



RESILIENT AND REDEEMED

**Lessons about
Suicidality and Depression
from the Psych Ward**

CHRIS MORRIS

“With deep compassion, Chris Morris shares his heartbreaking yet hopeful story. He navigates the often-misunderstood intersection of mental health and spiritual well-being with hope and wisdom that are desperately needed in today’s conversations about mental health in the church. I pray that Chris’s vulnerability starts conversations among believers, church leaders, and families.”

Kathi Lipp, author and podcaster, Clutter Free Academy

“Chris Morris is a voice the church needs to hear! By courageously sharing his story, Chris opens a much-needed conversation about mental health, weaving personal narratives, theological insights, and practical guidance into a topic that has long been left in the shadows of religious communities.”

Marty Kaiser, campus pastor, Vineyard Church Reveal

“In this book you will encounter Chris as a wise guide who shares his journey’s harsh and painful realities. As he skillfully unfolds his story, he encourages all of us to open ourselves to the beautiful possibilities for hope and healing in Jesus. May we all listen to Chris as he points us to Jesus, and may the church be filled with gritty friendships.”

Rev. Dr. Gino Curcuruto, pastor, The Table Philadelphia

“Open this book and journey with Chris Morris in the struggle to make sense of mental illness within the Christian life. Read the stories, reflect on Scripture, and find hope. In these pages, Chris helps us see God as present in the struggle. *Resilient and Redeemed* is a gift to all of us who struggle with mental illness or walk with someone who does.”

David Fitch, Lindner Chair of Evangelical Theology,
Northern Seminary, Chicago

“If you are a Christian who battles with depression and suicide, this book is for you. If you have a loved one who struggles with these same elements, this book will help you understand their

battle and how you can encourage and pray for them. Chris invites the reader into his very personal journey with reflection and understanding, and his words provide hope and healing through God.”

Morgan L. Busse, award-winning author of *THE RAVENWOOD SAGA* and *SKYWORLD* series, and pastor’s wife

“I ask my clients, ‘Has your faith, theology, or church experience been helpful or harmful?’ Chris vulnerably and courageously writes about how he has been harmed and most importantly how he has been helped, literally saved, by God and treatment. He shares how depression can affect marriages. It’s real, honest, and hopeful.”

Sovann Pen, host, *The Courage, Coaching and Counseling Podcast*; licensed professional counselor,
A New Day Counseling Center

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This book is for all my friends and family who have stood beside me through all the moments in this book, and who have never stopped loving me or wishing me the best. Without each and every one of you, I wouldn't be here to write this book.

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INTRODUCTION

What to Expect in This Book

First things first. I hope if you've picked up this book, you are safe. If this book finds you in a mental health crisis, do me a favor right now—set it down, pick up your phone, and call a friend. If you don't have a safe friend to call, dial 9-8-8, the mental health helpline. Please don't let another second go by without getting in touch with someone who cares deeply about this life moving forward for you.

If that's not you, I'm guessing you know what it's like to feel on edge or off-kilter. You've probably had some moments when you've wondered how the day will end. You're not alone in this. Mental health statistics in the last few years have been astounding. In the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, the global prevalence of anxiety and depression increased by a massive 25 percent, according to a scientific brief released by the World Health Organization.¹ Since these figures only include those individuals who have sought help for their mental health, the actual numbers are

1. "COVID-19 pandemic triggers 25% increase in prevalence of anxiety and depression worldwide," *World Health Organization*, March 2, 2022, <https://www.who.int/news/item/02-03-2022-covid-19-pandemic-triggers-25-increase-in-prevalence-of-anxiety-and-depression-worldwide>.

even higher. This isn't just an American phenomenon—these are global numbers. Regardless of where you call home, life has become harder to deal with these days.

And it isn't just the pandemic. Even studies completed before COVID hit show a spike in mental health challenges. More than half of all U.S. adults (58 percent) and practicing Christians (54 percent) say that at least one relational or emotional/mental health issue impacts their most important relationships.² Anxiety and depression are the most common challenges to relational satisfaction, with more than one-third of practicing Christians saying one or the other (or both) impacts their close relationships.³ A 2018 Cigna study of more than 20,000 U.S. adults revealed that “just under half of all those surveyed report sometimes or always feeling alone” and that 43 percent of those surveyed “sometimes or always feel . . . that their relationships are not meaningful.”⁴

How do we use statistics like this? Where can we find God in the middle of—let's be honest and call it what it is—this mess?

