

GRIEVING LOSS,

WRESTLING WITH GOD,

mourning
GOD

AND FINDING YOUR WAY

BACK TO LIFE

TIFFANY STEIN

Mourning God may be the single most important book I've read in the last decade. With pastoral tenderness and theological precision, Tiffany brilliantly and wholeheartedly reveals how our pain shapes our view of God. Her words have transformed me. I will never get over the significance of this book and the way it will guide a generation of Christians longing to process the heaviness of our times with honesty and without losing hope.

KAT ARMSTRONG, Bible teacher, author, and podcast host

In her excellent book *Mourning God*, Stein probes the hard questions many Christians hesitate to ask about grief. She charts a biblically sound path forward to a richer, stronger faith—one that sees the God who is, who loves with an undying love. A must-read for pastors and those desiring a deeper walk with God.

LYNN H. COHICK, PHD, Distinguished Professor of New Testament at Houston Christian University

In *Mourning God*, Tiffany Stein offers a brave reflection on grief, faith, and the seeming absence of God after the loss of her infant. With raw honesty and spiritual depth, she invites readers into a sacred journey of lament and longing. Her voice is that of a faithful companion for anyone navigating sorrow and searching for God in the silence.

SANDRA GLAHN, coauthor of *When Empty Arms Become a Heavy Burden*

Perhaps the most beautiful and bottomless theological project humans ever face is discovering the God who is and separating him from the God we imagine. Nothing aids that divination like suffering, and out of her own suffering Tiffany Stein has a deeply personal lesson for every person of faith. Because we all suffer, we need grace. Because we all misunderstand God, we need truth. Tiffany is a guide to help us find the God of grace and truth in a world of hurt. Listen to her.

RYAN SANDERS, commentary editor at *The Dallas Morning News* and author of *Unbelievable*

With searing honesty and hard-won faith, Tiffany Stein does what few dare to do: She names the secondary grief that comes when the God you thought you knew no longer fits in the categories you've constructed. She invites the reader into the metaphorical counseling room with God himself, refusing to settle for trite answers or spiritual bypassing. For anyone who has felt abandoned or disillusioned by God, *Mourning God* is theology forged in the furnace of real suffering. Read it when you're ready to ask your hard questions, and be prepared to let Tiffany Stein lead you to unflinching, yet hope-fueled, answers.

AUBREY SAMPSON, author of *What We Find in the Dark* and *The Louder Song*

Having the privilege of knowing Tiffany, I can confidently say that she doesn't just write about this topic; she lives it. Tiffany has not just intellectually learned about grief, suffering, and how to reorient her view of God, she has applied it to her life and the lives of others. If you've ever struggled with your view of God, particularly amid pain, please read Tiffany's work. She writes with a shepherd's heart, a scholar's wisdom, and a deep conviction of the goodness of God.

TORIANO MAYO, lead pastor of The Well Austin Community Church

If loss or shattered dreams have sadly led to a loss of your God, this book is for you. Tiffany will gently take you by the hand and lead you through death and darkness back into the light and life of your Savior! She has walked this path and can show you the way.

LINDA DILLOW, author of *Hope for My Hurting Heart* and *Calm My Anxious Heart*

Why does God let good people (and especially his own children!) suffer? My wife, Alice, and I were with the Steins at the hospital where doctors had summoned them to say goodbye to their infant son, David. We bear

witness that the Steins' personal traumatic journey began not only with the pain of losing their child but also with the arguably even greater pain of feeling abandoned by God. This is the refreshingly unique and powerfully credible perspective of *Mourning God*. Tiffany does not address the problem of pain emotionally, from the sterile heights of a philosopher, but biblically, from the tearstained depths of a broken heart. That means that she moves past shallow answers (which are short-lived and cheap) in favor of this deep wisdom (which is enduring and costly): "Ours is the God who comes near and mourns with us."

E. ANDREW McQUITTY, THM, DMIN, pastor and author of *Notes from the Valley*, *The Way to Brave*, *Hobo Pastors* (with Larry Parsley), and *Your Best Life Later*

I had the sacred privilege of walking closely with Tiffany and Jason through the brief but beautiful life of their son, David. His life and their faith have indelibly marked my own. *Mourning God* carries the hard-won wisdom of one who has wrestled honestly with God and found him faithful even in the dark. Tiffany writes with honesty, courage, and profound pastoral wisdom about grief, doubt, and the God who meets us in our deepest sorrow. This book will be a faithful companion for anyone struggling to trust the God they thought they knew and will serve as a gentle guide back to hope.

