For my dad,
who taught me we can’t escape our storytelling souls, and that sure matters.

For my mom,
who taught me to cherish books and the way true words move us all closer together.

For Josh,
who’s home to me.

For my Jesus,
you come for me again and again, your goodness astounds me.
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In the summer of 2012, I knelt over the frail shell of a child, my son, strapped to all manner of medical monitoring equipment. His body failing, his frame thinning, the medical staff at Arkansas Children’s Hospital was at a loss. They had no answers, no direction. He was an anomaly, they said, and they’d need to regroup after making him as comfortable as possible.

Though the medical community struggled to sort it all out, my faith community seemed to have every answer. God would provide, one said, because God would respond to my great faith. God was setting up a miracle, another said. God works all things together for good, I was reminded. Platitude, platitude, platitude. I smiled through all of them, even nodded. Silently I wondered Did all those words amount to anything, well-meaning though they were?

Hunched over my son, all those platitudes haunting, my phone rang. I looked at the screen, read the name. It was a pastor from a more reformed church in my hometown, and as I answered the phone, I wondered what platitude I might hear. There was a purpose in my son’s suffering? Everything
has a Kingdom purpose? After an exchange of greetings, I clenched my jaw. Stiffened. Braced myself. Through the phone, I heard only three words: “I’m so sorry.” There was a pause, and he told me to holler if I needed anything. He said he’d be praying, and that was that.

It was a moment of selfless solidarity, a moment in which this man of the cloth didn’t force-feed me anemic answers or sell me some fix-all version of a bright-and-shiny gospel. Instead, he did the work of Christ himself; he entered into my suffering. And years later, after a long season of healing (both my son’s and my own), his words served as a reminder of the Christian response to suffering—we enter into it together, share in it together, lament with each other. I suppose it’s natural, our tendency to try to run from suffering, to somehow try to drag other folks from their own. We Christians use the holy tools at our disposal (particularly, the misinterpretation of Scripture) in an attempt to pave a path around suffering. The problem is that’s not the way of Christ. Christ—God with us—entered into the suffering of humanity. He lamented with those who lamented, extended compassion and healing to the hurting. Ultimately, he took on the existential suffering of all mankind as he endured his own suffering on the cross.

The deep invitation of the Christian life is not to a pain-free existence. Instead, the invitation is to enter suffering with Christ. But don’t take my word for it. (After all, I’m no guru.) Consider these words penned by Oswald Chambers in *My Utmost for His Highest*:

> In the history of the Christian church, the tendency has been to evade being identified with the sufferings of Jesus Christ;
Foreword

[people] have sought to procure the carrying out of God’s order by a shortcut of their own. God’s way is always the way of suffering, the way of the “long, long trail.”

In these pages, Alia invites us to join her in the “long, long trail” home. Through sexual trauma, encounters with racism, the loss of a child, and mental health issues, Alia shares her suffering with such sensorial artistry that you cannot help but enter in. But this is not a book about suffering for the sake of suffering. Instead, this work leads you deeper into an experience of Christ, the suffering servant, and along the way exposes the faux-christ of middle-class privilege.

Enter this journey soberly, intending to feel it all. As you do, examine your own journey of pain, maybe the pain you’ve pushed down for so many years. With Alia, experience the Christ who is and always will be Emmanuel, God with us, the God who bends low in our suffering and whispers, “I’m so sorry.”

Seth Haines, author of Coming Clean: A Story of Faith
Introduction

Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit

Every weakness contains within itself a strength.

Shūsaku Endō

This book isn’t for everyone. My publisher’s marketing team might not want me to tell you that, book sales being what they are these days, especially for a relatively obscure first-time author who is known primarily for writing her feelings on the internet. But there you have it.

When I first had an inkling that I had this book beginning in me, I was bawling my eyes out in the emergency room. (You’ll read the details later if you decide this book is, in fact, for you.) I was vulnerable and hurting, thinking of how much of my life I’ve spent in hospitals. I wrote on my now sorely neglected blog, “I don’t want to live like a vagrant anymore, I don’t want to be known for my lack, my weakness, my constant recurring despair.” I wrote it in the midst of a deep depression when I could barely get out of bed, and my daughter, Kaia, had climbed up next to me,
clutched both sides of my face in her tiny palms and said, “I’m sorry you’re hurting, Mommy,” staring into my tear-filled eyes. I wanted so desperately to tell her I was fine, to pretend again, but I lacked the stamina to even try. It didn’t matter to depression that I had a loving and faithful husband in Josh. That Judah, Kaia, and Nehemiah continued growing into kind, compassionate children despite my inability to fix myself. I wanted the meds to work and to not be the kind of person consoled by their children. So this is not the book I’d have chosen for myself—I don’t want to be the author who writes about how weak she is.

