

Tears
and
Tossings



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Hope
in
the Waves
of Life

*Sarah
Walton*

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When suffering strikes

I stirred uncomfortably in my seat, struggling to accept the reality that this chair had my name on it for a reason. I sat there quietly and listened as the group went around sharing their personal journey of sorrow, loss, and grief. Each person represented a unique story, with their own circumstances, experiences, personalities, cultures, and beliefs. But we all shared one thing in common—the heartache of a life we never expected. Regardless of how different we were, we knew pain and all the outworkings of its unwanted presence.

As we shared, one thing was clear—we were all searching for comfort, purpose, hope, and healing in our pain. There were no simple fixes or empty

platitudes that would bring comfort to the agony of those who'd lost a child, were raising a child with life-altering needs, reeling from rejection or abuse, battling a cancer diagnosis, or struggling to put food on the table for their family. No matter how we try to sugarcoat it or find a silver lining, there's something about suffering and loss that shakes our confidence, disorients us, dulls the things we once enjoyed, and brings questions that demand an answer.

Why me? we wonder. What's the purpose of my suffering? Do my tears just fall to the ground as useless? If my pain is for nothing, then what hope do I have within it? If this life is all there is, what's the point? Or, is it possible that my tears point me to something or someone greater? If there is a God, does he see and care about me personally? And if he does, why is he allowing this pain if he really loves me?

If you've asked these questions, I'm right there with you. Although I have a lot to be grateful for, much of my life has been filled with various forms of pain, sorrow, and loss. Loneliness has been a frequent visitor, grief is often just under the surface, and, at times, tears have been the only language I've known how to speak.

My story

I grew up with loving parents and had a fairly uneventful childhood, but it was also marked from very early on with pain. As a child, I faced ongoing physical ailments which no one seemed able to explain or solve. My teen years brought an abrupt end to my joy of athletics, coupled with sexual abuse from classmates and increasing health challenges. My life unraveled before me, landing me in a pit so dark and deep that there was no foreseeable way out. At the age of seventeen, I found myself in the adolescent psychiatric ward of a hospital.

If there's such a thing as "hitting rock bottom," I had reached it.

I was lost. I was deeply hurting. And I desperately needed something—or Someone—to give me a reason to go on. Thankfully, the trajectory of my life was forever changed in that hospital room—a trajectory that would be far from easy, but one that gave me a hope and purpose to go on.

Fast forward three years and, much to my own surprise, I met my husband (Jeff) and we were married shortly after I turned twenty. Although this wasn't the path I expected to be on, we were

excited to embark on our life together. Three years later, we welcomed our first child into the world and were filled with hopes and dreams for our growing family. But those came to a screeching halt as we rushed our seven-week-old baby to the emergency room with a high fever and words from the doctor that no parent ever wants to hear: “We don’t know what’s wrong, but it doesn’t look good.” For five long days and nights we waited, with no answers and growing concern in the doctors’ faces. Although nothing was found other than evidence of an “unknown severe infection,” the heavy doses of medicine finally took effect. After many sleepless nights and countless prayers, we were sent home with overwhelming gratitude that we were leaving with the child we had been prepared to go home without.

Little did we know that what happened to him in those five days would affect him (and our whole family) for years to come—possibly a lifetime. Frequent sickness, weight loss, increasingly difficult behaviors, uncontrollable and long-lasting tantrums, unreasonable responses to normal situations, neurological and physical struggles that no doctor could give answers to, and overwhelming stress in our home led to a

life of mere survival. Our son was bright, sweet, and funny at times, but his illness impacted every aspect of our lives. The hours seemed like days, and the days seemed like years. Before we knew it, six long years had gone by and our family of three gradually grew to a family of six.

During this time, Jeff worked long hours, on call twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week as an orthopedic trauma consultant. It provided a comfortable salary, but made for a very uncomfortable family life. Over time, my health drastically declined, the challenges of our child’s behavioral and neurological outbursts increased, and our other three children began to complain of their own aches and pains. Our family was in crisis.

