

The Pressure's Off



**Breaking Free from
Rules and Performance**

LARRY
CRABB

The
Pressure's
Off

There's a New Way to Live

LARRY
CRABB



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*To my father
Larry Crabb Sr.*



*August 16, 1912
Life began, the fruit of Charles and Laura's love
for their Lord and for each other.*

*August 31, 2001
Real life began, the fruit of the Father, Son,
and Spirit's love for each other and for my dad.*

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More is available to us in Jesus Christ than we dare imagine.

In 1654 Blaise Pascal encountered Jesus Christ in a new way. He recorded the ecstasy of the moment in a series of sentence fragments, including these:

“certitude, heartfelt joy, peace”

“joy, joy, joy, tears of joy”

“complete and sweet renunciation”

“total surrender to Jesus Christ my director”

Fellow seeker, will you dare to imagine what for so long you’ve feared may not be available? Will you join me, a trembling pilgrim, in putting aside the cynicism that skillfully avoids the risk of hoping? Will you embrace your desire for the *one thing* you would give all else to gain—an actual encounter with Jesus Christ, now, before heaven?

- Perhaps, like me, you’ve been working hard to figure life out, to get it right so things go well. The Bible calls that approach the *old way* of the *written code*. No matter how dressed up in Christian language, the old way will not form you spiritually. It leads to inward emptiness, churning, unbearable pressure. Perhaps that’s becoming clear to you as it is to me.
- There’s another way to live. The Bible calls it the *new way* of the *Spirit*. Those who take this route through life find themselves flowing toward the Father in rhythm with the Spirit as He opens their eyes to see the beauty of Christ. This new way leads through a life that doesn’t work very well into a mysterious certitude that anchors us in storms of doubt, into moments of ecstasy that keep bigger hopes alive when good dreams die, into the terrifying experience of

death to self that allows our true selves to walk out of the tomb into the light of day.

- Can you feel the Spirit's rhythm inviting you to the Sacred Dance? Perhaps He's releasing our imaginations to soar, like children the night before Christmas.
- There's a *new way* to live. It's the way of the Spirit. Let's dare to dream our greatest dream. It will not shatter!



NIGHT QUESTION

“What am I doing wrong?” The question was never far from the woman’s mind. Tonight it screamed from deep places within her, demanding the answer that never came.

“Look at my life. Things aren’t turning out as I’d hoped. Why don’t I feel better about myself? Why is life sometimes so difficult? I must be doing something terribly wrong.”

The woman did not believe she was being punished for wrongdoing by a vengeful deity, though that thought was sometimes hard to resist. She did, however, believe there was a right way to live that would make her life work. Of course there was. But she could not find the way.

Here at home, at night, she couldn’t pretend as easily as she did in her busy days that she was content, that God had blessed her enough for her to call Him good. In the aloneness that pressed against her soul, memories came back—of times when she’d felt alive and happy and good, and of times when she’d felt very bad.

Those memories often came to her, especially after evening descended, and they had shaped her vision of the better life she wanted, of the blessings she was willing to work for and therefore expected to come her way. The woman longed to feel again the joy she’d known earlier and to avoid the pain she could not forget. She knew what she wanted...but she couldn’t find the way. Her life wasn’t working.

“Thank You, God,” the woman made herself pray as she crawled into

bed. “I know You will take me to heaven when this life is over. Thank You for the gift of eternal life I could never work hard enough to earn. And I know You have a plan for me now, before I go home. I will continue to trust You to bring it about.”

Before sleep came, she could hear herself add, “But what am I doing that’s getting in the way? *What am I doing wrong?*”

In the bedroom’s quiet darkness, the woman waited. Surely God would answer her question and show her what she must do to receive the blessings of a better life now, the blessings she was sure God intended His people to enjoy. “I’d do whatever it takes...if only I could know what it is.” That was her last thought before sleep rescued her from the pressure to figure it out.

How much later it happened she never knew. The woman sat bolt upright in bed, wide awake, but in a different way than when her alarm clock sounded. This wide awake was wider. Had she looked now at that clock by her bed, she would have seen the digital display of four blinking zeros. She had entered a world beyond time.

The Voice had not awakened her, but she heard it clearly: “I’ve come to show you the New Way.”

Who was there? Who had spoken? She could see no one. Had there been a body behind the Voice, she couldn’t have seen it. The darkness was too thick.

“It’s a dream,” she said to herself. She would lie down again and let it pass.

The Voice spoke again in the same clear tone. “It’s your time. I’ve come to show you the New Way. It’s dark enough now for you to see.”