Truth is, no one wants to be that person. The one always in crisis, the one who is always sick or struggling, the one who always feels like a burden. No one wants to need. No one wants to be found lacking. No one wants a ministry of weakness. In any case, this is the book that started burning a hole in my gut with a message God wouldn’t let me shake—that we are all called to a ministry of weakness. That, in fact, we cannot know grace without it.

After that hospital visit, I began meditating on the Scripture found in Matthew 5:3 where Jesus says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (NIV). We live in a society that despises lack. We don’t value poverty, that’s for sure. So what does it mean to be poor in spirit? How could that possibly be what God desires for us? How is it a blessing to need?

I’ve come close to death many times, first with childhood leukemia, but then many more times with chronic and mental illnesses. I’ve been sick for much of my life. I have bipolar disorder, which, in itself, is often fatal. Something like one in four will lose that battle to suicide. Unfortunately, we don’t
talk much about suicide in church. When I first wrote the words “bipolar disorder” on my blog, I was terrified. What would people think? But I knew I had family support and generous readers, and so I began writing about faith and mental illness. About sitting with God in the dark. And the emails started coming in.

I discovered that the lights have gone out for many of us. You know how, when you close your eyes, for a moment you can still see the outline of what you were looking at as faint orbs? That’s how it felt when the light went out for me: I knew the light had mass and form and it was still there, but I couldn’t make out anything. It’s the smallest hope of light. And it’s that hope of light that I want to share. When the whole world goes dark, even the tiniest glimmer shines.

Looking back at my childhood, I can see that the dark edges always closed in even among the beautiful things, even among the treasures. But now I also see that God continually promises beauty from ashes, redemption from our sorrow.

When I was a girl in the bright and beautiful world, the neighborhood kids and I played pirates. We cut up grocery bags and took the rough brown paper to draw out and place our treasure. We could navigate the world to the correct spot if we just knew where the X was.

To age the maps, my mother, who always indulged our imaginations, taught us how to soak the paper in bitter black tea, to crinkle them up and dry them on the line like a set of fresh linens. The final step was to get an adult and a candle and burn the edges. I was a girl who already knew where the darkest edges in the world were; they curled up and surrounded me, like a map set on fire. They were crisp and black and left your fingers smudged and shadowy like coal. Their
char shed like flaking skin and got everywhere. I believed the
dark places made me dirty.

But I knew where to dig up the old Folgers coffee can we
filled with Mardi Gras beads, plastic gold coins, and baubles
we collected. We’d beg our mothers to stop their grocery carts
before the parking lot to feed the greedy machines our quarters
and turn the metal dial, watching our treasure fall into the slot.

Sometimes we got a fancy emerald ring or a press-on tattoo or a gummy hand that would collect fuzz in our pockets.
But we saved each treasure so we’d be able to hide it and
find it again.

Once, we sat in the grass on the edge of our lawn with
the coffee can peeled open, the whiff of morning percolating
while we divided up the good stuff. I slipped a ruby ring onto
my finger, looking down at my hand. My flesh was marked
with ash from finding my way.

These days, when I am adrift on rough seas of life, and the
tidal wave of my own limitations crashes against me, I need
the X written down and mapped out so that I can believe
in treasure again, to believe in beauty. I need to believe that
lost things can be found if we only know where to look. My
saltwater tears have mixed with the ash from the Refiner’s fire,
and they form the ink to pen my story, a story that helps me
find my way to the beauty that was always buried and waiting.

I’ve spent a good bit of my life searching, trying to find
my way. Maybe you have too? Maybe you’re also marked by
the dark edges of your life. Maybe you’re tired from going
in circles and getting nowhere. Maybe you’ve lost your way
once again and you’re not sure you’ll ever right this ship. If
that’s you, this book is the story I offer. My place to simply
say, I will not pretend. I will not mask my weakness, my

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poverty of spirit, my broken places. I will scratch out a story of hope and glory. An X on the map, a cross to guide our way.

So many people don’t have a way to talk about these kinds of struggles. The thing is, we all want to be able to tell the truth about ourselves and God. Some of us just didn’t know we were allowed.

