



Raw Faith

kasey
van norman

what happens when
God picks a fight

Foreword by Matt and Lauren Chandler

The title, *Raw Faith*, says it all. Kasey courageously bares her soul and shares her harrowing journey, holding nothing back. Even so, her much-tested faith in God's goodness and mercy shines from every page, and her message is clear: you can trust God in every circumstance. A powerful and passionate call to embrace real faith.

LIZ CURTIS HIGGS

Bestselling author of *The Girl's Still Got It: Take a Walk with Ruth*
and *the God Who Rocked Her World*

Kasey peels back the layers of her heart and speaks to us with power, hope, and conviction!

KAREN KINGSBURY

#1 *New York Times* bestselling author

Most of us have learned the hard way that the Christian journey is not always rainbows and butterflies. We've all been to the valley at some point or another, but few are willing to talk about it, warts and all. Regardless of what landed you in the valley, Kasey reminds us that the choice to trust God is not a onetime decision, but rather a decision we make daily—sometimes with weary souls and clenched fists. Don't wait until you're in the valley to read this book. Read it now—highlight it, savor it, and remember that the same God who fought like mad in the valley for Kasey promises to show up and fight for you, too.

VICKI COURTNEY

Bestselling author of *Ever After: Life Lessons Learned in My Castle of Chaos* and
5 Conversations You Must Have with Your Daughter

Embracing raw faith means understanding that the Christian life also means accepting pain, suffering, and trials. Genuine faith means accepting the reality that life is a continual movement to become more like Jesus. I can honestly say that I had never read someone's story with as much anticipation as I did with Kasey's. Her honesty is both brutal and beautiful. Her moments of truth are so deeply rooted in Scripture, and each chapter begged me to go deeper in my own faith journey. There were times when reading *Raw Faith* that I felt as though Kasey had written my thoughts on paper and then proceeded to teach me how to process them through an honest conversation with God. I believe that Kasey's vulnerability will not only encourage you through your own hardships, but also challenge you to discover what it means to fully trust God in all circumstances.

LESLIE JORDAN

Worship leader for All Sons & Daughters



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Contents

Foreword *xi*

Introduction: A Note from Kasey *xv*

- CHAPTER 1 Laid Bare *1*
- CHAPTER 2 When Hope Fades *15*
- CHAPTER 3 Where Did All the Faith Go? *29*
- CHAPTER 4 Drugstore-Brand Faith *47*
- CHAPTER 5 When God Sets You Up *61*
- CHAPTER 6 The Land of Silence and Shadow *75*
- CHAPTER 7 Feeding the Pigs *87*
- CHAPTER 8 The Toxic Ds *105*
- CHAPTER 9 Paralyzed by the Past *129*
- CHAPTER 10 Music and Fire *141*
- CHAPTER 11 Deeper Still *159*
- CHAPTER 12 The Anti-Religion *173*
- CHAPTER 13 Confident Hope *193*
- CHAPTER 14 Own It! *207*

Afterword: What's Next?: Digging Deeper
into Raw Faith *229*

Appendix: Jewels of Faith *231*

Acknowledgments *239*

Notes *243*

About the Author *245*

Foreword

THANKSGIVING DAY 2009 was when everything and nothing changed for our family. Everything changed in that new words were introduced into our vernacular: *mass, resection, cancer*. No longer did we count the days until some exciting event or vacation; instead, we counted down the days to the final round of radiation or chemotherapy. Where we'd once let our minds wander to the possibilities of tomorrow—of gray hairs and grandchildren—we shifted our focus to wondering if there would even be a tomorrow together.

And yet nothing changed. The reality is that all of us, regardless of whether we or a close loved one sits under the weight of a poor prognosis, are susceptible to pain and struggle, hardship and loss, at any moment. We are truly fragile beings. The diagnosis of a malignant brain tumor simply served to dispel the mirage of security based on good health and a stable income.

The comfort that comes from rosy circumstances is like a blanket of Texas snow—a Currier and Ives Christmas scene one morning and early spring’s dew the next. It is not sustainable. It doesn’t last.

So then, are we relegated to stormy seas? Are we to but hold our breath until the next wave hits? A stormy sea before us—yes. Hold our breath—maybe. There is, however, a better way.

There’s a story in the Bible in which a group of men are set upon the sea. An unexpected wind blows, tossing their vessel with each wave. In a far corner of the boat, a man heavy with sleep is awakened by his frantic friends. Now, these friends had seen this man heal the incurable. They had even witnessed him raising the dead to life. His miracles and wonders were more than stories they had heard; they were moments shared, experienced. It’s no wonder, then, when he asks his friends, “Where is your faith?” Although this could sound like a rebuke, it was a sincere question. The man reserved his rebuking for the wind and the waves.