This is no dream, the woman thought. “I’m glad you’ve come,” she said aloud. “I desperately need to discover a new way. For a long time I’ve prayed to know how to make my life go better. Nothing I’ve tried so far has worked. I need to find the New Way you speak of.”

“You’re looking for another version of the Old Way. I’ve come to show you the New Way.”

The woman was puzzled but not silenced. “I quite agree there are many ways that don’t work. My life is proof enough of that. I’ve tried everything I can think of to change how I feel and to make my life go better. Please, if you have any mercy at all, show me what I’m doing wrong that’s keeping me from what I so badly want. I’m eager to learn a new way. You’ll find me a willing pupil.”

“You’re looking for a method to make life work. That’s the Old Way.” The Voice was filled with patience, like the voice of a grandfather teaching his grandchild as the two walk together. “Whatever method you choose becomes your master. You’ve served many masters in your lifetime, but your goal has remained constant. You want nothing more than the Better Life that your experience has taught you is desirable. That goal is your idol. It must be abandoned.”

“I-I see your point,” the woman replied, though she saw nothing. “Yes, I do believe you’re right. Quite right, actually. Your point is revolutionary. I need to find a *spiritual* way. My goal must be God and my method obedience. And prayer. Yes, I must do what’s right and trust God with the outcome. You’re saying exactly what I’ve just heard from a wise, elderly woman in my church. She was most interesting.”

“She spoke truth to you. But you didn’t hear. That’s why I’ve come.”

“Well, I think I *did* hear what she had to say.” The woman was more indignant than unnerved. “But thank you for coming to reinforce her message. Let’s see. Yes, I remember. She told me I was working hard to understand and live by the Principle of Sequence. You know, the idea that *B* follows *A* so that if I want *B*, I must discover the *A* that will bring it about. She was, of course, quite right. I want to know what I must do that will change my life for the better and keep me out of more trouble in the future. She said, too, that I must give up trying so hard and learn instead to pray.

Again she was quite right. Of course I must still obey, but since my talk with her, I've been praying far more."

"Why do you pray?" A chill suddenly swept into the room. The woman braced herself against it.

"Why do I pray? What a strange question. I'm certain you know the teachings: Ask and you shall receive; cling to God and don't let go till He blesses you; pester Him, if you must, to get a response; settle for no less than every blessing He has reserved for you."

"That's the Old Way."

The woman frowned. Did the Voice not know the Teachings of the Sacred Book? Then a frightening thought crossed her mind. Perhaps the person behind the Voice knew the Teachings but didn't believe them. Was she speaking with a demon? A false prophet? Was a serpent in the room with her?

"How can that be?" she retorted with strengthened indignation. "My life is difficult. It's right to pray. Why, I run to God with everything. Surely you aren't telling me that prayer is the Old Way."

"Prayer is not the Old Way. *Your* prayer is."

The woman began to cry. "Why do you mock me? I'm desperate. I thought you were going to show me a new way to live. All you've done so far is to make me lose what little hope I had left."

"Your desires are too weak. Small affections create idols, unworthy gods to whom you sacrifice your life. Your prayers are idol worship. You've been bound to your desire for the Better Life, which you define by your experience of pleasure and pain. I've come to show you the New Way that leads to the Better Hope."

The woman's tears intensified into sobs. The sobs turned into wailing. "I only want to do what's right so I can enjoy God's blessings. Is that so wrong? Why won't you tell me what I must do?" If this Voice was from God, she was sure her wailing would cause Him to take pity on her and tell her what to do.

The Voice said, “You want to know what’s *effective*. You aren’t asking to know what is *holy*.”

The woman’s wailing quieted. “Are they two different things?”

“Your search for an effective way to the Better Life will lead you to follow the basic principles of this world and not the paths of holiness. Following those principles can sometimes make your life more pleasant, but it can never fill your soul. It will never bring you into the Better Hope.

“Moreover, your determination to do what’s effective is futile because you are sovereign over nothing. You control nothing. The Principle of Sequence guarantees nothing.”

“Are you saying *nothing* I do affects what happens in my life? That I have no influence at all?”

“*Influence* is real. It brings the joy of responsibility and impact. *Control* over what matters most is an illusion. Be grateful you have none.”

The woman began to feel different, like a grandchild who just realized her grandfather was wise. To this point her dialogue with the Voice had been a debate. Now she began listening to learn.

The Voice continued. “The illusion of control brings requirement, requirement creates pressure, and pressure leads to slavery, the slavery of having to figure out life to make it work. Those who hold on to the illusion of control lose the enjoyment of freedom.”

