

**K I S S
T H E
F I R E**



7 WAYS TO
GET BACK UP

K I S S
T H E
F I R E

WHEN
YOU WANT TO
GIVE UP

SHAWN JOHNSON



NELSON
BOOKS

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Kiss the Fire

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To my three boys—Ethan, Austin, and Ashton.

This book is for you. Getting to be your dad is one of the best parts of my life. I don't know what this world will throw at you, but what I do know is the power of God is enough to get you through it no matter what. Don't stop trusting God. Don't stop supporting, loving, and fighting for each other and for Mom. And don't you ever give up!

Chase down the passions and callings God has put in your heart, and don't let anyone or anything stop you. Your God can and will do more in your life than you could ever ask, think, or imagine. Keep believing, keep going, and remember I'm always in your corner, cheering and fighting for you. I love you!

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FOREWORD

There are some people who live with such honesty and authenticity that you can't help but lean in. Shawn Johnson is one of those people. He's the real deal, and it isn't because he's the lead pastor of Red Rocks Church. It's because of his willingness to talk about everything God has done in his life—not just the parts that are inspiring and impressive but the parts that are messy and painful.

I remember when Shawn told me about his diagnosis. I could barely breathe, searching for words as I fought back tears. But no words came. So I just hugged him, cried with him, and prayed for my friend.

In that moment I didn't know how Shawn would respond. Would he lose hope and give up? Would he fall into discouragement and despair? Or would he find the faith to fight back?

The truth is, we all walk through fire—difficult circumstances we didn't choose, bad news we never saw coming, and pain we wouldn't wish on anyone. Shawn knows what that feels like. On the other side of his diagnosis, he wrestled with anxiety, questioned his future, questioned his calling, and even questioned God.

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But this book isn't about giving up. It's about getting back up. It's about deciding, sometimes moment by moment, that you're not going to let the fire consume you. That you're going to trust God in the middle of the flames.

What I love most about Shawn's writing is that it's raw and honest. So be warned: This book doesn't offer quick fixes or empty promises. Instead, it gives you something far more powerful: a strategy. Shawn gives you an inside look at the mindset and habits that helped him fight back when he felt like quitting.

If you've ever felt overwhelmed, unsure, or broken, this book is for you. If you've ever believed the lie that your past disqualifies you, let this book remind you that God chooses to use broken people—because that's all he has to work with. What you've been through doesn't have to hold you back. It can actually launch you into your calling.

I believe in Shawn, I believe in this message, and I believe God is going to use this book to speak directly to you.

So take a deep breath. Open your heart. And get ready to walk through the fire with renewed faith, because by the time you're done, you might just kiss the fire and walk away whistling.

Craig Groeschel

Founding and senior pastor of Life.Church

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“WE’RE GONNA KISS THIS FIRE AND WALK AWAY WHISTLING”

‘ve got bad news.”

Jill’s hand tightened around mine; my wife has always been better in these moments than I am. I wasn’t even going to ask her to come to this appointment. I wasn’t expecting it to be anything serious, and I certainly wasn’t expecting the neurologist to say what he said next.

“I believe you have a degenerative neurological disorder—somewhere in the family of Parkinson’s.”

“I’m sorry. What?” I asked, trying to make sure I heard him correctly as my world came tumbling down around me. I was stunned. That news came out of nowhere.

A few months earlier I had torn my bicep wakesurfing and had to wear a brace for six weeks. After I got the brace off, I had

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six months of physical therapy. During the first session I was doing wrist curls, and my left hand and arm started shaking uncontrollably.

“It’s probably just atrophy,” my physical therapist assured me. “You’ve been in a brace for six weeks, so you just need to strengthen your arm.”

But when the tremor kept happening, she began to worry. During a later session she got really quiet and then said, “Maybe you should see a neurologist.”

That’s weird, I remember thinking. What does a shaky hand have to do with the brain?

Every once in a while, I’d had to get an injection in the back of my neck to help manage the pain from a pinched nerve. After years of doing this, I could always tell when it was time for another shot because my arm would begin to get weak and start to shake.

I figured that’s all this was, but I agreed to see a neurologist anyway.

When I got to the neurologist’s office, he ran some tests and used a bunch of medical language I pretended to understand. He convinced me to get a brain scan, and I left his office without thinking twice.

The day before I got the results from the scan, I was meeting with my counselor and he asked how the appointment had gone. I told him it had been fine and that I was going in to receive the results the next day.

“Is Jill going with you?” he asked.

“No,” I told him casually. “Honestly, I hadn’t even thought to ask her.”

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“Well,” he said, obviously more aware of a possible threat than I was, “maybe you should have Jill go with you.”

“You think?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said cautiously. “You know, she’s a lot better with details and all that.”

“Right,” I said. “Yeah. Sure.”

I’m really glad he gave me that advice, because Jill’s presence in the room was the only thing keeping me going.

