



MARK CHIRONNA

“One of the most important books you are ever going to read.”
from the foreword by Christine Caine

ON THE
EDGE
OF
HOPE

NO MATTER HOW
DARK THE NIGHT, THE
REDEEMED SOUL *still* SINGS

ON THE
EDGE
OF
H O P E

NO MATTER HOW
DARK THE NIGHT, THE
REDEEMED SOUL *still* SINGS

MARK CHIRONNA

 **Chosen**
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

On the Edge of Hope • Mark Chironna
Chosen Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022 used by permission

© 2022 by Mark Chironna

Published by Chosen Books
11400 Hampshire Avenue South
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55438
www.chosenbooks.com

Chosen Books is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Chironna, Mark, author.

Title: On the edge of hope : no matter how dark the night, the redeemed soul still sings / Mark Chironna.

Description: Minneapolis, Minnesota : Chosen Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group, [2022] | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022004694 | ISBN 9780800762575 (trade paper) | ISBN 9780800762995 (casebound) | ISBN 9781493437481 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Suffering—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Pain—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Hope—Religious aspects—Christianity.

Classification: LCC BV4909 .C45 2022 | DDC 248.8/6—dc23/eng/20220225

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022004694>

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations identified BSB are from the Berean Bible (www.Berean.Bible), Berean Study Bible (BSB) © 2016–2020 by Bible Hub and Berean.Bible. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations identified CSB have been taken from the Christian Standard Bible®, copyright © 2017 by Holman Bible Publishers. Used by permission. Christian Standard Bible® and CSB® are federally registered trademarks of Holman Bible Publishers.

Scripture quotations identified ESV are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. ESV Text Edition: 2016

Scripture quotations identified KJV are from the King James Version of the Bible.

Scripture quotations identified LEB are from the *Lexham English Bible*. Copyright 2012 Logos Bible Software. Lexham is a registered trademark of Logos Bible Software.

Scripture quotations identified MSG are taken from *THE MESSAGE*, copyright © 1993, 2002, 2018 by Eugene H. Peterson. Used by permission of NavPress. All rights reserved. Represented by Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

Scripture quotations identified NASB taken from the (NASB®) New American Standard Bible®, Copyright © 1960, 1971, 1977, 1995, 2020 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. All rights reserved. www.lockman.org

Scripture quotations identified NASB1995 taken from the (NASB®) New American Standard Bible®, Copyright © 1960, 1971, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. All rights reserved. www.lockman.org

Scripture quotations identified NIV are from THE HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Scripture quotations identified NKJV are from the New King James Version®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

This publication is intended to provide helpful and informative material on the subjects addressed. Readers should consult their personal health professionals before adopting any of the suggestions in this book or drawing inferences from it. The author and publisher expressly disclaim responsibility for any adverse effects arising from the use or application of the information contained in this book.

Cover design by Studio Gearbox

Baker Publishing Group publications use paper produced from sustainable forestry practices and post-consumer waste whenever possible.

22 23 24 25 26 27 28 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To
Reverend Vincent Bernard Manzo,
without whose help, wisdom, guidance, and presence my
dark season would have been utterly intolerable

Contents

Foreword by Christine Caine	13
Acknowledgments	17
Introduction: If I'd Seen the Bus Coming . . .	21
1. How Did I Get Here?	9
2. Acceptance Is Not a Dirty Word	43
3. The Grunt Work of Getting Whole	59
4. Nothing's Perfect	73
5. Perplexity, Apprehension, Anxiety	81
6. Soul and Body	89
7. The Knot in My Stomach	99
8. Going Out of My Mind	111
9. A Dark Night of the Spirit	119
10. I Won't Complain. Or Will I?	133
11. Power and Powerlessness	149
12. Fear and Hope	165
Epilogue: Daring to Dream	183
Notes	199

Foreword

What started out as a fun family ski trip turned into my being strapped to a stretcher in the back of an ambulance on my way to the hospital. One moment I was skiing downhill, the next I was in the air in an unplanned somersault listening to a *pop-pop-pop* come from my right knee. I had snapped my ACL, torn my MCL and meniscus, and fractured my knee. Never had I experienced that kind of pain. In the days following, I hobbled around with a leg brace and crutches until I could have surgery for a hamstring graft.

I was still in the recovery room when a physical therapist said, “Chris, you did a lot of damage to your knee, and most people tend to not fully recover after that sort of injury. It’s not that you can’t recover, because, thanks to surgery, your right knee is now technically stronger than your left knee, but the challenge is whether you will be willing to endure the recovery process. The injury happened suddenly and quickly, but the recovery process will take several months of focused and painful therapy. There is no way to avoid the pain. You can recover fully or partially, quickly or slowly—it will be totally up to you. The degree to

which you are willing to embrace the recovery process is the degree to which you will recover and thrive again.”

These were not words I wanted to hear after a painful, traumatic accident, nor was the process one I necessarily wanted to endure. But if I wanted to get well, if I wanted to be able to run again, do squats, even ski, then I had to agree to go through the process of recovery. I would have done anything for a friend with the gift of healing to come and lay hands on me and for me to instantaneously jump out of bed, fully healed, and run laps of praise around the hospital. Alas, although many people did pray for me, there was no instantaneous miracle. If I wanted to be able to move my knee again, I was going to have to go through the process of healing. Little did I realize how much I would have to suffer to be able to experience healing.

