

Endorsements

“Kevin has written a book that applies to all of us! He is honest about his pain, clear about how we all carry a wound, and hopeful as he points us to the Healer. Get this book. Read it! Share it!” Dean Fulks- Lead Pastor, Lifepoint Church

“Kevin is a longtime friend of mine who has experienced life’s challenges that readers will quickly relate to. His situation made him question his faith but ultimately led him to grow closer to the Lord and truly live out his faith.” Ryan Smith- State Representative, Ohio House District 93

“Kevin challenges our motivations for faith. Christians have been motivated by and conditioned to accept comfortable, easy, immediate, casual and rule-complying Christianity as God’s blessings. Kevin provides a better, more effective motivation in this book: the integration of faith and life experiences through the pursuit of God and God alone.” Sam Rosa- Senior Pastor, Delaware Christian Church

“This book is so relevant for Christians in America today. For those who are willing to hear what Kevin is saying, this is a life-changing message. More importantly, it has the power to be a Christian culture-changing message.” Amber Nelson- CEO, Lantern Property LLC

"Kevin vividly describes his transformation from spiritual death to life in the milieu of the American middle class with all of its attendant distractions

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from true intimacy with God. I'm thankful that he was called to share this story of hope with others who may be awakened from their present spiritual sleepwalking to a fuller relationship with Jesus Christ." Richard M. Garner- Partner, Collins Roche Utley & Garner, LLC

"Kevin's life challenges have provided him the opportunity to share his story about how Christ-Followers are being deceived by the American Dream." Ric Bishop- Partner, Engenesys

"*American Pharisee* inspires readers to search their hearts for the truth and explores the pathway to experience God's peace and restoration through suffering." Sherry Bockert- Vice President, Citigroup

"Kevin addresses the 'successful' 21st century American Christian who is suddenly rocked by an unforeseen tragic circumstance that brings him to a crossroads of faith. He asks hard-hitting questions about God, faith, and self in a manner that is personal and relevant to all Christians who seek to know God more intimately." John Cassell- Executive Director, Cornerstone Family Services

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ACADEMY elite

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To my wife and 3 daughters
for making our journey rich and beautiful

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Introduction

Warning: This book is going to challenge your faith to its core. If I achieved my goal in writing this book, then it should cause you to pause and reflect on your own personal relationship with God. This might be an uncomfortable experience, but I highly encourage you to embrace the discomfort and ask God to expose anything that might be creating a barrier that prevents you from experiencing Him to the fullest. In doing so, the temporary discomfort you feel in wrestling with your faith will provide an opportunity to draw closer to God. Simply put—this could be one of the biggest steps you take in your faith journey with Christ. However, it may require you to get out of your comfort zone in order to truly pursue God with a heart fully surrendered to Him.

As Americans, we tend to treasure independence, freedom, and prosperity. Our country was founded upon independence, and generally speaking, all of mankind, regardless of the culture, admires the trait of self-sufficiency. Many Americans who claim a faith in Jesus Christ tend to follow this same philosophy and fail to realize that putting too much emphasis on these principles can actually become harmful to their relationship with Christ. Self-sufficiency is a good thing, but living the Christian life independently from God—no matter how moral, ethical, or upright a person claims to be—will ultimately draw one further away from God instead of closer to Him. These people admittedly suffer from a stale and boring faith experience. They recognize something is missing and that God

feels distant. More likely than not, culture is negatively affecting their faith walk. This book will confront the common American beliefs that can negatively affect one's relationship with the Lord and provide solutions to cultivate a thriving and flourishing relationship with God.

