



Trust and transformation
in difficult times

Mags Duggan

GOD
AMONG THE
RUINS

Foreword by Tony Horsfall

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Foreword

Mags Duggan is a close friend for whom I have the upmost regard. Warm-hearted and humorous, Mags is a gifted speaker but also a wise listener. She has had a lifetime of serving God as a missionary with the Navigators and, most recently, as a lecturer, teaching spirituality at Redcliffe College here in England. We met because of our shared passion for spiritual formation, and I have benefited so much from our conversations about the nature of the Christian life and how to live it. Many of these deep exchanges happened over coffee at motorway service stations (we live at opposite ends of the country), and it was at one such meeting that the idea for this book was conceived.

God among the Ruins deals with the ever-present dilemma of why bad things happen to good people, but from a personal perspective rather than a detached, theoretical standpoint. At some point in life, many of us will know what it is to have the bottom fall out of our world, when circumstances shake our faith to the core. For Mags, the shaking began with the news that her beloved niece Jenny was diagnosed with a serious and rare form of cancer. Throughout the awfulness of Jenny's treatment, Mags was forced to wrestle with some of the most fundamental questions of faith: where is God in this? Why does he allow such things to happen? Why doesn't he answer our prayers? And then, when Jenny passed away, other questions rose to the surface. Would she ever be able to make sense of what had happened? Would her relationship with God ever be the same again?

This is an intensely personal book in which Mags shares with us her journey during that difficult time and beyond. She speaks openly and honestly about her fears, her doubts and her questions. She invites

us into her world, into her mind and her heart, so that we can share the journey with her. We feel her pain, sense her bewilderment, but also follow her path to recovery – the rebuilding of her trust in God and the emergence of hope following her despair.

It was my privilege, along with some others, to be a small part of this journey and to watch from a distance the resilience of her faith as she processed what had happened with courage and integrity. After a couple of years had passed and I sensed she was ready, I asked Mags if she would write a short chapter about her experience for my book, *Deep Calls to Deep* (BRF, 2015), since the topic was about spiritual formation in the hard places of life. With a little coaxing she agreed, and I have to say I think her chapter is the best part of the book! I realised then that she has a gift for writing and that there was a much fuller story to be told. Here it is!

What I love about *God among the Ruins* is that it is so biblical in its approach. In the Bible, Mags found a surprising companion for her journey in the obscure Old Testament prophet called Habakkuk. His faith struggle gave Mags a framework for her own wrestling with God, and here she invites us to share her interaction with this ancient prophet. I read her text with my Bible in hand, and it made the book of Habakkuk come alive for me.

There is so much hope here, for this is a story of spiritual formation and the transformation that happens when we allow God to work in us during our times of pain, disorientation and loss. Ruins can be rebuilt with time, and recovery is possible. We are changed, and will never be the same again, but we can emerge from our times of darkness stronger than we were before. This is the testimony that Mags shares with us, not in a triumphalist way, but in humility and with candour. Her story will bring hope and healing to many.

Mags has written a very practical book, designed to help us reflect on our lives and enable us to process our pain. She has the mind of a teacher and the heart of a counsellor. After each chapter, there are

helpful exercises to apply the teaching. Those who take the time to work through them will benefit enormously.

This is not a book to read as quickly as you can. Take your time and allow the book to read you. That way you will reap great rewards, both now and in the future, for yourself and for those for whom you care.

Tony Horsfall

Introduction

I'd slept deeply but woke suddenly, fully awake, aware of five words pulsing gently and insistently in my mind.

'Even though... even here... Emmanuel. Even though... even here... Emmanuel.'

As I burrowed more deeply into the warmth of the duvet, my mind began to drift over scriptures I knew which contained those words. David's words in Psalm 23 came to mind, '*Even though* I walk through the darkest valley... you are with me' (v. 4, NIV). Job's agonised declaration that, '*Though* he slay me, yet will I hope in him' (Job 13:15, NIV). The psalmist's discovery, recorded for us in Psalm 139, that whether the circumstances of his life took him to great depths or to great heights, whether his life was expansive or narrow, in darkness as in light – *even here* God was present, Emmanuel, God with us, was present (v. 10).

