

Colleen Chao never imagined hearing: ***“Cancer. Stage four. Terminal.”*** The author shares a devotional gift: thirty-one days of wisdom, hope, and encouragement. Drawing upon stories from past saints, Scripture, and habits that build joyful endurance, Colleen helps fellow sufferers put themselves *In the Hands of a Fiercely Tender God*.

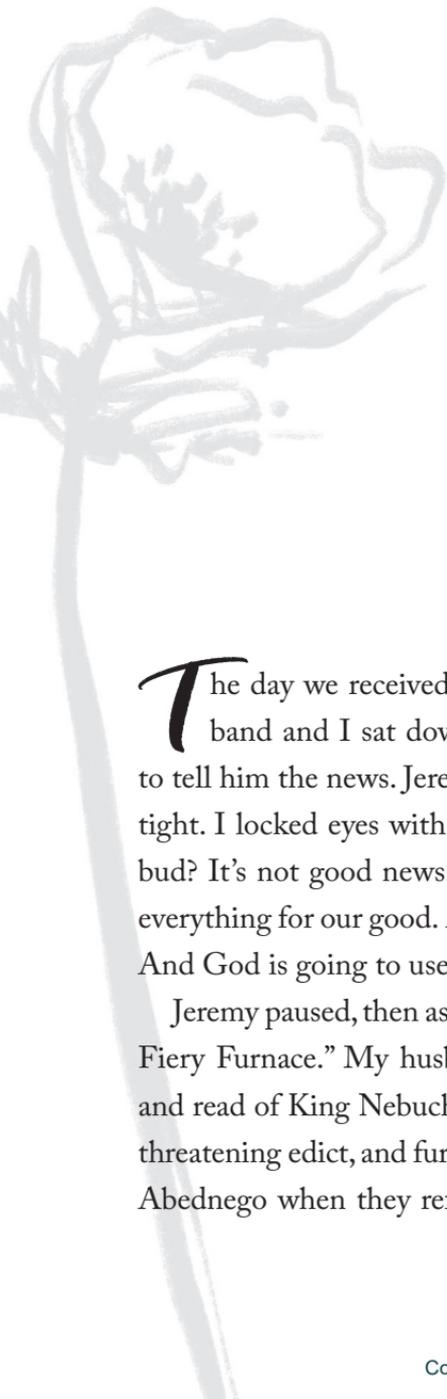
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one

LOOK

The day we received my first cancer diagnosis, my husband and I sat down with our (then) six-year-old son to tell him the news. Jeremy shed some tears and hugged me tight. I locked eyes with him and said, “This is hard, isn’t it, bud? It’s not good news. But God is with us, and He turns everything for our good. *Everything*. So, we don’t need to fear. And God is going to use this in your life in amazing ways.”

Jeremy paused, then asked if we could read the story of “the Fiery Furnace.” My husband opened the Bible to Daniel 3 and read of King Nebuchadnezzar’s intimidating gold statue, threatening edict, and furious rage at Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego when they refused to bow down. You know how

the story goes: after the men had been bound and thrown into the fiery inferno—

King Nebuchadnezzar jumped up in alarm. He said to his advisers, “Didn’t we throw three men, bound, into the fire?”

“Yes, of course, Your Majesty,” they replied to the king.

He exclaimed, “Look! I see four men, not tied, walking around in the fire unharmed; and the fourth looks like a son of the gods.”

Dan. 3:24–25

My husband finished the story and closed the Bible, and after a pause Jeremy said, “There are four of us in this family.”

In his suffering, a six-year-old looked and saw that God was with us in our own fiery furnace. He was given eyes to see Jesus standing with us in the flames.

But we’re not always so quick to see God with us in the fire, are we? Our eyes are more easily fixed on the pain, the loss, the unfairness. We see the impossible circumstances before us, and we despair, worry, fear, or fume. *God, why have You allowed this furnace to be heated seven times hotter than usual?! Why so much pain? Why the sting of death?*

Isaac Ambrose wrote, “Whilst we look on these things, we cannot see the beauty that is in Christ.”¹ While our gaze is

fixed on the furnace and the flames, we miss the Son of God whose presence with us in the fire is worth far more than any comfort, any dream fulfilled, any security, any promise of health or relief or rescue. Ambrose continues:

Oh that all men . . . would presently fall upon the practice of this gospel art of looking unto Jesus! . . . Only Christ is the whole of man's happiness; the sun to enlighten him, the physician to heal him, the wall of fire to defend him, the friend to comfort him, the pearl to enrich him, the ark to support him, the rock to sustain him under the heaviest pressures, "As an hiding-place from the wind, and a covert from the tempest, as rivers of waters in a dry place, and as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land." Isa. 32:2 Come then! let us look on this Sun of righteousness: *we cannot receive harm, but good, by such a look. . . . As Christ is more excellent than all the world, so this sight transcends all other sights; it is the epitome of a Christian's happiness.* (italics added)²

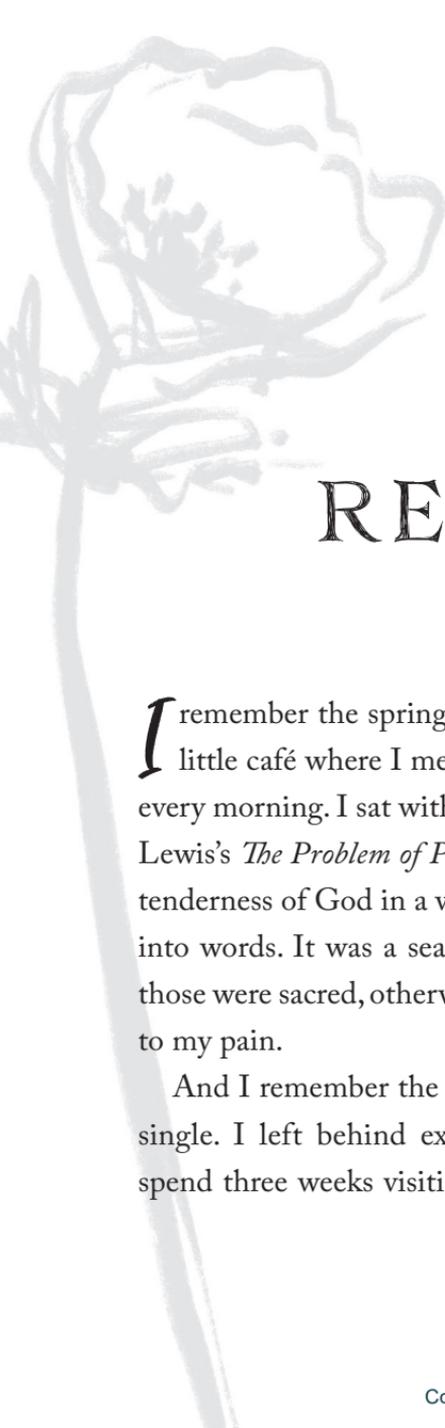
In your present suffering, what are you most tempted to fixate on? Is it the apparent unfairness of your situation? (*Why am I afflicted while my friends are so blessed?*) Is it the unrelenting physical pain? The grief that your loved ones

must suffer with you? The fact there is no end in sight?

One of the things I love about Christ is that He doesn't ask us to pretend we're *not* in the furnace. Instead, *He joins us there*. He knows it's blazing hot and oppressive and terrifying, and He wants to be with us in it.

*When you pass through the waters,
I will be with you,
and the rivers will not overwhelm you.
When you walk through the fire,
you will not be scorched,
and the flame will not burn you.
[Isa. 43:2*

It may be difficult to look past the flood and the flame today to get a clear view of Jesus. He understands. He's tender to our weakness and weariness. He meets us where we are and won't leave us alone in our pain. *Look!* Here is Jesus, walking with us in our fire—and His presence will change everything.



two

REMEMBER

I remember the spring of 2009—that corner booth in the little café where I met with God before the sun came up every morning. I sat with my coffee, Bible, journal, and C. S. Lewis’s *The Problem of Pain*. I experienced the nearness and tenderness of God in a way I’ve never quite been able to put into words. It was a season of suffering back then too, but those were sacred, otherworldly moments that gave meaning to my pain.

And I remember the summer I was thirty-three and still single. I left behind extremely stressful circumstances to spend three weeks visiting best friends from coast to coast.

We sat in the sun, sipped coffee, took walks, talked late, and laughed hard. I experienced the kindness and joy of Jesus in a way that has marked me ever since.

