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FOREWORD

By Anne Graham Lotz

ON September 11, 2001, terrorists hijacked four airliners, ramming two of the planes into the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City. The entire world watched in horror as the towers erupted into gigantic fireballs, then imploded until nothing was left of the 110-story, glass-and-steel structures except soot, dust, and a six-story-high pile of smoldering rubble.

Even before the dust settled, the heroic rescue effort began as thousands of people systematically started combing through the debris to find the survivors. One rescuer told how he had climbed down into a hole in the twisted steel and rubble, extending his arm even farther to shine his flashlight into the darkness, when out of the dusty blackness a hand reached up and grabbed his! He was so startled he almost dropped his flashlight and let go of the hand! But instead, he reached back for someone to grab his hand, then someone grabbed that person's hand, until a human chain was formed and the man trapped in the pile of debris was pulled to safety.

In our world today, there are many people who are trapped in the debris of despair, depression, and doubt; or in the rubble of broken relationships; or in the twisted maze of suffering and pain. God has uniquely equipped Nancy Guthrie as a “rescuer” to shine the light of God’s truth into the blackest night of confusion and grief, hopelessness and helplessness. Framing the testimony of her own suffering within the classic biblical story of Job, Nancy draws a magnificent picture of triumphant victory through faith in Jesus Christ.

In a world where so much attention has been focused on a Christian message of health, wealth, and prosperity, *Holding on to Hope* is like a beacon of Light, drawing the reader to God and God alone.

My prayer is that God will use this book to rescue you from the depths of being buried alive in the debris and rubble of your own life experience. And I pray also that your feet will be planted on the solid ground of his Word, setting your spirit free to soar in the rarefied atmosphere of genuine worship. God bless you as you grasp Nancy’s hand and allow her to guide you on your own path of suffering that leads to the heart of God.

INTRODUCTION

MY husband, David, and son, Matt, and I were working around the house on a Saturday morning when we heard the sound of helicopters and looked out the window to see black smoke billowing from somewhere in our neighborhood. A house, two cul-de-sacs away, was on fire. David walked over to the house, checked it out, and came back sobered by what he had seen—the house had burned to the ground in a matter of minutes.

When you witness something like that, you can't help but think, *How would I respond if that happened to me? What would I do if I drove up to the house I had left that morning, and it had been destroyed?*

It reminded me of a story I had read that week—a story of loss so astounding that most of us can hardly imagine it. It is the ancient story of a man named Job, a man known, perhaps, as history's most significant sufferer. Job was sitting at home one day when a series of messengers came and told him that all of his livestock and servants had been slaughtered and then that all of his children had perished as the building they were in

collapsed. Then, as if losing everything he had and nearly everyone he loved was not enough, Job was stricken with painful sores all over his body.

As I read his story, I was amazed by Job's response to pain and loss. *Would I respond that way to tragedy?* I wondered. I also noticed that Job was specifically chosen to experience great suffering. Evidently he was chosen not because he deserved to suffer or because he was being punished, but because of his great faith. And I wondered about my own faith—if I had the kind of faith that could withstand extreme, undeserved affliction. A faith that would remain when all hope was gone.

But that was before the affliction came. Before the devastating news that changed everything about my life. Before the painful anticipation of death. BEFORE HOPE.

JOB'S JOURNEY



THERE was a man named Job who lived in the land of Uz. He was blameless, a man of complete integrity. He feared God and stayed away from evil. He had seven sons and three daughters. He owned seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred teams of oxen, and five hundred female donkeys, and he employed many servants. He was, in fact, the richest person in that entire area.

Every year when Job's sons had birthdays, they invited their brothers and sisters to join them for a celebration. On these occasions they would get together to eat and drink. When these celebrations ended—and sometimes they lasted several days—Job would purify his children. He would get up early in the morning and offer a burnt offering for each of them. For Job said to himself, "Perhaps my children have sinned and have cursed God in their hearts." This was Job's regular practice.

One day the angels came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan the Accuser came with them. "Where have you come from?" the Lord asked Satan.

And Satan answered the Lord, "I have been going back and forth across the earth, watching everything that's going on."

Then the Lord asked Satan, "Have you noticed my servant Job? He is the finest man in all the earth—a man of

HOLDING ON TO HOPE

complete integrity. He fears God and will have nothing to do with evil."

