



EVEN IF HE

What We Believe about God When Life Doesn't Make Sense

DOESN'T



Kristen LaValley

Foreword by CARLOS WHITTAKER

Kristen's words will comfort your heart, care for your soul, and always, always carry you toward the hope of Christ. Through her writing that is both beautiful and truthful, you'll learn how to lean into the love of God when suffering threatens to hide your view of his goodness. May her words buoy you in whatever storm you're facing.

PHYLICIA MASONHEIMER, Founder and CEO of Every Woman
a Theologian

Trauma ignites so many different emotions in each of us, but the last thing we need is to feel like a failure because our faith feels shaky. Kristen mirrors courageous, raw honesty as she helps you flip the script on the way suffering has tutored you to how God *actually* talks about suffering on the pages of Scripture. Kristen is a gifted storyteller—you will not want to put this book down. No empty platitudes or pithy sayings here, just real-life examples of how to apply the Bible to your current suffering.

MIKELLA VAN DYKE, Author and founder of Chasing Sacred

As I joined the whole internet praying and rallying around the LaValley family in 2020, I had no idea that Kristen's words about their experience would later help bind up deep wounds tied to my own grief and tragedy. Many books talk about Christian suffering, but this is the first I've seen that simultaneously gives permission to suffer without making you feel like it's your fault *and* gives permission to heal without turning to platitudes or feel-good theology. *Even If He Doesn't* takes the raw truth of suffering and mixes it with a gentle invitation to lean on the one who is with us through it all. And it's done with a bit of humor and levity that can only come from a life marked by joy and hope in the midst of deep sorrows.

CODY JAMES VERMILLION, Cofounder of Uncommon
[good] Church, San Diego

In a humorous tearjerker, Kristen courageously reveals her experience through trauma, giving the reader a firsthand look at what it's like to have every certainty ripped from your suffering hands until all you're left with is a relationship with a God who is glad to be with you no matter what. Using her own story to expose harmful, distorted beliefs within Christian culture, Kristen creates space for the reader to find grace, peace, and joy in their journey.

TONI M. DANIELS, Operations director of LK10,
coauthor of *Relational Revolution*, and podcast host of
Joy Fueled and Jesus Led

It can be difficult to put words around suffering, loss, and grief. Kristen takes her story, woven beautifully with Scripture, and walks alongside the reader through their own feelings. I am very thankful for the grace and love that jump off the pages of this journey. Everyone deals with the pain of suffering differently—I'm thankful for Kristen's ability to help articulate a practical theology around a topic the church often struggles to explore.

TONY MILTENBERGER, Pastor and host of the *Reclamation Podcast*

Few are brave enough to address the topic of suffering because to believe in Jesus and suffer, too, can sometimes be a hard reality to accept. In this book, it feels like Kristen is holding our hand as she walks us through suffering and the sacred way to be in it while still hoping and believing in God. Every day, we are surrounded by suffering in this world, whether we see it or experience it—this book is for such a time as yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

PRICELIS PERREAUX-DOMINGUEZ, MSW, MS ED.,
Writer and founder of Full Collective

Kristen's words help us feel included—that our pain can be shared and understood. By the end of this book, God will feel closer and more real, and you will give yourself more love and compassion.

LEE ANN MILLER, TV personality

This book is a gift for those of us caught between hope in a God of love and the brutality of our own experience. Kristen LaValley courageously, transparently, invites us into her own journeys through this crucible. On the way, she brings fresh light, hope, and courage for our own roads ahead.

DR. KENT SMITH, Author, professor, and
cofounder of the LK10 Network

The body is desperate for an honest expression of what it means to suffer while also walking with Jesus. In the wake of church hurt, loss, grief, and pain, Kristen offers a profound and earnest gift of words to believers everywhere and in any season of life. She wrestles well with the uncomfortable realities of loving Christ while living in the now and not yet.

BRENNA BLAIN, Contemporary theologian, author, and Bible teacher

In *Even If He Doesn't*, Kristen LaValley opens the door into her darkest moments with such honesty and straightforwardness that we can't help but feel less afraid to face our own valleys. Kristen writes with the voice of a friend—the kind who isn't afraid of your angst but also won't ever stop believing how beloved you are by God. This book felt like a balm to me personally, and I pray it offers the same to you. This is such a warm and welcoming book for all of us who can't unsee our own wounds.

K. J. RAMSEY, Therapist and author of *The Book of Common Courage* and
The Lord Is My Courage

Even If He Doesn't



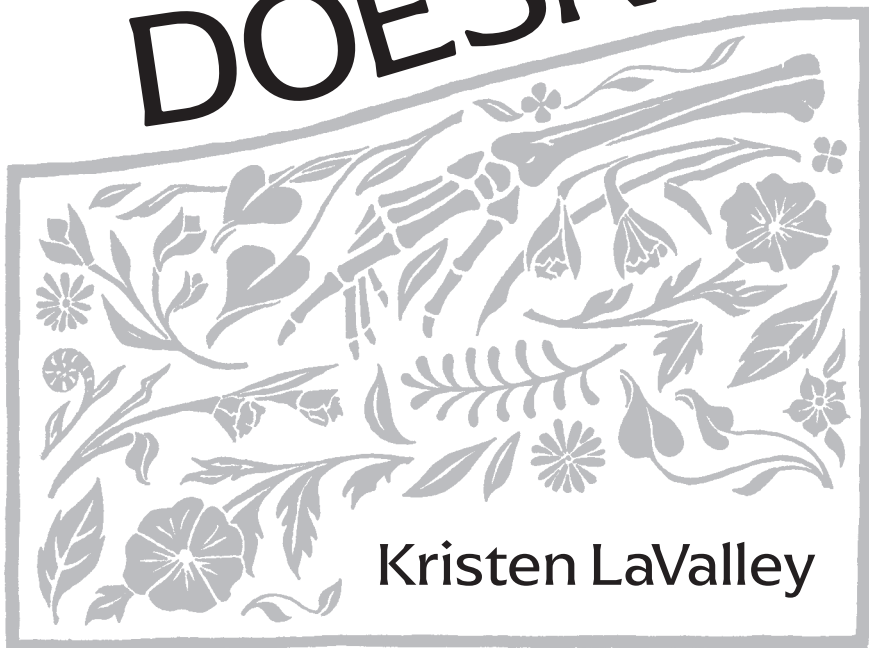
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Kristen LaValley

