

# CONTENTS

Preface	11
Introduction: My Story	15
Chapter 1: Where Is God in My Pain?	21
Chapter 2: Why Did My Story End Up This Way?	39
Chapter 3: Why Can't I Overcome Sin in My Life?	55
Chapter 4: Is This How Christians Are Supposed to Act?	73
Chapter 5: Is God Really Fair?	91
Chapter 6: Is <i>This</i> the Normal Christian Life?	107
Chapter 7: Why Can't I Feel More of God in My Life?	119
Chapter 8: Why Is It Hard for Christians to Love?	135
Chapter 9: Is It Supposed to Be <i>This</i> Hard?	149
Afterword	159
Appendix: Deconstruction Diagram	161
Acknowledgments	163
Notes	165

## Chapter 1

# WHERE IS GOD IN MY PAIN?

I've heard a million sermons about suffering. I bet you have too. You'd think I'd know all about suffering by now. You'd think I'd have figured out how to assimilate my suffering into a clean Christian box of faith. But that's not my story, and since you're reading this book, it's probably not your story either.

As an ER doctor, I've lived with pain my whole professional life—that is, other people's pain. And while it bothers me to see them hurt, let me tell you about the day my eight-year-old nephew was brought to the ER with abdominal pain. I happened to be the attending physician in the ER that day. An hour later my nephew was in the ER, crying in pain, though at sixteen today, he would rather die than admit it. Suddenly my knowledge about pain flew out the window. *This* pain was personal.

Humans suffer. It's a fact of life, like breathing. Most of us are compassionate enough to admit our frustration with human suffering in general. But the biggest questions we have about God are born out of personal pain.

Where is God in *my* pain? Why does He seem so far away when I need Him the most? Most sermons I've heard about suffering offer clear scriptural assertions that God is always with us. My heart rejoices when I hear that no good thing will God withhold from those

who walk uprightly (Ps. 84:11), or that no weapon formed against me will succeed (Isa. 54:17). Yet the euphoria and reassurance barely last through Sunday brunch until I'm alone with my thoughts again, wondering if I'm the only Christian still asking, "Why?"

*Why does this hurt so much?*

*Why can't I hear God's whisper in the darkness?*

I need more than tweetables and popular hashtags when I'm hurting. In the valley of the shadow of death, I need to *know* that I follow a Savior who is not oblivious to my pain.

**The key is in remembering who God really is, not who we've made Him to be.**

Ironically, God is not unfamiliar with our cry for His presence when we're overwhelmed with suffering. Since the creation of humankind, God has heard it all. He's heard our complaining and our accusations. He's heard our moans and our groans. He's heard our confusion and our frustrations. He's not unaware of our pain though it may seem like it at first. In fact, the story of the Bible is the story of the suffering of humankind and the goodness of a God who saves them—and almost always *despite* them. The story of the Bible is the story of an imperfect people and their good God—a God who sometimes seemed to be missing in the middle of their pain, but somehow showed up when they least expected Him to and in ways they never anticipated.

In other words, just when we take God out of the equation, He shows up with so much goodness it's hard to ignore. The key is often in learning to know what to look for in our pain. *The key is in remembering who God really is, not who we've made Him to be.*

The Bible is a beautiful display of humanity in all of its pain and glory. The writers do not attempt to hide or minimize the flaws of humankind. If anything, it seems as if they revel in telling all the ugly details. Throughout this book I'm going to tell the biblical accounts of men and women like us—men and women with questions and struggles. Men and women with disappointments and doubts. Men and women who thought the worst about God and faced the truth about themselves. Men and women whose faith almost eroded, who hung on to it by a thread, and who later had their faith miraculously reconstructed. Men and women who are going to help us better understand our own struggles to believe.

### **Meet Naomi**

At the top of my list of favorite untidy stories in the Bible is the story of a woman named Naomi. Her life got so bad that at one point she told everyone she knew that she was changing her name from Naomi to Mara, which means bitter. But Naomi's story, like so many of our stories, didn't start out bad. It just got bad, and when things looked even worse, God seemed absent.

