

The background of the cover is a photograph of a calm body of water reflecting a dense forest of evergreen trees. The sky above is a clear, vibrant blue. The text is centered and reads:

WHERE
IS
GOD
IN
THIS?

LOOKING FOR GOD'S GOODNESS
IN OUR STRUGGLES

LANDRA YOUNG HUGHES

WITH HOLLY CRAWSHAW

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Landra Young Hughes with Holly Crawshaw, *Where Is God in This?*
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In memory of my sister LeeBeth Young,
whose beautiful life continues to teach us
all about God's good purpose.

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God? I'd Like to Speak to the Manager

I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.

John 16:33 NIV

I'm not really OK.

That's probably *not* how you should start a book that's supposed to help people, right? Especially a book about finding value in the struggles and suffering we experience in life. I should probably open with a lighthearted story you can connect with. Something that would engage you, maybe make you smile—something endearing, almost kitschy. The decline of the *Bachelor* franchise would be an obvious choice.

But that's not what we're doing in this book.

See, I'm in the middle of what has to be the most soul-draining season of my life. And right now, it feels dark. It feels heavy. And it feels hopeless.

Notice, I said it *feels*. Because you know the thing about feelings? They're not always a representation of what's *true*. And this knowledge *does* assuage the ache slightly, but for the most part, I vacillate between crushing waves of despair and blurry interludes of business as usual.

On January 18, 2021, my precious sister LeeBeth Young died.

LeeBeth was sick. She had been sick for a long time but not the kind of sick that means Get Well Soon balloons and all-you-can-eat ice cream. LeeBeth was an alcoholic—a binge drinker. Now, if you're not familiar with the disease of addiction, I'm sure it's impossible to wrap your head around the idea that someone can't stop doing the thing that makes them sicker. But that's the nature of the mental insanity that seizes those of us with this particular thorn.

I say "us," because as an anorexic/bulimic in recovery, I have a level of empathy for LeeBeth. By God's miraculous grace, I walk in healing from my addiction. And by the same miraculous grace, LeeBeth is in heaven with our Father, walking out her healing with a restored mind and body.

Yes, there's the glorious and life-giving hope of heaven. But here on earth, it still hurts.

It had only been a few short years since we realized LeeBeth was a full-blown alcoholic. She never partied growing up. She never drank. She didn't sleep around. In fact, she was pretty perfect by surface standards. But later in life, LeeBeth suffered from loneliness and depression, which transformed her into someone completely different (more on this later).

When LeeBeth was sick, it was like she had undergone a total personality transplant. I didn't even know my sister the last few months leading up to her death.

I'd like to paint some pretty picture for you here and say we had a meaningful moment in her final days that I look back on now as some mysterious treasure, but that's not the case. Death rarely gives you that perfect Pixar ending.

I did have a chance to talk to LeeBeth shortly before she died. And I guess if I were going to look back and say there was one last time we connected meaningfully, that would be it. She called me from my dad's phone and just kept repeating over and over how sorry she was for being sick again.

"I just want you better," I told her. "I love you. My kids love you. We all love you. We just want LeeBeth back."

I was so angry that night. I asked my husband, Brad, "When is she going to hit rock bottom? When will she lose more than she's willing to lose and make some sort of change? Why does she keep doing this to us? To herself? What is it going to take for her to get well?"

Kind and brilliant Brad said, "Landra, I think what she really needs from us is just acceptance. No more advice, no more telling her what to do. She just really needs to know that we're beside her on this journey. That we love her no matter what."

If you have a significant other, is there anything more annoying than when they're calm, rational, *and* right when you just want to be mad?

But he was. He was right. LeeBeth just needed our love.

I'd like to think the last memory LeeBeth has of this earth is of her father, holding her, caring for her, telling her how much he loved her. Dad was in his office working on a

sermon—a message about God asking Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac—when he heard a noise down the hallway.

LeeBeth was having a seizure. My brother and sister-in-law were staying there for the night, and Dad screamed for them to start CPR while he called 911. The paramedics who arrived were able to find a faint heartbeat, but no pulse. What happened next is a hazy, bitter blur.

