

**IN A PIT
WITH A**

LION

HOW TO SURVIVE AND THRIVE WHEN OPPORTUNITY ROARS

**ON A
SNOWY
DAY**

MARK BATTERSON

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*Dedicated to Parker, Summer, and Josiah.
May you grow up to become lion chasers.*

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Locking Eyes with Your Lion

*You are responsible forever for
what you have tamed.*

ANTOINE DE SAINT-EXUPÉRY



There is an obscure passage in Scripture that I doubt any Sunday school teacher has ever assigned as a memory verse. It wasn't exegeted in any of the systematic theology classes I took in seminary. It has absolutely no bearing on any major biblical doctrines. You may have read it a few times in a one-year Bible, but it probably didn't even make a blip on your radar screen.

Buried in the Old Testament book of 2 Samuel, the twenty-third chapter, the twentieth and twenty-first verses, is one of the most inconceivable and inspirational passages in Scripture:

There was also Benaiah son of Jehoiada, a valiant warrior from Kabzeel. He did many heroic deeds, which included killing two of Moab's mightiest warriors. Another time he chased a lion down into a pit. Then, despite the snow and slippery ground, he



caught the lion and killed it. Another time, armed only with a club, he killed a great Egyptian warrior who was armed with a spear. Benaiah wrenched the spear from the Egyptian's hand and killed him with it.

It's easy to read verses like this in the comfortable confines of your home or office and totally miss the monumental acts of courage displayed by Benaiah. Have you ever met anyone or heard of anyone chasing a lion? Sure, Barnum & Bailey have lion tamers. But lion chasers? Benaiah didn't have a hunting rifle or Land Rover. And this was no game-park safari.

Scripture doesn't tell us what Benaiah was doing or where he was going when he encountered this lion. We don't know the time of day or Benaiah's frame of mind. But Scripture does reveal his gut reaction. And it was gutsy. It ranks as one of the most improbable reactions recorded in Scripture. Usually, when the image of a man-eating beast travels through the optical nerve and registers in the visual cortex, the brain has one over-arching message: *Run away*.

Normal people run away from lions. They run as far and as fast as they possibly can. But lion chasers are wired differently.

For the vast majority of us, the only lions we've ever encountered were stuffed or caged. And few of us have experienced hand-to-hand combat that forced us to fight for our lives. But try to put yourself in Benaiah's snow shoes.

Out of the corner of his eye, Benaiah sees something crawling. I don't know how far away the lion is—and their vision is probably obscured by falling snow and frozen breath—but there is a moment when Benaiah and the lion lock eyes. Pupils dilate. Muscles tense. Adrenaline rushes.

What a Hollywood moment.

Imagine watching it on the movie screen with THX surround sound. Your knuckles turn white as you grip the theater seat. Blood

pressure escalates. And the entire audience anticipates what will happen next. Lion encounters tend to script the same way. Man runs away like a scaredy-cat. Lion gives chase. And king of the beasts eats manwich for lunch.

But not this time! Almost as improbable as falling up or the second hand on your watch moving counterclockwise, the lion turns tail and Benaiah gives chase.

The camera films the chase at ground level.

Lions can run up to thirty-five miles per hour and leap thirty feet in a single bound. Benaiah doesn't stand a chance, but that doesn't keep him from giving chase. Then the lion makes one critical misstep. The ground gives away beneath his five-hundred-pound frame, and he falls down a steep embankment into a snow-laden pit. For what it's worth, I'm sure the lion landed on his feet. Lions are part of the cat genus, after all.

No one is eating popcorn at this point. Eyes are fixed on the screen. It's the moment of truth as Benaiah approaches the pit.

Almost like walking on thin ice, Benaiah measures every step. He inches up to the edge and peers into the pit. Menacing yellow eyes stare back. The entire audience is thinking the same thing: *Don't even think about it.*

Have you ever had one of those moments where you do something crazy and ask yourself in retrospect: *What was I thinking?* This had to be one of those moments for Benaiah. Who in their right mind chases lions? But Benaiah now has a moment to collect his thoughts, regain his sanity, and get a grip on reality. And the reality is this: *Normal people don't chase lions.*

So Benaiah turns around and walks away. The audience breathes a collective sigh of relief. But Benaiah isn't walking away. He's getting a running start. There is an audible gasp from the audience as Benaiah runs at the pit and takes a flying leap of faith.