Naomi was married to a man named Elimelech. They were both followers of the God of Abraham. They had two sons, Mahlon and Chilion. A famine struck their land so the family decided to emigrate to Moab. If you're a Bible scholar, you might have a solid critique of their move, but if you're human like me, you might figure that their move was an act of survival. If you're a Bible scholar, you probably know that the Moabites were not friendly to God, and that Naomi and Elimelech ought to have known better. But most of us understand the need to reach for security when faced with our own seasons of famine.

I grew up in West Beirut in the 1970s and 1980s. Those were years of severe famine, and when famine strikes, people run. Only

the lucky ones could escape. The war made it hard to survive in a city that had been considered the Paris of the Middle East. I don't remember Beirut looking anything like Paris. But I do remember the bullet holes in buildings and the weeks spent in the hallway of our home praying that the bombs and the shrapnel wouldn't kill us. We were one of the families that eventually escaped. Given a chance to emigrate to the United States, we took it. So, when I hear that Elimelech and Naomi ran away from the famine, it's hard to criticize their decision. With two young men to raise and their hunger palpable, running seems very palatable. I totally get that.

Still, Naomi and Elimelech's decision seemed to backfire. Before long, Elimelech died and soon afterwards, both of Naomi's sons died too. As if life couldn't get any harder, she was left with two daughters-in-law. Desperate and broken, Naomi decided to go back home. Her daughters-in-law, maybe out of a sense of duty or guilt, started out with her. But it didn't take long for the first one, Orpah, to bail. Who could blame her? The other daughter-in-law, however, stuck around. Her name was Ruth. Unbeknownst to Naomi, Ruth would become the tipping point in Naomi's life. *It's in learning to become aware of God's presence in our pain that the scales are tipped toward freedom.* Yet in the midst of this famine, neither Ruth nor Naomi could have predicted how life would play itself out.

By the time Naomi got back to her hometown of Bethlehem, she was a mess. And she was in pain, so she changed her name to Mara. Her arrival back home was no small affair. We're told that "when they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them" (Ruth 1:19). Were they stirred in pity? Were they stirred in self-righteousness? Were they stirred in shock? We'll never know, but we're given a glimpse as to how Naomi felt in her pain. She was hurting and likely felt vulnerable, exposed, and fragile.

"Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the LORD has brought

me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the LORD has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?” (Ruth 1:20–21).

Have you ever felt like God was against you? Like He went missing when you needed Him the most? Have you ever felt alone in your pain? That was Naomi’s experience, in a nutshell.

My friend understands that feeling. She grew up in a Christian home, went to a Christian high school, and then graduated from a Christian college. Afterwards, she moved back home and eventually married and started a family. She couldn’t have been happier. Then her husband had an affair, and they divorced. Today, she no longer believes in God.

I’ve asked her why: Why did she stop believing?

“God wasn’t there in my pain. When I went through the divorce, I looked for God, but He wasn’t there,” she said. “So, I stopped believing.” In the middle of her deepest pain, my friend felt abandoned by God. She became an unbeliever, and I sympathize with her.

Pain has a way of revealing who you really are and what you really believe. Pain doesn’t destroy your faith; it simply exposes it. Instead of seeing pain and suffering as the worst thing that could happen to you, it’s life-saving to see suffering as a pathway to God. *Instead of allowing suffering to deconstruct your faith, consider how God wants to use your suffering to reignite your faith in Him.*

I’ve done a lot of healing in the last six years to be able to write these words: I joined a small group recently. It’s an interesting and eclectic group of people who share two main things in common: Jesus and a group thread. I woke up to this text recently from one of the small group members:

“This new solo life is tough—just divorced four years and not used to being single, and seeing your adult child still broken is tough. I am realizing that I’m still grappling with my anger with God. Intellectually I know I don’t deserve anything, and anything He gives us

is sheer grace but in my heart I still feel hurt and keep scratching my head at the things He allows or disallows.”

