

“Whatever your life stage, let Robert coach you on living with intention, grace, and courage. This lap can be your best one yet.”

MICHAEL HYATT, NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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g s u n

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STAYING IN
THE RACE
WITH
PURPOSE
—

Robert
Wolgemuth

l a p

I've known Robert Wolgemuth for almost four decades. During that time, I've watched him walk with purpose and integrity. This is why he's qualified to write *Gun Lap*, one of the best books I've ever read on running my own last lap. Whatever your life stage, let Robert coach you on living with intention, grace, and courage. This lap can be your best one yet.

Michael Hyatt, *New York Times* bestselling author

The final lap in our lifelong race can be our best. We don't have to cave to resignation; we can run with joyful determination. If you'll read *Gun Lap: Staying in the Race with Purpose* by Robert Wolgemuth, you'll have a faithful friend alongside you, helping you run magnificently, all the way.

Ray Ortlund, Renewal Ministries, Nashville, Tennessee

Whether he knew it or not, I'm the guy Robert had in mind as he was writing *Gun Lap*. I needed this book—the encouragement, the coaching, the challenge. And I'm guessing I'm not the only one. I'm grateful for the wisdom and authenticity that pour from these pages. I'll see you on the home stretch.

Bob Lepine, cohost, *FamilyLife Today*

Whether your race is short or long, the key is to run that last lap well. It's called the gun lap. Written by my friend Robert Wolgemuth, here is a must read for anyone over fifty . . . men, running their gun lap. It's an honest, down-to-earth, and biblical look at the meaning of our lives in this season. It will show you how to make every day count, drawing you closer to God and helping you get a fresh perspective on your life. I highly recommend this book.

Greg Laurie, pastor/evangelist, Harvest Ministries

Inspiring, challenging, invigorating, and very motivating. *Gun Lap* is a must read, not only for men approaching their sixth or seventh decade, but *all* men! Why? It is a guide that guarantees a lasting

legacy of success, peace, and victorious achievements for yourself and those you will have mentored. Read this book and you will start every year as a gun lap!

Dr. Raleigh Washington, president/CEO, The Road to Jerusalem and president emeritus of Promise Keepers

If you want to make the rest of your life the best of your life, read my good friend, Robert Wolgemuth's book. *This* book. Be inspired by words of a man who is leading the way around the track to the home stretch and beyond with faith, courage, and joy. A remarkable book by a remarkable man.

Jack Graham, pastor, Prestonwood Baptist Church

As a fitness nut, I'm aware of the challenges of running competitively so I'm familiar with that final trip "round the track . . . the gun lap." Here's a wonderful book that is exactly what I needed to be encouraged to run well in my later years. My favorite part is that as I was reading, it seemed more like I was having a conversation with my friend, Robert, rather than turning the pages of a book. Try this yourself. The experience will be the same. Wonderful. Trust me.

Ken Davis, author, speaker, CEO of
The Art in Business of Public Speaking

The Scriptures exhort us to lay aside every encumbrance so that we may run with patience and endurance the race that is set before us. Easier said than done, right? Well, in this timely, practical, and encouraging book, Robert Wolgemuth shows us how it is actually possible to so live our lives—from our first burst out of the blocks to our final lap. I love this book. I need this book.

George Grant, pastor,
Parish Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee

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lap

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STAYING IN
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Robert
Wolgemuth

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Printed in the United States of America

978-1-0877-4047-8

Published by B&H Publishing Group
Nashville, Tennessee

Dewey Decimal Classification: 248.842
Subject Heading: CHRISTIAN LIFE / SPIRITUAL LIFE / MEN

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Published in association with Wolgemuth & Associates.

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Dedication

Nick Challies

(March 5, 2000 – November 3, 2020)

How strange, you might think, for a book—written for men in their forties and fifties, getting ready for their sixties and seventies—to be dedicated to a man who stepped into heaven at age twenty. In fact, Nick is a man I never met . . . but I do know his parents, Tim and Aileen. These folks got the phone call parents dread with everything in their being. In an instant, with no warning at all, their twenty-year-old son was gone.

At his son's memorial service, Tim spoke these words:

Each one of us is given a race to run. Some are called to run a long race; some are called to run just a short race. What matters is not how long the race is, but how well we'll run it. It's God's business to determine how long that race will be; it's our business to determine how well we'll run it. Let me tell you, it is so much better to run a short race well than a long race poorly.

God called Nick to run just a short race. Some people get eighty years, some get ninety; Nick got only twenty, but he ran well.

J. I. Packer was a man who ran a very long race indeed, and he once said this: “My contention is that . . . we should aim to be found running the last lap of the race of our Christian life, as we would say, flat out. The final sprint, so I urge, should be a sprint indeed.”¹

That was my boy. He sprinted strong to the end.

Nick’s story—and the way his precious parents have faced this tragedy with singular courage and grace—has been such an inspiration and encouragement for me since, as for now, I’m still running. And since you’re reading this, apparently so are you. Like his dad said about him, may you and I sprint to the end.

