

NO MORE
Faking Fine

ENDING THE PRETENDING

ESTHER FLEECE





ZONDERVAN

No More Faking Fine

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TO JEANNE MCMAINS—

*you were the first to embark on this journey with me.
Your friendship gave me the courage to write this book.
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*you taught me the word lament and sat with me patiently
as I discovered a God who cared to listen to me.
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Thank you for teaching me from a foundation of grace.
Thank you for giving me a home and safe place.
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Foreword

The beautiful nature of lament is that it has a beginning and an end. No one is meant to live forever in grief and sorrow, yet without it, our life loses all meaning and our sense of immeasurable joy that is intended for our journey. Without lament, there is no joy.

Esther Fleece has taken such a beautiful, sorrow-filled road to recovery. Her life, challenged and imperfect, affected both by her choices and by the choices made for her, became a long path of broken-heartedness until she discovered Jesus' stunning plan for hope and recovery. While pain could have paralyzed her life's trajectory, she chose instead to express her honest emotion and frustration to God.

She lamented and God responded. Weeping is a part of the healing. One of the shortest Scriptures and one of the most powerful reads, "Jesus wept" (John 11:35). Why would that be in Scripture? Why would God make a point of wanting us to know our Savior, Redeemer of all of us, wept? In this narrative, Jesus had actually just lost one of His closest friends, Lazarus. I believe He wanted to not just tell us about compassion, but show us what compassion looked like. He knew He had all power, yet He chose to weep over the consequences of earth and sin causing the death of His friend.

God doesn't spiritualize our pain; He actually understands it. He knows what it is like to live on earth with a broken heart, yet He also

encourages us that while weeping lasts for the night, joy comes in the morning (Psalm 30:5). Clearly, there is a season for lament. Lament is not for a lifetime. Some of us need to backtrack to move forward, looking intently into what caused our brokenness and grief. In this remembering comes our healing. For the rest of us, we may need to remember that the healing *does* come. We aren't meant to live in the brokenness, but instead to let the healing of that grief be a catapult to our bright future.

Wherever you are in your grieving or healing journey, you will be inspired by Esther's story and given permission to sit where you are for a moment, knowing that in *your* healing resides your opportunity to point toward glory. Our healing isn't just for our own sakes, but for the sake of the One who made us. God glories in our wholeness. For you and me, this is the true reason we exist: to bring all glory to the One who made us. Let's not miss our opportunity! Let's lament, and live.

All glory to You, Jesus.

Louie and Shelley Giglio

Dear Reader,

As an expert in faking fine for most of my life, I want to start by being real with you: for years it felt as though my faith was hanging by a thread. If I heard one more message about thinking differently to change my circumstances, or praying more to see results, or trusting God more, I thought I would scream.

My circumstances were desperate, with no relief in sight, and it made me wonder if *this* was the moment when people give up on God?

Yet somehow, even in my dark night of my soul, I was still praying. Even if it was just, *God, why is this happening to me? Are You as good as You say You are? Do You really love me? Have You forgotten me?*

These felt like very dangerous prayers at the time—prayers I never thought I was allowed to utter. But I felt like my faith was failing, and I had nothing to lose. My will was dying; my heart was hurting. And yet, even in the midst of such heartache, a lament was surfacing.

And this was not fake faith; this was deep, authentic, *worth-everything* faith that comes at a cost. Even though I didn't know what to call it at the time, a lament was giving me a language for relating to God my Creator. Even more than that, lament was saving my faith. Because a lament was the only thing that enabled me to keep the line open to God in my moment of greatest need.

Most nights, I slept on my Bible, trying to absorb the words of God's promises but even more to be comforted by Him as the Healer. I felt as though everyone around me had abandoned me, and I couldn't help but wonder: Was God doing this to me, or was God allowing this to happen? Either way, could I trust Him again? Would God be the next to leave?

Of course, the last thing I wanted was for anyone to know I felt this way. My busy days were spent performing and producing, keeping up appearances, praising God in public while wondering in private if He even cared.

That was years ago, but today, I want you to know I wrote this book because I need this book. And I wrote it for you. I want to tell you that hardships can blindsides you in this life. I want to tell you to expect pain, but not to settle for heartache without comfort. God cares for us way too much to go through this life alone.

I want to give you a hug and share with you that pain is not your fault, that God is still with you and for you, and that He cares more than you could even imagine. I wrote this book to give you permission to grieve, to ask questions, to hurt—and to do so without apology. You can take as much time as you need. Emotions are not weak, and feelings are not to stay locked up inside our hearts or behind the closed door of a counseling office. Some of the kindest and most compassionate people have the ability to feel deeply for one another. Your pain is producing something great, and I don't want you to give up prematurely. I hope you'll take it from me, as someone who's been there and who's learned all of this by making all the mistakes.

