

STRONGER

**HOW HARD TIMES REVEAL
GOD'S GREATEST POWER**

////////// CLAYTON KING



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FOREWORD

I've always appreciated honesty. In almost any and every context, I feel better when I'm dealing with people who don't beat around the bush or sugarcoat the truth. As a pastor, I also want to make sure I am being honest with the people I shepherd and serve. I don't want to give them any false sense of hope that, if they are following Jesus, their lives will be easy and all their bills will be paid and they'll never get sick and their kids will turn out perfectly. I know these things aren't true for me, and they're not true for others either.

So I try to strike a balance between being truthful and being hopeful. I don't just want to warn people of the tough times they will inevitably face in life. I want them to pitch their tent in the land of hope, especially during seasons of weakness and struggle. Because I value this approach to both life and ministry, I respect others who face life's struggles and hardships with the same perspective, especially leaders who

influence and instruct those under their care. That's why I resonate so much with Clayton's message in *Stronger*. It is truthful and it is hopeful.

I'd heard about Clayton for several years before we met. He had a reputation as a great communicator and a straight shooter. Then I had a chance to meet him and hear his heart for his marriage to Sharie, his calling to communicate the good news of the gospel, and his desire to help people find hope in hard times. There's a total lack of pretense with Clayton, and that comes through clearly as he tackles one of humanity's greatest mysteries here: whether or not anything good can come out of weakness, suffering, and hardship.

Clayton doesn't flinch. He doesn't even blink. He bares his soul with a combination of pastoral care and reckless abandon. He plays the part of a trusted old friend you can always turn to, then he lets you see his wounds—like the dark season in his life when he watched almost all of his family members die, one after another, culminating in the loss of his father.

Yet *Stronger* is not some kind of sad, sentimental memoir. It's a joyful journey away from despair and toward joy. This is a book that everyone can relate to, because everyone struggles. Somehow, Clayton shows us how to see beyond, almost through, our hard times and into the promise of better days and a stronger future. In no way is this a trite little self-help guide filled with one-liners about "taking the lemons of life and turning them into lemonade." These lessons were born in the crucible of real life, real pain.

Clayton has the guts to share with you, the reader, the very hard questions he asked when it seemed like the sun would never shine again in his life. He faced depression and

despair, looked them square in the face, and survived the ordeal with a greater understanding of God's goodness and our ability to grow stronger not just in spite of but because of our weakness.

This book is more than a page-turner. It's a game-changer. It's courageous. It's bold. It's vulnerable and funny and redemptive. It's a revolutionary way to see suffering, which Jesus modeled two thousand years ago.

You will learn that no one is exempt from difficulty. We don't get a pass when it comes to pain. But we can worship God in our weakness because pain has a way of clearing out the clutter in our lives. It burns off the excess and allows us to see what really matters after all: the people we love, the message we carry, and the God we worship.

Mark Batterson, pastor and author
of *The Circle Maker* and *The Grave Robber*

INTRODUCTION

It was mid-April and I was neck-deep in the writing process for the book you hold in your hands right now. My deadline was approaching and I was writing bits and excerpts any chance I could get. So while I waited to board a small plane to Ohio, where I would be preaching for the next three days, I stole away for a few moments in an attempt to bank another few hundred words.

I found the entire ordeal of writing this book to be both spiritually cathartic and emotionally exhausting. In order to write well, I was going to have to dig deep into my raw, wounded soul and dredge up feelings I would rather leave buried. I was attempting to chronicle my own odyssey of weakness for others' benefit, to show everyone how God can leverage bad things for good purposes. It proved to be harder than I imagined.

Over the course of twelve years, I lost nine close family members. When I say “lost,” I mean they died. That’s an

average of one death every sixteen months. I preached each of their funerals too. These included my two grandparents, my wife's grandparents, an uncle, two aunts, and my own mother and father, who died eighteen months apart from each other.

Revisiting those moments of depression and despair felt at times exhilarating (like one feels after a good thirty-minute cry) and at other times like a lobotomy of the heart. Often I would remind myself of A. W. Tozer's famous quote about how God cannot use someone greatly until he has wounded them deeply. If that were true, then I believed God would use this book in a profound way because I had been wounded in a profound way.