God tells us so often in Scripture to *remember*—remember who He is and what He has done for us. But suffering can make us forgetful. Our minds are overwhelmed with our present pain or the complexities of surviving another day. We become like a child fixated on his scraped and bleeding knee—in the middle of Disneyland. Caught up in his pain, he loses sight of the magic and marvels all around him.

In the book of Lamentations, the prophet Jeremiah describes suffering that would cause most of us to forget the goodness of God—especially because Jeremiah *attributes his suffering to God*. He says things like,

He has driven me away and forced me to walk in darkness instead of light.

Lam. 3:2

He has laid siege against me, encircling me with bitterness and hardship.

v. 5

He forced me off my way and tore me to pieces.

v. 11

Yikes. Is it okay to say things like this? To tell people that *God* has forced us to walk dark and difficult paths? That *He* is the One who has weighed us down?

I love how raw and real Scripture is, don't you? Haven't we all felt the truth of Jeremiah's words on our darkest days? It's safe to be unedited with God. He can take the full weight of our emotions and questions—and then give us eyes to see things from His perspective. I'm so grateful that Jeremiah was gut honest about his afflictions, but I'm even more grateful that he didn't stop there. Look at what he reminds himself of in the middle of his anguish:

*Yet I call this to mind,
And therefore I have hope:
Because of the LORD's faithful love
we do not perish,
for his mercies never end.
They are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness!
I say, "The LORD is my portion,
therefore I will put my hope in him."
The LORD is good to those who wait for him,
to the person who seeks him. . . .*

For the Lord

will not reject us forever.

Even if he causes suffering,

he will show compassion

according to the abundance of his faithful love.

For he does not enjoy bringing affliction

or suffering on mankind.

Lam. 3:21–25, 31–33

Jeremiah did something astonishingly simple yet powerfully effectual in the midst of his suffering: *he remembered*. He reminded himself of *who God is*. In essence, he was saying, “Self, God isn’t happy about my suffering. Nope, that’s not His way, that’s not His heart. Remember—He is the God of love, mercy, faithfulness, goodness, and compassion! This is not for nothing. Hope again!”

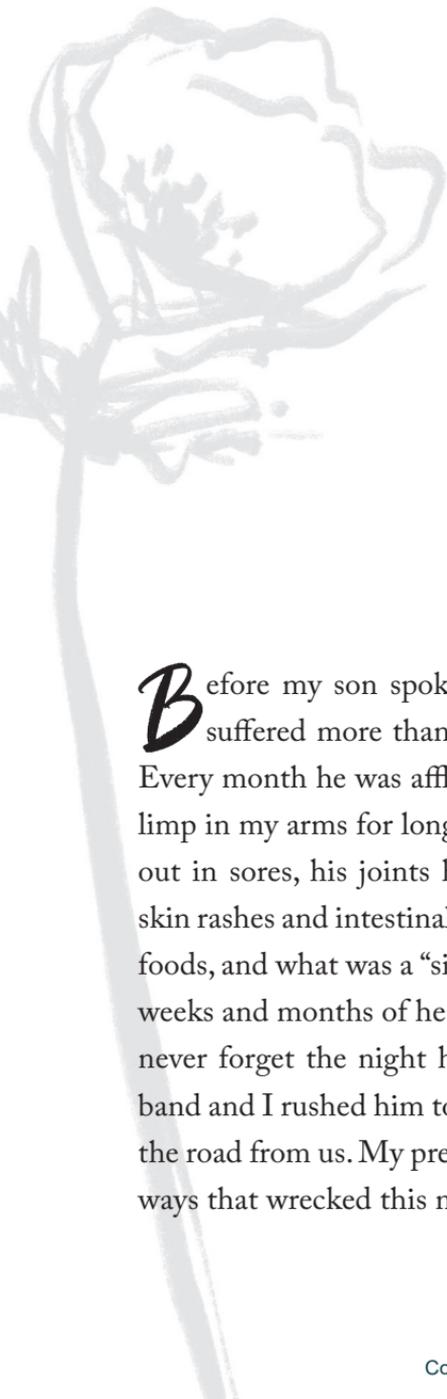
Thousands of years after Lamentations was written, another Jeremiah—Jeremiah Burroughs—wrote in a similar vein:

Name any affliction that is upon you: there’s a sea of mercy to swallow it up. If you pour a pail full of water on the floor of your house, it makes a great show, but if you throw it into the sea, there is no appearance of it; so afflictions, considered in themselves, we think they are

very great, but let them be considered with the sea of God's mercies we do enjoy, then they are not so much, they are nothing in comparison.¹

We don't need to pretend our afflictions aren't real and miserable. We just need to put them in the right place—within the “sea of God's mercies.” We look (and keep looking) at who He reveals Himself to be in Scripture, and the wonderful things He has done for His people, for *us*.

