

"A one of a kind book . . . to read for yourself or give to a struggling friend or loved one without the fear that depression and suicidal thoughts will be minimized, medicalized or over-spiritualized."—**Kay Warren**, cofounder of Saddleback Church

SARAH J. ROBINSON

I LOVE JESUS.

SNEAK
PEEK



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*But I Want
to Die*

FINDING HOPE IN THE
DARKNESS OF DEPRESSION

Foreword by Holly K. Oxhandler, PhD, LMSW

I LOVE
JESUS,
But I Want to Die

FINDING HOPE IN THE
DARKNESS OF DEPRESSION

SARAH J. ROBINSON



WATERBROOK

I LOVE JESUS, BUT I WANT TO DIE

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*To Katie (and all those like her).
You've fought fiercely for wholeness and
turned your shattered pieces into something beautiful.
The world is better because you're still here.*

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Foreword

Dearest Reader,

I am so grateful for your presence in this precious moment and for your willingness to begin this book. Regardless of how this book has crossed your path, the pages ahead contain some of the most honest and tender reflections from one woman's journey navigating the intersection of faith and mental health.

Over the last several years, we've heard more courageous and heartbreaking stories surface alongside a growing amount of research that indicates our faith and mental health are interwoven in complex ways. As someone who has examined this intersection for more than a decade, I sense that these stories and studies are beginning to heal the complicated and unfortunately common divide between faith communities and mental health professions. Sarah's willingness to share her story and wisdom from lived experience helps us heal this division and empowers each of us to see these areas of our lives not as *either-or* but as *both-and*. We can have faith *and* struggle with mental illness, while moving toward our unique version of thriving.

Sarah and I connected a couple of years ago over our shared interest in this topic, and getting to know her compassionate spirit, gentle heart, and humble desire to care for others has been a gift. Her journey is unique, and yet the complex layers of what she's navigated echo what so many experience. For some, faith can be a powerful source of support, while for others, elements of faith can

be part of the painful struggle. More often than not, however, it's a complicated combination of both.

Sarah's careful attention to the diversity of experiences you may bring to her story, her deep respect for both science and faith, and her humility merge into one of the most helpful books for understanding one person's lived experiences of mental illness who also loves Jesus with her whole heart.

This book is as much for those with mental health struggles perhaps wrestling with their faith as it is for many other groups. For example, the loved one who wants to better understand how to support their partner, friend, and/or family member working through symptoms of mental illness will be served in the pages ahead. Mental health-care providers with clients who regularly mention the role of faith in coping with mental illness will find deeper insights into this intersection. Finally, faith leaders who recognize that mental-health struggles are a current reality for one out of five of their community members' daily lives—and even more when factoring in loved ones who are impacted—will find helpful considerations ahead as they discern how to best serve their community.

I am deeply grateful for Sarah's courage, vulnerability, transparency, and tender care woven throughout this book. Even more, *I am deeply grateful for Sarah's presence in our world*, and I am honored by her willingness to share her heart with us. Sarah's life is a gift, and her story is one we can all grow from as we care for ourselves and for those around us.

Kindly,
Holly K. Oxhandler, PhD, LMSW

Contents

<i>Foreword by Holly K. Oxhandler</i>	00
<i>Author's Note</i>	00
<i>Introduction: How to Use This Book</i>	00

Part One: Dying

1	Loving Jesus Doesn't Cure You	00
2	People Say Terrible Things (But We Still Need Them)	00
3	"I'm Not Disappointed in You"	00
4	Learning to Be Loved	00
5	Bad Therapy	00

Part Two: Surviving

6	Permission to Be Broken	00
7	Relapse, Reputation, and Risk	00
8	If I Make My Bed in Hell	00
9	The Darkness May Always Be There	00
10	Living with a Limp	00

Part Three: Thriving

11	Sit in the Dark	00
12	When Provision Comes in a Pill	00

13	Good Therapy and Doing the Work	00
14	Beating Back the Darkness	00
15	Ruthless with Self-Care	00
16	Boundaries, Loving Others, and Soul-Keeping	
17	Even If	00

<i>Appendix A: How to Help Depressed and Suicidal Loved One</i>	00
---------------------------------------------------------------------	----