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For Max.
Even though he didn't,
we know that one day he will.
We'll see you soon.

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Author's Note

THROUGHOUT THE PROCESS OF WRITING, an important question has come up: “What gives me the right to write this book?” The pages you’re about to read are about how crisis can devastate our faith and how painful and beautiful the rebuilding can be. I’ve experienced so much heartache in my life, but my biggest “Even if he doesn’t” ended with “But he did.”

I’ve wrestled quite a bit with that. Do I have the authority to write a book about suffering when we received the miracle we asked for? Why would anyone listen to me? Do I have the right to speak to hearts that carry tragedy I’ve never known?

The truth is, I don’t. Our griefs are uniquely our own. Our suffering may be recognizable to others, but it’s only intimately familiar to ourselves. When a mother and father lose a child, each of them experiences that grief in different ways. When a woman loses a husband, his mother loses a son. They both feel the loss, but the relationship to the grief is as different as their relationship to the person.

I can’t speak to any individual suffering, even the kinds of suffering that look similar to my own. I can only speak to what I’ve learned from my own heartache.

In her book *Suffering Is Never for Nothing*, Elisabeth Elliot says, “Suffering is a mystery that none of us is really capable of

plumbing. And it's a mystery about which I'm sure everyone at some time or other has asked why."¹ On these pages, I certainly don't claim to plumb the depths of every person's pain. If anyone were capable of writing an exhaustive study of the nuance and complexity of suffering, surely it would have already been written.

Instead, all I can do is offer my experiences and reflections. When we share our stories with each other and reflect on what we've learned through our pain, we're still only reflecting fragments that make up a larger theological and spiritual mystery. We can only know in part—this is my part. I haven't suffered in the same way or with the same intensity as others. I'm just familiar with its sting.

When we compare our suffering to someone else's, we're simply trying to make sense of what we're going through. In our attempt to understand a pain that is unfathomable and inexplicable, we measure our experience against what someone else is going through or has gone through. The result of that comparison is always the discrediting of pain.

If you compare your pain to someone else's and find yours to be greater, you diminish their suffering. If you compare your pain and find theirs to be greater, you diminish your own. And who can really scale the weight of suffering? I certainly can't.

What I do know is that most of us will experience suffering of some kind at some point in our lives. Your crisis may be considered significant by the standards of our culture (such as the loss of a child, the death of a spouse, a chronic disease, or a fatal diagnosis), or it may be something that the world considers "minor" but breaks your heart all the same.

No matter the width and depth of your pain, in this book you'll find the threads of faith both through answered prayers and in the middle of what felt like spiritual abandonment. Maybe my pain will be familiar to you; maybe it won't. Either way, hope and hard things are on the pages ahead of you. I hope you find yourself in them too.

Foreword

I AGREED TO WRITE Kristen's foreword for two reasons:

1. Kristen is a wordsmith unlike any I have run across in decades. This is the God-honest truth. She writes words like Steph Curry shoots threes. She writes paragraphs like Taylor writes bangers. It just seems so effortless.
2. I knew how important this book was going to be for so many people who have walked the hard road. Myself included . . .

But when I opened the box and the words *Even If He Doesn't* sat there, staring me in the face, in two seconds flat my mind accelerated toward all the still-empty shelves that were supposed to hold monuments to answered prayers I have prayed. I closed the box and said out loud, "Nope. Not today."

And I'm assuming that you may have experienced that same moment with this book. You may be reading these words months after you bought it because you just couldn't bring yourself to face some pain that you feel is purposeless. Or you may be ready to

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devour every page because you need some hope NOW. Well, let me tell you something: the fact that you are reading these words means that you are about to embark on a journey that won't exaggerate your pain but instead will literally be balm to your soul.

Pain has a way of moving us from carefree to cautious to calloused. From secure to suspect to cynical. That journey is a painful one, and the thought of ever getting back to a space where we are carefree and secure seems ultimately impossible. Well, I have some good news for you: this book is going to do just that. Don't stop reading until you hit the last word. Because if you are starting off reading this feeling like God has abandoned you because he didn't do something you begged of him, I have a feeling you will close this book, look up, and see that he has been sitting right next to you all along . . . even if he didn't.

Carlos Whittaker

Introduction

IF I HAD BEEN ASKED FIFTEEN YEARS AGO to write a book about hardship in the life of a believer, I would have been thrilled. With all the confidence of a recent Bible college graduate, I would have written that book emphatically. I would have huffed and puffed and passionately typed out all I knew about hardship, because my perspective hadn't yet been humbled from experiencing it. The main points of this hypothetical (*Thank you, Jesus*) book would probably be something like this:

Most hardship is caused by sin.