BARRY D. JONES, senior pastor of Irving Bible Church and author of *Dwell*

In Tiffany Stein's tender reflection on the death of her son, we encounter the God who not only stands sovereign over the depths but also, and crucially, remains lovingly with us there. To encounter such a God, as Stein recounts in this lovely book, is to experience the beginning of healing and hope, two things that those who find themselves in the depths fear they might never experience. May this book be a balm to your soul and

a companion to you in the dark days and nights when you find yourself wrestling with God—and, by grace, finding your way back to life.

W. DAVID O. TAYLOR, associate professor of theology and culture at Fuller Theological Seminary and author of *Open and Unafraid* and *Prayers for the Pilgrimage*

Tiffany Stein had me at “death sucks.” I am wary of those who glorify death (as if Jesus did not come to vanquish it) or pretend that grief and loss cannot disrupt a Christian’s faith in God. This book does neither. Rather, it is as chock-full of vulnerable honesty about the tension of clinging to God after loss as it is of insightful Bible exposition and hope.

SHARIFA STEVENS, THM, author of *When We Talk to God: Prayers and Poems for Black Women*

GRIEVING LOSS,

WRESTLING WITH GOD,

mourning
GOD

AND FINDING YOUR WAY

BACK TO LIFE

TIFFANY STEIN

NavPress 

Published in alliance with Tyndale House Publishers



NavPress.com

Mourning God: Grieving Loss, Wrestling with God, and Finding Your Way Back to Life

Copyright © 2026 by Tiffany Stein. All rights reserved.

A NavPress resource published in alliance with Tyndale House Publishers

NavPress and the NavPress logo are registered and/or common law trademarks of NavPress, The Navigators, Colorado Springs, CO, in the USA and various other jurisdictions around the world. All rights reserved. Tyndale is a registered and/or common law trademark of Tyndale House Ministries in the USA and various other jurisdictions around the world. All rights reserved. See tyndale.com for a full list of trademarks owned by Tyndale House Ministries.

The Team:

David Zimmerman, Publisher; Caitlyn Carlson, Acquisitions Editor; Deborah Howell, Copyeditor; Lacie Phillips, Production Assistant; Ron C. Kaufmann, Cover Designer; Brandi Davis, Interior Designer; Sarah Ocenasek, Proofreading Coordinator

Cover and interior photograph of starry sky copyright © by trahko/Adobe Stock. All rights reserved.

Author photo copyright © 2025 by Thomas Shaffer. All rights reserved.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, *New International Version*,[®] NIV.[®] Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.[®] Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide. Scripture quotation marked AMP is taken from the Amplified[®] Bible (AMP), copyright © 2015 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. www.lockman.org. Scripture quotations marked CSB are taken from the Christian Standard Bible,[®] copyright © 2017 by Holman Bible Publishers. Used by permission. Christian Standard Bible[®] and CSB[®] are federally registered trademarks of Holman Bible Publishers. Scripture quotations marked ESV are from The ESV[®] Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version[®]), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Scripture quotations marked MSG are taken from *The Message*, copyright © 1993, 2002, 2018 by Eugene H. Peterson. Used by permission of NavPress. All rights reserved. Represented by Tyndale House Publishers.

URLs referenced in this book were verified as live and accurate source material prior to publication. Some links may have expired or redirected since publication.

Some of the anecdotal illustrations in this book are true to life and are included with the permission of the persons involved. All other illustrations are composites of real situations, and any resemblance to people living or dead is purely coincidental.

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Tyndale House Publishers at csresponse@tyndale.com, or call 1-855-277-9400.

ISBN 978-1-64158-983-3

Printed in the United States of America

32 31 30 29 28 27 26
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To David Allen Stein. Beloved son. February 20–April 14, 2018.

You and your little sister are my pride and joy, but it is you who made me a mommy and first taught me about the “Never Stopping, Never Giving Up, Unbreaking, Always and Forever Love”¹ of God. Thank you for the honor of stewarding your story. I pray that I’ve told it well.

To Mark Allen Stein. Beloved husband, father,
and Papa. November 19, 1957–March 30, 2024.

For as long as I’ve known you, you asked when I was going to write a book. I never believed that I had anything to say, but you did. You had a way of seeing what people could become and lovingly drawing the best out of each of us. Thank you for believing in me and for sacrificially modeling the lavish love of the Father. Your generosity made this book possible.

To the women of Irving Bible Church, especially the women
who journeyed alongside my family from 2017 to 2019.

