

Rise Above

Defying the Gravity of Adversity

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Introduction

I wasn't planning on writing this book. Truthfully, the thought that my experiences with adversity were something that would even gain the faintest blip on another person's radar screen was the furthest from my mind.

Yet, one day I had an inner prompting from God to just "put it out there" and so I gave a series of messages titled "Rise Above" to my congregation. I was nervous, it was emotionally draining, but the response from people held a bigger surprise.

After the first message in the series (in which I shared my personal story of adversity) the tenor of the congregation changed. People opened up to me that had never before. You could sense an uplifting in the spiritual atmosphere as people were discovering the hope they have in Christ to rise above the adversity in their lives. Many were being touched, changed, and set free.

As a pastor, you would think I would have expected at least some of that, but I really didn't. I honestly didn't believe my story of what God had brought me through was any real big deal. I always figured my experiences were not that powerful and would hardly benefit another from ever hearing them.

Evidently, I was wrong. God had much larger plans and greater power. And most of all, He saw my life's journey up to the present much differently than I had.

So, long story short, here I am writing to you. I pray my experiences with God along the road of adversity and the principals for rising above that I have learned will bless you as they have others.

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Adversity Happens

In this world you will have trouble. John 16:33b

My pastor told me as I was entering into the ministry many years ago, "Behind every person's eyes is a story that if they told it to you, would break your heart"

Sadly, that's true for most people, because we live in a world where adversity happens. Things don't go the way we plan, people and circumstances hurt and steal from us, and we soon realize that life is painfully unfair. The very thing we thought would never happen, is actually what happens. The moment we take one step forward, something flings us two or three steps back. Just when things start to look up, something is quick to pull us back down. And sometimes it feels like weights have been recklessly shackled onto our feet. Areas in of our life where most people walk with ease, for us in that area, it's all uphill. Every step is difficult and tiring.

What's the result? We have the exhaustion, the depression, the insecurities, the scars, the tears, the fears, the disappointments, the pain, and the flaws to show for it all.

It's adversity, it's like quick sand. You know how it is, you're running along in life minding your own business, all the sudden it sucks you in, takes you off your feet, and if we aren't careful, it can swallow us whole. Yup, adversity sucks.

Job in the Bible said this of adversity...

Job 2:10b "Shall we indeed accept good from God and not accept trouble?"

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It's unfortunate, it's painful, but it's reality... adversity happens. It's happened to you, it's happened to me.

Soon into the very first few years of my life at 3 years old, I began to have health problems. It started with a swollen esophagus. I couldn't swallow food properly, so doctors decided to surgically place a plastic, carrot looking contraption down my throat to stretch it. They would leave it there for days and then surgically pull it out. Attached was a string that came out of my mouth and hooked onto my clothes. I remember one evening, I was sitting on the stairs that led up to my bedroom. Down ran one of my sisters, snagging the string as she passed by and before I knew it, up came the plastic carrot. Good times.

But that was just the beginning. Soon after, I began to have serious skin problems. Severe eczema developed everywhere, all over my body. Rashes here, rashes there, so much that doctors would prescribe putting plastic bags with steroid creams in it around my hands and feet. Sometimes I would scratch until I bled. And of course the kids at school made fun of me, because that's what kids do. They used to call me "scaly" and "Chris Cracker." I was the school joke.

I was unusually, physically small growing up. Kids made fun of that too, referring to me as a "little shrimp." They even got creative by combining their name calling with statements like "Look, it's shrimp and crackers!" To this day, people still make fun of my small size. No, I don't come from a very physically small family. The reason why I am small now is because of all the steroids I took as a child that actually stunted my growth. It's the reason why my hands are scarred with wrinkles to this day. As one doctor called them, "alligator hands."

If that wasn't enough to weigh down my life from the start, there was the asthma. On top of my skin problems, from about the

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age of 5 until I was 10, I was in hospital 2 months out of every year because of severe asthma. When other kids were playing outside I had to stay indoors, often alone.

On two occasions, I nearly died. One of them I remember quite vividly. I was in a hospital room in which there was a large window where people in the hallway could look in. My dad had just finished up at work, and stopped by to see me on his way home. When he arrived, he looked into the window to see my hands were turning blue. I remember the nurses coming by my bedside and telling my dad that they had given me all the medicine I could have. My dad rushed out and yelled for doctors. They obviously did something because I am here today. I am told that had he not been there to call attention to my condition, the outcome would not have been good. Childhood asthma survivors will tell you, growing up you live in fear every day that, if you are not completely in tune with your body and emotions, it might be your last.

One thing that poured gasoline on the fire of my asthma was the family problems. You could say our family put the "fun" in dysfunctional. Beginning with my parents, my father at times was a very angry man. You just never knew when dad was going to blow his top and go postal. My parents would fight; yelling, screaming, the works. Sometimes it got physical... throwing things, breaking things.

I remember as a boy being woken up one night by sounds of one of their fights. I quietly walked down the steps from my bedroom to peer unnoticed into the family room where they were. I turned the corner and witnessed my father having tied up my mother on the couch with rope and tape over her mouth as he kept her restrained. Not good, not good at all.

Then there was the sexual abuse. It started with one of my 3 sisters. At the age of 7 she would have me lie naked with her on her bed while my parents and other sisters were up stairs.

On one occasion, just for kicks, that same sister selected one of the neighborhood girls who lived down the street and forced her and me to lie naked on top of each other in the back yard of a friend's house, humiliating us both as other kids watched.

Sadly, that was just the appetizer. Over time it went much further than that with that same sister. I will spare you all the gory details because I think you can probably fill in all the blanks. Everything that you can pretty much imagine happened, and that lasted all the way until I was a teenager. At times I was so anxious about what was happening that I would come home from a day at middle school and urinate on the family room floor, not knowing what else to do. I was that messed up.

If that wasn't enough, on top of all that was my father's rejection. I had a daily sense that I just could never live up to his standards as I was always falling short.

One time, I came home from middle school with a report card that had some "C's" on it. I usually tried to forge my report cards with better grades, but this time I couldn't pull it off so I just had to face the music. My father hated "C's" because in his mind he didn't want to have a son that was just "average." After seeing my report card, I could tell my father was disgusted with me and my grades. So, I went into my room and cried. My mother heard me crying and came to my room. She inquired as to why I was so upset. I told her it was because "dad doesn't love me." My mom insisted that wasn't true and added, "Let's go out to the living room where your Dad is and we can ask him so you can see for yourself that he loves you." Reluctantly, I walked out with my mother, turned the corner from the kitchen into the living

room where my dad was rocking in his rocking chair. My mom said to my dad, "Honey, Chris doesn't think you love him, tell him that you love him" To that my father responded, and I quote "With grades like that he is no son of mine."

Somehow, High School went somewhat normal, I think. Except when one of my closest friends got struck by lightning. We had dated a couple of times. She was a kind of best friend to me. We played tennis together often. One late morning on a Saturday, she went to get the mail, and lightning struck her. Just like that. She didn't pass away, but was severely injured, physically and mentally. For a young guy in high school, that really shook me and my faith. Why would God ever let anything like that happen? She was the nicest person I knew, valedictorian of her school. It's just not fair. Of all things, she just went out to get the mail, it was barely even raining outside. In my mind still to this day, that's messed up.

So off to college I went, and let's just say at that time in my life I was a cussing, lusting, self-centered heathen, that's just straight up the way it was. How God called me into the ministry out of all that, I am still a little fuzzy about. No, I never got into drugs, but alcohol, sex, and pornography had a way of numbing the pain. And believe it or not, embarrassed to say it, but I carried that right into Seminary. Lutheran Seminary this is. This sounds really crazy, I guess it was kind of a Lutheran thing, but I drank a lot in Seminary.

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Part of my seminary training involved being a chaplain in a hospital for several months. During that tour, no kidding, I had a baby die in my arms. Right there, right then, her mom sitting right next to me. I watched several people die, ministered to people who's lives were instantly and completely devastated, I saw things I don't think you would ever want to see. It's not the kind of stuff you can just wash off either. It stays with you.

My third year of Seminary came, it was the internship year. During my internship, I became engaged. No, not to Amy my wife. This was another girl before Amy. And let's just say that relationship eventually fell through like a lead balloon. To make matters worse, I didn't handle it well. I made some mistakes, which contributed to a couple people in my internship church writing letters to the seminary saying I shouldn't be allowed to

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become a pastor. That was a very messy time in my life, but somehow, by the grace of God, I got to move onto my last year.

That last year of Seminary, I don't even know if I can put this into words, but it was a dark year. It was spiritual warfare of the most intense degree. I literally thought I was going crazy. Anxiety attacks, delusional thoughts, you name it. At times I literally thought I was going to die.

During the night I would wake up in cold sweats. On one occasion, I felt the very presence of evil upon me like a black cloud. It was a kind of hell. But I made it through and, towards the end of that final year, I met Amy, my wife. The day after I graduated from Seminary, Amy and I got married. We began our life together and my ministry.

My first church assignment was as an associate pastor. My ministry there was a blessing. In fact, it was within those first three years that God began to give me a heart and vision for contemporary ministry. One of the largest contemporary churches in the country at that time, Community Church of Joy, wanted to hire me as a pastor on their staff. That was a dream opportunity. But after weeks and weeks of interviews, flights and visits, it didn't come true. Deep down, I knew it wasn't right for me at that time, but I was devastated. It was there at that church, as I was speaking to a Sunday crowd of 3,000 people that God put in my heart a sense that one day, my ministry would be like that.

