

**about
what
matters
most**

**A Christian Man's Guide
to Forging Friendships**

J. Alasdair Groves


P U B L I S H I N G
P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

© 2026 by J. Alasdair Groves

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—except for brief quotations for the purpose of review or comment, without the prior permission of the publisher, P&R Publishing Company, P.O. Box 817, Phillipsburg, New Jersey 08865-0817.

P&R Publishing offers special discount rates for bulk orders and ministry purchases. To inquire about a special rate, please write to us at sales@prpbooks.com.

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

Italics within Scripture quotations indicate emphasis added.

Cover design by Jelena Mirkovic

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Groves, J. Alasdair, 1982- author

Title: Talk about what matters most : a Christian man's guide to forging friendships / J. Alasdair Groves.

Description: Phillipsburg, New Jersey : P&R Publishing, [2026] | Summary:

"Are you silently carrying a burden of sin, fear, grief, or struggle? You're not alone. Many men are experts at keeping everything inside—even when silence leaves them vulnerable to loneliness, moral failure, and spiritual stagnation. Alasdair Groves shows how honest, gospel-centered conversation can break that silence. By sharing the real issues that weigh on their hearts, men create strong, supportive friendships that encourage spiritual growth and protect against moral pitfalls. Learn how to make more meaningful conversations, frame discussions around Scripture to strengthen faith—not just feelings—and build a routine of honest check-ins to keep you and your friends accountable and connected"-- Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2026020863 | ISBN 9781629958293 paperback | ISBN 9781629958309 epub

Subjects: LCSH: Christian men--Religious life | Friendship--Religious aspects--Christianity

Classification: LCC BV4528.2 .G76 2026

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2026020863>

For James Alan Groves,
a father who sought and taught my heart

For Alden Davis Groves,
the finest brother a man could hope for

For James Alden Groves,
my son, with whom I am well pleased

And for my band of brothers throughout all the years—
it has been my privilege to stand by your shoulders

contents

Introduction 9

Part 1: Why We Need to Talk About What Matters Most

- 1. Light for the Battle 17
- 2. Words Matter 23
- 3. A Band of Brothers 29

Part 2: Why We Don't Talk About What Matters Most

- 4. The Reasons We Don't Talk 39
- 5. The War Within 45

Part 3: What Matters Most

- 6. What Matters Most to God? 55
- 7. What Matters Most to You? 61

Part 4: How to Talk About What Matters Most

- 8. Good Conversation Starts with Good Listening 69
- 9. Celebrate the Good 79
- 10. Lament the Hard 85
- 11. Confess the Bad 93
- 12. Steward Your Brother's Confession 101
- 13. Pray About What Matters Most 109

Part 5: Who to Talk to About What Matters Most

14. Start with the People Right in Front of You 119

15. Go One Step Further 125

16. Marks of a Trustworthy Man 135

Conclusion: A Word of Encouragement 141

Acknowledgments 145

Appendix A: How to Start a Men's Group 149

Appendix B: Using This Book with a Group 157

introduction

Tracy was exactly the kind of man you need to be to get away with being a man named “Tracy”: tall, but seemingly taller because of his time in the weight room; rough around the edges but quick with a smile; generous and loyal, but nobody you’d want to cross. When he began attending our church, Tracy was rediscovering a genuine, if not profanity-free, walk with Jesus after some rough-and-tumble decades. We became friends, and I had the privilege of hearing him pour out his heart about his family, his mistakes, and his honest wrestling with the Lord. So it was with deep sadness that I found myself sitting in a charcoal gray suit, listening to loved ones reflect on his forty-two short years just days after he suffered a fatal heart attack. It felt as though the damp December fog slumping against the church windows had somehow seeped inside, settling over us all.

The most striking thing about Tracy’s funeral, however, wasn’t that he died so tragically young. No, the most striking thing I remember from that day was all eight men from his church men’s group standing shoulder-to-shoulder on the stage, honoring their fallen friend and sharing what he’d meant to their fellowship. It was obvious that Tracy’s men’s group had been at the center of his life and that the men facing us had lost someone vitally important to them.

As I walked out of the service with a mutual friend, a man's man himself, he asked with an awkward, almost embarrassed hint of yearning, "You went to his church—what is this 'men's group' thing he was part of? How does someone become part of something like that?"

The longing for a band of brothers I heard in his question has stuck with me for more than ten years now. This book is my attempt to answer his question. At its heart, the question exposes a lack that countless men quietly sense. The symptoms are everywhere: pervasive loneliness, difficulty forming meaningful friendships after college, a deep longing for a place to be honestly known and accepted, resignation to the isolation of modern life.