Some hardship isn't caused by sin, but we don't know why it happens—so just suck it up and trust God.

I come from a rich heritage of faith, and for most of my childhood and early adulthood, nothing really bad happened to any of us. I was convinced that my lack of childhood trauma and my family's protection from major heartache was because we were prayer warriors, faithful to the Lord, and free from sinful strongholds. So for me, faith was pretty formulaic: accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior + don't sin that much + tithe 10 percent = a happy life of minimal suffering.

If only it had stayed that simple.

In the last decade and a half, my simplistic view of suffering (and God's role in it) has crumbled and been rebuilt. But even with the pain I've experienced and now carry with me, I wouldn't want to go back to the naivete I had before I discovered how difficult life could be. I was relatively pain-free, but my faith was simple. If something went wrong, I blamed myself. I believed my actions, my immaturity, my selfishness, or my sins were the cause of my problems—even things that were out of my control. In my mind, everything could be explained, and most pain was avoidable.

When your life experiences follow the formula you believe in, you have no reason to question it. The equation feels simple, and your life serves as the proof. What a brutal grace it is to experience something that proves the formula problematic. Whether it's our own pain or the pain of someone we love, the experience will bring us to believe one of two outcomes.

The first is that when we encounter some kind of pain that doesn't fit our faith equation, our thoughts about God and our faith in him are shaken, sometimes to the point of abandoning our faith. The math of a pain-free life doesn't add up, which leads to the logical (albeit incorrect) conclusion that everything else we believe is also false.

The second outcome of a formulaic understanding of suffering is that it blocks us from truly caring for those around us who are hurting. When we believe that even the most brutal crisis can be easily explained or that sin is always the catalyst for pain, we place the fault and responsibility solely on the person in crisis. How can we bear the burden of a brother and sister in Christ if we believe their pain is their own fault? Can we truly follow the command to love each other if the side effect of our theology is conditional compassion? Can we really bootstrap people into complete healing?

Spoiler alert: the answer is no.

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The other outcome is that the breaking of our formulas will lead us to a better understanding of the love of God. When we engage with our pain instead of bypassing it, we allow ourselves the opportunity to know God in—and through—our great hurts. As we grow in our knowledge of God’s love and character, we can engage with others’ hurts with grace, compassion, and gentleness.

I have walked through trials with shaky faith, and I’ve walked through them with unwavering faith. I’ve been the recipient of compassion and gentleness, and I’ve been blamed and accused of causing my own heartache. Sometimes my pain was too complicated for others to touch. So people stayed out of it, afraid to misplace their compassion in case what had happened was my fault. Sometimes my pain was received with warmth—but from a distance. At times my grief felt like too much for people to cross the threshold. Other times the body of Christ stepped into the thick of it without questions, loving me in a way enabled by Christ. In those moments when I could barely put one foot in front of the other, they were my breath, my voice, and my strength.

Through the painful moments, the paradigm shifts, the shaking of my faith, and the rebuilding of it, I have found the goodness of the Father at every turn. Sometimes all I had to hold on to were the pieces of my faith that hadn’t been shaken by my pain. When my brain was foggy and I could barely open my Bible or utter a word of prayer, I’d repeat to myself things I knew to be true: he is good, he is kind, he is faithful, he is for me. Those truths were tied to the character of God—aspects of who I believed him to be that didn’t need theological clarification. His faithfulness in my life had confirmed those unchangeable attributes over and over again.

When I didn’t have the time or bandwidth to think, to process, to decide what I believed about something, the roots of my faith were planted so deeply that my decisions were instinctive. I knew

what my belief system would compel me to decide without having to retrace the steps of how I got to that belief.

It wasn't always that way, of course. We don't suddenly become assured of what we believe when crisis hits. And often, that assurance is just certainty that hasn't been tested. When we allow suffering to teach us, and when we interact with others' suffering with openness and empathy, our theological best guesses get tested and tried and then they either take root or are ripped out. The ones that take root become spiritual instincts that guide us when we need it most.

Crisis tends to hit us out of nowhere, and we don't often have the time or emotional fortitude to rethink what we believe about God. It's in those moments that our faith becomes active. We move in step with what we already believe to be true about our Father, for better or for worse. We'll react differently to a situation if we believe God is good, kind, active, and faithful or if we believe he is distant, uncaring, and vengeful.

The way we were taught to pray, what we were taught to believe about suffering and the sovereignty of God, and how our community displays care for the hurting will shape the way we respond to trials. If we believe that suffering is always a consequence of sin, the blame we heap on ourselves will become self-hatred, which dishonors the image of God in us. If we've learned to pray only as a way to receive something from God, we'll feel like he has abandoned us when he doesn't answer. If the faith communities we're part of respond to pain with judgment and reservation, we'll never learn how to respond to others' suffering with compassion, grace, and generosity. But when we view suffering as something that we will all have to endure at some point, regardless of how good of a Christian we might be, and when we believe that God is present with us in it, we'll be able to get a clearer picture of who God is and who we are.

I grew up in a Christian family, surrounded by pastors and missionaries. My dad is a pastor, as was his dad and my mom's

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dad and most of their siblings—all in the same denomination. I went to Bible college in that denomination, so the messages about suffering I absorbed as a child were validated and doubled down on in my formal education.

My family was mostly suffering adjacent, observing the hardships of the people in our churches but never experiencing much loss firsthand. The message I observed and internalized was that there was always a reason someone was suffering. It was a consequence of something they'd done or a trial the Lord had given them to grow their faith. When hardship did come into our family, the solution was simple: just trust Jesus; don't ask why. I thought I needed faith the size of a mountain to endure whatever pain life (or God) brought my way.

