide an easy answer to the question, “What should I do with my life?” they will reject it. Even if it's true. They've seen enough news, read enough blogs, and experienced enough firsthand to know that the world is messed up.

They do not need to be convinced. What they do need is guidance. Certain questions plague us all, and this generation is well aware of those that matter most: “What’s my purpose in life?” “Is there really an overarching story?” “Do I have a crucial part to play?”

But there is something else we must ask of ourselves: “What if the purpose of my life is not about me? Am I willing to give up all my dreams, my aspirations and comfort to find it?” Are you willing to pay the cost? This is the pearl of great price, the abundant life we are all seeking and, at the same time, petrified to find. Po Bronson, author of *What Should I Do with My Life?* elaborates on this:

We are all writing the story of our life. We want to know what it’s “about,” what are its themes and which theme is on the rise. We demand of it something deeper, or richer, or more substantive. We want to know where we’re headed—not to spoil our own ending by ruining the surprise, but we want to ensure that when the ending comes, it won’t be shallow. We will have done something. We will not have squandered our time here.⁶

We want our lives to mean something. We want to be able to make our parents and children proud. We want to be able to stand before God with confidence when He asks us how we spent our time here. Maybe accomplishing this is messier than we thought. Maybe something can only be born when something else dies. Maybe our “coming alive” feels like being dragged through the dirt. Maybe you and I are hanging by a thread of grace for most of our lives and we’re expected to be humble, not haughty, with the breaks we’ve been given. Maybe we’re supposed to pay good deeds forward. Maybe we’re supposed to think *what’s in it for me?* far less than we do. Maybe we need to sacrifice more. Maybe it won’t feel like a sacrifice at all, but more like the sensation of becoming unnumbered.

It's time, friends. Time to give back. Time to step out and risk more than we want. Time to dream dreams bigger than we imagined. Time to mourn with those who mourn, to bring beauty where there are ashes, to announce a new season in the world. This isn't mere altruism or sympathy; it's more than a tax write-off or publicity stunt. It's a shot at living the lives we were meant to live, that the world needs us to live, that we're scared to live.

IS THIS AS GOOD AS IT GETS?

I love that Jack Nicholson movie where he asks that very question. Really? This is it? All this work and discipline, and this is all we get? A decent place to eke out our seventy or eighty years of life, maybe a dog to keep us company, and that's all? What about life and love and loss? What about drama and stories worth telling our grandchildren? We are all asking this question. And softly our souls whisper, "No. There is more."

We are all searching, waiting for a Moment to come along and wreck us. If we are lucky in this life, our worlds will get turned upside down, our expectations will be shattered, and our stories will shift away from us. If we are lucky. It can be a tragedy or a triumph, but whatever it is, it must attack the way we view the world.

Everyone will not do it. But you can.

If you've been wrecked, you know there is no choice. Not really. You've seen a fourth dimension, collided with a new reality. And there's just no going back to the same you from before. But you do have a choice. You can camp out, trying to relive an old memory or feeling of adventure. Or you can move forward. You can step out into more of the unknown.