

Kissing the Wave

WORDS ON SUFFERING
THROUGH STORMS



LORE FERGUSON WILBERT

**“The wave of
temptation may even
wash you higher up
upon the Rock of ages,
so that you cling to it
with a firmer grip
than you have ever
done before, and so
again where sin
abounds, grace will
much more abound.”**

CHARLES SPURGEON

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Honeymoon Phases and When Everything Crushes at Once

Spurgeon said, "I have learned to kiss the wave that strikes me against the rock of ages," and I have written about it before. It still stands that I'd rather kiss the wave after it's battered and thrown me against the Rock instead of while it is battering and throwing me. I am human and therefore value self-preservation.

Honeymoon stage is a phrase I wish didn't enter the Christian's vocabulary. If marriage is to be a reflection of Christ and the Church and we are to worship at His throne forever in joy, why would we think earthly marriage should be different? I know just saying that has some of you shaking your heads, "Just you wait, Lore, it's coming for you." To that I want to say this: our honeymoon was one week and two days long, we spent it in Aspen, eating delicious food and having lots of sex. It was everything a honeymoon should be.

And then we came down out of the mountains to a new city, bought a house, started a job, lived in a basement apartment for a month, tried to make a new and

different church feel like home, and we still don't know who our people here are. Honeymoon was vacation, this is real life.

In the still dark hours of the morning a few weeks ago I made breakfast, sat down to drink my coffee, and read my bible while the man ran and then showered. He joined me when my coffee was drunk and we had a hard discussion on the realities of life: we need a new roof (\$15,000) and his car needs \$4000 dollars worth of work. That's nearly \$20,000 out of our honeymoon stage budget.

I got to work and he texted a few minutes later to call him. His contract won't be renewed for his remote job. He understands and is full of faith, and has a skill set that's useful and employable anywhere, but the kick in the gut still hurts. This wasn't part of the honeymoon. He's been looking now for a month and jobs are harder to come by than we thought.

In September I miscarried. For fifteen days I bled and cried and couldn't answer the question: why? and what? This foreign emotion of being tied to something inextricably and forever felt alien. I am still learning what it means to live "until death us do part," but that is a two way commitment and this felt painfully one way.

I say all this because I feel the waves and they're battering and pressing and bruising, but I wake up every single day confident of the goodness of God in the land of the living. I wake up confident that living means really living, really seeing God's goodness, not lowering my eyes to the sinking depths of life, but raising them to the One from whom my help comes.

Buechner said, "This is the world: beautiful and terrible things will happen," and I have thought of it often in recent months. Sometimes Colorado is so achingly beautiful and so achingly hard at the same time. And sometimes marriage is. And sometimes church is. And most of the time life is.

I think often on Psalm 73: the nearness of God is my good, and I ask often that I would not just know his nearness, but I would feel it too.

I don't know what's going on in your life today, what waves are throwing you against the Rock of Ages or what beautiful and terrible things are happening, but I know this: He is good and He is near, especially to the brokenhearted and crushed in spirit. His love for you is not a honeymoon love, fervent in the beginning and waning when real life hits. His love for you is everlasting and always good.

In the mountains and in the valleys. In still seas and stormy ones. He remains.



Hedge of Doubt

I woke this morning for the first time in weeks without the heaviness of condemnation on me. I haven't been able to shake those feelings lately, no matter how hard I've pressed myself against the robe, no matter how much I've bent my face over Jesus' feet. I'll be honest, I began to doubt some things. Even now, writing this, my mind is replaying a litany of doubts. Do you really believe that God loves you? Do you really believe you're worth something to Him? Do you really believe that anyone could love you at all? What makes you think He'll be happy with you? They pile up and attack what I know to be true. And so this morning when I woke up gently, quietly, I held my breath for a moment or two, waiting for the doubts to assemble and charge. But they didn't. And I couldn't figure out why.

One of the greatest gifts God gave me was the gift of doubt. I doubt that many of us would see it as a gift, but I know it to be the deepest grace to me. He gave me the wide pasture of doubt and pleasant boundary line of truth. He wounds me with my doubt, but heals with me with His truth.

Like most who grew up in the church in one manner or another, I bought the lie that a fortified moralism would lead me to paths of great joy—purity until marriage, marriage by 22, children by 24, ducks lined up before me and behind me, I got them in a row. I organized my life to make sense.

And then life didn't make sense. Life dealt me, as one person called it, a bad hand. I'll never forget walking away from that conversation wondering how to play these cards. What do you do with a handful of threes and no partner in this game? I'll tell you what you do: you doubt.

You fall full into it, bathe yourself in it, wash your soul with sin and shame. When the answers you've been given by well-meaning people fail, when the theology you believe (that God responds when we pray harder, give more, seek deeper, and repent faster) proves you the fool, and when God does not seem good, I'll tell you what you do: you doubt.

