

Patrick Regan, OBE, is the founder of the charity XLP, which fights poverty, supports education and helps young people in the London area. He has won the Mayor of London's peace award, speaks regularly at Soul Survivor and Spring Harvest, and is a frequent guest on radio and TV programmes speaking about issues of poverty and justice. He is author of several books including *No Ceiling to Hope*.

Liza Hoeksma is a writer who has been involved with Soul Survivor for over twenty years. She has co-authored several books including *Conspiracy of the Insignificant* with Patrick Regan, and *Worship Evangelism, Justice* with Mike Pilavachi.

"A moving story of courage and faith in the fire."

– **Bear Grylls, adventurer, writer and television presenter**

"Something incredibly powerful happens when real people tell us the truth. It has the capacity to reach deep into our hearts and souls and bring about a transformation – not just an external shift but an internal awakening. Patrick asks a lot of questions in this book and shows us how he wrestles with his own weakness. It's a beautifully deep, personal account of God's mysterious way of using us in our weakness to show his power to the world. Weep and dance as you read, for this kind of Truth will set us free."

– **Danielle Strickland, speaker, writer and Salvation Army officer**

"Patrick Regan is a remarkable leader and this is his best, most honest book yet."

– **Pete Greig, 24-7Prayer, Emmaus Rd and Alpha International**

"I used to think that being a hero of the faith meant being a superhero: fighting off every demonic attack with ease and standing up to your neck in the Irish sea whilst praying. Now I realise that it often

means something far more ordinary: keeping hold of Jesus, and letting him keep hold of us, whatever unexpected and difficult path we find ourselves on. Patrick and his family have been through so much over these last few years – and there is much still to be gotten through – but his honesty (and that of the others in this wonderful book) about his emotional and spiritual struggles will encourage all of us and help us to remember that we're not on our own."

- Dr Ruth Valerio, Churches and Theology Director, A Rocha UK

"This is a searingly honest and absolutely necessary book. We all go through times where we wonder where God is and we can be tempted to close down and hide our fears and pain. What Patrick has done, and encourages us to do, is to be honest before God and with one another. Patrick isn't afraid of asking the tough questions as well as sitting in the uncomfortable tension that we don't always get the nice neat answers that we seek. He points us back to Jesus, to who he is and to what the Bible says and helps us find a new depth of relationship with God within the pain. This book is challenging and uplifting, honest and vulnerable; read it and draw closer to Jesus."

- Mike Pilavachi, Executive Director, Soul Survivor

"Patrick Regan has learned the pain and the power of walking with a limp. Not just physically, but spiritually. As I read his words I was reminded of times in my own life when I have wondered where God was. Patrick reminded me that even when I do not see him, God is there. Even when I cannot hear him, God is listening to me. Even when I do not feel him, God is present. This book will be a lifeline to those who have discovered that life is hard and God can sometimes feel distant. Don't just read this book, weep your way through it and let God's grace and hope water your heart again – then watch as buds of hope push through the once dry soil."

- Malcolm Duncan, author, lecturer, broadcaster and Senior Pastor, Gold Hill Baptist Church

"Great pioneers are often viewed as superhumans, impervious to the challenges that ordinary mortals face. In his work in gang culture

in London, Patrick has proved himself to be a tenacious pioneering visionary, but in this latest book, he shares his fragilities and struggles with refreshing candour. Liberating, authentic stuff about faith, offering encouragement to us all.”

– **Jeff Lucas, author, speaker, broadcaster**

“Patrick is a compelling communicator. In this book every word about finding God in the midst of pain is authenticated by his own lived experiences.”

– **Joel Edwards, Director, Micah Challenge International**

“Honest, gripping, challenging. If you have ever experienced a cluster of disasters and wondered how your faith can withstand the knocks, you should hear Patrick’s story and be encouraged.”

– **Krish Kandiah, Founder, Home for Good, and President, London School of Theology**

“Patrick has written a comprehensive and honest description of how the Lord has led him through hugely painful times and disorientating experiences. His story encourages us to be real with God and lean on Him when faith is severely tested.”

– **Mark Bailey, National Leader, New Wine**

“In this helpful book, Patrick tells of how he moved from ‘unshakable’ to ‘real’. He is open about his struggle with depression and doubt. He experiences the fear and then the joy of being out of control and then realising that God was carrying you all the time. Rather than pretending shaking will not happen, Patrick tells stories of where it has resulted in growth, in depth and lasting change.

“When faith gets shaken, we are forced to look at some of the less common and less popular parts of human life. We move away (or perhaps ‘beyond’ is a better word) a simplistic faith. We read more widely of books away from our usual food, we dig into hitherto untouched parts of the Bible, we allow questions to go unanswered because there is no answer to be had. We find some gems and treasures

that we wonder how we ever did without; and we engage with simplicity again at a better level - for God just IS... And I think our worship is somehow sweeter as a result.”