I don't have the words to express the pain involved in breaking up the scar tissue at a cellular level in my knee and learning to walk, run, and yes, even ski again. The physical therapy required to prevent a collection of tough, fibrous tissue from interfering with my mobility involved repeated stretching, strategic exercises, and other treatments, to the point I thought I couldn't bear it. Every move was excruciating, the recovery long, but the results in ensuring a great quality of life in my second half was more than worth it.

Could God have intervened and miraculously and instantaneously healed my leg? And delivered me from all my pain? Of course, and I've seen God do such miracles in other people's lives, but in my case, He allowed me to go through a recovery process that involved pain, suffering, and endurance. Looking back, I have rarely felt closer to Him or more dependent upon Him than when I have been in such trying times.

What's more, it has not only been in the physical realm that I have gone through a process of recovery to find healing and wholeness, but also in the realm of my wounded soul, broken heart, and tormented mind. I come from a background of

abandonment, adoption, and sexual abuse. I have carried a lot of spiritual and psychological “scar tissue” around in years past because of things that happened to me when I was not even old enough to understand what was happening to me. I have come to understand that because we live in a fallen world, bad things can and do happen to good people. No one can escape the effects of a fallen world. Jesus Himself said that in this world we *will* have troubles (see John 16:33). He did not say if we have enough faith then we won’t have any trouble; He gave no exemption. Therefore, we should not be surprised that troubles, pain, suffering, and varying degrees of trauma and injustice are part of this life.

The real problem is not that these things are a part of life, but that we do not know how to walk in faith and simultaneously wrestle with profound pain. We often have a faulty belief system that tells us we need to deny, dismiss, or diminish our pain or suffering in order to live victorious, overcoming Christian lives. We often feel like failures because we have tried to declare, decree, and confess victory and freedom with no tangible change in our life or circumstances. We have tried all the formulas, prayed all the prayers, attended all the conferences, sowed all our seed, tried to fake it by faith until we make it, and nothing has seemed to work. Despite our best efforts, we still feel bound, broken, tormented, anxious, distressed, or depressed. We wonder, *Where is this abundant life Jesus promised? Where is the victory? Where is the freedom? Where is the joy? Where is the peace? Where is the hope?*

I believe the book you are holding in your hands answers such wondering. I believe it will be one of the most important books you are ever going to read. Dr. Chironna masterfully integrates the theological with the psychological as he teaches us how to wrestle with the complexities of the human condition. As he takes us into the journey of Job, we discover that we can accept the mystery of suffering and not be ashamed of

our own suffering. And that absolutely any one of us can stand strong in one moment and struggle the next; it is simply part of living in a fallen world. The good news is we can all learn to trust ourselves to the goodness of God, who loves us perfectly, even when the process of sanctification does not always feel good in the moment.

My physical therapist wanted my knee to have full range of motion and for me to be able to do any and all activities, so I had to go through the painful recovery process. Everything in me wanted to avoid the rehabilitation, skip sessions, and be instantly healed, but I had to stick with it, day after day, week after week, and month after month, to be where I am today. I encourage you not to try to run from your pain, ruminate on your past, or fear your future. Do the work, answer the questions at the end of each chapter, sit at the feet of Jesus, and yield to the process of sanctification. It is there you will find healing, wholeness, and freedom. It is there you will be spiritually formed and transformed. It is there you will discover you are truly known, seen, and fully loved. It is there you will experience your belovedness that is only found in Him.

Christine Caine

Acknowledgments

When it comes to writing a book, the task, at least for me, has never been a small undertaking. I am ever grateful for the support of my wife, Ruth, and her encouragement, her prayers, and her willingness to sacrifice her time with me for time with writing. She is a trooper, and after all these years is used to the process. She has exhibited great grace in giving me space to take on this challenge and opportunity, for which I am forever grateful. The dark season I experienced was something she had to endure with me, all while we learned to face life's day-to-day affairs with faith, courage, stamina, and fortitude, for the sake of our children and the church we pioneered.

I want to thank my son Matthew for the way he has supported me as he travels with me on the road and has gotten used to a dad who is always either writing on the plane or writing in the hotel, and then having to speak at various conferences. My writing takes place mostly while he is quietly being a caring presence with me during all my ministry time away from home. He never complains, he is always available for whatever I need, and he always anticipates what I may need without me having to ask.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to my daughter-in-law, Ashley, for allowing her husband to travel with me and give up time with her and the children, because she knows that in all of this God is at work in mostly hidden but sometimes obvious ways.

Thanks goes to my son Daniel for all he has taught me about overcoming insurmountable odds, his will to survive from his earliest struggles, and how in spite of all those struggles, he has continued to persevere.

Many thanks also to my four grandchildren for the constant joy and inspiration they are to me. Ariana, Mark, Londyn, and Enzo—each one holds a very special and treasured place in my heart. It is hard to explain how they have given me great joy, during and since my dark season, in a way that words cannot describe.

I also want to thank Misty Hood, my administrative pastor, for her tireless willingness not only to administrate the process of this project along with everything else on her plate, but also to take up all the slack with managing my schedule, my appointments, and all the nitty-gritty details of making sure the staff at Chosen Books has consistent and timely communication and approvals. Writing this book during the final stages of postgraduate work on another doctoral degree has required her to make sure I stick to a rigid schedule. She has managed that and me well. During that dark season, when the best I could do was manage to preach on Sundays and at our midweek services, she had the responsibility of keeping the church running on an even keel. She did a masterful job.

