



GOT YOUR BACK

HELPING CHRISTIAN MEN FORGE THE
BROTHERHOOD CONNECTIONS THEY NEED

Includes discussion questions to be used as a men's Bible study

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Introduction

Today's church is experiencing an epidemic of male isolation. Research reveals that nineteen out of twenty Christian men have no best friend, no one helping them fight their spiritual battles, much less a brother who has their back.

Yet there are many signs that God's Spirit is at work, bringing the age of John Wayne Christianity to a close. Here are just three:

1. The rising generation of Christian men sees more clearly the importance of living out their faith in community. For some, the brokenness of their family of origin motivates them to seek connection in the family of God. Others realize that since sin has fractured the relationships of this world, the church is called to be the place where Christ's power to restore relationships is demonstrated. They are committed to building community, so that the church is seen to be a place where Jesus is reweaving the well-being (shalom) of his kingdom.

2. Twenty-first century Christian men are not particularly enamored with material success. Not only do they want to be engaged in a mission that matters, they also realize that their deepest struggles—with God, with themselves, with sexuality, with relationships—are spiritual in nature.

3. Today's rising generation of Christian men realizes that discipleship isn't a program; it's a relationship. They're not so much interested in a mentor or program that provides "The Ten Steps to Discipleship" as they are a brother (maybe an older one) who walks with them through life's challenges as a Christ-follower. They want a brother saying to them, "Got your back."

In short, the conviction is growing among contemporary Christian men that God never intended for them to fight their spiritual battles alone. Way too conscious of the battles they are losing, today's men are wondering where to find a few close friends who will have their back. But **finding** them may be the wrong verb. They may need to **forge** them. This book is written to help men forge the kind of brotherhood connections they sense that they are missing, and know that they need.

The biblical principles you will discover in the subsequent pages are road-tested. Thousands of man-hours have been logged by men implementing these principles and churches executing these strategies, many of which first appeared in print eight years ago under the title, *Forging Bonds of Brotherhood*. This updated version, *Got Your Back*, has several new chapters that provide practical insights and strategies for using the material most effectively in your men's ministry. You will enjoy the varied stories of men who have moved out of isolation and into the kind of brotherhood connection experienced by Jonathan and David and by our Lord, with his close friends, Peter, James, and John.

Chapter 1

The Battle

A part of me loved war. Now please understand I am a peaceful man, fond of children and animals. And I believe that war should have no place in the affairs of men. But THE CAMARADERIE our platoon experienced in that war provides an enduring and moving memory in me.¹

Scott was expecting the Iraqis to fire a few surface-to-air missiles at his F-16 when he got close to his target, the nuclear power plant south of Baghdad. What he wasn't expecting was an all out barrage beginning twenty-five miles away. Screaming and cussing at the SAMs that were exploding everywhere, Scott stayed on course, reached his target, and dropped his bombs. But, as he pulled up, he could see an SA3 explode right underneath his wingman's plane, blowing off his fuel tanks and putting what later proved to be over a hundred holes in the fuselage of his wingman's aircraft.

Miraculously, the pilot himself wasn't hit. Scott immediately flew to his wingman's side, conducted a visual inspection of the damaged plane, took over responsibility for his navigation and defense, and radioed for help. He guided the damaged plane to the closest base for an emergency landing, but bad weather made it impossible to land. For the next two and a half hours, Scott worked feverishly, conducting emergency divers to refuel his wingman's plane to keep him in the air long enough to land safely. The bad weather forced them to visit five different emergency landing sites before they were able to get him on the ground. Scott literally saved his wingman's life.

A half hour after Scott had landed, a brigadier-general, who was one of the pilots on the mission, stopped by to visit Scott. In the general's words, "Scott was standing leaning against a bunch of sandbags, just holding on to them, and shaking like a leaf. He couldn't walk; he couldn't talk; he couldn't move anything. All he could do was stand there and shake. The guy had nothing left. All his adrenaline was gone. He gave everything he had that day for his wingman."²

Scott's heroic care of his wingman illustrates what all F-16 pilots know. You never fly alone. You need a wingman. You need another pilot in case you get into an emergency. You need someone watching your back—what pilots call their *six*—since a high percentage of aircraft are shot down by a threat they never see.

Everything about combat flying reinforces this principle. During the pre-flight brief, the pilot and wingman discuss tactics, techniques and procedures as well as the specifics of aircrew coordination. "When you're attacking the target, exposed to the threat, I will be above you, providing high cover, prepared to engage any threat that pops up. When you come off target, I'll roll in, expecting you to provide high cover for me. This is how we will communicate ..." One of the most important parts of the brief is the discussion of emergencies—what will we do when the unexpected happens and things go bad?