<i>Appendix B: Additional Resources</i>	00
-----------------------------------------	----

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	00
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<i>Notes</i>	00
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Author's Note

I know there might be times when you don't think you can go on. You don't have to face those moments alone. If you need immediate help or just someone to talk to when you feel overwhelmed, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is available 24/7 at 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255). For TTY users, use your preferred relay service or dial 711 then 1-800-273-8255. You can also reach the Crisis Text Line by texting the word HOME to 741741. Trained volunteers can help you navigate your situation, come up with a plan of action, and find your way back to a calm, safe place. Or call 911 or head to the emergency room—or an emergency mental health facility, if available in your area—if you can safely do so. You matter immensely and are worthy of support, care, and everything it takes to get better.



Introduction

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

You're here because of the pain, aren't you? It might be a dull, gray ache that steals the color from your world or a raging inferno tucked just beneath your skin. If nothing else, it's persistent, sticking around long enough that you don't know if you can do this anymore.

I've felt that pain too. It's the stray dog I fed and couldn't get rid of, the colorless clouds, the oppressive fog. It's the weight on my chest, the rattle in my bones, the ghost that haunts the halls of my heart and mind and body. It's the curse I've carried like a scarlet letter, desperately wishing to be rid of it. And it's the disorientation of being plunged into midnight, finding myself terrified of the unseen things howling in the darkness. I'm sure there's something in that description that you can relate to; otherwise, you wouldn't be here.

If you don't personally know this agony, perhaps your heart is aching for somebody you care about: a loved one, a child or friend or spouse. Maybe a congregant or student. You're trying to understand his pain so you can offer some support, or maybe even help her find her way back to hope. It's a beautiful thing to want to lighten someone's load; thank you for loving well enough to learn about this illness.

Whether you're here for yourself or a loved one, I'm so sorry that you know this anguish. And I'm so glad you're here. Because there's something I've learned that I desperately want to share with you: it's possible to live a rich, beautiful life even under these heavy clouds.

This might sound absurd, especially for those of us who were

taught a life of faith means a life of victory, constantly overcoming the challenges in our paths. When healing doesn't happen, when our struggles remain, we're left wondering what's wrong with us for not experiencing this kind of triumph.

I've asked that question—*What's wrong with me?*—more times than I can count. But years of wrestling with depression, self-harm, and suicidal thoughts have taught me that sometimes the greater victory of faith is learning to walk with Jesus when suffering remains. This doesn't mean we're doomed to have miserable lives, controlled by mental illness. Instead, we can learn to live *well*, cultivate hope, and find new ways of experiencing the abundant life Jesus promised those who walk with him. This may not be the vision of what it means to thrive that we're familiar with, but it's no less valid.

Let me say it again, friend: you are not disqualified from the abundant life Christ promised to all his followers. There is beauty, hope, and even joy ahead for you; you aren't too fractured to experience it. There's a richer relationship with the God who loves you and never leaves you. There are wonderful surprises, and there's freedom you can't yet imagine, *even if* you don't experience complete healing from mental illness in this life.¹

I know this because these promises—of hope even *in* the dark, of joy coexisting with sorrow—are etched throughout Scripture, from beginning to end. Science is constantly revealing ways we can live more whole and more healthy lives, even with depression. I'm confident of this, not just because I read about it in the Bible or in a scientific research study, but because I'm living it.

I've had lifelong depression and anxiety. Over the years, I've attempted suicide and used self-harm to cope with the pain. Even now, I still have hard days and weeks. But in spite of all that, my life is marked by genuine peace and even joy because I've learned how to care well for myself, I've realized what God *really* thinks and feels about me and my struggles, and I've found how I can support my brain and body to experience more joy and contentment. Now when hard days come, I know I can ride the waves of depression without drowning under them. That's what this book is all about.

This book won't cure you. It won't fix everything for you (believe



me, I wish it could). But it can help you find a path to a rich, fulfilling life despite living with severe depression.

I want you to know that I am not a mapmaker. I can't plot your journey in perfect detail, showing you every milestone and landmark on the way to a life you want to wake up to, even on your hardest days. I am simply a fellow traveler, perhaps a few paces ahead on the journey, able to turn back and share some of my steps and missteps. I've picked up some information that can help make your way easier, and I hope to help you avoid some pitfalls and navigate well. But mostly I want to give you hope.

