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AL CARRAWAY

Best-Selling Author of *More than the Tattooed Mormon*

**Wildly
OPTIMISTIC**

**GAINING NEW PERSPECTIVE
FOR LIFE'S CHALLENGES**

CFI

AN IMPRINT OF CEDAR FORT, INC.
SPRINGVILLE, UTAH

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ISBN 13: 978-1-4621-2338-4

Published by CFI, an imprint of Cedar Fort, Inc.
2373 W. 700 S., Springville, UT 84663
Distributed by Cedar Fort, Inc., www.cedarfort.com

Library of Congress Control Number: 2019947926

Cover design by Shawnda T. Craig
Cover design © 2019 Cedar Fort, Inc.
Edited by Nicole Terry

Printed in the United States of America

1 0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed on acid-free paper

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CHAPTER 1

When It's Hard

I HAVE SPOKEN AT UTAH STATE PRISON four times now (twice on the men's side, twice on the women's), and it's still probably one of my favorite places I've spoken at. When I got a call to go back and speak for the fifth time, I was elated!

Utah State Prison has Sunday church services as well as something during the week. It was among those services that I would go and speak. But this time would be different because it wasn't church services that reached out to me. This time it was for a drug addiction program graduation. I was told that not only could I not speak on my religion, but I couldn't even mention God at all. I didn't know if I knew how to speak without talking about God, so when they told me that, I was incredibly confused about why they would even think of me to speak to begin with. I tried to think what I would even talk about if I did accept the invitation since I felt I was the most irrelevant speaker they could have chosen. I know nothing about drug addiction or rehab or anything of that nature. I ended up agreeing, and I spoke on change.

I was in their gym and I sat on this makeshift stage they had just for this ceremony. There were hundreds of inmates sitting in front of me all in their matching uniforms. This graduation was a big deal—it was hard to get accepted into the program and it was a lot of work to

complete it. For the ceremony it was permitted that family members could attend. But I'll never forget the feeling I had when I saw that very few family members came. I spoke on the reality of change, and that went well and I felt good about the things I shared. I'm not sure if you know this or not, but most, if not all, prisons don't have choirs. But for this graduation ceremony they had a one-time choir sing a song at the closing of it. It was a small group of maybe 15 men that got up, all different ages, some younger than I was and some in their 70's. Some of them were missing teeth, some of them were just the biggest built men that would tower over me, and close to all of them had tattoos all over their faces and their heads. Being a New Yorker, I've seen a whole lot of everything, so it is difficult to be surprised or shocked by anyone, but the men that got up were intimidating men to look at. Now, mind you, this graduation was definitely not a church thing, and definitely not a God thing—it was a drug thing inmates in the prison had to qualify for—but this one-time choir of inmates got up to sing, and I was completely shocked at their choice of song, "A Child's Prayer." I saw these men with their missing teeth and the tattoos on their faces and heads sing and ask, "Heavenly Father, *are you really there?*"

I sat on their makeshift stage and I lost it. The Spirit overwhelmed me in an indescribable way—more than I have ever felt before in my entire life. Because I *felt* so physically that He really was there. That God was very aware of them in that moment and always. That regardless of where they were and what they had done, they were not alone. And I felt so powerfully that they never have been. And neither are we.

But we have these times in our lives when we ask that same question. There are some times we can't help but wonder where He is and if He really is aware of us and if He actually cares and if He even exists at all.

It is well known the raging storm on the water that caused the original Apostles to yell, "Carest thou not that we perish?"¹ But perhaps we can more see ourselves in our personal storms and our heavy thoughts and passing doubts and our pleadings of "Carest Thou not that I'm struggling?! Carest Thou not that this is so hard? That this was unwanted?"

1. Mark 4:38.

That I don't deserve this? That this has been going on for *too* long? Carest Thou not . . . that I don't think I can go on? Carest Thou not . . . about *me*?"

Like the Apostles waking up Christ, who was sleeping during what seemed to be a life-threatening storm, we too sometimes find ourselves wondering if He is sleeping through the times when we feel we so desperately need Him the most. We wonder where relief is, we plead for Him to calm our storm because it's as though we may not make it. Or at the very least, we plead for Him to wake up—to be conscious, to be mindful, to be present—for our raging storms we're in the midst of.