The very first step: talk more about it. There's just not enough energy being expended on conversations about mental health in the church. Most churches still act as though mental illness occurs because of the odd exception instead of being a normal part of life. This assumption harms the people sitting in the pews every week. If something doesn't change, those in the mental illness community will stop participating in churches altogether, and that's a terrible prospect.

That's where this book comes in.

We're going to have a frank and open conversation about depression and suicidality, without fear or embarrassment or shame. We're going to investigate the darkness and find God.

2. *Restoring Relationships: How Churches Can Help People Heal and Develop Healthy Connections*, Barna Group, 2020, 12.

3. *Restoring Relationships*, Barna, 13.

4. “Cigna U.S. Loneliness Index,” *Cigna*, 2018, 3, <https://legacy.cigna.com/static/www-cigna-com/docs/about-us/newsroom/studies-and-reports/combating-loneliness/loneliness-survey-2018-full-report.pdf>.

News flash: I've struggled with depression and suicidality my entire adult life. There have been seasons when the pressure of these things lessens, but I'm always aware of them in the back of my mind. Always.

Despite this reality, I can trace the presence of God in my life. God has never given up on me, even when I've given up on myself. Certainly, I didn't always *recognize* God's quiet movement, like when I attempted suicide in 2020, but I know I just missed his whispers until after the fact.

The church needs to hear this message: God doesn't disqualify anyone because of a mental health diagnosis. He does not become disappointed or befuddled or angry with us because we're battling depression or anxiety. God doesn't shake his head and throw up his hands, even if we're admitted to an inpatient facility. God is in the business of qualifying people with murky motives, broken dreams, busted pasts, and messed-up lives. He accomplishes his goals through people, and there are no perfect humans to choose from, save Jesus, who sits at the right hand of the Father now, interceding on our behalf.

Indeed, we have been called to good works that God has ordained beforehand, and we have been perfectly crafted for these works based on the exact dimensions of our experience and expertise. But we can only engage in these works when we move past the fear and shame of our mental health diagnoses. That's the heart of this book: to empower you to move into wholehearted service for God, regardless of any mental health struggle or diagnosis you might have. And I truly believe that this can happen, both because of the witness of Scripture and because this is precisely what God has done in my own life.

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What to Expect in this Book

Each chapter will share a vignette from my life, an episode in which my lifelong battle with depression raised its head. We'll take our time walking through these moments. After each vignette, I'll share what I learned from that experience and then share applications and reflection-and-discussion questions. We'll end with a verse and a short meditation focused on the steadfastness of God, the trustworthiness of his presence, his grand, unending love, and how nothing—not even a mental health diagnosis—can separate us from that love.

Will this book be the answer to all your mental health struggles? I wish! But we both know mental health is too complex for that. However, I anticipate your time in these pages could help you move forward in your journey with God and mental health in three distinct ways.

First, you'll see from my story that God doesn't disqualify anyone because of a mental health diagnosis, and that he continues to invest his love and care into our lives regardless of how healthy we might be. Second, you'll gain some specific skills to call upon when your mental health feels out of control. These skills are powerful antidotes to the all-too-familiar feelings of helplessness and despair that come with mental illness. Third, as you wrestle with the truth of God's love for you and practice using good tools, you'll develop a stronger sense of mental stability, growth, and equilibrium in your life. This may be a book you come back to more than once to relearn and remember its lessons.

Likewise, I have a threefold prayer for you as you read. First, I hope you'll be encouraged in your walk with Christ, with a deeper assurance that no diagnosis can keep you from intimacy with God. Next, I want you to find strength in the practices outlined in this book so that you feel less alone in your journey. Finally, I pray you'll find greater hope as you look toward a future in which your mental health does not define your life.

Three Quick Notes

I need to mention a few things before we jump into the vignettes. Number one: my memory isn't always perfect, so there's a chance that I'm misremembering something. I've done everything I can to run these moments by other people who were there, to make sure I'm not exaggerating or straight-up imagining things that happened, but it's possible something slipped through. Nobody can remember everything correctly, even if those recollections end up in a book like mine have here. It's not an intentional oversight.

Second, the book promises lessons I learned in the psych ward, and we will get there. However, this book walks through my life in a broadly chronological way, and my visits to mental health facilities are more recent developments. This means that the psych ward visits come later in the book, but I promise they are coming. I learned a lot of lessons along the way to the psych ward, which largely became clear for me during my stays, as I had time to ruminate on my lifelong struggles with depression and suicidality. So just trust the process and keep reading. You'll eventually get to the psych ward and resilience. There's a lot to walk through before we arrive at those moments in my life, though.

