

Why Is This Happening to Me, God?

Making Sense of Suffering and Stress,
Finding Joy and Discovering
Purpose in Life



SAM CHOO

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Author: Sam Choo

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Scripture quotations and references are included for teaching and reflection. Bible translations may vary in wording.

Email: samchoo@gmail.com

Website: <https://payhip.com/christianlibrary>

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Introduction: When Life Does Not Match the Life in Your Head

“There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death.” ~ Proverbs 14:12

Most of us carry an invisible picture of how life is supposed to turn out.

We expect to find someone who loves us, build a reasonably happy marriage, raise children who grow into decent adults, earn enough money to live without constant worry, and do work that gives us some dignity. We hope our bodies will remain healthy. We expect people to treat us fairly. As we grow older, we imagine slowing down with enough savings, people we love nearby, and some peace after decades of work.

These hopes are reasonable. Trouble begins when the life in our head becomes the standard reality must obey.

A marriage becomes lonely. A child stops speaking to us. A career stalls. Money disappears faster than we can earn it. A medical test changes the future we imagined. A person we love dies too soon. We pray, and the answer we wanted does not come.

The distance between the life we expected and the life we actually have can become a painful place to live.

The Argument With Reality

Pain is part of being human. If someone we love dies, we grieve because we loved that person. If we lose our livelihood, there are real consequences. Christianity should never reduce suffering to a bad attitude.

But another layer of suffering can grow around the pain.

“This should not have happened.”

“My marriage was supposed to last.”

“My children were supposed to understand me.”

“After everything I did, I deserved better.”

“By this age, I should have been successful.”

“If God loves me, why did He allow this?”

We are experiencing what happened, but we are also fighting the fact that it happened.

That fight can produce enormous stress because reality has already arrived. We may be able to change what happens next, but we cannot negotiate yesterday out of existence.

Acceptance does not mean calling wrong things good, tolerating abuse or injustice, or refusing practical help. It begins with seeing clearly what is true now.

This happened.

I do not like it.

I may wish with all my heart that it had not happened.

But it happened.

Only then can we ask a useful question: *What do I do now?*

The Temptation to Control Everything

One common answer is to take control. There is wisdom in this. Personal responsibility matters. We can change harmful habits, apologize when we hurt someone, learn new skills, and make better decisions. Faith should never excuse us from responsibilities that belong to us.

Yet self-reliance eventually reaches a wall.

You can control what you say, but not how another person responds. You can prepare carefully for an interview, but you cannot force someone to hire you. You can love your children, but you cannot live their lives for them. You can care for your body, but you cannot guarantee that you will never become ill. You can make excellent plans and still wake up one morning to news that changes everything.

Sooner or later, life introduces us to the limits of our own power.

We are taught to work harder, set better goals, become more disciplined, and solve our problems. Those things can take us far. But what happens when we meet a problem effort cannot solve?

What happens when we have done what we can and life still refuses to cooperate?

Perhaps We Have Been Asking the Wrong Question

This book begins with “Why is this happening to me, God?” because it is an honest question. Even people who are uncertain whether they believe in God sometimes ask it when life becomes unbearable.

I will not pretend this book can explain every tragedy. Easy explanations can wound people in deep pain. Some questions remain unanswered.

Instead, I want to explore whether there are better ways to live with the questions.

We will look at helplessness and blame. We will look at the strength, and eventually the limitations, of self-reliance. Then we will consider a possibility that may be unfamiliar to some readers: perhaps peace does not require controlling everything.

Perhaps trust can begin where control ends.

For the Christian, that trust leads to Jesus Christ. If you are not a Christian, you are welcome here. You need not pretend to believe anything. I only ask you to consider the possibility.

Following Jesus does not promise a painless life. His own life included rejection, betrayal, grief, injustice, suffering, and death.

Christian hope makes a different claim: suffering does not have to have the final word.

God can meet us in circumstances we would never have chosen. He can bring good from what was painful without asking us to pretend the pain was good. **He can give us a kind of joy that does not depend entirely on circumstances.** And sometimes the very experiences that once made

us ask, “Why me?” can eventually become part of how we understand, comfort, and serve someone else.

We begin with the life in our head and the life in our hands.

The question is no longer how to force them to match.

The better question is this:

How do we live well, trust deeply, and discover purpose when life will not obey us?

Chapter 1: Why Is This Happening to Me?

“How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?” ~ Psalm 13:1

There are moments when “Why me?” is not self-pity. It is the most honest question we have.

A diagnosis arrives. A marriage falls apart. Someone we trusted betrays us. A business fails after years of work. A child makes choices that break our heart. Someone we love dies. We lose a job at the worst possible time.

We look at what has happened and think, “*Why is this happening to me?*”

Sometimes another question follows: “*God, where are You?*”

These questions do not make us weak. They make us human.

When Pain Looks for Someone to Blame

When something hurts, the mind naturally searches for an explanation. We want to know who caused it, why it happened, and whether it could have been prevented.

Sometimes there really is someone responsible. People lie, betray, abuse, exploit, neglect, and make selfish decisions. Calling wrongdoing by its proper name is not bitterness. Accountability matters.

But blame can also become a place where we remain trapped.

We replay conversations. We imagine what someone should have done. We construct arguments in our minds against people who are not even in the room. Years later, the event is over, but the trial continues inside us.

The strange thing about resentment is that it can make another person's actions part of our daily life long after that person has left it.

Forgiveness may eventually become part of healing, but forgiveness should never be used to rush someone through genuine pain. Before asking what we should release, we may first need to acknowledge what was lost.

Anger With God

Sometimes the person we blame is God.

"If You could have stopped this, why didn't You?"

"If You love me, why didn't You answer my prayer?"

"I tried to live faithfully. Why did this happen anyway?"

The Bible does not hide these questions. Job wrestled with suffering he could not understand. David wrote psalms filled with anguish. Jeremiah

complained bitterly. Jesus Himself cried from the cross, *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”*

Scripture gives suffering people room to speak honestly.

Faith does not require pretending we are fine when we are not. A relationship with God that allows only polite words would be a very shallow relationship.

God already knows what we are thinking. We might as well tell Him.

When Helplessness Takes Over

Pain becomes especially dangerous when *“Something terrible happened”* slowly becomes *“Nothing I do matters.”*

That is helplessness.

Perhaps you tried to save a relationship and failed. You applied for job after job and received rejection after rejection. You trusted someone again and were hurt again.

Eventually you stop expecting anything to change.

There are circumstances in which we genuinely have very little control. Recognizing that fact is not weakness. The problem begins when powerlessness in one area spreads into every area of life.

“I couldn’t stop this” becomes *“I can’t do anything.”*

Those are very different statements.

You may not be able to change what happened, another person’s behavior, or circumstances outside your control. Yet there may still be choices available today.

Finding those choices is one of the first steps out of helplessness.

Do Not Blame Yourself for Hurting

There is another trap, particularly in religious conversations about suffering.

Someone is hurting, and we immediately search for the spiritual lesson.

Perhaps they need more faith. Perhaps they should forgive. Perhaps God is teaching them something. Perhaps they need to change their attitude.

There may eventually be lessons. But timing matters.

When Jesus met grieving people, He did not always begin with an explanation. At Lazarus's tomb, Jesus wept.

Sometimes the most appropriate response to suffering is compassion.

This book will eventually talk about responsibility, acceptance, trust, and purpose. None of those ideas means that people cause their suffering by thinking incorrectly or lacking faith.

Terrible things genuinely happen.

Children suffer. Good people become sick. Faithful spouses are betrayed. Innocent people are harmed. People lose livelihoods through events they did not create.

Christianity does not require us to deny these realities.

A Better Question Begins to Appear

"Why me?" may be where we begin. It does not have to be where we remain.

Sometimes we receive an explanation for what happened. Often we do not. Even when we know the cause, knowing it does not necessarily remove the pain.

There is another question that slowly becomes more useful:

“What can I do now?”

It is a modest question, but it returns something suffering often steals from us: the ability to choose our next step.

Perhaps today the next step is asking for help. Perhaps it is having a difficult conversation, setting a boundary, making an appointment, praying honestly, resting, or simply getting through the day.