Satan replied to the Lord, "Yes, Job fears God, but not without good reason! You have always protected him and his home and his property from harm. You have made him prosperous in everything he does. Look how rich he is! But take away everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face!"

"All right, you may test him," the Lord said to Satan. "Do whatever you want with everything he possesses, but don't harm him physically." So Satan left the Lord's presence.

JOB 1:1-12

LOSS

Two weeks after the neighbor's house burned down, I gave birth to a daughter we named Hope. For years we had planned on that name for a daughter, but I never could have dreamed how meaningful it would become.

The doctors were immediately concerned by several “small” problems evident at birth—Hope had club feet, she was very lethargic and unresponsive, she had a flat chin and a large soft spot, she had a tiny indentation on one earlobe, she would not suck, and her hands were turned slightly outward.

On Hope's second day of life, a geneticist who had examined her came to our room. He told us that he suspected Hope had a metabolic disorder called Zellweger Syndrome. Because she was missing something in her cells called peroxisomes, which rid cells of toxins, her systems would slowly shut down.

And then he dropped the bomb that most babies with this syndrome live less than six months. No

treatment. No cure. No survivors. I felt like the air had been sucked out of me. While he was talking, I let out a low groan.

To be honest, it just didn't seem real. Sometimes it still doesn't. My husband, David, crawled into the hospital bed with me and we cried and we cried out to God. The next morning when I woke up, I was hoping that perhaps I had dreamed the whole thing—but I hadn't.

We called our pastor and asked him to come see us that morning. I looked at him and said, “Well, I guess here is where the rubber meets the road. Here is where I find out if I really believe what I say I believe.” I knew I had to choose how I was going to respond to this incredible disappointment and sorrow.

In the days following the diagnosis, we learned how to feed Hope with a tube and awaited the anticipated onset of seizures. As we began to accept the reality that she would be with us for only a short time, I returned to the story of Job. I wanted to look more closely at how Job responded as his world fell apart.

Perhaps you've experienced your world falling apart. Maybe your marriage has ended, or your parents' marriage has ended. Maybe financial disaster has come your way and you're trying to dig your way out. Maybe your child has rejected your values and rejected you. Maybe you've received the diagnosis you

didn't want. Or maybe, like me, you have faced the sorrow and loneliness of losing someone you love.

Do you feel as if your world has fallen apart? If so, you know what it is like to feel hurt and helpless and hopeless in the midst of loss. And perhaps you, too, are wondering if you will ever find your way out of this place of pain.

Throughout the pages of this short book, we're going to look carefully at Job's experience, because Job shows us how a person of faith responds when his world falls apart. We know Job was a great man of faith because the writer tells us so in the first verse of the first chapter, describing Job as a man of complete integrity who feared God and stayed away from evil. And, later in the same chapter, God himself uses these same words to describe Job.

This introduction shows us that Job was devoted to God. He had impeccable character. We could even describe Job as God's friend. In fact, when God endeavored to choose one person he knew would be faithful to him no matter what, he chose Job—with complete confidence. Job must have proved himself faithful over and over for God to have had that kind of confidence in him!

But Satan was skeptical. Satan thought Job was faithful only because Job was supernaturally protected by God and had such a comfortable life, and that if his comfortable life were taken away, Job would turn on God.

At that point, God gave Satan permission to hurt Job. We don't want to hear that, because it just doesn't square with our understanding of a loving God. But it is clear. God gave the permission and set the parameters for Job's suffering.¹

“All right, you may test him,” the Lord said to Satan. “Do whatever you want with everything he possesses, but don't harm him physically” (Job 1:12).

Do you wonder why God would give permission for Satan to harm Job? More importantly, do you wonder why God has given Satan permission to bring so much pain into *your* life?

Before we try to answer the question “Why?” let's look closely at how Job responded as everything he had and everyone he loved were abruptly ripped away.

We'll see that Job's story is about much more than his suffering. Somehow, along the way, he discovered God in a way he had never known him before. And when his story comes to a close, we see that “the Lord blessed Job in the second half of his life even more than in the beginning. . . . He died, an old man who had lived a long, good life” (Job 42:12, 17).

Isn't that what you and I want, even now, in the midst of our painful circumstances—to understand God like we never have before, to see him as we've never seen him before, to emerge from our days of suffering with God's blessing and with a life that can be described as good?

Loss

How did Job move from profound pain to profound blessing? Let's follow Job's steps closely to discover his secret. Let's examine each stepping stone along the way. Let's follow him on the pathway of suffering so that he might lead us to the very heart of God.



