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1

A Father's Love

One crisp, cool October afternoon about eight years ago, I was getting home from a doctor's appointment. As my dad and I rolled up to our new home in Douglasville, Georgia, I was doing my best to hold the tears in until I could get to my room to be alone.

While at the doctor's office, we had gotten bad news about a running injury I was dealing with. Almost a year before, I had just finished up my dream cross-country season, which I ended having qualified for nationals as one of the top high school sophomores in the nation. I was now at this specialist because when I had started running again after a two-week break, I had a bad fall on my first run back. I ended up severely injuring my foot and still had some lingering hip issues as I had landed on it. Turns out I had torn the labral cartilage in my hip socket.

To say the least, the doctor had not done a very good job of encouraging me. I was in the middle of another cross-country season and was not able to run due to a lot of lower back and hip pain that had been ongoing since the accident. He had been very clear that this pain would most likely never go away or heal

due to the shape of my spine from scoliosis.

Within a matter of seconds of entering the house, I was upstairs in my closet crying. You know those deep sobs where you can hardly cry because you are so upset? It is not as loud as normal crying, but it is deeper, harder, and more passionate.

I had finished last fall with the realization that I would get to run anywhere I wanted in college. Based on my national ranking, time for my age, and performance, it was looking like there was a large chance I would go pro and be a runner for my dream job someday. But now I was ten months out from this damaging fall, and nothing had gone my way since that moment of pain on the ground.

I had not been the same runner and had experienced nothing but health issues and doctor visits for almost a year. It felt like I was at the end of my rope, waiting for answers to help me get back to my dream of running. I sat in the closet crying, asking God to explain, just wanting to go back to the way my life was before.

My dad heard me from downstairs. Shortly after, there was a soft *tap, tap* on my bedroom door. I got up to answer, and as soon as I saw my dad's face, I burst into another fit of tears. I could see in his eyes the empathy and pain he felt. He came and sat with me in my closet and let me have a good, long cry.

"Why me?" I asked him. "Why do I have to go through this when none of my friends do?"

My dad held me and rubbed my back as the long, deep sobs turned into a snotty nose and slow tears running down my face. He answered in a slow, apologetic voice, almost on the edge of tears himself. He told me he did not know why I had to go through this. He said he wished I did not have to.

Then, he began to slowly unpack the story of Lazarus in the Bible for me. He said, "I don't know why, but this is what God

does to His friends. All throughout the Bible, He does *this* to His closest friends.”

GET BACK UP

This past fall, I spoke at a small women’s conference about the story of Lazarus. I encouraged the women listening to see Jesus’ empathy for Lazarus as an example of how He cares for us in the pain we face in life. (Before I share more, I want to be clear that I do not mean God wishes evil upon us. But I do believe that whatever pain we walk through in life, God is able to use.)

Before speaking at this event, I reread the passages in John 11 over and over to study exactly what Jesus did in this story of Lazarus. I wanted to make sure I said everything in the right context and shared the heart of God with these women through this moving story. About my third time reading through it, I remember being so powerfully moved by these four verses:

Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. And he said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” Jesus wept. (John 11:32–35)

Now, in the verses before this, John talks about when Jesus first got the news that Lazarus was sick. John states that Jesus was good friends with Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha. These women are two significant people in the Bible and loved the Lord intimately just as He loved them. But John also tells us

that Jesus waited two days before going to Judea to see Lazarus. Imagine knowing you had the power to help a close friend or relative who was on death's doorstep, and you had to let them pass and wait two days before going to check on their family.

I think the most significant verse in this story is verse 35—the shortest verse in the Bible—“Jesus wept.” You might think, yes, Lazarus was His close friend. Of course, Jesus cried. But to me, the crazy beautiful part of Jesus being “deeply moved” by Mary’s and Martha’s tears, as it says in verse 33, is that Jesus knew He was about to go raise Lazarus from the dead. Even though Lazarus had been dead four days, Jesus knew He had the power to heal him and had told His disciples verses before, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him” (John 11:11). Jesus knew what He came to Judea to do. He could have come in dancing and praising and joyful because He knew He was about to bring glory to God, but He didn’t.

Instead, Jesus hurt with them. He physically wept with them. And then He said, “Where have you laid him?” (John 11:34). After Lazarus was raised, much glory was brought to God, and many believed. But that did not change the fact that the pain of Lazarus and his family was intense. There had been death and tears.