I want you to know God's deep love for you.

I want us—you and me—to get unstuck from the weight and burden that sorrow can bear.

I don't have any special connection to God or a direct line to Him that He has not also provided for you. I can only tell you my story in the hope that it encourages you in yours, and that as you read these words, you will feel a little less alone.

From the beginning, I have always wanted to dedicate this book to anyone who has ever felt alone. I wrote it for the hurting, the restless, the disappointed, the stuck, the faithless—and yes, even the faithful.

Because I have been all of these things. All of us need lament. All of us long to be rescued from pain.

And so you are not alone, dear reader. Pain will not be forever, but pain will be present in this life, and so I pray for you. I pray for *us*. That God will meet us in our distress, and that we will end the pretend, *together*.

God meets us where we are at and not where we pretend to be.

So let's set aside our performing, put away our expectations, and stop our striving. God will meet us right where we are.

Let's uncover this language of old and see what fresh things it can stir in our faith.

May my words echo, ever so slightly, His vast love for you.

And may we never ever give up.

*With love,
Esther Fleece*

PART 1

FAKING FINE

CHAPTER 1

God Wants Our Sad

“But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail.”

LUKE 22:32

I had learned to fake fine by the time I was ten. As I walked down the long aisle on the way to the witness stand, the weight of how much I hated my life pressed against my chest like an anvil. Girls my age would typically dream of their wedding day while they played with Barbie dolls, but the only aisle I was accustomed to walking down was in a courtroom. You hardly have time to dream when you're in survival mode.

My extended family was scattered throughout the courtroom, and my parents sat with them on opposite sides from one another. So many familiar faces—yet as I passed, no one reached out to hug me, say hello, or even glance my way. *Why did my parents get to sit with someone, but I had to be alone? What had I done to deserve this?*

Quickly my mind flipped back through the many other times I had been dragged into court by my parents, through protracted divorce proceedings, custody battles, domestic violence lawsuits, and any other nonsense my father was involved in. He always saw fit to call me as a witness, even though I wasn't old enough to drive or kiss a boy. This time, I would be testifying in a felony case. I wasn't privy to the details

at the time, but I knew it pitted my family members against each other. The effects still linger to this day.

My father managed the family business that had been passed down through generations, and my mother was a stay-at-home-mom. She volunteered at church and was always involved in the PTA. They both cheered me on from the sidelines at my swim meets and gymnastics practices, at least for a few years. And on weekends, they would take my brother and me to golf and tennis lessons at the country club. From the outside, our family looked fine; we appeared put together in upper-middle-class suburbia. We were the family with the pool in the backyard—a hot tub, even—the “fun” house that people wanted to be at.

But slowly, alarmingly, all of that began to change. My father’s mental illness was changing everything, and while it felt like my family had disintegrated overnight, it had been a decade of disaster in the making. My father became more and more irrational and violent, and before long, my mother could no longer cover her bruises. Child Protective Services became more familiar than my own father, and my mother, brother, and I moved from house to house in order to stay safe.

We all tried to keep it hidden for so long, but today it was all coming out in the open as we gathered in the courtroom.

A police officer led me to the seat on the witness stand. I was scared, but even at ten years old, I wanted to appear strong. My father’s illness made him a threat to others, not just us. As the years went by and he remained untreated, his behavior got worse. Assault and battery of his employees. Assault and battery of police officers. Numerous attempts to kidnap me, out of some misguided sense that we were family and should be together at any cost. My father was in and out of jail, and while he was no longer welcome in our home, he kept trying to come back. I lived in fear of this man I had loved. Those formative years were filled with police raids, sleeping in hotels, and early morning Salvation Army runs so we could find new clothes after being displaced the night before.

Life was unstable and unsettling—and all the more confusing because the offender, my father, denied doing anything wrong.

Seated to my left in the courtroom was the judge, shrouded in black, sitting on his lofty podium. His countenance was stern. I was a social girl known for making friends with the people I met, but his lack of warmth caused my heart to tighten up inside. I clung tightly to the only thing I was allowed to have with me in the courtroom: a tiny stuffed-animal tiger I had received from my grandpa on a recent trip to Florida. Somehow I knew something bad was about to happen. I tried to pay attention, but everything in the room felt hazy.

I faced the courtroom and did my best to put on a big-girl face.

I was asked to place my hand on the Bible and swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

What would I have to lie about?

