

Under a Desert Sky

REDEFINING HOPE,
BEAUTY, AND FAITH IN THE
HARDEST PLACES

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Questions for Reflection

Since I was a little girl, I have kept a journal or diary. One of my earliest memories is sitting in the haymow of the barn drawing crayon pictures of various cats and detailing their antics in the lined notebook on my lap.

Little did I know that one day those crayon scribbles would advance into captured stories of our family's cancer journey. The book you are holding in your hands began in my journal.

Cancer was the tsunami roar that tumbled my life on its head as the waves washed over me, scrambling my emotions and beliefs on faith, hope, mortality, beauty, and purpose. For you, it may not be cancer. Perhaps your tumble is divorce. Job loss. Betrayal in a friendship. The sickness or death of someone close to you.

The circumstances that cause pain and suffering will be unique to each of us, but the need for a safe place to wade through the hard questions is common to us all. A journal can be that safe place to record thoughts and emotions that are difficult to decipher and express. Journal writing provides moments to slow down in the overwhelming flash flood of it all.

In this reflection guide, I have listed questions for each chapter to prompt you in your own storytelling as you embark on your

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healing journey. There is no right or wrong type of gathering stories. Some paragraphs will be a mishmash of emotions. Other pages may be philosophical. Each has value and is important as you put sentences to events larger than words on a page. Cancer, heartbreak, and trauma attempt to take many things. I pray you do not allow your words to be stolen.

It is my hope you discover, as I did, that you are not alone in this hard place but, rather, hope, beauty, and faith can be found as you hold hands in community and are pursued by a loving God.

Chapter 1: Cancer Makes a House Call

1. What memories do you have of the day tragedy, sickness, or heartbreak made a house call?
2. What do you feel has been stolen from you?
3. What questions do you have for God?

Chapter 2: Stupid Strong

1. While swimming in the pool, I decide not to allow another swimmer to finish laps before me, but in essence, I determine that the cancer diagnosis spoken over my life will not win. What memory, event, or day did you make a similar choice?
2. Do you consider yourself strong? How is that strength a positive and/or a negative thing?
3. Do you find the “why” questions mask a deeper question of “Who”?

Chapter 3: When Theology Has No Handhold

1. I use images of an upside-down map and a flash flood to put words to my difficult experience. What images do you use?

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2. Do you find yourself longing for life to be “back to normal”? What aspect of “normal” have you been able to maintain? What is different?
3. I find solid ground with the truth that God is not a liar. What phrase, Scripture, or truth has helped you?

Chapter 4: I Will Live until I Die

1. Where would you place an “Add 30 Seconds” button?
2. What message do you hear when you look at the stars? Do you hear the voice of a number-loving God? Do you know you are His favorite?
3. Do you consider the boundary of time a good thing created by a loving God?

Chapter 5: Allee, Allee, All Come Free

1. When have you been surprised by unexpected emotion or grief?
2. Author Arthur W. Frank states that “illness is about learning to live with lost control.” In what aspect of life has the loss of control been the most difficult for you?
3. Where do you need to be found? Where have you been hiding?

Chapter 6: Love in the Bending Low

1. Are you in a season of easy water or of collecting precious drops?
2. Ordinary life continues to happen during impossibly hard places. How do you juggle it all? How do you express love in small ways?
3. How do you struggle with soul amnesia?

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Chapter 7: A Hard, Forgetting Place

1. When have you hit a “meanwhile” as you traveled from point A to point B?
2. Where do you find yourself in the pages of the story of the disciples in the boat, the storm, and Jesus coming on the waves?
3. How is your prayer life? Is it suffering? Do you look out on the waves and see only the ghost of Jesus, or do you see a dear friend?

Chapter 8: Difficult Beauty

1. How are you doing as you stand before the difficult and the beautiful? Is your heart open?
2. What do you think about the phrase “God won’t give you more than you can handle”?
3. Have you discovered the wooing voice of God in the desert of Hosea 2:14?

Chapter 9: A Stack of Gratitude Stones

1. Have you experienced a magnifying glass to your emotions? What happened?
2. I write about a hike with my husband when grief wears a mask and comes out in anger. Where have you struggled with grief?
3. What three things are you grateful for today? (I would like to encourage you to take up the discipline of writing at least three things each day for which you are thankful. This practice rescued my soul from bitterness.)