Thank you for praying for me when I could not pray, for worshiping on my behalf when I had no songs to sing, and for bearing witness to my sorrow. You were the reason I got out of bed each morning after David died. Thank you for allowing me to pastor you through tears, for the abundant supply of hot tea and dark chocolate, and for continuing to speak my son’s name. I love you.

Contents

INTRODUCTION Losing God *xi*

PART 1 Death

- 1 Death Can Go to Hell: *Grief* 3
- 2 Let It All Out: *Lament* 19
- 3 The One Who Died for You: *Love* 37

PART 2 Darkness

- 4 Breaking Point: *The Wall* 55
- 5 Hold On: *Waiting in the Dark* 67
- 6 Look for God's Goodness: *Hope* 79
- 7 The One Who Speaks with You: *Presence* 99

Interlude 117

PART 3 Light

- 8 Suffering Love: *Joy and Sorrow* 125
- 9 Dare to Delight: *Celebration* 143
- 10 The One Who Goes Before You: *Trust* 157

PART 4 Life

- 11 Cultivate Life: *Colaboring with God* 175
- 12 The One Who Dwells with You: *Life Everlasting* 189

EPILOGUE Found *197*

Recommended Resources *205*

Acknowledgments *209*

About the Author *213*

Notes *215*

INTRODUCTION

Losing God

The Christian life, from one angle, is the long journey of letting our natural assumption about who God is, over many decades, fall away, being slowly replaced with God's own insistence on who he is.

DANE ORTLUND, GENTLE AND LOWLY

All of us have multilayered portraits of who we think God is. As we've gone through life, we've shaped God according to our individual experiences. We've picked up stories about him along the way, imagined him to be like our parents (for better or worse), viewed him through our cultural ideology, and bumped into perceptions of him in hundreds of formative ways. In so doing, we've shaped a god who is small, known, comfortable, and manageable. Ours is a curated god.

But what happens to this curated image of God when your loved one dies or your spouse leaves you or you receive a terminal diagnosis? What happens when you lose your job or you slip back into addiction or the depression becomes treatment resistant? What then?

Most of us would like to think that we'd remain strong, faith intact and the hope of the gospel on our lips. But I've lived this

raw *What then? What now?* And when I left the NICU for the final time, I lost both my infant son and the God I thought I knew. I'd expected to mourn David, but the sense of abandonment I felt by God blindsided me.

Don't worry: If you're already flinching and thinking that you don't have the emotional stamina to read about the loss of a child amid your own suffering and pain, this isn't a memoir. Our experience with David is a precious memory that the Lord has given to me, Jason, and a few family members and friends to cherish. But this is a book about you and me and God. It's a book for all of us who find that when the bottom falls out we aren't just grieving what we've lost—we're mourning the God we thought we knew.

THE PAIN OF EMOTIONAL DOUBT

When life as you knew it is falling apart, to sing "O death, where is your sting?" (1 Cor. 15:55, ESV) is like hurling a harpoon at your own heart and hoping you don't bleed.

"Christ Is Risen" is usually sung on Easter as a bold proclamation of the hope we have in Christ: "Come awake, come awake. Come and rise up from the grave."¹ But that assumes that you're worshipping on Easter, when new life abounds and graves are newly emptied. What do you sing when the grave is fresh? What do you declare when it's metaphorically, or literally, Good Friday and the sting of death is searing pain?

For six months, every time we sang that song at church, the only part I could resonate with was the anthem-like cry "Oh hell!"² To be a believer amid crisis is to have your faith tested and tried at every turn. You try to preach truth to yourself, but sometimes—many times—it falls flat. And the truest thing you may be able

to declare is that you're walking through hell and don't have the strength to keep going.

Friend, there's no shame in acknowledging your life-upending grief. And there's no shame when that grief gets mixed with the dark clouds of doubt and morphs into grieving God himself. If you've ever found yourself disoriented, disappointed, frustrated, isolated, disillusioned, hopeless, and questioning everything about the God you thought you knew, you're in good company. You may even be walking on holy ground.

Dr. Barry Jones suggests that there are at least three kinds of doubt related to faith: intellectual, volitional, and emotional. Intellectual doubt asks, "Is it true?" and is born from the weight of uncertainty. Volitional doubt acknowledges, "I don't want it to be true" and results from the blindness created by pride. But the most common form of doubt, emotional doubt, emerges from the ache of pain and suffering and declares, "It doesn't feel true."³

There are apologetic and evangelistic tools, resources, and books ad nauseam to address the intellectual and volitional doubts someone may have about Christian belief, but what do we do with the complexities of emotional doubt?