I have been in too many raging storms, wondering too many times if I will be able to make it, losing my voice too many times because of how loud my pleadings have been, physically aching from wondering if He is sleeping, asking that same question: *Heavenly Father, are you really there?*

Before Lehi had been brought to a large and spacious field where he saw and partook of the fruit, and before he saw the iron rod and the big and spacious building, the very first place he was brought to was a "dark and dreary waste"² *Why?* Why was he told to follow a divine being only to be brought right into a dark and dreary place that he was left wandering in for many hours?

What about when Nephi and his family were asked by the Lord to travel years and years in the wilderness to the land of promise, an ongoing trial that threatened his life several times, only to hear the Lord tell them, when they eventually got there and started to settle in, that they needed to leave? To pack up, to keep going, to continue to sacrifice and travel past the promised original counsel and find a different home, the land of Nephi.

What about Alma and Amulek, when they were watching women and children of believers burned for their beliefs and they were restrained by the Lord to stop it? What about in Ether when they

2. 1 Nephi 8:7.

traveled in barges for what was much longer than anticipated, and they were buried in the depths of the sea with great and terrible tempests? It was the Lord God who caused that there should be the furious winds and storms on the water.

What about arguably Christ's closest friend, Lazarus, and his two sisters, Martha and Mary? When Lazarus was sick, Christ didn't come to visit. When he died, Christ didn't show up for several days. Where was He then as a close friend? Where was Christ then as someone who is full of miracles? What of the time Joseph Smith was in Liberty Jail while the Saints were suffering? The Prophet of the Lord was pleading for things to be over and things to be different, but months had passed, and he was still in jail.

What about when I joined the Church and I lost all of my friends and had years of silence from family members? What of my and my husband's years of being unemployed while pregnant? What of me following God, who took me away from my home and my family and brought me all the way across the country, just for things to fall apart when I got there? What about all the times I've lost my voice in my prayers because things were getting harder? What about all the times I've prayed and He never answered? Or the countless times I was brought down unwanted and uncharted paths? I, like Lehi, have also been led into dark and dreary places. I, like Nephi, have also been asked to sacrifice *even more*, just when I was confident I couldn't any longer. Like Alma, Amulek, and Joseph Smith, I have also asked for righteous things that were not fulfilled, and *wow* what pain that brought me. Like Lazarus's sisters, Martha and Mary, I have often found myself wondering where Christ is. Wondering why He hasn't come yet, that if He were truly here with me, then my situation could have been avoided. I wonder, like Martha and Mary, if He really does care about me like I thought He did, because relief and miracles have not come yet.

This isn't what I wanted. I didn't ask for this. Why was I led to a dark and dreary place? Where is God in this? How could He let this happen? Why didn't He prevent it? Is God always good? Can He be trusted? Why is it taking so long? Does He really care about me? Is He

even there at all? Why do I feel alone? Where are my answers? Where are my promised blessings?

I can think of too many experiences that have caused me to ask these questions, but one that stands out to me was the time I was engaged to a boy that I didn't end up marrying. We had a date set in the temple and everything. He broke it off. He told me that he usually dates "really skinny brunettes" and that he "knew he could find someone much better." Brutal, right? In his defense, he was a really nice man who didn't realize he was being mean but felt that he owed it to me to be honest and thought he was doing the best thing by saying it that way—haha.

But *man*, I had never been crushed so low in my entire life. Reasonably so, right? My self-esteem completely shattered. Even that is an understatement. I left thinking, *I'm not skinny enough, pretty enough, good enough, and bluntly put, I am easily replaceable*. How do you come back from hearing that from someone you were about to marry? How did we even get as far as we did?

But that wasn't the hardest part. Most of all, I had never been more confused in my entire life. This is one of the trickiest things I've gone through, *not* because I wasn't with this guy, but because I thought I was following the Spirit, so how could it not work out? What did I do wrong? Why am I being denied a righteous desire? What's wrong with me? I all of a sudden doubted my relationship with the Spirit—did I even really know Him? Was I doing it wrong the whole time? Every day, no matter how hard I tried to be positive and strong, I'd still break down. I had never been more *spiritually* confused in my life.

Every day I'd find myself screaming and pleading to God that this whole thing would be over and pleading for answers and clarity. I just couldn't make sense of feeling prompted to do something that was going to fail. Yet it seemed it wasn't letting up. I worked overtime every day, doing everything I could to try and get out of this spiritual and emotional slump that I couldn't seem to get out of no matter how many prayers I said. I longed for it to pass, and it didn't. I was mad, thinking that my faith and my God were failing me.

