

INTRODUCTION

You Are Not Alone

“Pain is a part of life, but it is God who brings purpose to it.”

- Armando Palazzo

There were five distinct moments in my life where grief, despair, and pain was so deep, that it pierced the depths of my soul physically and emotionally. I sensed the leading of the Holy Spirit that it was time to develop my raw, uncut prayers, into a devotional book that helped deliver me from a time of great despair. It was clear that this would be a 40-day devotional to support others in their time of need.

When Jesus was led out into the desert where he fasted, prayed, and was tested for 40 days,¹ His season in the wilderness was also a time of pain. My journey of pain felt like I was in a desert, a wilderness, and left all alone. It was my time of testing, deep pain, and deep faith. I am a year and a half into my journey of discovery and my faith has strengthened. Jesus made it out of the desert and so will you.

The words grief, loss, or pain, often cause us to think that it must be the result of a death. Yet there are many kinds of deaths or losses we face in this life. Grief is experienced in a much wider range of losses than just the physical loss of a loved one. Some experience grief as a result of having lost a career, a beloved pet, financial ruin, sickness, betrayal, an unfilled dream, breakup of a relationship, unresolved family conflict, trauma, social shame, a traumatic event, a wayward child, divorce, and the list goes on

and on. Grief may be the result of *any* loss of something or someone that is significant in our life to cause great emotional distress.

In addition to being a pastor, I work bi-vocationally as a licensed mental health counselor. Over the years, many clients described psychosomatic pains, which I had not known first hand until now. My clients were open to share with me that their grief or sense of loss was so bad they didn't know if they would survive. I now fully and completely understand what they meant. Others have expressed the benefit and release from journaling. I had never journaled. However, at this crossroad in my life, I had no choice.

In this devotional you will notice though I share the pain, impact and aftermath of the traumatic event in which I don't share the details of the event at length. It was a struggle to decide whether to share details of the trauma that was before us; but through much prayer and consideration for our child, I decided I would share the journey, the feelings and the struggle rather than the details of the trauma itself. This was a thoughtful boundary to protect our child from the re-trauma of exposure. If you are a parent, I am confident that you understand this sensitivity and need to protect. The details of this event are really her story to share one day when she is ready. It is her testimony and her strength. So, this devotional is the story of what we faced as a family, and how it profoundly impacted each of us.

It all started when my oldest was about 14 years of age. She began to struggle with depression, engaged in self harm, and had suicidal ideation. This was a very desperate and trying time in our lives. As parents, we lived in a state of constant fear that we would come home one day and find that our worst fears have been actualized. We could not make sense of our fear for her safety and the impact upon our other children. How could our happy loving child who has always loved life now despise it so much? What could have brought her here?

What has happened?

Nothing in life could have prepared me for this pain; not my career in counseling, my calling as a pastor, nor theology. I had no answer for it.

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I couldn't fix it or make it better. All of the counseling skills and prayers didn't take my pain away. I felt utterly and completely overwhelmed and ill-equipped. My life had fallen apart and I had no response for it. I felt like a failure and distant from God. I was now left with my grief, perceived failure, and shame.

During those early moments, I was brought back to the story of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Right before his arrest, He would endure the greatest of pain and punishment. He, too, ran to the Father in prayer.² He felt such deep sorrow and pain to the point of death. I think we should take comfort in knowing that even Jesus, the Son of God Himself, the second member of the Trinity, knows the depth of my pain and yours.

Bringing God into our pain opens the door for how we experience this journey of pain. We *all* have to go through this journey. We can't expedite it or run through it. Nor should we try to avoid it or medicate it—that will cause more destruction and pain. In our culture we have such a fast food mentality. We live in a society where almost everything is perceived to be in our control and for our convenience. One of the few things we approach differently is working out at the gym. Very few of us expect to go to the gym for a one-time workout and expect to lose 30 pounds. Why do we not approach our faith this way?