I hope this book gives you permission to illuminate the darkness in your own life, to skip the shortcut, to weather the storm, and to seek out the treasures along the way. A lot of things don’t get said in the Christian Living section of our Bible bookstores or on Christian blogs or in our Bible study groups. Over the years I’ve written about things like sexual abuse, body image, mental and chronic illness, suicide, doubt, grief, race, poverty, and identity. There’s power in truth telling, in resurrecting the sunken things and sifting them, a couple good shakes to get the sand out and let the light back in.

That’s what I’ve attempted to do in this book. I’ve dug through the stories of my life, and I offer them to you as permission to tell your own, to be honest about the unlikely places God might meet us and to be okay with areas that aren’t Sunday-school shiny or put together. This book might read like a memoir because I’m on this journey with you. I haven’t “arrived” either, so think of me more as a companion than a guide. It’s broken into four parts: weakness, hope, strength, and glory. It is my story of discovering God in all the places I thought were lacking and seeing how he is good when life is anything but. It’s about the cycles we live in and the stuff that happens not only before you believe, but long after, when you realize that believing, hoping, and knowing God isn’t reciting a sinner’s prayer and calling it good. It’s
remaining fluent in our language of hope on an expedition that often feels foreign and hostile.

It’s my hope you’ll discover there are miracles and wonder and grace here, but they’re often of the small variety. This isn’t a book about befores and afters in the extreme-makeover sense, because we live most of our lives in the middle spaces. In the here but not yet of Kingdom Come. But this is a book about life to death and back again. About finding your way, not always out of the darkness, but through it. About surviving the storms and lashing yourself to the bough that will not break—the cross of Christ.

Sometimes trials capsize me, but even in the barrage of waves, tossed to and fro, I know now I have never been unanchored. I am shackled to the grace that lets me breathe under the weight of the tempest. As Charles Spurgeon said: “I have learned to kiss the wave that throws me against the Rock of Ages.”

I started out by saying this book wasn’t for everyone, and maybe that’s true, but its message is. So how do you know if you should keep reading? Well, this book is for every one of you who emailed me and told me my story made you braver with your own, whatever it might be. It’s for everyone who doesn’t understand their identity as beloved. It’s for everyone who can’t imagine their weakness might be their greatest strength. It’s for everyone who thinks strength comes from trying harder and doing more. It’s for everyone who struggles and for everyone who loves the struggling. It’s for everyone who’s sat in the dark with a silent God, looking for a glimmer of hope that they’re not alone. It’s for everyone who needs to know that being poor in spirit is the richest place of all. That’s where the treasure is buried.
The Nakedness of Need

_The Glorious Weakness of Poverty_

We are so inclined to cover up our poverty and ignore it that we often miss the opportunity
to discover God, who dwells in it.

_Henri J. M. Nouwen_

I have seventeen teeth. Most adults have thirty-two. I count each one, running my tongue in and out through the hollows in my jaw, like fence posts that have been pulled, leaving a rickety mouth full of shame.

The X-ray hangs on the light box to my left, outlining the ghostly remains. The top left molar has a cavern of black, and it’s this inky blemish that brings me to this chair, tipped back and bibbed like a helpless infant, tears leaking from my eyes. It’s been weeks to get in and every breath sends an electric shock down the root of my tooth. My jaw aches
from rolling soft foods to the opposite side of my mouth for so long.

“And you said you had no trauma to the tooth? Nothing hit it or you bit down really hard on something or got hit?”

“No, nothing,” I whisper.

“Well, sometimes a tooth can spontaneously die. It does happen. Usually it’s from trauma, but sometimes with an infection, it can get into the nerve and down to the root. The nerve is dead and now the infection has gone into your jaw and that’s what they saw in the ER a few weeks ago with the CT scan.”

I hear her outlining the best course of action, the importance of saving what few teeth I have, and the cost of a root canal, a permanent crown, and a bridge. I listen politely and nod my head, but I know before she finishes talking that I will opt for having it extracted. Options cost money. Having choices is a luxury we can’t afford right now.

When We Gather in Pain

Two weeks earlier

I stumble into the ER clutching the side of my mouth as if my hand were scaffolding holding my face in place. The triage nurse takes my vitals and plugs my information into the computer, telling me to take a seat.

