

The Hardest Thing I Have to Tell You

A Witness

This is the chapter I have been most afraid to write. It is also the one this book cannot do without.

Before I say anything else, I want you to know that thoughtful, faithful, loving Christians have answered the question this chapter is about to enter in more than one way. Some answer it the way I am about to. Some refuse to answer it at all and hold only the mystery, believing that any answer wounds more than it heals. Some say that God's ways are not our ways and that the question itself belongs to God alone. Each of these can be faithful. Each of them has been held by people who love survivors and who love God.

What I offer here is what I have come to, through my own life and my own walk with the One who was there. You are free to take it. You are free to leave it. You are free to come back to it later, when you are stronger, or to set it down entirely. If you need to skip this chapter and go on to the next one, that is not a failure of faith. It is a kindness to yourself, and the One who walks with you will understand it perfectly. The chapter that follows is offered with that freedom in mind.

I want to name, before I go any further, the cheap answers you have probably been given to this question. They are worth naming because most of what makes the honest answer difficult to receive is the bad taste left by the dishonest ones.

You have probably been told things that were meant to console you but did not. That God had a plan for the harm. That He needed what was done to you in order to accomplish something. That you should not question. That you should be grateful for what happened. That one day you will understand why God wanted it. Each of these answers was a form of spiritual malpractice. They are not true. They should not have been said to you. If they were said to you by people who represented God, those people were wrong, and their wrongness is not evidence of anything about God Himself.

I want to draw a careful distinction here, because the careless version of this teaching has wounded so many survivors that the careful version is hard to hear. There is a difference between *God planned the harm* and *God can bring good out of the harm*. The first sentence is false. The second is true. They are not the same sentence, and they should never be collapsed into each other.

God did not plan your abuse. God did not need it. God is not grateful to the perpetrators. What was done to you was evil, without qualification, and any theology that tries to make the evil itself into a kind of hidden good is not Christian theology. It is something else wearing Christian clothes.

And — at the same time — the evil did not catch Him by surprise. He saw it. He grieved it. He has been at work, ever since, weaving good from what should never have happened. Not because the harm was good. The harm was evil. But because He is the kind of God who can take what was meant for evil and redeem it, the way He did with Joseph's brothers, the way He did with the cross, the way He has been doing throughout your life in ways you may not yet have seen. The brothers' evil was real. God's good was also real. Both were true at once. The first did not justify the harm. The second did not erase it. They coexisted, and the second is stronger than the first, and the second is what is going to have the final word.

Holding both of these together is some of the most important theological work a survivor will ever do. The careless version — *God planned it* — turns God into a co-conspirator with the perpetrators. The dismissive version — *God had nothing to do with any of this* — turns God into a bystander. Neither is true. The truth is harder, and better. The harm was not His. The redemption is.

Having said all of that, there is still a question underneath. If God was there, and God saw, and God was grieved, and God hates what was done — what about that moment? What about the moment when the harm was happening and He did not stop it the way you desperately wanted Him to stop it?

Before I tell you what I have come to believe, I want to walk with you through three truths in order. They have to come in this order. If we skip the first one, the second one

becomes a way of making God smaller than He truly is, and that is not a kindness. It is a different kind of harm. You deserve the whole truth, held together, even where the holding is hard.

First: He Is All-Powerful.

I will not let you believe, and I will not pretend, that God could not have stopped what happened to you. He could have. He is the God who parted the Red Sea so His people could walk through on dry ground. He is the God who shut the mouths of lions for Daniel's sake. He is the God who spoke worlds into being and holds galaxies in His hand. He is the God who raised the dead, who calmed storms with a word, who multiplied loaves until thousands were full. There is no power in heaven or on earth that He does not surpass.

The prophet Jeremiah said it plainly: *Ah, Lord God! Behold, You have made the heavens and the earth by Your great power and by Your outstretched arm! Nothing is too difficult for You* (Jeremiah 32:17). The angel Gabriel said the same to a frightened young woman: *Nothing will be impossible with God* (Luke 1:37). Jesus Himself said: *With God all things are possible* (Matthew 19:26). And Job, who had lost everything, came at last to say: *I know that You can do all things, and that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted* (Job 42:2).

