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CHRISTOPHER COOK

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*Transform Your Mental, Emotional, and
Spiritual Health from the Inside Out*

FOREWORD BY DR. JOHN DELONY

healing what you can't erase

*Transform Your Mental, Emotional, and
Spiritual Health from the Inside Out*

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FOREWORD BY DR. JOHN DELONY



WATERBROOK

This book aims to provide useful information that serves as a starting point
but is not intended to replace the advice of your doctor or therapist.

Please seek professional help if you're struggling to recover from
trauma or other serious life events.

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To you, my reader.
My fervent prayer is that the testimony of your life
will be marked by transformation and wholeness.
Take courage. Get up. He's calling you.

FOREWORD

I first met Christopher Cook at a private, invitation-only event in Nashville, Tennessee. There was a small group of new podcasters, YouTube stars, and public speakers, gathered from all over the country. The hotel conference room was full of money experts, a few mental health folks, a Navy SEAL, fitness gurus, pastors . . .

And me.

I was the dean of students at a university in Nashville, and I was considering making the seemingly insane leap of leaving my dream job to begin a career in media: from chief student affairs officer to, as my young son mocks me, YouTuber. I was an anxious fish out of water, because, although I pretend to be a loud and gregarious fun guy, I'm a closet introvert, always trying to cover up my insecurities and fears with more volume and relational sleight of hand.

I met many wonderful people that weekend, but one man in particular *saw through me*: Christopher Cook. Instead of being impressed and distracted by my dog and pony show, Chris cut through my anxiety and self-doubt, and he talked to me with interest, compassion, and powerful encouragement.

Chris spoke to me as someone who was on the Path. Someone who had been there. He knew something I didn't know: He was, in real time, healing, transforming, and growing into the person God was calling him to be. I didn't know his backstory or the extraordinary things he has endured and overcome. I didn't know about his work as a coach and pastor, or about his extraordinary podcast. I just knew he saw me clearly, and he encouraged me to jump.

Fast-forward several years and I'm reading the manuscript of the book you now hold in your hands. In the four short years since Chris and I first met, the world has changed dramatically. I'm looking across a burning landscape of political division, Covid-19, escalating global tensions, war, and fractured trust in the most essential pillars of society: church, education, medicine, and government.

We are living through a time when much of what we have taken for granted as wisdom or "right" is dissolving before our eyes. And while revealing falsehood is always a good thing, it is also unnerving when new truth isn't readily available to take its place. We all feel this anxiety.

Here are the facts: More people than ever are under the care of a licensed mental health professional, and more people than ever are taking some type of psychotropic medication. People in the United States are streaming out of the church. They are quiet quitting at work, and they are borrowing unprecedented amounts of money to prop up a fantasy lifestyle of comfort, indulgence, and survival. At the same time, people are increasingly more depressed, anxious, and frazzled. We are distracted, lonely, and Netflix-ing ourselves to death.

We have everything at our fingertips, and we've created a bronze statue of the Self and placed it in the center of the universe. And yet we're sick, divided, and awash in shame, anxiety, and depression.

Someone needs to call out the truth: What we're doing isn't working.

And like a phoenix rising from the ashes of a culture that has

burned itself to the ground, Chris's book arrives on the scene, offering another way, a blueprint for moving into true healing, peace, and transformation.

As he did with me, Chris is staring a hole through the chaos, anger, and divisiveness. He reveals our God-less self-help culture for what it is: A fraud. A facade. A sham. A map to nowhere.

If self-help books truly did their job, we'd have a much different cultural, political, and relational zeitgeist. We'd have joy, laughter, and peace.

But we don't. We have chaos and disconnection instead.

We've been told that mental health is just getting all the right thoughts in just the right order. We destroy our bodies and our nervous systems for peace. We are told to forgive and forget, to "just get over" the traumas in our lives. Or worse, we're told that we will always be the worst things that ever happened to us. We spend our lives wallpapering over traumas, hurt, and grief with deep breathing exercises, politics, achievements, running away, or pseudo-religious performances.

And we find ourselves here. Tired, exhausted, and wanting to heal . . . but not knowing where to turn or whom to trust. Christopher Cook is just the author for such a time as this.

In *Healing What You Can't Erase*, Chris takes, head-on, the most terrifying questions of our time: *What if I can't fix myself, all by myself? What if I'm not good enough or strong enough to do it all, all by myself? How do I trust God when I've suffered and experienced life-altering pain and loss? If the self-help books are all wrong, what do I do now? How do I find peace?*

Chris is a coach, pastor, and podcaster, and in his book, he weaves a tapestry of theology, psychology, neuroscience, and his own incredible personal story to take us from a place of despair to action. From navel-gazing to submission. From shame, lack of trust, loss of identity, and trauma to a place of healing, transformation, and peace.