“I’m not sure I understand. Don’t good parents raise good children? Don’t faithful tithers enjoy the promise of financial security? Aren’t the prayers of God’s children always answered by their loving Father?”

“As the Master wills. He is sovereign over all. Be careful never to claim promises He hasn’t made. Those who make that mistake think that by doing right they obligate the Master to bless them according to their understanding of the Better Life.”

Now the Voice became infinitely gentle. “My child, you’re in bondage to the Law of Linearity, what the wise, elderly woman called the Principle of Sequence. It obligates you to do what’s right to win the blessings you

desire. That law is no longer the guiding rule for God's children. It has served its purpose. The conclusion is clear. By right doing, no one can gain the Perfect Life later nor the Better Life now. By the Master's grace, that law has been replaced by the Law of Liberty. Under the Law of Liberty, you're free to live in the mystery of trust.

"But you haven't accepted the authority of this new law because it requires you to give up the illusion of control. You've cheapened the requirements of holiness by assuming you can do enough right things to bring about the Better Life. Sometimes that works. Sometimes it doesn't. You therefore live with uncertainty and pressure, and you demand to know the way to live that will make your life work as you want. You maneuver; you do not trust. You negotiate; you do not worship. You analyze and interpret to gain control over what happens; you do not depend. You seek the Better Life of God's blessings over the Better Hope of God's presence."

The woman felt as if waters were about to rise above her head. "But I *do* want my life to work. I've been so miserable. I have to know what I'm doing wrong! Won't you please tell me what to do?"

"Seek only the blessing of His presence, and you'll know what to do. It will fill your soul with joy."

"But...only God's blessings bring me true joy. I need to know how to get them!"

"It's not so. You need only God."

"But I thought I needed God because only He could make my life better."

"When the Master walked this earth, He withdrew from people who wanted to use His power to arrange for the Better Life. He will not be used in the service of weak affections. There's a Better Hope than what you believe is the Better Life. The New Way will take you there."

Those were the last words spoken by the Voice. As soon as they were said, the woman lost consciousness. She reentered time.

The clock's digital display showed 6:30. Morning had come. The woman rubbed her eyes. The question she'd gone to sleep with was still

present as she faced the new day, but it no longer seemed urgent. She still didn't know what to do to make her life better, but it didn't seem to matter as much. She was aware of a desire for something, something more than the blessings of the Better Life. *But nothing I can do*, she told herself, *will bring it about.*

A pressure that had long been sitting heavily on her soul was lifting. She felt lighter, more at rest. *Is this what I've been after all along?*

She turned her head toward the window to see the morning sun. As she did, she heard a familiar voice whispering, "You're about to discover the New Way to live." Strange, she thought. It was the voice of a wise, elderly woman.

TWO PATHS

Right now, at this very moment, you're walking one of two paths through life.

Either

you've decided that what you most want out of life is within your reach, and you're doing whatever you believe it takes to get it

or

you've realized that what you most want is beyond your reach, and you're trusting God for the satisfaction you seek. You want Him. Nothing less, not even His blessings, will do.

If you're walking the first path, your life is filled with pressure. Inside, where no one sees, your soul is weary. You see no way to step off the treadmill. Or life is going well, and you're satisfied. But you sense something's wrong, something's missing. The pressure is still there.

If you're walking the second path, you have hope. Your soul may be weary, your interior world may be filled with struggles no one sees, but you have hope. At times you rest. Something is alive in you; the desire of your heart is not smothered. You can taste freedom. And the taste brings joy.

The first path is the Old Way. It involves a quid-pro-quo arrangement with God or, if not with God, then with the order in the universe, with the rules that make life work. If you do what you should, then you get what

you want, either from a moral God who rewards good behavior or from an orderly world that you effectively use. It leaves you in control of how things turn out in your life. The Old Way promises a better life filled with good things that make you happy.

But it never delivers, though it may seem to for a long time. The Old Way doesn't work for one reason: You never keep your end of the bargain, not completely. No one does.

The second path is the New Way. In this arrangement, God first plants a desire in your heart, a longing that actually values His presence over His blessings; then He invites you to live out that desire, to abandon yourself to what you most want. It takes you out of control, but it sets you free. The New Way promises a *better hope* than the good things of life. It promises nearness to God, and it delivers, though not right away and often through suffering.

Most people live the Old Way all of their lives; most people who go to church live a religious version of the Old Way. It goes something like this:

If you want good kids, raise them according to Christian principles.

If you want a good marriage, understand a biblical model for marriage and live up to it as closely as you can.

If you want God to bless your ministry, follow godly principles of leadership.

If you want to be emotionally healthy, practice spiritual disciplines and trust Jesus for your needs.