You do not need to solve your entire life today.

And you do not need to pretend that what happened was acceptable.

You only need to recognize that what happened to you does not have to decide everything that happens next.

“Why is this happening to me?” is an understandable question.

Soon, however, we will need to examine another source of suffering: the picture we carried of how life was supposed to be.

Sometimes our deepest struggle is not only with what happened.

It is with the life we thought we were going to have.

Chapter 2: The Life You Thought You Would Have

“Many are the plans in a person’s heart, but it is the Lord’s purpose that prevails.” ~ Proverbs 19:21

Before the future arrives, we write it in our heads.

We carry assumptions about how life will unfold. We will meet the right person. Our marriage will remain loving. Our children will grow up well. Work will reward effort. Money will become less frightening as we earn more. If we take reasonable care of ourselves, our health will hold. By the time we grow old, life will finally become easier.

Then life edits the story without asking our permission.

The marriage becomes distant. The promotion goes to someone else. Savings disappear in an emergency. A child chooses a path we never

imagined. Our body begins doing things we thought belonged to old people, until we realize we have become one of them.

The event hurts. Another pain appears beside it: this was not how the story was supposed to go.

The Invisible Contract

Expectations can behave like invisible contracts we have signed with life.

If I am a good spouse, my marriage should be happy. If I work hard, I should succeed. If I raise my children properly, they should make good choices. If I save carefully, I should be financially secure. If I pray, God should protect the people I love.

These hopes are understandable. The trouble comes when a reasonable hope quietly becomes a guarantee.

Life never signed the contract.

A devoted spouse can still be abandoned. A responsible worker can still be retrenched. Loving parents can have children who make destructive choices. A careful saver can face an expensive crisis. A healthy person can become seriously ill.

When this happens, we may feel more than disappointment. We can feel cheated.

The Marriage Imagined

Few areas carry more expectations than marriage.

People enter marriage imagining companionship, affection, loyalty and growing old together. Then perhaps conversations become practical and cold. Affection disappears. One spouse changes. Betrayal occurs. Or two people who once felt inseparable begin living like strangers.

The pain is not only, “My marriage is difficult.”

It can also be, “This is not the marriage I was supposed to have.”

That second sentence contains grief. We are mourning something that may never have existed except as a future we expected.

Recognizing that grief means becoming honest about what we are actually facing instead of measuring every day against what should have been.

The Success Supposed to Come

Career and money create their own stories.

Perhaps you believed that if you worked hard for twenty or thirty years, you would eventually become secure. Maybe you expected a certain position, income, business, home or retirement.

Then you look around and wonder how other people moved so far ahead.

Comparison makes the disappointment worse. We see someone else's visible success and use it as evidence that our own life has gone wrong.

But human lives do not follow a common timetable. Money and work matter, but neither can carry the full weight of telling us whether our life has been worthwhile.

Children We Cannot Script

Parents often write futures for their children without realizing it.

We imagine their education, character, career, marriage and relationship with us. We sacrifice for them, and somewhere inside those sacrifices an expectation may grow: surely they will understand one day.

Then children become adults.

They have their own minds, mistakes and journeys. Some remain close. Others choose lives their parents struggle to understand.

Love can guide another person, but it cannot control another person's story.

That is one of the hardest lessons of parenthood and, more broadly, of loving anyone.

When the Body Changes the Plan

Health and aging eventually confront almost everyone with the same truth: we are not completely in charge.

The body that once carried us without much complaint becomes slower. Recovery takes longer. Friends become ill. People we thought would always be around begin disappearing from our lives.

Aging can involve grief as well as gratitude. We may grieve our strength, independence or simply the years that disappeared faster than expected. Growing older exposes an illusion that was present all along: permanence was never promised.

Making Room for a Different Story

There is nothing wrong with hopes or plans. The answer is not to expect nothing.

The healthier question is how tightly we hold the story.

We can plan while leaving room for surprise. We can work toward an outcome without making our peace depend entirely upon receiving it. We can grieve the future that did not happen while remaining open to a future we never imagined.

Perhaps your life today looks very different from the one you pictured ten or twenty years ago.

That does not automatically mean you have failed.

It means you are living an actual human life rather than the one you once wrote in your head.

The next question is what you do with the life that is here.

For many of us, the answer is immediate: **take control.**

And that is not a bad place to begin.

Chapter 3: When You Decide to Take Control

“The plans of the diligent lead surely to abundance, but everyone who is hasty comes only to poverty.” ~ Proverbs 21:5

There comes a moment when asking “Why me?” is no longer enough.

Perhaps you become tired of waiting for someone to rescue you. Perhaps you realize that blaming your parents, your spouse, your employer, the economy or your past is not changing anything. Some of those things may genuinely have hurt you. Some may still be affecting your life.

But a new question begins to form:

“What can I do?”

That question can change a life.

Taking Back What Is Yours

Personal responsibility begins by separating what happened to us from what belongs to us now.

You may not have chosen the problem. You still have choices about your response.

If your finances are in trouble, you can examine your spending, look for additional income or learn how to manage money differently. If your health has been neglected, you can seek appropriate care and change habits within your control. If you lack a skill needed for better work, you can learn. If you damaged a relationship, you can apologize and change your behavior.

None of this guarantees the outcome you want.

It does, however, return agency to you.

There is dignity in saying, *“This is my life, and I will take responsibility for the part that belongs to me.”*

Goals Give Direction

Once we recognize that we can influence our future, goals become useful.

A vague desire says, *“I want my life to improve.”*

A goal asks what improvement actually looks like and what step can be taken next.

Perhaps you want to get out of debt. The first step might be knowing exactly what you owe. Perhaps you want different work. The next step might be learning a skill rather than resigning tomorrow. Perhaps a relationship is deteriorating. Your first responsibility might be changing

the way you communicate instead of waiting for the other person to change first.

Small actions are easily underestimated because they do not feel dramatic.

But lives are often changed by ordinary decisions repeated long enough.

Discipline Matters More Than Mood

Motivation is useful, but unreliable.

Some mornings we feel ready to conquer the world. Other mornings getting out of bed feels like an achievement.

Discipline helps us act even when enthusiasm is absent.

The student studies when entertainment is more attractive. The worker learns a new skill after a tiring day. The person trying to repair financial damage follows a budget even when spending would feel better.

This is one reason responsibility can be empowering. We discover that feelings do not have to make every decision for us.

We can choose.

Learn What You Do Not Know

Taking responsibility also requires humility.

Sometimes the problem is not a lack of effort. We simply do not know what we need to know.

Education can change that.

Education does not always mean returning to school. It may mean reading, taking a course, finding a mentor, asking better questions, receiving

professional advice or admitting that the strategy we have used for years is no longer working.

Wisdom sometimes begins with three uncomfortable words:

“I don't know.”

Those words can open a door that pride keeps closed.

Perseverance Has Power

Many worthwhile things take longer than expected.

We apply and get rejected. We try something and fail. We make progress, then slide backward. We wonder whether anything is changing.

Perseverance keeps us moving.

The Bible is filled with people who had to wait, work and endure. Faith has never meant sitting still while expecting God to do everything for us. Proverbs repeatedly praises diligence, wisdom and responsible action.

If there is work that belongs to us, we should do it.

Prayer is not a substitute for responsibility.

The Danger Hidden Inside Self-Reliance

There is, however, a subtle change that can happen when responsibility begins producing results.

We start believing that everything depends upon us.

Success reinforces the idea. We work hard and receive a promotion. We save and build financial security. We exercise and become healthier. We set a goal and achieve it.

Soon the lesson becomes larger than the evidence.

“If I do the right things, I can control what happens.”

That belief feels powerful.

It is also fragile.

Hard work improves our chances of success, but cannot guarantee success. Good decisions matter, but cannot remove uncertainty. Discipline can influence our health, but cannot make us immortal. We can improve a relationship, but cannot control another person's heart.

Personal responsibility is a gift.

Total control is an illusion.

Wisdom requires knowing the difference.

Do What Is Yours to Do

There is a mature form of responsibility that does not require pretending we are all-powerful.

We can ask:

What can I change?

What can I learn?