The questioning began.

They asked where I went to school and then asked me to point out my parents. They asked what seemed to be obvious questions, but still I couldn't relax.

Suddenly the judge interrupted. "You must answer the questions with a clear yes or no," he said to me. Evidently "yeah" was not permitted in a court of law.

Why was this judge talking so mean to me? Why is everybody so mad at me?

Suddenly I heard my father's lawyer say quietly to him, "Are you sure you want to do this?"

My father nodded vigorously without hesitation. His answers were usually no-nonsense, direct, and to the point. This answer was no exception.

I saw my father's lawyer remove something from a plastic bag. I felt panic rising as I realized what it was: my diary.

When life starts taking a turn for the worse, you handle things the

best you can. I had received a diary a few years before, and it was my safe place to write down what was in my heart. My family was a mess, but writing brought me clarity and calm. Some days I wrote down my dreams and my crushes on boys, but most days I filled the pages with hurtful things about my parents and the angst inside my heart.

I also filled the pages with things my father told me to write—indicting evidence against my mother that wasn't true. This confused me, but I did it because he pushed me to and I wanted to make him happy. He even told me how to spell the words I didn't know.

What was my diary doing in the courtroom? In that moment, I realized that multiple emotions can exist simultaneously. I felt hurt, angry, betrayed, sad, and scared. I began silently pleading with God that nobody would read what I had written out loud.

But it was even worse than that.

My father's lawyer approached the witness stand and asked me to read my words—or rather, my father's words he had coerced me to write—in front of everyone. My stomach felt like it was being punctured with knives. My heart felt like it was bleeding on the ground. I could not find the strength to read my own words aloud. All I could think was, *How did my father steal my diary?*

I hated crying in front of people, but as much as I tried to hold back the tears, they kept falling. *Why was my father doing this to me?*

I looked around frantically for help. *Why wasn't anyone coming to my rescue? Didn't anyone care?* I wanted to yell at my father. I felt violated in front of everybody. But I was also still so young and just wanted somebody to hold me. Instead, I fell out of my chair and onto the ground. I clung to my stuffed animal and wept bitterly. This was more than any little girl could handle.

Just then, the judge—already towering over me—rose to his feet and said in a stern voice, “Suck it up!”

I couldn't believe what I'd just heard. It took me a minute to register

his unkind words. *Didn't he know what was going on?* He treated me as if I was the one to blame. I cried even harder.

He repeated it louder. "Suck it up!"

Afraid of getting in trouble, I took a breath, wiped my tears, and sat back up in the chair. My body was upright, but my shattered heart was still on the ground.

But suck it up is what I was told to do, so that's what I did. I dried my tears, stared hard at the attorney, and went numb for the rest of the proceedings. It didn't hurt as much that way.

It was a life-changing day for our broken family. Not only did my family on separate sides of the aisle never reconcile, but my father was also found guilty and sentenced to jail on a felony sentence. His side of the family blamed me, and my mother's side was just as wounded.

It was a life-changing day for me as well—the day I made an important discovery: that sucking it up might not be such a bad idea. After all, that was the way to be strong—right? Surely if you can pretend everything is fine, it *will* be—right?

The lesson I internalized was that hiding my pain was the only way to please others, the only way my pain and fears couldn't be used against me, the only way to stay safe. I was determined to never again let anyone see what was really going on inside me. I tried hard not to know more than I needed to, either. It seemed like knowing my feelings only meant acknowledging the pain and abandonment I had tried to forget. I felt betrayed by my own emotions, so I decided to shut them down and out. I was only ten years old, but I vowed from then on to pretend I was fine. It was easier that way. It didn't hurt as much. And frankly, I couldn't see that I had any other choice.

So, ignorant of the long-term ramifications, from then on I bucked up and worked hard to look good. From the outside, you'd have never known I was a girl whose world was falling out from under her. I participated in back-to-back afterschool activities and played sports. I served

as class president or vice president each year from sixth grade and even into college. I attended church and youth group and tried to be a good person. The church loved my gifts. The church loved my people skills. The church loved my willingness to serve others and even benefited from my inability to say no. I didn't think it was a Christian thing to take "me time" or ask for the help I so desperately needed; plus, keeping my focus on others was one more way to distance myself from my own heartache.

From little hurts to extreme trauma, "suck it up" became my mantra. I just wanted to move forward fast in order to minimize the impact. I thought this was the best way to cope—that this is what adults were supposed to look like. I thought painful things were to be kept private, and that being emotional in a public setting was inappropriate. I didn't understand that whether my pain was the result of the sinfulness of another or my own deliberate sin and disobedience, the pain always went somewhere. It became exhausting to keep up with my "fine" facade, and the vows I established to protect my interests became the very things that would paralyze me for years to come.

