

*Reaching Out  
to God  
When Pain  
Overwhelms*

THE HEM  
OF HIS  
GARMENT

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DR. MICHELLE  
BENGTSON

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*a division of Baker Publishing Group  
Grand Rapids, Michigan*

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Published by Revell  
a division of Baker Publishing Group  
Grand Rapids, Michigan  
www.revellbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Bengtson, Michelle, author.

Title: The hem of his garment : reaching out to God when pain overwhelms / Dr. Michelle Bengtson.

Description: Grand Rapids, Michigan : Revell, a division of Baker Publishing Group, [2023] | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022037726 | ISBN 9780800742355 (paperback) | ISBN 9780800743079 (casebound) | ISBN 9781493441235 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Pain—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Suffering—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Prayer—Christianity. | Healing—Religious aspects—Christianity.

Classification: LCC BV4909 .B467 2023 | DDC 248.8/6—dc23/eng/20230217

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022037726>

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23 24 25 26 27 28 29 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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This book was forged through the crucible of pain,  
and is dedicated to all my fellow pain sufferers,  
because you understand,  
but also because you need to know  
someone understands you.

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A woman who had a flow of blood for twelve years came from behind and touched the hem of His garment. For she said to herself, “If only I may touch His garment, I shall be made well.”

Matthew 9:20–21 NKJV

They sent out into all that surrounding region, brought to Him all who were sick, and begged Him that they might only touch the hem of His garment. And as many as touched it were made perfectly well.

Matthew 14:35–36 NKJV

# Let Me Link Arms with You

*Dear Fellow Pain Sojourner,*

*I wept in pain through the night and early this morning, praying not only for my own healing from pain but also for the physical, emotional, spiritual, relational, and financial healing of so many I know and love, as well as for you, dear reader.*

*Years of enduring different types of pain have humbled me and made me grateful for the pain Christ experienced on our behalf. He paid for our sickness, our sin, our brokenness, our imperfection, and our pain knowing we could never truly appreciate it this side of heaven.*

*I want you to know that you will experience victory on the other side of your pain journey and that your victories are worth fighting for, but you don't fight alone. I have experienced each type of pain mentioned in the following pages. I come to you not as one who no longer suffers but rather as someone who knows the loneliness that accompanies the journey through pain and offers to link arms with you so you will feel less alone.*

*In our own strength, we may feel weak. But our faith is in a very strong God. It is my prayer that as you read through these pages, you will grow through the pain you go through. Hope lets us get up and face each day, pain-ridden as it may be, unsure of what it holds but confident in the One who holds it. Will you hold on to hope with me as we take this journey together?*

*God isn't just the God of heavenly thrones, churches, Bible studies, prayer meetings, and revivals; he's also the God of chemotherapy chairs, overdrawn bank accounts, prodigal children, empty chairs at holiday dinners, bathroom floors, broken hearts, and tear-stained pillows. He's a God who stoops and bends his ear to listen to our heart-felt cries. He's the God who promises to go before, walk alongside, and come behind when no one else will. I pray that as you read this book, you'll encounter him in a fresh new way through your pain and reach out to touch the hem of his garment.*

*Linking arms with you,  
Dr. Michelle*



# 1

## Encouragement *through* Pain

*About a year prior to the release of my first book, I was deathly ill, on medically prescribed bed rest, and being kept alive with IV hydration and nutrition. I plummeted from 113 pounds to a skeletal 74 and was so depressed from my isolation and confinement, I didn't want to go on that way. I had treated thousands of patients who had depression, and I recognized it in myself. I followed the advice I had given those patients for years: I rested, ate healthy once I was off the IV, slowly resumed exercise, and started therapy and medication. All those efforts helped, but I was disturbed to find that they weren't sufficient to eradicate the depression. As my depression continued, I looked enviously at others, those with energy and evident joy, and I began to believe I was joy-immune.*

*The longer I remained in that state, the more frustrated I became and the harder it was to keep fighting. I needed a reason to get up each day and face the world. That's when I learned the*

