

# **FIGHT**

## **The Good Fight**

A Battle Plan for Life

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FOR CAMERON

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## CONTENTS

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Lesson One</b>	<b>19</b>
It's Not About You	
<b>Lesson Two</b>	<b>29</b>
You Can Live Without Anything — Except Purpose	
<b>Lesson Three</b>	<b>43</b>
Life is Hard — Choose to Fight	
<b>Lesson Four</b>	<b>65</b>
Character is What You Do When No One is Looking	
<b>Lesson Five</b>	<b>85</b>
Most of Life is About Showing Up	
<b>Lesson Six</b>	<b>101</b>
Whatever You Choose to Do, Do it with All Your Heart	
<b>Lesson Seven</b>	<b>119</b>
Worldly Pursuits Will Never Satisfy You Completely	
<b>Lesson Eight</b>	<b>139</b>
You Were Destined for Greatness	
<b>Lesson Nine</b>	<b>159</b>
You Were Born to Love	
<b>Lesson Ten</b>	<b>181</b>
Life is a Journey, Not a Destination	
<b>Epilogue</b>	<b>199</b>

## LESSON THREE

### LIFE IS HARD—CHOOSE TO FIGHT

“IT IS NOT THE CRITIC WHO COUNTS; NOT THE MAN WHO POINTS OUT HOW THE STRONG MAN STUMBLED, OR WHERE THE DOER OF DEEDS COULD HAVE DONE THEM BETTER. 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 ERRS AND COMES UP SHORT AGAIN AND AGAIN; WHO KNOWS THE GREAT ENTHUSIASMS, THE GREAT DEVOTIONS; WHO SPENDS HIMSELF IN A WORTHY CAUSE, WHO AT BEST, KNOWS IN THE END THE TRIUMPH OF HIGH ACHIEVEMENT, AND WHO, AT THE 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.”<sup>28</sup>

—THEODORE ROOSEVELT

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<sup>28</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, “Citizenship in a Republic,” speech at the Sorbonne, Paris, April 23, 1910.

## GONNA FLY NOW

I make no apologies for it. *Rocky* is my favorite movie and, in my view, the best movie ever made (I make no comment on *Rocky II* through *VI*).<sup>29</sup> I know, I know. People say *Gone with the Wind* and *Citizen Kane* are better choices. But let's face it, those films contain no boxing.

Set in 1976, *Rocky* is the story of a big-hearted, journeyman fighter. Life seems to have passed by Rocky. He's been relegated to collecting debts for a loan shark and fighting against guys with names like Spider Rico. Even by his own estimation, Rocky is a loser, a has-been, a nobody.

Rocky's luck takes a dramatic turn when he gets a million-to-one shot at the title against the undefeated heavyweight champion of the world, Apollo Creed. So Rocky begins to train. He starts slowly, cramping up on his first run, but he gradually improves. He drinks raw eggs. He does road work. He hits the weights and does one-handed push-ups. He pounds raw meat. He spars. And in the climactic training scene, Rocky sprints up the steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. At the top, he turns, looks out over the city and raises his hands in anticipatory victory, the theme song *Gonna Fly Now* reaching its crescendo.

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<sup>29</sup> *Rocky*, written by Sylvester Stallone, directed by John G. Alvidsen (MGM: 1976)

Yes, Rocky is going to beat the champ!

Then reality sets in. It's the night before the big fight. Rocky can't sleep, so he wanders into the auditorium. Standing in the center of the ring, he looks up in awe at the banner hanging from the rafters with the larger-than-life image of the champ. He doesn't see a man, he sees a god. An unbeatable giant. Then his eyes scan across the cavernous arena until they settle on his own banner. All he can see is the imperfection—the artist painted the wrong color on his boxing trunks. Rocky's shoulders slump, his head hangs. He leaves the arena, beaten before the first punch is thrown.

Have you been there before, son? I have, many times.