I want to thank my entire pastoral staff at Church on the Living Edge for the way they have trusted me not only when things have gone well, but also when I felt quite incapable. They all rose to the occasion and made the rough places smooth.

I want to thank Donna Scuderi, as she has been such a help in making sure my voice stays intact when my words get ahead of my thoughts and need be corralled. Donna had to do double

Acknowledgments

duty during the writing of this book, as she has edited all my thesis work, as well as the first half of the book you now hold in your hands. I am grateful for who she is to me personally, to our entire church family, and to the Body of Christ at large.

I also want to thank Dr. Chris E. W. Green, who, in a moment when Donna's tasks grew far more monumental than we both realized, willingly stepped in and finished editing my manuscript, paying careful attention to the details and being faithful to my intent in every sentence and paragraph he scoured.

I also want to thank Kim Bangs at Chosen Books for her ceaseless encouragement and prayers as I was moving through this process to bring the book to completion. She has made this journey an absolute joy, and she has been a solid prayer partner who covered me as I found spots in the writing that triggered pain to revisit.

I am deeply grateful for Ginger Kolbaba, Chosen's editor for this book, for the way she worked through the manuscript with an eye for grasping what I intended to say, helping me perfect the way I said it, and assuring that readers would be able to grasp it and make it applicable in their lives. She is a gem.

I want to thank the entire Church on the Living Edge family, who, through their ongoing inspiration to me in good times and bad, have made pastoring a joy that I wouldn't trade for the world, and who in that darkest season of my life never gave up on me. They are my heart.

Finally, I am deeply humbled that Christine Caine would consent to write the foreword for this book. I am always amazed at how Providence works in our lives, how God serendipitously places people in our pathway who make such a profound difference in more ways than words can tell. God has graced Christine with a measure of wisdom and faith that is an inspiration to all of us. It is an honor to call her "friend."

Introduction

If I'd Seen the Bus Coming . . .

For everything there is an appointed time . . . a time to bear and a time to die . . . a time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance; a time to throw away stones and a time to gather stones . . . a time to seek and a time to lose.

Ecclesiastes 3:1–2, 4–6 LEB

Reflecting on a certain prolonged dark season of my life, I often say, “If I had seen the bus coming, I would have gotten out of the way!” The truth is that even if I had seen it coming, it would have been too late. That bus was headed my way for some time. When it finally hit me, it did so with full force and no qualms about the effects on my well-being or that of my loved ones.

The ensuing dark season brought deep psychological and physical suffering. For three and a half years, the anxiety persisted, and depression came along for the ride. I had no rest and virtually no sleep, day or night. It is difficult to describe the damage from that kind of sleep deprivation. You know you are in for a rough ride when your anxiety keeps your eyes from

closing. Medical experts say that the body will eventually fall asleep, but that did not happen in my case.

I don't share these details from a place of self-pity. My concern is the reality of human suffering and its implications for Christians and non-Christians alike. When the bus hit me, I was a Christian. In fact, I was on a ministry trip far from home, where I planned to preach to thousands of people who wanted answers for their own struggles. How ironic! I thought providing answers for others was my role, but I arrived at the venue weighed down by some very hard questions of my own.

I reached a well-traveled crossroad that day—the same one many people reach every day. Mine brought me face-to-face with unconscious drivers operating deep within my heart and mind. Although the crisis came as a shock, the conditions preceding it were common. A certain amount of unfinished business drives the emotions, feelings, and behaviors of all human beings. It is often the residue of our earliest years of formation and life. As grown-ups, we are not fully conscious of all that adolescence instilled in us. Much of it remains unresolved. Often, it returns to haunt us in our *middlence*, the period from our thirties through our sixties.

You might be at a similar crossroad right now. It may be difficult to explain your pain to others and even harder to process it for yourself. That is why I wrote this book. None of us—not preachers, doctors, movie stars, philosophers, or even self-help gurus—are exempt from the kind of suffering that seems to come out of nowhere. Even the people who appear to have it “all together” can experience indescribable challenges. Whether we expect them or believe they cannot touch us, those challenges are part of the human condition. They may be preventable, not because we deny their existence or believe we are spiritually inoculated against them, but because we become attuned to our unfinished business and deal with it before it deals with us.

I do not offer the questions and insights in these pages as therapy but as confirmation that we humans have an awful lot in common and can benefit from being transparent about our struggles. Although I have a long history of training in psychology and theology, this book comes out of a long period of processing what my dark place revealed. I have learned some things about

- » what led me into the path of the cosmic “bus” I mentioned earlier;
- » how my beliefs contributed to or exacerbated my suffering;
- » how those beliefs tailored my responses to suffering, and how those responses helped or hindered my healing; and
- » what the Bible really says about suffering and about our psychology.

These are some of the things I feel called to share. They don’t come from any sense of having arrived or excelled above anyone else. They aren’t theoretical or designed to tickle your ears. They come from a place of realizing how precious life is and how much we need God’s help to live each day. I know I could not have survived my dark season without Him, and I am forever grateful that He kept me, even when I believed my suffering would never end.