One day when Job's sons and daughters were dining at the oldest brother's house, a messenger arrived at Job's home with this news: "Your oxen were plowing, with the donkeys feeding beside them, when the Sabeans raided us. They stole all the animals and killed all the farmhands. I am the only one who escaped to tell you."

While he was still speaking, another messenger arrived with this news: "The fire of God has fallen from heaven and burned up your sheep and all the shepherds. I am the only one who escaped to tell you."

While he was still speaking, a third messenger arrived with this news: "Three bands of Chaldean raiders have stolen your camels and killed your servants. I am the only one who escaped to tell you."

While he was still speaking, another messenger arrived with this news: "Your sons and daughters were feasting in their oldest brother's home. Suddenly, a powerful wind swept in from the desert and hit the house on all sides. The house collapsed, and all your children are dead. I am the only one who escaped to tell you."

Job stood up and tore his robe in grief.

TEARS

Shortly after Hope died, I was at the cosmetics counter buying some mascara. “Will this mascara run down my face when I cry?” I asked.

The girl behind the counter assured me it wouldn’t and asked with a laugh in her voice, “Are you going to be crying?”

“Yes,” I answered. “I am.”

We had Hope for 199 days. We loved her. We enjoyed her richly and shared her with everyone we could. We held her during her seizures. Then, we let her go.

The day after we buried Hope, my husband said to me, “You know, I think we expected our faith to make this hurt less, but it doesn’t. Our faith gave us an incredible amount of strength and encouragement while we had Hope, and we are comforted by the knowledge that she is in heaven. Our faith keeps us from being swallowed by despair. But I don’t think it makes our loss hurt any less.”

It is only natural that people around me often ask searchingly, “How are you?” And for much of the first year after Hope’s death, my answer was, “I’m deeply and profoundly sad.” I’ve been blessed with many people who have been willing to share my sorrow, to just be sad with me. Others, however, seem to want to rush me through my sadness. They want to fix me. But I lost someone I loved dearly, and I’m sad.

Ours is not a culture that is comfortable with sadness. Sadness is awkward. It is unsettling. It ebbs and flows and takes its own shape. It beckons to be shared. It comes out in tears, and we don’t quite know what to do with those.

So many people are afraid to bring up my loss. They don’t want to upset me. But my tears are the only way I have to release the deep sorrow I feel. I tell people, “Don’t worry about crying in front of me, and don’t be afraid that you will make me cry! Your tears tell me you care, and my tears tell you that you’ve touched me in a place that is meaningful to me—and I will never forget your willingness to share my grief.”

In fact, those who shed their tears with me show me we are not alone. It often feels like we are carrying this enormous load of sorrow, and when others shed their tears with me, it is as if they are taking a bucketful of sadness and carrying it for me. It is, perhaps, the most meaningful thing anyone can do for me.

Our culture wants to put the Band-Aid of heaven

Tears

on the hurt of losing someone we love. Sometimes it seems like the people around us think that because we know the one we love is in heaven, we shouldn't be sad. But they don't understand how far away heaven feels, and how long the future seems as we see before us the years we have to spend on this earth before we see the one we love again.

Fortunately, we are not alone in our sadness. In Isaiah 53:3, the Bible describes God's Son as "a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (NKJV). And so it is in our sadness that we discover a new aspect of God's character and reach a new understanding of him that we could not have known without loss. He is acquainted with grief. He understands. He's not trying to rush us through our sadness. He's sad with us.

The day after we buried Hope, I understood for the first time why so many people choose to medicate their pain in so many harmful ways. That day I tried to sleep it away. And in the days that followed, I discovered that I could not sleep it away, shop it away, eat it away, drink it away, or travel it away.

I just had to feel it. And it hurt. Physically.

I realized I had a choice—I could try to stuff the hurt away in a closet, pretend it wasn't there, and wish it would disappear, or I could bring it out into the open, expose it to the Light, probe it, accept it, and allow it to heal. I chose to face it head-on, trudge through it, feel its full weight, and do my best to con-

front my feelings of loss and hopelessness with the truth of God's Word at every turn. Even now I can't say I'm healed. Part of my heart is no longer mine. I gave it to Hope and she took it with her, and I will forever feel that amputation.² But embracing my grief means allowing it to do its work in me.