*importance of encouraging myself in the Lord. A friend called the night before my scheduled surgery and lovingly reminded me of this truth: “Weeping may last through the night, but joy comes with the morning” (Ps. 30:5 NLT). To encourage myself, I crafted a very simple post on social media: “Today is going to be a good day because God’s joy comes in the morning.” A couple of weeks later, as I fought back depression’s darkness, I wrote another post to encourage myself: “Today is going to be a good day because God’s mercies are new every morning.” Over time, this became a daily exercise for me that always started “Today is going to be a good day because . . .” and was based on one of God’s promises. I left my posts open for public viewing, and they began to attract views and comments from others. Quite unintentionally, this turned into a six-year ministry of daily devotions about how and why we can experience a good day despite our feelings and circumstances when we trust in and stand on God’s promises.*

*As I walk through my pain journey now, I am encouraged to see that what began as an encouragement for me turned into a book that has touched so many lives, *Today Is Going to Be a Good Day: 90 Promises from God to Start Your Day Off Right*.<sup>1</sup> Especially on my highest pain days, I return to Scripture to encourage myself in the truth of the Lord. God brought me through those dreadful, pain-filled days, and I know he will do the same for you.*

A definition of *encourage* is “to inspire with courage, spirit, or hope.”<sup>2</sup> When we’re in the abyss of pain, our grip on the thread of truth may slip, and the temptation is to let go. Encouragement—or inspiration with courage, spirit, or hope—fortifies our grip and strengthens our resolve. Sometimes we must encourage ourselves, sometimes we need the encouragement of others, and always we need God’s Spirit to encourage us to keep holding

on, looking up, walking, waiting, and sometimes just breathing. We can be our own worst critic, and we must be careful what we say to ourselves because we are listening. Instead, we should consider speaking kind and grace-filled words to ourselves like we would to a friend. “Kind words are like honey—sweet to the soul and healthy for the body” (Prov. 16:24 NLT).

## Encourage Yourself

In 1 Samuel, we read that David and several hundred of his men were away when a band of raiders from a neighboring region captured one of their hometowns, kidnapped women and children as slaves, looted the city, and burned it. Nothing remained of the city, their property, or their families when David and his army returned home. David and his men wept in grief, and his men talked of stoning him. When pain strikes our lives, our temptation is often to look for someone to blame.

In his grief and devastation, David likely had many questions, whether he voiced them or not. *If I’m a man after God’s own heart, how could God let this happen to me? If I’m an anointed man of God, why must I hide from my attackers? Why doesn’t God protect me?* David’s situation is reminiscent of the situation Job found himself in; they both lost all they had, except God.

In his pain and discouragement, David had a choice, just as we do, to either blame God or encourage himself in the Lord and in what he *knew* to be true about God and his character. David offers us an appropriate model for our response to pain, suffering, and tragedy in our own lives. He reminded himself of the truths offered in Scripture and applied them to his situation: “And David was greatly distressed . . . but David encouraged himself in the LORD his God” (1 Sam. 30:6 KJV). Other translations say David “found strength” (ERV, NIV) or “strengthened himself” (ASV) in the Lord. Encouraging or strengthening

ourselves in the Lord requires intentionality. If we neglect this choice, we offer the enemy a blank canvas on which to write his lies and which stokes our natural impulse to cast blame on God. When pain ravages our lives and the enemy tempts us to become angry and blame God, we

**When pain ravages our lives and the enemy tempts us to become angry and blame God, we encourage ourselves by knowing, recalling, and affirming the truths of God’s Word, especially those that rebut the enemy’s lies.**

encourage ourselves by knowing, recalling, and affirming the truths of God’s Word, especially those that rebut the enemy’s lies.

When the doctor put me on bed rest and my spirit plummeted, I encouraged myself in the Lord by doing three things: (1) As I read the Word or listened to preaching or teaching online and came across Scripture that spoke to the pain of my heart, *I wrote the Scripture on sticky notes* and posted them on my IV pole, bedside lamp, bed-

room door, closet door, light switch, bathroom mirror, car dashboard, and every other bare space. (2) Each time I saw one of those notes, *I read the Scripture out loud*. Scripture tells us, “So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Rom. 10:17 NKJV). Hearing God’s Word out loud bolstered my faith and encouraged me. (3) *I repeated the verses several times* each time I saw them to help me remember them later.