Time to Get Real

In case you haven’t noticed, lots of folks you know are either hiding their pain or doing their best to process it. We are all in the same boat: Nobody was raised in a perfect environment by perfect people, and nobody is perfect. We are all somewhat

dysfunctional, precisely because of what Christians acknowledge as the Adamic Fall. Sin makes us vulnerable to brokenness, and our brokenness increases our vulnerability to suffering. Yet, in Christ, we are acceptable before God. He has imputed His righteousness to us. But we are still sinners (see Romans 7:14–20). Therefore, Christ is in the business, by the Spirit, of putting our lives back together again. He is continually remembering us and returning us to the Father’s original intent, which is to make us more human.

We cannot separate our journey to humanness from the need to face our brokenness, fragility, vulnerabilities, pains, and sins. From beginning to end, God’s perfect love works to reveal our humanness in its fullness. His work will continue until we receive our resurrected bodies. Until then, we hope against hope, even amid our suffering and pain, knowing that God is not the author of evil and cannot commit it. God did not ordain the bus that ran over me. But, sure enough, it ran me down.

Maybe you can relate to my experience. Really, I believe anyone who has lived more than a few years can relate in some measure. We have all heard stories of people who were standing strong one moment and struggling the next. Things happen that we do not fully understand, but we need not be ashamed of them. And we certainly should not ignore them. What we can do is accept the mystery of suffering and realize that all of us will taste of it at some point in our lives.

I once knew a precious woman, a highly skilled nurse who served as a nutritionist. She dedicated her professional life to colon health and worked with doctors on behalf of her clients and patients. She provided my wife and me tremendous help when we faced digestive concerns. Gracious and kind and always the picture of health, she had a flawless complexion and clear, bright eyes. Her beautiful smile filled the room.

One afternoon I had a luncheon appointment in the city where we lived at the time. As I finished lunch and walked

toward the exit of the restaurant, I saw this woman sitting alone in one of the booths. Her countenance was fallen. Her amazing complexion had a gray pallor. When I stopped to say hello and ask about her well-being, she began to weep.

The woman who meticulously guarded the colon health and well-being of so many people had contracted colon cancer herself. Late in the fourth stage of the disease, doctors told her they could do nothing for her. Of course, I prayed with her and for her. She was extremely grateful. The irony of her situation struck me: A woman whose career centered on colon health suffered the ravages of colon disease! It left me shaking my head.

In a matter of weeks, this dear woman passed into eternity. Her life had not unfolded in a predictable way. Very few lives do. Doctors get sick, psychologists sometimes need to see other psychologists, and pastors and leaders who care for the souls of others suffer from afflictions in their own souls.

Life's paradoxes are all around us, and human suffering is ubiquitous, whether we want to admit it or not. All of us battle at times with distressing or overwhelming negative thoughts, emotions, and feelings. On the surface, some people seem to handle them better than others. But do they? What about you? How have you handled your seasons of stress and pain? Will you be honest enough to say, "I probably could have handled it better"? Or would you feel too ashamed to admit it?

Either way, I understand! I grappled with these issues and know that some of my responses to pain hurt me more than they helped me. I understand why people work so hard to conceal their suffering. They don't want other people to think something is wrong with them. But, beloved, there is "something wrong" with all of us. We live in a fallen, sin-stained world, and we all suffer its effects—yes, even those of us who call Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. Why else would we *need* a Savior?

Speaking from the perspective of the Church, are we not called to come alongside those who suffer? Or are we called to

selectively judge the suffering of others and even reject those whose sufferings seem in some way taboo to us? Is *that* our theology?

I am eternally grateful to those who stood by me in my dark season and spoke life into my breaking heart. I did not need anyone to judge me or give me the “answers.” I spent plenty of time judging myself and trying to figure out why I was going through hell. Instead, I needed reminders that I was God’s beloved. I needed someone to tell me that we all suffer, and our suffering does not last forever. Whether they realized it or not, the people who did these things helped me climb out of the depths and live. They did not succumb to covering up, ignoring, or shaming. They recognized that my struggle was real, and they were real with me. It made all the difference!

The Wake-Up Call

If I learned anything from my dark season, I learned to pay attention! Prior to July 2007, I was “blowing and going,” as the expression goes. My rigorous schedule included flying four or five times a week, speaking in four or five places, plus heading the local church where I was pastor. I also did one-on-one certified coaching and group coaching. I earned a psychology degree and continued to study theology. Each month, I read a minimum of fifteen books, and I managed to get by on four or five hours of sleep each night. Meanwhile, I dealt with the usual issues that face the parents of teenagers, and I was navigating our church’s move into a larger, more expensive building.

I had a lot on my plate! From the outside looking in, you might have thought I was “successful.” In some ways, I thought so too. For years, I had managed to keep up that kind of schedule without blinking an eye. But I wasn’t paying attention to the fatigue in my body or how tense I was becoming. I had a bout with heart palpitations that sent me to a cardiologist.

A series of tests over the course of several weeks proved that nothing was wrong with my heart. But I *was* carrying a lot on my shoulders—and not handling it as well as I thought.

By the time July 2007 arrived, the cosmic bus had caught up with me. It was the wake-up call I could not ignore. I have more to tell you about that season, but for now, I will say that by the grace of God, I lived to tell the story. To borrow the words of Maya Angelou, I “wouldn’t take nothing for my journey now.” As difficult as my hard time was, I would not trade it or what I learned from it.

My Hope and Prayer

While I can lay claim to a master’s degree in psychology, I am not a clinical specialist. Likewise, despite my doctorate in theology, I do not have God all figured out. In fact, I contend that the more I learn about the human psyche and the Triune God, I concur with the apostle Paul, who said, “We know only in part” (1 Corinthians 13:9). Whatever I say in these pages or anywhere else can only be “in part.” I do not have all the answers.