Third, I have created a video course on resilience specifically for the readers of this book. I cover topics like what tools you can use to access resilience in your life and whether resilience has limits. You can find the QR code to this course in the *Additional Resources* section of this book toward the end.

1

Meeting Jesus

Then call on me when you are in trouble, and I will rescue you, and you will give me glory.

Psalm 50:15

My Story

In a moment of total despair, I cried out to the God I didn't even believe in. "If you're real, God—whoever you are—you have seven days to show me or I'm going to end my life. I don't see the reason to go on, so you better get to work. I'm not kidding. Seven days, or else. Amen, I guess." I had turned fifteen a few months prior, so some part of this was teenage dramatics, but some of it pointed to deeper problems. I felt overwhelmed by my life, and I needed something to change. I had to know some reason for my life existed beyond the atheistic existence I'd been experiencing.

It's not that I had been raised in an antireligious environment, but an ambivalent one. It was more like I needed to figure out on my own what I believed about God, and my parents weren't that

concerned with giving me help on this topic. That's not a fair thing to put on a kid, so I chose not to believe anything. I figured God would show up if he wanted me to believe something different, and then I basically lived as though God didn't exist. While I carried a bit of a dark storm cloud over my head, I still felt like atheism worked out all right for me overall. I had some stuff to deal with from my parents' divorce and my dad's alcoholism, which I wouldn't deal with for a long time, but I got through most days without an emotional breakdown. As I said, I did all right—not great, but decent. Then the bottom fell out of my so-so life in an instant.

I woke up one morning to get ready for school and noticed my mom wasn't awake yet. That was odd because she usually walked out the door as I woke up. I went into her bedroom to see if she had just overslept, and I saw her on her bed in the middle of a seizure. "Mom, are you okay?" I asked. She came out of her seizure for just a moment and said, "Yeah, I'm just not feeling well. Check back with me in five minutes." Then she went back to seizing. Shaken to my core, I listened to my mom anyway. I grabbed some breakfast and wolfed it down, thinking the whole time about my mom and wondering what had happened. After I finished my meal, I went back to check on my mom. She remained in a seizure, but this time unresponsive.

I called 9-1-1.

"What's your emergency?"

"My mom is having a seizure that's lasted over five minutes and won't stop."

"Okay, we will send an ambulance to your house. Hang in there!"

A few long minutes later, the paramedics arrived and started checking my mom. "Does your mom use drugs?"

"No, she doesn't use drugs—why would you ask me that?"

"This looks like a drug overdose to me, that's why." (I look back on this and shake my head—who tells a fifteen-year-old his mom might be overdosing on drugs?)

For some reason, they didn't let me ride in the ambulance with my mom, so I found myself alone with a disaster of a house left by the paramedics, wondering if my mom would die or not. I didn't know what to do, and I couldn't think of anyone to call and ask for help, so I did the only thing that made sense—I went to school.

By the time I arrived at school, the first period had already started. I walked into the office to get a pass for class, and the office assistant asked me why I came to school late that day. I burst into tears and blurted out, "Because I think my mom might die!" The office assistant wisely got my school counselor, who asked me why I felt this way. I explained everything that had happened and then he drove me to the hospital. We found my mom's room. She had stopped seizing but remained unconscious. He stayed with me until we could get my mom's boyfriend on the phone, and he came to the hospital. My mom fought for her life over the next several days. Her temperature spiked to the degree that the doctors worried about brain damage or other permanent damage to her body. Several days later, the doctors released my mom from the hospital and things started to get back to normal for our family.

But not for me. If my mom, perhaps the kindest person I knew, could almost die at a moment's notice for no discernible reason, then what was the point of life? I continued to feel more and more desperation in my life as I explored all the religious systems of the world. I ran through Hinduism, New Age spirituality, Mormonism, Islam, and other less popular faith systems, but none made sense to me. I even considered Norse mythology! I needed to know the purpose of life, and I found myself increasingly desperate. So, I made my bargain with God. I didn't believe at that moment that God existed, and I certainly didn't expect him to be paying attention to me if he did. But the threat of suicide in seven days loomed large—I had a plan and an intent to execute the plan. I

never thought God would use the stranger next door to change my life, but that's exactly what he did.

