

Selected Excerpts from *Hope When It Hurts* By Kristen Wetherell and Sarah Walton

LIFE HURTS

Life hurts. We're no strangers to this fact. It's why we wrote this book. And not simply because life hurts, but because there's hope even when it does.

We suspect that you're reading this because you're hurting, or because you love someone who is and wish that you could take away their pain. Perhaps the act of reading these pages is in itself a big deal for you because even the slightest effort feels like it drains you. No matter where you're coming from, whether you're suffering right now or not, we welcome you and are glad you're here.

And if you are currently suffering, we are sorry. We feel for you. But we will not say "we understand" because, most likely, we don't. We don't know your particular situation, or the years of struggle and darkness you've endured. Perhaps our stories share common threads, and if we were having coffee together, we might be so bold as to say, "Me too." Even though your suffering looks different than ours, and may be far greater and harder than we could imagine, we are walking through pain along with you. Pain of different sorts, but pain and suffering nonetheless.

When we are hurting, the pain affects our view of everything—including our view of God. Perhaps yours made you doubt God for the first time, or think about him for the first time. It may have made you grow in your love for him, or in your anger or disbelief. It may have caused you to pray for the first time, or the first time in a long time, or to stop praying at all. Most likely, it caused a conflicting set of feelings toward and questions about God. In all our pain, Sarah and I have found in turning to him, not away from him, and in wrestling with reality rather than trying to ignore it. This book is in many ways a product of our journey and struggles.

POWER IN WEAKNESS

Americans will do almost anything to appear strong, capable, and worthy of admiration. We exercise our bodies with intensity, climb the corporate ladder at the expense of integrity, and struggle to accept the help of other people. Our society works by the principle that the way up is the road to success and value.

When we transfer this into our Christian faith, here is what happens: we believe that comfort is a right that Christ would never remove, and that success indicates a godly Christian life. This sense of entitlement has therefore deeply impacted the way Christians interpret and respond to suffering.

Think about how we talk about and react to a trial. We try to avoid it. We complain about it. We think we don't deserve it. We're embarrassed by it. We commiserate with others about it. We believe that God is mad at us, or just plain angry.

We hate weakness and will do almost anything to escape it.

One big problem with this approach is that weakness is real. Behind our masks, everyone is weak. It's inbuilt into our humanness in this world. We can't run from it, and thankfully we don't need to. What we need is a biblical understanding of the value of weakness (that's a strange-sounding phrase!), and how suffering is the tool God uses to expose it (that's another strange ideal!).

Everything changes when we see weakness and suffering in the light of the gospel. For it is through human weakness that God's strength upholds us and is displayed to the world.

Here is the Bible's description of who a Christian is: "We [are those who] have this treasure in jars of clay." What treasure? The glorious gospel: the work of Jesus Christ to save sinners by grace through faith. And what is clay? A brittle, easily broken substance. And that's what I am. That's what you are.

AFFLICTED BUT NOT CRUSHED

Danger. Exposure. Violence. Pressure. My guess is that you can resonate with Paul's words, not because you've gone through similar struggles but because of the overwhelming pressure of the struggles you have known. What affliction is threatening to crush you right now? What suffering is testing your faith?

Maybe you're fighting a malignant disease. Maybe it's a short-term illness that is keeping you from carrying out your plans. Or maybe you lost your job this week, and you're worried about feeding your family. Are you in the middle of a nasty relational feud? Or married to someone who is not following Christ?

Lyme disease threatens me. Because of Lyme and its ill effects, physical pain and weakness are my frequent visitors. There are times when, after an extended period of feeling well, stable, and hopeful, they rebound with a vengeance. I reach my limit during these regressions, as my faith feels pressed and my struggle to believe the gospel intensifies—and out pour the tears. I often cry because I'm angry, fearful, and worried. I wonder how much more I can take, if the struggle will ever end, and if any good will come of it.

