

Hearing Jesus Speak into Your Sorrow



NANCY GUTHRIE

author of *Holding On to Hope*



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What a treasure of truth you have in your hands. Learn it for yourself, and God will use you to help others, even as Nancy does. The Word of God has the answers, and that is exactly where Nancy Guthrie, a woman acquainted with sorrow, takes us. If you let Nancy take you by the hand, lead you where she has been, share with you truth that never changes, and cry, “Heal me, O Lord” (Jeremiah 17:14), you will find yourself “hearing Jesus speak into your sorrow” . . . and there you will find healing.

KAY ARTHUR, co-CEO of Precept Ministries International

My friend Nancy Guthrie has experienced two of the most profound losses that a human heart should ever have to bear, but out of her valley, she’s heard his words. Really heard. And she wants to share what she’s heard with you. This is no theoretical treatise but a compelling book hammered out on the anvil of a mom’s heart. You *will* benefit from hearing these words too!

DENNIS RAINEY, president of FamilyLife and host of
FamilyLife Today

A mutual friend introduced me to Nancy Guthrie as I was going through a personal crisis of my own. My friend felt certain I would draw strength and hope from hearing how Nancy and her husband, David, were coping with devastating loss. He was so right. She spoke to me where I was living, inspiring me to keep pressing on in spite of my pain. Nancy’s style is straightforward, raw, and yet full of faith. This book is for all those who find themselves unable to sleep in the middle of the night due to an ache in their souls. She takes us even further into the existential question most of us ask when we’re hurting: Does Jesus *really* know what it’s like to have a broken heart? This is a book I’ll refer to and recommend often to those struggling with unanswered questions about suffering.

KAY WARREN, executive director of HIV/AIDS Initiative,
Saddleback Church

From a crucible of personal tragedy, Nancy Guthrie confronts deep, disturbing questions with unflinching candor. Never content with the usual answers, she digs and digs, for her own soul and ours. Her authentic message of hope challenges and nourishes both mind and heart.

HAROLD MYRA, former executive chairman of Christianity Today International and author of *One Extraordinary Day*

Nancy Guthrie invites us to join her on her journey of grief and loss as she seeks a deeper understanding of Jesus through her pain. Those who read her story will be moved by the tenacity of a grieving mother's faith as she clings to Jesus despite unanswered questions and a sorrow that won't go away.

CAROLYN CUSTIS JAMES, author of *The Gospel of Ruth*

Postmodernity seeks to deny death by driving it into the closet, to trivialize it by treating it irreverently, or to circumvent it through the use of clever clichés. In sharp contrast, Nancy Guthrie writes with the realism and perspective of one who has been refined in the cauldron of life's tragedies. She does not offer up a panacea but the peace that comes from hearing Jesus speak into our sorrows.

HANK HANEGRAAFF, president of the Christian Research Institute and host of the *Bible Answer Man* broadcast

A life crisis is gritty and messy. While books that soothe have their place, you need a real-world guide to finding help and hope when it seems like there is none to be found. This is that book. It will show you, in your darkest of days, how to find healing and rebuild your life.

STEVE GRISSOM, founder of DivorceCare/GriefShare

Nancy writes with both conviction and compassion. . . . She takes on the hard questions that arise from ongoing suffering and undesired outcomes; then she responds to them with Scripture—which she applies to the issues with laser-like clarity. Not only does Nancy lead us to the Word, she also helps us connect with the living Word—Jesus. I highly recommend this thoroughly biblical book to all those who are suffering or helping others in their struggles. I found it a source of strength and encouragement.

SARAH YOUNG, author of *Jesus Calling*



DEDICATION

None of us has to look very far to find
people we love who are hurting deeply,
and I am no exception.

I lovingly dedicate this book
to my friends and family
who live with the sorrow of
infidelity, infertility,
a spouse's rejection, a child's rebellion,
paralysis, bipolar disorder, suicide,
depression, dementia, a learning disability, death,
fear over finances, loss of reputation, a difficult marriage,
an unwanted singleness, an embarrassing failure,
an ongoing conflict, a pervasive loneliness.