My prayer as you read this book, however, is that God will use it as a vehicle to empower you. I have shared everything I could share, and I pray that it will help you as you learn to navigate your pain and suffering, particularly the kind of pain and suffering you experience as negative, distressing, and overwhelming thoughts, emotions, feelings, and moods. I also want to encourage you to realize that you might need more support than this book can provide. There is no shame in needing the services of a well-trained helping professional. As a Christian leader, I thought there was—until I needed help myself. I realize now that my prior approach was less than authentic. In God’s mercy, my suffering drew me out of my misunderstanding of the Jesus who loves and cares for us deeply. In time, I realized

that the One who gave His life for us is not the least bit ashamed when we get the help we need.

What is more important than any baseless taboo is that you come to know—truly *know*—deep in your interior that Jesus loves you so fully and completely that He will be with you in the darkest, most seemingly God-forsaken emotional places. The history of His love attests to this truth! When Jesus crossed the Kidron Valley and entered the Garden of Gethsemane to pray to His Father, He allowed Himself to experience the deep suffering and agony of our forsakenness. It was there that He Himself despaired of life. In His humanness, He wrestled with the very things that confound us (see Mark 14:32–36; Luke 22:39–44).

Jesus knows what your suffering and my suffering are like. With that in mind, I invite you to take a healing journey through these pages. What I will share is like me—far from perfect. My focus, however, is the truths that brought me through a very long and distressing season. Jesus is the One who perfects us, day by day. The same Jesus lifted me out from under the bus and stood me back on my feet. Because of Him, I can say, “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life” (Psalm 23:6 NKJV)!



1

How Did I Get Here?

Living with anxiety is like being followed by a voice. It knows all your insecurities and uses them against you. It gets to the point when it's the loudest voice in the room. The only one you can hear.

Anonymous

When the bus is coming at you, getting out of the way seems like a solution. But can you avoid getting hit by something you refuse to see? My experience with crushing anxiety tells me that you cannot. Looking back, I chose to compartmentalize the signs that presented themselves. I convinced myself that I would deal with them “when I had the time.” Whatever was brewing, it would have to keep until my schedule eased up.

When the pressure is on, procrastination can seem like a great way to bury your problems. The underlying, unspoken hope is that they will eventually take care of themselves. The truth is that whatever you bury alive stays alive and burrows

deeper into your heart. Postponing your attention feels comforting, but only for the moment. The issues you avoid will only fester until you face them.

Trust me when I say we can convince ourselves that we are dealing with reality when we are not. The prophet Jeremiah wrote that “the heart is more deceitful than all else” and intimated that we don’t even understand it (Jeremiah 17:9 NASB). In other words, our hearts can play tricks on us. I learned this truth the hard way. When I ignored the signs of trouble ahead, I conveniently split what was real from what I wanted to think was real. I created a bubble of magical thinking in which I could isolate myself from the problem and conjure a false sense of security, a façade that said, *Everything is fine*.

That kind of thinking feels good, but not for long. There was no escaping the underlying issues. The longer I ignored them, the more powerful they became. They were bound to surface, regardless of my schedule and commitments. The fact that I was busy and keeping up with my schedule did not prove that I was fine. My issues kept brewing despite my formidable schedule.

When the bus finally hit me, panic ensued. It came as I followed my busy schedule and traveled to a pulpit far from home. Despite my sudden agony, I would have to preach as though everything was okay.

Facing the Unthinkable

When panic comes, it comes in disorienting, debilitating waves. The first wave hit me at thirty-two thousand feet above the Atlantic. All hell seemed to break loose, as though the ocean below had released a torrent to tear me apart, inside and out. In terms of pain, I had little to compare it with other than a bout of kidney stones years earlier. Those stones also hit with full force! I remember thinking that passing out would be a

godsend. At least I would get a break from the pain. But I never did pass out, and the pain never subsided. To get at the source, I had to take medication and have an operation.

Anxiety is different. You cannot cut out the source of your emotional anguish. Instead, you must face it. But facing it was the last thing I wanted. Amid the suffering, I prayed for a normal night's sleep—or any sleep at all. And when the anxiety was the most intense (which it was for most of the next 1,278 days), the idea of falling asleep and never waking up sounded like mercy to me. Thankfully, I did not enter my final sleep. But neither did I find the nightly escape of slumber. The anxiety would not release me into any significant period of shut-eye.

What I faced in the Caribbean at the very beginning of my dark season was like nothing I had ever known. I thought I was having a panic attack and assumed it would end in a reasonable amount of time. Instead, it became a fixed and unrelenting anxiety that soon teamed up with depression. The condition was tough enough, but it produced a psychological and physiological feedback loop that was 100 percent negative, which only made things worse. For the entirety of the ordeal, I had almost no break from the fight-or-flight response. In fact, I experienced no rest of any kind at all.

Enter the accuser of the brethren, the expert exploiter. He used the beautiful promise that says “he gives sleep to his beloved” as a torment and accusation to me (Psalm 127:2)—a torment because I could not grasp why a loving God had overlooked my prayer for relief, and an accusation because the powers of darkness twisted God's promise and convinced me that I was under judgment in some area of my life. Whether I was my worst enemy or the devil was, I did not know. But I felt as though I had been engulfed and swallowed up by evil.