Where is your faith? In the wind and waves, or in a power greater than yourself, greater than the storm? And not just any power, but the God of the universe, who humbled himself to come as one of us—Jesus. At his first coming, marked by the celebration of Christmas, he is called Immanuel, which means “God with us.” He is the fulfillment of an ancient promise to bless all nations of the earth by eradicating the separation between God and man through his life, death,

and resurrection. It is because of him that we can genuinely say—no matter the pain, no matter the turmoil, no matter the storm—God is with us.

In the dark, minutes after our heads hit the pillow, when every fear claws at our peace, every frightening “what if” takes its turn on the stage of our hearts, the heavy curtain of faith falls. A faith that declares, even in the storm, that God is with us. And that’s enough.

This book you’re holding is one woman’s account of being in that primitive fishing boat heaved about on the waves of cancer. Kasey has felt the sting of the driving rain, the nausea of the relentless rocking. And she has heard the voice of Immanuel, the God who is with her. Her answer to his question, though as fragile as a falling snowflake, is revealed in these pages that have poured out from her overflowing heart—raw faith in a God who is there.

Matt and Lauren Chandler, The Village Church

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INTRODUCTION

A Note From Kasey

I DID NOT WANT to write this book.

Truthfully, the mere thought of reliving the experiences described on these pages made my insides churn. During most of my “writing time,” I just sat there paralyzed, thinking about every good reason *not* to write this.

So if your eyes are reading these words right now, it is through divine intervention, the likes of which I never would have planned on my own.

This book has come about as a result of gut-wrenching grace on God’s part and much arm wrestling with God on my part. (Since you’re reading this, it looks like he won.) But this isn’t really about me—this book is a setup by God on *your* behalf. That’s right—he has you right where he wants you, and he may very well use my story to pick a scab off a deep wound that needs to bleed and hurt and throb so it can finally heal.

This book is designed to change you completely.
Scary, right?

The words on these pages are intended to leave all cod-
dling behind and wake you up to a desperate hunger for
God's glory in all things—even suffering.

For too much of my Christian life, I settled for a paci-
fier kind of faith—soothing, perhaps, but ultimately wimpy
and insubstantial. Instead of being consumed by a faith that
wrecked me into submission before a terrifyingly magnificent
Creator, I tried to fill my deep cravings with spiritual fluff.

It took God punching me in the gut with cancer to shake
off my Christian anesthesia and wake me up from my “play-
ing church” coma.

God wounded me that I might truly live. Although I
wasn't always able to see this in the midst of my pain, I know
now that my affliction was on purpose and for purpose. For
his glory and for my good, the sovereign Lord rubbed against
my wound until I was nothing but a bloody, raw mess. He
wanted to show me that *true* faith—a faith that brings me
freedom and real security—requires me to see the world
through a different filter. I need to see God not just as a
tender, gentle, easy-blessings kind of God. He's also the God
who takes us into the difficult trenches of pain, suffering, and
trials to mold us into his valiant warriors.

I daresay that God has brought you to these pages so he
might do the same with you: pick a fight.

But before you run away from this challenge, let me offer

a word of encouragement: if God has chosen to test your faith in this way, then his mercy is already upon you, for he is inviting you to see a revelation that few are chosen to see.

I pray that as we begin this journey together, your faith will forever be shifted closer to truth and closer to Jesus. And I pray through my personal story of raw, unbridled faith, you will see your own story through new eyes too.

May we never look back. Together, my friend. Together we go.

Now, O Jacob, listen to the LORD who created you.

O Israel, the one who formed you says,
“Do not be afraid, for I have ransomed you.

I have called you by name; you are mine.
When you go through deep waters,
I will be with you.

When you go through rivers of difficulty,
you will not drown.

When you walk through the fire of oppression,
you will not be burned up;
the flames will not consume you.”

ISAIAH 43:1-2

*All my heart,
Kasey*

CHAPTER 1

Laid Bare

SUDDENLY I COULD no longer breathe. There I stood, alone, paralyzed with fear, and drowning in uncharted emotions. I wanted to scream. I wanted to throw things and smash walls with my bare fists. I wanted to shout obscenities that would make my church friends shudder. Yet all I could do was focus on breathing.

Just keep breathing, I told myself.