I sit and wait. The waiting room smells sterile, filling my nostrils with the scent of industrial-strength cleaner and rubbing alcohol. I am instantly transported to childhood. I hate hospitals. As I said earlier, I have spent so much of my life in them. For many of us, our stories begin and end
The Nakedness of Need

here. We are born into weakness and we die in weakness, but in the space between, we spend an inordinate amount of our time, money, and energy fighting, masking, numbing, or pretending not to have any. But I can’t mask mine. I hurt too much to pretend.

A woman sits hunched over in a wheelchair, head tipped forward as if she is in prayer. Every few minutes she lifts a tissue to her lips, coughing and dabbing at her mouth. Her hand is dotted with age spots the color of weak tea and traversed with blue veins that seem to knot like tangled yarn under her papery skin. She is all alone, no children or care worker by her side. I wonder how she got to the ER. She lifts her eyes to mine and her lips part in the smallest smile. We both know that waiting to be seen can be the loneliest time of all. We all want to be seen, don’t we? Sometimes just being seen and understood is the first step to easing the pain.

The sliding doors glide open and a boy who is all limbs and elbows enters, grabs a wheelchair and wheels it out to the waiting taxi. I see him bend forward and extend his arm like a prince in a Disney movie. Only what emerges is no fairy tale. A woman leans out of the cab, clutching at his arm like she’s drowning and he’s a branch on the banks to snatch on to. Her last hope before going under. He lowers her into the wheelchair and her face grimaces in pain. She leans heavily against the side of the wheelchair as he pushes her toward the nurses’ station.

He doesn’t look up or around, his eyes stay focused on the top of her head. He looks as tired as a lifetime of hard could ever look. He’s doing man’s work. Caring for his mother. Her skin is sallow and sunken, partially hidden under her blue surgical mask, and her voice rasps in agony as she moans.
The nurse motions the boy to wheel her toward a set of chairs with patients waiting to be admitted. She’ll have to wait her turn.

After a few minutes, I hear the woman wail, “I’ve been waiting for a long time! Get me in to see the doctor! I hope none of you jerks ever get cancer and have to know how this feels! . . . Oh, I don’t want to hear it! Just get me in, you stupid nurse. Get me in! I can’t handle this chemo, you don’t understand. I’m dying! I can’t wait for your stupid list, I need to go in now! I used up all my pain meds and I need more. I need them now. Do your job, you stupid . . .” Her voice trails off into choice expletives and then fades to whimpers.

She is half crying and half squirming out of her skin as the nurse takes on a clipped, irritated tone and tries to calm her. The nurse is professional but dismissive. At first her voice was soothing like she was talking to a child or an imbecile. But as the rants continue, she is brisk, speaking in short, staccato bursts.

The woman bristles at the slightest touch and her cries echo through the waiting room. When the nurse tries to get a blood pressure, the woman’s son helps her peel the layers of clothes off and what’s left has been reduced to a body no bigger than a child. She is agony encased in bones and skin and all of it is being poured out, brandished like a weapon, like a lifeline, like a curse.

The security guard comes out of her office and hovers near the reception area. When they’ve shuffled the woman off behind the doors, I see the nurse mouth to the officer, “Junkie.”

“Today it’s one thing, tomorrow it’ll be something else. That poor kid of hers, though,” the security guard whispers as she shakes her head.
The Nakedness of Need

My eyes connect with another elderly woman seated near me. She has an Ace bandage wrapped tightly around her ankle and she lifts her eyebrows in disapproval and rolls her eyes when the woman is wheeled across the hall, her mouth pinched disdainfully so that tiny lines feather out from her lips like cracks in dried clay. But the wailing woman is beyond restraint. Her torment is unleashed as she screeches like a siren down the hall, her son trudging after her.

She is flailing and lost and I ache for her. I want to gather her and her son. I want to sit with them. Instead, I do the only thing I can. I pray. I pray into the void, into the pain, into the trauma and poverty that would bring a woman here in the middle of the night rather than to an oncologist’s office where she might be treated as a patient instead of as a problem. I don’t know if she’s battling an addiction or if she’s just in so much need that it comes out as vulgar and coarse, but I know what it’s like to hurt so bad all I wanted was to be numb, to be nothing. I remember my teen years when my only relief came from the hazy in-between that drugs provided. It doesn’t matter if she’s an addict or not, at this moment, she’s human and hurting, and I feel her sorrow echo in my soul like déjà vu.

I don’t know where she’s poor, but I know she is. I know it’s poverty of soul or poverty of spirit or poverty of circumstance, because this kind of deficit shows. It can’t even hide itself and pretend because the void swallows everything. People turn away because it’s indecent to be so desperately needy.