## **Stones of Encouragement**

In Joshua 3, God led the Israelites across the Jordan River, on dry land, into the promised land—a parallel to the miraculous Red Sea crossing they had experienced a generation before. Following the crossing, God called the people to pick stones

from the riverbed, one for each of the twelve tribes, and create a monument on the riverbank to serve future generations as a physical reminder of God's faithfulness (see Josh. 4:2–9). Samuel used a similar stone of remembrance in 1 Samuel 7:12 to remind himself and others of God's faithfulness.

The stones themselves had no special power. They were simply tokens, visual reminders of God's past participation in their lives. We too can use stones of encouragement today to remind us of God's faithfulness. Consider keeping a written record of the instances when God demonstrated his participation or deliverance in your life. Or frame a photograph of a place where you were when you recognized that God met your need. I'm a simple girl: I like sticky notes with simple scribbles that encourage me to remember God's faithfulness. When my husband was diagnosed with a second form of cancer, I kept a sticky note on my mirror that said, "God healed him before, he can heal him again. Trust him."

## **Draw on Others' Encouragement**

Sometimes in the depths of pain, we struggle to encourage ourselves. Sometimes the pain is so severe that thinking clearly is a challenge of its own. On those occasions, negativity pushes optimism aside, diminishing our ability to encourage ourselves. When this happens, we need external encouragement. First Thessalonians 5:11 reminds us, "Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing." Pain promotes isolation and loneliness, yet God warns us in Genesis that he didn't create us to live alone. Our enemy wants to isolate us and cause us to question everything we know to be true about God and his character. All too often, that leads to a slippery slope into depression, discouragement, and despair. When you struggle to encourage yourself, after you've prayed

and shared your pain with the Lord, consider reaching out to a trusted friend, pastor, ministry leader, mentor, or counselor who will speak truth to you.

In the depths of my pain, I heard myself repeat Satan's lies. I *knew* they were lies, but at times, the weight of the pain made it difficult to rise above them. The pain swallowed me and left me in the darkest pit, like Jonah in the belly of the giant fish. In those times, I forced myself to reach out to a few trusted confidants. These are people I know I can be honest with about my pain, about my negative thoughts, and about my unanswered questions. I also know I can trust them not to varnish the truth and to speak it to me and over me. I don't always like it when they do (misery loves company, right?), but I am grateful because if they stooped to my way of thinking, then both of us would be sitting in the painful, hopeless darkness. Just knowing others are praying for me encourages me. Comfort comes when I know God has prompted others to pray. Please reach out to others who will encourage you, speak truth to you in love, and pray for you.

### ***Go through the Storms of Life***

We can consider pain a storm: We often have little forewarning of it, we feel trapped under it and miserable during it, and we have no inclination of how long it will last or how we will get through it.

**I've learned we are meant to go *through* the storms of life—not camp out there.**

When was the last time you faced one of life's painful storms? Maybe you're there now. As I've pondered some of the recent storms of life, I've learned we are meant to go *through* the storms of life—not camp out there.

With the recent upheaval of the world, there's so much we don't know. So much misinformation, so many rumors, and for many, innumerable fears. We've

missed worshiping in person together. We've experienced concerns for students, families, seniors, and businesses. In many ways, we've wanted to turn back the hands of time. But instead, God beckoned us his way—*through*.

When you pass *through* the waters,  
I will be with you;  
and when you pass *through* the rivers,  
they will not sweep over you.  
When you walk *through* the fire,  
you will not be burned;  
the flames will not set you ablaze.  
For I am the LORD your God,  
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. (Isa. 43:2–3,  
emphasis added)

### **Go through Grief**

The year 2019 was a particularly painful one for me. I counted the passing of almost twenty friends and family members, mostly from cancer. No sooner would I find out about someone's new diagnosis than I'd hear of the death of someone else I loved, cared about, and had been praying for. I believed and still believe that God can and does heal, and yet my heart ached for the earthly losses of each of those who weren't healed this side of heaven but who now lived healed and whole in glory. Each new death seemed to compound the grief I already felt. I was comforted by Scripture and reminded that "Jesus wept" (John 11:35), so I knew he didn't condemn my grief but instead allowed it. Yet I also knew he didn't want me to stay in a permanent state of grief but rather journey *through* it with him.