As a writer, I've always believed that *intent precedes content*. My intent was to open myself up to the world, for all our sakes, and show readers like you how pain can have a purpose, how weakness can lead to worship, and how brokenness can lead to blessing. I thought the content of these pages would flow from my intention to help others find hope in hard times. But it was tough to get started. Just when I thought I was moving forward, I had to wake up all the old monsters: anxiety, discouragement, grief, regret, and fear. I wanted to tap into the reality of my own weakness to help you face yours. And that kind of thing can't be faked. I would have to kick the hornets' nest.

I had my laptop out and was pounding the keys, working on the chapter dealing with vulnerability, when our plane began to board. I shut down and packed up. And then I received a phone call from my uncle. He was informing me

that his wife, my aunt Gwen, had died a few hours earlier. I was sucker punched in the heart. *Not again! Dear God, not again.* Gwen was like a mother to me. She and my father were the best of friends and the closest of siblings. Now she was dead too, less than two years after I buried my dad. And, of course, I would preach her funeral in three days.

So I boarded the plane and began writing again—not on my laptop but in my journal. My ears were ringing and my heart was pounding and my stomach was churning, but I managed to scribble a few things on those pages while the wound was still fresh and pouring blood. For the next three days in Ohio, these words sustained me, and I believe they came straight from the Spirit of God to my weak and wounded soul. Here is what I wrote, verbatim, in my journal that day.

Hard times don't make me happy, but by God's grace,
they can make me holy.

Where there's no death, there can be no resurrection.

Where there's no cross, there can be no empty tomb.

Peace isn't the absence of crisis. It's the presence of Christ
in my crisis.

Just because I feel invisible, it doesn't mean I'm not
valuable.

God works in our weakness because that's all he has to
work with.

Before every triumph, there is a trial. Before every testi-
mony, there is a test.

I can't stop when I feel stuck. I have to keep moving for-
ward in faith that Jesus is stronger.

I want to give up, but if I'm not dead, then God's not done.

If I'm still *breathing*, then I can keep *going*.

I don't have to feed every feeling. Just because I'm lonely, it doesn't mean that God has left me.

I can grow bitter or I can become better. If my pain serves the purpose of seeing Jesus more clearly and preaching the gospel more boldly, then I want to embrace it, not escape it.

I keep asking Jesus to give me something, but he keeps trying to show me something. Maybe the real gift is the revelation of his presence in my pain.

I should stop seeking happiness in my weakness and start seeking holiness. Pain has a way of purifying my motives and clarifying my calling.

God is not punishing me for failure. He is pruning me for fruitfulness.

The things that *break me* are the things that *bring me* closer to God.

Then I remembered 1 Peter 1:6–7, which reads:

In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

Could those verses apply to my situation? Could I really praise God in my pain? Could it really purify my faith and bring honor and glory to God somehow?

I reached into my backpack and pulled out *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering* by Tim Keller, which I was reading to help me along my own journey as well as a resource for *Stronger*. I randomly flipped to page 8. God must have orchestrated the whole thing, because I read these words:

The biblical understanding of a fiery furnace is more what we would call a “forge.” Anything with that degree of heat is, of course, a very dangerous and powerful thing. However, if used properly, it does not destroy. Things put into the furnace properly can be shaped, refined, purified, and even beautified. This is a remarkable view of suffering, that if faced and endured with faith, it can in the end only make us better, stronger, and more filled with greatness and joy. Suffering, then, actually can use evil against itself. It can thwart the destructive purposes of evil and bring light and life out of darkness and death.¹

As the plane took off from the runway, I was filled with a tangible, concrete sense of hope. I was going to make it. And by God’s grace, I would do more than just *make it*. I would allow God to *make me*—make me a stronger man who knew how to rely on his strength and not my own. I began to see that as God was breaking me, he was actually making me into a man more like his own Son, Jesus Christ.

Just as smooth seas don’t create skilled sailors, an easy life has no power to purify us and make us stronger. Hard times, on the other hand, have the power to transform us in ways that no other force could. God leverages them to grab our attention, humble us, teach us to trust him for provision, and use our stories of weakness to help others in their own fiery furnace.