Intubation.

Doctors.

My dad trying to fly my mom back home.

Calls.

Texts.

Prayers.

Tears.

Hearts shattering.

“I’m sorry,” the doctor finally said. “There’s nothing else left for us to do. LeeBeth is gone.”

Some of us in the room and some of us on FaceTime watched in utter disbelief as they disconnected my beautiful, so-much-life-to-live, thirty-four-year-old sister from the machines keeping her body alive.

My mom, watching from a cold chair in an airport sitting area, sobbed. Her anguish, her desperation, the cries of a mother torn apart—I’ll never forget it. It was the darkest moment of my life.

There are people in this world who abuse their bodies to no end. I know, because there was a time I abused my own by starving it. There are people who use lethal amounts of drugs, who drink, who inject or snort or take anything put in their hands. They get to live, but LeeBeth does not. This is a truth. This is a fact. But how I choose to process

this data is up to me. Some days, I do well with it. Others . . . I don't.

I have a daughter of my own—Sterling. She's perfect. And I love her so much it is literally painful.

Have you ever asked your kid, "What's something Mommy [or Daddy] says all the time?" Be careful if you do because kids don't lie about stuff like this. When we posed this question to Sterling, without hesitation her response was, "Mommy says, no, no, no, no!" (complete with a full-on finger wag). In fact, I'm pretty sure that *no* was Sterling's first word. It's cute when a toddler says it. But when God says it?

It doesn't feel cute.

If you've been told no by God before, you can relate (pretty sure that's all of us). When God doesn't answer our prayers the way we want, when something feels unfair or unjust, when bad things happen, when we're disappointed, stuck, hurt, or angry, it can feel an awful lot like God has stopped caring about us. In fact, it can sometimes feel like God is on the opposite team or like we're being punished. And we start thinking and searching and rehashing our actions, wondering which of our many sins is the reason we are suffering.

The problem with that way of thinking is just that—it's *our* way of thinking. It's our human logic trying to reason out how an omniscient, all-powerful God operates, and that is like explaining physics to a newborn. We cannot wrap our minds around the infinite power of the almighty Creator. But we like to try. And we also like to give him feedback when things don't go the way we think they should.

If you break it down, if you bring our experiences of adversity and struggle into the light of God's Word, it would be more surprising if we *didn't* face difficulty. I mean, aren't

we promised as much? John 16:33 says, “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (NIV).

“In this world *you will have trouble.*” This is 100 percent the truth.

“But take heart! *I have overcome the world.*” This is also 100 percent the truth.

I think one of the greatest tensions of the Christian walk is reconciling our fallen world with a loving Father. But we quickly forget that this world is not the world God created. Genesis 1:31 tells us, “God saw everything he had made. And it was very good.”

The earth God made was not just good—it was *very* good. God walked side by side with humankind. Nothing separated him from us and us from him. There were no strokes, no heart attacks, no cancer, and no alcoholism in the world God created. But you’ve heard what happened next. Satan visited Eve in the garden as a serpent and whispered sin into existence. No longer was the world what God created. Paradise was lost—but not forever. God immediately went to work to solve a problem he was not responsible for.

See, we get it wrong when we say the first sin was when Eve took a bite of the fruit and then handed it to Adam. The first sin was Adam and Eve questioning God—thinking they knew better than their Creator.

Genesis 3:1–6 tells the story:

The serpent said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat fruit from any tree in the garden?’”

The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden. But God did say, ‘You must not eat

the fruit from the tree in the middle of the garden. Do not even touch it. If you do, you will die.”

“You will certainly not die,” the serpent said to the woman. “God knows that when you eat fruit from that tree, you will know things you have never known before. Like God, you will be able to tell the difference between good and evil.”

The woman saw that the tree’s fruit was good to eat and pleasing to look at. She also saw that it would make a person wise. So she took some of the fruit and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her. And he ate it.