– **Dr Rob Waller**, consultant psychiatrist and on the leadership team of Mind and Soul

ALSO BY PATRICK REGAN

No Ceiling to Hope (Monarch)

No Ceiling to Hope DVD (Elevation)

Fighting Chance (Hodder)

Conspiracy of the Insignificant (Kingsway)

WHEN FAITH GETS SHAKEN

PATRICK REGAN
with **Liza Hoeksma**

MONARCH
BOOKS

Oxford UK, and Grand Rapids, USA

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*To Diane, Keziah, Daniel, Abigail, and Caleb:
I'm so proud to be your husband and dad; in sickness and in
health you have all been my rock.*

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Foreword

Church renewal leader John Wimber often said, “Never trust a leader who doesn’t walk with a limp.” I often smile when I see Patrick limp toward me when we meet for one of our regular prayer lunches, not because I like to see him in pain, but because Wimber’s words echo in my mind. I trust Patrick; his physical limp reminds me of the profoundly good character within him.

Leaders often look like they have a lot of friends, but ask them how many people they trust deeply and you will get a disappointing response. Competition, jealousy, envy, and projected self-image are all alive in leadership, both secular and Christian. Paradoxically the need to present oneself in a “victorious” light as a Christian leader is far greater than within secular settings.

Most leaders fear revealing that their struggles are anything but conquered and tend only to offer testimonies that hark back to the “bad old days of their youth”, rather than the struggles they had this morning. All of this generates a perfectionistic culture that fails to give our leaders permission to struggle. At its worst we have seen the propagation of a wholly inauthentic “muscular Christianity” model in some quarters of the church where, like the emperor’s new clothes, everyone pertains to be enjoying “victorious living”; free from doubt, fear, and suffering.

I mention the paradoxical denial of suffering in the

FOREWORD

Christian life, since true biblical leadership is itself rooted in vulnerability and suffering. Ultimately we follow a Saviour who ministered for three years before being crucified, a Lord who wept at the magnitude of his own fate and one that makes an invitation for us to “Pick up our crosses and follow him” (Luke 9:23). The agony of Jesus’ own sense of abandonment in suffering, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46), is an authentic cry, echoed in our own lives in the face of incomprehensible suffering and loss. This is a book that simply gives a language to what we already know to be true.

One of the reasons I am excited to be writing the foreword to this book is because Patrick isn’t like me. I get put into the “he’s a bit sensitive” box, where you can relegate people who are into “emotional stuff”. Patrick, on the other hand, is a regular tough guy. He will be angry with me for saying it, but at the end of the day, his work speaks for itself: he has an OBE for his services to young people; he works on some of Britain’s toughest estates with some of its most brutal gangs. And, as you will read within these pages, he voluntarily had his own leg broken in multiple places, enduring excruciating pain in an operation with questionable prospects of success! Patrick cannot be written off; his story cannot be denied or patronized. It speaks for itself: doubt, suffering, fear, frustration, and vulnerability are all part of the authentic Christian experience and are not simply the preserve of those with “little faith”.

The levels of vulnerability expressed in this book by Patrick and Diane, along with Andy, Liza, and Hannah, demonstrate great courage. They give us an insight into some of the most private and painful struggles that any

family or individual might have to bear. Patrick has nothing to gain by sharing this journey of suffering with us. He will undoubtedly face criticism: some will say he shows self-pity, others that he lacks faith or is discouraging. But nothing could be further from the truth.

I trust the man who (still) walks with a limp. These pages are not full of woes; they are full of biblical wisdom that has been refined in the furnace of experience. As a reader, you are privileged to receive an insight into what truly great Christian leadership looks like; what it means to suffer in the body and still say, “Jesus is Lord.” Enjoy the journey and know that whatever you are limping through, “... your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you” (Deuteronomy 31:6).

In his service,

Will van der Hart

Director of Mind and Soul, Pastoral Chaplain at HTB

INTRODUCTION

Will I Hold on to My Faith?

Have you ever struggled with your faith? I mean *really* struggled? Not just an occasional fleeting doubt but a season of your life when you wrestled with the very nature and existence of God: is he good? Is he kind? Does he care? Is he in control? Is he even there? Facing suffering, and seeing others suffer, can break our hearts and pierce the very core of our faith, but it doesn't have to be the final word in our lives.

