
LIVING IN THE SHADOW OF DEATH

Learning to Thrive through Tragedy & Uncertainty

CARRIE DAWS



Living in the Shadow of Death

© 2019 by Carrie Daws

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN: 978-1-947539-15-0

eISBN: 978-1-947539-16-7

1. Christian life—Women. 2. Christian biography. 3. Change (Psychology)—
Religious aspects—Christianity

Unless otherwise indicated, Scriptures are taken from THE HOLY BIBLE,
NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011
by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Scripture taken from *THE MESSAGE*. Copyright © 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996,
2000, 2001, 2002. Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group.

Scripture quotations taken from the Amplified® Bible, Copyright © 1954, 1958,
1962, 1964, 1965, 1987 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

Scripture quotations marked KJV are from the Authorized (King James)
Version. Used by permission.

Cover design by Jarmal Wilcox

Page Layout by Carrie Daws

IMMEASURABLE WORKS

104 Harvest Ln.

Raeford, NC 28376, USA

FOREWORD

I first met Carrie nine years ago as my husband and I prepared for our wedding. She was the church staff member assigned to us, opening the church, coordinating for our needs, making sure my husband-to-be didn't catch an early glimpse of me, and leading me to walk down the aisle at exactly the right time. Just as Carrie was there on my wedding day, guiding me to wait, relax, breathe, and then finally move, God is there to do the same for us.

Fast-forward to when Carrie asked me to read through the manuscript for this book in a professional role. I willingly said yes, eager and honored to help. As a medical social worker with a hospice agency, I worked with many encountering anticipatory grief. As a licensed clinical social worker, I provide therapy for many more. I know this part of life well, through education and years of work experience. Little did I know, as I read through these chapters, God would use them to minister to me. Carrie's words hit me square in my stomach, her struggles and knowledge relating to a personal situation I was (and still am) going through. She unknowingly ministered to me right where I was, providing comfort and reassurance.

Carrie uses her firsthand experience, life lessons, and God's

Word to provide encouragement, guidance, and insight. This book will have you thanking God for Carrie's transparency, and it will have you leaning into the Father, trusting Him when the path is uncertain, dark, or downright intimidating. May you find peace and comfort within the covers of this book. May it draw you closer to God, and may you seek Him in prayer and in His Word.

“ *And we know [with great confidence] that God [who is deeply concerned about us] causes all things to work together [as a plan] for good for those who love God, to those who are called according to His plan and purpose.*

– Romans 8:28, Amplified Bible

– Kimberly Bell, LCSW, LCAS

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

I feel like I am coming back to life. According to the calendar this morning, fifteen days ago, my dad passed away. Nine days ago, we buried him with my mom, who died thirteen months before him. I miss him terribly.

The last months have been a whirlwind where life came to a screeching halt. A mere four months ago, I met my siblings at my dad's house in Ohio to spend time together as a family and to see how he was adjusting to life without his wife of sixty years. Sixty years. He was okay, but we could tell that life alone was wearing on him. So we talked him into moving in with my family.

I came home and immediately got to work. Our oldest son moved out to share a house with his sister and make more room for Dad. We cleared out his bedroom and one other room in the house so Dad could bring what he wanted to fill those two rooms. We installed a chair lift on our stairs and rearranged our kitchen to make things easier. And I cleared my calendar of everything non-essential for two months so we could all make the adjustment of him living with us.

Three months ago, my siblings, youngest son, and I

descended on Dad's house and began the moving process. Discarding things he didn't want to move, packing things he did, preparing the house to go on the market to sell. After a week of hard work, the five of us caravanned down to my home in North Carolina. My brother had to return early the next morning to his house, but my sister stayed for a few days to help us unpack and settle.

And the reality of what life was going to look like set in. By mid-afternoon that first day in North Carolina, we called an ambulance to take Dad to the emergency department.

Over the next three months, he visited the hospital more times than I want to remember. He entered a skilled nursing facility on Christmas Eve, and continued to flip between the nursing facility and the hospital. The full magnitude of his health concerns threatened to overwhelm us. But I wouldn't trade those long, difficult months for anything.

Most of this book was written before Dad came to live with me. You'll read stories of how the shadow of death inserted itself into my life in different ways over the years. In November, he came back again and sat himself down at my kitchen table. Uninvited. Unwanted. Obtrusive. Ominous.

The apostle John records Jesus saying in John 10:10, *The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.* The shadow of death wanted to steal from me—steal precious moments with my father. He strived to kill the dreams I had of what life with Dad would look like, destroy my hope, and turn Dad into a burden.

I won't deny that I got tired. At times, I battled the futility of it all, wondering what we were truly accomplishing by going to the emergency room again for more x-rays and another CT scan.

But I refused to let the shadow win. I determined to spend time with Dad. I resolved to enjoy the moments we had, even if they didn't look quite like I'd pictured before the move. And I

would help him navigate his health and life decisions in every way that he allowed.

My family joined me, giving me heaping portions of grace and patience. They picked up some of my chores to keep the household functioning, and they tolerated more sandwiches and fast food for dinner than we'd eaten, well, since the last time we'd moved from one state to another. I slowed my life down, almost to the point that if it didn't include Dad, it wasn't on my calendar. I largely dropped off social media, postponed my writing schedule, dropped by church for little more than quick hugs of support, and lost track of most of my friends.

It was a sacrifice for all of us. Yet, on the day Dad finally, quietly passed away, he knew he was deeply loved. The staff at the hospital and the nursing facility knew he was loved. And they loved me well in return.

It was a unique season. A hard season. But it is one I cherish.

OUR BATTLES AHEAD

Whatever it is you are facing, whatever the reason you picked up this book, I want you to hear me. The shadow of death is haunting and fierce and terrifying. But he is not in control of this life we live. He has no power over our choices unless we give in to his taunts.

Yes, I know that's easier said than done. Remember, I just lived it. I still live it, as you'll read in the pages ahead. Romans 8:37 comes to mind; *We are more than conquerors through him who loved us*. Oh, but I do not want you to think I say that flippantly.

On the nights when the nursing facility called me just as I laid my head to rest to say that they were calling the ambulance, I sighed deeply before dressing to go once again the hospital. On the days when I walked into the hospital room to answer Dad's questions, again, about how dire the situation really was, I

sighed deeply before recommitting to love him well by being completely honest.

And in those moments when he was out of his mind, searching for his wife so they could go home together ... the shadow of death lingered so close I could sense him. My heart broke. Sadness of the days, the experiences I wanted to have with my dad, washed over me.

Yet the truth of Romans 8:31-39 stuck with me, strengthened me.

“*What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written:*

“For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.”

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

David penned in Psalm 23:4, *Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your*

staff, they comfort me. I am determined to not fear the shadow of death. For God is with me. God.

The shadow of death doesn't stand a chance.

If you would like to talk more about this or share your story, I invite you to email me. You'll find my contact information at the end of the book and on my website.

– Carrie

FOUNDATIONAL ISSUES

THE SHADOW OF DEATH

“*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.*

– Psalm 23:4, King James Version

THE TWENTY-THIRD PSALM is familiar to many Americans. Even those who don't regularly attend church run across it in a variety of situations. I've grown up with it. As both the granddaughter and daughter of pastors, the Bible has always been a regular part of my life. Listening to favorite passages and key biblical truths were as normal in my growing up years as were my favorite toys and books.

When I considered how to start this book, it seemed natural to begin with the verse that pushed me down the road to writing it in the first place. Actually, it was Max Lucado's words about Psalm 23:4. He wrote in his book, *Traveling Light: Releasing the Burdens You Were Never Intended to Bear*, "God will lead you through, not around, the valley of the shadow of death" (Lucado, 93). I didn't like that. Even now, after months of reading dozens

of books, studying what the Bible says, dealing with my own realities, and writing the manuscript for this book, I still don't like it.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death. Most of you know that the verse doesn't stand alone, but is the rest of the psalm any better? Oh, I know that we tend to hear it in times of sorrow, but have you ever seriously considered its words? Before we go any farther, I want to take the time to do that, to be completely honest with you about my feelings of this beloved psalm. They may surprise you. And I've purposely chosen the King James Version as it contains some of the most familiar phrasing.

Please understand, that while I have great respect for the King James Version, it is not part of my normal reading routine. I purposely rotate through several different translations so I can better see the intricacies of the word pictures and more deeply grasp the richness of the words within the Bible. But wading through archaic phrasing is not something I enjoy, so I tend to avoid older versions. Until it comes to a passage that I've heard since my earliest days on this earth. While many of the verses I have memorized are a horrible mixture of different translations, some passages—like the Twenty-third Psalm—remain steadfastly King James.

A CLOSER LOOK AT PSALM 23

The Lord is my Shepherd. Is there any more comforting thought? Well, except for those moments when the Shepherd knows something unpleasant is best. We don't usually think that way. No, normally these verses are intended to offer comfort or peace, not the reality that the Shepherd knows better than His sheep what is good.

I shall not want. Again, great comfort comes from these words

up to the moment when we learn the painful truth that our wants do not always line up with our actual needs. “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord” (Isaiah 55:8).

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. How many of you skipped right ahead to the green pastures part? We like green pastures! They symbolize rest and peace, goodness and fruitfulness. I picture a well laid out picnic, a comfortable blanket, soft grass, my kids enjoying the day, and no bugs. And I completely ignore the phrase *He maketh me*. Why do I fight Him on green pastures? Is it perhaps that I don’t recognize the goodness around me in the moment, and I think I know better than He what I need?