We are a society that despises lack. We despise weakness and need and insufficiency. We turn the other way and pretend to be watching oncoming traffic when the red light
We gather in pain. We come with wounds and worries, afflicted beyond the scope of our first-aid kit and our Tylenol. We come for healing or at the very least for hope. We come for rest and relief, for remedy.

I pray into the space where we’re gathered for this moment. I don’t know one word of her story other than she hurts. I know that. I know what it feels like to hurt. And maybe that’s enough.

I am in anguish over a few lost nights’ sleep and pain too much for me to handle. I am tired and discouraged, trying to survive the radiating ache throughout my neck and chest and jaw, pulsating like a beacon guiding my nerves to battle.

I am crying now. Not a delicate stray tear but weeping violently. Tears are streaming down my face and I don’t know where my pain has ended and others’ pain has begun, but I know everyone comes broken. The elderly woman rises and hobbles across the waiting room away from me; I have become offensive too. We often become offensive to respectable types when we enter into other people’s suffering and brokenness, or divulge our own.

Will I Be Seen?

Tucked behind the curtain in the ER cubicle, I pull the weathered blue gown closed in the back and climb up onto the starchy white sheet.
The nurse enters with my chart and asks me what I’m being seen for, and I begin to explain how the pain started and where. When he finishes typing my information into the computer, he asks my pain level. I tell him it’s a 10 out of 10. He taps my veins with gloved fingers and swabs me with the cool sting of alcohol before filling vials to send off. Another nurse tells me the doctor will be back in soon and leaves without ever looking me in the eyes. I wait.

I brace myself for what’s coming. I know before the curtain is ever pulled back that I must prove my pain. Before I finally acquiesced to the pleas of my family to get help, I leaned in close to the mirror at home and inspected my mouth, open wide, seeing nothing obviously wrong with my tooth. I applied makeup like I was going somewhere important. I made sure to brush out the mats in my hair from tossing back and forth all through the night. My husband once questioned why I’d bother when I’m just going to the doctor. But I always do when I need to ask for help.

When I have errands like returning something to a store, or asking for a discount, or knowing I will be dealing with someone and their perceptions of me, I dress up. Over time, I have learned it’s easier to get help if you look like you don’t really need it.

Stores were happy to accept the expired coupon from the elegant-looking white woman with her arms full of shopping bags in front of us in line but were less inclined to do so for my mom, who was missing her front tooth at the time and who bought her clothes from Goodwill.

But none of that effort matters, because I have cried off all of my makeup in the hours waiting and my eyes are swollen and blurry, crisscrossed with tiny red veins like an atlas of
my world, marking where I am, how I am, what I feel. This is the nakedness of need.

I wish I didn’t have to wonder how I would be treated if I didn’t have state insurance, the kind you qualify for when you haven’t made enough to buy the real kind. When you have to jump through hoops to see a specialist or get something covered. When a few months of good pay means fewer cutoff notices but your insurance is canceled because you make just a little too much to be considered poor enough. When the in-between of being uninsured means you pray no one gets hurt and nothing happens you can’t fix with your medicine cabinet and some WebMD. When you instead learn to live with whatever goes wrong until you can’t anymore. When you don’t have a primary care physician because you only go in for emergencies. When you get teeth pulled because you have no other choice.

I wish I wasn’t stripped of my identity in this gaping hospital gown, with no makeup and bed head, and I could make them see me as a person. I wish I didn’t have to wonder if classism or racism was a factor in my care. But I’ve been dismissed so often, having to prove that I am what I say I am: hurting. I watch the clock tick mercilessly on through the night, counting the ceiling tiles while I pray for someone to see me. To really see me.

Painkillers

I hold my breath for the count of three and feel the dye flushing my veins and rising through my neck, making my cheeks red and hot as the CT scan closes around me like a casket. I’m wheeled back to the ER to await my results.
When the doctor and nurse enter with my scan results, their demeanor has changed. They’re gentle, helpfully explaining that the scan showed an abnormal abscess that had broken through my top gum line and, if not treated, would continue spreading toward my brain. Suddenly my phantom pain is justified, and instead of frowning at me as if I am a child faking a tummy ache to get out of school, their eyes show concern and care. My pain is now justified because I have a raging infection pressing on my nerves, and in that moment, I know they finally see me. Strong pain meds are ordered, and the nurse hangs a bag of antibiotics and hooks it to my IV. He looks me in the eyes when he asks gently if I’d like some water and promises me pain relief is on its way. When he takes my IV to administer the pain medicine, he pats my arm compassionately. “You’ll feel better very soon,” he assures me. The world becomes watery and soft, and my hands drop to my side as my limbs uncoil. Being seen and understood goes a long way toward killing the pain.