What decision belongs to me?

What action can I take today?

Then we act.

This is a tremendous step beyond helplessness. Instead of allowing circumstances to write every page of our future, we participate in writing what comes next.

But eventually every one of us reaches a boundary.

There will be a problem we cannot solve, a person we cannot change, an outcome we cannot guarantee, or a loss we cannot reverse.

We may have worked hard, made wise decisions and done everything reasonably within our power.

And still, it is not enough.

What happens then?

That is where self-reliance reaches its limit, and where the next part of our journey begins.

Chapter 4: When Self-Reliance Stops Working

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and don’t lean on your own understanding.” ~ Proverbs 3:5

Self-reliance works surprisingly well until it doesn’t.

You make plans. You work hard. You learn from mistakes. You become more disciplined. Problems arise and you solve them. Each success strengthens a reasonable belief: my choices matter.

They do.

But somewhere along the road, almost everyone encounters something that refuses to respond to effort.

You cannot make someone love you. You cannot force an employer to choose you. You cannot guarantee that treatment will restore your health.

You cannot negotiate with aging. You cannot bring someone back from death.

Eventually life takes us somewhere our abilities cannot carry us.

When There Is Nothing More to Fix

Imagine someone whose marriage is falling apart. She has examined her behavior, apologized for mistakes, changed the way she communicates, sought counseling and tried to rebuild connection.

Her spouse still wants to leave.

What else can she do?

Perhaps a father has done everything he knows to help an adult child who is making destructive choices. He has talked, listened, advised, prayed and offered appropriate help.

The child continues down the same road.

What else can he do?

Sometimes there is another useful action available. Sometimes there isn't.

One of life's hardest lessons is that sincere effort does not give us ownership of the outcome.

The Body Has Its Own Limits

Health makes this painfully clear.

We should care for our bodies. Medical care, appropriate exercise, nutrition, sleep and other healthy habits matter. But healthy living is not a contract guaranteeing a long life without disease.

Illness can arrive despite our precautions.

A diagnosis can divide life into before and after. Suddenly the person who was planning next year's holiday is learning medical vocabulary they never wanted to know.

Our instinct is often to regain control. We research. Seek treatment. Change routines. Ask questions.

These can be wise responses.

But somewhere beneath all that activity is a frightening realization:

I cannot guarantee what happens next.

Self-reliance struggles with that sentence because self-reliance wants certainty.

Life rarely provides it.

Some Things Cannot Be Undone

Failure can sometimes be corrected. Loss is different.

When someone dies, there is no strategy that restores yesterday. We can learn to live with grief, receive support and gradually rebuild our lives, but grief cannot be solved like a business problem.

The same is true of certain regrets.

Perhaps you made a decision years ago whose consequences cannot now be reversed. You can apologize. You can change. You can make amends where possible. But you cannot return to the person you were and choose differently.

There comes a point when fixing must give way to something else.

Acceptance.

Not approval. Not pretending it did not matter.

Acceptance says, “This is part of my story now.”

That can be one of the most difficult sentences a human being ever says.

The Limits of Achievement

Success can hide our vulnerability for a long time.

When life is going well, it is easy to believe we have mastered it. We build a career, accumulate savings, solve problems and earn respect. We become accustomed to being competent.

Then something happens for which competence has no answer.

Money can purchase excellent care but not immortality. Status can attract attention but cannot force genuine love. Intelligence can explain many things without explaining why a particular tragedy happened to us.

Achievement is valuable. It is simply unable to carry the weight we sometimes place upon it.

Eventually even the strongest person encounters the limits of strength.

Living Without Certainty

Perhaps the hardest thing we cannot control is the future.

We want guarantees.

Will my marriage survive?

Will my child be okay?

Will I have enough money?

Will the treatment work?

Will I find another job?

Will I be alone?

We imagine that peace will arrive once these questions are answered.

But many answers come only after we have lived through the uncertainty.

So we face an uncomfortable possibility: if peace requires certainty, we may spend much of our lives without peace.

There must be another way to live.

When You Reach the End of Yourself

Self-reliance has brought us somewhere important. It has taught us responsibility, discipline and action. We should not abandon those lessons.

But now we can see their boundary.

There are things we can control.

There are things we can influence.

And there are things we must eventually release.

This is where the conversation about God becomes more than religion or philosophy.

Perhaps you believe in God. Perhaps you are uncertain. Perhaps you stopped believing years ago because something happened that you could not reconcile with the idea of a loving God.

Wherever you stand, consider one question.

What do you do when you have done what you can and it still isn't enough?

You can become bitter.

You can keep trying to control the uncontrollable.

You can numb yourself so you do not have to feel afraid.

Or perhaps there is another possibility.

Perhaps reaching the limit of your own power does not mean you have reached the end of hope.

Perhaps there is Someone beyond you whom you can trust.

Faith begins to matter precisely because we are limited.

It does not ask us to stop thinking, planning, working or taking responsibility. It asks whether those things were ever meant to carry us alone.

The next step is not learning how to control life more successfully.

It is considering what might happen if we no longer had to carry life alone.

Chapter 5: What If You Don't Have to Carry Life Alone?

“Cast your burden on the Lord, and he will sustain you.” ~
Psalm 55:22

There is a particular kind of exhaustion that sleep cannot cure.

It comes from feeling responsible for everything.

You must keep the family together. You must make enough money. You must solve the problem. You must protect the people you love. You must anticipate what could go wrong and prevent it. If something fails, you assume you should have tried harder.

Carrying responsibility is part of adulthood. Carrying the entire universe is not.

At some point, we need to ask whether we were ever meant to live as though everything depends upon us.

Consider the Possibility of God

If you are already a Christian, the word God is familiar. Perhaps too familiar. It is possible to believe in God intellectually while living as though He has nothing to do with Monday morning.

If you are not a Christian, I am not asking you to pretend.

Perhaps you have doubts. Maybe religion has disappointed you. Perhaps Christians you have known did not make Christianity attractive. You may simply have lived quite well without thinking much about God.

For now, consider a possibility rather than forcing a conclusion.

What if reality is larger than what you can see and control?

What if you are not alone in it?

And what if the God Christians speak about is not merely an idea for explaining the universe, but Someone who can be known and trusted?

Those questions do not require you to switch off your mind. They invite you to keep it open.

Surrender Is Not Giving Up

The word surrender can sound like defeat.

A soldier surrenders when the battle is lost. A person who has given up stops trying.

Christian surrender means something different.

It means recognizing the boundary between what belongs to us and what belongs to God.

If you are unemployed, surrender does not mean staying home and waiting for a job to appear. You can search, apply, learn, ask for help and prepare well.

If your relationship is struggling, surrender does not mean ignoring problems. You can communicate honestly, examine your behavior, seek wise counsel and establish necessary boundaries.

If you are ill, surrender does not mean refusing appropriate medical care. You can seek treatment, ask questions and care for your body.

After doing what belongs to you, however, there remains something you cannot do.

You cannot guarantee the result.

Surrender begins there.

The Burden of Outcomes

Much of our stress comes from carrying outcomes as though they were responsibilities.

We confuse effort with control.

Our responsibility may be to prepare carefully for the interview. Getting hired is not entirely within our control.

Our responsibility may be to speak truthfully and lovingly to someone we care about. Their response belongs to them.

Our responsibility may be to make prudent financial decisions. We still cannot guarantee that no crisis will ever occur.

When we insist upon controlling the outcome, the mind remains on duty all the time. It rehearses possibilities, predicts disasters and searches endlessly for one more thing we could do.

Faith allows another sentence:

“I have done what I can. I will entrust what I cannot control to God.”

The problem may still exist.

But you are no longer pretending that you are God.

Trust Without Understanding Everything

Trust is difficult because we want explanations.

Why did this happen?

Why did God allow it?

Why did one prayer seem to be answered while another was not?

Christianity does not provide a neat explanation for every individual tragedy. Anyone who offers one too quickly should be treated cautiously.

The Bible itself contains people asking God questions that are not answered in the way they expected.

Faith therefore cannot mean understanding everything God does.

Trust becomes meaningful precisely where understanding ends.