Many who have decided to follow Christ quickly fall into what I call the American Pharisee lifestyle. An American Pharisee is one who claims Christ as Savior, yet allows the surrounding culture to negatively influence one's faith instead of using that faith to positively influence the culture. The result is often that people who believe they are legitimately following Christ actually live independently from him by pursuing something other than a growing relationship with him. Usually, the other pursuit is some form of happiness, comfort, or success. Specifically, **it is a lifestyle that attempts to use faith as a tool or mechanism to assist with achieving some other goal of happiness, comfort, or success.** In this context, the person's primary desire to worship God is motivated by receiving blessings from God instead of being connected to God. It is a "safe" form of Christianity because it doesn't require any great sacrifice or commitment that might get in the way of pursuing one's goals in life. If things aren't going well, American Pharisees believe the solution is to muster up enough self-discipline, motivation, and willpower to increase their faith so that their circumstances will turn around. And, as long as things are going well, American Pharisees will continue pursuing the good life and work in their Christian duties as long as

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they fit conveniently within their busy schedules. American Pharisees completely miss the point that God IS the blessing.

The American Pharisee lifestyle moves at a rapid pace focused on **attaining, achieving, and acquiring**. It is a lifestyle that tends to **establish high moral standards**, yet either ignores those standards altogether or follows them rigorously to the point of judging others who are unable to live up to those standards. It is a lifestyle where people will tend to feel pretty good about themselves most of the time, but there's also a recognition that something is missing in their faith walk.

Symptoms of being an American Pharisee include:

- Experiencing little spiritual growth or connectedness with Christ
- Pursuing personal desires over God's desires
- Focusing on life's circumstances instead of God's promises
- Consistently experiencing high levels of stress, anxiety, and worry
- Possessing a mindset that God is distant and detached from the world
- Frequently questioning or even doubting the Bible because it appears to contradict current circumstances

American Pharisees will tend to respond to these symptoms by:

- Focusing solely on God's commands and Christian disciplines (attending church, reading the Bible, praying, etc.)
- Trying harder to produce the fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and self-control) by their own exertion
- Doing good deeds in order to receive
- Striving to sin less and serve God more in order to receive
- Searching for a release from suffering
- Becoming consumed and overwhelmed with life's circumstances

Instead of curing these symptoms, American Pharisees actually worsen their condition because they believe the lie that hard work, dedication, motivation, and self-discipline can fix a person's spiritual condition, but that is not how God designed it.

I have been a Christ-follower for most of my life. However, I'm disappointed that for many of those years, I have lived this American Pharisee lifestyle. It's something that I'm not proud of, but I'm so thankful that God has been patient with me over the years. He has never given up on me, and He has not given up on you either.

God has created a way for us to truly experience Him here and now this very day. We no longer have to live a life where God feels distant and where life is spinning out of control. Eternal life with God begins the day we make the decision to follow

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Him—not merely when we get to Heaven. When we decide to follow God above all else, instead of simply considering Him as one of several options, we will become equipped with everything we need to experience true freedom. And this freedom allows us to enjoy a life that is so much fuller and more satisfying than we could ever imagine. Eternal life is to know God and Jesus Christ whom He sent (John 17:3). It's a journey that will last throughout eternity because we will never be able to fully comprehend the infinite greatness and majesty of God.

If you've made the decision to follow Christ at some point in your life but feel stuck in your spiritual journey, then this book will help you identify your sticking point and provide a way to get "un-stuck." If you haven't yet made the decision to follow Christ or are unsure about what it even means to be a Christian, I highly encourage you to read this book as well. I'm confident it will expose some of the popular, modern-day myths of what it means to be a Christian and teach you Biblical truths about living a fulfilling, thriving, exciting, and—yes—even fun life that is rooted in Christ. The Christian life was never meant to be boring, dull, and lifeless. Unfortunately, mankind has done a very effective job at making the Christian lifestyle unappealing, not only for unbelievers, but for believers as well.

As long as we live in this broken world, we will be susceptible to living the American Pharisee life. None of us are exempt from it, so all of us must

constantly be on guard. Therefore, as Christ-followers, we must be vigilant in making sure the American Pharisee does not live inside of us.

