

From me to you

Hi.

If we haven't had the chance to meet yet, I'm Brooke. I lost my only sister to a heroin overdose in 2011. Although I had experienced hardship and pain prior to her death and have experienced it in a number of ways since, it was my first introduction to a sort of suffering I could not control, manage, reduce, or simply move on from. I like to say it's where suffering and I first got acquainted.

I'm assuming, since you picked up this guide, that you've suffered in some way, too. So, before we dive in, I want you to know how deeply sorry I am for the pain you've endured. I really mean that. While I don't know the specifics of the cause of your suffering, I've imagined your face sitting across the table from me countless times as I wrote this guide. I've wept over the unimaginable reasons that would cause someone to pick up this book—loss, betrayal, addiction, divorce, diagnoses, infertility, regret, depression. I know there are simply no words sufficient to take your pain away, so I'll instead offer you this: I get it. You are not alone. I'm so sorry.

Suffering sucks. It really does. I hate watching my loved ones experience it, and I hate experiencing it myself. It's valid to want to run from it. It's normal to want to escape it. It's tempting to want to numb it. It's common to be overwhelmingly angry at it (Jesus was, too, by the way, which we'll get more into later). All these feelings are valid.

Suffering was not God's "Plan A" for the world, or for us for that matter—which is precisely the reason why it feels so wrong.

You are allowed to be mad at God for the pain you are suffering or have suffered. I was, too, for a long time...sometimes I still am.

Goodness will return. It did for me, and it will for you, too. Not just when your season of suffering comes to an end, or when enough time has passed, or when something else eclipses the weight of your pain. Goodness will be formed and fashioned into you along the way as you process, struggle, and wrestle your way through.

You won't find any quick solutions amidst these pages (I don't think "quick" translates into suffering anyway). And I won't provide you with glib answers, either (i.e., *Everything happens for a reason; God needed another angel; Just have faith*). Jesus didn't respond this way to suffering, so neither will I. I've come to realize these statements often make the comforter feel better, but rarely offer any real consolation to the sufferer.

This study won't answer your deep, aching question of "Why?" While answers are often the thing we most desperately grasp for in our pain, they usually don't provide the thing we most need, which is

healing. So, that's what I want to lead you toward—true, deep, and thorough healing. Healing is (hopefully) what you will walk away with at the end of this book.

Suffering is one of the most vulnerable, raw, and tender experiences we have as humans. To be a voice in and through this fragile time in your life is not something I take lightly. I assume this role with great responsibility, care, humility, and respect. Therefore, I want to make a few promises to you before we begin:

I promise not to simplify your pain.

I promise instead to give space to its complexities.

I promise not to make you justify your pain.

Your pain is valid and real. No proof needed.

I promise not to make you better or get you "back to normal."

I promise instead to walk you through this valley to the other side, a new side.

I promise not to slap Bible verses on your gaping wound.

I promise instead to thoughtfully, gently, and intentionally share what God has to say as it relates to the suffering you are experiencing.

I promise to honor space for your pain AND remind you of hope.

Both/and. One will not be diminished by or negate the other.

One will also not be more valued than the other. Both hope and pain deserve equal space, attention, and care, and that is what I plan to give them throughout this book.

Oh, and I promise not to rush you toward hope, either.

Hope will come, but not at the expense of the process.

I know that your suffering is sacred and tender.

I humbly promise to treat it as such.

I wrote this guide because after my sister died, I had no clue how to walk through suffering. I wanted a guide that didn't minimize my pain, or amplify it, either. But I couldn't seem to find one. So, God led me on a journey all my own. This guide is a copy of that journey: a guide to help you make it to the other side. While every journey through suffering is unique, my hope is that this guide will provide you with practical steps and an intentional structure to help you walk through. The work you are about to do—of sorting through, feeling, and healing—is holy, sacred work. You are already doing a good job. You are going to be okay. You are not alone. There are good days ahead. Promise.

Let's do this together. I'm with you.



Introduction

I first met suffering on September 12, 2011. It came like a thief in the night, stealing away a lot of what I thought I knew of the world. It evasively greeted me in that dreadful phone call in which my dad blurted out in despair and sorrow, "Lauren's dead." My only sister, my best friend, had died tragically from a heroin overdose. There was no tiptoeing around suffering in a moment like this. I fell headfirst into uncharted territory with cries of agony, accompanied by shouts of denial: "NO! NO. Please, God, no."

Shortly thereafter, the moving van of suffering pulled up to my curb and began unloading box, after box, after box — without my permission and despite my denial. Boxes of what I could have done, boxes of what she could have done, boxes of images, memories, and a future without her, were all unloaded, imposing their grief and wonder and what-ifs on my weary, tattered soul.

"How am I supposed to sort through all these boxes?" I wondered.

I quickly learned that suffering wasn't going anywhere and pretending like it didn't exist wasn't a viable option, either, unless I wanted to spend the rest of my life numbing my pain or detaching from my emotions. I knew that to make it to the other side of this tragedy, I would have to eventually walk through the pain and suffering.

So, I begrudgingly began opening the boxes.

In the pages that follow, we will be opening and sorting through some of those very same boxes together. In the first chapter, we'll identify and articulate exactly where it hurts. Next, we'll talk about the importance of boundaries in seasons of suffering, and how to establish and keep them. Chapter three will invite you to honestly wrestle, cry out, and process your pain, confusion, and questions. In the fourth chapter, we'll learn about, or be reminded of, the forgotten practice of lament, and I'll guide you through how to do it. From there, we'll practice experiencing the presence of God and acknowledge why it's so important in our seasons of suffering. And finally, we'll end by remembering Hope and clinging to God's promise of it.



CHAPTER ONE

WHERE DOES IT HURT?

Naming Your Pain

Reflecting on what has actually happened, what do you wish would have happened?						
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S E L A H

 $\hbox{``The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.'' Psalm~34:18}$

Waves of Feelings

I've lived in California for over a decade. Before that, I grew up coming here all the time as a kid. One time while my family and I were visiting, we spent a day at the beach and my sister and cousin went out to boogie board. After an hour or so, my sister got caught in a riptide. A lifeguard saw her struggling, ran to the water's edge, and began shouting out directions for her to follow. What I found ironic at the time, before I knew anything about riptides, was that the lifeguard told my sister NOT to swim to shore, but instead to swim parallel to it.

I later learned that you can't swim against riptides. If you do, you'll get nowhere and completely tire yourself out in the process. People drown from fighting against riptides because human strength is a measly competitor when it comes to the surges of the sea. As contrary as it feels, the only way to get out of a riptide is to give into the current, swimming with the surge, rather than against it. After some time and distance, the current will eventually let up and release you, allowing you to swim to shore.

I've found that suffering can feel a lot like a riptide. We wake up on certain days and find ourselves caught in an intense current of painful emotions or memories. Due to the agony of these feelings, we try our hardest to swim against them; we ignore them, distract ourselves from them, or try to shut them up. Meanwhile, we're getting nowhere and completely tiring ourselves out in the process.

As contrary or backward as it may feel, we need to practice swimming with the currents of suffering rather than against them. When we find ourselves caught in an intense emotional riptide, we need to allow it to carry us for a bit, as uncomfortable and out of control as it might make us feel. We need to look the surge of pain in the eye, turning toward it in gentleness. Eventually, the current will let up and we will be able to swim back safely to the shore.