A child may not understand everything a loving parent knows. The comparison is imperfect, but the principle helps: limited understanding does not automatically mean there is no reason beyond what we can currently see.

Sometimes the most honest prayer is simply:

“God, I do not understand this. Help me trust You here.”

Faith Still Gets Out of Bed

There is a danger in talking about trusting God. We can turn faith into an excuse for avoiding difficult responsibilities.

“I am leaving it to God” can sometimes mean “I do not want to deal with it.”

Biblical faith is active.

Noah built. Abraham travelled. Joseph worked. Nehemiah organized. Paul travelled, taught and endured hardship. They trusted God while doing what was placed in front of them.

Faith and action belong together.

We work without believing that our work makes us all-powerful.

We plan without demanding that the future obey our plans.

We pray while taking the next responsible step.

That is surrender with its feet on the ground.

You Were Never Meant to Be God

Perhaps one source of our exhaustion is that we have quietly accepted a job description no human being can fulfill.

Know everything.

Prevent everything.

Fix everyone.

Control the future.

Never fail.

Never lose.

We cannot do it.

There is relief in admitting that.

Christian faith begins with a very different arrangement: God is God, and we are not.

We are responsible for our choices, but not sovereign over every outcome. We can work faithfully today without knowing exactly what tomorrow will bring.

And when our strength reaches its limit, we do not necessarily arrive at emptiness.

We may arrive at the place where trust becomes possible.

The next question is naturally more personal.

If we are going to trust God, what is He like?

Christianity answers that question by pointing us toward a person.

His name is Jesus.

Chapter 6: Meeting Jesus in the Middle of Suffering

“Jesus wept.” ~ John 11:35

If you want to know what Christianity says about suffering, look at Jesus.

Do not begin with religious institutions, arguments between Christians, or people who have used God’s name badly. Begin with the man described in the Gospels.

Watch where He goes.

Watch whom He notices.

Watch what He does when suffering stands in front of Him.

You may discover that Jesus is much closer to human pain than you expected.

The Jesus Who Stopped for People

Jesus repeatedly encountered people whose lives had not gone according to plan.

There were sick people, grieving parents, social outcasts, people carrying shame, and families facing death. Some came looking for Him. Others encountered Him unexpectedly.

Jesus did not treat suffering people as interruptions.

He stopped.

He listened.

He touched people others avoided. He ate with people respectable society looked down upon. He noticed individuals hidden inside crowds.

Whatever else you believe about Jesus, the picture presented in the Gospels is not of someone standing safely outside human suffering and giving advice.

He entered it.

When Jesus Wept

One of the shortest verses in the Bible tells us something profound about God.

“Jesus wept.”

His friend Lazarus had died. Lazarus’s sisters, Martha and Mary, were grieving.

According to John’s Gospel, Jesus knew that Lazarus would soon be raised. Yet when Jesus saw Mary weeping and the people around her grieving, He wept.

He knew what He was about to do, but He still entered their sorrow.

That matters.

Sometimes Christians become so eager to explain suffering that we forget how Jesus responded to people who were actually suffering.

He did not tell Mary to stop crying because everything would soon work out.

He wept with her.

Christian hope does not require emotional denial. Tears and faith can occupy the same room.

Jesus Knew Rejection

Jesus also knew what it meant to be rejected.

People misunderstood Him. Religious leaders opposed Him. Crowds that once followed Him disappeared. One of His disciples betrayed Him. Peter, one of His closest followers, denied knowing Him when Jesus was arrested.

There is something important here for anyone who has ever wondered whether God understands what rejection feels like.

Christianity does not present a God who observed human pain only from a distance.

In Jesus, Christians believe God entered human history and experienced hunger, exhaustion, friendship, disappointment, grief, rejection, physical suffering and death.

When you say, “Nobody understands,” Christianity points toward Jesus and asks you to look again.

Gethsemane

The night before His crucifixion, Jesus went to a garden called Gethsemane.

He knew suffering was approaching.

The Gospels do not portray Him as emotionally untouched. Jesus was deeply distressed. He prayed that, if possible, the cup before Him might pass.

In simple language, He did not want the suffering.

That makes what followed even more significant.

Jesus prayed, *“Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done.”*

This is surrender in its deepest form.

Jesus expressed what He wanted. He did not pretend pain was pleasant. He did not call suffering enjoyable. He brought His desire honestly before God and then entrusted Himself to the Father's will.

That gives us a model for prayer when life hurts.

We can ask for healing.

We can ask for the marriage to be restored.

We can ask for the job.

We can ask for circumstances to change.

Surrender does not silence those prayers.

It adds another one:

“God, I have told You what I want. Help me trust You with what happens next.”

The Cross

Then comes the cross.

Jesus was betrayed, arrested, mocked, beaten and crucified.

Christianity does not place a symbol of comfort at its center. It places an instrument of execution there.

That tells us something about the Christian understanding of suffering.

God's answer to suffering is not merely an explanation.

It is Jesus entering it.

At the cross, Christians see innocent suffering, human cruelty, forgiveness and sacrificial love meeting in one place.

But if the story ended with Jesus dead, Christianity would offer us only a courageous example of suffering.

The Christian message says the story continued.

The Resurrection Changes the Meaning of the Cross

On the third day, Jesus' followers proclaimed that He had risen from the dead.

This claim stands at the center of Christianity.

The resurrection does not make the crucifixion painless. It changes what the crucifixion ultimately means.

What looked like complete defeat was not the end.

What looked hopeless was not beyond God's power to redeem.

That pattern becomes central to Christian hope.

It does not mean every illness will be healed in this life, every broken marriage restored, every financial loss recovered or every prayer answered exactly as we ask.

It means Christians believe suffering and death do not possess the final word.

God does.

An Invitation, Not a Shortcut

Perhaps you are reading this without calling yourself a Christian.

I am not asking you to pretend certainty you do not have.

I am asking you to meet Jesus before deciding what you think about Him.

Read one of the Gospels. Watch how He treats frightened people, difficult people, religious people, rejected people and suffering people. Listen to what He says about God, forgiveness, life, death and Himself.

Christian faith is more than agreeing with ideas. It is an invitation to trust a person.

Jesus never promised His followers a life without trouble. He said plainly that trouble would come.

But He also said, "*I am with you always.*"

Perhaps that is where faith begins in suffering.

We still hurt. We still grieve. We still ask questions. We still take responsible action where we can.

But we no longer have to face suffering as though we are alone in the universe.

At the center of Christianity stands Jesus, wounded yet risen.

And His story introduces a possibility we will explore next:

Something can be genuinely painful and still become part of something good.

Chapter 7: Can Something Painful Become Something Good?

“We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose.”~ Romans 8:28

When something terrible happens, Christians sometimes reach for Romans 8:28 too quickly.

A person has just received devastating news, and someone says, “Everything happens for a reason.”

A family is grieving, and someone says, “God will work it all out.”

The words may be well intended. The timing can make them painful.

Romans 8:28 was never meant to tell suffering people that what happened to them was good.

It offers a more hopeful claim: **God can bring good out of circumstances that are not good.**

That difference matters.

Evil Does Not Become Good

Betrayal is still betrayal.

Abuse is still wrong.

Cancer does not become good because someone grows spiritually while facing it. The death of someone we love does not become good because grief later makes us more compassionate.

Christianity does not require us to rename darkness as light.

Instead, it says that evil and suffering do not place God in a position where He can do nothing more.

God can redeem.

Redemption does not erase the wound or pretend it never happened. It means the wound does not necessarily get to determine the final meaning of the story.

The Bible repeatedly shows this pattern.

Joseph: What Others Meant for Evil

Joseph's story is one of the clearest examples.

His brothers were jealous of him. They sold him into slavery and allowed their father to believe he was dead. Joseph was taken to Egypt, falsely accused and imprisoned.

There is no need to make any of that sound good.

Years later, circumstances changed dramatically. Joseph rose to a position of authority in Egypt and eventually had the ability to help preserve his family during famine.

When he finally spoke to the brothers who had harmed him, Joseph said:

“You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good.”

Notice that Joseph still called their actions evil.

He did not say, “What you did was actually good.”

