

# LEAD ME

FINDING COURAGE TO FIGHT FOR  
YOUR MARRIAGE, CHILDREN, AND FAITH



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PROOF

MATT HAMMITT

FOREWORD BY BART MILLARD

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## LEAD ME

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*For the one who hopes to find meaning at  
the end of their hard story.  
Sarah, our struggles will not be wasted.*

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# Foreword

I know how hard it can be to wear a happy face when you're hurting inside. For over twenty years, I've been telling some difficult parts of my story from the stage, through songs, and most recently on the big screen. Maybe you've heard how I grew up in a small town in Texas, with an abusive father behind closed doors. I smile as I tell how God's grace turned him into the dad I'd always wanted before he died. That same grace continues to transform me too.

But even when I'm smiling, I feel the reality of loss, the sting of my failures, and the ever-present struggle to keep embracing what I know—that God loves me just as I am.

Truth is, there was a time I was so lost in the painful parts of childhood that I was missing out on the most important parts of adulthood. I had let the busyness of my career distract me from my responsibilities at home, and my identity was wrapped up in the highs and lows of MercyMe. Kingdom work had become the villain that was stealing my heart from Shannon and the kids. The very thing I thought was noble was slowly chipping away at my family.

It's a scary thing to stop and look in the mirror at the parts of yourself you'd rather not see. It took my wife, Shannon, going to counseling and then successfully and lovingly luring me along with her to start my path to healing. To start seeing the whole picture of who I was, who I am, and who God is shaping me to be.

Around the time I first heard Matt singing "Lead Me" about his shortcomings as a husband and father, I found myself standing face to

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face with my own. It's a hard battle when your children are looking at you saying, "Daddy, you're never home." I told the band that something had to change—that God isn't a God of chaos and that family has to win every time. We cut our tour schedule in half, started exercising the word *no*, and began taking real steps in the process of living what we claimed to believe about family being more important than our careers.

Shannon and I have spent the last couple of years growing in community with Matt and his wife, Sarah, along with a group of friends we call our village. Together we embrace the reality that marriage and life can be a real mess sometimes, doing our best to help carry one another's burdens as our own. We also share the challenges of parenting, including the grief of raising children with chronic illnesses. Along with sharing our pain, we experience the beauty of being loved, known, and accepted, not for what we give this village, but simply because we're a part of it. If that's not a piece of heaven on earth, then I don't know what is.

The journey is so hard when it feels hopeless. And hopelessness finds no better place to grow than when you're isolated. If you don't have good counsel or community, then I pray you seek it. But in the meantime, as you read this book, I want you to see that you're not alone. And I hope that God will give you an open heart to allow His redemption into your life and marriage. That you will find yourself ready to receive the healing that He has waiting for you.

—Bart Millard, MercyMe

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# Dear Reader

But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

—2 CORINTHIANS 12:9

It’s easier to judge a book by its cover than to wrestle with what’s inside. That’s probably why we spend so much time managing the covers of our own lives, trying to preserve the appearance that we’re either normal or far more interesting than we really are. It gets messier the deeper you get into someone’s life, and it’s no small thing asking someone to go there with you.

Although this book is based on my story, the heart of it is an invitation to become who God has called you to be. And I believe the first step in that lifelong journey is coming to terms with the reality of who you are now versus who you are meant to become. Truth is hard, but to paraphrase King Solomon, reality wins in the end. Accepting yourself and others, scars and all, is a painful process. We were weak when we wanted to be strong, awkward when we longed to be cool, rejected when we hoped to be loved or at least recognized.

I could airbrush, cover up, and present a version of my life that’s far more attractive than the truth. But who would that help? Real life

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comes with junk drawers and scary containers of leftovers you forgot were in the back of the fridge. It's not always pretty, but being honest about that stuff—that's what connects us. I don't know about you, but I can relate a lot more to people's screwups than their successes. If you really want my trust, don't just brag about your victories. Show me your scars.

