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CHAPTER

NUKED

On March 17, 2003, President Bush issued a forty-eight-hour ultimatum for Saddam Hussein and his sons to leave Iraq. Military conflict was imminent. I watched the president's address to the nation from my living room in Hewitt, Texas, just twenty-five miles from Bush's Crawford Ranch, and I remember the feeling of apprehension that war was, in fact, near. The entire nation knew we were inches away.

The next morning I was awakened at 3:15 by a distinct alarm sounding off outside of my house. What could that be? It definitely didn't sound like a car alarm. Assuming it would soon be silenced, I quickly went back to sleep. Thirty minutes later it was still sounding, so I got out of bed and went into my boys' room that looks out the front of our house. I opened the blinds to examine the street left and right to try to decipher from where this alarm was sounding. No luck. It definitely wasn't coming from this side of the house. It was coming from the back. So I walked into the living room, approached our back door, opened the blinds, and examined the area directly behind our house.

A thick fog covered the area from the ground up, making it even more difficult to locate, so I opened the door and stepped out about ten feet onto our back porch. (Our house is one of many cookie-cutter *Pleasantville* models, so even distinguishing my house from the others in my own backyard requires precision.) Within seconds I knew the alarm was definitely coming from this direction, but I still couldn't find its exact location. I climbed up onto the patio table centered on our back porch to peer out over the fences and figure out what was going on. And as soon as my feet were firmly planted on the table, I picked up my head, and THERE—IT—WAS! ... An orange-tinted, mushroom-shaped cloud billowing up from the ground *in the direction of Crawford!*

NO WAY!

Saddam Hussein has one-upped Bush and nuked the Crawford Ranch just eighteen hours before the ultimatum expired! Of course! Those crafty Iraqis!

Wait.

What is the blast radius of a nuclear bomb? Nuh-uh. It's got to be more than twenty miles. I've gotta load Jen and the kids in the car and drive east as quickly as possible!

(running back into the house and into the bedroom) "Jen, wake up! Come here, quick! The Crawford Ranch has been nuked!"

"What?"

"The Crawford Ranch! You know, the ultimatum!"

(drowsy) "Huh?"

(pulling her outside, onto the back porch, and pointing) "Look!"

After clearing the sleep from her eyes, she squinted off into the distance. And I will never forget her response. I've harbored heavy bitterness ever since.

In the most condescending tone, she turned to me and scowled back.

“That's the Hewitt water tower.”

“Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh.”

A red light sits atop the water tower and, at night, continually blinks to warn planes or helicopters in the area. During a fog as thick as what we had that night, the light's redness blurs to a haze, casting an orange hue over the entire tower. I swear you would've taken one look at that thing at 3:15 in the morning—just hours before the ultimatum expired—and thought, “Yes. That is definitely a nuclear explosion. There are no two ways about it.”

But rather than feeling as though I had been duped, I was actually relieved. I mean, a week without marital communication I can deal with when compared to the split-second disintegration of my flesh and bones. Somehow the thought of total annihilation is a wee bit more difficult to embrace.

Fortunately and unfortunately, I've had this experience a number of times. Not mistaken nuclear explosions, but experiences in life where what I perceived to be real was in fact not real at all. Some of these experiences have been spiritual in nature because they pertain to how I've understood God, or rather misunderstood God; how I've understood Scripture, or rather misunderstood Scripture; how I've understood the nature of prayer, or rather misunderstood the nature of prayer. When God, Scripture, and prayer create 98 percent of your worldview, you

can imagine how jarring it can feel to have someone or something come along and tilt the axis on which your world has spun for more than thirty years. At times the jolt is so overwhelming that I choose not to accept it and simply continue along my merry way. It may be truth, but truth is not welcome when it comes at such a high price. The hollow cavity it creates in the pit of my stomach cannot be worth whatever awaits on the other side, or so I tell myself. And that works for a while ...

THE UNKNOWN

There are those times, however, when I actually wade out into the unknown and explore the possibility that things are not as they seem. Not out of some extraordinary display of courage on my part but due to some very tangible reasons. Believe me, I'm not the fearless type. I have friends—Brody, Sloan, and Jed—who habitually search out the next cliff to jump, a steeper ascent to climb, a higher class of river navigability to kayak. They are adrenaline junkies. They're the Tasmanian Devils of extreme sports. I, on the other hand, have vowed not to live life on the edge. I am Winnie the Pooh.

So my wading out into the unknown, my pushing of boundaries, my exploring of terrain is hardly admirable. Again, it's simply due to some very tangible reasons. Reasons that are quite logical and at times intermingled with a spot of intuition.