Moody Bible College President Joseph Stowell tells the story of the night he met Billy Graham,¹ the renowned evangelist who has seen thousands upon thousands come to faith. They had been at a dinner together and, after the meal, Stowell managed to ask the question he'd been longing to ask all evening: "Of all of your experiences in ministry," he said, "what have you enjoyed the most?" He wondered aloud if it would be time spent with presidents and heads of state, but Graham quickly pushed his suggestion aside and said, "By far the greatest joy of my life has been fellowship with Jesus. Hearing Him speak to me, having Him guide me, sensing His

¹ Joseph M. Stowell, *Simply Jesus*, Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Publishers, Inc., 2002, page 16.

presence with me and His power through me. This has been the highest pleasure of my life!” The response was unscripted, unrehearsed, and clearly from the heart. Graham didn’t even have to pause to look back over the then eighty years of his life to draw that conclusion; his relationship with Jesus beat everything else hands down.

In contrast, author Lee Strobel tells of meeting one of Billy Graham’s friends, Chuck Templeton, who was himself a well-known evangelist and who ministered alongside Graham in setting up Youth for Christ Canada. Having brought many to faith, Templeton eventually denounced that faith and wrote *Farewell to God*, a book outlining why he had shunned his previous beliefs. Strobel said that Templeton, who was then eighty-three and in declining health, just couldn’t reconcile a God who said he was love with the horrendous amount of suffering he permitted in the world. He stood by his decision to turn his back on the Christian faith. But when Strobel asked how he felt about Jesus, Templeton, he said, visibly softened and spoke of Jesus in adoring terms. He said, “In my view he is the most important human being who has ever existed.” His voice cracked, and he added haltingly, “I... miss... him,” before he began to weep.

Billy Graham and Chuck Templeton were two friends who worked together to introduce people to Jesus. But as they grew older their lives couldn’t have been more different, Graham rating his relationship with Jesus far above anything else he had witnessed or experienced on earth, Templeton weeping for the man he had loved and lost.

This story has always struck fear into my heart. What if I end up like Templeton, so overwhelmed by the pain and suffering in the world that I can no longer believe in a loving

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and powerful God? It's not the sort of thing Christian leaders are supposed to say, is it? Certainly not publicly. But I see so much agony around me that sometimes, like Templeton, I find it hard to reconcile this with who I understand God to be. I've worked with young people for around twenty-two years and I've seen so much heartbreak. I regularly speak to mothers whose children have been stabbed and left to bleed to death on the streets. I deal with kids who have been emotionally, physically, and sexually abused by the adults who are supposed to take care of them. I've held children who weeks later have died from a preventable disease because they live in countries where there is such poverty that they don't have access to the simple medicines that would have saved their lives. These things take their toll and there's no way to protect yourself from the horror of so much pain and suffering. I know a powerful God and yet I feel helpless. I'm desperate to make things better, and I believe that is God's heart, but how can you bring back the dead to life, rewind time and protect children, or provide food and medicine for every child living in poverty?

Many of us know the theological answers to some of the big questions about why people suffer. I know I've read about them, wrestled with them, prayed about them, and even preached on them, but nothing makes it any easier when you're staring suffering in the face. That's why this book isn't about the "whys" of suffering. There are far more theologically minded people than me who can help you if that's your question. This book is about how we deal with suffering when it comes and rocks our world. It's an honest look at what we do when everything falls apart and we're left with very few certainties. It's about how we keep going when we're faced with physical, emotional, and psychological pain in our own lives and in the

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lives of those we love. It's about learning that God is with us even when it doesn't feel like it. It's about how we stay present in the moment rather than wishing our lives away, waiting for a day when things will be better. It's about being kind to ourselves and allowing ourselves the grace to rest; and encouraging us to be vulnerable with one another so that those around us can see who we truly are. It's about how we find peace when life is anything but peaceful, and ultimately about how we grasp the love of God at a deeper level.

If you have read any of my other books or heard me speak, you'll know that I often talk about things like how I've worked with gangs in Jamaica's Trench Town and on the streets of Los Angeles. I've spent time in some of the world's poorest places, such as India, Bolivia, Ghana, and Asia, and seen Christians doing amazing things while working with communities to relieve poverty and bring transformation. I can share stories of change from my hometown of London, where urban youth charity XLP works each week with almost 2,000 young people who are at risk of exclusion from school and of getting into gangs. I've met some of the country's most high-profile political leaders and been consulted on a number of issues to speak up for the young people we work with.