If I was to heal from my past trauma and stop faking fine, I needed to face my pain and grieve my losses. But I didn't know how, and I wasn't interested in learning. Like so many people today, I had no grid for grief.

NO GRID FOR GRIEF

Fifteen years removed from that courtroom scene, I had a successful career at an international nonprofit and partnered or volunteered with ministries throughout the world. I thought success in work and relationships meant I was fine. After all, it seemed that God was blessing the work of my hands.

In fact, because my relationship with my biological father was so dysfunctional, I did not understand how God could be a good Father. So

I viewed Him as my employer—a cosmic boss I had to work hard for to please, to win His favor, and to earn a praiseworthy performance review.

I climbed the corporate ladder until I went from an entry-level position to vice president at age twenty-five. Then, finding a more mission-minded opportunity, I worked for a large Christian organization as its youngest female speaker, an “up-and-comer” on the national scene. Part of my role was to teach the importance of marriage and family to the millennial generation. It was more than a little ironic that in spite of how little I knew about the subject from my childhood, God was able to use me to guide and encourage others. It wasn’t long before CNN named me one of “5 Women in Religion to Watch” and *Christianity Today* featured me among their list of “Top Women Shaping the Church and Culture.” I was proud of these accomplishments because I thought I was working for God, but even the recognition was reinforcing the idea that strength and accolades were the measures of a successful Christian life.

I was working at the largest marriage and family nonprofit in the world, attending the largest church in Colorado, and serving on the leadership team for one of the largest college groups in the nation. I didn’t fake fine intentionally; I just thought it was what God expected of me. I saw myself as an overcomer. I thought I had to be strong because God wants competent, un-anxious Christians.

My next job took me to Orange County, California, where I thought I had really made it. My love for shopping and the beach found its home, and my office was on the thirteenth floor, overlooking the city. I *had* made it. So why was I miserable? Late nights, seven-day workweeks—if God had led me to this place, why did life feel so hard?

Turns out that “arriving” doesn’t make a person happy, any more than striving does. But I didn’t know how to be an unhappy Christian. I didn’t even know it was okay. After all, nobody likes a complainer.

So I kept working hard to look good and put my past in the past. I hardly slept. Who had time to sleep? I was speaking and teaching

and leading mission trips on the side. I would be asked to speak on the importance of marriage and family, rarely shedding a tear for what I went through during my own traumatic childhood. It felt like another lifetime ago. I assumed God had healed my heart, because I couldn't feel pain anymore. Instead, I had simply mastered suppressing every emotion I ever felt, and I gave God credit for a healing I had never experienced. I was faking fine—not intentionally, not even consciously—but I was not really fine. The past I'd tried so hard to conceal was beginning to rear its ugly head. I would wake up in the middle of the night with horrible nightmares of my childhood and wonder why all of a sudden the painful emotions were beginning to take over.

The career, the money, even the happiness weren't my primary goals; rather, I was pursuing the route that would bring me the least amount of pain. So when this "good" path brought pain, I was confused. All I wanted was to be fine. But life was just not working out the way I had hoped, and my longstanding coping mechanisms were starting to fray at the edges. I tried to stay busy and not think about it; I tried to "give thanks in all circumstances";* I tried to endure trial after trial with a stiff upper lip.

It didn't work. It became a full-time job to suck it up and to keep up the appearance that I was doing okay.

But I wasn't.

And I couldn't keep faking it.

Something had to give.

So, barely nine months after I'd "made it" in California, I quit my job. At the age of thirty, I walked away from everything I had worked so hard to build and decided to wait on God for direction. I moved in with one of the families I had lived with during college. I resigned from work, anticipating a three-month time of rest. A vacation of sorts, for I knew

* 1 Thessalonians 5:18.

the pace I was going at was not sustainable, but I didn't know how to live any other way. I felt God whisper to me to "wait" and "be still"—yet everybody else, including those inside the church, were asking me what I was going to do next.

The expectations of others, as well as the expectations we put on ourselves, can leave us with an incredible amount of pressure. The pressure to keep up is sometimes so significant that we default to everything being fine—even our unhappy lives and our packed-tight calendars—because we want to avoid being seen as weak or in need. But this downtime was necessary for me to chart out a new normal. Not having things all neatly put together and charted out leaves time and space and quiet for our unhealthy normal and wrong patterns of identity to be exposed. God was beginning to reshape my wrong perceptions of the Christian faith.