I felt that it had conquered me and God had forsaken me. The darkness was very dark. The trauma was all too real, too endless, and utterly unthinkable.

Magical Thinking

During my dark season, nothing would have been more welcome than an instantaneous healing or a Scripture verse to “zap” whatever demon had descended upon me. When months and years passed without either form of deliverance, I learned the hardest lesson of my life—one I’m still learning. It shattered my misconceptions about Scripture and about God Himself. Everything I thought I believed was tested, and many misguided views were stripped away. Much of what I believed involved the magical thinking I mentioned earlier. Like many other followers of Jesus in a consumer-driven culture, I bought into some unproven, unsound ideas that could not help me when the bus showed up.

Beloved, I heard all the barn-burning messages and even preached some of them! I read all the books and “knew” all the techniques about how to be free, get healed, and defeat demons. I understood what it was to lay hands on the sick and see them recover. I still do! Healing *is* the children’s bread, but that does not mean we will never suffer or face trials.

Many popular Christian teachings lead us to think in magical ways that have little to do with scriptural truth. Therefore, they have almost nothing to do with spiritual formation and transformation. We accept them because we like the idea of three easy steps and a quick way out of our struggles.

As the popular psychologist Dr. Phil would say, “How’s that working for you?” My point is that if it had worked, none of us would be facing the issues before us. None of us would ever be sick or financially strapped. None of us would die of cancer or heart disease. And none of us would suffer bouts of emotional and psychological turmoil. If our magical thinking were effective, none of us would be searching for yet another quick fix.

Perhaps the worst part of our reliance on magical formulas is that we sacrifice the genuine article, which is to know the truth experientially and deeply and to allow it to bring us into

real freedom. *That* is the wholeness we really need and want. The problem we have with the genuine article is that it rarely brings instant relief—what we most yearn for when our suffering seems unbearable.

Avoidance Strategies

Before my season of trouble came, I ignored its warning signs. The mind can do a pretty good job of burying the evidence, but we pay a price on the back end. The price of my avoidance was a perpetual fight-or-flight posture that I thought might never end. Having deftly ignored my body's warning system, I now faced its ultimate response: more than forty months on full alert, without sleep, rest, appetite, or peace, and barely able to lower my eyelids. It was a brutal combination of anxiety and depression. Yet even after the onset of my anxiety, my avoidance strategies continued.

Some of them were more subtle than others. I developed one strategy from a very logical question: "How did I ever get here?" I rightly wanted to know how and why the bus came after me. Maybe if I figured out where it came from, I could send it back and forget it ever happened. Or maybe I could control the thing. I'm not entirely sure what I was thinking. Of course, the issue was not as simple as I tried to make it. In fact, it proved to be much more complicated.

Each of us has a different temperament. We are unique personalities, and we process our pain differently. I tend to be analytical and pensive. When I think about something, I consider it from every conceivable angle. That is what I did with my question about "how I got here." The question seemed logical enough. If I wanted to understand where I was, I needed to figure out where I had been.

For someone as deeply analytical and pensive as I am, however, a simple overview was not going to be enough (at least

not in my mind). So my analysis quickly turned into endless rumination. I chewed over my past almost ceaselessly. I know now that ruminating about anxiety and depression is not helpful to our well-being or hope for the future because it leads to “awful-izing.” The more we think about how terrible we feel, the worse we feel. And when we reflect on our past from our current place of pain, our minds automatically select the memories that confirm the “awfulness.” Instead of figuring out how we got into our current crisis, we end up reconstructing in the present moment the pains we remember from our past—and even projecting them into our future.

The fact is that all memory is reconstructed. Nobody remembers events exactly as they happened. Instead, we remember them as they seemed to us, based on our way of seeing and understanding the world. We don’t like the idea that we reconstruct our memories, but we have no other way to recall a past that no longer exists. To remember it is to re-member or reconstruct it.

Accepting this reality and realizing that our memories are not entirely trustworthy are essential components of mental health. The truth of reconstructed memory does not mean that we are willfully lying or making things up without any basis. Long after painful events leave indelible impressions on our psyches, we simply try to make sense of them. Because our memories are always incomplete, we naturally try to make sense of the gaps. So we fill them in with ideas that seem to emerge from the memories themselves. This “filler” comes from how we look back on events and how we process what we remember. Therefore, it is unique to us and reflects our individual ways of being.

The incompleteness of our memories probably exists for a good reason. Some scientists explain it from the perspective of evolutionary biology. From a theological perspective, we attribute it to the Fall in the Garden of Eden. The event that compromised our humanness affected every aspect of our

existence and function, including our ability to cognize, perceive, imagine, remember, intuit, and reflect.

The fact is that analyzing my past and attempting to make sense of it led to an unhealthy habit of rumination. At some level, it became an avoidance strategy. If I remained fixated on remembering my past, I could avoid dealing with my current reality. In a sense, my mind tried to “pass out” and not feel the pain.

Ruminating did me much more harm than good. It is the nature of rumination that each “rehearsal” triggers new fears about our pain becoming permanent. This is partly because we battle with incomplete knowledge and faulty analysis.

Your memory is not perfect or objective. Like all of us, you assume your thoughts are 100 percent accurate because *you* are thinking them. If you are thinking about your anxiety or your insecurities, for example, you believe that every terrible thought you have is true. Then you project that negativity onto the future and ruminate on how awful tomorrow will be.