On day six after my plea for God to show up, my next-door neighbor whom I'd never spoken to knocked on my front door and invited me to her birthday party right then. I told her I didn't have time to come to her party. She peeked around me and said, "I think your Nintendo won't miss you if you stop by for an hour or so." I told her I didn't have a present, and she countered that she didn't need one from me. We went back and forth a few more times, and finally I capitulated, mostly because I couldn't think of any other excuses. I followed her back to her party with a bunch of strangers, expecting to leave about five minutes later. Instead, every single person I met overwhelmed me with kindness and genuine interest in me, to the degree that I said to someone, "I'm sort of a jerk. Why are you being so nice to me?" They replied that their kindness came from Jesus and that I should come with them to church the next day to learn more. Mostly because I hadn't explored Christianity yet and knew time was short on my bargain with God, I agreed to show up. This decision changed my life.

The next day, I went to church for the first time in I don't know how long. The youth pastor talked about Romans 8, and he ended with a powerful promise: "Nothing can separate any of you from the love of God in Christ Jesus, but only if you are in Christ Jesus. If you aren't in Christ, then the love of God isn't for you yet. It can be, but it's not activated yet."

He invited anyone who wanted to know more about this love of God to come up and talk to him. While he spoke about the love of God, my spirit burned inside me. I know enough now to know the Spirit of God wooed me to salvation, but I didn't know that then. I just knew that I needed to understand more about this Jesus.

I went up and talked to the youth pastor, and he shared the good news of the gospel with me. He told me I had sinned and deserved death, but that through the sacrifice of Jesus, I instead had the opportunity to have a close friendship with God. He asked

me if I wanted that friendship, and I almost leaped out of my skin saying yes. At that moment, I prayed a prayer of salvation, and I can honestly tell you my life has never been the same. For a season, my depression and suicidality even lifted in the joy of my new spiritual life. It would return, but for a few years, I had the joy of being free from these burdens and felt the joy of growing and learning more about God.

What I Learned

God listened to the desperate prayer of a suicidal fifteen-year-old kid and orchestrated events so that I would hear just the right message on day seven of my bargain with God. He used a stranger who lived next door to me. He used a group of kind strangers I'd never met before. He used a youth pastor who happened to be preaching about the unconquerable love of God in Christ. At that moment, I learned that God cared intimately for me—yes, even busted and broken and messed-up me. I didn't miss the fact that God wasn't late in fulfilling his end of the bargain I had half-seriously made with him. Even though I wasn't actually expecting any God to show up, I had seriously planned to end my life. My mom had a gun. I knew where to find it and how to use it. I had planned to end my life in just one more day. Instead, God jumped into the middle of my reality and said, "No, Chris. I love you desperately. Don't end your life." He said this through a dozen people, and he didn't use those words even once, but I received the message loud and clear.

God jumped into the middle of my reality and said, "No, Chris. I love you desperately. Don't end your life." He said this through a dozen people, and he didn't use those words even once, but I received the message loud and clear.

This message would form the core of my next five to seven years. I quickly slipped into a mode where I allowed the love of God to become the foundation of my life. In this season, I didn't battle any suicidal ideations and I had very few depressive episodes. Things felt fixed by a magical, kind, and loving Jesus, and I reveled in this newfound life and hope. Alas, things weren't meant to stay this way, and I eventually had to learn some hard lessons about how God saves us through our trials more often than he saves us from our trials. For this season though, the miraculous healing of my suicidality filled me with great hope for my future.

I pray for each one of you that God takes away your suicidality and depression, at least for a season, as he did for me. It's a glorious sense of freedom that I can't even find words to explain, and in some ways, I wish I still lived out of that freedom. I have learned much about the grace of God through the dark spaces I've walked through since this season ended, and there's a sense in which I wouldn't trade those lessons for freedom, but there's another sense in which I wish I had freedom rather than battle-tested faith, if I'm being honest.

Regardless, I learned that God will go to any lengths to draw someone to himself. In the eyes of most, I wouldn't even have been worth saving. I sometimes acted like an angry young man then, dissatisfied with the world, and I was literally a day away from my last day on earth. Yet God looked from the heavens and said, "I love that one and want to rescue him from his dark pit." And that's exactly what he did. Through a series of events that, in retrospect, are borderline ridiculous, God set the stage for my next season of hope and joy. I'm forever grateful that he chose to intervene in my life when he did. I would have missed so many moments of joy that I didn't know sat on my horizon—my wedding day, the births of my children, tender parenting moments, precious friendships that keep me afloat in very real ways in my dark times, and the list goes on. God saw a life worth rescuing despite all evidence to the contrary, and he acted. Hallelujah!