I will not hide behind a smaller God to spare you the question. The God we are talking about is not a God who tried His best and failed. He is not a God who was looking the other way. He is not a God who lacked the strength to intervene. He is the Almighty. He could have spoken a word and the room would have emptied. He could have sent angels. He could have stopped the breath in the lungs of those who harmed you. He has done such things before, in His own time, for His own reasons.

And I will not let you have a smaller God for another reason: the same power that troubles you here is the power you need for everything that is coming. If God were not all-powerful, on what ground could we say He will defeat the evil that set all of this in motion? On what ground could we say that Satan, the accuser, the one who has prowled

like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour, will be thrown down at the last? Scripture says He will. *The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet* (Romans 16:20). *And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone* (Revelation 20:10). *He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be abolished is death* (1 Corinthians 15:25–26). Every one of these promises requires a God who is all-powerful. A God who could not have stopped your suffering is also a God who cannot finally stop the one who caused it. You cannot have the second comfort without the first hard truth. They are the same omnipotence.

And He Is Also a Father Who Will Not Coerce Love.

The same God who is all-powerful is also the God who, in the beginning, made a world in which love was possible — and made it the only kind of world in which love is possible, which is a world where refusal is also possible.

From the very first pages of Scripture, the pattern is set. *I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life* (Deuteronomy 30:19). He set the choice before His people. He did not make it for them. He invited. He pleaded. He warned. He did not override. And later, through the prophet Isaiah: *All day long I have stretched out My hands to a disobedient and obstinate people* (Isaiah 65:2). The posture is His. The hands are stretched out. The refusal is on the human side.

Jesus said it Himself, weeping over Jerusalem: *Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing* (Matthew 23:37). *How often I wanted.* The longing was His. The reaching was His. *You were not willing.* The refusal was theirs. The same is true of every love that is real.

This is the truth that the careless answers will not let you see, and that the dismissive answers cannot account for. God did not lack the power to stop the people who harmed

you. He lacked the willingness to undo the nature of the world He was making — a world in which love is possible because refusal is also possible, a world in which your own yes to Him today is real because it was never forced. To override the freedom of the people who harmed you would have required overriding the freedom of every person in every moment. There is no selective override. A God who reaches in to control some choices and not others is not a God. If He did that He would be a manipulator. He would actually be doing what those who hurt us did. He is not that. He has never been that.

The cost of this kind of world is staggering. He knows. He has not denied the cost. He has not pretended the cost is worth it from the outside, as a ledger that balances. He has only told us that the love made possible by the freedom is the kind of love that can carry the world through to its end, and that He Himself was willing to bear the cost alongside us — not above us, not at a safe distance, but with us, in our flesh, on a cross.

I know this is not the same as comfort. I know that an answer which makes theological sense does not fill the hole where the protection should have been. The answer is the answer. The comfort is what comes next.

And He Is Also the God Who Did Not Leave You There.

Everything I have said so far has been about what He did not do. The rest of this chapter, and in many ways the rest of this book, is about what He did do. Both have to be said. But this is the part that holds the weight. This is the part the survivor was given Scripture for.

He saw. He did not look away. *You have taken account of my wanderings; put my tears in Your bottle. Are they not in Your book?* (Psalm 56:8). Every tear. In His bottle. Recorded in His book. Not one of them lost. Not one of them missed. Not one of them dismissed.

He grieved with you. He did not grieve from a distance. *In all their affliction He was afflicted* (Isaiah 63:9). The grief was His before it was yours, or at the very least it was His alongside yours. When you were broken, He was breaking with you. *The Lord is*

near to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit (Psalm 34:18). He did not stand far off. He came near. The nearness was the work.

He entered the suffering Himself. This is the part that no other religion in the world has dared to say. The God we are talking about did not stay safe on the other side of the world He had made. *He was despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief... Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried* (Isaiah 53:3–4). He carried them. Into His own body. Onto His own cross. *He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross* (1 Peter 2:24). The wounds He took were not symbolic. They were real. He let the world's evil come to Him, and He did not stop it, because stopping it would have meant leaving you alone with yours.