Notice that whether you are dwelling on the past or the future, you are in avoidance mode. The past is over, and you cannot retrieve or change it. And you cannot access your future because it isn't here yet. The only real space you can live in is the present moment. You cannot do it, however, with your awareness trapped in the past or the future. One of the keys that unlocks the door to freedom is to become aware of the present moment and not run from it. Yes, you can experience freedom by accepting the current moment as it is. That does not mean you surrender yourself to sickness or sorrow, for example. It means simply that you acknowledge your present state and scuttle your avoidance schemes.

Avoidance has so many painful and self-sabotaging effects. While I focused on my past and feared my future, I seemed to lack awareness of Christ's abiding presence. I knew He was always with me, yet I waited for Him to “show up” and rescue

me. The blanket of anxiety and depression felt so heavy that my consciousness of Christ became marginalized. Added to that was the opportunism of the powers of darkness, with their unrelenting accusations. Some of their slanders were direct and some veiled, but they came at me day and night. (A topic worthy of another book!)

The Exempt-from-Suffering Approach

In our pain, our search for answers demands some ruthless honesty about ourselves, our beliefs, and our approach to God. When our pain seems unbearable, the last place we want to be is in the present moment. In my case, the anxiety and the stress response it triggered made me want to jump out of my skin. That seemed like the only possible way to alleviate my suffering. Of course, I knew I could not jump out and then jump back in when the storm was over.

David, the sweet psalmist of Israel, put it this way: “If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!” (Psalm 139:8 esv). All of us want to transcend our limitations and ascend into heaven. We could say it is a “sanctified way” of jumping out of our skin. David often voiced his yearning for transcendence in the immediate presence of the living God. His desire makes sense to us. Yet within his worship is this revealing proposition: “If I make my bed in Sheol . . .”

I have asked myself, “Who in their right mind would want to make their bed in hell?”

Of course, no one would *want* to. Yet all of us have made unhealthy and unwise decisions that have led to hellish consequences. The dichotomy between good and evil—even for those of us who love Jesus—runs straight through our respective beings. Some of us would disagree with such an idea. But consider the words of the apostle Paul: “I do not do the good I

want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing” (Romans 7:19 ESV).

You might argue that Paul was speaking of his pre-conversion experience. Yet you and I and every other Christian have made sinful and foolish choices after being converted. We do not have time here for a theological exposition of pre- and post-conversion positions as they relate to Paul. The point is that he addressed what we would call a *dilatory will*—the human will that is less than perfect before God. It is the result of eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, which is the root of all human suffering.

If we are ruthlessly honest with ourselves, we can admit to being less than perfect before God. Our recourse is to ask His forgiveness, which explains Paul’s response to his own self-sabotage. He didn’t seek a technique to deliver him. He didn’t cry out, “*What* shall deliver me from my mess?” Rather, he cried, “*Who* will deliver me?” (Romans 7:24 ESV). Paul did not seek a technique; he sought the Person of Christ, who loves us completely and perfectly.

To be forgiven of your sin requires you to acknowledge your sin before God. To be delivered from your pain—not through magical thinking, avoidance, running away, or any other lesser remedy—is to acknowledge your pain and take it to God. The hard part is to acknowledge and “be with” your pain. I can testify! The last thing I wanted to do when intense anxiety gripped me was to pay attention and face it. My instinct was not to accept my living hell but to run from it as fast as I could. In my agony, I could see no practical reason to do otherwise. After all, if Jesus died to set me free, I shouldn’t have to go through hell in the first place! Isn’t that what we think in our *Have it your way* culture? The thought of enduring and being enlarged by adversity seems nonsensical.

This became part of my strategy of pain avoidance. And when my strategies failed to work, I did not want to admit

their failure. I knew that ignoring the warning signs had only backfired. I knew that my avoidance did not ease my pain but only made it worse. But what else was there? Avoidance was my default response. I possessed no other well-honed response in my toolbox, except for one: the idea that if I confessed God's Word and "decreed a thing," God would wave a wand and make my pain go away—*poof!* After all, I was His child, and I wasn't *supposed* to suffer.

Today, I marvel at God's mercy toward me. He overlooked my rigidity and arrogance and brought me to the place of healing anyway. But He taught me a few things first.

The Cares of This Life

One of the great lessons of this journey involves understanding how I arrived at this difficult place. It is complicated. Life's pressures have a way of converging, even piling on at times. My bus hit me at one of those times. I cannot share all the details and all the stories, but I can say that our congregation made a move from one side of town to another. And when we did, we lost the lion's share of our membership. We also acquired a building that was far more costly than the one we sold. All of that weighed heavily on me, as it would anyone in a similar position. What made matters worse is that I believed it was all my fault. I saw it as a failure.

I didn't make any of these decisions without the counsel and support of the church leadership, of course. Still, I lived by Harry Truman's "The Buck Stops Here" rule, so I held myself totally responsible for what took place. If I were a better leader, I told myself, I would've anticipated all the worst-case scenarios and planned for them. The truth is, however, there were all kinds of unforeseeable and uncontrollable dynamics at play in those events. All at once, we were faced with the loss of our space, the need to find a suitable new building, and the

stress of securing funds to buy it, as well as unethical real estate dealings, which led to lengthy legal battles.