And here's the thing about doubt: it is a seemingly endless plateau. God has given us the gift of reason and logic and thought, and so doubt will take us where nothing else can because there is always another question, another possibility. Even if we bump up against a wall of truth, we are like little squares in Atari games, bouncing for eternity.

Doubt doesn't seem like a gift.

This morning I read the first chapter of Job, the righteous man who we might also say was dealt a bad hand. But today I noticed a word: hedge.

"Have you not put a hedge around him and all that he has?" The enemy asked God before he unleashed upon Job the full fury of his minions.

God permitted the enemy to do what he would, only told to keep his hand from Job himself, and today I think about the hedge God has set around us. I want to believe that the hedge prevents the enemy from coming in, but that is not what we're told. No, the hedge prevents the enemy from going outside the bounds of what God has set for him. It is Job's hedge, but it is also the enemy's.

This morning I woke up and felt myself hit the hedge. Not my limitations, but God's. Not the end of myself, but the time when God holds up His hand and says "No more. This is the safest place I have for you. Within these boundary lines. Here. All the rest I have for you lies within these boundaries. All the struggles I have for you too lie within these boundaries. But do not worry: I have set this hedge around you and the enemy will not prevail."



Wipe That Glass

The first thing we know about God is He is Creator. He takes nothing and makes something. He makes many somethings. More somethings than any one of us will ever see in our entire lifetime. Staggering.

I understand God as Creator, but if He is Creator, that means He is infinitely creative—and that is something I will never be able to grasp or understand.

He is involved in every iota, every molecule, every atom, every gene, every thought, every action—and He is infinitely creative, which means He never stops creating.

Just thinking about that for three minutes staggers me.

But it becomes so real, so personal, when I think about all the ways He has been creative with me—and the accompanying realization that He isn't finished with me yet. He is still creating, still teaching, still growing, still perfecting, still forming.

So an infinitely creative God, constantly creating and recreating His people, is a God who can be trusted to not make mistakes. Every scrap of my spectacular story, every rag of my richest rich, every moment of my mind—these form who I am and who I am becoming. He knew the washed up, backwards, inside-out, upside-down story He'd bring me through and He knew that through the mess I'd see Him.

And I'd see Him through a glass dimly, but that dirt and grime, that's mine. I own that grime. God let me have that grime because otherwise I'd never understand His holiness, His set-apartness. Now all I can do is never stop asking Him to wipe that glass clean.

I love that.

I really love that.

I love it because it's my hope, more than anything, that we'd spend our lives helping others to clean that grime. To take a rag and say, "You too? Me too. Let's clean it together. Let's see Him more clearly, love Him more for Who He truly is."

I don't know what your grime is, but I know God knows it. He made it, every atom and molecule. He knows your issues with fundamentalism, gender roles, abuse, theology, culture, suffering, depression, death, divorce, fear. He knows it all. And He's so creative that He knows how to draw you in, grime covered you, and show you Himself, holy and splendid, majestic and clean.

It's spectacular.



When We Feel Fallow and Infertile

'Tis the season for all the top ten lists. I thought of doing one but decided against, for various reasons. Writing, for me, has taken a different turn in this season and I've had to mourn the loss with tears, stalwart determination, and sometimes crippled fingers and thoughts. Last week I confessed in tears to Nate that one of the hardest parts of life this year has been how quickly the world turns and how my work has faded from sight, and how forgotten I've felt as time and people progress and we feel stuck. It was a good talk, a humbling one and a needed confession of my own sin. This week I've just tried to remember, remember, remember all that God has done in this fallow season.

Fallow is an agricultural term meaning, simply, to let a field alone for a period of time in order to restore its fertility. As I look over 2016, and the lingering parts of 2015, it's very easy for me to see all the death and none of the fertility. What have we borne? Nothing, even if you look closely, which I have been trying to do. And there is something inside of me—and probably inside of you—that wants to

rush to cover over that sad statement with so many reminders of "All The Good Things!" But, just as those fields need times of fallow, of non-productiveness, of not bearing, and seeming to all the world and the field too, of having lost their ability to bear, God is still doing something in that neglected dirt. The platitudes we want to console or coddle with actually make what *isn't happening* less beautiful. If I look closely enough I can see God's beautiful sovereign hand in all of the seeming nothing. This may not make sense to you, it barely does to me in my cognitive moments, but in my poetic moments, those mysterious *ah-has* creep into my heart unawares and surprise me with comfort, joy, hope, and peace.

I take great comfort right now in not being able to know the mind of God, even if I try. For all my attempts to garner an explanation for what He has done and is doing with our lives, or to wrangle a glimpse of next year, or bribe my way into what I want or less of what I don't want, I'm humbled that the only show of hands is His promise of Love. He gives the presence of Jesus, as a baby, in a humble birth, and permission to pray "Our Father" even when He is off in Heaven and we are still here on dirt-encrusted earth, and the gift of His Spirit, comforting, helping, teaching, always quietly and sometimes imperceptibly.