Shortly after that fell through, I received a call from another church to become their Senior Pastor. They were a traditional church that wanted me to lead them to become contemporary. Which, by the way, is nearly impossible to pull off, but I didn't know that at the time. Yet things managed to go very well and we were very successful. We tripled the attendance at that church within 18 months. We went from having one service to having three different services on Sunday mornings.

But then I ran into a problem. I couldn't turn it off. I came home with my ministry still at the top of my mind and heart. Every conversation at the dinner table was about ministry. Amy finally basically said, "This has got to stop, or this isn't going to work" We went to counseling. I was consumed, and ministry was consuming me and my marriage.

During that time, I was spiritually and emotionally attacked, and I didn't know how to handle it. I was young, naïve, and inexperienced. The attack started with a key leader in the church who basically wanted to take over and run the show, he

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was arrogant and worldly, a wolf in sheep's clothing for sure.

The church council wanted to confront this guy and I agreed. We met with him, and afterwards, he came up to me, and literally gave me the kiss of death, right on my forehead. I soon learned this man had ties to the Tampa mafia and had put a hit out on me. And as you can imagine, that freaked me out.

Prior to that, I had long been seriously questioning my beliefs in Lutheranism, sensing God wanted to move me out of that denomination. I didn't agree with the direction the ELCA was headed, no longer believed in infant baptism, and certainly didn't believe in the ordination of homosexuals. To be sure, my world was turning upside down.

During this deep time of soul searching, on a Saturday morning, a woman from the church came to our home uninvited and unannounced. She knocked on our door and as I opened, she literally pushed her way in. She sat Amy and I down on our couch and basically started cursing Amy out, telling her that she was a horrible pastor's wife and that she didn't belong with me. Amy was in tears and to say the least, as you might guess, Amy was crushed. Innocence lost.

Not long after that, Amy and I starting putting things together and realized that God was closing doors as these things weren't happening by chance. To make a long story short, even though we lost almost all of our pension in the process and had no clear job lined up, against our parents wishes, with the odds stacked against us, we left the Lutheran denomination and became a part of the Tampa Bay Baptist Association. At the same time, I became involved in the staff of a very large, contemporary church. My role was to start a Church I envisioned in the Tampa area, named Quest419. They came along side to support me.

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In order to start the church, Amy went to work becoming a teacher, never having any background or study in it. I stayed at home with our infant son Harrison and started the church.

We started the church with 7 people and grew to over a hundred. We leased and renovated an old Discount Auto Parts store for \$3,000 per month. I was barely collecting any salary at the time. We were blazing new trails and reaching people who would never had gone to church. It was life with God on the seat of our pants, and we loved every minute of it. The church was so pioneering that it caught the attention of writer Jim Wilson, who wrote an entire chapter about our ministry in his book, "The Future Church"

But just as soon as the momentum was in full gear, the bottom fell out. It started with the church that supported us. The pastor there, who had mentored me and taken me under his wings through all of this, unfortunately had a moral failure. The church forced him to resign, I believe unnecessarily. Upon that, the church soon decided it was no longer in the position to support us and basically cut the umbilical chord.

As you might guess, we were financially unable to move forward and just too young as a church to survive. It was very sad and very hard to watch. Churches across the United States and even other countries were basing their ministry vision on what we were doing. It was really hard to let that go, it was our baby.

Soon after, we moved to North Carolina, where I became the Senior Pastor of a small contemporary church. And truth be told, it was uphill from the beginning. It's hard for me to even believe how uphill it was as I look back.

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Two months into it, I quickly realized the church had deep levels of division within it, so much that when I brought professional consulting materials in to assess the level of division within the church, the tests resulted in diagnosing the church as at the level just above terminal.

Now put yourself in my shoes, you just moved your whole family, having just had such an awesome ministry that you started from the ground up essentially dissolve right in front of you. And now you find out the committee that hired you knowingly lied about the condition and start of the church, intentionally covered up the conflict and division, and now you're at a church that is all but dead.

As a matter of fact, I remember going out to lunch a few months into being there with a member of the search team who hired me. During our lunch, she said, "Chris, I can't tell you how many times I thought of calling you before you came and telling you to run as far as you can from this church" In my mind I started thinking, "Really? Nice of you to tell me that now!"

I spent the next 7 years struggling to repair and resurrect that church. In the process, I had a youth minister conceal their criminal record, weathered a church split of nearly 50/50, had people who made it their personal mission to ruin my reputation, all to clean that church up and get it on its feet.

Yet, ministry wasn't my only challenge during those years, not even the biggest.

I had a dermatologist say a long time ago, "One day all the eczema and skin problems you had as a child is going to come back, and when it does, it will be much worse than before." Well, that one day came. Honestly, it was almost over night, my entire body became a bright red rash. So bad, that I couldn't sleep at

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night. At best, I would fall asleep for 2 minutes only to wake up itching and sweating. Just like I had as a child, I would scratch myself to bleeding, and any eczema you can see on me now, is not nearly as bad as it was.

Some people who see pictures of me from back then say I was fat. I wasn't fat, I was pumped up on steroids. I would wake up with skin all over my bed, blood stains from where I scratched during the night. It was hell, and sometimes it still is. There is nothing more self conscious than having ugly looking skin problems.

But if that wasn't enough. All the years of steroids finally caught up with me as about 3-4 years ago, I started seeing a halo in my right eye when I would look at certain lights. It wasn't in the left, but only in the right. For several weeks I ignored it, until during a ministry event, for about 2 or 3 minutes, I completely lost my vision in that right eye.

When I went to an eye doctor, I found out I had glaucoma in that eye. In fact, the eye pressure was the highest they had ever seen. The pressure was 60, the normal is 20 and under. I began treatment with eye drops, but the eye drops wouldn't hold the pressure down long enough, and unfortunately, before I finally had a surgery to correct it, I had lost 50 percent of my vision in the right eye, and you can't get it back.

So, with all the challenges of trying to resurrect and repair a diseased church, and all the health problems from severe eczema, allergies, and losing my vision, I became very depressed.

I wasn't making nearly the income I wanted to for my family, I thought I might be going blind, and I didn't want to be seen in public with my skin problems. My ministry wasn't going near the

way I thought it would be going by that time in my life, I cried a lot and was filled with anxiety and emptiness. I didn't want to get out of bed and I didn't want to leave the house. I felt like I was failing in every way and at every level of my life. I questioned my salvation, I questioned everything. I literally thought my life was over.

I even sat Amy down one night, and with complete seriousness, I told her to find another husband. The kids need a better father, a better future, and she deserved a better husband. I told her the kids deserved a father who wasn't so diseased and such a pathetic man. "My ministry is over, my best days are behind, you should take the kids and move on."

It was the dark night of soul, I was at the end of my rope, I was broken, fallen, and giving up.

There is more to this story that you will read in upcoming chapters, but what I have shared with you thus far, I share with you for two reasons.

The first, because adversity happens. It's a part of my life and surely your life. No one is exempt. Behind your eyes is a story that if you told it, would break the listener's heart.

Second, I want you to see something now. I want you to know the miracle that after all I have shared with you and much that I have spared you, I am still here and I am still standing!

"My ministry is over, my best days are behind, you should take the kids and move on."

The fact that I am writing to you and sharing these words is a miracle.

Amy and I are still standing and my present and my future are brighter than ever, thanks to God's grace and favor. God is on the throne, I am rockin skinny jeans, and last time I checked I am a pastor blessed with a great ministry! By the grace of God, I am a stronger, better, wiser, more skilled, and a more experienced husband, father, and pastor than I have ever been.

Listen to these words from the Bible...

Ephesians 6:10-17 10 Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. 11 Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. 12 For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. 13 Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. 14 Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, 15 and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. 16 In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. 17 Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

Notice how many times it says "to stand." In standing you defy the gravity of adversity. It's time to take your stand!

To that end, this is a book about learning to stand right in the midst of adversity. When everything around us and in us wants us to lay down and give up, this is a book about how to stand up on the inside and rise above!

In the chapters ahead I am going to talk about some biblical principals that have been critical for me and countless others in learning to defy the gravity of adversity.

Make a covenant with God in regards to this book. Promise yourself and God that you are going to open your heart and mind to the chapters ahead and learn from God how to stand... how to rise above and defy the gravity of adversity!

Purpose in Pain

“God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: It is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world”. C.S. Lewis

The first step, for me, in rising above adversity was to get to a place of faith where I understood and truly believed that there is purpose in pain.

For some of us, the core reason why we aren't rising above like we could is because we don't understand pain correctly.

Pain hurts, and so our temptation is to believe that pain is something we should always avoid. We conclude that pain automatically takes us away from what is best for us and gets in the way of life. We resolve that it's always going to be set back, it's always something we need to avoid at all cost, it's a dream breaker and life taker.

However, the truth of the matter is God sees pain differently, and if we are going to learn to rise above adversity, we too need to learn by faith to see pain differently.

One of the things we need to see about pain is that God doesn't cause pain for the sake of pain. He's not into that. He doesn't take delight in people's suffering. He doesn't get His kicks that way, that's not the kind of God we have. Yet at the same time, the Bible is clear, when it comes to understanding pain, at times, God allows pain and God leverages pain in our life. Furthermore, some of the work God needs to do in our lives can be painful, there is no other way around it.