That's what Job did. Out of the deepest kind of agony and pain from loss, Job openly mourned. He didn't cover up his sadness or put on a happy face or offer religious-sounding clichés. He tore his robe and shaved his head. He hurt. And he was not ashamed to show how deeply he hurt.

Do you know what it is like to groan with sorrow? Part of being human is that when you lose something or someone that is valuable to you, you agonize over that loss, and there is nothing wrong with that. Your tears do not reflect a lack of faith.

Rather than running from or trying to ignore your grief, would you lean into it? Would you allow it to accomplish its healing work in your heart?

Would you be willing to invite God to walk with you during this sorrowful time so that you might experience his healing presence?

Would you confront your feelings of hopelessness and heartache with truths from God's Word so that it can become a healing power in your heart and mind?



JOB stood up and tore his robe in grief. Then he shaved his head and fell to the ground before God.

JOB 1:20

ENDNOTES

¹Reading from Max Lucado's *The Great House of God* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1997) taught me the broader picture—that Satan has no power that God does not permit and that God gave Satan the permission and set the parameters for Satan to test Job. This concept is found in chapter 13 of Lucado's book.

²In the days following Hope's death, I found great comfort in reading Gregory Floyd's *A Grief Unveiled: One Father's Journey Through the Death of a Child* (Brewster, Ma.: Paraclete Press, 1999). Not only did I find companionship on the path of grief over losing a child, but I also discovered a faithful follower of Christ. I learned from Floyd's example as well as his words. He wrote about his son, and I adapted some of his words: "I realize that sometimes the reason I feel so strange is that part of my heart is not here any more. I gave it to Johnny and he took it with him" (p. 192).

³John R. Claypool, *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler* (New Orleans: Insight Press, 1995), 74–75.

⁴I am indebted to Jerry Bridges for his help in understanding what it means to fear God through his book *The Joy of Fearing God* (Colorado Springs, Co.: WaterBrook Press, 1997).

⁵Eugene Peterson, *THE MESSAGE: Job* (Colorado Springs, Co.: NavPress, 1996), 9. I benefited greatly from reading and rereading Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of the book of Job in *THE MESSAGE*. I'm so grateful for *THE MESSAGE*, which made Job come alive to me and

AN INTRODUCTION TO THIS STUDY GUIDE

This guide has been designed to be used by an individual or group to study the book of Job and its themes. Studying Job is a thrilling but daunting undertaking. Job's story addresses some of the most profound questions of human experience and an all-powerful God. Perhaps the most important lesson of the book of Job is that there are no simplistic answers to these questions—that God, while knowable, is also mysterious.

Like the book of Job itself, this study does not nail down all of the answers to the questions that Job's story raises. But it will help you and those you study with to dig deeply into Scripture to discover more about who God is and how he works in the universe and in us. While he remains a God whose ways are often unexplainable, he has chosen to make himself knowable. That is why he has revealed himself to us through the person and work of Jesus and through the pages of Scripture. He “rewards those who sincerely seek him” (Hebrews 11:6) like Job did—and the reward is himself.

For individual study, this guide provides seven weeks of daily questions that will encourage your own pursuit and understanding of God through the study of his Word. You will study the entire book of Job as well as many other Scripture passages about issues that Job's story raises. And you will be encouraged to apply what you learn to your life so that God might use it to make you more like his Son. And that's a good thing, isn't it? A commitment to the study will help you solidify the life-transforming habit of daily Bible study, as well as build your anticipation for all that God wants to say to you and show you through your reading of the Bible beyond these fifty days.

But don't become discouraged if you fall behind or are

unable to get to the study every day. Just work through the questions as you can, so you will be able to listen to all that God wants to say to you.

For group study, this guide provides questions for a weekly discussion of Job and its themes, as well as daily study assignments that will prepare group members for a meaningful discussion the next week. It also suggests chapters of *Holding on to Hope* that correspond to the passages of Job being studied that week. You may want to select some of the daily study questions from the previous week to add to the group discussion questions as time permits.

If you are leading the group, I encourage you to set a tone of openness, beginning with your first session together, so that everyone feels free to confront the difficult questions raised in Job's story and to share about the hurts in their life. Your group should be a place where hurting people feel accepted and cared for by others. However, you may find it necessary to clarify that the purpose of your group is to study and discuss the Scripture rather than to serve as a support group. You may also want to plan carefully which discussion questions to cover, setting an approximate amount of time for each question so that you are sure to get through all of the topics in the time allotted.