He gave you a mind that knew how to save you. Long before the harm reached you, He had already woven into your design a capacity so exquisite that science is still trying to understand it. When the suffering came, your mind — the mind He gave you — knew what to do. It separated you from what you could not yet hold. It took the unbearable and divided it among parts of you who could carry pieces of it until the day you would be strong enough to know the whole. It let you keep going to school. It let you keep loving the people you were able to love. It let you grow up. It let you live. It built walls of merciful forgetting between you and the terror, so that for years — sometimes decades — you walked through your life unaware of what had been done to you. The not-knowing was not denial. The not-knowing was protection. The truth was held in safe places by parts who knew how to hold it, until the maturity was in place, until the coping was in place, until you had enough ground under your feet to face what was waiting. The timing of your remembering was not late. The timing of your remembering was mercy. *For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and love and a sound mind* (2 Timothy 1:7). The sound mind He gave you is not the mind that never broke under what was done to you. The sound mind He gave you is the mind that knew how to keep you alive when breaking apart was the only way through. *I will give thanks to You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; wonderful are Your works, and my soul knows it very well* (Psalm 139:14). Fearfully and wonderfully. Not in spite of how you were made. Because of how you were made. The dividing was not a deficit. It was a deliverance. The parts who came forward to take what you could not take alone were not damage. They

were grace. They were God's provision, placed in you before you were born, against a day He grieved would come. You are not broken because they exist. You are alive because they do.

He carried you when you could not walk. *Even to your old age I will be the same, and even to your graying years I will bear you! I have done it, and I will carry you; and I will bear you and I will deliver you* (Isaiah 46:4). Through the years you could not feel Him. Through the years you could not name Him. Through the years faith itself had been used as a weapon against you. He was carrying you the whole time. The not-feeling was not the not-being-there. *I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you* (Hebrews 13:5). Never. Not in any room. Not in any year. Not in any silence.

He has promised justice. Not vague justice. Not eventual justice. Specific justice, for what was done to you, by His own hand. *Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord* (Romans 12:19). *There is nothing covered up that will not be revealed, and hidden that will not be known* (Luke 12:2). What was done in the dark will be brought into the light. What was whispered behind closed doors will be proclaimed from the housetops. The book is not closed. The accounting is coming. *For the vision is yet for the appointed time; it hastens toward the goal and it will not fail. Though it tarries, wait for it; for it will certainly come, it will not delay* (Habakkuk 2:3).

He has promised to redeem what was done. Not to justify it. Not to excuse it. Not to call it good. To redeem it — which is a different word. *Then I will make up to you for the years that the swarming locust has eaten* (Joel 2:25). The locusts were real. The years they ate were real. What He promises is not to pretend the locusts were not there. He promises to make up to you what they took. *And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose* (Romans 8:28). Not *all things are good*. Not *He planned all things*. *He causes all things to work together for good*. The harm was not the good. The redemption is.

He has promised that what He is doing in you now is not the end of the story. *He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away*

(Revelation 21:4). Every tear. Wiped away. By His own hand. The first things will have passed away. What is happening here is not the whole of what is happening. What you can see is not the whole of what is real.

This is what He did. This is what He is doing. This is what He has promised to do. The non-intervention in the moment was real. The intervention across the whole of eternity is also real. Both have to be held. The first will not have the last word. The second will. He has staked His own name on it, and His name is faithful.

That is as far as I know how to go. The Scriptures that follow take each piece of this answer and let you sit with it. I hope they help you. And I hope that, even where they do not fully satisfy, they make the silence of God feel less like abandonment and more like the pause before He finishes what He has begun.

The Freedom That Wounds and Frees

I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants.

Deuteronomy 30:19

God speaks this verse not as an announcement of what He will force, but as an invitation to what He asks. I have set before you. I have not chosen for you. The language is deliberate. From the very beginning, the Scriptures describe a God who puts real choices in front of real people, and then lets them choose. This is not a mistake in the design. This is the design. A universe in which love was possible required a universe in which refusal was also possible.

