

VANEETHA RENDALL RISNER

watching for
the morning

90 DEVOTIONALS FOR
WHEN HOPE IS HARD TO FIND

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To my beloved parents,
Dave and Suku Rendall,
who first taught me to hope

Acknowledgments

So many people have touched my life, and their stories are reflected in these pages. I wish I could list all of them by name because their faith and friendship have shaped me. Since space is limited, I'm just mentioning a few, but know that this list of acknowledgments in no way represents all those I feel indebted to.

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Introduction

This book has been years in the making. It's a collection of my thoughts on suffering from experiences decades ago and some articles written many years ago when my world turned upside down. I wrote to remind myself of what I knew to be true, to give me hope as I was watching for the morning. Suffering has been a companion, mostly unwelcome, through the years. I contracted polio as an infant, was bullied because of my disability, endured four miscarriages, buried an infant son Paul, was diagnosed with post-polio syndrome (which may result in quadriplegia), went through an unwanted divorce, and struggled with single-parenting two adolescent daughters. But since much of that pain is behind me, as I began this devotional, I assumed most of the reflections would be captured from past experiences, while I was comfortably sitting in the pain-free present.

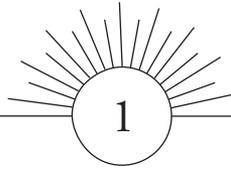
But God had different plans for me. He knew I needed to experience and live what I was writing so I wouldn't offer an academic view of pain but rather a real-time, in-the-trenches view. These last twelve months I've struggled with tremendous physical pain and losses, at times unable to think or write. So this book has become a compilation of both my past experiences and my all-too-real present.

God has been near. Closer than I could ask for. I've begged for more strength to finish this book, but God keeps reminding me that His grace is sufficient for me and His power is being made perfect in my weakness. I'm seeing signs of God's grace through my amazing sister, who actually *asked* if she could help edit and organize before either of us knew how physically difficult this month would be. My sister felt called to clear her schedule though she didn't know why. But God knew.

I don't know where you are today, but God does. He may feel distant, and you may be struggling to hold on to hope. When I'm in that place, I cling to the Word of God. That's why I have sprinkled fifteen memory verses throughout this devotional. If you do nothing else, I would love for you to commit these to memory. They will give you sturdy words to pray and promises to hold onto as you watch for the morning.

Today I read these words from Charles Spurgeon: "If there's anything in this world for which I would bless him more than anything else, it is for pain and affliction. I am sure that in these things the richest, most tender love has been manifested toward me. Love letters from heaven are often in black-edged envelopes. The cloud that is black with horror is big with mercy."¹ I think Spurgeon would agree with me when I say, "The cloud that seems black with horror is *in reality* big with mercy."

I pray that the Lord will meet you in these pages, and that you will discover that the black-edged envelopes in your life contain love letters from God.



Beauty in the Broken

*Now we have this treasure in clay jars,
so that this extraordinary power may
be from God and not from us.*

2 CORINTHIANS 4:7

Kintsugi reminds us there is beauty in the broken. It is a Japanese art that repairs broken pottery with gold, rendering a new piece that is more exquisite than it was before the break. It literally means “to join with gold.”

Rather than trying to hide the damage, kintsugi highlights the repair. The imperfections make it beautiful and valuable. A broken piece that is put back together has more of a story, seems more authentic and real, and is stronger and more resilient than something that has stayed pristine. The breaking of what once was, the layered and time-consuming process of putting it back together, the mending it with gold—all contribute to its value. And surprisingly, it becomes more resilient after it has been mended by kintsugi, even stronger than it was before.

God is the Restorer, the kintsugi Master who skillfully and tenderly puts the broken pieces of our lives back together. It takes time, but God leaves no broken piece untouched. I think of the gold resin as the work and power of God, who redeems what is broken in our lives.

Jay Wolf says, “The story of kintsugi may be the most perfect embodiment of all our trauma-shattered lives. . . . Instead of throwing away the broken beloved pottery, we’ll fix it in a way that doesn’t pretend it hasn’t been broken but honors the breaking—and more so, the surviving—by highlighting those repaired seams with gold lacquer.”²

After reading about this art, I decided to make my own kintsugi vase since the authentic ones were expensive. Besides, I wouldn’t mind breaking a dish for the cause. I found some do-it-yourself instructions online about how to make faux kintsugi, particularly how to break it cleanly, and laughed as one man observed that deliberately breaking pottery just to put it back together defeated the real meaning behind kintsugi. He wasn’t wrong but I forged ahead.

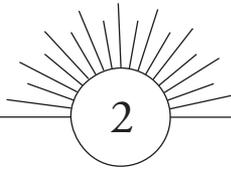
A friend came over and helped me with the process. Ironically, I wanted my bowl to look perfect and wasted hours trying to make it look clean and authentic. Kintsugi is about embracing and honoring flaws, but apparently, I like curated imperfections.