To believe that the experiences we have are valid, that the feelings and expressions of them are true and real and worthy of being listened to, is one of the greatest mercies we offer each other.

**Poor Teeth**

I am thirty-nine years old. Most every picture taken of me, I’m smiling at the camera with my lips closed like I’m holding in a secret. When I go to restaurants, I’m careful to only order things I’m able to chew with my front teeth and my one set of connecting molars.
Nothing indicates your station in life more than poor teeth. The poor don’t go to the dentist until their brittle teeth shatter like porcelain, leaving them with a jaw full of rubble. Even then, most dentists don’t take random people who can afford little more than a fragment of what’s due.

And when I’ve sat in the dentist’s chair, I’ve often been met with disdain and judgment when the mottled X-ray is slapped onto the light box displaying all the ways I’ve failed in basic hygiene and discipline. To fix each tooth would be hundreds if not thousands of dollars, and so they are plucked one by one like roots from the earth. There’s a reason we use the expression “it’s like pulling teeth” to describe something that is difficult and no one wants to do. So I sit, mouth agape, waiting for the void, the empty spot where my phantom tooth can still be felt and where my tongue can’t stop probing its grave. This empty and cavernous vacancy spreads in the whole of me. When they look at my chart, I know what they see.

So often when dentists see low-income patients, there is no accounting for the genetics and maternal care afforded to their moms or whether she got prenatal vitamins and enough milk. They don’t see a mouthful of teeth competing for space and no money for braces. They don’t consider the poverty that would provide a poor diet or food deserts that don’t provide nutritious choices. They don’t think about access to clean water and the alternative beverages people drink when it’s not available. The absence of regular cleanings is viewed more as a failure in prioritizing and scheduling than a maintenance that would mean not paying rent that month. They don’t account for constant toothaches that are ignored or old toothbrushes with the bristles worn down and splayed.
open like the head of a straw broom. No one considers dental floss a luxury and chewing without pain a fantasy. When they look down at the chart and let out a frustrated sigh, they’re not accounting for anything other than a moral failure on the patient’s part. The disgust that anyone would let it get this bad is palpable.

If you want to make a character on screen insidious, laughable, stupid, or ridiculous, give them snaggled yellow or decaying teeth, give them the stumps worn down to gums or gaps in the front and the audience will fill in the rest. They’ll know just what to think.

Sometimes it’s easier to keep your mouth shut than bear the shame.

There are many secrets the poor keep, if they can. Keeping their lips shut when smiling is just one of them.

The Poor Can’t Choose

One of the biggest distinctions between the rich and the poor is not account balances or stock options, it’s choices. The poor cannot choose.

In lean times, we’ve struggled to pay rent, to buy food, to put gas in the tank, to pay medical bills. For much of my life, we’ve been one paycheck away from being homeless, and indeed if it weren’t for my in-laws letting us move in with them, we probably would’ve been at one point when the housing market crashed and there was no work. Yet, compared to so many, we are affluent. Now, we’re often broke but no longer poor. Our income has fluctuated greatly over the years because of the housing market and the effects it’s had on construction, but when you’ve lived on the sparse
side of things for so long, you never forget how it feels to have no options.

I’d lived so much of my life with scarcity a constant companion. Those feelings that God was not going to provide or come through for me is my Achilles’ heel. It is my weak spot, the tender area where Jesus asks me to trust him again and again. To walk forward anyway and to believe that in these areas where there never seemed to be enough, he is.

I’d learned to set my sights lower. Always lower. As a newlywed, I’d underline the portions of the Bible that talk about contentment and suffering and I’d hope for the payoff one day. But really, I wasn’t so much hoping for character and perseverance as I was for another ten bucks so I could buy some Top Ramen and toilet paper. I was praying for a few extra hours on Josh’s paycheck so I could get a winter coat and also make rent that month. I prayed for money to be able to fill prescriptions or go to the doctor when I knew I wasn’t well but had no options available to find out why.

I see people who’ve chosen to live among the poor and are applauded for their noble choices. It’s one thing to choose to be among the poor; it’s another to not have enough to keep the electricity on or worry your paycheck isn’t enough to buy groceries. There’s no nobility in that. No one applauds your character when you always come up short.