I am tempted to believe that because I am afflicted in certain ways, I cannot get out of the downward spiral into being crushed in spirit as well as in body. How I long for my heart-cry in suffering to be like Paul's! How I long to believe this beautiful truth: I am afflicted in every way, but not crushed.

Oh, don't you want this? To have the confidence that the pressures of suffering will not defeat you?

MAKING MERCY GREAT

Fighting for this joy in times of darkness is a battle, but fight we must. The only other way is defeat and despair. One of the ways we can do this is by focusing on how God has "dealt bountifully" with us—what the great sixteenth-century Reformer Martin Luther (who knew more than his share of physical pain and psychological pressure) calls "the rhetoric of the Spirit." Luther was determined...

if a cross comes, to make the cross but little, but if there is a mercy, to make the mercy great.

It is so easy to magnify our trials and to belittle our blessings. We can easily be defined by our pain and view everything else, including the mercy God gives us, through its dim prism; rather than defining ourselves by God's mercy, and seeing all else in that glorious light.

So pause now and think. What great and loving mercies has God brought to you? These will be different for all of us, but think about them. Has he given you food to eat? A family to love? Has he shown you compassion through fellow Christians? Has he revealed a fresh truth to you in Scripture? Has he spared you from many years of wandering without him?

And what about his grace? Hasn't he lavished it upon you, along with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places? Hasn't he given you the Holy Spirit? Hasn't he promised never to leave you or forsake you? Hasn't he made you a co-heir with Christ? Hasn't he taken away your sin and forgiven your trespasses? Hasn't he spoken to you through his word? Hasn't he given you light to see the glory of Christ? Hasn't he set eternity with him before you?

Our crosses have come, and sometimes terribly so and without end in this life. But God has dealt bountifully with us. His mercies are greater, and his mercies are without end in eternity.

GOD CAN HANDLE OUR EMOTIONS

Friend, you don't need to settle for, or strive for, a façade of Christian goodness, bottling up the feelings you think "good Christians" shouldn't feel and trying to present a neat and tidy front to God. It's exhausting for you, and distances God from you. Your God says, "Come." Your God says that you can pour it all out to him.

As we learn that we're free to be real with Jesus, we're able to learn to be real with people around us too. The world doesn't need to see more people who seem to have it all together; it needs to see real people with real struggles, real emotions, and a real hope. Being real with people starts with being real with our Savior. So as you seek to walk by faith and not by sight when what you can see looks overwhelming to your faith, come to Christ in honesty, laying down every doubt, question, and emotion before him, trusting that though he may not give you answers, he will give you rest.

COMFORTING ONE ANOTHER

As I have endured years of physical pain, heartache, and loss, I have come to learn that nothing can replace what's been lost, or repair what's been broken, apart from Christ. But instead of the Lord comforting me by removing the pain and reversing the loss of my worldly hopes, he has comforted me with his presence and secure future hope. In his grace, he has not only comforted me through his word and promises but through brothers and sisters in Christ who walk this journey with me. It is out of these comforts that I can turn to someone else and offer that same comfort.

Comforting another person in their pain is not simply commiserating with them, and it may not always mean agreeing with them. It is speaking the truths of the gospel that we ourselves have found of greater value than any earthly comfort. We need to point to God's promises while being real about the present. Instead of telling them it will be alright and life will get easier (you don't know that), we can comfort them with the truth that not a second of their pain will be wasted, and that when Christ returns, there will be not one more second of pain or heartache (you can know that!). Although we may not be able to make sense of what they are going through, Christ promises that as they choose to trust him (even if their faith is hanging by a thread), he will faithfully use those trials to accomplish his good and loving purposes in their life and the lives of those around them. We may not be able to offer answers or temporary solutions that ease their pain, but we can bring the comfort of Christ and the eternal value of suffering with him.

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Biblical Reflections to Help You Grasp God's Purpose in Your Suffering

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