Since then, I've walked through devastating spiritual wounds. I've grieved the loss of loved ones. I've suffered a violent miscarriage, witnessed a murder, and experienced the trauma of a high-risk twin pregnancy, an extended hospitalization, a premature delivery, and my babies' two-month stay in the NICU. I am more familiar than I'd like to be with pain and loss. But it would be foolish to consider myself an expert on suffering. I'm not. I simply have suffered. I don't know your story, but I think that if you picked up this book, you've probably had your share of pain too.

For the first couple of decades of my life, all I knew about pain was from observing it in others and studying it in books. But all the book knowledge, research, and theology in the world can't do for our hearts what crisis can. Heartbreak has a way of softening the edges in us that need to be softened while sharpening the ones that need sharpened. Our response to suffering can increase our capacity for hardship while deepening our empathy for those in pain.

Sometimes trials will surprise us in the most beautiful and complex ways. In the midst of the darkest pain, we may find flowers blooming in unexpected places. Like wildflowers growing in

all the wrong spots, our faith will become more like a meadow and less like a math problem. Stories we've read in God's Word a hundred times will come alive in new ways. We'll find new friendships and connections that never would have grown without the pain that waters the soil of relationships.

At some point, most of us will experience the kind of unspeakable pain that shakes the foundations of everything we believe. When you find yourself walking through something so painful you can barely string together a coherent thought, I want you to have anchors to cling to, the comfort of the Spirit, a community of believers to hold up your arms, the peace of God, and the light of Christ to illuminate the fog that heartache brings. Maybe your faith needs a good shaking, as mine did. Maybe not. But in order to endure suffering with hope and strength, we need to take an honest look at what we believe about who God is and his relationship to our suffering. It's only then that we can sort the distorted truths from the real ones.

God meets us in the midst of all our days, and the painful ones are no exception. On the pages ahead, we'll learn how to hold on to faith when God doesn't answer the way we want him to and when it feels like he's not answering at all. You'll be invited to experience the God who is with you in your heartache, in your hardship, and in the complex pain in your life.

I won't promise too much, because there are no easy answers to pain.* While this isn't an exhaustive study on the theology of suffering, my hope is that reading this book will feel like having coffee with a friend who has walked a few steps ahead of you. By the time our cups are empty, we'll have unraveled some misconceptions about suffering, earned some hard-won wisdom, and wrapped ourselves up in a warm blanket of comfort for our spirits.

* I can, however, assure you that this is a much better read than whatever book I would have written fifteen years ago. There is no greater peace in my life than the knowledge that no one let me write a book in my early twenties.

When Your Image of God Shatters

*How can I write you
to tell you that I'm angry
when I've been given the wrong address
and I don't even know your real name?*

MADELEINE L'ENGLE

DURING ONE OF THE MOST PAINFUL seasons of my life, I was late-night scrolling one of these social media apps I pretend to hate. I was halfway through my pregnancy with identical twin girls, and my husband, Zach, and I had just found out they were not likely to survive.

As I scrolled aimlessly through my feed, trying to distract my mind and give myself something—*anything*—to think about other than the roaring sounds of grief and uncertainty, my finger stopped at an aesthetically designed quote. It was from one of the biggest, most influential churches of our time. It read, “Don’t let your circumstances change the way you view God.”

My nana always warned me that if I rolled my eyes, they’d get stuck, and now I know for sure that’s not true because if it were, they definitely would have gotten themselves stuck that time. *Easy*

for you to say, Skinny Jeans, I thought. Not that I knew whether he was wearing skinny jeans when he said it. Or that it was a *he* who said it. Or if it was easy for him to say. Or what circumstances Probably Wearing Skinny Jeans endured to come to the conclusion that we shouldn't allow our circumstances to change our view of God. I took a screenshot of the quote and sent it to my husband, adding, "Sometimes they do tho."

At the point of that late-night doomscrolling session, I was tired, emotionally exhausted in a way I'd never known before. I was completely uninterested in Christian platitudes and theological gotchas meant to jolt me into "correct" thinking. They might make you think, *Mmm, yeah, that's good*. You like it, you share it, and then you go on with your day. But in that moment, I didn't have an appetite for theological snacks.

I'd been through difficult things before. I'd experienced firsthand what it's like to have my image of God shatter into a million pieces because of circumstances that were out of my control. While I was hurting because of what happened to us, I was also trying to hold on to any shred of belief in a God who was suddenly not the God I thought I knew. These heartbreaks had changed how I viewed God and led me to a better understanding of him. Not before my heart bled out all of the images of him I'd created, but I eventually got there. It was a mercy for God to use my circumstances to change the way I viewed him. I hadn't truly known him until then.

But I'd never walked through anything like this before. I'd never been in a spot where every choice I made had the potential to write a death sentence.

There I found myself, in a crushing circumstance I hadn't asked for and hadn't caused, and this post was demanding that I hold on to how I viewed God. That wasn't really the issue for me. I knew who God was and believed in his goodness and faithfulness more than ever. But the only reason I'd gotten there was

because my circumstances had demanded that I search and know God better.

So I did what I always do when a post on social media annoys me. I scrolled past it and allowed my mind to drift away from the reality I was facing. My babies were sick. They were, on paper, dying.



It was early March 2021. Zach and I had been together for fifteen years, married for twelve. Our kids were ten, eight, and seven. We were a few years out from a painful break with our church, where Zach had served as youth pastor, and we'd spent the last year traveling the country in an RV.

