

LIFELINES  
— *for* —  
TOUGH TIMES

MIKE FABAREZ



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## LIFELINES FOR TOUGH TIMES

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## Finding Genuine Help in Life's Pain

It's one thing to give thought to the puzzling question of pain and suffering in light of the existence of a good and loving God, as though we were high school students struggling to make sense of our algebra homework. It is an entirely different kind of struggle when our lives suddenly (or perhaps gradually) take a left turn and we have to navigate our way in the midst of excruciating pain or prolonged suffering.

While I have admittedly written this book for those who are searching for hope in the middle of a dark and difficult period of their lives, I should be up front and tell you that we will have to grapple with a little *algebra* along the way. You see, a long series of cheerful platitudes won't provide any lasting help when we find ourselves tearfully asking why God would allow us to face difficult trials and how is it that he expects us to get through them all. Real strength and perspective will come only when we are willing to calibrate our thoughts and align our lives with the truth that God has revealed in his Word.

God has much to say about why things are not the way they ought to be, and how it is that we, as his beloved children, can “walk through the valley of the shadow of death” and actually “fear no evil”

(Psalm 23:4). And we will take a fresh look at several of the Bible's timeless truths—truths that have provided profound comfort and genuine help for generations of God's people through the centuries.

As a pastor of a large church for many years, I have walked through crushing hurts and heartbreaking losses with a variety of people—some whose trust in God has been refined and who come out of their trials stronger and wiser, as well as others who have spiraled downward into increasing anger and frustration and ended up walking away from Christ altogether.

Much is riding on how you and I handle life's pain. For Christians, there should be only one choice. Because, as Peter said when Jesus asked if he too was going to walk away, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68). Jesus provided ample proof that he has the answers—for this life and the next. The resurrected Christ knows what we need when we are suffering. Walking away is not an option. Deepening our understanding, refining our faith, and learning how to respond realistically is our agenda in the pages ahead.

Not only have I walked through a variety of trials with the people I love in my church, but I have also had to navigate some dark days in my own family. I will elaborate on one particular season that is arguably more painful than when the problem is embedded in our own bodies. The struggles my wife and I faced with the unexpected diagnosis regarding our only daughter was what God used to take many of his eternal principles off the inspired pages and into the center of our daily lives.

So join me as we look to God and his truth to give us strength, perspective, and hope as we consider the problem of pain and the genuine solutions found only in Christ.

## CHAPTER 1

# Things Will Go Wrong

For us it began with a routine ultrasound. We were expecting our third child. With two rambunctious little boys at home, Carlynn and I had selfishly prayed that this child would be a girl. But like so many other expectant parents, our prayers always ended with the admission that it really didn't matter—boy or girl, we just appealed to God for a healthy baby.

The ultrasound technician had been our longtime acquaintance, and knew we were hoping to hear the news that we could paint the nursery pink. As the goopy transducer scanned my wife's belly, all eyes were fixed on the grey haze on the computer screen. A smile spread across the tech's face as she exclaimed, "Yes, it's a girl!"

We were thrilled. We whispered our first prayer of joyful thanksgiving for our long-expected little girl, who, in anticipation years earlier, we had named Stephanie. But before we could say "Amen," the room grew strangely quiet. Our friend's smile disappeared. Her face was suddenly crestfallen. "I need to get the doctor," she said as she scurried out of the room.

The three-minute wait felt like hours.

What's wrong? How serious is it? Could we have somehow misunderstood what had just happened? Is our daughter okay?

The doctor walked in, quickly taking the controls of the ultrasound. He leaned into the display monitor. "We have a serious problem here," he said with a tone of sobriety we had never heard from him before. "Look here," he directed us. "This area of the cranium where you see black—it should be grey. The fetus is missing its brain. This is an anomaly called *anencephaly*. The fetus will certainly not survive. We need to schedule an abortion."

We were stunned. A mix of emotions flooded our hearts.

To us, Stephanie was so much more than a "fetus." This was the daughter we had prayed about for many years. Add to that, I had already been a senior pastor for more than ten years and took a firm public stance against abortion. So for us, the doctor's words were like fingers on a chalkboard. Abortion!

Carlynn and I looked at each other speechless. Without a word, we could each see the other draw on years of commitment to protecting human life. We were resolved. We would no more entertain the idea of abortion in this situation than if our four-year-old son were diagnosed with a terminal disease. We would see this pregnancy through come what may.

But we knew that with such a resolve we were entering a tumultuous season of grief and uncertainty. Our lives had just taken a left turn. Without warning, everything had changed. We were about to begin a journey punctuated by a series of victories and a sequence of defeats. We were about to travel an unfamiliar road filled with a depth of pain we had never experienced.