I am not a therapist, doctor, or scientist. I am a bit of a nerd who loves to understand how things work and why. In this book, you'll find research, tips, and tricks that have helped me to care for myself and find healthy rhythms in the midst of my depression. However, I cannot give medical or psychological advice, so please don't take what I share in these pages as a replacement for working with well-trained, licensed professionals. In fact, if you don't already have a solid team around you, that's the first thing I would suggest. Skip ahead to the chapters on working with doctors and therapists if you need some help navigating the process to find a good one.

I'm also not a trained theologian. You won't find a systematic explanation of the theology of sickness and suffering here. Yes, I'm a former youth pastor, but the majority of my theological understanding has come from personal study, listening to people who believe differently than me, and the experience of walking with God in hard places.

In these pages, you'll discover the things I wish I had known when I began my journey of integrating my faith and mental health—the tools I wish I had much earlier. Sometimes that means I'll talk about the spiritual side, focusing on ways to pray or things I've learned about the love of God. Other times, I'll dig into the practical and scientific side by sharing the work of professionals who have discovered how we can work with our brains and bodies to live well, even in the fog. When it comes to the research, I'll leave the nuances to the experts—just think of these parts as an introduction to the voices I've learned a great deal from. If something piques your

interest or seems particularly relevant to your experience, please follow up with additional reading. There are plenty of resources in the notes and appendix B to check out.

How to Use This Book

I wish I could sit with you at a coffee shop, hear your story, and share the bits and pieces of my journey that would most encourage you. Of course, since I can't sit down with everybody, some parts of this book will be more immediately relevant than others. That's okay.

You'll find the chapters arranged more or less chronologically according to my experience, but feel free to skip around based on what seems most helpful to you. Each chapter focuses on a lesson I learned along the way: from becoming a new Christian, to discovering that loving Jesus didn't take away the darkness of depression, to the process that taught me to cultivate hope even in my worst seasons. Some chapters will be practical, offering specific steps to take or exercises to try. Others deal more with mindsets, beliefs, and emotional challenges that we often experience on our mental health journeys.

One Thing You Need

When you've been wrestling despair for a long time, it starts to feel impossible that anything will ever change. That loss of hope for a better future is a dangerous place to be. And for somebody who deals with severe depression and suicidal thoughts, a complete loss of hope can be life threatening.

For many years, I believed that I was stuck in my anguish unless God chose to heal me from the depression and anxiety that plagued me. I lived in fear of the next depressive episode that would send me into a pit so deep I wasn't sure I'd ever climb out. It was a brutal time. What I didn't know is that I wasn't at the mercy of my circumstances.

Eventually, I discovered a crucial truth about thriving: it's not about being healthy or ill. It's about having a set of learnable skills that I can develop and apply to any circumstance. Dr. Carol Dweck,

a professor from Stanford, has spent her career researching the way our beliefs change our ability to thrive. She discovered that a simple change in mindset makes all the difference.

The first perspective is the one I had about mental health for most of my life. It's called a fixed mindset, and it assumes that our abilities and traits are predetermined and unchangeable. That means we believe that some people are naturally smarter, or better at math, or able to cope with hard things, while others missed out on those abilities. When we have a fixed mindset, we believe that setbacks and failures reveal who we really are and will always be.

The second perspective is one that has changed my life. It's called a growth mindset because the core belief is that we can learn and change our abilities and traits. Sure, some people might have more natural talent at art or basketball, but anybody can learn to be a better artist or basketball player through practice and education. With the growth mindset, failures and setbacks don't have anything to say about who we are as people; they just reveal areas in which we can grow and learn.²

In Dr. Dweck's research, she found that mindset makes a huge difference in people with depression. Patients with a fixed mindset experience more severe depression, more tormenting thoughts about themselves, and more disruption to their lives than those with a growth mindset. They aren't able to keep up with their work or care for themselves. In fact, Dr. Dweck explained that "this mindset seems to rob [patients] of their coping resources."³

Those who have the growth mindset still ache with the pain of depression, still struggle to get out of bed and face another day. But they also believe that they can get better and that their choices make a difference in their lives. "The worse they felt, the more motivated they became and the more they confronted the problems that faced them," Dr. Dweck said.⁴ In other words, the simple belief that things can change—that *we* can change—can make a world of difference in whether we're able to keep going in the darkness.