Chapter 10: Laughter and Faith Hold Hands

1. When have you pushed through your own difficulties to do something important to you or to those you love?

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2. What words of blessing would you speak to your family and friends?
3. On your most miserable days, are you able to hear the invitation to step off the edge of all that is known and believe in a God who loves, a God who loves, a God who loves?

Chapter 11: Remember the Sound of Rain

1. I choose not to look at cancer as a gift but have many friends who, in this wrestling place of putting words to the incomprehensible, find comfort in viewing cancer this way. How do you view hard and difficult circumstances?
2. In what ways do you relate to Mary and/or to Martha as they stand with Jesus outside the tomb of their brother?
3. When do you struggle with words from the Evil Whisperer who raises doubts about Jesus as God, all power, and Jesus as God, all compassion? How has Jesus shown Himself to be both?

Chapter 12: The Narrow Place

1. Have you discovered Jesus in the narrow place?
2. How have you had to face your own mortality?
3. Where on your bumpy road have you experienced Jesus's comforting presence?

Chapter 13: The Final Solo

1. What stories have impacted your life?
2. What lessons are people learning from your pages? If you are experiencing the final pages, what words are being read from your life?

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3. Victory songs are not about singing alone. When have you found that to be true?

Chapter 14: Sunrise, Sunset

1. When have you found yourself “hitting the wall”?
2. Sunrise. Sunset. Sometimes the only difference is the direction you are facing. Are you in the coming? Are you in the going?
3. When have you sensed the presence of God, who creates and forms face-to-face, cheek to cheek, breath to breath?

Chapter 15: The Bigger Shadow

1. Do you live under a shadow? Do you fear that since one bad thing happened, another may be right around the corner?
2. Has darkness ever become your familiar companion?
3. What do you do to stay under the shadow of almighty God (see Ps. 91:1)?

Chapter 16: Not Half of Two

1. In what ways are you tired of the hard place?
2. What have you found to be helpful when talking to your friends and family about your difficult reality?
3. When have you found it difficult to admit your needs to another person?

Chapter 17: When Anxious Thoughts Multiply

1. How have you struggled with anxiety?
2. Where are you living an asterisk life?
3. What promises from God are helpful for you to remember when you are afraid?

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Chapter 18: The Dance of Surrender

1. When do you struggle to find the steps in this new dance?
2. What losses have been the most difficult to surrender?
3. Can you reach your hand to Jesus as He asks, “May I have this dance?”

Chapter 19: A Mystery Bigger than the Unanswerable

1. What are you carrying that is too difficult for you?
2. What awkward advice have people given you on your journey?
3. Do you find it comforting to picture God as a mystery bigger than the unanswerable? When have you encountered God in that way?

Chapter 20: The Most Brave

1. I write about my mom having a diagnosis of a limited number of days, but in reality, even without cancer, we all live such a life. What helps you accept this reality?
2. What are the fragile moments you are enjoying in this season?
3. For what purposes has God placed you on this earth? How are you fulfilling those purposes?

Chapter 21: Finding God in Community

1. How have you felt compelled to leave a witness of your life?
2. When have you struggled to find the smallest evidence of God’s love?
3. When have you witnessed God’s love in other people?

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Chapter 22: The Bully in the Mirror

1. How have you faced the bully who makes daily demands for your lunch money?
2. What message do you hear when you look in the mirror?
3. By wearing lipstick, my mom refused to allow cancer to define her beauty. How have you refused to allow your hard reality to define you?

Chapter 23: When Foundations Shake

1. When have you had a day where the dominoes kept toppling, and it was too much?
2. When has someone extended timely kindness to you?
3. How has the power of kindness turned you back to God?

Chapter 24: The Gethsemane Hour

1. When have you experienced the love of others who simply chose to be there with you?
2. Have you had a Gethsemane Hour where you have pled “may this cup pass from me”?
3. Have you discovered the shade of God in the compassion of others?

Chapter 25: An Ordinary Life

1. What are your thoughts on pain and suffering? Where do you find beauty in life, despite pain and suffering? How does this point you to God?
2. What list of accomplishments would you write about your life?
3. Who handed a baton to you? To whom will you hand a baton?

Questions for Reflection

Chapter 26: Chocolate Rain

1. What says “welcome home” to you?
2. How would you answer if someone asked, “Is there anything you need?”
3. Have you experienced a time when another person’s love allowed you to see God’s love? What was the experience?