My emotional doubt didn't come just from the pain of losing David. I also felt forsaken by God. I kept crying out, "God, where are you? *Where are you?*" I knew intellectually that if God was still with me he would provide the comfort and love necessary to sustain me through the loss of David. But if God wasn't present with me in my suffering—if he wasn't loving and good—then this journey wasn't worth walking. And frankly, life wasn't worth living.

Here's what I can tell you from years spent processing various traumatic losses while wrestling with God as well as over a decade

of pastoral counseling experience: No matter the darkness, there is a hope that doesn't disappoint.

I don't know what darkness you find yourself in. I don't know what pain and heartache you bring to these pages. But I do know you are mourning the God you thought you knew. And I suspect you're yearning, hoping for something more. If you'll allow me, I'd like to be your companion on that journey.

Together we'll explore the invitation for you to move through mourning the God you thought you knew to intimately knowing the God who loves, comforts, walks with, and weeps with you. For it is in the painful stripping of false narratives about God—and the undoing that often results—that you have the opportunity to see God more clearly for who he is. That is the gift of this present season: to have your distorted views of God cast aside and replaced with a fuller understanding of the self-revealing God. *Ours is the God who comes near and mourns with us.*

PACKING FOR THE JOURNEY

Before we begin our journey, I'd like to suggest a few items to pack in your backpack. First, you'll want to carry our shared definition of *grief*:

Grief is the loss of anything you weren't prepared to part with.

While I'm speaking from the perspective of losing my son (bereavement), our journey through this book is for mourning of *any* kind. I promise that there is something for me to learn in your story of mourning and for you to learn in mine.⁴

Second, you'll need a map of where we're headed and what you

can expect along the way. As you've already experienced, the journey of grief is complex and disruptive. Grief comes out of experiencing the worst sort of change imaginable, and psychologists frequently describe acclimating to any sort of change as a three-step process: orientation, disorientation, and reorientation (although grief is not linear and you may experience this process multiple times). In many ways, this book follows that general approach, but it does so through the distinctive lens of the Christian story, tracing how the Man of Sorrows (Isa. 53:3, esv)—Jesus himself—journeyed from death to resurrection life so that you and I and all creation might one day be set free from our groanings and experience true life *with him*.

We begin where you already are: in a graveyard confronting loss. In part 1, "Death," we'll explore the invitation to complain and cry out to God in the form of lament and reflect on the crucifixion of Christ, the ultimate act of love.

But sometimes the searing pain of grief can be so strong that it temporarily blinds you and casts you into darkness, which is the focus of part 2, "Darkness." As you grapple with an unseen opponent and the very real reality that God might not be who you thought he was, echoes of *Who and where are you, God?* bounce off the terrain. Together we'll examine the difficult yet sacred act of waiting in the dark for God to make himself known and the hope that can be birthed as you thirst for God's goodness.

Because God's silence is not his absence, darkness does eventually give way to light, and things become a bit clearer. Part 3, "Light," begins a season of reorientation where the nature of your grief and a greater awareness of the true God allow joy to comeingle with your sorrow. In this new landscape, celebration becomes possible, as does increased trust in our risen God.

Finding your way back to the land of the living, we'll conclude the book with part 4, "Life." Jesus, the one who died for you, speaks to you, goes before you, and will one day dwell with you face-to-face, invites you to colabor with him in bringing beauty and redemption to our hurting world. In so doing, you get to actively participate in your own healing journey, help ease the pain of others, and declare that by God's power life triumphs over death.

Admittedly, when you and your faith are in survival mode, possibilities of new life may be the furthest thing from your mind—and that's okay. Allow me to do some of the heavy lifting for you and to point out places of potential healing as well as memorable vistas on our journey. I promise that there is still beauty, goodness, and truth to be found in your life.

Third, save the number of a licensed professional counselor in your phone. I'm serious. This book is not meant to be a replacement for counseling or therapy with a licensed practitioner. While spiritual counseling is of great value, its primary aim is to speak to your soul and to help you discern the will and ways of God in your life. However, professional counseling can specifically speak to your areas of hurt, such as grief, traumatic loss, abandonment, or rejection. I personally have benefited from counseling for over two decades, and I credit my licensed therapists for helping me be more mentally and emotionally healthy.

