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THINGS

SARAH FREYMUTH



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*For my grandpa, Don Rennie—
the first true champion of my writing.*



*And for those who walk the valley—
may you stay close to the Shepherd.*

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INTRODUCTION

A Pilgrimage Begins

PRAISE THE LORD; PRAISE GOD OUR SAVIOR! FOR EACH DAY HE CARRIES US IN HIS ARMS. **PSALM 68:19 NLT**

The sun swings below the horizon, slowly extinguishing the day. Shadows stretch, like extended fingers of the branches of beech, juniper, and oak trees, all knotted together in the woods that have lined your pathway for longer than you'd like to admit.

Dusk will soon settle in, hiding the wildflowers and tall grass, though the sweet scent of them still lingers.

Where am I? You try to remember the way you've walked today, look for any signposts that signal a location. But you have no map, and you don't know the destination. You set out on this pilgrimage to make sense of all the hard things that have worn you bone-weary. Every step is new ground covered; there are no instructions for times like these.

Water from your canteen runs cold and smooth down your throat, relieving the physical thirst, yet your spiritual appetite still pants. "Where are you, God?" you whisper to the smattering of stars manifesting across the darkening sky. You long for his voice, a reassurance that he sees you even though you have lost your way. But the rustle of leaves and high buzz of crickets are the only response.

You never asked for this road, never wanted to go through this life

with the weight of disappointment, pain, and loss heavy on your heart. It's exhausting, and through the trees and meadow, a thin fog is rolling in.

"God, please," you murmur, before settling into a plush spot in the grass. "Help me through."

Eyelids lower, heart still asking what words cannot say. Sleep comes, with weary hope for a new day tomorrow.



What do you do when you get the news you never expected to hear? Or the news you've always dreaded to receive? When you've clung to a wild hope that seems to grow smaller with each new month or passing year?

Confidence wavers, and we can even experience a crisis of faith. *Where is God in all this?* we ask. *Is he really invested that much in my life that he would leave me in this suffering? He has the power to put an end to it, so what's he hold up?*

"In this world, you will have trouble," Jesus says to us (John 16:33). But in the next breath, he tells us to rest easy, for he has overcome the trouble-twisted world.

Does it feel like it? When we stare into a cavern of grief from the loss of a beloved one, or a medical diagnosis with a wicked track history, we're faced with a faith that either holds up or unfolds, collapses or expands. It can get muddy when the platitudes we've held don't seem to holdup under the sheer force of what's threatening to knock us down.

Do we have breath to murmur our doubt, our grief, our fears? Can we muster up any movement at all to make our way to the top of this long stretching summit? Peaks and valleys, shadows and storms, the surges and quakes of the earth beneath our feet. Will we ever stand on solid ground again?

The hard things feel unbearable. But they will not overtake us. The God of this universe always has his grip on us.

*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.*

ISAIAH 41:10

Welcome to *All the Hard Things: 50 Days Through the Valley*. Together, we are going to walk through the circumstances of life that are sharp and split us open, and we are going to search for God's presence with us in these lowlands. I'm not claiming any answers or expertise. I'm not going to stand on stage and give you a pep talk filled with self-help mantras and frame up the benefits of positive thinking. But I *am* going to hold your hand and walk with you as a fellow sojourner seeking the heart of God in all the hard.

I've been in the deep shadows and valleys more times over the last decade than I'd like, and the more I make my way into the thicket of life, the more twisting and overgrown brush I encounter. Sometimes I lose the trail altogether.

Sometimes, there are no good answers. And, I hate to say, sometimes there are no answers at all.

The unanswered leaves us in quite a vulnerable position. But, if I'm to offer any hope, it is that there is a vulnerable God who, unfathomably, enters into our pain and presses his heart right up to ours. I know at times it feels like he is a thousand miles away, watching with only mild interest in reaching out to help. But the thing about faith

is, we get to a point where we can't go off our feelings anymore. We have to stand on the things we've been taught, look back on what we've experienced.

Faith is a remembrance of God's faithfulness in the past, not only in the lives of our spiritual forefathers and mothers in the Bible, but in our own lives as well. And it's an anchoring to his Word, a clinging to his character where we count on him to show up as who he says he is. We hold him to it, by faith. And we look forward when we cannot see an end to the hurt, where clouds have not yet parted and the weariness lingers, believing that just because we do not yet see doesn't mean more will not be revealed.

