

Believing for Healing—Even When the Pain Overwhelms You

I am going to be raw and honest in this post. And I hope I'll be a little bit encouraging too. I am emerging from a brutally hard season in life. But even as I emerge with my feet on more solid ground than I've felt in a long time, I still face a life that was not the one I envisioned as an earnest Christian teenager in youth group and then Bible college. I don't like to talk about the details of that season publicly, because despite my freedom to share myself, public writers must grapple with the effects of their story on the others in their lives who haven't signed up for publicity and don't benefit from the sharing. I feel free to share privately things that I won't share publicly and have worked to be upfront and honest with those whose ministries intersect with mine. I am at peace with how I've been able to work that out so far.

The bottom line for my life is that I am looking toward a life of persevering in some very hard things for the long haul. And no amount of peeling off layers of myself to get to my core heart is going to rescue me from the twists and turns my story has taken. But don't hear fatalism in that last sentence. Like the woman diagnosed with terminal breast cancer, there is a precious jewel hidden in the layers of suffering and self-sacrifice with what seems a permanent blight on one's life.

I have several of these blights on my life physically, which I will use to talk about lessons learned from spiritual and emotional blights as well. I have been a Type 1 diabetic for over 20 years. But this year, for the first time, I showed the first signs of damage to my eyes. In conjunction, my body showed symptoms again of ankylosing spondylitis that had previously gone into remission. So I started up the first line of medicine, the easy one with the fewest side effects, that had pushed it into remission the last time. But the doctor

called me Wednesday. Blood work showed problems. I will likely have to discontinue and start another one that has even more side effects. (And, yes, I see a chiropractor, talk with a naturopath and eat a mostly gluten-free diet.)

It's becoming natural to think of dying to myself as I face more and more physical issues that evidence the fact that my physical self is truly dying (though not any time soon). It's actually helpful that, unlike a hard marriage or family relationship or ministry commitment, I can't escape these physical symptoms. I can't run from them, so I have to face them head-on and figure out how to live abundantly in light of them. And that learning has equipped me to persevere in the other issues in my life that I could run from if I did not feel constrained by God's instructions through the Word.

My dad has been a great encouragement to me. He has chronic heart failure, and we almost lost him last March. But he recovered enough to get out of the hospital, and after a day at home, he drove back up to his farm to sit in the office and "tend to business." He bought a Gator (a farm utility vehicle like a golf cart) to drive between the tractor shed and the Quonset hut, where he restores old tractors. His hip has been bothering him, and he moves slowly. But he moves, one slow step in front of the other. He gets 10 percent done in a day compared to his prime years, and I fully expect to find him slumped over a tractor one day. But I applaud him for his perseverance. He models for me how I want to face both my physical limitations and my emotional ones.

Sometimes, obeying God is hard. Many days, submitting to God's laws feels restricting. It is one thing to honor our faithful God by faithfulness in relationships when the relationships are easy or affirming. But God is faithful to us when we are faithless (2 Tim. 2:13). He persevered with us when we turned away from Him. Jesus followed through on doing the right thing at great cost to Himself.

But that sounds—hard. And herein is the great paradox that Jesus Himself taught us.

Then He said to them all, “If anyone will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. For whoever will save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world, yet loses or forfeits himself?” (Luke 9:23-25).

This is a true statement from Jesus. God doesn't need me to affirm it for it to be true. But it is true nonetheless, and I can attest to that from my own experience. And this truth encourages me to persevere, stumbling physically and emotionally at times.

There is great talk of self-love in Christian circles right now, the kind of self-love that promotes a perceived circumstantial happiness. When I hear of Christian bloggers or authors or even just professing Christians in my own private life diverging from orthodox Christian faith or values because it is “too hard,” I feel a depressing weight on my shoulders. Their quest for happiness outside of orthodoxy demoralizes me in a way a combative atheist never could. They demoralize me in a way that even my own particular burdens of suffering do not.

I opened up the psalms Thanksgiving morning, in the calm after prepping before thirty-something family members descended on my grandmother's newly remodeled home into which I had just moved. It was Psalm 19, and David's words resonated deeply with me as I contemplated yet another “Christian” author/blogger finding themselves in a way that was markedly divergent from an orthodox understanding of Scripture.

David reflects —

The heavens declare the glory of God,

and the firmament shows His handiwork.
Day unto day utters speech,
and night unto night declares knowledge.
There is no speech and there are no words;
their voice is not heard.
Their line has gone out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world.

In them has He set a tent for the sun,
which is like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber;
it rejoices as a strong man to run a race.
Its going forth is from one end of the heavens,
and its circuit extends to the other end,
and there is nothing hidden from its heat.

The law of the Lord is perfect,
converting the soul;
the testimony of the Lord is sure,
making wise the simple;
the statutes of the Lord are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the Lord is pure,
enlightening the eyes;
the fear of the Lord is clean,
enduring forever;
the judgments of the Lord are true
and righteous altogether.

More to be desired are they than gold,
yes, than much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb.
Moreover by them is Your servant warned,
and by keeping them comes great reward.
Who can understand his errors?
Cleanse me from secret faults.
Keep back Your servant also from presumptuous sins;
may they not rule over me.
Then I will be upright

and innocent from great transgression.

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable in Your sight,
O Lord, my strength and my Redeemer (Ps. 19:1-14).*

Dear friend who is struggling with a weight on your shoulders, one that may seem lighter to bear if you walk away from God's instructions—Don't buy that lie. It was the first lie ever told, and it remains Satan's great summary temptation. "God's instructions are a limitation. They will keep you from all you are meant to be."

No, it is not true. Embrace the path of suffering in obedience to God's instructions. Lose your life. Let go of yourself and your expectations. And trust God to meet you in it, redeem your story and give you a place of import in His larger story. As you lose your right to your story, you emerge in a much greater One, and what you will find is worth it.

If you're wrestling through such a losing and finding, I highly recommend Tim Keller's *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness*. It is subtitled, *The True Path to Christian Joy*. I loved those meditations, and I can give testimony of their truths. Wesley Hill's *Washed and Waiting* was also a great encouragement to me as I wrestled with these truths.

I have walked a hard path, and I continue to walk a hard path. But God gave me manna to sustain me at the most difficult points and has blessed me abundantly even through the taking away of things I thought I couldn't live without. He has proven Himself to me, and He has proven the goodness of His words. When others encouraged me that I was not constrained by God's instructions, I found instead abundant grace and help when I felt convicted that I was. But it requires faith to stay in that process. I cannot produce such faith in you. And you can't produce it in yourself. Lean into the One who can, and may you look back in future years in praise of the one who

turns stones into bread, water into wine and loss into life abundance. {eoa}

Wendy Alsup is the author of *Is the Bible Good for Women*, *Practical Theology for Women*, *By His Wounds You Are Healed*, and *The Gospel-Centered Woman*. She worships at a small Presbyterian church in the South.