In this book, I will share with you real life experiences, what I learned from them, and how I've grown in my spiritual walk with Christ throughout these experiences. Along the way, I have made some poor choices and have also experienced tremendous hardships that were out of my control. I even came to the point where I was so upset with God that I was ready to give up on Him and walk away from Him altogether. But even in that very moment, God never gave up on me and saw me through the absolute lowest point in my life—even when I didn't think He was by my side. Looking back on my personal turmoil, I know without a doubt that He never left me, but rather I created barriers throughout my years of being an American Pharisee. Those barriers prevented me from experiencing a close and intimate relationship with Him. God not only saw me through those darkest moments, but He completely redeemed my brokenness and made it into something more beautiful than I could have ever have imagined. God wants to do the same thing with you. My hope is that you will identify the barriers that are preventing you from fully experiencing God and have the courage to take the steps of faith to allow those barriers to be removed.

When it comes right down to it, I am no different than you. I have experienced many highs and lows in my spiritual journey, and looking back, I can

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truly say that my spiritual lows were not necessarily the times when I experienced hurt, sadness, or despair. Rather, my real spiritual lows occurred at points in my life when I decided to follow the American Pharisee lifestyle instead of following Christ. I learned all of this through suffering, and now I have a completely different perspective toward the pain and loss I experience in this broken world.

I hope that my story will have a positive influence on your faith walk, but my greater hope is that God will be glorified through this book.

Chapter 1- Out of Control: The Crossroads of Faith

“My God, my God, why have You forsaken me? Far from my deliverance are the words of my groaning. Oh my God, I cry by day, but You do not answer; And by night, but I have no rest.” Psalm 22:1-2

Friday, July 23, 2010

It was midmorning, but it felt like time had stood still. I was supposed to be in the office, but I'd decided to work from home. As much as I tried to complete my assignment, I just couldn't focus. I was lost in time, simply staring at my screen. I called my manager in New York and told her I had to take another day off work.

Anne responded with such compassion, “Oh Kevin, I'm so sorry. Take as much time as you need. We have everything covered here at work. You're such a good man, and you don't deserve to experience something like this.”

As a tear rolled down my cheek, I thanked her for understanding and told her I was trying as hard as I could to move forward, but the pain was just too much. I truly didn't know what to do next. All I knew is that I wanted to be free from this awful sadness.

In an attempt to get my mind off the pain, I called my dad to see if he wanted to go kayaking. He and I have always enjoyed canoeing and kayaking together ever since I was a child, and I needed to get my mind off things. My hope was that a father-

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son activity would do the trick—at least for a brief moment in time. It had been two weeks since I'd received the news, and I hadn't been able to stop the thoughts that were haunting me.

I'm not sure how much time had passed, but my dad's knock on the door snapped me out of my numb daze—I'd just been staring at the ravine in my backyard. I'm sure my sadness was apparent, even to him, because as soon as Dad walked in he said, "Kevin, I wish I could take this pain away from you. We are all hurting with you," and gave me a hug.

On our hour-long drive to Clearfork Reservoir, I don't recall talking very much to Dad. It was all I could do to keep from breaking down in tears. We finally arrived and put our kayaks on the water, but after about five minutes, I wanted to go back home. As much as I desired to get my mind off things, I had already missed the comfort that home brings—even if it was a sad, lonely comfort, it was still familiar.

After drifting for a while, I decided to paddle ahead of Dad. I experienced peace and quiet as I floated atop the water, but then it happened. Tears began to fill in my eyes. I desperately tried to focus on something else, so I quickly grabbed my fishing pole, threw out my line, and began trolling for bass. Fishing was one of my favorite outdoor activities, but in this moment, even my favorite past time couldn't keep me from the pain. And in an instant,

everything broke loose. I couldn't keep it together any longer. I wept.

As the tears poured down my face, I began to paddle even farther ahead of Dad. I didn't want him to see me this way. Not that he'd ever taught me to hold back emotion. In fact, it was just the opposite. One of the many life lessons I had learned from both my mom and dad was that expressing emotion is healthy for the soul. But for some reason, I didn't want him to see me filled with such sorrow. I was experiencing the lowest point of my life, and I just wanted to be alone.