And we knew our pain was not unique.

## No Exemptions

As a pastor for more than twenty-five years, I have had a front-row seat to the kinds of suffering and pain that flood Christians' lives. Sincerely loving God and tirelessly serving him obviously provide



no exemption from pain. At any given time in a church like ours, the daily e-mails we receive listing the trials, heartaches, and diseases among our people chronicles a directory of suffering that is difficult to read, let alone pray through.

It is common for Christians to assume that a person's pains and difficulties have been brought on by some secret sin in his or her life. Perhaps there is some personal act of rebellion that God is responding to. Maybe there is a character flaw that is being addressed.

Such misguided thinking is one reason God gave us the book of Job. Remember how Job is described at the beginning of his painful excursion? He "was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil" (Job 1:1). And that wasn't an assessment from just anyone. This evaluation came from God himself (cf. Job 1:8). We know from the rest of Scripture that Job, like everyone else on the planet, was not perfect. But the onslaught of pain Job faced had nothing to do with God's frustration toward him. Job was a paragon of righteous living, yet he suffered greatly. All his children died in a catastrophic storm. All his businesses went bankrupt. He was struck with a debilitating disease, and his reputation was trashed. Job's wife was less than supportive of him, and his friends accused him of hidden, unconfessed sin.

Though God eventually restored Job's fortunes, the suffering he endured was very real. His memories included the funerals of his children. His body bore the scars of an amazingly difficult season of life. And this happened to one who was described by God as one of the godliest individuals in the Old Testament.

### **A Misguided Assumption**

Why all the pain? If God loves his people, why doesn't he guard them from all the hurt? You might be able to figure out some specific answers for Job's excruciating season of pain. But even in his case, there are many head-scratching aspects to the story. Especially if your assumption is that if God loves his children he will keep

them from suffering and pain. After all, isn't that the way we parent? Because we love our kids, if we had the power to prevent a disease, or the opportunity to exempt them from broken bones, we would certainly exercise that power. We would keep them from pain. We would exempt them from suffering. Makes sense, doesn't it? If you look around, you'll find this is the foundational assumption of most people in our world.

In her autobiography, President George W. Bush's wife Laura speaks of driving through a stop sign at age seventeen and colliding with the car of her classmate, Michael Douglas, which resulted in his death. Laura says she pleaded with God for her friend's life, to no avail. She writes,

I lost my faith that November, lost it for many, many years. It was the first time that I had prayed to God for something, begged him for something, not the simple childhood wishing on a star but humbly begging for another human life. And it was as if no one heard. My begging, to my seventeen-year-old mind, had made no difference. The only answer was the sound of Mrs. Douglas's sobs on the other side of that thin emergency room curtain.<sup>1</sup>

Mrs. Bush eloquently verbalizes what so many others have confessed to me over the years. Namely, that their frustration and disappointment with God, because he had "failed" to protect them from life's tragedies, had driven them to "lose their faith."

In a way, this can be a good thing. Not that they are upset with God, but that their unbiblical assumptions about God are revealed and forced to change. For if our "faith" has been in a "god" who is presupposed to exempt us from life's pain and suffering, then it is a faith that needs to be lost. It needs to be exchanged for a biblical faith in the real God.

As we learn in the case of Job, the real God is a God who not only has the power to prevent our pain; he is also a God who is fully

aware of our pain. And God, as we consistently see in the Bible, is a God who strategically and thoughtfully prescribes our pain.

Such prescriptions do not contradict his love for us or his dedication to our well-being. That may be hard to fathom. (My attempts to resolve this seeming contradiction is one of the reasons I have wanted to write this book.) But we need to see the reality that these truths do not contradict each other.

Even as God's children we will face difficult and painful experiences in our lives. Consequently, we cannot afford to function with a distorted and simplistic view of God, a view that assumes our pain means he is either powerless to stop it, ignorant that we are experiencing it, or in some way slack in fulfilling a presumed promise that he would never allow pain, suffering, or tragedy to touch us. The truth is, God not only allows pain, he has actually planned it and even promised it. Even so, we must remember that our God is a good God. He has a purpose in the pain and stakes his character on the truth that in the end he works all things together for good for those who love him and are called according to his purpose (Romans 8:28). That gives us hope, even when the pain is severe and the world seems out of control.

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Because sin became a part of the human equation, suffering is a part of the human experience.

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## A Broken World

We live in a sinful, fallen, and broken world. The origin of all this is described for us in Genesis 3. There we find some initial answers to why we suffer. As unsatisfying as it may be to read, this chapter of the Bible details the purposeful introduction of suffering, pain, disease, and death. Here in the middle of God's statements to the first man and woman, we see that God is the one who is personally imposing these painful realities:

To the woman he said, "I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children..."