If you just opened this book and you are not sure if it is for you but reading this story about Lazarus reminded you a bit of your own story, I encourage you to keep reading. Friend, God *loves you*, with a capital L. However, sometimes things in our lives have to die before He can raise up something beautiful. When this happens, our most helpful response is, “Lord, come.” I’ve learned we have to ask Him to come and be with us in the brokenness that we do not understand.

Jesus hates to see us hurt, but He loves us so much that when we feel pain, He feels it with and for us. How significant a love

our God has that He does not simply show up celebrating because He knows the end of the story. He knows the final outcome is good, but He still holds us and allows us to lean back against His chest and feel His heartbeat. He knows how to love us better than anyone.

ENVIABLE INTIMACY

My husband, Casey, and I have been reading *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C. S. Lewis aloud to each other anytime we are on a long road trip or getting ready to go to bed. We try to read instead of being on our phones all the time. If you have not read the Narnia stories, I will give you a little context. In the series, Aslan represents God, and he is a lion.

We were reading *The Magician's Nephew* a few weeks ago. It parallels the creation story in the Bible. Digory, the main character, is a child who has a very sick mother. He realizes Aslan might heal her as he gets to know how powerful and kind Aslan is.

I couldn't hold back my tears when I read the following passage aloud:

“But please, please—won't you—can't you give me something that will cure Mother?” Up till then he had been looking at the Lion's great feet and the huge claws on them; now, in his despair, he looked up at its face. What he saw surprised him as much as anything in his whole life. For the tawny face was bent down near his own and (wonder of wonders) great shining tears stood in the Lion's eyes. They were such big, bright tears compared with Digory's own that for a moment he felt as if the Lion must really be sorrier about his Mother than he was himself.¹

I don't claim to know why God does what He does or why He allows certain things to happen to us. But the truth is, as my dad shared with me after that disappointing doctor's appointment, Jesus' "best friends"—those who have enviable intimacy with Him—almost always have hard stories because that's how that intimacy grows. Just think back to Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha.

We also see this in so many of those closest to God throughout Scripture. Job had his whole life stripped from him but still trusted God's goodness when everyone told him to give up (Job 1:20–21). David went through massive hardships before he ever became king, as God promised and called him to (Ps. 13:1–6). Abraham and Sarah went through decades of infertility before receiving the son God promised them (Gen. 21:1–3). The list goes on and on.

Like those in the Bible, we do not have to know why God allows us to break. We just have to know He does not leave us that way. We can draw closer to Him by fighting battles with Him and for Him.

The circumstances of this life cannot be what defines my joy or yours. Running fast and being injury-free was never supposed to be my purpose. Being "skinny," "fit," or "having goals" were not meant to be my purpose either. I can see now that God was using every hard "closet moment" with Him to help me develop a sense of identity, purpose, and love for Him far beyond what I already had. And every time you and I look into God's eyes, just as Mary did after her brother Lazarus died, just like Digory did when he thought about his mother being sick and possibly dying, we get to see God's character. And His character is love, empathy, goodness.

I wanted to set the tone of this book right off the bat in this first chapter by letting you know God loves you—and, as I said

earlier, it's with a capital L. You are probably thinking, *Okay, Kat, I have heard that a million times, I know. I do not need another book on that.* I think as believers we do *know* God loves us because we hear it so often. But I think sometimes we forget that loving someone can involve pain. For some of us, when we walk through painful seasons—full of death or sickness, broken dreams, or a broken heart—it is hard to not become numb to the love of God.

I remember when I hit the peak of all my injuries and disappointment over running. It was a few years after that first fall when I tore my hip. I was in college, depressed and convinced I would never feel like myself again, and dealing with an eating disorder. After years of rehab to get the previous tear to an okay state to where I could run, I tore the hip cartilage on my good leg. It truly just felt like everything was wrong and life would not be right again.

I was going to church and hearing messages talking about trusting God. The pastors were saying things like, “Everything is going to be okay,” and I felt so much resentment toward them for saying these clichéd things I had heard so many times. They felt so untrue in my current circumstances. I never had a “rebellious” phase where I fell away from God. I always loved Him and believed. But I did struggle for years before I felt like I could trust Him during pain. I knew the words, “He is good,” but I did not know deep down for myself that even in the midst of the pain it could be good.