Before we move on, I want to give you a couple of notes on how this book is structured. From time to time, you'll see some words from Sarah—as in Sarah, my wife. Her voice is so much a part of my life that to consider telling my story without including her seemed foolish. Her quotes are not accompanied by any commentary; rather, they're pauses where she steps into the story and says, "Okay, Matt. But this is how I saw it."

Finally, this book as a whole is divided into three main parts, made up of smaller sections. At the conclusion of each of the three main parts, you'll find six questions to reflect on. If you're reading through the book alone, you can respond to them on your own. But the questions are also useful in a group setting or if you're reading alongside a spouse or friend. Either way, I hope you'll take the time to consider the questions when you see them and answer honestly.

—Matt

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# Intro

The end of a matter is better than its beginning,  
and patience is better than pride.

—ECCLESIASTES 7:8, NIV

I couldn't quit the band. I had a wife and four children depending on me to provide for them. There were mouths to feed, a mortgage to pay, and medical bills to sort out. How could I give up my sole source of income?

But my family needed more than financial provision. Something that another million streams of "Lead Me" couldn't give them. Sarah and the kids were hungry for me to provide for their emotional and spiritual needs, and I knew it was time for me to do more than just sing about it. I had to step up and be the man I was called to be, to move beyond my good intentions and take action as the spiritual leader of my family.

Throughout my career, I encouraged people to keep dreaming. Dreams are important, even biblical, but when your personal life is stressed to the point of collapsing, I think it's a sign that you may be chasing your dreams in the wrong direction.

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I didn't have to give up crafting words and music for a living. I needed to find a new context in which to use my gifts, where I could be present and attentive *and* provide financial support for my wife and kids.

As much as I had leaned on it, a career in Christian music was not my provider. God was. I would have to trust and let go, believing that just as God brought my career with Sanctus Real at the proper time, He would provide each step of the way.

---

I planned to meet with my bandmates in person, but first I wrote a letter to pave the way.

*Chris and Mark,*

*I've wanted to talk with you both over the last few days, but I was concerned that I wouldn't remember all I needed to say in the moment. I felt that writing this letter would give me a sure opportunity to be clear and gracious with my words.*

How do you tell your closest friends that the life they've known for twenty years is over? The threads and layers of the life we shared were complex, woven together through time, love, brotherly struggles, and common accomplishments. Our bond was spiritual and emotional, and marked by our physical presence in each other's lives for almost twenty years. I did my very best.

*As a husband, father, leader, and friend, I'm accountable for the things in my life that feel out of balance. I'm*

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*responsible to listen to God's voice and seek what He is trying to teach me in my restlessness. My natural inclination is to strive harder to fix things and to come up with solutions to keep things moving forward at all costs. However, I think Saint Augustine said it best when he wrote, "Lord . . . our heart is unquiet until it rests in you."*

I felt the weight fall from my chest as I wrote down the words I had bottled up inside.

*Obedience requires action, sacrifice, and hard conversations with people you love. Sometimes obedience requires loss and causes questions that are difficult to answer, because walking in faith can't be perfectly explained. It's not right or fair to keep what God has been speaking to me hidden. Everyone is searching for direction, and I need to speak out. I've come to the place where I know, without a doubt, that God is calling me to step out in faith and walk into a new season, apart from the band.*

There was more to the letter I wrote my bandmates, but most of all I wanted to tell them that I loved them and that I was committed to finishing strong.

---

I boarded our tour bus late on a Thursday afternoon, knowing we had a long ride through the night. I'd practiced the speech that would follow my letter a thousand times over in my head, hoping not to stutter, praying the words would come out right.

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The bus lounge was quiet, with only the hum of the engine to soothe my nerves. I had planned to call the band together but found myself alone with Chris and Mark, and one spilled word gave way to another. I explained how I'd felt spiritually restless for so long, how each time I performed "Lead Me," it burned in my chest that I was not that man. Those words I had written years earlier were still the cry of my heart.

The words I had rehearsed escaped me, and I began to speak from the heart. I let them know that I loved them as brothers, bandmates, friends. They were my family too. But my marriage was strained. The kids were growing up without me. Bowen had made it four years, but the reality was that his disease was progressing. Most of all, I knew that God was calling me to step into a new season of life.