The camera pans out.

You see two sets of tracks leading up to the pit's edge. One set of foot prints. One set of paw prints. Benaiah and the lion disappear into the recesses of the pit. The view is obscured to keep it PG-13. And for a few critical moments, the audience is left with just the THX sound track. A deafening roar echoes in the cavernous pit. A bloodcurdling battle cry pierces the soul.

Then dead silence.

Freeze-frame.

Everybody in the theater expects to see a lion shake its mane and strut out of the pit. But after a few agonizing moments of suspense, the shadow of a human form appears as Benaiah climbs out of the pit. The blood from his wounds drips on the freshly fallen snow. Claw marks crisscross his face and spear arm. But Benaiah wins one of the most improbable victories recorded in the pages of Scripture.

A TERRIBLE, HORRIBLE, NO GOOD, VERY BAD DAY

Right at the outset, let me share one of my core convictions: God is in the business of strategically positioning us in the right place at the right time. A sense of destiny is our birthright as followers of Christ. God is awfully good at getting us where He wants us to go. But here's the catch: The right place often seems like the *wrong* place, and the right time often seems like the *wrong* time.

Can I understate the obvious?

Encountering a lion in the wild is typically a bad thing. A really bad thing! Finding yourself in a pit with a lion on a snowy day generally qualifies as a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day. That combination of circumstances usually spells one thing: *death*.

I don't think anyone would have bet on Benaiah winning this fight—probably not even the riskiest of gamblers. He had to be at least a one-hundred-to-one underdog. And the snowy conditions on game day didn't help his chances.

Scripture doesn't give us a blow-by-blow description of what happened in that pit. All we know is that when the snow settled, the lion was dead and Benaiah was alive. There was one set of paw prints and two sets of footprints.

Now fast-forward two verses and look at what happens in the next scene.

2 Samuel 23:23 says: “And David put [Benaiah] in charge of his bodyguard.”

I can't think of too many places I'd rather *not* be than in a pit with a lion on a snowy day. Can you? Getting stuck in a pit with a lion on a snowy day isn't on anybody's *wish list*. It's a *death wish*. But you've got to admit something: “I killed a lion in a pit on a snowy day” looks pretty impressive on your résumé if you're applying for a bodyguard position with the King of Israel!

You know what I'm saying?

I can picture David flipping through a stack of résumés. “I majored in security at the University of Jerusalem.” Nope. “I did an internship with the Palace Guard.” Nada. “I worked for Brinks Armored Chariots.” Thanks but no thanks.

Then David comes to the next résumé in the stack. “I killed a lion in a pit on a snowy day.” David didn't even check his references. That is the kind of person you want in charge of your bodyguard. Lion chasers make great bouncers.

Now zoom out and look at the story through a wide-angled lens.

Most people would have seen the lion as a five-hundred-pound problem, but not Benaiah. For most people, finding yourself in a pit with a lion on a snowy day would qualify as bad luck. But can you see

how God turned what could have been considered a *bad break* into a *big break*? Benaiah lands a job interview with the King of Israel.

I'm sure the bodyguard position was the last thing on his mind when he encountered the lion, but Benaiah wasn't just chasing a lion. Benaiah was chasing a position in David's administration.

Here's the point: God is in the résumé-building business. He is always using past experiences to prepare us for future opportunities. But those God-given opportunities often come disguised as man-eating lions. And how we react when we encounter those lions will determine our destiny. We can cower in fear and run away from our greatest challenges. Or we can chase our God-ordained destiny by seizing the God-ordained opportunity.

As I look back on my own life, I recognize this simple truth: The greatest opportunities were the scariest lions. Part of me has wanted to play it safe, but I've learned that taking no risks is the greatest risk of all.