Dejected, Rocky goes home to his girlfriend Adrian. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he mutters, "I can't beat him." Adrian awakens and asks what he's talking about. "Who am I kidding?" Rocky says. "He's the champ, and I'm a nobody." Adrian protests, but Rocky knows better. "I was thinkin'," he continues. "It don't really matter anyway. I don't care if I lose. I don't care if Apollo opens up my head. I just wanna go the distance. No one has ever gone the distance with Apollo. If I'm still standing after 15 rounds, then I'll know for the first time in my life that I weren't just another bum from the neighborhood."

In that glorious moment, Rocky's mission changes. It's no longer about winning; it's about going the distance. It's about being able to stand up to a giant. It's about fighting the good fight.

Of course, Rocky does go the distance, and he almost wins the fight to boot. That's not the point of the story though. I love how the announcer's voice trails off in the background when he reads the split decision. It's an afterthought. Sure, it's relevant to Apollo Creed, who raises his hands in victory. But Apollo knows he almost lost his title to a nobody. As for Rocky, well, he went the distance with the heavyweight champion of the world!

## FACING YOUR GIANT

The Rocky movie makes two important points. The first is obvious—life is not about winning or losing; it's about engaging the fight. It's about facing our giants and going the distance. The second point is more subtle. You see, the giant Rocky was fighting was not so much Apollo Creed, but the demons in his own mind—the feelings of self-doubt, insignificance, and inadequacy. Apollo Creed was Rocky's foil, but lack of self-esteem was his giant.

As it turns out, we all have a giant—all of us. Like Rocky, it may be insecurity and self-doubt. Or it might be greed, materialism, lust, anger,

jealousy, fear, worry, addiction, depression, regret or lack of self-control. Some are haunted by their past. Others feel all alone. Some believe they're too old or too young. The giant might be a troubled relationship, lack of money or poor health. For some, it's a dead-end job. For others, it's having no job at all. And for many, the giant is not having a compelling vision for life.

But we all have a giant—that one obstacle that towers above our other problems and has the capacity to thwart all forward progress. So I ask you, son, what's your giant?

Some of us go through life thinking we have no defects, no giant at all. For those people, I have a diagnosis. I know because I'm one of them. Our giant is pride.

A few years ago, our dear friends Win and Stephanie Green were moving, and we were helping them pack. Stephanie was giving some mementos away to her friends, and she gave Mom some handmade jewelry. "I have something for you too, Spencer," she said. Stephanie disappeared into her library and emerged with a little paperback entitled "Humility." At the time, I thought it was just a random selection of a book otherwise destined for the trash heap. I didn't think much about the book until six months later when I noticed it on the shelf. It finally dawned on me that Stephanie thought I could benefit by reading it—that my arrogance, lack of humility and pride might go well with a slice of humble

pie. I ran to tell Kat my discovery, but somehow, she seemed to know already. I swallowed hard and asked, “Does anyone else feel this way about me?” She just smiled and looked away.

You see, that’s the way it is with pride. You have a nine-foot-tall giant towering over you, but you can’t see him. He’s obvious to everyone—except you.

And then there’s the rest of the population. Those who are battling so many giants, they can’t limit it to just one. My suggestion to those folks is that if they really reflect on it, there’s that one giant who stands about a head taller than the rest. There’s one giant who seems to be leading the battalion of giants. My advice to them? Focus on the lead giant.

One more thing. Throughout the seasons of our lives, we have different giants. The truth is that life is hard. And it’s hard for everyone—even the ones who seem to have it easy.

As long as I’m being brutally honest, not much of my life has been easy. When my family moved from New York to Miami when I was seven, I cried every day for a month. Second grade at a new school was hard, and third grade didn’t get any easier. My mother died when I was in eighth grade; that was really hard. In fact, all of school was hard, right through law school. Being a teenager was hard. Having my father die when I was

a college freshman was hard. The following year, my girlfriend Kat (your mother) had brain surgery just a few months after we met. It was hard. In my twenties, learning how to be a lawyer and a husband at the same time was hard. In my thirties, starting my own law firm while becoming a new dad was hard.