God is after our hearts, as well as the strengthening and growth of our character. He made us his image bearers, and for us humans, character growth is often a process of restoration rather than an immediate change. And his means to get us there, for some upside-down reason, is to take us through the unthinkable, the heartbreak and loss, disappointment, and pain in all different ways.

This is a pilgrimage through all the hard things. But we are going to navigate our way through. It won't be easy, and there is no direct path, but we're going to keep walking by leaning on the promises of God, remembering how he has gotten his children through hard things before, and he certainly won't stop with your story. We may be hurting, but we will not be left behind.

Our hearts are set on pilgrimage. Let's begin.



IN ROLLS THE FOG:

SPIRITUAL DISCONTENT

Slender fingers of fog weave around the waves of air and through the woods. Moments before, we could see an expanse of tall grass, puffed clouds, and a cluster of soft evergreen trees, but now they are encased in gray shadows. The fog blocks our way, makes the ground beneath us tender. I'm uncertain where to place my feet, and my arms involuntarily stretch in front of me so I don't run into something solid. Your eyesight isn't any better, and I know you're looking for an explanation for the sudden appearance of this encompassing fog.

All this gray—it's numbing. Are we losing our bearings? Can we remember the way we were told to go, though we can no longer see the road? This new confusion startles and disorients, and we claw our way forward with trepidation.

ALL THE HARD THINGS

God's voice is hidden in the thick silence of this fog. We plead for him to take us out of this mist and into visibility, to hold our hand so we can have sunshine warm our faces.

We're made for relationship with the Triune God who expresses himself through relationship and communion. Our hearts are inclined to hook to his, and when we are unable to discern his nearness, it's enough to send us spinning, lost and lonely.

It's here, in the fog of spiritual discontent, where we examine what we honestly believe. When we enter into those seasonal spaces of the dark night of the soul and God seems distant and mysterious, we wonder if something has happened to us that makes our faith falter. When the floor drops beneath us and we stumble around, sometimes we have to shed our old ways of finding God and hold to a new way of believing.

HIS LIGHT, A BEACON

Reorienting After Losing Our Way

WE SEE LIGHT. PSALM 36:9

I struggle with the weight of wandering, fight with a tightness in my chest, a veil over my heart. This dim light of a season full of fatigue, head fog, and anxiety stretches on longer than I ever would have imagined. This is not something of my choosing, but God knows this. He knows the inside of my heart, the private corners I don't even like to share with myself. He sees my scared suspicions of his absence, fears that force their way into my head, the patterns of thinking I can't seem to stop. I thought he would give me a better light to see through my suffering, not to dampen my faith and dizzy me with a silence only broken by my exasperated cries for clarity.

Losing direction when our spiritual senses seem to go out is unnerving and disorienting.

But there *is* hope; God has guaranteed it (Proverbs 23:18). I am an active participant in this stretching, this suffering. These growing pains result in my good, even in the middle of this process. Even when there's no time frame that shows the end. Even when faith must overcome feeling, or a lack thereof. The fog over both mind and soul will not last forever. Though it is hard to discern his presence or navigate this unknown, he is providing for me right here, right now. Holding on to me when I have no strength to which I can cling on my own.

I lift my heart, my mind, to the sky that is a tranquil blue today. It's been so gray for so long, low-hanging clouds dampening the view. But light lies behind the clouds.

We can see a step beyond where we are when we look for his light, the glow that brings illumination in the darkness. He has led us into this darkness, the bleak caverns that cover our sight, but he has also given us himself, a guiding light that leads us into the life he has in store, one that results in our good and his glory. Dimly lit as it may be, we still can *see* hope before we feel it.

Every day, we have a choice: curl up and feebly live through the day, or fight for the faith we know is there despite what we cannot see. Faith becomes sight, and the sliver of light he gives today will grow brighter tomorrow. It's the mindset of more: more trust, more faith, more of him making a way.

*The angel of the LORD encamps around those who
fear him, and he delivers them.*

PSALM 34:7

With the God of the universe beside us, what can we truly fear?

Today let's choose to hold to the light, to fasten our eyes on a blue sky, even if the window might say otherwise. God is faithful. The darkness does not last. We can open to that tightness in our chest, acknowledge our fear, our disappointment, our sense that this is a new path of faith we've never walked. We can give grace to ourselves that we might not have allowed in a long time. Grace grows to acceptance, and we release the burdens we were never meant to bear.

We can shift our hearts to believe beyond the unbearable. Believe

his presence is the fountain of sustaining waters springing forth in our souls (John 7:38). Believe he is making a way, even in the midst of what feels broken. Believe his light is strong enough to penetrate the blackest night.