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Introduction

MANY YEARS AGO, I WAS in a conversation with Dr. Tim LaHaye in his Washington, D.C., office. Standing next to his conference table at the close of a meeting, he and I were talking about life and family, book writing, and publishing. Tim was a man with intense eyes, steely resolve, small of stature but a giant in the world of Christian leadership and thought. Almost as an aside, he dropped a piece of wisdom on me I will never forget.

As you may know, in addition to writing many books on his own, Tim was Jerry Jenkins' coauthor in the *Left Behind* series of sixteen books. And how did those books do? Well, the best number I can come up with is over sixty-two million copies sold. So if Dr. LaHaye was giving me writing counsel . . . I was going to take it.

He said something to me that day I have probably repeated five hundred times. Maybe more.

“A book is a long letter to just one person.”

By that point in my life, I had spent my career solely on the business side of the business, involved in one way or another with maybe a thousand titles. But there were no books in the marketplace with my name on the cover. This comment from a veteran author released something in me that continues to live on, even though Dr. LaHaye has been in heaven since 2016.

I've now have had the joy and privilege of writing more than twenty books. And with nearly every one of them, I've intentionally kept one person, and one person only, in mind as I wrote that long letter.

Whenever I'm speaking to a group, of course, I'm looking into the faces of the many people in attendance. But a book is different. There are no faces. No platforms. No microphones. No crowds. Only a computer screen. No need to make eye contact with as many as possible.

So I make a game out of it and pretend there *is* a face. A man I'm writing to. Virtually. That way, when in my mind's eye I see a knowing smile looking back at me because of something I've just written, his face tells me I'm on track. When I see a tilted head, a furrowed brow, and a quizzical look, I know I need to step back, step up, and try again.

Unlike speaking to a group, writing is a very intimate medium. In this case I have the honor of being the writer, and you, my friend, the reader. Although, even in saying this, I'm under no delusion that I had anything to do with bringing you to this book. Someone else helped. Either someone recommended it to you and you bought it, or they gave you this copy. But you're here. And you're reading . . . at least the first few pages.

So, welcome. I'm excited that you're here.

Thank you for joining me.

But now that you have this book in your hands (or are listening to it on audio), it's my job to keep you here.¹ This means as I stroke these words into my computer, my heart better be pounding, and I'd better be on the edge of my seat, if I expect you to be on the edge of yours. My hope and, literally, my prayer are that

you stay with me the whole way to the end. I also hope there are times when what I say sends your mind in a direction far beyond what I'm even talking about. You know, like a pipe dream. I'll say something that ignites something else, and then your mind is off and running.

I'd love that.

Let's do it, you and me.

Who Are You?

With more than forty years in the book publishing business, I've asked the following question to marketing teams seemingly countless times: Who is this book for? Who is the target audience?

As you'd guess, this isn't just a stray bullet point on the marketing agenda. It's the *reason* for the marketing agenda, as well as for the rest of the meeting that follows. Next to an inquiry into the actual content of the book, it's the most important question to be considered.

So, let's ask the same question about *this* book. Who is it written for?

I'm writing *Gun Lap* for myself and for men like me. (I'll explain more thoroughly what the gun lap is in a few minutes.) Men who find themselves at the point in their lives when they're running their last lap. Or I'm writing it for men who are getting ready to *start* their final lap, and they have some questions, maybe even some anxiety about it. This is no small thing—examining our very own lives at this point on our journey. Taking our last lap. In fact, it's a big deal.

Over the years, philosophies have emerged that claim the possibility of “do-overs.” Reincarnation and the like. But these are not true. You may remember the Madison Avenue quip, “You only go ‘round once in life.” Unlike some other claims these marketers sometimes use, this one’s thoroughly accurate.

The author of the New Testament book of Hebrews wrote, “It is appointed for people to die once—and after this, judgment” (9:27). And it stands to reason, if you and I only *die* once, we’ll only *live* once as well.

That’s what I want to talk about. Just between us. In the pages that follow, there will be some laughter and tears, but mostly there will be candor. Honest conversation. Only you and me.

The point here will be for us to reflect on the years that have gone by, and even more to embrace the amount of sand that still lingers above the pinch of the hourglass, to be encouraged about the possibilities that remain in each grain. Not *discouraged*, but *encouraged* about the time that’s left to run. To be as intentional as you can be about what’s ahead. On the gun lap. *Your* gun lap. And mine.

**The point here will be for us to reflect on the years
that have gone by, and even more to embrace
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Gun Lap—do you know what I mean by that?

Here's what I'm sure you *do* know. In a long-distance race around a track, the ear-splitting sound of a starter's pistol is what breaks the pregnant silence after the shouted words, "Runners, to your mark! . . . Set!" . . . then, *Bang!* and the race is on.

The sound is intended to be rude and intentional. I suppose, if someone wanted something else besides this auditory violation of the still air, there could be the recorded sound of a jazz band striking up a tune. Or a singer crooning a love song. But the impact on the runners at the ready, or on those gathered in the stands, would not be the same. In order to get the race started right, you need a gun.