He leadeth me beside the still waters. Now this sounds completely wonderful, doesn’t it? I mean, as long as those still waters don’t have any mosquitoes! But that’s the thing. This verse just says God leads us. He beckons us to follow with no word on what those still waters look like or how smooth the terrain is beside them.

He restoreth my soul. Wait. Just wait. My attention quickly catches on *restoreth*. After all, it’s great that God is fixing things for me or in me, but can’t we just skip the whole part where my soul gets to the point of needing repair? I mean, I know we’re fallen beings born into a fallen world, but this sounds more like He’s addressing the tragedies that hit after birth.

He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake. And the word *leadeth* makes another appearance. Righteousness is required for entry into God’s kingdom, and I’m thankful that He’s present and willing to “lead me in the way everlasting” (Psalm 139:24). But once again, we’re not told where we’re going or what the road looks like. We’re just supposed to follow up the hill, through the fog, and around the blind corner.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death. Here’s where I got stuck for years—seventeen years, to be exact—uncertain whether this was a good thing, a God thing, or a

disobedient, lost-in-the-wilderness thing. Seventeen very long years, and more tears and angry words than I want to remember. Oh, sure, I had moments where God comforted me. At times I could see His guiding hand and sense His presence. But mostly, even in those moments where I knew God was right there, I felt the oppressive hand of death pressing upon me, hovering nearby, waiting to crush me.

Why exactly do we offer this psalm for comfort? Surely I'm not the only person to come up with these questions, doubts, or concerns. As I look back over the last two decades, I'd be less than honest if I didn't tell you that death still hovers near me. But he no longer scares me. Why? Because of the rest of Psalm 23.

“ *I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.* ”

Amen.

A PIECE OF ME

Your story probably looks different from mine. For each of us, the shadow of death takes on the form that most immobilizes us, most renders us ineffective and useless. It's often a mere facade, but it works ridiculously well for our enemy's intents and purposes.

My story began when I was young. If you've read *The Warrior's Bride: Biblical Strategies to Help the Military Spouse Thrive*, then you may remember that I was born into an active duty US

Air Force family. I was three the first time we moved across the country from Virginia to Alaska. Then Dad retired when I was five and entered The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. Another cross-country move. We moved again when I was eight. And twelve. And fourteen. Not as often as many military families, but quite a lot for civilians thirty years ago.

I truly didn't mind moving so much. New houses still excite me and always provide a good opportunity to thoroughly clean out everything, even behind those solid pieces of furniture that never get moved otherwise. I enjoy learning different places, meeting people who have always lived there, figuring out what is normal for that part of the country.

But for most of my life, I allowed my friendships to remain surface level. No one really got to know me because I assumed we wouldn't be there long enough for it to matter. And I was right—at least about the part of not being there long. As I continued to grow and continued to discount the depth of my friendships, I began to negate my own value to those around me. After all, they'd gotten along without me just fine before I'd arrived and would do so again after I left. What did it matter if they didn't know what I really thought? Who I wanted to be when I grew up? What difference I wanted to make in the world?

Things changed in my teen years. My dad had another chance to move when I was sixteen, but he turned it down. For me. Not that I'd asked him to, mind you. He probably knew better than I did what was going on in my heart, and he was determined to remain in one state long enough for me to graduate high school. When I learned that we were staying, a piece of me relaxed. I felt it deep within, although I didn't take the time back then to recognize it. But, maybe for the first time ever, I allowed myself to go deeper with three friends than I'd ever gone before.

My friends and I graduated and moved on to college, only

one of us leaving town for the experience. Her absence hit me hard, but I squelched it and pretended it wasn't a big deal. Boys took on a bigger part of our lives, and one of the friends who had stayed in town with me got married. Another loss, more squelching. Still, we stayed in contact and got together occasionally even if it wasn't as often as I wanted. Yes, the distancing habit was growing in my heart once again, spreading its constricting branches into every part of my life.

I married, my husband and I had our first baby, and then a new reality set in: My husband enlisted in the United States Air Force. And the days of moving started all over again, cementing the need to protect myself from the pain of losing friends. Anticipating the grief I would go through every time I moved from a friend or they moved from me, I slipped more fully into surface relationships, keeping everyone a safe distance from my tender heart.

This time, though, I couldn't sustain the isolation I forced upon myself. I fell apart just a few years into my renewed unhealthy pattern. I was a stay-at-home mom of a four year old and a one-and-a-half year old and was pregnant with our third baby. We had a new puppy, our finances were stretched to the breaking point, I was starting to dive into homeschooling, my husband's work schedule kept him out of the home far more often than he was in it, and we were new in town. Again. Sixteen hundred miles from family and six hundred miles from our closest friends.

All that was stressful enough to my poor system intent on growing a healthy baby, but then my husband began spiraling into health problems, some of which would not be diagnosed for years. Literally, years. The big items on his medical list now include: fibromyalgia, degenerative disc disease, intermittent muscle cramps, migraine headaches, thoracic outlet syndrome, hypothyroidism, adjustment disorder with depression, insomnia, restless leg syndrome, and severe obstructive sleep apnea. More diagnoses sit in the multitude of pages of his medical records,

but you get the idea. I'm not merely being dramatic. This was a heavy load.

PHYSICAL, MENTAL, AND EMOTIONAL

For a while, one diagnosis followed another, some with explanations or causes but many without. At times they could see something wrong in his body like the syrinxes, or fluid-filled cavities in his neck, but they didn't think any one of them was big enough to be causing his pain. Multiple sleep studies plus a commander who thought he was making it all up led to surgery: Uvulopharyngealpalatoplasty with tonsillectomy, to be exact. No, I can't say it, but I can tell you that it's the removal of pretty much everything dispensable in the nose and throat. He had to learn to swallow again, and still occasionally gets food up into his nose rather than down his throat.

Multiple appointments and discussions with the Life Skills Support Center, Radiology, Mental Health, Pulmonology, Physical Therapy, Occupational Therapy, Chiropractor, Physical Medicine, Endocrinology, Urology, Neurology, and Pain Management, just to name the ones I can remember. Treatment plans included exercises, stretches, strengthening movements, rounds of traction, and trigger point injections. They insisted on education classes covering mental health, back health, nutrition, appropriate shoes, and walking surfaces. He's been to his primary care doctor more times and given more blood at laboratories than he cares to remember. Truthfully, he's a little doctor wary these days. I can't blame him.

But perhaps the most difficult part of all of this isn't the physical toll of the pain, as bad as it is some days. It is the mental and emotional toll of unnamed and unresolved issues along with the loss of hopes and dreams. Imagine being in enough pain to take time off of work to go to multiple doctor

appointments in multiple locations, to submit to a variety of tests of varying degrees of pain and humiliation, and then be told that the results showed everything is normal. Imagine living with constant pain, decreasing strength, and growing fatigue, only to be told nothing is wrong with you.

How does a man live with a growing incapacity that doctors can only document based on his word and not verify or explain?

And, how does a family live with this man?

In his book, *Traveling Light*, Max Lucado echoes Moses in Psalm 90:12: “The wise remember the brevity of life” (Lucado, 84). But what if you’re staring at the brevity of life while also staring into the eyes of your three children all under the age of six? What if the brevity of life takes your spouse or his ability to be fully active and present with you before his thirtieth birthday?

Between diagnoses, potential diagnoses, and medications prescribed to my husband, he’s either been at high risk of or remains at risk for conditions as scary as heart attack, stroke, and respiratory arrest. Many of his prescriptions over the years added to the muscle weakness, headaches, and other issues he was already battling. One medication threatened the health of his liver; others, his kidneys. In fact, even though he’s removed himself off most medicines today, lab results continue to show his kidney functions declining. He stops breathing in his sleep numerous times per hour, at least in those moments that the insomnia and pain don’t keep him awake. And I’ll tell you that his memory is so bad that we lovingly refer to it as “Swiss cheese brain.”

At one point several years ago, he was taking more than twenty prescription pills every day. I don’t know how he functioned. Truly. But then, a single dose of decongestant knocks me out for a couple of hours and renders me useless for a day and a half. It was difficult for me to understand all that he was walking through, even though I sat with him day after day, watching him deteriorate.

I observed him shuffling through life, wondering if our youngest child would have any memories of his father. Would my husband live to see his children graduate high school? Get married? Meet his grandchildren? Some days I doubted it. Some days I was certain he wouldn't. Some days he was so irritable that I hoped for his death almost as much as he did. And every day, I lived with fear, uncertainty, doubt, and a plethora of overwhelming questions that no one had any answers to. What would life look like in the coming days?

And what was I supposed to do in the situation I found myself?

TROUBLES BODY AND SOUL

I'm fascinated by how deeply interconnected God made us. Think about the last time your body hurt. Something as simple as a stubbed toe consumes our attention for a few moments. A sprained ankle is more than inconvenient; when the pain throbs, our mind struggles to focus on anything else. Continue to increase the pain level into more serious injuries or conditions, and physical turmoil quickly consumes mental energies.

The heart is no different. When my husband and I argue, my world isn't right until things are settled again. Even a dispute with one of my children can distract me until the matter is resolved between us. Several years ago, an agonizingly difficult relationship with a person at church dominated my thoughts and depleted my emotions. The entire situation was so devastating that it threatened to wreck several relationships around me. The pain wasn't physical, but it took over my mind just the same.

Trouble for the body, heart, and mind leads to bumps and concerns in your spiritual life. Ginger Harrington writes in her book *Holy in the Moment: Simple Ways to Love God and Enjoy Your Life*, "What troubles the body often troubles the soul, and what

distresses the heart often affects the body” (Harrington, 122). As disease attacked my husband, I looked around my family and could see the impact on all of us, even our little ones that we tried to protect.

