### Praise for Finding Hope in Hard Things

"We have come to expect the highest standards of Christian orthodoxy argued with remarkable clarity from Pierce Hibbs. Increasingly, though, his passion about facing the tough parts of life with ultimate confidence bring a dimension with them impossible to fabricate. They come to us with unusual honesty. I don't believe I know of any writings quite like his. Pastoral, practical and profoundly biblical, every Christian will be rewarded by these journeys into suffering and grace."

- WILLIAM EDGAR, Professor of Apologetics, Westminster Theological Seminary

"Hibbs's writing—clear, crisp, and passionate—makes for an easy read. And yet behind that simplicity is a depth that comes from someone who has been in a 'fellowship of Jesus's suffering.' When you meet a fellow traveler, like Pierce Taylor Hibbs, that has been through the valley of shadow of death, you want to sit down and listen. Hibbs will give you hope in the midst of your hard things."

- Paul E. Miller, best-selling author of A Praying Life and J-Curve

"There is redemptive beauty and meaning in the brokenness of this world. In the hard things, the really hard things, God speaks to us, and Pierce gives us the ears to hear."

- ROGER LOWTHER, author of The Broken Leaf

"This is a case for suffering we need to consider. In his latest work, *Finding Hope in Hard Things*, Pierce Taylor Hibbs tackles the challenging reality of hardship in our lives. With biblical clarity and engaging experience, Hibbs writes winsomely about the positive side of suffering, while including personal pains, and how God shapes us by His grace—at times calling us to rejoice. Read this book and you will not only be encouraged and comforted, you will see and know the steadfast character of the One who stands with you in the hard things."

- NATHANIEL SCHILL, Founder of Shepherd Apologetics





### Other Books by the Author

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- In Divine Company: Growing Closer to the God Who Speaks
- Theological English: An Advanced ESL Text for Students of Theology
- Finding God in the Ordinary
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- Struck Down but Not Destroyed: Living Faithfully with Anxiety
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## FINDING HOPE IN HARD THINGS

A Positive Take on Suffering

by

PIERCE TAYLOR HIBBS

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### Introduction



here are you? Right now. As your heart chambers expand and contract. As your lungs fill with oxygen. As your eyes survey the space around you. As the locomotive of ambition and desire clicks down the tracks, keeping the time of the day. Where are you?

And who are you? Gather up the leaves of your memories. Rake them into a place you can see. And then add the loves and longings, the quirks and questions, the amusements, the concerns for today. Add your body, the contours of your forearms and fingers, the shape of your chest and hips, thighs and calves. Shuffle your toes to remember that those, too, are a part of you. Who are you?

Can you answer? Probably not. There's not a concrete square in your mind right now; there's a cloud, a vapor with a shape, a mist that is both meaningful and transparent.

Now—take where and who you are, and sit with me. I'd like to talk with you. I'd like to pour myself out on pages and have you do the same. Maybe we can learn from each other. Maybe this is more than a book, and you're more than a reader, and I'm more than a writer. Maybe we're meeting here right now—together—because God is doing something momentous.

This is a book about where and who I am. But it's also a book about where and who *you* are. It's a book about how the hard things we face in the hours, days, months, and years ahead are things not just to be survived. They are things to be celebrated. What makes us wince with pain, drip with tears, and bow in defeat—these things are working in us. *God* is working them in us. He is working with our where and our who.

We think we're stone. Only chisels and hammer strikes can change our shape. But no; we're wet clay. We're sediment and soil. We're waiting for hands. We're waiting for finger tips. We're waiting for the pressure of palms. We're waiting to be shaped by an artist. And the artist's tools are hard things.

The central idea for this book is quite simple: Hard things are going to shape us in ways easy things can't.

I'm going to move through this in three areas, three countries. The first is my father's long battle with cancer. The second is my anxiety disorder. And the third is my ongoing struggle with self-doubt.

I'm going to be vulnerable. I'm going to be candid. I'm going to squeeze my soul in a vice and drip onto the page. The dripping is for you.

My prayer for you is that you not only find me in these pages—with all of my brokenness and yearnings—but that you find yourself. I'm walking you through three of my countries, hard places that God uses as environments for my shaping. But what are your countries? Where would you take me? Study your own continent. Survey the surroundings. Mark your heart's topography. It's good to know the land. The footsteps of your past become the stepping stones of your future.

My underlying hope for this little book is that it

I've written about my anxiety disorder in Struck Down but Not Destroyed: Living Faithfully with Anxiety (Independently published: Amazon Digital Services, 2020), and in the Still, Silent, and Strong series.

reorients your approach to the difficult things you face each day. Anxiety disorders, Crohn's disease, cancer of the spine, the death of your father—these things happen. What matters most is not what happens to you but how you perceive and respond to it. Perception and response—that's the key.

When hard things happen, great shaping is being done. As the title suggests, we can even find hope in hard things because of the articulate, aching, intentional artistry of God, in whose cosmic hands we are wet clay, dripping with potential.

Are you ready? Let's change the way we see the world.

Part 1: Cancer

# 1

### On Giants and Shadows



iants cast long shadows, even if they're only 5'10" and don't give particular attention to their posture. That was my father: a great small man with a shadow stretching over his four sons.

My father was a titan. After some twelve years of battling a cancerous brain tumor, he gave up the ghost. And it feels like he grew taller after he died.

I always hid in his shadow—that's what sons do with their fathers—but after his death the shadow seemed wider and longer. It's reached mythic proportions now. His death was one of the hardest experiences in my life, which means it's shaped me in profound ways. In that experience, my clay soul was crushed and kneaded, embossed and incised, rolled and stamped. I no longer recall all the details of my

former shape. But I remember enough to marvel at the drama and to break down at the craftsmanship of a holy potter.