It's not entirely unlike what was done to each of us at the beginning of our lives. The doctor who delivered us from our mother probably took us by our little purple feet, held us upside down, and gave us a hearty swat on our bottom. *Whap!* How absolutely rude of him or her. But it's a necessary piece of the routine. In that moment our lungs filled with air and we let out a wail, announcing to the crew in the delivery room, and more importantly to our mother, that we are in fact here and ready to go. Our race is underway. That first whack was like the starter raising his arm, gun in hand, squeezing the necessary trigger.

And now, after many years, the gun is about to be fired again. For the second time. The "Gun Lap."

In distance running parlance, this is the last lap to be run before the race is over. And it's what you're getting ready to run, or perhaps are already in the process of running.

Either way, there's no getting around the inevitability of it.

Whap!

Your gun lap is inescapable.

I don't know about you, but I have this secret propensity to question almost everything. When I see a sign that says, "Wet Paint," there's something in me that wants to touch it . . . even just an inconsequential edge . . . to be certain that the sign is telling the truth and the paint is really fresh. Is this you, too?

Many years ago, I was on a business trip. Having landed at the airport and renting a car, I was on the way to my sales call.²

Before the age of GPS and the convenient early warnings about road construction or traffic-snarling accidents,³ driving meant finding out about these things when you got there. No heads-up in advance or a suggested alternate route.

Presently, I passed a large, yellow sign that told me of a bridge out in five miles. *Interesting, a bridge out*, I remember contemplating.

Three miles later, another sign updated me. "Bridge out, two miles. Detour ahead." *This may be real*, I thought to myself. *But I can't afford a delay like this. I'll be late for my appointment.*

Then something happened I can still vividly recall. I observed the oncoming traffic. Cars were coming back toward me in the oncoming lanes at full, unbothered speed. *If the bridge is really out*, I rationalized, *then why is traffic coming this direction?*

Silly as it must sound to you as you read this, it's really what I was thinking. Knowing that a bridge under construction affects all lanes of traffic, both ways, I figured the signs must be for construction they were planning for the future. It couldn't be real since the cars coming back my direction must have crossed that bridge. The signs weren't telling me the truth, I reasoned.

Two miles later, I came to a stop. The massive sign across all lanes of traffic left no wonder. The bridge was out. Huge cranes and earthmoving equipment confirmed that not only was the bridge really under construction but no one would be crossing it. Not today. In either direction. The cars coming the opposite direction had definitely not crossed the bridge but were simply doing what I was about to do as well—make a U-turn, deceiving the cars and the silly drivers behind me into believing a lie.

No one was going to avoid this detour, regardless of where they were headed or which direction they were going.

For the sake of this current conversation between you and me, your gun lap is coming. Like the bridge out in front of me, there's no way around it. At one point, sooner or later, you are going to hear the pop of gunpowder, and you'll have to come to terms with the fact that the lap you're now running is going to be your last. Or at least one of them.

Your gun lap is coming. There's no way around it.

And the starkness of this reality, my friend, is something for both of us to ponder.

Solomon Gets Old

In this moment, I'd love for you to take yourself—by yourself—to a quiet place. You probably have a few of these in your life. Your car parked somewhere might be a good spot for this, although there's the liability of the radio proving too tempting to

keep silent or your cellphone from streaming something. For now, whether your quiet spot is an easy chair, or a comfortable resting place on your deck, or a corner in your family room, may I ask you to just keep everything turned off? Go to that place without taking anything else that would distract you, where you're not occupied with tasks or schedules or cable news, all the things that never, or at least rarely, give you the chance to do what you're about to do.

Okay, are you there?

I'd like for you to consider where you are right now. By that, I don't mean geographically. I'm talking about emotionally. Physically. Spiritually. Contemplatively. Think about your age and your stage in life. Consider some of your failures and accomplishments. Hard things and finer things. Your relationships. How are they? The good ones and those in need of repair. Finally, as my wife, Nancy, often asks me, ponder this: "How's your heart?"⁴

Why all the questions? you may wonder. Partly it's because of the truth behind a famous quote by a man we know simply as Socrates: "The unexamined life is not worth living." Or it's because of another man, one we get to meet in Scripture, whose life can help us examine our own. Solomon,⁵ the biblical king of Israel, was inching toward his gun lap. His life was filled with a kind of opulence you and I cannot even conceive. His power was complete. His wealth uncountable. His hedonistic lifestyle unimaginable.

So, what did Solomon find when he took an unvarnished look back at his life? What did he see under the magnifying glass of his own memory?

Spoiler alert: it wasn't a pretty picture. All that he had accomplished and all the cool stuff he'd gathered now mocked him. Solomon sat on his "time-out chair," similar to the one I've just

invited you to visit for yourself, and summarized his life with the most horrific of all conclusions he could draw.

“‘Absolute futility,’ says the Teacher.⁶ ‘Absolute futility. Everything is futile’” (Eccles. 1:2).

And truth be known, as we sit here quietly, three thousand years after Solomon, you and I are susceptible to this same kind of thinking. This is serious business. Taking enough time to do this right is a really good idea.