Now in my forties, experiencing the onset of my body’s physical deterioration (punctuated by several orthopedic surgeries) has been hard. Work is hard. Commuting an hour each way to and from the office is hard. Going to the gym every day is hard. Eating healthy is hard. Writing this book is hard. Being a Christian in a fallen world is hard.

Don’t get me wrong. I’m not saying that life isn’t wonderful. It is. But let’s face it, it’s hard. And it’s filled with giants. So I ask you, what do you do with all these hardships? How do you survive in the land of the giants? To answer these questions, I need to go back even earlier than 1976. I need to go back 3,000 years—to the original Rocky.

## THE ORIGINAL ROCKY

A long, long time ago, God used prophets to anoint the kings of Israel. The very first king-maker was the Prophet Samuel. At God’s direction, Samuel anointed Saul as the first King of Israel.

King Saul stared off strong, but later disobeyed God. Unbeknownst to Saul, God directed Samuel to anoint a new king, one of the sons of a man named Jesse. So Saul traveled to Jesse's home and spotted his eldest son, Eliab. Eliab must have been quite a physical specimen. Samuel thought to himself, "Surely the Lord's anointed stands before the Lord. But the Lord said to Samuel, 'Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.'"<sup>30</sup>

So Jesse paraded the rest of his boys before Samuel—seven of them—but none was chosen. "Are these all the sons you have?" Samuel inquired. "There is still the youngest, but he is tending the sheep" Jesse replied. Samuel had Jesse send for his youngest boy, David. "Rise and anoint him," the Lord said. "He is the one."<sup>31</sup>

What? Rise and anoint him? What was it about young David that was different than his seven brothers? The text doesn't say exactly, but it does give us a clue. It says the Lord looks at the heart—a recurring theme throughout the Bible. The only thing I can conclude is that David's heart somehow was different from his brothers'. The nature of the difference becomes clear later in the story.

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<sup>30</sup> 1 Samuel 16:6-7 (emphasis added).

<sup>31</sup> 1 Samuel 16:10-12.

King Saul, unaware that David was his replacement, took a shine to the young man. He noticed that David was handsome, that he played the harp and had a reputation for bravery. So impressed was Saul with the young man that he made David his armor bearer.

At this time, Israel was at war with the Philistines, which had a champion, a nine-foot-tall giant named Goliath. For forty days, Goliath stood at the battle line and taunted Israel:

"Why do you come out and line up for battle? Am I not a Philistine, and are you not the servants of Saul? Choose a man and have him come down to me. If he is able to fight and kill me, we will become your subjects; but if I overcome him and kill him, you will become our subjects and serve us." Then the Philistine said, "This day I defy the ranks of Israel! Give me a man and let us fight each other." On hearing the Philistine's words, Saul and all the Israelites were dismayed and terrified.<sup>32</sup>

Among the terrified Israeli warriors were David's three older brothers, including Eliab. David, on the other hand, was too young for battle, so he helped by bringing provisions to the soldiers. In

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<sup>32</sup> 1 Samuel 17:4-11.

other words, he was the water-boy. But when David heard the obscenities the giant was spewing, his blood began to boil.

His brothers told him to mind his own business, but David couldn't. He went straight to King Saul and volunteered to fight the giant himself! Saul, of course, thought David crazy. He reminded David that he was just a boy, and Goliath, well, he was a giant. But David pestered Saul until he relented. With a bit of foreshadowing, Saul dressed the future king in his own armor. But David had never worn armor. After clunking around the royal palace a bit, he removed it, took up his wooden staff and gathered five smooth stones from the stream.

With sling in hand, David approached his giant—his Apollo Creed.