Chris gives us what most modern "how to heal" books lack: the truth. Things happen to us that simply cannot be erased. They are forever part of us. But they are not our destiny either. God is not

calling us to a whitewashed life full of forgetfulness and ease. He's calling us into a messy new life, *especially* including what happened to us in our past. This life isn't about comfort; it's about peace.

If you're hurting, exhausted, lonely, and done with the cheesy five-step plans to wellness, a church that has left you for more smoke and lasers, or trying to be the center of your own universe, *Healing What You Can't Erase* is a cup of cold water for your weary soul. It is a blueprint for what to do next—a roadmap for a lost soul.

As you read, you'll feel Chris staring into you, as he did me at our fateful meeting years ago. You'll feel called out, yet encouraged, supported, educated, and loved—all powerful, right, and holy things. I have the privilege of calling Chris my friend, and though you may not know him personally, this book is the next best thing.

May the God of the universe bless you as you read. Over time, may you find peace. I promise it's real.

You can heal. You can be transformed. This book shows you how.

—DR. JOHN DELONY, bestselling author, mental health expert,
and host of *The Dr. John Delony Show*

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START HERE

Healing what you can't erase. It's a deeply personal phrase I've been thinking about for the past decade. Not only does it describe the restoration I experienced after years of adversity and loss, but the implication therein is my greatest desire for you as we journey together through this book—that you, too, would receive physiological, mental, emotional, and spiritual healing from the pain-filled experiences that can never be erased from your life's story.

While I don't know the exact circumstances that brought us together on this page, there's a good chance that you might be feeling stuck or perhaps overwhelmed in a particular area of life right now. And as a result, you're languishing or in a state of depression or unrelenting anxiety—or you have some other form of psychological or emotional distress. Consequently, at some point along the way, you might have even thought, *I can't do this anymore*, or worse, *I don't want to do this anymore*. And if that's the case, I hope you don't interpret my words as being dismissive or callous when I tell you that I'm not surprised.

Multiple sources estimate that in the United States alone, forty

million adults (those aged eighteen years and older) suffer from various anxiety disorders.¹ Of course, there's little doubt about the fact that the coronavirus pandemic that began in March 2020 enflamed many of these issues and pushed them into center stage of our cultural conversation. A Pew Research study revealed that "at least four-in-ten U.S. adults (41%) have experienced high levels of psychological distress at least once since the early stages of the coronavirus outbreak."² Remarkably, the same study said that "a 58% majority of those ages 18 to 29 have experienced high levels of psychological distress at least once across four Center surveys conducted between March 2020 and September 2022."³ *Fifty-eight percent*. And as for post-traumatic stress disorder, the National Institutes of Health reports that "about 6 of every 10 men (or 60%) and 5 of every 10 women (or 50%) experience at least one trauma in their lives."⁴

That said, even though there is evidence of an uptick in depression, anxiety, and other mental and emotional health challenges within the last several years, the conditions themselves are nothing new to humanity. Centuries ago, the prophet Isaiah wrote, "Behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you."⁵ Darkness speaks of misery and sorrow.⁶ One commentator explained, "*Darkness* constitutes both the circumstances of life and the experience of people."⁷

Sound familiar?

"But," he continued, "the solution lies in what happens to *you*."⁸

And there's our key. Did you catch it? The solution is found in what happens *to you*. This is the work of transformation.

Healing what you can't erase doesn't mean ignoring the devastation of your past or putting a glossy spin on tragedy. That plastic version of faith isn't actually faith; it's immaturity and unbelief. Instead, healing what you can't erase is about moving forward through every loss, *scars and all*, while being transformed by the Holy Spirit's power toward wholeness in your physiology, your mental and emotional health, and your human spirit.

That's what this book is all about.

In the following pages, I'll share the candid details of my own story—as a precursor to unpacking the principles that forged my roadmap to wholeness. I must caution you, however, that the path we will tread together is neither the shortest nor the easiest. But the extent to which you accept the pain of change and growth will be the measure of healing you experience. That's not hyperbole either. That's the story of my life.

The principles you're about to learn aren't "five steps to live your best life." After all, what you hold in your hands is a roadmap, not a formula. As a pastor, a coach, and simply a person whose passion is *your* transformation, I'm here to guide you down a path that will be familiar to us both yet unique to you and your circumstances. Having said that, here's what you can expect:

In part 1, "The Breaking," you will learn that

- each day, we can all choose to say yes to participate in the process of transformation by the power of the Holy Spirit;
- while we can position ourselves for healing, we cannot turn the key to systemic transformation in life by our own determination, desire, or will; and
- healing a wounded, broken spirit is a linchpin for transformation.

