

“The compassion and empathy of Jesus may surprise you, and it will undoubtedly comfort you. For those of us who have experienced deep heartache, and for any who have walked with friends through unimaginable grief, the gems in this book are more precious than gold. Here is wisdom for our sorrows and solace for our pains. Very few people get through this life unscathed by suffering, and *Just Be Honest* helps us grasp that reality that Jesus is ‘hospitable to heartache’ and that ‘hurting people need to be heard.’ Absorbing and applying these truths can save your faith and help you brave the brokenness of life with those you love. Whether you are amid sorrow currently, preparing for sorrow eventually, or walking with others through their sorrows sympathetically, this book will prove to be a masterful guide!”

**CRAIG ALLEN COOPER**, *USA Today* Best-Selling Author, *Glad You're Here: Two Unlikely Friends Breaking Bread and Fences* (with Walker Hayes); Author, *Overflowing Mercies: 100 Meditations on the Tender Heart of God*

“With pastoral tenderness and wisdom, Clint Watkins shares how the practice of honest lament was the grace he needed to draw near to God in a time of acute pain and heartache. Watkins compels us to make space in our personal lives and faith communities for worship practices that engage the whole spectrum of human longing and need. In an age when we’re rewarded for putting our best selves forward, *Just Be Honest* is not a blueprint for a better way but an invitation to enter one.”

**ADRIEL BOOKER**, Author, *Grace Like Scarlett* and *Tethered to Hope*

“Why do I presume that faith means pretending that the Christian life is always cheery and fulfilling? Through his careful unfolding of the biblical witness on lament and complaint, Watkins extended to me the Lord’s permission both to grieve and grieve like a Christian. I suspect he’ll do the same for you.”

**PETER KROL**, President, DiscipleMakers campus ministry

“Clint helps readers discover a legacy of lament that allows us to hope through heartache and trust through tears. Clint has known loss that cannot be assuaged by Christian platitudes, yet he writes beautifully of the consolation he found when he broke his silence with Jesus, the one ‘acquainted with grief.’”

**PETER GREER**, CEO, HOPE International; Co-author, *Mission Drift: The Unspoken Crisis Facing Leaders, Charities, and Churches*

“When we cannot reconcile our experience of tragedy with our faith in the God who could have prevented it, what happens next? Clint Watkins bravely wades into the tension between doubt and faith, helping show a faithful way through questions and pain for those of us who feel too afraid, too weak, or too bitter to even dip our toe in. Through artfully constructed sentences and beautifully presented personal experience, *Just Be Honest* provides a much needed alternative to ‘faking it till you make it’ or abandoning faith because belief feels too hard. What an incredible gift to the weary minds and vulnerable hearts of sufferers.”

**ABBEY WEDGEWORTH**, Author, *Held* and the Training Young Hearts children’s book series

“Our God can handle periods on the ends of our sentences of pain. ‘I’m devastated.’ ‘We’re reeling.’ ‘Honestly, I’m really struggling.’ He feels no anxiety to immediately relieve the tension. He is not too fragile for our faith to be fragile. Yet some of us feel the pressure to leave no more than commas, if we leave room for any pause at all. Meanwhile the spirit of our age evokes complaining, wallowing, and unbelief. How might we learn to lament faithfully, as Christians? Clint Watkins has suffered deeply, thought deeply, and knows the deep, deep love of Jesus. Let him share his scarred and recovering soul—and his scarred and majestic consoling King. Jesus does not commend doubt but calls and welcomes us to bring it to him. He gives not only joy in place of pain, but joy deeper than pain in the midst of it. He is a king who can handle your periods, your pauses, and your process.”

**DAVID MATHIS**, Senior Teacher and Executive Editor, [desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org); Pastor, Cities Church; Author, *Rich Wounds: The Countless Treasures of the Life, Death, and Triumph of Jesus*

“*Just Be Honest* is a rare treasure: a book on suffering I would actually dare to give someone in the midst of their pain. Heart-wrenchingly honest about how faith is no stranger to deep pain and how Scripture refuses to oversimplify the struggle with anguish in our souls, this book will connect to the Lord hearts shattered by countless griefs by teaching the piercing, soul-sustaining path of lament.”

**J. ALASDAIR GROVES**, Executive Director, CCEF (Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation); Co-author, *Untangling Emotions*



JUST  
BE  
HONEST

*How to Worship  
through Tears  
and Pray  
without  
Pretending*

CLINT WATKINS

the goodbook  
COMPANY



*For our little warrior,  
Eli David Watkins.  
(Psalm 127:3)*

Just Be Honest

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Published by:

The Good Book Company

[thegoodbook.com](http://thegoodbook.com) | [thegoodbook.co.uk](http://thegoodbook.co.uk)

[thegoodbook.com.au](http://thegoodbook.com.au) | [thegoodbook.co.nz](http://thegoodbook.co.nz) | [thegoodbook.co.in](http://thegoodbook.co.in)

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ISBN: 9781784988951 | JOB-007582 | Printed in India

Cover design by Drew McCall





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## FOREWORD

*by Vaneetha Risner*

Suffering has a way of reframing everything we once held dear. The biblical truths we have long believed can suddenly feel hollow as we find ourselves grappling with a dilemma: how can we find comfort in the very God who could heal our deepest wounds with a word, yet seemingly chooses not to? We start wondering if God even cares about our pain—but that wondering seems too scandalous to voice.