Goliath moved in for the kill, but was surprised to see that David was “only a boy, ruddy and handsome.” Goliath mocked and cursed David, saying that he would serve his flesh to the animals. David was not intimidated. Like Babe Ruth pointing to left field, he replied, “You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty . . . Today I will strike you down and cut off your head . . . and the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> 1 Samuel 17:45-46.

With that, David loaded one of the stones in his sling, fired it at the giant and hit him right between the eyes. Goliath fell to the ground, dead! For dramatic effect, David stood over Goliath, removed the giant's sword from its scabbard and cut off his head. Fear stricken, the Philistine army retreated in horror. But the Israeli warriors now had courage. They gave chase and routed the enemy.

I guess Andrew Jackson was right when he said, “One man with courage makes a majority.”<sup>34</sup> Especially if he's fighting with God at his side.

## A MAN AFTER GOD'S OWN HEART

Of course, you already knew the story of David and Goliath. Everyone does. People have been telling it for 3,000 years, and they'll be telling it for another 3,000.

And that King David, what a guy—warrior, musician, lyricist (he wrote most of the Psalms). Did you know he was also a dancer? When David brought the ark containing the Ten Commandments back to the Holy City of Jerusalem, he donned a linen priest's apron and danced before the Lord with all his might. His wife Michal observed the scene from her window. There was her husband, dancing and leaping, and in front of the slave girls no less! When David finally came home that evening,

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<sup>34</sup> Andrew Jackson.

she lit into him: “How the king of Israel has distinguished himself this evening, disrobing in the sight of the slave girls of his servants like any vulgar fellow would!”<sup>35</sup> But David was indignant: “It was before the Lord” I was dancing, not the slave girls. And undignified? Stay tuned, he told Michal, “I will become even more undignified than this!”<sup>36</sup>

Incidentally, this story is why I never judge the way people worship God. Scripture tells us that Michal died childless.

Now I want to be clear, David was no saint. He committed both adultery and murder! Yet, amazingly, he is the only human being in the Bible described as “a man after God’s own heart.”<sup>37</sup> Another reference to the heart. Which leads me back to the question, what was it about David’s heart that was so special? How was his heart like God’s? And where can I get one?

As I reflect on it, I think it comes down to this. Dave had unshakable faith. And, unlike his brothers, he volunteered to fight! He was passionate too. Yeah, that David was a giant-slaying, harp-playing, song-writing, God-loving fool. And he danced. Boy, did he dance. When it was time to fight, he fought. But when it was time to dance, he danced.

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<sup>35</sup> 2 Samuel 6:20.

<sup>36</sup> 2 Samuel 6:21:22.

<sup>37</sup> Acts 13:22.

If I had to express the heart formula as an equation, it would look like this:

**Faith + Action + Passion = HEART**

## THE DREAM SEQUENCE

Every so often, I have this dream. I’m sitting on the couch staring at a nine-foot-tall giant. And I’m having a case of the pity-me’s. There I am, stuck on the couch, paralyzed with fear and self-pity. I stare at the giant and wonder to myself: “Wow, how did he get so big? And why is he picking on *me*? What did I do to him? Why did he take my parents? Where was God then? Why didn’t he deliver me? Why is life so hard? And why am I still gripped with sin—with pride and greed? When will I catch a break? When will God show up and fight my giants? When will he get me off this couch?”

Now here’s the part where it gets really weird (as if the giant isn’t weird enough). Just when I’m about to give up, an angel appears right in my living room. Turns out, it’s King David! But he’s not a boy anymore. He’s older, with gray hair and a flowing beard. Sort of like the Ghost of Hanukah Past. He says he’s been watching me from heaven, pacing the sidelines, waiting for me to act. Just like he did 3,000 years ago when he watched as the Israelites were paralyzed with fear by the giant Goliath. He says he just couldn’t take it anymore, so he came down from heaven

for a little half-time pep talk. How ironic, I think to myself. At 45, I'm in the half-time of my life.