We live in the most isolated and isolating culture in the history of mankind. Men in particular are more disconnected from genuine friendship with other men than ever before. Most men sense there must be something out there better than this. They know, even if only faintly, that they were made for deeper friendships. Yet, increasingly, men don't know how to move toward the kind of connection they hunger for.

How can you surround yourself with a band of brothers? I can tell you in a single, five-word sentence: *Talk about what matters most.*

Yes, that's it. The path to friendship begins with finding the courage to talk with other men about the things you care most deeply about. Doing so will not only empower you to grow into the man God is calling you to be, but it will also bind you together with brothers in the fight. When men begin to talk to other men about things that matter, they discover an untapped reservoir of oil that has been lying right in the backyard of their lives. I've never seen a man discover that reservoir and then return to a life without it. I know I never will.

In saying that men need to talk about what matters most, I am *not* trying to cast shade on talking about your job or sports or the weather. In fact, just as the peak of a mountain can exist only if a vastly greater volume of earth and rock lies beneath it, so the kinds of conversations that can forge lifelong friendships rest upon a larger body of generic greetings, little jokes, and updates on family, work, and activities. The fact is that most of our time spent talking on this earth will be about minutiae that are decidedly *not* the things that matter most. That's as it should be.

The problem, however, is when we get stuck there. When we stop and set up a permanent camp just short of the summit. Sometimes we call a premature halt to the hike because we are afraid. We can see that the trail ahead winds more steeply. Sometimes we pitch our tents, telling ourselves we'll get back to the hike later, but then we somehow never manage to strike the tents and lace our boots back on. Sometimes we simply don't know the way and can't make out the trail at all; the top of the climb is lost in the clouds.

Here's the approach we'll take to solving this problem: In part 1, I'll cast a vision for why we should put in the effort and take the risk of talking about what matters most, leaning heavily on two key realities: You are in a battle, and you are surrounded by potential brothers in Christ. In part 2, I will identify some of the hefty barriers that hold men back from engaging with one another in earnest. Part 3 will explore what God sees as most important, what you see as most important, and how those two things intersect. In part 4, I'll lay out the core, how-to elements of talking about what matters most. Finally, in part 5, I'll suggest some ways to get started.

What about you? Where does earnest conversation about the most important things in your life fit into the ecosystem of

your relationships with other men? Maybe your vision of male friendship is the companionable silence of two men with fishing rods, listening to cicadas and the water lapping against the side of the boat. Maybe it's laughing by the grill, shooting around on the court, or staying up till the early morning hours with a gaming headset over your ears and a controller in your hands. Maybe it's sitting in worn leather chairs talking theology over beer or pipes in a room crammed full of books.

Whatever the case may be, I don't want us to mistake these things for the true center of connection. True friendship is more than simply doing things with or for each other. The proactive pursuit of opening your heart to your brothers in Christ and welcoming them to do the same is like going to the gym. With consistent effort, this pursuit produces strength, resilience, and growth that cannot be gained any other way. But if you never exercise, you eventually end up in the hospital. And who among us wouldn't rather go to the gym than the hospital?¹

That kind of "cord of three strands" resilience is what God wants for you. And I am hopeful. As much as I see men more isolated now than ever before, I also believe there is a greater "openness to openness"² among men today than there has been in a long time. A greater sense that maybe honesty and vulnerability are both possible and desirable. Maybe you're feeling that way yourself, and that's why you've picked up this book.

As is so often the case, our greatest challenges are also our

1. I'm indebted to Andy Crouch, an author and a coach of entrepreneurs, for this wording. See his interview by Adam Jeske, host, *The Nonprofit CEO Podcast*, episode 005, "The Hidden Vulnerability of the Nonprofit CEO," March 24, 2026, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EkJzE1HcmgE>.

2. Crouch, "The Hidden Vulnerability of the Nonprofit CEO." Crouch used this phrase to describe the small group of fellow Christian leaders he has been meeting and going deep with for years.

greatest opportunities. The more polarized and lonely the world around us gets, the greater the church's opportunity to be a place that welcomes men into something radically better than and different from what they can find anywhere else. What if our churches increasingly became places where men got honest and real? What if church became known as the place to go for lonely men who are sick of the shallowness and the distance? The place for guys to go deep with one another about the good, the bad, and the ugly things in their lives and be met not by rejection but by God's pursuing grace? We have a chance in this generation to see the church become *the* place where men increasingly find an answer to loneliness.