As preachers we're good at telling these stories, and they are often what people want to hear; I know that when I listen to a speaker, I want to be encouraged and inspired by the things that God does in our world. Those stories are important to tell and we need to hear from as many people as we can about ways in which we see God at work. But sometimes we can hear other people's amazing stories and wonder why our life doesn't match up, forgetting that this is never the full

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picture. Pastor Steven Furtick says, “The reason we struggle with insecurity is that we compare our behind-the-scenes with everyone else’s highlight reel.” Isn’t that true? We look at preachers and think their life is great because they have these amazing stories to tell, forgetting that they are just giving us their highlights because they want to inspire us. Their everyday lives probably aren’t all that different from ours. They still get sick, have bad days at work, wonder why their prayers haven’t been answered, argue with their spouse, clean up after their kids, have to navigate complex friendships, and wrestle with doubts and insecurities. They have to do many of the same mundane daily activities that we do, and struggle with problems and setbacks, but, from the twenty minutes of their lives that we hear about from their talks, we think they simply go from one glorious God-encounter to another.

I know I feel challenged to make sure my talks are now more balanced so that people also hear stories that highlight our common humanity, and that’s partly why I wrote this book. I want to tell you a bit about what’s been going on in my life behind the scenes while some of the other stuff that I’ve written about was going on. Not because I think my life is all that interesting or to use this as a form of cheap therapy, but because God has taken me on a journey that I think many of you are on too. While I’ve seen God doing amazing things in London and all around the world, my faith has been shaken to the core by the pain and suffering in my own life and in the lives of those I love. As I have shared my struggles and some of God’s whispers with people I’ve met who are suffering and struggling, they have seemed to strike a chord, so my hope and prayer is that they will do the same for you. There is something very powerful in us being honest about where we’re at and the

things we find difficult. I've read many books where people have talked about how amazing it is to come out the other side of suffering and see with hindsight all the wonderful things that God was doing, but I wanted to write while I was still in the process of dealing with the pain. Because the truth is I'm still grappling with these issues. I'm still trying to figure out where God is and what he's doing. He's been whispering to me along the way but I'm not always that good at stopping and listening. I foolishly try to sort things out using my own resources and then get increasingly frustrated when I realize that I don't have the required strength to do it all on my own.

Life is complex and we are more fragile than we sometimes realize. When I'm in pain, and I see those around me suffering, I sometimes lose sight of God. But when I strip everything back – my past experiences, my frustrations, my fears of being misunderstood – I realize that I need to look again at the person of Jesus. When I see him, I find hope. I remember that he really is willing to get involved in the agonies of our lives and to go through the pain with us. He doesn't leave us on our own to figure things out and he's desperate for us to know how much he loves us. When I remember that I find myself wanting not to abandon ship but to be part of the journey. In the process of that journey, I am slowly learning to let Jesus speak to me about his love for me and for the world. I need to stay as close to him as I can, walking beside him even if I'm walking with the limp of confusion and doubt, because I love him. Templeton's story serves as a warning to us that this is where we need to be and this is where we need to stay. We have to keep looking to Jesus so that we never walk away from our faith and find ourselves in the heartbreaking position of having to say, "I miss him."

Chapter 1

God, Where are You?

I've always considered myself to be someone with a solid faith. I grew up knowing that both my parents and my sister loved Jesus and were committed to living every area of their lives for him. I was no stranger to stories of God healing people dramatically, and in fact God healed me of jaundice and complications related to Rh incompatibility when I was born. My mum also tells me that when I was four she found my baby sister cold and unresponsive in her cot. While she ran to phone for an ambulance, I apparently knelt down to pray, and by the time she came back upstairs my sister was smiling and giggling as though nothing had ever been wrong. But my family also knew, all too well, that God doesn't always answer prayers for healing with a yes. When I was very young, my brother Matthew died when he was just a few days old. It was the day before my birthday, so every year as I celebrated getting a year older I thought about what it would have been like if he'd lived and we'd been able to grow up together. Matthew's death was incredibly painful for my whole family but my parents managed to hold tight to their faith and set me an incredible example to follow.

As I got older, I knew that I wanted to live for Jesus

and do whatever he called me to. I was passionate about communicating and telling others about God through both my words and my actions, dragging teenage friends along to Christian gigs, putting on video shows and non-alcoholic cocktail evenings – anything that would help me introduce others to my faith. I met Diane, my wife, at school when I was just fifteen. She also loved Jesus and we got married when I was twenty-one. When I finished studying, I did a missional gap year and began doing youth work for a local church in London. When I was invited to speak at a local school after a pupil was stabbed, it led me to set up a charity, XLP. Though life had its ups and downs and starting a charity presented a whole set of challenges I had never expected, life was pretty good. I began to travel to understand the cultures of the kids I was working with, I was asked to speak at different churches and events all over the place, and Diane and I started a family.

When our first child, Keziah, was born, there were complications and she was in special care for ten days. It was so hard to see our tiny and precious daughter so seriously ill, but thankfully she recovered well. A few years later when Diane was pregnant with our second child, Daniel, we found out at twenty-three weeks that he had a two-cord artery instead of three, and this was potentially indicative of a major chromosomal problem. Again we feared for our child, but he was born healthy and our fears were allayed. Situations like these give you wobbles in your faith but in isolation you can deal with them; I just wasn't prepared for what was ahead.