But as I reflected yet again on my lack of progress, I had a new thought. *What if it wasn't God that was failing me. What if it was me? What if I was improperly placing blame? What if I had it all backward? What if there was a different way to look at all this? What if there were different questions I should be asking? What good am I overlooking?*

Through my wrestle and my experimenting due to my desperation, I had learned so many more adjectives of the Spirit and of God. What I had known and learned about Them thus far was actually limiting me from allowing Them to show me *what else*. I had unconsciously put a box around Them and what They were capable of doing and how things were “supposed” to be, that I was accidentally dismissing myself from experiencing and recognizing Their vastness of blessings and miracles. I figured if God brings us to something that it should “work out,” or if we experience answers to prayers in certain ways that we assume those are the only ways: “I know how to get answers to my prayers, and they come in *this* box because every answer He's given me so far has come *this* way.” So when we don't notice it in *that* way, wonder and doubt could take over. But what if He was answering me outside of that box that I ignorantly put there to begin with? When I tried to take away these limits that I unconsciously put on Them, I was learning and noticing different ways They were showing me They *were* there and They *were* answering me and trying to guide me and teach me and bring me to better things, and it had just gone over my head.

I roll my eyes thinking about all the time I spent wondering why it didn't work out and where God was in all of this because I failed to see that I was supposed to get engaged all along, that God and the Spirit and my efforts did not fail me. I was supposed to get engaged, but I was not supposed to get married. It was supposed to “not work out” the whole time. It “not working out” was actually it working out perfectly how God had in mind the whole time! Because it led me to a wrestle, which led me to learning vital lessons I couldn't imagine living life without—lessons I would be lost without knowing. Because it all led me to *knowing* God. And when He becomes a reality to you, could you trade that knowledge?

Every bit of pain, confusion, discomfort, and loneliness wasn't for nothing; it was all for the best and 1,000 percent worth it. As hard as things were and continue to be, I know God. And I love Him with a real love.

So whatever it is that we are going through now, what if we ask ourselves, have we got it all backward? Am I improperly placing blame? Am I limiting my God? What if there's another way to look at all this? What if there are better questions to be asking? What if God has something else in mind? What if He knows something we don't? Something greater?

It's sobering to think of Christ, who also asked questions during trials so hard that they caused Him to bleed from every pore, circumstances so brutal that they cost Him His life. I think of when He asked the question to His disciples, "Could ye not watch with me *one hour*?"³ A parallel question they themselves were asking Him during the raging storm on the sea, "*Could you not be here with me? Could you have at least been with me as I struggled?*" Or during Christ's most painful sacrifice, which caused Him to also wonder and question if He had been forsaken by God Himself. And as Heavenly Father watched His Only Begotten Son be mocked and spit on and falsely judged and murdered, "It pleased the Lord to bruise him."⁴ *Why?* Because there was, in fact, something greater to come from it.

I once went to bed on a Saturday trying to think of an excuse so I wouldn't have to go to church the next day. Ever get like that? Where you know it's important to pray and to read, but it doesn't take away from feeling that you just . . . don't want to? I told that to God as I fell asleep. The next morning, it was just Gracie and I at church while Ben stayed home with our sick two-year-old. I woke up surprisingly anxious to take the sacrament. As it was being passed and as I sat there

3. Mark 26:40; emphasis added.

4. Isaiah 53:10.

with my eyes closed thinking about the weight of my current situation, my four-year-old daughter grabbed my hand and held it the whole time. There were two convert confirmations and a musical number. This woman sang “All is Well,” and it got me thinking.

I don’t think “all is well” is referring to times when everything is going smoothly and our lives are free from trials. Perhaps it is referring to times when our soul is content and we feel at peace even among our struggles. Because despite my shortcomings I was so aware of and dealing with even that exact morning, I felt that all was actually well because I felt that God was there with me and loving me and helping me and forgiving me. Even in the middle of an unresolved circumstance, I felt that God was not sleeping.

And I think that’s what I love most about the gospel. Not that it prevents us from the blows of life, but that we can feel peace and contentment and love right in the middle of it. Regardless of my shortcomings, regardless of my questions and wondering about His path for me, regardless of my hard times, I felt the Spirit so strongly, and I was so grateful I pushed myself to do what I needed to do most and exercise my power over the adversary.