He recognized something larger: their evil intentions had not prevented God from bringing good out of the story.

That is redemption.

Peter: Failure Was Not the Final Chapter

Peter's pain was different.

He failed himself.

He had confidently told Jesus that he would remain loyal. Yet when Jesus was arrested, Peter denied three times that he even knew Him.

Then the rooster crowed, just as Jesus had predicted.

Peter went away and wept bitterly.

Anyone who has badly failed at something important knows something of that feeling. You cannot blame circumstances forever. You know what you did.

Failure can become an identity.

“I failed” becomes “I am a failure.”

But Jesus did not leave Peter there.

After the resurrection, Jesus restored him and entrusted him with responsibility. Peter's worst moment did not become the final definition of his life.

Christianity offers that hope to people carrying regret.

Your failure may have consequences. You may need to apologize, repair what you can and live differently.

But God can write beyond the page you wish you could tear out.

Paul: Weakness Can Have a Purpose

Paul knew another kind of limitation.

In one of his letters, he described a “thorn in the flesh.” He asked God three times to remove it.

God did not.

We are not told precisely what the thorn was, and there is little value in pretending we know.

What matters is Paul's response.

He wanted something painful removed. Instead, he came to understand weakness differently. God's answer was, *“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”*

The problem remained.

Paul changed in relationship to the problem.

That may be one of the hardest forms of answered prayer to accept.

Sometimes God changes our circumstances.

Sometimes He changes us while the circumstances remain.

What Good Might Look Like

When we hear that God can bring good from suffering, we may immediately look for a dramatic outcome.

Sometimes the good is quieter.

Perhaps suffering makes us more compassionate.

Perhaps failure removes an arrogance we did not recognize.

Perhaps losing something exposes how much of our identity depended upon it.

Perhaps an unwanted season changes our priorities.

Perhaps receiving comfort teaches us how to sit beside another person without offering easy answers.

We should be careful about telling someone else what good their suffering is supposed to produce.

Some meanings can only be discovered by the person living the story, and some questions may remain unanswered in this life.

Romans 8:28 is a promise to trust, not a formula for explaining every tragedy.

The Story Is Still Being Written

When we are in the middle of suffering, we see only the middle.

Joseph in prison could not see the ending.

Peter weeping after his denial could not yet see restoration.

Paul asking for his thorn to be removed did not initially know what he would learn through its presence.

Neither do we know everything about our unfinished stories.

Perhaps the painful thing you are facing today will eventually lead somewhere you cannot yet imagine.

Perhaps some good will become visible.

Perhaps much of it will remain mysterious.

Christian hope does not require us to know how every piece fits.

It asks us to believe that God is still present and still able to work.

We can call pain painful.

We can call evil evil.

We can grieve what was lost.

And still we can say:

“This may not be good. But God is not finished with my story.”

That is where hope begins to loosen suffering's grip.

Chapter 8: The Freedom of Letting Go

“Therefore don’t be anxious for tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Each day’s own evil is sufficient.” ~ Matthew 6:34

Stress often begins before anything has actually happened.

The mind travels into tomorrow and starts living there. What if I lose my job? What if the money runs out? What if the medical result is bad? What if my child makes another mistake? What if this relationship never improves?

We try to solve tomorrow while standing in today.

Some preparation is wise. Constant mental rehearsal is different. Worry can create the feeling that we are doing something useful when we are actually circling a problem we cannot presently solve.

Letting go begins by knowing what belongs in our hands and what does not.

What Can I Change?

When something is causing stress, start with a practical question:

What can I change?

Perhaps there is a conversation you have been avoiding. Perhaps you need to reduce spending, seek professional advice, apply for work, apologize, make a medical appointment, establish a boundary or change a habit.

If action is available, take it.

Surrender should never become an excuse for avoiding responsibility.

Sometimes we pray repeatedly about something God has already given us the ability to address. We ask for better health while ignoring habits we can change. We ask for financial relief while refusing to look at our spending. We ask God to repair a relationship while refusing to admit our part in damaging it.

Prayer and responsibility belong together.

Do what is yours to do.

What Can't I Change?

Now ask the harder question:

What can't I change?

You cannot rewrite yesterday.

You cannot control another adult's decisions.

You cannot make someone forgive you, love you or understand you.

You cannot guarantee that every careful plan will succeed.

You cannot prevent every illness, disappointment, accident or loss.

Much **stress comes from repeatedly trying to control something that has never been ours to control.**

Recognizing that limit can initially feel frightening. Yet it can also become freeing.

You are allowed to stop doing a job that was never yours.

What Must I Accept Today?

Acceptance is often misunderstood.

It does not mean liking what happened. It does not mean remaining in a dangerous situation or tolerating wrongdoing. It does not mean abandoning hope that circumstances can improve.

Acceptance means beginning with reality as it currently exists.

“My marriage is in serious trouble.”

“I have lost this job.”

“My adult child is making choices I cannot control.”

“This person has died.”

“I am growing older.”

“This diagnosis is part of my life right now.”

Reality gives us somewhere solid to stand.

Denial keeps us negotiating with facts that have already arrived.

Once we **accept what is true today**, we can make wiser decisions about tomorrow.

What Still Requires Action?

Letting go does not mean becoming passive.

Sometimes the most faithful thing you can do is act.

Leave the unsafe situation. Ask for help. Tell the truth. See the doctor. Make the difficult phone call. Learn the skill. Apply again. Rest when your body needs rest.

There is a useful distinction between **surrendering an outcome** and surrendering responsibility.

We surrender outcomes to God.

We remain responsible for the choices that belong to us.

This allows us to work without carrying the impossible burden of guaranteeing success.

What Can I Place in God's Hands?

Eventually we arrive at what remains.

You have taken reasonable action. You have thought carefully. Perhaps you have asked for advice. There is nothing useful you can do tonight.

Yet your mind keeps working.

This is where prayer becomes more than asking God to give us what we want.

Prayer can become the act of handing something over.

“God, I cannot control this person.”

“God, I do not know what will happen.”

“God, I have done what I know to do.”

“God, I am afraid.”

“Please carry what I cannot.”

You may have to pray the same prayer tomorrow.

Letting go is rarely a single dramatic moment. We often release something and discover an hour later that we have picked it up again.

Then we surrender it again.

Come Back to Today

Jesus' teaching about tomorrow is deeply practical.

Today already contains enough to live.

When our minds rush months or years ahead, we begin carrying imagined troubles alongside the real ones.

Ask instead:

What does today require of me?

Perhaps today requires courage. Perhaps patience. Perhaps a decision. Perhaps rest.

Tomorrow can wait until it becomes today.

This does not eliminate uncertainty. It changes our relationship with uncertainty.

We stop demanding that we know everything before we can have peace.

We take the next faithful step and leave room for God to be God.

That is the freedom of letting go.

You still care.

You still act.

You still hope.

But the future no longer has to sit entirely on your shoulders.

And when we **stop spending all our strength trying to control tomorrow**, something else becomes possible.

We begin to notice the life that is still here today.

That is where joy can begin.

Chapter 9: Joy When Life Is Still Difficult

“Rejoice in the Lord always! Again I will say, ‘Rejoice!’” ~
Philippians 4:4

Joy can sound almost insulting when life hurts.

Tell someone who has just lost a loved one to “cheer up,” and you have probably misunderstood grief. Tell someone facing serious trouble to “think positive,” and you may simply give them another burden: now they must pretend to feel better as well.

Christian joy is not pretending.

It does not require smiling through every tragedy or convincing ourselves that painful things are wonderful. Jesus wept. Paul knew hardship. The Psalms contain grief, fear and despair alongside praise.

Joy can exist in a life that still contains sorrow.

Happiness and Joy Are Not the Same

Happiness usually responds to circumstances. Happiness depends on happenings.

We receive good news and feel happy. Someone we love visits. A problem is solved. We enjoy a meal, hear a joke or spend an afternoon doing something we love.

There is nothing wrong with happiness. Receive it gratefully when it comes.

But circumstances change.

If our entire inner life depends upon circumstances cooperating, peace becomes fragile. One phone call can take it away.