About six years ago things started to go seriously wrong. Keziah was just five when she started complaining of severe

pain in her stomach and her joints and then came out in a rash on her legs that looked like purple/brown bruises. It turned out to be a rare condition called Henoch-Schönlein purpura (HSP), which affects children and means their immune system isn't working properly. The doctor was fascinated, calling in a colleague to take a look as neither had seen the condition before. It can cause the kidneys to stop working properly so we had to monitor Keziah's urine and twice we found traces of protein. I'll confess that my first reaction in this type of situation is to panic. I hate being out of control and there are few things as frightening as seeing your child in pain and not being able to make them better. The doctor came to our home to check on Keziah and I was desperate for her to come up with some sort of miracle cure. I wanted instant results but, when it comes to healing, it can be a slow process. In fear I said to the doctor, "It's not life-threatening, is it?", waiting for her to tell me I was overreacting. Instead, she said, "It can be. You need to take her to hospital." To our relief the hospital discharged her, but it wasn't long before we were rushing her back in after she developed a fever and was sick. There's never a good time to be ill, but that visit happened to be on Boxing Day and the joy was certainly sucked out of our family celebrations as we waited to see if Keziah would be OK. Over a period of six weeks we were in and out of A&E every weekend, and it wasn't just with Keziah. We decided to take a break at Center Parcs to have some time together as a family, but when our son Daniel was coming down the flume another kid crashed into him. Daniel broke his leg, so it was back to A&E for us and back to crawling for a few weeks for Daniel.

A few months later our third child, Abigail, was born and all was well. “At last,” we thought, “a pregnancy and birth with no complications!” When she was ten weeks old, both Keziah and Daniel were on antibiotics for an ear infection and late on a Friday night we suspected that Abigail was infected too. To save waiting until the Monday for a doctor’s appointment, Diane took Abigail to A&E to have her checked that evening. While there she was alarmed when the doctor who was assessing Abigail thought she was blind. She was waving a pen in front of Abigail’s eyes and commenting on her lack of interest. Diane picked up a brightly coloured toy and dangled it close to Abigail for her to respond to, which she did. The doctor asked if we had noticed Abigail’s eyes flickering. We had, but had just thought she was taking everything in very quickly. The doctor said she probably had an eye condition called nystagmus, which is a problem in the pathways between the brain and the eyes that causes difficulties with vision that can’t be corrected by glasses. She warned that it could also be a sign of something quite serious. We were distraught. We looked up information online and found websites saying that this diagnosis wasn’t the end of the world (despite it feeling that way). Tests confirmed she had nystagmus (anything more sinister was thankfully ruled out), but they said there was little they could do except monitor her to see what happened. She can currently see about six metres ahead of her (a normally sighted child can see double that), and can see clearly only by looking out at an angle. We don’t know how this will affect her in the future and she continues to have hospital tests every few months and a visual aid expert to visit her termly in school to monitor the situation.

It wasn't just the kids who were in and out of hospital either. I was struggling with pain in my knees, and as I'd been a keen footballer for many years, I wondered if it was an old injury flaring up. After an MRI scan I discovered that the truth was far worse: I had a degenerative knee condition that would require major limb reconstruction surgery. I listened in horror as the consultant described how they would have to break my legs above the ankle and below the knee. Then they would attach a huge circular metal frame with three metal rings circling my leg at the ankle, shin, and just below the knee. These rings would be linked by twelve metal struts that would have to be moved slowly to set the bones correctly and to allow the bone to grow into the gaps created. To keep everything in place there would be six large pins going right through my bones, and another six that would be screwed into the bones. The frame would be on for a minimum of six months, and once it came off I still wouldn't be able to walk for a while. The even worse news was that, as both my knees were affected, they would have to repeat the operation for the second leg once I had recovered from the first operation. The whole process meant two or three years of pain and major disruption to my life.

I was devastated. I asked if there were any other options and was assured this was it. If I had been older they would have given me a straightforward knee replacement, which is much less invasive and has a much shorter recovery time. The downside to knee replacement surgery is that the effects don't last for ever and it can be done only once or twice, so they won't do it for anyone under fifty. As I was diagnosed in my thirties, they said I would have to have the limb reconstruction now, and when that was no longer

sufficient, I would have to have the knee replacement surgery too.

I found it hard to take in the implications of what I was being told. I had no idea what my life was going to look like if I couldn't walk. I started XLP in 1996 and we now run projects in schools and communities across seven London boroughs, reaching almost 2,000 young people every week. There is so much need and always so much going on. The team are amazing but things are always busy and there's never a good time to take a break. Life at home was busy too with three young kids. How would I be able to look after them or play with them if I wasn't mobile? Football had always been a big part of my life and a much-needed stress outlet and now I was being told I couldn't play any more. I would be in pain and have limited mobility for a long time.