Deep breath in. My lungs stung as if I'd just swallowed a thornbush.

Deep breath out. The air barely made its way past the massive sob that was moving from my gut to my chest.

I felt like I was outside of myself, watching the scene play out as if it were a TV show. Except I couldn't change the channel—this was my reality one cool October afternoon in central Texas.

I looked around my living room. The sectional was in place, with the three turquoise throw pillows in disarray, as

usual. I'd wanted a pop of color on our drab brown and khaki sectional piece, but these pillows never really made sense. I just moved them around from corner to corner, hoping to magically acquire the eye of an interior decorator one day.

The room was lit by bright sunshine pouring in through the windows. I love windows—lots and lots of windows. When I'm home alone, I like to turn off all electrical lighting and raise each section of blinds all the way to the top. Sometimes I catch myself squinting at the particles dancing on the light beams. *Is it dust?* I often wonder. If it is, I must be a terrible housekeeper. Or perhaps it's just air—fine, perfect pieces of air. I assured myself of this possibility once again as I traced the movement with my finger. *And so we are*, I thought. *Dancing pieces of air moving along a beam of light. Here today—gone tomorrow.*

I breathed in the familiar home smells—a mixture of my latest Yankee Candle fix (sugar cookie) and the aromas that seemed to follow my children—crayons, dirty socks, wet towels, soap, bubble gum, and—let's see—peanut butter. Yes, in my house, there's always lots and lots of peanut butter.

The house was quiet. Both children were still in school, my husband was busy at the office, and the dog was asleep somewhere (probably curled up at the base of my husband's pants hanging in our small closet). There was no sound except the muffled hum of nearby traffic and the faint buzz of a neighboring lawn mower.

Everything seemed so perfectly normal.

The Phone Call That Changed Everything

Now over the hump of thirty, with a marriage that was stronger than ever, the blessing of two healthy children, a fresh new start in a new town with a new church and new friends, and the dream of becoming a published author blooming into my reality, my life wasn't just normal—it was *good*. For the first time in a long time, my life was finally something I wanted to be part of again.

Only a few moments before, I had fluttered into the kitchen with my loads of groceries while humming—no, loudly proclaiming—each lyric of the latest Taylor Swift song. I spun on my toe like a makeshift ballerina, spinning along with the chorus as I dramatically whirled to open the refrigerator door.

As I unloaded the groceries, my cell phone rang from somewhere at the bottom of my purse. I brought the deafening anthem down to a gentler decibel as I grabbed for my purse, shuffling through the jumble of bills, makeup, granola bars, and random mom necessities.

“Hello?” I answered cheerfully. “Yes. This is Kasey.”

And then . . . the room stopped. The singing stopped. The spinning stopped. Even the tiny flits of air floating through the room stopped. Now all I could hear was breathing—deep, heavy gasps of air that were apparently coming out of my own body.

Only moments ago I was happy—I daresay *joyful!*

I was smiling and singing, wearing my hair in a ponytail

for one of the first times in my life. I'd always worn my hair short, but a year ago I vowed to grow it out enough to experience at least one ponytail before I died.

I'd said it jokingly, the way someone who is feeling young and healthy would say it. The way someone would say it before getting a dreaded phone call from a doctor's office on an otherwise ordinary October afternoon.

That was just one moment ago. But now . . .

As I stood outside of myself, I saw a girl who was pale and fragile. A girl who desperately wanted to cry but for some reason was holding back the tears. I saw a girl whose face had aged dramatically in the span of a few minutes. She no longer looked like a thirtysomething—more like a fifty- or sixtysomething, with her crinkled brow and down-turned mouth and hollow eyes.

No part of my body moved. I wasn't even sure if I'd blinked for some time. I felt frozen in place. Utterly lifeless.

I stood that way in statue-like silence for what felt like hours.

And then, all at once, the silence shattered.

"Why, God? *Why?*"

I was surprised to discover that the voice was my own.

Then everything seemed to happen in slow motion. My phone hung suspended in midair before crashing to the hardwood floor below.

My body shook uncontrollably as I paced through every room in our home. I would start to sit down, only to jump

to my feet like I'd caught on fire. I ran into our bedroom and flung myself on our unmade bed. Seizing the nearest pillow, I smothered my face in the soft cotton with all my might. It smelled of laundry detergent mixed with my shampoo.

Ah, my new shampoo, I thought. My first shampoo from an actual big-city salon that had cost way too much for our family's modest budget. But it was the shampoo I just *had* to have for my new, long hair.