**WHERE LOVE IS MORE PRECIOUS
THAN A PAIN-FREE LIFE**

A while back, I had a girl direct message me on social media. I had no idea who she was, but she said God put it on her heart to

send me a book called *Hinds' Feet on High Places*. She described how the book talks a lot about my life verse, Isaiah 52:7. I had talked about this verse in my posts, so that is how she knew what it meant to me.

I looked through her page and she seemed trustworthy. I had peace about giving her my address (which is not something I would normally do), and thanked her for sending me the book. I received it along with a sweet note and glanced at a few pages, but failed to read it until years later. Once I did pick it up, it was evident this was a resource God meant for me to have in my hand.

Hannah Hurnard, the author of *Hinds' Feet on High Places*, talks about a girl named Much-Afraid, who lives in the Valley of Fear and is tormented by her fearful and taunting relatives. It is a very *Pilgrim's Progress*-style read where the Good Shepherd begins to walk Much-Afraid out of her captive mindset. He shows her that with His help she can walk through hard things and get to the Valley of Love where His Father reigns.

Like me, Much-Afraid struggles intensely with a fear of pain. I struggled with a triggering fear of pain for years because of the trauma from all of my injuries, doctors' appointments, broken dreams, and depression. Even today, whenever I feel a twinge of pain in my right hip, where my first labral tear occurred, I start to worry and think about the worst-case scenario. That physical sense of pain still makes me feel shame about my body because it triggers an emotional response in me from all of the disordered eating thoughts and body image issues I walked through during my hip tears and injuries in high school and college. (I'll talk more about this in later chapters.) It is wild how much of a marker pain can leave on our lives.

I think in some ways, we are all wired like this. The enemy is

so good at lying to us, and I've discovered pain is one of his top ways to do so. He loves to tell us, "It will always be this way. You can never beat this. Remember how bad that hurt you? God is going to allow it to happen again." It is hard not to fall into believing these lies because the enemy is good at what he does. His name is "the deceiver" (Rev. 12:9).

The only true defense mechanism I have found against these lies is my Father's heart. The more time I spend on my phone or in my busy world where temptation and depression run rampant, the less in tune I feel with God and His truth. However, the more time I spend with my Father, getting to know His heart, and leaning into His presence in my prayer closet, the closer I am to the truth and the easier it is to detect a lie and dismiss it. When we fall in love with the Lord, we are saying, "I trust You." We are choosing to believe what Paul wrote when he said, "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing to the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Rom. 8:18).

In Hurnard's *Hinds' Feet*, there is a leap-of-faith moment where the Good Shepherd—who represents *abba* (the Aramaic word for *father*)—says:

"To love does mean to put yourself into the power of the loved one and to become very vulnerable to pain, and you are very Much-Afraid of pain, are you not? . . . But it is so happy to love. . . . It is happy to love even if you are not loved in return. There is pain too, certainly, but Love does not think that very significant."²

Jesus going to the cross and His Father allowing Him to die hurt deeply. This hurt shows us that love is more significant than pain. The Father loved His Son and He loved us so much that He

allowed Jesus to go through the most painful act of all so that we might be saved. What a glorious gift we daily take for granted!

But how do we get to this state where love is more precious than living a pain-free life? How can we have this kind of surrender and sacrifice? For me, it happened in waves. One of these first waves was on a rainy summer night a few years back.

WHEN WE WORSHIP

One rainy August night, back in high school, I was driving home from our local Starbucks where I had been catching up on some homework and having my daily time with the Lord. I was playing worship music, and our neighborhood had a very long street with a lot of speed bumps, so it took me a good song or two just to get home once I entered the neighborhood.

As I drove onto the familiar road I had taken home every day for the past few years, a new song by Lauren Daigle came on called “I Am Yours.” She was my favorite artist at the time, and, with all I was walking through in the realms of pain and disappointment, I related heavily to the deep cry of her lyrics.

I had hit my third season in a row with a new injury nagging me and was seeing many doctors a week for some unexplained health issues outside of just the injuries. My body was failing me, so I felt like a failure even though I was working harder than I ever had to try and get healthy and happy again. It felt like all of my dreams for the future and running and who I thought I was were crashing to the ground. Lauren’s lyrics helped remind me that God was trustworthy even when not much else in life felt good.

I had been battling the surrender of my will. My desire for my running dreams to come true was stronger than my desire for

trusting God. But driving home in the rain that day, screaming Lauren's lyrics in surrender, something clicked.