In an article posted in *Today's Geriatric Medicine*, the author wrote:

By the time older adults enter their seventh decade of life, their thoughts inevitably turn to life assessments. What achievements or accomplishments have marked life's journey to this point? What opportunities does life present over the upcoming decades? Has life fulfilled expectations? Are there goals still to be attained?

At the threshold of older adulthood, thoughts often turn to satisfaction in the past and confidence—emotionally, financially, and socially—in the life events yet to unfold. Unfortunately, for some older adults, such satisfaction and confidence are elusive or nonexistent. *And in the face of hopelessness in the prospects for a satisfying future, some older adults choose to end their lives prematurely.*⁷

So, if I may, please consider the following pages as a lifeline between you and me—a sincere reaching out from a man who is doing his best to encourage your mind and your heart during these challenging days. These “Gun Lap” days.

The Man I'm Writing This "Letter" To

My dad never told me what it actually felt like getting older, but he was the man I watched more closely, more carefully than any other, in his gun lap.

Here's what I saw. For one thing, a typically cautious man became more daring. And more secretive. Here was a guy who was as intentional and deliberate as anyone I've ever known. But in his eighties, during my mother's overnight stay at the hospital where she was recovering from a hip replacement, Dad went out (on a whim, I guess) and bought a car. Cash.

Though he wasn't poor by worldly standards, my dad was anything but flush. Yet somehow, while he was waiting for mother to be released and go home, he decided to venture out and buy a Buick. Mother only found out when she was being discharged and the nurses brought her to the front of the hospital building in a wheelchair.

"Whose car is this?" she asked him.

"Ours," he responded sheepishly.

"Darling?" she asked in a way that wasn't purely disrespectful, but came about as close as she ever got.

Such changes to his usual living patterns, in ways both subtle and surprising, became more observable. My dad, like a turtle in a food fight, pulled his head inside as he aged, slowly growing more and more introverted. Now don't get the wrong idea. I don't think for a minute his brain was literally in neutral. Oh, he was thinking all right. It's just that he wasn't letting us know what he was thinking about. In the above case, he was planning to walk into a dealership, plunk down cash, and buy a car. Who knew?

I can remember family gatherings during this time where the conversation would be lively, loud, and fun. There's just something about dozens of cousins getting together. Almost everyone was involved in the interchange. Not my dad. Although he did his best to smile so he wouldn't come across as critical or disapproving (my mother always helped him with this), I can remember him sitting in the background, not making a sound. I wondered why.

One reason he didn't engage as much, I concluded, was because most of the chatter had to do with the latest movies, hit songs, YouTube downloads, and social media platforms. My dad was Exhibit A of the intimidation that is often created in older men by advances in technology and contemporary culture.

Looking back, I've also wondered if he wasn't sure of some of the names of his grand- and great-grandchildren. At that point, he had seventeen grandchildren and dozens of great-grandchildren. A big family, to be sure. In order to avoid the embarrassment of calling someone the wrong name, or asking who they were, he chose to not speak.

Not long after that family experience, I caught him sitting alone one quiet summer afternoon in the corner chair of his study. This room was his cave, and this chair was his favorite. Here was his sacred place. It was where he caught up on his Bible reading, on inspirational books, on his favorite periodicals. But this time, nothing was in his hands or resting on his lap. He was just sitting there. I asked permission to come in. He smiled and nodded.

Kneeling down next to him so I could see him eye to eye, I asked how he was doing. "Just fine," was his predictable response, accompanied by a thin smile and gentle nod. I asked how he was feeling. Although my question was aimed at his physical and

medical condition, which wasn't the best at the time, he didn't receive it as I had asked. He thought I was asking for a snapshot of his heart.

I gently laid my hand on top of his hand. His eyes focused on mine, laser-like. I waited.

"I feel useless," he finally said, in a tone that sounded utterly defeated.

A lump formed in my throat; tears welled up. Here was a man whose accomplishments were legion. His family loved him. People all over the world revered him. His business and ministry colleagues held him in the highest esteem.

Yet here he was, in his eighties, feeling like life had passed him by, as if there was nothing left for him to do. And since, like most men, his self-respect was birthed from accomplishments and performance, he knew his more productive days were well behind him. He now believed he was worthless.

My motivation for writing this book is to try to turn back the clock and help my dad, even though I realize he's been in heaven since 2002. Still, in my mind's eye, I envision myself helping him get ready for his gun lap, giving him encouragement during the course of actually running it. I'm also motivated to walk—maybe run—alongside *you* as you face this season, while also speaking honestly to *myself* about the time I have left.

Just So We're Tracking

In my quest for good answers to share with you, I've had the privilege of sitting down with some of my friends, men my age, men with whom I've walked through the years—some of them very

closely and some at a bit of a distance. The transparency of their failures has taught me. Their wisdom has inspired me and helped to shape what I'm about to share with you.

My first book was published in 1996. It was an account of my relationship with my daughters, and I used the idea of building a deck as a metaphor for the “project” of being a good dad to these women. I confessed that, as a man, I didn't have a clue about raising a daughter, yet I found a certain inspiration in venturing into the unknown, like building a deck for the first time, confident that this task could actually be done well. I also pointed out that having a big project ahead like raising a daughter was an enterprise worthy of my best.