Christian joy reaches deeper. It grows from knowing that our present circumstances are not the whole story and that **our value, hope and future do not depend entirely upon what happens today.**

We may still cry.

Joy does not cancel grief. Sometimes they live together.

Gratitude Changes What We Notice

Pain narrows our attention.

When one part of life goes badly, it can become the only thing we see. A broken relationship can make us forget the people who still love us. Financial trouble can make every day feel empty. One disappointment can overshadow ten ordinary gifts.

Gratitude does not deny the problem.

It widens the picture.

There may still be food on the table. Someone may still call to ask how you are. Morning still arrives. A cup of coffee can still taste good. Music can still move you. A child can still make you laugh.

These things do not solve suffering.

They remind us that suffering is not necessarily everything.

A grateful person can say, “This is difficult, and there is still goodness here.”

Hope Looks Beyond Today

Joy also needs hope.

Without hope, suffering feels permanent.

Christian hope does not promise that everything will improve according to our preferred schedule. It rests in the belief that God is present, that our lives have meaning beyond present circumstances, and that death itself is not the end of the Christian story.

This is why the resurrection matters so deeply.

If Jesus rose from the dead, then despair never gets an unquestioned final word.

The Christian can grieve honestly while still believing there is more to the story.

Hope gives suffering a horizon.

Be Where Your Feet Are

Much unhappiness comes from living somewhere other than where we actually are.

The mind returns to yesterday.

“If only I had...”

Then it races toward tomorrow.

“What if...”

Meanwhile, today passes unnoticed.

Presence means returning to the life directly in front of us.

Eat the meal.

Listen when someone speaks.

Walk outside and notice the air.

Do today's work.

Pray today's prayer.

Receive today's grace.

There is something profoundly freeing about not requiring this moment to answer every question about the future.

Sometimes joy is found in a very small piece of life fully received.

Do Not Suffer Alone

Suffering often tells us to withdraw.

We do not want to burden anyone. We are embarrassed by failure. We assume nobody understands. So we disappear.

But human beings need one another.

A trusted friend cannot remove grief, but can sit beside us in it. A family member may not solve the problem, but can remind us that we are loved.

A church community at its best becomes a place where burdens are shared rather than hidden.

Sometimes receiving help requires humility.

We would rather be the strong one.

There are seasons when strength means allowing someone else to carry part of the load.

Prayer Makes Room for God

Prayer does not need impressive words.

Sometimes prayer is gratitude.

Sometimes it is silence.

Sometimes it is anger.

Sometimes it is one sentence repeated because we have nothing else:

“God, help me.”

Prayer turns our attention toward Someone beyond the problem.

The circumstances may not immediately change. But prayer reminds us that we are not speaking into an empty room.

For the Christian, joy ultimately rests here: **God is present.**

A Deeper Place to Stand

Circumstances matter. Money matters. Health matters. Relationships matter. Loss hurts because what we lose mattered to us.

But none of these things was designed to become the complete foundation of our identity.

If my worth depends entirely upon success, failure can destroy me.

If my peace depends entirely upon another person's love, rejection can destroy me.

If my hope depends entirely upon health, illness can destroy me.

Jesus offers a deeper place to stand.

We are loved before we have solved everything.

We can trust before we know every outcome.

We can hope while questions remain unanswered.

Joy begins to grow there.

Some days it may feel strong. Other days it may be little more than enough strength to continue.

That is enough.

You do not have to manufacture happiness.

Look for the good that remains. Receive the people who love you. Stay present. Pray honestly. Keep hope alive.

And perhaps, as you do, you will discover something surprising.

The life you would never have chosen can still contain joy.

And the pain you would never have wanted may eventually become part of something meaningful.

Chapter 10: Your Pain Does Not Have to Be Wasted

“He comforts us in all our affliction, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction.” ~ 2 Corinthians 1:4

There are experiences we would never choose, even if we knew they might teach us something.

Nobody needs to lose someone they love simply to learn compassion. Betrayal is not required for wisdom. Illness does not become desirable because it changes our priorities. Failure does not suddenly become pleasant because we eventually learn from it.

Pain is pain.

But once something painful has become part of our story, another question becomes possible:

Must it be wasted?

Christianity offers a hopeful answer.

No.

Redemption Is Different From Explanation

When suffering happens, we naturally ask why.

Sometimes there is an obvious answer. Someone made a harmful choice. We made a mistake. A disease has a medical explanation. An accident occurred.

Other times the deeper “why” remains unanswered.

Why now?

Why this person?

Why did God allow it?

We should be cautious about answering questions God has not answered for us.

Redemption asks a different question.

Instead of “Why did this happen?” we begin asking, **“What can God do with what has happened?”**

We may never receive a satisfying explanation for every painful chapter.

We can still discover that the chapter was not useless.

Pain Can Deepen Compassion

Before suffering, it is easy to give advice.

After suffering, we may learn to listen.

Someone who has experienced grief may understand why a grieving person does not need a quick explanation. Someone who has faced unemployment may understand the fear behind another person's financial worries. Someone who has experienced rejection may notice the lonely person everyone else overlooks.

Pain can make us softer.

It can also make us harder. Suffering does not automatically improve anyone. We still choose what we do with it.

But when pain is brought honestly before God, it can enlarge our capacity to recognize pain in others.

We begin noticing wounds we once walked past.

Experience Can Produce Wisdom

There is knowledge we gain from books, teachers and advice.

There is also knowledge that arrives only after living through something.

You may have known intellectually that money cannot guarantee security. Losing financial security can make that truth painfully real.

You may have believed that forgiveness is difficult. Being deeply hurt can show you exactly how difficult.

You may have told others to trust God. Then one day you find yourself praying without knowing what tomorrow will bring.

Experience moves certain truths from the head into the heart.

This does not mean everyone will reach the same conclusion from suffering. It means hardship can become a teacher when we are willing to learn.

Your Scars Can Become a Language

There are people you may be able to reach precisely because your life has not been perfect.

Imagine someone saying, “My marriage has failed.”

Advice from someone who has never experienced relational loss may still be useful.

But then another person says quietly, “I know something of that pain.”

The conversation changes.

Shared experience creates a language.

This is one reason our weaknesses and wounds do not automatically disqualify us from helping others. Sometimes they allow us to sit beside people whom our successes could never have reached.

You do not need to turn every painful experience into a public testimony.

Some stories remain private.

But even private pain can change how gently you treat another human being.

God Does Not Need Evil to Be Good

We should make an important distinction.

Saying that God can redeem suffering does not require claiming that God deliberately caused every tragedy so that we could learn a lesson.

Scripture describes a world containing human freedom, human wrongdoing, suffering, brokenness and death. Christianity does not ask us to celebrate those things.

Its hope is that none of them exceeds God's ability to redeem.

The cross remains the clearest Christian picture.

Human beings committed an act of terrible injustice against Jesus.

Christians do not call the injustice good.

They believe God brought salvation through what human beings intended for destruction.

That is the pattern of redemption.

God can take what should have destroyed hope and create something beyond it.

What Is in Your Hands Now?

Perhaps something has happened in your life that you still wish had never happened.

You do not have to be grateful that it happened.

But you can ask what is in your hands now.

What have you learned?

What do you understand now that you did not understand before?

Whose pain do you notice differently?

What matters less to you now?

What matters more?

Where have you discovered strength, grace or kindness that you did not know existed?

There may not be immediate answers.

Purpose often appears slowly.

One day, however, you may find yourself sitting beside someone who is where you once were.

And suddenly you understand why your presence matters.

You cannot remove their pain.

You may not have an answer.

But you can say, with honesty, "I know something about this road."

Sometimes that is enough to help another person take one more step.

Your suffering does not have to become the best thing that happened to you.

It does not have to become something you would choose again.

But in the hands of God, it does not have to be wasted.

The question now becomes even larger.

Could God use not only what happened to you, but you yourself?

Chapter 11: God Uses Imperfect People

“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” ~ 2 Corinthians 12:9

Many of us quietly assume that God uses a better class of person.

People with stronger faith. People who know the Bible better. People with impressive testimonies, clean histories and fewer weaknesses. People who seem certain about what God wants them to do.

We look at ourselves and see too many reasons God should choose someone else.