If you want close friends, learn to accept yourself and to be vulnerable, authentic, and forgiving.

People who live the Old Way believe the *Law of Linearity*, a law that states there is an *A* that leads to the *B* you want. Figure out what *A* is, do it, and you'll have the life you most desire. The pressure's on.

People who live the New Way believe the *Law of Liberty*. They come as they are. They do not bathe before they approach God. They come to God for the bath. They feel no pressure to change either their inner life or their

outer life, but they *desire* change in both spheres. And they are eager to do whatever will create the opportunity for change, even if it means dipping themselves seven times in a muddy river or marching around an enemy's wall for seven days and blowing trumpets. They live for the truest desire of their hearts: to know God and to enjoy Him. They do not live for a better life in this world. And when their life here is hard, when things fall apart, they most clearly reveal who they are. They're citizens of another world who most want what this world can never provide. So they wisely indulge their deepest desire and trust God to reveal Himself to them. That's the Law of Liberty.

Most of us are living the Old Way. Some of us can feel the emptiness it never fills. We're working hard to make life work so we can feel good. The pressure's on.

There's a new way to live that takes the pressure off. Join me as together we search for it.

PART I

THERE'S A
NEW WAY TO LIVE

I Think We're Missing It





RULES TO LIVE BY

As I write, a new self-help book is high on the charts. The title is *The Rules for Marriage*, and its two authors are making the talk show rounds.

I've not read the book. I just caught a few minutes of the authors' latest interview. One rule, I think it was number twelve, reads like this: "Don't compare your mate to someone else's."

Good advice. Mention to your husband, no matter how sweetly, that Sally's husband cooks dinner several times a week, and you can expect a tough evening. That's true. That's how things work.

But tell him you appreciate how hard he works to support his family, even though it means he drags himself home late, slumps on the kitchen stool, and in five minutes wolfs down a dinner it took you three hours to create, and there will be less conflict. You might actually feel good about yourself for encouraging your weary husband rather than complaining, and—who knows?—he might aim a smile your way and help clear the table. At least for that evening and perhaps longer. If you consistently follow the rules for marriage, you'll likely enjoy a better life.

But you'll be farther from God. Not because you were kind, but because your kindness was directed toward a goal that you valued more than intimacy with God. You wrongly defined life.

Your kindness was a power play. You decided what you wanted and you went after it. You neither depended on resources the Spirit provides nor

placed top priority on glorifying God. He was not the center of your affections, neither the source nor goal of your movement.

HE WANTS SOMETHING MORE

Some would critique your kind affirmation of your husband differently. The problem, they would say, is cowardice, weakness, a fearful refusal to risk conflict for the sake of something even better than a tension-free evening. According to that thinking, a better rule to follow might be “Air your feelings honestly but not antagonistically. And do it to help your husband become a more sensitive person.”

Those familiar with their Bibles might claim divine support for such advice: “Speak the truth in love,” an inspired author once wrote. This rule, it could be argued, has a chance of generating a closer relationship, a real meeting of souls. Notice, however, that the formula remains the same: Decide what you want, then figure out how to get it.

My concern with *The Rules for Marriage* is not whether the rules are good or bad, whether they're effective in reaching a truly better life or effective only in reducing conflict. It isn't even whether the rules are Christian or unchristian. And my intention is not to suggest a better plan to secure a better life. I have no strategies in mind to give you a better marriage, better kids, a more complete recovery from sexual abuse, or quicker healing after your divorce. Nor, I believe, does God.

I want all these things for you. So does God. And I want a better life for myself. So does God. *But He wants something more for both of us.* And only when we pursue the more will He grant the less. Or He might not, until the next life.

I'm troubled by how unquestioningly we live out our determination to make this life work. All our hopes for happiness are bound up in it. It's as if we believe this is the only world we ever plan to inhabit.

And I'm troubled most by the often unstated and unrecognized

assumption that lies beneath our resolve to experience a better life. The assumption might be called the Law of Linearity. It goes like this:

Choose what you want out of life, figure out what you have to do to get it, then follow the rules. Select the *B* you desire, then perform the *A* that leads to it. There's an *A*—a strategy—that leads to every *B*—a goal.

That's the Law of Linearity. Let me offer a few examples.