The room became quiet. I took a long breath. "Guys, I'm done," I said. "It's hard to say, but . . . for good."

Mark got quiet, but Chris became understandably upset. Sanctus Real had started as just him and me, at Toledo Christian School. We were just kids.

As teenagers we answered God's call, and together we remained faithful to it through adversity. We had also shared the privilege of seeing lives touched and miracles happen through the mysterious power of ministry through music. But despite our successes, none of us could deny that life on the road had come at a great cost to our families. Ultimately, they would understand. But as with any life-altering change, this one would take time to accept.

# Chasing Dreams

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# Early Years

To live by grace means to acknowledge my whole life story, the light side and the dark. In admitting my shadow side, I learn who I am and what God's grace means.

—BRENNAN MANNING

They called me “The Barf King.” Not the sort of cool nickname an elementary school kid hopes for, certainly not “Ace” or “Lucky” or something the fast, athletic kids get, like “Flash.” Those would’ve been good nicknames. But when you’re a first grader with a nervous stomach who upchucks in front of the water fountain while your classmates are lined up to get a drink, Barf King it is.

I can’t recall who blessed me with such a clever nickname. Maybe the janitor whispered it around the halls as payback for all the times he had to carry his push broom and sack of red sawdust to the scene of my latest spew. Boy, that guy must’ve hated me.

I grew up in a neighborhood just northwest of downtown Toledo, Ohio, only a mile away from the hospital where I was born. I rolled with a small gang of neighborhood kids on the weekends but also had

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a few friends at church, where the Hammitt family could be found most any time the doors were open.

Most of my early memories share the same location, Toledo Christian School, or TCS, the private Christian academy I attended from kindergarten through grade twelve. Our mascot was the eagle, and bold letters across the gymnasium wall reminded every student of the promise in Isaiah 40:31.

Those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint. (NIV)

“Those who hope” meant that with God’s help even the Barf King could soar. I believed those words back then. And despite the staggering number of students I meet who seem proudly jaded by their Christian school experience, I still believe those words today.

My mother worked as the school secretary, which meant I was the first kid through the doors every morning and the last to leave every afternoon. I would sit there in my pleated corduroys and mushroom-shaped eighties haircut, staring out her office window as the other kids streamed from class, textbooks stuffed into backpacks. Laughter echoed as they headed off to ride bikes and play *Super Mario Bros*. The glorious sounds of freedom. While I was still in school.

“Matthew, could you grab the new announcement sheet from Mrs. Rumschlag?” Mom would call over. “And run off a hundred or so copies for me after that?”

“Sure, Mom,” I would reply.

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Remembering childhood is like looking back through old yearbooks. Snapshots and random memories, some blurry and others crystal clear. Old friends and enemies. Highlights and lows. Psychologists say those early moments shape the rest of our lives.

I remember sitting on the floor in front of my first-grade teacher, Mrs. LaPrarie, repeating after her with my classmates, *“Obedience is doing what you’re told, when you’re told to do it, with a smile on your face.”* I wanted nothing more than to live up to those words. Maybe that’s why I still feel a little heartbroken when I think about the first time I was sent to the principal’s office. I was caught in the middle of a misunderstanding and paddled for something I didn’t do.

I would’ve preferred that paddle in the hands of a coldhearted villain. I could’ve been bitter about it, had someone bad to blame. But Mr. Gagle? Glasses and a mustache, friendly, funny, kindhearted to all. He was short but walked with a sense of towering joy. I loved him. Most everybody did.

The shame was overwhelming to me, being the “bad kid” sitting across from such a good man. Graciously, he called Mom down from her office to take the swing, which wound up being more of a bunt. Maybe that was Mr. G.’s way of saying, “I know you’re a good kid, Matt, but I gotta do it.” Or maybe that’s just what I wanted him to think.

My third-grade teacher was feared for her cruel, superstrict demeanor. There’s a quote that goes, “Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.” Maybe Mrs. Duval’s battle was hard. Tough to see it that way when you feel like your teacher hates you.