Any fast food approach to pain leaves us with unrealistic expectations. Life is really a mixed bag of the good and the bad. Unfortunately, many of us are ill-equipped to cope and deal with difficult times. I don't know why that is, maybe the difficult things are too scary and uncomfortable. Whatever the reason, no one taught us how to suffer well.

During this deep and terrifying season, the pain I was facing was so great that all the encouragement in the world and the emotional and spiritual band aides – “pray harder,” “it will get better,” “trust God,” fell on deaf ears. Although at times, a part of me felt that nothing could make my situation better, the other part knew that it would only get better with God as my companion. When I think of suffering, I have to think there is

more to it. When I sit in my pain, I am at a place of such great despair only God can heal. I knew ultimately that I would find peace and I would find God! I've learned that there must be purpose in pain, and it will ultimately be revealed.

The prayers in this devotional were never written with the intention of one day being a devotional book. Rather, this was birthed out of deep pain; from hitting a wall head on so hard I questioned whether myself or my family would ever recover, whether we would ever be the same. I couldn't imagine life ever being OK again.

I started writing out my prayers. It was hard to speak, to know what to say or even pray for. My emotions were all over the place and I was emotionally and spiritually confused. I was overwhelmed and had difficulty even praying, talking or expressing my feelings into words. So, I just wrote. Sometimes I wrote multiple times a day. I wrote as I needed to cry out. I viewed it more as writing out my prayers to God, than labeling it as journaling. I was writing to someone wiser and more powerful than me. I have the expectation that He hears my prayers and has the ability to respond. Knowing God was in the midst of my pain and turmoil brought me such deep hope and purpose.

“The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.”

- Psalm 34:18

I claim Psalm 34:18 over my life and the life of my family. I claim it over you and your family as well. In using this devotional, it will allow you to journey through your grief, and find hope. Each devotional has five sections:

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*Prayer

*Self-Contemplation

*Scripture

* Your Daily Prayer

*Prayer Journal Questions

1. Prayer: Each devotional will start with my own personal prayer journal entries or lament from my journey.

2. Self-Contemplation: Each prayer is followed by an emotional and spiritual self-contemplation that is meant to encourage you and speak life into the confusion of your loss, grief, anger, and pain. It should help you meet God where you are in your journey.

3. Scripture: Following the self-contemplation are Scripture references that were encouraging to me and I believe will be a source of encouragement and hope to you.

4. Daily Prayer: In addition to meditating on Scriptures, confessing daily prayers in first person can help to strengthen your soul, breathe life into your situation, and help you to own your faith and the promises of God. Scripture is clear about the power of the tongue:

Proverbs 18:21 NIV

The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit.

This power is not in the same sense of God's power to speak but rather the power of creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. What we speak will either bring life or death/negativity in a spiritual and emotional sense.

5. Prayer Journal Questions: After your daily prayer, there are questions to challenge you to process, to have the courage to feel, and to help you express your feelings to engage with God. Try to approach the questions from a conversational platform with God. Lines are provided at the end of each devotional for your own self-contemplation, questions, or prayers. If you are working through this book in a small group context, follow the same directions and then discuss the prayers/journal entries, contemplation, scriptures, and questions with your group. Share within the group your own journal entries, if you're up for the challenge.

I encourage you to use this collection of prayers more as a tool rather than just normal reading material. Generally, it is recommended that you not start writing a devotional if you are still in the shock stage of a difficult event, loss or tragedy. Emotional shock is a common response to trauma or in some cases, even vicarious trauma. Emotional shock is an acute stress reaction. Shock is usually short-term. It usually follows the first few days after a traumatic realization.

People have described being in shock in many different ways. Some people who have experienced shock have described the absence of feelings, feelings of confusion, feeling disconnected, distracted, wondering why they were not crying, or screaming. This is when you received that initial phone call or that figurative phone call—that moment your world stood still. Some of you might still be in this position today.