God is doing something in the fallow field, so small, so magnificent, so intricate, and so miraculous, that it would astound me to know the details and so, instead, it just seems to me a dark, hardened, untended, infertile, and frozen acre of dirt. Planting will come, and someday, again, fruit, and then harvesting, but fallowing is just as important for the process as seed sowing and sun shining, it simply isn't as pretty in the meantime. *Thank you, Father, for leaving us fallow sometimes, but never leaving us, ever, any of the time.*



CHAPTER FIVE

Clear Dances Done in the Sight of Heaven

I have dreamed of doing laundry for a long time. I dreamed of a washing machine near my kitchen, the table piled high with his and hers and theirs, the backyard with a line strung through it, billowing sheets and hand-towels and discreet underthings with the sun bleaching everything to near new. I dreamed of

what that laundry meant and how it would be proof that life had settled and moved into a rhythm, not an easy one, but a known one. The poet, Richard Wilbur, says, "Oh, let there be nothing on earth but laundry / Nothing but rosy hands in the rising steam / And clear dances done in the sight of heaven," so I cannot help myself for romanticizing it. Since I first read this poem I knew that if Love ever called me to the things of this world, this was the thing I wanted to be called to: nothing on earth but laundry, his and hers and theirs.

I think of this today and every day now because we live in a rental house where the laundry is tucked in a narrow closet in a small back room upstairs, where the doors aren't level and never stay opened or closed, depending on what I want them to do. And where the washer, and the dryer above it, are barely large enough for a single load of hand-towels. The dryer finishes with a buzz so loud you can hear it on our back porch and front porch too. And the floors aren't level and so for 45 minutes while the washer cleans, it also shakes our home near to falling apart. Every day I wonder, "Will this be the day it comes crashing through to the kitchen below?" This is not the laundry I imagined doing with my life.

I cried hard today on the phone with my husband. I knew I would before he called, I knew if he mentioned a certain string of words he is prone to mentioning these days in a certain order that all the things inside of me would break and be nudged out of their crevices and I would cry.

Richard Wilbur wrote also "The soul shrinks / From all that it is about to remember, / From the punctual rape of every blessed day," and I used to think I knew what that meant. Before the laundry of my life—and not my dreams—

became reality. I imagine rows of people lining up to say in my general direction, but not to me, "I told her so." I falter. I fall.

This is not the laundry I imagined once: the sort billowing on clotheslines in the backyards of cabins or farmhouses or small bungalows; the sort worn by people who knew a hard day's work, but knew how to rest too; the sort where the lights and the darks never landed in the same heap in the corner of the closet, and where they always landed in baskets and not heaps in the corners of the closet to begin with.

This laundry is loud and hard and long and mixed and never ending. It is everywhere and always and all the time. It is folded and put away and then tomorrow it is in need of wash again. It never ends. It is the "punctual rape of every blessed day" and today I break with it. The washer is pounding itself into the wall again and the dog is barking downstairs and the door won't stay open long enough for me to hold a basket and go out of it. There is work to be done for others and work to be done for myself and I am still wearing the shorts I pulled on at 5:47 this morning. I have not brushed my teeth. I have had three cups of coffee and three wide mouth Mason jars of water and the dog won't stop whining and my husband and I are disagreeing in a frustratingly agreeable way and now the dryer is buzzing three times at me and I crumble because this is not the laundry I imagined.

I bring the basket of clean clothes into our closet and pull the necks of shirts over the cedar hangers. I catch a scent different than detergent. The scent of my husband. His dress shirts hanging above with a new rule instated by me: wear your shirts more than once because I cannot make laundry my whole life. I gather them

in my hands and pull them close and inhale. The smell of work and soap and laundry and him, my love, my thing of this world.

Love does call us to the things of this world and it looks more like "clear dances done in the sight of heaven" than I thought it would. Quiet faithfulness, echoing silence, long days, little praise, the presence of God and a puppy and not much else. This was not the laundry I imagined, but it may be the laundry I needed.

CHAPTER SIX

Prepositions, Autumn, & Waiting

The tree across the street has started changing to red and it stands like a small flame against the darkening green of summer's maturation. It is strange, isn't it, how a tree proves its life by its death? We could learn one or two things from the trees.

The waiting grows heavy inside me. Today I talked with a friend who for many years prayed over the distance, spiritual, emotional, geographical, etc., of her family and today we rejoiced because all the immediate ones live within just a few blocks of her. Last week I talked with a friend who waited a long, long time for the baby who came not of her womb, but who came just the same. This morning a friend tells me the job she's been wanting is happening soon.