So I'm laying it all out on the table for you: the pain I've felt, the crippling depression, the fits of anxiety, the lessons and the holy moments . . . all of it, raw and unfiltered. May you be filled with hope and promise and encouragement as you see the bigger picture and the better purpose in your hard times. From the outset, you can trust this truth: the comeback may be harder than the setback, but you'll be stronger than you were when you leverage your weakness to find God's strength.

Sometimes God will *remove* the weakness and sometimes he will *redeem* the weakness, but he will never waste your weakness.



BROKENNESS

A Strange Kind of Blessing

God uses men who are weak and feeble enough
to lean on him.

Hudson Taylor, missionary to China

To be human is to be broken. Bones break. Hearts break. Wills break. Spirits break. Waves break too . . . sometimes over us and sometimes against us. Sometimes they break over and over again; we are tiny creatures up against a vast and raging sea, often in over our heads. The day breaks too, but the nights can be so very long.

We forget that we are fragile, vulnerable creatures, subject to the elements of time and chance, heat and cold, hunger and desire. We forget because before we suffer, we live under

the delusion that we are stronger than we really are. We are the stars of the movie that plays in our heads, dreaming we are smarter, tougher, and more durable than we are. We may bend. We stub our toe, we scrape our knee . . . and then we mend.

But then there are these moments, every so often, when life does not bend us. It breaks us. Sometimes we break ourselves. And there is no running from the scene of the accident. All of a sudden we realize how broken, how fragile, how dependent

*Weakness is a welcome sign hanging on
the door of our lives, inviting God inside.*

we really were all along, and that we were not as strong as we thought we were. And when we do finally taste the bitter salt of the waves that have broken over us, we are awakened to the fact that the world itself, even in its staggering beauty, is so very broken—that we are in fact surrounded by people who are as broken as we are. The world didn't break because we finally tasted our own weakness—rather we see our pain illuminated in the world and recognize that it already is and always has been broken.

I have no idea in what ways you are or have been broken, nor why. I don't know where the cracks and tears are in your heart or on your body, what wounds have been inflicted on you or that you have inflicted on yourself. I only know that, in ways that are more profound than you can possibly imagine right now, God makes himself known in and through our brokenness. Weakness is a welcome sign hanging on the door of our lives, inviting God inside.

It is not our goal to see how broken we can become, as if brokenness in and of itself is a virtue. No. But what I do believe is this: that the God offered to us in Jesus of Nazareth has been broken for us and has been torn in all the ways we are tearing. And that somehow, mysteriously, in our own brokenness there is a way to connect with God from where we are. As hard as it is for us to comprehend right now, embracing the brokenness of the moment we're in is actually the path to strength and wholeness.

But let's not skip ahead too quickly. Before the day breaks, there is much to learn from the darkness we are in right now. Rather than patting you on the head and telling you everything will be all right in the morning, I want to take you with me into my own experience of night and shine a flashlight on my own brokenness—so you will know you aren't alone in yours.

A Rude Awakening

It was the darkest day of my life. One of my worst nightmares had just come true. And it was only the beginning. I was embarking on a journey of suffering in which my world would be turned on its head. I was on my way to discovering my own weakness, trading strength for fragility. As it turns out, this was also a voyage of learning about God, life, and the world in ways I could not have dreamed of before. I had no idea it would be so *traumatic*. And I had no idea it would be so *transforming*. The only thing harder than telling my story is keeping it bottled up inside.

I travel for a living. Technically, I make a living as a minister—but my job requires that I travel, so I actually *preach* for a living.

As an itinerant speaker and author, I live my life on the move from one church (or university, camp, or retreat center) to the next. I'm that guy who lives out of a suitcase and sleeps in Hampton Inns and Hiltons. And I've been living this lifestyle since I was just fourteen years old.

The way it all started might sound unbelievable. But my story is my story, and I suppose most of our stories have something strange and spectacular somewhere along the way. So believe it or not, on the night I first converted to faith in Jesus Christ, God clearly called me to preach. Not once, but twice. And it was not a metaphorical or allegorical call. It was clear and real and tangible.