Why It Matters

What's the most important part of my story? It's not unique. God didn't do something that he's never done when he rescued me by orchestrating unlikely events to set the stage for my salvation. Quite the contrary, God regularly rearranges lives through circumstances that don't make any sense. He changed Peter's heart in an instant with a tremendous catch of fish and, in the process, turned Peter into a future church leader. He looked at a tax collector and saw a faithful disciple, then learned that Matthew had many friends who needed to hear the good news of the kingdom of God when Matthew threw a party for Jesus and the community. But one story stands out among the rest of these moments where God used seemingly unlikely situations to bring salvation—Cornelius. Cornelius and his household became the first Gentiles introduced to the gospel, so this story takes on special significance, and there's application beyond the historical fact.

We can read his story in Acts 10. We read that Cornelius was a kindhearted Roman officer committed to the Jewish way of living. He gave generously to those less fortunate than him and prayed regularly. So far, nothing seems too far off, but it's about to get weird, so I hope you're ready. At three o'clock in the afternoon, Cornelius had a vision where an angel walked toward him. As always happens when angels are involved, Cornelius became very afraid and asked what the angel wanted with him. The angel gave him unbelievably specific instructions on where to find Peter and to ask Peter to come to speak with him. When I say specific, I mean that the angel told Cornelius what city to find Peter in, whose house to look for him in, and how to find that house in the city. Cornelius did what the angel asked him to do by sending people to get Peter. Pretty crazy, right? Just hang on, there's more to this story.

As the people sent by Cornelius neared Peter's temporary abode, Peter had a vision from God. God communicated in this

vision that he can make clean whatever he wants to make clean, even things previously considered unclean by the Jewish regulations. As Peter pondered the significance of this vision, Cornelius's servants showed up and asked him to come to talk to Cornelius and his household. The Holy Spirit told Peter to go with them without asking any questions, even though he, as a faithful Jew, would be going into a Gentile's house, which would be considered unclean. The next day, Peter traveled to Cornelius's house and began to share the gospel with Cornelius, and everyone gathered to listen to the good news. In the middle of his sermon, the Holy Spirit fell on the Gentile listeners, so Peter baptized them.

So what's the significance of this story, and why pay attention to it at all? It shows the lengths that God will go to bring good news. God sent an angel to talk to Cornelius, gave Peter a vision, spoke directly to Peter through the Holy Spirit, and interrupted a perfectly good sermon by filling these Gentiles with the Holy Spirit. He did all of this because he saw Cornelius and loved him. God will go to any length to demonstrate his love for one person. He did this for me, he did this for Cornelius, and he will do it for you too. Nothing can conquer the love of God.

How It Applies

1. If you have ever made a bargain with God, how did that end up? By the way, it's okay if your experience wasn't a dramatic salvation experience like mine was—sometimes God seems to specialize in absence, not presence, but we can't find the redemptive patterns in our lives if we don't ask the questions.
2. What experiences have you had where someone seemed to be a literal angel of God, sent to show you the tender mercies of God in your life when you needed it most?

3. In your walk with God, when have you felt his presence in moments of darkness, lightening the burdens you've been carrying and giving you hope to move forward, even for just one more day?
4. What went through your mind as you read about the lengths God went to just to capture the heart of Cornelius, especially the specific revelations he gave to Cornelius and Peter to make sure that Cornelius heard the good news of Jesus Christ?
5. Do you believe that God is as invested in demonstrating his love to you in your life? Why or why not?

What God Thinks

I see very clearly that God shows no favoritism.

Acts 10:34

It's easy to read this verse and understand it to mean that God doesn't play favorites, and there's truth in that statement. However, the grander picture is this: everyone is God's favorite. One of my early mentors in life used to always tell me, "You're one of God's favorites. Don't forget that!" I want to pass that message on to you as you're reading this book. You're one of God's favorites. He adores you with every fiber of his being and longs to see you walking in freedom and joy. More than that, he longs to see you reflecting the love and light of his Son, Jesus. Sometimes that longing means tough times, but sometimes it means orchestrating events in remarkable ways to demonstrate his love to you.

Consider this question. How would you live your life differently if you lived in full recognition of the idea that you truly are one of God's favorites? Too often we relegate ourselves to backseat believers who God tolerates or maybe perfunctorily loves, but we think he probably doesn't like us very much. Being one of