Giving up a full-ride scholarship at the University of Chicago to transfer to a small Bible college was a huge risk. Asking my wife, Lora, to marry me was a huge risk. (Of course, not as big a risk as Lora saying yes!) Packing all of our earthly belongings into a fifteen-foot U-haul and moving to Washington DC with no place to live and no guaranteed salary was a huge risk. Each of our three children was a huge risk. Jumping into a church plant with zero pastoral experience was a huge risk, both for me and for the church.

But when I look in the rearview mirror, I realize that the biggest risks were the greatest opportunities. Some of those life-altering decisions caused sleepless nights. The steps of faith were accompanied by acute fear that caused nausea. We experienced some financial hardships that required miraculous provision. And we had to pick ourselves up and dust ourselves off after falling flat on our faces a few times.

But those were the moments that I came alive. Those were the

moments when God set the stage. Those were the moments that changed the trajectory of my life.

NO GUTS, NO GLORY

In his book *If Only*,¹ Dr. Neal Roesse makes a fascinating distinction between two types of regret: regrets of action and regrets of inaction. A regret of action is “wishing you hadn’t done something.” In theological terms, it’s called a *sin of commission*. A regret of inaction is “wishing you had done something.” In theological terms, it’s a *sin of omission*.

I think the church has fixated on sins of commission for far too long. We have a long list of *don’t*s. Think of it as holiness by subtraction. We think holiness is the byproduct of subtracting something from our lives that shouldn’t be there. And holiness certainly involves subtraction. But I think God is more concerned about sins of omission—those things we could have and should have done. It’s holiness by multiplication. Goodness is not the absence of badness. You can do nothing wrong and still do nothing right. Those who simply run away from sin are half-Christians. Our calling is much higher than simply running away from what’s wrong. We’re called to chase lions.

There is an old aphorism: “No guts, no glory.” When we don’t have the guts to step out in faith and chase lions, then God is robbed of the glory that rightfully belongs to Him.

Is anybody else tired of reactive Christianity that is more known for what it’s against than what it’s for? We’ve become far too defensive. We’ve become far too passive. Lion chasers are proactive. They know that playing it safe is risky. Lion chasers are always on the lookout for God-ordained opportunities.

Maybe we’ve measured spiritual maturity the wrong way. Maybe

following Christ isn't supposed to be as *safe* or as *civilized* as we've been led to believe. Maybe Christ was more *dangerous* and *uncivilized* than our Sunday-school flannelgraphs portrayed. Maybe God is raising up a generation of lion chasers.

In this book, I will introduce you to some of the lion chasers I know. People like John, a Georgetown lawyer who put his law practice on hold to shoot a documentary film about human trafficking in Uganda. Or Kurt, a tenured professor who gave up his chair to pursue a dot-com dream. Or Natalie, a college grad who moved halfway around the world to teach English in the Marshall Islands. Or Sarah, an NCCer who followed God's leading to a mission trip in Ethiopia, despite her many fears. Or Lee, who not only quit his executive-level position at Microsoft but forfeited all of his stock options to plant a church. Or Greg, a political neophyte who decided to throw his hat in the ring and run for a congressional seat.

Most of us applaud lion chasers from the sidelines. *Good for them!* We're inspired by people who face their fears and chase their dreams. What we fail to realize is that they are no different from us.

The lion chasers you'll meet in this book are ordinary people. They put their pants on one leg at a time like everybody else. Most of them were scared to death when they bought the plane ticket or handed in their resignation. Weighing the pros and cons caused some ulcers along the way. And at times it felt like *they* were the ones cornered by the lion in the snowy pit.

I wish I could tell you that every lion chase ends with a lion skin hanging on the wall, but it doesn't. The dot-com dreamer is successful beyond his wildest dreams, but the guy with political aspirations lost the election. However, both of them are lion chasers in my book. What sets lion chasers apart isn't the outcome. It's the courage to chase God-sized dreams. Lion chasers don't let their fears or doubts keep them from doing what God has called them to do.