Chapter 27: The Better Offer

1. What are your thoughts regarding the difficult realities of this life being a “momentary, light affliction”?
2. Do you find comfort in viewing death as all that is mortal being “swallowed up by life,” as recorded in 2 Corinthians 5:4?
3. Can you believe and trust that Jesus will be with you when you find yourself in a hard place, even when facing death? Can you believe and trust that Jesus will also be with those you love?

Chapter 28: No More Good-Byes

1. Where have you experienced difficult good-byes?
2. Where do you find beauty in your desert journey?
3. What brings you peace in knowing God is planning a huge party in heaven?

Scriptures for Desert Sojourners

When You Are Afraid

- “Do not be afraid. . . . I have called you by name; you are mine” (Isa. 43:1 NLT).
- “Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:6–7 NIV).
- “The LORD is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid?” (Ps. 27:1 NIV).
- “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea” (Ps. 46:1–2 NIV).

When You Need Hope

- “‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future’” (Jer. 29:11 NIV).

Scriptures for Desert Sojourners

- “Rejoice in our confident hope. Be patient in trouble, and keep on praying” (Rom. 12:12 NLT).
- “This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, a hope both sure and steadfast and one which enters within the veil, where Jesus has entered as a forerunner for us” (Heb. 6:19–20).

When You Feel Alone

- “Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there” (Ps. 139:7–8 NIV).
- “Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows” (Luke 12:6–7 NIV).
- “And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20 NLT).

When You Are in a Hard Place

- “When you go through deep waters, I will be with you. When you go through rivers of difficulty, you will not drown. . . . For I am the LORD your God” (Isa. 43:2–3 NLT).
- “At present we do not yet see all things under his control, but we see Jesus” (Heb. 2:8b–9 NET).
- “For the LORD will have compassion on Zion, have compassion on all her ruins. He will make her wilderness like Eden, and her deserts like the garden of the LORD. Joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving, and the sound of singing. Sorrow and sighing will flee away” (Isa. 51:3 ISV).

When You Need to Be Reminded of the Bigness of God

- “Your eyes have seen my unformed substance; and in Your book were all written the days that were ordained for me, when as yet there was not one of them” (Ps. 139:16).
- “He counts the number of the stars; He gives names to all of them. Great is our Lord and abundant in strength; His understanding is infinite” (Ps. 147:4–5).
- “Who among all these does not know that the hand of the LORD has done this, in whose hand is the life of every living thing, and the breath of all mankind?” (Job 12:9–10).
- “‘Am I a God who is near,’ declares the LORD, ‘and not a God far off? Can a man hide himself in hiding places so I do not see him?’ declares the LORD. ‘Do I not fill the heavens and the earth?’ declares the LORD” (Jer. 23:23–24).

When You Need to Be Reminded of a God Who Loves

- “The LORD will command His lovingkindness in the daytime; and His song will be with me in the night, a prayer to the God of my life” (Ps. 42:8).
- “When I said, ‘My foot is slipping,’ your unfailing love, LORD, supported me. When anxiety was great within me, your consolation brought me joy” (Ps. 94:18–19 NIV).
- “I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness” (Jer. 31:3 NIV).
- “And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them” (1 John 4:16 NIV).

When You Need to Hold On to Kindness

- “Do not let kindness and truth leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart” (Prov. 3:3).
- “Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to act” (Prov. 3:27 NIV).
- “Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?” (Rom. 2:4).

When You Witness Suffering

- “Weep with those who weep” (Rom. 12:15 ESV).
- “I was sick and you visited me” (Matt. 25:36 ESV).
- “For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal” (2 Cor. 4:17–18).
- “For indeed while we are in this tent, we groan, being burdened, because we do not want to be unclothed but to be clothed, so that what is mortal will be swallowed up by life” (2 Cor. 5:4).

When You Need Strength

- “But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint” (Isa. 40:31 KJV).
- “The LORD is the strength of my life; of whom will I be afraid” (Ps. 27:1 ISV).
- “So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand” (Isa. 41:10 NIV).

- “My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (Ps. 73:26 NIV).

When You Wrestle with Surrender

- “O LORD, my heart is not proud, nor my eyes haughty; nor do I involve myself in great matters, or in things too difficult for me. Surely I have composed and quieted my soul; like a weaned child rests against his mother, my soul is like a weaned child within me” (Ps. 131:1–2).
- “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight” (Prov. 3:5–6 NIV).
- “He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High, will abide in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say to the LORD, ‘My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust!’” (Ps. 91:1–2).