In "The Building," part 2, you'll see why

- when shame enters our stories, what we tell ourselves is not based simply upon our actions but rather our inherent value as individuals;
- shame thrives in secrecy, often manifests in self-protection or self-promotion, and affects our spirits, souls, and bodies;
- the art of surrender is less about giving *up* and more about giving *in* to a process of confrontation that leads to life transformation from the inside out;
- entering the grief process is a necessary trek to help us eventually move forward in life;
- real peace is not a soul state absent of conflict;

- the output of our lives is wholly contingent on the interior health of our hearts;
- we are the ones who must take responsibility for our health and growth; and
- we must never underestimate the strength of our minds to steer our lives.

And part 3, “The Beckoning,” will help you

- establish and fortify your true identity in Christ as your foundation stone of transformation.

At the end of each chapter, you’ll find guided questions aimed at helping you personalize and assimilate your learnings. That’s because life transformation requires consistent application. It is an ongoing work of the Holy Spirit, not a onetime event. So, as you set forth to heal what can’t be erased, hear Isaiah’s clarion call to you today:

Arise [from the depression and prostration in which circumstances have kept you—rise to a new life]! Shine (be radiant with the glory of the Lord), for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you!⁹

Are you ready? Let’s get started.



PART I

THE BREAKING

ONE

“HOLE”-NESS

Pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.

—C. S. LEWIS, *The Problem of Pain*

Think back to the day when *it* happened. What is *it*? Maybe the ugly divorce. The cancer diagnosis. The far-too-early death of a loved one. The betrayal of trust in a relationship. The indescribable and unidentifiable weight of defeat that keeps you from moving forward in life. The slow and steady buzz of anxiety that has been with you for so long that you wouldn't even recognize Monday morning without it. Waking up in physical pain for the umpteenth day in a row, exacerbated by fear and anxiety that cloud your view of a hope-filled future . . . or perhaps, just for once, a pain-free afternoon.

Or how about the chatterbox of taunts that greet you every morning before your feet hit the floor? *You talk too much. You're not taken seriously. You're too sensitive. You're too needy. You're never going to heal, so you might as well give up now. Your spouse is going to cheat on you. Your children are in constant danger. It's too late. No one really wants to be your friend. You're not good enough. You don't have what it takes.*

It's tormenting, isn't it? For a lot of us, we are languishing, and

anxiety, overwhelm, exhaustion, and cynicism are the norm, even though their presence in our lives is anything but normal. And the scariest part? We've endured those feelings and internal indictments for so long that we don't even know when they first showed up on our doorsteps.

That was my story.

The details I'm about to share are as raw as they are honest. But I'm beginning our relationship here because I want you to know right off the bat that you aren't alone in your pain and loss, even though I'm sure it feels like you are. I also realize that it's hard to step into someone else's trauma while walking through your own. And for that reason, I want to reassure you that, as you go through this book, you won't walk alone as you chart your path to wholeness either—the wholeness available only through the ongoing process of transformation by the power of the Holy Spirit at work within us. I pray that you'll learn from my experiences in both pain and healing. No doubt, I have plenty of scars. I'm sure you do too. But those scars tell a very personal story. And *that* story begins right now.

THE NIGHTMARE ON OUR STREET

Autumn had settled on the Midwest, and despite our reputation for brutal winters, this time of year was absolutely breathtaking. It was Saturday, November 3, 2012, and at a glance, you'd think it was going to be a picture-perfect day. Though the morning temperature was in the low forties, the sun was rising on the dew-covered grass, and the crisp air seemed to awaken the neighborhood in unison. Our family's quaint quad-level home, where we had lived for seventeen years, sat on the corner lot. Within its walls, Mom and Pops had hosted high school graduation parties, birthday celebrations, Thanksgiving dinners, and memorable get-togethers. And in the home office where my parents operated their professional counseling practice with precious care, marriages had been restored and many lives—young and old—given focus, compassion, challenge, and empowerment. To this day,

when I envision a place of peace and rest, it's that house. The literal blood, sweat, tears, laughs, and sacrifices that built and rebuilt that house from the inside out made it our haven. It wasn't elaborate by any stretch, nor was it perfect, but it was perfectly ours.

Just across the street on that November morning, the sun's reflection shone on the tiny lake. The fiery colors of autumn blanketed the trees in the background. Trust me when I tell you that you haven't seen beauty until you've been to Michigan in the fall. If you don't believe me, book a trip here and witness it for yourself.