I was at a small, rural church in South Carolina. Those kinds of churches have an altar down at the front of the church for people to come and pray in response to the preacher's invitation. That night the guest evangelist preached a message asking us to repent of our sins and commit our lives to Jesus. Even though I came from a religious family in a religious town and attended church routinely, that was the night I knew I wanted to really become a Christian for myself. So along with a number of other teenagers, I went down to the altar to ask Jesus to take control of my life.

That's when it happened the first time. As I was kneeling at the altar and praying to God to save me, I thought I heard a voice talk back to me—out loud. I was expecting my prayer to be more of a monologue, not a dialogue in which God responded. The tone wasn't pushy or forceful. It was calm and its volume was normal. The man's voice said, "Preach the gospel." I couldn't tell if it was in my head or a real person speaking. I was just a kid!

I turned my head to see who would be so audacious as to speak out loud during such a holy moment. Who would dare interrupt me while I was literally asking Jesus into my heart? He obviously didn't understand church etiquette. But when I looked behind me, there was no man. My eyes only registered a couple dozen other teenagers—all about my age and all with their heads down and their eyes closed, evidently asking Jesus to save them too. None of them seemed to have heard the voice I heard. Was I hearing things? Had I imagined it?

As I rode home in the church van with teenagers I had known from childhood, I was vividly aware that something had changed in me. I felt very different than I had felt just a few hours earlier. The van dropped me off at my front door and I entered the familiarity of home. The smell of supper still hung in the air. It was winter and the wood-burning stove hummed in the den, accompanied by the faint smell of smoke. I said hello to my parents and slipped upstairs to my bedroom as if controlled by an unseen force, and slid down on my knees beside my bed. I sensed that I had unfinished business to attend to, business that had begun an hour earlier at the church altar.

Praying on my knees was not a personal habit. I had *never* prayed on my knees before that night. Now I was there for the second time, with carpet fibers pressing through my jeans into my bony kneecaps. An awkward place to find myself, to be sure, especially with no real experience of what to do or even how to pray—how to speak to a God who had just become as real to me as the blanket on my bed where I rested my elbows.

I picked up where I'd left off back at the church. This time it was just me, all alone in my bedroom, so I felt more

comfortable praying out loud, which helped me focus my thoughts and emotions. It's odd to me that nearly three decades later I can still remember what I prayed that night.

“Jesus, I know you're real. I know that you just came into my life. I don't know what all that means or even what you want me to do next, but here and now, Lord Jesus, I give you everything. I want to tell people about you. I will go anywhere. I will do anything. I will pay any price to follow you.” It was a tender and vulnerable moment for me, perhaps the most meaningful moment of my life up until that point. Then it happened again . . . that voice.

“Preach the gospel.”

It was that same voice from the church saying the same thing it had said earlier. I never saw a face. But I heard that voice. Then it made sense. *His voice was not interrupting me. He was answering me.* I was praying to Jesus and Jesus was responding to my prayer. Like a normal conversation with a friend, requiring two people to talk to each other, I was talking to God. I just wasn't expecting him to talk back. But he did. And what seemed like an interruption was actually an invitation. Jesus was inviting me to join him on a journey. He was inviting me to walk with him in a relationship in which I would feel fantastic joy, elation, severe suffering, and real weakness.

You may bristle at the thought of God speaking to anyone today. I understand that. And I don't blame you. It's odd. Maybe crazy. It doesn't happen to most people like that. But I sensed Jesus calling me to preach the gospel. And I guess he had the right to, since I told him I would do anything he wanted me to do. That night was the moment that changed my life. Prior to it I was a typical kid with a big mouth who

loved to entertain crowds of people, play sports, and get into trouble. After that moment I was filled with a sense of purpose. I began to see why I was put on the earth. I was going to tell people about Jesus. I was going to preach about how good God was and how God could change lives.

Immediately, doors began opening for me to speak. As an eighth grader I was invited to speak in local churches and youth groups. Then I started teaching on Sunday nights at a local prison, before I was even old enough to drive. Then I began preaching at youth rallies where I was the same age as or younger than most of the people I was speaking to. I started making the rounds in our region of South Carolina. I was a high-school football player at one of the largest high schools in our state, which gave me a huge platform. Then I gained some more credibility when I became an officer in the National Beta Club, an organization for smart kids.