The first sin wasn’t the physical act of biting into the fruit. It was questioning God—questioning God’s plan, God’s goodness. It was the desire to *be* godlike. To be in control. It was *these* desires that led to a sin-soaked world. And we all hate sin. We hate what it does to us and what it does to the people we love. We hate it when people die young. We hate it when marriages are ripped apart. We hate it when natural disasters kill thousands of innocent people. We hate the bad things that happen.

But let me ask you this: Is *our* questioning of God any different from Adam and Eve’s? Is our desire to have things go the way we want any different from their desire to be godlike, to be in control? How are our actions any different from the very actions that opened the doors to sin in our world?

Phew. I don’t know about you, but that thought convicts me thoroughly.

But I’m not gonna leave y’all hanging here, because God sure didn’t. I can’t imagine what he must have felt when he learned of Adam and Eve’s betrayal.

Brad and I recently moved our family back to Texas from Oklahoma (more on this later). My parents, Ed and Lisa Young, are the pastors of Fellowship Church. Brad and I are both on staff at our main campus in Grapevine. That means my kids are at church a *lot*. If you are a pastor's kid or your kids are pastor's kids, you know what I'm talking about. They're at church so much, they think they own the place.

Anyway, I had walked out of work and was trying to wrestle the kids into the car—Sterling (who's currently four) and Jackson (who's currently one). If you've ever carried a one-year-old in a car seat carrier for any amount of distance, you understand the fire that was burning in my forearm and bicep. I told Sterling, "Ster, hold on to Mommy's leg while I buckle in your brother." This is not an unfamiliar command. I make her touch me in the parking lot until I can get her secure.

I had just heard the satisfying *click* of the car seat into the base when Sterling squealed. And *ran* across the parking lot.

I thought I was going to come unglued. "STERLING, NO!" I yelled.

She ran with reckless abandon toward my dad's car, which was pulling back into the parking lot.

In that moment, Sterling thought she knew better than I did. In her eyes, she was doing something that felt right—running toward her papa. But in reality, what she did was incredibly dangerous. Thank God the parking lot isn't busy during the weekday, but can you imagine if she did that on a Sunday? With people backing in and out and darting around?

I couldn't leave Bubba by himself, so I waited until my dad walked her back to me. "Sterling, we do *not run* in parking lots."

“But I saw Big E,” she said, as if that were an excuse to play dodge-the-SUV with her *body*.

I felt all the emotions. Relief that she was OK. Rage that she disobeyed. Rattled by what *could have* happened. And dread that she may disobey again and the result will be different—worse. Much worse. I imagine that my reaction to Sterling’s disobedience is a faded shadow of what God felt in the garden of Eden when he learned of Adam and Eve’s disobedience. He didn’t give them the *one* rule to restrict them. He gave it to them for the same reason we give our kids most of their rules—to protect them. To protect us.

Once Adam and Eve sinned, the consequences were unavoidable. But God was determined to rescue his children. Romans 8:3 says, “The written law was made weak by the power of sin. But God did what the written law could not do. He made his Son to be like those who live under the power of sin. God sent him to be an offering for sin. Jesus suffered God’s judgment against our sin.”

Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God created a road map back to perfect union with him—through our faith in his Son. That’s the love our Father has for us! Unwavering, undeterred, and unaffected by our actions. He is constant; he is *good*.

We don’t have a God problem. We have a sin problem. Yes, I can get really worked up when I try to understand LeeBeth’s death through my own thinking, my own reasoning, my own logic. But when I take a step back and think about it through the truth of God’s Word, I may not make *sense* of it, but I can make *peace* with it. Some days, at least.

Typically, when we struggle it’s because we’re wrestling with acceptance. We’re given a circumstance we don’t want,

and we think, *God did not consult me on this matter, and I'd really like to speak with his manager.*

When we try to live within our own power, we see God as unfair. We begin to question him and wonder if he is really with us as Job did when he said, “Why have you made me your target?” (Job 7:20 NIV). Have you asked that of God? Why is this happening to *me*? Why *her*? Why *us*? It’s human nature to ask these things. It’s completely understandable. But it’s also the same as thinking we can see the whole picture better than God can.