If you’ve ever felt the sting of disappointment and pain, it’s not hard to wrap your mind around my friend’s words: *Doesn’t God care enough about me to end my suffering?*

It wasn’t just people in the Old Testament who struggled to see God in their pain. Even while Jesus was alive, those who were closest to Him wondered whether He was aware of their suffering. One time, Jesus got on a boat with His disciples after a busy day of ministry. While He slept in the back of the boat, a storm broke out, “and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling” (Mark 4:37). The disciples were horrified. They were angry, frustrated, and confused. They woke Jesus up none too gently and expressed their surprise at Him: “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” (v. 38).

*God, don't You care that we're in pain?  
Don't You see what we're going through?  
Don't You understand that we're sinking?  
How can You sleep while we're hurting?*

Who of us hasn’t faced the agony of feeling abandoned by the Almighty in our hour of deepest need? Remember Mary and Martha in John 11? They did all the right things. They lived for Jesus. They loved Him and were loved by Him. When they hit troubled waters and their brother Lazarus got sick, they looked to Jesus. They believed He could heal him. They believed He *would* heal him. They figuratively circled the verse in their Bibles and prayed. They begged Jesus for their miracle. They hoped for an answer to their prayers. They wanted healing from their pain. But instead of showing up in their hour of despair, Jesus did the very opposite.

“When he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer

in the place where he was” (John 11:6). By the time Jesus did show up, Lazarus had died.

What kind of Savior does that? What kind of Savior holds back when His people—those whom He loves—need Him the most? *What kind of Savior chooses silence over comfort? Absence and delay over the miracle? What kind of Savior allows His children to be swept away in the storms of life, seemingly oblivious to their pain?*

### **God, Are You There?**

I’m not a theologian; I’m a doctor. If you have a problem, I want to fix it and fix it fast. I typically know exactly what to do, and I can do it in record time. It’s why people come to me for help. Even in real life, when I’m not in the ER, I think on my feet. My kind of thinking makes me annoying to the contemplative types and Enneagram 2s. (If you don’t know what the Enneagram is, don’t worry, you’ll survive and it won’t lessen the impact of this book for you.) I tend to think in black and white, yeses and noes, and simple answers that, according to one reviewer of my first book, *Thrive*, can sound to some people “theologically trite.”

Maybe I am trite, or maybe I just have a yearning to fix everyone’s problems. And fast! The fact that I love concrete, clear answers to problems makes the mysteries, complexities, and nuances of the Christian life immensely challenging to me at times. Yet, it is in complicated questions where we find the truth. We need to ask the tough questions, such as:

*Why does Jesus sleep in the middle of the storm?*

*Why does Naomi lose all the men in her life?*

*Why doesn’t Jesus show up when Mary and Martha need Him the most?*

*Where was God in my friend’s painful divorce?*

*Why do I still find it challenging to talk about the pain inflicted on me by my old church?*

I've spent the last five years working with Syrian refugees in the Middle East. It's been one of the best things I've done in my life. The work came unexpectedly and unintentionally. I had just left my church and was coming to terms with all the losses in my life. I wasn't sure what I'd do with the rest of my life. I looked for God in my pain, but instead of finding Him in the places I wanted Him to be, all I found was an invitation to do this work with a people that I had grown up hating, but had come to love. (More on *that* later, I promise.)

I got on a plane and went back home to my birth country to run my first medical clinic serving Syrian refugees who had fled from the terror of ISIS. I found a people whose pain made mine pale in comparison. I found a people who hurt so badly, no earthly balm could ever soothe them. I found a people who had lost everything—loved ones, home, security, comfort, respect, jobs, futures, and dreams.

Yet, in the midst of their pain, many of them had also found life and freedom. Many of them had found joy and the realization that life was more than food and clothing. In the midst of their pain, many of them had found Jesus.