And then familiar words from the end of the book of Habakkuk: *Even though* the fig tree does not blossom, *even though* there is no fruit on the vine... yet I will rejoice (Habakkuk 3:17–18).

As I began to reflect on these 'even though's, I realised that each one was a declaration of trust and hope and confidence in distressing or devastating circumstances. This last scripture particularly stirred something deep within me. I remembered so little about the book of Habakkuk, but there was something about his defiant 'even though's in the face of such obvious loss that drew me out of bed that dawning morning. A full pot of coffee, my favourite throw, a comfy sofa, my Bible and a pen later, and I was ready to walk with Habakkuk.

I turned to those last verses again and I could almost hear Habakkuk's voice asserting,

Even though the fig trees have no blossoms,
and there are no grapes on the vines;
even though the olive crop fails,
and the fields lie empty and barren;
even though the flocks die in the fields,
and the cattle barns are empty,
yet I will rejoice in the Lord!
I will be joyful in the God of my salvation!
The Sovereign Lord is my strength!

HABAKKUK 3:17-19

They were defiantly hope-laden words in the face of devastating circumstances, of loss and need, of ruined work and failed expectations.

How had he come into such a hopeful place? I couldn't remember, so I turned to the beginning of this little book and after the very briefest of introductions was confronted with the words:

How long, O Lord, must I call for help?
But you do not listen!
'Violence is everywhere!' I cry,
but you do not come to save...
Why must I watch all this misery?

HABAKKUK 1:2-3

I flipped to the end again and checked the verses – and back again to the beginning. Questions began to form even as the sun rose: how did he get from the outraged questions of the opening verses to the outpourings of confident hope in the closing words? What was the route he took? Where were the pathways he'd left? And where was God in it all?

These were not academic questions, but ones for which I was desperate for answers. I needed some kind of deepened hope, some kind of help that might ease the heavy ache of grief I had been carrying for over two years, a pain I had no inkling was coming when I arrived at my mum's home for the weekend in November 2010.

As I carried my bags in from the car, I was feeling happy to be home with mum, looking forward to a weekend of watching her favourite TV programmes with her, looking forward too to seeing my sister and her family for a good catch up on all their news.

My mother must have heard the car arrive because when I opened the front door she was waiting for me in the hallway; she looked grey and old – and scared. And my heart began to pound. She said nothing, but tried to pull me into the sitting room. 'What's wrong? What is it?' My mouth had gone dry as my mind flooded with the thought that her cancer, which had been in remission for six years, had returned. Her eyes searched my face, and in a cracked voice, 'Jenny, Jenny has cancer; it's very bad.'

Jenny, my wonderful 22-year-old niece, the daughter I never had and whom I loved with all of my heart, had *cancer*? There had to be a mistake. This could not be true; this could *not* be true.

'I need to go'. Leaving mum, I got back into the car and drove to my sister's home just a few minutes away. It was only when I saw her ravaged face that the awful truth of mum's words truly hit.

My sister is a nurse, working in cancer research. She knew the awful seriousness of Jenny's cancer. Quietly, through tears, she explained to me that Jenny didn't just have cancer, which would already have been hard to hear, she had an extremely rare, horrifyingly aggressive and deadly form of cancer. And there was no cure.

That was the beginning.

Over the next twelve months, Jenny would undergo multiple therapy treatments: radiotherapy, chemotherapy, brachytherapy, all endured by her in an effort to delay the spread of the cancer. But the disease was a monster which kept metastasising. Month by month, she got worse. Every therapy failed; nothing seemed to halt the onslaught, the strident encroachment of this disease. Jenny's body seemed to be a playground for this cancer as it spread into her organs, her spine, her lymph system. No part of her body was off limits to this insidious spread.