We're all waiting for something, aren't we? Funny how we order the waits, though. Certain what we're waiting for is holier or healthier or wholer or harder than what another is waiting for. He's waiting for his church to grow. She's waiting for her community to deepen. He's waiting for a plan to surface. She's waiting for a husband. He's waiting for his marriage to heal. She's waiting for home. He is too. We all are actually.

“Hoping does not mean doing nothing... It is the opposite of desperate and panicky manipulations, of scurrying and worrying. And hoping is not dreaming. It is not spinning an illusion or fantasy to protect us from our boredom or our pain. It means a confident, alert expectation that God will do what He said He will do. It is imagination put in the harness of faith. It is a willingness to let God do it His way and in His time.”

EUGENE PETERSON

This year I have grown weary with the hierarchies and echelons of growth in the gospel. I have tired of the corner markets and church-speak. I have wished there were more places where Christians could be tired and weary and wait or even just be okay—knowing that their time there might be longer or harder or deeper than they knew. And that we didn't all rush to cheer them up, make them look on the bright side, try to rescue them from the depths of what God might be leading them into, keeping them in the shallowness of faith. An unchecked faith is not the faith I want to have.

I am not the girl I was a year and a half ago. I described depression to a friend of mine who lives with a sufferer of it: it was like feeling like a shell of yourself, knowing the inside must exist somewhere, but lacking the arms and hands to feel around for it. I talk in the past tense to her, but the present tense to myself. I remind myself that Christ in me is my hope of glory. Even if I never find myself again, Christ is in me, this I do know.

Maybe "myself" was never all she was cracked up to be.

I have hurried through my day, trying to order it by tasks which must be done and tasks which might be done and tasks which mustn't be done no matter how tempting they might be. Writing this is of the latter sort, but self-control is not my strong point.

Plans thwarted by a geographical mishap (I made an appointment for the wrong location) I am driving home and I see the red tree, redder than she was this morning. Or maybe it's the angle of the sun. It doesn't matter. She is dying. Beautifully. But still dying. It's more complicated, I know, but part of her is dying.

A useful part of her, a beautiful part of her, and a necessary part of her—the yellow comes, then soon orange, now red, and then brown, and then, like the leaf I found in our back yard yesterday: dead. Autumn is a slow and brilliant death here on the east coast but only if you pay attention.

It is a necessary death but not an eternal one. It is a scheduled death and not an immature one. It is the mark of growth, of maturity, of another year come and gone. It is death, but it is not the end.

The leaves which will come next year (and they will come, mark my words) will be the same and so very different. Of their former selves, but not their former selves. It is like that with us: one day, eternally, but also right now: being renewed. Being built into. Being transformed. Being saved. Being.

I have grown heavy with waiting and most days I can't even articulate what I'm waiting for—this is the fog we have been walking through, arms outstretched, trying to feel around for something that feels familiar. So many wonderful strangers have put things in our arms—resources, people, pastors, contacts—but none of those things mean as much as the simple companionship of being known and loved just as you are without what you can bring or be brought.

This weekend we visited some deep and dear friends and one asked me about a traumatic event from last year, to describe it in detail. I shook, but I told it all. The next day, his wife asked me about two more traumatic events from last year, and I told her all of too. It was cathartic in a way I had forgotten, the way true friendship just asks for the story and not for the success.

It has been so long since I felt the freedom to just be sad and hurt and confused and a little bit dead inside—and not feel the need to produce something of it. I know the time to produce will come again, but right now is not that time.

And that's okay. It's okay.

Christ in me is the hope of glory and hope cannot disappoint.

Spring cannot help herself, she will come again.

When the Dark Night Seems to Have No End

I've been wondering, these past few weeks, when did it become a sin to be sad? We have become little band-aid applicants, carrying them with us everywhere in the form of advice, counsel, scoldings, and, for those unwilling to soil our hands, corridor whispers. We are faster than an ambulance in our rush to clean the scene, sweep away the proof, and move on to bigger and better and happier things. Does anyone think, I think to myself, how silly it is to do such a mediocre job when what is needed is surgery only God can perform? Two verses, but mostly the same, have played on repeat for me in this year of sadness (Is it okay if I say that out loud? I have nothing to prove, nothing to preach, and nothing to lose.). They are from the book of Jeremiah (that great Lamentor for whom we seem to have little use in happy, clappy modern Christianity):

From prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely. They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace. (Jer. 6:13-14 & Jer. 8:11)



It is against our nature, I think, to apply pressure to a wound, everything in us wants to be soft with another's and softer with our own, to handle with care or kid gloves or not handle at all. But the greater temptation is to cover a wound lightly and call it healed: out of sight, out of mind.