A SURVIVAL GUIDE FOR LION CHASERS

I have a simple definition of success: Do the best you can with what you have where you are. In essence, success is making the most of every opportunity. Spiritual maturity is *seeing and seizing God-ordained opportunities*. Think of every opportunity as God's gift to you. What you do with those opportunities is your gift to God. I'm absolutely convinced that our greatest regrets in life will be missed opportunities.

At the end of the day, *success equals stewardship* and *stewardship equals success*. But our view of stewardship is far too parochial. Sure, how we manage our time, talent, and treasure is a huge stewardship issue. But what about being a good steward of our imagination? Or our medial ventral prefrontal cortex (the seat of humor, according to neurologists)? Or how about stewardship of our sex drive and competitive streaks? Stewardship is all-inclusive. We've got to be good stewards of every second of time and every ounce of energy. But right at the top of the stewardship list is what I'd call *opportunity stewardship*.

When you cross paths with the lion, are you going to run away like a scaredy-cat or are you going to grab life by the mane?

Lion chasers grab life by the mane.

Benaiah went on to have a brilliant military career. In fact, he climbed all the way up the chain of command to become commander in chief of Israel's army. But it all started with what many would consider being in the wrong place at the wrong time. His genealogy of success can be traced all the way back to a life-or-death encounter with a man-eating lion. It was fight or flight. Benaiah was faced with a choice that would determine his destiny: run away or give chase.

Not much has changed in the past three thousand years.

I seriously doubt that anybody reading this book will ever find themselves in a pit with a lion on a snowy day. None of us lie awake at night worrying about what we would do in a lion encounter. In a strictly literal sense, can you imagine a more irrelevant topic for a

book? But in a figurative sense, I can't imagine anything more germane.

I don't pretend to know the unique circumstances of your life, but I'm guessing you have encountered some lions, fallen into some pits, and weathered a few snowy days. Maybe it's a God-sized dream that scares the living daylights out of you. Maybe a bad habit or a bad decision finds you at the bottom of a pit. Or maybe a cloud of self-doubt casts a dark shadow on your future.

Think of *In a Pit With a Lion on a Snowy Day* as a survival guide for lion chasers. As you strap on Benaiah's sandals and unsheathe his sword, you'll learn *seven skills* that will help you climb out of the slipperiest pits and chase the biggest lions.

Some of the skills will come naturally for certain personality types. If you're optimistic by nature, *overcoming adversity* will come more easily. If you tend toward the pessimistic end of the spectrum, it will require more intentionality.

Some skills will feel as unnatural as writing with your weak hand or rappelling off a cliff for the first time. *Unlearning fears* and *embracing uncertainty* requires a counterintuitive approach to life. But like Benaiah, the courage to swim against the current will help you get where God wants you to go.

Some skills, like *calculating risks* or *seizing opportunities*, are developmental and habitual. Almost like innate athletic ability or musical prowess, practice makes perfect. The more risks you take, the easier it becomes. Seizing opportunities becomes second nature. *Defying odds* and *looking foolish* will become default settings.

I don't know where you are geographically or demographically. I'm not sure how you're doing emotionally, physically, relationally, and spiritually. But these skills will help you get where God wants you to go—no matter where you're starting from. The principles in this book aren't just a script out of Scripture. They can rewrite the story of your life. All you have to do is turn the page and begin a new chapter.

CHAPTER 1 REVIEW

Points to Remember

- God is in the business of strategically positioning us in the right place at the right time. But the right place often seems like the *wrong* place, and the right time often seems like the *wrong* time.
- Goodness is not the absence of badness. You can do nothing wrong and still do nothing right. Our calling is much higher than simply running away from what's wrong. We're called to chase lions—look for opportunities in our problems and obstacles, and take risks to reach for God's best.
- When we don't have the guts to step out in faith and chase lions, then God is robbed of the glory that rightfully belongs to Him.
- Spiritual maturity is seeing and seizing God-ordained opportunities.

Starting Your Chase

Based on what you've read so far, which lion-chasing skills do you think might be most difficult for you to master?

Defying odds?

Facing fears?

Reframing problems?

Embracing uncertainty?

Taking risks?

Seizing opportunities?

Looking foolish?