In a drastic step to save our family, Jeff took nearly a seventy percent pay cut in order to change jobs and be more available to help with our declining home life. It took immense sacrifice to walk away from a comfortable salary, sell the home we loved, and downsize to a rental home, but it seemed clear that the cost would be worth it in the long run. However, a year later, Jeff was caught up in company-wide cutbacks and was left without a job. Once the shock wore off, anger, questions, confusion, and tears were frequent

visitors. With chronic health issues, special-needs challenges, the loss of our beautiful home, no income, and us living off food stamps, it seemed like things couldn't possibly get worse.

Until they did.

In 2015, I was finally led to doctors who were able to connect all of my various health issues to years of untreated Lyme disease and other related autoimmune issues. Over the following year, as each of our children's aches and pains increased, tests revealed that my active Lyme infection had been passed on to all four of them in pregnancy. I was a mom battling a chronic, difficult-to-treat infection, while carrying the grief, guilt, and burden of knowing that I had brought four children into the world who now suffered from the very same disease. On top of it all, we had no income to pay for the out-of-pocket costs for treatments. Honestly, it felt like more than I could bear.

The sorrows weighed heavily and the tears came often. They came when I watched my children suffer things that I felt helpless to change. They flowed when the pain in my body made it feel like I was watching life happen, rather than living it. They came as my husband and I worked through the painful trials that put increasing

strain on our marriage. They flowed as I endured my fifth ankle surgery and was told I would increasingly lose my ability to walk. They came when I feared the future would be more than I could bear. They came when Jeff was swept up in a second company-wide layoff three months after he was hired. And the tears still flow every time I watch my son suffer from something that no child (or adult) should ever have to endure.

There's no denying that I have carried a weight of sorrows I never thought possible and shed tears to the point where there have been no tears left to shed. Pain and heartache have caused me to ask difficult questions and search for their answers, desperate for a hope and purpose in all this pain.

My guess is, if you're picking up this book, you are too.

Maybe you're carrying some form of sorrow and know what it's like to shed tears over loss, disappointment, heartache, or physical, emotional, or mental pain. If that's you, I'm so very sorry. Maybe you've always felt in control of your life but now circumstances have left you disoriented and shaken. Or maybe you've endured long and layered suffering, and you're wondering if there's any point in getting out of

bed each morning. Maybe you've searched for answers, but still feel like something is missing. Or maybe you've heard about the God of the Bible, but you're struggling to understand why a "good God" would allow you to suffer.

Well, friend, you're not alone. I'm still in the trenches of my suffering with no end in sight, and I certainly don't have all the answers. But I'm learning that there's Someone who does, and it's changed everything for me. It hasn't removed my suffering, but I've found a strength, hope, peace, and joy that my circumstances haven't been able to diminish. I'm learning that the God of the Bible is not a distant, uncaring God, but he's a compassionate, merciful, loving Father who sees us at our worst and still wants to come near to us, comfort us, and provide what we need. He's a God who has compassion toward our frailty and weaknesses, and grieves with us in our grief and sorrow. And he's a God who sees our tears when no one else does. As the Bible says in Psalm 56:8–9,

*You have kept count of my tossings;
put my tears in your bottle.
Are they not in your book?
. . . This I know, that God is for me (ESV).*

This doesn't lessen the pain of my circumstances or make life easier. Yet it tells me that somehow my pain isn't pointless, and there's a God who loves me, knows me, and not only sees my sorrows and tears, but holds them as if they are his own.

No matter what you're facing right now, what's happened in the past, what questions you have, or what you do or don't understand about God, the same can be true of you. You don't have to put your struggles, fears, sorrows, and tears aside. Just come as you are, with whatever griefs you bear, guilt you carry, insecurities you feel, or tears that may fall.

Friend, could it be that there's more to our pain than meets the eye? Could it be that our tears are not only seen but held by God himself? If not, then our pain in this life is nothing more than something to endure. But if this is true, and God is good, loving, and compassionate, then there's comfort to be found in knowing that our sufferings are not pointless or hopeless.

Pain is real. But so is hope.