For three entire days and three entire nights, nonstop, Alma was in the *most bitter* pain. Torment. No breaks. No let-ups. Just paralyzing anguish that kept him crying to God. Completely consuming that whole time. But then, after the longest passing time of immobilizing struggle, he found peace to his soul. And so sometimes we feel like things are *the most* consuming and *the worst* anguish, and we agonize over the passing time with no breaks or let ups, and we have to make the decision to plow through with God and see it through, or we accept and give up.

I know we have these phases where we really have to push ourselves to keep going even when we don’t really want to or when we feel like we can’t much longer. And I know the weight that comes from not knowing how or when things will work out. But like the three long days and nights in Alma 38, or the 344 days in Ether 6—or perhaps for us in some situations, even longer—as we continue to turn and cry

to Christ, He will send angels like He did in Alma, and He will send light like He did in Ether, and we will find peace and forgiveness and strength and change and rest and a new start. Where we don't find an ending to a trial quite yet, we find ease and added strength.⁵ Where we can't find answers to prayers quite yet, we find comfort and reassurance. Where we don't see promised blessings quite yet, we find love and help and continued guidance. We will always find a chance to change and be forgiven. And *oh what a feeling* it is when we see these phases through and realize that the best things can only come from sticking with God at all times and in all things.

Like I felt when speaking in prison, regardless of where we are and whatever we have done and whatever season we may be in, we are not alone. We *will* find peace to our soul. Everlasting struggle just isn't in God's cards. Because really, like Alma said, "There is no other way."⁶

I know how easy it is to wonder and to doubt, but I also know how easy it is for the adversary to skew our perspective when we are trying to make sense of things. He'll get in our vision to stop us from progressing, stop us from doing what is right, stop us from trying, from turning to Christ, and to keep us standing still. I think of Adam and Eve when they were in the garden. The adversary got both of them to hide from the only ones that could help them: Heavenly Father and Christ. Anything that is trying to stop us from trying, to turn around, to give up, to stop crying unto Him, to jump ship—anything to pull us away from God is clear who it is coming from. Holding on to the pattern and promise God set for us that greater things are coming, when He said, "It pleased the Lord to bruise Him," we can move forward knowing there is a better way to understanding. A better way to progress and growth. A better way to the better things.

Are we being productive in our hard times? Are we looking and noticing the good? Are we open to new opportunities? Are we listening? Are we paying attention to our recurring thoughts? Are we standing still? Have we allowed the adversary to run rogue with our thoughts for too long?

5. Mosiah 24:15.

6. Alma 38:9.

What if it's not always about proving ourselves or building our character—what if He is trying to help us discover *His* character? Are we allowing God to be God? Are we giving Him the opportunity to show us how great He really is? What if letting go will allow us to take hold of blessings greater than what we picked out for ourselves? What will happen if we let go of our desire to be in control? What will our life look like if we trust God with our whole heart? What if all of this is not meant to push us away from God, but bring us closer? “Know ye not that ye are in the hands of God? Know ye not that he hath all power?”⁷

Hard will always be there—that won't change. I still wonder and I am still being brought to trials that seem to get harder with time, and I still have to battle the adversary while in the season of making sense of it all. Hard times will always be there, but so will Christ. And with Christ do we overcome and conquer absolutely everything. And with God, we will be brought to the better things—blessings and opportunities and knowledge we wouldn't trade.

Never let a change of course take away from the unchangeable truth that God is taking care of you. Never let our own visions and desires block the unchangeable truth that God knows something we don't. We may not have gone where we had in mind, but we will end up where we need to be, with better blessings, if we but change our perspective and allow things to unfold and blossom in the discomfort and the unexpected and the unwanted and the longer than anticipated. If we but look at things a little differently.

With the reality of our trials come the reality of Christ and the reality of His power, His love, and His purpose to help us succeed. And when we remember all that we have and all that we have been given, when we remember who He really is, then we really can continue through raging waters, knowing He is quite literally with us. And we can continue down uncharted and unwanted paths, knowing He is awake, aware, and actively bringing us to the best things. And we can continue without panic, knowing we are in His hands.

7. Mormon 5:23.

And when we plead and wonder, He will lovingly correct us “of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?”⁸ Because He’s never left. He really does care, we really will make it, and it will be *incredible*. They will *never* give up on us, so let’s not give up on Them.

8. Matthew 14:31.