His way is *through*.

When you pass *through* the waters,  
I will be with you. (v. 2, emphasis added)

### **Go through *Cancer***

My husband has received multiple different cancer diagnoses, and I've received a cancer diagnosis three times. Each time we've journeyed through cancer, we've reached for the hem of Jesus's garment and waited on his will and his way. God never intended for cancer to be a way of life, but he has allowed us to go through it and trust him to see us through it. There were so many times during each diagnosis and subsequent treatment when I thought for certain one or both of us might drown in the rivers of difficulty, and yet I knew God was in the rivers with us.

His way is *through*.

When you pass *through* the rivers,  
they will not sweep over you. (v. 2, emphasis added)

### **Go through *Miscarriage***

"I'm so sorry. I can't find a heartbeat. We've lost the pregnancy." I sat stunned as the doctor delivered the words I could not have been more shocked to hear. The baby had kicked strongly the day before. And I had been giddy with excitement over making nursery plans and picking out baby names. This baby was a gift from God—until it wasn't. *How could this happen?* I wondered. I was healthy, and I had done everything "right." Grief suffocated me, leaving me unable to speak, and God allowed me to feel it for years afterward. Even though he didn't intend for me to stay there, I needed to go *through*.

His way is *through*.

When you walk *through* the fire,  
you will not be burned;  
the flames will not set you ablaze. (v. 2, emphasis added)



## Go through *Depression*

After having treated thousands of patients in my career, no one was more surprised than I when I journeyed through my own valley of depression. I chronicled this journey in my first book, *Hope Prevails: Insights from a Doctor's Personal Journey through Depression*.<sup>3</sup> I'll never forget crying out to God in my despair and honestly sharing that if that was going to be my lot in life, I wasn't sure I wanted to continue living. Fortunately for me, God offered patience and gentleness as he revealed that a life of depression and despair was not his intention. Instead, he wanted to bring me *through* depression so I could share hope with others who suffered.

His way is *through*.

Even though I walk  
*through* the darkest valley,  
I will fear no evil,  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff,  
they comfort me. (Ps. 23:4, emphasis added)

## Go through *Job Loss*

I was puzzled when my husband walked through the door midmorning, a time when he was always at work. I had no words, just shock, as he explained, "I was laid off."

*Wait . . . what? You lost your job?* We had young children and a mortgage to pay! It took time to recover from the shock and recognize our own fears and anxieties. We didn't know what would come or where God would show up, but we came to trust that he would *see* us through it, but we had to *travel* through it.

His way is *through*.

One day Jesus said to his disciples, “Let us go over to the other side of the lake.” So they got into a boat and set out. As they sailed, he fell asleep. A squall came down on the lake, so that the boat was being swamped, and they were in great danger.

The disciples went and woke him, saying, “Master, Master, we’re going to drown!”

He got up and rebuked the wind and the raging waters; the storm subsided, and all was calm. “Where is your faith?” he asked his disciples.

In fear and amazement they asked one another, “Who is this? He commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him.” (Luke 8:22–25)

Friend, pain presents various obstacles, but rest assured, God’s way is *through*. Your current pain-filled landscape is not your destination.

## Encouraging Lessons

As our family has journeyed through many of life’s painful storms, I’ve learned a few things:

1. **We are meant to go *through* the storms of life—not camp out there. His way is *through* (see Isa. 43:2–3).**
2. **We must hold on to God’s hand and his promises when the storms of life arise. “For I am the LORD your God who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear; I will help you” (Isa. 41:13).**
3. **Even when we go through the storms of life, God never leaves us to go through them alone. He promises to be with us anywhere we go and that he will never leave us or abandon us (see Gen. 28:15; Josh. 1:5).**

4. **Storms may bring pain, doubt, or discouragement, yet he offers to be our comforter *through* the storms.** “Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me” (Ps. 23:4).
  
5. **We don’t need to have the map; we just need to turn to the One who does.** When Jesus told the disciples, “Let us go over to the other side of the lake,” he knew they would get there, but they forgot that promise when the storm arose (see Luke 8:22–25). God knows his plans for our life before they happen, and he goes through life’s storms with us, taking us to the other side.
  