At this point, taking it slowly, sharing your story, allowing yourself to receive the support of those around you, and trying your best to be emotionally, physically, and spiritually present, are the best initial steps. If you have had a significant loss, you may want to consider counseling, grief care, or meet with your spiritual leaders for pastoral care and support. Don't isolate yourself. You are not alone even when it feels like it. Let someone in to support and walk with you. You matter and so do your feelings.

In addition, I have provided five rest days throughout this devotional after every eight days. One of the more important things that I found

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on my journey through pain and recovery in coping with the weight, the pressure, and the pain, is rest and self-care. They will bring peace to your heart and comfort to your soul. During a traumatic moment, your body, mind, soul, and spirit are working overtime. All are constantly running and racing with worry, fears, anxieties, and pain. As you know, rest and self-care look different for each of us. For me, I found the best rest and self-care was being with God in nature. Taking long hikes or fishing at a local lake or stream rejuvenated my soul. Take a breather and find something to break your routine of stress and worry. Consider doing something you've never done before, treat yourself, allow your creativity to flow, practice gratitude, limit your social media interactions, or volunteer your time.

It is my hope that this devotional will help validate you and help you find hope in the truth that there is life after a loss, failure, mistake, a setback, or even grief. One thing for certain; things will never be the same. What happened is done. There is no taking it back and there is no do over. Trust that God can use your situation as a catalyst for good and positive change in your life. Somehow, by going through this journey, you can meet God.

Read this devotional at your own pace. There is no pressure to read every day. Go back and read prayers that correlate with where you are emotionally. This journey is more about sitting in your pain long enough for it to do its work rather than trying to run out of it. There is life after loss and grief, and it can be a good life that is fun, happy, and fulfilling. Somehow, God leverages our pain for us to encounter Him and grow. Keep your eyes fixed on the prize, which is HOPE. Hope in God who knows and understands your pain. Hope in the God who will rescue you. Hope in God who is able to do more than you can imagine or think as He meets you on this journey.

As we now in courage move forward fighting through, pressing through, and pushing through the pain, there is a God-sized miracle awaiting all of us. Let's win together in the struggle. God can do more than we can ever imagine.

“The end of a matter is better than the beginning...”

- Ecc. 7:8

DAY 1

The Day the World Stood Still

“Honest questions, sincere doubts, and deep hurts can draw you closer to God than you’ve ever imagined before.”

- Craig Groeschel

Prayer of stunned disbelief:

Lord, I do not want to accept recent tragedy. I am resistant to accepting things as they now are. I find myself avoiding it. How could this be true? How could this have happened? I don't understand.

Lord, I feel so abandoned. I feel rejected, as if your favor has been taken away. This can't be true; this can't possibly be true. Your promise is that You would never leave us nor forsake us!! I trust Your word and find myself now holding onto it desperately. I sink my nails deep inside of it to hold on, but I feel them slipping. It's so hard, I feel like I can't comprehend or process what was shared then or what's happening now. I am feeling oddly detached and numb. As I sit here in confusion, I question even if it's all real. It must not be!! How can it be??

I have so many questions. I don't know how or what to ask or if I'm even sure if I want the answers. I just want to go to sleep and wake up from this bad nightmare. I want to find out that this was all a terrible dream. It's not real, it's not happening. Please give me the strength to face this. I am so fearful. I'm terrified. I have never felt terror before.

As I look for meaning, I search Your Scriptures. I find story after story of the heroes of old; the stories of men and women of God who walked through disastrous situations to eventually find them where You were faithful in seeing them through their journey and faithful to Your promise in the end.

I know I am struggling with shock and denial of the current situation. I don't want it. How can I possibly want it? Yet I know that you have a purpose in it and in the end will make it good because I love you and I know you love me.

At this moment, I cannot make sense of it, though. I can only hope that at some point clarity would be revealed to me. You're faithful to turn a bad situation into good and to turn the waste into a harvest. I'm just broken, beaten, and exhausted. I'm so tired and overwhelmed. All I have the energy for is to still hope; to just sit and hope this wasn't real. Please do for my family and me what I am powerless to do!