Know that I am sharing your sorrow,
and I'm listening with you
to hear Jesus speak.



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*So pay attention to how you hear. To those who
listen to my teaching, more understanding will be given.*

—JESUS (LUKE 8:18)



INTRODUCTION

There is a significant birthday coming up at my house, and I'm finding myself thinking about it quite often. When I do, I feel a lump forming in my throat, and tears begin to burn behind my eyes.

Soon the day is coming when our daughter, Hope, would be ten. Ten somehow seems significant—more significant than nine or eight and some of the other numbers that have gone by barely acknowledged.

Our daughter's life was marked by days rather than years; she lived 199 days. In other words, there were not nearly enough of them, in my accounting. And as I'm anticipating what would have been her tenth birthday, I'm also anticipating the day that comes 199 days later—the day that will mark a decade since I have held her and known her. It feels like an ever-widening chasm as the years take me further away from her, even as they bring me closer to her.

Honestly I had not known much sorrow in my life before Hope introduced me to it. And one might think that in loving and losing her, I, along with my husband, David, and my son Matt, had received our full share. But only two and a half

years later we buried her brother Gabriel, who was born with the same fatal metabolic disorder as his sister had and lived a mere 183 days.

I don't remember all the specifics of what our pastor said the two times we stood at the grave where Hope and Gabe are buried together, but I do remember that what he said really mattered. At Hope's graveside service, he said something like, "This is the place where we ask, 'Is the gospel really true?'" There was a deep *yes* inside me as he spoke, as I had been thinking about that question a lot in the months that led up to that difficult day. And I remember one specific verse he read that I was relieved to hear, because it, too, echoed my own desperation and discovery.

It is found in John 6, where John records that many of Jesus' followers had turned away and deserted him because some of his teachings were so hard for them to swallow. They were offended by what Jesus said, so they simply walked away from him. He didn't meet their immediate expectations, and he seemed to ask of them more than they wanted to give. They were far more interested in what they could get from Jesus than in getting more of Jesus. And when Jesus made it clear that what he wanted to give them was more of himself, they simply weren't interested any longer. At that point, as the throngs that had been following him began to slip away, Jesus turned to his twelve disciples and asked, "Are you also going to leave?"

I try to imagine the drama and emotion of that moment as Jesus

said out loud what they were probably all thinking to themselves and as he called those closest to him to a decision. Simon Peter spoke up for the group, saying to Jesus, “Lord, to whom would we go? You have the words that give eternal life” (verse 68).

As my pastor read the Scripture, I could relate to those in the story who found some of Jesus’ words difficult to understand and accept, and simply walked away. Perhaps you can too, as you have struggled to reconcile your understanding of what you’ve read about in the Bible, and your expectations of how God cares for those he loves, with your own difficult reality.

Jesus’ question hung in the air, not only in that ancient setting, but also between him and me. “Are you also going to leave?” he asked. I could hear Jesus speaking to me, calling me to a commitment to trust him with this heartbreaking sorrow.

And I sensed the desperation and almost resignation in Peter’s response to Jesus when he said, in essence, “Where else would we go? Who else could we turn to? You are the only one we can run to who has the power to give life just by speaking it into being.” I remember thinking that my only hope for ever seeing Hope again was what the gospel tells us about how we find life that continues beyond the grave. Not having that hope to hold on to would have been an unbearable agony.

I also knew that Jesus provided my only hope for coming back to life myself, as I felt like the life in me was being snuffed out by sorrow.

In times of sorrow and disappointment, everything we believe

can be called into question, can't it? Yet if we turn away from God, there really is no other place to go for meaning or peace. Anywhere away from him is hopelessly dark and empty.

I don't know what has brought sorrow into your life. Maybe you, too, have stood by a grave and said good-bye. Or maybe you have had to bury your dreams for a future with someone you love or your plans for doing something you have longed to do. Perhaps circumstances have forced you to leave behind a position you thought you were made for or come to terms with a frightening financial problem or a painful medical condition. Perhaps you live with ongoing sorrow over a child who has turned away from you or from faith. Maybe you are living with regret over the sorrow brought into your life by your own bad choices, or maybe you are living with resentment over the sorrow brought into your life by what someone else has done. Whatever the source of your sorrow, I wonder if you would be willing to spend a few quiet hours with me, listening to hear Jesus speak into it.