Finally, pack a water filter. By that I mean grant yourself permission to sift and filter through your beliefs, have faith-related doubt, ask hard questions, and refine your understanding of God. I'm not suggesting that you throw out an entire belief system. What I am suggesting is that you thoughtfully and intentionally engage in the process of examining—and if need be, dismantling—your faith so that the poisonous and untrue pieces can be discarded and

INTRODUCTION

you can reclaim and rebuild from that which is good and true. In other words, the journey we're on is a *refining* journey of spiritual growth, based on the self-revealing God who calls you and me to know him as he is revealed in his Word, through his Son, and through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

And I say *refining* because our faith won't be perfectly pure and without any degree of falsehood or sin until Jesus returns and our faith becomes sight. But that doesn't mean we don't endeavor to "lose our wrong ideas of God and the church" in the meantime.⁵

Now you stand at a crossroads, backpack packed. Will you keep your feet planted in despair and the fragments of your faith? Or will you take the first step into the swirling cloud of grief to see what, if anything, lies beyond? I hope you'll walk into the unknown with me, because the journey from disorientation to reorientation is an invitation to transformation (Rom. 5:3-5). You're invited to know God more fully and to learn to live and hope again.

PART 1

death

Death Can Go to Hell: *Grief*

“Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

“Where, O death, is your victory?”

Where, O death, is your sting?”

1 CORINTHIANS 15:54-55

Prior to David’s death, I keenly felt the presence and goodness of God. In hundreds of ways, God kept reminding Jason and me that we weren’t alone and that he was making a way for our family.

Nurses we didn’t even know who attended our church were assigned to David’s care and stayed long after their shifts to be present with us. Friends and family packed us up and moved us into a new apartment so that we came home to a stocked fridge and a decorated home complete with vases of fresh roses in February. Believers worldwide prayed for the healing of our son and sent hundreds of messages and cards of encouragement. And on day five of David’s life, after we were told to say goodbye, he miraculously lived through the night and confounded doctors the next morning when they discovered that his heart was somehow stronger.

I had a mental image of Jason and me holding David and of Jesus wrapping his arms around all three of us in a strong and

loving embrace. God was with us, and we would get through this, however it turned out.

But when David died, the image seemed to shift. It was as if Jesus was with us nearly to the end—until David exhaled his last breath, when Jesus released us from his embrace, got up, and walked out of the hospital room. I imagined Jesus standing outside in the hall, observing those precious final moments of David's life through the NICU window, just like the doctor and nurse who were respectfully distant but available should our family need them.

Then, once a few minutes had passed, I envisioned Jesus entering the room again and wrapping his arms around Jason and me, a family of three minus one. And I couldn't forgive God for walking out on us in our deepest moments of need, because in my opinion, friends don't abandon their loved ones in death.

DEATH SUCKS

So let's start there. There's likely been a catalytic event—your own version of death, whether literal or figurative—that has brought you to this point. Perhaps your child walked away from God, your spouse had an affair, or your best friend died unexpectedly. Maybe your pastor has been charged with abuse, your cancer is no longer in remission, or your company is cutting costs by laying you off. It's possible that your house has been foreclosed on, your adoption fell through, or mental illness is ravaging your family. You've lost something precious and have been ushered into a season of grief—grief of what was and of what could have been.

In your pain and desperation, you look for Jesus, the one who promised to never leave or forsake you, but now it seems he's nowhere to be found. Or perhaps, if you squint just right, you can make out an indistinct figure standing far off, watching you from

a distance. Which is worse: for God to be completely absent or for him to be removed from and unmoved by your suffering? Either way, this is the sucker punch you didn't see coming, the secondary grief that comes from being stripped of the certainty you once had about God. It's a second death. And this is the one that cuts you, then guts you, and leaves you questioning everything. Because if you're now mourning God on top of grieving your original loss, who will carry you through this hell?

* * *

We all want a resurrection, but first there must be a death. And frankly, death sucks. It is the ultimate enemy of everything good, true, and beautiful in the world.

For millennia, people have struggled to reconcile God's love, goodness, and power with the presence of evil and suffering in the world. In fact, theodicy is an entire branch of philosophy devoted to addressing the problem of evil: If God is good, why does he allow evil to exist?¹

Just as you and I can have similar and different stories, we each experience similar and different kinds of suffering, degrees of suffering, and causes of suffering. We cannot and should not paint suffering with one broad brushstroke.

In *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering*, pastor and theologian Timothy Keller identifies four kinds of suffering in the Bible:²

1. *Suffering we bring on ourselves.* This type of suffering is directly caused by our own failures and is the consequence of sin. Jonah and David experienced this kind

of suffering. The invitation in this kind of suffering is to learn repentance.