Let me walk you through this old country one footpath at a time. In this chapter, I'll describe it. In the next, I'll tell you how this hard thing hurt. And in the one after that, I'll try to express how I was shaped by it. Throughout all of this, keep the central idea of the book close at hand: Hard things shape us in ways easy things cannot. If it helps, you can ruminate on a quote by the French novelist Marcel Proust: "We are healed of a suffering only by experiencing it to the full."



When you're young, the world can feel eternal—an unbreakable, transparent orb that you walk freely in. The words "end" and "death" are cryptic, even foreign. What do they *really* mean?

I still remember the announcement when we met for church in my high school cafeteria. My father was a pastor and a carpenter. He worked with wood on weekdays, with words on the weekend. The room was yellow from the painted cinder block walls. I don't remember all that was said. I just remember my oldest brother crying, and one of my father's best friends gripping my dad's shoulder.

"We need to pray," he said.

The words "cancer" and "brain tumor" drifted into the room and settled into the silence. I was too young to grasp them. They seemed like empty boats. What did they carry? Everyone was very serious, dabbing their eyes with knuckles and tissues. What did this mean?

That question was answered with seizures—moments where my dad would space out for up to two minutes. His speech left him in those moments, the way the blue jays in our white pine trees leave a branch, flapping away in an instant, leaving the limb swaying in the stillness. His facial muscles and bodily movements slunk into a daze. He was somewhere else, in a cloud at 30,000 feet. We would have to wait ... until he came back down, until words would bend open his mouth again, until his eyes would refocus. The blue jay would return.

It happened at the beach, in the front yard, during his sermons on Sunday mornings. He would leave us and then come back, travel and return. I didn't see then what this was foreshadowing . . . the leaving.

The grand mal seizures were different, like bombs on a country landscape. They forced us to remember that explosions were real, that the white lights of the hospital were not going to dim. After the smoke cleared from one of these, we all checked ourselves for shrapnel. We were still here. Still okay.

This went on for nearly twelve years. It became routine. And for an unsuspecting boy, it still seemed normal. Even three major brain surgeries. Even desperate trips down the highway to Temple hospital at 11:00 pm. It was all still normal to me.

That word, "death," was just an idea, a thought, a vocabulary word on an index card. I knew what it meant, but I didn't know what it meant. I hadn't eaten the word yet. I left it on the table, passing by it each day like an old apple in a fruit bowl.



And then one day, far into the foothills of the future, I had to bite it. My teeth broke through the skin of death. And it was . . . bitter. Incomparably bitter. Nauseatingly bitter.

A doctor phoned the hospital room where his body lay in a white bed like an uprooted flower, his pale skin calling out for water. We were there after my dad started feeling weak and was losing his ability to walk. The tumor pressing on his brain stem had decided to grow, despite the chemo.

They were sorry. There was "nothing else they could do." There would be no replanting of my father's body—at least, not in the way we hoped. Not in the way we assumed all along. My God . . . death is bitter.

So, this "nothing else"—that meant . . ?

Oh. It meant . . . it meant . . . what was the word? That's right: death. So *that's* what death meant. It meant "nothing else."

So, what exactly do we do now? You take your father home until he leaves. You help him die in a living room. I'm starting to see what death means now.

But I really learned it on the night he left.

When someone's respiratory system shuts down, it doesn't "go quiet into that good night." For two hours, my dad would suck in air through his nose

and then moan it out into the room. I remember grabbing his thickly bearded face, his sandpaper chin, and trying to pry open his mouth to drop more morphine in. His jaw was strong.

After an eternity, the hospice nurse let us know when he had three breaths left.

Can you count to three? I can.

One. The moaning was gone now. He was rowing away from us, paddles caressing the water.

Two. Was this really happening? There has to be something else. My chest had an anvil on it.

Three.

And then there was this moment, this bizarre and mysterious moment, when I could feel in my bones that someone had left the room. There were nine of us there just a second ago. Now there were eight.

Oh. I see. That's what "death" means. It means leaving. It means silence. It means the conversation is over. It means dad has left.

I see now.



This was the hardest thing I'd ever faced. I was eighteen, with my toes still creeping over the cliff

of the future, surveying the land, staring at birds I wanted to chase.

Against this hard thing, I didn't feel like clay. I felt like water. When you lose someone close to you, it's like having the borders removed from your life. You thin out and spread, wondering if you'll ever be gathered again (you will, but not how you think).

The hurt that this hard thing brought was multifaceted. The first thing you try to do when you're hit by something hard is cope. The world and our inner life offer plenty of options, some better than others. Some roll into the comfort of feelings—from alcohol or pills or smoke. Feelings are tangible amidst the intangibility of death. They offer something to grasp. But the thing you grasp isn't firm and round like a ladder rung. It's thin and sharp like a knife blade. Substances don't comfort; they kill.

Introspection is a far better coping mechanism. Continually asking basic questions will carry you down paths of inquiry that lead to light. Every question asked in the dense foliage of suffering can lead to a glade, a place where you can look up and see beyond the trees. Here were some of my questions. I

wonder what yours have been.

- Where is my dad now?
- What do I really believe about death and God and life?
- Am I going to feel normal again?

I shared a Marcel Proust quote with you earlier. "We are healed of a suffering only by experiencing it to the full." In the months following my dad's death, I did that. I would wake up weeping in my college dorm room. I would wander the campus with no real destination. I was lost for a time, lost in the trees, lost amidst the questions, lost in the feelings, lost in the hollows of thought and marveling with a heavy heart at what had happened.

"So we really do die," I thought. "We really don't get to live forever." Being young means you can be immune to hard truths for a time, but they always catch up to you. You have to walk in the shadows cast by those who came before you. The giants who have left don't take their shadows. They leave them for us.