The people who harmed you exercised their freedom to do terrible things. That is the hardest truth in this verse. God set before them, too, life and death. He invited them to choose life. They chose otherwise. He grieved their choosing. He grieves it still. He did not undo the choice, because to undo theirs would have required undoing everyone's,

including yours. This is not an explanation that makes the suffering acceptable. It is a description of how the suffering became possible in a universe designed for love.

There is a deep and terrible cost to the kind of world God made. He bears that cost alongside us. He does not deny it. He does not pretend the cost is worth it from the outside, as a ledger that balances. He only tells us that the love made possible by the freedom is the kind of love that justifies the world's existence — not because it makes the suffering trivial, but because the love is strong enough to walk into the suffering and come out the other side.

He Wanted to Gather You

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing.

Matthew 23:37

This is Jesus speaking, near the end of His life, to a city He loved. Listen to what He is saying. How often I wanted to gather your children together. The longing is His. The posture is His. He wanted to protect them the way a hen protects her chicks — hiding them under her wings, interposing her own body between them and danger. This is not a distant God. This is a God whose entire posture is protection.

And yet the city did not let Him. You were not willing. The refusal was on the human side, not the divine side. God's longing to gather was met, across generations, by humanity's refusal to be gathered. The freedom that allowed the refusal was the same freedom that made the gathering meaningful. A hen who forced her chicks under her wings would not be protecting them. She would be suffocating them. The nature of the love required the consent of the loved.

I want you to hear this in the context of what was done to you. Jesus' heart toward the vulnerable is the heart of a hen over her chicks. It is not the heart of an aloof observer.

When children are harmed, His posture is the posture of one who wanted to gather them, who longed to interpose Himself, who ached to pull them under His wings. That you were not gathered in the moment was not a failure of divine desire. It was the cost of a world where refusal is possible — a cost He has been carrying alongside you the whole time.

This does not let the perpetrators off the hook. They did not refuse to be gathered; they refused to gather. They stood between the chicks and the wings on purpose. The text of Matthew 23 is a warning to religious authorities who harmed the vulnerable in God's name. Jesus' rage in that chapter is not directed at the sheep. It is directed at the shepherds who were devouring the flock.

But it also shows us the shape of God's heart toward those who were not gathered. He wanted to gather them. The intervention He desired was real. The harm that happened despite His desire is not a sign of His indifference. It is a sign of what love costs in a universe where refusal is possible. He grieved it. He grieves it still. And what He did not prevent in the moment, He has promised to answer in full.

He Is Not Slow. He Is Patient.

The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.

2 Peter 3:9

This verse addresses a question many people ask: why does God wait? Why the delay? Why does the justice take so long to arrive? The answer given here is unexpected. God is not slow. He is patient. The delay is not indifference. It is mercy — even toward those who have done terrible things, God is extending the possibility of repentance, because that is who He is. He would rather a perpetrator repent and be restored than be destroyed unrepentant. This is not a comfortable answer for survivors. But it is an honest one about the nature of the God we are dealing with.

I want to name clearly that this patience is not permission. The patience is not God saying, ‘take your time, harm a few more people.’ The patience is God holding open the door of repentance until the last possible moment, knowing that when it closes, it closes. Every day the perpetrators did not repent was a day of grace they did not deserve, not a day of permission for more harm. The justice is coming. The patience is not a delay of justice — it is the final offer of mercy before the justice arrives.

For you, the practical meaning of this verse is this: the fact that the harm has not yet been answered does not mean it will not be. The bottle is being filled. The book is being kept. The day of reckoning is being held open only for as long as mercy requires. When that day closes, nothing — not secrecy, not death, not the passage of time — will keep what was done in the dark from being brought into the light.

The Vision Awaits Its Appointed Time

For the vision is yet for the appointed time; it hastens toward the goal and it will not fail. Though it tarries, wait for it; for it will certainly come, it will not delay.