After the brief, the aircrew walks to their jets for a pre-flight, reviewing the maintenance history of each other's aircraft, letting each other know what problems they could potentially have with the aircraft. Just prior to takeoff, the lead pilot and his wingman look over each others' jets very carefully to ensure that there are no problems: no doors open, no fluids leaking, flight control surfaces in the correct position for takeoff, etc. After their mission is completed, it is with each other that they carefully debrief.

The United States military is committed to the principle that in war, you cannot fight alone and survive very long. That is why our military trains as it does. Vietnam veteran Stu Weber recounts the words of his grizzled C.O. at the Army Ranger School at Ft. Benning.

"Many of you will not complete the nine weeks. It is simply too tough. But, for those who do, when we are finished with you, you WILL BE the U.S. Army's best. America's best. You WILL be confident. You WILL survive, even in combat. And you WILL accomplish your mission...."

"Step one in your training is the assignment of your 'Ranger Buddy.' Difficult assignments require a

friend. The two of you will stick together. You will never leave each other. You will walk together, run together, eat together, and sleep together. You will help each other. You will encourage each other. And as necessary, you will carry each other.”³

Because our military understands that no man can fight alone and survive very long, the team is everything. In Mogadishu, Somalia, when the lead Blackhawk helicopter went down, a hundred Rangers formed a perimeter around the downed chopper and its pilot. In the ensuing firefight eighteen Americans were killed and seventy-five wounded. The Ranger code says you don’t leave a fallen comrade to fall into the hands of the enemy.

In war no man can fight alone and survive very long. Yet that is the way Frank was fighting a fierce battle that raged inside his soul. He knew that the feelings he was experiencing with Pam, his secretary, were wrong, illicit. And yet he had never felt so wonderful in all his life. Pam loved him. Unlike his wife, Pam admired him. She understood him. She wanted him. Never had he felt so alive, so good—as he did when he was with her.

Yet, daily, he did battle with his conscience. Adultery was wrong. He knew that. As a pastor he had taught it. But to leave the warm embraces of a woman who deeply wanted him to return to the cold, almost hostile emptiness of his marriage was more than he could face.

His love for his wife had died a long time ago. He had realized that their feelings were dying, and almost mentioned his concerns to one of his church friends. But from the time he was a boy, Frank had been taught that men shoulder their own problems. He asked no one for help, and slowly his marriage decayed before his own eyes. He and Cindy simply focused more and more on their three kids and the house. Fights were more frequent. Affection cooled. Sex was rare until it finally became extinct. No wonder he couldn’t control himself when Pam was so inviting.

The battle with his conscience grew even more intense when his and Pam’s affair was discovered. He faced a mandate from his wife and the church. Break off with Pam and come back to Cindy or move out of the house, and face church discipline. Either, daily face

the harsh anger of his wife, ridiculing him for his hypocrisy in a marriage where the feelings were completely dead or start over again with a new wife who loved him, admired him, and wanted him. He hated to damage his relationship with his kids who were fully grown by then. He loved them. But, the reality was, that relationship had already been severely damaged when they found out about the affair. As far as church discipline was concerned, he and Pam would solve that problem easily enough by simply leaving the church. He would have to leave the ministry to sell insurance, but life with Cindy, or life with Pam? Misery versus happiness? It was a no-brainer, regardless of the loud clamor of his conscience.

Frank divorced his wife, and moved in with his secretary, whom he married the day after the divorce was finalized. The repercussions of his decision were far reaching. His wife, despite the care of her adult children, would die a lonely and rejected woman. Since he had been the dominant influence as his kid's spiritual leader, his betrayal of his faith and their mother sent their faith into a tailspin. It would be over ten years before his youngest son, Jim, (then in his thirties) would come back to Christ. Frank's teen aged grandchildren were hurt even more severely. A blow was struck at the root of their confidence that Christianity was real. If Christianity was about hypocrisy and betrayal, why not dive headfirst into the pleasures of drugs, alcohol, partying, and illicit sex? So they did.⁴

Frank was taken down by temptation. His whole household crashed and burned, with the damage extending three generations. The parallel is obvious. The stakes are too high, the battle too fierce, the enemy too wily, the attacks too frequent, the cost of defeat too severe for any Christian man to fight his spiritual battles alone.

Many men miss this parallel because they don't view their everyday lives as a spiritual combat zone. Paul, however, says it is.