For Those Who Have Ears to Hear

Over the past ten years, I have found that Jesus has some significant things to say to those of us who hurt. But even as I write that, I'm afraid you might misunderstand me. I'm afraid you might think I'm going to go through the words of Jesus found in the Gospels to pick out only the parts that sound soothing or comforting to our modern ears. I'm not. I want to

hear everything Jesus has to say to me, and I believe you do too. Just as I want to embrace his hopeful promise of “I am going . . . to prepare a place for you” (John 14:2, NIV), so also I want to accept his harder-to-hear promise that “here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows” (John 16:33). And just as I want to obey his instruction to “trust in God, and trust also in me” (John 14:1), so also I want to embrace his call to “love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind” (Matthew 22:37), which often seems like too tall an order for me.

We want the complete picture and deeper understanding that will bring clarity as well as comfort. We want to welcome needed correction and respond in repentance to uncomfortable conviction. Only the full truth can do that. We want to hear what Jesus is saying that brings solid hope we can grab hold of—even, and perhaps especially, in what he says that is hard to understand or just hard to hear.

When I tell you that we are going to listen carefully to words Jesus spoke, I’m also afraid you might think I’m suggesting that the words and teachings of Jesus have more authority or importance than other portions of the Bible. And I want to make sure you know that’s not what I’m saying. We know that all Scripture is “God-breathed” (2 Timothy 3:16, NIV) and that Jesus himself gave all Scripture ultimate and equal authority (Matthew 5:17-18; Luke 16:17; John 10:35) as being the very Word of God. Jesus often responded to his detractors by saying, “Have

you not read . . . ?” or “It is written . . .” making it clear that he considered Scripture to be the definitive authority.

Those of us who find ourselves in places of deep sorrow and suffering can find unique comfort and clarity in words of Jesus we might have skimmed over in the past, the ones we’re so familiar with that they have little impact. We need to go beneath the surface to search for the deeper truths he is speaking to us and the implications of what he is saying. We recognize that we may have been hearing him speak through some filter that has warped, misapplied, or completely muffled what Jesus has said through his life and ministry, and we’re open to having our perspectives completely reshaped.

That’s what we will do in this book. We’ll seek to have ears to hear in a fresh way eleven statements Jesus made. Honestly I’ve chosen many of these statements because they are the ones that have been most challenging for me to understand and apply to my own experiences. They are the ones that have caused me to say, “I just don’t get it” as I read them and tried to fit them into my established understanding of the nature and purpose of the ministry of Jesus. I want to share them with you because over and over I find that the passages of Scripture that on the surface seem indiscernible to me hold some of the richest truths—life-changing, perspective-shaping, hope-giving truths.

I suppose this book is really the culmination of my search for deeper understanding that has come with the perspective of years and further study of the Scriptures since writing my earlier

book *Holding On to Hope* . That book was written in the crucible of incredible circumstances—while I was pregnant with our son Gabriel—and published six months after he died. As I write now, many years down the road on this journey of sorrow, my thinking has not changed, but hopefully it has deepened and developed. I am still holding on to hope, but with an even firmer grip and clearer grasp of the nature of that hope.

Words of Real Comfort

Jesus said that we should listen closely to his words. “Pay close attention to what you hear,” he said. “The closer you listen, the more understanding you will be given—and you will receive even more. To those who listen to my teaching, more understanding will be given. But for those who are not listening, even what little understanding they have will be taken away from them” (Mark 4:24-25).

And so I have to ask you, Do you want to listen closely to Jesus so that he will give you more understanding? Will you open your heart and mind to hear him speak into your sorrow? The words written on the pages of your Bible are not just detached religious dialogue that fails to intersect with your difficult reality. They are God’s personal message to you.

The words Jesus speaks are far different from the words we speak. There is life, power, and authority in his every word. He speaks life into death, hope into despair, truth into delusion,

meaning into futility, peace into panic. From his lips we receive wisdom, compassion, companionship, and so much more.