I don't know when exactly the gauging came, but this morning I read my husband's text in the still dark morning and send my own back. Our prayers are staccato sorts: Help. Pray. Please. Love. Sorry. Forgive. Forgiven. Love. Love. Love. Marriage is beautiful, but sin crouches at our door waiting to pounce and we must rule over it, even with staccato prayers in still dark mornings (Gen.4:6-8). But how did we get here? How did the wound grow from small and tolerable paper cuts to tears on the way home from church and pulsing guilt for the seeming missteps of our year? We both believe in a sovereign God, don't we? Why then would we falter for one second even, in our belief that He directs our every step—even if it feels like we've fallen into a ravine and there is a cliff above us and a rushing river below us—death no matter where we look.

Maybe this isn't you. Maybe you're one of those happy, clappy Christians who has never fallen into a ravine or had to scale a cliff or navigate roaring waters. I don't envy you, although I suppose I should. My pastor used to say, "Suffering is coming for us all. If you haven't experienced it yet, it's coming for you." And I used to believe it had come for me and I had gotten through it okay. I was wrong, and there's probably more ahead. The truth is I don't understand the happy, clappy Christians. I really don't. I don't understand those who would heal a wound lightly (though I've been guilty of it a time or seven), thinking it would be enough to have

paid attention for a second and then washed my hands of it, having done my part smartly enough.

There are so many things this year I can't even begin to tell you but they all mount one big awful offense: God cannot be trusted. I'm horrified to say those words at all, and especially horrified that the offense hurts me worse than it hurts Him. It also isn't true, and I know this with every fiber of my being. But the arrows carrying their deceitful message come flying still. Who here hasn't felt the flaming arrows of untruth come battering down on their weary souls? If you say you have not and will not, I beg you to read the accounts of Paul again and then talk to me. What I cannot figure out, though, is how stalwart he stayed through it all.

What I am saying is the same as what Hemingway once said, "This world breaks everyone," and also "And afterward we are strong at the broken places." But to pretend the brokenness and the broken places don't happen or don't hurt or need to be fixed speedily or need some form of happy, clappy Christian healing with immediacy, is to lie, not only to the wounded, but to yourself most of all.

It is no sin to be sad. I have believed that theologically for a long time and it is being tested in the crucible of truth now. Can one be sad and still trust God? Can one mourn and still know God is good? Can one weep and still know morning is coming? Can one grope blindly in the long night without one single doubt that God stands there, somewhere and certain, in the sea of darkness?

I have thought those things might be possible and now I know they are. My sadness is not a sin, but I will not call "Peace, Peace" until the heavy hand of healing is applied all the way through.

Maybe you are sad today too, maybe the dark night of the soul has lasted far longer and been far darker than you thought, or maybe you know someone for whom that dark night is their reality. Nate and I watched a film this week where the lunacy of the main character was not portrayed as such from his perspective. To him, his friends were not imaginary, they were as real as he was. We remarked, at the stunning conclusion, how it helped us to have empathy for our friends walking through forms of depression, lunacy, and irrationality in a way we might not have had before. Their pain is as real to them as our pain is to us. I do not need to feel their pain precisely to understand its reality. I pray for this for us all.

Everyone you meet today is carrying some hidden weight, and the temptation to make your own greater in comparison, or to overlook theirs for laziness or fear, will be great. I beg you today: Do not heal a wound lightly, your own or someone else's. Do not cry, "Peace! Peace!" simply because you want their sunny disposition returned. Sit across from them and ask what hurts and don't offer counsel or advice or bandaids, ask only for the Savior to be near, because His word says He is and He is the only One who can heal all the way through to the other side.

The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit. (Ps. 34:18)



Embracing Accusation

I like to think of myself as flexible, in spirit and person. I am naturally judgmental of myself and not of others, and prone to dissecting my inadequacies with a double edged sword, painfully and precisely. Some call this naval gazing or introspection. I am learning it can be a tool of the enemy to split the Gospel into sections, applying some to me, all to others, and none to the parts I stumble over naming. Last night we ate soup and homemade bread and in the middle of dinner pulled up a Shane and Shane song on YouTube. We don't usually keep electronics at the dinner table and by usually I mean we never do, but we were talking about shame and the enemy's ploy. I had sent this quote from Pilgrim's Progress to Nate earlier in the day and we were talking about some shame I have been carrying around like a child carries worthless treasures in his pocket: sticks, stones, names that really do hurt you.

"Shame tells me what men are, but it tells me nothing of what God or the Word of God is," said Faithful.

It seems to me we're all carrying shame in some fashion. (Shame is different from guilt, although we often confuse the two—guilt is a true reminder of what you have done, shame is a cloudy reminder of what others or you perceive you have done—but neither are too far gone from the expansive cloak of the gospel.)

Few of us will take the time to tell the difference between shame and guilt, and even fewer will raise our hands and say, "That's me. I am stumbling under the crippling weight of shame." It is so shameful, see, to confess shame. For the guilty it is easy to point to a specific instance in which the sin was committed, to say, indeed, I have done the thing. But shame? Shame slinks and crowds and cordons and points and laughs and we all feel like blind men groping in the pitch for something to feel guilty about because the shame is too much to bear without a certain wrongdoing to make right.