We'd been hoping to have another baby for almost two years at that point, so carrying *two* babies was an unexpected and welcome joy. We had no reason to believe that this ultrasound would be anything other than routine.

Wrong. So wrong. Maximum wrongness.

At the end of the scan, the maternal fetal medicine doctor came in and introduced herself and said, "I'm sorry to meet you like this."

I don't remember what she said after that. I'd read memoirs by people who have gone through something traumatic, and I'd never really thought about how they were able to recall so many details from the experience. That wasn't the case for me—my memories are spotty, fading in and out. I remember the doctor's face. I remember the silence of the tech beside her. I remember how cold my phone felt in my hands. I remember wrapping my arms around my body in an attempt to comfort myself. I remember the doctor reaching out and touching my knee. I remember the room spinning. I remember feeling like I wanted to rip off all my clothes and run away. But I don't remember the initial impact of the explosion.

My memory kicks in somewhere around the time of the doctor's crude drawing of my uterus. She sketched two stick-figure babies inside a circle and drew two squiggly lines from their bellies to represent their umbilical cords. She then connected those squiggly lines to an oval shape representing their single shared placenta.

The doctor explained that Baby B wasn't getting enough blood through her umbilical cord. She was small—too small. She was weak. She wasn't likely to survive to a viable gestational age. If she died, her death would send a surge of blood into the shared placenta, which would go straight to Baby A's heart. This would likely cause Baby A to die as well or, at the very least, to have a life-altering stroke. She would never lead a normal life.

"You do have options, though," the doctor told me.

She explained a procedure that would save Baby A by lasering the umbilical cord of Baby B. I didn't fully understand what she was saying until she took her pen and drew a large X through Baby B's squiggly umbilical cord, representing its detachment from the placenta.

"Oh my God!" I choked.

The doctor startled a bit, blinking her eyes a few times. "I know this is so difficult to hear," she said. I could tell she was trying to remain neutral and controlled.

"Are you recommending that I terminate one baby to save the other baby?"

She nodded sympathetically. "Yes, that's the option some mothers in your situation choose."

Oh my God. Oh my God. Oh my God.

The sobs that escaped my chest were guttural. "There has to be another way. There has to be another option. I want them both. Oh God, I want them both."



In one instant, I was thrown into the valley of the shadow of death, left to decide the fate of our daughters while holding on to the hope that God would make it all okay. Don't let my circumstances change the way I view God? *Why not?*

When crisis hits, it presents us with a choice. Will we stubbornly cling to what we've always believed, even when it no longer makes sense in our circumstances? Or will we respond to the crisis as an invitation to know him more? When we've decided we have God figured out, our firmly held beliefs become security blankets. We might even be convinced that it would be wrong or sinful to change our minds.

So instead of leaning into our pain and our questions, we turn away from them, cozy up with what we're confident is right, and deny ourselves the grace of knowing God *through* our pain, not just in spite of it. In pain, God becomes full, vibrant color.

The key difference between religion and faith is that while religion stands still and quiet, faith chases, pursues, and seeks. Faith moves us. We run after him with limps. We praise with no words. We sing with no song. We search for him in the dark, we reach out our hands to make contact, and we turn our heads toward him and whisper, "Are you still there?" Even when he doesn't whisper back, we continue to speak, to crawl, to try to find some shred of the God we still somehow, inexplicably, believe is there in the dark with us.

What I *hope* that quote I stumbled on that night was trying to express is that our experiences often tempt us to believe that God is something he isn't. That he's against us. That he's cruel. That he's a dad who leaves when we mess up. But maybe there's a better thing to say and teach about suffering: that we can allow our circumstances to reveal the truth of God's character and shake out everything that doesn't reflect who he is.

*In pain,
God becomes
full, vibrant color.*

When we're in the middle of a reality we never dreamed would be ours, we don't have to hold on to our image of God so tightly that our fingers practically break. Instead, we can offer up this simple prayer: "God, use this to reveal to me who you are and break any false images I've made of you."

Clearly, I'm not a fan of theological quips that put the fault of a changed perspective on a person whose circumstances are crushing them. Suffering isn't always someone's "fault." Neither is a changed perspective. Changing your mind about something you were wrong about is a grace given to us by the Father, who can use our pain to show us who he really is.

<p><i>Faith moves us.</i> <i>We run after him</i> <i>with limps.</i></p>		<p>When you're at the bottom of a pit, and you're cold and hungry and tired, and it's dark, and someone yells out, "Hey! Are you bleeding? Can you hear me? Listen, I have to tell you something, and this is really gonna help you! Don't let this change your mind about God! Okay, bye!" what do you think your response will be? Do you think you'll reply with a hearty, "You know what? You're right! Gee, thanks for that, buddy!"</p>
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Yeah, I don't think so. Your response will most likely be a desperate grasp at anything you can hold on to before whisper-yelling back, "I'm trying. I'm trying. I want him to be who I believe him to be. I want him to be here with me."

And also . . . maybe throw down a rope?

The truth is that circumstances *can* change our minds about God—and that's not always a bad thing. But it's also not a fun thing. Once you're committed to the way you see things, it's hard to see the world any other way, even when presented with convincing evidence.

Let me tell you a story about Emily. I need you to read it like I wrote it. With narrowed eyes and a bit of snarled lip: *Emily*.

When I was in first grade, I went over to Emily's house for a playdate. Emily had a *playroom*. A whole room full of toys that were just hers. I'd never seen anything like it in my life. A room for toys? Where did her mom put her sewing machine? Where did her dad put his books? Where did they sleep? These were questions I never got answers to because that day was about playing with our dolls, and Emily wanted to braid their hair.