2. *Suffering of betrayal.* This type of suffering is caused by bearing Jesus' name and may result in betrayal, persecution, or attacks from others. Jeremiah and Paul experienced this kind of suffering. The invitation in this kind of suffering is to practice love and extend forgiveness to your accuser.³
3. *Suffering of loss.* This type of suffering is caused by the grief of loss, be it the loss of finances, health, a relationship, a dream, trust, identity, circumstances, or a loved one. *This is the initial grief this book focuses on.* Mary and Martha experienced this kind of suffering when their brother, Lazarus, died. The invitation in this kind of suffering is to receive God's comfort and love and to fix your eyes on God.
4. *Suffering of mystery.* The cause of this type of suffering is ultimately unknown. It could result from the sins of another, the brokenness of the world, demonic powers, or something else. Job experienced this kind of senseless and mysterious suffering, which then led to him questioning God and the relationship he had once enjoyed with him. *The secondary grief we're exploring in this book—the loss of the God you thought you knew—is included in this category.* The invitation in this kind of suffering is to practice deliberate dependence on God.

In all four varieties of suffering, God invites the sufferer to grow spiritually and to become more like Jesus. And to be clear,

this does not mean that the suffering itself is good. God can and does bring beauty from ashes and new life from death, but ashes and death are not good (Isa. 61:3; 1 Cor. 15:26). They are the evil results of living in a fallen, sin-soaked world in desperate need of redemption and restoration.

THE DEATH OF CERTAINTY

You and I were created for life and for uninterrupted, intimate relationships with God and others. Jesus said, “A thief is only there to steal and kill and destroy. I came so they can have real and eternal life, *more and better life* than they ever dreamed of” (John 10:10, MSG, emphasis mine). It sounds idyllic, doesn’t it? So what happened to this spiritually flourishing and abundant life?

Well, thieves in the forms of sin, brokenness, and a pervasive desire to go our own way, do our own thing, and answer to no one entered the garden via the fall. And sin brought with it twin agonies:

- (1) the pain of death and loss we’re all well acquainted with
and
- (2) the breaking of relationship with God and the shattering of our certainty about who we believe God is and how we think God operates.

Let me explain. Yes, Adam and Eve ate the fruit after being instructed not to eat it. But the original sin wasn’t one of coveting good food (although anyone who knows me knows that I don’t like to go a day without hot tea, dark chocolate, and chips and salsa). Adam and Eve’s sin was a lack of confidence in God and his goodness.

As finite creatures, Adam and Eve were limited. They didn't have unlimited power, unlimited presence, or unlimited knowledge like God did. And they were content with that for a time. Adam and Eve enjoyed a perfect relationship with each other and walked in the physical presence of God. They knew no shame and experienced the abundance of the world God had created for them to steward and cultivate as his image bearers.

And then the serpent, Satan, entered and sowed a seed of doubt: "Did God *really* say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'" (Gen. 3:1, emphasis mine). In other words, "Is God actually good? Does God *really* want good things for you? If so, why is he withholding this knowledge from you?" And when confronted with their limitations—with their physical inability to be God or at least manipulate and control God according to their desires—Adam and Eve rejected God's declaration over them as being "so very good" (Gen. 1:31, MSG).

As someone who has been plagued my entire life by a pervasive sense of shame and inadequacy at my core, I can't imagine the freedom and joy that comes from being created "so very good," even though, yes, I know that truth applies to me as well. I understand and resonate with Adam and Eve's desire for perfect knowledge of good and evil and with it the comfort that comes from certainty. And isn't that what we all want? Stability, safety, and security for us and our loved ones?

Yet Adam and Eve's literal grasping for control and certainty came at the cost of their confidence in God, the only one who truly is in control. As a result, Adam and Eve experienced the agony of death and loss (agony #1). A sacrificial animal was slaughtered to cover their nakedness (the first death in the history of the world).

Adam and Eve lost their home (exiled from Eden) and way of life. They stepped into a life of pain: painful toil in farming the land, pain in childbirth, and discord and misaligned desires in their marriage.

But even more painful was the shame and brokenness that now pervaded Adam and Eve's respective relationships with God and the undoing that resulted (agony #2). Adam and Eve likely had believed that life would *always* be as it was. They would *always* walk and talk with God in the garden of Eden. God would *always* provide for them. Their home would *always* be one of beauty and peace. Their children and the earth would *always* flourish. Adam and Eve had a certain view of God and expectations for how he would *always* act. But when the true God acted according to his will and not theirs, Adam and Eve found themselves undone, separated from God's physical presence, and literally uncovered.

Please hear me. I'm not suggesting that sin on your part is why God feels distant or you feel as if you no longer know who God is. But what we all share with Adam and Eve is this: Loss and the perception that God failed to act according to our expectations can all too easily propel us into disappointment and disillusionment with him.