Emotional & Spiritual Self-Contemplation:

Have you ever cried out to God in a similar manner? When nothing made sense anymore and I couldn't understand why everything was happening, I held onto one stabilizing truth: That God was real and that God was good. I just didn't understand why we were now facing what we were facing.

I knew one thing for sure: That there would be no quick fix, no matter how much I wanted one. So apart from an immediate miracle, I knew I was on a journey that would take time for myself and my family to heal. The fear and pain was just so debilitating and heavy. It hurt to breathe. There was nowhere else to go and no one else to run. All I had was God. This was a journey of wrestling.

It was a typical Tuesday morning when I received a call at work. When I answered, little did I know that the call would change everything. A family member shared devastating news. I was in complete and utter shock. Each time I asked to repeat what was said, I could not comprehend or process what I was hearing. Of course, I heard it but it was like my brain couldn't understand, compute or accept it. It was as if my brain was rejecting this

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news, much like a gag reflex—everything was in slow motion. It literally felt as though the world stood still.

I had so many questions that I wanted to ask but I could not articulate. All I kept saying was: “What? What? I don’t understand.” This must’ve been very confusing for the one sharing with me their devastating news, but at that moment, I just could not function. My brain wasn’t working. I knew what I heard, I just couldn’t understand it. I wondered what it all meant. What did this mean for our lives as a family? What did it mean for the way things were?

I wondered how Mary, Jesus’ mother and the Apostles felt as Jesus would share with them prophetically His death to come?³ They, too, received the figurative call. Jesus was sharing something with them that they could not understand; they could not make sense of. All they knew was that they did not want it. They did not want that phone call and neither did I. You didn’t want your world to stand still either. None of us would choose a tragic outcome.

Three days after the phone call, I literally could not function. If you have received a phone call or can remember the exact point where your pain started, you know what I’m talking about. I did not know what to do with everything I was feeling; the confusion, the sadness, the numbness, the emotional detachment, the feeling like a zombie, emotionally and spiritually. All of these confusing feelings that I was experiencing overwhelmed me.

I had no action plan. No steps. All of my work as a counselor, all of the skills that I have used to help others navigate through grief, totally abandoned me in this painful moment. For the first time in my life I picked up a pen and cried out the best way that I could. Somehow, on paper, everything I felt started to make sense. I was able to articulate questions, share with God my desperation. Writing out my prayers seemed to be the only thing that made sense. It just kind of all happened. Looking back, it all makes sense. When faced with the greatest hardship of my life, I had nowhere to turn but back to God. I had no one else to run.

Scriptures

The following verses brought me comfort as they reminded me that God was still present in my life. Though things were now chaotic, the realization of God being with me brought me hope, though I still had so much pain. Of course, none of what happened in your situation makes sense at this early point in your journey. As you write below try to find a Scripture or promise of God to hold in your heart and mind; it's the only rock you have to stand on.

Psalm 34:18 ESV

The Lord is near to the brokenhearted
and saves the crushed in spirit.

Deuteronomy 31:6 ESV

Be strong and courageous. Do not fear or be in dread of them, for it is the Lord your God who goes with you. He will not leave you or forsake you.”

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Daily Prayer

Dear Lord, in these difficult moments I pray that I will sense you now more than ever. In and of myself I lack strength and courage. I thank you that you will meet me where I am at. You comfort the brokenhearted and save those that feel lost. I pray that you would bless this journey for me and bring me hope. I turn to you now in my hurt and pain and I ask that you bless me in the name of Jesus. Amen

Prayer Journal Questions

<i>Personal Reflections...</i>
1. What was your experience of that initial “phone call” or moment your world stood still? Try to focus on your feelings rather than what you thought. Start with, “ <i>I feel...</i> ”

ARMANDO PALAZZO

2. Where was God at this moment? Did you feel God was distant or close?
3. Which Scripture or promise of God are you standing on today?