This gun lap thing is no different. It's the project of a lifetime, the dusk of our years. And my hope is that you'll be inspired and not overwhelmed by it.

**Remember that this book is not about death
 ... your death or mine. It's about living ...
 running intentionally and wide awake.**

Even if, at your age, the idea of actually running may have little to no appeal to you, that's okay. I'm finished literally running too. But even the pages of the New Testament, penned long ago, tell us we are in fact running a race. So, embracing this metaphor, the pages that follow are going to give you some ideas about these questions. Where is this race, *your* race, going? And how well are you and I running it?

Remember that this book is not about death . . . your death or mine. It's about living . . . running intentionally and wide awake. My prayer as you read is that you'll be helped and encouraged, that you'll find our time together deep and thought-provoking, yet enjoyable and full of invigorating possibilities. For me, that would be terrific. It would make the hours of crafting these words completely worth it.

Thank you for coming along.

Robert Wolgemuth

May 2021

CHAPTER 1

You Need a Coach for This?

“Truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains by itself. But if it dies, it produces much fruit.”

—JOHN 12:24

FOR AS LONG AS I can remember, I’ve been fascinated with speed.

On the driveway in front of my parents’ house, nearly every Memorial Day, I would wash and wax the family car (then when I had enough pennies in the bank, my *own* car) while listening to the “Greatest Spectacle in Racing” on the radio. For some reason, after having been televised live in black-and-white in 1949 and 1950, the Indianapolis 500 exclusively aired live on radio until 1986, when it went back on the tube in living color, bolstered by advertising.

Actually though, for me, listening to the race was almost as amazing as watching it. Detailing every inch of the car in the hot sunshine, with the high-pitched sound of cars screaming at

breakneck speed on my little transistor radio, is an indelible memory—A. J. Foyt, Rodger Ward, Graham Hill, and a daring host of others will never be forgotten.

Feeding this obsession with speed, I received a Christmas present in 1961 I'll never forget, as a thirteen-year-old. It was a miniature Indy race car, motorized by a gas-powered "thimble drome" engine.

Because this little sucker, not more than twelve inches long, could reach speeds up to 100 mph,¹ the only way to actually play with it in the dead of a bitter Chicago winter was to do it inside our family garage, fashioning a tether that allowed it to go in circles. Securing a twelve-inch cement block, forcing a 2x4 into the center, then pounding a big nail into the top, I had the perfect anchor. A little extra-strength fishing line finished the package.

I can still hear the soprano-like whining sound my little car made as it whizzed in little circles around the perimeter of the garage. The acrid smell of the blue plumed the air. My heart actually pounds as I remember it. Speed had its grip on me.

Then there was bicycle speed. Two of the homes where I grew up were perched on sloping streets. I loved getting on my bike and riding as fast as I could go, leaning way out over my front tire to make myself as wind resistant as possible. The wind in my hair was exhilarating. Can you picture this? Maybe you did it, too.

Not until junior high did I take a crack at creating speed with my legs. *Without* a bike. But it didn't take long before I came to terms with the fact that I did not have the genetic material to be a speedster.

I was a distance guy.

Practice was each day after school when my teammates and I ran the surrounding neighborhoods. I liked it. And was good at

it. In fact, for a few short weeks—literally—I held the unofficial school record in the half mile: the 880 at Edison Junior High in Wheaton, Illinois. After taking good care of this distinction for only a very brief time, I relinquished it to my classmate, Gary Grauzas, and never won it back.

Pretty soon, my competing days were over, and I did most of my running primarily for exercise. Then my fascination with long-distance running shifted to more of an observer status. This came into sharp relief my senior year in college.

Leading up to that year, I was pushing the edges on personal character and conduct. I guess my parents' teaching and admonitions were somewhere between planting and harvesting, if you know what I mean. Because of that, I often stayed out late. I don't mean just late, I mean *late*. More like early in the morning. And sometimes, in returning to campus, I'd see one particular young man running along the country roads that surrounded our school in North Central Indiana. Here it was, the dawning glimpses of the morning light sneaking through the haze on the horizon, and this person was running all by himself.

I did some asking around and found out he was a sophomore from a small, rural Indiana town. His name was Ralph Foote, and he clearly was a serious runner. I'm not exactly sure how often I saw Ralph, skinny as a wisp, on these solo country-road scampers; I only know that it was many, many times.

The following spring, I learned the track coach was looking for some staffing help for the conference track meet. Taylor University was hosting the event, and there was a need for timers and helpers to move hurdles, rake the sand in the broad jump and pole vault pits, set the bars for the high jump, and so forth. He started the

list of volunteers with the physical education majors, and since my roommate was one of them, I happily embraced the invitation to join him for the meet.

Near the end of the afternoon, the announcer called the runners to the starting line for the two-mile run. And since I didn't have any current assignments for other events, I gingerly crawled up to the top of the press tower to watch.

When the starter's pistol sounded, the mass of runners took off like a single, multiheaded creature. But by the end of the second lap, the creature had substantially thinned out. Several men were leading. Maybe six or seven. The rest of the field stretched out for thirty yards or so.