Friend, what we need isn't illusory certainty. What we need is confidence—confidence in the person and promises of God, fueled by an intimate relationship with him. Living out of confidence in God is the only path through the pain and loss of our broken world.

But how can we move toward intimacy with and confidence in God when we feel like Jesus has left the room in our darkest hour and our faith seems to be fragmenting quickly? We must fight the urge to turn away and instead look at him unflinchingly with a question: *Who are you, God?*

TAKING GOD TO COUNSELING

Friends don't abandon their loved ones in death. If my refrain sounds familiar, it's because Mary and Martha echoed a similar cry when their brother, Lazarus, died (John 11:3, 21-22). We're going to explore Mary and Martha's story throughout this book, but for now, let's look at the setting.

Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. (This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.) So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick."

When he heard this, Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it." Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days, and then he said to his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea." (John 11:1-7)

First, notice the obvious: A man is sick and dying. Lazarus's illness is not attributed to personal sin, divine discipline, or a lack of God's love (see Eccles. 9:11; Luke 13:1-5; John 9:1-3). Lazarus is dying simply because he lives in a fallen world, where physical death reigns.

Second, notice that Jesus' love for Mary, Martha, and Lazarus is not in question. The sisters appeal to Jesus' professed love for Lazarus in verse 3, and the Gospel writer John affirms Jesus' love in verse 5. This family intimately knows Jesus, counts him as a close friend, has hosted him in their home, and number among

his disciples. Yet Jesus intentionally chooses to delay traveling to see Lazarus, even though he knows Lazarus will die without his healing power.

And herein lies the tension. If Jesus is loving—and it's been established that he is—why does he allow Lazarus to die when he has the power to heal him?

Perhaps that's where you are today. You're not asking, *God, who are you?* in an intellectual or theoretical sense, because you know the truth of God's Word and have followed Jesus for a while. No, your questions in this season are experiential and come from the deepest recesses of your heart. They're personal questions about the very person and character of God, how he relates to you, and what he desires for you.

You're asking relationship questions. And if you didn't know it already: You're in relationship counseling with God.

Let me explain what I mean. I have lived with chronic depression and generalized anxiety for more than twenty years, and professional therapy continues to be one of the most beneficial tools in my mental-health journey. It's a safe and trusted place to wrestle with the difficult questions of life, share my disappointments, process my suffering, and receive insight and direction from my counselor. Honestly, I rarely enjoy the process of being in counseling (who delights in being utterly undone in front of someone else?), but I'm grateful for the hard work my counselor and I do together and for the fruit borne from taking intentional steps toward health and wholeness.

And so when I felt abandoned by God and couldn't see, feel,⁴ or hear him in the wake of David's death, I did what seemed most natural: I took God to relationship counseling, metaphorically speaking.

God and I occupied this mental space for about six months. I imagined us to be in a small counseling room, sitting across from each other in two oversized chairs. This was relationship counseling, so of course we weren't sitting side by side on the couch. (That's only for couples in premarital counseling, who still daily text heart emojis to each other instead of important things like "Do we need milk?" and "Can you pick Katie up from school today?") There was never a counselor present, which I find odd in hindsight, but perhaps that's because my subconscious understood that I was in counseling with the Counselor himself. He was both the accused and the mediator.

After more than twenty-five years of walking intimately with God, I thought I knew who he was and how he operated. I thought we had a good relationship and enjoyed each other's company. But this betrayal—this abandoning Jason, David, and me to face death alone—was the breaking of a relationship. And there would be no coming back from it if God didn't start talking.

Mary and Martha cried to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (John 11:21, 32), and my lament was similar. I cried, "God, if you were loving, you wouldn't have allowed David to die and then abandoned me in my grief."

So let's pause right there. You're in the metaphorical counseling room with God. Go ahead and mentally design a room where you feel as comfortable as possible. Rearrange the furniture to your liking, add plants and pillows, light a candle, install a few windows to let in natural sunlight, and add a therapy dog you can cuddle if that makes your heart sing. My counselor in real life, Sherry, has a goldendoodle named Cooper. That sweet dog allowed me to sob into his wavy fur for hours and never once shamed me for using

an entire box of tissues in one session. (Thank you, Sherry and Cooper, for always keeping the Puffs lotion tissues stocked for me.)

And if needed, imagine a counselor or third party present. This can be a trusted person, an imaginary counselor of your liking, or even me if you so desire. This is your room, so try to imagine a space where you feel as safe and secure as possible.