We can repent for what we did wrong, but it seems impossible to repent for the compulsory constant feeling that we've done something wrong. This is shame. Guilt sends you to prison. Shame keeps you out of it but makes the whole world a prison. You cannot go anywhere or see anything without a pulsing reminder that something isn't right. This is shame.

Years ago my pastor said when the enemy comes and tells him he's a failure, he's wrong, he's terrible, he's a loser, he tells the enemy back that he is right. He is all those things, and more. This is why the gospel is such beautiful news, he said, because all the things the enemy says about him are true—even worse (lust is as adultery, hatred is as murder!), but Jesus. Sweet Jesus.

Somewhere along this year I've had my head down so far I could only see the strewn failures behind me, there is nothing I can do to make any of this year make sense or be made right. I feel shame about marriage, my body, my fear of violence, our loss of financial security, our home, church, all of it. There is not anything in life unscathed from shame these days. If you note something beautiful about any of it, the thing quickest to my lips and heart is how I have failed at all of it. And this

won't make sense to almost anyone, but it makes sense to the enemy and he has taken every foothold he can in the process. And you have places just like that in your life today too.

Last night, that quote from Pilgrim's Progress, the song from Shane and Shane, my best friend reminding me that whatever accusations come my way are true, but not as true as the gospel which covers them all—these things are raising my head, slowly, surely, reminding me of truth. If this weighty shame is not telling me something about God or the Word of God, then it is not of Him, it cannot be.

This morning I read in Colossians and circle all the times the word "all" appears and it is many. The first chapter is full of them, they're everywhere. I am reminded that there is no part of my heart or soul that is not covered completely by the gospel of Christ, whether a true failure or a perceived one, His grace is enough. It is all and enough.

The Art of Repairing Broken Things

We were married less than three months when I broke his favorite mug. It was bound to happen. My favorite mug had broken on the move to Denver from Dallas, which was why, I suppose, it was his I carried that day. Coffee from the morning pooled in the bottom, my hands full of books and papers and another cup, which is why, I suppose, I dropped his mug as I opened the door. It lay there in seventy shards and I on my knees trying to find every one of them, crying and apologies and it's okays. I think he went inside frustrated. I think I stayed outside thinking if only I could keep everything together it might never have happened.

The shards moved with us, inside a grocery bag, and stuffed in the back of our pantry all this year. The bag also holds a ceramic bowl my mother gave me which sliced neatly in two with not a single other piece to be found. This afternoon I took them both out, as well as a teal peacock whose head had broken off in the move from Denver to D.C. I gathered them all on our wooden table and laid their remains around them and began the work of piecing broken things back together again.

“Christianity teaches that, contra fatalism, suffering is overwhelming; contra Buddhism, suffering is real; contra karma, suffering is often unfair; but contra secularism, suffering is meaningful. There is a purpose to it, and if faced rightly, it can drive us like a nail deep into the love of God and into more stability and spiritual power than you can imagine.”

TIM KELLER

The Japanese have a word for this, kintsugi, only they use precious metals like gold or silver to bind brokenness back together again. They think of it as an art: the history of a thing is part of a thing. I think it's beautiful to think so, but that was before all of the moves and the breaking and storing and sealing and healing that has been a part the history of our thing. It is romantic to call to memory the history of breaking and healing, but it is not romantic to feel in pieces at the front door or stored away in a plastic bag in the back of the pantry or to even sit alongside your other broken comrades while you are pieced together with strong glue. I wonder if the mug or bowl will be useable again. I know the peacock will be because what does one do with a peacock anyway except look at it?

There have been times this year when I wonder if we have been broken beyond repair. I know the Christian-lite will hurry to allay and calm the picture this brings to mind, but I wonder if the Bible tells a different story. Wasn't it Jacob who walked with a limp all his life—proof of his wrestle with God, but still, a limp? Wasn't it a whole chapter in the letter to the Hebrews that tells of their forefathers and mothers: those who did not see what was promised. It is a temptation, to be sure, to believe wholeness is for tomorrow or next year, but what if wholeness is not until eternity? Or what if healing means beautiful, but not useful in the former way? These are the things I have thought about this year and the things I thought of today, while piecing pottery together again.

What if our intended use is different than the Father's intended use for us? What if he pieces us together again with precious metals, but puts us on a shelf, never to be filled again? There are many rebuttals that come to mind when I think of the possibilities, but none of them are promises. God does not promise to heal the old

hearts, but to give us new ones entirely. Why then, are we so bent on bandaids and also trying our best to hide our collective bandages?