No one thinks you have succeeded when you have SNAP benefits or you’re sorting your boxes of approved cereal and gallons of milk from WIC and trying to match them up to your checks and the worn pamphlet telling you exactly what you can and cannot have, and you can see people looking at your children, appraising your situation, appraising you. Are you a good mom? Are your children well behaved?
Heaven forbid you’re shopping at naptime because it’s the only time you can walk to the store without it being too hot, and your child throws the expected missed-nap tantrum. Do you look destitute enough? Not too uppity like you’re scamming the system, just someone who’s fallen on hard times. Or do you look too poor or too fat or too exhausted? So they think you’re a lazy slob, just wanting a handout. No one thinks it’s great to show up to the church potluck with ramen noodles or one serving of Kraft boxed mac and cheese because that’s all you have to spare.

So we learn early on that lack is embarrassing. Our pain is uncomfortable not just for ourselves but for those around us. Our need is obscene and offensive to a world that prides itself on its self-reliance and wide-open smiles. A world where we easily dismiss pain we do not ourselves feel.

**Poverty as a Pastor**

Being poor doesn’t automatically make someone righteous or holy any more than being rich does. But limited material resources, while embarrassing in our self-sufficient society, can create a deeper faith and dependency on God because you don’t have the power to do it in your own strength. We know this in theory, and yet we hate being reliant on anyone or anything. We love the power we feel in choice. We say God is all we need but we don’t live like it.

As Christians, we must develop muscle memory, the re-bounding shape of our spiritual fibers, snapping back into place and getting stronger when stretched further than we’ve gone before. So many of us let faith atrophy because we don’t truly know God’s character. We’ve never had to completely
relly on it and therefore can’t trust he is good. We lack stamina to walk the long, steep, narrow path we’re often called to. It’s easy to say God is good when we’re #blessed. We associate God’s favor with a clean bill of health, a flush bank account, and the ability to bless others. We don’t believe our ability to bless others might result from our poverty. Our need might be the thing that most blesses the body of Christ.

Sometimes faith is easier in the crisis. We cry out to God so easily in our desperation—in the storms, the waves, the torrential downpour. The frailty of our condition, our humanity small and powerless in light of the crushing weight bearing down from all sides, is revealed in our inability to ransom ourselves. In the words of one of my favorite hymns, “Rock of Ages,” “Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling; naked, come to Thee for dress; helpless, look to Thee for grace.” There is a helplessness in poverty that precedes the move of God in our lives because we understand an aspect of grace that so many miss: we do nothing to earn it. When we understand this, all becomes grace.

**No Shortcuts to Faith**

Our suffering works on our behalf when we are powerless, and this is easier to endure for short sprints of pain. But when it is drawn out, a marathon of crisis that becomes our whole life, we begin to look for shortcuts, for ways to anesthetize the pain. We rarely develop stamina in our faith when there are other routes available, as avoiding complete dependence has been our default since Eden. The rich and affluent simply have more options, other socially acceptable routes they can choose.
The Nakedness of Need

Christians talk a lot about how we’re “blessed to be a blessing.” We understand how poor people benefit from the benevolent rich. If we’re faithful, we practice generosity. We’re reminded of the ways the poor need the affluent to help meet their needs through compassionate charity. We write checks and put money in the offering tray and we take that mission trip but we remain distant. It remains a choice. Our choice. Poverty is something removed from many of us. We often see well-meaning Christians return home from short-term mission trips from poverty-stricken countries gushing about how happy the people there were with so little. How faithful, how inspiring! We send our unruly teens to build houses and get their hands dirty for a week with their matching ministry T-shirts. We hope it will transform them from ungrateful consumers to faithful stewards of all the blessings they have. It will open their eyes to how those other people live and they will feel a small burden to be grateful for their old second-generation iPod when everyone has the latest upgrade.

We return home vowing to be grateful with less; we feel guilty about our Target trips and we skip our Starbucks latte once a week and instead sponsor a child. We might give up some of our excess, but it doesn’t really cost us. We become practiced at charity but we don’t identify with that poverty internally. Poverty remains foreign, across continents, across oceans, across borders. It doesn’t live in our neighborhoods, our churches, our relationships, our homes, and our hearts.