Breaking through the barriers between men and deep friendship always requires someone to go first. Will you?

part 1

why we need
to talk about
what matters
most

1

light for the battle

I saw a movie recently in which half a dozen paramilitary contractors defend a US compound against the unrelenting assault of multiple waves of hostiles over the course of a night.¹ Despite the Americans' incredible courage, superior weaponry, and tactically advantageous position on the compound roof, the film powerfully captures the terror of their situation. Shadowy enemy figures continuously close in through swirling mist and drifting smoke, melting into and out of the cover of pillars, stone walls, and even billowing laundry. The surrounded men have no illusion that they can defeat their determined adversary. They're simply trying to buy enough hours for rescuers to reach them.

The one thing the Americans have in their favor is light. The camera shifts back and forth between dark nighttime shots and the perspective of the fighters' night-vision goggles. As a viewer, you feel the impossibility of firing accurately on an enemy you cannot see. But when the camera dons the infrared night vision, the enemy suddenly becomes visible, and the American fire turns deadly. The battle for and against light continues throughout

1. *13 Hours: The Secret Soldiers of Benghazi*, directed by Michael Bay (2016).

the night, alternating between the attackers trying to shoot out the lights on the compound wall and the defenders periodically hammering their floodlights on the invaders. The light makes all the difference.

This illustrates our situation as men living in a fallen world. We are rarely alert to it, but we too are surrounded by lethal enemy forces who take full advantage of the darkness. We too have incredible weapons at our disposal and rescuers who will come to our aid. And we too have the ability to bring searing light against the forces that seek not our blood but our souls: It's as simple as talking about the battles that matter most with faithful friends.

It's a shame we so often leave our floodlights unused and our night-vision goggles untouched.

the battle is real

When I say our situation is like that of surrounded soldiers in a gun fight, I am, of course, speaking figuratively. We are not literally surrounded by charging enemies wielding AK-47s under cover of a pitch-dark North African night.

No. Our actual situation is much worse.

Scripture could not be clearer on this point. You live in a world in which your soul is under assault every moment of every day. Satan, a literal, powerful, smarter-and-stronger-than-you'll-ever-be spiritual being wants more than anything to turn your love and loyalty away from the gracious God who made you and onto yourself (see Gen. 4:6–7; 1 Peter 5:8). On top of that, you live in a world flush with subtle seductions, significant distractions, severe sufferings, and scintillating idols that all invite you to turn aside from the path of life and onto the path that leads to the grave (see Prov. 13:14; Rev. 17:1–6). Finally, and most pertinent to our

discussion in this chapter, you yourself are fundamentally flawed, craving to be the god of your own life, infected from birth with an insatiable desire for things that will hurt you and those you love most if left unchecked (see Prov. 14:12; Rom. 7:15–24). And every last one of us is born blind to these dangers. Talk about a light problem.

Only if the teaching of Scripture overcomes our native operating system can we learn to recognize our innate selfishness and pride as the enemies they are. We need Jesus's severe words that it is better for us to cut off our hands or gouge out our eyes than let them drag us down to the place where all evil is ultimately headed: hell (see Matt. 5:29–30).

We have vastly more to fear from the world, the flesh, and the devil leading us away from faith in the living God than we do from angry gunmen. "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell," Jesus says (Matt. 10:28). Nothing could be more serious than fighting the battle for faithfulness to Christ.

the battle is won but fiercely raging

The really, really good news is that this vicious, desperate battle is, in the most important ways, already won. Jesus has overcome the forces of evil, he has fought the battle for your soul, and your hope lies not in how quickly you can fire your spiritual sidearm at temptation but in his finished work (see Rom. 8:37–39; Eph. 2:1–6; 1 Peter 2:9). Those who are in Christ are like people protected inside the walls of an impenetrable tank: No matter what projectiles the enemy may send at you or how hot the blasts they drop on your vehicle may be, you will remain safe inside (see Eph. 6:16). To be in Christ is to be forgiven for all your sins, empowered

by the Spirit to please and worship God, and promised his unending delight and affection (see Rom. 8:1; Eph. 4:22–24; 1 John 3:1).

These are the weapons Jesus won for us. The enemy has no answer for them. Our hope in our captain is sure.