Just imagine the rush of emotions raging through my husband and me: anger, fear, doubt. My husband fought shame for those things he once could do and still had the knowledge to do but could no longer physically handle. I battled shame when I would show up to another event alone because he was in too much pain to join me. Anxiousness, powerlessness, hopelessness. I easily stumbled into insensitivity and impatience. He grew bored resting and irritated that he couldn’t do much more than rest. He was moody and miserable. I felt abandoned and fought resentment.

Ultimately, we were both grieving. The illness that had robbed my husband of his physical abilities also stole many of our hopes and dreams. The motorcycle he loved to ride sat unused in the garage. The plans to remodel our home and maybe flip houses to increase our income was cut short because he could no longer handle the labor. Obviously our plans for a full career in the military complete with at least one duty station in Europe had to change. And my heart kept returning to our kids. What kinds of memories would they have? Likely not ones where their daddy wrestled with them on the floor or played touch football in the yard.

“Thoughts and feelings reveal what we believe in the moment, and many of those beliefs relate to getting our needs met—the really important ones like love, acceptance, value, worth, and security” (Harrington, 123). These words succinctly articulate my problem during those early days. I wasn’t struggling with my husband’s health. No, my beliefs about God were coming under attack. Was He really good? Could a good God allow what was happening in my husband, my marriage, my family? Could I successfully raise three happy and healthy children under these circumstances? Would (not could, but would)

God provide if the worst happened? What if the worst wasn't death but rather a continual decline in my husband's physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health? What then? Would our marriage survive? Did I want it to?

The first several years, I sat in denial, convinced that things would return to normal one day, that some grand diagnosis and treatment would suddenly clear up the worst of the concerns. Then I spent a few months pushing for answers myself, as if some label would make everything better. It was only as I accepted the reality in front of me that the questions above became clearer. That was the real battleground. If I wanted to win the fight for my family, I had to come up with the right answers about God.

WE ARE DIFFERENT SHADES OF THE SAME COLOR

I occasionally like to browse the social media website Pinterest. I keep boards for pictures related to my books, great quotes that inspire me, and funny pictures that make me giggle. One of my boards is related to writing and includes helpful tips, encouragement from those who've found success, and details that are good to remember. One such detail is a pin from the Color Thesaurus. A small rectangle divided into twenty blocks, it lists the names of colors and includes a picture of the appropriate shade, colors like syrup, gingerbread, caramel, and cedar. All twenty blocks on this particular pin are brown, but each a different hue.

I suspect that if you picked up this book, then you and I are like those brown colors. Maybe your husband isn't facing significant health challenges (caramel) like mine. Perhaps you have a severely handicapped child (chocolate) or a rebelling teen (cinnamon). Some readers may have lost their job (mocha) or a bank foreclosed on their home (pecan). Maybe a health crisis resolved itself but left a massive pile of debt (walnut) or a natural disaster

cleared out every penny you sacrificed to save to finish college (tawny). Each one a different crisis, but all heart-wrenching and gut-twisting problems just the same.

Trauma and tragedy strike us all, whether they take the shape of a car accident or a deployment or a move, a fire or a hurricane or a tornado. The circumstances are different, but the foundational questions are the same. The authors of the book *Military Widow: A Survival Guide* start out by simply writing, “Life’s tragedies rarely ask for permission” (Steen and Asaro, 1). They are right. No one asks us what shade of brown we want to wear for the day.

Whether death comes to the physical body, to our hopes and dreams, or to our plans and life purposes, it is painful. It is unwelcome. Why is this? We know death comes for all, but why do we struggle with it so very much? Perhaps Max Lucado stumbled onto the answer. In *You’ll Get Through This: Hope and Help for Your Turbulent Times*, he talks about a one-week period in which his church saw five funerals, “ranging from the memorial for a baby to the burial of a ninety-four-year-old friend.” He struggled with the emotional weight of that week, telling himself,

“Death is a natural part of living. Then I self-corrected. No, it isn’t. Birth is. Breathing is. Belly laughs, big hugs, and bedtime kisses are. But death? We were not made to say good-bye. God’s original plan had no farewell—no final breath, day, or heartbeat. Death is the interloper, the intruder, the stick-figure sketch in the Louvre. It doesn’t fit (Lucado, 132).

Death, no matter what form it takes in our daily life, doesn’t fit. But we can’t kick it out either. We’re stuck dealing with it, so we struggle through. We waiver between anticipating the grief to come, mourning the loss before us, and telling ourselves to dig deep and push forward. This is where my battle raged, wrestling

with God over what I believed and what I wanted to be true. Are we doomed to face one tragedy after another until we die? Must we muddle through, sloshing from one sludge puddle to the next until finally Christ takes us home to heaven?

After years of thinking and praying and searching out God's responses to my questions, what if I said the best answer I've got is, "Well, sorta." I bet you don't like that answer any more than I would have ten years ago, but it's the most honest answer I have. The reality of your situation will rest in how you deal with two very personal battlegrounds.

FIRST, YOUR EXPECTATIONS

What kind of life do you expect? Get honest for a moment, taking a look at your struggles and attitudes.

With all the unspoken training provided to pastors' kids who practically live at church, all my hours sitting in Sunday School, Vacation Bible School, and summer Christian kids' camp, on top of the hundreds of sermons, dozens of revival services, and various types of personal and family devotions I've done, I know that ten or fifteen years ago I would have said the pat, Christian answer.

Second Corinthians chapter one talks about God comforting us in our troubles, and chapter four says these troubles are light and momentary. First Peter five mentions suffering for a little while, and Romans five says we glory in our sufferings because we know that suffering produces perseverance and character and hope.

Yeah, yeah. I know. As I contended with God over suffering, I fought against these passages. That's the problem inherent with pat, Christian answers like these. Our head knowledge fights against the heaviness in our heart and the realities surrounding us. No matter how I tried, I couldn't avoid the fact

that my attitude revealed my belief: God owed me a better life than the one I was sitting in. Ouch. The ugly truth deeply hidden within me.

Sheila Walsh writes in *God Loves Broken People: And Those Who Pretend They're Not*, "For too long we have imbibed a watered-down, filtered version of the Christian faith—a faith that's all about us. A faith that claims life will always work out well. A faith that promises picture-perfect, happy families, healthy bank accounts, and good reports from our annual physicals. But this is not the normal Christian life as described in the Word of God!" (Walsh, 112). Oh, ouch again.

As I thought about her words, though, I realized she was right. I wanted the faith of Abraham without having to wait one hundred years for the promised son or walk three days to sacrifice him before he matured into the adult that would fulfill the promises of God. I wanted the obedience of Noah and Daniel without having to build a boat in front of my disagreeable neighbors or pray illegally in front of an open window. I wanted the rewards of David without having to run for my life or live in caves among my enemies.

I wanted the filtered, Christian faith complete with a happy family and good health reports. Even more embarrassing, I had to admit to myself and my Heavenly Father that I was throwing a classic child's temper tantrum because my life didn't look like I thought it should.

SECOND, GOD'S CHARACTER

Once I'd gotten honest about my attitude, I had to figure out where I was going to anchor myself. Because of my upbringing, I easily repeated truths like "God knows everything" and "He only wants what is best for me." But were these actually truths I

could rely on from the Bible? Or were they pop-psychology that sounded good but had no biblical backing?

This is important, and you need to wrestle with it yourself. What do you know about God? Put the present circumstances off to the side for a moment and look back over your life. Consider what your mind has learned about God. Through stories in the Bible we see that He is love. He can show mercy, at least when He chooses to (Exodus 33:19, Jonah 3:10). God is compassionate toward the poor, the widowed, and the orphaned (Exodus 22:22-24, Psalm 68:5 and 146:9, Isaiah 1:17). He's just and powerful, hates sin, and is jealous for His people (Exodus 20:5, 2 Chronicles 19:7, Isaiah 30:18).

Psalm 139:1-3 says, *O LORD, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways.* And Hebrews 4:13 says, *Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.*

Those are pretty convincing verses, but they lead me to at least two different questions. First, if God knows everything, why is He allowing my painful situation to continue? And, if God knows everything, what are we supposed to do with His knowledge of our present suffering and pain?

The Bible clearly shows that sometimes God brings pain or difficulties. It also displays moments where God doesn't instigate the problem or turmoil, but He allows it. Sometimes we can see at least part of why He acts as He does; sometimes we cannot. But my heart keeps coming back to one passage that may seem unrelated to this entire discussion. John 14:1-3 records Jesus saying, *Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.*

Jesus is preparing a place for those who believe. He's coming

back to take us to this place—leaving no chance of us getting lost on the way. And don't forget where we started this discussion. In the Twenty-third Psalm David writes, *I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever* (verse 6). God wants us in heaven, forever, with Him. So, why would He do or allow anything to endanger that goal without it somehow doing something for us or bringing something out in us that is for our good?

Do you struggle with that? I did, until I looked closer at my children. As their mother, I pushed them into uncomfortable situations that I knew would force growth in them that they needed to succeed on their own. Occasionally, these moments were painful for both of us: refusing to answer an adult's question for my overly shy little girl, requiring her to find the courage to speak for herself; declining to referee an argument between my two boys, forcing them to negotiate with each other; compelling each of them into an unfamiliar building to take the required class in order for them to obtain their driver's licenses.

Bits of discomfort, lovingly applied or allowed, steadily increasing in challenge, ranging from irritating to agonizing in the moment of confrontation. But each step led to a victory that helped mold them into the young adults I am proud of today.

Would God do less for you or me?