In these pages, Clint Watkins illuminates a path less traveled—a path of honest wrestling with God through lament. He vulnerably invites us into his inner life, to see the raw reality of pain and loss and what it looks like to engage with God without denying our intense hurts. When we do, we discover that the Israelites, God's Old Testament people, were accustomed to wrestling with

God as a regular part of praise and worship. In fact, the very name Israel means “one who struggles with God.” They found solace in a God who didn’t simply endure their mournful cries but rather welcomed their lament, regarding it as part of worship.

I wish I had had this book when I first encountered loss. I buried my infant son when he was two months old due to a doctor’s careless mistake, and in the weeks and months that followed I had no categories for how to process such a profound loss. While I’d faithfully spoken of God’s goodness at Paul’s funeral, weeks later I saw no shred of that goodness in my life.

I was lost. Wondering what to hold onto. Not sure who to trust with the growing sense of feeling betrayed, abandoned, and forgotten by God. I wondered why God hadn’t answered my prayers: those desperate pleas I poured out while kneeling till my body ached, begging him to spare my son.

There were few people I could talk to about how I was feeling. I had been teaching Bible study at our church and assumed people were watching me closely, judging me by the orthodoxy of my response. I thought strong faith meant never questioning God, that it had to look like boldly praising him as my world was ripped apart.

So I said the right thing, thinking that it was my job to defend God. I assumed that letting people know I was struggling would damage their faith. It was a twisted way

of thinking, but I felt responsible for what other people thought about God. And that sense of responsibility led me to pretend I was ok when I was dying inside. It pushed me away from facing my own emotions. It pushed me away from community. Most importantly, it pushed me away from God.

I discovered the grace of lament when I was well into my journey of grief, and it became a lifeline for me as I weathered subsequent losses. A diagnosis of post-polio syndrome which may eventually leave me a quadriplegic. Betrayal and an unwanted divorce after 20 years of marriage. Raising two angry adolescents as a single parent. I remember screaming into my pillow many nights—and also in front of my pastor—“Why does God hate me?”

It was through those honest exchanges that I discovered that not only does God not hate me but he loves me extravagantly. But that discovery was a process, one that required I be “all in” with God—wrestling with him, engaging my fears and questions, confessing my doubts and anger. I needed to know that even in my worst moments, in my bursts of uncontrolled emotion and angry tears, I was safe. That I could cry out to God with my greatest hurts, knowing he was holding me, inviting me into a richer life with him.

So I wish I had had this book for those times. *Just Be Honest* is a masterful testimony to that mysterious process in which we offer God our questions and doubts and inexplicably emerge with a stronger faith than we

could have imagined. With insight and compassion, Clint confronts our tendency to “wrap up stories of suffering with lessons and silver linings.” Instead, he invites us to sit with our sorrow and to bring our pain before the Lord without pretense. He presents a compelling case, rooted in Scripture, that the strongest faith may involve honest struggle, and that the deepest trust may be forged in the fire of our doubts.

As you embark on this journey through the exquisite and soul-stirring pages that follow, may you find the courage to embrace your own wrestling with God. May you discover that your weeping is not weak and that your wrestling is not irreverent. May you find comfort in knowing that Jesus, who himself offered his own prayers with loud tears, will be your tender companion through every trial. And may you experience the transformative power of lament, allowing it to deepen your worship and strengthen your walk with the Lord.

Vaneetha Risner  
Author, *The Scars That Have  
Shaped Me* and *Desperate for Hope*  
July 2023

## INTRODUCTION

# HURTING WITH GOD



**F**lip through my Bible and, at first, you won't notice anything unusual. Its weathered pages bear the typical signs of a well-worn book. But find your way to the book of Lamentations—to the empty space after its final verse—and you will see a striking addition: the footprints of our firstborn son. Black ink, provided by the hospital after he was born, captured an impression of his particular beauty. Distinct lines. Delicate ridges. Marks made permanent by his soles and toes. These tiny footprints always stir my fatherly pride. But they also provoke unspeakable pain. Due to a fatal condition, our son did not survive—his birth and his death occurred in the same room. My Bible is one of the only surfaces ever touched by the feet of our son, Eli.

We found out Eli's diagnosis months before he was born. A routine anatomy scan turned my wife's first pregnancy

from wonder to terror—a medical condition which we had never heard of introduced an agony we had never known. The doctors told us that our son would continue growing in the womb but would not live after delivery. Jillian would endure the discomfort of pregnancy and the excruciating pain of labor. But we would not come home with our son.