Things were going great! By the time I was a senior, I was living the dream. I was team captain, student body president, had been recruited by a dozen colleges for both football and academics, and was speaking at bigger and bigger events and seeing more and more people respond to the gospel. Things

*To me, strength and success were proof that
God was using me and that he loved me.*

were good. Really good. I felt like my faith was growing deeper. I felt *strong*. It was during this season that I subconsciously began making a big assumption: God's power in my life was most evident when I was strong—strong in my faith, strong in ministry, strong in athletics and academics.

To me, strength and success were proof that God was using me and that he loved me.

I was physically strong. I was six feet three and 215 pounds. I was competitive and in shape. I was a decent football player who could knock heads off. I was academically strong. I graduated at the top of my class and was set to go to college on a full academic scholarship. I was spiritually strong. During my senior year in high school I was preaching multiple times a week. My parents supported me. My pastor mentored and affirmed me. I was reading the Bible daily.

Essentially, I was enjoying a season of God's blessing. I hadn't experienced hard times in my life yet. Moreover, I assumed that becoming a Christian was a guarantee of sorts. Jesus would save my soul but he would also bless my life by making things easy for me. There was a subtle shift taking place in my perspective. I assumed that being in ministry at such a young age meant that God would insulate me from hard times and protect me from the trials and tests that everyone else had to go through. Didn't he owe that to me? If I was going to give up all my other hopes and aspirations to work for him, the least he could do was provide a struggle-free life so that I could accomplish more for his kingdom. Or so I thought.

When the Nightmare Comes to Pass

Fast-forward about two decades. It was November 2010. The energetic high-school evangelist had matured into a husband and a dad who was still passionate about preaching the gospel. Yet in the process I had learned some hard lessons and won some hard-fought battles. I was discovering that being a Christian contained no promises of an easy life. The call to

preach the gospel carried its own set of burdens along with its blessings. And just when I thought I had graduated to the next level of my understanding of God and life and ministry, the bottom fell out of my life and I began freefalling into a bottomless pit of despair and depression.

My parents were both getting older and sicker. My mother had a chronic kidney issue. My father was diabetic and suffered from heart disease. I lived an hour away from them, but they kept me well informed of their infirmities. So every time I traveled anywhere overnight, I wrestled with a very real fear that one of them would die while I was traveling and I wouldn't be there to help. But ten thousand times greater than that fear was the nightmare that one of my parents would die while I was out of the country, and I would be stuck on foreign soil with no way to get back to my family. And that's exactly what happened. My worst nightmare came true. And it was just the beginning.

I've been to almost forty nations, including India, Egypt, Malaysia, and Russia. It's common for me to be out of the country, usually preaching or leading a mission trip. But this particular trip, to Canada, was for a TV appearance to promote a new book. I flew from Charlotte to Toronto on a Sunday afternoon. Before our departure, I called home from the airport to check on my dad. My mom answered and we talked for a few minutes. When I hung up, it never occurred to me that we would never speak again on this earth.

When I landed in Toronto a couple of hours later and turned my phone back on, text messages began flooding in from my brother, informing me that something had happened to Mom. There was a voicemail from my dad. It was barely intelligible. He was screaming and crying and asking me to

pray for Mom. My world started spinning. My heart rate immediately doubled and I broke out in a sweat. While the plane was still moving down the runway toward the gate, I called my dad. He was a basket case. All I could decipher was that he had found my mom lying on the floor. The ambulance came and took her to the hospital, but he thought she was already dead when she left the house. My brother was with her in the emergency room.

Can you imagine what it was like for me to have that conversation with my dad while sitting on the runway in an airplane, in a middle seat, with two total strangers sitting on either side of me . . . in another country? I remember hoping that it was just a bad dream I would wake up from, but I never woke up. It wasn't a dream, and it was going to get even worse.