And to Adam he said, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you. . . . By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Genesis 3:16-19).

Adam and Eve’s fatal choice to eat from a prohibited tree careened the human race into a host of painful consequences, the most serious of which is death itself. As Romans 6:23 says, “The wages of sin is death.”

Because sin became a part of the human equation, suffering is a part of the human experience. That may seem over the top, but the Bible couldn’t be clearer. The original human decision to disregard God’s command resulted in a promise from God that every person, regardless of his or her relative piety, would encounter pain, disease, and death. There are several paradoxical glimpses of grace in this reality that we will examine later, but for now let us concede that the pain and suffering we so naturally deplore was imposed on the human race by God in response to human sin.

Think of it this way: If we didn’t experience suffering, pain, disease, and death, God would be unfaithful to his promise that there would be consequences if Adam and Eve disobeyed him. He would be dishonest. In the words of the theologian Don Carson, “this perennial slide toward death with all its associated illness, death and bereavement is nothing other than the outworking of God’s judicial sentence, ‘when you eat of it you will certainly die’ (Genesis 2:17).”<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, our suffering—and even our death—are not signs that things are out of control and that God is absent or silent. No, the unpleasant realities of pain and loss are signs that everything is

right on schedule. They are reminders that God is in control and accomplishing precisely what he has said is supposed to happen.

### **God's Promise to Fix the Problem**

At this point some will object and suggest that I have overlooked a large portion of the Bible—the positive, hopeful portion. Doesn't the Bible tell us that God is the problem solver? Doesn't it say that he heals, delivers us, and fixes our circumstances?

Yes it does. But we need to be clear about timing. The sweeping and all-encompassing promises about God making “every crooked thing straight”<sup>3</sup> and “wiping away every tear”<sup>4</sup> are directed to a time when “the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ” (Revelation 11:15). The root of the problem of sin, suffering, and death were dealt with at the first coming of Jesus Christ, but their eradication must wait for his second coming. Jesus paid the price to redeem his people and forgive their sins, but he has yet to reverse all of the effects of sin and the consequences he has imposed on this fallen world.

Even for those who have repented of their sins and placed their trust in Christ to forgive their sins, the judicial response of God on the human race has not yet been revoked. And until the second coming of Christ, we are all still members of fallen humanity. The godly and ungodly will all physically suffer, become sick, and eventually die.

There are times when God does graciously deliver, mercifully heal, and kindly stave off the peril of death, but it is always a temporary reprieve. The final reversal of death, the permanent elimination of disease, and the complete abolition of suffering must wait for the next world. We must always be careful to not claim promises before their time. Jesus often sought to get this point fixed in our minds. For instance, he said, “In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). All the work that

is required to reverse the problems we face has been accomplished, but God has reserved the implementation of his perfect blessings for a future time.

For those of us who are trusting in Christ, we can be sure God will fix our problems. We will reign with Christ (Revelation 22:3). We will have bodies which are impervious to disease (1 Corinthians 15:42-43). We will never attend another funeral (Isaiah 25:8). Mourning, crying, and pain will be things of the past (Revelation 21:4). There will be no more war, conflict, or battles (Isaiah 2:4). Life will be good. Perfect, in fact.

But for now, we must prepare ourselves for the path this side of the coming kingdom. As Paul encouraged the first-century Christians, we should “continue in the faith” knowing that “through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22).

### Hostility Against Christians

It doesn't help that there are many who peddle a brand of Christianity that is supposed to cure all our ills and fulfill all our earthly dreams. Their hypocrisy should be evident, for eventually every peddler of a health-and-wealth gospel ends up dying and leaving behind all their assets. But many flock to hear these charlatans in the hopes that adding Christ to their lives will fix all their temporal problems.

However, the truth is that adding Christ to your life creates a number of temporal problems. Think about it: Non-Christians may struggle with all the same problems as Christians; they may struggle with disease, disappointment, and death, but at least the culture is tailored to help them drown their sorrows, numb their pain, and muddy their fears regarding their own mortality. In other words, the world suits them. It's a place they can fit in and find outlets for their desires and priorities. We who are Christians, on the other hand, have the problem of not fitting in. The culture in which we are called to live out our Christianity rejects us in many ways. Not

only is the culture not Christian, it is hostile to our priorities and values. Jesus put it this way:

If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: "A servant is not greater than his master." If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours (John 15:18-20).