THIS IS FOR MY BEST

Which leads me to an uncomfortable conclusion. I'm going to dive further into God's goodness in the next chapter, but here I'm willing to consider that if God knows everything, and if He loves me and wants what is best for me, then my present circumstances are good.

Please don't misunderstand. My husband's pain is not good, nor are his falling lab results. But God has me in a place that will challenge me to more fully be who He created me to be. It

pushes me to seek Him and rely on Him. I can live in a place of denial or bitterness, fighting against the problems that I cannot control or assuage. Or, I can accept that God knows what He's doing and trust Him to bring something beautiful out of it.

The choice belongs to each of us. Whether we own it or not, we will each face tomorrow with the consequences of our decision.

“ *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*

– Romans 8:28

GOD'S GOODNESS

“ *Is God good only when the outcome is?*
— Max Lucado, *You'll Get Through This*

SOMETIMES LIFE IS JUST PLAIN HARD. Heart-wrenching, gut-twisting, want-to-stay-in-bed-and-ignore-the-world difficult. But staying in bed is rarely an option. Okay, so it's an option, just usually not a good one.

What do you do when life throws these punches your way? Let's be honest here for a moment and not give the church answer that might spring to mind. Pray? Of course. Trust God? Absolutely. Keep going. I'm looking for honest. Cry a bit? Completely appropriate in many situations. Doubt God—that He cares or is going to show up? That's the honesty I'm looking for. Throw a temper tantrum, yell at heaven? I've done that a few times in my life—once while walking outside during a fantastic thunderstorm that made at least one friend nervous about my health and sanity.

In the previous chapter, I described a time when I had to admit my unrealistic expectations of the Christian life. I suspect

I'm not alone in my thoughts and feelings. In fact, Max Lucado wrote in *You'll Get Through This*,

“ Most, if not all of us, have a contractual agreement with God. The fact that he hasn't signed it doesn't keep us from believing it.

I pledge to be a good, decent person, and in return God will ...

save my child.

heal my wife.

protect my job.

(fill in the blank) _____.

Only fair, right? Yet when God fails to meet our bottom-line expectations, we are left spinning in a tornado of questions. Is He good at all? Is God angry at me? Stumped? Overworked? Is His power limited? His authority restricted? Did the devil outwit Him? (Lucado, 81).

Anyone who walks with God for very long must face a difficult question: How can God be good and allow such pain and tragedy? I've already talked a little about this, but now it's time to go deeper, to separate that question into two more basic questions: Is God good? and, Is God in control?

GOD NEVER CHANGES

Buried in James 1:17 is an idea that is paraphrased and offered up in all kinds of situations: God never changes. The half-brother of Jesus and leader of the Jerusalem church was writing to the Jewish Christians scattered in various countries around the Mediterranean Sea, challenging them to not let their faith

merely be words, but to let their actions show it. *Every good and perfect gift is from above*, he writes, *coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows*.

When people say, “God doesn’t change,” I’m certain they possess a heartfelt desire to bring comfort and ease anxiety, much like those who utter the Twenty-third Psalm. But I wonder, deep down where it really matters, do we like a God who never changes?

Oh, I know we’re supposed to, but think about what that means. It means that He won’t change His mind about a hot button topic that I’m not sure I fully agree with Him on. Or that He won’t modify His stance on right and wrong based on the situation that I find myself in, even if I think exigent circumstances should be considered. Is that really as comforting as it should be to us?

But then, in the big picture of life, do I really want Him to be any different? Do I want a God who changes? One I can’t count on to be the same tomorrow as He was yesterday? The one who loved and guided Abraham, loved and guided King David, loved and guided the apostle Paul, and now loves and guides me? No, I really don’t.

This highlights a significant problem when we think about God’s goodness. We tend to simplify at least two attributes of His character, which causes us great confusion.

FIRST CHARACTER ATTRIBUTE: GOD IS JUST

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the word *just* as “acting or being in conformity with what is morally upright or good; legally correct.” Most of the time, we like that. We want the person who wronged us to pay, even if the crime is somewhat removed from directly affecting our lives. For example, I want the person who shot a family that I don’t know to go to jail

because if he can shoot them without consequence, he could shoot me or my children. And that's a problem!

Thankfully, the Bible tells us God is just. Isaiah 30:18 says, *The Lord is a God of justice*, and Job 34:12 says, *It is unthinkable that God would do wrong, that the Almighty would pervert justice*. Deuteronomy 32:4 labels Him a *God of faithfulness and without injustice*, and Proverbs 11:1 proclaims that *a just weight is [the Lord's] delight*.

Finally! Something we can get behind, right? Or can we? Not so fast. I'm confident that we all support God's justice *for* us. However, don't we all sometimes struggle when His goodness also demands justice *from* us? We don't mind the criminal down the street getting his punishment, but what do we do when the roots of those same criminal desires live within us, within our hearts? Are we so quick to demand justice?

SECOND CHARACTER ATTRIBUTE: GOD IS HOLY

Just like justice, many verses throughout the Bible talk about God's holiness. Merriam-Webster defines *holy* as "exalted or worthy of complete devotion as one perfect in goodness and righteousness." Isaiah 6 and Revelation 4 both mention six-winged creatures crying out, *Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord*," and the author of Psalm 71 calls Him the *Holy One of Israel* (verse 22). First Peter 1:16 quotes God speaking the law in Leviticus 11:44, saying in part, *Be holy, for I am holy*.

Because God is holy, or perfect in goodness and righteousness, He is concerned with our holiness. That sounds good when we're at church on Sunday dressed in our best with smiles on our faces surrounded by other Christians who are striving to love us as God loves them. But on Monday night? When it's been a tough day and big concerns plop themselves down nice and comfortably on our living room couch?

God is so attentive to our holiness that whatever He has to do or allow to develop that righteous character in us is precisely what He is going to do or allow. Even though that thing may not be good in and of itself, it pushes us to seek God and allows God to act in us and through us for good.

Ouch. I'm not sure how much I like that. As I consider the newest wave of difficulty to hit my home and loved ones, I must admit that even though that thing circulating around us is not good, us seeking God for relief and for answers is good. And when we get to that place—when we seek God and His righteousness first (Matthew 6:33)—we allow God to act in us and through us for good. Which is very good.

But it all starts with circumstances that I don't want to walk through or endure.

THE PURPOSE OF PAIN

Before we go further, we should consider pain itself. I'll be honest and tell you that I don't like pain at all and tend to avoid its possibility if I can. Do I climb on roofs? No. Because I'm afraid of heights? Not really. Although heights can make me a bit nervous, I am actually more afraid of falling—or rather, hitting something hard and unforgivable when I fall—than I fear the height itself. When I rode my husband's motorcycle with him, crashing was never far from my thoughts. And although a lot of bugs look creepy to me, it's their unpredictability and the irritation that results from bites or stings that bothers me more than the insect itself.

But when I took the time to learn more about pain and its function within the body, I was totally fascinated. What I learned convinced me that pain is not our enemy! In fact, God designed it purposely to serve us just like he did every other part

of our body. In his book *Where Is God When it Hurts?*, Philip Yancey writes,

“ In a thousand ways large and small, pain serves us each day, making possible normal life on this planet. If we are healthy, pain cells alert us when to go to the bathroom, when to change shoes, when to loosen the grip on a mop handle or rake, when to blink. Without pain, we would lead lives of paranoia, defenseless against unfelt dangers. The only safe environment for a painless person is to stay in bed all day ... but even that produces bedsores” (Yancey, 46).

Struggling to believe me? Mr. Yancey spent some time talking to the doctors who study and work with those with congenital indifferences to pain. In other words, those who live with broken pain functions. Think about raising a child whose pain receptors and signalers are not working. How do you convince them of the dangers of a hot stove or a sharp knife? What about teenagers or young adults who are thick skulled and insist on learning things the hard way? They could push through a job with a sprained ankle or dislocated shoulder simply because they didn't feel it and no one around them noticed. Persistent headaches that would send the rest of us to the doctor for answers would be ignored if we didn't feel the pain to alert us to the possibility of something being wrong, perhaps terminally so.

We need pain in our life, as unpleasant as that is to admit. But can you consider the possibility that without pain, we'd also miss out on pleasure? Not only does the body use the same passage-ways to convey both positive and negative sensations to the brain, but think about real life situations. Can someone who's never pushed through the pain and discipline of learning to run understand the joy in crossing a marathon's finish line? Can someone

who didn't return time and again, submitting to the agonizing exercises of a physical therapist, know the joy of tossing their crutches aside and walking unassisted across the room?

Theologian and philosopher Augustine of Hippo once concluded, "Everywhere a greater joy is preceded by a greater suffering." Perhaps our problem isn't so much with pain as it is with our perspective of pain. Maybe we need to quit disparaging its presence in our lives and instead consider its blessing. Yes, pain alerts us when something is wrong. But pain also gives us the opportunity to do something to make it better.

TRUST, BUT ALSO ACT

The Old Testament is full of stories of the Israelites messing up, finding themselves in horrible circumstances, crying out to God, and Him stepping in to rescue them. The pattern repeats itself time and again, and the book of Nehemiah is no exception.

Somewhere around 930 B.C., the twelve tribes of Israel divide into two kingdoms: Israel and Judah. In 722-720 B.C., Israel is conquered by the Assyrians. Judah lasts until 586 B.C. when they are conquered by the Babylonians. At this point, Jerusalem and the Temple are destroyed, and most of the Jews are exiled. Forty-eight years later, in 538 B.C., a group of Israelites returns to Jerusalem and begins to rebuild the Temple, a glorious feat. Yet, with the wall still in shambles, the city and its inhabitants remained unprotected and in great danger.