As I floated along in my kayak with tears streaming down my face, I began to doubt the promises of God I had once believed, and I recognized that I was at a crossroads in my faith. For the first time, I was forced to deal with the challenging questions about God firsthand. Is God really sovereign? Is He even real? This was no longer a casual discussion over a cup of coffee or a philosophical teaching during a Wednesday night Bible study. My situation was real, and I was presented with a decision to believe God is faithful to His Word or to walk away from my faith altogether. I couldn't believe where my mind was taking me because, for most of my life, I had simply accepted what the Bible said as truth. Now I was experiencing something firsthand that appeared to contradict the truth of the Bible and who God says He is.

I couldn't understand why God would allow something so awful into my life, why He would

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allow sin to prevail, or why He would allow my wife of twelve years to leave me. After all, if God is sovereign and hates divorce as the Bible states in Malachi 2:16, then why would He allow my marriage to fall apart? This is something I did not want, and yet it was something I was being forced to endure. I loved Alyson, and I couldn't understand why she was choosing to leave me. She was breaking our marriage covenant, and I was left behind to carry the burden. Not only was I experiencing betrayal from my wife, I also felt betrayed by God. Confined to my kayak with my dad in the distance and no one else in sight, I looked up to the sky and told God, "I don't know if I believe in You anymore."

Looking back at the lowest moment of my life, I recognize that I was in a situation that was out of my control. I could do nothing to change my circumstances, and I just wanted the pain to go away. Suffering, whether it be physical, emotional, or psychological, is something that no one desires, and we all possess a natural defense mechanism to avoid it. We are designed to recognize pain as a threat, so we take preventative measures to increase our odds at survival. We will do whatever it takes to make the pain go away, and in almost every case, we want the pain gone immediately.

Three Kinds of Suffering

Suffering exists in three different varieties, and everyone will encounter all three at some point in

life. In some cases, we are able to make a conscious decision to engage in pain. In other situations, we can take preventative measures to avoid suffering. But arguably, the most difficult, the most painful, and the ugliest kind of suffering comes to us without any warning and will remain in our presence until the sorrow decides to leave on its own terms. This suffering comes unplanned, unanticipated, and will change us forever—for better or worse.

The first kind of suffering is **planned suffering**. In this type of suffering, we make a conscious decision to initiate pain. We choose to suffer because we understand the payoff that will result from it, and we measure our planned suffering in terms of cost/benefit. In general, planned suffering is used to improve ourselves mentally, physically, or emotionally. For example, obtaining an advanced college degree, starting a new business, losing weight, purchasing a new home, and raising a family all require sacrifice. We sacrifice time, money, competing desires, and sometimes even relationships to achieve the goals that we value. Those who become successful in planned suffering are not only rewarded for achieving their goals, but they also develop highly sought-after skills such as discipline, motivation, and focus. In most cases, this type of suffering is voluntary, and a person can choose to end the suffering or continue until the goal is achieved.

But not all suffering can be entered into voluntarily. Poor decisions will lead us down the path of

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consequential suffering, where we have no one to blame but ourselves. This type of suffering is usually avoidable, yet we have a desire within us to play Russian roulette with this type of consequential suffering. We have somehow convinced ourselves that participating in something that God has declared “off limits” is better than the pain it will bring. We measure this kind of suffering in terms of risk/reward, and for some reason, we believe the risk is worth the reward. In reality, our reward (the object of desire) will never measure up to the pain of the consequences. Our distorted reason whispers to us, “I don’t want to suffer, but I’ll engage in something that *might* bring suffering because of the pleasure offered.” The drug abuser suffers from the isolation and destruction of addiction. The food abuser suffers from obesity and chronic health ailments from making poor eating decisions. People who seek pleasure in pornography will suffer from a lack of sexual satisfaction. Consequential suffering has been going on ever since the serpent deceived Adam and Eve, and the same truth remains—mankind will suffer the consequences of satisfying desires that do not align with God’s character, will, and plan. We may not experience the consequences in real terms immediately, but every poor choice is guaranteed to take us one step farther away from our relationship with God because we are choosing a different path than His. Simply put, we cannot expect to receive God’s best from making a poor choice.