My brother wasn't answering his phone. I continued calling him without success. Then we had to go through Canadian customs, where I was not allowed to even have my phone in my hand. There was a terrorist threat. None of us were allowed to hold our phones until we cleared customs, which would take over an hour. I felt it buzz in my pocket and knew my brother was calling me from the hospital, but when I went to answer it a customs officer yelled at me and threatened to take my phone away from me. I couldn't even look at my phone to find out if my mom was alive or dead. For sixty minutes I felt like I was losing my mind. I prayed a lot during that hour.

God, a little help here?

Lord, I've been faithfully following you for twenty-four years. Do you think you could heal my mom?

God, why are these custom officers so mean? I told them my mom was dying back home and they ignored me and walked away.

Jesus, why is this happening to my mom? Why is this happening to my dad? Why is this happening to me?

God, please don't let my mom die while I'm in another country. If you love me, you will heal her and get her home.

If my mom is dead, who will take care of my dad?

My entire understanding of strength and weakness was being turned upside down. It was the first time in my life that I felt completely out of control. There wasn't a single thing I could do. The only person I could talk to was God. And I was terrified. I vividly remember calling out to God while standing in that line in Toronto. *Jesus, I've never felt more afraid or more helpless. Please heal my mom. Don't let her die. Please comfort my dad. Please be near my brother as he waits for news from the doctors.*

Suddenly I was overcome with a crystal clear thought. *We are all completely weak. We are all so very broken. Each of us is powerless to do or change anything.* My mom was possibly dead in a hospital room back in South Carolina. My brother was alone in the waiting room, anticipating news from the doctors. My terminally ill father was home alone, unable to even walk, awaiting news about his wife. I was standing helplessly in a customs line at a Canadian airport. It was the first time I remember feeling complete terror and absolute weakness. Finally, I was feeling my own brokenness.

The Vortex of Weakness and Despair

What do you do when you find yourself in a situation far outside of your ability? What do you say when you know for certain that you are too weak to change any detail of circumstances that are way beyond your control? And how do you move forward when you're facing an obstacle that's impossible to defeat? Furthermore, as a Christian, how do you approach your own weakness in the face of a foe you can't possibly hope to overcome? How do you square up God's unlimited power with your own inability to gain victory over discouragement, depression, debt, disease, and death?

I've had to come face-to-face with these hard questions, and it hasn't been easy. There are no quick answers. It's a lot tougher than reciting positive phrases or quoting your favorite Bible verses. And if you haven't already had to deal with these questions head-on, you will at some point. If you live long enough, you're going to face hard times too. They may not be exactly like the ones I've endured, but they're coming

Sometimes hard times don't mean that you're messing up. They mean that you're growing up.

your way eventually. And when those storms hit you, they will shake you to your core. They will wreck you emotionally and cause you to question all you've ever believed in. You may get so frustrated that you scream at God. I know I did.

Yet within that vortex of weakness and despair lies a very tangible and real hope. When all that you held on to as stable and predictable starts to crumble around you, you will find

a new strength that springs out of your weakness. It will overcome you and lift you up when you least expect it and most need it. It's a strange paradox; when you are weak, you can actually tap into a secret reserve of strength that God has stored up for you. Sometimes hard times don't mean that you're messing up. They mean that you're growing up.

Sucker Punched

I finally made it through customs. I called my dad but all he could do was weep and wail. I thought he was having a nervous breakdown. He was home alone while my brother was at the ER. My heart broke when my dad said to me, "Son, I just wish you were here right now with me. I'm so scared, I don't know what to do." I called my brother. No answer. I was walking outside, along the sidewalk, to meet my driver who would take me to the hotel in Toronto. That's when I got the text from my brother.

She didn't make it.

I stopped dead in my tracks. The icy November wind cut through me like a knife. My mother was dead in South Carolina and I was in Canada. My worst nightmare had come true. I lost all control of my emotions and began to sob from a place deep down inside my stomach. I had to tell my driver, a total stranger, that my mom was dead. Then I walked back inside the airport. I had to get back home. My dad and my brother needed me, and I needed them. I needed my wife and my sons by my side. It was 9:00 p.m. and I knew it would be nearly impossible to get back to Charlotte that night. The ticket agent was compassionate, but there were

no flights out of Toronto until 6:00 a.m. the next morning. I would have to spend the night in Canada. In a hotel room. By myself.