This fact weighs on Nehemiah's heart, and he petitions God and then King Artaxerxes to return to his homeland long enough to make repairs. God clears the way for him, and Artaxerxes sends him with letters of passage and Army officers for the journey. Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem in the year 445 B.C., ready to get to work.

Before he even arrives, though, two officials in the

surrounding area are not happy. Nehemiah 2:10 reports that *When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard about this, they were very much disturbed that someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites.* And later, after Nehemiah discusses his plans with the Jews living in Jerusalem, he wrote that when Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem the Arab *heard about it, they mocked and ridiculed us. "What is this you are doing?"* (verse 19). Nehemiah wisely ignores them and begins the work.

The ridicule continues in chapter four, but Nehemiah takes his frustration to God. He prays, *Hear us, our God, for we are despised. Turn their insults back on their own heads. Give them over as plunder in a land of captivity* (verse 4). When these men see the openings in the wall close up and its height growing taller, they get angry. *They all plotted together,* Nehemiah writes, *to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it. But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat* (verses 8-9).

The threat becomes more real, and Nehemiah continues in his prayers. But what impresses itself upon me is that he doesn't merely pray. He also acts. In 4:9, he posts a guard. When the threat becomes more intense, he stations *some of the people behind the lowest points of the wall at the exposed places, posting them by families, with their swords, spears and bows* (verse 13). And still, with those fortifications in place, he doesn't stop. He encourages the people by saying, *Don't be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your families, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes* (verse 14).

Remember the Lord. And fight.

Nehemiah never let the circumstances around him take his eyes off of his purpose for being in Jerusalem. He writes, *From that day on, half of my men did the work, while the other half were equipped with spears, shields, bows and armor. The officers posted themselves behind all the people of Judah who were building the wall. Those who carried materials did their work with one hand and held a*

weapon in the other, and each of the builders wore his sword at his side as he worked (verses 16-18).

Nehemiah knew he'd been called to this work, but he didn't take anything for granted either. He kept a trumpeter near him, ready to sound an alarm if their enemies should launch an attack. *I said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, "The work is extensive and spread out, and we are widely separated from each other along the wall. Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, join us there. Our God will fight for us!"* (verses 19-20).

We're not positive how much work was needed, other than it was considerable. We know Nehemiah faced breaches in the wall and replacement of all the gates. Based on historical records, we believe the wall was sixteen feet wide, and the modern wall averages thirty-nine feet tall. Considering all of that information, one of the most amazing verses I've found in the Bible is Nehemiah 6:15. *The wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days.*

It's absolutely amazing what can be accomplished when we focus our attention on what God's asked us to do, trusting Him to do what He said He will do while putting forth the effort to utilize what He's already provided.

In my situation, God had called me to be a wife and a mother. After all, I was married and had children. Those two callings were not going to change just because circumstances around me became difficult. I needed to pick up my battle gear—my Bible, my prayers, the quality Christian books and devotions I owned and could access through friends and the library, my church and all its resources—and fight, knowing that God stood ready to step in everywhere He was needed.

MARY AND MARTHA'S QUESTION

But what about those places where we can't act, where we must depend on God, and yet it doesn't seem like He's answering? What if the trauma that's entered our life is so egregious that God seems absent or unconcerned? What actions am I supposed to take in the case of my husband's health problems if even the doctors don't know what to do with him? Sure, I can read my Bible and pray and lean on friends, building up my spiritual, physical, mental, and emotional health. But is that all? Should I be doing more?

Maybe the thought of doing more is disheartening because the truth is you're flat exhausted. Dealing with everything that's going on around you right now is more than you can handle, and just the thought that God is asking one more thing of you is too much. What then, if you're worried that God wants one more thing but you don't have the mental or emotional ability to think about it, much less the physical stamina to add it to your To Do list?

In the eleventh chapter of his Gospel, the apostle John walks us through a very intense scene. Jesus gets word that a dear friend, Lazarus, is ill. He knows Lazarus will die, yet on His Father's instructions, Jesus waits for that death to occur before He makes His way to Lazarus's sisters.

Then John records the heart-breaking cry of everyone touched by intense pain. First Martha approaches Jesus. *"Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died"* (verse 21). A few minutes later, Mary echoes her sister. *When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died"* (verse 32).

Can you relate? Have you had moments when you've cried out, "Why didn't You stop this from happening?" Maybe when a tragic news story crosses your desk you wonder, "Where was God?" Or how about when that problem hits the news that's too

big and complex for any easy solutions? Perhaps you think, “Why aren’t You intervening, God?”

Right after Mary’s heart-wrenching question, John simply writes, *When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled* (John 11:33). Our English translation cannot adequately convey the depth of emotion in this scene. Sheila Walsh writes in *God Loves Broken People*,

“ The Greek term translated “moved” is *embrimaomai*. It’s a strong word denoting anger, strength, or the bellowing and snorting of a horse. In other words, as Christ looked at the grief of His friends, He felt a rage, a fury at what sin has done to this world. “Moved”? No ... that doesn’t even come close. I feel “moved” when my son tells me he loves me, or my dog rests her head on my lap. But what Jesus experienced went far beyond some sentimental, warm feeling; far from it! This was the Son of God raging at the pain that Mary and Martha ... faced (Walsh, 47).

Several years ago, I served as a support staff member of our church. One of my jobs was to help organize funerals for families who wanted to have a service at the church. Those I met with were in varying stages of shock and acceptance, and I strived to be patient, extend tremendous grace, and take the time to listen to those who wanted to talk. One widow sticks out in my mind when I think about Jesus standing with Mary and Martha. She kept herself fairly well pulled together, up until the moment when it was time to roll the casket away to the hearse and take it to the cemetery. When the funeral workers stepped forward, she collapsed, sobs wracking her entire being. I was standing in the foyer, more than twenty yards away and on the other side of a weight-bearing wall from the bereaved

woman, but her cries echoed throughout the building. Her pain rippled through me as the depth of her grieving poured out for several moments.

Whatever you are going through right now, whatever you and I will face in the days ahead, Christ feels it too. He rages at our pain with an intensity that we often overlook. He understands the unfairness of this fallen world, and He longs to restore it to what it was meant to be. That brings me comfort, even now as I seek to love the man in my life who didn't sleep well last night or the night before.

Why doesn't God end all of our suffering right now? I know you don't want the pat, Christian answer any more than I do. Outside of God's desire to extend grace, *not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance* (2 Peter 3:9), I can offer three statements that I have learned to embrace through my years of wrestling with God over the pain in my husband's life.

1. I DON'T KNOW

Are you familiar with Job? Many avoid this book of the Old Testament altogether, which I understand. It's uncomfortable and doesn't provide any easy answers. Job, a rich man who loved God and sought to follow Him and His laws, faced tremendous loss. This is one of those cases where God didn't bring tragedy, but He clearly allowed it. Satan asked God for the opportunity to prove that Job only praised God because God blessed him and his family. So God allowed Satan to go to work.

First, a servant reported to Job that enemies attacked, taking all of his oxen and donkeys, killing the rest of the servants nearby. Before he finished talking, a second servant came forward, reporting fire falling from the sky, burning up his sheep and all of the servants working with them. Before he finished giving his report, a third servant came forward with reports of

more enemies raiding his fields, this time taking all of his camels and killing all of those servants.

If that wasn't enough sorrow for one day, a fourth servant arrived. This one said, *Your sons and daughters were feasting and drinking wine at the oldest brother's house, when suddenly a mighty wind swept in from the desert and struck the four corners of the house. It collapsed on them and they are dead, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!* (Job 1:18-19).

Can you imagine? Your animals that feed you and earn you money, many of your servants, and every one of your children gone. In one day.

Somehow, Job fights through the pain and continues to praise God, so Satan takes another swipe at the man. This time, he attacks Job's health, giving him *painful sores from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head* (2:7). In the face of Job's intense suffering, he lobs many questions at God, questions we also tend to ask when life hits us hard. *Why did I not perish at birth?* (Job 3:11), and *Why is light given to those in misery, and life to the bitter of soul, to those who long for death that does not come?* (3:20). Can you relate?

Instead of answering him directly, God throws a few curveballs. He asks:

- *Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?* (38:4)
- *Have you given orders to the morning, or shown the dawn its place?* (38:12)
- *Do you send the lightning bolts on their way? Do they report to you, "Here we are?"* (38:35)

I can't even tell you why bananas are yellow or if every single snowflake really is different! I don't know why God is allowing that pain and suffering in your life. While I can see some good coming out of our experience, I can't tell you why He crippled my husband with chronic pain and weakening muscles.

I don't like that answer, and I'm sure you don't either. But it's the most honest one I've got.

2. I STILL LOVE GOD.

Even though I don't have many answers, I still love and trust God. Although I don't understand Him and can't predict His plan. Despite the fact that I don't know why the good perish along with the evil, or why it seems that the evil prosper while the righteous suffer.

Let me tell you this, though. Lodging that truth deep into my heart didn't come easy. While I'd grown up in the church and tended to see the world through rose-colored glasses, my husband's health concerns challenged my beliefs about a good God. Disproportionate facts stared me in the face as I looked around our world. Could I look at the Bible and still see a God who cared? Would I look at the stories I knew and still see God as good and just, who offered mercy and extended grace?

Ruth is my daughter's favorite book in the Bible. In the first paragraph of the first chapter, we are introduced to Naomi, a married Jewess with two sons living in Bethlehem. A famine hits the land, so they make the choice to flee to Moab, the people descended from Lot (Ruth 1:1-2, Genesis 19:36-37). In both the lack of food and in saying good-bye to friends and loved ones, the first sorrows we know of hit Naomi's life.