My first question to the neurologist was, “What’s best-case scenario?”

“That we find lung cancer,” he responded.

I was shocked. He added that lung cancer could explain some of the symptoms I was having and would be something we could at least fight against.

His words punched me in the gut. Cancer isn’t supposed to be the “best-case scenario.” I’ve been in lots of fights before, but none quite like this. And I had a feeling this fight was just beginning.

“Okay,” I managed to say, bracing for impact. “If that’s best-case, what’s worst-case?”

“Well, if it’s what I think it is,” the neurologist said, “there are treatments that could potentially help slow it down, but eventually you’ll end up in bed unable to use your muscles, and someone will need to help feed and dress you.”

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Jill and I sat in my truck and cried for what felt like forever. With my voice trembling, I managed to get out two words between tears: “I’m sorry.”

“Why are you sorry?” she asked.

My eyes filled with tears. “Because if he’s right, then I don’t know what kind of husband I’m going to be for you. I don’t know what kind of father I’m going to be for the boys. And so I’m just really sorry and really scared.”

“Well, I’m not,” Jill responded, her voice shaky but strong. The two of us had been through a lot over twenty-five years of marriage. This wasn’t the first time she’d seen me break down. She pulled out a Bible—she always seems to have one on hand—and started reading.

“Babe, why are you doing this? What’s the point?” I asked her. “You heard what the doctor said.”

She straightened up and looked me in the eye. “Because I’m not scared. I’m not going anywhere. And it sounds like we need a miracle.” Then she held my hand and prayed for one as I cried.

Jill and I had taken separate cars to the hospital. Once I felt okay driving, she got in her car, and we went our separate ways.

I sped the whole way home. I don’t usually drive fast, though it’s not because I’m afraid of speeding tickets; it’s because I’m claustrophobic. My worst fear in the world is getting arrested, put in handcuffs, and placed in the back of a tiny police car. I’m afraid I would explode with panic.

I’m not kidding.

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I almost got in a fight at a gas station once with a guy who nearly ran over Jill with his truck. Only one thing stopped me, and it wasn't having to stand in front of the church to tell them I'd headbutted this guy while defending my wife—that didn't scare me. The only thing that stopped me was the fear of being handcuffed in the back of a cop car.

Anyway, that's why I don't speed anymore. But on my way home from the hospital, I sped down the highway driving as fast as I could, hoping I'd crash and be put out of my misery.

Our church was in the middle of a fast at the time, but I decided my fast was officially over. *What's the point?* I reasoned as I pulled into the first gas station I saw and drove out a minute later armed with a box of Krispy Kreme doughnuts. *God obviously doesn't care about me.*

By the time I got home, I was done. I didn't want to see anyone, hear from anyone, or receive any encouraging texts from friends. I just wanted to sit on my back patio in silence. I scarfed down the entire box of doughnuts as I tried to figure out my next step. It's hard to know what to do when you work at a church but don't want anything to do with God.

So I sent out two texts. The first was to our church's executive team letting them know I wouldn't be in to work for the rest of the week. The second was to my friend Bryan letting him know I wouldn't be at our small-group meeting.

That was it. With my bases covered, I threw my phone aside and gave up.

I gave up on trusting God.

I gave up on my calling.

I gave up on my future dreams.

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I gave up on community.

I gave up on life.

Maybe you know how that feels. You may be at that point right now, or maybe you know someone who is. When life knocks you down, getting back up can seem impossible. Trust me, I know the feeling. As I sat on my back patio, I thought my life was over. My story was done.

That's when I got one of the most important phone calls of my life.

My friend Marc Montoya is a world-class, future hall-of-fame UFC mixed martial arts coach. He runs a gym in our town that trains some of the roughest and toughest fighters in the world—the ones other people have given up on.

He's got a knack for picking people up when they get knocked down.

He's also in my small group, and apparently Bryan had showed him my text because he called me.

Marc is one of the only guys in the world I'm afraid of, which is probably the reason I picked up the phone. He asked me what was going on, and I didn't hold back. I told him everything the doctor had said and informed him that I was giving up.

"No, you're not," he said in a stern voice.

Honestly, if that had come from anyone else at the time, I would've rolled my eyes and tuned them out, but Marc had earned the right to say what he said next. In full-on coaching mode, he told me, "You're not giving up on God. You're not giving up on your calling or your future dreams. I won't let you give up on community. And you're sure as hell not giving up on life."

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These weren't empty words. They were promises.

Marc wasn't just telling me what I wanted to hear; he was telling me the truth. For the first time since I had received the news, I felt life start to come back to my body. I slowly began to nod, and then Marc ended with a line that changed my life.

"Shawn," he said with both confidence and conviction, "we're gonna kiss this fire and walk away whistling."

"Coach, I gotta be honest," I told him, "I don't know what that means."