*With you is the fountain of life;
in your light we see light.*

PSALM 36:9

His is the light that sees us through, even when all looks shadowed—*especially* then. When I don't understand, I choose to obey anyway. At just the right time, his light will break through, and goodness will once again flood my soul. Joy will come in the morning (Psalm 30:5). Sorrow will give way to singing. In my weakness, his strength becomes my lifeline. He brings his light right on time. I take hold of this comfort and let my chest expand a little more, allowing release.

REFLECT

What verse can you hold to when you need your faith to be bigger than your lack of feeling?

How can you begin to tune your eyes to see the light of God around you?

LINGER

Psalm 36:7-9; Psalm 40:1-2; Galatians 3:6

RESPOND

Lord, I feel so weak and uncertain right now. I am forging through the fog in me, and I fear I have lost my way to you. In your light I see light; illuminate my heart to take hope that this heaviness will not last, and you will yet again revive my heart and faith. In Jesus' name, amen.

PRAISE

“Dear Heartache” by 7 Hills Worship and Rachel Morley

RECOVERING FROM LIFE

Seeking Rest When We're Weary

I WILL GIVE YOU REST. MATTHEW 11:28

Life comes too fast. Too full. Culture keeps moving forward at the speed of light, but I am blinded in my search for God's presence. I can't quite seem to find his voice amid the sounds in my head and distractions on the screen. *Where are you, Lord? I can't hear you in all the noise.* I long for more of him, but today he feels like more shadow than shape, and the search leaves me exhausted.

I am tired of trying to say the right prayers, read the right Scripture, and adjust my heart to where I think it needs to be to receive words from God again. It's all too much. I am spiritually starved, stuck in my striving, weary from doing good and wondering what more I need to find true rest.

*Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion?
Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your
life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with
me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the
unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or*

*ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll
learn to live freely and lightly.*

MATTHEW 11:28-30 MSG

Tired? Burned out? Done with doing? We've let society tell us the steps we need to take in order to find grace and closeness with the Lord. We have blocked out the gentle voice that reaches into our weary hearts with a breath of fresh perspective.

Come to the Lord, all who are weary. All who are worn out from wondering whether God truly sees this situation and why he's taking his time responding. God gives great rest, if only we would still our souls long enough to let him whisper.

Spiritual renewal awakens a spark in us that has long laid too dormant. Defenses down, heart open, we move to a posture of receiving what God wants to share with us.

*My heart is not proud, LORD, my eyes are not haughty;
I do not concern myself with great matters or things too
wonderful for me. But I have calmed and quieted myself,
I am like a weaned child with its mother;
like a weaned child I am content.*

PSALM 131:1-2

No more striving. No more plowing through our quiet time as one more thing to get done. The Lord offers us a way to real rest, as we hitch our hearts to his and walk in his ways, match his cadence, tune our ears to his voice. He wants to *ease* our burdens, not add to

them. To slow our minds that are always in motion, let's lean in close to the one who offers us a true and proper way of living. There's great freedom when we stop *working* for God and start *walking* with him.

Clear out the clutter that's been corroding your heart and mind. One worry, one task on the to-do list at a time, release it to the Father. Set it aside and make room for silence. Don't be afraid to sit in it, even if it feels a bit uncomfortable. God is near. Immanuel is with you. Maybe to begin, all you need is to sit in quiet and let your body untangle from the stress of constant strain. God holds you while you allow yourself to *be*, and that is the best place to find yourself.

*He says, "Be still, and know that I am God;
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth."*

PSALM 46:10

Be still. There's so much God longs to show us when we take the time to slow down from the pace of our lives and our to-do lists, sit with him, and notice what he wants to share. Subtly, when we let ourselves sit in quiet, we begin to see the Lord's shape from the shadows. We realize he's been here the entire time, but now we have the spiritual space and eyes to see.

REFLECT

How has your life gotten too busy? Can you see where you have been striving for God rather than sitting with him?

Take five minutes in silence. How does your body feel?
Where can you sense God's presence?

LINGER

Exodus 14:14; Proverbs 3:24; Luke 10:38-39

RESPOND

Father, all this striving is stretching me thin. I keep doing more and more, and the level of noise I'm in constantly chips away at my soul. I am not meant to keep up with all this activity, and I miss you. Hold me close and help me sit with you and share my heart. I want your unforced rhythms of grace. In Jesus' name, amen.

PRAISE

“Closer” by Lifepoint Worship