As a matter of fact, maybe a simple way to think of it is that God never wastes pain in our lives. God is always trying to take pain and either use it for our good, or leverage it for our

good. That's His agenda. Now does that mean if your life has pain that God always puts it there? No. Sometimes we put it there. But often, God allows pain in our lives. And sometimes the work that God is doing in our lives is painful. But in the end, no matter how you slice it, from God's perspective, there is always purpose to pain. God is trying to do something good with it. For God, pain is not purposeless.

Often times, the good thing, the better thing, and the best thing that God wants to do in and through us can't be accomplished without either the use, the leveraging, or the presence of pain.

So, the very thing we want to quickly medicate, the very thing we want to avoid, the very thing we want to hide from, the very thing that we want God to make instantly go away, can in fact turn out to be one of the most important ingredients that God is trying to use to work out the best for us in our life.

Understanding and believing that reality is so very critical. It changes everything. And I am convinced from my own experience that you can't rise above adversity without this kind of understanding.

Here are some passages in the Bible that help us get our heads around that truth....

Psalm 119:71 My suffering was good for me, for it taught me to pay attention to your decrees. (NLT)

Genesis 50:20 You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.

Romans 5:3-5 Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does

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not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

1 Peter 1:6- So be truly glad. There is wonderful joy ahead, even though you have to endure many trials for a little while. 7 These trials will show that your faith is genuine. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold—though your faith is far more precious than mere gold. So when your faith remains strong through many trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world. (NLT)

2 Corinthians 12:9-10 But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

1 Peter 4:12-13, 19 Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed... So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.

What do all these passages have in common? First, they show us that God has a purpose in pain. At times God allows it, God leverages it, but all for a purpose. Next, the purpose is always for our good and His glory. God is always going in a positive direction with pain, and sometimes it's absolutely necessary. Third, we need to learn how to go through pain properly. God is trying to coach us in some of these passages. We need to apply

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God's wisdom about pain and get our heads around it correctly, or we might miss the blessing and the great thing that God can accomplish right within the midst of our pain.

Part of learning to rise above adversity is learning to suffer well. We are all going to suffer, we are going to have pain and times of trouble. Remember, adversity happens. The Bible teaches that, Jesus taught that. In this world you will have troubles.

What we have to come to understand if we are going to overcome the world is that God has a purpose in the pain that we experience, and it's not for you and I to just run from it, hide from it, get bitter about it, or give up on our life.

Rather, if I want to rise above, we have to get our head around this pain and adversity thing correctly, and learn how to suffer well so that God can accomplish the better thing, the greater things He wants and often needs to accomplish to get us further into who we need to be and what we need to be doing. God's trying to go somewhere with the pain and adversity and we need to learn how to get on board with that.

In a sense, we need to learn be a good patient for God. God is in the business of healing, restoring, and redeeming our lives, making us more into who we should be and doing what we should be doing, but sometimes that process is painful. Sometimes God has to allow some pain in order to get some things to happen for our own good and for our own growth.

Everyone wants to rise above, but no many are willing to go through the pain to get there. Everybody wants a resurrected life, but not many want to take up their cross. We all want the

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best life, but we don't want there to be any cost to it. God wants to teach us that it just doesn't work that way. You don't rise above without first being brought low, there is no mountain top without a valley.

You don't rise above without first being brought low, there is no mountain top without a valley.

That's why as Christians, we don't make very good patients for God.

Some of us won't even schedule an appointment with Him. Others of us refuse to take the medicine He prescribes. Many refuse to let Him do the spiritual surgery that needs to be done in our lives. In the end, won't go through God's rehab program. Why? For the same reason why we don't go to a regular doctor, it's painful, and we don't like pain. Partly because we don't understand it and we don't see how precious and necessary pain can actually be for God's use in the betterment, healing,

and the transforming of our lives.

In short, we don't know how to suffer well.

For example, God wants to leverage pain in our lives. In times when we are down and life gets hard, and our emotions are heavy. He wants to leverage those times and seasons to draw us into His presence, because that's what we really need to rise above. But what do we do? We automatically pop a pill because life gets hard. We don't understand there is purpose in pain, we don't know how to suffer well, so we rush to the pills instead of His presence. Instead of to the throne we rush to the therapist for a prescription, and then we wonder why we aren't rising above.

Why do things get more numb, but not more better? The reason is because a lot of times, when it comes to the hardships of life, pills don't solve problems, but seeking God's presence does.

Part of what I didn't tell you in chapter one was that when I went through that deep dark depression where I wasn't getting out of bed, didn't want going out of the house, had anxiety all over the place, and told Amy to leave me and find another husband and father for our children, the Dr. I visited had as his first impulse to put me on anti-depressants. But Amy and I just felt from the Lord, "no way."

Even as bad as things were, I had this sense that God was trying to do something in all of it; in my heart and in my life. And me popping a pill was going to get in the way of what God is trying to do.

I stand here today, and can you believe it? In America in 2011, somebody made it through severe hardships in life without a pill. I firmly believe if I had taken anti-depressants I wouldn't have near the relationship I have now with the Lord. I had to learn to lean on Him, not a pill. I had to learn to stand in the midst of pain, without a pill, and praise God nonetheless.

Now hear me clearly, is there a time when a person may need to take a pill? Sure. Absolutely, that's a possibility. Depression is real and so is mental illness.

But we live in a culture where a lot of people are taking pills God never prescribed. Those pills aren't helping what God wants to do, they are preventing what God is trying to do. They are numbing the problem not healing the problem. God is trying to get you into a seeking-the-presence-and-power-of-Jesus-program, not a pill program. Why? Because that's what you need to rise above!

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I realize probably some who aren't liking what I am saying, so while I am on your toes, let me just push a little bit harder! I can't tell you how frustrating it can be hearing Christians say things like, "My day has been so tough, I am so stressed out, I just need to get a pill." "I am just going through a tough time right now, I just need to get a pill".

I am not making light of problems, you have read my own story. But are you kidding me? You are telling me your faith is no deeper, your sense of how God works in your life is no wiser than thinking a pill is automatically the best remedy. That's the best play you got in your playbook, that's the best way for dealing with life and adversity?

The very God who promises He will give you beauty for ashes, a garment of praise in your time of sorrow, a double blessing for all your trouble is being automatically bypassed for a pill?

Maybe what we actually need is to have go through some pain; un-medicated pain. Maybe, even a full season of pain. Maybe what we need is to actually experience some hurt, to feel sad, to feel depressed, to get some un-medicated desperation in our life. Then, in the midst of that, we can learn how to depend and draw close to Jesus and receive His comfort. We can learn to tap into the peace that passes all understanding, not a pill. We can learn to get real healing to the pain in our life, not just intoxicate it and hope it magically goes away. We need to learn to stand on our faith, to stand on our relationship with Him. We need to learn put Him under our feet instead of some pill.

God wants to leverage pain.

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Sometimes God wants to use the pain of mistakes, setbacks and shortcoming. For what purpose? To leverage it so we will come clean and deal with the real issues in our life. Yes, a kind of wake up call. But what do we do? We move into denial and put on our happy faces. We try to pretend there is no pain to deal with. "Don't let the 20 marriages I have had throw you off, I don't have any issues, really I don't" "I can handle the pain myself." "I'm a man."

Our brilliant response to pain is to build walls and hide behind them while we pretend that it never happened. And then we wonder why we never rise above. God wants to use the pain so we'll be willing to get the spiritual surgery that needs to be accomplished in our heart for true healing. God wants us to become fortified in Him, not through a bunch a walls we build around our souls. Running and hiding from things while trying to paint a picture that we got it all under control isn't rising above, it's going underground.

Nothing gets healed that stays behind a wall, you can't rise above what you are running away from.

Nothing gets healed that stays behind a wall, you can't rise above what you are running away from, and you can't rise above what you are denying. We have to learn to suffer well.

Sometimes, God wants to leverage pain to get us to want to learn His wisdom, to choose His path for our life, and to make better choices. He wants to develop our character and motivate us to right our wrongs. But what do we do instead? We get bitter at God and rebel. "Well God, I have some pain in my life, that must mean you don't care, you aren't

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a loving God, and you have given up on me. I shouldn't have trusted you anyway."

No, it may just mean God wants you to wise up, learn from your mistakes, and make better choices.

Sometimes, God wants to leverage pain in our life so that we learn to trust Him and wait on Him. God wants to teach us how to be happy with Him, not with things, circumstances, nor getting what we want when we want it. God has a desire for us to learn how to be satisfied in Him, and Him alone. What do we do instead? We try to cover our pain with worldly pleasures, rush ahead of God, and replace God with all kinds of other satisfactions.

Yet, behind the pain in our life, God is trying to do something that probably needs to happen in us so we can rise above.

In chapter one, I shared a good portion the pain that I have endured over my life thus far.

I am here to tell you, by faith, I know that though God could have certainly taken me out of all of those things, He did not take me out of all those things for a reason. I know by faith, that He was with me and was leveraging every moment for my ultimate good and for His glory.

I don't know if I can give this to you in the right words. But, I wouldn't wish the adversity of my past on anybody; the sexual abuse, the near death experiences. Yet, I wouldn't trade my abuse, nearly dying, and going through times of severe adversity in ministry for anything. Why? Because it's part of how God made me who I am today. I am a better person than I would have been had it not happened. I am saved, I know God more, I am stronger, I understand people's pain, I am a better

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person and I can accomplish far more in my life for God than I ever could have if He had removed it or minimized it. In fact, I would have never become a pastor had God removed the pain.

If you take the pain out of my life, you take me out of my life.