Still, I wanted to fit in. I wanted job security and a steady paycheck—and goodness, I missed the shopping. This was an important season between me and God, and I almost missed it. He was desperately wanting to reframe my view of Him, yet I was stuck on the idea that I was somehow failing Him. When the path got hard, I began to see God as I did that courtroom judge—disappointed in me and expecting me to keep myself together. I set out each day to know God and to serve Him, but I felt like I was benched—sidelined by the God of the universe.

Two years went by in this season of waiting, and I was without a job or a vision of what my future would hold. I would have daily quiet times, yet it felt like God was distant from me. God had purpose in my everyday, but it didn't feel like enough. I wasn't seeing His favor or His promises come true for my life. And when the world around me continued to hurt, I began to wonder if God Himself was even good. My faith began to buckle, and I wanted to keep it all inside. I knew God was real, but was God kind? I struggled to pray. I hardly knew how to relate to Him anymore. Social media added to the feeling of abandonment of God, wondering why He could be using so many of my friends in

mighty ways, yet didn't seem interested in me. So I began to lose hope. Where were the blessings of God? Had I lost His favor? I was still waiting for God to deliver me from my circumstances instead of letting Him transform me in the midst of my pain.

In hindsight, I believe God's walking me through this painful season was one of the kindest things He could have done for me. He wanted to break my habit of faking fine and show me what it means to trust Him and truly live. But it surely was an unexpected journey. And if I would have continued suppressing my emotions, I am convinced my angst would have gotten the best of me.

GOD WANTS OUR SAD

Maybe you've never been admonished by a courtroom judge or threatened by a parent, but I'll bet you can remember some of the pivotal moments that taught you to fake fine to one degree or another. Maybe you grew up being told that boys don't cry, so you stuffed your pain deep inside. Maybe you had all the right clothes and all the right friends and all the right grades, but you never invited friends over—because then they'd know the mess you lived with at home. Maybe you were told that if you just did certain things and clicked your heels, you'd have the good life you've always wanted—you know, the one the prosperity gospel is always promising—but you haven't even glimpsed it on the horizon.

The story our culture tells us—and even some misguided churches—is that health, wealth, and prosperity can and should be ours. As Americans, we are often led to believe we are entitled to these things. We are led to believe life should be easy, and we should be happy.

So, of course, when life crashes hard, we believe something must be wrong with us. And that's exactly what I began to believe.

I was always wanting more, wanting to do more, and wanting to make a bigger impact for the kingdom. But suddenly I felt my efforts were as useless as banging my head against a brick wall. I didn't go to a university to be unemployed, and I certainly hadn't built a home for myself only to be living with family again at the age of thirty. I was taught I could be anyone and do anything. I had been taught to take what was mine and fight to the top, but I had not been taught what to do when all you do is not enough. Somewhere along the way, I missed out on learning a theology of suffering. Prayer was a significant part of my life, yet I had never been taught about the prayer called lament.

Lament is one of those words we don't use very much today. It's not a regular entry in our vocabulary, even with us church people. I was in my late twenties before I really even knew what this word meant, despite growing up in church and staying connected to a Christian community in my early adult years. When everything hit rock bottom, it was my counselor who was the one to first explain it to me.

Lament, he said, is simply expressing honest emotions to God when life is not going as planned. Whether we're hurt, frustrated, confused, betrayed, overwhelmed, sad, or disappointed, lament is the language God has given us to talk to Him right in the middle of life's messes. It's real talk with God when you're hurting, when all you can do is cry out for His help. It's a prayer that says, *God, I'm hurting—will You meet me here?* And as such, it is a prayer to which God always responds.

This is not a prayer for the superspiritual. Lament is a prayer for all of us.

Not everyone experiences prosperity, but everyone we know will know loss and grief. Each and every one of us will experience setbacks, letdowns, failures, and betrayals. Every one of us will encounter change that is hard, lose loved ones before their time, and see relationships fail with people we counted on.

So what do we do when everything is not fine? Why are we shooting

for the easy-street, pain-free life anyway? Where did we come up with the idea that we should be happy all the time?

We all need do-over days, and sometimes we will wake up, eat a bowl of ice cream for breakfast, and head straight back to bed. This should not surprise us because Scripture tells us that we will go through different seasons—not all of them pleasant.

Adam and Eve were banished from the garden, the only home they'd ever known.

The Israelites wandered the wilderness for forty years before they entered the Promised Land.

The prophets ripped their clothing, grieved in the streets, and warned God's people to repent and return.

Jesus died the most gruesome death the Romans could come up with. And the early church faced persecution of all kinds.