When they showed me what the frame was like, the horror grew. The pins and screws that held it in place looked as if they'd cause agony, and the frame was so huge there would be no hiding it. I could remember seeing people with them on in the past and had thought to myself then that it would be my worst nightmare. I'm quite a self-conscious person so the last thing I wanted was to have such an obvious sign that no one could miss, advertising the fact there was something wrong with my leg. I asked the doctors when I would need the operation and their response didn't cheer me up. They said that they would wait until I was in agony before they would perform it. Their experience is that the pain after the operation can be endured only if the patient knows they are ultimately being saved from excruciating pain in their everyday life.

GOD, WHERE ARE YOU?

It was a very strange thing knowing there was a major operation looming on the horizon but that I couldn't even plan for when it would be. All I knew was that my pain was going to increase until I eventually walked into a hospital to have my legs voluntarily broken. Then I would have to endure months of a painful recovery process before doing it all again. As one of my friends commented, it was like waiting for a horrendous car crash you knew for certain was going to happen.

I found the uncertainty of the timing very difficult. I'm a visionary and I love to make plans for the future; suddenly my future seemed to offer nothing but a series of operations. Diane and I had been talking about having another child and suddenly we didn't know how that would work with my operations. After much discussion we decided to try for another baby straight away and hope that my knees would hold out for a bit longer. The one bright spot on the horizon appeared when we found out Diane was pregnant. We were overjoyed, and at last there seemed to be some good news.

But then my dad got some terrible news: he had bowel cancer. We've always been a close family and we were all rocked by the thought of Dad's life being threatened. An operation was planned to remove the tumour and we were told he should be home within a week. After the procedure we were given good and bad news. Thankfully, the cancer hadn't spread, so his long-term prognosis was good; that was a huge relief for all of us. But unfortunately during the operation they had cut through Dad's urethra by mistake, leaving him in a lot of pain. Things worsened when they said his bowel was twisted and he had a blood clot; he needed a stent but the only person who could do it was away for two

weeks. Dad was in hospital in Essex, and for me to travel from London took about an hour and a half each way. Every time I made the journey I would pray that he'd be sitting up and looking healthier, but every day when I got to his bedside he looked a little worse. He lost three stone and, as he wasn't a heavy man to begin with, he looked gaunt and fragile. My prayers consisted largely of my begging God not to let him die. My dad has a strong faith and one of his favourite sayings is "You can't have a victory without a battle". He didn't waver in his understanding of God's goodness or his love. I wish I could say the same as I watched him spend nine weeks in hospital, in terrible pain, getting weaker and weaker when he should have been almost fully recovered.

More bad news was to come. While I was going backwards and forwards to the hospital, Diane suffered a miscarriage. She had been thirteen weeks along in the pregnancy and we were devastated. It's a very hard thing to process, losing a child that you haven't even met. Diane couldn't talk about it without crying and I didn't know how to get my head around it. We knew that miscarriage is common but of course that doesn't mean it's any less painful when it happens. We grieved for the child we would never know and both feared that we'd missed our last chance to have another baby before I went into hospital for my leg operation.

I desperately wanted to be as steadfast and faith-filled as my dad but I'll be honest – I got very low. The question I kept asking God is probably familiar to many people who've faced difficult situations: "Why me?" I wanted to list all the good things I'd done in my life, all the ways I'd tried to serve God and bless my community, and come up with all the reasons why none of this should be happening to me

or my family. Rationally I knew that life doesn't work like that, but it's very hard to be rational when there are so many painful things happening and you can't see where God is in the midst of them.

It wasn't just me either. I found that other Christians were struggling to know how to respond too. One person sent a text to my dad while he lay in hospital, saying, "I'm speaking to the cancer and it is now gone in Jesus' name." I'm sure they had the best intentions, but it wasn't exactly helpful. Many friends were praying for my knees to be healed too. Whenever I was speaking somewhere, the team there would ask to pray for me, or would invite a guest speaker known to have a healing ministry to try. I was invited to healing meetings and prayed for at every opportunity. After they'd prayed, I would often be asked, "How does it feel? Can you do something now that you couldn't do before?" As I looked at their expectant faces, I wished I could say all the pain was gone and that I was fully healed. It became embarrassing to say time and time again that nothing had changed, and I would apologize profusely as though I had let them down. No matter how often I was prayed for my leg was still bowed, and, though the pain came and went, it was showing no signs of improvement. Some people told me that it was my fault I wasn't healed because I didn't have enough faith, and others claimed that "speakers are the worst people for receiving". Trying to encourage me, people commented, "God will use the time you have after your operation to teach you how to rest," or said, "Think of all the time you'll have on your hands to pray and be in God's presence!" Many people told me about times of trial they had been through (ranging from bad flu to a broken ankle) and told me they had known God