As I write these words today, you are looking at the evidence that God has purpose in pain, and the purpose is to bring you further, closer, deeper into Him. He desires to make you stronger and better. He longs to give you a story to tell and a ministry to accomplish that shows the world that God is alive and all things are possible through Jesus Christ.

You may not see it now, but by faith, some of God's best plans are worked through the worst experiences. God sees in pain a better future that we can't attain, and a better person you cannot become without it.

I believe God puts a seed of greatness in everyone, and pain is one of the things God uses, and sometimes is necessary to move us into greatness in Him.

I don't know if you have ever thought about it this way, but God takes a good bit of risk when He allows pain in your life. He knows we could rebel, we could give up, or we could walk away. We could deny Him and curse him. It's the risk He took with Job and He is taking with you right now in your adversity. God knows, instead of rising above you could choose to sink below. But the risk of our rebellion, in God's economy for your life, is worth the incredible work that God can carry out in us through the pain that happens in our life. The prize of what you can become and do is worth the pain God risks you experiencing to get you there. That's how much purpose there is in pain. God is willing to risk so much, because there is so much purpose and potential behind it.

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The worst thing you can do is to waste pain.

We need to make it our confession, “God is trying to go somewhere great with this pain in my life, and I need to make sure I am on board. I need to make the most out of my pain, because God can use pain to make the most and bring out His best in me.”

Pain is where champions are formed, pain is where we rise above.

We need to make it our confession, “I’m not going to fight God, I’m not going to get in the way or run from it. I’m going to let God do His work that only He can do, and if in the process there is some pain in that, that’s o.k.. It is well with my soul. God do your work through me and in me, whatever pain it takes. If you want me to go through the fire, I will if you want me to.”

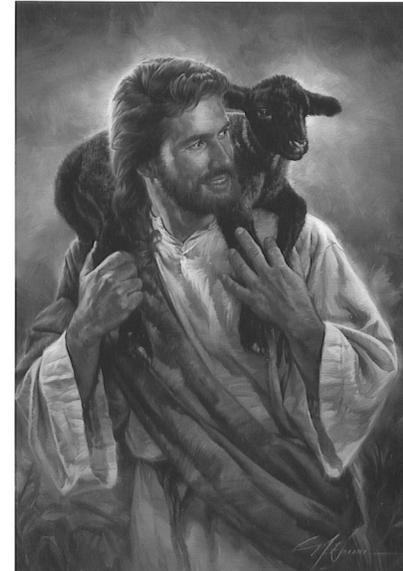
This is how Jesus understood pain. If anybody knows pain, it’s Jesus. Jesus always saw the purpose in pain.

Hebrews 12:2 Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Jesus looked at the cross and said, “I am not going to run from it, I am not going to pop a pill, I am not going to get down too quickly. I am going to walk through it, I am going to endure as long as it is going to take, because God is doing something great.”

Chances are you are familiar with this picture, but do you know the real story behind it?

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When there was a sheep that refused to follow because it runs off or won't stay with the herd, if things get bad enough, the shepherd would break a leg of the sheep so that it has to be carried. Being carried, the sheep would learn to be close to, develop intimacy with, and depend on the shepherd in such a way that when the legs healed, it never would want to run off again.

Sometimes it feels like the work God is doing in us is breaking us. It's painful, but God is always at work, for our good and for His glory.

Don't be fooled, pain is not your enemy, not discovering and living God's purpose in it is the enemy.

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Ginny Owens is a blind, Christian singer and songwriter who has endured tremendous adversity. Yet, she found God's purpose to her pain and turned her misery into a ministry. The lyrics to her song "If You Want Me To" are powerful and poignant.

*The pathway is broken and the signs are unclear
And I don't know the reason why You brought me here
But just because You love me the way that You do
I'm gonna walk through the valley if You want me to*

*Cause I'm not who I was when I took my first step
And I'm clinging to the promise You're not through with me yet
so if all of these trials bring me closer to you then I will walk
through the fire If You want me to.*

*It may not be the way I would have chosen
When you lead me through a world that's not my home
But You never said it would be easy You only said I'd never go
alone*

*So when the whole world turns against me and I'm all by myself
And I can't hear You answer my cries for help
I'll remember the suffering Your love put You through
And I will go through the valley If You want me to.*

-Ginny Owens

Rise Above

Surrender

So, how do you move from pain to purpose, from tragedy to triumph, from the valley to the mountaintop?

Once I had the conviction that there is purpose in pain, the biggest turning point to setting my life on a path to rising above could all be boiled down to one word...

Surrender.

Every person in the Bible who rose above their adversity, had critical moments of surrender to God that made all the difference in the world.

For them and for me, learning to surrender was the difference between moving forward or moving backward. It was the crossroads to either getting to the mountaintop or staying in the valley, either rising above or sinking below. It's the key to moving from great suffering to greatness, from pain to promotion, from tragedy to triumph, and from misery to ministry.

Surrender is a flat out game changer.

There may be nothing more important to rising above adversity than learning to surrender.

However, learning to surrender isn't an easy thing by any stretch of the imagination. It opposes our instincts and most everything in our flesh. It pushes up against the backbone of our pride and human nature.

In war, sports, and so many areas within life, surrender is an act of defeat. It's humiliating, and it's the last thing you want to do.

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That's why we have to deconstruct our instincts and our education and learn that in our walk with God it's different. In our relationship with God, surrender is an act of victory, and most of all, it's probably the most important step to rising above adversity in our life.

Learning to lay it all down, to put all your cards on the table, and to take both hands off the wheel can be the turning point in the story of what adversity has done, is doing, or is going to do in your life.

So much of us actually rising above the adversity in our life hinges on not just talking about it, not just praying about it, but actually learning how to surrender. That why Jesus said things like this...

Matthew 10:39 Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.

James 4:6b "God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble."

The world tells us "When the going gets tough, surrender is the last thing you want to do." But God teaches us it's in fact the first thing you want to do.

Take it from the people in the Bible, you aren't going rise any higher above the adversity in your life than you are willing to learn to surrender to God.

The first critical moment of surrender for me came in January of 1995, it was the second half of my fourth and final year of Seminary. Up until that point I been through a lot, years and years of sexual abuse, very serious asthma to the point of

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nearly dying, skin problems, family problems, my best friend being struck by lightning, and having a child die in my arms. You name it, it seemed like it happened. Truth be told, by that point in 1995, I wasn't doing well.

I had become an egotistical, sexual promiscuous, pornographic, insecure, unsaved (in seminary mind you), beer drinking to get drunk, cussing, dirty joke telling guy who somehow thought he was called into the ministry. And by the fourth year of seminary, sadly, not a whole lot had changed in my life. Rather, it had actually become worse.

During the first half of that last year of seminary, I hit a wall. My days were filled with severe anxiety attacks, I literally thought I was going crazy. I was questioning my sanity, and there was a tangible darkness over my life. I was waking up in cold sweats with a spiritual battle going on inside of me that I had never experienced in my life.

And though I didn't know it then, God was actually driving it. Yes, God was pressing me. He was turning the heat up. He was backing me into a corner, getting under my grill, and pushing every button. It was an experience that lasted months and months, until the moment of all moments came...

One afternoon in January of 1995, I was walking down one of the streets on campus, my wife to be, Amy Elizabeth Shuler had shared the Gospel with me in past conversations. She told me that Jesus was real and I needed to invite Him into my heart. Religion wasn't enough, I needed to surrender my heart, and it needed to be personal. She emphasized I had a decision to make, that God was looking for a response from me. As I was walking down a street connecting the Seminary campus while going through all that I was going through, it just hit me. I looked up to the blue sky, and said, "God come into my heart, save

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me, I surrender." Right then and there, I surrendered my heart to Jesus.

God didn't want me to be an unsaved, religious, worldly pastor with just a bunch of knowledge in my head and traditions to follow. No, he had something else in mind. He had bigger plans. He wanted to set me on a path to rise above. God wanted me to become a real-deal-pastor, with Jesus in my heart and the Holy Spirit my guide. Jesus had plans for me I didn't even have a clue about.

However, in that critical moment, had I not surrendered, none of the future God had in mind to give me would have ever taken place. I wouldn't be the person I am today, I wouldn't be married to Amy, I wouldn't have the life I live had I not said, "Jesus, I bow down, I surrender!"

That one pivotal moment of surrender, was THE game changer.

However, adversity doesn't end once you surrender your heart and begin a relationship with Jesus. For me, it certainly wasn't the end, in some ways, it was just the beginning.

The next 15 years was filled with a lot of ministry joy and success, but also incredible adversity. From going through a church split, to my own church plant dying beyond my control to save. From having my life threatened by a church member to staff members embezzling money. From a church seriously lying about their history and condition in order to get me to be their pastor, to people trying to destroy me and my reputation. From people breaking into my office to pushing their way into my home while trying to find ways to get rid of me. And that's just the trailer to the movie of the adversity of my ministry.

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And if that isn't enough, then just fast forward to 8 years ago.

The serious skin problems I had as a child came back a hundred times worse. It was a kind of living hell. From all the steroids used to treat my skin, I developed serious glaucoma in my right eye, losing 50% of my vision. Just five years ago, everything was falling a part and coming to one big climax of adversity.

I was a grenade of hurt, brokenness, frustration, discouragement and depression waiting to go off.

I had built a pretty strong case against God. I mean, "Come on God, I surrender my heart 17 years ago, I have sacrificed so much for you, and all I have is a bunch of adversity to show for it." "All these other pastors have all kinds of great ministries, you are blessing them, what about me?" "My unchurched, heathen, God hating friends' lives are looking better than mine. I have taken pay cut after pay cut to do your work, to stay the course, I have been beaten up, emotionally flogged, betrayed, lied to, used, abused. What kind of justice is this Lord?"