Through it all, Jenny was her wonderful self: optimistic, non-self-pitying, unselfish, funny, generous, beautiful. Through it all, I cried, prayed, claimed promises for healing, for comfort, for help, for salvation. I declared the truth of God's character; owned for myself the words of the psalmist in Psalm 86:5, 'You are so good... so full of unfailing love for all who ask for your help.' And verse 15, 'You... are a God of compassion and mercy... filled with unfailing love and faithfulness.' This was my God, this was my Saviour, and knowing his power on behalf of the weak and the helpless, I did what that psalmist had done as recorded in Psalm 88:13, 'I keep on pleading day by day', trusting that God would one day reveal with a flourish his healing hand – and Jenny would be freed from this cancer.

But nothing happened.

Through it all, faithful friends walked with me, prayed with me and for me, trusted for me, wrote cards and emails, and held me up on the many days when I could not hold myself up, when curling up into a tight ball seemed to be the best option for coping with the day.

Over the months, as Jenny became worse, I sought out those who seemed to have the gift of faith and asked them to pray, but it seemed that every time people prayed, she got worse, so after a while I stopped sharing prayer requests, and I stopped asking people to pray. But I carried on quietly, secretly, hoping, trusting, for a miracle.

It took just over a year for the cancer to win the battle. In the last week of her life, Jenny's pain intensified beyond morphine's ability to keep up, and now my prayer became a pleading that God would take her. She had endured so much and not been healed, but could he now at least ease her passing. She was in pain, in distress, confused and so, so weary of it all. And still she lived on, and on.

On the night she died, I kissed her goodnight, whispered that I would see her in the morning and drove home to mum. It was late and she had already gone to bed, so I crept up to my room and there through clenched teeth I howled my rage at God. I pleaded for her release, I irrationally cajoled with promises of fulfilling whatever sacrifice was necessary for me. I groaned my agony, and unbelievably, I threatened God; I threatened him that even though I would not, could not, stop believing in him, I would stop loving him; I would stop trusting his heart if he did not now have mercy on her. The pain-pounded irrationality poured out of me.

At five minutes past midnight, as I lay exhausted on my bed, my nephew phoned to say that she had gone. Jenny had died. The impossible, the stupid, the cruel, the senseless had happened. And while my mother slept, unknowing, I buried my face in my pillow and sobbed my pain and my grief. Drained of everything, I waited in the darkness for the dawn, hugging tight, rocking the news that no grandmother should have to hear.

Over the next days, both my thankfulness at Jenny's release and my outrage at the wickedness of her death poured out of me. Although there were moments of profound thankfulness, outrage seemed to be the primary emotion of those days, the walls of my tiny bedroom amazingly withstanding the onslaught of my whispered fury as I retreated there when I could no longer handle being around the many people who called with flowers and condolences and baskets of memories to share with us.

And then, the evening before her funeral, I sat in the car in the driveway of mum's home and with my head on the steering wheel, I surrendered. The fight was all gone, the rage spent. I was depleted of all energy. And I let go. I let go of blaming God for how Jenny died; I let go of blaming him for not answering so many, many prayers; I let go of his needing to 'work this together for good' for me or for my family in order for Jenny's death to have any dignity or purpose. Basically, I let go of God needing to be anything other than who I'd come to know him to be over so many years; my dearest friend, my loving, faithful Father. Quietly and very calmly, I spoke to my God, 'I have nowhere else to go. There is no way out of this, there is only a way through it, and I choose to go through it with you. But you have to be more.' I hardly knew what I meant by that last phrase. But his love interpreted what I could barely articulate and in the depths of my heart I sensed a clear response, 'More I can do', and then very clearly, I sensed these gentle words: 'Mags, you have always trusted me as the God you know, now I am asking you to trust me as the God you no longer recognise.'