Consequential suffering can be extremely intense. Depending on the severity, the person could be

forced to live with the consequences for life. The sadness, regret, and guilt that come from this type of suffering can be more than one can handle. People wishing to escape from this type of suffering may begin to look for outlets to cope with the negative feelings, but left to their own devices, they will never find rest or relief. It is only through accepting responsibility for one's poor choice and turning toward God's forgiveness that a person will begin to experience relief. Still, relief may take a significant amount of time before healing is fully recognized. In consequential suffering, people also have the ability to learn from their failures and begin to understand that God's commandments are designed to give freedom and protect mankind from the consequences of sin. When faced with temptation, they will have the ability to resist temptation because they know that God's way is best. They will no longer experience the prison of sin, and they will glorify God by choosing His way. As a matter of fact, consequential suffering can provide an opportunity for the person to grow in self-discipline, similar to planned suffering, but the real benefit is realigning oneself again to God.

The last kind of suffering is arguably the most difficult kind of suffering to endure. It's the suffering that no one can anticipate. People who experience this kind of suffering firsthand will be brought to their knees in sorrow. What makes this kind of suffering so painful is that it comes without warning, and it is no respecter of persons. It is unplanned, and in most cases, there are no answers that will justify the pain of **tragic suffering**.

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The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, natural disasters, cancer, innocent victims of abuse, paralysis, birth defects, the death of a child, an unexpected loss of a loved one—these are just a few examples of tragic suffering. The suffering is harsh, enduring it is extremely painful, and in most cases, the innocent are left with no answers to justify the pain. People who experience this type of suffering are victims of outside forces such as intentional evil, accidental circumstances, or laws of nature.

When examining the three different types of suffering, it's easy to see that with planned suffering, we receive a payoff, and consequential suffering can allow us to learn from our mistakes. But in many cases with tragic suffering, we do not see any reason for undergoing this type of suffering. Additionally, the person does not intentionally initiate the tragedy nor is it a consequence of a poor choice. Victims of tragic suffering spend years searching for answers, but none can be found. Unlike planned suffering and consequential suffering, tragic suffering cannot be measured in any sort of economic terms such as cost/benefit or risk/reward. The measurement of tragedy is only in terms of loss. It is sorrow that seeks its prey and takes up residence for an undetermined timeframe. The person can't escape it and is left saying, "I don't see any good in this suffering, and I want it to go away."

Our Natural Response to Suffering

Here is one of the underlying beliefs of our American culture: anything worthwhile will require some level of pain to achieve. But truth be told, most everyone, if given the opportunity, would prefer to choose the path of least resistance to achieve the same goal. If presented with the choice between years of exercise to maintain a healthy body or achieving the same level of physical fitness without enduring the time or effort, most everyone would choose the achievement without the pain. In other words, given the opportunity, people will generally choose to avoid pain.

Humans are designed to recognize pain as a threat, so we take preventative measures to increase our odds at survival. Pain avoidance is perfectly natural, and our bodies are excellent machines when it comes to protecting ourselves from pain. Pain is a defense mechanism that screams, “DANGER! PROTECT YOURSELF!” Our bodies respond so quickly to pain that we don’t even need to think about it. Our reflexes take over in a matter of milliseconds, and as quickly as we identify the pain, we try to get away from it. Anyone can test this theory by taking a stopwatch, sticking a finger in a light socket, and recording how long it takes to pull out the finger. For the record, I don’t recommend anyone actually attempting this, but my guess is the one who attempts such a feat will pull back that finger faster than the time it takes to start and stop the timer!

Avoiding emotional pain is similar to avoiding physical pain, but it’s a lot more complicated.

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Emotional pain would fade quickly if we could bring our loved ones back to life, extract diseases out of bodies, force paralyzed limbs to move, or hold our spouses in our arms until they promise not to leave. The list goes on and on, but the outcomes are the same—certain types of pain cannot be avoided, so our only option is to endure.