I literally felt like Jeremiah in the Bible. All Jeremiah had done was to be faithful to God. Chapter after chapter he dotted every "i" and crossed every "t." What did he get for it? It resulted in a bunch of gut wrenching adversity in his life. Finally, it got so bad that Jeremiah blew his top.

Jeremiah 20:7-8 You deceived me, Lord, and I was deceived; you overpowered me and prevailed. I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me. Whenever I speak, I cry out proclaiming violence and destruction. So the word of the Lord has brought me insult and reproach all day long.

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Jeremiah was like, "God, you seduced me, you hung me out to dry. I thought if I was faithful, if I did what you asked, it would go well. This is awful. This isn't what I signed up for, what kind of God are you?"

That is exactly how I felt, and I had my case against God ready for trial of all the ways He treated me unfairly.

In addition, I had built a case against all the people in my past who had hurt me. My sister who had abused me, the kids on the playground growing up that had made fun of me, the people in ministry who broke my heart, betrayed my trust, and beat the tar out of me. I had my list and I was checking twice, to see all the people who were naughty, and never nice.

Additionally, I had built a case against myself. All the time I wasted before coming to the Lord. All the stupid mistakes I have made along the way. I should have done this, should have done that. Why did we ever move to N.C.? Why didn't I get to the doctor sooner? And the list went on and on.

And to top off my case against God, other people, and myself...I had hopes and dreams.

I knew God had put a dream into my heart that one day he would use me to build and lead a large, vibrant contemporary church for His glory and purposes. But after years and years, that dream still wasn't near coming true. In fact, the fruition of that dream was nowhere in sight.

"What kind of God are you? You give me a dream and a passion, just to keep it from happening? You just dangle it out there and front of me, what kind of God are you? You trying to be like Lucie with the Charlie brown and the football? You want

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to see me run and try to kick it only to pull it out so I fall on my face while you get to laugh at me? Is that what kind of sick God you are? Are you just taunting me with this dream, is this some kind of twisted game you are playing with me?"

I had hopes and dreams of being the husband of my wife's desires, the father my children would call their hero, and all of that seemed like it was becoming a nightmare right in front of me. How can you be the husband of your wife's dreams when you are covered with rashes, you can't even go outside, or put on shorts and a short sleeve shirt? How can you be the hero of your children when you might go blind? How can you pastor a ministry when it seems like everything you touch just doesn't seem to work out and you have more fear than faith?

And then there was all the baggage that I had built up. Truth be told, it's hard to even look back at this. My sense of God's love was so fractured. I could preach to you all about God's love. I could tell you that God is a loving and gracious God. But deep down, I didn't believe it. Not in my core. No, I believed that God's love was more like my father who rejected me. I concluded there was always a bit of condition to God's love, and you just couldn't trust it to be there when you needed it most. I believed in my heart that you just don't ever know who you were going to get, angry God or loving God.

Because I didn't know God's true love, I couldn't trust Him, and because I couldn't trust Him, my heart was ruled by baggage loads of worry and fear. All the pain of the past, all the wounds from battle all hurt just as much as they ever did, if not worse.

With my case against God, with my case against all the people who wronged me, with the case against myself, with all my broken dreams that seemed like they were as good as dead, with my hopes of being the husband of my wife's desires and the

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heroic father of my children seeming to crumble right in front of me, one evening I sat Amy down on the side of our bed.

I looked in her the eyes, as serious as serious can be, and told her, "You need to move on, find another husband, another father, my ministry is over, my life is over, I'm done."

I started crying, she started crying, and I'll never forget what happened next. We had been sitting on the side of the bed. I got down on my knees, and I cried out to God, "I surrender" "God I can't do this, I need you God, I am nothing, I am so broken. God I am begging you, God please, please help me."

Right then, as I was praying with my eyes closed, I had a vision of myself running to Jesus and jumping completely, feet off the ground, into His arms. It was as real as real can be. I felt and saw Jesus hold onto me. He wouldn't let me go. I punched His chest, I cried out, I yelled at him, and he just held me. He just held me, he just held me.

My dad would have never done that, but I found out my heavenly Father always wanted to.

Right then and there, I surrendered. I surrendered my case against God, my case against all the people who wronged me, and my case against myself. I surrendered.

I told God in those moments, "I don't need to be a pastor, I don't need ministry, I don't need my eyes, I don't need to be healed of eczema, I don't need to be my wife's dream husband, I don't need to be my children's hero, I just need You. All my anger, all my bitterness, all my hurt, all my resentment, all my disappointment, all my regrets, I lay it all down."

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“God, I surrender it all, my hopes my dreams.” “If I never pastor a church, if I lose all my vision, if my skin never gets better, if I can’t be the husband and the father I want to be, just knowing You, just being in Your arms, just being in Your presence, it’s enough for me.” “That’s all I want. God forgive me, create in me a clean heart. I bow down, all my cards are on the table.”

In those moments, for the first time in my life, I experienced pure love and the “peace that passes all understanding.” God rescued me.

All the amazing things that happened following that evening that I will share with you over the course of this book, I promise you, would not have happened with out my surrender.

It was the same for Job in the Bible. Over the previous 41 chapters leading up to chapter 42 in the book of Job, Job had gone through tremendous adversity. He essentially lost everything. He too had a case against God. He had shattered hopes and dreams, bitterness, and resentment. But finally in chapter 42, something critical happens...

Job 42: 3b-6 Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. 4 “You said, ‘Listen now, and I will speak; I will question you, and you shall answer me.’ 5 My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. 6 Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.”

Job essentially says, “God I don’t understand it all, it doesn’t make sense to me, I don’t even completely understand where you are going with this, but I surrender. All the hurt, all the questions, all the bitterness. You are God and I am not. Have your way. I trust you, have your way.”

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And only because Job surrenders in verse 6 are we able to read in verse 12...

Job 42:12 The Lord blessed the latter part of Job’s life more than the former part.

Job rose above, only because he learned to first to bow down and surrender.

What needs surrendering in your life? Where are you not rising above because you aren’t willing to surrender?

Is it your heart? Is it your case against God? Is it your case against other people or against yourself? Is it with your hopes and dreams? Is it all your baggage; your worries, fears, hurts, anger, or disappointments?

All along God wanted me to rise above. But God knew He had to press me to the point where I learned to bow down, kneel down, and surrender it all before I could rise above anything.

Before you can learn to stand, you must learn how to bow down.

One word... surrender.

Psalm 23:4-5a Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

In this passage, David, the writer of this Psalm, is in the midst of a valley of walking through adversity. It's the darkest of the darkest valley. Yet David discovers that God, right in the midst of this adversity, prepares a kind of table for him. What's the table? It represents God's presence; His care, His healing, and His protection. David discovers that God set it up right within the valley where everything was spinning out of control and crashing around him.

In the same way, God presents and extends this invitation to you and I. When in the valley of adversity, we can either focus on the enemy and all the things going wrong while going into a tailspin of anxiety because all the ways that our life is crumbling around us. Or, we can sit down at the table, take up God's invitation, and come into the presence of God.

The table is there, God is present for you. In fact, He is present with you in the midst of anything you are going through. However, you and I have to learn to come into that presence, to sit down at the table. God's not going to force it on you. No, we have to actually come and sit down. It's then and there that we learn to hear His voice, to be still, and to listen. It's at the table that we learn to be quiet, to wait, and to rest in God. The table is prepared and available to us, but we have to learn to sit down at it and eat.

It's interesting that at the last supper, Jesus invited the disciples to sit down at a table and refers to Himself as the true meal.

So it's not surprising that in Psalm 23, we even get the sense that the biggest purpose of the valley is so that God can get us to come to the table of His presence. Is this where God has been going with this adversity thing all along? Is it all about the table; learning to come into His presence? I strongly think so.

If you look at this Psalm, it's almost like God gets David into the valley and then pushes the pause button on the whole scene and says, "O.k., David, I got you here, now let me show you the real reason why I have you here." "See this table, I want you come sit at it."

I don't know if you are like me or not, but if I were David, I would be like "Wait a second God, you are telling me to sit down when everything is falling a part?" "Don't you see what I am going through, didn't you get the doctor's report? Don't you see what that person has done to me, don't you see how many years I have wasted?" "Have you missed seeing the tears in my eyes, the sleepless nights, don't you see how broken down I am, and you are telling me sit down?" "Don't you see that enemy over there and over there, and over there?" "Sit down? No sir!"

God's reply, "Yah, that's exactly what I am asking you to do!" "I have prepared this table for you of My presence, My care, My healing, My protection, and My power. I want you to come sit down". "That's right, I want you to ignore the storm and come be with Me."

At first glance, it seems crazy, right? But if you really look at what God is doing with David, His wisdom is perfect. As it turns out, the truth is, the best time to teach someone how to come into the presence of God sometimes is when life is at its worst. For some reason, when the heat is turned up, we may be finally open to it and actually take God up on His invitation.

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Isn't that why Jesus had the whole storm thing happen with the disciples on the boat? You remember the story. They are crossing the sea of Galilee and a storm comes out of nowhere. Jesus is with them on the boat, but they freak out in fear anyway.

At the end of it all, Jesus calms the storm, but then He is like, "Hey guys, what's up with panic attack back there? Where is your faith? I was with you the whole time, but obviously you weren't with Me." "As far as you were concerned, I was as good as asleep to you." "The table of my presence was there, but you weren't sitting with me" "You were looking at the storm and acting like a bunch of pansy school girls."