For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. (Eph. 6:12-13)

Men are born to be warriors and Christian men are called to wage a fierce, three-front battle. We must daily battle the enemy within, our sinful nature, which relentlessly seeks to overpower us. Ever since the fateful day when Adam disobeyed God's command and ate the forbidden fruit, men have been conscious of this traitor that dwells in their hearts. John Owen describes this collaborator,

However strong a castle may be, if a treacherous party resides inside (ready to betray at the first opportunity possible), the castle cannot be kept safe from the enemy. Traitors occupy our own hearts, ready to side with every temptation and to surrender to them all.⁵

It is true that in Christ, every believer has been made into a new creation, and indwelt by the Holy Spirit to transform our heart. But, we still must daily do battle with the sinful nature that remains. Paul describes this conflict,

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other... (Gal. 5:16-17a)

Our own sinful nature is just one of the enemies we face daily. We must also resist a world that continually bombards us with enticements that seek to take the affections of our heart captive. Reformed Theological Seminary professor Steve Childers explains the sin that lies beneath most sins.

To Paul, mankind's root problem is not merely an external, behavioral problem—it is an internal problem of the heart. Paul believed that one of the primary reasons human hearts are not more transformed is because the affections of people's hearts have been captured by idols that grip them and steal their hearts' affection away from God.⁶

Such idols subtly propel us to do whatever it takes to get the success, respect, stimulation, financial stability, prestige, financial security, sexual pleasure, or “happiness” that our heart thinks it needs to be satisfied. So vulnerable is our heart to deception that Paul says the very thoughts that enter our mind need to be challenged. “For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ...” (2 Cor. 10:4-5).

The third adversary to be engaged in this three-front war is a spiritual enemy who wants to “rob, and kill, and destroy” us and our loved ones (John 10:10). His name is Satan. He is on God’s leash; but that does not mean that he and his cohorts do not have enormous power to destroy. Jesus was so aware of Satan’s influence in this world that he taught his followers to pray daily, “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one” (Matt 6:13). On one occasion he said to Peter, “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail” (Luke 22:31).

If you are a Christ-follower, you have an adversary coming after you. John makes that clear in the book of Revelation. “Then the dragon (Satan) became furious with the woman (the church) and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus” (Rev 12:17). John Eldredge is right when he argues,

Behind the world and the flesh is an even more deadly enemy...one we rarely speak of and are much less ready to resist. Yet this is where we live now—on the front lines of a fierce spiritual war that is to blame for most of the casualties you see around you and most of the assault against you.⁷

The spiritual warfare described in Scripture is not just a nice metaphor for the fact that life is sometimes difficult! It is reality. Yet the vast majority of Christian men are like Frank, fighting their spiritual battles by themselves. They have no one checking their six. Is it any wonder that so many are losing the battle with lust and

pornography, the battle to be self-disciplined, the battle for the souls of their teens, the battle over whose values will shape our culture?

A few years ago I was standing in line to get some food at a men's "beast feast" where I was going to speak. The guy beside me said, "Gary it's not just in the military where fighting alone makes you vulnerable. That principle is true in the animal kingdom. If a pride of lions gets hungry for zebra steak, what do they do? They chase the herd until they can break one zebra away from the rest of the herd. Then they go in for the kill."

I responded, "And Scripture says, 'Your adversary, the devil prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour'" (I Peter 5:8).

Not long ago a survey was taken of over 120,000 Christian men, who were asked, "Do you have a best friend?" An astonishing ninety-five percent answered, "No." *Nineteen out of twenty Christian men in our country are so disconnected that they have no best friend.* They have no comrade-in-arms.

It's not that Christian men today have no friends; it's that they have no friend close enough to have their back. Proverbs 18:24 is enlightening: "A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is *a friend who sticks closer than a brother*" Most Christian men today have many companions, but no friend who sticks closer than a brother. They have numerous *acquaintances*, but no *brothers-in-arms*.

With a friend who is merely an acquaintance conversation centers on the ball game, work, the kids, vacations, and the news—superficial subjects kept safely away from issues of the heart. "Acquaintance" and "superficial connection" are the concepts behind the Hebrew word used in the first half of Proverbs 18:24 which is translated, *companion*. In sharp contrast is having a true *friend*, (ESV), also translated, *beloved friend* who sticks *closer than a brother*.

This is the kind of brother Paul had in Epaphroditus. Paul introduced him to the Philippians as "my brother, fellow worker, and fellow soldier" (Phil. 2:25). Here are two souls knit together by common family bonds, by a common task to be accomplished, and by a common enemy to be faced. Epaphroditus was a true brother-in-arms to Paul, the kind every warrior needs. If Frank had had an

Epaphroditus in his life, chances are that he never would have crashed and burned through his affair with Pam. His family would have been spared enormous pain.