Memories flooded in. Through the years I had come to know the Lord as good and kind and loving; he was my compassionate, tender God; the God of mercy and generous grace. Through hard times of deep disappointment, devastating loss, betrayal and dream-crushing circumstances, I had known and experienced his loving kindness and the depth of his comfort. I really had. But after these battle-torn months of bruisingly unanswered prayer, I had been faced with a God I hardly recognised. The clouds of grief and fear and pain had distorted his features; I could barely make out his outline through the veil of tears I lived with every day. The God I thought I knew, the one I loved, had become a mystery to me. I no longer recognised him, and now, in the quietness of my car, on that last day of November 2011, a whispered question rose in my heart, 'Who *are* you?' and the answer was immediate and clear. In the very depths of my soul, I heard him whisper, 'I am your Emmanuel; I am God *with* you; I *am* God with you.'

And then peace, at least in that quiet moment, that quietest of evenings before the morning of Jenny's funeral. No healing, no resurrection, no miracle – except perhaps this miracle of peace.

He had broken through with the promise of his presence, and it was enough.

It had been a long year since Jenny's death, a year since her funeral when almost 1,000 people turned up, each wearing or carrying a flash of yellow, Jenny's favourite colour, and each one expressing the grief of their own hearts over the loss of such an amazingly joyful presence in the world. And as a family we grieved, each in our own way.

And I grieved; every single day of that year had brought new depths of missing her, new depths of pain for the loss of her. Her absence was present everywhere. There were moments when I thought that if I could just figure out a reason for it all, if I could just turn 'Why?' into a more pragmatic 'What now?', then I would find more peace. But in the midst of this splintering grieving, wise friends advised me not to try and make sense of Jenny's death, not to search for a lesson to learn or a purpose to settle into which would perhaps ease the weight of grief for the moment; not yet. That time would come but, for now, the wisest action was to wait quietly with God, for God, trusting that at some stage in the months or perhaps even years ahead, hope would appear again, healing would soothe its way to my heart and the questions answered – or not, at least in this world. The desperate need to determine a purpose for her death needed to be released right now, surrendered into the care of God who would hold the questions until I was ready for the answers – if there were any. I could not even begin to imagine what shape hope might take, what dimensions healing might hold, what possible purpose Jenny's death might serve that her life wouldn't serve equally well. But I did wait, holding and being held by the words I had sensed him speak in the car that evening – words which invited me to trust in the dark what I had always believed about him in the light; to trust and to lean into one word, *Emmanuel*, and all the richness that word contained.

Just a few months before the Lord's early morning wakeup call, I had come across words written by Eric Liddell, the Olympic runner who became a missionary and who died in a Japanese prisoner of war camp in World War II. They resonated deeply within me, sparking the hope of healing and new life:

Circumstances may appear to wreck our lives and God's plans,
but God is not helpless among the ruins.¹

And slowly, over the months, I had been experiencing this gentle moving of God among the ruins. He *was* beginning to heal my broken heart, waking me to a cold December dawn with these words from Habakkuk's own grieving and healing heart; words of defiant hope; words which would become a gift for me to unwrap in the months that followed. Somehow, unbelievably, Habakkuk had found his way back to life, to joy, to hope and to a vibrant confidence in God. How did he do it? Where did this determination to live with such explosive energy come from? I was intrigued and, more, hopeful.

On that morning, as I sat there hugging my coffee mug and looking over the rooftops at the sky getting lighter, I drew my journal closer and wrote, 'I so admire Habakkuk's honesty, his humility, his wisdom and his hopefulness. I have a deep sense that he'll be a wise companion for my own journey in the months ahead.'