We also bring these weapons to the war that still rages today. We hold in tension the fact that the battle is won and yet still ongoing. On the one hand, the battle is the Lord's, his church is on an unstoppable march by his power, we are commanded to "put to death . . . what is earthly in [us]" (Col. 3:5), and we are promised that the "gates of hell shall not prevail against [the church]" (Matt. 16:18). On the other, we are called to "flee youthful passions" (2 Tim. 2:22) and to "work out [our] own salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil. 2:12); we must grapple with the reality that we live "amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing" with an enemy "armed with cruel hate" whose "craft and power are great."² The outcome of the battle between Jesus and the darkness of this world is not in the slightest doubt, *and yet* we truly are still in the midst of a battle.

And both of these facts lead to the same implication: We have every reason to fight to the uttermost against the sin that remains in and around us. If our lives are truly under assault, why would we not stack sandbags and set up machine gun nests against sin invading our lives? And if we know our champion has guaranteed our side the victory, why would we not advance boldly?

fight with light

We began by noting the advantage conferred by night vision and floodlights when waging war in the dark. This is where we get to

2. Martin Luther, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," ca. 1529; trans. Frederick H. Hedge, 1853.

the heart of this book: talking about what matters most. When you speak about the spiritual battles you face and the struggles in your own soul, you are lighting up the dark.

The question to you and me as we live in this fallen world, both surrounded by hostiles and equipped with an invincible arsenal, is this: Will we turn the lights on? Will we speak honestly to our brothers about the battles and, in so doing, flood the field of fire with bright sight lines so that we can pray and press into the work of the Spirit? Or will we keep the floodlights dark and put our goggles down, not wanting the neighbors to know there is any disturbance around the compound of our lives? How often have you failed to resist the invading forces entering your home rather than risk waking the neighborhood to ask for help?

This is how our enemy harnesses our shame against us, and it is his most deadly tactic. We don't want anyone to know what sorts of threats we are truly, immediately vulnerable to. So many men spend their lives pretending that the forces of sexual lust, greed, arrogance, laziness, self-indulgent comfort-seeking, obsession with success, self-aggrandizement, lovelessness, faithlessness, dishonesty, and a thousand other ugly foes aren't a genuine danger to their souls. Let the light of naming your enemies to your brother reveal what is real and what is fake.

Brother, you and I are in a battle. Blaze the floodlights by giving voice to your struggles. Join with others who will come alongside you and fight.

questions for personal reflection

1. Are you genuinely fighting a spiritual battle in your life? Or are you just laying down your arms and letting the enemy occupy your house?

2. Where would you guess the Lord most desires you to fight right now?

questions for group discussion

1. Do you feel like you live in a battle?
2. What is one area in which you know the Lord would have you grow?
3. What's one thing the others in this discussion should know about your struggle so that they can better encourage and pray for you?

2

words matter

Conversations are extremely powerful. Words, and sometimes silences, have an enormous capacity to alter and shape reality. I'm not speaking metaphorically here. I am saying that when we catch up, when we talk sports, when we discuss an idea or work together on a plan—all those exchanges can and do have direct impact on the world around us. The more you grasp this, the more earnestly and the more eagerly you will pursue the kind of honest, deep conversations this book lays out, because you will perceive, perhaps even tremble a bit before, their power.

How can I make such grand(iose) claims on behalf of conversation? Am I really saying that even mere chitchat is meaningfully rearranging reality? Yes, I am, at least much more than you think. Let me explain.

words make things happen

The most basic reason our words have such enormous impact is simple: We bear God's image, and *his* words have impact. He is the one whose *word* both exploded the universe into existence and sustains his creation moment by moment throughout all of

history. He is the one whose signature achievement was to send Jesus himself, *The Word*, to take on flesh and dwell among us (see John 1:14). *His Word* has been written down in Scripture, and we are, shockingly, able to truly know him (not just about him) through it. And when his Word goes out, it always accomplishes the purpose for which he sent it forth (see Isa. 55:11). Because we were made in God's image and cannot help but reflect and imitate our Maker, it is no surprise that our words would bear a derivative capacity to change the world around us.

It turns out that the things we say do more than simply convey information. As with the power of God's speech, at least some utterances actually cause things to change by performing some function. The classic example is "I now pronounce you man and wife." When a preacher (or a justice of the peace) says these seven words aloud before witnesses, they aren't simply describing something that has happened; the pronouncement itself actually causes the two individuals to become married in the eyes of the law. Yelling "fire" in a crowd or "bomb" in an airport will instantly affect the behavior of everyone within hearing radius. And then there's the dreaded phone call in which you learn that a member of your family has been badly injured in a car accident: A simple sentence from a person you can't even see and may not even know instantaneously rearranges your blood pressure, your thought patterns, and your schedule for the day.

words shape reality

Friendships follow the same inexorable logic. Our words reveal that we share a strong interest in the same team, hobby, novel, theological debate, or social circle. C. S. Lewis aptly describes friendship as beginning in conversation: "The typical expression

of opening Friendship would be something like, ‘What? You too? I thought I was the only one.’”¹ Even men who fish together in total silence will be unable to refrain from reminiscing around the campfire that night about the one that got away, recounting the story in a way that reinforces and cements their belief that casting and reeling and baiting and waiting was a worthy way to spend a day.