Charity alone allows us to remain distant, and the recipients of our offering are like a specimen to be examined and Instagrammed, a letter or updated picture to pin under the fridge magnet rather than a transformational relationship
that would help us know the heart of Jesus in ways nothing else does. Jesus knew that proximity to the poor would transform us. I don’t want to discount this. But even more so, he knew putting himself incarnationally into the position of interdependence would be the only way to truly demonstrate the kingdom of God. Indeed, it is the only way we can experience it. We cannot know the inheritance of God without identifying with the poor in spirit, without the poverty that says, “I am naked and poor and wretched and I need a Savior or I’ll die. I’m desperate for you, Jesus.”

We’ve valued one side of the equation and not the other because we don’t imagine the poor have anything to teach us about God. We go with our gospel but don’t always understand grace. We are not students of the poor, the weak, the broken, the outside, or the other. We don’t learn from the margins, we still esteem power and success and skill.

What happens when our pastor is poverty? What happens when we are discipled by our lack instead of disciplined for it?

We have merit-based ideology so ingrained into our cultural identity and theology that we often fail to see the great imbalances Jesus constantly pointed out. Much to the irritation of the respectable religious people, Jesus was always elevating the poor and the weak. He knew something we so often forget: none are worthy, not one. Our works are filthy, our hearts desperately wicked, and our lips unclean. And yet, God chose these weak vessels to demonstrate his glory, his mercy, his majesty. He calls us holy, beloved, good, sons and daughters. “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9 NIV).
Jesus displaced himself that we might know him. This is incarnational ministry, and it’s the life we’re all called to. Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:3 NIV). The word poor here isn’t referring only to material poverty like the widow in the temple. It’s another word, the Greek word *ptochos*, that describes a beggarliness. It means being completely destitute of any wealth, resources, position, skill, influence, or honor. It is a helpless dependence that knows in itself, it is powerless, weak, naked, and empty. It literally translates to “beggarly.” It connotes nothing to fall back on. No other route, no shortcuts. No reputation to vouch for you or safety net to catch you because the bottom has already fallen out. This kind of poverty means no choices. And yet Jesus is saying that to come to him, the very first qualification is our realization and identification of our spiritual poverty. Our identification with something so many of us would rather avoid.

By identifying with the poverty in us and around us, we become rich. Yet so often, we don’t believe we have anything to learn from the poor.

We think, *Haven’t they made the choices that got them into that mess in the first place?* We don’t place value on neediness and poverty. There are no accolades for our lack and our weakness. No best-life awards for those who continually struggle. But God places tremendous value there. Throughout the Bible, God spoke of the various reasons for poverty, and while the foolish choices of a sinful lifestyle can contribute to being impoverished, Jesus spent much more time rebuking the affluent for their sinful lifestyles of oppression, greed, and systemic injustice that showed they didn’t love, care for, or see their poor neighbors. That, in fact, created
much of the inequity that kept their brothers and sisters in poverty. His heart of compassion always bent toward those suffering under the burdens of injustice, poverty, and calamity. Jesus has a decided preference for the weak.

He commanded his disciples to feed the poor, offer drink to the thirsty, and clothe the naked and needy. He told them to practice hospitality to the foreigner. To love the refugees and the immigrants. To nurse the sick and to sit with their pain, to visit those incarcerated and see them as made in the image of God. Jesus adored those we so easily dismiss, despise, or denigrate.

Jesus always taught that he himself was present not only with the poor but also in the poor. Understanding Jesus’s presence and incarnational approach to loving our neighbor will always have more to do with identification of our own areas of poverty than with a posture of thinking we’re in any way the savior the poor need. The place of blessing we give from is our understanding that all is grace and everything belongs to God. We didn’t earn a single thing, material or spiritual. Grace levels us and humbles us to see our neighbor as ourselves. It frees our hands to give and guards our hearts from greed and self-gratification.

In Matthew 25 Jesus taught us that when we fail to see him in the poverty and oppression of others, when we ignore their plight, we fail to understand the heart of God. He made no qualifications of those who deserved grace and mercy. He didn’t mention their choices, their gender, their mental stability, their religion, their political affiliations, their country of origin, their work habits, addictions, vices, sins, or the color of their skin. He didn’t say to only visit those incarcerated if they were innocent and to limit our love for immigrants to
those from Norway, who are gainfully employed and not a perceived drain on the economy. He said in seeing the least of these, in serving them, we would serve him. We would see him. When we begin to do this, displacing ourselves while loving and caring for people who are marginalized, our love has less to do with charity and everything to do with the incarnation of Christ who made himself poor, just for us.