Shortly after arriving in Moab, her husband dies (Ruth 1:3). A second sorrow piles on to the first. Her sons marry Moabite women, and life seems to settle down for a bit. We really aren't given many details, including how old her sons were when they left Bethlehem, how long they lived in Moab before her husband died, or even at what point her sons married. All we know for sure is that ten years pass between moving to Moab and verse 5, which reports the deaths of both her sons. Two more sorrows to pile on.

Was she close with the families her sons married into? That could have brought some comfort to her over the years she was

away from Bethlehem, but we don't know. Maybe they never fully accepted her because she wasn't one of them. What about grandchildren? The text doesn't suggest in any way that either Ruth or Orpah carried babies. Were they not married long enough for this to have happened? Or was this perhaps more sorrow that Naomi endured as she watched her children go childless?

When word reached Naomi that the Lord had provided food again in Judah, she and her daughters-in-law packed up and prepared to return. But on the road, Naomi encouraged her two girls to go back to their mothers' homes where they could perhaps find another husband. The tender relationship between the three of them is beautiful. Verse 10 says, *She kissed them good-bye and they wept aloud.* More sorrow piling on.

At first, both girls fought her on her request, but she laid out the painful reality to them. She had no other sons and little chance to gain another husband. She was returning to her people in poverty, relying on the care and concern of others for the rest of her days. Orpah conceded and returned home to her family.

But Ruth? In one of the most loved passages in the Bible, Ruth plainly states, *Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me* (verses 16-17).

This loyalty touches me, but Naomi was lost in her grief. When she returned to Bethlehem, all those that had known her before commented on the change in her. She seems to ignore Ruth at her side when she says to them, *the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty* (verses 20-21). Oh, how easy it is to be blind to the blessings surrounding us!

Thankfully, Naomi doesn't remain so buried in grief that she can't see the opportunity placed before Ruth. When the girl stumbles into Boaz's field to glean food for them to eat, Naomi

encourages her to follow Boaz's instructions and glean only in his fields behind his workers. When the winnowing of the barley began, she guided Ruth, teaching her how to seek Boaz out and ask him to be her guardian-redeemer, the man to marry her. And everyone soon recognized the blessings to Naomi. Boaz became father to Obed, who became father to Jesse, who became father to King David.

In all of Naomi's sufferings, she never left God's heart. He watched over her and provided for her even when the worst things she could conceive happened to her. Even though His methods were not what she would have chosen, I'm certain that in her final days, Naomi would never have chosen a life without Obed.

Sheila Walsh asks some pointed questions in *God Loves Broken People*, questions well highlighted in Naomi's story.

“Suffering and pain peel back the layers of our faith and present us a life-changing choice: Will we become bitter, blaming God and others for our pain, venting our hurt and anger and frustration on those we consider responsible? Will we wallow in self-pity? Will we run and hide? Will we resist? Or ... Will we choose to see God's hand in the midst of our pain and suffering? Will we embrace His will for us? Will we declare our trust in Him and fall at His feet in worship? Will we bring the broken pieces of our lives to Him and allow Him to use them to create something beautiful, something that brings Him glory? (Walsh, 111).

Max Lucado asks, “We can't always see what God is doing, but can't we assume he is up to something good?” (*You'll Get Through This*, 146). Powerful questions. Perspective-changing questions. Will I embrace God's will for me, even if it includes continued pain and suffering? Will I declare trust in Him as I

worship Him even in this hard place? Can I assume even when, or maybe especially when, I don't understand how He is up to something good?

My answer didn't come easily or quickly, and I still don't say it lightly. But I confidently believe that whatever life looks like right now or in the next moment, God will bring good from it.

3. I WAS CHEATED? ABSOLUTELY NOT!

Maybe it's only in military circles, but a common phrase when someone dies young is, "The world is cheated by the loss of men like your husband." I understand, even appreciate, the sentiment behind it, but I respectfully disagree.

No matter what has happened to me before or what will happen in the future, I don't want to believe I was cheated out of anything. Sure, maybe my childhood wasn't protected like others, or my marriage has rougher moments than some. But to believe I was cheated by the pain and suffering is to believe that God wasn't powerful enough to stop what never should have been. Or maybe that His plan isn't good enough, and I'm missing out because God was impotent or asleep or unconcerned. Is that really what the Bible shows us?

The story of Joseph dominates the last quarter of the book of Genesis. Seventeen when his adventures begin in chapter 37, he was the oldest son of his father's favorite wife. Add in a bit of youthful arrogance, God-given dreams, and ten older brothers, and you have the makings of a tumultuous upbringing. Over the next thirteen years, Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers, sold into Egypt by the slave traders, sexually tempted by his master's wife, falsely accused of attempted rape, thrown in jail, and completely forgotten by a servant of Pharaoh he helped. Yet, Joseph never lost his faith in God.

"In God's hands intended evil becomes eventual good," Max

Lucado writes in *You'll Get Through This*. “Joseph tied himself to the pillar of this promise and held on for dear life. Nothing in his story glosses over the presence of evil. Quite the contrary. Bloodstains, tearstains are everywhere. Joseph’s heart was rubbed raw against the rocks of disloyalty and miscarried justice. Yet time and time again God redeemed the pain” (Lucado, 7).

The Bible shows me that God’s plan is good—even when they include moments I don’t particularly like. His plan is good even when life is so hard I want to stay in bed and hide underneath the covers. If God is sovereign with supreme power and authority, then every event in my life is under His control. No circumstance is random, and no tragedy is unexpected. Which means I wasn’t cheated.

No, God’s just lining things up for something amazing.

WILL YOU STILL LOVE HIM?

At the beginning of this chapter, I quoted a pointed question from Max Lucado. “Is God good only when the outcome is?”

Most of us don’t like to consider that question because we’d rather our life just be good so we can boldly declare God’s goodness to others. But, that’s not the way God works. It’s not the path to holiness nor to dependence on God, appreciation of God for who He actually is.

First Timothy 6:15 calls God *the blessed and only Ruler*. God tells us in Isaiah 55:9 that His ways are higher than our ways, and Romans 11:33 says, *How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!* We will never fully understand God or His ways as long as we live on this earth. His infinite being is beyond our finite mind.

Which leads to another great question that we must all wrestle with, one asked by Sheila Walsh in *God Loves Broken*

People. “Will you still love a God you don’t understand?”
(Walsh, 83).

When life is overwhelming and you can barely get yourself out of bed in the morning, God asks, “Will you still love me?” When you’re exhausted from just keeping up with the most basic things that need done and the light at the end of your tunnel seems to have faded with the sunset, God asks, “Will you still love me?”

Will you still love Him, even in this pain that you don’t want and can’t see any good in? Will you still love Him as you journey through your valley of the shadow of death?

THRIVING AFTER TRAGEDY

“ *The long series of disappointments you accumulate in a lifetime can stop you from moving forward into all the goodness God has planned for you—and that means they’ll be stopping not only you, but also all those God has destined you to reach along your life journey.*

– Christine Caine, *Undaunted*

Do you know the name Elisabeth Kübler-Ross? She was the psychiatrist who first noticed that terminally ill patients tended to go through five emotional stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Sound familiar? She initially discussed her findings in her book *On Death and Dying*, published in 1969. Over the years as her experience, observances, and training expanded, she shared that the stages could also be applied to other types of loss, such as the end of a relationship, a job rejection, or the loss of a loved one.

Some experts attack what we’ve come to call the stages of grief, arguing that they do not apply well across cultural lines and that environmental resources and pressures are not taken into

account. In her final book, *On Grief and Grieving*, written with grief expert David Kessler, Ms. Kübler-Ross expounded on her previous work. They wrote that those experiencing loss may not proceed through the stages sequentially, and some skip one or more stages while others get stuck somewhere in the middle. If someone has an immense amount of emotional and familial support, they might proceed through tragedy more easily, whereas those with few to no close friends or spiritual foundations often struggle more. Additionally, other responses are also common, including shock, sadness, haunting dreams, isolation, and seeking alternative solutions.

Academic arguments aside, we need to understand that grief and all of its effects show up in our life in many ways. Sure, tears may be common for a while, and emotions may flux between anger and depression, but dealing with a loss may also affect your physical and mental health, your levels of grace and patience, your empathy and sympathy, and how you see the world.

Additionally, we need to embrace the fact that no matter what kind of loss you face, you cannot ignore it. Our hearts will not magically mend or our thoughts supernaturally forget what could have been. No, when suffering interrupts your life, you cannot go around it. You must go through it.

GRIEF TAKES A TOLL

When grief is fresh, everything in our world can feel off. Depending upon the type and severity of the loss, you may not be thinking clearly, or your emotions may be hypersensitive. If the loss is less severe or dramatic, you may simply feel cloudy or have trouble remaining focused. In more intense situations, a normally patient person may be short-tempered, or an organized person may become forgetful or messy.

“There is no good way around grief, although you may be

tempted to avoid it” (Steen and Asaro, 80). When I’m overwhelmed with emotion, I tend to get busy with menial tasks. Putting my hands to work straightening out a closet or cleaning the kitchen gives my mind the time it needs to process what’s happening. And my bathrooms are never so clean as they are right after an argument with my husband or one of my children. While it can be a good way to disperse nervous energy, it’s easy for most of us to overdo it, to get lost in working or volunteering to the point that our hearts and minds are busy with tasks other than the one they most need to work through.

Some people like retail therapy—shopping to ignore, or at least quiet, the pain. Others find comfort in overeating, drinking to excess, using illicit drugs, or online gambling. Jumping from one relationship to another without time to heal or grow can be a sign of avoiding the pain just as assuredly as depression and anger are signals that something is not right within us.