When we finally obtained our new facility, it was on the opposite end of town. I was sure the members were so committed to the vision that they would gladly embrace the shift to another location, but many of them did not. Our first Sunday in the new building, only four hundred adults showed up—a remnant of what had been a megachurch. Additionally, the expenses of the brand-new facility far exceeded the expenses of our previous building. I found myself suddenly dealing with being the senior pastor of a much smaller congregation in a much more costly space. We had gone from a \$7,000 per month mortgage to a first mortgage of \$70,000 and a secondary balloon mortgage of \$50,000. To put this in perspective, the mortgage on the building we sold was less than the air-conditioning bill in the new building. All of that left us with an inordinate amount of debt, and seemingly an insufficient number of congregants to manage it.

That was the beginning of unprecedented levels of anxiety in my life. And over the next several months, as we worked to create a strategy to manage the heavy mortgage, I found that what had worked in times past wasn't working now. As a result, my personal sense of incapability and incompetence increased dramatically and became overwhelming. Why hadn't God made me aware of any of this in time for me to have made better decisions? Had I failed to regard the voice of the Lord?

I will talk more about perplexity later, but at this juncture in my life perplexity was all around me. As it laid a more total claim over my mind, my emotions, my feelings, and even my body, I became more and more apprehensive. How were we going to make ends meet? Because I feared the house would buckle and fold, my mind had a difficult time focusing on study or prayer. Thus, the preparation and delivery of timely, substantive messages that would feed the flock proved increasingly

hard. Having lost so many people in the move, I was bound by fear that the financial burden would sooner or later cause the remnant to leave as well, so that in the end we would lose everything we had ever worked for.

Although I was incredibly apprehensive, I managed for a while to hold up under the stress because I worked out regularly and hard. After the bus hit, however, the anxiety was simply too much. I was totally in the dark, constantly bewildered. My thoughts started to have me instead of me having them. As Russ Harris, a trainer in the acceptance and commitment therapy model, says, I was being “pushed around,”¹ bullied by negative thoughts and feelings and emotions.

This complex scenario played a part in my experience with anxiety and depression. In His goodness, however, God helped me to understand the dynamics of the experience so that I could learn and grow in the process.

But let me say this before I say anything else: We all learn at our own pace. The pain for me was so great that it took me a while to learn. I say this not to discourage you, but in hopes that it will help you recognize where you are and what is happening to you. I trust my story can help you learn more quickly than I did, so the disentangling can happen as it should. Let me be clear: I was the reason for the delay, not God. And God was never impatient with me, even when I was impatient with myself. God was faithful, as God always is. And He saw me through the darkness.

Out of the Bubble

In the words of John Newton, “I once . . . was blind, but now I see!”² Really, my “sight” is still being adjusted. But I can honestly say that my long, dark season changed me. Not only do I understand how I arrived at such a crossroad, but the experience tested my beliefs and weeded out some fallacious ones. Today, I

read the Scriptures differently. I wrestle with them more. I ask more questions about things I seem to know and things I don't. I'm more open to certain ideas than I was before I was tested. I hear people and their pain far more acutely. I discern their trauma more precisely. I sense their suffering in a deeper way. My pressing through and beyond my own pain has brought me closer to the One who ever stands as the Paschal Lamb, having been freshly slain on the throne of the universe (see Revelation 5:6). For all of this, I am eternally grateful!

Two centuries ago, Christ followers thought it wise to be wary of psychological theory. Much needful work has been done in the past century and a half, however. Brilliant thinkers who love Jesus and desire to integrate the psychological with the theological have impacted the world of therapeutic consciousness. I believe that integrating the best of these disciplines will bring healing and hope to people in pain—those who didn't see the bus coming and are now pressing through the long, dark aftermath.

Let's face facts: Our thinking is not always as sound as we would like it to be. Far too many issues, events, and experiences of human suffering impact us. We live in a culture where everyone wants to win all the time. So the people who lose feel like they don't belong. We tend to think that Jesus hangs out with winners. I would argue that far more often, He hangs out with folks who have suffered loss or been disenfranchised, disillusioned, distressed, and downcast, like sheep without a shepherd.

Beloved, there is a Wonderful Counselor who knows the soul's dark night firsthand. Strangely enough, through my valley of shadows, I got to know Him in a way I never had before. Trust me: There were many shadows, and they haunted me at every turn—morning, noon, and night.

You may be in that valley right now. Maybe you used to be or feel that you might be headed there. Whatever your situation, I can promise you that, with God, the end of the matter is better than the beginning (see Ecclesiastes 7:8). I can also promise that

even when your trial feels like a life sentence, it is only a season. I cannot tell you how long that the season will last, but I know that when you cry out, “How long, LORD? Will You forget me forever?” (Psalm 13:1 NASB), God is there.

I often think about the words of the great Dr. Charles S. Price, the Pentecostal pioneer and healing evangelist. I have heard hundreds of his sermons and remember him saying that the redeemed soul continues to sing, even in the dark night.³ In my dark night, I had to learn how to sing. I was already trained vocally and had an undergraduate degree in music and performance. But when pain consumed me, I had to take singing lessons from the Holy Spirit. They were lessons in the naked faith that held when nothing seemed to work, and God seemed to turn a blind eye to my suffering.

Whatever your story may be, you can learn to sing! However feebly you might start out, you can endure your dark season and know that it *will* end. You will come out the other side with something only God could give you, and no one can take away.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

- » What fears can you identify in your life that keep cropping up?
- » Where do you find you hesitate most when it comes to making decisions?
- » Can you identify those areas in your life where you tend to avoid facing situations or things that trigger painful thoughts and emotions? What are they?