Not many people can pinpoint a moment in their childhood that changed the way they interacted with the world, but I can. This was it. I sat there in absolute shame as every other girl at the playdate braided her doll's hair . . . except me. I couldn't do it—I didn't know how.

I fumbled my fingers and twisted strands and said, "I did it!" But my classmates only laughed at me for being stupid. They didn't say that, but they kind of did, with their eyes.

When I got home from that playdate, I went straight to my dolls (they could all fit on my bed—I didn't have a whole room full of them) and sat there twisting and pulling and crying until I figured out how to do a beautiful three-strand braid. I would braid the hair to the very tip, unravel it, and do it again. Over and over and over again. On different sized dolls, in different places on the dolls' heads. Ponytails, pigtails—you name it, I braided it.

I would never, ever for the rest of my life be caught not knowing how to do something.

The next morning, I walked confidently into my classroom, head held high, fingers itching to prove my worth. I went straight to Emily and said, "I can do it! I can braid hair!"

She laughed. "No, you can't. You don't know how."

I was adamant. "No, really, I can do it! Watch!"

I had my friend with the longest hair sit down in front of me. As Emily watched, I braided the girl's hair from top to bottom.

I tied it off with a scrunchie and everything. I looked at Emily, eager for her approval.

But Emily, Professional Braider, crossed her arms. “You didn’t do that.”

I’m sorry, what?

Even our friends were like, “Girl, what?”

“Yes, I did,” I said. “You just watched me do it!”

She looked me up and down. “No, you didn’t.” And then she walked away with all our friends.

Somehow Emily convinced our entire class to believe I didn’t know how to braid even though they’d all just *watched me do it*.

But who gets the last braid now, *Emily*? Now the world knows that I can braid and you’re the girl who gaslit an entire first-grade class!

The point of this story isn’t to show you the childhood wounds that are still gaping in my life (obviously, I am fully healed from this one) but to show you that sometimes people refuse to change their minds even when the evidence is alarmingly stacked against their long-held beliefs. This isn’t only true for the first-grade crowd; it also applies to things we’ve been taught about God that aren’t actually true about him. Pride keeps a death grip on things that cost too much to let go of. Fear prevents us from asking tough questions that lead to a deeper understanding of God and his Word.

For the sake of intellectual honesty and spiritual sincerity, we have to be willing to change our minds sometimes. We need to take the risk of pursuing truth, even if it comes at the cost of changing our minds about things we were sure were right. Fear and pride only keep us from the presence of God. They keep us from knowing him and from diving into the fullness of Christ with our full selves.



I have a big red tub full of all the things I've written down, dating from right around the time I learned to write. There are journals, poems, songs, letters, and notes scribbled onto airplane napkins. It's a history of my life, my thoughts, and my faith—a sort of coming-of-age story of a kid who grew up “saved.”

These days, it serves as a memorial for the fragile fragments of my faith that shattered when crisis hit. I can follow the breadcrumbs of my life and mark these moments—from smaller events, like getting fired from a job I loved and breaking up with a guy I thought I'd marry to things that truly shook the earth under my feet.

Every Christian learns a theology of suffering. Most of us don't learn this in a classroom or by studying academic books; we sort of pick up an understanding over time. We hear messages from teachers, pastors, social media posts, or conversations with mentors and peers, and we internalize them without really stopping to think them through. We tend to absorb these beliefs experientially as we respond to suffering.

We share our theologies about suffering more in the way we respond to suffering than in the systematic teaching of it.

“Did you hear what happened to John?”

“Yes, I did. God must really be trying to teach him something.”

We nod our heads, thankful we aren't the ones God is trying to teach, and we never really think through the implications of the conclusions we draw. It doesn't feel important until it's relevant to our own lives. Unfortunately, by the time suffering knocks on our door, it's too late to develop a more robust theology about it. Our beliefs are already there, informing how we feel, how we act, and how we engage with our pain.

Most of the time, we don't really know the strength of our

beliefs until they're tested. When what we believe to be true about God and what we experience have always been aligned, we don't have any reason to think we're wrong. The framework seems solid: $A + B$ has always equaled C , so we must have it right.

But what happens when we experience something that directly challenges what we believe to be true?

When we're faced with something we never expected, we either try to make our experience fit our theology or try to make our theology fit our experience. We can choose to close our eyes and ears and scream, "La la la" and ignore the fire in our chest that burns from our feelings of abandonment and doubt. Uncertainty is scary territory for the theologically confident. We wouldn't doubt if we had enough faith, and if we don't have enough faith we'll fall into sin, and if we fall into sin were we ever really his at all? So instead, we pretend that the doubt isn't there. We tuck it away, lock it up, and throw away the key.

We grab our theology in one hand and our experience in the other. We slam them together, trying to force them to come together in a way that makes sense, even though they're repelling each other like opposing sides of magnets. But something has to give. This is when we need to take a look at what we're holding on to and drop the things that we shouldn't have had a tight grasp on in the first place.

I don't know what those unguaranteed absolutes are for you. Were you taught that if you pray hard enough, you'll get your miracle? That you only suffer when you have unconfessed sin? That if you have enough faith, the person you love will be healed? That your faith community will stand beside you perfectly in your suffering, knowing exactly when you need a hug or a casserole? That God will move in ways that are predictable and make sense in the here and now?

The reality is that some things are too heavy to carry in the

same hands as your unwavering faith. It's hard to hold on when your hands are shaking, so you drop some things and steady yourself. If one of the things you drop is the comfort of a faith that's never been challenged, it frees your grasp to hold on to what you can be sure of: the presence of a good and faithful Creator.