A growth mindset sounds a lot like hope, doesn't it?

That doesn't mean you're going to be able to change your whole life in an instant, and it certainly does not mean you can simply

think your way out of your illness. Instead, this perspective—that thriving is possible—helps us pursue things that make a huge difference, such as prayer, medication, therapy, and good self-care.

A Note on Difficult Content (Trigger/Content Warnings)

It's a delicate balance when writing about depression, suicide, and self-harm. On one hand, it can be incredibly validating to hear someone talk about the things you haven't been able to voice. We all want to know we aren't alone and that somebody else gets it. On the other hand, reading about self-harm or a suicide attempt can stir up dark thoughts and urges that make you feel overwhelmed and unsafe. We call this being triggered, and it's a physiological reaction to something especially distressing. It commonly happens as part of a trauma response, but we can also experience triggers with other mental health challenges (such as a struggle with an eating disorder or suicidal thoughts). Being triggered doesn't mean you're weak. It's just your body's way of saying it doesn't feel safe and it's looking for a way to cope with an overwhelming experience.

With all this in mind, I've attempted to err on the side of caution in what I share, but it's important for you to skip sections that don't feel safe for you. While everyone experiences different triggers, I've highlighted some particularly difficult sections to make them easier for you to skip. If you do notice yourself feeling distressed (anxious, short of breath, lightheaded, numb, or having more thoughts of hurting yourself), that's a sign you should take a few deep breaths, skip the section, or set the book down for a bit. It is much more important for you to stay safe than it is to read every word in this book.

A Note on God and Faith

I haven't always known God to be loving, compassionate, and close. I didn't believe God loved me for the first five years of my faith because painful circumstances, complicated church experiences, and trauma made it hard for me to connect with the God I had always

heard is kind and gracious. You might relate to that struggle, my friend. If, like me, you've been angry with God or haven't always felt he could be trusted, that's okay. If you've struggled with faith or aren't even sure what you believe, you are welcome here.

In these pages, you'll see how I've come to know a God who is present in the dark and refuses to bail on us. I speak of God as relentlessly kind, knowing that we who wrestle with mental illness desperately need to know divine comfort and grace. God is love (1 John 4:8), after all, and there is immense healing in knowing that love is real and for us, even during our worst moments.

It's been my joy to connect with readers from many different streams within the Christian faith, with traditions as beautiful and varied as the body of Christ. This is precious to me because God is greater than all our boxes and we need each other to reveal more and more of God to the world. But it's also precious because the kindness of God is not bound to any denomination, worldview, or political perspective—and neither are mental health challenges.

Most of us with mental illness have experienced trauma of some type⁵, so we bring those experiences to bear on our perceptions of God. For example, it can be difficult to see God as a good parent if we've only ever experienced toxic parenting. For that reason, and many others, assigning a gender to the God who created both male and female as equal image bearers is uncomfortable for many.⁶ That said, I've chosen to speak about God in traditional ways, including using masculine pronouns, though I acknowledge that may be difficult for believers with different backgrounds and faith experiences. I've done this because it is most familiar to the majority of my readers as well as me. If this is foreign or strange to you, please keep in mind that all our little words are simply signposts pointing to a God whose fullness defies description.

When It Feels Too Hard

I've lived with mental illness long enough to know there will probably be times when the clouds feel like they're closing in and you're not sure you can face the day. We're going to talk about some things

in this book that won't be easy to do, some changes that will take practice to implement. And there might be moments when you grow impatient with the slow pace of change or don't think you have it in you.

Take courage, my friend.

The mindset research I mentioned earlier is exciting because it proves that we really can change our lives. But what's even better than that is the fact that we, as believers, have the additional strength and support of God to help us. By the time the apostle Paul wrote about learning to navigate hardship, he had endured severe trauma: beatings, imprisonment, and even starvation. He was near the end of his life, writing from a prison cell, when he said, "I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength" (Philippians 4:13, NLT).