- Do you want to be spiritual? Then practice spiritual disciplines, not to create space for a merciful and sovereign God to work in the depths of your hungry, humble soul, but rather to generate the level of spirituality you want. There's a line between the practice of spiritual disciplines and the experience of spirituality, an arrow pointing from the practice (*A*) to the experience (*B*). You are in control. *B* follows *A*.
- Do you want this crisis with your daughter to resolve itself well? Consult with a seasoned counselor who specializes in adolescence, not to discern where the Spirit is moving through this trial in both of your lives, but rather to build a bridge between you and your daughter that will allow the two of you to soon meet in a healing and warm embrace. There's an *A* that will lead to the *B* you desire. Don't be concerned that reconciliation with your daughter has become a priority higher than drawing near to God. Go after the better life you want.
- Do you want to overcome your sexual addiction? Join a recovery group of men who are serious about moral purity, not to revel in God's grace and to discover how badly you long to know Him, but rather to find the help you need to keep you away from pornography. The point is getting your life together, not getting closer to God. And there's a way to do it. The Law of Linearity says so. Be practical. Figure out what it takes to solve your problem.

Let me put it more generally. We all want our lives to work well, to become better than they are or to remain as good as they are. When that

desire becomes our goal, the objective we most value, then we like to believe the Law of Linearity is operative. We want to believe there's an *A* we can do that will lead to the *B* we want. Our lives then become a sustained effort to discover and follow whatever principles will provide a life that lets us feel pretty good.

And it sometimes works. Stay calm rather than ranting when your teenage daughter tells you she's pregnant, and you may preserve a good enough relationship to weather the crisis. Be honest with a group of men about your sexual struggles, and you may find yourself better able to resist temptation. Spend time in contemplative prayer and *lectio divina* (a special way of listening to the Spirit as you read the Bible), and you may feel closer to God.

But you might end up farther from God. And you *will* end up farther from God if you think of these principles as methods to produce the better life you want.

ISN'T THAT THE WAY THINGS WORK?

The Rules for Marriage is a new bestseller. The Bible, the best-selling book of all time, is thought by many to offer the Rules for Life. We think it teaches us how to depend on the Law of Linearity to get the life we want. It offers principles to follow to get what we want out of life. That's what we think. No wonder it's so popular. And no wonder it changes so few lives of those who read it.

When we live to make this life work, whether we follow natural wisdom or biblical principles, we become either proud or discouraged, self-congratulating or self-hating.

Christians are no exception. When a Christian parent consistently practices a godly approach to raising children in order to see them turn out well, and when it works, that parent becomes more proud than grateful. But the pride is disguised.

“Yes, my children have turned out as I’d hoped. But I’m not surprised. I spent quality time with them. I prayed for each by name every day. And God is a prayer-answering God. I know we must do our part. By His grace, I think I did, not perfectly, of course, but pretty well. I set clear boundaries. I was involved and fun-loving, but they always knew who was in charge. I was their parent, not their buddy.

“And kids want that. They feel more secure when they play in a fenced yard. God is so faithful. He’s so good. I trained my kids according to His wisdom, and He saw to it that they became fine young people. That’s how it works.”

The worst sermon I ever heard was delivered by a middle-aged man who made me think of a strutting peacock when he spoke. For thirty-five minutes, he explained how he’d driven foolishness out of his children with the rod of correction and had planted wisdom in them through regular family devotions. The message was clear: I did what I was supposed to do. God blessed my efforts. I now enjoy the better life of having godly children.

When the law works, we become proud, though we disguise it as gratitude. And we profoundly discourage the parents who tried just as hard to “do it right” and now ache over a drug-abusing son and a rebellious, sexually active daughter.

When the law doesn’t work, we assume we simply didn’t follow it well enough. We believe someone failed, usually us. We become more defeated than trusting. It doesn’t occur to us that the law might no longer be in effect.

Marie’s husband left her ten years ago, after twenty-two years of marriage. She was devastated. She never thought it would happen. After hearing me lecture on the Law of Linearity, she wanted to speak with me. Here’s what she said:

“I never realized it before, but my thinking is governed by that law. Ever since the divorce, I wake up every day wondering what I did wrong

that resulted in my sleeping alone. I've been so puzzled. I've never been able to believe I was that bad a wife. I wasn't. I really think I was a darn good wife. Lots of women I know aren't half the wife I was—and they're still married, some of them happily. I've been so confused.

“I try to convince myself it was all him. And he really was a stinker. But now I can see that whether I blame him or me, I'm looking for an explanation. And that's linear thinking. What A wasn't followed that would have resulted in B ? And that question creates such pressure. I've blown it once. Now I've got to get it right.”

Then she added, “But isn't that the way things work? Are you saying there's no linearity, no cause and effect? If the Law of Linearity isn't the basis for how we live, what is? Is there another way to think?”

There is. As we'll see, the Rules for Life have been replaced by the Opportunity to Live.

The pressure's off!