And he has been. The circumstances of our stories were different, but the confusion and bewilderment and disappointment and the ragged grief of it all were the same. In his story I found snatched echoes of my own, which helped me make sense of where I'd been and where this journey might take me. The account of his honest struggles helped me to understand something of my own. His words of lament validated my own cries. His questions reflected my own questions. His courage and honesty invited me to dig even deeper, to discover the wells of my own courage and honesty. His hopefulness challenged me so many times to trust the slow unwrapping of the purposes of God in my life. As I studied his words and his actions,

I recognised places and practices that had been life-giving and God-affirming for me too and was encouraged to continue to strengthen them. It's been a few years now since that early morning discovery, but even today I am finding that the companionship of this obscure prophet on my continued journey toward healing and trust and transformation is as inspiring and as wise as ever.

The pages that follow therefore are in some ways a tapestry of moments and movements, interwoven threads of two journeys; the thread of Habakkuk's story as he walked with God through the awfulness of his reality, and the thread of my own reflections through the journey of Jenny's cancer and her death. My prayer is that the thread of *your own* journey will find a place in this tapestry as you weave your own reflections, your own practices, within the fabric of these words.

At the end of each chapter are some suggestions for reflection – a pause for thought, like the one below, or a spiritual practice or prayer form to engage with which hopefully will help us move more surely toward the God whom Habakkuk knew, and the God who knows us so very well, and who truly is with us among the ruins of our lives.

Reflection: Even though... even here... Emmanuel

Habakkuk's 'even though's are a snapshot of a world in which the blessing of God seems to have been removed. What is left is massive loss: the failure of crops, the death of animals, the devastation of the land were all evidences of the removal of God's blessing on his people. And yet... In the face of all of this loss, Habakkuk holds on to the truth that the covenant God of Israel cannot and will not abandon his people. He continues to be present even through the losses, even through the destruction and the distress. Because of his trust in the truth of God's covenant word, Habakkuk makes this defiant declaration of trust: 'Yet I will rejoice...'

Before we begin our journey with Habakkuk, it might be helpful for us to identify any ‘even though... even here’ places in our own lives, and to invite the Lord to lead us into a fuller understanding and experience of his name, Emmanuel.

So, you may want to write or make an audio recording of your reflections on the following questions:

- Where are the ‘even though’ places in your own life right now, those places where your faith is being challenged, your hope stretched, your understanding of God and how God works confused or bewildering? Where is that ‘even though’ place in your life that you sense God may be inviting you to trust him? What would trusting him in that place look like? What would need to change in your thinking or praying or being or doing in order to walk in trust in this place?
- Is there an ‘even here’ place in your life, a place in which you can hardly imagine that God would be, could be, present? Are there circumstances, relationships, inner struggles and outer demands which seem to you at times to be even beyond God’s reach to help you in them? A place too deep or too far for him to go to? The psalmist in Psalm 139 had obviously thought about this and his conclusion in verse 10 was that ‘even there your hand will guide me, and your strength will support me’. What would God’s guiding, God’s support look like for you in your ‘even here’ place?
- What does God’s name ‘Emmanuel’ communicate to you? As you look back on your journey with God, when have you experienced the reality of ‘Emmanuel’ in the different places of your life? What difference do you sense the presence of Emmanuel would make to the ‘even though... even here’ places of your life?

Before moving on into the rest of the book, you might want to pause for a few moments to consciously place yourself in the presence

of the God who knows your life, your heart, your journey, and who promises to be *your* Emmanuel for all that is needed.

You might find it helpful to bring to the Lord all your reflections in a prayer which begins with the words, *My Emmanuel...*

Endnote

- 1 Eric Liddell, *Disciplines of the Christian Life* (SPCK, 2009), p. 122.



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As you read, discover for yourself the value and practice of honest prayer, of surrender, of silence and listening, and of irrepressible hoping.

Mags Duggan has worked with the Navigators for 35 years, many of these as a cross-cultural missionary in East Asia, Hong Kong and Taiwan. More recently, she was on the faculty of Redcliffe College, Gloucester, where she lectured in two areas she is passionate about: Spiritual Formation and Soul Care. Currently, she is engaged in providing spiritual nurture and pastoral care to a diverse group of cross-cultural missionaries and ministry leaders, both in the UK and around the world.

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