Eventually, even Job (who lost more than I have) was able to come to a point of acceptance: “To God belong wisdom and power; counsel and understanding are his” (12:13 NIV).

So what do we do? Just stop praying? Just stop trying? Check out of our lives and let God do whatever he’s going to do, because he’s going to do it anyway? No, of course not. I mean, trust me, I’ve been in that season of life, and it’s no better than the struggle. In fact, it’s worse. It’s isolating and detaching, and that is not how we were designed to live.

My dad has this statue in his office. It’s the faces of two men—Paul and Jesus. Jesus is holding the back of Paul’s head with one hand, almost lovingly, while his other hand touches Paul’s eyes. Paul’s face looks strained—as if he is in pain or discomfort. Jesus’s face is serene with an almost knowing look in his eyes. If you’ve cracked open the Bible, you know who Paul (formerly, Saul) is. Paul was one of the biggest persecutors of Jesus followers in the history of humankind. Literally, he hunted down people following Jesus and had them arrested—or worse. But Paul is also

responsible for most of the writing found in the New Testament. He is credited largely with the establishment of the first church. And he led countless people to Christ.

How did this come about? What happened? Paul suffered.

Have you ever thought about that? That Paul's very first interaction with Jesus was one of suffering?

While traveling to Damascus on the search for more Jesus followers to imprison, "suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. [Paul] fell to the ground. He heard a voice speak to him, 'Saul! Saul! Why are you opposing me?'" (Acts 9:3-4).

Paul's like, *Um. Who. The. Heck. Are. You?*

"'I am Jesus,' he replied. 'I am the one you are opposing'" (v. 5).

Then Paul opened his eyes, but he couldn't see. He had been struck blind. I'm not going to make light of the loss of vision, but can you imagine the loss of control Paul must have felt? He had lost the way he interpreted everything—his sight. If I wake up in the morning and don't have my glasses on or contacts in, I am a legitimate hazard to myself and others. And here's Paul, this big, important religious zealot, with no control over his surroundings.

Paul's story continues and he encounters a man named Ananias, a man God had sent (though Ananias was reluctant, which I get because Paul was a scary dude) to help Paul. Ananias prayed for Paul, and something like scales fell from his eyes, and he could see again. Paul gave his life to Christ and the rest is literal history. But it all started with suffering.

Maybe, just maybe, our suffering serves a similar purpose. Maybe suffering is something God uses to teach us, grow us, and help us.

Does he send us suffering? Does he allow our suffering? These are questions we're not going to grapple with in this book, mostly because I'm not God. Some days, I'd like to think I'd be a good God, but I'll be honest. I found my wedding rings in a bag of sour candy last week. No idea how they got in there. No one wants me to be ruler of the universe.

What we *are* going to unpack, however, is the usefulness of suffering. Of what it brings. Of the—dare I say?—*gifts* that come as a result.

As I write this, I'm having a crappy week. I miss my sister. Someone at church told me on Sunday: "You look just like her, like LeeBeth." I know people mean well when they make these kinds of comments, but they sort of drive the stake of grief just a little deeper into my heart. I don't want to look like LeeBeth. I want LeeBeth to look like LeeBeth. I want LeeBeth to be alive.

But she isn't. Instead, LeeBeth suffered. Instead, I'm suffering. Instead, my family is suffering.

Are you suffering right now, friend? Does your life resemble a battlefield? In the aftermath, when you look around you, do you see nothing but mess after mess?

Have you lost someone you love? Have you lost a baby before you even held her? Have you lost the hope of ever being married because the dating scene has left you bitter and hurt? Have you lost trust in your spouse because of their actions? Or have your own actions cost you more than you're willing to lose? Few things grate on the heart quite like self-inflicted suffering.

Have you lost your health? Have you lost your dream? Have you lost faith in someone you trusted or faith in the entire country?

Paul lost his vision.

I lost my sister.

But I know my God. And I know he is good. Because of that, I can be certain that he will not waste my suffering. He will not waste *any* suffering—including yours.