As I stepped off our front porch to go for a quick walk, our neighbor Lynn, with coffee in hand, sauntered to the edge of her driveway to retrieve the newspaper and waved in my direction. "Morning, Chris!" she exclaimed.

Have you ever been so deep in thought that you don't even hear someone talking to you? This was one of those times.

"Chris! Mornin', honey," she called in her soft, quintessential midwestern tone.

I waved back. "Morning, Lynn. Hope you and Tom have a good day." Truth be told, I wasn't lost inside my mind. I was *drowning* there. Allow me to explain.

That particular Saturday was my birthday, and it became the third-worst day of my life. You see, four weeks earlier, doctors had sent my mom home without any further medical recourse. At the age of fifty-five, she was fighting for her life after a nearly two-decade battle with multiple myeloma, a rare, medically incurable form of cancer. With tears in her eyes, my mom's oncologist placed her into hospice care—the very organization for which Mom was once the bereavement coordinator. If you're unfamiliar, when someone is placed on hospice, death has been declared imminent.

Despite this prognosis, our family was relentless in our pursuit of healing. Sobered by the medical facts, we were equally anchored in and focused on the truth of the Scriptures: Our God is a healer. We were tired, but we weren't giving up hope for a miracle. People

had told us to stop playing “the faith game” and instead face the facts. But this was no game.

Through weeks of sleepless nights and tear-filled days, we poured ourselves into her care, often ignoring our own needs to provide for her in the most personal and intimate ways while protecting her dignity. Because Pops—hero that he is—worked three jobs for nearly twenty years to keep the family out of medical debt, my sister and I were on rotation, sleeping in our parents’ bed to cover the arduous night shift with Mom. Our love was stronger than any embarrassment or shame at her total dependency, because her worth, value, dignity, and beauty were not clouded by the terrible disease destroying her outer shell.

Though Mom could barely speak or even keep her eyes open, multiple myeloma was not her identity. *She* was not cancer. And that’s why I was internally distracted when Lynn called my name that morning. I was hoping that when I got home from my walk, somehow life would be good again. That all of this would be a bad dream. But it wasn’t. I hated that day. I *hated* my birthday.

When I returned fifteen or twenty minutes later, I went upstairs to tend to Mom, who was barely conscious. I asked her, “Momma, do you know what today is?” She shook her head no. “It’s my birthday! Do you know how old I am today?”

She whimpered, “A hundred and thirty-five?”

She wasn’t trying to be playful, though her gregarious Italian personality, now absent, was my favorite part about her. She was in and out of a comatose state. I kissed her on the cheek and left the room for a moment, heading toward the bathroom as a flood of tears fell down my cheeks. I leaned into the sink and dropped my head. *How can this be real?* I turned on the faucet and splashed some cool water on my face.

That night, my sister and a few close friends took me to my favorite sushi restaurant for dinner. They sang “Happy Birthday,” but I didn’t hear anything. I could barely stomach my food. When I caught my sister’s eyes a few times during the meal, I noticed she lifted a soft smile toward me, but I saw the shared exhaustion in her countenance.

THE STORM WE NEVER SAW COMING

Though this was the darkest chapter, our story began more than eighteen years prior on Monday, September 26, 1994—the *second*-worst day of my life. It was an unseasonably balmy day, the dark clouds were low, and the smell of an impending rainstorm was in the air.

Little did I know as an eleven-year-old seventh grader, though, that a storm more devastating than the lightning and thunder headed our way was about to upend our family's simple life. It was odd that Mom *and* Pops picked us up from school that day. Something was up.

After just a couple of minutes hearing about our days, they looked at each other and then Mom looked back at us. "I have cancer," she said. "But it's sleeping right now. We're going to be okay." Indolent multiple myeloma was the diagnosis, asymptomatic for the time being.

Doctors had never seen this disease in a thirty-seven-year-old Caucasian woman. She was an anomaly to say the least—one of the first Americans fitting that profile to be handed this diagnosis. At the time, my parents were told that myeloma typically showed up in elderly Black *men*.¹ Myeloma tends to be much more aggressive in younger patients too.² Not knowing exactly what to do, the doctors at a large hospital in Detroit had offered her two options: (1) a stem cell treatment that might buy her anywhere from six months to two years, or (2) do *nothing*.

With cries for help to the Lord, our family knelt together in prayer by the peach-colored camelback couch in the living room. I remember not sleeping well that night, and though I was nearing my twelfth birthday, I dug out my old Glo Worm nightlight and plugged it into the wall beside my bed. Yet not even that familiar soft glow could take away the fear of the dark so deep in my young soul.