The Bible makes that argument difficult to maintain.

Its pages are filled with people who were frightened, impulsive, reluctant, wounded, morally compromised or painfully aware of their limitations.

God used them anyway.

Moses Had Reasons to Say No

When God called Moses to confront Pharaoh and lead the Israelites out of Egypt, Moses did not respond like a confident leader.

He asked why anyone would listen to him. He worried that the people would not believe him. He told God that he was not eloquent and was slow of speech.

Moses also had a complicated past. Years earlier, he had killed an Egyptian and fled.

He hardly looked like the obvious choice.

Yet God did not wait for Moses to become fearless before calling him.

Moses had to move forward while still knowing his limitations.

Perhaps that is encouraging for anyone who has thought, “God could never use someone like me.”

God has heard that argument before.

Peter Failed Publicly

Peter was passionate, outspoken and often too confident.

He promised Jesus that even if everyone else fell away, he would remain faithful.

Hours later, he denied three times that he knew Him.

Imagine carrying that memory.

Peter could have spent the rest of his life defined by one terrible night. He could have decided that hypocrisy had disqualified him permanently.

Jesus restored him.

Peter later became an important leader in the early church. His failure remained part of his story, but it was no longer the end of the story.

Failure can humble us. It can expose things about ourselves that success allowed us to ignore.

When grace meets failure, even our worst moments can become places from which a different kind of person emerges.

Paul Could Not Erase His Past

Paul carried an even darker history.

Before becoming a follower of Jesus, he persecuted Christians. He approved of Stephen's death and tried to destroy the early church.

Then he encountered Jesus.

Paul could not travel backward and become a man who had never done those things. His past remained true.

But his past did not prevent God from giving him a future.

Paul became one of Christianity's most influential missionaries and writers.

This does not mean consequences disappear when someone turns to God. Grace is not permission to avoid accountability.

It means our history does not have to possess permanent ownership of our identity.

God can use a person who has genuinely changed.

Weakness Is Not the Same as Uselessness

We often imagine that usefulness requires strength.

God may see things differently.

A person who has known loneliness may notice lonely people.

Someone who has failed may become less judgmental toward people trying again.

A person who knows fear may speak gently to someone who is afraid.

Someone who has needed grace may become more willing to extend grace.

Weakness can produce dependence, humility and compassion when we allow God to work within it.

This does not mean we should glorify weakness or refuse to grow. If something can be improved, improve it. If a harmful behavior needs changing, change it. If you need help, seek it.

But do not confuse being unfinished with being unusable.

Every person God uses is unfinished.

You Do Not Need a Platform

Being used by God does not necessarily mean preaching to thousands, starting a ministry or becoming publicly known.

Perhaps God uses you in one conversation.

You notice someone everyone else ignores.

You call a person who is grieving.

You tell the truth about something you survived.

You encourage someone who is ready to give up.

You quietly provide practical help.

Much of what matters in God's kingdom may never receive applause.

Jesus spoke to crowds, but He also repeatedly gave His attention to individuals.

One life matters.

Bring What You Have

The question is not whether you are impressive enough.

Perhaps a better question is:

What is already in your hands?

You have experiences.

You have abilities.

You have mistakes you have learned from.

You have wounds that have changed the way you see people.

You have time, however limited.

You have a voice, even if only a few people hear it.

You may also have weaknesses that keep reminding you that you need God.

Bring all of it.

God has never depended upon flawless human beings to accomplish His purposes.

If He did, very little would ever get done.

Available Is Enough to Begin

Perhaps you still have unresolved questions.

Perhaps your faith sometimes feels strong and sometimes weak.

Perhaps part of your story still embarrasses you.

You do not have to wait until your life becomes perfect before it can have purpose.

Follow Jesus from where you are.

Learn.

Grow.

Make things right where you can.

And remain available.

The painful parts of your story may eventually help you recognize someone else's pain.

Your failures may give you humility.

Your limitations may teach you dependence upon God.

Your ordinary abilities may become exactly what someone else needs.

God does not need a perfect version of you before He can begin.

He can work with the person standing here now.

And sometimes the clearest evidence that pain has been redeemed is when the person who once asked, "Why is this happening to me?" becomes the person who can sit beside someone else and say, "You do not have to walk through this alone."

Chapter 12: When Your Story Becomes Someone Else's Hope

“He comforts us in all our affliction, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, through the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.” ~ 2 Corinthians 1:4

Purpose is often made to sound enormous.

Find your calling. Change the world. Build something significant. Leave a legacy.

Those ideas can inspire us, but they can also make ordinary lives seem unimportant.

Most people will never stand on a stage, lead a large organization, become missionaries or write books read by thousands. Their names will never be widely known.

That does not mean their lives lack purpose.

Sometimes purpose is sitting across from one hurting person and knowing what to say because you once sat in the same chair.

Sometimes it is knowing when to say nothing.

Comfort Received Can Become Comfort Given

Paul describes a simple movement in 2 Corinthians 1:3-4.

God comforts us in our troubles so that we can comfort others.

Notice what Paul does not say.

He does not say we must understand everything that happened to us before we can help someone. He does not say we need professional expertise for every act of compassion. He does not say our own lives must be completely repaired first.

We receive comfort.

Then, somewhere along the way, we become capable of giving some of it away.

Perhaps someone once sat with you during grief. Years later, you find yourself sitting with someone else.

The comfort keeps moving.

Listening Can Be a Ministry

When people suffer, we often feel pressure to say something wise.

So we give advice.

We explain.

We search for a Bible verse.

Sometimes the greater gift is attention.

A grieving person may need someone who will listen to the same memory again. A frightened person may need somewhere safe to admit fear. Someone whose marriage is collapsing may need to speak without immediately being told what decision to make.

Listening communicates something simple:

“Your pain matters enough for me to stay here.”

You do not need a title to do that.

You need presence.

Purpose Lives at Home Too

We can become so fascinated with finding our great purpose that we overlook the people already in front of us.

Raising a child patiently matters.

Caring for an aging parent matters.

Being faithful to your spouse matters.

Calling a lonely relative matters.

Showing kindness to someone who cannot advance your career matters.

Much of a meaningful life is built from actions too small to become stories anyone tells publicly.

Jesus spoke about giving a cup of cold water.

That is an extraordinarily ordinary act.

Perhaps heaven measures significance differently from us.

Tell What You Know

Sometimes your story itself can help someone.

You do not need to exaggerate it or make yourself the hero.

Simply tell the truth.

Perhaps you survived a season when you thought you would never recover. Perhaps you made a serious mistake and learned something that could prevent another person from repeating it. Perhaps God met you during grief, unemployment, loneliness or failure.

Your testimony does not need a dramatic miracle.

Sometimes the most believable testimony is:

“I went through this. It was difficult. I did not understand what God was doing. But I discovered that I was not alone.”

Someone may need exactly that story.

Serve Without Being Seen

Some acts of purpose will never be noticed.

You help someone privately.

You pray for a person who never knows.

You encourage a child who remembers your words thirty years later.

You give quietly.

You forgive.

You show up.

The world often measures influence by visibility. Followers, audiences, titles and recognition make impact easy to count.

God's work is not always countable.

A person can influence thousands and still neglect the person beside them. Another can live almost entirely outside public attention and profoundly shape a family, a neighborhood or a few precious lives.

Purpose does not require fame.

It requires faithfulness.

Your Story Is Still Useful

You may think your life is too ordinary to help anyone.

Perhaps you have never overcome anything spectacular. You have no dramatic conversion story. You are still dealing with some of the same struggles you had years ago.

That is all right.

People do not always need heroes.

Sometimes they need companions.

Someone a few steps behind you may benefit from what you have already learned.

You do not need to say, "I have the answer."

You can say, "Here is what helped me."

That humility makes room for another person's story to be different from yours.

From Pain to Presence

Earlier in this book, we began with the question:

“Why is this happening to me?”

That question turned our attention inward because pain naturally demands attention.

But healing gradually allows our eyes to lift.

We begin noticing other people again.

And perhaps one day we encounter someone standing where we once stood.

We recognize the fear.

We recognize the questions.