By the time the runners finished the first mile—four laps around the track—the distance between the guys in front and those in the back was the full length of the straightaway, almost a full half lap. The lead pack was down to three.

This running triplet hung together for three laps. Step for step, they were pacing each other with gliding, synchronized strides. As the timers in the press box glanced at their stopwatches, excitement began to build. "These guys are making great time," I overheard one of them say. "There could be a new conference record set in the two-mile—maybe a new *state* record, no small thing happening on the grounds of a very small college."

Finally, the lead runners crossed the starting line to begin their last lap, and the starter fired his pistol again. I asked around. This was the *gun lap*. The gun alerting the runners—who clearly did not need the reminder—and everyone else, that this was the final lap.

That's when something unbelievable happened. As I write these words, almost thirty years later, I can still feel the overwhelming

emotion of what I saw that day, as though I'm experiencing it for the first time. Before the sound of the shot had finished reverberating through the woods behind the track, a single runner seemed to explode from the pack of three. It was the sophomore. *Ralph Foote*. As though propelled by a slingshot, he took off in a dead sprint. And although the other two runners had picked up their own paces a bit as well, it looked as if, by comparison, they'd almost reduced their pace to a lazy jog.

The entire stadium stood to its feet. Field event competitors finishing their efforts froze in place. For a full quarter mile, Ralph did not slow his pace. The dead sprint he'd begun at the start of the gun lap did not slack. By the time he rounded the last turn for the final dash to the tape, every person was watching and screaming for this nineteen-year-old. Even the athletes and coaches from other schools were cheering him on. Ralph had been waiting and training for this moment. The faithful discipline of early-morning running on those lonely country roads was seeking its rightful reward.

When the time was posted, Ralph Foote had scraped a full eleven seconds off the school record in the two-mile, and more than ten seconds off the conference record. (The spring before, he had broken the previous conference record by 19.3 seconds! And just for good measure, he set still another new record—this time the state mark—in the two-mile a year later.)²

But if you think Ralph Foote was *only* naturally skilled, that he was a genetically assisted athlete, or that his success could be totally ascribed to his obsessive training regimen,³ I should tell you that he, by his own admission, like all great runners, had a

world-class coach, a mentor. His was George Glass, the iconic track coach at Taylor University from 1960 to 1985.

It would only be natural to wonder why a runner would need a coach. I mean, in addition to shouting out an order like, “Hey, man, run faster!” what would a running coach do?

Actually, that’s an easy one. A great coach plants a seed in the heart of his student athlete that says, “You can do this,” and, “I believe in you.” He schools a young runner with a strategy for winning.

A great coach plants a seed in the heart of his student athlete that says, “You can do this,” and, “I believe in you.”

Even from my own few years of competitive distance running, I can still remember some of the admonitions handed down from my coaches. Things like . . .

- Keep an eye on the other runners, but don’t be obsessed with them.
- Expect pain and push through it with resolve and courage.
- Save something for your gun lap.

Coaches communicate that there’s a right way to begin a race; there’s a correct method for running the middle laps; and then there’s a cashing in of your reserve on the gun lap. What Ralph knew was that if he was going to have enough energy for his finish, he would need to listen to his coach and decide to obey.

It would be my honor to do this for you as you read.

You Gotta Wanna

My brother Dan was a competitive wrestler. Almost eight years his senior, I went to as many of his meets as I was able to attend after I was out of college and living not far from the homestead. If there's any sport that features a lack of glamour and few folks in the stands, a sport that pushes the edges on endurance and sheer guts, it's wrestling.

One of the stories Dan told me was of a locker-room speech given by one of his toughest and (therefore) most successful coaches. The man was trying to get his boys to step up, to be unsatisfied with mediocrity, and to push for excellence. Gathering his team together after a disappointing tournament, he admonished them with the need to "get their minds right" before doing anything else.

"If you really expect to win," he said, "you first gotta wanna."

I confess to stating the obvious here, but if you and I are going to have a gun lap for the ages—a final lap that truly means something special—we must choose to want it. There will be times when throwing in the towel feels like our only option, times when too many obstacles and impediments and issues are keeping us from running our gun lap well. But like Dan's wrestling coach, can I encourage you, *beg you*, to decide you want this? Really want this? For your own?

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ages—a final lap that truly means something
special—we must choose to want it.**

My encouraging you to embrace the “wanna” actually comes at great personal expense. It requires of me a full confession, but it’s a story you need to know.

I grew up in a home where God was honored. We said “grace” before every meal and tried to have some kind of “family worship” at the close of many dinners. My mother’s voice often filled the air with hymns sung or hummed throughout the day and with prayers she regularly prayed with her friends in our living room. And on many early mornings, I saw my dad on his knees praying for his children and his work as the leader of a Christian ministry. He used those dim hours of the morning to read his Bible. This was my home.

So, from the time I was a youngster, I knew that someday my own devotional time—reading the Bible and praying—should be standard equipment. I did this in fits and starts. Mostly fits. A motivational speaker at a retreat would sometimes get me back on track after I’d slipped off the rails, but there was nothing habitual about my devotional habits.