The same God who raised Jesus from the dead, who empowered Paul through such suffering, is with us now. Throughout this book, we'll see over and over how God is with us to help us in the darkness. We don't just have the God-given ability to renew our minds (though we'll look at the science behind brain change and what this means for us). We have Christ himself, present in our lives through his Spirit, to strengthen us in our weakest, darkest moments.

When those moments come, take courage. When you don't feel hopeful, remind yourself of this truth: you can learn to live well despite mental illness. And whether depression becomes a distant memory for you someday or it remains part of your life as it does for mine, you are not disqualified from the rich, abundant life that Jesus promised. There are good things ahead, my friend. And you are worth whatever it takes to get there.

Part One

DYING



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Loving Jesus Doesn't Cure You

TRIGGER/CONTENT WARNING—The first section of this chapter discusses a suicide attempt. If you are currently struggling with thoughts of suicide or self-harm or believe reading about a suicide attempt would be unhealthy for you for any reason, please skip the gray highlighted section. Remember, if you notice any distress as you read, take a few deep breaths, step away, and distract yourself with pleasant thoughts or activities before returning to the book. Take good care of yourself.

I was a Christian the first time I tried to kill myself.

I'd contemplated suicide countless times over the years, emptying a bottle of pills into my hand to feel their weight or fantasizing about stepping in front of a car. The thoughts were constant, vicious, and unspoken. But I never made an actual attempt until eight months after committing my life to Christ in a tiny warehouse church.

I'd done all the "right" things. I got baptized, went to church every time the doors were open, swapped my old friends for relationships with youth-group kids, read my Bible, prayed, and worshipped. I'd gone to conferences and even on my first mission trip. And with my charismatic,



miracle-focused church, I'd preached the gospel and prayed for people to be healed on the streets of our city.

I was convinced I should have felt better.

But I didn't.

Instead, the hope of my new faith faded into a gnawing sense of disappointment. Why did I still hurt so much? Why wouldn't God fix me? Everyone at my new church seemed to receive constant reassurances of God's love and approval, but he seemed bitterly silent to me. It only reinforced the raging self-hatred I'd carried for so long. *God doesn't even want me. It's my fault; I'm too selfish and sinful. It's never going to get better.* I felt sick all the time and everything seemed so hollow. I was sure I was doomed to an unending ache and I couldn't bear it.

So, one late-spring evening when my house was empty, I found myself sitting on the kitchen floor, pressing a knife into my eager skin. There was no note, no explanation, just a blade and some blood between me and relief from the bone-crushing suffering.

At first I felt calm, resigned. That hollow nausea was still in my chest, but at least I didn't have to live with it much longer. I took a deep breath, bracing for the pain. But then I froze statue-still. My heart pounded and I started to sweat as I seemed to wrestle a force outside myself. I willed myself to press in just a little more, just enough, but I couldn't do it. I couldn't make it happen.

Finally, I relented. I flung the knife across the room.

"You won," I spat in God's direction, flushed with anger. It was all his fault I couldn't be free from the pain.

I don't know how long I sat on the dirty kitchen floor, but I eventually realized I didn't want my family to find me there, so I got up and put the knife away. I climbed into bed, put on a worship CD, cursed God, and went to sleep.

I told only one person about the attempt, a kid in my youth group who was like a big brother to me. I don't know if he ever told anybody else, if he thought I was being dramatic, if he really understood what I was saying. And I don't remember his response. But I do know he never mentioned it again. My secret struggle with the darkness remained a secret.

As an adult, I look back with compassion on those around me; they were as clueless about how to handle mental illness as I was. What was that seventeen-year-old boy in the early 2000s supposed to know about suicide prevention? What were my twenty-three-year-old youth pastors in a “name it and claim it” church supposed to tell me when I talked about how much I was hurting?

It's not that they didn't do their best to lead and love me well; they just didn't have the tools they needed to care for someone with severe depression. Chris and Jenny were newlyweds just figuring out what it meant to be married, work, go to college, and run a youth group all at the same time. To be in ministry—especially in a small church—is to live under a microscope, and as neither had any formal training, they depended on the theology they picked up from the culture around them. To say they were stretched thin would be a massive understatement, but they had big hearts and longed to make a difference in the lives of others.