DAY 2

Heart of Heaviness

“There’s only one power in the world great enough to help us rise above the difficult things we face: the power of God.”

- Stormie Omartian

An inconsolable hurt:

Lord, my heart feels so heavy, a weight that I am not sure I can bear. I feel burdened and afflicted with pain. As the burden gets heavier, I start to feel so numb. I can’t feel anymore. This numbness is not a comforting feeling, but rather, a feeling of emptiness. There is no joy or solace in feeling numb. It causes me to be concerned for myself. I want to feel again, but I know if I open that door to the feelings, and as the numbness departs, the emptiness invites pain and sadness. I do not desire to dwell in either of these places. I am scared to death to face and accept the pain and trauma my child now faces, the weight of pain on my family, and the guilt I hold as a father.

So I cry out. I cry out for You to rescue me. I cry out because I feel like I can no longer run. I feel like I can no longer defend. I feel like I can no longer protect. I cry out because I am in need.

What does Your Word have for me? What encouragement and hope can I find there? What is Your promise to me? You are the God that rescues. You are my strong fortress. You are my rock. You bring me peace. It is Your hand that

has demonstrated faithfulness, love, and tenderness. It is Your hand that rescues and makes a way. It is by Your hand that we will be delivered.

I feel so helpless and so empty. I just wish that I could make this all better or go away and I can't. You give hope to those who need hope, You give help to those in need of help, and You give peace to the brokenhearted. I call upon Your name, Lord, and I ask for Your blessing, Jehovah, my Provider, Jehovah, my Rescuer.

Emotional and Spiritual Self-Contemplation

As I reread this prayer of desperation, it brought me back to that deep sinking feeling of loss, of emptiness, and helplessness. I felt as if I were trying to swim while tied to a heavy weight. I was sinking fast. As I started to write this prayer, I realized that I had not yet cried. I was still in shock. My feelings seemed to have vanished. I knew tears were appropriate, but I was so shut down. A short while after I expressed this numb detached feeling in this short prayer, it happened. The dam broke loose and the tears started to flow. My tears became an uncontrollable river.

Crying out was all I could do. I cried and cried. I had no tears left. I was stunned to find that tears could run out. It was a scary feeling. I was still in shock. Not comprehending all that was happening. At this point, it still felt like a dream.

As I reflect upon this, I wondered what Jesus' followers and family felt after His body was laid in the tomb.⁴ I imagine they were in an emotional state of shock. How confusing is that? Their Lord, their Savior had died. None of this made any sense. I imagine they too felt as I did and how you may now feel. What was it like to go home after Jesus was removed from the cross and laid in a tomb? It must have been terrifying, shocking, and painful. What did it all mean? Like me, I imagine they felt numb and confused. I believe the Apostles, like us, had hoped that they would wake up from this bad dream. Fortunately, their shock soon turned to joy. They woke up to the resurrection of a conquering Savior. Scripture promises

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us that the same power that raised Jesus from the dead is alive in us. We, too, will wake up from the shock. The following scriptures brought me connection back to reality and my emotions.

Scriptures

Roman 8:28 NIV

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

Psalm 107:13-16 ESV

“Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death, and burst their bonds apart. Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wondrous works to the children of man! ...”

Daily Prayer

Lord, I claim your blessings over each of our journeys. I claim them in the name of Christ Jesus. What you have done and said, the enemy cannot steal or have. Thank you for the reminder of what you have done in the past because it causes me to look forward to what you will do again. It is your promises that I embrace. To God be the glory. Amen.

Prayer Journal Questions

<i>Personal Reflections...</i>
1. How do you connect your feelings to the experiences of Jesus' family and companions upon His death or to others that you know are hurting?

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2. Describe the helplessness you feel at this point in your journey?

3. What specific help do you ask of the Holy Spirit?