Turn the clock ahead fifty years. I’m a husband, father of two grown and married women, and grandfather to five, one whom is married. My life has not turned out like I had planned. Mostly because of good surprises. I spent six post-college years in actual ministry to young people and have now spent the remainder in the business of Christian publishing. I’ve also taught Sunday school to adults almost all these years.

In 1996, as I said, I wrote my first book and was helplessly smitten by the writing bug.⁴ This soon became two books and then three. In 1999, I wrote the notes to the *Devotional Bible for*

Dads, which included daily insights for guys—men, husbands, and fathers.

Truly, all this vocational activity required Christian activity and commitment, Bible study and research. But in spite of this, my own prayer and Bible reading—I'm talking about the kind that's done merely for connection and inspiration, without the goal of teaching it or publishing it—was sporadic. At best.

Enter Miss Bobbie.⁵ From the time we married in 1970 until her death in 2014, Bobbie loved God's Word. An early bird, she often rose in the dark and found her favorite chair to park in and study her Bible. I knew this because on countless mornings I'd wake only a few minutes after she did and quietly pass her in the living room as she was studying—on my way to secure coffee and head to my work space upstairs.

Without purposefully deciding it, I had assigned my wife the job of being the daily Bible reader and lover of Jesus in our home, the one who did it just for the sheer love of Him with no specific destination in mind.

In a word, I was spiritually *lazy*.

I guess I just lacked the “wanna.”

But your Bible and mine are filled with hints and direct admonitions along the lines of making hard decisions to do the right thing . . . getting your head to lead your body. One of my favorites comes from the heart of the apostle Paul, found in his letter to the church in Philippi. He composed this letter from a Roman prison toward the end of his life and ministry. *His gun lap*. It was likely dictated to his friend Luke, his writing collaborator.

In this letter is what you and I might consider the trademark, the logo, the positioning statement, the slug line for our gun lap.

It's found right there near the beginning, where Paul spoke of "being confident of this very thing . . ."

. . . that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ. (Phil. 1:6 NKJV)

Can you see in these words the image of getting ready to run your final lap? This trip around the track carries with it the memory of God's careful providence, His leadership, and His faithfulness in all the preceding laps you and I ran. That's true.

But the other thing Paul says, which fits perfectly with Dan's wrestling coach's locker room speech, comes with a powerful twist.

For God is at work within you, helping you to want to obey him, and then helping you do what he wants.
(Phil. 2:13 TLB)

Let me lean in for a moment so you know how important this is. We're facing this gun lap. And in getting ready for it, you and I tell the Lord we want to obey Him. Like a young runner in a track meet whose dad is cheering for him from the stands, we want to run in such a way that brings Him pleasure. We are eager to hear His "well done" directed toward us. That's the "wanna" part.

But according to Philippians 2:13, not only does our Father give us the *desire* to please Him, He also gives us the strength to push through this lap with endurance and grace, so that we're able to hit the tape on the final straightaway with confidence. And then when it's time to hang up our running spikes—when our time on this earth is finished—we can look back as Paul did, on his own concluding run around the track, and say this:

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. There is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give me on that day. (2 Tim. 4:7–8)

You might be saying, “Okay, this sounds fine, Robert. But what should I do differently? What should I do now?” So glad you asked. This is exactly why you’re here.

A New Morning Resolve

Walking past Bobbie as she read in the early morning hours began to change when she was diagnosed with Stage IV ovarian cancer in 2012. That’s when we started having some of those early morning times *together*. We’d read the Bible selection out loud and pray. Sweet times. Until in October 2014, after thirty months of pure guts and courage—and an amazing attitude with not a whisper of complaining—Bobbie stepped into heaven.

At the close of her funeral service, we showed a three-minute video that I’d asked a friend to put together, featuring something I had shot from my cellphone. It caught Bobbie walking in front of our house, singing aloud an old hymn called “Trust and Obey.” She didn’t know I was recording her.

When we walk with the Lord in the light of His Word,
 What a glory He sheds on our way!
 While we do His good will, He abides with us still,
 And with all who will trust and obey.⁶

The video ended with the following Bible verse on the screen. White letters on a black background:

“Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies,
it remains alone, but if it dies, it produces much grain.”

(John 12:24 NKJV)

In the days that followed the service, I believed the Lord was nudging me toward a new spiritual commitment, the same one I want to gently nudge you toward as well. Always the Gentleman, He didn't shame me or bludgeon me with the facts. With the failures. He was only letting me know that for a long time I'd been walking through the door on Bobbie's push. I'd been assigning to my wife those early morning times in the Word and prayer, just as I might do with any another household duty. But this had to change. I needed to exercise the same discipline of daily Bible reading and prayer that I'd seen in my wife.

So, the decision was made. I even did my early morning reading sitting in Bobbie's chair, now that she was in heaven and would no longer need it. It was almost as if she were there with me each time, never condemning me, always encouraging me.

As of this writing, Bobbie has been dead for more than five years. That's more than 1,500 mornings. And, with some fear of sounding like I'm boasting, I can tell you I may have only missed ten mornings. Probably less. This practice has become as predictable to me as slipping on a reliable pair of worn jeans and brewing fresh coffee.