When You Face Death

- “Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies’” (John 11:25).
- “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me” (Ps. 23:4).
- “When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: ‘Death has been swallowed up in victory’” (1 Cor. 15:54 NIV).
- “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:38–39 NIV).

When You Need Reminding about a Life Beyond This Life

- “At present we are men looking at puzzling reflections in a mirror. The time will come when we shall see reality whole and face to face! At present all I know is a little fraction of the truth, but the time will come when I shall know it as fully as God now knows me!” (1 Cor. 13:12 Phillips).
- “However, as it is written: ‘What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived—the things God has prepared for those who love him’” (1 Cor. 2:9 NIV).
- “I heard a loud shout from the throne, saying, ‘Look, God’s home is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever’” (Rev. 21:3–4 NLT).
- “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you” (1 Pet. 1:3–4 NIV).
- “My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am” (John 14:2–3 NIV).

Notes

Acknowledgments

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Chapter 1 Cancer Makes a House Call

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Chapter 3 When Theology Has No Handhold

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Chapter 4 I Will Live until I Die

1. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperOne, 1980), 136.

Chapter 5 Allee, Allee, All Come Free

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2. Frank, *Wounded Storyteller*, 30.

Chapter 6 Love in the Bending Low

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Chapter 7 A Hard, Forgetting Place

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6. Jennifer Kennedy Dean, *The Power of Small: Think Small to Live Large* (Birmingham, AL: New Hope Publishers, 2011), 26.

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2. Craig Childs, *The Secret Knowledge of Water* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2000), xii.
3. Hosea 2:14 NLT.
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5. See Matthew 4:1–11.

Chapter 9 A Stack of Gratitude Stones

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2. Hebrews 2:9 NIV.
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Chapter 10 Laughter and Faith Hold Hands

1. Proverbs 17:22.

Chapter 11 Remember the Sound of Rain

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2. Ibid.
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4. Ann Voskamp, *The Greatest Gift* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2013), 201.
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Chapter 12 The Narrow Place

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3. See Isaiah 54:4–5.

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2. Ruth Kirk, “Of Walls and Time,” in Ryan, *Writing Down the River*, 60.

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4. Ibid.
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7. C. S. Lewis, "The Problem of Pain," in *The Complete C. S. Lewis Signature Classics* (New York: HarperCollins Publisher, 2002), 613.
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3. John Bredar, "A Marvel of Inca Engineering," NOVA, September 1, 2009, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/ancient/wright-inca-engineering.html>.

4. Mark Adams, "Machu Picchu Secrets," *National Geographic*, accessed November 11, 2015, <http://travel.nationalgeographic.com/top-10/peru/machu-picchu/secrets/>.

5. Bredar, "A Marvel of Inca Engineering."

6. Jeff L Brown, "Water Supply and Drainage at Machu Picchu," *WaterHistory.org*, accessed October 13, 2016, <http://www.waterhistory.org/histories/machu/>.

7. Beth Moore, *Whispers of Hope: 10 Weeks of Devotional Prayer* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2011), 169.

8. Ibid.

Chapter 24 The Gethsemane Hour

1. See Matthew 26:39.

2. Psalm 91:1 KJV.

Chapter 25 An Ordinary Life

1. "Doctor Who: Vincent and the Doctor," IMDb, October 14, 2016, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1591786/quotes>.

2. Elisabeth Elliot, *A Path through Suffering: Discovering the Relationship between God's Mercy and Our Pain* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications, 1990), 53.

3. Ibid.

4. Lewis, "The Problem of Pain," 613.

5. Chambers, *Utmost for His Highest*, 255.

Chapter 28 No More Good-Byes

1. Sheets and Jackson, *Praying through Sorrows*, 30. This entire section was influenced by the authors' thoughts on the significance of Mary and the first questions asked after Jesus's resurrection.

2. Max Lucado, *You'll Get through This* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2013), 132.

3. Ibid. I have often said that our hearts are not created to say good-bye and found my words echoed by Max Lucado. His thoughts influenced this section.

4. Kurt Nassau, *Experimenting with Color* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1997), 54.

5. See 1 Corinthians 13:12.