You may have found that most people around you simply don't know what to say to you about your sorrow and struggle. But I can assure you that Jesus knows just what to say to brokenhearted people. He knows just what we need to hear because he knows us better than we know ourselves. And Jesus understands the weight of our pain because he himself has plumbed the depths of suffering and sorrow. He experienced the sorrow that comes from the death of someone he loved dearly (Matthew 14:12-13; John 11:35-36) and the sorrow of knowing those he loves are hard hearted toward God (Luke 19:41). He suffered rejection and ridicule from his own family (John 7:5), homelessness (Matthew 8:20), temptation (Matthew 4:1-11), and of course, the cruel agony of the crucifixion (Matthew 27:32-44). Jesus has the resources of compassion and wisdom that no one else has. He is the one we need to hear from when our hearts have been broken by life in this world.

Fortunately Jesus is inclined to speak to us in our sorrow. He's not intimidated by awkwardness or hard questions. He is drawn to brokenhearted people. He knows we're not interested in pat answers or going through the motions of politeness, sentimentality, or religiosity. He knows we are desperately in need of the life and hope that come as we hear the truth.

So let's lean in to hear what Jesus has to say—out of his own brokenness into ours.



CHAPTER 1

HEAR JESUS SAYING, *I, Too, Have Known Overwhelming Sorrow*

“My soul is crushed with grief to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.” MATTHEW 26:38

Jesus understands the crushing weight and agonizing loneliness of grief.

I’ve heard Jesus speaking to me about as long as I can remember.

When I was a little girl growing up in church, I heard Jesus, the Shepherd of lost sheep, calling me into the fold. I remember sitting in the pastor’s office as a small child as he asked me if I understood what it meant to be lost. I pictured myself lost in the forest or the shopping mall. That’s probably not exactly what he had in mind.

But the day came when I did understand it—at least to the extent a child can understand, since I wonder even now if I really understand how lost I truly was when Jesus found me and gave me the faith to trust him. I heard his voice clearly,

calling me to himself, into the safety and contentment of his fold. Hearing his voice enabled me to say, “The LORD is my shepherd” (Psalm 23:1). He spoke life into a spiritually dead little eight-year-old girl, and I came alive to Jesus, the Savior of my soul.

But like many kids who grow up in the church and “make a decision for Christ” early in life, I came to a crisis point in my teens. I knew I had to decide if I would submit to the authority of Jesus in my life, not only on Sunday but throughout the week—and throughout my life. I heard Jesus telling me that being Savior of my soul meant being King of my heart. Oh, how I wanted to put him in charge yet so often doubted he could be trusted.

As I headed off to college and then began my career, Jesus, the Source of truth, began to shape my thinking, challenge my assumptions, prick my conscience, and expose my false beliefs. But rarely did he warm my heart or stir my passion. I found myself dry and disillusioned, so busy for him but often so far away from him. There were times I didn’t know how to get the conversation going again, and I wasn’t sure if he’d be willing to listen to me or if I even knew how to recognize his voice.

That’s when, with a sense of desperation, I made a commitment to listening to him by reading and studying his Word day by day. Jesus, the Word of life, broke through my religious activity and accumulated Bible knowledge and began to convict me and change me. I fell in love with hearing his voice

through his Word and developed an insatiable appetite for it—so much so that sometimes I wondered if he was preparing me for something.

Then I found out. The day came when I needed to hear the voice of Jesus in a way I had not heard it before. As I faced the heartbreak of losing my child, I needed to know that he understood the deep pain I was in. That's when I heard Jesus speak to me as the Man of Sorrows, as one who has suffered, as one who knows what it feels like to be crushed by grief to the point that it is squeezing the life out of you.

So many of the other ways I had heard Jesus speaking to me—as the Shepherd of lost sheep, the Savior of my soul, the King of my heart, the Source of truth, and the Word of life—were mostly about listening for what he could do for me. But in this hard place of grief, hearing Jesus was less about what he could do for me and more about the companionship he could share with me. Jesus' words told me that he was safe to spend time with in my sadness.