The next day at school, my mom, like the poised and attentive counselor she was, met with my sister's and my teachers to let them know what was going on so they could provide a watchful

eye over our temperaments and emotional dispositions throughout the day. Over the next several years, we adjusted to our family's new way of life. Cancer ebbed and flowed through everyday conversations most days.

Amid these pressing challenges, however, my sister and I had an incredible childhood. We had the best parents. Truly. They sacrificed a lot and worked multiple jobs to make sure we received a meaningful and impactful education. Our homelife was safe, stable, and nurturing. But the best part about growing up was our church friends. Not only were they our *best* friends, but they'd also become family and stood by us when we needed them most.

Eleven years into this fight against cancer, we finally felt like we were regaining a sense of routine . . . and hope. As a family, we eagerly anticipated good days ahead. Sadly, however, our expectations were shattered one afternoon in September 2005. As my mom opened the sliding glass door to let our dogs outside to play, a bee flew into the house and landed high on the kitchen window. Because my mom was severely allergic to bees, she quickly grabbed a fly swatter and lifted herself halfway up on the countertop to get a good swing. In the process, she overextended her back to such an extent that a loud popping sound, immediately followed by debilitating pain, ripped through her spine. Collapsing on the floor, she cried out for help. For the next seven months, Mom experienced a level of pain she had never known. Her surgeon diagnosed it as severely strained discs in the lumbar region of her spine.

FROM BAD TO WORSE

Soon after, things turned from a bad dream to a *nightmare*. On Monday, May 1, 2006, I walked up the sidewalk after a stressful day of work. Head down, I was already thinking about the paper I had to finish for one of my undergrad classes. Then I looked up toward the front door. Mom stood, frozen, on the other side of the glass. I nearly jumped backward. The color had drained from her face, and as soon as I opened the door, she threw the phone

down, screamed, and fell into my arms. "There's cancer all over my body!" she cried.

An MRI had revealed that rather than displaced discs, her spine was full of bone marrow disease. The cancer was spreading. Had we not acted quickly, doctors speculated that with her stage IV disease progression, she might not have lived another thirty days.

Within an hour, our house was filled with our closest friends, pastors, and extended family. Shocked and stricken by grief and fear, I disappeared into the backyard alone, where I sat on the grass, paralyzed in terror. I didn't speak. I *couldn't* speak. I honestly don't remember much else about that day. Maybe that's from the trauma. But after an hour or so, my pastor came to sit with me. He had known me since I was a little boy, and I trusted him. His gentle presence told me that I was safe. All the pain I had evidently buried after Mom's original diagnosis rushed to the surface, and I wept in his arms. He just held me.

Two days later, we met with Mom's new local oncologist, who would soon launch a barrage of chemotherapy into her body to hold back the stampede of cancerous lesions quickly multiplying throughout her spine.

Over the next few years, there were more bad days than good. Don't get me wrong. We did experience good days, but they were almost always short-lived. It was like every good report came with a proverbial asterisk tacked on the end. In fact, when the phone rang at home, it was usually bad news from the doctor. Before long, the sound of the phone ringer itself—no matter *who* was calling—triggered panic that rushed through my nervous system. As you might expect, "on edge" became my normal state. I cried often. Depending on the day, the tears were an overflow of feeling exhausted, fearful, or inescapably trapped. Or a combination of all three.

You see, before I knew anything about wholeness, I encountered "hole"-ness: a soul state in which blistering divots caused by acute fearful, shame-filled experiences motivated me to hide inside myself, even while I wore the costumes of a smile and an

upbeat personality. I'm not at all insinuating that I was living insincerely. I just didn't know where to slot the trauma responses, incessant chatter, and anxiety-ridden rumination that had been inside my head since childhood.

From 2006 to 2010, Mom was in and out of the hospital several times for various emergency surgeries and procedures. And then in mid-February 2011, on a snowy Thursday night, we had to call an ambulance because she couldn't move. She had a new tumor the size of a softball on her spine. The pain was unbearable. As snow fell on her frail body, the EMS workers carefully yet expeditiously wheeled her into the ambulance. Then Pops, in haste, fell down the stairs and broke his ankle just twenty minutes after the ambulance raced Mom to the hospital.

Two days later, we almost lost her in surgery. The rest of 2011 was a blur, but we still held on to hope for a miracle for Mom.

As I mentioned earlier, by the first week of October 2012, the medical community could offer no further assistance, and hospice care was called in. The night the hospice workers came to meet with my parents, I hid in my bedroom and shook violently as chills ran through my body. I sat on the floor, barely deciphering the details of the conversation taking place downstairs in the living room. I vaguely remember hearing a few questions: "With which funeral home should we coordinate your details?" and "Are your desires written in a will yet?" For the first time in almost eighteen years, I felt betrayed within the four walls of the safest place I had known throughout this storm: my home.