I suspect Jesus actually chose this heavily charged moment of adversity to teach them on how to come into His presence. Why? Because when everything is smooth sailing, there won't be an urgency within us to draw close to God. There is something about adversity that makes it the perfect classroom for some in learning how to truly come into God's presence.

But God's wisdom with this whole "valley" thing gets even better. God understands our human nature. God understands that being in the presence of God is likely not going to become important to us when we are on the mountaintop. Who needs God's presence when you are on top of the world? So, if there is a place where we have any chance of learning to cherish the presence of God in the good and in the bad, it's probably going to be in the valley.

The temptation on the mountain top is to conclude, "I don't need God nor do I need closeness with God." I don't need His power or presence. I don't need to listen to God closely. "Look at me, I'm on top of the world."

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It's often when everything is bad that you truly can taste and see that the Lord is good. It's within these moments that we have the best chance of becoming addicted to that taste in our mouth of the very presence of Jesus in our life.

God knows, it's out of His presence that you and I are given the power to rise above. No presence, no power. If we don't learn to come into God's presence, we will miss the power needed to rise above. That's what's at stake.

As I have mentioned earlier, 4 or 5 years ago was a time when I was at the end of my rope. I was so depressed and discouraged, my life seemed to be crumbling all around me. It was so bad that I sat my wife down at the edge of our bed in our home at the time in Lexington, NC. I told her to find a better husband and father for the kids. Amy was so upset, she left the room. Soon after, there came a moment where I found myself kneeling down at the edge of the bed. It was there that I surrendered everything to God.

From that day forward into next several months, God showed me that right within that kind of hell I was going through, He had prepared a table for me of His presence, care, and provision. However, He had to teach me, and I needed to learn, how to come into that presence.

There was a time when Jesus went through a kind of valley early on in His ministry. The Bible says He went through a period of testing in the wilderness for forty days and forty nights. During that time of testing, there was something important that happened for Him...

Matthew 4:11 Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

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I don't know if you believe in angels, but I do. I'll never forget, shortly after that night of surrender, I sought out my close friend Annette, who I knew from a church in Tampa. She had been on staff there as a Christian counselor and headed up their small group ministry. Previously, I had arranged to talk to her by phone for counseling every Friday as I was in North Carolina and she in Florida.

One such Friday, I was driving on I-85 headed to Salisbury, N.C. It was raining outside as I was talking to Annette. What I am about to tell you, no kidding, actually really happened. She was talking to me on the phone. But then there was a moment where she was talking, but it was like she stopped talking, and God started talking to me directly. It was a kind of heavenly voice on the phone, like an angel. I know, it sounds beyond belief, but it's true.

God, through an angel, started speaking to me with words of love, encouragement and healing. Words like, "Everything is going to be ok., God has an amazing future ahead of you" "God is opening up doors you won't believe, just learn to be in His presence, learn to trust Him, and let Him heal you." I got off the phone and I knew I had heard, maybe for the first time in my life, the voice of God speaking directly and personally to me.

Right in the midst of the lowest time in my life, God prepared a table for me, but He had to show me how to sit down and come into His presence. Furthermore, He had to teach me that my best battle strategy is not to focus on and engage the enemy, but to focus on and engage Him and His presence. Our battles are not best fought in the flesh, but at the altar of God presence through prayer.

To help me learn those valuable lessons, during that same time, God showed me how to be still. When everything around me

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seemed out of control, God desired to show how to be calm in His presence.

Psalm 46:1-3,10 God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging. He says, "Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth."

God desired to show me how to listen, how to truly hear God's voice. Up until that point, I had a lot to say to God, but I wasn't a good listener for sure.

God orchestrated what I believe was an angel to speak to me personally with comfort and encouragement. He had other pastors speak prophetically over my life, telling me things about what I had gone through that they could not have known other than through God showing it to them. They spoke over my life with words of insight, words of encouragement, and words about my future.

If you and I will simply listen, it is amazing what God will tell you and how He will speak to your personally. God is speaking all the time, but sometimes we just aren't dialed in.

Additionally, I had to learn how to open my Bible, and not just study it for information or memory verses, but to hear God speak to me through it so that I would personally encounter Him. That's His deepest desire and joy. God's Words was always meant for the ultimate purpose of leading us into an encounter with Him.

I needed to be willing to stop asking God for things, and start to really listen and open myself up to whatever God wanted to say.

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Learning how to get quiet with God was also important. I had to learn how to create solitude in my life and turn down the volume of my mind. Only then could I be in tune with God's work and movement in my life. I had to learn how to listen to my Spirit over the emotions going on inside of me.

Finally, I had to learn to rest in God. I had to learn to depend on Him in everything so that I could truly cast all my cares on Him as I invited Him into every emotion, decision, plan, and concern. I had to learn how to lean on him, and not my own understanding, trusting in His timing and learning the art of waiting.

If you put this all together, I had to learn how to sit at the table of God's presence; let Him heal me, comfort me, and learn how to listen to Him and hear His voice. What I discovered was the more I sat, the more God healed, comforted, encouraged, empowered me, and lifted me up.

Now in all of this, I have surely not mastered any of this! Yet, I am further along now than I ever have been before. To God be the glory!

See, because if you are like me, you don't like sitting, especially when it seems like your life is falling apart. No, those are the moments where we want to grab the steering wheel out of God's hands, put the pedal to the medal and get out of the situation as fast as we can.

However, in God's perspective, there is something you and I need right within the valley of adversity that you can only get by coming and sitting down at table... and that is, His presence.

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I will never trade what I found and what I have gained in coming into the presence of God for anything. It's the most important and treasured thing in my life. God gave me something in the darkest valley that gave me the power to rise above. He gave me something in the valley that was more precious than any other, and that's the table of His presence.

That's why Jesus essentially said to Martha in the Bible, "Martha, you are so busy making sandwiches that I never ordered. Mary has chosen the better thing; to be at my feet and sit at the table." "Martha, sitting at the table is much better than spending your life setting the table."

So how do you do that?

Many of the things I mentioned in this chapter are vital principals for coming into the presence of God. Furthermore, being intentional about seeking the presence of God and making that a priority in your life will be critical.

Yet, here is something specific you can do that will give you powerful results. What I am about to teach you is a cherished part of my devotional life as I seek to come into God's presence.

Step One: Purchase a journal book and a Bible

Step Two: With your Bible in hand and your eyes closed, pray to God, "As I come into your presence Lord, please lead me to places in your Word that will speak your heart to me. In Jesus' name, Amen."

Step Three: With you eyes closed, let God move your hands and fingers, opening up to a page in the Bible. With your eyes still closed, let God move your eyes and hands to the specific place(s) He wants you to read on the page you opened.

Step Four: Open your eyes and locate the place where your fingers and eyes landed as you sense what God wants you to read.

Step Five: Read and right down the verses in your journal (ex. John 1:3-13)

Step Six: Read and reread the passages and meditate on their meaning as you seek to hear God's Words for your life.

Step Seven: Write down what you sense the Lord is saying to you in the passages you read.

Step Eight: If you desire repeat steps 2-7.

I have journals full of where I have done this process on a daily basis and look forward to one day, giving all these journals to my son. What's so powerful is that these journals read like a book as you go back and review how God interacts and speaks specifically to you through the course your life. It's amazing to see the story line of God's direct and specific communication and presence in your life.

Yes, I know there are some who would say this may not be the best way to approach prayer or the Bible. To the extent that it's not the only way we should study, pray and seek to encounter God, I agree. But I humbly disagree that it can't be a valuable, powerful way. It has been for me.

God's Word is the revelation of His presence in written form. So much, that when we read the Bible in a church, we are to stand like we would if a human king entered the room. Indeed when you open the Bible, the King of King enters the scene. That being the case, we would have no problem going to a human counselor and asking, "What is God saying to me?" and listening to whatever came to his or her mind. Yet, the Bible is

said to be the Counsel of God. So, isn't it all the better to ask the King Himself through the counsel of His Word, "What do you want to say to me?" as you allow Him to guide and direct you in and through His Word?

When you open up the Word and let God speak to you, you can enter into His presence and the counsel of His Word, period.

Should you check what you are hearing from the Word of God with people who are wise in the ways of God? Sure, absolutely. Especially before making a major decision. Yet, we have no problem listening to preachers, going to conferences, and having a counseling session in the presence of another human being, and not even thinking twice about it.

Conferences, books, and sermons are great, but there is nothing that should ever replace our coming before the King and experiencing His Word spoken specifically into and for our lives through opening up His Word and encountering Him for ourselves. What I have shown you is one way to begin to do that.

FAQ:

What if I don't understand the passage being read?

Read the surrounding passages and study a good commentary on the passage in question. This may give you the understanding that you are missing.

It may be that God is showing you something that will make sense later on. That's why journaling is important. Don't get frustrated, rather ask God to make it clear to you in time.

What if what I sense God is saying is convicting?

Don't worry, God is not out to condemn you, but to heal and free you. Sometimes the truth is challenging for us to hear. Seek out a person who is wise in the ways of God and share what you are hearing from the Lord. If God is truly trying to get your attention on something in your life, He will give you the power to overcome it.

What if God leads me to a place that makes no sense?

Sometimes God is silent or seems to make no sense because He is trying to get us to learn something He has already taught us. There is no point in speaking further in our lives if we aren't willing to hear what He has already said. Spiritual growth isn't always about hearing something new from the Lord, but listening to what He has already said.