I realized that my sorrow gave me the opportunity to know him with a depth I had not experienced before, in a way I

*I heard Jesus speak to me
as the Man of Sorrows,
as one who has suffered,
as one who knows what
it feels like to be crushed
by grief to the point that
it is squeezing the life
out of you.*

could not have known him without going through deep sorrow myself.

Hearing Jesus, the Man of Sorrows, speak to me told me something about his character, his experience, his demeanor. It told me about his heart.

He has a heart that is broken.

Jesus, the Man of Sorrows, draws close to those of us who hurt and speaks to us as one whose heart has been broken too, calling us to himself.

Hear Jesus Convey His Own Deep Sorrow

A couple of years after my daughter died, during the days in which I was anticipating the birth of my son Gabriel, I read these words of Jesus, spoken in the garden of Gethsemane the night he was arrested.

Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me."

MATTHEW 26:36-38, NIV

I made a note in my Bible that day in April 2001: "He understands how it feels to be 'overwhelmed with sorrow.'" What a

relief it was to know that Jesus understands what it is like to feel like sorrow is pressing the life out of you. He understands the lump in your throat, the heaviness in your chest, the sick feeling in your stomach.

His sorrow was so intense that he had a physical reaction to it. Luke writes that Jesus' perspiration became like "great drops of blood" (Luke 22:44). His agony was so intense that his blood burst through the capillaries and ruptured them, coloring the perspiration and enlarging the drops that continually fell to the ground.

Sometimes, in the desperation of deep grief, we begin to think that no one around us "gets it." We think that no one has ever hurt like we are hurting, that no one really understands how hard the simplest things of life are these days.

But Jesus does. Jesus is not a distant deity who knows nothing about the pain of disappointment and death. He knows firsthand. He understands. Hebrews 2:18 says, "Since he himself has gone through suffering and testing, he is able to help us when we are being tested."

Hear the words of Jesus: "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death," and let them draw you closer to him.

Have you always wanted to be closer to Jesus? I know you wouldn't have chosen this method to get there. We wish we could get closer to Jesus by saying a prayer, going to a Bible study, reading a book, or in some other convenient and controllable

way. But the truth is, it's uniquely through our own sorrow that we can draw close to the Man of Sorrows.

It's in our suffering that we can truly begin to identify with his. We can finally get a tiny taste of what he was willing to endure

He has been here before us and has things about himself to reveal to us in this hard place, which we could not have been ready to listen for and learn without the hurt.

out of his love for us. This is the deep knowing most of us have at least said we wanted, though we never thought it would cost us this much.

It is the kind of knowing Paul wanted when he said, "I want to know Christ and experience the mighty power that raised him from the dead. I want to suffer with him, sharing in his death, so that one way or another I will experience the resurrection from the dead!" (Philippians 3:10-11). Paul recognized that all his suffering—being imprisoned,

shipwrecked, stoned, threatened, rejected, criticized, cold, and hungry—allowed him to experience a special fellowship with Jesus. It gave him access into a sacred fellowship—the fellowship of people who share in the sufferings of Jesus.

When we hear Jesus speaking into our sorrow, we hear his assurance that he has been here before us and that he has things about himself to reveal to us in this hard place, which we could not have been ready to listen for and learn without the hurt.

We hear his promise to walk with us on this difficult journey, providing companionship and compassion.

Hear Jesus Express His Aching Loneliness

When we listen closely to the words Jesus uttered in agony in the garden, we discover that it is not only the pain of our sorrow Jesus can relate to. He also understands the loneliness of it. He knows what it feels like to be at the lowest point of life and find that some of those you thought would be there are not there for you.

Here was Jesus, with his face to the ground, praying and asking God to take away the agonizing punishment for sin that was about to be poured out on him. Jesus, who had never committed any sin, was about to *become* sin.

Even though it had been his plan since the foundation of the world to give himself as a sacrifice for sin, Jesus was now standing at the precipice, staring into the cavernous darkness of death itself. And he was alone. Desperately alone.

