

Q&A with Kristen Wetherell and Sarah Walton **Authors of *Hope When It Hurts***

You each have been diagnosed with Lyme disease and continue to suffer the effects after many years. Pain and suffering is deeply personal, but is there kinship among Lyme sufferers?

(Sarah and Kristen) Definitely! While we wouldn't wish Lyme disease on anyone, there's so much comfort in realizing you're not alone. Many people who suffer with this awful disease go years without a diagnosis, without an explanation for their pain. Yet even when the diagnosis comes, most people have never heard of Lyme and are left feeling isolated and overwhelmed. Meeting another person who has experienced this disease is not only a comfort, but it greatly helps you navigate the road to recovery.

How did the diagnosis, coming after years of unexplained pain, impact each of you?

(Sarah) For me, it was a mixture of emotions, as I think many diagnoses are. While I was thankful to have an answer, I felt overwhelmed by the mountain in front of me. That mountain only grew bigger as we slowly learned our entire family had Lyme disease. I had passed it onto my husband and four children. If I think about it too long, the reality of our future feels crushing. So I frequently remind myself that none of us knows what tomorrow will bring, even when we feel healthy and happy. I've learned to entrust my days (and my family's), moment by moment, to the Lord's sovereign plan. If he chooses to allow suffering from this illness for the rest of our lives, I believe he has a good and loving purpose. Someday we will clearly see all the good and beautiful born out of this suffering.

(Kristen) I resonate with Sarah's response. For my husband and me the diagnosis was bittersweet. We felt thankful, even glad, to finally have an answer after many years of pain. Simultaneously we felt shocked, sad, and scared. When you can't see the road ahead of you in any diagnosis, fear presses in and threatens to steal your peace. But we've found help in running to Scripture and praying together every day. One day at a time, we say, we will trust God, the doctors, and the treatment plan.

How does American culture view suffering, and how does it compare to a Christian perspective?

(Sarah and Kristen) American culture often views suffering as something to be avoided at all costs. If we believe that we are entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, then anything that gets in our way seems inconvenient and purely negative. Even as believers, we get caught up in this way of thinking, assuming that if God were for us, he would keep us from all harm and discomfort. After all, he is our defender, provider, and protector, right?

But God's ways are not our ways. His love for us desires something far greater than our temporary happiness and comfort. Rather, he longs for us to have the eternal joy, happiness, contentment, and peace that only he can give. And suffering is often the training ground he uses to strip away our false sense of securities and comforts in order that he can fill us with an unshakable and joy-filled hope in Christ our Savior. In a nutshell, suffering is often what God uses to deepen our understanding of the gospel and allow its truth to saturate every aspect of our lives.

C.S. Lewis says, "Pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world."

You write that God's mercies are greater than our trials. What about when the pain is so great you can't even muster a prayer?

(Kristen) 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.

When we forget, it helps to simply name his mercies. What great and loving mercies has God brought to me? Has he given you food to eat? A family to love? Has he shown you compassion through fellow Christians? 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?

When my pain makes it hard to pray, even to take the next needed step, I've found it helpful to simply think about Christ dying for my sin and resurrecting to defeat death. I'm strengthened when I consider what Jesus endured so I could have everlasting hope in him, so I would never perish in my sin. That perishing would be the worst suffering of all—but I don't need to endure it now because he took it for me. God's mercy is his gospel.

Now this doesn't mean our trials don't matter, or that reflecting on the gospel removes them, like a magic spell. But it does give us perspective in our darkest moments, and helps us rise from the pit of discouragement and despair. Our crosses have come, and sometimes terribly so and without end in this life. But his mercies are greater, and without end.

You encourage readers to be honest to God, to cry out to Him. What do you say to those who feel “good Christians” can't pour out messy, overwhelming emotions?

(Sarah) I'd say that God has given us his Word which shows us that he not only gives us permission to, but wants us to come to him honestly. I find such encouragement in the Psalms, as well as Job, where we see godly men bring their fears, complaints, anguish, sorrow, anger, and questions to the Lord in honesty. They weren't turned away or struck dead for verbalizing faithless emotions, but rather were met with the comfort, strength, and hope of God's promises and goodness. We were created emotional beings in the image of God. We can come honestly before our maker and trust that he can handle our emotions.

I learned this in a fresh way immediately after we finished writing *Hope When It Hurts*. I felt as though I was hanging on by a thread. The burden I was carrying was almost too much to bear: four sick children, our oldest child's challenges, my physical pain, and the anguish of watching our savings account drained by medical expenses. The morning I received the final draft of the book, I spent time praying and pleading with the Lord for his provision and strength. Less than an hour after I had prayed, my husband learned that he had lost his job along with more than 60% of the salesforce. It was our only source of income.

I had so many emotions flooding my heart - fear, anger, confusion, numbness, shock, hurt. When I had asked the Lord for provision and strength, this wasn't what I had in mind. For about two weeks, I struggled to pray. I have always had a tendency to push my emotions aside, especially if they are uncomfortable ones, so I tried to just keep going and choose to trust.