When my own suffering tore me to shreds, there was no book, no Scripture, no sermon, no well-meaning words from a friend that could undo the unraveling that was happening in my life. Suffering has a way of forcing us to look directly at things we've been content to leave unquestioned in the past. When you feel like God hasn't fulfilled his end of your saved-to-Savior relationship, you feel betrayed. When you feel betrayed, trust is gone. When trust is gone, so is the relationship.

I needed to reexamine each piece of the framework of my faith if I was ever going to believe anything good about God again.



When we're standing exposed in the cold winds of suffering, it's easy to land in one of two places: *this is my fault* or *this is God's fault*.

If you've absorbed a theology that says suffering is always the result of sin, then when something bad happens, you go searching for sin that might not even be there. You blame yourself and beat yourself up until eventually you either resign yourself to a life of self-flogging or accept that your theology isn't as airtight as you thought.

I'm not sure what's worse: believing that God is punishing you for some unknown sin or believing that God is just that unkind. The most devastating of all conclusions to draw from suffering is that God has rejected you.

It's a lie, of course. It's the same lie that the enemy has been planting in human hearts since the beginning. Satan is convinced

that with the right amount of pain, God's people will believe he is against them and they'll reject him. Imagine his audacity in telling God that if enough things were taken away from a man, he'd curse God to his face.*

The book of Job is about a man who lost everything. He trusted God, and his suffering wasn't the result of his sin. Yet God didn't spare his health or his home or his children or his livelihood. Job's entire story is a series of "even if he doesn't" events.

Just as he did with Job, the enemy tries to use the vulnerability of our pain to convince us that the most intrinsic piece of our faith—that God loves us—isn't true. When the enemy can manipulate our perspective so much that we doubt the love of God, our image of God becomes fractured.

The way we view God affects the way we see everything. It changes the way we interact with each other, the way we experience joy, and the way we experience pain. If we believe that God's love is unreliable or transactional, then the responsibility of his affection relies on us. We think we have to work hard to keep his gaze fixed on us. *Don't mess up, or he'll turn away!* But that isn't true.

God loves you. Full stop. No qualifiers. No "Yeah, but . . ." He loves you. Even when you sin. "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."†

Yes, sin has consequences. In some cases, we can look at the destruction in our lives and say, "Oh, look, if it isn't the consequences of my own actions." Hebrews 12 shows us that sometimes God does allow suffering to teach us and discipline us. Of course, sin and selfishness can bring significant measures of pain and suffering into our lives. But God is not standing there waiting for us to sin, dangling his love like a carrot for us to chase. Even when we sin, he doesn't remove his love from us.

* Job 1:11

† Romans 5:8

Suffering can be a result of sin, whether as the natural consequence of an individual sin or because of the universal existence of sin in the world. But sometimes bad things happen and it's not one's fault. Suffering, in itself, is not a sign that you have hidden sin God is punishing you for. Theology like that is incomplete because it fails to account for the work of the Cross, where Christ took the punishment of sin and death *for* us.

For argument's sake, let's take the absolute worst-case scenario. Let's say you're a filthy, wicked sinner and God has allowed suffering in your life as a direct punishment for your sinful choices. Even if that's true, God still has not rejected you. He still loves you. He's still for you. The most important thing to remember about God is that he is redemptive, not vindictive. All he does, he does in love—to draw us to himself, not push us away from him.

The story of God and his people is one of failure (on our part) and perpetual second chances (on his part). In every moment of our lives on earth, we are given the opportunity for redemption and reconciliation. So if there's nothing we can do to separate ourselves from the love of God,* that means we are loved by him even in our sin, even in the consequences.

Whether your suffering is a natural suffering, independent of sin, or if it's suffering brought on by sin (yours or someone else's), he is still drawing near to you and drawing you to himself. He has not turned his face from you. You aren't hidden from him, even if you're in sin.



When I was in college, I was diagnosed with ovarian cysts. With my future husband (who was “just a friend” at the time) by my

* Romans 8:39

side, the doctor told me I would likely never have children. I was stunned. Zach and I barely spoke on the drive back to campus while I shed a few silent tears from the passenger seat.

As I processed the diagnosis later with a group of friends, I expressed that I felt like this diagnosis and “the closing of my womb” (because in Bible college, you talk like that) was because of my sin. My friends were quick to shut down that idea and remind me that God is merciful and kind.

As I struggled with what my life would look like moving forward, I was comforted by another incorrect simplification of suffering: that suffering is proof we’re directly in the middle of God’s will for our lives.

While it’s true that God can use our suffering to form our character and make us more like him, simply belonging to him doesn’t put a target on our backs for suffering. The idea that God *wants* us to suffer (for any reason) stands in direct contradiction to the life, testimony, and work of Christ. Jesus came to take our suffering on himself, not to have us prove something by our own suffering.

This misconception is the opposite of “I’m suffering because of my sin,” but in some ways it’s worse because it says, “I’m suffering because God approves of me.” If you follow this train of thought logically, this would mean that if you have peace, if you have no suffering, you’re far from God. This theology implies that if we’re in God’s will, we’ll suffer.

Suffering is a pretty terrible litmus test for whether we’re doing the right things. I know people who deeply love the Lord who have not walked through extreme suffering. I know people who do not know the Lord who have experienced unspeakable tragedy. If the equation doesn’t work every time, the equation is wrong. The presence or absence of suffering is not a cheat code to determine whether we’re in the will of God.