Who as a Christian hasn't experienced the jeers, criticisms, and putdowns that come when we openly confess our trust and allegiance to Jesus Christ? To freely affirm that we read and study the Bible as God's revelation and our binding guidebook for life will raise eyebrows in some settings and invite outright insults in others. Budding friendships can come to a screeching halt, clients can suddenly decide to seek another vendor, and an assortment of disparaging comments can flow from people "who can't stand 'religious' people" or "will never do business again with a Christian." While in the modern West we may not be fed to literal lions, there is certainly a cultural price to pay if we are willing to stand up and speak out about our commitment to Christ.

Jesus told us to expect such hostility, and to even rejoice over it. He said,

Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you (Matthew 5:11-12).

This kind of ridicule can be gladly endured, knowing that we are not only being lumped in together with the great men and women

of the Bible and church history, but that we are also being aligned with Christ himself. It will still hurt, and it may have financial or relational repercussions, but at least we know it is something that every godly person is called to bear.

## Spiritual Enemies

As Christians we not only face incompatibility with the world, but much like in the case of Job, we also have a spiritual enemy. God's ultimate and most powerful adversary, along with all his henchmen, make it their job to oppose us in every way possible. We are told that as Christians, God's formidable antagonist has become ours: "Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8).

The Bible calls our adversary the "destroyer" (the meaning of "Apollyon" in Revelation 9:11), a "slanderer" (the term translated "devil" meaning "slanderer" in Luke 4:2, 13), the "deceiver" (Revelation 12:9), the "tempter" (Matthew 4:3), and our "accuser" (Revelation 12:10). None of this is good. And it brings to mind the ways our lives are made more difficult as a result of our alliance with Christ.

Often we do not connect the dots in our thinking, but it is safe to assume that some of the destruction, slander, opposition, temptations, and accusations that we endure as Christians have more behind them than meets the eye. The Bible asserts that these spiritual enemies of ours are real, and that they are focused on causing real trouble, doubt, and discouragement in our lives.

But what about Christ's protection? Doesn't the Bible say that "he who is in you [i.e., God's Spirit] is greater than he who is in the world [i.e., Satan]"?<sup>5</sup> Yes it does, and yes he is. God is infinitely greater and more powerful than our spiritual enemies. But while we can be sure that Satan and his henchmen will not carry out all that they'd like to do in our lives, we must realize that—as evidenced throughout the Bible—God does not grant some kind of all-inclusive buffer of protection from their activity. Job is a classic



example of Satan's destructive activity in the life of one of God's beloved followers. But he is not our only example.

Consider Paul's chronic illness, mentioned in 2 Corinthians 12. He doesn't reveal what the ailment is. All we know is that it's annoying and painful like a "thorn" and that it is sent by Satan (verse 7). The amazing thing about this confession is that Paul says he had repeatedly asked God to remove this ailment, and God said no. Paul went on to conclude that his "thorn from Satan" was a purposeful provision from God. In his case we learn that God's prescription of pain was an effective safeguard against pride.<sup>6</sup> So, while Jesus has promised to "never leave you nor forsake you,"<sup>7</sup> at the same time, you are not fully insulated from the enemy's harassment. "For indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Timothy 3:12).

Every true Christian will experience the continual conflict between *who* they are (new creatures in Christ) and *what* they are (fallen human beings).

### An Internal Struggle

There is yet another type of problem that God said we would all face—one that hits very close to home. It is one thing to encounter problems externally from the world, our anti-Christian culture, or even demonically instigated troubles. But we also need to be prepared to experience a set of struggles that come from within us. I'm talking about the conflict that occurs between a Christian's regenerated, reborn, redeemed spirit and the sinful flesh or fallen humanity in which our spirit is encased.

Every true Christian will experience the continual conflict between *who* they are (new creatures in Christ) and *what* they are (fallen human beings). Perhaps 1 Peter 2:11 summarizes it best when it tells us that we are to "abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul." Any time there is a "waging of war," you can change your caricatures of idyllic, easy, breezy Christianity to the biblical motifs of battle, warfare, and struggle.

That may not fit the Sunday school images of the Christian life or the assumptions of Psalm 23 with the smiling Good Shepherd and his frolicking sheep. But as long as that image is now in your mind, let's consider this motif for a moment. If we are to think of ourselves as God's sheep, let's be careful to add to that picture the promise that we will be surrounded by "wolves" and that we will be made to walk "through the valley of the shadow of death." Then we must also remember that sheep are animals who have a tendency to wander away. They have conflicting motivations. While sheep do have a true loyalty to their shepherd and they hear his voice and follow him, in their sheepishness, they also desire to forge their own path. They desire in their sheepish curiosity to do their own thing, thereby transgressing the call and leadership of their shepherd.