I don't see many easy-street lives in the Bible. And I certainly don't see God demanding that we keep a stiff upper lip through hard times.

In fact, D. A. Carson, a professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, writes, "There is no attempt in Scripture to whitewash the anguish of God's people when they undergo suffering. They argue with God, they complain to God, they weep before God. Theirs is not a faith that leads to dry-eyed stoicism, but to a faith so robust it wrestles with God."^{*}

So where do all the clichés and false hopes we use to explain suffering come from? Not the Bible, and certainly not from God Himself.

My insistence that I have a nice, easy, "fine" life was not only unbiblical; it was also an unrealistic expectation that ended up making me feel disengaged from God and disappointed in Him. I thought I was suffering because I had done something wrong. I had fallen for clichés, which only increased my pain.

^{*} D. A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 67.

The majority of us have said or heard predictable clichés in times of suffering.

“If God brings you to it, He’ll bring you through it.”

“It could have been worse.”

“Everything happens for a reason.”

This is not a biblical way of thinking, nor is it a biblical way of dealing. We say these things because, somewhere along the way, we lost the biblical language of lament. We have not discovered the beauty in sorrow, so we try to get out of pain as quickly as possible—and we expect others to do so as well. But life will let all of us down, and we need a way to talk about it—a way we have lost along the way.

I have learned through the years that God does not want just our happy; He also really wants our sad. Everything is not fine, and God wants to hear about it. He is drawn to us when we’re mourning and blesses us in a special way. God is not up there minimizing our pain and comparing it to others who have it worse than we do. God wants all pain to be surrendered to Him, and He has the capacity to respond to it all with infinite compassion.

What’s more, lament is a pathway. Honest expression to God makes way for God to come and work His real healing. Lament is a channel for powerful transformation. It is exactly the kind of song we need for hope and healing.

For so much of my life, I thought sucking it up and faking away the pain showed true strength. But real strength is identifying a wound and asking God to enter it. We are robbing ourselves of a divine mystery and a divine intimacy when we pretend to have it all together. In fact, we lose an entire vocabulary from our prayers when we silence the reality of our pain. If questions and cries and laments are not cleaned up throughout Scripture, then why are we cleaning them up or removing them completely from our language?

Nobody likes dealing with pain, but we lose so much by wishing it

away. What has silencing laments cost us? It has cost us far more than church attendance; it has prevented people from feeling comfortable enough to even enter our church doors. Many have walked away from Christian community because of how they were treated when they were in pain. And some have even left the faith entirely because they weren't receiving the "prosperity" they were told they were entitled to as believers. Maybe the reason the church has gained a reputation of being inauthentic and superficial is because we have not let our laments be heard—by each other or even by ourselves.

How often have you tried not to cry your own tears? Maybe you're like me, and you weren't prepared for life to be shockingly painful at times. Or maybe you believe, as I did, that you have to fake fine because God wants strong, un-anxious Christians. I know I am not the only one who minimizes my pain, works hard to get out of it, or just pretends that everything is okay. But I have found that if we minimize our suffering to a 3 on the pain scale, then we only heal at a 3 as well.

Has your pain ever been silenced or carelessly addressed? Have you ever been met with a "suck it up" when your pain has been exposed? How about someone wrongly diagnosing your pain and giving advice when you never asked for it? Or someone offering a fix-it-overnight formula not found anywhere in Scripture? I have yet to meet a person who truly has everything together. Think of the people who say everything is "fine" all the time. How many times is "how are you?" asked in our church hallways and coffee times only to be responded with an automatic "good!"—even if it's not true? The church is supposed to be the safest place to share our pain. It should be a sanctuary for our healing. And yet the epidemic of faking fine has reached into its walls as well.

We are a wounded people, but in a prosperous and entitled culture, we have not learned enough about the holy and healing power of grieving our losses honestly. We are not kind to ourselves when it comes to

processing grief and heartache. Many of us expect ourselves to simply move on after trauma or loss—when life is not that simple at all.

Scripture doesn't tell us to pretend we're peaceful when we're not, act like everything is fine when it's not, and do everything we can to suppress our sorrow. God doesn't insist that we go to our "happy place" and ignore our sad, yet so many of our churches preach that we will have peace and prosperity just by virtue of being Christians. Scripture, in contrast, tells us that as followers of Christ, we are called to serve a "man of sorrows"* who died a gruesome death. Until we identify ourselves with our Savior and acknowledge, as He did, just how painful life can be, we won't be able to lament or to overcome. And if we silence our own cries, then we will inevitably silence the cries of those around us. We cannot carefully address the wounds of others if we are carelessly addressing our own.