I'm sure that in your own story, you encountered an inflection point in which you realized there was no going back to normal—a point when even the most familiar parts of your life no longer felt like home. This was that night for me.

The following six weeks, October through mid-November, were the most devastating of all. Many nights, we were wide awake with Mom as she declined to a childlike, unrecognizable state. My sister and I had to frequently call the twenty-four-hour hospice care phone line for direction and assistance as the side effects of the medications prescribed for Mom's palliative care

caused her to become belligerent. Those nights scared me. Where did my *mom* go?

As I already shared, my birthday came and went, and we were in the heat of the battle. There was no letting up. The lack of sleep took a toll on our bodies and minds. And though the calendar indicated that the holiday season was upon us, it meant nothing, for we were under siege. The explosion of autumn's colors painted a backdrop for absolute horror to unfold in the most devastating and unpredictable manner.

Then Wednesday, November 21, 2012, arrived: the *worst* day of my life.

At 11:40 A.M., my phone rang while I was at work. It was Carmen, my sister. In an unforgettable tone, she ordered, "Get home *now*. Mom stopped breathing." And like that . . . it was over. An eighteen-year battle. Over. I raced home, only to find her lifeless body. *Why didn't I get to say goodbye?* Apparently, she was still breathing until she was alone in her room, literally for a minute. Then she left.

What happened in the hours following was like punctuation on a sentence I never wanted spoken. I felt completely stripped and robbed, blindsided, and abandoned. Within an hour, the house was flooded with people. My extended family, our closest church friends, and others came to be with us. Some people attempted to offer "explanations" of the situation to invoke faith and trust, but I wanted none of it. It's not that they were insincere; I just wanted my mom back.

And like I did six years prior, I retreated to the backyard and stayed there for a couple of hours. I begged a friend to tell me when the funeral home had taken my mom's body away. I couldn't watch that scene unfold. Certainly, *that* would not be the final image of my mom forever painted on my heart. Later that night, all I remember is collapsing on our wooden stairs, battle-weary, as an uncontrollable flood of tears literally discolored a single plank of wood beneath me. When the cries of family members and friends joining us in our grief subsided, a deafening silence engulfed the house.

The next day, Thursday, was Thanksgiving. I stayed in my bedroom the whole day. Some family members came over with a turkey. Though there were no intentions of celebrating that day, they just wanted to be together. But what did I have to be thankful for? Oh, that even though Mom was gone, she was “in a better place”? Whatever. That she had “won”? *Who* won? All I knew was that even though Mom was in heaven, her absence hurt like hell.

Christmas 2012 came and went. Just a week later, 2013 arrived, and we were surviving. I barely spoke for two months after my mom died, and when I did, my words were few. As 2013 progressed, there were a few good days. Some days it felt like we were breathing again, though for the majority, it felt like we had been thrown back into a pit of despair. But that’s grief. It’s hardly tidy and linear. We’ll talk about grief later in the book, but for now, I’ll say this: Grief is like a wild river—it’s unpredictable and messy. You probably know how this feels from times of loss and bereavement in your life. And while I’m not sure we ever get *over* grief, we do go *through* it.

That summer, Carmen got married. It was a beautiful day, yet it was marked with a keen presence of sadness. There was an empty chair in the front row, occupied only by a single sunflower. That was Mom’s seat.

HIT WHILE I WAS DOWN

You know how it is when you’ve hit rock bottom and you think things can’t possibly get worse? And then you realize they can? Yeah, me too. A few weeks later, on a humid Michigan morning in late-August 2013, I woke up and began my daily routine: make the bed, open the window blinds, head to the bathroom to insert my contact lenses. But when I put the contact lens in my right eye, something was off—my vision in that eye was slightly distorted. Convinced that the humidity and heat were simply exacerbating my allergies, especially in a house that lacked central air-conditioning, I took an antihistamine and went about my day.

But by late afternoon, the issue hadn't resolved. I called my doctor, who, luckily, squeezed me into his schedule late in the day. Upon investigation, he was puzzled and, truth be told, a little concerned. He arranged for me to see an ophthalmologist the next day. The ophthalmologist, a wonderful man, was gracious and very careful, but he, too, was concerned. Finally, after a battery of tests, he looked at me and said, "Internuclear ophthalmoplegia. Christopher, I need to call a neurologist and set up an appointment for you."

By September 2013, after another round of tests, a handful of appointments with specialists, and an MRI of my brain—and living through nearly a year of unrelenting post-traumatic stress, sleepless nights, and an unmanaged thought life fueled by the spirit of fear—my body couldn't withstand the internal battle any longer. Especially after this latest fiasco with my eye.