As I stared at the piece on my shelf, I mourned what was broken in my life. I was once an artist, expressing myself through graphic art, and now I needed help even with this relatively simple project because of the limits my body held.

Then I saw it. The way God was blessing my increasingly broken body. My writing came from a desire to express myself, which could no longer be through graphic art. I realized that God, the master Artist, was putting my life back together with the gold of His presence and grace to show that the extraordinary power belongs to Him and not to me. He is doing a work in my life and yours that is beyond our understanding.

Our lives are in God's hands, and He is using our brokenness to create something beautiful.

REFLECT: Where has your life been broken? How have you seen the master Artist bless you, and others, through those gold-lined, once-broken places?



Responding to Suffering

*Therefore, submit to God. Resist the devil,
and he will flee from you. Draw near to
God, and he will draw near to you.*

JAMES 4:7–8

When I'm struggling, my thoughts are all over the place. I can seamlessly go from anger to despair to doubt, and before I know it, I'm in the pit. I keep spiraling downward until I stop and refocus, turning to God, remembering and rehearsing the truths I need to hold onto. Passages like this one in James 4 help me reorient my heart.

Verse 7 begins with “therefore,” connecting this call to what comes before it: a reminder of God’s favor toward the humble, to those who have chosen friendship with God rather than with the world. When I approach God humbly, He draws near, pulling me even closer to Him and further away from the prideful ways of the world.

The posture I bring is important. When I submit to God, I'm acknowledging that He is sovereign over my life. I need His Spirit who lives in me, cultivating the humility we're called to have, and offering His grace to make it through suffering. Submitting in suffering reorients my mind to God and to my utter dependence on Him. It is trusting Him with the outcome, knowing He will give me what is best.

“Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.” Before I can resist the devil, I need to be aware of his schemes. Throughout Scripture we see that Satan wants us to believe that God isn't for us, that God doesn't care, and that God isn't good. Satan wants us to be self-reliant, to assume we don't need God or His wisdom, and to believe instead that we are better off without God. Satan, the accuser, wants us to feel accused, guilty, desperate, and hopeless. So when those thoughts start creeping in, I need to recognize they may be the work of the devil.

The best way I know to resist the devil is to repeat Scripture, just as Jesus did. And if I have verses at my fingertips, committed to memory, I can draw them out when the devil prowls around. I can call on Jesus and ask Him for help and deliverance from all my fears.

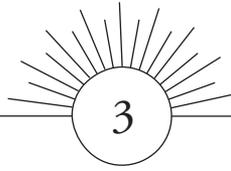
Then I deliberately draw near to God. I turn toward Him. It's not that He meets me halfway. I just turn around and He does the rest. He is always waiting, always with me, always willing. But as I turn around to face Him, I know He is there.

We all need to fight for faith when we're suffering. And if you don't recognize the battle, you will go in unarmed. You may succumb to your fears, framing and reframing your circumstances

in light of your feelings rather than the truths you know about God. So perhaps this is a good first verse to memorize. In our despair, we need words to cry out instinctively, words that shape our minds and our responses.



MEMORIZE: Write today's verse on an index card. Put it where you'll see it regularly so you can memorize it.



Does God Feel Cruel?

*He did not even spare his own Son but
gave him up for us all. How will he not
also with him grant us everything?*

ROMANS 8:32

Not too long ago, I overheard my daughter Kristi say on the phone, “Sometimes I think God is low-key savage. It seems like He wants to take away the things we don’t even realize we rely on.” I was taken aback. God? Low-key savage? Kristi had to explain the meaning to me: subtly ruthless with a touch of irony.

Then I realized many of us suspect that, but we phrase it differently. A friend shared at Bible study, “I have lots of fears, particularly about my family’s safety. I’m afraid to ask God to help me get over them because I don’t know what He’ll do.” We laughed because we can all relate.

Yet I know that God isn’t cruel or unkind, despite how it looks. Everything He brings into our life, including trials, is out of love, to do us good in the end.

When I was two, I couldn't walk but was happy to be carried around on people's shoulders. So when I woke up with my legs in a cast after my first surgery, I wondered why I was in so much pain and why I couldn't move my legs. I was furious at my mother and then broke down in tears, promising not to be naughty if she would take away the horrible white pajamas.

I thought I was being punished. And even after my mother tried to explain it to me, I didn't understand. How could I grasp that this surgery could one day help me walk? I couldn't. In my two-year-old mind, I just wanted to go back to the way things were. My mother bravely watched me suffer, knowing I blamed her for my pain. She hated seeing me in pain, and if there was another way to help me walk, she would have done it.