That's when I fell down on the floor, right at the ticket counter. All the strength left my body. I couldn't even compose myself enough to stand up. I just lost it. I wept uncontrollably. I wanted to throw up. People were staring at me. I was an emotional mess. A police officer came over to investigate, but the ticket agent motioned for him to stand back and leave me alone. All I had in that moment was a suitcase and a computer bag. And a broken heart. For a brief moment I wanted to stop living.

Yet a strange thing happened in the midst of such despair. I knew that I had to get up. I couldn't stay on that floor forever. I composed myself, prayed a simple, desperate prayer to God asking for help, and managed to get up on one knee. Then I leaned on my suitcase and got my other knee underneath me. I thanked the ticket agent, grabbed my boarding pass for the flight the next morning, and walked back outside into the frigid wind to find my driver, who took me to the hotel. I called my wife and broke the news to her. Then I told my children that their grandma was dead. We all cried together. I just wanted to hold each of them in my arms but a thousand miles separated us.

When I walked into that lonely hotel room, I did something I had grown accustomed to since that night at the little church where I was saved: I fell on my knees beside the bed. I called out to Jesus for help and cried until my eyes swelled shut. I told him how weak and helpless I felt. I asked him for strength. And he responded. I felt a strange sensation, like the way I felt twenty-four years earlier in my bedroom as a

teenager when I sensed God calling me to preach. I felt his tangible presence as I knelt in that hotel room, comforting me, holding me.

Friends began to call me. They prayed for me, read verses to me, and encouraged me. One of my closest friends called and peeled back the years to his adolescence, when he lost his mom when he was twelve. He got real and raw with me; he talked about his hurt, confusion, and anger with God. He walked me through all of his emotions and gave me permission to embrace the grief I was feeling. Then I called my dad and attempted to minister to him, even though I had no idea what to say. But God began to give me words for him. In my weakness, I felt God's strength working through the phone. Oddly enough, I felt weak and strong at the same time.

That night didn't last forever. Morning came, and I boarded the plane and flew back home. I drove to my dad's house and cried all day with him and my brother. We looked at pictures of my mother, Jane King. We told stories about her, laughed and remembered, and cried some more. I preached her funeral two days later, managing to say a few words here and there in between outbursts of sobbing and weeping. I knew my dad wouldn't survive much longer. We had thought he would die first because of his diabetes.

Just a few days after she died, it was Thanksgiving. Two days later, it was my birthday. Three days after that, it was my mom's birthday. Then just two days later, it was my brother's birthday. Can you imagine how hard it was to absorb all of that in just over a week? Without the woman who held our family together? I ran out of tears.

And then . . . life continued. I knew I couldn't stay in that pit of grief forever. I had to find a way to live again.

The Light through the Cracks

As I struggled to find my way, some words from 2 Corinthians carried me through my dark night. I find it one of the most fascinating books in the New Testament because the apostle Paul wrote it from his own place of brokenness. The people at the church in Corinth, whom he loved and had given his life for, were spurning him in favor of the so-called super-apostles, the first-century equivalent of money-grubbing preachers, who dazzled gullible people with their fancy show.

Throughout the letter, you can feel Paul's heartbreak that these people whom he'd laid down his life for were now picking religious con artists over him. He was unafraid to let his humanity show. He was not only concerned for their souls, he was struggling with his own sense of rejection. Here he was, beaten and battered by all the talk about how these other religious leaders were more impressive than him, better looking than him, and better speakers than him. His beloved friends at Corinth should have taken his side, but they didn't. Paul had suffered through numerous physical beatings, but this situation beat his soul. So throughout this letter, we get the heart of a weathered, lovesick apostle, still hanging on because of the people he can't get out of his heart or his head.

Paul has shaped so much of not only Christianity but also Western culture with his words. Even at the time, Paul had a pedigree like nobody else's and a list of accomplishments a mile long he could use to mount his counterattack, to convince these people he cared so deeply for that he was the one they should listen to. But instead Paul did the strangest thing: he kept talking about his weakness. He put his brokenness on display for all of them to see.

In one of the most crucial texts of the letter, Paul said:

For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. (2 Cor. 4:5–10 NRSV)

In a stroke of pure genius, Paul compared how the power of God shone through his weakness to the light that shone from a flame through thin clay pottery.