more closely in their suffering. While I was glad for them that they were able to testify to God's presence in their pain, our stories were different and I didn't find it all that reassuring. Someone even told me, "God has backed you into a corner to teach you something." That conjured up some pretty unhelpful images of God in my mind! During charismatic meetings it seemed as if there was always a story about someone being miraculously healed, whether that was someone getting out of wheelchair or a dead person being raised to life. I didn't begrudge anyone their healing – I loved knowing God was doing miraculous things – but you do find yourself asking, "What's wrong with *me*? Why aren't *I* being healed?"

If you've read one of my previous books, you'll know I'm a firm believer in having hope against all odds. At XLP we work with young people who have chaotic lifestyles and whom others have written off. We regularly say that hope is the refusal to accept a situation as it is. I've visited some of the world's poorest areas and seen God's light shining in even the darkest places. I believe with all my heart that God wants to restore this world, and when it comes to other people's circumstances, I can dream of a better future. It's when it comes to my own life that I can often struggle to find that same perspective. My last book was all about hope, and as I spoke on that theme in front of hundreds of people, and even to millions of people through national TV and newspapers, I would wonder whether I was a complete hypocrite when I felt so hopeless about my own life.

My anxiety was growing, and that was making me feel guilty. I knew I should be able to bring my troubles to God and felt that I was letting people down by being a Christian

leader who was struggling with so many doubts and worries. My family could see I was spiralling downwards and tried their best to support me, but the anxiety started taking a toll on my health. I began getting new aches and pains, and when I searched online to do a bit of self-diagnosis the conclusion was always that I had some sort of terminal disease. Google was really not my friend! I considered taking antidepressants, to help me through a difficult time. I know some Christians have a problem with them, but I don't believe depression, anxiety, and panic attacks are a sign of weakness or that there should be any stigma attached to taking medication for them. Statistics show that one in three of us will suffer in these areas at some point in our life. Eventually I decided the best route for me was to see a professional counsellor to chat to them about the best way forward, whether that was medication or anything else. Part of me was sceptical about whether talking to a stranger would help, but a Christian friend who is a psychiatrist persuaded me to give it a try.

I was a little nervous about how my first counselling session would go, but quickly realized it was going to be extremely helpful. By nature I'm a solutions man, so when I'm presented with a problem my instinct is to try to jump in with ten ideas on how to solve the problem. What I wasn't giving myself time for was to have my current feelings validated before I was in a position to think about possible solutions. That's one of the amazing things about counsellors: they listen and let you talk without judging you and trying to move you on before you're ready. I thought I needed an action plan for how to get through a painful season in my life but what I needed before that was someone to tell me

it was OK that I was finding things hard and that I hadn't already "prayed myself through to victory". I needed to let go of the guilt that had crept in about whether I hadn't been healed because of a lack of faith. My counsellor helped me to realize that I needed to be kinder to myself. I continually set myself incredibly high standards that I can't possibly hope to meet, and then beat myself up for not reaching them. As a Christian, my counsellor had lots of experience with Christian leaders who had pushed themselves beyond reasonable limits in the name of advancing God's mission. She would often ask, "Do you feel God in any of this?" and I felt that I was supposed to say yes, but my honest answer was, "I don't know." In my naïvety I thought I'd be sorted with five or six sessions; I was looking for an instant fix, but it didn't work out that way.

As I started to let go of the pressures I was piling on myself, I began to see that God really was with me in the turmoil. Because of all the stress I hadn't been sleeping very well, and if you tell that to someone who knows their Bible they will often quote Psalm 127:2, which says that God "grants sleep to those he loves". When you're feeling anxious and sleep-deprived, the last thing you need is to think that you're not even loved by God! One morning, after another night of tossing and turning, I came across Psalm 56:8 in *The Message*, which says, "You've kept track of my every toss and turn through the sleepless nights." What a relief! God wasn't waiting for me to get over my crisis of faith, angry with me that I couldn't summon the trust to see his good plans in among all the awful stuff that was happening. He was with me during my sleepless nights of anxiety and pain as I tried to figure everything out.