So, it broke. My body broke.

My immune system crashed in a nosedive that I never saw coming, especially because of the cloud of grief surrounding me. And so, on September 20, 2013, I sat in a neurologist's office, already in a fog of depression and anxiety, as he told me I had been diagnosed with a medically incurable autoimmune disease: relapsing-remitting multiple sclerosis (MS). Though he assured me that unlike the report given to many across the nation, my case was manageable and nonthreatening to my long-term livelihood, I was devastated.

Carmen came to the appointment with me. With poise and grace, she took notes and asked the questions I didn't even begin to know how to ask. Keep in mind, we weren't even a year into grieving the loss of our mom. I felt kicked and bruised while I was already down-and-out.

In the days and weeks following my diagnosis, I scoured the internet for case studies and anecdotal evidence of MS patients' success with various nutritional protocols. A repeated theme began to emerge: the efficacy of functional medicine principles combined with an anti-inflammatory Paleo diet and high-dose

vitamin D₃, among other things. The repeated anecdotal evidence confirmed the direction I wanted to take in conjunction with classical therapies prescribed by my neurologist.

By late autumn of 2013, I sensed a glimmer of hope for life again as I settled into my new rhythm. Sadly, however, it was short-lived. As the holiday season approached, along with the one-year anniversary of Mom's passing, I could feel a blanket of heaviness hovering over my soul. The intensity of grief and our awareness of the permanence of our losses sure seem to dial up during the holidays, don't they?

I spent Christmas Day in bed. Not only was I in physical pain, but a cloud of depression and hopelessness like I had never known also arrived. Underneath the covers of my bed, I stared across my bedroom as tears filled my eyes. These tears were different, however. They didn't flow easily but instead dropped slowly and heavily. The exhaustion of the last year, particularly the final six weeks with my mom, and my own medical diagnosis left me battle-weary and defeated. Like many others who experience similar seasons of trauma, I didn't want to live. I never considered acting on that thought, but the profundity and severity of my broken spirit caught up with me in a frightening way.

As the new year arrived, I was going backward, even though I feigned a smile for almost everyone else. Why I did that, I don't know. I think I just didn't want to be burdensome to anyone. Have you ever felt that way? You rationalize that it is easier and less exhausting to avoid long conversations, and "I'm okay" becomes the de facto response to anyone who asks how you're doing.

And sure, I was following my treatment protocol, but the turmoil from within was hampering my body's ability to heal. Irrational fears from childhood reemerged in my heart, and I spiraled into obsessive-compulsive panic-stricken hypochondria on top of severe depression and anxiety. Every cluster headache and muscle spasm, every blood test and routine checkup with my neurologist thrust me into severe panic. All of this later led to a diagnosis of complex post-traumatic stress disorder.

And even though I received incredible support from my imme-

diate family (who were grieving themselves) and close friends, there was only one person I wanted to talk to about my pain and my fears—my mom. Why, in the middle of our deepest pain, does it feel like the person we need most is the one who is gone?

Each morning, I awoke with tears in my eyes. I spent my lunch breaks at work sleeping, after setting my phone's alarm for twenty-five minutes in hope of giving my soul just a few moments of rest.

In March 2014, after more research for local medical support, I became a patient of a well-respected functional medicine doctor, formerly the head of internal medicine at a university hospital. During my intake appointment, my words were labored. I sat across from the doctor and wept. I didn't know how to ask for help anymore, let alone know what I needed in the first place. Frankly, I just wanted to find rest for my broken heart. Sensing my profound and immediate need, she momentarily hurdled the typical professional boundary between physician and patient. With great compassion, she rose from her desk, walked to the chair where I sat sunken in pain, and embraced me like a mom would her son. Though I was a grown adult, in that moment I felt like a little boy, desperate for help and safety. A torrent of emotion overcame me. With desperation and a whimper, I begged her to promise I would be okay. This was "hole"-ness at full tilt.

By the time springtime fully arrived, I had adjusted to the changes in my treatment protocol and felt more secure having a small team of professionals nearby. But the anxiety didn't let up. Each day, I was arrested by no fewer than twenty attacks. Thankfully, however, I learned how to breathe and move through each bout within a few minutes after their onset. Still, it felt like post-traumatic stress had latched on to my mind and body with no plans of letting go.

To cope, I created a very small, safe, but stuck existence. And though I had discovered a newfound love for running on the local junior high school track where my mom used to run when Carmen and I were kids, I rarely went anywhere outside a five-mile radius, and I *never* deviated from my routine.