I remember the first time I met Daria (not her real name). She was beaming. There's no other way to describe her. She had a smile that shone for miles. I wanted her to be my friend simply because of her radiance. I found out that she was a Syrian refugee who had started working at the church, cooking and cleaning for visitors like me. She had first been introduced to the church because of her physical needs. Her family was hungry and the church was giving out food rations to those in need. So, she showed up wearing her hijab, convinced she would be turned away. Her kids fell in love with the children's programs that were offered and kept coming back for

more. Her eldest, an eleven-year-old boy with soulful eyes, heard about Jesus and couldn't resist His love for him. He wouldn't stop talking about Him. He'd encountered the risen Christ and his whole life changed. His family noticed the difference. Daria tried her best to shut him up. Frustrated when he refused to give up, she stormed to the church ready to meet this man named Jesus who had created such havoc in her home.

She walked into the church intent on meeting this Jesus and, sure enough, she did. She walked back home with a new life, a new love, a new heart, and a new perspective. In the midst of her pain, Daria had found the Messiah, or maybe He'd found her. In the midst of her pain, she found freedom, and her joy became palpable to anyone who would meet her. Eventually her husband would believe in Christ as well. Today, Daria knows Jesus; He redeemed her pain and replaced it with the joy of His presence.

Daria is still a refugee. Her home has not been recovered yet, and tragically probably never will be. She has not gotten a great education or graduated from college. She hasn't won the lottery. She lives with the reality of the broken pieces of her life, yet I have never met anyone happier or more satisfied in their life. I have never met anyone more aware of God's presence.

How is it that so many Syrian refugees meet God in their pain and find Him while so many of us in the West sink into despair in our seasons of (metaphorical) famine? Do they simply look for Him a little bit harder? Do they need Him more than they need their prayers answered and their dreams fulfilled? Perhaps they've finally gotten to the place where they have run out of prayer ideas. Having hit rock bottom, anything will do, and a Savior who promises life and freedom and resurrection that can never be taken away becomes so obviously the answer.

Perhaps it is our many desires for material comfort that have sidetracked us from what our soul really needs. Perhaps we can learn

something important from refugees like Daria: Suffering is not the worst thing that can happen to a person but, instead, can be an invitation to the heart of our Savior.

*The longer I live, the more I wonder if my inability to see God in my pain is rooted in the fact that I'm not really looking for God. I'm looking for a god to show up in the way that I want him to and to give me what I want him to give me. I'm like the disciples; I beg Jesus to stop my storm now. I'm like Mary and Martha; I want Jesus to heal my sick brother now.*

Some like to think that because Jesus suffered once, we never will have to. That because Jesus was wounded, we're promised permanent healing; that if He was abandoned by God, we never will be. But what if the very fellowship of His suffering is meant to draw us closer to Him? What if our very pain is meant to help us see Him more clearly?

Why do some people turn to God in their pain while others turn away from Him? C. S. Lewis once wrote that "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world."<sup>1</sup> But I'm left to wonder, if pain is God's megaphone to rouse a deaf world, why do so many of us remain oblivious to God's presence in our pain? Why is it so hard to hear Him when we need Him the most?

We have a Savior who is quite familiar with our suffering. We have a Savior who understands what we're going through in our pain. *The reality is that often we're never as close to our Father as we are in our suffering. We're never as alive to God's purposes as we are when we suffer.* We just have to learn to see it more clearly. We just have to learn to live in awareness of God's presence even in our pain—or *especially* in our pain. (Don't worry. I'm going to tell you how I've learned to do so. Just keep reading.)

### **Waking Up to God's Presence**

If there's one word I've learned to hate, it's the word COVID-19. By the time this book will be released, most of us will have become quite familiar with the effects of a global pandemic. Most of us think of "suffering" when we hear the word COVID-19, but as an ER doctor turned telehealth provider, I hear "awareness."

COVID-19 has brought awareness like few other things have. Because of this deadly virus, we as humans have become aware of distances—six feet being the magical distance needed between two people for adequate protection. Because of COVID-19, we have become aware of the need to cover our mouths when we cough and wash our hands for twenty seconds multiple times a day. We are aware of others when they cough now. The pain of COVID-19 has created a heightened awareness of our own humanity, interconnection, and need. *Pain's gift is that it increases awareness. Suffering heightens our sense of need and deepens our heart's cry for help. While suffering hurts, a growing sense of God's presence heals.*

The longer I live as a Christian the more I am convinced that God saved, and saves, us despite ourselves, both on the cross as well as now, each and every day. The formulas that used to work for me don't anymore. Answers that have long served the purpose of quieting my questions now fall on jaded ears like water on a duck. They wet the surface of my heart but they don't penetrate deeply.