When we’re in the midst of these traumatic moments, it feels like we’re all alone, like no one else in the world has ever felt as overwhelmed as we do or that no one else has ever faced such tremendous odds as the ones that currently stand in our way. Can I tell you something with deep love and concern? Those thoughts are not truth. Oh, they feel like truth, but they are lies that will keep you stuck where you are rather than reaching for the very help that can make all the difference in the world, even when your circumstances do not change.

We all battle uncertainty. Everyone experiences insecurity, self-defeating thoughts, and fear. I’ve wondered if God heard my prayer or has lost track of me altogether. I’ve panicked and reacted badly, isolated myself out of paranoia, and been frustrated by the perceived judgmental looks of others. Sure, your circumstances may look different from mine, but that doesn’t mean either one of our feelings are invalid.

Most people today have heard of Mother Teresa. A spiritual giant in the eyes of many, she was a humble nun born in Macedonia who served most of her life with the poorest people in

Calcutta. She was well praised during her life for her tender work among those who were dying of AIDS and leprosy. She even won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979 and was canonized (recognized by the Catholic Church as a saint) in 2016. Yet she experienced great spiritual insecurities.

“Mother Teresa once wrote to a spiritual confidant, ‘Jesus has a very special love for you, [but] as for me, the silence and the emptiness is so great, that I look and do not see,—Listen and do not hear—the tongue moves [in prayer] but does not speak’” (Walsh, 86). Can you imagine a woman who the world saw doing mighty things for God feeling like God wasn’t even listening to her? Wasn’t nearby? Wasn’t talking to her, guiding her? Loving her?

Let’s make it even more personal. Thinking back to the story of Job, we must acknowledge that God allowed all the turmoil and strife in the time of his life depicted in the Bible. God permitted Satan to steal his wealth, kill his servants and children, and bring great physical discomfort to the man himself. That’s difficult enough to consider, particularly if you are in a hard place right now. Has God allowed your enemy access to your life like he did for Job?

Or think back to the story of Joseph. When he revealed himself to his brothers as a thirty-year-old man, he said, “God sent me ahead of you” (Genesis 45:4–7). Was he really implying that God sent him into slavery and into prison? That’s certainly where he ended up for a little over a decade of his life.

And what about Leviticus 14:34 where God says, “When you enter the land of Canaan, which I am giving you as your possession, and I put a spreading mold in a house in that land ...” God told Moses that the Israelites would be dealing with mold in their homes at least sometimes because God Himself put it there. What!?

While many of us aren’t sure we want to wrestle with these issues, we must get to the point where we take one step farther than the questions that may not have an answer we are comfort-

able with. We must ask ourselves this: Does it matter? Pause for a moment and consider that. If God is absolutely good, then does it truly matter whether He allows it, does it, or leads us to it? As Sheila Walsh asks, “Would we relate to God any differently depending on His answer?” (Walsh, 8).

These are tough questions that plunge into the deepest concerns plaguing us. But I ask you to consider them because how you answer is critically important. If we can rest in the knowledge that God is good, then we can also confidently say that no matter what our life looks like in this moment or the next, “In all things God works for the good of those who love him” (Romans 8:28). In all things. Even pain. Even suffering. Even loss.

THE GIFT OF BROKENNESS

Have you ever heard of bummer lambs? CommonSenseAgriculture.com says, “A bummer lamb is one that is raised entirely or partially away from a mother. They come from a variety of situations.” The author goes on to explain that sometimes the mother dies, leaving lambs behind. Occasionally, a ewe will have triplets and quadruplets but not be able to produce enough milk for all of them, so she will chase one or more lambs away. And every once in a while, the mother senses something physically wrong with a lamb and will abandon it.

Often, these little ones die, brokenhearted and alone. But if they are in the care of a good shepherd, he will see them and take them in. For a time, he will feed the baby from a bottle several times a day, and if the weather is adverse outside, the young one may even get to live indoors for a while. When the lamb is strong enough to return to the flock, they thrive, but they never forget that intimate time with their shepherd.

“When the shepherd calls to the flock, guess who run to him

first? The bummer lambs! Why? Because they know his voice best, and they have been held close to his heart. It's not that he loves them more; it's just that they've been broken enough to let that love in ... down deep" (Walsh, 15).

Can you relate to the bummer lambs, rejected by the very one that should love you most? Do you feel neglected or negated, pushed away as insignificant or less important? Was someone else chosen instead of you, or was another provided something you wanted or needed? Listen to the blessing for you found in Isaiah 40:11. "He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart."

Bummer lambs know heartbreak and brokenness. But, because of that very heartbreak, they get to learn the shepherd's love in a way that the regular sheep will never experience. And so do you. This is exactly why we can learn to see brokenness as a gift, offered to us from our loving Heavenly Father. "Only sheep who know that they are broken—and yet loved—can learn to trust not in themselves but in the wisdom and strength and mercy and grace of the Good Shepherd" (Walsh, 24).

OUR RESPONSE IS EVERYTHING

On the surface, that all sounds great. Getting to spend time up close and personal with the Shepherd watching carefully over our care is healing and hopeful, especially after a time of suffering. But we need to venture into painful territory yet again if we truly want to find our way back to full health.

Are you ready? I'm going to ask a sensitive, possibly offensive question. Did you cause your own problems? Without knowing the details of your particular situation, I'd guess that at least some of what you're dealing with is your own fault. Trust me, I don't like that any more than you do. Some of you might be

raising a court-worthy defense at this moment. But give me a minute to explain the question more fully. Hopefully you read my story earlier in this book. I didn't share everything, not the full scope of pain from my life. But even in what I did share, you probably saw moments where I didn't instigate anything yet suffered pain anyway. I was collateral damage, the victim of someone else's thoughtless behavior or careless words.

In the big scope of life, I've learned that where the pain originates is only a portion of the total problem. If I caused it, then I can do more to fix it, but ultimately, something else is even more important. One of the lessons I've worked hard to drill into my children is that their response matters. Every time. Whether I own a piece of the original problem or not, the moment I respond poorly, I am responsible for aiding, abetting, or furthering my own pain. Even if I did nothing else wrong. Oh, we don't like to admit that. But let me tell you this: Accepting that is good news. Really good news.

You see, if I am responsible for my response, then I maintain control. I can do something to turn things around, enact positive solutions over a negative mess! Think about it. If I was part of the problem to begin with, I can talk with God, figure out the issues I need to deal with, go ask forgiveness from those I hurt, then grab Jesus's hand, walk through my own hurt, extend forgiveness and grace, and move on. That's easy for most of us to see.

But the process isn't dramatically different if I was damaged entirely from someone else's poor choices or thoughtless behavior. If I confess that the moment another person hurt me I grabbed hold of resentment or unforgiveness or bitterness, then I can turn to Jesus and ask for help from those debilitating diseases that keep me trapped, unproductive, and in pain. I can grab His hand, walk through the hurt, extend forgiveness and grace, and move on!

That's not to dismiss the pain that must be dealt with when someone else harms me, but the end result in either case is up to

me! I can either sit in the mess, growing more fearful, more embittered, more unhappy, and more toxic to those who love me, or I can accept my part of the problem and get to work on a solution that heals and refreshes from the inside out. Which one sounds like a better way to live your life?

Even more than that, though, when we choose the more difficult path toward complete healing, we become someone God can use to His great glory. In fact, He searches for exactly this. Christine Caine wrote in *Undaunted*, “God deliberately chooses imperfect vessels — those who have been wounded, those with physical or emotional limitations. Then he prepares them to serve and sends them out with their weakness still in evidence, so that his strength can be made perfect in that weakness.”

Job didn't enjoy the loss of wealth, the death of his children, or his debilitating disease. Joseph didn't enjoy being carted off against his will to Egypt, being sold into slavery, or his time in prison. But those wounds showcased God's strength and provision in a way that neither man was capable of displaying before their trials and tragedies.

SHOWCASING GOD

Maybe that doesn't particularly appeal to you. Perhaps that hits you the wrong way, like God is some bully who rains down turmoil so He can appear to the rest of the world as victor or savior. This circles back to the previous chapter on God's goodness. If God is good, if you really believe that truth with your whole heart and mind and soul and strength, then you should be able to see the faulty logic. That's precisely why I wanted to broach the topic of God's character before I talked about our emotional response to all that's happening in and around us. We must cement ourselves in the truth of God's goodness.

“As commentator William Barclay has written, ‘Suffering ... may well drive a man to bitterness and despair; and may well take away such faith as he has. But if it is accepted in the trusting certainty that a father’s hand will never cause his child a needless tear, then out of suffering come things which the easy way may never bring.’ God wants to bring rare, unexpected treasures out of your days of suffering, things that the easy way simply cannot bring.” (Walsh, 106)

Our perspective on what God thinks about us, how He loves and cherishes us, should tint every other aspect of our lives. We can’t dissect one part of who God is from any other part. He is good. He is both love and mercy. He is holy and just and sovereign. All that God is works together, perfectly aligned, seamlessly in tandem, as He looks upon and deals with us. And, like it or not, one of the great purposes we have while we walk out our life on this earth is to showcase God’s glory. Oh, some of you may struggle with that. It runs counter to our American mindset—that we are the hero of our own story.

Let’s take a look at Isaiah, though, and gain some encouragement. In chapter forty-three verses one through seven, the Lord says:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have summoned you by name; you are mine.
When you pass through the waters,
I will be with you;
and when you pass through the rivers,
they will not sweep over you.
When you walk through the fire,
you will not be burned;
the flames will not set you ablaze.
For I am the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior;
I give Egypt for your ransom,
Cush and Seba in your stead.