A few months after the attempt, when I hesitantly shared bits of my pain, they carved time out of their impossible schedules to invite me over for dinner at their four-hundred-square-foot apartment. Chris talked to me about overcoming lies with Scripture and spending more time in the presence of God, while Jenny made me a card covered in glittery stickers and Bible verses about freedom, overcoming the flesh, and having the mind of Christ. They prayed with me and encouraged me to praise the Lord, especially when I didn't feel like it.

That night, I left their cramped apartment with a jumble of emotions. My youth pastors did everything they knew how to do, and their love for me was obvious. But I also felt frustrated because my experience didn't match the promises, confused because I didn't understand why. Regardless, I received the same message they had from our church culture: Jesus fixes everything. We just have to co-operate.

When I began to self-harm in college, Chris and Jenny would say they'd found out I had started cutting "again," as though it had been something that plagued me in the years before I came to faith. I never corrected them, never told them how I only started carving my pain in my skin after I pledged my life to Christ.

I understood the unwritten rules: This isn't the story I'm supposed to tell. This isn't how it works for "good Christians." You meet Jesus and then everything gets better. You discover you're loved and find your purpose in Christ, and you're filled with unspeakable joy. Life is good, God blesses you, and you're too busy serving others and worshipping God to hurt like that. That's how it's supposed to work.

You don't find yourself slipping deeper beneath the waves, drowning while surrounded by people who can't even see the water. You don't starve in the middle of the elaborate feast set before you. You don't watch the light grow dim and wonder how everyone else around you is able to see anything at all.

But that's what happened to me.

Looking back, it's not tough to see how my church—and countless others—came to believe that loving Jesus cures all ills. We loved a good testimony, proof of God working in our midst. Week after week, people would stand up and share how they were healed, delivered, or rescued from some difficult thing or another. The message was clear: Jesus fixes broken things. Jesus works miracles.

Our senior pastor was a firm believer in the miraculous and leaned heavily on verses that talk about God healing anyone and

everyone. We were taught that God promised perfect health when he brought the Israelites out of Egypt and that these verses were just as applicable to us:

He said, “If you will listen carefully to the voice of the LORD your God and do what is right in his sight, obeying his commands and keeping all his decrees, then I will not make you suffer any of the diseases I sent on the Egyptians; for *I am the LORD who heals you*. (Exodus 15:26, NLT)

And the LORD will protect you from all sickness. *He will not let you suffer* from the terrible diseases you knew in Egypt, but he will inflict them on all your enemies! (Deuteronomy 7:15, NLT)

We recited Psalm 103:3 together every Sunday to build our faith: “He forgives *all* my sins and heals *all* my diseases” (NLT). And Isaiah 54:17 promised that “no weapon formed against you shall prosper” (NKJV).

It wasn't just the Old Testament that promised God would heal and restore everything. Luke 4:40 recorded that when sick people were brought to Jesus, “no matter what their diseases were, the touch of his hand healed *every one*” (NLT). And Matthew 7:11 clearly showed that if we asked our Father for good gifts, he would give them to us.

Isn't the crux of Christianity that there is a good God who loves us and paid the price for our sin and suffering? Isn't his character full of kindness and compassion? Doesn't it make sense that his will is always to heal us?

That theology sounds true and beautiful—and it fits well with the very human desire to avoid suffering. In my church, I believe this was taught from an innocent desire to see God glorified and impact the lives of his children. It was never intended to cause harm or undermine the full truth of the gospel. But it's woefully incomplete, ignoring the many times in Scripture that God—for whatever reason—allowed people to endure sickness and suffering without swooping in to rescue them from it.

Like countless other churches, my community glossed over verses that talked about suffering as part of life or times when God allowed painful situations to remain. It wasn't until years later that I saw a fuller picture of suffering in Scripture. I found this truth woven throughout the New Testament, in verses that get little notice: God doesn't always heal people.

In Galatians 4:13–14, we learn that Paul was sick when he came to Galatia—sick enough that it would have tempted the people to reject him. Instead, they took him in and cared for him. Later, we learn that one of Paul's companions was left behind to rest because he was sick (2 Timothy 4:20). He wasn't healed to go on with the important missionary work.