These days I need more than just three steps to get there. I need the reality of God's presence. I need the truth about God. I need a God who will save me on my worst days—even when I know better. The good news of the gospel is that we have such a God in Jesus. But that good news of the gospel is still ours to be received. God's goodness is meant to be received in the midst of our pain, not proven by the absence of our pain.

**God's goodness  
is meant to be  
received in the  
midst of our pain,  
not proven by  
the absence  
of our pain.**

One of the ways I have learned to grow in my awareness of God is to practice seeking His presence with a very simple prayer that I whisper to God throughout the day. It's a prayer any kid can memorize, which is about the level I can handle when I'm crushed by suffering. Though I don't believe in secret formulas or chants that empower us to be more for God, I have found this whispered prayer awakens me to God's presence in my life:

*Lord,*

*Open my eyes that I may see You.*

*Open my ears that I may hear You.*

*Open my mouth that I may praise You.*

*Open my heart to receive all that You have for me today.*

Living in the reality of God's presence is not meant to be difficult. It's meant to be freeing. It's meant to ignite hope. It's meant to be real. I hope this prayer helps you too.

### **The End of Pain**

There's one more thing I learned from the story of Naomi: It's that no matter how bad today is, eventually harvest does come. After bemoaning her fate and expressing her frustration with God, we're told that "Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabite her daughter-in-law with her . . . and they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest" (Ruth 1:22).

There is significance to the mention of harvest after years of

famine. At the depth of Naomi's grief, the mention of harvest is God's offer of hope in a season of pain. Harvest was a reminder of God's presence, the evidence of His powerful hand of provision. For Ruth and Naomi, harvest meant the beginning of a new season and the end of the old. That year Ruth became the catalyst for healing. Ruth went out to harvest, and of all the fields she could have chosen, she chose Boaz's. Boaz would become the kinsman-redeemer for Ruth and Naomi. The kinsman-redeemer in those days was a male relative who had the privilege or responsibility to act on behalf of a relative who was in trouble or need. He was meant to be a redeemer or deliverer for the needy. Boaz would do just that on the day he would marry Ruth, but it was ultimately God who had orchestrated that season of harvest that year. And it was Naomi who experienced new life.

God's goodness is first glimpsed at the beginning of harvest even when we still feel bitter or, fittingly, "mara." No matter how hopeless today feels, light is on the way, and it has less to do with what I do and everything to do with who God is. He is good. He is sovereign. If you're in a season of pain, it might feel foreign for you to read those words. It might feel like a cruel joke to hear that light is making its way beneath the crack in your doorway. But it's the truth. You might be praying for fruit right now, but perhaps God's plan for today is the grain that will yield your harvest someday down the road. Daria understands it; even I understand it.

It took a while for me to see my season of harvest come. I was one whose faith almost deconstructed in the pain. I became suspicious of God. I became hardened in my heart. I went through the motions, did the right things, but I resented this God who seemed so far away. Some days I felt angry. Other days I felt grief. I'd numb my pain or distract myself with Netflix and other addictions. I dared God to stop me. I yelled at anyone who would listen. I almost fell off the proverbial cliff. The people in my life tried to placate me with well-meaning answers, but this was a battle I was waging with God.

It wasn't about them; it was between me and this God whom I barely understood anymore.

People talk about the dark night of the soul. The sixteenth-century Spanish mystic and poet St. John of the Cross experienced that dark night and then wrote two books about the concept.<sup>2</sup> It wasn't about suffering, but about being guided to God, even through our difficulties. I don't know if what I lived through was a dark night of my soul or Satan trying to take me out. All I know is that what seemed familiar, reliable, and certain in my twenties and thirties had become foreign and stale to me in my forties. I thought about leaving the faith. I stopped going to church for a while.