Now, if you're able, state your question, complaint, or concern before God. It might be something like *God, if you were good, my friend wouldn't have been killed in a car accident.* Or *God, if you were merciful, my cancer wouldn't have come back.* Or perhaps *God, if you were my provider, I wouldn't have lost my job and had my house foreclosed on.*

Please be honest with yourself. In this season of disorientation, where everything seems to be sliding and shifting, you owe yourself the stability of truth. There's no shame in asking hard questions of God or investigating a belief you once held to be true. In fact, it takes great courage and vulnerability to evaluate your framework of beliefs and admit that you may need to refine some of them or even reject some altogether.

The good news is that if a belief is true it will hold up to scrutiny. And if it's not true, then that belief was never helping you anyway. In fact, it may have been harming you and holding you back from the fruitful life God desires for you and with you. So what question(s) do you have about God or for God?

SUFFERING AND THE HEART OF GOD

This side of heaven, you and I will likely never know the reason God has allowed such traumatic suffering and loss to come into our respective lives. And honestly, no intellectual reason would

ever be worth the loss of my son. But in his great love, God did choose to explain why he allowed Lazarus to die.

After he had said this, he went on to tell them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up.”

His disciples replied, “Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better.” Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep.

So then he told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.” (John 11:11-15)

Jesus allowed Lazarus to die so that when he later raised Lazarus from the dead (spoiler alert!), the disciples and onlookers would believe in Jesus (John 11:15, 42) and glorify God (John 11:4, 40). As Jesus said: “This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God’s glory so that God’s Son may be glorified through it” (John 11:4).

This explanation may smart a little because you and I have received no such promise. Prior to Jesus’ return, we aren’t promised that what is dead and gone in our respective lives will once again rise to new life. You aren’t given a promise that a new and better job will come along, that your estranged child will desire reconciliation, that the heart bypass surgery will be successful, or that your womb will be opened. What you are promised is the same promise that God gave to Israel: “I’ve never quit loving you and never will. Expect love, love, and more love!” (Jer. 31:3, MSG). Somehow love endures even when you feel like you can’t.

For a month, my husband, Jason, and I literally sat in the dark praying and watching over our newborn son, cradled in his

Isolette, as his heart and lungs struggled to keep up with his growing body. Per protocol, nurses kept the shades drawn in David's NICU room, overhead lights were always off, and the only sounds to accompany our anxious thoughts were the alarms, beeps, and drips of the machines keeping David alive.

After the second failed attempt to take David off his ventilator, I realized my son would likely never be free of medical cords and that, short of God's divine intervention, he wasn't coming home from the hospital. Sitting in a rocking chair, half hidden by shadows, I was consumed by this new reality. I looked up at Jason across the sterile room and stated, "If David dies, I don't know if our marriage or my faith can survive." And without missing a beat, Jason turned from David toward me and replied, "Tiffany, my faith in God is strong, and my love for you is strong."

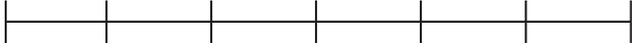
The agony of watching my son suffer and fearing his impending loss was so great that my hope had been crushed. But here was someone who loved me and truly knew me, who had promised to walk with me through it all. And in that moment I let Jason carry our hope because the weight of hope was too much for me to bear.

If you are despairing, if your confidence in God is shaken, if belief in his love and in his promises feels like a cruel trick, may I invite you to ask God who he is? To ask, *God, who are you?* and then sit in silence and sometimes darkness waiting for the great I Am to speak? This is the most important question you will ever ask. It's not something that requires misplaced hope, unearned trust, or suspended doubt. You may not yet be at a place where you have the desire or strength to look for God's love amid suffering, and that's okay. You've already taken the first step. You've shown up to relationship counseling with God, and that is enough.

MOURNING GOD

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Rate yourself on the scale below regarding your general desire for control.



I don't care what happens, and I don't need to control it.

I prefer to have some control, but I'm okay without it.

I'm only comfortable when I'm in complete control.

2. What do you think is the relationship between your desire for control and your current disappointment or disillusionment with God?

3. Imagine you're in the counseling room with God. State your question, complaint, or concern before him. Go ahead and write down any other questions you have about God or for God.

PRAYER

God, I'm hurting, I'm confused, and I don't know what to pray—and it doesn't always feel like prayer makes a difference. I long to know who you truly are, yet you remain a great mystery that I cannot fathom. In the spirit of Isaiah 40:28-29, I confess that I desire to know and hear from you. I need to receive strength from you, for I am weary and wrung out with grief. Please reveal yourself. Amen.

Do you not know?

Have you not heard?

The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.

He will not grow tired or weary,
and his understanding no one can fathom.

He gives strength to the weary
and increases the power of the weak.

ISAIAH 40:28-29