John 11:43 43 When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" 44 The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go."

Lazarus was facing the ultimate adversity, death. By the time Jesus gets onto the scene of this passage, Lazarus is dead and buried. It's the lowest of the lowest. It's the ultimate valley. But Jesus comes along and decides to raise him from the dead. He calls him out of death back into life, from the bottom of the valley to the top of the mountain, from tragedy to triumph. This is what Jesus is prepared to do as He stands outside of Lazarus' tomb.

But there are some details to how this happens that are critical for us to understand if we too are going to be raised above adversity by the power of Jesus. What I want you to see is so critical, and that is the reality that Lazarus wasn't truly alive until the burial bandages came off.

Jesus did His part, but Lazarus has to go through a kind of recovery process. It was a healing process, a bandage removal process, a process of moving from death to life, from being wrapped up and as good as dead, to being completely whole and free.

For Lazarus, there was a sense in which there was some climbing to do. Otherwise, he is just walking around like a mummy. And what good is that? Not much.

Yet, it's very possible that Lazarus could have said, "I have

kinda gotten comfortable in these burial bandages, so lets keep them on." "It's too hard taking them off. It's too painful" "It will take too much effort, let's just leave them on." As weird as it sounds, Lazarus could have just as easily said, "I have grown warm and comfortable in this valley, and getting out of this thing looks a little daunting to me right now. Leave me alone."

It's possible for you to go through adversity and never climb out of it. It's possible for adversity to become your home, and for the pit to become your palace. Not because God doesn't give you what you need, not because you can't walk it out, but rather because you won't. You won't get the counseling you need. You won't do the hard soul searching. You won't change what needs to be changed. You won't take off the old and put on the new. You won't change the people you hang around. You won't change your habits. You won't get help. You won't draw closer to God. You won't grow up.

See, death is easy. Believe it or not, the crucifixion was the easier part, it's the resurrection that is the greatest miracle. There is no miracle in death, anybody can die, and anybody can have adversity. It took Jesus a matter of hours to die, it took three days for Him to be resurrected. Anybody can bottom out, and anybody can fall into a valley. It takes nothing to get into adversity. One moment everything is hunky dory, the next moment you're right in the middle of adversity. However, it takes a lot of climbing to get out of it, it takes a lot of unwrapping to move from death to life, from the bottom to the top!

As I stated in the last chapter, God will set up the table of His presence right in the midst of your adversity and give you everything you need for the journey out of your valley. However,

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He's not going to walk it for you.

Right now, God is standing outside the tomb of your adversity saying, "It's time to come out. I will do all the things you can't do, but you are going to have to do what only you can do. You are going to have to walk it out. You are going to have to do some climbing. You are going to have to do some serious unraveling of the burial bandages in your life." "And all of that is going to take some serious effort on your part."

In the valley of adversity, we all are going to have to make a choice. Do we really want to get well? Do we really want to rise above? Do we really want to be a champion or a chump? Do we really want to be free? Do we really want to get better? Do we really want a better marriage, better finances, better health, become more spiritually mature, and to be whole and secure as a person?

Everybody wants to rise above, but not everybody wants to do the climbing required to get there.

I am reminded of an encounter Jesus had.

John 5:1-9 1 Some time later, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish festivals. 2 Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades. 3 Here a great number of disabled people used to lie—the blind, the lame, the paralyzed. 5 One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. 6 When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, "Do you want to get well?" 7 "Sir," the invalid replied, "I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me." 8 Then

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Jesus said to him, "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk." 9 At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked.

You can sense in this passage that Jesus picked up on some things that just weren't adding up. What's a guy doing there 38 years? Right next to a pool where people would get healing no less. He's so close yet so far away. Something isn't complete about this picture.

Did you know that when you are in the valley of adversity, you are closer to a new mountaintop than you have ever been before? However, you are also as far away as you are willing to climb.

Because of this same kind of tension, Jesus asks him the ultimate question, "Do you want to be healed, bro?" "Because it's not like the opportunity isn't right there in front of you."

I don't think Jesus was buying into this man's lame excuses that suggested "someone gets in front of me every time, I am such a victim." I can hear Jesus saying, "Enough already, stop expecting to be healed with out doing your part." In fact, notice in the story when the man was healed. It was only after he was willing to do his part and walk it out.

It's not unlikely that there are some reading this book that have been in the valley of adversity for years and years, maybe even as much as 38 years. Yet, God has given you everything you need to rise above it. The problem is, for whatever reason, you just haven't been willing to do the climbing. You expect God and everybody to do for you what only you can do for you. Just like the guy at the pool, you expect God to do what we aren't willing to do.

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Stop praying and asking God to work in ways that you aren't willing to work.

Stop sitting at the pool expecting a healthy marriage to fall out of the sky. You help you! Pick up your mat, you have some climbing to do.

Stop blaming everybody and everything else. Stop blaming the government, your parents, the economy, and all the people who seemingly don't care. It's not going to help.

Four years ago, I had to start climbing. I had to start unwrapping the bandages, as bruised, injured and weak as I was. With hurt and discouragement, and as mummified and terrified as I was, I had to start putting one foot in front of the other. I had to start unwrapping myself from all the adversity I had been through.

It was really hard, of course. Have you ever noticed, climbing is always up hill? At first, I didn't feel worthy. I thought to myself, "God, I don't deserve to get better, I don't deserve a better future, I don't even know if I can handle it."

Additionally, I didn't know where God was going with things. Was I still supposed to be a pastor or was I supposed to switch careers? What did God have in mind, and who am I going to become? How is this all going to work out? I was so lost with zero direction in my life.

But by the grace of God, I started walking. I started climbing, one foot in front of the other, one day at a time. Little by little, standing back up, getting back on my feet, one foot in front of the other.

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It was then that pastors, mentors and friends started helping me find my legs. I continued to get counseling with my friend Annette in ways that healed and guided me with each step.

I started forcing myself to get out of the house and to stop focusing on what I didn't have and start focusing on what I did. Was I scared? Absolutely, but sometime you just have to do it afraid. I was determined to stop feeling sorry for myself, and start making the most of what I had as I pressed forward.

I started listening to worship music again (there had been a time when I didn't even want to do that) and listening to messages online. I began studying about how to move forward and come through adversity. I sought to learn everything I could about what I needed to do and who I needed to become.

As hard as it was, I literally forced myself to start climbing, often not even knowing exactly where God was going. I was looking for signs, looking for doors, no matter how small.

Soon, with every small step I took, God began to do some miraculous things. First, I received an incredibly successful surgery on my eye diseased with glaucoma. God connected me with one of the best glaucoma surgeons in the country. He saved me from going blind in my right eye. Following the surgery, more and more the doctor assured me that my eyes would be fine for the rest of my life. God had it all under control.

My skin, slowly but surely, started miraculously getting better. Almost without any kind of real explanation to it.

With every step I took, God was supernaturally helping me to the next one. Taking off one bandage at a time.

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I don't know how to explain this to you, or put it perfectly into words. However, it was during this time, that God initiated me into becoming a true man of God in a way that was real and secure.

I went into the valley of adversity a boy, but was coming out of it with a sure sense that I was now a man, a true man of God having God's favor and blessing. Only your heavenly Father can give you that.

With each step I took, as the bandages came off, underneath it revealed a new Chris Kratzer that had been formed. It was time for me to come into myself, and be the man God created me to be like I had never before.

Week after week, month after month, I kept on climbing, one foot in front of the other. What I am sharing with you in a matter of pages took months and years of climbing. One foot in front of the other.

Now, here I am writing to you, after a long climb, and all the bandages are either off or coming off. I am free, I am growing, I am more of the real me than I have ever been in my life. My ministry, my marriage, my family, my health, my relationship with the Lord, my character, my competency, are better and stronger than they have ever been.

When it says in the book of Job that God blessed the latter part of Job's life more than the first. That's not just a passage, that's a promise, and I am living proof.

But please know, it took a climb to get there, and I am still climbing today. God has a future and hope for me that is beyond

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my present, and He has the same for you.

As you walk out of your valley of adversity, here are several Ideas to remember.

Put one foot in front of the other:

It may have only taken one step or one fall to get you into the adversity you are in, but it will take more than one step to get out. Don't be surprised nor discouraged at this reality.

At certain moments, David had to encourage himself in the Lord. There wasn't anybody on Facebook cheering him on. Rather, on his own, he had to assert the God given power of his will.

In the same way, you are going to have to do your part. Don't expect God to fix overnight what's been broken for years. God will go *with* you, but not *for* you.

With determination and a willingness to override your emotions, start putting one foot in front of the other. Set your mind and heart towards moving forward and your life will follow.

Draw close to God:

You can't walk out of your adversity alone, nor can you do it all yourself. Make Jesus and His Church a priority in your life. Get your prayer and devotion life up and running strong and find the support you will surely need. Search out a vibrant, biblical Church to attend and get involved in. Preferably, one with a healthy small groups ministry. Drawing close to God and developing spiritually strengthening relationships will be critical.

Truthfully, the best time to do this is before you find yourself being thrown around in a bad storm, but often the ideal isn't real. So, don't worry about the timing as much as making sure you draw close to God and people who will encourage as you do.

Learn everything you can:

Hosea 4:6 My people are being destroyed by a lack of knowledge.

As I was climbing, I spent a lot of time getting the counsel of wise people. I studied about the effects of sexual abuse. I learned a lot about overcoming, and how to work on areas of hurt and weakness in my life.