We remember what it was like not to know whether life would ever feel normal again.

Now something has changed.

The experience that once made us feel isolated has given us a way to connect.

Our pain has become compassion.

Our survival has become encouragement.

Our story has become hope.

You do not need to save the world.

You do not even have the power to save another person.

But you can be present.

You can listen.

You can serve.

You can tell the truth about what God has done in your life.

Sometimes purpose is that simple.

And sometimes one ordinary life, faithfully offered to God, becomes an answer to a prayer someone else has been praying.

Chapter 13: What Will You Do With the Life You Have?

“Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.” ~ Psalm 90:12

There comes a point when we have to stop waiting for another life to begin.

Perhaps you thought you would be married by now. Perhaps you expected your marriage to be happier, your children to remain close, your career to go further or your finances to be more secure. Maybe you imagined reaching this age with better health, fewer regrets and more certainty about the future.

The life you imagined may still exist partly as a quiet ache.

But there is another life in front of you.

The one you actually have.

What will you do with it?

Stop Waiting for the Missing Piece

It is easy to postpone living until something changes.

When I have enough money, I will relax.

When this problem is solved, I will be happy.

When my relationship improves, I will enjoy life again.

When I recover, retire, succeed or finally understand what God is doing, then I will begin living properly.

Sometimes circumstances really do need to change, and we should work toward changing them.

But life is happening while we wait.

Years can disappear while we remain emotionally parked beside something we wish were different.

You may not have everything you wanted.

You still have today.

Receive the Life That Is Here

Receiving your life does not mean approving of everything in it.

There may be things you should continue working to change. There may be grief that never completely disappears. There may be consequences you wish you could undo.

Receiving your life means beginning with truth.

This is where I am.

These are the people in my life.

These are my responsibilities.

These are my limitations.

These are the opportunities still available to me.

These are the wounds I carry.

This is the time I have been given.

We cannot faithfully live a life that exists only in our imagination.

We can live this one.

Control What Is Yours

We have travelled a long way from the question “Why is this happening to me?”

We discovered that helplessness does not have to become our permanent home.

There are things we can do.

We can make wiser decisions. We can learn. Work. Apologize. Seek help. Establish boundaries. Care for our bodies. Manage our money more carefully. Repair what can be repaired.

Personal responsibility matters.

But responsibility becomes exhausting when we turn it into the belief that everything depends upon us.

Some things belong in our hands.

Others do not.

Wisdom is learning the difference.

Trust God With What Is Not Yours

There will always be unanswered questions.

You may never fully understand why something happened.

You may not know how a situation will end.

You cannot see ten years ahead.

Faith does not give us control over those uncertainties.

It gives us Someone to trust within them.

This is where surrender becomes practical.

Do what you can today.

Then place what you cannot control into God's hands.

Tomorrow, you may have to do it again.

That is not failure. Trust is often practiced repeatedly.

We release the future, pick it up again, notice what we have done, and release it once more.

Over time, our grip may become a little looser.

Ask a Different Question

At the beginning, suffering asks:

“Why me?”

Responsibility asks:

“What can I do?”

Faith asks:

“God, can I trust You with this?”

Purpose eventually asks:

“God, how can You use me?”

That final question changes the direction of our attention.

We stop seeing life only as something that must satisfy us before it can be meaningful.

Perhaps your life can become an offering.

Your experience can encourage someone.

Your work can serve.

Your home can become a place of kindness.

Your mistakes can make you wiser.

Your pain can make you more compassionate.

Your remaining years can still matter.

Available to God

You do not need a grand plan for the rest of your life.

You need willingness for the next step.

Perhaps there is someone you should call.

Perhaps there is something you should create.

Perhaps you need to forgive, serve, teach, encourage, give, write, listen or simply become more present to the people around you.

Ask God.

“Here is my life as it is. What would You have me do with it?”

That prayer is very different from demanding that God give us the life we designed.

It opens our hands.

The Life in Your Hands

You may still wish certain chapters had been different.

That is understandable.

But your story is not only what happened to you.

It also includes what you choose now.

You can spend the remaining pages arguing with the chapters already written.

Or you can bring the unfinished story to God.

You do not know how many pages remain. None of us does.

But today you have something.

A little time.

Some experience.

Perhaps some faith.

Perhaps only enough faith to ask another question.

That is enough to begin.

You may never receive the life you once imagined.

But with God, the life you actually have can still contain love, joy, growth, service and purpose.

So bring Him this life.

Not the life you wish you had.

This one.

And ask:

“God, what can You do with me now?”

Conclusion: From ^{aa}Why Me? ^{aa}to ^{aa}Use Me ^{aa}

“Here I am. Send me!” ~ Isaiah 6:8

We began with a question:

“Why is this happening to me, God?”

Perhaps you picked up this book because something in your life has not gone according to plan. Perhaps the problem has already passed, but you are still trying to understand what it did to you. Or perhaps nothing dramatic has happened. You simply discovered that the life you have does not look much like the one you expected.

I wish I could promise that every painful experience eventually comes with an explanation.

Christianity makes no such promise.

Some questions remain unanswered.

You May Never Know Why

There are losses for which no explanation feels sufficient.

Why did this person die?

Why did the marriage fail?

Why did the illness come?

Why did the opportunity disappear?

Why did God seem silent when you prayed?

We naturally want answers because answers give us the feeling that life makes sense.

Sometimes understanding comes later.

Sometimes it does not.

Faith does not require us to invent explanations where God has given none. We can live with unanswered questions while still trusting that our story is held by Someone who sees more than we do.

That trust changes the question.

What Can God Do With This?

Instead of remaining forever with “Why did this happen?” we can eventually ask:

“God, what can You do with this?”

That question does not call suffering good.

It simply refuses to believe that suffering must be wasted.

Perhaps God can bring wisdom from failure.

Perhaps grief can deepen compassion.

Perhaps disappointment can loosen our grip on something that had become too important.

Perhaps receiving comfort can teach us how to comfort someone else.

Perhaps the experience will become part of your testimony.

You may not see any of that today.

That is all right.

Redemption has no deadline.

The Life You Cannot Control

We have seen throughout this book that much stress comes from trying to carry what human beings were never designed to carry.

We can make decisions, work hard, learn and persevere.

But we cannot control everything.

We cannot guarantee love, health, success, security or tomorrow.

Recognizing those limits does not make us helpless.

It can lead us toward trust.

We do what belongs to us and place what does not into God's hands.

Then we wake tomorrow and practice it again.

From “Why Me?” to “Use Me”

Something beautiful can happen as healing progresses.

Our attention begins to move outward.

The person who once needed comfort becomes capable of comforting.

The person who once needed someone to listen becomes a listener.

The person who discovered hope in a dark season begins carrying hope into someone else's darkness.

The question changes again:

“God, what can You do through me?”

You do not need a perfect life before asking it.

God has always worked through imperfect people.

Bring Him your abilities and limitations, successes and failures, wisdom and unanswered questions.

Bring the life you actually have.

If You Are Still Unsure About God

Perhaps you have reached these final pages and still do not consider yourself a Christian.

I will not pressure you into saying words you do not yet believe.

But I encourage you not to dismiss Jesus without encountering Him for yourself.

Read one of the Gospels. Start with John, Mark, Luke or Matthew. Ask simple questions.

Who is this man?

What does He say about God?

How does He treat broken people?

Why did He die?

What does His resurrection mean if it is true?

And perhaps offer one honest prayer, even if you are uncertain anyone is listening:

“God, if You are there, help me know You.”

Faith can begin with honesty.

Your Story Is Not Finished

You may still carry the problem that brought you to this book.

Your circumstances may not have changed.

But perhaps you can hold them differently now.

Do what you can.

Release what you cannot control.

Look for the good that remains.

Allow yourself to receive joy without waiting for life to become perfect.

Trust God with the parts you cannot understand.

And remain available.

One day you may look back and realize that the experience you thought had destroyed your story became part of how God shaped what came next.

You may never receive every answer to “Why me?”

Perhaps you no longer need every answer before you can live.

There is another prayer waiting beyond the question:

“God, here is what happened.”

“Here is what remains.”

“Here is my life.”

“Use me.”