The stress became worse, and Mom finally took me to the doctor for tests. I can still feel the cold exam table under my hospital gown as they handed me a chalky substance to drink. They pumped the rest up

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into my gut so they could get all their X-rays. I tried to lie still and not cry as a nurse shoved a long tube the wrong way up a one-way street.

“Good job, Matt!” the nurse said when it was over, like I was a puppy they were trying to housebreak. A mammoth toilet, twice as deep as the standard bowl, mocked me as I ran into the bathroom.

Official diagnosis: irritable bowel syndrome. IBS at age eight. Thanks, third grade.

---

School days at TCS have overshadowed many of my childhood memories, but I can still picture the nights and weekends that our family spent at church. It was rare for the Hammitts to miss Sunday morning worship, Wednesday night classes, or potlucks in the fellowship hall. Mom volunteered while my father, who worked as a software engineer, served on the board.

I didn’t know it at the time, but some members of the church board had privately expressed concerns to our pastor. Those concerns were taken to heart, but not in the way they had hoped. One Sunday, in front of the whole church, those board members—including my dad—were told to leave. As in “leave and don’t come back.”

Church life, social life, everything stopped. These people were our family, all smiles, all love. Then suddenly they’re avoiding us in the grocery store. I was eight years old. Too young to understand. But you never forget the way it feels to be cast out.

Mom and Dad acted like they were fine, but I think they were trying to shield me and my brother, or maybe even themselves. We found a new church home where we were welcomed with open arms. Dad started serving again, teaching Sunday school, getting involved in various aspects of outreach and ministry. Our new pastor was a gifted

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teacher and kind man, genuinely loved by his congregation. In a way, it seemed he was righting the wrongs of our previous pastor. I wish it could have been so simple.

There was more to it, of course, but from my point of view, our new pastor just disappeared one day. Must've been hard for Mom and Dad to tell me the truth, that our pastor was having an affair. With another man.

A new preacher came into the fold. Before long, the church split yet again. I wasn't sure how to process that pain, but I felt back then what I know for certain now. People are people. I never blamed God for those wounds, but I carried them. Maybe I still do.

My parents remained through multiple pastors, changes, and splits. They were a picture of grace and faithfulness in a world that's fractured and fickle. I'm so grateful for the way they have selflessly loved God, the church, each other, and me.

---

Things took a turn for the better in fourth grade when I entered Mrs. Segler's world. Every year Mrs. Segler directed a class play, and that year she cast me—yes, *anxious me*—in the starring role. The play was called *Tales of the Kingdom*, and I played Scarboy, an orphan ridiculed for the unsightly scar on his face. As the story evolves, Scarboy finds his place in the world through the power of love and is given a new name, Hero. This was far more than a tale to me. It was a life-changing lesson of how grace teaches us to wear our scars with dignity. I didn't just play the part of Scarboy—I *was* Scarboy. And being up there performing? It felt like maybe I had found my place in the world too.

Mrs. Segler's confidence changed everything. I've heard it said that we should do for one person what we wish we could do for many.

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I'm so grateful that Mrs. Segler chose *anxious me* to be her Hero that year.

---

The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit. (Proverbs 18:21, NIV)

Throughout the Bible, names carry the weight of hopes and dreams, calling, vocation, and sometimes prophetic vision. When someone is given a name, it can come with a blessing or a curse.

Funny how I took a ridiculous name like Barf King to heart when I was a kid. Perhaps the pain of taking that name has kept me from embracing the names and titles that describe my work.

“So, what do you do?”

The person asking may not see it through my smile or hear it in my voice, but that simple, cordial question from a stranger sets me on edge. It's not that I don't have anything to say, and I certainly don't have anything to be ashamed of. It's just that I do a lot of different things, and it's difficult to explain. Artist, singer, songwriter, author, speaker, and so on.

I catch myself dancing around those words. Claiming these titles, even though they describe what I do for a living, makes me feel pretentious. Regardless of the success I've experienced along the way, I still feel like a wannabe, a poser, a dreamer, clumsily trying to validate myself to strangers.