Corinth was known for manufacturing cheap clay lamps. Precisely because of their thinness, these vessels cast more light. This frail form also made it clear that the light came from another source, so Paul added that in his case, frailty

*We can never escape our weakness.
So we must embrace it.*

ought to make it more obvious that the power came from God and not himself. "But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us" (v. 7 NRSV). The

more cracked we are, the more the light of Jesus is revealed in our brokenness.

None of us like to feel broken. We want to feel strong, in charge, full of courage. We want to stop feeling so frail, so human—we wish we could be unaffected by the pain of the world in and around us. We would not choose to be crushed, to feel rejected, to feel spurned. We would not choose to be heartbroken. But we don't get to choose what breaks us. We only get to choose how we respond. We can never *escape* our weakness. So we must *embrace* it.

It is precisely because we are so broken that there will be no confusion about where the light comes from. It will clearly be the gift of God, and not of ourselves. As lamps, we may feel like cheap, thin, transparent earthen vessels similar to the ones manufactured so long ago in Corinth. But God sends us out into a dark world, where everyone around us has their own pain and brokenness to contend with and so many are walking and living in darkness, desperate for light. That world needs to see God through our weakness more than through our strength. It's remarkable, almost comical, how effectively God uses our own hard times and brokenness to help others. As my pastor once said, Jesus uses losers. It's all he really has to work with.

More than any other passage in 2 Corinthians though, I began to meditate on one particular passage I had read many times before. It had always caught me off-guard as being a bit mysterious, even mystical. But I couldn't quit thinking about it—like a scratched vinyl record that kept skipping back to the same part. It was this short passage that would change my perspective on hard times, weakness, and strength:

In order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me, but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for *my power is made perfect in weakness.*” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. *For when I am weak, then I am strong.* (12:7–10, emphasis added)

Hard times reveal God’s greatest power. His strength is made perfect in our weakness. And his Word can show us how Paul arrived at the place of embracing his brokenness as a blessing, because it wasn’t always the case for him. But for right now, I want you to know that whatever broken place you are in, God will meet you there. Pretending that you are not weak is no shortcut to wholeness. Right now, what you need to know is that grace is present in the midst of your hard time. His grace is sufficient for you. His power is made perfect in weakness.

Wishful thinking will not get you out of your brokenness. Clicking your heels together three times and saying “I’m not really broken” won’t make it any better. We spend so much time trying to escape our weakness when our first task really should be to allow God to be fully present with us in it. We have to stop trying so desperately to get out of where we are just because it feels bad and become aware of how near God is to us right where we are. He is already present in our broken places.

“Blessed are those who mourn,” Jesus says, “for they will be comforted” (Matt. 5:4). We cannot receive comfort unless

we allow for our tears. God has sent us the Holy Spirit, the very presence of Jesus, as the Comforter, precisely because he knew how desperately we would need comfort. We never know the Spirit as Comforter until we hurt so bad that we need to be comforted.

Henri J. M. Nouwen talked about how we, like Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, will all have to drink the cup of suffering in our lives. It is tempting to try to avoid the cup or to not drink it all the way down. But in some mysterious way, it is not that God works in us *despite* our brokenness and pain but that he works *right through* it. The very thing we think might kill us has an odd way of bringing us to life. The very trial that threatens to destroy us may yet be the vehicle for a joy and freedom we have not yet known. But we cannot get to that place unless we hold the cup of sorrow we have been given and drink it all the way down. In Nouwen's words:

As we gradually come to befriend our own reality, to look with compassion at our own sorrows and joys, and as we are able to discover the unique potential of our way of being in the world, we can move beyond protest, put the cup of our life to our lips and drink it, slowly, carefully but fully . . . we can choose to drink the cup of our life with the deep conviction that by drinking it we will find our true freedom. Thus, we will discover that the cup of sorrow and joy we are drinking is the cup of salvation.¹

Sometimes brokenness precedes the blessing. And other times brokenness is the blessing. Stop trying to escape it and learn to embrace it, because it's God's way of using you to shine his light, and it's the means by which he is drawn to you with tender love and comfort when you need it most.