What about you? Do you have a brother who knows where your spiritual battles rage, who is shoulder-to-shoulder with you fighting for you in prayer? Have you invited a brother into your life to be close enough to you so that he's got your back?

Group Discussion Guide

1. If one is *the pits* and five is *great*, pick a number for the kind of week you are having and tell why you picked that number.
2. If you had a best friend either as a boy or as an adult, describe that relationship.

What caused you to be best friends?

3. What has been your past experience meeting with Christian men for Bible study or encouragement/accountability?
4. How valid is the analogy made in this chapter between fighting a physical enemy alone and fighting spiritual enemies alone?
5. Which of the three spiritual battlefields—your sinful nature, the world, or the evil one—do we tend to ignore the most, in your opinion? Why?
6. Why do you think so many Christian men today have many acquaintances but no friend who sticks closer than a brother?

During the week: Think and pray about your answer to the question, “Do you have anyone in your life who knows where your spiritual battles are?”

The Rest Of *Got Your Back*

Chapter 2 Why Do Nineteen Out of Twenty Christian Men Have No Best Friend 12

No Christian man I know sets out to fight his battles alone. So, how did we get here? Why are nineteen out of twenty of us in this condition?

Chapter 3 Jonathan and David 24

No doubt, our wives are to be our most intimate companions. And, it is for our wives and children that we are to pour out sacrificial love. We are called to die for them. But, as Stu Weber points out, “something inside us longs for someone to die with...someone to die beside...someone to lock step with. Another man with a heart like our own.” Jonathan found that kind of brother in David.

Chapter 4 Jesus’ Teaching and Example 35

Christian men are called to engage in a fierce spiritual battle with sin; and too many of them are alone in their struggle. Lone Ranger Christianity, however, is not Christianity at all. It is an aberration.

Chapter 5 The Biblical Case Against Isolation 43

The message of the New Testament is that we need each other. We can’t make it in the Christian life alone.

Chapter 6 The High Price of Isolation 50

Over the years I’ve observed that when we Christian men cease to be connected to other Christian men for encouragement, support, and accountability, we begin to display most of the following characteristics.

Chapter 7 Rediscovering How Disciples Are Made 58

The brotherhood connection men need is not random; it requires intentionality. It requires getting organized to beat the old man. But how do we do that? Might the New Testament teaching on

discipleship provide clues about the structure men need to give them the discipline to do what they know they should? Let's investigate.

Chapter 8 I've Got Your Back 74

*Why is it that so many Christian men are vulnerable out there, isolated, running by themselves—dead meat? This does not happen while men are still in the first life stage of discipleship—spiritual boot camp—where they usually have a speak-the-truth-in-love connection with other brothers. It is after a young believer has completed a structured training program and moved on to the spiritual adulthood stage of discipleship that **today's church is failing him**. This is the life stage where a soldier spends most of his career and a believer spends most of his life.*

Chapter 9 Starting a Check 6 Partnership 92

By now, I hope you agree with the above quote—we need men to whom we can bare our souls. The question is, how do I go from not having such close brothers to having them? Over the past eight years, here is what has worked to help men forge brotherhood connections.

Chapter 10 Helping Your Men Become a Band of Brothers 103

Over the years we have assisted hundreds of churches to help their men forge brotherhood bonds with one another. In this chapter, we want to observe the most common mistakes we have seen churches make in this process and then examine six practical steps your leadership team can take to help your men connect.

End Notes

¹ Frank Broyles, *Brothers in Arms: A Journey From War to Peace*, (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1996).

² This account of what happened was passed on to me by Joe Craft, the Executive Officer of the Basic School at Quantico Marine Base, Quantico, VA. Joe also explained the wingman relationship between two pilots. He left Quantico to command a Top Gun squadron at the Marine Corps Air Station, Miramar.

³ Stu Weber, *Locking Arms: God's Design for Masculine Friendships* (Oregon: Multnomah Books, 1995), p. 77-78.

⁴ The names in this true story have been changed to protect the participant's privacy.

⁵ John Owen, *Sin and Temptation*, Classics of Faith and Devotions Series, (Oregon: Multnomah Books, 1986)

⁶ Steve Childers, Spiritual Dynamics Class Notes, Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando, 2005.

⁷ John Eldrege, *Wild at Heart*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001 Special Addition MIM), p. 157.