6. **We all experience storms in life, but when we look back, we can see God has gotten us *through* those storms each time.** “Be strong and courageous, and do the work. Do not be afraid or discouraged, for the LORD God, my God, is with you. He will not fail you or forsake you until all the work for the service of the temple of the LORD is finished” (1 Chron. 28:20).

In walking through my own pain journey and researching for this book, I’ve found a special affinity for the woman with the issue of blood in Scripture (see Luke 8:43–48). We’ll discuss her experience in upcoming chapters, but I am most encouraged by her determination to reach out to touch the hem of Jesus’s garment in faith, knowing that if she could but touch a tassel, she would be healed. Scripture assures us of the promise, “You know with all your heart and soul that not one of all the good promises the LORD your God gave you has failed. Every promise has been fulfilled; not one has failed” (Josh. 23:14). Because of this truth and because that woman is an inspiration to me, I

close each chapter with a “Hem of His Garment” passage: a promise that we can cling to *while we wait* for the healing we know God can do. As you continue to read, I encourage you to make your own list of godly “hems” to hold in your heart as you put your trust in him.

As a neuropsychologist, I’ve also concluded each chapter with a “doctor’s prescription” (“Your Rx”), to complete on your own to help you apply the material covered in the chapter. Sometimes I offer questions for you to ask yourself or God. Other times, points to ponder or consider in your own pain journey. Often I suggest pertinent Scripture to remember and hold on to when pain clouds your perspective. Just like any other doctor offering a prescription, I won’t know if you follow the prescription. But I suspect you’ve opened this book and begun reading because you’re tired of the pain you’re enduring and are ready for a change. I want to walk this journey with you, believing that one day you’ll be able to do that for someone else.

When I was so ill, on bed rest, and in great physical, emotional, and spiritual pain, I struggled to have the desire to praise God. During that time, however, I played praise and worship music 24/7 in my room. I discovered that even when I didn’t *feel* like praising God, as the music played, I couldn’t help but hum or sing along in praise. Scripture tells us that God inhabits the praises of his people (see Ps. 22:3 KJV), and I sensed his presence in that room. I also know that the enemy can’t stand it when we praise God, and I love to infuriate the enemy. So, I’ve included a recommended playlist of songs at the end of each chapter to encourage you in your pain. The entire playlist can be found at <https://drmichellebengtson.com/resources/playlists/>.

It is my sincere prayer that this chapter will encourage you as you walk through your own pain journey. I also pray that

as you continue reading, you'll sense (1) a hand to hold as we look at the different types of pain (not just physical), (2) God's presence in your pain, (3) new perspectives on pain you may not have previously considered, and (4) some suggestions from both my clinical experience as a doctor and my personal experience as a fellow pain sojourner regarding what not to do as well as what to do to help mitigate your pain experience.

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### **The Hem of His Garment**

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My comfort in my suffering is this:

Your promise preserves my life.

Psalm 119:50

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### **Your Rx**

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1. From the suggestions in this chapter to encourage yourself, to construct stones of encouragement, and to draw on others' encouragement, which is most challenging for you and why? Prayerfully ask God to strengthen your ability to exercise that.
2. As you reflect on your pain journey, where do you find that you have become stuck? Prayerfully ask God how to move *through* it.
3. Which of the lessons mentioned above most resonate with you in your own pain journey and why?
4. Look up Psalm 23:4; Isaiah 41:13; and 1 Chronicles 28:20. Write the verses on index cards and place them where you will see them frequently. Read these passages aloud three times daily, committing them to memory. Ask God to reveal himself to you in your pain.

### **My Prayer for You**

*Father, what a privilege it is to pray for this dear one whom you love and know by name. I am comforted to consider that you know not only when they rise and when they rest but also the sources of their pain. When pain strikes and is all they can sense, help them to look to you and remember that you are with them, that you guide them, and that you will not leave or fail them. Help them to hold fast to your hand as you take them through their painful trials to the other side. You have always been faithful before, so help them to choose to trust your faithfulness in this present suffering and in any future trial. Help them to encourage themselves in you. In Jesus's name, amen.*

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### **Recommended Playlist**

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- “The Healing,” Blanca and Dante Bowe, © 2022 by CURB|Word
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