When have you experienced God's love, kindness, or compassion? Replay that memory in detail today. He came to you in such a beautiful way then; He will come to you again. Sit in that sweet remembrance and let it pour your painful of pain into His ocean of mercies—mercies that are vast and new every morning.



three

CRY

Before my son spoke his first word, he had physically suffered more than most adults have in their lifetime. Every month he was afflicted with high fevers that left him limp in my arms for long days and nights. His mouth broke out in sores, his joints hurt, and he suffered from chronic skin rashes and intestinal pain. He was intolerant of multiple foods, and what was a “simple cold” for most children meant weeks and months of health complications for Jeremy. I will never forget the night he stopped breathing, and my husband and I rushed him to the emergency room just a mile up the road from us. My precious child, my only son, suffered in ways that wrecked this mama’s heart.

On my son's healthier days, I challenged him to develop new skills, stretched him beyond his comfort zone, and delighted to see him do things independently. But on his days of pain and illness, I scooped him into my arms and looked and listened attentively to his every cry and discomfort. Even as a weary, sleepless, often overwhelmed and anxious mama, I wanted to meet his every need, comfort him, track down the best medical care possible. Before he even learned to tell me what was wrong or ask me for what he needed, Jeremy would cry out in his pain for me, and that alone stirred my heart to love in ways I'd never known before.

I can only imagine how much more our Perfect Parent—who is never tired or anxious, who always knows exactly what is wrong with us and what to do about it—longs to care for us when we cry to Him. Imagine how His heart feels when we weep and wail in pain. For years I have loved Isaiah 63:9 for the glimpse it gives us into God's heart: "In all their suffering, he suffered, and the angel of his presence saved them. He redeemed them because of his love and compassion; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of the past."

In all our suffering, He suffers too. C. H. Spurgeon—who lived with chronic illness and pain (as did his wife), who endured slander from envious London pastors, and who wrestled

with dark bouts of depression—knew the truth of this. He wrote,

It makes pain so glorious when you think that the very same pain shoots through Him as through you, that there is not so much pain truly in the finger as there is in the head, that the head is indeed the true seat of all the sensitiveness. It is not so much Christ's people who suffer, as it is Christ, Himself, suffering in them.¹

The God who suffers in you and with you wants you to cry to Him, wants you to “pour out your heart like water before the Lord's presence” (Lam. 2:19; see also Ps. 62:8). Like a small child in pain, you may not have words for your suffering. Maybe sometimes all you can do is writhe and flail, weep and wail. Other times, you can use the words of the psalmists to express your longings. This past week I've cried out to God with these verses:

*God of our salvation, help us,
for the glory of your name.*

Rescue us . . .

for your name's sake.

Ps. 79:9

*“Restore us, God;
make your face shine on us,
so that we may be saved.”*

Pg. 80:3

*“Will you not revive us again
so that your people may rejoice in you?
Show us your faithful love, LORD.”*

Pg. 85:6-7a

*“Be gracious to me, Lord,
for I call to you all day long.
Bring joy to your servant’s life,
because I appeal to you, Lord.
For you, Lord, are kind.”*

Pg. 86:3-5a

*“LORD, God of my salvation,
I cry out before you day and night.
May my prayer reach your presence;
listen to my cry.
For I have had enough troubles,
and my life is near Sheol.”*

Pg. 88:1-3

Cry

Whether we have words or just groans, we can cry to God knowing He understands our suffering and will carry us through it with His love and compassion.

The beauty of spending so many years crying out to God is that I can look back to see *He has always answered me*—so I can trust He will answer me again. He will love me through this. He will comfort me. Again and again I have experienced the truth of Isaiah 66:13: “As a mother comforts her son, so I [God] will comfort you.”

As my son used to cry out for me in his misery—and I would drop everything to comfort and care for him—so I cry out to the God of all comfort (2 Cor. 1:3). And from the depths of your own suffering, you can cry to Him too and experience His perfect comfort once again. Oh, how He loves you.

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