So King David walks over to me, takes a knee and gets right in my face.

"Spence, do you know what time it is?"

"I . . . I . . . I don't know," I stammer, still in shock from the vision. "Around midnight?"

"No, it's time to man up! You don't need pity. What you need is a backbone! Where's your heart?! Did you forget that you are God's mighty warrior?! Did you forget that he can make you more than a conqueror?!"

With that, David rises to his feet and says, "Spence, it's time to join the battle. Because it's in the battle that God builds your character. It's in the battle that God shapes your heart. It's in the battle that God explodes your faith. It's never on the couch. It's never in the rocking chair. It's never on the sidelines. It's in the battle where you meet God, where you come face to face with Jesus Christ."

"But there's a catch," David reveals. "The battle is the Lord's, but you must take the first step. He will not levitate you off that couch. It's always been that way—always. When the Israelites stood ready to cross the Jordan River to enter the Promised Land, God did not part the water until the priests got their feet wet. Nor did God intercede for Abraham until he was ready to plunge

the knife into his son Isaac. And Peter didn't walk on water until he got out of the boat. God will fight with you, but he will not fight for you."

"And one more thing," David says. "That story about Goliath and me. I must admit, I like that one myself. But if you keep reading through First and Second Samuel, you'll see there were other battles with other giants. Sometimes I got the best of them, and sometimes they got the best me. I always kept fighting though, no matter what."

"So there's just one thing you need to do," David says. And then he leans over and whispers in my ear that one word that shakes me down to my soul.

"Fight" he says. "Get off the couch and FIGHT!"

Then David starts to fade away. "I have to go back to heaven now," he says. "I'm working on a new dance."

And with that, he's gone. It's just me again—alone with the giant. But then I hear another voice.

This time it's God.

"My son, are you willing to join the battle? Are you ready to fight?"

"God, I'm a proud man," I say. "Teach me humility, and then I can get off this couch."

God replies, "I know all about it. What you need to do, my son, is serve the needy. Make yourself low and wash their feet."

"But God," I say, "I don't think you heard me. I need you to make me humble before I can do that."

"I heard you perfectly," God answers. "Wash their feet, and I'll teach you everything there is to know about humility."

"And what about my greed?" I ask.

"That's simple," God replies. "Just write a check."

"I think you have it backwards, God. You need to make me generous first."

"No, I think you have it backwards," God responds. "Write a check, and you'll become generous."

"But I've had a hard life, God. I'm weary and I'm scared. Can't you just make things easy for me?"

"Sure I can," he says. "But I won't. Because then you'd think you succeeded on your own merit. Your character would never develop. Your faith would never grow. And your heart would never change. But if you take the first

step, I promise I'll be with you. I will make you more than a conqueror."

So I rise up off the couch, and take a step. "Wow, that wasn't so hard."

"Good," God says. "Now take another."

So I do. And pretty soon, I'm high-stepping all over my living room. That is, until I remember that the giant is still there.

"You can do it," God assures me.

I swallow hard and take a step toward my giant. And then another. And another. Until I'm right in front of him, staring up into the face shield of his helmet. I lift my trembling hand and knock on his armored chest. But there's no answer. I knock again. "Hello, Mr. Giant." Still no answer. So I lift up his face shield, and to my great surprise, there's nothing inside. My giant is hollow!

I can't believe it. I spent all that time worrying about a giant, and he existed only in my mind.

Then I wake up.

## THE IMPOSSIBLE DREAM

Son, don't expect life to be easy—because it's not. It's hard. But that's the best part. All the

great things in life are hard. If they weren't, they wouldn't be great. If everyone could hit a baseball like A-Rod, throw a pass like Peyton Manning or swing a golf club like Tiger Woods, those guys wouldn't be superstars. If everyone could ride a bike like Lance Armstrong or swim like Michael Phelps, no one would marvel at their accomplishments. Their feats are amazing because they're hard. Don't ever look for the easy way; it's the hard way that makes the man.