If you'll allow me to be your running coach, I'd be honored to encourage you to start with the basics. Would you resolve right now—whether you're getting *ready* for your gun lap or you are already actively *running* it—to commit to spending the first wakeful moments of your day with your ultimate Coach and Encourager?

Would you resolve right now—whether you’re getting ready for your gun lap or you are already actively *running* it—to commit to spending the first wakeful moments of your day with your ultimate Coach and Encourager?

This will very soon be a completely worthwhile habit. In no time it’ll be something you actually look forward to each day. Something that, if you’re not able to do it, will negatively impact the day ahead.

For what it’s worth, I have chosen for my Bible reading a “One-Year Bible.”⁷ As you might already know, this daily Bible includes an Old Testament and a New Testament passage along with a psalm and proverb. By the end of the year, you will have read the whole Bible through, the Psalms twice.

In fact, to add to this resolution, could I add something I’d never heard of before I started doing it as I was beginning to fall in love with my wife Nancy? As I’m reading my verses for the day, I look for one or two or three that I know will encourage my wife. I text them to her. During the dark-o’-thirty hours, while I’m reading and while she’s finishing up her night’s sleep, I queue these verses onto her phone. So when she wakes up and takes a look, these portions of Scripture are waiting for her.⁸ You’re welcome to ask Nancy what this means to her.

Oh, and just so you know, she’s not sleeping in after eight hours. The reason I’m up first is because I went to bed the previous night long before she did, so her “alone hours” are at the *end* of the day; mine are at the start of the next one. However . . . and this is a big “however” . . . before I go to sleep, we cuddle, review the day and pray. In no time after the final “amen,” I’m sleeping. Then,

the next morning, before getting started with my day, I snuggle up to her semi-comatose frame and whisper a prayer in her ear. A gentle hand squeeze lets me know she heard.

Even though my primary purpose in sending her early morning passages of Scripture is to encourage her, the bonus is the accountability I feel in knowing that Nancy will wake up and read what I've texted her. When she does, she usually returns my text with a "Good morning, my beloved" and an affirmation of how much she appreciates waking up to this truth from God's Word. And from her husband.

Here's the only other thing I'll say about it, and then I'll leave it up to you. Since you and I aren't going to get legalistic about when our gun lap actually begins, I can at least say I didn't start this relentless habit until I was sixty-seven years old. How I wish I had done it long before! But I tell myself, *It's better late than never*. I do my best to issue myself the necessary grace to not dwell on my tardiness. And I also find my heart filled with gratitude for Bobbie's example of faithfulness, of that whole "seed falling into the ground, dying, and bearing fruit" thing.

Even though I'll be giving you other suggestions throughout this book to consider during your gun lap, it's my sincere hope that whatever you do with whatever you read, you will not treat this first-thing-in-the-morning ritual as optional equipment. Do it for your own heart and as a daily boost for your wife. She will love it. And she will love *you* all the more.

How Fantastic Is This?

So, in this moment, let's you and I pretend you're not reading a book. Let's say we're sitting somewhere comfortable. Just talking. Maybe on a bench in a quiet park or in a corner booth in a quaint coffee shop. You hear me suggest that in order for your gun lap to be a good, fulfilling experience, there will be some things you'll need to do now—probably before if not soon after you hear the sound of that starter's pistol once more and your gun lap actually begins.

It may be a little presumptuous of me to act like I'm your running *coach*, but I have no qualms about offering myself as your running *companion*, the guy who paces alongside you. And even before we get into the details of your running strategy, I'm asking you if you're up for this. I encourage you to think carefully about your answer regarding your willingness to learn, even at your age. I even remind you of one of my favorite statements, a bit of wisdom from Henry Ford, a man whom many would say is among history's greatest inventors: "Anyone who keeps learning stays young." How's that for a sweet promise?

**It may be a little presumptuous of me to act like
I'm your running *coach*, but I have no qualms about
offering myself as your running *companion*.**

And if I could amend the legendary automaker's words, I would say, "Anyone who is willing to be intentional about his gun lap will run well." In fact, one of the men I spoke with about his

gun lap—a CEO and a man in his mid-sixties—told me, “The most engaging thing you can do is to let your people know you’re still learning.” Don’t you just love this?

Or another way we could say it is in words that came from a pastor friend, a man I dearly love, truth he spoke from the pulpit: “Every life change begins with a single decision.”⁹ And the single decision you make to be coached—to allow yourself to be mentored—is tantamount to a life change.

So here we go. We’re going to get ready for running and living this lap. As the Scripture says, we’re going to “set our mind”¹⁰ in the right direction and realize the power of acting out what we think.¹¹ And we’re going to embrace the impact of a single decision to not run this last lap without intentionality, focus, and grace.

It’s going to be great.

Gun Lap Prayer

Father in heaven, my Lord and Friend, I gratefully commit this season and the next to Your care. I ask that You fill me with Your Spirit so as I face the inevitable challenges, I do not panic or despair, losing sight of Your faithfulness and steadfast love. I pray this in Your name. Amen.