As a very disciplined and structured person by nature, when I

became overextended and stressed, I let structure become my source of stability. That's because the motivating fear in my life

The motivating fear in my life wasn't so much the fear of bad news but the fear of losing more control.

wasn't so much the fear of bad news but the fear of losing more control. And even though the predictability of my weekly routine gave me a refreshing taste of reprieve, I was stuck. Time was moving on, but I wasn't moving forward. Grief was no longer a process; instead, it became complicated. More often than not, I saw life through the lens of "what was" rather than "what is"

and "what could be."

Being aware of my condition created more anxiety for my type A personality, but I really believe the Lord was waking me up to what was at stake. My pain was real. The trauma was legitimate. The losses were great. No one could deny that. But equally real was the existence of my purpose—a purpose I could have chosen to forsake. Something had to change.

SOMETHING HAD TO CHANGE

One Saturday night in late October 2014, I was home alone watching a basketball game on television. Unsettled by a nagging desire for something to change, I turned off the game and prayed.

Despite the pain and losses I'd endured, I still loved the Lord. Did I doubt Him? Of course. I was profusely mad at Him and felt betrayed when my mom died. And when my health collapsed shortly thereafter, I felt defeated and abandoned. But somehow, I never painted Him into a corner or staked the totality of my faith on one answer to prayer. Honestly, I attribute that posture to my mom. When Carmen and I were growing up, she would often share two foundational truths with us: "Nothing is impossible with the Lord" and "He is eternally good."

"Like a puppy on a leash," she'd say, "stay anchored in the goodness of God. Don't get too far removed from it, because if

you do, you'll get bitter. And bitterness will kill you from the inside out." She was right.

My moment in prayer wasn't profound. I was tired and annoyed, and I just needed answers. "Lord, I can't live like this anymore," I stated matter-of-factly. "You have to do something. Heal me tonight. Please. I'm done. I don't know what, but *something* has to happen." That was it. I opened my eyes and sat on the couch in silence for a few minutes before turning the TV back on. I knew He heard my prayer and hoped that maybe by morning, something would change.

But then He spoke.

I knew it was Him because ever since I was a little boy, I had grown familiar with His still, small voice. It was an uncontested, undeniable knowing. But He didn't respond with "I see you. You're right. You're healed." Instead, He asked me a question: "What do you want Me to do for you?"

I knew immediately that I'd been set up. He wasn't asking me that question because He didn't know what I needed (or wanted). God is omniscient. He knows every word I will speak before I utter it. Instead, He was asking me a rhetorical question: Was I willing to take responsibility for my life and no longer find sufficiency in my deficiencies? Was I unwilling to allow one season, though long and painful, to write the whole story of my life? And while I couldn't turn the key on manifesting healing in any area of my life (He alone is healer), would I partner with Him and position myself for it?

It is the same question He asks you today. I don't believe you picked up this book by accident. If you're exhausted, confused, defeated, jaded, and hopeless, I see you. I'm so sorry for what happened. But just as He did for me, He's asking you, "What do you want Me to do for you?"

Within that question is an invitation to partner with the Lord in your own process of transformation. Trust me when I tell you that it won't happen in one day; it will be *daily*. Will change hurt? Yes. But the consequences of *not* changing are much greater, especially in the long run. Is healing costly? In more ways than one.

In fact, it might even seem like things get worse before they get better. But is transformation worth it? Is a life marked by wholeness far greater than the cost? Believe me when I say, unequivocally and assuredly, yes, it is. So lean in, and let's get started on transforming your mental, emotional, and spiritual health from the inside out.

PERSONALIZE IT

THE POINT

We all have the opportunity to participate in the daily process of transformation by the power of the Holy Spirit.

THE PROMPT

What do you want the Lord to do for *you*? Your answer might relate to a specific defining moment of crisis, loss, or disappointment (when *it* happened). And while your answer is valid, please remember that in my case, what I needed more than a change of circumstance was a change of heart. The Lord knew I wanted my circumstances to change. But His rhetorical question provoked me to get beyond the surface-level issue to the *deeper* one. And I believe the same will be true for you. This is the work of transformation.

THE POSTURE

Don't rush this very important first step. Before moving on, take ample time to gain clarity about the area(s) for which you desire transformation, as well as areas the Lord is leading you to confront and heal. And when you've painted a mental picture of what this looks like, I'll meet you in chapter 2.

THE PRAYER

Lord, I want to change. I want to experience healing for what can't be erased. So today, I say yes to Your invitation to transformation. I say yes to taking responsibility for my life. I give You access to my heart. Search me. Shape me. Sharpen me. It's for Your glory that I ask these things. Amen.

"Razor-sharp focus . . . a clear-cut path to find healing."
—*New York Times* bestselling author and pastor MARK BATTERSON

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