Learn everything you can, particularly about the adversity you are going through. Your bandages will be different from mine. But your need to gain wisdom and insight into them will not be any different.

Don't let a lack of knowledge be a factor that is holding you back from rising above your adversity. Adversity can be like a classroom from God. The good news is, with God, you will never receive a failing grade. He will simply keep you in the classroom until you learn what you need to learn to graduate to the next level. Therefore, don't let a lack of learning delay your victory.

Don't try to take the old into the new

To make the climb out of adversity, you are going to have to give some things up along the way. It may be a habit, a kind of lifestyle, an attitude or something else. So much of climbing out of adversity has to do with that you are willing to let go of.

Holding on to old habits, hang ups and hurts will only prolong your climb and make the journey harder. The behaviors, beliefs, and habits that got you into the valley, won't be the ones that will get you out.

Additionally, you will likely need to rearrange your priorities in life while making some new friendships and leaving some old ones in the past. Some of the people who liked you in the valley, will not like the idea of you climbing out. In fact, they will probably do things to keep you from moving forward and to lure you back down. With some people, you will be able to take them along for the journey out of the valley, but with many others, by their choice, you will have to leave them behind.

You won't make it very far into the future by looking through a rear view mirror. Keeping the past in the past will be critical as you climb out. We can't change the past, but we can change the future. Learn from the past and then let it go.

The truth is, we all want the change of view that comes from climbing out of the valley, but we often don't want to make the changes that are required to get there. Mostly, because that will mean we need to let some things go.

Don't try to take the old into the new.

Never ever quit.

I am here to tell you that whatever it takes for you to climb out, whatever it takes to untangle your life and unwrap the bandages, I promise it's worth it. Who you become and what God gives you in the process is a reward well worth the risk.

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As the saying goes, “Quitters never win, and winners never quit.” Determine today to take the “Quit” card out of the deck of your life and off the table of your options.

Remember, when you are in the valley you are literally closer to the mountaintop than you have ever been! When you are at a dead end, you are closer to your deliverance than ever before. It doesn't feel that way, it might not even look that way, but it is true. So don't give up now, you are almost there!

Rise Above Breaking the Bread

There are amazing things that come out of the process of God bringing you through adversity.

As a matter of fact, what makes the top of the mountain so wonderfully worth the pain, waiting, suffering, and climb to get there, is not only who you become in the process, but also the miraculous blessing you can bring into people's lives.

The way God can use you, because of what you have been through and who you have become in the process, is truly amazing, there is nothing like it in the world.

Think of a loaf of bread, it starts off as dough. In that state, it's not very useful nor appetizing. It's just dough. But if it is placed into an oven where the heat is turned up for a period of baking, the dough rises and starts to take on some life. Soon the dough starts to stand upright, get some shape to it, and right in front of your eyes, it becomes a loaf of bread,

The reality that you can get such a beautiful loaf of bread out of something that started off as a piece of dough is amazing in and of itself. But then the power that loaf of bread has to bring forth life and to feed a hunger when it's shared and given away, is even more amazing.

There's nothing like, in our own lives, starting off as a lump of dough, and then God using the heat of adversity to transform you into a loaf of bread that is able to bring His life to the world. That's the top of the mountain. When out of the adversity you have been through, God uses you to change the world, to turn a life around and to heal a hurt in a way that only you can, it doesn't get any better than that this side of heaven!

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Think about the adversity you are going through at this moment. Now imagine rising to a place in your faith where you actually thank God for the adversity you once cursed because of what you gained in the Lord, who you have become as a person, and what you can do for others because of what you have been through.

If it can happen for me, it can happen for you.

Believe it or not, there is a place of faith you can get to where you actually thank the Lord for the very thing you once wished never happened. The very thing you thought was the end of you, you discover was actually the beginning of you.

I wrote this earlier on in the book, but I want you to read it again. Now that you know my whole story, I think it will be even more meaningful to you. I would never wish upon a person anything that I went through; the sexual abuse, illness, adversity, betrayal, near death experiences, depression, anxiety... but I also wouldn't trade any of it for the world.

If you take the adversity out of my life then you take my calling, you take my salvation, you take my character, you take my spiritual gifts, you take my abilities, you take my anointing, and you take it all.

I thank God for what I have been through, and how He miraculously uses it in ways I could never imagine to ultimately bless me, my life, and others.

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That's the mountain top, when you can look back at the valley of abuse, failure, betrayal, broken dreams, hardships, and floggings and say "God, thank you."

For so long I thought passages in the Bible like the following were basically ridiculous...

James 1:2-4 My brothers and sisters, consider it nothing but joy when you fall into all sorts of trials, 3 because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance. 4 And let endurance have its perfect effect, so that you will be perfect and complete, not deficient in anything.

Psalm 119:71 My suffering was good for me, for it taught me to pay attention to your decrees. (NLT)

1 Peter 4:12-13,19 Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed... So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.

However, when you get to the mountaintop, these Words from God start to make sense and find a resting place in your soul.

From the inner depths of your being, your heart begins to form the confession that you would be willing to go through it all again for what you have gained in the Lord, who you have become as a person, and how God can use you in ways He never could have before.

Perhaps the fullness of this journey is found in that epic moment where even after all the bad that has happened to you, on top of

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the mountain you can declare with total conviction and first hand experience that "God is good."

With some people, when they say "God is good," you can just tell they are worshiping God with their lips, but their hearts are far from the Lord. They are saying it, but they don't truly believe it. It comes out of religion for them, not out of relationship.

But not for you, because there is the place you can find at the top of the mountain where you have developed a joy and satisfaction in the Lord that literally nothing can steal. It is engrained and glued to the very depths of your heart. It is a confession of the soul that concludes that God is good no matter how bad things are.

Yet, that kind of faith, that kind of conviction, and that kind of satisfaction in the Lord, I am convinced, can only come from having been through the valley and journeyed with God to raise you to the top. What a gift this is from the Lord packaged in the kind of faith that actually works and weathers the most stubborn of storms.

It doesn't mean your faith can't be tested, can't be shaken, or your joy can't be challenged. But it does mean at the end of the day you have a place where you can always come back to in your heart where God always wins, He is good, and His love endures forever.

But maybe the greatest reward in all of this is to find sanctuary at a place in your faith where you have become closer to Jesus and you're more like Jesus than you had ever been before.

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It's where you know first hand that God's never allows anything in your life for the purpose of destroying you, but rather to develop you. It's not a theory to you, it's not just a prayer you have said, it's a reality you know. Intimacy with God is no longer a nice idea to you, rather it has become as free flowing in your life as breathing in and out.

Having been through all the things that I have, you might wonder what I haven't walked away from God. You might surmise that God and I likely have some serious issues between us now. Yet, I can tell you my relationship with the Lord is more real and stronger than it's ever been, and that would never had happened a part from God allowing me to go through the valley.

I am doing better at living more like Jesus, I have grown spiritually in leaps and bounds, and I am further along now than I have ever been before, and adversity is what developed that. I am not all I can be, but I am certainly not who I used to be!

So what do you do with the rich loaf of bread your life has become fresh out of the oven of adversity? What do you do with your experience, your relationship with God, your wisdom, your faith, and your growth? You break off the bread of your life and give it away.

Living to break off the bread of your life and give it to others, for the Glory of God, is the best way to live. When the pain of your past becomes a big part of the purpose of your future, there is a sense of redemption and fulfillment to which little can compare.

One of the most significant ways you know you have risen above adversity is when your misery comes full circle and becomes your ministry, when the tragedy of bad things comes full circle and becomes your testimony of God's love and

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faithfulness. It's when you are taking your experience of adversity with every thing you have learned and become, and using it to bless others.

It is in those moments that you are breaking the bread of your life and giving it to others.

There truly is no joy greater than to see God use the adversity He brought you through being used to help another person move forward in their life in way that had you not gone through the adversity, it could never have happened.

I will be glad and rejoice in your love, for you saw my affliction and knew the anguish of my soul." (Psalm 31:7 NIV)

The very adversity you thought was so terrible that no one else ever went through besides you, can be the very adversity that God uses to make you into the one person that understands and can help what another person is going through in a way that no one else can.

I truly believe that God has things for you to become and do that only you can become and do, and if you don't become and do them, they simply won't get done. That's why God created you, and no somebody else to try to be you. Furthermore, my Bible and my experience tells me that adversity can be a critical tool used by God to help us clearly understand who we are to become and what we need to do to fulfill God's unique design and plan for our lives.

When you break the bread off of your life and give it to others, you are fulfilling the destiny God has for your life. God never calls you to use less of yourself, He always call you to use more

Rise Above

of yourself, which includes the pain and adversity you have been through.

Take some critical steps today to start breaking the bread of your life and giving it to others.

1) Take an inventory of the pain in your life. As you do, ask God a simple question, “How can my experience with pain help heal another person?”

2) Listen for the things that you see in the world that you are passionate about and that burden your heart.

3) Have a spiritual gift assessment done so that you can see how God wired and gifted you.

Next, start taking what you discover in 1-3 above and asking God to show you practical ways to use your adversity to change the world.

As you do, remember, if God can use me and my adversity, just imagine what He can do with you and your adversity.

Rising above to the top of the mountain is remarkable when the very oven of adversity you never wanted to go through, becomes the very oven that made you who you are, and now God is using it all to change the world.

It doesn't get any better than that! A new perspective, a new purpose, a new life!

Now, go rise above and change the world for Christ!