The ponytail whose days were numbered, I now knew.

For some reason I couldn't get my head around the implications of what the nurse had just told me. The only thing I could grasp was that I would lose my ponytail.

I let out another sob and threw the pillow across the room.

I need something heavier, I thought. I wanted to throw something that would leave a dent.

I knocked down a fan that stood in a nearby corner. Then I ran my arm across my bathroom countertop, sending every product and toiletry bottle soaring across the room, crashing to pieces onto the floor. But it still wasn't enough.

I clenched my fists to my sides, puffed out my chest, and craned my neck to the ceiling. Then I yelled like I'd never yelled before. It wasn't even a yell—it was more of a roar from a place deep inside, a place I didn't even know existed.

There were no recognizable words—just moans and groans, with a few profanities mixed in, that escalated into a full-out scream. I paced a few more rooms and finally found myself collapsing onto one of the turquoise couch pillows.

Though it had once felt like the splash of color I'd needed, the shade now struck me as tacky.

• • •

I never guessed I'd end up here. I'd been a Christian since the age of nine. I'd been a grief counselor for three years, speaking hope to weary family members as they clung to those final moments with their loved ones. I taught the Bible to a group of women each week, and I'd even had the incredible opportunity to write and publish a book on what it means to truly believe God.

My head knew all the right answers—each step required to respond in a moment like this. My brain kept beating into me the definition of faithfulness. After all, I'd preached and prayed about that very topic to so many others in their times of crisis. But now . . .

Snot and tears saturated every inch of my face. My trembling fingers twisted around my ponytail over and over again. I attempted to swallow, but no saliva would come to my aid.

I tried to stand, but my body was chained to the place I'd landed. I reached for my phone to call somebody—anybody—just to hear a voice. The sound of anything besides my wretched breathing would do me good. But I couldn't stop shaking enough to press any buttons on the phone.

And then, as if someone had flipped a switch inside me, I stopped.

I stopped crying. I stopped yelling. I stopped throwing things, stopped moving, stopped thinking, and maybe even stopped breathing for a moment.

I sat there frozen on my drab sectional, feet curled under me, wrapped in a cocoon, and mustered every ounce of energy I had left to ask just one question out loud. I tasted salt as the words left my lips.

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” My voice was little more than a whimper.

The moment the words escaped my lips, I covered my mouth in shame. *How dare you compare your pain to the pain Jesus bore on your behalf?* I thought. *It doesn't even come close!*

Yet the phrase remained on my tongue as I sat there in silence, watching the air dance around me.

The C-Word

I knew I needed to call my husband. And the rest of my family. I knew I should clean up the mess I'd made in my fit of anger. I knew I needed to face this treacherous word—look it in the eye, engage it in battle.

Cancer.

Somewhere in the back of my mind I knew I'd eventually have to deal with all the implications, too. Losing my hair. Wrestling with whether this was some kind of delayed punishment for the sins of my past. Wondering what would happen to my two children if they lost their mom before they hit first grade. Would I be there for my son, Lake, when he

got his driver's license or started his first job or fell in love? Would I ever stand in the front of a country church on a hot Texas day as my blue-eyed Emma Grace flowed gracefully toward me in a white dress?

I couldn't think about all that yet.

And I couldn't think about my mom's battle just two years ago. I wouldn't allow my mind to travel back to that hospital room where she took her final breaths, where I watched her suffocate under the weight of her own fluid as the cancer ate away her body from the inside out.

I'm not sure how long I lay there like a child, lost and alone, bathing in a pool of my own sweat, mucus, and tears.

Finally, I whispered, "God, please help."

With shaky hands, I picked up my phone and called my husband. His voice was cheery when he picked up. "Hey, honey. How are you?"

Justin's voice was always like that. He has a gift for being tender and optimistic—he's sunny even on a cloudy day. It's as if he always has a silver lining tucked away in his pocket, ready to be pulled out whenever I come to him with a problem. If I called to let him know the oil light was blinking frantically on my dashboard or a friend hadn't texted me back and I was sure she was mad at me, he was ready to soothe me. He'd say, "Well, have you tried this, honey?" or "It will be okay—just let me get home, and we can deal with it together." Yes, my husband is a saint (although he hates it when I say that). He may not have the exact solution to the

problem the moment I call, but he always leaves me confident that if I just give him a few minutes, he'll come up with something.

Except this time.

“Justin, I need you to come home,” I said. “Pathology called. They said the news is not good.”