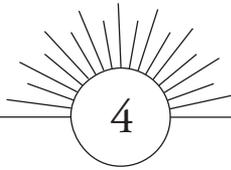
In the same way, God does not enjoy seeing us suffer. He loves us more than an earthly parent ever could.

When I asked Kristi about her conversation, she said, "I know God isn't savage. But I told my friend sometimes it *feels* like that because He knows what motivates us and takes away the things we rely on. But I learned that when God takes things away, it makes us rely on Him more, which in the end is so much better."

She's right. Life circumstances can make us *feel* like God is being cruel. Maybe you feel that way today because God has taken away something or someone that was precious to you. Despite how you feel, know that God loves you and everything you experience comes from that love. He who didn't spare His son because He loves us that much wants to give you everything good. You can trust Him.

If you are tempted to doubt the Lord's intentions, these words from Charles Spurgeon may comfort you as they have me: "Affliction does not come haphazardly, the weight of every stroke is accurately measured . . . the knife of the heavenly Surgeon never cuts deeper than is absolutely necessary."³

REFLECT: Where, in your own life, have you suspected God of being "low-key savage"? How have you learned to rely more on God in the losses you've endured?



God Is in All Things

*Your judgments stand firm today, for
all things are your servants.*

PSALM 119:91

Recently I was hurt by a friend's insensitive comment. My first response was irritation, and then I began mentally cataloging a list of grievances—remembering all the other times I'd been hurt by her.

It might have ended there, but when I came across these words from A. W. Tozer, I started thinking differently about the situation: "If we understand that everything happening to us is to make us more Christlike, it will solve a great deal of anxiety in our lives."⁴

Everything that is happening to me is to make me more Christlike. Nothing is excluded. Joy and pain. Suffering and ease. People who love me and people who hurt me.

I stopped focusing on my friend's comment and wondered why God might have brought this situation into my life. It was

a simple question, but the answers revealed more about my heart than hers. My friend's actions were an avenue for God to reveal a layer of sin in my life that I otherwise would have glossed over. As I saw the sin in my response, I was able to confess it to God and repent.

Whenever I feel annoyed or frustrated or angry, perhaps God is inviting me to examine my own heart instead of focusing my attention outward. Perhaps my irritation is an invitation from the Lord to go deeper with Him. God may be doing something far more important and more lasting in me than what is happening to me.

No experience is ever wasted. My difficult circumstances can cultivate a dependence on Christ and teach me to pray more fervently. And my successes can lead me to praise God and give Him glory. And perhaps teach me humility by taking the low seat even in the limelight. Everything can be a stepping stone to holiness.

Madame Guyon had a difficult life, marked by illness, neglect, and humiliation. When she was sixteen, her father tricked her into marrying a man who was twenty-two years older and afflicted with gout. Guyon became his nurse and cared for him tirelessly, living in her mother-in-law's home, even after she spread vicious lies about her.

Guyon deeply trusted God's character and saw that her father's deceit and mother-in-law's lies were both blessings because they enabled her to humbly turn to God and see His great love for her.⁵ Rather than growing bitter at the pain she'd

endured, she chose to see God's loving hand in it—that God had brought all her circumstances to draw her closer to Him.

Everything that is difficult in our lives is a divine invitation to turn to God. Our annoyances can reveal our sin. People who hurt us give us opportunities to forgive. Our physical ailments teach us to depend on God.

Everything that happens to us can make us more like Christ.

PRAY: Heavenly Father, turn my eyes from what is outside of me to what is inside of me. Meet me in that place. Reveal what is in my heart, and make me more like You.

Weeping may last for the night,
but joy comes in the morning.

PSALM 30:5 NASB

WAITING, WATCHING, HOPING—these words describe how Vaneetha lived for years, after her once-comfortable life dissolved in front of her. She pleaded with God to fix her situation and stop the pain in the midst of an escalating illness, the death of a child, and an unwanted divorce. But instead of doing what she asked for, God gave her something even more wonderful. He offered Himself.

This devotional will help you find hope in whatever you're facing today as it grapples with the inevitable questions:

- **How do we embrace** the present moment with its pain and imperfections instead of just waiting for our problems to disappear?
- **How do we live with** uncertainty, trusting that God is doing something beautiful in what appears to be an empty silence?
- **How do we wait for God**, satisfied in Him alone, without insisting on the outcome we want?

These ninety devotions are for anyone who is waiting in the dark, wondering when life will get better. Some reflections will encourage you to press on, some will help you process your losses, others will make you laugh, and still others will show you the gift of lament, in both its grittiness and grace. Ultimately, these devotions are intended to draw you closer to the God who is always for you—who is nearer than you know and loves you more than you can imagine.



VANEETHA RISNER is the author of *Desperate for Hope*, a 7-week study on suffering. Vaneetha and her husband Joel live in Raleigh, North Carolina, where she writes at vaneetha.com, encouraging readers to turn to Christ in their pain.

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