"Look, I'm not saying this is going to be easy. You're facing a fire, and it's going to be hot. I'm not saying you won't get burned, but I am saying you're going to get through this. And when you do, you're going to be better and stronger on the other side. I'm going to be with you every step of the way, and we're gonna kiss this fire and walk away whistling."

This book is about that statement Marc made. That line has given me strength over the last few years to face this fire. It's given me the courage to get back up and keep fighting, and as we talk through those words together, it will do the same for you.

If you're looking for reassurance that nothing bad will ever happen, look elsewhere. This isn't a book about promising a pain-free life; it's a book about getting back up when everything in you wants to give up.

The truth is, the Bible doesn't promise that life is going to be easy. The same Jesus who told us, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full," also said, "In this world you will have trouble" (John 10:10; 16:33).

Think about that for a second. Jesus is saying two things:

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1. You're going to go through really hard things.
2. You can live the best possible life at the same time.

Those two truths used to confuse me. It felt like Jesus was contradicting himself. Which one is it, Jesus? Abundant life or trouble?

But I've learned over the years that both of those statements can be true at the same time. They are like the two parallel sides of a train track.

Trouble on one side.

Life to the full on the other.

This means that we can live life to the fullest, but we'll have to walk through fires along the way.

This book is my best attempt to help you embrace both of those truths and live really well when life really hurts.

While we usually can't control the part where life really hurts, we *can* control whether we start taking God up on his offer to help us live well through the pain.

You get to decide how to respond to the fires in your life. Some of us choose to curse our fires and live out the rest of our lives angry and bitter (believe me, I get that option). Some choose to fear the fire, batten down the hatches, and give up on everything altogether (trust me, I get that option too). But this book is about a third option, the one Marc taught me: You can kiss the fire and walk away whistling.

We all have fires: challenges or circumstances that are not going according to plan. The big one in my life at the moment

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is this diagnosis. But yours may look a little different. Maybe you find yourself saying that this isn't where you wanted to be:

This isn't what I wanted my kids to be dealing with.

This isn't what I wanted my parents to be going through.

This isn't where I wanted to be financially at this point in my life.

This isn't where I wanted to be professionally at this stage in the game.

I wanted to be married, but I'm not.

I wanted to have kids, but we're struggling.

I wanted to get sober, but I just relapsed.

I thought I would find peace, but I'm more anxious than I've ever been.

I just want to be happy, but depression makes it hard to get out of bed.

I have this dream God placed on my heart, but right now it feels a million miles away.

I'm just trying to get through today without giving up on life altogether.

My point is that we all have a fire we are currently facing. The question is, How can we get back up when all we want to do is give up?

That's where we're heading. I want to share my experience and the struggles of my journey, because I know they are going to help you on yours.

In part I we'll answer the question, Why kiss the fire?

I don't know about you, but when I encounter a fire, my immediate reaction is to curse it, not kiss it. I turn off my phone, sit on my back patio, and throw myself a pity party. In those moments finding the strength to face the fire can feel

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impossible. But in part 1 I'm going to get you ready by giving you three reasons why you need to kiss the fire.

Then in part 2 we'll answer the second question, How do I kiss the fire?

Once you know why it's so important that you kiss the fire, you'll be ready to actually do it. In part 2 I'll give you seven ways to get back up when you want to give up. Learn these seven principles, and I promise you'll start walking away whistling.

A month after that original doctor's appointment, I went to the Mayo Clinic in Florida to get a second opinion.

My only hope was that the first doctor was wrong. So I flew to Jacksonville and spent one of the most nerve-racking days of my life with some of the best doctors in the world. They ran all sorts of tests, and then the neurologist sat me down to give me the news.

It wasn't good.

"You have an incurable brain disease," the doctor told me. His best guess was Parkinson's, but he explained that it could instead be corticobasal degeneration (CBD). In that case the average life expectancy is seven years, and the only course of action is to test different medications to see which will fight off the disease for as long as possible.

There was something final about those words.

Now the diagnosis wasn't just one doctor's opinion. The fire was real. And so was the decision I had to make: I could either give up or get up and kiss it.

xx

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That was two and a half years before I started writing this book. As you can imagine, there have been plenty of challenging moments and bad days since.

I get mad a lot.

I get sad a lot.

I get scared a lot.

But I haven't stopped fighting.

I have decided that this pain will have purpose.

I don't know what sort of fire you're facing right now, but I promise you can face it. You can keep going. You can find the strength to get up for another day. You can keep fighting; you've got another round in you.

You may be knocked down.

You may want to give up.

But this book is going to teach you how to get back up.

That moment in the Mayo Clinic wasn't the end of *my* story, and today isn't the end of *your* story. Don't you dare give up. One of these days you're going to look back and be really glad you didn't. And so if you're ready to learn how to live really well when life really hurts, it's time to kiss the fire.