Instead of judging your heart by your suffering, judge it by the

Spirit. Instead of looking at your suffering as some sort of inevitability to serving Christ well, look at your suffering through the lens of someone who has a Savior. We will all experience some level of suffering in our lives, and we would do well to remember that we're not victims of our suffering. Jesus didn't just defeat sin and death on the cross; he also defeated the effects of sin and death. You may not escape suffering, and Scripture tells us as much. But don't get comfortable in it, and don't be proud of it either, waving it around as if it's some kind of badge of honor.

One day, while we were in the thick of navigating our daughters' diagnosis, I was listening to a song with lyrics that went something like "I want you to put me in the fire, Jesus. Try me by fire!" I sat there in my car, shaking my head, talking out loud to whoever was singing: "Are you sure about that? Do you actually want that?" I pictured all the tragedy and loss I'd walked through, and the thought that someone would pray for that was wild to me. No amount of romanticizing suffering would make me want to sing those lyrics. *I'm done, Lord! I want to be tried by fuzzy blankets and cups of tea!*

As long as you're breathing, never stop asking for healing. Never stop praying for peace. Never stop believing for redemption. Jesus is with you in your suffering. The promise is not that you won't suffer but that he is with you in your suffering, offering peace and hope, and leading you to calmer waters.

Instead of saying, "My suffering is proof that I'm in the will of God," we can say, "Jesus came to bear the weight of our suffering. His death and resurrection give me hope that I won't be stuck in this unrelenting pain. He is a God of redemption, and he always offers a way out."

When we reframe our understanding of suffering in a more truthful, tangible way, we'll have something with roots to hold on to when life turns us completely upside down.



When you're in pain, you don't want to depend on words God has already spoken; you want something new! When he's been quiet for a while, we start to believe he's distant. But that's never true—he's always speaking, always moving, always drawing his people to his heart. We won't always recognize it and it won't always come the way we expect it to, but that doesn't mean God has removed himself from us.

When I look back at the years when I felt he wasn't around, I can clearly see how he was actively working on my behalf. On the same days I wrote things in my journal like "Do you even care about us anymore?" details were being lined up in the perfect way so they would happen at the perfect time. I couldn't see it yet, so it was hard to believe it. It's only when the fog of suffering lifts that we can recognize how God was intervening.

Exodus 3:7 captures these words from the Lord to his people, who were suffering under the oppressive rule of Pharaoh in Egypt: "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering." Even if you don't feel God or see him or hear him in the way you were taught to expect, he is the God who sees and the God who is concerned.

Grief has a way of consuming our thoughts. We start to draw conclusions like *I haven't heard from God, so either he isn't real or he doesn't care*. Write this down to remind you what is true: "God is present and active in my life, but he might not always speak the way I expect." When God called Elijah to the mountain so he could speak to him, there was a wind that shattered the cliffs, but God wasn't in the wind. Then there was an earthquake, but he wasn't in that either. After the earthquake, there was a fire, but

God wasn't in the fire. God was in what came last: a whisper.* Even in the middle of the darkest night, your heart—even if just a fragment of it—can trust that he is actively present in your life.

The reality is, we want our pain to count for something. We can't imagine a world in which a good and kind Creator would let us suffer for nothing. So we take our pain and dissect it and dig through the layers of dirt to try to extract some sort of design from it. *Maybe he's trying to teach me patience. Maybe he's trying to teach me grace. Maybe he's allowing me to go through this so I can teach someone else.* We search endlessly for meaning, because how could a good God waste our pain?

But not everything that happens in our lives is supposed to be some grand heavenly lesson. It's true that our suffering is never wasted. Our pain isn't purposeless. But we may never know why while we're here on earth. In fact, I think it's safe to assume we likely won't be given explanations for our pain. When we're obsessed with finding the purpose for everything, we're seeking comfort in the purpose rather than the comfort of Christ.

But even if we don't know the reasons, we can know the Father. Instead of saying, "God is trying to teach me something—I have to figure out what it is so I can learn my lesson and end my suffering," we can say, "I don't know whether I'm supposed to be learning something here. I'll stay open to the teaching of the Holy Spirit and trust the Lord to bring peace and healing, regardless of whether I have something to learn."

When we stop trying to squeeze purpose from our pain, we can rest in the peace of God. His peace—the peace that "transcends

When we're obsessed with finding the purpose for everything, we're seeking comfort in the purpose rather than the comfort of Christ.

* 1 Kings 19:11-12

all understanding”—will hold our hearts perfectly when we don't understand.*

The people of God have been asking him “Why?” since the beginning of creation, and they are rarely given an answer. But he gives us his peace. And that is enough.

Suffering has every right to shake your confidence, but it doesn't have to destroy your faith. So let your paradigms shake a little and see what shakes out. You might find yourself left with a much truer and more beautiful understanding of grace, the work of the Cross, and the presence of God in your suffering.

When I sat in that cold hospital room, holding the sudden weight of a crisis pregnancy, I had already experienced the kind of earthquakes that shake your faith to its roots. I'd already been shaken, and I'd already rebuilt from the fragments of faith that were left. Those fragments became the foundation for a belief system that kept me grounded when my entire world was crumbling around me.

I didn't know what was going to happen with our daughters. I didn't know if they were going to live or die. But I knew that God loved me. And I knew that he was faithful, even though it might have looked like he'd abandoned us. While I didn't understand why he was allowing my pregnancy to be clouded by heartbreak, I knew that he was with us and that he would stay with us until the end, no matter what that ending might be.

* Philippians 4:7