The very definition of suffering means to endure pain. As discussed earlier, we might be willing to suffer because we believe the pain will eventually lead to a greater good, goal, or purpose. In this case, we subconsciously rationalize pain in the following terms: as pain increases, the payoff should also increase; otherwise, do not endure the pain. This logic works well in planned suffering because we can determine whether or not we want to engage in the pain. We are in control of the situation. This rationale also helps us through consequential suffering because we learn that our actions yield consequences. However, excessive consequential suffering or unnecessary tragic suffering tend to appear to us as unfair and unjust.

When suffering is excessive or unjust, our natural reaction is to take matters into our own hands. We pursue “pain avoidance” in the hopes of eliminating the pain. Sometimes, we will try so hard to avoid pain that we will begin to make poor choices. Drugs, alcohol, hobbies, entertainment, TV, movies, sports, exercise, material possessions, and misusing relationships are just a few examples of how people attempt to medicate the pain. Unfortunately, all of these examples either are, or can lead to, unhealthy

ways of dealing with the pain. And an even more damaging result can arise when we begin to doubt God in the midst of our suffering. This doubt might begin subtly by simply asking the question, “Why God? Why me?” or it may become so extreme as to doubt His existence. Regardless of the degree, we turn away from God with every thought of disbelief.

The Futility of Asking Why

Just as pulling our finger from an electrical outlet is a natural physical reflex, our natural cognitive reflex to unjust suffering is to ask the question, “Why?” Thoughts flood our minds such as, “Why God? Why did You allow this to happen? If You are all-powerful, why didn’t You stop it? If You are a God of love, why are You allowing something so painful in my life?”

Even though posing questions to God is a natural cognitive reflex, it is a futile exercise because logical answers cannot heal emotional wounds.

For example, the Bible has already provided the following explanation for why we experience unjust suffering here on earth:

Pain and sorrow are the result of a fallen world that’s been broken since the time of Adam and Eve. The fall of man altered the course of this world in ways that our human minds cannot even comprehend. Evil, injustice, disease, natural disasters, and death are all a result of the fall of man, and

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our world has been broken ever since. Can God fix all of this? The answer is an absolute—Yes!

Before time began, God already knew mankind would rebel against Him and this world would suffer from the brokenness brought forth from rebellion. Knowing this, He established a perfect plan to redeem this fallen world before He even created it. He's been in the process of redeeming the world to its original state since the day He made animal skins for Adam and Eve to cover their nakedness, and He will continue to reinstate the world to its intended design. In other words, He has been redeeming the world, He is currently redeeming the world, and He will continue to redeem the world until it is fully accomplished. But this will be completed on His timetable—not ours. Until then, we will continue to experience the aftermath of suffering that comes from living in a broken world.

Even though the above explanation is absolutely true and answers the question as to why we suffer, people who are in the midst of significant suffering will continue to feel pain even if they understand this explanation. Logic may sooth the mind, but the soul is comprised of more than mere human

intellect. And suffering reaches deep into the soul, where logical explanations and head knowledge fall short of complete healing.

Asking God “Why?” can also be dangerous because this questioning can lead to unbelief. Once doubt sets in, it is not long before we begin thinking God has made a mistake. In doing so, we usurp God by attempting to sit on His throne of judgment. What started out as an innocent question in the midst of our pain has now transitioned to sin because we have come to the conclusion that we know better than God. So, instead of asking, “Why God?” we should be asking, “What do You want me to do next, so that I may eventually overcome this suffering?” By shifting our thought pattern, we move ourselves from the wrongful place of sitting on God’s judgment seat to our rightful place of kneeling before His throne.

Abandoned with an Emotional Wound

Looking back on that July kayaking trip, I couldn’t believe what was running through my mind. I had come to the point where I was thinking about abandoning God. Many people describe “rock bottom” in different ways, but for me it’s when a person experiences helplessness and hopelessness simultaneously. I had never truly experienced “rock bottom” until that moment, and I knew it without a doubt—this was the lowest point of my life. When I was twelve years old, I had made the decision to follow Jesus and allow Him to be the Lord of my life. Throughout my faith journey, I had always

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assumed that He would take care of me. Sure, I knew that life would bring sorrow, but I trusted that God would bring me through the sorrow. Twenty-six years later, I was now faced with the reality that Alyson was leaving me and God wasn't doing anything about it. While I knew there were very few guarantees in life, I'd always thought I had two guarantees: my salvation and my marriage to Alyson. After all, we'd made a commitment to each other until death do us part. Now that my marriage was beyond repair, I began to seriously question the other so-called "guarantee"—my salvation.