Real Christians have heard Christ's voice and have, by God's regenerative work, chosen to follow him. But they are still encased in their humanness, which is stubborn, independent, and at odds with their loyalty to follow Christ. Our human and fleshly desires are at war within us. The Holy Spirit is present in our lives to direct, discipline, and empower our obedience to our Good Shepherd, but the flesh fights, claws, and opposes the Spirit's influence on our spirit. A daily war is inevitable. As Paul wrote, "The desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other" (Galatians 5:17). Thankfully this conflict is one that God will aid us in fighting, but it's still a fight—at times, a painfully big one.

Put it all together, and the biblical picture of the Christian life looks a lot different than what we often hear or want to imagine. A.W. Tozer was right to tell us:

To bring ourselves under the plenary authority of Jesus Christ... is to invite trouble from a hostile world... Add to this the temptations of the devil and a lifelong struggle with the flesh and it will be obvious that we will need

to defer most of our enjoyments to a more appropriate time.<sup>8</sup>

### **Adjusting Expectations**

All of this unpleasant focus on the downside of the present reality for Christians should settle one thing for good—we shouldn't expect a pain-free, problem-free Christian life. I can't emphasize this enough: Changing that expectation changes a lot!

When Jesus called his disciples by saying, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me,"<sup>9</sup> there should have been no confusion about what taking this path would entail. The "narrow way"<sup>10</sup> Jesus spoke of is not a primrose path. It does end with incomparable treasures as we "enter by the narrow gate,"<sup>11</sup> but the journey will necessarily include a variety of thorns, internal conflicts, jeers from the world, opposition from Satan, and a share of strategic trials handpicked for us by God. These are not signs that something is wrong; they are the bumps that remind us that we are on the right path.

### **Pressing On**

It was admittedly difficult for my wife and I to see the terminal diagnosis of our preborn daughter as "an expected bump," but there was no other option. We knew that God was neither unaware of the problem, nor was he impotent to have prevented it. We loved God and we knew he loved us. We could only tearfully embrace the news as something that God had sovereignly chosen for us, and for Stephanie. After all, he had never promised there would be a tomorrow for us or our children. He never promised that my wife and I would have healthy babies. There were no guarantees from heaven that our earthly families would be free from pain, disease, or death. Having officiated funerals of young children from solid Christian families over the years, I knew that we carried no special exemptions.

As God would have it for Stephanie, pain and disease were her immediate realities, but death was off the table, at least for the time being. Our doctor's snap diagnosis was less than accurate. Stephanie's brain did in fact form, but it had been severely compressed due to the swollen ventricles in her brain. As a specialist pointed out to us, she did not have anencephaly; she had hydrocephalous—sometimes called “water on the brain.” In her case this threatening problem was caused by a failure of some of her vertebrae to properly form, allowing an abnormal protrusion of the spinal cord from her spinal column. That, in turn, herniated the rear portion of her brain, sealing off the drainage path for her ventricles and inflating them to an abnormal size.

This congenital disorder of the vertebrae is called spina bifida, which comes in a variety of degrees of severity. Throughout a series of prenatal appointments the outlook for Stephanie was mixed. There were lots of guesses and prognoses, which seemed to always include words like *retardation*, *paralysis*, *malformation*, *wheelchairs*, *surgeries*, *therapies*, *catheters*, *leg braces* and occasionally we'd still hear the word *stillbirth*. We'd have to wait and see the full extent of what God's path would be for her and for our family. But come what may, we were committed to pressing on with faith in a good God. We were ready to walk this unfamiliar road that God had prescribed for us, knowing that he would walk it with us and that he was able to sustain us each step of the way.

## Your Trial

You or someone you love might not currently be facing a medical crisis. Instead, perhaps your pain is the distress of financial trouble, the grief of personal loss, the hurt of relational conflict, or the ache of rejection. Whatever it may be, remember that the Lord has promised to be “near to the brokenhearted” (Psalm 34:18). His desire is to walk with you through your trial.

C.S. Lewis insightfully wrote that “God whispers to us in our

pleasures...but shouts in our pain.”<sup>12</sup> My prayer is that we are all careful to listen. We must not allow our pain to deafen us to the instruction of God and the lessons he desires to impart. We dare not put our head down and trudge through each painful day without looking up. God desires to be near to you in your trials, but he requires that you draw near to him (James 4:8).



The path may be unpleasant, but the destination will not disappoint.



So don't let the pain harden your heart. Be attentive to God's wisdom and hopeful in your suffering. Know that he is a loving Father who "saves the crushed in spirit" (Psalm 34:17). He has a plan for you, and he is working it out. The path may be unpleasant, but the destination will not disappoint.