The fact is, God does not expect us to have it all together, so it is a real disservice when our Christian communities create this expectation. We will be unsuccessful at sitting with hurting people if we have not allowed ourselves to grieve and wail and mourn and go through the lament process ourselves. God understands that life is full of pressures, hurts, stings. He took on flesh so He could relate to us in both our joy and pain. He wants us to feel and express every emotion before Him and not minimize a thing. There is no "fake it till you make it" in Scripture. When we fake fine, we fake our way out of authentic relationship with God, others, and ourselves.

RECLAIMING A LOST LANGUAGE

Spiritual maturity does not mean living a lament-less life; rather, it means we grow into becoming good lamenters and thus grow in our need for

* Isaiah 53:3 NASB.

God. The songs of lament are the very songs we need for healing and wholeness, yet how many of us are singing them in our church services today? We often call worship music “praise songs”—and these are good and necessary songs guiding us to praise God for who He is and what He has done for us. But where are the songs asking God for help? Where are the songs expressing the harsh realities of the world we live in, while looking to the only Savior? If we begin to believe God only accepts “happy” songs, our perception of God and the life of faith will be skewed. There were times I had to awkwardly walk out of church because I could not honestly sing “I’ve got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart!”

My silenced cries prevented me from seeing a clear picture of God. Throughout Scripture, we see that God Himself is deeply emotional; each member of the Trinity has experienced grief.

God the Father grieves: “Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. The LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart.”*

The Holy Spirit grieves: “Yet they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit.”†

Jesus grieves: He grieved over His friend Lazarus’s death, even though He knew Lazarus would live again. The shortest verse in the Bible is rich with theological insight: “Jesus wept.”‡ In just two words, we are given a glimpse into the depth of emotion of our Savior—who entered into our suffering to be with us out of incredible love.

If we don’t allow painful emotions to surface, then we are setting expectations for ourselves that even God cannot meet. Nobody laments more than God Himself. And we are called to be like Him.

What a kind God we have, who has warned us that pain in this life

* Genesis 6:5–6 NASB.

† Isaiah 63:10.

‡ John 11:35.

will come and has given us a language to relate to Him in the midst of it. We are not abandoned in a lament; we are being refined, renewed, and held. When we begin to understand God as a God who weeps, we begin to see Him as someone safe to run to in the midst of our pain.

Lament is not a common word in our churches today, though it is a language woven throughout Scripture. A lament is a passionate expression of our pain that God meets us in. It's real talk with God about the ways we are hurting. It's an honest prayer to God about where we are, not where we are pretending to be. A lament may take the form of a plea for help in a time of distress or a protest over injustice. Strong's Hebrew concordance says that the word *lament* has the same root word as "to mourn" and "to wail." Isn't that amazing? Lament doesn't have to be a formal, structured prayer. This prayer is not about being polite or restrained or holding it together. No, lament is about our most honest expression of pain. Lament is about tapping honestly into our emotions in a deep and primal way that sometimes transcends words. I am comforted to know that God meets us here, any way we choose to cry out.

But in my experience, Christians are not exactly known for being a lamenting people. Too often, we suck it up instead and prescribe a misguided interpretation of how to live with loss. How many of us mistakenly believe that our strength is what God wants from us, when it is our brokenness that actually attracts Him the most?

It was never meant to be this way. God's grace meets us where we are, not where we pretend to be.

It takes only a peek at Scripture to challenge our misconceptions. Did you know that Abraham lamented? Joseph lamented. David lamented. Ezekiel and Jeremiah, Rachel and Hannah, Peter and Paul all lamented. The majority of the psalms are laments, and the Old Testament even has a book called Lamentations, written by a weeping prophet.

What would we miss if we removed laments from the Bible? We would miss entire books; we would lose stories of people we can relate to;

we would miss out on receiving and knowing God's presence, comfort, and provision in the midst of our stories. We might even miss our Savior, because Jesus Himself lamented the brokenness He encountered in our broken world.

To know God is to need God. So where are all the needy Christians? Every church in America dedicates a portion of the service to worship—with happy, upbeat music and key changes that rise with electric emotion. Where is the time dedicated to lament? Too many of us affirm happy emotions while neglecting painful ones.

People are leaving the church because they are being told their pain isn't welcome, that there's no place for their pain when they rush through our doors. It appears we are keeping disappointment and heartache inside the counseling offices instead of expressing them in corporate worship or even from the pulpit. What would happen if our pastors opened up about their unanswered prayers? What if our leaders shared with us their hurts and fears so we would not feel alone in ours? The church is at its healthiest when it is a safe place to lament, to heal, and to worship, and it is most unhealthy when we don't allow heartache and disappointment to be expressed. If we are operating this way—as churches or small groups or disciples of Christ, do we recognize that even Jesus Himself would not have found a home in our presence?