Even Jesus didn't always heal everybody. There's this beautiful story in John 5 in which Jesus comes up to a pool called Bethesda in Jerusalem. It's surrounded by crowds of people in desperate need of healing. They're paralyzed, sick, or blind, waiting for the moment when the water starts to bubble and stir. They believed that the bubbling was actually caused by an angel and whoever could get into the pool first would be healed.

So Jesus comes up, makes his way through the crowd, and stops in front of a man who had been sick for almost forty years. “Do you want to be healed?” he asks.

This poor, sick man doesn't know who Jesus is, doesn't know his life is about to change, and just says he can't get into the water in time. If you've read the story, you know what happens next: Jesus tells this man who has been ill for thirty-eight years to get up—and he's healed instantly.

It's a beautiful story for so many reasons: the way Jesus saw somebody who wasn't even looking for him, the way the grace of God made way for healing, and the heady possibility that one encounter with the Lord can change everything—but we usually miss one important fact.

There were crowds of people Jesus didn't heal that day.

Tons of them. In fact, the King James Version calls it “a multitude.” And Jesus just made his way past them, maybe even stepping over them as they lay on mats and cobblestones around the pool.



Why do we ignore this?

I think it's because we're afraid.

Maybe we're afraid we'll be stepped over, passed by, or ignored by Jesus.

Maybe we're afraid that God isn't really as good as we want to believe, and it's hard to hold the tension of a Father who both gives good gifts and allows us to endure suffering.

We have to wonder what it means if God is able to heal but doesn't heal us. God may be good, but is he good to us when our anguish seems to go unnoticed by an all-powerful, all-loving being? Is there something horribly wrong with us that keeps us from experiencing his kindness and grace?

It's scary when we recognize God's goodness in the lives of others but not our own. And in some church structures, those anxieties can be reinforced by those in the pulpit or the pews. You may even have experienced the kind of toxic leadership that uses those fears as a tool for control or selfish gain, telling you God will bless you only if you give more money or conform to certain expectations. But in most churches, this plays out less as a desire for control and more as a longing for security.¹

This subtle prosperity-gospel faith teaches us that if we do the right things—whether it's having enough faith, giving financially, or working hard enough—God will bless us. Maybe we don't expect him to reward us with a fancy car or big bank account but surely with happiness and healing and answers to our problems. On some level, we are convinced that the circumstances of our lives are evidence of how happy he is with us. We may labor in prayer or performance, but our ultimate goal is to be good enough to please God. This belief system is especially dangerous because it teaches people struggling with mental illness that our circumstances are our own fault. That searing shame drives some of us to despondency, denial, or even resignation. Others, like me, are driven to furious activity, trying desperately to crack the code that will lead to our healing.

So we keep showing up at church, desperately going through the motions of our Christian duty, but hope slips from our grasp week by week. We give and pray and serve, but nothing seems to change.

In the midst of a culture that celebrates victory, we start to believe God is good—just not to us. God is present, but not with us. God is gracious, but not to us. Those thoughts feed a cancerous self-hate, reinforcing the lie that our sickness is beyond God's reach.

When I'm drowning in the darkness, aching with indescribable pain, I don't need to hear that if I just pray or read my Bible or become a better Christian, God will heal me.

I need to know, deep in my bones, that loving Jesus doesn't cure me. I need to know that being a Christian doesn't automatically make me better and that it's not supposed to.

This may sound discouraging, but I think it's actually good news: being a Christian doesn't guarantee we won't struggle. In fact, Jesus actually *promised* that we would struggle. He gave us a heads-up about this in John 16:33. Before going to the cross, during his final hours with the disciples, Jesus said, "In this world you will have trouble" (NIV). The NLT says "you will have many trials and sorrows."

Ouch, Jesus. We don't want trials and sorrows. I sure don't. If I'm honest, part of me wishes for the simplicity of a transactional, vending-machine faith: put in the right payment in the form of good-Christian behavior, receive the right reward in the form of health, wealth, and happiness.

But here's why it's good news: it means nothing is wrong with us when we struggle in the darkness. It means we haven't failed, we aren't bad Christians, and we're not lacking faith. Jesus promised we would have trials and sorrows and hard times.

And here's the even better news: Jesus has overcome the world.

That's the other half of John 16:33: "Take heart, because I have overcome the world" (NLT).