Not only that, it's the pain and suffering that give context for all joy in life. Without suffering, joy has no meaning. Before the Israelites entered the Land of Milk and Honey, they wandered in the desert for 40 years. And before Resurrection Sunday, there was Crucifixion Friday. There are no shortcuts. To get to heaven, you have to go through hell.

And please, don't get too hung up on results. Remember, it's the impossible fights that fire our imagination. Rocky fought a giant and lost. In the classic story, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, small-town lawyer Atticus Finch defended an innocent black man accused of raping a white woman—and lost. And Don Quixote tilted at windmills. He didn't win. But those characters are heroes, not because they won—they didn't—but because they fought. They are champions because they marched into hell for a heavenly cause.

As a civil defense lawyer, I can relate to those stories. My profession is hard. If I were a plain-

tiff's lawyer, I would get better, more winnable cases as I progressed in my career. The cases with clear liability and huge damages. For us defense lawyers, it's exactly the opposite. We're defending those huge cases brought by the best plaintiff's lawyers. The more experience we get, the harder and scarier our job becomes. In fact, I know from the start that many of my cases can't be won. I recently lost a trial to the tune of \$38 million! Sure, every once in a while I may snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. But if I focused on the outcome, it would get pretty depressing. I choose instead to focus on the fight—to answer the call to battle, to fight the good fight, to go the distance.

Recall the Apostle Paul's final words to his protégé Timothy: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."<sup>38</sup> Notice what he doesn't say. He doesn't say he won the fight or the race. It was enough that he fought the fight and finished the race—and kept his faith in the process. That should be enough for you too. On your death bed, you may regret the battles you lost, but you'll never forgive yourself for the ones you didn't fight.

In the hit Broadway musical *Man of La Mancha*,<sup>39</sup> the Don Quixote character described

<sup>38</sup> 2 Timothy 4:7.

<sup>39</sup> *Man of La Mancha*, music by Mitch Leigh, lyrics by Joe Dorion (Broadway 1965). This was my mother's and Kat's father's favorite song. We adopted it as our wedding song and life song.

the mission of a knight in similar terms—as an *Impossible Dream*:

It is the mission of each true knight . . .  
His duty... nay, his privilege! To  
dream the impossible dream, To  
fight the unbeatable foe, To bear  
with unbearable sorrow To run where  
the brave dare not go; To right the  
unrightable wrong.

To love pure and chaste from afar,  
To try, when your arms are too weary,  
To reach the unreachable star!

This is my Quest to follow that star,  
No matter how hopeless, no matter  
how far, To fight for the right Without  
question or pause, To be willing  
to march into hell For a heavenly  
cause!

And I know, if I'll only be true To this  
glorious Quest, That my heart will lie  
peaceful and calm When I'm laid to  
my rest.

And the world will be better for this,  
That one man, scorned and covered  
with scars, Still strove, with his  
last ounce of courage, To reach the  
unreachable star!

Like the song says, Cameron, you have a mission. A noble mission. But you are also free to reject it. It's your choice. It's the same choice that confronted fictional characters Rocky, Atticus Finch and Don Quixote. The same choice posed to historical figures King David, the Apostle Paul and even Jesus Christ. The same choice facing every man since the beginning of time.

The choice is this: You can take the easy way out. You can spend your life wondering why it's so hard; why bad things happen to good people. Or you can be an agent of change. You can choose to fight for what is right; for what is good and noble. If you fight—if you just take the first step—I promise, God will be with you. Remember, it's in the battlefield of life where you meet God. He will make you more than a conqueror.<sup>40</sup>

Cameron, you will have hardship in this life. When you do, I hope you choose to fight.

And when the fighting is over, I hope you dance.

Now, if you're going to fight, you'll need a code of conduct for the battle.

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<sup>40</sup> Romans 8:37.