Wrung out from the intensity of his pleading with God, he found his closest friends not praying as he had asked them to do but sleeping, seemingly oblivious to the battle going on inside his body and soul.

Lean in and listen to what Jesus says. Try to hear his tone of voice.

Couldn't you watch with me even one hour?

MATTHEW 26:40

Do you hear the humanness in his words? The aloneness?

On top of the betrayal Jesus was aching over, the humiliation he was anticipating, and the physical exhaustion he was enduring, Jesus was experiencing the loneliness of having friends who were not there for him when he needed them most.

Were there friends you thought would be there for you when the going got tough? And have you found that some of those friends have disappeared? They don't get it. They can't deal with it. They want you to get over it.

Find comfort in the companionship of the one who understands what it is like to be all alone. "He was despised and rejected—a man of sorrows, acquainted with deepest grief. We turned our backs on him and looked the other way. He was despised, and we did not care" (Isaiah 53:3).

When you feel like no one understands, listen to the words of Jesus and find comfort. He has been there.

When you feel like everyone has abandoned you and no one cares about the agony in your soul, listen to the words of Jesus and find companionship. Hear him calling you to a deeper, more real relationship with him than you've ever had before.

He, too, has been overwhelmed with sorrow. He will meet you in this place of pain and speak to you, letting you know that you are never alone.

HEAR JESUS SPEAK

As He Reminds You He Is with You



I KNOW THIS SITUATION you're going through can cause you to wonder if God, our Father, has abandoned you, if he has left you alone. But you can be confident that he will never turn away from you or leave you on your own. Anything and everything that could come between you and the Father was placed on me when I hung on the cross. It was then that he turned away from me—but only so he would never have to turn away from you. He abandoned me that day so he could open his arms to you forever. And he will never let you go.

Even though you may sometimes *feel* like you are on your own, your feelings don't tell the whole story. You are not on your own. I am with you always—in every situation and in every moment. In your darkest, lowest experience, I am right beside you. When everyone else falls away, I will still be here. So you don't have to be afraid.

My Holy Spirit is with you and within you. He is the one who helps you hear my voice and understand it. He is the Counselor, showing you what is true and what is false so that you can embrace the truth of who I am and what I'm holding out to you. He is the Advocate who turns the words on the pages of your Bible into something powerful and personal that can penetrate your soul and change your heart. He is the Comforter who soothes your troubled thoughts with whispers of my love for you.

Whenever you feel alone, remember that I came to make my

home with you. I'm here with you, even now, and I will never leave you.

Adapted from Mark 15:33-34; Matthew 28:20; Mark 6:50; John 16:13-15; John 14:16-26; John 1:14



DISCUSSION GUIDE

CHAPTER 1: Hear Jesus Saying, *I, Too, Have Known Overwhelming Sorrow* (MATTHEW 26:38)

Jesus understands the crushing weight and agonizing loneliness of grief.

- What does it mean to hear Jesus speak, and how can you really do that? How do you know it is his voice you are hearing?
- Does it help you to know that Jesus has experienced overwhelming sorrow and agonizing loneliness? In what ways?
- What truths do you find in Hebrews 2:14-18 that add to your understanding of Jesus sharing your sorrow?
- What specific aspects of your experience of sorrow do you think Jesus is able or unable to identify with?
- How can seeing and hearing from Jesus as the Man of Sorrows change how you pray and how you worship?



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to Umbrella Ministries, which invited me to speak at their annual retreat for women who have lost children, where I first gave the message that laid the foundation for this book. How well I remember reading through the list of women who would be at the retreat along with the names of their children and their causes of death. The magnitude of their sorrow took my breath away. It still does. It made me desperate to offer something beyond squishy sentimentality—a genuine hope and truth to hold on to, which I found in listening for the voice of Jesus.

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One of the first things I remember saying to David when we met was, "You have a really great voice," and I still love to hear it. His is the voice I want to hear when I wake up in the morning and when my eyes close in sleep at night, second only to the voice of Jesus.

And I never want to stop hearing the voice of Jesus speaking into my sorrow—at least not until that day when sorrow is no more, when he will wipe away my tears for good.