I love the idea of kintsugi because it is the story of the thing I love most about any thing. It is beautiful to think of the work and love that went into the making of our table, but I know the history of it, not just ours, but the makers of it, and that story wasn't and isn't always beautiful to others—but still, that enhances the beauty of the table to me. I know the hands that made it and I love them. And I know the conversations that have been had around it and I love those voices. And I know the man who it was first given to and I love that man. It isn't the table I love, it is the story it tells.

The mug and the bowl and the useless peacock are sitting on the table drying. I hope we will fill the cup with coffee tomorrow or the next day and it will hold it so well the coffee pools and overflows. I hope the bowl will hold, at least, small tangerines or applesauce for our dinner soon. I know the peacock will strut in place on our mantle or bookshelf as though it has never left. If you came to our home you might never know you were drinking from a mug I broke three months into our marriage, it will be useful to you even without the story. But I'm not promised any of that, I know, and on this I meditate today.

We are trying to move back to Texas. I wasn't sure whether I was going to say that on here until after we'd moved because what if, like so many of our other plans, it didn't happen? I confess, since the day we made the decision (a decision I've been asking God and my husband for to varying degrees and with various levels of passion and passivity nearly since we left it the night of our wedding), I have been scared it won't happen. Yet another thing we tried for and failed. Yet

another broken plan. Broken endeavor. Broken heart. I know God heals, but what if not on earth at all?

A friend told me that if we do come back, to be okay with being different, a different bowl or mug or peacock. Pieced together, but barely, and not with gold or silver or fine metal but with the faith and hope and love of God that has carried us thus far. We may not be beautiful or useable in the former way, but our marriage has a history now and it is threaded in the finest cracks and crevices of our lives, barely seen, but there.

CHAPTER TEN

We Were Going to Move to Chattanooga

A year ago today Nate and I were standing on the pinnacle of a familiar mountain, a place I called home for years and a place that still holds a piece of my heart. We were quietly dreaming, after a year of crushing disappointments, heart-ache, trauma, and loss. We were asking the questions "What if?" and "Where might?" It was the first time I felt hope in over a year. We made the beginning of a plan that weekend: to move to Chattanooga and settle there.

There's a lot that happened between Labor Day 2016 and Labor Day 2017, but the shortest way to say it is that we're back in Texas, in the place we met and married, but not the place we fell in love.

The place we fell in love is everywhere and everything.

It was honeymooning in the Aspen trees and buying a house on July 4th and learning things weren't as they seemed at my new job and losing a baby we didn't know was beginning and losing his job we thought was certain and coming home to a police-taped home near Thanksgiving and cutting down our first tree together in the Rocky Mountains and witnessing the shooting of a cop on my birthday and



and losing the beginning of another life we were sure of and navigating a church conflict we felt blindsided by and being disappointed again and again and again by hopeful job interviews and no call backs and packing all of our stuff again and moving again to another side of our country and losing more money than I'd ever dreamed of even having and living in our second 1800s home with creaky floors and uneven doors and charm and still feeling so alone every single moment. It was bringing home Harper and struggling to find a church home and learning the Chattanooga job market was another Denver job market and our dreams of moving there would not be realized. It was packing again, and moving again, back to the south. It was unpacking in a home we knew wasn't guaranteed or our "forever home" or secure or would be full of children or dreams coming true.

What I'm trying to say is we can make a lot of plans, but our hope is in the Lord and he carries us through—and grows our capacity for life and love within it all.

I get a lot of emails from you, dear readers, asking about love and marriage and singleness and how do you know and what is settling and all that. I guess I just wanted to say to you today: you can make a lot of plans and have a lot of dreams and just envision how your life should be and think it is all somewhat certain. Because you have a certain "call" or a certain "desire" or feel you were made by God for a certain "purpose," it can become so easy to believe life will turn out that way, all you have to do is make the people in it and the jobs you take and the decisions you make fit within that call or dream or purpose.

I want to say to you, friends, that this is a lie. It's a sneaky one because it sounds good to have purpose and to aim for it straight. But the lie is that we think we're

somehow owed the life we desire, even if God has not yet granted it and might never do so.

You may feel called to be a mother or a husband or a pastor or a teacher or a writer or a wife or a single or a speaker or a counselor, but a sense of calling does not mean God will fulfill things in your order or way. The way to be a successful wife is not to have the perfect husband, the way to be a successful pastor is not to have a pastor's wife, the way to be a successful writer is not to have a successful book, and the way to be a successful single is not to be undistracted by the opposite gender. No. The way to be successful is simply to be faithful with today.

And tomorrow.

And the next day.

And the day after.

Someday, when you are very old, or maybe not very old, and just in the middle of your life, you will look behind you at a series of crushing disappointments, plans that went awry, ways you felt stolen from and lied to, and you will see the faithfulness of God pressing you into the way of a faithful servant. This is the mark of a successful child of God.

The answer to the questions we're all asking can be summed up with another question: What is the presence of the Holy Spirit inside of you—within the confirmation of Scripture—telling you to be faithful in today?