Many of the questions are open-ended and include "What do you think?" Encourage your participants to recognize that those are opinion questions and there may not be a "right" answer. Make your group a safe place to be bold with opinions. At the same time, lean on the revealed truth of God's Word for answers rather than opinions. Encourage group members to support their views with Scripture.

Some days call for reading or skimming large portions of Job. If this is difficult for you, you may choose to read only the portions required for answering the questions. In skimming, you might also rely on the paragraph and section headings to get a feel for the flow and emphasis of the chapter. If your week does not allow you to answer the questions

An Introduction to This Study Guide

each day, focus on the “Preparing for Discussion” questions at the end of each week so the group discussion will be more meaningful for you.

I also encourage you to become as comfortable as possible with not having to nail down every issue with a black-and-white answer. In truth, there is much we cannot understand about God and much we cannot control in this world. What we can control is how we respond to the circumstances God allows into our lives and how we choose to pursue God in the midst of our questions. Encourage your group members to keep pursuing God with their questions while committing to love, serve, and trust him even if their questions are never answered to their satisfaction.

My prayer in preparing this study has been that God will honor your desire for him, and that this study will not be merely an intellectual pursuit but one that transforms your heart and mind. If you are suffering or are touched deeply by the pain of this world, this study will have special meaning for you. I have tried to include many of the most difficult questions that have pressed in on me in dark places. May God honor the effort you put into this study so that he might fill the dark places in your life with the light of his very presence.

Nancy Guthrie

For other small group resources go to
www.nancyguthrie.com.

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WEEK 1

Job: History's Most Significant Sufferer

Small Group Discussion Questions

1. What is your impression of Job based on what you already know about him?
2. What questions do you have about Job before we begin our study?
3. What aspects of Job's experience and interaction with God make you most uncomfortable or leave you with significant questions?
4. Most of us are uncomfortable with Job's story because we fear suffering in our own life or because we've experienced significant suffering in our own life. If you feel comfortable doing so, finish this sentence:
The suffering God has allowed into my life includes . . .
or *The suffering that I fear the most is . . .*
5. What do you hope you will gain from investing your time and effort in the group sessions and in the daily Bible study involved with this study of Job?

Daily Study

DAY 1: Read Job 1–2

1. What kind of a person was Job?
2. What was Satan looking for? What do you think he really wanted to do?
3. What was God confident about in regard to Job?

4. What did God give Satan permission to do in this chapter and what happened?
5. If you were in Job's situation, how do you think you might have responded?

DAY 2: Skim Job 3–21

1. What are some phrases that stand out to you that indicate how Job was feeling and what he was thinking?
2. What are some phrases that indicate the primary message of Job's friends?
3. What did Job want most in these chapters?
4. What did Job reveal at the end of chapter 19 that seemed to give him hope in the midst of his utter despair?
5. Reading through these chapters, we see that Job seemed to vacillate between despair and hope. When have you had that same reaction to some of your struggles?

DAY 3: Skim Job 22–37

1. What are some phrases that reveal Job's friends' underlying belief about how God treats the righteous and the unrighteous?
2. What are some statements that they suggest would "fix" Job's suffering?
3. Which of Job's phrases can you particularly relate to?

DAY 4: Read Job 38–41

1. Summarize God's response to Job.
2. What do you learn about suffering and about the reasons and solution for Job's suffering from what God says?

Week 1

3. As humans, why do you think we have such a craving to know the reasons for suffering?
4. In chapter 40, how did Job respond to God's questions?

DAY 5: Read Job 42

1. Do you think Job was satisfied with God's response to his questions? Why or why not?
2. In what ways did Job's life change because of what he experienced?
3. What questions does this initial reading of the story of Job leave you with about Job, about God, about Satan, and about yourself?

DAY 6: Overview

1. Who are the three main characters in this story (introduced in chapter 1)?
2. What loss invaded Job's life in chapter 1?
3. What happened to Job in chapter 2?
4. In chapters 3–31, Job and his three friends made speeches to each other. Who were these three friends?
5. In chapters 32–37, a fourth friend spoke. What was his name?
6. Who began to speak in chapter 38? What form did his speeches take?
7. How would you summarize what happened in the final chapter of Job (chapter 42)?

Read the corresponding chapters in Holding on to Hope: Introduction, Loss