Then I re-read the chapter I had written on emotions and found myself convicted by the words the Holy Spirit had given me months earlier. I was reminded that Christ wants all of us, not just the parts that are neat and tidy. What better place to bring our messy, confusing, faithless emotions than to the one who loves us and intimately knows us? We can come to Christ and pour out our hearts. And we can allow him to pour in the truth of his goodness, sovereignty, love, and promises—even when we can't make sense of our circumstances.

Sarah, you've experienced personal pain with Lyme disease and seen the pain it has caused your family as well. How do you tap into hope when your children are suffering?

(Sarah) That's a great question. It's hard to suffer, but it's even harder to watch your child suffer as you are helpless to do anything about it. While I continually grieve the pain that my children have had to endure at such young ages, I have already seen God bring blessing out of their trials.

Here are a few ways I've seen pain open their eyes (even if just a little) to the goodness of God:

- ❖ It's been used to stir up in them a dissatisfaction for the world, motivating them to seek something more lasting and satisfying.
- ❖ It's begun to open their eyes to their sinful nature and need for a Savior, since trials have a way of drawing our sinful nature to the surface.
- ❖ It's revealed their weaknesses, lack of control, and frailty, which I pray will continue to drive them towards dependence on Christ for salvation, strength, provision.
- ❖ It's begun to shift their view from an earthly one to an eternal one.
- ❖ It's teaching them to find comfort in God's Word, rather than their own solutions.

- ❖ It's teaching them to pray, rather than just complaining when life isn't going the way they had hoped.
- ❖ And most importantly, I believe they are learning to love Jesus more than anyone or anything else in this world.

As much I wish I could remove suffering and sickness from their lives, I am learning that while their precious lives have been entrusted to us for a time, they are ultimately in the Lord's hands. I have to trust that he will use these trials for his good purposes in their lives, just as I trust that he will do so in my own. As a mom who desires to protect her children, this requires me to let go of control and lay them back down at his feet moment by moment.

Thankfully, our children's outcomes are not up to us. Yes, we bear responsibility for what we do with the time we are given as their parents, but the Lord remains bigger than our greatest failures or successes. We can plant the seed, but only the Lord can give it life. We can water the soil, but only the Lord can grow our children up in him. It is God's grace that he does not call us to walk this hard road on our own. I have never been more thankful for this truth than I am right now.

For those who want to help and comfort others in their suffering, what is your best advice?

(Sarah) Pray first, listen second, pray third, and speak last. The truth is, we are often uncomfortable with suffering and either say more than we should or don't say anything at all (which can be more hurtful). Yet over the last decade of deep suffering in our family, I have learned so much about comforting others.

First of all, we don't have to suffer in the same way as another person in order to bring the comfort of Christ. Be cautious about making statements such as, "I know exactly how you feel," or "Things will get better." We need to learn to grieve with those who grieve and not be so quick to try to make the pain go away or offer a solution. We struggle with grieving with others because it's hard to watch someone suffer when you can't do anything about it. We have a tendency to want to save others from their pain, but Christ has not given us that role. He has, however, given us the role of comforting one another with the comfort we have received from Christ in our own time of suffering.

The losses we experience as a result of an illness can cause us to question why God takes good things from our lives. How have you come to view your own losses?

(Kristen) Loss has caused me to consider God's wisdom. God knows better than I do what I need. I wrestle with this because what I think I need is typically a desire, rather than an actual need. When these desires are good—like exercise, activities, opportunities—I'm tempted to believe that God isn't being good to me when he takes them away. It's easy to view losses as...well, loss and loss alone. (And it's okay to grieve our losses. Oh, how we must!)

But Scripture tells us that our God is infinitely wise. It also says that everything is loss compared to knowing Christ, which is gain. So if God is wisely stripping good gifts from me, he must be helping me to know more of himself through those earthly losses. He must be creating more space in my self-centered heart for Christ. He must be teaching me to die to myself, take up my cross, and follow him—because to gain Christ is worth the loss of any earthly, good thing. I must ask myself every day if I believe this, and come to him with empty hands willing to receive all the good he has for me—and letting go of all the good I want for me.

For those who are bowed down with pain today, where can they find help and hope?

(Kristen) Oh, friend, Sarah and I won't pretend to understand your pain. We don't. We can't. But God does. He sees you. He hears your pleas. He knows your heart, even if you haven't cried out to him yet. He knows your pain. Because the Son of God took your punishment on the cross, he is intimately acquainted with suffering and knows the worst of it. And he went there for you so you may know the everlasting, enduring, joy-filled hope of trusting in him for salvation, both now and forever. Jesus was crushed for your sin so you would never be crushed: by sin, suffering, or any earthly trials.

Come to him. You can hear Jesus speak to you in the Bible, and you will find in him a Friend, Helper, Lord, and Savior who will never leave your side, not even in the darkest night of the soul. When it hurts, he will be your Hope.

###