That's it. That's our answer.

Your life will take many twists and turns and near fails and falters and wins and losses, but if you're pent up inside trying to situate yourself in such a way for success as you determine it, you will feel lost on the way. No matter how

strategically you play the pieces of your life, you are not guaranteed the win you envision. You are only guaranteed the win you have been promised in Scripture. The sooner we can all learn things won't turn out like we planned because life is not some choose your own adventure book like we all think it ought to be, the sooner we can rest in the comforting presence of the Spirit, the true promises of Scripture, and the beckoning care of the Father.

Whatever decision it is that's tying you up in knots today? What does it look like to open your hands around it, obey the Spirit (as hard as it might be), and let the trajectory of your life take an unexpected and—perhaps—painful turn? I promise you, no, Scripture promises you! There is the joy of your Master at the end of the story of your life—a story you can't even imagine today he would write for you.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Held Fast

It isn't so much that I feel he will let go of me, but that I will let go of him. That I will grow so discouraged with repetitive mistakes and ambles into sin, that I will lose sight of the Most Glorious and fix my eyes on the lesser things. It creeps in inopportune ways and places, times and moments. It snags itself on my heart and won't let go, a constricting weakness—an oxymoron if there ever was one. I know I am certain and sure in him, but only because I know HE is certain and sure in himself.

It is comfort, then, that it was Jesus himself who prayed for Simon Peter, that his faith would not fail. Jesus knew what waited for Peter on the other side of things and it was not a life without sacrifice. Jesus warred for Peter on his behalf that his faith would not fail.

I am of little faith. From the outside looking in, you see strength and consistency, but the inside of this heart is rotted with the stink of faithlessness and fear, doubt and condemnation, discouragement and self-pity. But Christ wars for me? He holds me fast? He cannot deny himself? This singular note is my only praise:

You will hold me fast. “We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain.” Hebrews 6:19

CHAPTER TWELVE

Who Can Believe the Reports?

Hemingway said, "The world breaks everyone, and afterward we are strong at the broken places." I wrote that quote on an index card when I read it in high school and didn't know how prophetic it would prove to be in my life.

Who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? For He shall grow up before Him as a tender plant, And as a root out of dry ground. He has no form or comeliness; And when we see Him, There is no beauty that we should desire Him. He is despised and rejected by men, A Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him.

Someone said, a few years ago, "Teach your kids they're broken, deeply broken," and the internet swarmed and stung in response. No one wants to believe deep inside the horrible, awful, no good truth. That the gears inside of me will keep getting stuck and rusty, jamming up in inopportune places and too small spaces. No one wants to believe the brokenness on the outside points a terrible truth about the inside.

Surely He has borne our griefs And carried our sorrows; Yet we esteemed Him stricken, Smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace

was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way; And the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.

It's not a prosperity gospel to believe that the brokenness on the inside of us results in wars and rumors of wars, gunned down black boys on city streets, cancer, and genocide. It is not a transactional brokenness: you broke me, so I'll break you. Or, more honestly, I broke me, so He breaks me more. But it is a cause and effect of sorts. Deeply broken people don't turn the other cheek, not only in war, but also at home when the floor doesn't get swept and it's his turn to do the dishes and someone was uncaring or uncouth. It starts with the small fractures and leads to the tremors and quakes until we are all shattered pieces and wondering how we got here.

He was oppressed and He was afflicted, Yet He opened not His mouth; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, And as a sheep before its shearers is silent, So He opened not His mouth. He was taken from prison and from judgment, And who will declare His generation? For He was cut off from the land of the living; For the transgressions of My people He was stricken. And they made His grave with the wicked— But with the rich at His death, Because He had done no violence, Nor was any deceit in His mouth.

The world does break everyone and it is not for nothing to say we are stronger at the broken places. I heard it said recently that good eschatology says "The bad gets worse, the good gets better, and the mushy middle is done away with." I groan for that and so do we all.

The mushy middle is what breaks us, that pliable and soft already/not yet we live in. We groan for the culmination of the kingdom, the new heaven, the new earth, but we're still here, where missiles fall every four minutes and Christians claw their way into a helicopter from an Iraq hilltop, and journalists are tear-gassed and officers act hastily, and my friend has a tumor and it's cancerous, and where the tears won't stop falling this morning because we are broken, yes, it is true. We are deeply broken.

But, on our behalf, so was he.

Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise Him; He has put Him to grief. When You make His soul an offering for sin, He shall see His seed, He shall prolong His days, And the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in His hand. He shall see the labor of His soul, and be satisfied. By His knowledge My righteous Servant shall justify many, For He shall bear their iniquities. Therefore I will divide Him a portion with the great, And He shall divide the spoil with the strong, Because He poured out His soul unto death, And He was numbered with the transgressors, And He bore the sin of many, And made intercession for the transgressors.



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