I'm not sharing these things to put one more thing on your to-do or to-be list; I am simply saying it because faking fine almost killed my faith. I'm not saying this to dishonor the church either, because I love the church. I am merely trying to pose the question: Where have all the lamenters gone? To be the church that Jesus hoped for, we need this language in our life together.

But it seems to me that lament is the prayer we have forgotten. I'll be the first to say I forgot it myself. We are so quick to get to the beauty that we skip over the brokenness or have a hard time seeing beauty arise amidst brokenness. This has led us into some dangerous and unbiblical

theology. And if we are going to recover a healthy, biblical understanding of how God meets us in our pain, we need to recover the lost prayer of lament in our churches. Authentic praise flows from honest prayer, unrestrained lament, and trusting dependence. And this is when brokenness becomes beautiful.

A lamenting prayer is a prayer that is never silenced and never wasted. In my experience, a prayer of lament offers the best return on investment in this broken world, because a lament not only draws us near to God; it draws God near to us. Lamenting allows the Spirit of God to intercede on our behalf, and through this honest groaning, a sweet trust in God can grow. In fact, I've come to see lamenting as evidence of a healthy relationship with God. I don't think it will ever be something I don't have to do. I used to think that once I got through a hard season, everything would be fine again. Now I just see lamenting as part of life. It's okay to not be okay. God will never ask you to suck it up.

That doesn't mean God doesn't want us to be happy. But sometimes life is incredibly hard, and in these moments, God wants our sad. My faking fine for many years was really a vain attempt to keep God happy with me. I didn't know that God could be happy with my sad. Having all of me is what makes God happy. He doesn't want my portions of sad rearranged or sanitized before I come to Him. My questions, laments, doubts, and fears—all of these can be handled by Him and held by Him. It's what He is there for! Not just *some* of our genuine emotions, but *all* of them. And that's what this book is about: permission to feel it all and express it honestly to God through prayer.

In his book *The Songs of Jesus*, Timothy Keller writes, "It is we who read hastily, skip prayer, and fail to meditate on his Word, who find it confusing."* As I began really studying Scripture, I found the entitled life I'd been anticipating to be profoundly unbiblical. It was only after I

* Timothy Keller, *The Songs of Jesus: A Year of Daily Devotions in the Psalms* (New York: Viking, 2015), 29.

observed how the followers of God in both the Old and New Testaments persevered despite challenging lives and circumstances did I want to know how my faith could survive like that too.

A lament saves us from staying stuck in grief and rescues us from a faith based on falsehoods. It was a false belief that told me I would always be incapable of being loved. It was a false belief that led me to believe I was the reason for my parents' divorce. It was a false belief that told me I would never find my way out of despair. These false beliefs, combined with my inability to lament, caused a deep wedge between me and God. God was not angry with me about this. He understands the complexity of human emotions. But I had to be willing to communicate with Him to see what I needed and what He was doing and to uncover the false beliefs prohibiting my intimacy with Him.

While a lament may not change our circumstances, it will help clear up our misunderstandings about God. When we lament to God, we see Him more clearly on the other side. God does not leave us in lament, any more than He leaves us forever in this messed-up world. A lament is a pathway; it serves a purpose. But a lament denied turns into a lie, and this is why God wants us to express them freely. Because if faking fine keeps us stuck in our pain, even though we pretend we're okay, lament becomes an authentic pathway leading to real healing. Life in this world is painful—excruciatingly so at times—but reclaiming the language of lament allows God to infuse His very being into ours and equip us to face the challenges of life with perseverance, trust, and a sense of purpose.

Faking fine is hurting us, and it's time to break our habit. A lament, on the other hand, is a cry that God can work with, because it keeps the conversation going just when we need Him most. In fact, learning to lament saved my faith, and I have written this book for no other reason than I want it to save yours too.

Almighty God, teach us to pray (Luke 11:1). There are so many aspects of You we have yet to learn, and so much of You still left to discover. Will You reveal Yourself to me through this book? I am worn out from my groaning (Psalm 6:6). Will you meet with me? Save me, for the waters have come up to my neck (Psalm 69:1). Hear my cry for help (Psalm 5:2). Have mercy on me, for I am faint; heal me, for my bones are in agony (Psalm 6:2), and answer me when I am in distress (Psalm 20:1). Amen.