Yet something kept me hanging on. I felt tethered to a force bigger than me. For a while I lived in Genesis 32. If you're not familiar with the story, it's the one where Jacob wrestles with God in the middle of the night. He fights with everything he's got for a while, but eventually, he wears out. I'm not sure if he wanted to let go at one point, but somehow, he hung on. Or maybe it was *God's* hold on *him*.

I've read the story of Jacob a thousand times, and I can't quite tell when the turning point in that night was. The only thing I can see is that when Jacob wore out, when he couldn't fight God anymore, he let go. He had no plan B, no way out of his mess. That's when God took over.

I have a feeling it was Jacob's letting go, rather than hanging on, that saved him.

Most of us intuitively understand that there is "a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance" (Eccl. 3:2–4).

Eventually harvest will come and with it a season of dancing and rejoicing.

### Unexpected Joy

When harvest comes it usually comes in unexpected and unusual ways. For Naomi, the harvest came through community, and specifically a daughter-in-law named Ruth who would eventually birth a boy who would become a forebear of Jesus. For others, the harvest comes through a miracle, like Jesus' whisper stilling the storm. Sometimes harvest comes through a resurrection, like it happened for Lazarus. Or it may come quietly, unexpectedly, in the form of an empty tomb on a Sunday morning when everyone has already written that story off.

In the middle of the darkness, God's light still shines. In the midst of our pain, His sovereign goodness overrules our pain. It turns out that God is committed to us, despite us.

For me things got messier before they got better. Breakthrough came through the unexpected form of God's people. Though it was God's people who had hurt me, they became the tool God used to heal my broken heart. A loving pastor who wouldn't give up on me. His wife who understood me. A small church community who saw past my defenses. *Though it was God's people who fueled the deconstruction of my faith, it was also God's people who would become the building blocks for its reconstruction.*

Then there was my therapist. For the first time in my life, I was given the chance to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. It took my going to a therapist to finally find the safety to tell the truth.

I told the truth about my pain. I told the truth about my anger. I told the truth about my relationship with God. I told the truth about everything.

And then I cried. I cried over my broken heart. I cried over the pain inflicted by my lost community. I cried over my dead dreams and lonely days. I cried over everything I could think of. She listened

until I stopped crying. She told me it was okay. She accepted who I was. And she pointed me to the One my heart still longed for.

And I realized an earth-shattering truth: In the middle of my suffering, God was still right there. He had never left me. He had never abandoned me. Just like He'd promised, even when I tried to make my bed in hell, He was right there with me all along (Ps. 139:8). Just because I hadn't noticed God's presence didn't make His presence any less real. It took my hitting rock bottom to notice that when I'd lost my grip on God, He'd kept His grip on me, and He resurrected hope in me.

The first step to reconstructing your faith is to start by telling the truth. You need to find a safe place to tell your story, like to a therapist or trusted pastor or friend. It's essential. And it will not be pretty. You don't need to hide anymore. You don't need to act like everything is okay. You are in this fight because you have questions, and they're not a surprise to God. Your present suffering is God's invitation to you for more of His presence in your life. It will take courage and guts to tell your story. It might even create some significant changes in your future, but it will be worth it. You will find out that you are not alone in your pain, and that when you finally let it all out, God will still be right there, waiting for you. You will realize that God isn't disturbed by your pain. He welcomes it; He welcomes you. He's a Savior who is familiar with our pain. But He's also a Savior who knows that glory is born out of suffering. If you feel like you've lost your grip on God, it's okay to let go. Because when you finally let go, you'll find that He still has His grip on you.

Today, you might be asking, "Where is God in my pain?" but try to believe, even for a moment, that tomorrow your harvest is coming.

**SPEND A FEW MINUTES CONSIDERING THESE QUESTIONS,  
and bring your thoughts and feelings to God in prayer:**

*Do you relate to the story of Naomi? Which part feels most familiar to you?*

*Are you aware that God is with you in your pain?*

*Can you make room for God's whispers in your grief?*