As I was writing this chapter, I asked myself what some of the most consequential words in my own life have been. Here is just a quick sampling that jumped to mind.

“*She said no, Alasdair.*” These words from a classmate waiting at the door of my sixth-grade homeroom informed me that the girl I’d asked out after months of mustering the courage did not share my interest. I wouldn’t seek out another girlfriend till college, preferring to pine from a distance rather than risk the compounding anguish of rejection and public humiliation. Those words changed me and the way I saw my relationship potential. “She won’t want to be with you” became a deeply held conviction.

“*You might be the youngest, but I think you were the most mature one here tonight.*” These words came from a fellow team leader after a high-spirited outing to a local diner devolved into a full-on food fight amongst the young men in our college discipleship program. Embarrassed, we leaders began to turn on one another before I intervened with a plea to focus on finishing the evening’s agenda while taking a step back from the full flush of our emotions. His passing comment, offered to me at a formative age, gave me the confidence to continue engaging in emotionally fraught situations.

“*I used to see men talking as weak, but these friendships have taught me that being vulnerable with one another is actually a sign of strength.*”

1. C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (1960; repr., Harvest Books, 1988), 65.

These words from a friend about his change of perspective on the need to talk about the spiritual battles of our lives ignited my interest to write this book.

words change people

Here's the bottom line: If you drill down far enough, this idea that our words change the world (for good or ill) applies to every single thing any of us ever say. When you laugh and nod at someone's dirty joke, you actually alter their world (and your own) by reinforcing their belief that the joke was welcome and that they should tell more like it. When you mention to a friend that you've noticed his child's character growth, your comment reinforces his commitment to do the hard work of discipling his child with wisdom. Put simply, every word you say (and every word you withhold), whether or not you're aware of it, is influencing the people around you, sending them some message about what is normal or awkward, worthy or disgraceful, worth repeating or avoiding, important or trivial. Every one of us is a much better student of the messages others send us than we realize.

My hope in drawing your attention to the power of our words is not to freak you out, but actually to encourage: I want you to be energized and excited about the opportunity you have in even your most mundane interactions to make an impact on other people! When you engage other men with Christian kindness, patience, gentleness, honesty, or courage, you are actually reshaping their unconsidered assumptions and thought pathways as you talk to them.

It changes people when you ask them how they're doing and listen to the answer like it matters. It changes people when you apologize to them directly for something you've done wrong. It

changes people when you confess your own sins, share your own fears, and ask for support in the face of trials. It changes people, in short, to speak to others as if God is present and active in each of your lives and he can be trusted, even when the path ahead looks confusing.

Let's not underestimate the power of words. Indeed, from humanity's earliest days, we have both fairy tales and accounts of earnest efforts to reshape the world through magic spells. While spells don't have much of a real-world track record, they do demonstrate the deep longing in the human soul for our words to mold our worlds. Every lie we tell—even the little “harmless” ones—with our tongues or our tones is a bid to cast a spell on the hearer, to enchant them into following our agenda in a way they would not want to if they knew the truth. Yet if even the illusions cast by lies have power, how much more is there power in words of light and truth! Words used to openly disclose the vital elements of our lives gain strength only as they are tested and tasted and found trustworthy. Every true friendship feeds on this.

questions for personal reflection

1. I shared a few words that have stuck with me and had a formative effect on my life. What are some of the words that have mattered most to you in your life?
2. What other words have impacted you, for good or for ill?
3. Are there words you are ashamed of speaking that you suspect or know had a negative impact on others? Is there anything you can do about this that you haven't already done?
4. What is something you have said to another person that you believe, or hope, has positively impacted their life?

questions for group discussion

1. Who have been some of the biggest examples or mentors in your life?
2. If someone you respected could say one thing about you that would feel most satisfying or validating, what would it be, and why?
3. If you're comfortable sharing, did you have a good relationship with your father? Did you ever hear words from him that shaped you, for good or ill?