Reason #1: God in a Box

My experience of life outgrew my understanding of God. Pure and simple. At some point, I was overcome by the realization that the God I was raised worshipping could not handle the complexities of real life. He was perfectly fit to deal with lollipops, candy canes, and sugarplums, but avalanches, wildfires, and tsunamis He was not. Literally and metaphorically.

What's odd about this realization is not its ridiculous nature but my response to this realization. The next few years I shifted into a defensive posture. I became protective of God, like an older brother watching out for his diminutive little sister who couldn't hold her weight on the school playground. And this posture eventually seemed odd to me. Why did God need defending? Who was I really protecting?

Reason #2: Vacant Mentors

For more than ten years, I had my own personal pope—a guy I thought to be the quintessential perfection of spirituality. But somewhere along the way, my model of faith—the person I patterned my life after—became someone I did not want to be. I examined the trajectory of my life and didn't like where it was headed. For instance, my personal pope regularly went public with the messages he'd heard from God. Only a few times was this information announced as if through a megaphone; most of the time his announcements were far more subtle. Eventually, I began to realize that the people who spoke most often about God telling them this or God telling them that were also (ironically) arrogant, self-seeking, and artificially humble.

Now this, I thought, was odd. If God is going to speak to humans, won't He always point them in the direction of being fuller, deeper, more loving, more responsible followers of Jesus? And if that's the case, why do those who claim to have experienced God's personal communication leave their encounters with a sense of superiority? It's ironic. Shouldn't an active prayer life breed a person whose resemblance mirrors Jesus? It would make much more sense to have a dormant prayer life and therefore choose Satan as a comrade, but that was not the case. So I began re-evaluating all of the terms, parameters, and byproducts having to do with prayer and was reminded that someone once said, "Perhaps we should give up our good Christian lives and

follow Christ.” So maybe, just maybe, some forms of prayer promote “good Christian lives” while other forms of prayer promote the actual following of Christ. Is this possible?

Reason #3: Christianity’s Eastern Roots

As I grew older, I began to realize that the word “prayer”—as it has been taught and defined to me—could not fully describe all that was included in my communication with God. I know, I know, this sounds odd. In fact, I regret to say that after spending some 243,360 hours within the walls of various churches to date, I began approaching prayer with the mindset of what counts—and what doesn’t count. This is somewhat disgusting. It’s almost like me emailing my wife an entire conversation from work one afternoon. Then, once I get home, I’d walk through the door and say, “We don’t really have to talk tonight, right? I mean, you did get the email I sent this afternoon ... and that counts, right?” My wife may only be five foot two, but I tell you, she works out. Somehow I think I missed the point. Especially after a shot to the gut, I now KNOW I missed the point.

Saving me from such legalism and compartmentalization, a good friend walked me through the differences between a Western mind (which I, an American, function with) and an Eastern mind (which Jesus, a Hebrew, probably functioned with). Without this crucial conversation, I’d probably still be approaching my prayer life with bar graphs, pie charts, tables, and diagrams, plotting data and quantities along a certain set of axes—and, in the process, entirely missing the point.

Thankfully, I somehow became more Eastern in my approach to God and faith even while living in central Texas—a feat that rivals the feeding of the five thousand or the raising of Lazarus from the dead. When I say “Eastern,” I’m not saying that I’ve started confining my dress to sandals and a turban and begun

hitting the tanning bed four times a week. Please. I'm as Caucasian as you can get. Instead, I'm saying that somehow, somehow an entirely different orientation toward God and, in particular, the presence of God has become my own. This Eastern mindset, which I believe will provide much of the fuel for our conversation, will be elaborated on in chapter 8.

In the meantime, the next six chapters will be spent elaborating on reasons #1 and #2. I believe the need for some healthy level of deconstruction is paramount to any learning/growth process. That is, some amount of time should be spent unloading baggage, albeit a healthy unloading. No matter what we are trying to discover or rediscover—whether it be something as deep as our own identity or simply a craft like crochet—a natural part of that learning process involves distinguishing what you should do as opposed to what you shouldn't do, or who you should be as opposed to who you shouldn't be. In other words, the unloading aspect of the learning process is natural and vital; however, I've realized that tons of people get off on the unloading part. There's something satisfying about being the renegade who lives life for the sole purpose of shooting the wheels off other people's methods, interests, practices, and ideologies. That's why I intentionally use the word "healthy" ...

My end goal isn't destruction but construction. How lame would it be to spend 90 percent of my time demolishing and only 10 percent of my time rebuilding? Heck, what about 70/30? Still lame. Because there's no risk or identity involved there. The critic's chair is and has always been the safest seat in the house because the critic defines himself by what he is not. It's an entirely different way to live when you actually step out and explore, affirm, create, re-create, invent, and reinvent. Much of this book will be spent doing just that.