*That's cute, they'll think. Still chasing dreams at forty . . .*

Sometimes I'll just reply that I'm a musician. “You should try out for American Idol!” They offer this great piece of advice with a proud look, as if no one has ever suggested that to me before.

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“Maybe I will!” I reply with a smile, because it’s not worth explaining that I’m already published or how the world won’t benefit from another idol these days.

Instead of embracing the titles that come with my calling or receiving the blessing of the name my parents gave me, Matthew, which means “gift from God,” I’ve carried the curses of others close to my heart. I keep fighting the feeling that I’m a child in a grown-up’s world.

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# The War Within

True courage is being afraid, and going ahead  
and doing your job anyhow.

—GENERAL H. NORMAN SCHWARZKOPF JR.

Only at a small Christian school would the principal also teach fifth grade. But hey, I was more than happy to get Mr. G.

The Gulf War was raging, Saddam Hussein was America's arch-nemesis #1 and Mr. G. was a member of the army reserves. I had just added a General Schwarzkopf to my Desert Storm trading-card collection, so I was psyched when we started talking about the war at school. One day Mr. G. brought his army-issued hazmat suit in for us to pass around. The suit came to my desk. I figured it would be camouflage, but the pants were the exact same color as the dark khakis I had on.

I slipped the hazmat pants over my khakis, slid my arms through the jacket and pulled the gas mask down over my head. The army suit made me feel bold and mighty, ready for some secret mission, like Rambo or G. I. Joe. "Hurry up, Matt," River Wilson said. "It's my turn."

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I took off the jacket and quickly yanked the hazmat pants down. The whole class broke out in hysterics.

*Did Mr. G. say something funny? Why is everybody laughing?*

I looked down. Not one, but two pairs of pants around my ankles.

So there I stood for what seemed like twelve solid minutes in my Hanes-brand tighty-whities. Have you ever had that dream where you're caught at school in your underwear? This was not a dream.

Mr. G. slid his arm around me and guided me to the hall. I tried really hard to hold back tears. "It's okay, Matt," Mr. G. said. "Everybody makes mistakes. Someday you'll look back on this and laugh too."

Mr. G. was nice but such scenarios are bully bait. Bullies seize upon the weaknesses of others, out of fear that someone will expose theirs first. Reality is harsh, even in a Christian school. Sometimes, especially at a Christian school.

Brad Lane gave me fifth-grade hell after that incident with the pants. Brad had a withered arm, limp from birth. Maybe that's why he felt the need to strong-arm us smaller kids with the other one. Headlocks, noogies, pulling my chair out from under me while I was eating lunch.

One day Brad smacked me in the head while passing in a crowded hall. I tripped and my books scattered. I'd finally had enough. "You wanna go?" I demanded, throwing my fists up. I'd heard that in a movie, I think. I paired it with the most menacing face I could possibly make.

"Go where, stupid?" Brad shot back. Fair question, I suppose.

The kids all laughed like I was Charlie Brown whiffing the football again. I picked up my books, hung my head, and walked away.



I've thought long and hard about what made me such an anxious child. I was part of a loving family, and I even asked my mother about it while writing this book. She said I seemed happy on the outside. Besides the struggles with anxiety and school-bully stuff, I have a lot of wonderful memories from childhood.

I used to get hung up on finding reasons for everything, but these days I've learned to rest in the mystery. Much like the apostle Paul, we all have our thorns. I guess God made me really sensitive. That's my thorn. Or at least one of them. Isaiah 40:31 says God gives power to the faint and strength to those with no might. I just needed to trust that He would turn those thorny parts of my life into something good.

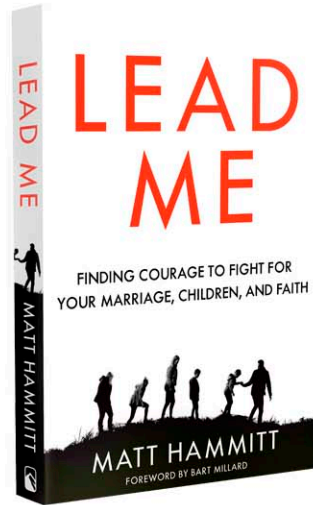
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