He didn't even ask me what the news was; he just hung up the phone. Normally I would have thrown a fit that he'd hung up on me, but not that day. After ten years of marriage, I knew him well enough to know he had his keys in hand and was probably halfway out to his car.

Moments later, Justin burst through the front door like the Hulk, huffing and puffing, stumbling over his words. “What . . . when . . . um . . . what did they say?”

We both knew there weren't many options for the pathology report. It was either cancer or it wasn't, and when I said the news wasn't good, he knew I was about to drop the dreaded c-word. Yet there he stood—out of breath, tormented, but still hoping beyond hope that I might say something else—*anything* else.

Facing My Faith

The pain had started innocuously enough as an ache in my lower back. But over time the pain grew worse, and after five years, it still wouldn't go away. At times it was debilitating, causing me to grip the wall in agony just walking from one room to the next.

The doctor recommended surgery, assuring me it would take care of all my back pain. Apparently one of my ovaries had ruptured completely (which would explain the terrible pain). I would need a complete hysterectomy, meaning I'd be forced to have all my "girl parts" removed at a young age (think early onset menopause and hot flashes—yeesh). Even so, the surgery was a no-brainer for me if it meant I could live a normal life.

When the gynecologist ran the ultrasound scope across my jelly-coated abdomen, I saw her face pale instantly. Not only had one of my ovaries ruptured, but the other was "no longer functional," as she put it. All my other reproductive organs were barely viewable on the ultrasound through the massive cloud of endometrial cells that had invaded every physiological part that made me female.

There was no longer a choice: it would be an emergency hysterectomy.

This was a routine surgery for my doctor. She assured Justin that the entire procedure would take only thirty to forty-five minutes. Justin later told me he began pacing around the two-hour mark.

When I awoke enough to catch a blurry vision of my husband's face, I remember him saying to me, "Kasey, there was a mass . . ."


The rest of his sentence trailed off into a cloud of morphine-induced sleep. When I finally woke up enough to talk in complete sentences without drooling, I still brushed off the conversation about the mass.

I heard Justin say it. I heard the doctor say it. But in my mind, I zeroed in on what I considered the key word: *was*. There *was* a mass. Dr. J. assured me she'd gotten every piece of it, so why worry? The good doc even put up with the surrounding surgeons mocking her for taking such precious time scraping and cleaning, then scraping and cleaning again. For three hours, all she did was scrape and clean around the now-empty cavity where the golf ball-sized mass once rested firmly in my abdominal wall.


Dr. J. told me later amid sobs (from both of us) that she sensed the Spirit of the Lord in her ear telling her to take her time, be thorough, and be sure to get it all.

Looking back, I now know that the removal of the tumor was a miracle in itself. The other surgeons—more experienced than Dr. J.—told her to leave it there, assuring her that it was nothing more than a fat pocket. But she continued scraping and cleaning, listening to the small, repetitious voice of God's Spirit pulsing within her.

As I sat in the hospital bed after the surgery, sinking into Dr. J.'s warm Jamaican accent, I chose not to believe that this mass could be potentially problematic. I ignored the hints of concern in the voices of both my doctor and my husband.




There was no way God would start something big in my life only to destroy it with a terminal diagnosis.




Come on, I thought. I'm only thirty-one years old. Except for the pain in my back, I feel great. I work out, I eat relatively healthy, I take vitamin supplements.

True, my mom had died of cancer only two years before, but I refused to believe God would make me go through the same thing myself so soon. Besides, my new ministry had just launched, and my first book was coming out in just a few months. There was no way God would start something big in my life only to destroy it with a terminal diagnosis. Everything was going to be just fine. I knew it.



My faith suddenly felt like a gaping wound, raw and exposed and tender to the touch.



I coasted along on this belief for two weeks. But then the call came that forever changed my life.

Before the call, I thought my faith was pretty strong. I thought my relationship with God was solid, secure. I'd been through some trials—some of them self-inflicted and others that came as part of living in a broken world. But the moment I heard the timid voice of the nurse on the other line, all my stockpiles of faith dried up, and I felt as parched as a desert. This triumphant, redeemed, ready-to-take-on-the-world-for-God woman was suddenly laid bare on the floor.

My faith suddenly felt like a gaping wound, raw and

exposed and tender to the touch. The simple brush of air against it caused me to flinch. My faith lay ripped open— little more than a blister of blood and pus.

There was no hiding it. No covering it. No running from it or looking away. There was no medicine that might soothe the nauseating ache.

In that moment, there was one thing I could do.

I must face my faith.