Since you are precious and honored in my sight,
and because I love you,
I will give people in exchange for you,
nations in exchange for your life.
Do not be afraid, for I am with you;
I will bring your children from the east
and gather you from the west.
I will say to the north, 'Give them up!'
and to the south, 'Do not hold them back.'
Bring my sons from afar
and my daughters from the ends of the earth—
everyone who is called by my name,
whom I created for my glory,
whom I formed and made.

Do you see the passion in those words for you? When disaster threatens you, God sees you, walks with you, and protects you. You are precious and honored and loved by the same One that created you. And when He calls you home, not only will nothing stand in your way, but He will instruct the forces of nature to aid in your return to Him.

These are not the words of a selfish God concerned only with showcasing His glory. This is a passionate God, totally focused on caring for His people and showing that love to the world. He is the fierce lion that C.S. Lewis depicted in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and those who love and follow Him are His people within His loving care.

DO WE WANT HEALING?

The question we must honestly determine for ourselves is if we want to be healed from the pain in our lives. This might seem

like a simple question—of course we want to be free from the pain! Right? Are you certain?

Take a moment to consider the question. David Seamands writes in *Healing for Damaged Emotions*, “Ask yourself if you want to be healed. This is what Jesus asked the sick man who had lain ill for thirty-eight years (see John 5:6). Do you really want to be healed, or do you just want to talk about your problem? Do you want to use your problem to get sympathy from others? Do you just want it for a crutch so that you can walk with a limp?” (Seamands, 25).

Letting go of suffering, choosing to walk into health and wholeness, and thriving after unimaginable pain or loss when we bear scars from our journey, can be difficult. Sometimes we’ve walked with the pain for so long we don’t know how to let go, and sometimes we confuse forgiving someone for the wrongs done to us with fully trusting that person again. Occasionally, we carry the tragedy boldly in front of us like a badge of honor, and far too often we hide behind it like a shield of protection. All of that is normal to some extent, but none of it is healthy for the long term.

Much like people who have broken an arm need a doctor to set things right, God is waiting to put our heart, mind, and emotions back into their proper place for us. And a key piece of allowing God the time to work in us is patience and quiet. Just like an injured limb needs rest and time to recover, so do our hearts and minds after a loss. That can be a tall order in modern America.

FOCUSING ON RECOVERY

The religious and legal experts of Jesus’s day liked to ask Him questions, trying to trick Him into some corner where they

could discredit His words or beliefs. Luke tells about one of these occasions in Luke 10:25–37.

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Such an innocent sounding question. I’m sure many of His day wanted the same assurances that we do, a checklist to perform to know that we’ve done all God’s asked of us. I know I’ve thought on more than one occasion, “Just tell me what to do, Lord.” Reading the Bible, praying, and listening for God’s voice in my life is not an exact science, especially when you add in pain from a recent wound. Sometimes I just want to know that I’m getting it right more than I’m missing the mark.

“What is written in the Law?” [Jesus] replied. “How do you read it?” Such a smart counter-move by Jesus. He knew this legal expert’s heart wasn’t seeking an honest answer to his basic question. No, this lawyer was playing a game of chess. Unfortunately for the expert in the law, he didn’t understand that he’d underestimated his opponent.

He answered, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind”; and, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Indisputable quotes. When the lawyer spouted off these passages from Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18, he showed his knowledge of the written law of God.

“You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.” Oh, but the lawyer hadn’t accomplished his mission, and everyone listening who was important in his eyes knew it. He had to press on, ask Jesus more.

But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” He might have thought he’d maneuvered Jesus into position for an easy end to the game. But have you ever played a game with a master of it? You know, one of those games where you think you’re holding your own fairly well, and then suddenly, in one or two moves, it’s all over? You never had a chance.

In reply Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jeri-

cho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead." And so starts the passage commonly referred to as the Parable of the Good Samaritan. One injured man, two religious men likely protecting their status and busy schedules, and one Samaritan loathed by all of Jesus's listeners.

We're often challenged to be the Samaritan, the one who reaches out in spite of boundaries placed by culture and beliefs to help someone abused by life. I've heard dozens of sermons in my life about being aware of those around me, of going to them and providing what I have, even to make sure I have the margin in my life to be able to take the time to love on others.

But every so often in our lives, we're not the Samaritan. We're not the priest or Levite busy about our duties for God. No, sometimes, usually against our will and in spite of our best plans, we are the man attacked by robbers. The one left naked and beaten and half dead. The one in need of a neighbor who shows mercy.

What do we do then?

Joanne Steen and Regina Asaro wrote in *Military Widow*, "Working through grief is like walking through mud. Each step is an effort, and progress is measured in inches, not miles. Like mud, grief is messy. By the end of the day, you're covered in it from head to toe, and should you stumble and fall, it's downright embarrassing. When you're stuck in the mud, you want to give up and quit. But, the only way to get through the muck and mire is to keep moving forward." They are absolutely right. We must journey through grief and loss. Some days, we must fight our way through. But don't miss my full point because you got lost in the sludge.

Have you ever watched a butterfly leave its cocoon? One year, I purchased a butterfly kit complete with several caterpillars and a small net suitable for their survival. We hung it up in our kitchen where we could all watch the transformation. I was fascinated as they built their cocoons, and we all counted the

days waiting for them to emerge. And then the first one started the long, difficult process of breaking free.

I knew what to expect. I knew the butterfly had to struggle, and that I would want to help. But I had to restrain myself and my children, letting the insect figure it out for itself. This painful process is absolutely critical to the success of the butterfly. As author and speaker Priscilla Shirer told her boys when they watched this happen, “If it gets out too early, without fighting through, it’ll be crippled the rest of its life.”

Do you see the parallel for your own life? Priscilla emphasizes it well in *Discerning the Voice of God*, “The challenge is part of the plan.... We knew that, didn’t we? Or maybe we’d forgotten. Or didn’t want to admit it. But since our Heavenly Father’s goal is to help us reach our full spiritual potential as believers in Christ, we too will often be challenged by the things He calls us to do. Sometimes *really* challenged. And it won’t be a mistake or a divine mishap. It will be on purpose.”

The butterfly must struggle, but it is a battle it is designed to win—if it does one thing. Focus on getting out of the cocoon. If it is distracted by anything else, if it gets discouraged and ceases to fight, it will die trapped in its struggle. But don’t stop yet. Keep going. Do you know what the butterfly does as soon as it’s free from its bonds? It rests, for a good long while. Isn’t that what the man going down from Jericho did once the Samaritan had him settled at the inn? Rest, allowing his body (and probably his mind) time to heal.

The man injured by robbers and the beautiful butterfly are two very different situations, but not so different in some aspects at all. Both require intense focus on the difficulty at hand. And both require rest to recover in order to fully return to their life in the world.

And so do you.

THRIVING IS WORTH THE COST

Why did I spend so much time on rest? Because far too often, I've watched someone come through a time of intense pain and immediately jump back onto the battlefield so they can help others. My concern isn't that they aren't capable, that they don't have the empathy or even the skill necessary to do some good. No, my worry is that they have not yet rested and recovered. They've not allowed the Holy Spirit to speak into their hearts and minds, permitted God the access He needs to bind their wounds and heal their emotions. They are not yet what they could be if they exercised patience.

They are just like me when I get busy scrubbing my bathroom at midnight after a fight with my husband. Hurt and exhausted, I don't suppose I can do much harm to a porcelain tub. But if I pick up my phone or log onto social media, coming across the tender heart of a friend fresh from her own battle with whatever challenge is facing her?

Please understand that I'm not advocating we lock ourselves away until a team of medical doctors and psychologists declare us fully returned to health. No, too often, in fact, I believe God calls us back to the battlefield before we're convinced we're ready. What I am encouraging you to consider is this: Have you taken the time you need to rest? Have you settled the question of God's goodness until your heart is secure in His love? Are you in a place where you can respond to the pain in this world in godly ways that will encourage and uplift others?

Our response matters so very much. "How we choose to respond to life's challenges, setbacks, and tragedies makes an enormous difference—not only to our own experience of life, but also to the experience of those who travel through life with us" (Walsh, 105). And if we've not yet taken the time to rest, if we've not yet settled the battle over what we believe about God, if we're still too afraid of the shadow of death in our lives, then we cannot be as effective as we otherwise could be.

Thriving after tragedy is possible. But you have to settle these fundamental doubts first. “God promises to render beauty out of ‘all things’ [Romans 8:28], not ‘each thing’” (*You’ll Get Through This*, 83). If you can believe deep within yourself that God is good even when He permits pain, then you’ll also be able to see how much God passionately loves you and everyone around you. And that’s when He can most easily transform you to be a light that guides others to Him.

“*You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.*

– Matthew 5:14–16

ALSO BY CARRIE DAWS

NONFICTION

The Warrior's Bride

BEYOND THE WARRIOR'S BRIDE SERIES

Your Extended Family

Reintegration

Moving

Finances

Other Military Spouses

Retirement

I've Got Jesus . . . Now What?

Mentoring for Life

FICTION

THE CROSSING SERIES

Crossing Values

Ryan's Crossing

Romancing Melody

Crossing's Redemption

A Dream Come True

THE EMBERS SERIES

Kindling Embers
Igniting Embers
Extinguishing Embers

THE SACRED TRUST SERIES

Seeking Isabel
Finding Benjamin
Banishing Felipe

HOME FRONT HEROINES

More than Meets the Eye
Not My Ways

CHILDREN'S BOOKS

A New Home for Allie