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It's so easy to lose sight of who God is when things are hard. A quote from *The Shack* always sticks in my mind: *The Shack* is a fictional tale by William Paul Young of a man meeting God in the pain of losing his child, in which God says, "Just because I work incredible good out of unspeakable tragedies doesn't mean I orchestrate the tragedies. Don't ever assume that my using something means I caused it or that I need it to accomplish my purposes. That will only lead you to false notions about me."²

When our circumstances are painful and confusing, we focus a lot of our energy on asking why. We want answers; we want to know why things are happening to us and how they're going to turn out. But very few of us get the answers we want – we just get tangled up in knots. I take comfort from the stories of Mother Teresa, who was well known for her phenomenal acts of love and faith. When she was asked by a young man if she would pray for him to have clarity, she refused. She told him, "Clarity is the last thing you are clinging to and must let go of. I have never had clarity; what I have always had is trust. So I will pray you will trust God." As my knees deteriorated, that was the story I was holding on to. I couldn't understand why I was going to have to undergo such intensive surgery and prolonged recovery; I didn't know why God hadn't healed me despite all the prayers I and others had offered, but I could still choose whether or not to trust him. That much was under my control.

Instead of focusing on the whys and what-ifs, I knew I needed to remember who God is. He is Immanuel – God

² William P. Young, *The Shack*, Newbury Park, CA: Windblown Media, 2007, page 185.

with us. Psalm 23 (KJV) says “Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death”; we would all prefer God to take us *around* the valley of the shadow of death, but instead we walk right through it. But the psalmist goes on to say that even in that dark place we don’t need to fear evil. Not because evil isn’t real, or because we should pretend that pain is OK, but because *God is with us.*

He is also the God who promises to use any situation for good (Romans 8:28). Some of you will have heard of Nick Vujicic, who was born without arms and legs. Though as a child he felt so hopeless that he attempted suicide, he has gone on to become a hugely inspirational example to millions around the world as he has shared a message of hope in Jesus. Because of the challenges he faces he has received thousands of emails from others, sharing their stories, and he says that many ask “Why me?” about the things they’re going through. One letter he received really made an impact on me.³ A guy called Jason was in a car with his family when the driver lost control and the car hit the crash barrier, flipping the vehicle over. Jason was thrown from the car and his skull was cracked as he hit the ground, damaging his brain in four places. Thankfully, a nearby ambulance was able to get to the scene quickly, but Jason still lay in a coma for two weeks. When he finally awoke, his right side was paralysed. He underwent rigorous rehabilitation for a month and managed to regain the ability to speak, but he still remained paralysed. Amazingly, when he wrote to Nick Vujicic, his question wasn’t “Why me?”, like so many others. He must have gone through the most incredible

³ Nick Vujicic, *Unstoppable: The Incredible Power of Faith in Action*, Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press, 2012, page 107.

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anguish as his whole life changed, and he said he feared no one would ever treat him the same way again. But he said he realized something that changed everything: God was with him and he would be OK. Jason said, “I used to ask ‘Why me?’; now I ask, ‘Why not me?’” When people asked him if he still believed in God, he replied, “God kept me alive; how could I not believe in him?” Nick commented, “I don’t believe God causes us to be hurt, sick or to suffer a loss, but I do believe that God finds a way for us to use bad things for a good purpose.” I agree. When we get stuck in the “why” questions, we’re looking for answers that are unlikely to come; sometimes we have to let go and trust that God is working even in the awful circumstances of our lives, even when we can’t see it.

Our faith can get shaken for many reasons. Often it’s not just one terrible incident, but a culmination of many painful factors, whether that’s a relationship breakdown, being damaged by church, the death of someone we love, an illness, a tragic event like 9/11, an earthquake or a tsunami, or an area of theology we can’t get our head around. There can be an unspoken rule in the church that we don’t talk about our doubts; we should just focus on our faith, but even a quick look at the Psalms will tell you that God has no problem with allowing people to express themselves honestly.

As a family we could still see God’s goodness in many ways, not least in that Diane became pregnant again. So finally we were back in hospital for a joyful reason: to welcome our son Caleb into the world. We were so thankful for this gift of a fourth child that we had doubted we might ever get to love. The complication was that Diane ended up having an emergency Caesarean and lost almost three litres

of blood. As she lay in bed in the high-dependency unit, her face yellow from the blood loss, our new son – just hours old – asleep in a cot next to her, I wondered why even this happy moment couldn't be straightforward. The hospital overlooked the headquarters of the Salvation Army and when I looked out of the window, I saw a huge cross lighting up the night sky. The truth hit me again that God allowed his only Son to die the most painful and horrendous death for us. Why would he show us his love through the ultimate act of sacrifice, only to leave us in our times of need? I remembered again that God was with me whether I could feel his presence or not. The years of turmoil had shown me that we can't always plan life and there are many, many things that are outside our control, but we can be sure that, whether we feel it or not, God hasn't left us. So, after five years of going backwards and forwards, praying about when to have surgery, I finally decided it was time to put myself on the waiting list and have the operation.