God was walking me through something deeply painful, but I just kept asking Him for a pain-free life. I sat in the car weeping and screaming the lyrics to this song, asking God to help my love for Him be stronger than my current circumstances. I knew full well that I was asking God for more trials if that was what He willed, but trust was truly clicking for one of the first times in my life. I was realizing that, yes, I didn't want the hard things, but I wanted more of God's presence and will in my life than anything else. So I asked Him for the first time in years to lead me where I fully trusted Him and I would not walk on my own.

The realization of what I had just done was hard because I knew trusting Him like that might be surprisingly harder than I expected. And from the past few years of disappointing surprises, I had grown to dread hard things. I was scared to say, "I trust You, God. Your will be done," because in the past when His will was done, it hurt. I felt scared that I might not like whatever God wanted to do with my life. I had come to believe that all of the hard health issues and things I had gone through over the years were not worth anything and were just wasted years and potential. It was very easy for me to become a pessimist when I listened to the enemy's lies in my life.

Since that day, I have learned and experienced deeper levels of God's goodness, His kindness, and His love. God was always doing something in my life; I just had to trust Him enough to stay with Him during the storms. To know Him is to love Him. I am praying you can enter into this kind of love as you read this book. We will have empathy with one another as we discuss pain and disappointment, but more importantly, we will accept the truth that sets us free.

EVERY MOMENT

Before we wrap up this chapter, I want to speak to the girl who has enjoyed the start of the book but still doesn't know if it is "for her." The girl who is not walking through something difficult at this moment, but has in her past and has some scars she does not consider beautiful yet. I understand. I've been there too. We may love our Father now and be great at surrendering our current circumstances to Him, but how do we hand Him those ugly parts of us we do not tell anyone else about? How do we consider the ugliness of our past beautiful? How do we trust He was doing something all along? I want to share one more story for that girl and all of us.

During my freshman year at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, I spent most of my time cross-training instead of running after I tore the cartilage on my second hip and struggled with injuries for another year. I remember going to a small church basement with a small aquatic center-style pool for their members to do water aerobics and therapy exercises.

Every morning at 5 a.m., you could find me swimming either by myself or with a few older people doing water aerobics. I would stare at the old-school clock on the wall, waiting desperately for my one to two hours of solitude and water jogging to be over. I hated those lonesome hours. I would tread water around the whole pool and then stare up at the clock to see if I had gotten through another five minutes yet. I would play worship music from the side of the pool on my phone to get me through the lonely hours. Lauren Daigle was still one of my favorites.

During the past month or so, I have been worshipping to Upper Room music on YouTube quite frequently. One of their recent music videos is called "Hey, Jesus." Some of the lyrics talk about

how Jesus was there every single moment, and when we look back, we can see He was there. The image they used with these lyrics is an old-school clock.

Anytime I see an old-school clock, I am still reminded of that lonely pool in Waco. So I burst into tears the first time I saw it with the song lyrics plastered over it in the worship video. God reminded me that He had seen every moment of pain. And not just seen the pain but had been there with me in it. Every moment of loneliness at 5 a.m., as I drove myself to the cold pool, He was in the car with me. When no other teammate, friend, or family member was there, He was.

I encourage you to look back on your loneliest and hardest moments. How do you see God was there? Have you convinced yourself He was not? If so, I encourage you to look harder. Sometimes, I think it can be frowned upon when we see God in everything. People make fun of us or think we are “over-spiritual.” But friend, who cares what others think because God made everything and *is* truly in everything.

When I was little, my father used to tell me to look out the window when the wind was blowing the trees hard. He would say, “Look how even the trees praise Him. How much more so should we.” As we move through this book together and talk through pain and disappointment, I encourage us to see it as an opportunity to grow in our intimacy with God and proclaim He is good above it all! To commit our lowest to His highest.

Even when it seems cliché to sing the same song lyrics again, will you? Even when it does not ring true in your circumstances, will you believe beyond that? The enemy says to dwell in our self-pity and remain navel-gazing instead of getting into our Father's arms. I pray I make the decision to see God for who and where He is and that you will join me.

My Lowest for His Highest

I hope we make space for Jesus to come into our corner, just like my dad came into my closet after that discouraging doctor's appointment. I left that moment with my dad, proud and determined instead of desperate and at the end of my rope. When we meet with God, He ministers to us, picks us up, and reminds us that He is a good Father.