Preparing for Eli's birth was unbearable. Before we had even met our baby, we had to prepare our goodbye. We exchanged nursery plans for funeral arrangements. Instead of a crib, we chose a casket. I longed for the chance to hold my child but dreaded the horror of letting him go. Agony strangled my soul as I could do nothing to save my son or protect my wife from devastation. I was a shell of a husband, a shadow of a father. Despite the despair, we fought to cherish every moment and memory we could steal back with our son during the pregnancy. But sorrow eclipsed each glimpse of joy as every day crept toward our loss.

I've never had such intense conflict with the Lord as in that season. I still believed he was sovereign and good. But his good promises felt hollow and his sovereign plan seemed harsh. Gospel truths that I had championed for years as a missionary now rang trite and ineffective. I clung to the promise that only the Lord could offer hope for my withering heart. Yet how could I find refuge in the one who had the power to heal my son but chose not to? It was not well with my soul.

You may have picked up this book because you're feeling something similar. Your circumstances are likely different,



but the sting of your spiritual pain is the same: “Where is God? Why is he allowing this? Lord, why don’t you do something?” And then guilt whispers to your soul: “Am I allowed to say these things? Shouldn’t I trust God without hesitation? Am I just a faithless Christian?” Suffering can reduce your prayers to questions. And shame tries to convince you that your questions are unwelcome.

Christian culture can reinforce the pressure we feel to appear composed through our suffering. Conflict with the Lord doesn’t always seem to have a place in church. Instead, spiritual positivity dominates the landscape. We’re quick to point to a God who is in control, but slow to wrestle with the tension that this truth entails. People feel obligated to wrap up their stories of suffering with lessons and silver linings. Prayers often ring out with declarations of trust and polite petitions. And the majority of our songs resound with victorious joy. Belief, then, becomes synonymous with optimism—relegating sorrow to the fringes of faith.

I felt this acutely in church following Eli’s diagnosis. While song after song of joy surrounded us, the best I could do was suppress my weeping. This tearful silence became my common posture during worship. I ached for lyrics and prayers that would give voice to our pain and wrestling with God, but what I longed for didn’t seem to exist. Instead, triumphant prayers defeated me. Uplifting choruses brought me further down. Apparently, I had not been given the kind of faith that produces happy praise in the midst of pain. And I was neither able nor willing to pretend otherwise.

But what if I told you that there's another way to relate to God in suffering? You don't need to choose between silence or optimism. You can wrestle honestly with God through lament.

Lament was how sufferers in the Bible struggled in the tension between their pain and God's promises. From Genesis to Revelation, burdened believers groaned boldly before the Lord: heartfelt cries about hardship, probing questions about God's involvement, and desperate pleas for his intervention. Scripture shows us that faith doesn't have to be tied up neatly—it is often knotted with tension. The believers of old did, indeed, praise the Lord. However, their praise was filled with God-wrestling. And engaging God with their hurts was what paved the way for lasting hope.

The Lord didn't merely tolerate these cries; he authorized lament as an act of worship. And he still does. God welcomes his people to worship through tears and pray without pretending. Aches, questions, and tears are a heritage of faith handed down to us through the generations. We belong to a legacy of lament.

Today, however, lament has become a forgotten refrain. A language that God's people were fluent in for millennia has now become foreign for many. My aim in this book is to help you recover God's gift of honest wrestling. The Lord does not expect you to simply polish your pain with his promises or raise a hallelujah over your hurts. Nor does he require you to leave your sorrow at home on Sundays. You can seize hope by voicing your heartache to the Lord.

We're going to explore how God's invitation to be honest about suffering (chapter 1) is demonstrated and authorized by Jesus (chapter 2). Learning to lament (chapter 3) can keep us from grumbling (chapter 4) and help us rejoice in suffering (chapter 5). When we lament as communities in worship (chapter 6) and rely on others in our pain (chapter 7), we can fulfill our call to weep with those who weep (chapter 8).

So if you picked up this book because you are hurting, I hope you find that Scripture gives voice to your sorrow. God invites you to come to him with all your questions and uncertainties. Or you may be reading because you know someone who is currently suffering, and you want to be able to respond well to them. I trust this book will help you walk with them in their darkness. Whatever season you're in, I pray that you will discover God's gift of lament, and feel better equipped to help others do the same.

My prayer for you as you read is rooted in our son's name. Eli means, "my God," a phrase found in many prayers throughout Scripture. Sometimes it's a confident declaration, other times it's a cry of despair. It's how Jesus called out from the cross as he died. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46). Every time we utter a lament like this, it is a prayer of both dependence and desperation. Whenever my wife and I say the words "Eli," the gospel whispers alongside his name—the story of a consoling King who knows our pain and hears our

cries. I pray that you discover the hope to be found by honestly crying out, "My God."

I printed Eli's ink-covered feet in the book of Lamentations because it's one of many places in the Bible where personal pain collides with God's promises. I hope that you, too, will find that God's word speaks for your wounds.