Habakkuk 2:3

The prophet Habakkuk had been asking God a question very much like the one this chapter has been asking. ‘How long, O Lord, will I call for help, and You will not hear? I cry out to You, ‘Violence!’ yet You do not save.’ He was not asking rhetorically. He was asking because he could not understand why God was not acting in the face of obvious evil. God’s answer, when it came, was not an explanation. It was a promise. The vision is for the appointed time. The answer is coming. It will not be late. It will not fail.

This is different from ‘God has a plan.’ ‘God has a plan’ is used to justify the harm. ‘The vision is for the appointed time’ is used to promise that the harm will be answered. The first sentence makes the suffering retroactively acceptable. The second sentence makes the waiting for the answer bearable. They are not the same. Only one of them is true.

The waiting is not comfortable. Habakkuk never said it was. He did say, at the end of his book, that he would rejoice in the God of his salvation even when everything in his life suggested there was nothing to rejoice about — because the answer was coming, on God's timeline, at God's appointed time. You do not have to rejoice today. You only have to know that the waiting is not forever, and that the One you are waiting on is not slow but patient, and that when the appointed time comes, the answer will be complete.

The One Who Entered the Sorrow

He was despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and like one from whom men hide their face He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried.

Isaiah 53:3-4

This is one of the most startling passages in all of Scripture. It is a description, written hundreds of years before Jesus was born, of the One who would come to be God's answer to the question of suffering. And the answer is not what people expected. The answer was not a warrior who would eliminate suffering by force. The answer was a Man of sorrows who would carry the grief Himself — who would enter the suffering rather than stop it from the outside.

Read the words slowly. Despised. Forsaken. A man of sorrows. Acquainted with grief. Like one from whom men hide their face. This is not the description of a God who watches suffering from a throne of detachment. This is the description of a God who chose, when He came to answer the question of human suffering, to answer it from the inside of it. He did not stop the grief from existing. He entered the grief. He let it come to Him. He carried it.

Surely our griefs He Himself bore. The word 'surely' carries the weight of astonished recognition. The prophet is saying, with the tone of someone who has just seen

something he did not expect to see: it was our grief He was carrying. The One we thought was being punished by God was actually being crushed under the weight of our own sorrow, which He had taken onto Himself.

This is the deepest comfort this chapter can offer you. The question ‘why did He not stop it’ has an answer, and we have walked through that answer carefully, but the answer is not the comfort. The comfort is this: He was there, and He was entering your suffering, and He was, in some mysterious way we cannot fully understand, carrying the weight of it Himself. Your grief did not go unwitnessed. It also did not go uncarried. The Man of Sorrows did not only see your sorrow. He took some of it into His own body and bore it.

This does not make the suffering acceptable. It does not make the perpetrators less guilty. It does not fill the hole where the protection should have been. But it changes what we understand about the God we are dealing with. He is not the God who avoided the world’s pain. He is the God who, when He could have stayed far from it, came as close as it was possible to come — close enough to let it do to Him what it had done to us. That is not the posture of an indifferent God. That is the posture of a Love that would rather share the suffering than leave the sufferers alone in it.

For Your Own Heart

What is one small thing — just one — that you might let yourself trust Him with this week?

Not the whole story. Not the deepest wound. Not the biggest fear. One small thing.

A worry you have been holding alone. A hope you have been afraid to name. A part of tomorrow that feels uncertain. A decision that has been waiting for you to make it. A conversation you have been avoiding.

Tell Him about it. Not to receive instructions. Just to let Him know. The telling itself is a brick.

If you cannot trust Him with anything today, that is the most honest answer there is. He can hear that too. You can say, if nothing else, I do not know how to trust You yet. That sentence is also a beginning. He understands it perfectly.

Rest Here

This was a heavy chapter. Thank you for staying with it.

You do not have to have arrived anywhere by the end of these pages. The questions are still real. The answers are still partial. What has been offered here is only a beginning.

Whatever anger is still in you, let it be. He can hold it. He has been holding it. Whatever grief is still in you, let it be. He has been carrying it.

The vision is for the appointed time. What has not yet been answered will be. You are not waiting alone.

Rest now. You are held by the One who chose to share your sorrow.