In my darkest moments, when shame gripped me and kept me bound, I didn't need to hear that God had promised to heal me. I needed to hear God was with me, that there was nothing wrong with me, and that God was no less present in my pain than in the triumphs of others. I needed to know that Christ, who has overcome the whole world and all its suffering, wouldn't leave me alone in mine.

We need faith that makes room for suffering, that refuses to



deny the brokenness of this sin-sick world and our place in it. We need theology that honors the ache while clasping tightly to the hand of a God who refuses to abandon us. We need a community that doesn't wait for Jesus to wave a magic wand and fix us before they can accept us.

Sweet friend, there is nothing wrong with you. You are not a bad Christian for toiling under the crushing weight of depression. Mental illness is not a failure of faith or evidence of a flimsy prayer life. It's simply a common part of the human condition, one that many people will experience.

The brokenness in our world shows up in a million shattered ways: sickness and trauma, betrayal and grief. Some of us suffer because of biology, coming from a family with a long line of mental illness. Others live with the fallout of harmful choices others made. And many endure the heavy waves of grief that are sure to come with great loss.

Jesus came to earth in the midst of this suffering. He was surrounded by it constantly. And yes, there were certainly times when Jesus performed miracles, when he touched and healed the brokenness. And each time revealed something rich and beautiful about God: that he cares immensely about us, that he is powerful, and that he is near.

But there were many, many times Jesus simply gave hope for the future. And that hope reveals the same things about God's care, power, and presence with us. Hope is no less powerful than miraculous healing. It still shows us that he is near and he cares deeply.

Because the truth we forget when we read short Bible stories is this: every person healed by Jesus went on to suffer in countless ways. Each still lost loved ones, still lived in the wreckage of a world that desperately needs to be made right.

My friend, we are not alone in the aching dark. We walk with saints who have gone before us—a great cloud of witnesses who intimately know sorrow and heartache and grief.

And we are not missing anything. There's no enigma to unravel, no right combination of behavior and prayers, no secret decoder ring that holds the answers to escape or deliverance.

Those who have gone before us know a truth we sorely need: there are some things about God that can be experienced only in affliction. When we endure suffering, including mental illness, we have the opportunity to know God in an incarnational way.

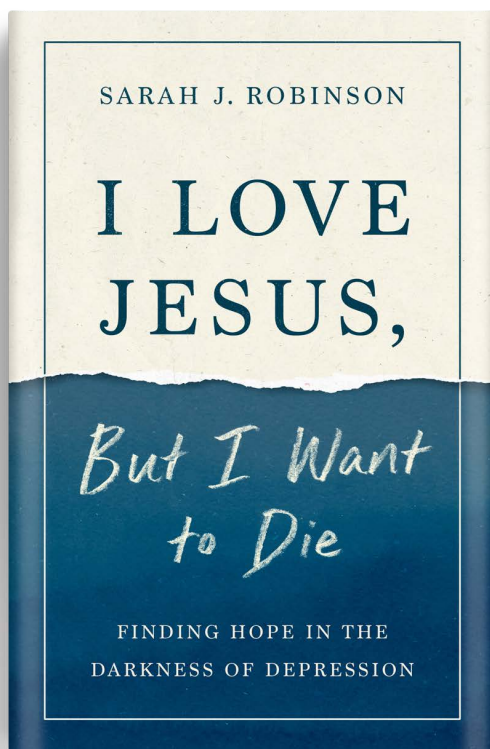
I get it. When you're shaking so hard you can barely breathe and you think your heart might literally explode, you're not so sure you want to know God like that. But I've learned there is no better way to know the Comforter than by being comforted. There's no peace like what you experience in the fire of anxiety.

Maybe it's really hard to make this mental shift right now. That's okay. Sometimes it's more difficult to sit in the darkness and believe God is with us there than it is to cling to a prosperity-gospel faith that promises healing if you do the right things.

It's okay if this is hard and doesn't make sense. It's okay if you're angry and can't understand why God would allow this pain. It's okay if you're struggling to move past the fear that God is good to everyone except you. We'll dig into more practical ways to find wholeness later in the book, but I want you to know that this is a journey, and wherever you are right now is okay.

Still, in the midst of the ache, cling to this truth: There is nothing wrong with you. You have nothing to be ashamed of. And even in the darkest night, there is hope.





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