Up to that point, I had truly believed that as long as I remained committed to God, He would protect me from the brokenness in the world—especially from something like divorce. From the moment I committed my life to Christ, I tried my very best to sin less and serve God more in the hope that my life would turn out well.

I was a model student in grade school, went to college and graduated with a finance degree, married Alyson, had a lovely daughter Meredith, and pursued a highly successful career. I had done my best at practicing the Christian faith, and now all of that effort appeared to be a waste of time. I had spent thousands of hours studying the Bible, praying, obeying God's laws, serving regularly, and giving consistently. It seemed that the results of this discipline generally worked out well for me. I knew right from wrong after all the years of growing up in the church, and I was concerned about making this world a better place. All I had to do was live by the

golden rule—do unto others as I would have them do unto me. This philosophy made sense to me, and I implemented the golden rule without much difficulty.

While I knew I wouldn't be immune to misfortune, I definitely thought that God would give me the desires of my heart if I delighted in Him (Psalms 37:4). I also believed that if I asked for anything in Jesus' name, God would give it to me (John 16:23). All I wanted was a nice and wholesome life. I didn't need to "have it all", and I wasn't asking God for anything excessive. I had witnessed many non-Christians living the good and nice life, so why couldn't I have the same? Experience had taught me that working hard and living a morally upright life would reap rewards in the long run. But with the demise of my marriage, new thoughts entered my mind. Who needs God if this is how He treats His children? I concluded that if my childhood salvation experience was real then I was guaranteed to go to heaven when I died. But if my salvation experience was false, then I wasn't about to waste any more time following a God Who wasn't faithful to His word.

In the midst of my suffering, I believed that God was either absent in this situation or had abandoned me. I couldn't figure out why He wasn't answering my prayers for Alyson to remain in our marriage. I'd confessed to both Alyson and God that I was willing to change anything in order to prevent the divorce, but my petitions appeared to fall on deaf ears. I couldn't believe this was how God was going

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to repay me. I had been begging Him for weeks to change Alyson's mind. If He is all-powerful, my simple request should have been easy for Him. If God is actively involved in this world, why wouldn't He make this one change? If marriage is a reflection of Christ's relationship with the church, why would He allow my marriage to fall apart after I'd been committed to Him? I had never prayed so hard in my life for God to bring Alyson back to me, and all I seemed to receive from my heart-felt prayers was an empty silence.

When I reflect on that moment, I can see that my emotional despair overwhelmed me. I was thrown into a terrible situation that I couldn't control and all I wanted was for the pain to go away.

No one is exempt from tragic suffering. Believers and non-believers alike are fully exposed to this kind of suffering; the Bible doesn't offer any immunity. In the midst of our sorrow, we come to the end of ourselves, unable to rely on our knowledge, ability, and effort to eliminate the pain from emotional wounds. Admired characteristics such as self-discipline, self-determination, and self-motivation fail us. Everything is out of control, and we fall to our knees at the crossroads of our faith wondering which way to turn. Will we continue to believe God and take steps of faith even if we don't understand or will we turn down the path that looks familiar and seems right from our perspective? One

path tells us to endure the pain, while the other takes us down the path of pain avoidance.

As I sat in my kayak on that July afternoon, I had come to the crossroads of my faith, and I didn't know which path I was going to take. In the quiet suspension, as I floated atop the water, I found myself drowning in the empty silence of brokenness as the wind drifted me wherever it pleased.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Have you experienced a crisis that has totally broken your heart? How have you responded to that crisis?
2. How do you view God in the context of suffering?
3. What does our response to suffering tell us about ourselves and our relationship with God?

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